

Mr. and Mrs. Kent

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Summary: Lois and Clark both have their secrets. Can one night of passion be enough to bring them together — even if Lois happens to be an assassin?

Set in an alt-world, borrowing alt-Clark and elements of Smallville (with the blur) and a premise from the movie Mr. and Mrs. Smith (written by Simon Kinberg).

Jor-El quotes taken from Superman movies, writers Mario Puzo, David & Leslie Newman, Robert Benton, and Tom Mankiewicz

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~Brazzaville~

Clark asked the barman for a beer. The water here was disgusting, and even if he was invulnerable to it, he still didn't like the idea of drinking water that was light brown. Or dark brown, depending. So he ordered a beer. At least he knew what it would taste like.

He had been sent to the Congo to find a reporter that had gone missing, Lois Lane. The Chief had fallen into the habit of sending Clark on the most dangerous stories — probably because he always made it out alive. Lois seemed to mean something to Perry, and Clark had been so grateful to get a chance to work at the Daily Planet, he promised to do what he could to find her. The thing was, she had been missing for over two years, and Clark didn't think there was much of a shot of finding a young, white female reporter, out here in the jungle ...

Suddenly, the doors of the saloon swung open. A beautiful, petite redhead stepped in, her hair swinging around her waist as she was manhandled by some guys with guns. They could be authorities or they could be thugs. It was a thin line between the two in the Congo.

“Vous-êtes toute seule ?” asked the thug in French. <<Are you alone?>>

“No,” she said definitively, though Clark would have guessed otherwise. She had an air about her of having suffered and fought alone and still prevailed. She was beautiful and strong, and yet, he thought, so vulnerable. She was trying hard for a confident attitude, but she didn't fool Clark. He could see her looking over the shoulder of the men, hoping for an excuse to get out of there.

Before he realized what he was doing Clark walked over to stand by the woman. “Elle est avec moi,” he said in flawless French. <<She's with me.>>

She turned to him, looking at him in shock, but covering it quickly.

Clark rested his hand on the small of her back in a proprietary manner, ushering her out of the bar and down the hall into the room he had rented for the night.

He closed the door behind them and they both listened to see if the thugs intended on following them.

There was no sound, so he reached out his hand to her in greeting and smiled, “Clark.”

She took his hand, and he held onto hers just a fraction longer

than was necessary. She cleared her throat, but didn't take her hand away. “Thanks ... I'm L ... Linda.”

Clark wondered what those guys out there had wanted from her. Obviously nothing good, which stirred all kinds of questions in Clark's mind.

And he was fairly certain she hadn't given her real name.

But that was okay, for now.

After all, he knew all about keeping secrets, didn't he?

~Later that night~

Lois went with him to the cantina. She had no idea why. It was foolish, reckless even. She was putting her family at risk. If the gunrunners found out ... She had been intimidated into not associating with any Americans, but this guy had saved her from the local authorities. Besides, there was something about him that intrigued her, something that made her feel like she could trust him.

And anyway, he didn't know her real name. He hadn't asked where she was from. He just wanted to spend a little time with her, he'd said. Was there any harm in that?

So, they had a few drinks. It was a clear, beautiful, if hot night. She undid the top of her blouse — a few buttons, just above her cleavage She had taken to wearing white when in town, as it was much cooler. In the jungle she had to wear darker clothes, so her targets couldn't see her. She shook her head, trying to erase those images. <<You've had no choice. You've had to do what they told you.>>

But tonight, maybe she could pretend things were normal. Just this one time ...

A drum band was set up in the cantina. Clark coaxed her to dance after they each had a shot of tequila. She couldn't resist. <<Those eyes ... one could drown in eyes like his,>> she thought wistfully as he pulled her on to the makeshift dance floor.

Clark was utterly entranced by the woman before him. He hadn't been thinking straight since she had sauntered into the saloon that afternoon, totally at risk, yet utterly poised.

She was magnificent.

He had intended on finding out more about her tonight, but she had barely said a word. She had ordered them drinks and dinner, and spoken enough to let him know she was American. But she didn't seem interested in small talk. She offered no answers, and he asked no questions.

He felt daring. More daring than he had ever felt before with a woman in his arms. He pulled her close, letting the rhythm of the drums drive their dancing. They moved together as one. It was sensual, intoxicating.

She suddenly pulled his face down to hers, her sweet breath warm on his face. “Clark, I don't know who you are. I don't care. But will you make love to me tonight?” she asked, her hips swaying gently with his to the music.

Clark swallowed and tried to think straight. He was completely blown away and had no idea how to react. But he simply couldn't — could he?

“I don't know. I mean ... you don't know anything about me,” <<and that's not knowing quite a lot,>> he mentally finished.

“I don't want to know about you. I want ... I want to forget. Can you make me forget?” she asked, her eyes two pools of sensual brown pulling him in to her spell.

She leaned up and suddenly kissed him. The shock of electricity hit them both as they pulled back and looked into each others' eyes. Then, they were kissing again, each trying to get closer to the other. Clark could no longer think rationally. He wanted to be a gentleman, he knew he should step back, step away from her ... but he was lost.

And found at once.

“Come on. Back to your place?” she asked.

All Clark could do was nod.

~The next morning~

Lois stretched in the bed as she awoke. She felt ... wonderful. Images came back to her of the night before. How gentle Clark had been, how caring. He had treated her like a precious and rare flower. She had *never* been made love to that way ... it had been just what she'd needed. Not only physically, but her soul felt renewed. Perhaps she could face all the demons she knew she had to face if she could keep last night's memory alive.

She stretched again and reached for his side of the bed. He was gone.

Had she expected anything more? Of course he wouldn't stick around. What would be the point? He had *no* idea who he was involved with. And it was just as well that he didn't. She didn't want him to know, because then he would also be at risk ...

The door to the bedroom opened, and she jumped.

Clark was back with breakfast. She tried to quell the warm appreciation she felt at seeing him again. <<It would have been better if he *had* disappeared, though. Seeing him again ... this was too much.>>

Lois felt her throat clench as tears sprang to her eyes. She tried to concentrate on just accepting the breakfast tray.

Before she did, she strategically pulled the sheet up around her torso and prepared her heart to look in his eyes.

"I, uh, brought you breakfast," he said warmly.

Even his voice made her want to melt into butter.

"Thanks," she said, feeling her cheeks blush as she took the tray, her fingers barely brushing his.

"The Daily Planet?" she asked before she could stop herself as she noticed the paper on the tray. "I mean, how did you find an American newspaper here?"

She hadn't seen one in over a year. The logo still brought a warm feeling to her heart, and she surreptitiously caressed it as Clark looked out the window.

"Oh, I have my sources," he said, and then covered his remark. "I mean, when you've been here a while, you figure out where to find things like newspapers."

"Sure," she said absently, flipping through its pages and recognizing names of long-ago colleagues. Some of the names had changed as well, and it made her wonder what else of her old life she had missed during the last two years.

Clark turned to her, his attitude reassuring. "Look, about last night?"

"Save it, Clark. It's fine. I mean, I don't expect —" she said, getting up from the bed, tossing the newspaper carelessly beside the breakfast tray.

He walked up to her and stopped her with a kiss. "I wasn't finished," he said quietly, his gentle tone belying his words. "No need to make excuses. But, I have to tell you that last night was the most amazing night of my life."

She felt her cheeks flame as she stood in his arms. Suddenly, she longed for a moment of truth in her a life, a moment she had been denied for the last two years.

"Me, too. It meant a lot to me, too," she said, and then let herself be pulled into his embrace.

"This is going to sound **really** crazy, but I'm just going to trust it," he said with a bracing breath. "Marry me."

She stepped away from his embrace, absolutely flummoxed. "What?" she asked, utterly shocked.

He braced his hand against the wall, and shook his head.

"Look, okay, that was uncalled for. I guess what I'm saying is, I don't want to lose you. I don't want you to walk out of my life and never see you again ..."

"You know nothing about me — -about what I've been through. And yet ... you just asked me to *marry* you? Are you nuts?!"

She started searching for her clothes — [see previous comment] suddenly desperate to get out of there.

Clark tried not to be distracted by the show of thigh peeking out through the layers of bed sheet she had wrapped around her as she gathered her things. He turned away to let her dress and tried to focus on why he had made the ridiculous suggestion that they get married.

"Now, look. I just said that because — I don't know. I felt the impulse and went with it. Don't you ever do that?"

She unexpectedly let out a warm laugh and the sound went straight to Clark's heart. "All the time. I'm known for jumping in without checking the water level first."

"What I'm saying is — I have to head back to Metropolis tomorrow."

"Metropolis?" she asked in shock.

He continued to stare out the window, unable to face her rejection. "I ... I don't know. I guess I'm offering you a ride back to the U.S. if you need it. Or even want it."

"No, I can't — I mean, I have a life here," she said dully. He turned to face her as he tried to determine the truth of those words. Clark nodded in defeat, uncertain if she had meant it, but not wanting to push her. "Okay. Well, *if* for some reason you change your mind. I'll be leaving from the Brazzaville airfield. It's a small company, and there's not much traffic there. I'll be taking a helicopter to Gabon. So if you head out to the field, you'll find me. We fly at 20:20."

He leaned towards her, giving her a moment if she wanted to back away.

"You touched me deeply, Linda," he whispered, stroking her face gently. He searched her eyes for confirmation that she had felt the same, but instead he saw fear.

She stepped back from his embrace before he could say anything more, and dashed out the door.

She at least had the decency to look back at him before she left and said, "Thanks for everything, Clark. You're a ... nice guy."

And he watched her walk away, never knowing whether he'd see her again.

~Later that afternoon~

Clark was in a complete daze. Everywhere he went, he thought he saw Linda. She had invaded his thoughts and he couldn't focus on anything else, let alone do anything constructive about finding this Lois Lane woman. He felt guilty about getting distracted from his mission, but Linda had left impressions on his soul that he thought would be with him forever. It was more than physical attraction, he knew, because he had never been susceptible to beautiful woman before. No, it was the vulnerable strength he had seen at once in her, something about her spirit that spoke to him, that made him wonder what was Linda's story. As a man of secrets himself, he had suddenly become intrigued by hers.

He looked down at the picture he had of Lois Lane, the woman he was supposed to be looking for. Even with his special vision, it was difficult to make out her picture on the old and grainy newsprint. But it was all Perry had had to give him. That and the notes she had started about a gun running operation in the Congo, the story that had possibly cost her life. He had asked some questions in town, but no one had seen a female reporter there in a very long time. And those that may have seen her were vague in their description of her.

But the Planet couldn't afford to keep him there any longer to search for her. He had to go back to Metropolis. The last wire he had sent Perry had nearly broken his heart, <<She's gone forever, I'm afraid. I'm coming home.>> He didn't want to picture the Chief's face when he got that wire.

Clark's mind kept wandering back to Linda, if that was even

her name. Something about her had gotten under his skin, and he wasn't going to be able to shake the sensation any time soon. He hoped she would take him up on his offer, and fly back with him to America. He got the feeling that she felt like she had limited options, and he wanted to offer her that lifeline at least.

Besides, he didn't know what he'd do if he never saw her again.

~Gunrunner base, just outside Brazzaville~

"We have another mark for you, Ms. Lane."

She had long ago shut down feeling anything at hearing those words. In the early days, it had made her want to vomit. Now, she simply took a breath and asked for the information.

"A Mr. Kent, from Metropolis. Apparently, he's after one of our ... men. You have to take him out tonight before he gets on a helicopter."

"Just show me the mark," she said, half-listening. All she could think of was Clark's face as she had left that afternoon. Heartbroken. Surely he had known that they couldn't have anything more than just that one night ... had he been serious when he asked her to marry him? Either the man was naive or ... she couldn't bear to think of what. Good. Decent. Brave. Those qualities just didn't exist anymore, she was certain.

"His file has already been uploaded to your communicator."

"Fine. I'll have it done by the end of the day," she said absently, not opening the file. She had to get out of that office; she had to think!

It had been such a mistake to sleep with Clark. He was too distracting, even if he was leaving, even if she never saw him again.

<<The airfield ... I could say good-bye, at least.>>

But she knew that it would just make things worse. No, she had to do her job so they wouldn't kill her. So they wouldn't go after her family ...

She went to her tiny room on their 'base.' It was really just an old U.S. military outpost that had been abandoned more than forty years ago, but it served its purpose.

She closed her door to her tiny room, which was more like a cell. They could lock her in here if they chose. She tried not to think back to when it had been her prison. As long as she did exactly as told, she wouldn't have to face that again ...

They tossed her into a tiny room and slammed the door. She was alone at last. Her nose was bleeding and she thought she may have a bruised rib, but she was alive, for now. Lois tried to stand, but her feet were wobbly. She was terrified. She banged on the door, demanding that they open it.

"I'm an American reporter! You can't treat me like this!" she cried, her voice shaking.

A shot rang out as a bullet came in through her door and out the other side of the cell through the barred but glassless window.

"Enough from you!" shouted the guard.

<<That could have hit me!>> she realized, instantly shutting up.

She waited for two whole days. They gave her little water, stale bread, and two green bananas. Her stomach was rebelling against everything but the bread. Besides, she was too terrified to eat. She had no idea what they planned to do with her next. She knew she'd have to cooperate if she wanted to stay alive, and that scared her all the more. What would she have to do to survive?

A day later, the answer came. The door opened and they dragged her into another small room.

A thug came in with dark hair and even darker eyes. He wore military fatigues, but she didn't think he was really military. He chewed on the butt of a cigar, and she got the impression he'd had the same cigar for a few days. His breath reeked of tobacco.

"Miss Lois Lane. Intrepid reporter for the Daily Planet, huh? Well, you can bet that your reporting days are over."

She started to protest, but he slammed his fist on the table

startling her.

"You will do exactly as we say, do you hear?" He didn't wait for a response from her before he continued. "You're good at sneaking around. It could come in very handy for our operations. I bet you have a good eye for a gun as well," he said judiciously.

"I will never work for you!" she spat.

He back-handed her across the face, hard. His ring scratched her cheek and knocked into a tooth. She felt her heart rate go up in fear and decided that maybe it would be wise to keep her opinions to herself for a while.

"I don't play games, Miss Lane. Either you cooperate, or you will die. And we will go after every one you hold dear. Is that clear?"

She nodded.

"Good. Now, you will be trained over the next six months. You will work hard and learn everything our guys teach you. Then, you will work for me. If you so much as blink the wrong way, your ass is mine and we'll go after your family. Understand?"

She nodded curtly, terror suddenly seizing her throat.

She couldn't believe this was happening. She had been on a story, a story, just doing what Lois Lane does, and had been captured by the wrong guys.

She was lost, utterly and completely lost ...

Lois pushed those memories aside, along with the pain. The last two years had been hell, but she hadn't looked back. She actually relished some of the training, as it gave her a little power. Someday she'd fight back. Someday she'd get back to Metropolis

...

She shook her head, thinking of Clark and the offer of a helicopter. She couldn't go back now ... could she? Surely, it was too late. Surely, she was too mired into this operation. They'd hunt her and her family down if she left. She couldn't do that to them.

Lois took a steadying breath and uploaded the file they had sent her on her next mark.

The picture was in green encryption, so it was difficult to make out exact features at first, until they filled in. When they did, and she connected the name, her breath caught.

<<Clark Kent. They want me to kill Clark! My Clark!>> she thought with horror

"No, no, no. There must be some mistake. This can't be right!" she said aloud. But she knew it was no mistake. These guys didn't make mistakes.

She had to kill Clark Kent, or end up dead herself.

~The airfield, 20:00~

Lois was shaking. She hadn't been this afraid in a very long time. She was afraid of herself, which she hated even more. But she didn't know what else to do. She had to kill Clark Kent. Kill the one man who had treated her decently, who had made her feel something.

She felt hot tears streak her cheeks. She remembered a medicine man had once told her that if tears spilled hot, it meant they came from the very depths of one's soul. She knew, that if she killed Clark, that there would be no turning back. She'd become as evil as the rest of them. Her heart would turn to ice, and her soul would be lost forever.

"What choice do I have?" she asked herself, squeezed up against some large crates in the hangar. Clark's helicopter was already on the field. She had a long-range pistol. Lois tried and failed to load the gun twice.

Her hands were shaking like they hadn't done in a long time. She loaded the bullets.

Primed the barrel.

<<Breathe. Just breathe,>> she thought, steadying herself by not thinking of the final action, but just loading the gun, one step at a time.

“Just do it, Lane. Do it to protect Lucy. Do it to protect Perry,” she coached herself, as she had done dozens of times over the last two years.

Tears welled in her eyes, making her vision blurry. She swiped at her tears, and more came to replace them. God, she couldn’t do this anymore.

She had been one of the good guys once. When had she become a criminal, a murderer?

For one bleak second, she thought of aiming the weapon at herself. But no, she was a fighter, a survivor. She’d get through this. She’d somehow move on —

A movement on the airfield caught her eye. She could see Clark’s handsome form heading to the helicopter.

He moved with such easy grace, yet with power, purposefulness.

She had lost all sight of her purpose the day they had kidnapped her and forced her into this hellish life, doing something so contrary to her spirit that she didn’t know who she was anymore.

She took a deep breath.

She steadied herself, her face wet with tears and sweat.

Lois stared down at her target — at Clark. A man who had made love to her, who was a *good* man, she knew.

A man who had been foolish to get mixed up with her.

But he was good. Naive maybe.

But decent.

Kind.

Oh God, she couldn’t do this ...

She wiped her eyes one last time, terrified of what would happen if she didn’t pull the trigger.

Terrified of what would happen if she did.

She squeezed her eyes shut, begging silently that she would be forgiven, that someday she could return home, put this past her, move on — —

She suddenly fired the weapon and her whole world stopped.

Clark glanced over his shoulder in puzzlement.

Lois sat still, in the dark, holding her breath. Had she killed him?

He shook his head, and gestured to the pilot that he was coming. She saw him lower his glasses and look right at her, though she was certain he couldn’t see her in the dark, from that range. His shoulders sagged in defeat, and he climbed into the helicopter.

He wasn’t dead! He wasn’t *dead*! She had *missed*! Oh, thank God, that for *once*, she had missed!

She threw down the weapon in disgust, realizing what she had almost become. She had almost lost her soul in that one instant. If she had killed Clark, she knew there would be no hope for her ever again.

Suddenly, Lois was running to the helicopter. She didn’t question why, she simply accepted the bit of grace that had saved her from killing a good man, and ran towards Clark.

They were getting ready to take off, when Clark saw her. He jumped out of the helicopter and met her half way across the field.

“I’m *sorry*,” she cried with a gasp, tears streaming down her face. Those hot tears, from the depth of her soul.

He held her; he didn’t question her, he just held her.

“It’s all right, Linda,” he said soothingly.

She suddenly pulled away from him, but didn’t let go of his hand. She tugged him back towards the helicopter. “Take me away with you, now. Please. Before I think about it, before I change my mind. Just, take me with you, Clark!”

He nodded and helped her into a seat. She watched as the ground receded further away from her. As surreptitiously as she could, she pulled out the other gun that was tucked into her waistband, and the knife that was tucked into her shoe, and

kicked them both out of the helicopter. She watched as they became specks on the ground; harmless specks now, which had almost destroyed her life.

She hoped never to lay hands on weapons like those ever again.

Clark’s arm was around her, as she had fallen asleep shortly after takeoff, sobbing inconsolably in his arms. The tears were dried on her cheeks now, and she looked innocent and sweet sleeping by his side. He was torn and confused by her; from the moment he had met her, he had felt the desire to protect her. At first, he had thought she needed protection from the outside world, but now he wondered if she needed protection from herself.

Clark took the bullet out of his pocket and rolled it around in his fingers, thinking. She had fired a gun at him. If he had been an ordinary man, he would have been seriously wounded if not killed outright by that shot. She had intended to kill him. Yet, she had regretted it instantly, he had seen from across the field.

So the question that remained was, why?

Why would she try to kill him? He didn’t believe for a second that it had been her choice. That would be too horrific to contemplate anyway, and though that thought had crossed his mind when he had first seen her with the pistol, it had been erased completely when she had come running to his arms.

She obviously hadn’t wanted to harm him. Had she believed he was someone else? And if that were the case, what had driven her or forced her to pick up a gun at all?

He realized that she had probably been through something terribly traumatic, something much more than the one bullet aimed at his head.

He sighed, knowing that taking her with him was probably unwise, but he felt irresistibly drawn to her. It was more than last night when they met, though that was partly the reason. He had thrown caution to the wind that night, something he never did, and had made love to her ... his first time ever, with anyone. And it had been amazing.

Reckless.

Foolish.

But amazing ... And he was certain that she had felt it too. But she was scared, that much was clear. At the hotel, he had thought she was scared of him. His ridiculous comment about them getting married would certainly have given her sufficient reason.

But now, with the bullet that she had shot at him in his hand, he thought it was probably much more complicated than a mixed-up heart after a one night stand.

So what had happened between the time she had left the hotel and when he had seen her on the airfield? What had led to her to try to kill him?

And why, did he still feel like there was something precious in her that he had to protect?

He needed answers, but he was content to wait until she could tell him. They had another half hour before they landed in Libreville to begin the long journey home to Metropolis.

Libreville.

Freedom Town.

He wondered if that name would have an important meaning to the woman sleeping at his side.

He sighed as he took the picture of Lois Lane out one last time. He wished he had good news to bring back to the Chief. He wondered if he should have asked Linda about her. Maybe she’d know something about a young reporter poking around in the Congo. He felt stupid for not having thought of it before, though honestly, they had barely spoken. He would ask her though, and if she did know anything, he could fly back under his own power and check it out.

But his first concern was to get Linda to speak to him. He had to know what she had really been doing in the Congo. And if Linda was even her real name. Lois Lane would have to wait.

The sound of the whirring helicopter was the first thing Lois heard when she awoke, though she realized that she had probably heard it in her sleep. She had fallen asleep after sobbing in Clark's arms for what felt like hours, unable to explain to him why she felt like her soul had been taken away and then given back to her the moment he touched her. Unable to explain the hell she had been through that had brought her to this point.

Her eyes remained closed, feeling his solid shoulder under her chin, and his arm around her shoulder giving her undeserved comfort. *Clark*. She had *shot* him ... and missed. Thank God she had missed! Maybe he hadn't heard the gunshot over the roar of the 'chopper. She hoped so. She wouldn't be able to face him, not if he knew that she had tried to kill him.

Tears slipped past her lids again, though she did everything she could to remain still, so he would think she was still asleep. Although she felt totally unworthy, she took comfort in his presence, the first safe haven she had known since being kidnapped by the gunrunners. There was something solid and reassuring about Clark; he had a quiet strength that cut through all of the pain and terror she had lived with for the past two years. She was too shattered to hope for too much from him, but it was there, a fragile thing shimmering through the tears that dampened his shoulder. The hope that he could be the one who could bring her out of the darkness of despair, loneliness and fear that she had found herself mired in.

Her quiet tears simply would not stop, even though she hadn't cried in over a year. She remembered the last time she had cried ...

She wished she could forget ...

"*You are ready for your first target,*" said Jon, tossing her a communicator. "*It's already uploaded. Just push the button on the side.*"

She looked at the device, uncertain what to do with it. She had been in complete isolation from anything that might connect her to the outside world for months. And here, Jon had just tossed her a communicator. She felt her palms sweat as she turned it on.

"*Don't get too excited, Mad Dog. It's just a one-way communicator,*" he said, not even looking at her. "*It's to receive targets only. Your first one is already uploaded.*"

"*What?*" she asked, thrown by his comment, and as always, thrown by him calling her *Mad Dog*. She hated when he called her that. It had been a nickname she had earned in college, for never letting go of stories. "*Mad Dog. That's a good name for an assassin,*" he had told her, in an odd moment of camaraderie. He was her trainer, and rarely talked to her except to give her orders, but she had let that one thing slip about herself when they were sharing a sandwich once. She regretted it terribly. Because what had once been a mild source of pride, was now a deep wound. Because now it meant she was cold, heartless. A killer.

Lois switched on the device, feeling nauseous. They had forced her into training to be an assassin. She had enjoyed the physical part of it, imagining that she could one day use the moves they taught her on the men that had stolen her life away from her. It was her only comfort that someday she could escape ... and somehow protect her family from the Boss coming after them. That's what had always stopped her before. Fear of the Boss killing her family. As crazy and mixed up as they were, with her parents divorced and her sister changing boyfriends like socks, they still belonged to her, were hers to protect. Her family ...

She looked down at her 'target.' Facts were given, like that

he was Congolese, 5'8", and then a picture appeared. She tried not to wonder about the facts that weren't shown on her little device. Like did he have a family? Did he have friends?

She swallowed hard. If she knew she was being forced to kill bad guys, maybe, just maybe, she could do this. But the guys she was working for were the bad guys. She knew that, more than anyone. She had researched everything she could about them before they had captured her. They definitely weren't good guys, so who she was told to kill —

"*I'll go with you on the first one, Mad Dog,*" he said. "*You have 24 hours to do the job. We'll leave at midnight.*"

24 hours to kill a man. Everything in her spirit rebelled against the idea. Tears started forming in her eyes, and she searched Jon's face, looking for an ounce of compassion in him.

"*I can't do this, Jon,*" she said, wishing her voice didn't shake.

"*I am not going with you for moral support. I'm going with you to make sure the job is done,*" he said coldly, loading some pistols in his vest. Then, she immediately understood. If she didn't kill this guy, Jon would kill her:

Bile rose in her throat.

She felt trapped.

Terrified.

At midnight, Jon and Lois left the compound and headed into the town. Lois tried not to think about what she was about to do. She didn't know if she could do it. And yet if she didn't, she'd be dead by the end of the night, and her loved ones soon after ...

They found the target just outside his favorite bar. As she watched him, again, images of a family, a nice guy came to her. He was stumbling drunk, but that didn't mean he deserved to —

"*Do it, Mad Dog. Now's your chance,*" Jon said.

It took her two tries to load her gun, she was shaking so much. In the shooting range, when she wasn't hurting anyone, she was actually a pretty good shot. But this was different. She was being told to kill.

She took a breath, trying to steady herself, to empty her mind and her heart. But she couldn't—she was not a murderer!

"*I—I can't,*" she whispered, the gun aimed at the target, though she thought her whole body was trembling.

"*If you don't I'll have to kill you,*" he said, raising a pistol to her temple, and leaning close to whisper in her ear. "*And the Boss won't stop there. He'll go after your family. He'll go after your friends. Do you want all of those deaths on your head because you didn't kill one guy?*"

She shook her head, quavering. Tears were streaming down her face, and her arm was straining from the tension.

"*Do it, Mad Dog. Or I'll do it — and more,*" he said darkly.

Her finger was on the trigger. She closed her eyes, not to see, not to know. <<I don't kill. I do not — >>

The gun went off. The man across the way crumpled to the ground.

"*No!*" she cried, utterly shaken, feeling something irrevocable shift inside her.

Lois dropped the gun, trembling and crying uncontrollably. She fell to her knees and wretched into a nearby bush.

<<What have I done?>>

She suddenly stood and turned to Jon. "*I hate you! I hate this!*" she shouted at him, powerless to do anything else.

"*Good. Hate is good,*" he said calmly.

She was ready.

Lois felt sick at the memory — and the feeling compounded at that and all the other horrible things she had been forced to do since that first time. She had killed seven other men since that moment, and every one of them hung around her neck, like the sea mariner's albatross.

Yet, she had walked away. She had just done the impossible. She would have to protect her family when she got back to Metropolis, somehow, until she could figure out what else to do. She was too terrified to go to the authorities or even to Perry at the Planet. But she was trained to kill. Maybe she could use those skills to protect instead of kill.

Clark gently squeezed her shoulder, not to wake her, but she thought to reassure her, even in sleep. The gesture almost brought tears to her eyes again. She wasn't worth his kindness, his gentleness. She was afraid to let him know she was awake and look into those compassionate eyes again, to see his openness, his goodness. She had almost taken that away from him. Because she had been scared. Scared of the consequences if she didn't shoot him ...

And yet, he was alive and she had done the unthinkable — left the Congo.

Now, she just needed to find a way to protect her family.

They landed in Libreville.

Originally, Clark had intended on flying back to Metropolis under his own power, but with Linda, they would have to take a plane. It was a prospect he dreaded, but he didn't see any other way around it, not without telling her his deepest secret. They had enough secrets between them, and he simply wasn't sure he could trust her.

He gently nudged Linda awake.

"We're here," he whispered softly.

Her eyes fluttered open. He could see the wear of her crying on her face and it wrenched his heart. "Linda, do you have any sort of ... passport?" he asked, realizing he would need one to buy her ticket.

She mutely shook her head. That vulnerable look was on her face again, with her eyes wide, stirring the protective streak in him.

He sighed. "Can we talk?"

Lois nodded, although she looked uncertain. He offered his hand, and was grateful when she took it and allowed him to help her from the helicopter.

"What were you doing in the Congo?" he asked as they approached the small airport.

She stared at him, "I—I can't say."

"You can't or you *won't*?" he asked, still trying to be gentle, but needing some answers. He sighed again, "Can you at least tell me how long you were there?"

"Two years," she whispered so low, he almost needed his super-hearing to hear it.

That stopped him. <<Two years was how long Lois Lane had been gone ... >>

"Where are you from?" he tried.

She shifted her eyes away from him, and settled them on some passengers from another small puddle jumper who were walking towards them.

"You're scared to tell me," he said.

She nodded. "It—it's too dangerous."

Clark guided her away from the airport and, to the fields beyond. They walked silently until it was patently clear that they were alone.

"Can you tell me now?" he coaxed gently.

She looked at him a long moment, judging him. Judging his trustworthiness, he suspected.

"Why were *you* in the Congo?" she asked suddenly, turning the tables on him. Clark recognized it as a trick he used sometimes when he was hunting down a story.

"Fair enough," he said. "I was looking for a reporter who had gone missing."

Her mouth dropped open, but she shut it quickly. "A reporter?" she asked weakly.

Clark ran his fingers through his hair, frustrated at his lack of success in finding even a trace of Lois Lane. "Yeah, actually, I was going to ask you," he said, pulling out the wrinkly and worn newspaper clipping of a smiling brunette. "Her name's —"

"Lois Lane," she finished, feeling tears threaten once again. It had been over a year since she had even said that name ...

She reached her fingers out tentatively to the picture he held. That woman seemed like a completely different person ... happy and confident.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"Because ... I'm her," she admitted, her voice suddenly failing her.

"I'm Lois Lane."

She looked up at him after her confession, her heart thumping in fearful anticipation of his response. Part of her wanted to run away, afraid of what she had become. And part of her — wanted desperately to reclaim who she had been.

"Why ... why did you come looking for me ... now?" she asked, barely able to believe that she mattered to anyone in the world anymore. She believed her family and friends had assumed she was dead. And she ... well, she had lived in her own personal hell so that they wouldn't be killed.

"Perry White," Clark said simply.

Lois smiled at the name, and it was as if the sun had peeked through a cloud after a long rainstorm.

"Perry," she said with affection. "He ... he didn't give up on me?" she asked, self-consciously playing with her long red hair.

Clark shook his head. "No, he hired me as a reporter a year ago, and I kept hearing stories about the famous Lois Lane. Perry got wind that the gunrunners were still active in the Congo, and he had some extra expense money lying around ..."

"... So he sent you here on a hope that ... you'd find me?"

He nodded, his eyes alight with the knowledge that he *had* found her.

"Perry's going to be overjoyed to see you—" he began.

"He'll be planning a huge homecoming in the Planet newsroom ... " His words died away as the fear was suddenly back in Lois' eyes, the clouds covering that glimpse of sun.

"I can't — you can't tell Perry. Not yet, anyway," she said, pleading for his understanding.

"Why?" he asked.

She avoided his eyes, her arms crossed in a defensive pose, deciding how she could answer him.

"Just ... can you give me a little time?" she asked, thinking of her family. She needed to somehow get home and find out if they were still safe. Then she needed to form a plan for how she could continue to protect them without them knowing she was alive. If she told them she was back, they would force her to go to the authorities, and she just didn't trust them to protect her from the ubiquitous Boss.

Clark ran his fingers through his hair, thinking. "See, if I could call Perry, I know he could arrange to get you on a plane without a passport ... But as it is ..."

"I know ... it's complicated ... But Clark, all the same, thank you for getting me out of there."

"You're welcome," he said, and before she could stop herself, she tossed herself into his arms.

She breathed the warm comfort of him, the aroma of his leather jacket mingling with the clean male scent that was Clark; it enveloped her, made her feel welcome. In his arms, she could push the demons away. She could forget that she had been forced to kill, that she had almost killed him.

Here, there was sanctuary.

Lois pulled away from his embrace and let herself drown a moment in his chocolate eyes. They seemed to be magnetic, drawing her into their gentle force field moment by moment. She

wanted to kiss him, and she thought, he wanted it too.

Yet, uncertainty held them both at bay. They were on a new path now; they weren't merely strangers who had had a one night stand anymore. The rules had shifted somehow, and they knew that whatever had happened between them was lost to that moment. They would have to find their way together, slower this time.

Lois stepped out of the embrace first. She blushed, not even certain as to why, except that feeling so exposed and yet so protected by this man simply scared her.

"Um ... maybe ... is there a restroom around here?" she asked, hating herself for asking about something so mundane as needing the bathroom.

"Uh, yeah, in the airport. Let's go. While you make use of the facilities, I'll see what I can do about getting an American home without a passport."

Clark was on the phone with the American Embassy, but he was getting nowhere. They said they couldn't help him if he couldn't provide a name for the supposed American woman that needed permission to fly back to the US. He was on hold, waiting to speak to someone higher up, when he heard Lois cry out from the women's restroom across the lobby.

It wasn't very loud, but he had unconsciously attuned his super-hearing to her. He quickly hung up the phone and headed swiftly across to the door of the restroom. He lowered his glasses, seeing through the wall that Lois was struggling with a man who had a gun. Clark was about to rush in when he saw her work her way out of the hold with some very practiced moves. The man was stronger than she was though, and in his next move, easily knocked her down on to the floor. She hit her head on the porcelain sink on the way down, and was frighteningly still when she landed.

She was obviously knocked out, and Clark hoped that would mean the man with the gun would just leave, but instead, he aimed his pistol at her. Helpless, unconscious on the ground, Lois was an easy target for the man.

Clark moved faster than any human could into the bathroom, swiping the gun from the man. He used his own tie to restrain the man in a stall so Clark wouldn't be seen when he slowed down to normal speed to help Lois.

"What the hell?" said the man from behind the stall door. He kicked the door in an effort to weaken the hinges, leaving Clark precious little time to get Lois to safety.

The man had fear in his voice as he spoke, unsure of what was going on. But he evidently felt it necessary to decry that he had lost. "She's a marked woman. It's only a matter of time before the Boss takes care of her," he said with another swift kick at the door, loosening the hinges a bit more.

Clark knelt down beside Lois and quickly x-rayed her body. She seemed fine, with no broken bones, so he gently lifted her head, supporting her neck as he tried to find where she had hit the sink.

He found an ugly bump at her temple, as he gently felt the spot with his thumb. He used a little bit of his freeze breath on the spot to help with some of the bruising. She'd be knocked out for a while at least, though he didn't think any permanent damage had been done. At least he hoped not.

Clark suddenly had an idea. It was a little risky ... if she woke up while they were flying, he'd have some difficult questions to answer.

But she might be out for just enough time to get her back to Metropolis without her knowing a thing.

He decided it was a chance he was willing to take. The Embassy wasn't going to be any help, and he really had no desire to fly commercial anyway.

Clark gently scooped her up into his arms, her head lolling

against his shoulder. As he got her out of there, her beautiful, soft form cradled in his arms, he wondered what had pushed Lois Lane, Perry's prized reporter, to wield guns and keep what he assumed were dangerous secrets. From how Perry had praised her, he felt more confident about his initial instincts about her; she was vulnerable and definitely in danger. She had learned to take care of herself, yet he now had a strong desire to do that for her, to save her from believing she was the monster she thought she had become.

He carried her out of the airport, glad there were only a few people around to wonder why he was carrying a sleeping woman.

He thought of calling what passed for the police around here about the thug in the restroom, but he figured the goon would free himself soon enough, and he didn't want his name linked with Lois', so it would be harder for 'the Boss' to find her again.

Clark made his way to the small field where they had been talking before. He looked around one last time to see if they had been noticed.

"Lois, let's get you home," he whispered, taking off to the skies. "Then maybe you can tell me what really happened to you back there in the Congo."

Lois slept the entire flight back to Metropolis, cradled in Clark's arms. During the flight he applied a little more of his freeze breath to her bruise and x-rayed her again to make sure she was all right. He cradled her closely, so he could fly faster but not too fast. He knew that sometimes his clothes would tear if he flew too fast, and he worried that Lois could be hurt if he went at full speed. He needed her to stay asleep for the trip regardless of how fast he flew, yet he also worried that she was still out of it for the better part of the hour it took to get back to Metropolis.

He needn't have worried though, as like a child who wakes up when the car stops moving after a long trip, Lois slowly came to when they got to his apartment. Clark laid her gently on his bed as she fitfully began to wake up.

"What ... where am I?" she asked, looking around in surprise to find herself apparently in Clark's comfy apartment.

"You have been out of it for a while," Clark said gently. "How do you feel?"

"My head hurts, but otherwise okay," she said, sitting up.

"Would you like something to drink?" he asked, searching for something to say. He had a million questions, and had been left to mull many of them over on the flight back from Africa. But he knew he had to take his time asking them.

"Something hot ... not coffee though —" she said, though seemingly uncertain.

"Tea?" he asked, heading to his kitchen.

"Yeah, thanks," she said. She rose slowly, wincing. She walked around the apartment in a daze, as if she had been dropped onto a foreign planet. Her eyes took in everything ... and then came to rest on him.

"Tea's ready," said Clark, sitting down on his sofa.

She sat next to him, taking the hot cup from him. "I haven't had tea ... in a long time," she said. "Usually I'm a coffee girl. But, tea seemed to make more sense, somehow."

They sat in companionable silence for a bit, though Lois kept looking around, seemingly puzzled.

"When did we get here?" she asked. "How did I manage to sleep the entire flight?"

"Uh, well, you slipped in the ladies room, and I had managed to pull some strings to get us on a plane. I think you were just plain exhausted, Lois."

She seemed to accept his response and continued sipping her tea until Clark cleared his throat to speak again.

"Lois, now that we're back in Metropolis ... can you tell me more about what happened back there?" he asked.

Her face seemed to close to a blank. Clark wasn't sure if she

would speak. They sat there for a long moment, the silence only broken by the gentle clinking of cups meeting saucers.

Then she started talking, very low, looking into her teacup. “I want to tell you everything, Clark. I—I’m just scared. There are people here in Metropolis who can still get to me—I don’t want to put you in danger by associating with me.” She finished with a catch in her throat, and looked up at him with tears in her eyes. “I don’t remember how you got me here, and I don’t really care. I just — I want to put it all behind me, but I can’t. They’ll still come after me.”

“Lois, you can trust me. I—I can protect you,” he said.

She looked at him askance, “How, Clark? You can’t be there every minute, and besides, I—I would hate myself if anything happened to you,” she said earnestly, and he thought back to the moment she had aimed a gun at him. Again, the contradiction stirred questions.

He sighed, “But what else will you do, Lois, if you don’t let me help you?”

She stared at her cup of tea, thinking.

“Can you tell me anything? I need to know what to look out for, *who* to look out for, if you even know.”

“The Boss,” she said absently, then looked up, realizing what she had given away.

Clark remembered the man in the bathroom had mentioned this ‘Boss’ character. “Who is he?”

“I don’t know,” she said nervously. “I just know ... that he’s here in Metropolis. It’s how I s—started on the story in the first place,” she stumbled, nervous to talk about it at all.

Clark reached for her free hand, and urged her to look at him. “Lois, look. I know this is hard for you. I’m here to listen to you — for you to tell me as much as you’re comfortable with.”

She sighed shakily. “I’ve done some horrible things. They *made* me do some horrible things. I appreciate what you’re trying to do for me Clark, really I do. Maybe it would be better if I just leave. Pretend you don’t know me, pretend—”

He suddenly stopped her with a kiss, their teacups clinking as they struggled to set them on the table while reaching for each other. He didn’t know what made him kiss her, but she just seemed so trapped by her own fears and half-truths, that maybe if he could at least get her to acknowledge *this* between them, maybe he could get her to open up about other things as well.

She leaned into his kiss, surrendering briefly to him, and then moments later, pulled away. “I can’t rely on that, Clark,” she said sadly, indicating their attraction to each other. “Just because we shared one night of—wonderful passion, doesn’t mean you owe me anything or that you can even help me.”

He squeezed her hand gently, trying to convey his willingness to help her, no matter how crazy it seemed. “Will you let me try?”

“H-how?” she asked.

He suddenly smiled, “Why don’t we get married?” he said through a laugh, echoing his thoughtless yet totally genuine proposal after their first night together “—I mean, *pretend* to get married. Just until you can figure out who this Boss is and we can figure out how to deal with him.”

She looked at him a moment, a wry smile on her face, “You are a strange man, Clark. You asked me to marry you after sleeping with me, and now that you know who I am, you are willing to pretend marry me to protect me ... why?” she asked blankly.

He shrugged, “I don’t know. Call me altruistic,” he said lightly. “But, what else would you do? Do you have anywhere else to go? Anywhere to live?” He shook his head, seeing that she didn’t have any ready answer. “Lois, look, I don’t know a lot about you, that is true. But you don’t know a lot about me either.”

“You? Ha, I think you are an open book,” she said with a grin, ignoring his questions.

“Oh, really?” he said with a knowing smile.

“I’m pretty sure I learned all of your secrets the night we made love,” she said, her voice sultry and low.

“You think so?” he asked, enjoying knowing that she hadn’t a clue that he had flown her under his own power across the Atlantic this afternoon

She nodded, a little more confident. “All right, let’s do it,” she suddenly said. “I’ll be Linda again for a while then ... and you and I will be — ”

“Mr. and Mrs. Kent.” He finished for her. “Welcome home.”

After a long discussion, Clark convinced Lois that she at least had to let Perry White know she was alive and well. In the end, she let Clark convince her, because part of her really wanted to see her beloved editor again. She couldn’t imagine what he had been through worrying about her, and if he had still held out hope all this time that she was alive, well, she couldn’t let Clark show up empty-handed. Plus, Clark pointed out that they would need the resources of the Planet to help find this Boss character. No one else need know that Lois Lane was back. She looked entirely different anyway, with long red hair and a trim toned body after months of training. Their colleagues at the Planet would simply believe she was just another reporter Clark had met, and that they had fallen in love and eloped. But it would help to have the Chief in on their story. Besides, not much got past Perry. He was bound to recognize her and could cause more trouble by accidentally calling unwanted attention to her presence at the Planet. It was best if he knew from the start that she was back, in danger, and in need of a cover.

So Lois found herself in the conference room, the blinds drawn, waiting for Clark to bring Perry in, her stomach in knots. It had been wonderful to see the newsroom again. Many faces had changed since she had been there last, but the feel and smell of the place was still the same, and it still filled her with excitement. She tried to squelch the tiny hope that sat in her stomach like a bubble, that maybe someday she’d belong there again as herself, award-winning investigative journalist, Lois Lane ...

“Just trust me, Chief. You’ll really want to meet this young woman,” Clark was saying, leading Perry into the room.

“Clark, this is just not the time of year to be hiring—” Perry stopped, seeing the petite figure stand up when he entered. He took a moment to recover, his eyes round as saucers. “Lois, honey? Is that you?” he asked in a strained voice.

“It is, Chief,” she said with a watery smile, so happy to see her dear friend, and reached to hug him. “I’m home.”

Lois clung to Perry as he choked on a sob, and relief and happiness spilled over on her cheeks. She looked over Perry’s shoulder at Clark and mouthed ‘Thank you.’ He smiled back at her in acknowledgment and she turned into Perry’s hug once again.

Perry patted her back like a child and then set her at arm’s length to look at her. “I never gave up,” he said choking up, his eyes alight with the joy that the hope he’d see her again had not been for naught. “You must know that.”

Tears were spilling down her cheeks, “I know, Perry. Clark is proof of that.”

Perry suddenly broke into a huge smile, tears wetting the corner of his eyes, “We should have a party, make it a banner headline! ‘Lois Lane is back!’”

Clark and Lois exchanged looks.

“What is it?” asked Perry, glancing at the two of them in question.

“Perry, I can’t let the world know I’m back yet,” Lois began, looking at Clark to back her up. “I can’t—tell you everything, but Clark and I are after the Boss. I can’t explain further, except that the Boss was the reason that I went missing for two years.”

“I remember you talking about this Boss person before ... “

said Perry, sadness evident on his face, perhaps thinking of time lost without his favorite reporter. “So, what do you want from me? I’ll do what I can to help.”

Clark stepped in. “To protect Lois, we’re—going to pretend we’re married. We also need the resources of the Planet to try and track this guy.”

“Pretend you’re married? What kind of nonsense is that?”

Perry looked at the two of them, as if it had occurred to him that there might be more going on than they were willing to admit.

“Well, it will give me an alias name and make me harder to track. The Boss is dangerous, Perry. You don’t want to know what he’s capable of,” Lois shuddered as memories assaulted her.

“What did this ‘Boss’ do to you, Lois?” Perry asked.

She shook her head. “I—I can’t talk about it yet, Perry,” she said with some strain. “Will you just go along with it, please?” she asked, pleading just a bit.

“Well, uh, I guess I can’t say no. I want to get to the bottom of what happened down there in the Congo.”

“Thanks, Perry. And please, you can’t tell *anyone* that I’m back. It’s too dangerous,” she said.

Perry nodded, disappointed if resigned. “So, can I at least call you Lois?” he asked.

Clark shook his head and gestured towards Lois, “Perry, I’d like you to meet Linda Kent.”

Someone was definitely following her.

Lucy left her gym and as usual, crossed through Centennial Park to her subway stop. She had felt eyes on her as she made her way through the park and kept looking over her shoulder. A man in a dark jacket and sunglasses was definitely on her tail. She started jogging through the park, glad she knew some of its more meandering paths. But then she wondered if that would be just as bad. The paths could get pretty lonely, and she definitely didn’t need to be in a vulnerable position alone. So she jogged back over to the main path ...

Lucy made it out of the park, fumbling for her pepper spray key chain in her gym bag. She had bought it three years ago, at her sister’s insistence. At the time, the suggestion had annoyed her. Lucy believed if Lois could handle investigating the crime sludge of the city on her own, then Lucy could certainly handle walking around the city by herself. Even though the pepper spray was probably too old to be effective, Lucy felt a surge of affection for her sister’s foresight, a sister who in all likelihood was probably dead. Lois had always tried to look out for her.

Lucy ducked into the subway, throwing a cautious look over her shoulder. That guy was still there!

“If I were Lois where would I go?” she mumbled aloud. She decided to head for the densest part of town, down near Forty-second Street. There were always tourists and people there. Surely she could lose this guy downtown.

Lucy changed cars after a few stops, and the goon followed! What was his deal? She tried to think of anyone she may have angered or any boyfriends who were hanging with the wrong crowd, but she couldn’t think of anyone ... But she was in Metropolis after all. Sometimes goons just liked to give girls a hard time.

She got off at the crowded Forty-second Street stop, throwing herself into the crowd, hoping to lose the guy. When she got to street level, she noticed she was still being followed. Lucy started running, pushing people aside.

She hurriedly glanced over her shoulder, and seeing the guy was still close on her heels she screamed, “Help!” as loudly as she could. This being Metropolis, she barely got any glances, let alone any actual assistance. She rounded a corner and found herself in an alleyway.

The guy followed her.

“Please, don’t hurt me,” she whimpered, backing up as the

man came towards her. She couldn’t get a proper grip on the pepper spray and it slipped out of her fingers, falling uselessly to the ground.

“Just want to ask you a few questions,” the man said, pulling out a knife. “You answer me truthfully, and you won’t get hurt.”

He suddenly grabbed her arm to keep her from running again. “Where is Lois Lane?”

“L-Lois?” Lucy asked in surprise, the question completely unexpected. The man gripped her harder, demanding an answer. “I—I don’t know. I haven’t seen her in two years.”

“She’s back in Metropolis, and the Boss wants a word with her. If she contacts you, we’ll know.”

Suddenly she was released, and she fell to the pavement with the force of it, watching the man walk away. He wore large dark glasses, and she couldn’t see much of his face. She thought he might have disguised his voice as well. She’d never be able to tell the police what he looked like.

Shaking, she managed to stand up. She slowly walked out of the alleyway, carefully looking around to make sure the goon was gone.

Had the man been right? Was Lois somehow alive and back in Metropolis?

If she was, then Lois was in big trouble.

Lucy knew she couldn’t go to the police. She had no credible description to give and only the hint of a lead with a name like, ‘the Boss.’ But she thought there was somewhere else that could offer help. Something that her sister had believed in more than anything else in the city.

The Daily Planet.

Lois was drinking the first cup of coffee she’d had at the Planet in over two years. It was only office sludge, but to her it was heaven, a perfect homecoming even if she couldn’t share that fact with many of those around her. She scanned the bullpen, her heart beating a mile a minute as she was sure someone would recognize her, even with her long red hair. She had dyed it a year ago, thinking that she had to sever herself from this old life. Thinking that she could never come back to being Lois Lane, and yet here she was.

Drinking coffee.

At the Planet.

The newsroom as busy as ever around her.

She buried her nose in her cup, feeling tears prickle at her eyes, feeling the life she had left just within reach ...

If only ...

She watched Clark from where she stood at the coffee station. He glanced up at her helplessly from his desk as he fielded questions from some of their colleagues about his new ‘wife’. The story they had concocted evolved after another conference with Perry, as they realized if she immediately started working there full time, she might be recognized. So they told the staff she was a freelance journalist, making it easy for her not to hang around the newsroom too much, allowing people to assume she was writing for other papers. At least temporarily. Until they took care of the Boss.

The worst of all the gossip hounds was a gossip columnist herself, Cat Grant. Cat was one of the few people that Lois knew from before, and probably one of the few people who were likely to actually recognize her. Cat had started a few months before Lois left for the Congo and had annoyed Lois to no end with how she flaunted her sexuality to all and sundry. Lois had no doubt that Cat had probably thrown her usual forward pass at Clark, judging by the shocked if not downright hurt expression on her face when Lois had been briefly introduced as Mrs. Kent at the morning meeting.

And now, it seemed, the Cat woman had finally gotten the courage up to talk to Lois or ‘Linda’ herself, as she was now

making her way over to her.

Lois tried not to panic, but pulled her longish hair over her face a bit and tried to think of a way of disguising her voice.

"Hello, I'm Cat Grant," she said, reaching to shake Lois' hand.

Lois gave a quick shake and pretended to be consumed with fixing her coffee.

Cat leaned her slim body against the nearby table, crossing her arms as she assessed Lois. "So, you and Clark, huh? I have no idea how you did it. He barely even responds when women around the office flirt with him," she said in annoyance, and Lois wondered if by 'women' she meant Cat. "How did you snag him?"

"That's between me and Clark," Lois said, realizing the 'accent' she had pulled out of her bag of tricks was southern. <<Where did *that* come from?>>

Cat was watching Lois closely, possibly sizing her up, maybe trying to see why Clark had *married* her when he hadn't even wanted to go on a date with Cat.

"You know," Cat said, her hand moving to her hip as she assessed 'Linda.' "You look an awful lot like —"

Lois took advantage of someone walking by to pretend she had been bumped. Her coffee spilled all over the front of Cat's too tight dress.

"I'm sooo sorry!" Lois said, half terrified of being discovered and half hysterical with delight at having ruined Cat's dress.

"Geez! This cost me a month's pay!" Cat said angrily, reaching for a paper towel before stomping off to the ladies room.

Lois giggled as she watched Cat walk away, restraining herself from sending her a typical Lois retort about how she thought Cat had been ripped off if *that* dress cost a month's pay!

"What's so funny?" said Clark, coming up beside her.

"Oh, nothing. Just having fun eluding an old colleague." She looked up at him, noticing he looked a little frazzled. "How have the twenty questions been going, Mr. Kent?" she asked playfully, noticing eyes all around the office watching them. She leaned up to whisper in his ear, which might be easily misinterpreted by those around them as a lover's gesture. "I feel like we're on display. You really think this is going to work?"

His warm eyes met hers and he half smiled, "It's got to ... I just hope to get some work done today ... What are you planning on doing? You only have to hang out for an hour or so, but we may be able to at least get some preliminary research done on this Boss character and see if there's anything out there on him ..."

Just then Perry stepped out of his office. "Uh, Mrs. Kent? May I have a word with you in my office?"

Lois nodded, glancing at Clark.

"You want me to come?" he asked gently.

"No, it's all right. I think I can handle Perry," she said with a wink, patting his arm as she passed him.

"What's up ... Chief?" Lois said with a small smile, relishing calling him that again.

Perry closed his office door and went around behind his desk, bringing out a large cardboard box.

"I, uh, knew you'd be back. I kept your stuff, just in case," he said with a catch in his voice.

She was genuinely touched. Even if there weren't that many things of value in that old box, it was nice to know that he had kept them for her. She took a peek inside, memories flooding back about what her life had been like before.

She pulled out her dead office plant with a laugh. "I think it was dead even before I left."

A gasp of genuine relief escaped her lips as she found one thing of value at the bottom of the box. She clutched it to her chest like a child who had been lost.

"My Rolodex! I never thought I'd see this again!" She came over and hugged her editor. "Thanks Perry. For so much. For

this," she said gesturing at the box. "And for sending Clark after me."

"Clark is a good man, Lois. And uh, I'd bet my Elvis collection that man has genuine feelings for you."

"You think so?" she asked absently, seeing through the open blinds to where Clark sat at his desk as yet another colleague came over to congratulate him.

"Honey, if that man is willing to pretend to be married to you, trust me. He cares. A lot. None of the other women in the office have been able to get near him. Ever. He obviously cares about protecting you, and I think you should both be careful."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you've been through some kind of hell and it would be really easy to just become too dependent on a good-looking, kind guy like Clark. Especially if you all are masquerading like you are husband and wife. Just be careful. Be sure that you both know what you're doing. So neither one of you end up hurt."

She glanced over again at Clark. Did he really care about her? She hadn't considered where his heart really lay. She'd simply been caught up in surviving and getting out of the Congo.

Could he actually care for her?

And what did she feel for him?

She pushed the questions away for the moment, knowing that nothing would be possible between them until they had taken care of the Boss.

Besides, Clark had no idea who she really was and what she had done. If she told him ... how could he ever forgive her?

Let alone love her?

Lois refilled her coffee, wondering what she could actually get done in the newsroom today on looking for 'the Boss'. Thanks to Perry restoring her Rolodex, she still had a list of sources from when she worked here before the Congo, though she wondered how many of them were still viable. She also wondered if any of them even knew anything about 'the Boss.' But she couldn't call any of them herself. No one must know that Lois Lane was back in Metropolis.

So that would mean doing something she never thought she'd ever do, trust someone else with her sources, namely Clark. A big step, but one she felt she could do only for him. He had been so amazing, not pushing her too much to tell what had happened in the Congo and bringing her back here, to the Planet, where she could maybe find herself again ...

She asked Perry to keep her box safely hidden in his office for now, as it wouldn't do for Linda Kent to inherit Lois Lane's possessions. She took only her old Rolodex and called for Clark to come into Perry's office a moment. She hid it behind her back and when he entered, almost ceremoniously handed it to him. "Here," she said. "Take it, before I change my mind."

"What's this?" he said, accepting it with a smile.

"The only thing in the world that I never share — sources. Well, that and chocolate," she amended thoughtfully. "But, seriously. These sources took over three years to compile. I don't know how many of them are still viable, but I certainly can't go around calling them myself to find out. So ... " she sighed heavily, "I ... I trust you will use them well."

He reached for her hand, and she felt herself lean toward him unwittingly, drawn to him as always, like a magnet. "I will use them wisely, scout's honour," he said solemnly, crossing his chest.

She laughed nervously, "Yeah, you would be the boy scout type."

Perry watched them from his desk, an interested yet cautious look on his face. "Uh, Kent, I wouldn't let anyone see you with that. If Lois is in as much trouble as you say, it would be a dead giveaway if her Rolodex was flashed around the newsroom."

Lois took it back and hid it in a Daily Planet recyclable bag.

“No one will ever know. I’ll take it — home tonight. And we can work on calling sources later.”

As they walked back over to their desks, the elevator dinged open, and Lois happened to glance up to see who was heading into the bullpen. Lois was shocked to see her sister and looked around in a panic.

“What is it Lois?” Clark asked, immediately looking around to spot what she had seen.

“Clark—that’s my sister, Lucy!” Lois gasped. “She *can’t* see me ... I’ll be in the conference room. Please, talk to her ... But —whatever you do — *don’t* let her know I’m here!”

Clark looked helplessly at where Lois had disappeared and made his way over to a very upset Lucy Lane.

“Can I help you, miss?” he asked.

Lucy gaped at him, and he wondered why she seemed to just stare. He nervously adjusted his glasses on his nose and cleared his throat, waiting for Lucy to answer him. “Do — *did* you know my sister, Lois Lane?” she asked when she gained back her composure.

“I ... I might know the name.” he answered vaguely as he guided Lucy to a chair near his desk. “Why?”

“Some guys are looking for her. They think she’s back in Metropolis! Which is ridiculous! She’s been g—gone for almost two years,” Lucy said, starting to cry just a bit. “I mean, I know Lois can handle herself, but who goes missing in the Congo and after two years makes it back alive, you know?”

Clark felt torn between wanting to comfort Lucy by telling her that her sister was indeed safe and knowing he had to keep his promise of silence to Lois. He handed Lucy a tissue. She was getting more and more upset by the moment. “What do you know about the guys looking for her?” he asked, fishing for information and secretly grateful to whatever had sent her here to him and not to the police.

“Well, one guy chased me down. He had a knife! I thought — well, never mind, he didn’t do anything to me, thank goodness! But he did say if I saw Lois that they would know ... But that’s crazy, right? I mean, if she was *alive*, back in Metropolis, she’d certainly tell her own sister, wouldn’t she?”

“You’d think so,” Clark said wearily. He quickly assessed how at risk he thought Lucy might be, and he grudgingly admitted that Lois had been right. It seemed that if she contacted her family, then these guys would surely come after all of them. It seemed best to leave Lucy in the dark for now, as much as he hated lying to her, even if by omission.

Clark took out a card and wrote a phone number on it. “Here, if you see or hear anything, or get into any trouble, call me. This is my personal number at the Planet, and this is my home number. And I’ll ... see what I can do from my end, okay?”

Lucy took the card and nodded, looking a little dazed after all of the excitement. “Okay. Thank you, Mr ... Kent,” she said, reading the card. She looked up again at him and he thought she might want to say something else. He noticed her suddenly peering overtly at his mock wedding band and had to hold back a laugh as she sighed with disappointment and then promptly blushed as she looked back up at him. She stood up, shaking his hand awkwardly and shrugged on her purse, slipping his card safely inside it.

“Good-bye, Miss Lane,” he said, escorting her to the elevator.

When she left, Clark sighed and headed to the conference room to fill Lois in on what her sister had told him.

He opened the door, expecting a barrage of questions, when instead he found Lois sitting on the floor in tears.

“Lois?” he asked gently.

“I haven’t seen my sister for over two years. And I can’t even tell her I’m alive,” she said.

Clark gathered her into his arms. “I think you’ve done

enough for one day. How about I take you home?”

Lois was quiet on the way home. They got back to Clark’s apartment, and she made her way listlessly to the sofa.

“You okay?” Clark asked.

She simply shook her head, barely glancing at him.

“You—want to talk about it?” he asked, noticing her eyes were glassy with unshed tears.

Again, she shook her head.

He sighed and sat down next to her. He reached for her hand in comfort. She squeezed it briefly and then reached over him to where he had set the bag with her Rolodex down.

“Okay, first I think we should try Bobby Bigmouth. You have to pay him in food. Lots and lots of food, but if anyone knows anything, he should,” she said, businesslike in tone, although she swiped a stray tear from her eye.

“Lois, we don’t have to do this right now,” he said.

“We do, Clark. We absolutely must. We have to do it now and end this,” she said with finality, her brown eyes boring into him. “Because — I don’t want to live feeling like a trapped rabbit anymore.”

She flipped [through] her Rolodex and took out Bobby Bigmouth’s card, handing it to Clark. “Please?”

They spent the next two hours going through a good third of Lois’ contacts. Many of them wouldn’t talk to Clark, and some of them opened up a little when he mentioned that Lois may be alive and that they were her only chance. Clark didn’t get much information either way except that there was definitely someone in Metropolis called the Boss who may have had some less than savory dealings in places like the Congo. No one knew who he was, though.

Lois eventually retreated into silence, frustrated by their lack of progress, and possibly still distraught over seeing her sister and not having been able to say anything. When Clark asked her about it, she immediately changed the subject, which was becoming a sure sign to him that he was onto a touchy topic. He also still didn’t know much detail about what she had gone through in the Congo but he knew it must be tearing her up inside. Though if she wasn’t willing to talk about seeing her sister, he knew for certain she wouldn’t be ready to say anything about what happened in the Congo.

After their marathon call of her contacts, Lois flipped on the television, giving Clark time to do some surreptitious speed-reading. He concluded that Lois was going through Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which was common for war veterans. And he knew she needed to talk about it in order to move on, but she was as tight-lipped as an oyster. So instead, he’d decided that for now, he would just take care of her as best he could, earn her trust, and see where things went from there.

After several hours of fitful silence absently watching TV, Lois came into the kitchen to watch Clark as he sautéed some chicken for dinner. She eyed him silently, leaning against the fridge with her arms loosely crossed.

“Hey, how are you doing?” he asked quietly, throwing in some chopped veggies with the simmering chicken.

She merely nodded, barely acknowledging his question. She came over to him, though didn’t touch him, and watched intently what he was doing.

“You know, I never had much of a family,” she admitted out of the blue.

He didn’t answer, but just turned to her slightly, afraid to speak lest he scare her back into her shell.

“My parents divorced when Lucy and I were teenagers. Lucy and I stuck together like glue after that ... until I went to journalism school. But she still followed me into the big city. And

our mother ... well, she coped with a bottle of wine. Several a day, sometimes," she said bitterly.

"And your father?" Clark quietly prompted, reaching past her to take down some plates.

Lois side-stepped to let him pass playing with her hair a bit, twisting it and pulling it nervously over her shoulder. "Well, Dad was not there so much. He ... had cheated on Mother. Not just with women. He was obsessed with his work."

"I'm sorry, Lois," Clark said sincerely, reaching to gently squeeze her shoulder.

She gave him a wan smile. "The thing is, I was never *that* close to my family, and yet—" she choked on a sudden sob, "I was — *am* willing to do whatever it takes to protect them."

He pulled her into his arms then, dinner forgotten as again, quiet tears wet his shoulder.

"Do you know what that's like?" she asked mournfully. "To sacrifice everything to protect your family?"

He turned her to look at him, thinking of his own secrets, and knowing that even though he couldn't have saved his parents from that car accident so many years ago, he knew that he would have done anything to protect them should the world have found out about him.

"Yeah, I think so," he said as truthfully as he could.

She looked up at him, questions suddenly in her eyes. "And ... your family? How ... what are they like?" she asked, wiping her eyes with a tissue he held out to her.

Clark cleared his throat. It had been a very long time since he had talked about his folks, though they were on his mind daily. But if he wanted to earn her trust, he'd have to give a little as well.

"Well, my parents ... died when I was ten," he said, the images of that horrific night immediately coming back to his mind. He had just been starting to get his powers, and could run faster than any of the kids at school. But he hadn't been fast enough ... the *one* time his parents had truly needed him, and he hadn't gotten there in time ...

"Oh, Clark!" she said sincerely, brushing a lock of hair off his forehead as she searched his eyes. "I'm *so* sorry!"

He patted her hand gently. "Thanks ... I ... learned a lot from my parents, though. They taught me a lot about caring for others. You see, I was sort of adopted," he said, and then stopped. He hadn't meant to tell her that much.

"What do you mean, 'sort of adopted'?" said Lois, her eyes boring into him with questions. He suddenly could see the sharp reporter that she had been, and still was, though she may not realize it.

"My parents ... found me, actually. I don't know who my real parents are," he said sadly. "But my adoptive parents, they were the best parents a kid could have," he rushed on, lest she didn't think he had appreciated them.

"They must have been. They instilled in you a great goodness and gentleness ... " she said, looking up at him with admiration in her eyes. But then he saw her face suddenly cloud over as she retreated into herself again, and he felt like saying, 'no, no, come back to me!' Instead, he held her closer.

"What is it, Lois? Why are you upset?"

"Because I'm so thankful you found me ... and at the same time, I feel like I don't deserve you in my life," she said, pulling away. "You've been a wonderful — friend. No, more than that ... I just — until this is over, I just don't see how we can be together ... I mean ... if you *want* to be together ... " she finished lamely, looking helplessly at him.

"What do you want?" he asked patiently.

"I want to see the Boss — whoever he is — behind bars, for one! I want to be sure my family is safe ... and ... I want ... I want ... " She suddenly hurled herself at him, kissing him fiercely. "I want you," she whispered in his ear, sending shivers

of pleasure up his spine.

He kissed her in return, as she pushed him against the stove. His hand fell on the hot plate, invulnerable to the heat, but he couldn't let her see that. He felt behind him, turning off the stove, even as he kissed her. He picked her up as she wrapped her legs around his hips, still kissing him. Clark carried her to the sofa, gently kissing her face, her collarbone, lower ...

Her hands were on his chest, feeling, seeking. He felt aroused and protective of her at once.

"Make love to me," she whispered, her words echoing from that one other time ...

He didn't want to resist, he wanted to give in to her, but he didn't want to make the mistake he had made that one night. She simply needed comfort, to feel alive and protected, he knew. This wasn't love ...

He regretfully pulled away from her, trying not to let the hurt in her eyes change his mind.

"I'm sorry, Lois. I—we can't. Not—yet," he said, his breathing ragged.

"W-why? I mean, we have before — "

He looked at her intently, acknowledging what had passed between them before. "It was reckless, Lois. And though I don't regret it, I regret how it happened. And ... well, we need to — take care of some things before we go there again."

She nodded, not looking at him, but started buttoning her blouse and moving away from him. "No, you're right, Clark. It was a mistake ... I — I — think I'm going out for a bit," she said suddenly, grabbing *his* jacket as she headed to the door.

"Lois, wait," he said, worried about her wandering the streets upset.

"I'll be fine, Clark, really. I just need ... some time alone, to think." She turned to him, hearing the pleading in his voice. "Please, Clark? I'll be fine. I'll be back in an hour, okay?"

He nodded, "If that's what you think you need. I'll ... be here, I guess," he said, gesturing to the dinner he had just finished preparing for them. "Just, be careful, okay?"

"I'll eat when I get back," she said, shutting the door behind her, leaving him feeling bereft, and very worried.

Lois walked down Clinton Street, Clark's leather jacket pulled tight around her. She didn't even have her own jacket, for crying out loud! They had gone shopping yesterday for some basics. Lois had gotten the bare minimum, not wanting to feel obligated to Clark anymore than she absolutely must, although she was already for all kinds of reasons.

She pulled the collar up to her nose, breathing in his scent. It comforted her somehow, made up for that embarrassing moment that had forced her out of the apartment. She was absolutely attracted to him, and she was grateful to him for getting her out of the Congo, even if it complicated things. And that was just it; she knew she couldn't rely on him simply because he was attractive and helpful. His kindness was just too much. She wanted to pay him back somehow, and well, what other currency was there for a woman without a dime to her name?

She felt her cheeks blush with shame. That's not how Clark would look at it, and she knew it. She didn't really believe that either, even if she had let herself get carried away and think it. She simply longed for that connection, that wonderful moment when they had first made love and she had felt completely safe, loved even. She had never felt so right in any man's arms as she had in Clark's. It scared her and ... completed her all at once.

Maybe Clark was right, that they should take things slower now that she was back in Metropolis. Things might just get more complicated if they slept together again, as much as she longed to lose herself in his embrace ...

She shivered ... it was certainly getting colder. She buried her nose in Clark's jacket and started fishing around his pockets for

some gloves. She didn't find any, but she found something else that intrigued her. It was small, oval, and cold. Puzzled, she pulled it out of the pocket and looked at it under a street lamp. It was a fired bullet ... why would Clark have a fired bullet in his pocket, a man who obviously eschewed guns?

She looked at it closer, trying to puzzle where it may have come from. The casing was smooshed, but she could see some numbers on it, though the middle ones were blurry: "C48**94," she read aloud and then got chills up her spine.

"No, it couldn't be, could it?" she asked herself aloud. The markings were the same as *her* bullets. That would have to mean that this bullet had been fired from *her* gun ... and had hit something to crunch up like that, like steel.

How could he have found it in the dark that night, in that short time between her firing it and her running to his arms? She hadn't seen him bend over to pick up anything ... How would he have gotten this bullet?

The only explanation was that he had *caught* it somehow, bounced off the helicopter maybe, though she knew that was patently absurd. And if he had somehow found it without her noticing, then, did he know she had shot at him?

And if he knew, what must he think of her?

Lost in her thoughts, Lois hadn't paid much attention to where she was going. She had somehow wandered over to her old neighborhood though, and decided to take a peek at her old apartment. It was two long years ago that she had lived there, which seemed like a lifetime ago. She found her old building easily and looked up to the fifth floor to spot her apartment. A light was on, and she wondered who was living in it now.

She had loved that place. It had been just the right size for her, had a decent view, and was the first place she had rented without assistance from either of her parents. She noticed a woman's shadow in the window and it made Lois smile, wondering if it was some young professional living there — someone not unlike she had been. Lois saw her lean over the ledge of the window and Lois suddenly realized the woman was being threatened as the woman dodged something being thrown at her. Lois looked around, wondering what she could do to help. She no longer had keys to the apartment, having lost them long ago in the Congo, so she couldn't easily get in the building. She watched helplessly as the woman struggled with a man at the open window.

"Help!" cried the woman as the man lunged for what looked like her throat, though it was difficult to tell exactly what was going on from the street.

Lois froze in terror as she recognized the woman's voice! It was her sister, Lucy!

"Help! Please!" Lucy cried again. Lois looked around helplessly, about to burst into the front door with force, when she saw *something* move into her sister's apartment window, faster than she had ever seen anything move, and stop the man who was attacking her sister.

Lois couldn't see exactly what was going on from five stories below, but she saw that Lucy was all right. Lucy leaned out the window to try to glimpse what had rushed in and saved her. Finding nothing, Lucy sagged against the windowpane in relief. Whoever had been after her was miraculously gone, snatched like magic from her apartment.

Clark hadn't been able to let Lois blow off steam completely on her own, knowing that the Boss was out there somewhere, looking for her. So he flew above her, a quiet guardian watching over her as she walked listlessly around the neighborhood, apparently caught up in her emotions. He felt bad for pushing her away, yet he couldn't allow her simply to hide from herself or her past by using her body. It wasn't healthy, and he cared too much

about her to let her do that.

As he watched her walk down his street, Clark's mind busied itself piecing together the puzzle that was Lois, her strong will and deep heart — She was obviously fiercely protective of those close to her, even if it meant her own unhappiness.

Clark desperately wanted to help her. He felt something fine and infinite between them, possibilities they could reach if only they could set the world right and she could begin to heal. She was obviously deeply troubled, and he simply wished she would tell him the whole truth. Then maybe they could figure out how the Boss was connected to the gunrunners in the Congo and Lois could begin to really live again.

He suddenly noticed her digging for something in his jacket and his heart stopped. He had forgotten to dispose of that bullet! He watched as she dug out the bullet from his jacket and he felt a moment of panic, wondering what conclusions she would make from it. She seemed reasonably puzzled by it, and he knew it was a huge leap for her to think that he had actually caught it, but he still felt the insidious fear that if someone were to discover his abilities, his whole world could crumble. As much as he wanted to protect her, he worried he would put her in more danger if word got out she was living with a super powered alien.

Besides, what would she think of him if she knew the truth about him?

Suddenly, he heard a cry from a building near Lois. He recognized the scream for help as her sister's. Without hesitation, thinking of nothing other than protecting Lois' sister, Clark dashed over to the window, remembering to keep his speed up fast enough so that no human eye could see him. There was a man with gun, questioning Lucy about Lois.

"We know you went to the Daily Planet today, Miss Lane. Surely you must know something that you would like to tell us?" he threatened.

"I don't know anything," Lucy said, her voice shaking in panic.

Clark suddenly seared the gun from the man's hands using his heat vision and whisked him out of the apartment. He took the villain to a rooftop, and lifted the man by the collar, facing away from him, making sure he couldn't see Clark's face. He hoped to scare him enough to get some information, at least.

Clark lowered his voice, summoning as much authority and intimidation as he could. "What were you doing in Miss Lane's apartment?" he asked with a small shake.

"I—I—just put me down, will ya?" the man asked.

"Not until you answer my questions," Clark responded.

"The Boss sent me to scare her, that's all. He wants someone and he thinks the chick upstairs is her sister," he said.

Clark tried for a direct approach. "Who is the Boss?"

The man laughed, "I have no idea, honest. I think he has a lot of money though, and a lot of pull in the city. But, I'm just doing a job, all right? Can you ease off?"

Clark realized he wasn't going to find out more from him, but he didn't set the man down just yet. "Leave Lucy Lane alone. She's under my protection, and I'm always around."

Clark flew him to an alley a few blocks away from Lucy's apartment and then flew off before the man could glimpse him.

He at least had a clue. Whoever the Boss was, he obviously had his fingers in a ton of pies and gunrunning was just one of them.

Lois made her way quickly back to Clark's apartment. She was dying to tell him what she saw. She knew there was a story in what had just happened. She felt the excitement of it all the way to her toes, a feeling she hadn't had since before she left for the Congo. Who was that super fast, super strong man or thing that had saved Lucy? This was big news, she knew it. Maybe she couldn't write about it as Lois Lane yet, but Linda Kent sure

could.

“Clark?” she called as she came in, her heart pounding with excitement.

“You feeling better?” he asked, coming towards her.

“I feel wonderful! Clark, I have an idea for a story!” she cried, momentarily unconcerned about the bullet she had found in his pocket and simply being Lois Lane, ace reporter with a hot story on her hands. “I haven’t felt this excited in *years!* I want to call Perry! This is going to be big!” she said, suddenly reaching for the phone.

Clark pulled it deftly away from her before she could dial. “Hold on. What’s got you so excited?” he asked with some nervousness as he quietly set the phone down away from her.

She gave him a look of mingled exasperation and excitement. “I saw something amazing, Clark! Someone or *something* moved faster than I have ever seen and saved my sister! I was feeling a bit low and headed over to my old apartment ... and actually, Lucy is living there! Now, I am worried that the Boss may suspect I’m here and has been threatening Lucy, but apparently, she has a guardian angel out there,” Lois said, grinning, as she paced back and forth before Clark.

She suddenly glanced at him, and noticed he had gone a little pale. “Clark? Are you all right?”

He nodded, “Yeah, but Lois, do you really think it’s a good idea to go after this story with your sister involved?”

“Well, I don’t have to print anything about that. But Clark, there is some sort of, I don’t know, super powered being out there and he seems like he wants to help!”

“Are you sure you know what you saw?” he asked, running his fingers through his hair nervously.

“Absolutely! I wish—” she suddenly stopped in her tracks, the feeling of being held captive by circumstance dampening her excitement a bit. “I wish I could talk to Lucy about it,” she finished quietly. “If I could somehow interview her — *wait!* You could!” she said, turning to Clark. She stepped up to him and patted his chest gently.

“She talked to you the other day. You could just check up on her. I know Lucy. She won’t be able to hide something like this. She’ll be dying to tell someone. And who better than Clark Kent of the Daily Planet? You can interview her and we’ll both write the story!” she finished triumphantly.

“But what if this attracts the attention of the Boss?” asked Clark cautiously.

“It might be a good thing. Maybe we can draw him out. But I told you, we don’t need to mention Lucy.”

“How do you know this ... person you saw is good?”

Lois stopped and looked into his eyes, needing Clark on her side about this. “He saved my sister. It’s as simple as that. He’s good, Clark. I’m sure of it.”

Clark swallowed visibly. “How—I mean, are you sure that Lucy was threatened? Are you sure that this ... person or—whatever actually helped?”

“Well, we’ll find out.”

“How will we even contact Lucy? I mean, I only gave her my card—”

Lois rolled her eyes. “Look, I know my sister. I’m sure she was attracted to you. Even if she thinks you’re trouble, I’m sure she’ll find an excuse to call. And if not, we’ll think of something.”

Lois was making Clark thoroughly nervous. He stood in the bathroom, brushing his impervious teeth for far longer than necessary, mulling over what had just happened that evening. He was glad that Lois had perked up at the idea of a story, but he was terrified of the consequences, both for her and himself. Since moving to Metropolis, he had helped out surreptitiously when and where he could. His helping at fires and stopping small time

criminals had gone virtually unnoticed by the press, and he had managed to sneak by with very few people questioning about who was helping. But now, with Lois curious about him, he had no idea what to do. He wouldn’t stop helping, and he would certainly do all he could to protect Lois and her sister, but he wondered at what cost to his secret. If he misstepped even a little bit, he might put Lois in even more danger. He had to think of something, some way to help, some sort of disguise maybe, that would help Clark Kent be entirely disassociated from the helpful blur that Lois was about to tell all of Metropolis existed.

“Shoot, Mad Dog,” said Jon. “Do it, or you will die!”

She had killed only once before, and it had been hell. How many times would she have to do this? How many times until she could escape or —

The man she was aiming for turned to look at her. He had a handsome smile and dark wavy hair. His broad shoulders seemed capable of carrying the weight of the world on them.

“Kill him, Mad Dog,” came Jon’s voice from somewhere in the dark, over her shoulder. That insistent, sinister voice that she had heard so many times, forcing her to kill, to abandon all she held dear ...

“No! Clark!” she screamed, squeezing the trigger and watching in horror as Clark fell to the ground.

“No, Clark! I’m sorry! Clark! Don’t die! Clark ... !”

“Lois ... Lois? Wake up,” Clark said, gently shaking her shoulder.

“Clark! I’m sorry ... oh, God, Clark!” she cried.

Clark cradled her in his arms, trying to stir her awake. “Lois, it’s me. It’s just a dream. Wake up.” The room was awash in moonlight, bright enough to see each other in the dark. He had run in from the living room when he heard her distress. Despite Lois’ protests, he had insisted on sleeping on the couch. It seemed less complicated that way ... at least for now.

Her eyes fluttered open, tears in the corners. “Oh, Clark,” she said in anguish, burying her nose in his shoulder. “I—I can’t do this anymore ... I can’t ...” she said miserably, the elated reporter of a few hours ago was completely gone, replaced by the hurting woman in his arms.

It was enough to break his heart; he’d prefer to see her excited about a story—even one that could potentially disrupt his life irreparably — than see her so broken, so distraught.

“Shhh ... what? What can’t you do?” he asked soothingly. She clung tightly to him, unable to form words.

“You want to talk about it?” he asked gently, not sure if he was asking about her dream or finally about what she had been doing in the Congo, but willing to hear either.

She cried into his chest, small whimpering noises that were so uncharacteristic of her. “I’m not weak,” she said softly, as if to contradict her helpless position in his arms.

“I never said you were,” he said quickly, wanting to reassure her. “In fact, I think you are one of the strongest women I know.”

“Really?” she said, sitting up slightly.

“Yeah.”

She reached for a Kleenex and wiped her eyes. “I ... I was having a nightmare ...”

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked again encouragingly.

“N-not yet,” she said cautiously. “But ... I do want to talk ... You need to know ... what I am,” she said, her voice cracking with tears at the last.

Clark tried to soothe her, gently rubbing her back, calming her.

“Tell me whatever you want. There’s no pressure, Lois,” he said soothingly.

A long, heavy silence was in the room as Clark waited for her to begin. At long last, she pulled away from him, playing with the

sheet as she avoided looking at him.

"I was kidnapped by the very men I was chasing. I knew they were evil, but I had no idea —" she sighed, tears choking her again.

She glanced up at Clark, and he hoped he looked encouraging enough so she would continue.

"I thought they would kill me ... or — well, you know what can happen to women prisoners."

"Did they?" he asked in horror.

"No, but I almost wished they had. Maybe it would have been better. At least if they had raped me, I would know it wasn't my fault," she said sadly, with a pained expression.

"Lois. It wasn't your fault. Whatever happened, wasn't your fault. You were a prisoner. You fought to survive."

She nodded, shoring up her courage. "I'll let you make that judgment after I tell you," she said simply. She looked up to the ceiling, trying to dampen the tears that kept wanting to fall. "I never cry. In fact, I haven't cried ... for ... a long time," she said.

"It's okay. It's natural after being in a very stressful situation," he said, gently rubbing her arm in a calming motion.

She nodded, "Maybe" Then a sigh, "Okay, I'm just going to get this out. They kidnapped me." She swallowed, "And they gave me a choice."

"And is it this choice that you feel guilty about?" he asked cautiously.

She nodded, shame evident on her face.

Clark gently lifted her chin to his eyes. "Lois, I won't judge you. I'm here for you. Whatever happened ... it's in the past. I want to help you ... move on," he offered tenderly.

He offered whatever warmth and compassion he could, hoping Lois could see it in his face, in his eyes. He meant it. He was there for her, however she needed him.

"Why?" she asked brokenly.

"Ah, Lois" he said, seeing her distraught expression and pulling her into his arms again. "I guess ... no, I *know* because ... I feel something ... vital when I'm with you. I ... I think I'm —"

She turned to face him, stopping him with a finger to his lips. "Shhh ... don't say it. Not yet. I have to tell you this first. This ugly — thing that I became in the Congo. And if you still feel that way when I tell you, then you can say it," she said, releasing his mouth from her fingers, only to kiss him gently.

Lois sat back on the bed, bracing herself to tell her darkest secret to the one man who has meant anything to her in a long time — if not ever.

"They kidnapped me and trained me to be an assassin," she whispered, her cheeks dark with shame.

"An assassin?" he asked, seemingly uncertain.

"Yes. My choice was to become an assassin or be killed myself," she said quietly, burying her head in her hands.

"Oh Lois ... that's ... horrible! Unconscionable!" Clark cried in dismay.

She cringed, knowing she had said too much. "I told you that you would hate me," she said painfully.

"You? Lois ... I ... could never hate *you*," he said with feeling. "No, Lois, you misunderstand me. I mean those *monsters* in the Congo! To give you such a —choice! If you could call it that."

"But I became one of those monsters, Clark. I *killed* people," she said with dark shame. <<I almost killed *you*>>. "I don't know if they were good or bad people, it was a thin line between the two ... but it doesn't matter. I ... ask God to forgive me every day that I didn't have the courage to let them kill me instead."

He pulled her tighter to his chest.

"I'm glad they didn't kill you, Lois ... You're not a killer. You did what you had to survive, like a soldier, in a war. I wish you hadn't had to kill, but I know you're not a killer."

She wept on his shoulder, trembling in his arms. "I just want to go back to being Lois Lane, ace reporter. She was so much less complicated. That's why I am so excited about this story, about this super blur." She sat up and wiped her eyes. "Don't you see? Only by being Lois Lane—even incognito — only by writing stories about the good guys overcoming the bad ones can I ever hope to move on — to find my soul again."

Lois got up suddenly from his embrace and walked over to the window. The moonlight made her skin appear almost alabaster as she turned back towards Clark.

"Don't you see? If there is some sort of superhero out there, it gives me hope. In this completely hopeless situation where we're looking for a guy who obviously knows how to hide himself, who can go after my sister even in her own apartment —" She put up a hand to stop Clark, as he seemed about to interrupt. "I know we don't have the details about Lucy yet, but Clark, trust me. It had to be the Boss or at least one of his minions that was there tonight. And some ... guardian angel swooped down and saved the day. I *have* to write about it Clark. Don't you see?"

She came and sat back down on the bed and reached for his hands. "What happened in the Congo — I regret every moment of it except for the fact that I survived. And—that I met you," she said quietly.

"Lois —"

"Shh," she said, leaning her head against his chest. "Just hold me, will you? And tomorrow, let's see what we can do about writing about Metropolis' new hero."

Early the next morning at the Planet, Lois took over Clark's computer to begin composing her article about the blur.

"Quit pacing, Clark," she said, glancing over her shoulder. "I know you're worried about Lucy. So am I. But this is in the vaguest terms possible. It simply states that there is something supernatural out there helping the citizens of Metropolis," she said gesturing towards the computer screen, where her story was half finished.

Perry evidently caught sight of them wrapped up in Lois' typing, as he was coming over to see what they were working on.

"You two have a lead on ... the Boss?" he asked, lowering his voice conspiratorially.

Lois turned to Perry, eyes sparkling. "Even better!" she said with triumph. "Perry, there's something amazing going on in Metropolis and the Planet will have the exclusive story!"

Perry smiled enthusiastically, "Well let's hear it, L—uh, Mrs. Kent."

"Perry, you won't believe this. I was walking by my sister's apartment last night and someone or *something* literally *flew* into her window to save her from some thug! I could only see a blur, but I think it was a person! Can you imagine?"

Perry lost some of his enthusiasm, but seemed loathe to dampen Lois' spirits after all she had been through. "You're right, I don't believe it. Kent, can you back her up on this?"

Clark adjusted his glasses, apparently uncertain. "I, uh, wasn't there, Chief. I can't say."

"Perry, I *know* what I saw!" Lois exclaimed determinedly when there was no support forthcoming from Clark.

"Look honey, I'm really happy to see you excited about a story, really I am. But this is—well, I just can't print it. We need witnesses. And with what you've told me, I doubt you want to get your sister involved," Perry said quietly, his face strained with having to dampen down Lois' excitement.

"But Perry —" she began helplessly, then decided on another tactic. "Clark?"

Clark gestured vaguely at the screen. "He's right, L-Linda," he said, mindful of their cover around the office. "We need more evidence."

Perry patted her gently on the shoulder. "We can't go looking

like a gossip rag, printing something with not much to back it up. I'm sorry, honey. But you're gonna have to find something more solid that I can print."

As Perry walked away, Lois stared glumly at her story. "I know what I saw," she said defiantly, crossing her arms.

Clark placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I believe you. But Perry's right. You can't print that. Let's just wait and see — if he, or *it* acts again. And hopefully in a way that has nothing to do with your sister."

Lois sat crossing her arms, thinking. She knew that there was a huge story here, if only Perry would let her pursue it. She wished she could call her sister, or that she would call Clark. Then maybe she could get confirmation about what she saw, which would be something in the way of evidence, even if they changed her name.

She looked up at Clark. Seeing his expression, she laid her hand on his arm, "Clark, please stop worrying. Perry won't print anything yet anyway. If you talk to my sister, then we'll sort out how to handle the story. Everything will be okay." She smiled at him, thinking about what Perry had said about him caring for her. She thought about how compassionate he had been last night when she had confessed her darkest sin, and she wondered at the luck of having him in her life, even if it was just until the Boss was found and put away.

He sighed, seemingly shaking off his worries as he smiled down at her. "I know. Hey, you want to get out of here for some lunch?"

She pulled out a manila folder that she had tucked behind his computer earlier. "Actually, I'd like to go to —home and sort through this file. These are all of my notes on all of the underhanded dealings that have happened in the city the year before I left. If there are any clues as to who the Boss is, hopefully I'll find them here."

"You want company?" he asked.

"I need to do this on my own, Clark," she said, not looking at him. "I have to sort through a lot of things in my head. You know? Try and remember any clues I may have been given while I was down there. I appreciate your help, but I'm sure Perry needs you here. I'll be fine," she said, forcing confidence. The truth was, she was afraid once she started dredging up memories, she'd fall to pieces again, and she needed to do that alone this time. Push through and try to remember. If she had Clark's comforting arms there, she was afraid she'd just push it all away for the safety of his embrace and never discover the truth.

Clark seemed worried about her but resigned. He nodded and then leaned in to kiss her cheek. "Are you sure? I mean, you think you'll be safe?"

"Clark, I'll get a cab straight to the apartment. I'm sure I'll be fine. And besides, if there is a problem, maybe the blur will be right there to help me," she said smugly. She turned to look at him. "I know what I saw," Lois said stubbornly, expecting a protest from Clark.

He smiled unexpectedly, surprising her. "All right. I'm just a phone call away if you need me."

Lois gathered her things, her stomach doing flip flops as she realized this would probably be the longest time they would be apart since she had gotten back to Metropolis. But she needed to do this, for herself, and for any hope of solving the mystery that was the Boss.

Clark helped her put on her coat. "If it helps, I have some notes of my own. Some conjectures I've made based on your notes I read before — well, before I found you. And some other clues I've put together."

"I appreciate that, Clark. And this is a joint effort. We can go over your stuff tonight. I just — I need to face some of this alone."

His eyes searched hers and she felt her heart suddenly beat a

little faster as he spoke. "I respect that, Lois. Just know, you're not alone. Unless—you want to be. But I'm here for you. Don't forget that."

She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat, thinking of all the men who had been in her life who had patently *not* been there for her—or worse, had tried to destroy her — including her father, although to a much lesser extent. She simply had never been good enough for him.

"Why?" she breathed out before she could stop herself.

"Because — I am, Lois. Let's leave it at that for now ... So, I'll bring home dinner?"

Lois sat cross-legged on Clark's floor, all her old news clippings spread out around her. She had stories dating from the year before she disappeared covering local drug busts, arson, theft, and even a few murders. A lot of the crimes involved local businesses that were attached to larger firms, so she began compiling a list of all the businesses tied in to the stories, planning on cross-referencing them later with other larger conglomerates. She knew there had to be a common thread between these crimes and 'the Boss.' Obviously, somebody was running much of the crime in Metropolis though, because the thugs involved implied there was someone behind their actions, but always ultimately took the rap for the crime. They were all protecting someone.

But who?

She suspected many of them didn't even know. Which made her speculate further that it had to be someone very powerful indeed.

Lois sighed, her back starting to ache from sitting on the floor all afternoon. She thumbed through the last half dozen articles she had written, the ones that had ultimately led to her jumping on a plane to the Congo.

Bobby Bigmouth had told her before she left that some entrepreneur in the city was laundering money by selling illegal guns in the Congo and the money was being funneled through some space project. She hadn't gotten further than that, but knew she had needed evidence that money was indeed exchanging hands in the Congo and being sent back to Metropolis.

She propped her knees up, her hands covering her face as she tried to think back. Back to when she was in the Congo, before she had been caught—

The men were on the phone to someone in Metropolis, Lois knew, having heard them ask to be connected by an operator. But whoever they spoke to also passed them on through a few other channels before they reached their man.

"Tell the Boss the money will be sent under the code name we agreed on. We need a new shipment of M-16s and long rifles ... I don't care if he's on his yacht, I've got my own neck to look after! Tell him that's what we need, at least 50 of each ... Got it? ... Yeah, okay, I know he has a pet project, but there's only so much that can be sent at a time ... he knows that ..."

Lois crept around the warehouse, hiding behind large gun-filled crates, being careful to keep quite a distance from the men a few yards away. This was the first direct contact she had heard with anyone in Metropolis and she wasn't going to blow it by being discovered. She had been there a week and it had taken her that long to track down this storage area.

Her heart pounded as she scribbled a few notes on her pad: "the Boss ... filthy rich? (hanging out on a yacht!?) ... money to be sent to Metropolis ... guns ... pet project."

Lois rubbed her temples, remembering being back there again. She had been so naive, thinking she could take on a whole crime organization. If only she could get the proof, she had thought. She had gotten that and then some ... and oh how it cost her ...

There it was, the thing that she hadn't wanted Clark to see.

Her guilt and her fears. She let herself wallow in the feelings, trying to exorcise them, push them forward so she could move on. Tears came, as she knew they would, and she let them flow. She had denied herself the comfort of Clark's shoulder, knowing that she had to work through *this* — alone. This wasn't a path he could walk for her, even though he seemed game to try.

She kicked the pile of semi-organized articles as she stood up.

"Why? Why did I let them force me —" she said aloud, realizing that if she had somehow gotten away before, then maybe her family wouldn't have been at risk. Or at least, not as much as she had feared. And for that, she felt entirely guilty. She had let them terrify her and force her to do things—no, say it, Lane — to *kill!* And it might all have been for naught.

She suddenly walked over to Clark's large picture window, looking up at the bit of sky that was visible between the buildings, thinking of the blur she had seen the other night at her old apartment. He, or whatever it was that had been there, had saved her sister, and had managed to nullify her sacrifice in one great swoop.

But she didn't begrudge her sister's rescue, it simply compounded how many wrongs she still had left to right. It made her purpose clearer, too. She had to see the Boss put away and destroyed. And she would fight till her last breath to stop the evil in the world, even if she only managed to do it here in Metropolis.

She and the blur would somehow save the world ... and then maybe, she could forgive herself ... for being a coward.

Lucy argued with herself the whole way over to Clinton Street. She had justified looking up Clark Kent's address in the phone book, telling herself she was just double-checking the number he had given her. And she was going to his apartment because what had happened the other night was just too big to share at the Planet. Surely, a news reporter would want this story all to himself and wouldn't want nosy colleagues stealing the scoop.

She kept telling herself that, to avoid thinking about the fact that he was married and that his wife was probably home. She avoided thinking that she was acting just a little ... well, stalkerish.

Lucy smoothed her skirt before knocking on the door, at the same time trying not to think about how she looked. The man was married! It didn't matter how gorgeous he was, he was off the market.

Lucy was about to raise her fist again to knock when the door opened. The bit she could see of the apartment was dark, and all she could make out was the vague form of a woman on the other side of the curtained door. <<Oh great. His wife, no doubt.>>

"Can I help you?" came a woman's deep southern voice.

"Um, sorry to bother you. I was looking for Mr. Kent."

"He—he's at the Planet," the woman said, her voice hesitant for a second.

"Could I leave a note for him here? I have to be back at work and I don't have time—"

"You could call him," suggested the woman.

Lucy tried to get a closer look at the woman, surprised by her suggestion, though she kept pushing the door more closed.

"Wait! Please! Could I just have a pad and pencil?" Lucy said, trying to get a glimpse of the inside of Clark's apartment.

<<If only his wife would move out of the way!>>

The woman sighed and thrust a post-it pad and a pen at Lucy.

Lucy scribbled, "Hi Mr. Kent. I have BIG news! Good news! Hopefully it will be good for your career! Amazing thing happened — must share with trusted reporter. Lucy Lane."

Lucy handed the note and pen back through the door. "You know, I love southern accents. When we were kids, my sister and

I used to pretend to be Scarlett O'Hara in 'Gone with the Wind,' though I always thought my—sister made a better Scarlett than me ..." Lucy said, suddenly choking up.

"Your—sister?" asked the woman, her southern accent faltering just a little.

"Yeah, she uh, died ... I think. In the Congo. She was a reporter like Mr. Kent ... I'm sorry ... here I am crying all over your front stoop. You must think — I don't know ... Sorry to bother you," Lucy said, wondering why it still hurt to think of Lois.

"Wait," the woman said, "Did anyone follow you here? Does anyone know you came here?"

Lucy stopped crying, wondering at the strange questions. <<What kind of paranoid freak did that handsome devil marry?>> Lucy shook her head to the woman's questions, then realizing that she probably couldn't see her through the curtain said, "No. I'm alone."

The woman gestured for her to come inside, though Lucy still couldn't see her face properly. Lucy hesitated, wondering if this were some kind of trap. But she trusted Mr. Kent, and therefore, she thought she could trust his wife.

Lucy stepped inside and shut the door. The woman finally faced her, with tears in her own eyes.

"Your sister's not dead, Lucy. She's right here."

Lois didn't know why she had opened the door. That had been foolish to start with. It could have been anybody ... yet she had seen the slight form of a woman through the glass and her curiosity got the best of her. What if it was a girlfriend of Clark's? She should know if he had a girlfriend ... whatever their relationship was could be made infinitely more complicated than it already was if there was another woman involved.

And then, there had stood her sister. Her sweet, somewhat naive little sister. She had almost been brave enough to leave Lucy thinking she had just had a bizarre encounter with Clark's reclusive wife, but then Lucy had brought up their favorite childhood memory and had started crying.

It was the tears that got her. They made her realize she was hurting her sister by not telling her the truth. And besides, Lucy had a guardian now in the blur. So, Lois no longer wanting to be a coward, invited her sister in.

They were staring at each other, both of their cheeks wet with tears.

"Lois?" squeaked Lucy.

Lois nodded. "Yeah. I'm sorry, sis. I really am."

"For what?" said Lucy, reaching out to hug her long-lost sister.

"For not telling you that I was back," Lois said, relishing holding her sibling close once again.

"When did you get back?"

"A few days ago."

Lucy pulled away to look at her. "Do you know there are some seriously dangerous guys looking for you?"

Lois nodded solemnly. "Yeah, I know. That's why I didn't tell you."

Lois handed Lucy a tissue and wiped her own eyes with one. When Lucy had composed herself, she suddenly looked up at Lois.

Lois watched Lucy as the penny dropped. "So you're married to Mr. Kent?"

Lois laughed wryly. "Not exactly. It's a cover, Lucy. There are some really bad guys out there and Clark and I — are working to put them away."

"Lois, I came here because something unbelievable happened in my—well, your old apartment. I was going to tell Mr. Kent about it."

"Oh? And why didn't you try to seek him out professionally

at the Planet?” Lois couldn’t help a little teasing. It felt so good to tease her little sister again.

Lucy had the grace to blush. “Ok, I know. Not the most professional angle. But Lois, that man is *gorgeous!* And it seems, *not* married,” Lucy finished triumphantly.

“Clark is not a piece of meat, Lucy. And, no he’s not married, but he and I—” Lois began defensively, but realized she was uncertain how to define *what* they were.

“Are you a couple then?”

“Sort of. Look, it’s complicated and it’s none of your business, Lucy,” Lois hurried on.

“I’m sorry. I’ll lay off, if you want.”

Lois hesitated, “Have you—talked to Mom or Dad?”

Lucy nodded. “Yeah. Dad is in some unpronounceable European city doing research. Mother is chasing after a man half her age, but she is doing okay.”

Lois crossed her arms nervously. “Well, good. I’m glad Dad is somewhere remote. But Mother —”

Lucy suddenly looked worried. “Lois. I—I was scared when these men started threatening me about you. So I mentioned it to Mother. Was that a mistake?”

“It isn’t as long as she doesn’t go to the police. And Lucy, you can’t tell her I’m here in Metropolis. It’s dangerous information.”

“No, I don’t think she’ll go to the police. I talked her out of that the other night on the phone. She is worried, though. Can I at least tell her you’re alive?”

Lois sighed. “In the vaguest terms possible, I suppose. That they are looking for me, perhaps. But you can’t let her know you’ve seen me.” Lois started pacing. “Maybe it was a mistake to let you in here ... But I’m just so —” she looked over at her sister, whose face was full of concern. Lois smiled, shaking off her fears. “Tell me all about the other night when you were rescued.”

“Wait, how did you know I was rescued?”

“I was there, Lucy. Just taking a walk, and I saw it all.”

“Then I’m not crazy, right? There was something that flew into my apartment and took that bad guy out of there. I’ve been going over it in my mind, trying to sort out what the heck it could have been ... what do you think it was, Lois?”

Lois shrugged. “I don’t know. But whatever it is, it seems to want to help. And that can’t be a bad thing. I mean, it gave me the courage to open that door,” she suddenly beamed a smile at her sister.

They hugged. “I’ve missed you, big sis.”

“Me too.”

They sat and looked at each other a moment. “Lois, are you going to tell me *why* these thugs are after you?”

“No,” Lois said firmly, moving away from Lucy. “I can’t and you can’t know any more than you do now. I just hope — that no one knows you were here.”

“I’ll be careful, I promise.”

“You’d better. And please, stop stalking Clark. He’s not for you.”

“What? You mean he’s yours?”

Lois felt herself blushing. “That’s not what I’m saying. But Lucy, the man is not to be played with, that’s all. And well, he — okay, well he — just back off, okay? And be very careful when you go out. We know there is something out there that wants to protect you, but you can’t count on it or him or whatever to be there. Please promise me you’ll be careful.”

“Fine,” Lucy laughed. “It’s so nice to have my bossy sister back.”

They hugged again and Lucy headed towards the door.

“What do I do if I need to contact you? Come here?”

Lois shook her head. “No. Go to the Planet. Or call Clark. And ask for Linda. That’s my alias these days,” she smiled.

“Your life is crazy, Lois. I just hope you know what you’re doing tracking these bad guys.”

“You and me both.”

Lois had sent her sister home long ago and had resumed digging through her past. She hadn’t come up with much, but luckily, the tears hadn’t come back. It had felt so good to reconnect with her sister, though Lois hoped she hadn’t made a mistake in talking to her. The more Lucy knew, the more she was at risk.

Lois scooped up the newspaper clippings, setting the ones aside that she wanted to ask Clark about later. <<Speaking of Clark, where was he?>> she wondered.

She noticed it had gotten dark out, and unless he was onto a big story, he should be home soon. Her stomach growled with hunger and she smiled, wondering what he might bring home for dinner.

Her stomach rumbled empty again so she decided to look in the fridge for some leftovers to tide her over till Clark got home.

She was nosing in the fridge when she heard the front door open. She closed it in relief, glad that Clark was back and hopeful that he had brought some yummy takeout.

“Hey, I’m in the kitchen,” she called.

Instead of hearing a response, the light in the living room went dark.

“Clark?” she called fearfully.

Lois felt her heart in her throat and immediately took a defensive pose when he didn’t answer. She thought of reaching for a knife but instantly dismissed the idea. She was no longer an assassin ... she wouldn’t kill. But she knew enough moves that she could do physical damage without actually killing.

She eased towards the living room, listening intently.

She cursed herself for not paying attention to where all of the light switches were in Clark’s apartment. That was a detail that would be really helpful right about now. The open-plan layout of the place made it logical that there would be switches for lights in the living room near the kitchen, but she had no idea where.

“Miss Lane, you’ve fallen behind on your duties,” came a gruff voice from somewhere near the sofa.

“Who are you?” she demanded, trying to look through the dark and hoping that her voice didn’t sound as shaky as she felt.

“I think you know who sent me. The Boss doesn’t back down on his promises. You didn’t think we wouldn’t know how to follow you, did you?” he laughed menacingly.

A small light over the oven lit one small corner of the room near the balcony window from the kitchen, but the rest of the living room was hopelessly dark. Even the light on the front porch only illuminated the front door, so she could see only his shadow if he were to pass by it. She sensed he was circling her, seeing a vague shadow now and then, and she tried to counter-move as he moved. If she couldn’t tell exactly where she was than neither would he.

“You thought we didn’t know where your mark would be found? At the airfield? It was very sloppy of you to leave those weapons behind, Miss Lane. Very sloppy indeed.”

She cringed inwardly at her carelessness. Of course they would have conjectured that she had taken off with her American target with her weapons lying on the ground at the airfield! At the time, she had only thought of being rid of the whole mess, not wanting those instruments of violence to come with her.

She heard his gun click and she swallowed in fear, wondering if he could see her from the dim kitchen light. In her movement around the living room, she bumped into a side table. She felt for anything on it to throw at the man, her fingers landing on a lamp. Lois yanked it out of the socket and chucked it at him.

It merely crashed harmlessly somewhere in the dark.

She took a fighting pose and summoned up her courage to

face the gunman. “Are you afraid to face me unarmed? Must you come after a woman with a gun in the dark? Rather cowardly, I’d say,” she goaded.

She kicked a semi-circle around her, trying to sense where he was, but failing.

“Oh, Miss Lane, you are so foolish,” she heard from across the room.

Suddenly, she heard gunfire but nothing hit her.

Instead, she instantly felt gentle yet strong arms come around her from behind, shielding her from the bullets. Her heart jumped at the realization of what was protecting her.

It was the blur.

And the blur was not a thing, but a man.

After the rain of bullets, she felt him leave her and heard a swoosh of wind as he stopped the gunmen. She heard a small struggle but could see nothing. It was over in a matter of seconds, though.

Then in a blink, the light was on again and the gunman was tied up on Clark’s sofa.

He wasn’t what she had expected. In the dark, she had imagined a tall, large man. This man was short and fat, with beady eyes, though he looked as shocked as she felt.

Suddenly, Clark came in the door. “What happened?” he asked.

Lois could only point, “He — and—the blur—” she stammered, utterly stunned.

Clark came to her, giving her a comforting hug. “It will be okay, Lois.”

“We ... what should we do?” she asked shakily.

Clark turned to the thug, crossing his arms across his chest in an intimidating manner.

“Who is this Boss that sent you?” he questioned, his stance and his voice daring the thug to deny it had been anyone else.

“I don’t know anything about him,” said the man.

“Well, if you aren’t willing to tell us, maybe you’ll talk to the police,” Clark said, moving toward the phone.

Lois touched his arm, stopping him. “Is that such a good idea?”

“A man came into our home and threatened my wife. That’s all I need to say,” he assured her quietly.

She hesitated a moment and then nodded.

“Inspector Henderson?” Clark said into the handset. “This is Clark Kent. Can you send a few cops to my place? Someone broke in to my apartment armed with a gun. We’ve managed to stop him ... he’s tied up in my living room.”

Clark handled talking to the police, leaving Lois to pace in the kitchen, contemplating what had happened.

It had only been a moment, but Lois had felt the goodness in the blur, being held so closely. It sent shivers of excitement up her spine. She had to find him, had to figure out who he was. Not for a story anymore, but for herself. She had to know why he had saved her and her sister. Why them? Did he save others? Where had he come from?

<<The blur saved my life,>> she thought, her arms wrapped around herself as if to recreate the embrace that had protected her. <<He’s a man. A flesh and blood man! But how can anyone move like that? And be invulnerable to bullets! Invulnerable to —>>

She was pacing mentally when she glanced up, seeing Clark leaning against the door frame of the kitchen.

“You all right?” he asked with concern.

She turned to him and nodded with a small smile.

“Yeah, I’m fine ... Clark — the blur was *here!* He saved me!” She thought she saw a twitch of his lips as if to laugh at her. “Clark, I’m serious! And I discovered that the blur—is a *man!* How about *that!*”

He adjusted his glasses nervously. “Well, I’m glad you’re

safe, whoever it was that did it. But Lois, don’t you want to know what the police said about the thug that was in here?”

“Huh?” she asked, still distracted. “Oh, yes! Did you get any information on the Boss?”

Clark sighed. “No. But the guy that was in here has a rap sheet a mile long. Apparently he’s a hit man, and the FBI has been after him for quite a while. He wouldn’t talk about who hired him for the job, but he hinted that he was to be paid a pretty handsome sum. Lois, I’m sure of one thing. The Boss is a wealthy and very connected man.”

Clark could see the awestruck look in Lois’ eyes after her encounter with the ‘blur’ as she termed it, or him. He thought of telling her the truth, but he hesitated for a number of reasons. First, he didn’t want her to know that he had caught that bullet she had fired at him before they left the Congo. He knew she regretted it deeply, and he didn’t want her to have to relive that moment, that guilt.

Then, when she got all excited about the possibility of writing a story about the blur, he thought that if she knew the truth, she’d want to interview him ... he imagined she’d mean well, wanting to share her hero with the world, but for him, it would be a nightmare. He’d never have a personal life again. He remembered his folks long ago speculating on where he had come from, out of his supposed hearing, of course. But his super hearing had picked up on his name, and he knew they had wondered if he was some Russian experiment gone awry or even an alien. They never treated him differently though, but he thought that if anyone discovered his secret, someone would want to know the details about him and that would cost him his privacy if not his freedom.

So he couldn’t tell Lois. Not yet, at least.

He brought takeout to her on the sofa, as she was poring over her research from before the gunman had come in. “Figure out anything interesting?”

“No, but I do have a plan. Ooh thanks!” she said, reaching for the Chinese food he had brought and immediately digging in. “Clark! Where did you get this? I know I’ve been out of the country a while, but this is the best takeout ever!”

Clark smirked to himself. He had taken a flight to China on the way home ... hoping to get this exact reaction from her.

“I have my sources,” he said smugly.

She began to tell him about her ideas of compiling the list of businesses from her earlier stories, and that they needed to cross-reference them with larger conglomerates in the city.

“Well, there’s always the largest conglomeration. You could start with that,” he suggested.

“Who?”

“LexCorp,” he said as if it were obvious.

She laughed incredulously, “Clark, seriously? Lex Luthor is a known philanthropist. I highly doubt that he is involved in organized crime!”

“Well, he should at least be considered. Sometimes, it’s the ones you least suspect ...” he said, having his own suspicions about Metropolis’ philanthropic billionaire.

“Fine, but I think it’s a long shot. Anyway, we can start that research tomorrow.”

He watched her a moment as she balanced a box of Chinese food on her lap and flipped through her articles. She looked so at home.

“This is where you belong, you know that?” he said happily.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, here. Doing research ... eating Chinese food. With me,” he grinned.

She smiled back. “I do feel like I’m slowly coming back to life. And I owe you a lot of credit for that, Clark. I know I’ve been ... emotional and a little crazy—yet you seem to put up with

it,” she said lightly. “Though I have no idea why.”

He stared at her uncomprehendingly. “She didn’t know why?? Really?>> “Lois,” he began, setting aside her dinner and pulling her over to look at him. “I don’t as a rule, sleep with women I don’t know.”

“Well, that’s hard to believe,” she said with a knowing smirk.

“I’m serious here. I mean, I’ve had girlfriends ... but, I don’t date around,” he tried explaining, leaving unsaid the one *other* thing that he was afraid would turn her away from him — the fact that he had been a virgin that night they met in the Congo.

“What are you saying, Clark?” she asked.

He reached to caress her cheek. “I’m saying that ... I love you, Lois Lane. Or, Mrs. Kent, depending,” he said lightly, then sighed. “What I mean is you are very special to me. I saw it the instant you came into that bar. I mean, I saw *you*. Beautiful, strong, yet so vulnerable. I simply wanted to protect you.”

He leaned in to kiss her. She closed her eyes, but instead of going immediately to her lips, he kissed her eyes gently, causing her to gasp with pleasure. Then he settled on her mouth, his tongue gently insisting on entrance, which she freely gave.

“Clark,” she breathed in between kisses.

“I love you,” he whispered back.

She pulled back reluctantly, and he noticed her eyes were full of tears.

“What is it? Have I made you cry?” he asked with concern.

She wiped them away, “No, it’s not you. It’s me. I’ve never known anyone like you before, Clark. And you offering your heart like that to me — is amazing, yet I can’t accept it. You are so — wonderful, Clark. But I — I’m a mess. Honestly! You know some of what I did in the Congo, and that stuff doesn’t just go away overnight, you know? I feel like I need to, I don’t know, just get through this with the Boss. And I think the blur can help me.”

“The blur?” he asked weakly, wondering how his declaring his love got them so derailed.

“Yes! You see, he’s so good, and I know he’ll protect me. And I’m sure he’s after these villains as much as we are. Why else would he help me and my sister? But you see, I will feel forever haunted by the Congo until it’s over.”

“And then?” he pressed on. “When it’s over what will you do? Is there any hope for us to be together?”

She smiled at him. “I don’t know, Clark. Honestly. I care about you, I really do. And obviously I’m attracted to you. But do we really know each other? I mean, I know you to be one of the most decent—no, the most decent man I have ever met. But I can’t say I love you — not that I never will,” she hurried on, touching his lips gently with her fingers to stop him from protesting. “I just can’t say I do, yet.”

“Fine,” he grumbled, heading into the kitchen.

“Clark! Come back, please?”

He turned to look at her, his heart wrenched in pain. “What do you want from me, Lois?” He was offering her everything and she simply didn’t see it. She was blinded by her own past — and he knew he didn’t help things by not explaining the blur to her.

“Clark, look, I’m trying to be fair here. I *do* care about you — and that is the exact reason why I can’t — promise anything yet.” She stood up and walked over to him, taking his hand. “I owe you a lot, but I’m not sure it’s love. And it’s not fair to you or either of us to declare love when all it might be is an attraction and a sense of duty or gratitude. Don’t you see? I think we owe it to each other to give ourselves time. Isn’t that the reason — you said we shouldn’t — you know, sleep together again?”

Her cheeks were aflame, and despite his pain, he thought she looked charming. It softened some of the hurt he was feeling, but really a lot of his anguish was coming from an entirely different source. He wanted to tell her he was the blur, her hero, but he didn’t have the courage to confide that to her yet. Ultimately, he

conceded that she was right, that he had no right to press a declaration of love from her, not while there were still secrets between them.

“I’m sorry, Lois. You’re right,” he said warmly, gently squeezing her hand.

She leaned in to hug him and then whispered in his ear, “But I will admit that I’m jealous of any woman that as so much as glances your way.”

That warmed him a little, and he smiled in return. “Likewise. Any man that does, I mean,” he chuckled.

She laughed, “My sister has it for you bad, too. Oh, I forgot! My sister was here!”

“What?”

“Yeah, she was looking for you, wanting to tell you about her experience with the blur ... and well, I just couldn’t let her stand on the stoop, crying about me, actually. So, I told her.”

Lois looked up at him, waiting to see if he would be angry, he suspected. He wasn’t angry though, just concerned.

“I think it will be fine, Lois. We are on the trail of the Boss, I know it,” Clark said, promising himself to check on Lucy over the next few days.

She nodded. “I know. And the blur is out there, looking out for me and Lucy ... it was so good to talk to her again, Clark. Even if she is a little flaky.”

“I’m glad, then. But, did you tell her that she had to keep quiet about you? I mean, no one else knows you’re here, right?”

“Yes, I told her. I think she’ll keep it a secret. She was pretty shaken up by that guy coming into her apartment, even if the blur did save her.”

“I imagine so,” he agreed. “Did you—ask her about your parents?”

Lois nodded. “Yeah, Dad’s in some remote country in Europe and Mother is chasing some guy ... but Lucy did say she might tell Mother ... I don’t know, Clark. I want her to know, but I’m worried.”

Clark sighed, seeing his work cut out for him in protecting those Lois loved. “Lois, I promise, we’ll find a way. Everything will work out, you’ll see.”

He took her in his arms for a gentle hug.

“I don’t know what I would have done without you ... You ... and the blur. Both of you have saved me, you know? Given me hope again that people aren’t all bad.”

“They aren’t, Lois. There’s good in everybody, I’ve always believed that.”

She pulled slightly away from his embrace to look in to his eyes. “Is that why — why you don’t think I’m a horrible person?” she said sadly, the condemnation of herself evident on her face.

“Yes, I try not to judge people. We all face challenges. You would have ended up dead if you hadn’t done what you did. And even though I wish — even though I wish you had never been put in that position, I think you can move on. You have to. There’s good in you, Lois Lane. I’ve read it in your stories. You have set so many wrongs right with your writing, and you will continue to do so.”

She leaned into his chest, her head turned away from him, and he suspected she was crying.

Gently, he leaned down to kiss her head.

“Thanks, Clark.”

Clark got a phone call at the Planet the next day, and it felt like a visit from a ghost from the past.

“Is this Martha and Jonathan Kent’s son, Clark?” came the voice of a man from Clark’s childhood.

Clark choked a little bit in answering but managed, “Uh, yes it is. This is Clark Kent.”

“Clark? This is Wayne Irig.”

“Wayne? How are you? Haven’t heard from you in ages ... ”

Clark answered, as memories of Smallville came rushing back at the sound of his parents' best friend.

"Well, I'm sorry to bother you, a big metropolitan newsman and all now, but I might have something that's newsworthy, but not something I'm certain that should be shared with the whole world just yet," he said awkwardly.

"What do you mean, Wayne. Is everything okay?" Clark asked, his mind racing.

"Yeah, everything's fine. You see, I was digging on the edge of Shuster's Field, that bumps your parent's property and my own, and I found this really strange rock that glows green. I was thinking it might be worth something, you know? Times have been a little tough and well, I thought of sending it to the state lab to check it out, but — well, I just thought you might be interested to know, since I found it technically on your folks' property. What should I do, do you think?"

Clark had no idea what Wayne had found, though he wondered if it could have anything to do with him, knowing his parents had found him in Shuster's Field. He was intrigued regardless, and knew that it was best if this rock was kept a secret, at least until he knew more.

"Do nothing. Please. I'd like to see this rock. It may well be newsworthy, but — please Wayne, at least wait until I can get there."

"All right. When will that be, do you think?"

<<Two minutes,>> Clark mentally calculated, but forced himself to calm down. "Uh, I'll get a flight this evening and come by."

"Great, look forward to seeing you, Son. It's been a long time."

"I know. Too long," Clark said sadly, hanging up. He rarely went to Smallville anymore, though he hadn't had the heart to sell the farm. It was technically his and it hadn't needed to be sold because his parents had it paid off ages ago. But he went back to it less and less frequently, too saddened by the memory of the loss of his parents.

Lois suddenly came out of Perry's office, and she immediately came up to him, seeing his expression. "Clark? Are you okay?" she asked with concern.

He realized he had no idea what to tell her or what to do about Lois while he would be in Smallville. He couldn't take her with him, and he had to come up with some excuse to slip away for at least an hour this evening.

"Fine," he said, forcing a smile. "What did Perry want?" he asked, hoping to change the subject.

She eyed him a moment, judging if he was telling the truth, then flopped an invitation down on his desk. "Lex Luthor is giving a ball tomorrow night. Perry wants us to cover it. I figure this is our chance. If you think he's dirty, maybe something will slip up."

"But Lois, if he *is* the Boss, chances are, he'll recognize you. Do you think that's a good idea?"

"I can blend in, Clark. Besides, you'll be there."

He thought of Lois dressed up for a ball and laughed. "Lois, I highly doubt you can blend in at a ball like that."

She smiled, "Well, still. Even if you think Luthor is the criminal we're hunting, it's unlikely he'd try anything in such a setting, don't you think?"

Clark left Lois that evening at his apartment, poring over his notes on Luthor's business dealings, with an excuse that he needed to go back to the Planet to get something. He was vague, saying he'd be gone for about an hour, hoping that she'd be safe and that she wouldn't question further. He certainly had no idea how else he could explain going to Kansas and back and thought it was best to leave quickly. He had checked the area around his apartment twice, to make sure that no one was around who might

bother her. Besides, he would be back in an hour, tops.

Once he was assured she was safely ensconced in his apartment, Clark headed to Smallville, his heart heavy.

There were too many painful memories associated with his hometown. His parents had been wonderful when he was growing up, giving him the best childhood one could hope for. After their death, he had lived with various foster parents, never finding the sense of home he had known growing up with the Kents. Families would take him in until he accidentally did something strange using his powers, which would cause his fosters to send him away again in fear. Over time, he had learned to be more cautious, to try to fit in.

In high school, he had played some football, which had taught him how to rein in his strength and play sports like a regular guy. He became the star quarterback and had even fallen for the head cheerleader, Lana Lang. At first, their romance had been idyllic, but by their senior year, it had become another painful story about his life in Smallville . . .

Clark had saved her from a car accident. She had put together a hundred other little things that he had done with his special abilities since she'd known him, eventually leading her to discover his secret.

Lana had thought she sort of owned him after that, discouraging him at every turn from helping people by using his powers. She emphasized his need to blend in, and she isolated him from friends, declaring she was worried he would be discovered and taken away from her. She had even convinced him after their senior year that they should get married. But when she began to box him in and try to change who he really was, he had realized he didn't really love her, and worse, she didn't really love him. He began to push her away and she had clung harder to him, until finally he had left Smallville, cutting all ties there. He had traveled the world to escape the pain of his hometown, finally settling in Metropolis, a city large enough that he could blend in and still help out on occasion with little scrutiny.

Lana had eventually moved on as well, and was now married with two kids. He rarely saw her. In fact, he rarely even went to Smallville anymore. He had thought of selling his parents' farm dozens of times, but he was never able to bring himself to do it. Over the years, he had promised himself that someday he'd organize their possessions and pick a few things to keep and then sell the farmhouse, but he had barely crossed its threshold in ten years. He had managed basic upkeep on the farm though, and plowed the field in the fall. With his abilities, it didn't take much to keep it presentable at least. But no one lived there. It was simply a large memory box that he didn't dare open and couldn't bear to sell away.

Clark landed on the edge of Wayne's farm and walked the rest of the way to his house. As the sun set, the quiet of the countryside was beginning to evolve into the cacophony of night sounds. Clark's special hearing could hear through the general hum of crickets and night noises to hear exactly which animals were rustling, where bees were buzzing, and how many owls were hooting. The night time was easily as noisy as a Metropolis street here in the country, especially in the summer.

Wayne Irig's house was a modest farmhouse, smaller than the Kents'. As Clark walked up, he noticed Wayne's house was in a bit of disrepair. It needed to be repainted, some shingles were torn, and a few boards on the porch needed to be replaced. Clark felt shame for Wayne and shame for himself for not coming out here sooner to help him. His parents had been really close to the Irgs and Clark knew that his parents wouldn't approve of his neglect of one of their good friends. He silently promised to offer whatever help he could in the future, no matter how painful it was to come back to Smallville.

Clark knocked on the screen door, but saw Wayne sitting just

a few feet away in the kitchen, waving him in. “Come on in, Clark.”

Clark entered the small farmhouse and walked over to Wayne to shake his hand.

“It’s been a while, Son. How’s the newspaper gig?”

Clark smiled warmly, though inwardly he again felt guilty for not coming to see him more often, “It’s going well, Wayne. I’ve learned a lot over the past year. Perry, my boss—well, he keeps me on my toes.”

“I’ll bet,” Wayne answered mildly.

“How have things been around here?” Clark asked casually, wondering how much Wayne would tell him.

“A bit difficult, but the roof’s still over our heads ... for now,” he mumbled and an awkward silence fell between the two men.

Clark cleared his throat, determined to be a better friend to Wayne. “You know, while I’m here, I’d be happy to help out. Dad —” he hesitated, both of them remembering the friend they had lost in Jonathan Kent. “Dad taught me how to fix shingles and ... well, I’m pretty handy around a farm.”

Wayne smiled sadly, “I appreciate it, Clark. But there’s just too much that needs to be done and besides — well, there may not be much point to doing any fixing anyhow.”

“What do you mean, Wayne?” Clark asked.

“Well, I hurt my back about eight months ago and had to take some time off work. Never been the same since, you know. And well, I haven’t been able to do the farm work like I used to ... And Margaret has done what she can, but a lot of the work to be done is just back breaking. And well, it’s just been hard to pull in a decent harvest on my own.” At Clark’s questioning look Wayne continued. “I had the Conway boys on for a while, but can’t afford to be paying them, so had to let them go a month ago ... and now ... the bank’s been calling —” he couldn’t finish, but laid his head in his hands in shame.

Clark patted him on the shoulder. “Wayne, if there’s anything I can do — ?”

“It’s all right, Clark. I mean, things aren’t what they should be around here anymore,” he said, sitting up and wiping his eyes, from tears or strain, Clark couldn’t tell. “That’s one reason I was hoping you knew something about the rock I found. I thought it might be valuable.” Wayne then gestured to a heavy leaden box on his table. “I haven’t even told Margaret about it yet. She’s out with some friends tonight,” Wayne said with a dismissive gesture.

As Clark pulled the box closer to him, Wayne shook his head, still surprised by what he had found. “It’s the strangest thing I’ve ever seen ... you know there’s rumors of meteorites and even aliens out here in the country, and I just can’t help wonder — Well, have a look.”

Wayne reached over to crack open the box and a strange green glow came from the rock inside.

Clark immediately felt a headache, something he had never experienced in all of his life. It took him so by surprise that he had to immediately sit down, his hand going to his head that felt like it might explode. He couldn’t focus, but he could feel Wayne’s hand on his shoulder.

“Are you all right, Clark?” he asked with concern.

The rock seemed to vibrate through him, painfully, zapping all of his strength and energy. He managed to reach up and close the lid, feeling at last some relief from the terrible pain rippling through his body.

“Clark ... what happened?” Wayne asked steadily, getting him a glass of water.

Clark accepted the glass though he thought it might just slip out of his hands, he felt so weak. “I don’t know ... I’ve never felt anything like it. That rock seemed to do something strange to me ...”

Wayne eyed Clark warily. “Clark, now listen to me carefully

... I loved your parents almost as much as you did. They always helped me out and I did what I could for them ... I never questioned them, and I knew they loved you deeply. But Son, tell me, why did that rock affect you like that?”

Clark shook his head, still reeling from the effects of the strange encounter. “Honestly Wayne, I have no idea. I—I just want to ask you to please, don’t tell anyone about that rock. Not until I ... know more about it.”

Wayne nodded solemnly, thinking and looking right into Clark’s eyes. “Son, what do you know about how your parents found you?”

Clark looked at Wayne, torn between curiosity and panic. Clark’s own knowledge of his origins was sketchy at best. Over the years, he had examined over and over what little his parents had told him or he had overheard, coming up with little to explain how he got his abilities.

“I—I know that I was adopted,” Clark began cautiously.

Wayne nodded, his eyes never leaving Clark’s. “Look, Son, your parents were my best friends. I never would do them no harm, you have to believe me. But — well, they told me a wild story one night, one I think they regretted, though I never repeated it to a living soul. And it had to do with you.”

Clark’s mouth went dry, curiosity and fear warring within him as he wondered what Wayne knew. He thought Wayne could be trusted, as he seemed to have not breathed a word of whatever he knew all of these years.

“What — what do you know?” asked Clark, shocked by the thin sound of his own voice.

Wayne eyed the box in front of him then looked back at Clark. “Mmmm ...” he said, thinking. “I know they found you in Shuster’s Field.”

Clark nodded.

“Do you know how they found you, Clark?” Wayne asked, his eyes boring into Clark.

Clark shook his head, his heart pounding with interest mingled with fear.

“There was a meteorite that night. Clear lit up the sky, it did. Your parents were driving by and they went to investigate.”

Clark couldn’t speak, mesmerized by Wayne’s tale, absorbing every detail.

“They expected to find a space rock out in that field, and instead found you, Clark ... in a spaceship.”

Wayne waited for Clark’s reaction. Clark merely let out a breath. He had always known that his abilities had either come from a horrible experiment or that he was an alien. Could this be proof that he was the latter?

He had always felt different, and his abilities were certainly not like anyone’s on Earth. Clark suddenly felt very grateful that the Kents had found him — if he was an alien as Wayne was saying, then Clark was very lucky indeed to have found such loving and accepting parents.

Wayne paused as Clark sat reflecting on what he had told him. “I thought they were a little crazy. I didn’t give much thought about it, really. For years. But I heard stories ... and this rock—well, I think it came from your—spaceship or whatever. Clark, I think you’re an alien,” he said in all seriousness.

Clark laughed nervously. “Wayne, all of this is new to me. You have to understand. I—I don’t know the details of where I came from ... and this rock—” Clark eyed the box suspiciously. “I don’t understand its effects on me. I don’t know if I’m an — alien. I only know that — I’m different.”

“I haven’t said a word in almost thirty years, Clark, about what your folks told me. I’m not about to start now,” he said and pushed the box over to Clark. “I have no idea what this is, but I’ll pretend like I never saw it and we never had this conversation.”

Clark left Wayne’s in shock, reeling over the implications of

what he had told him. Was he an alien? Is that why he had these strange abilities that were completely unexplainable? As he walked back to his parents' farmhouse, he felt terribly alone. His story seemed wrapped up in a mystery that never became clearer, but only became embroiled in more questions. He suddenly longed for Lois. In her own way, she was as lost as he was and that sort of made a kind of sense when they were together.

He started to try and lift off the ground to get to his parents' house faster to dispose of the strange rock, when he realized he couldn't fly. *He couldn't fly.* He felt a moment of panic, trying to use each of his abilities in turn and each time coming up with nothing.

He was powerless.

Clark looked at the box with the strange rock, more fearful than ever. Had this rock taken away his abilities? Panicked, he started running for the farmhouse, but the leaden box felt heavy under his arms. Heavy?! When was the last time *anything* had felt heavy?!

His panic increased as he realized he had no immediate way of getting back to Metropolis. He had no explanation to give Lois if he was to call her and worse yet, if she were in trouble, he had no way of helping her.

Clark reached the front porch of the farmhouse at last. It was fully dark, and he could only make out the outline of things. He suddenly felt trapped in a nightmare. What if it were permanent? What if the rock had taken away his abilities, making him normal forever? <<Would that be such a bad thing?>> he wondered when he had calmed a bit, turning on the small light in the front room. Hadn't he wished over and over that he was normal so he could fit in like Lana had wanted, so he could stop hiding and just have a regular life?

He sat down on the small sofa in the living room, setting the fearful box away from him, as he wondered if it was somehow affecting him even now. His headache had mostly gone away, but what about his powers? Would they return?

Suddenly, his pager went off, making him almost jump out of his skin. He pulled it off his belt to see who it was, but he suspected he knew. Yup, it was Lois. <<Great, what do I tell her?>>

He could see no way of getting back to Metropolis before morning. He knew there were no commercial flights after nine and there wouldn't be any more until tomorrow. Besides, he'd have to drive out to the airport, and he didn't have a car. Clark sighed. He had to call Lois. He knew he'd have to lie. He just hoped she wasn't paging him because she was in trouble.

"Lois?" he said tentatively when she answered.

"Hey? What's taking you so long? I thought you said you'd be an hour?"

"Yeah, well, uh, Perry has me on the trail of a story. I got a lead a while ago and, uh, I—I'm doing a stakeout. Perry thinks it might be big, so, don't think I have a choice. It might be an all-nighter," he said, hating how easy it was to come up with a plausible lie.

"Oh," she said, sounding disappointed. "Do you want company?" she asked, hesitant.

<<More than anything,>> he thought. "Nah. It's going to be pretty boring. That Senator case he mentioned in the morning meeting, remember? No big deal ... Is everything all right?"

"Yeah, fine. I made up a list of questions to ask Mr. Luthor at the ball tomorrow night," she said, trying to sound optimistic.

"Good ... You get some sleep, okay?"

Silence on the other end.

"Lois? Are you sure everything's okay?" he asked.

"Yeah ... I—I guess so,"

He didn't believe her. "Lois, if I could, I'd be there with you. I worry about you."

"I'll be okay. I'll double bolt the doors and not let anyone in.

You know, the usual paranoid routine, just to be sure," she said lightly though he could hear fear in her voice.

"I'll be back as soon as I can, okay? Page me if you need anything," he said, wondering if there would be anything he could do if she did need him.

"Okay."

"Good night, Lois."

A long pause.

"Good night, Clark."

Lois hung up the phone in dismay, wondering about the truthfulness of the stakeout Clark mentioned. He had seemed uncertain on the phone, leaving her with a sinking suspicion that he was lying to her, and it cut her deeply. They had made so much progress getting to know each other and building trust in each other. Why would he suddenly back away and lie now?

Miserably she wondered if he had met another woman. Lois hated admitting even to herself that she would be jealous of anyone Clark might want to date, but she knew she didn't have any real hold on him. They weren't really married after all; it was just a cover. She had understood that from the beginning. And even though Clark had said he loved her and had been amazingly kind and supportive since they got back to Metropolis, she also knew there was still so much that needed to be sorted before she could ever believe his declaration to be true. Besides, she was more aware than anyone that saying "I love you" didn't necessarily mean forever or guarantee any certainty. Her parents were a classic example, and she herself had never had a relationship that didn't end in a federal disaster. So if he had met someone — then she might be out of his life — at least his personal one — as soon as the business with the Boss was all over ...

Lois, who could be very methodical, tried to take a step back from her suppositions. After all, she knew the news business — things could change in an instant. Clark *could* be on assignment — but her gut told her otherwise. There had been something in his voice, a hesitancy or even a fear that made no sense — unless he had been lying.

Lois glanced at the phone. She could be petty and call Perry to find out for certain if Clark had told her the truth ... she hated being petty. Up to now, she would say Clark deserved her trust. He had seemed so forthright and honest since the moment she had met him. Yet all the more reason to be suspicious of his phone call, which had sounded so false. The doubt ate at her stomach like an ulcer and simply wouldn't go away.

With an exasperated sigh, she reached for the phone. It was after nine and Perry was probably gone anyway — but if she waited much longer, he would be gone for certain and she'd never know the answer ...

"Perry White," her editor answered, sounding tired.

"Perry, hi. It's ... Linda."

"Linda?" he asked, momentarily sounding unsure. "Oh, right, Mrs. Kent. How can I help you?" he teased, and she could hear him perk up realizing it was her.

"Um. Fine, I guess. Just wondering. Did Clark come by this evening? He mentioned something about a stakeout and well, do you know if that's where he is?" she asked, hearing the fish wifey sound in her voice and hating herself for it.

"Lois—I mean, *Linda*. Is everything okay? Are you in any trouble?"

"I'm fine," she answered, feeling anything but fine. "I—just don't know where Clark is."

"Uh, well, I sent him home about three hours ago, I suppose. Try his pager again. Maybe he just didn't hear it. It's not like Clark to be unreachable. And ... call me if you need me, you hear?"

"Thanks Perry. Good night."

“Good night. You take care.”

Lois hung up the phone, more depressed than ever. It was true. Clark had lied to her, and was probably out with another woman. He wouldn't have had reason to lie to her otherwise. Would he?

Lois wandered listlessly around Clark's apartment—only just above the wallowing stage of self-pity. In one phone call he had proven to her what she knew all along — that no one could be trusted. She contemplated his interesting collections from all over the world and asked herself what she really knew about Clark anyway. There was a niggling suspicion in her mind that she was missing something about him, something that she didn't understand — something that may have pushed him into the arms of another woman. She realized that although she felt safe with him, he was still a man of mystery. For instance, why didn't she remember anything about how she got back to Metropolis? How had he gotten her on a plane without waking her —and without a passport!?

And her bullet she had found in his pocket. How had he gotten that? She had thought he had somehow picked it up that night they left the Congo. But now she wondered — had he found it before, from another incident? Had he been stalking her in the Congo, knowing all along who she was?

She didn't think Clark ever had any evil intent towards her, but she did believe he posed a lot of mysteries for her to think about. And now, add into the mix her worry that he was seeing someone else ...

Lois shivered involuntarily, unnerved by the recent events and worried about her relationship — if one could call it that — with Clark. She had bared her soul to him and despite her bravado to his face, she feared that she had only barely scratched the surface of who he really was.

And that terrified her.

So Lois did the only thing in her power to do. She left. She went to Lucy's, her old apartment and the only place in the city besides the Planet where she trusted anyone.

Clark began wandering aimlessly around the farmhouse, noticing how neglected he had left the place. Dust was everywhere. He felt ashamed and wondered why he insisted on keeping the place when he didn't take care of it properly.

His eyes settled on a picture of his folks. He picked up the small frame and blew off a layer of dust. They looked so young and so happy. His throat constricted with tears as he remembered joyful times growing up here. Christmases. His birthday. Helping his dad on the farm ... all those memories were why he couldn't sell it. The happiest memories of his life were here. After the accident, everything had become a struggle. A struggle to fit in, a struggle to move on ... he had at last felt some belonging at the Daily Planet, but he still felt like he had to hide, could never be himself.

He caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror and wondered if he'd feel like he belonged now that his powers were gone. But he realized suddenly that he didn't want them to be gone. They were a part of who he was ... and in an odd way, Lois seemed to accept that, even though she didn't know he and the blur were one and the same. But she saw the blur as someone positive, which gave Clark hope that ultimately she could perhaps accept all of him. If ... he got his powers back.

Clark continued to wander the farmhouse, opening old closets and rummaging through childhood memories. He found old pictures, some Little League football trophies ... happier times. Clark hadn't really looked through these old memories in years. It had always been too painful. But now, as sort of a captive audience, not being able to fly off at the first sign of painful recollections, he suddenly wanted to see everything. Every photo album, every knick-knack — every reminder of who his parents

had been.

He stood at the entrance to his parents' room, a room he had never dared to go in ... but now, fueled by the stirring of curiosity the strange story Wayne had told him, he stepped in, searching for answers. When he realized that was what he really was looking for, he became more methodical, more like a reporter. He needed information, and surely the answers were somewhere in the farmhouse. If only he had his powers, he could scour every item in the house in seconds ...

He turned to his parents' closet, wondering what secrets he was likely to find. He dug through old boxes, old clothes ... He remembered seeing his mother in this dress and his father wearing that hat, but he didn't find anything of any real significance. He sighed, wondering exactly what he hoped to find.

Next to the bed was a small wooden nightstand with a drawer. He went to open it, but it was locked shut, intriguing him. Futilely, he wished for his powers, so he could just pull a little harder to get it open. As it was, he realized he'd have to jimmy the lock. Clark went through the dressers and bureau, looking for something small enough to get it open. At last he found a hairpin. He'd really only seen people in movies open locks with hairpins, but he was willing to give it a shot. Surely it couldn't be that difficult ... Clark fiddled with it a few minutes, shaking the drawer until it eventually sprung free. For a moment, he felt guilty for prying into his parents' things, but his curiosity got the better of him. If there were answers in this old farmhouse, he needed to find them ...

The only thing inside was a solitary, small leather bound diary. His throat tightened with tears as he opened to the first page, seeing his mother's neat script. The first entry was heartbreaking:

March 28, 1966

Final test results were received today. It's official — we can't conceive. I've been trying not to cry all day. Jonathan has been so supportive. I think he blames himself, though the doctor says it's simply too slim a chance with my lazy ovary and Jonathan's low sperm count. Just unrealistic to hope we can conceive. It breaks my heart. I've always wanted a family. The farmhouse is perfect for a small family ... we even had had ideas for a baby room, though now we don't even talk about it. Adoption seems so complicated and we really can't afford all of the fees and paperwork. Jonathan is such a tower of understanding though, despite all of the difficulty. He says he loves me whether or not we have any children. But I can't help but catch the glimpse of disappointment in his eyes every now and then ...

Clark could almost hear his mother's voice in her writing and unbidden, felt tears roll down his cheeks. He took off his glasses and set them aside, wiping his eyes, determined to read on.

April 13, 1966

Talked to a lady in town about an adoption agency. But I know it's just wishful thinking. We simply can't afford it ... but I keep feeling like there is a child out there for me. It sounds crazy and I haven't told Jonathan. But I feel like somehow ... I don't know. I keep seeing this brown haired boy with soulful eyes ... Have I been poring over too many adoption portfolios? All those dear lost children out there ... why must they make it so complicated for a loving couple to adopt one?

And then —

May 17, 1966

A miracle! I can't explain it. But the most extraordinary thing happened to Jonathan and me tonight. We were coming back from town arguing about how we might save up for the adoption fees — Jonathan doesn't think it's possible, not with the crops this year. We've almost paid off the farm and that seems as far as our finances will stretch us. I said if we just mortgaged the farm again, we'd have enough for most of the processing fees. But he

says it's better to bank on the future with the farm and I argued a child would be our future — but it's all irrelevant now!

We were going by Shuster's Field when we saw what looked like a meteor. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen! It streaked red and blue across the sky, like a fallen star. I asked Jonathan to stop the car so we could take a look. He thought I was nuts, but followed me anyway — I think my impulsiveness is one of the reasons he married me. Anyway, it's been balmy for May and the crickets were loud as ever as we crossed the field. The tall grass was scratchy on my ankles. The smell of sulfur was in the air and I felt a hum of excitement in my stomach. I had no idea what we'd find, but I knew it would change our lives forever.

We came to where the meteor had landed. There was a strange — well, spaceship, I guess! Jonathan and I always believed our government dabbled in more covert operations than they let on ... and we thought — well, we didn't think. I simply walked up to it. It was small and it had a stylized 'S' on the front of it. I didn't really believe in little green men, but I was still cautious as to what could be inside. I reached over and barely touched the 'S' when the hatch lifted up. To my astonishment and delight, there was a *baby* inside! And not just any baby, but one just like I had dreamed about! With dark hair and soulful eyes. I turned to Jonathan and he saw the joy on my face. I don't know where he came from, but I don't care. He's mine. I have a son!

Through tears, Clark skipped ahead a few more entries, absorbing every word he could —

June 3, 1966

Clark is a delight! He's a wonderful baby! Doesn't cry too much, no problems with colic or rashes — I adore him!

January 18, 1967

Clark is walking, and every time he does it, it's a miracle! The most precious boy — how were we ever so lucky to find him?
September 25, 1968

Clark hasn't been sick ever ... I wonder if I should worry? I don't want my child to be sick — but maybe he's just special. We still have no idea where he came from exactly ... Jonathan thinks the Russians were trying to send children into space. I think — he was a gift. A precious, perfect gift!

Page after page was filled with his mother's love, chronicling all of his achievements, large and small. Clark let the tears roll down his face, setting the diary down a moment. His parents had so loved him. He knew that, yet somehow through all of the foster homes and drama over Lana, he had forgotten his parents' kind and gentle simplicity. He had been so pained when they died that he had blotted out memories, trying to erase the hurt. He realized what a disservice he had done them. The best thing he could do was remember them, and try to live up to the loving example they had set.

Clark read a few more pages and then skipped ahead to the end of the diary.

February 19, 1975

Clark is a miracle, that is sure. I wonder about where he really came from, though ultimately it doesn't matter to me. I love him, and I am his mother no matter what. But I know that he'll have questions someday, and I have no idea how I'll answer him. Jonathan told me that Clark seems to be getting stronger every day. He caught the tall metal ladder with one hand when it slipped from where Jonathan had propped it up in the barn. It could have crushed Jonathan! Yet somehow, Clark had the strength and the speed to stop it in time ... I know my son is special. I had a wild idea that someday he may do even more extraordinary things. But if he did, I know my Clark couldn't do them as himself. Too much scrutiny would come down on him ... He already hides the things that make him different from his friends. He asked Jonathan for glasses although we both know he doesn't need them. Can his eyes hold some powers he wants to

hide? I don't know ... I just keep imagining him, someday, saving the world ...

That was the last entry. Under it was a sketch. His mother was somewhat of an amateur artist, but the picture was captivating, inspiring even. It was a figure of a powerful man, his hands on his hips, a cape swirling about behind him, and a large 'S' across his chest that looked like the 'S' on his baby blanket his parents had found with him. The character in the sketch looked like a comic book figure and Clark almost wanted to laugh, but something stopped him. Could his mother have imagined this as him?

His emotions running high from reading the diary, Clark snapped it shut and almost set it aside. But then he noticed a small card sticking out of the edges. It was a card tucked into a white envelope. On the front was written, "For Clark's 18th". He felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on ends ... Why would she write a card for him when he was ten years old at most, and plan to give it to him at eighteen? Was there some other secret that she felt she couldn't reveal until he was at the age of a man full grown?

With slightly trembling hands, Clark pulled out the birthday card and read:

My dearest Clark,

I don't want you to have to hide who you are forever. I know you are special and I thank God everyday that we found you ... or maybe, you found us. I don't know if I'll ever have the courage to give this to you, but it's yours ... for someday. We've kept it in your 'fortress', hoping to keep it safe until your eighteenth birthday ... I know you'll use it wisely when the time comes.

Love always,

Mom

Clark read the card several times, trying to puzzle out what she could mean. "Fortress?" Did she mean his tree house? Clark and his father had spent one glorious summer when he was eight years old building a tree house in the backyard. He had spent many happy days there. It had comforted him when he had been ostracized at school for being different, and he had eventually named it his "Fortress of Solitude," which had his parents worried about his loneliness. His father had later added a secret compartment in it. At the time, his father had said that he was putting it in for fun. But Clark wondered now if there hadn't been another purpose for it.

It was dark outside, and Clark didn't have his powers, but it wasn't going to stop him from finding out what his mother had hidden in his tree house. His heart thundering with curiosity and excitement, Clark ran down the stairs to the kitchen to find a flashlight. The one in the pantry needed new batteries, so he had to hunt those down as well ... He found some, though they seemed to be old, as the flashlight only gave a weak glow. Still, it would have to do.

Clark grabbed a tool chest, expecting to have to pick another lock and headed out the back porch.

The house illuminated the location of the tree house, but that was all. Clark climbed up, surprised by the odd scrapes he got on his hands and the difficulty of maneuvering up a tree with a toolbox and a flashlight. He turned off the light while he climbed, to save some of the remaining battery.

At last he was inside. He turned the flashlight back on and scanned his childhood hangout. It was mostly empty except for a small table. In the middle of the small room was where he remembered his father had built in the secret compartment. He felt the boards, looking for the loose one. His hands picked up a few splinters as he smoothed his hands over the old wood, and again he cursed the luck of losing his powers this night. It was most definitely better to feel strong and alien than normal, he decided wryly.

At last he found the loose board. He lifted it out and shone

the flashlight down. There was another panel below it, this time with a lock. He sighed ... he really hated picking locks, especially when normally they gave him no trouble. Clark crouched down, trying to get comfortable enough to be able to reach the lock that sat about three inches below the rest of the tree house. He couldn't get a comfortable grip on the lock and the nail he was using to try and wrangle it open. He eventually lay down on his stomach, the faint light of the flashlight shining unhelpfully across where he needed it and not down into where the lock lay. Yeah, he definitely missed the powers now ...

Finally, he managed to get it open. The lock sprang free, though the panel was a little weather worn and stuck slightly. He pried it with a screwdriver and shone the flashlight down to see a large white box wrapped in plastic. It looked like an unwrapped Christmas box with the words "For Clark" scrawled across the front of it. Clark felt his heart in his throat again as he reached for it. He pulled it out of its hiding place and held the box for a long moment, contemplating it and wondering why his parents had felt it necessary to hide whatever was inside. The note had said something about it being something he could use ... what did that mean? And what had he missed by *not* getting the box till now? What had been significant about giving it to him on his eighteenth birthday?

Clark climbed down the tree house, wanting to open whatever it was in the light of the farmhouse. He thought about how he had hidden for so long from the memories of his parents. He never came to the farmhouse ... and as a foster child, he had never even had the opportunity to pore over his parents' things. Even as a ward of the State, though, the farmhouse had been his. He simply hadn't been allowed to live in it on his own until he was eighteen. He hadn't even wanted to. But now, he wondered what he had missed by not coming back here sooner. What treasures lay hidden in this house that he had flown from out of total guilt of not being able to save his parents from that car accident?

Clark took a deep breath, suddenly wishing that Lois were there with him. He thought she would understand the pain of digging up a hurtful past more than anyone. But at the same time, he knew he had to face some of this alone. Someday he might be able to share it with Lois. But this was his own history, his own battle to face. As she had said to him at the Planet earlier that she needed to sort through things on her own, in a sense so did he.

Clark sat at the kitchen table and slowly opened the box, his heart thrumming. Tissue paper covered a garment, as the clothes in the box had evidently been packed with care.

Clark pulled back the tissues, surprised to find a suit, similar to the one sketched in his mother's journal. The large stylized 'S' from his baby blanket was sewn on the front of a large blue spandex suit ... He pulled it out of the box and looked at it skeptically.

What had his mother imagined he'd do with it? Become some —mythical superhero? It was laughable, yet — seemed almost absurdly appropriate as he remembered his thought earlier about possibly acting as the blur in a disguise. — Maybe the blur *could* become public ... He laughed aloud suddenly at the idea, filled with excitement and a growing sense of liberation. This was a bit flashier than he had imagined, but he thought it might have possibilities. He grinned, imagining his mother sewing this suit in the hopes that one day he'd wear it.

Could he really do this?

He held up the suit and walked over to the full-length mirror in the hall closet. It looked almost like superhero p.j.s draped in his hands in front of him—but *on*?

What did he have to lose to try it?

Clark, feeling more like a kid than he had in years, stripped off his clothes and pulled on the suit. It was snug, but it fit, as his mother knew he'd need it as an adult and not as child. It felt—

majestic, especially with the cape. He could imagine intimidating the criminals haunting Lois in it. Rescuing her even, if she needed, but out in the open, and not as an elusive figure.

Would she know it was him right away in the suit?

Did he want her to know it was him?

Wouldn't people recognize him?

He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at the mirror. His glasses were still off, which he thought worked with his new look. His hair? He ran his fingers through it, slicking it back. He looked again at the mirror and thought he looked quite different with this other persona — could he fool the world?

Did he want to?

He suddenly wished he could tell Lois about this discovery and his wild idea to actually use it. But two things stopped him. First, his powers were gone and though he was hopeful they would return, he had no idea when and if they would.

And second ... Lois was still in danger. In order to protect her and have the best advantage over stopping this Boss, he needed to appear as the invulnerable superhero that didn't have a personal vested interest in her — *as long as his powers came back*.

He sat back down on the bed, slightly deflated from his giddiness a moment before. What if they didn't come back? He glanced back at the mirror, seeing the potential of what kind of superhero he could be ... and he wished for a miracle. For his sake and for the sake of his parents' memory. They had given him so much goodness in the few short years he had had with them. He owed it to their memory to take his mother's gift and do the best he could with it.

Clark awoke the next morning on his parents' old bed, still dressed in the Suit. His headache was completely gone, and he *felt* back to normal ... He sighed as he got up and eyed himself in the mirror, a wry smile gracing his lips as he took in the image of himself dressed in a spandex suit and a cape. Could he really do this?

Clark shook his head, uncertain. But he first had to test his powers. The idea of becoming a superhero would be completely irrelevant if the rock had incapacitated him forever.

He decided to try his heat vision first, for a shave. He was relieved to see it come out in a nice even blade of heat.

Clark took a deep breath, contemplating anew what the suit his mother had made him could mean to him, to Lois, possibly to the world. He felt excitement well up inside him. It would allow him to help openly, as long as he could gain the public's trust. He would need a large task to test it out on, something that would announce him to the world irrefutably as a hero who wanted to help and not some vigilante to be feared. He would have to pick his moment carefully.

For now, he needed to head back to Metropolis. He was worried about Lois, an uneasy feeling in his stomach over the lie he had told her last night. Besides, she may still be in danger and he didn't want to leave her alone any longer than he must.

The phone suddenly rang out in the silence of the farmhouse, surprising Clark.

"Hello?" he answered hesitantly, knowing only Wayne knew he was there.

"Clark? It's Wayne ... are you ... feeling better?"

Clark breathed out a sigh of relief. "Yeah, I am. Thanks ... and thanks for everything you told me last night."

"You were always a good kid, Clark. I never want any harm to come to you."

Clark felt the guilt of neglecting his parents' good friend seize him again as he responded, "Thanks, Wayne. You too. If there's ever anything I can do —"

"Well, Clark, that's why I called ... a man was here from the bank a few minutes ago. I don't know what to do. I owe way too much to — save my house. We have one week to move out ... I

—I don't want you to think I'm asking for money, because I'm not — I — just don't know what to do. Could a newspaper like the one you work for help out a working class guy like me?"

Clark looked around him at the beautiful farmhouse that had been sitting empty for years, for too long. It needed a good farmer to give it life again ...

"I can do you one better, Wayne," Clark said with a smile, warming to his idea. "How about you take my folks' house? At least until you get on your feet again."

Clark could hear Wayne choke up on the other end. "I—Clark that's awfully generous of you. I—I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll take it. I'm heading back to Metropolis in a few minutes. It's yours whenever and for however long you need it."

Wayne took a shaky breath. "Your parents raised a good son, you know that? Thank you."

"I'm glad I could help."

"We'll talk soon, hear? Don't be a stranger."

"I won't. Take care, Wayne." Clark hung up the phone with a smile, knowing he had made the right decision. Wayne knew more about him than anybody. If there were remaining secrets here on the farm, Clark was certain he could trust Wayne to keep them.

But Clark needed to go, uncertainty about Lois weighing heavily on his mind. He had to change, since his super persona didn't have a place in the world as of yet ... As a teenager, he had practiced spinning in and out of his clothes, just because it was fun. Now he wondered if it might become useful as well. Clark spotted his clothes from the night before, spun around at super speed, and had his new superhero persona safely tucked under his work suit in less than a few seconds.

He replaced his glasses, giving himself one more look in the mirror. He glanced around his parents' room, silently vowing to come back more often and visit with Wayne now and then ... and to not be afraid of old memories.

He owed his parents so much.

And he was determined to honor their memory.

Lois had hardly slept. She had arrived at her sister's place after midnight, teary eyed and worried. Her distress had grown considerably on her walk over, and once Lucy had seen her tears, Lois gave in to her worst suspicions, telling her sister she was convinced it was all over with Clark — whatever it had been. Lucy had had Rocky Road ice cream on hand, thankfully, and they tucked in with two spoons together as they had often done during the worst years of their parents' divorce.

"He's so wonderful, though," Lois had said when they had reached the midway point on the gallon tub. "I mean, he's been helpful and kind ... and you were right, he's gorgeous," she said, slamming another spoonful of chocolaty goodness into her mouth, as if to punish herself for that admission. "But, I just can't see how it can work out between us ... not after what I've been through ... surely he's decided I'm just too ... complicated. I mean, why wouldn't he rather be with a sweet, innocent girl — someone who hasn't done the things I've done ..."

That had started another crying jag, so then they broke out a bottle of wine and watched romantic comedies till Lois fell asleep on the sofa.

As morning light streamed in, Lois groaned as she awakened, feeling hung over and depressed. Evidence of their gluttony was still strewn about the living room, and she made a half-hearted effort to clean some of it up. Lois peeked into the bedroom and noticed that Lucy had already left. She found a note in the kitchen that said simply, "Had class this morning. Make yourself at home."

Lois smiled at the note, recalling when this apartment had indeed been her home. Lucy told her that she had fought to move in here, having been determined to have what she assumed was

the only remaining connection she might ever have left to her sister.

Lois poured some milk and cereal and sat at the kitchen table, contemplating what her next move would be. She knew she'd have to confront Clark, which she dreaded. And they would still have to be 'married' until the business with the Boss was over. Lois decided she would promise to move out of his apartment as soon as it was safe, and she would never look back. They could remain friends, perhaps work together at the Planet. But once the Boss was arrested — which Lois was determined *would* happen, one way or another — Clark would no longer be under any obligation to her. Until then, as long as he did it discreetly, he could date whomever he wanted ...

Lois felt the tears well up again. God, could she actually tell him that? The thought of him with anyone else sent a knife in her gut and she realized she cared for him way more than she had any right to. She tried to tell herself that it was as Perry had said, that she simply was grateful to be leaning on such a kind, handsome guy. But in her heart, with the thought of facing a future without Clark, she knew it went so much deeper.

Clark arrived back at his apartment, quietly hiding the case with the strange rock in his balcony storage unit until he could find time to deal with it. He came around to the front entrance, uncertain what he'd find.

"Lois?" he tentatively called as he entered.

When he didn't hear her, he scanned the apartment and listened for her heartbeat. She wasn't here, he realized, starting to panic. His first thought was the Boss, but there didn't seem to be any sign of struggle in the apartment.

Clark called Perry in hopes that she was at the Planet. "Hey Perry, have you seen — Linda?"

"No, uh ... she called last night looking for you, though."

"What did you tell her, Chief?" Clark asked with dread, beginning to wonder if she had left because of their phone conversation last night.

"Well, Son, I told her the truth. I had sent you home, and I didn't know about any stakeout."

"Great ... " Clark groaned. "I'll be in as soon as I find her," he said, hanging up the phone.

Clark was almost tempted to break out his new suit and go flying around the city in search of Lois, but he had promised himself he'd wait until an occasion truly warranted a superhero. He just prayed that this *wasn't* that occasion ...

That no one had kidnapped her or ...

His front door suddenly swung open, and there stood Lois, in sweats, looking like she had spent a miserable night.

"Are you okay?" he asked, coming towards her, visibly relieved that she was intact, at least physically.

"Don't touch me," she said in a low voice as he reached to hug her.

"Lois? Did something happen last night?"

She glared at him, her eyes glassy with tears. "I don't know, Clark. You tell me." She swept passed him, shutting the front door and heading towards the sofa.

Clark sighed, wondering how much trouble he was in. "Perry said you called the Planet last night," he began hesitantly.

She turned to him and nodded. "You weren't on a stakeout," Lois said, her stance challenging him to deny it, though her voice trembled.

"I—" Clark began, looking helplessly at her, unsure what to say.

"Who is she?" Lois asked in a voice barely above a whisper. Then waving her hands dismissively, "No, don't tell me. I don't want to know. I don't know why I care so much," she looked up, as if she could keep the tears from falling. "I mean, you don't owe me anything. We're not married! It's all a ruse, right? Why

should I have expected anything different?”

Clark felt numb, having no idea how to counteract her accusation. He couldn't tell her the truth, that he had been in Smallville and oh, a strange rock incapacitated him so he couldn't fly back last night ... she knew nothing about him! <<Think, Clark!>> “Lois ... I wasn't with a woman last night. I—” he braced his hands loosely on his hips and sighed, trying to think what to say.

She looked up at him, daring him to continue. “Where were you, then? And why did you lie?”

“I—I was on a story. I just — haven't had a chance to fill Perry in on it yet. Lois, I promise, there is no one else in my life. I swear.”

She crossed her arms, still apparently hurt. She eyed him speculatively, “Clark, I want to believe you. More than anything,” she whispered. “But I just don't. Everything you've been to me up until last night has seemed completely forthright — which is why I'm utterly baffled by you lying to me now ...” She paced in front of him, “I was right to some extent ... you are an open book ... most of the time. Which is why I'm willing to bet my Kerth awards that you were doing anything but working on a story last night!”

Clark sighed, utterly defeated. He couldn't answer her, had no way of explaining to her the truth and he bet she wouldn't believe it even if he did.

Lois stopped pacing and eyed him carefully, seeming to make up her mind about something. “Luthor's ball is tonight. Perry gave me some expense money for a dress yesterday. I'm going shopping and I'll meet you there at eight,” she said, emotion gone from her voice.

“Lois —” Clark pleaded.

“Clark, you don't owe me an explanation, you're right. I'll be out of your hair as soon as — as soon as I can, I promise. But for now, I'll see you at the ball tonight at eight.”

Clark met Lois at the curb outside the LexCorp building. He had worried over her all the rest of the afternoon, wondering if she would really try to leave him. Wondering if he should try to explain his absence truthfully — but always coming up in the negative. She needed the blur, and she needed him to remain disassociated with Clark Kent, especially if he was planning on going public about helping people. He knew it could make him and anyone associated with him a target. He even wavered on his decision to become a public superhero several times that afternoon, worried over that very notion. In the end, he decided that he'd only do it if there was a situation that absolutely warranted him taking the risks. For now, he planned on trying to woo Lois back and finding out as much as he could about Lex Luthor.

Lois stepped out of the cab in a full-length royal blue gown, the satin shimmering against her curves. Her shoulders were bare and creamy, draped with a black chiffon scarf. Her hair was swept up, displaying diamond studs on her ears. In short, she was stunning.

Clark reached his hand out to her to help her out of the cab. He couldn't say anything. He was rendered speechless by her poise and beauty.

She accepted his hand, though she pulled away immediately once free from the cab. She stood staring at him for a moment. Their eyes were locked as each searched for something to say.

“Clark, I've got to fix my hair. I-I'll meet you inside,” she said quickly, breaking the magnetic contact of their eyes.

Clark watched her walk away, noticing every man in the vicinity was suddenly drawn to the most beautiful woman at Luthor's event.

Lois stared at herself in the powder room mirror, trying to

collect her emotions. Clark had looked gorgeous in his tuxedo. She knew he had been impressed with her turn out as well, but it didn't change the fact that he had lied about where he was the other night. But she was Mrs. Kent to this crowd, and she would have to play the part as best she could and dance with her 'husband.'

She was also a reporter on a story. She was infinitely curious about Lex Luthor and this space station. The more she had read about him last night, the more intrigued she had become. He seemed like an incredible philanthropist and she couldn't believe that Clark had even suggested he might be the Boss. It seemed patently absurd! But she would approach him with an open mind, and learn what she could tonight.

Lois took a bracing breath and headed out the door into the crowd. She spotted Clark and began making her way back towards him, when suddenly Lex Luthor was announced to the awaiting crowd.

She stopped to watch the elegant billionaire enter the ballroom. He was poised, confident, and quite handsome. Lois gradually drifted closer to the small balcony from where he was about to speak.

Luthor humbly bowed before the riotous applause at his appearance. A careless cigar hung unlit in his fingers as he began to address the crowd. “Honored guests. We're here tonight for a good cause. As you know, I have dedicated my life to improving the quality of the lives of the citizens of Metropolis. Tonight, I'd like to go further.”

He walked down the staircase, with a small entourage in tow. They came to a holographic platform that Luthor switched on, stirring gasps of interest in the crowd. “I have decided to commit my total financial support toward the building of a privately owned space laboratory. I have submitted my proposal to the Congress of Nations and I am awaiting their go-ahead. Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you ... Space Station Luthor!”

Applause followed as Lois continued to edge her way closer to Luthor. She found herself oddly drawn to him. What a philanthropist!

Luthor, a man who knew about showmanship, pressed another button that moved the hologram to highlight the many features of his proposed space station. “An engineering marvel. Signpost to a new age in exploration and scientific advancement. A gift to the future of mankind.”

Luthor accepted the applause and then headed towards another doorway, possibly to avoid the crowd. Lois had heard that he was quite reclusive. But she wasn't about to let him get away that easily. She felt excitement fill her veins, the old excitement of chasing a story. She momentarily brushed aside her worries—including those about Clark — and went for the story. She simply had to interview Lex Luthor.

Lois skirted around some people and put herself between Luthor and the doorway, sticking out her hand to shake his. “Linda Kent, Daily Planet.”

Lois had felt pretty safe using her alias at the party. Perry had had to submit a list of guests to Lex Luthor's people. At the very least, presenting her as married, Luthor would know that there was someone looking out for her.

“Linda Kent, is it?” he said, taking her hand with an amused smile on his face.

She didn't think it would be wise to barrage him with questions right away, seeing that he was trying to dart off to avoid that very prospect. She decided to use her charm to get him to talk to her instead.

“Mr. Luthor, how can you leave without dancing with your guests?” she said demurely, noticing that he seemed to eye her appreciatively.

“How— remiss of me, Mrs. Kent. Would you like to dance?”

She nodded and let him lead her to the dance floor. As he pulled her into his arms, she felt a small thrill. There was something magnetic about him that thrilled her, even as it unnerved her.

“I hope you will forgive me for being so bold, but—” she began.

His lips curved into a sensuous smile, “Boldness is a trait I find very attractive in a woman, Mrs. Kent.”

She demurred, “Oh, thank you... Anyway, I was wondering Mr. Luthor —”

“Lex,” he corrected.

“Lex,” she said, feeling her cheeks redden. “I know you’re hesitant to give interviews —”

“I hope you can understand, a man in my position. I wouldn’t want to be misinterpreted, and I have had one or two bad experiences with the media.”

“But not with the Daily Planet, I believe.”

He pulled her closer, a strange mix of admiration and challenge in his eyes. “Why don’t we make it dinner?”

Suddenly, Clark was at their side. He cleared his throat, “Mind if I dance with my *wife*?”

Lex stepped back, offering Lois to Clark. “My apologies Mr. Kent. I was just getting to know your—wife. Just how long have you two known each other?”

Lois glanced at Clark with a ‘don’t blow it’ look and Clark responded, “Well, it was a whirlwind romance. We met while — working on a story and — fell in love.”

Lex smiled as if he had a secret and then laughed warmly. “Ah, yes, love... Very well, I’ll have my secretary contact you for that—interview, Mrs. Kent.”

Lex walked away and Clark turned Lois to face him. “Lois, what are you doing?” he asked in a low voice.

She didn’t like being manhandled and jerked her arm out of his grip. “Being a reporter. You should try it some time,” she said testily.

“Lois, I don’t trust him.” Clark moved her off the dance floor, where there were less people around. “He could be the Boss for all we know, and here you are dancing with him!” he said between clenched teeth.

“He seems perfectly legitimate. And he wants to help people. Shouldn’t we support that?”

“Just, please, be careful.”

“Why does it matter what I do, Clark?” she said, her resolve to defend Luthor wavering. “If he is the Boss, then I’ll find out, one way or another,” she said recklessly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She sighed, “It means — if he’s after me, I’ll know. I’m going to dinner with him. Besides, you don’t own me, Clark.” She dropped her gaze suddenly, and whispered half to herself, “And maybe — I deserve whatever I get.”

She turned away from him, heading outside to one of the balconies. She didn’t want him to see her tears. She didn’t know who she could trust, even though she wanted to trust Clark. But he had violated the fragile trust she had had in him by lying about last night. It sent her into a tailspin, almost wishing the Boss would find her and be done with it. Maybe she deserved to die — she knew she had a lot to atone for.

Lois sighed, leaning against the edge of the balcony, looking out over the city. She could feel Clark’s eyes on her, knowing he had followed her.

She felt him come up behind her. “Where’s the fighter I saw the other night? The one who would stop at nothing to take down the Boss?” he asked softly.

Lois turned to him, eyes shimmering with tears. “She’s shaken... Lost.”

“Lois, I—I’m sorry about last night. I swear I wasn’t with another woman. I was just — taking care of some personal

business.”

She nodded, “‘Personal business,’ huh? Why can’t you tell me what it is, Clark? You’ve said you love me and I can’t help feeling that if you do, it’s only on your own terms, which is unfair. I’ve told you everything about me — well, almost everything,” she amended, thinking of the horrible night when she had aimed a gun at him. “You know enough about me to destroy me. I’ve done horrible things that I can never — forget. If I’m to trust you with my heart, then you have to trust me with yours.”

He sighed, hanging his head in dismay. “Can you give me a little time?”

She laughed, slightly exasperated. “Time? Why? So you can hide your trail? Hide whatever secret you’re keeping? I don’t understand why you won’t tell me. I can’t imagine anything worse than what I told you... Clark, please, just tell me! I’m not naïve!”

“I will tell you, Lois. I promise. Just—not yet. Not until the Boss is taken care of. It’s too dangerous for you.”

She crossed her arms, angry. “Clark, I’m not some ‘little woman’ who needs protecting! Either we open up to each other or this won’t work!”

He stepped closer to her. “So what secret haven’t you told me?”

“Oh, no you don’t!” she said, backing away from him. “Clark, that’s not fair, and you know it!”

“Fine,” he relented, lifting his palms facing her in surrender. “You’re right. I’m sorry...”

Words hung in the air unspoken. Lois turned to him, a hurt expression on her face. “I—I guess I’m sorry, too... I just wish you’d tell me what’s really going on!”

Clark sighed, “I—just can’t right now, Lois. Please... trust me... Now, will you rejoin the party... as my wife?”

Lois finally relented and Clark walked her back inside, offering to get her a glass of champagne. She nodded and stood waiting for him to return by the hors d’oeuvres buffet. Lois wouldn’t relent her defensive pose, with her arms crossed in front of her, feeling like it was the only thing that was holding her up. Clark was right, she was being reckless, going so far as to flirt with Lex Luthor!

She rubbed her arms, suddenly chilled by the thought that he could be the Boss. The man was suave and charming, but charming like a snake. <<Maybe I deserve whatever I get,>> her words came back to her.

She glanced up and saw Clark coming towards her with two flutes of champagne. He looked devastatingly handsome in his tuxedo and she couldn’t help but appreciate the grace of how his body moved, how even when he was most uncertain he still radiated kindness and openness.

She sighed inwardly. << I certainly don’t deserve *him*.>>

Clark brought Lois the champagne, hoping it would calm her. He took a sip himself and for the first time wished alcohol affected him, wishing he could ease the uncomfortable feeling that had settled itself in his chest. He hated lying to Lois, but he had no idea how to even begin to explain himself to her. He had been on his own for so many years, since his horrible break up with Lana, that he had had no reason to give serious thought to having to explain things to someone he loved. And some of the things he didn’t entirely know the answers to.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence as they sipped their champagne, the band started playing one of Clark’s favorite songs, “Fly Me To The Moon.” He gently set his and Lois’ glasses on one of the nearby tables.

He lightly took her elbow, rubbing his thumb gently on her forearm to coax her. “Dance with me, Lois. Please.”

Her eyes met his, and she nodded. He pulled her into his

arms, her soft body warm against his as they began swaying sensuously to the music. Clark leaned down to whisper in her ear. “Lois... whatever else is going on in your mind, please just know that I would never do anything to betray you. I care about you, honey... whether you’re really my wife or not, you are my heart.”

She didn’t answer, but she did move in slightly closer to him, settling her head on his chest. He gently rubbed her back, enjoying their closeness, and hoped it wasn’t short-lived.

They got home after midnight. Lois hobbled into the living room, taking off her high heels as she went.

“I’m exhausted,” she said, stretching. They had danced for most of the rest of the night. It had been magical, really. They barely spoke words, yet their eyes and their bodies conveyed any number of nuanced declarations. It had seemed to take both of them back to the night they met in the Congo, when the music had made them so uninhibited that they had ended up making love...

Clark had thought that tonight, after a few hours of dancing, some of their closeness had returned. He knew she still doubted him a bit, but he hoped that she’d forgive him.

“Yeah, I’m beat too. Take my bed. I’ll—sleep out here,” he gestured to the sofa.

She nodded, too tired to argue, as she headed into the bedroom.

“Hey,” he called gently to her. She turned to him, her heels still dangling in her hands. “Come here a second,” he said with a warm smile.

She moved back towards him, a smile playing on her own lips.

“No matter how today or even this evening started... I loved dancing with you tonight,” he said, leaning to kiss her cheek.

He pulled back to judge her reaction. Her cheeks flushed pink. “Me too, Clark. I felt... free... Haven’t felt that way in a long time,” she said, her warm eyes possibly conveying the same memory that had haunted him for most of the night — the night they met in the Congo.

Clark stood there a moment, wanting to somehow capture the memory of both tonight and that reckless one, deep in the jungle. But secrets hung between them still. His secrets... and although he thought he knew all of hers, she was still too wounded to move into anything serious yet.

“Good night, Lois,” he said instead.

“Good night, Clark,” she whispered, poised to turn into his room. Then suddenly, she pivoted back and wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him soundly.

“Good night,” she said again softer after the kiss, disappearing into the bedroom. Clark wanted to follow her, but used all of his will power to stay put... they’d get there again... but not yet.

Clark waited until he was certain Lois was in bed and asleep before he stepped onto the balcony to check on the strange rock he had gotten from Wayne in Smallville. He took a lungful of the crisp night air and stared at the bright full moon. He took another deep breath, suddenly wanting to fly out over Metropolis in this gorgeous weather... But he had some business to take care of first. He had to get rid of that fearful rock, one way or another.

Clark’s sense of calm evaporated as soon as he noticed that the storage door was left open. Clark knew he had shut it and locked it when he had placed the rock in there earlier that day.

On closer inspection, he could see that the lock had been busted open. He quickly scanned the small shed. Everything was there except the case with the green rock.

Clark scanned for fingerprints, but found none. Who could know he had brought that here? And why would they want it?

He was fairly certain it had something to do with the Boss, that maybe he was spying on him? Which would mean that Lois was probably also being watched...

Clark scanned the apartment, and sure enough, located and took down six bugs. He easily crushed them with his hands. He had no idea how long they had been there, but he suspected that they had been planted recently, perhaps even while they had been at the ball. Clark knew he couldn’t be absolutely certain, but LexCorp personnel were the only other people besides Perry privy to their whereabouts this evening. Clark suspected that the Boss would be the only one to have reason to spy on him, which left him with the conclusion that Luthor had to be at least connected to the Boss.

He thought of telling Lois what he had found, but it would be difficult to explain how he had found the bugs in the first place. He also didn’t want her worried that they were still being watched. Clark felt confident that now that he knew what to look for, he could be sure that no one spied on them again — especially Lex Luthor. Boss or not, Clark didn’t like the idea of that man anywhere near Lois.

All the next day Lois avoided Clark, caught between worlds, so to speak. She had loved dancing with him, able to forget, however briefly, his lies from the other night and instead remembering how good it could feel in his arms. Though she was now intrigued with the possibility of dinner with Lex Luthor. If Lex was the Boss as Clark suggested, she was certain she’d find out in short order. The thought terrified her, yet at the same time she wanted to confront this, confront her past so she could try to move on.

She spent a few hours at the Planet, carefully avoiding talking about anything other than work with Clark. She wanted to believe that he wasn’t with another woman, but if that were true, it only elicited other questions. Where had he been and why couldn’t he tell her? The crux of it was, she couldn’t trust him anymore, not until he told her the truth.

So she decided she would work on her own to find out who the Boss was. Even if it put her in greater danger. She had to know one way or another. Besides, in the back of her mind, she thought that if worse came to worst and Luthor was the Boss, then perhaps the blur would save her if she needed it.

A runner came by her makeshift desk, which was almost adjacent to Clark’s, and left her a note: “I’ve made reservations tonight at La Fleur de Lys. Hope your husband won’t mind if I steal you away for dinner. Yours, Lex.”

Clark was suddenly over her shoulder and she folded the note quickly. “And are you going?” he asked, slightly belligerent.

She shrugged defensively. “I—yes, I’m going. Why not? If he is who you think he is, well, I should know pretty quickly, I suspect.”

“But Lois, why would you put yourself in danger like that?”

“Clark, I’ll meet him there... we’ll be in public. It’s not like he can try anything.”

Clark crossed his arms, clearly upset.

“Lois, you are unbelievable! I can’t believe you would go to dinner with him — especially after accusing me—” He shook his head.

She looked up at him defiantly. “Then tell me the truth about the other night, Clark.”

Clark stared at her, his mouth slightly agape, obviously unable to answer her.

“Exactly. You can’t tell me,” she said, standing up and preparing to leave.

“Lois—” he pleaded.

She eyed him caustically, her arms crossed. “Well? Out with it, Clark! Where were you the other night?”

When he didn’t answer, she growled out a curse and grabbed

her bag.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“To get ready to go to dinner with Lex Luthor. Maybe *he’ll* tell me the truth!” she cried, stomping off towards the elevator.

Dinner with Lex Luthor was a very elegant affair. The French restaurant he had selected was the best in Metropolis. Lois had had only her dress from the ball to wear, so she had returned it that afternoon and exchanged it for a new one, trying not to feel too guilty about it. She had bought a modest black satin dress, in a Japanese style that came up to her neck, yet left her shoulders and arms bare.

She hadn’t talked to Clark for the rest of the day, entirely frustrated by his stubbornness about lying the other night. She felt hurt by him and suddenly very alone. She had bared her soul to him and yet he couldn’t trust her with whatever secret he was hiding? Lois was at least hopeful that it couldn’t be worse than her own secret. But his reluctance to just admit the truth had sent her running away from him, and off to dinner with a potentially dangerous man.

Lois had looked over her notes on LexCorp’s holdings before dinner, trying to create a list of questions that the billionaire might actually answer. She certainly knew he wouldn’t come out and actually admit if he was the Boss or if he knew she was Lois Lane — So, that left her with using her charm and trying to coax more clues out of him so she could find out the truth about Lex Luthor, one way or another.

Lois checked her make-up in the restaurant’s powder room, suddenly uncertain of her plan. She had a small knot in her stomach that wouldn’t go away. Even though she knew she was skillful at interviews, she was terrified she’d say something or do something to give her own secrets away. And there was always the possibility that if Luthor **was** the Boss, he already knew exactly who she was.

She looked at the gilt mirror and plush chairs surrounding her, comforted by the distance such a luxurious setting afforded her. Based on her first encounter with Mr. Luthor, she knew he at least had enough class to treat her like a lady in such a place — no matter what either of them had done.

Lois took a deep breath and headed to the table where Lex Luthor awaited her, preparing how she would get the billionaire to open up — and hoping she wasn’t going to open a can of worms in the process.

“So, Mr. Luthor, would you like to tell me about how you started LexCorp?” Lois asked with an easy smile as she sat down, not giving him the chance to ask the first question.

“Let’s at least order drinks first,” he said calmly, nodding to the nearby waiter.

“Of course,” she agreed pleasantly. He looked at her expectantly to make a suggestion, but she shook her head, “You pick. I’m — hopeless at picking wine.”

Lex ordered and Lois tried her question again.

“You are persistent, Mrs. Kent,” he said warmly, eyeing her over the wine glass as he sniffed the vintage red the waiter had brought.

“Well, it’s the only way I know how to be a reporter,” she said honestly.

He nodded and then answered her, “I was a man of humble beginnings, Mrs. Kent. I worked hard and made a few — choice investments. Suddenly I had business opportunities open up for me.”

“Like what?” she asked.

He smiled, slightly patronizing as he answered, “Well, you know, Mrs. Kent. I have no secrets from the people of Metropolis! I have holdings in telecommunications, hotels, energy plants. . . all to help the good people of this city.”

On and on he went, question after question, all through

dinner, never letting Lois get any deeper than the things she already knew about him. Lex was an excellent conversationalist, and could divert a topic better than anyone she had met. He appeared affable and pleasant, modest when she mentioned his accomplishments, but easily led her on a different path if she tried prodding into how he had made his billions.

“A man must have some secrets,” he said halfway through the main course when she pushed the issue.

Lois was tempted to roll her eyes. She was sick of men with secrets!

Lois finished her meal and then moved on to try to get more information about his bid for the space station. “What exactly do you hope to accomplish with Space Station Luthor?”

“Well, I hope the Space Program accepts my proposal. LexCorp wants to lead the people of this nation into the future! In fact, I should hear any moment confirmation that Space Station Luthor will be the next great step for EPRAD.”

“And what if you don’t get the bid?” Lois asked, watching his eyes darken a bit in determination not to let that happen.

“I always get what I want, Mrs. Kent,” he said in a low, decisive voice.

Lois could see a man like him would be extremely dangerous if he were the Boss. At best, he was a very ambitious man who had fought for success in life. At worst — well, she didn’t want to think of what he might be capable of doing.

She tried to laugh off the intensity of his comment, “Well, maybe we are alike after all! Because I always want chocolate and I always get it,” she said charmingly, eyeing the dessert tray at the next table.

Lex gestured for a waiter and Lois selected a delectable chocolate mousse.

Over dessert, Lois realized she still had too little information to write any kind of decent exposé on him. What’s worse, she wasn’t any closer to determining if he was the Boss or not. On the surface, he still appeared to be a charming philanthropist.

But instinctively, she knew there had to be more to him.

Clark had stayed away for as long as he could. If Lois wanted to go to dinner with Lex, then he wasn’t going to stop her. But that didn’t mean he was going to stop investigating the Boss — or stop keeping an eye on Lois.

Clark parked himself in a café across the street from La Fleur de Lys with a stack of Lois’ notes on Lex Luthor and the Boss. He and Lois had been making promises all week to compare notes, but they had never gotten around to it. And once Lois had decided she was mad at him — well, it had just made it impossible.

Clark had suspected Lex Luthor of less than savory dealings for close to a year. He had never personally met the man until the other night, but often times when Clark did a story about a corrupt agent or businessman, the line — however sketchy — could be drawn back to LexCorp. Plus, no one knew how Lex had become a billionaire and everyone knew he was a self-made man. On the surface, that wasn’t a bad thing, but Luthor’s unwillingness to share how he became so successful seemed to raise a lot of questions in Clark’s mind.

Clark super sped read Lois’ articles that she had marked as possibly having ties to the Boss. Apparently, she had made similar conjectures, as her longest list of businesses with corruption problems could also be traced back to LexCorp.

He then started skimming her handwritten notes, which were written almost in a language of their own. She had notes from being in the Congo about some of the men she was asked to follow. He saw a small note that said “pet project/space?” which he thought could easily refer to Space Station Luthor, but most of the notes were just names of people and places.

He found one page though, that seemed to have nothing to do

with LexCorp. It was a list of seven names. Each one spelled out carefully, with a few notes about place of birth. Six of the names had tiny dashes with crimes listed.

Two were drug lords.

One was a pimp.

Three were mobsters — one had been wanted in five different countries.

But the last name was circled: Edwin Morrison.

She then had written out more detail about this man, a biography of sorts.

Edwin Morrison: Born in Papua New Guinea

Drug user—got caught up in Congo drug war in the eighties.

Tried to go back to school.

Had a son (!), Jacob

Here, the paper was spotted a bit, as if it might have been wet by tears. Then Clark read:

What did I do???

What can I do???

That last helpless line, underscored three times, made Clark's heart clench. All at once, he realized what this list probably was — a list of seven men she had killed in the Congo. She had gone back and carefully researched as much as she could about what they had done — and in turn learned about the lives she had destroyed.

He couldn't imagine the situation Lois had been in while in the Congo, and he hated what she had done. He didn't want to judge her and he knew there was goodness in her. She had strength and she had courage, even if those qualities had been abused into fear during those two years. He knew she carried guilt, and he also saw the resolve in her to make things better — if she couldn't set what she had done right, she could at least make things better in the future.

He wanted to help her do just that. He knew what it was like to want to change the past and yet to be powerless to do so. Over and over again, he had wished he had been able to save his parents. If only he had been faster...

And he imagined Lois went through the same thought cycle.

If only I had been smarter, stronger...

But Clark also believed in forgiveness. Every day he had to forgive himself for a past he could not change, a difficult lesson he had been forced to learn. He knew more than anyone that you only have the power to change the future. And he was determined to help Lois do just that — rebuild her inner strength, and from here forward, try to make the world a better place.

At last, Lex and Lois left the restaurant. Clark had hoped that Lois would take a cab home and avoid being at the Lex's mercy, whom Clark was now certain was the Boss.

But Clark was dismayed to see Lois being led to Lex's limo. He used his telescopic vision to see if she looked distressed, but she seemed all right... Maybe Lex *would* just drive her home? Clark hoped so.

He decided to follow them anyway. He had dressed in black for the occasion, in case he had to dart around, at super speed. Clark paid for his coffee, gathered his and Lois' notes, and headed out the door.

Before they had left the restaurant, Lex received a call that Lois wished she had been privy to hearing. As they made their way to his limo, he seemed agitated as a result of that call, though he wouldn't explain why. She suggested she could take her own cab home, feeling nervous about his sudden change of attitude, but he had turned to her with a charming smile and said that it was no problem to take her home.

Throughout all of dinner, he thankfully hadn't asked a single question about her professional or personal life. On the ride back in Lex's limo though, Lois suddenly began to feel closed in and

worried. Lex still seemed irritated about his phone call, but he sat close by her, as if to protect her — or to trap her. He began asking questions that seemed to hit a little too close to home.

"So tell me, Mrs. Kent, how long have you worked at the Daily Planet?" he asked casually, draping his arm around her shoulder. She noticed his cufflinks under her nose, which she hadn't paid any attention to under the lights of the restaurant. They were a strange green color, and almost glowed as if from their own source. <<Must be some rare gem that only billionaires could afford,>> she mused.

"I — started about a week ago. But I — am a freelancer," she said, wishing her voice hadn't quavered.

"Oh? Who else do you write for?" he asked with interest.

"Well, I — am new to Metropolis and haven't had anything published yet. Though some stories are in the works..." Her heart started hammering nervously. No matter who he was, it would be dangerous for anyone to know Lois Lane was alive and well.

He smiled politely at her, but it waned as he continued to stare. He turned to look out the window, and then glanced back at her. His expression was bland, though his voice soft as he spoke, "You know, you are a beautiful woman," he began. "I didn't realize how beautiful till I met you in person. You're smart, funny — and have many talents," he said, leaning into her slightly.

"Thank you, I guess," she said, unnerved by his closeness.

<<Till I met you in person?>> she echoed silently, suddenly panicked. She pushed away from him, "You know, Mr. Luthor, I *am* married."

He held his hands up in mock surrender. "I meant no offense. I was merely — thinking."

"About what?" she asked warily.

"Oh, well, I thought you could help me," he said, easing back in his seat a bit. He rolled down the window halfway and lit up a cigar.

Lois noticed through the open window that they were heading way downtown, that they had passed Clinton Street at least five blocks ago. "Where are we going?" she demanded, beginning to worry. What had she been thinking letting him drive her back to Clark's apartment! She should have gotten a cab no matter what Lex offered! She should have called Clark!

"Well, I thought you could get some information for me. And help your career as well. You see, I'd like you to sneak aboard the Prometheus. They are set to launch tonight. It would be brilliant for your career, and well, it might give me the leg up into — helping the Space Program."

"Is that why you asked me to dinner?" she asked warily and with some surprise, wondering if there wasn't a deeper plan afoot.

"Well not entirely, my dear. You are pleasant company," he said smoothly.

"This sort of thing takes planning and well, I just am not going to leave — my husband to go on a spaceship!"

"But, Mrs. Kent, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity! I have the resources to get you on that ship unnoticed. Imagine the exclusive you would get. I'm simply trying to help your career."

"Look, there was a time in my life when I would have been delighted to be impulsive and do something like you are suggesting. But — I can't just *leave!*"

Lex puffed on his cigar, seemingly blasé about the whole matter. "Mrs. Kent, if you want to be a world class reporter, you need to learn to take risks."

"I've taken enough risks in my life," she murmured, wondering if the risk she took going to dinner with Luthor would be one of the worst ones she'd taken. "Look, I don't want to go, okay? Please, just take me home!"

Lex reached over to the window that separated them from the driver. Lois relaxed a little, hopeful that maybe he had had a change of heart, that he was telling his driver to turn around. But

suddenly he turned to her with a handkerchief, reaching to cover her face with it, his strange green cufflinks twinkling in the dim light of the limo.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that — *Miss Lois Lane!*” he said triumphantly.

Lois gasped, struggling to breathe through the chloroform coated handkerchief— But it became clear, what she had known all along but didn’t want to admit — willing to go along with the nice dinner and the normalcy of being a reporter again — How could she have been so foolish? *Lex Luthor was the Boss!*

Then she began to drift asleep...

Her last thoughts were of wishing for Clark...

... if only she had called for Clark to save her...

Clark knew something was wrong when Lex’s limo drove past Clinton Street. Luthor wasn’t taking her home.

Clark flew past the car to meet them at the next stoplight. He scanned the limo to see Lois lying unconscious on the back seat of the limo! Had she been drugged or poisoned?

The tinted windows provided him some cover, and he simply followed behind the car, so he would be less visible. When the car stopped at the traffic light, he reached to pull the locked door open, but was struck with sudden weakness. He didn’t understand why until he scanned the car again —that’s when he saw the strange green glowing rocks that Luthor was wearing.

So Lex *had* stolen the rock! And he now had Lois, and Clark was powerless to do anything to stop him!

Lois Lane was beautiful.

Lex hadn’t realized how beautiful she was when his men had found her and recruited her two years ago. He had only received reports on her progress, that she was a good if reluctant shooter. And he had on occasion seen pictures of her, but none of them did her justice. The woman lying helplessly in his limo was a fireball, and he now had her at his mercy.

He had thought of giving her a choice.

During her interview that he had danced around, he had toyed with just telling her that he knew exactly who she was — just to see the fear in her eyes at the realization of her situation. But he knew he couldn’t trap her in such a setting. He was never one to make a scene, and surely, Lois dashing out of the restaurant would cause a stir.

But he had thought of offering her the chance of working for him here in Metropolis and possibly becoming his mistress.

She’d fight it, he was certain. Having tasted her old life again, he was sure she’d be reluctant to go back to hunting down his enemies. She would get messy to deal with and the inevitable would have to come to pass — he’d have to kill her eventually.

Then that phone call had come in, the one that told him that he wouldn’t get the bid for the new Space Station and everything — had simply coalesced.

He could see that in one moment, with one move, how the Space Program would see him as their savior for helping to rebuild after this tragic accident, and how Miss Lane could finally be dealt with by simply sending her on a little trip.

He looked down at her helpless, beautiful sleeping form... he regretted for a moment not trying harder to seduce her...

They arrived at EPRAD a mere 5 minutes before the launch.

It certainly paid to be a billionaire — money could always buy you access. His hired man met them at the foot of the launch pad and took Miss Lane. She would be a problem for him no longer.

As his limo pulled away, Lex opened a box at his feet to inspect another part of his plan, though he wasn’t sure how he would use it just yet. It was a box he had obtained from Mr. Kent’s apartment. It contained an interesting rock that his men had found on a raid of Mr. Kent’s apartment during the ball.

Interesting things had been happening there—including how his thug had been caught by the police. The fool had rambled on about how some sort of ghost had captured him. That’s when Lex had installed the surveillance equipment—to learn more about what might really be going on in Kent’s apartment. Then his man had spotted Kent put that odd box in his outside storage unit. Lex just had to know what he was hiding, and so with a little extra effort, had it stolen. The stone had so intrigued and inspired him that he had had some cufflinks immediately made from it for his date tonight.

His jeweler had never seen such a rock. It must be very rare indeed, and therefore very valuable, which made Lex satisfied to have it in his possession and curious as to why Kent had kept it hidden in his unit storage shed.

But no matter. He would find all the answers he needed.

Lex figured Kent would be his next problem to deal with.

Clark followed Lex’s limo to the shuttle-launching site. He watched from a nearby hangar as Lex sent a man carrying Lois into the space shuttle. Clark knew he could move fast enough to get Lois out of there without anyone noticing him. He was about to do just that when he heard the loudspeaker announce there was a problem with the shuttle; they had stopped the launch at twenty-nine seconds due to a mechanical failure.

It would buy him extra time to get Lois to safety.

But he also knew that in all likelihood the mission would probably be scrubbed.

All those people, with hopes of getting diseases cured, would lose their opportunity.

If they didn’t go on this mission, children might even die.

Clark felt a chill go up his spine as he realized he wouldn’t let that happen. This was the moment he had been waiting for — to announce to the world what he could do, and that he was here to help.

He felt excitement pour through his veins as a sense of purpose filled him, new and exhilarating. His mother had seen, all those years ago, what he would be capable of — and he wasn’t about to disappoint her.

Without a second thought, Clark spun into his blue and red suit, and flew towards the rocket — to embrace his destiny.

Clark could hear the hum of excitement and curiosity as people nearby and in the watchtower spotted him. He had no inclination to explain himself yet — he had to introduce himself by showing them that he was here to help.

Before he could address how to help the shuttle crew, his first priority was finding Lois. He scanned the rocket and found her in a matter of seconds, tied to a chair still unconscious, though she looked otherwise unharmed.

Clark flew in from the boarding bridge, heading to the cargo hold where Lois was, his heart pounding, but for a new reason. He suddenly wondered if she would immediately wake up and see him. Would she make the connection to the blur? Would she make the connection to *Clark*? Did he want her to?

These questions and more swirled in his mind, but he had little time to dwell on any of them. He had to get Lois out of there and see what he could do to help the mission continue. Plus he knew that people would be wondering who he was and what he was doing. He needed to present himself as a friend to help as soon as possible, so they wouldn’t be afraid of him.

Clark undid the ropes binding Lois, and gently lifted her out of the chair. He was about to take her out of the hold when he spotted a small bomb slapped carelessly on a wall nearby.

Clark realized that Lex hadn’t just planned on sending Lois into outer space to get rid of her for a while — but he had planned on killing her and possibly other people on the shuttle. Even if the bomb exploded only in this room, it would stop the

mission. And then Lex Luthor could step forward and offer to build *his* space craft and Space Station Luthor, if only they let *him* be in charge of the Space Program. Then Luthor would have even more power at his disposal.

Clark wasn't about to let him do any such thing.

He set Lois back down and inspected the bomb. He easily pulled off its face panel and discovered the small explosive inside. He knew he was invulnerable, but the limits of that invulnerability had only been tested as far as a bullet. Could he — swallow a bomb?

He had no time to think about it, as the timer was down to less than ten seconds. Clark simply put it in his mouth, knowing it would cause less damage inside him than it would out in the shuttle. He felt it explode in his mouth, feeling the vibrations of it all through him and throughout the room, but felt no pain.

Clark turned back to Lois, grinning over his little accomplishment. She wasn't awake yet to see, but she was beginning to stir a little due to the sound of the explosion. A small knot of fear suddenly welled up in Clark. He was afraid to face her like this, he realized. Completely exposed — the alien. He hadn't wanted to tell her his secret until the Boss was taken care of — but he also wanted her to trust him before he did tell her.

He had to get her out of there before she woke up and saw him, before she could begin to ask questions.

Clark carried her to the bridge where he was met with the passengers on Prometheus. Many of them had seen him fly up to the rocket and were staring at him in awe.

"Is there a medic nearby?" he asked the crowd. A man stepped forward, his eyes wide with shocked admiration.

"Ye—yes, I'm the crew's medic."

Clark passed Lois into the other man's arms. He hoped Luthor was gone and wouldn't know at least for a while yet that his plan had failed. He had to believe she would be safe, until he could come back for her. "She's a reporter with the Daily Planet. Call Perry White immediately. He's the Editor-in-chief. Make sure she gets back there."

The man nodded, and turned to take Lois back to the main tower.

People from the crew were milling around, uncertain what to do.

A man came running in from another room. "Was there a bomb? Someone said they heard an explosion!"

Before people could panic, Clark tried to calm them by explaining what he saw. "There was a bomb, but I took care of it."

The colonists looked at him with uncertainty, wondering how he had stopped it.

"Who are you?" asked a crew member.

Clark smiled, "A friend."

"Attention, colonists. The mission has been aborted," came a voice over the intercom.

"That's it then. It's over," said a man nearby. "The thrusters have been fired, and they'll need to be replaced. We can just forget about it."

Clark watched as the expected wave of disappointment became palpable in the room. He took a breath, knowing his moment to become a hero had come.

"There's nothing wrong with this transport vehicle *or* the station. You only need to get there," he said with a little more confidence than he felt. His abilities had never been tested in space. Because he was invulnerable, he had always believed he could fly into space with no problem — theoretically, anyway.

"How?" asked a woman.

Clark smiled, his confidence strengthening with the hopeful glances from the colonists. It had to work.

"I'll give you a boost."

Still slightly dizzy from the chloroform, Lois stood on the observation deck staring at the sight before her with disbelief. A single man lifted a space shuttle into the air.

She was frozen to the spot, utterly fascinated by the miracle in the sky, and the energy in the room as a nation watched a hero being born. Lois even let herself forget for the moment the fact that Lex Luthor had known who she was and had tried to get rid of her. For now, she lost herself in the buzz of excitement over the flying man.

"Did you see him fly into the shuttle? You could barely see him! Just a blue and red streak in the sky!"

<<You could barely see him?>> she wondered to herself. <<Like the blur... could this man be the blur?>> The blur had been nearly invisible, helping, but doing so surreptitiously. The blur was a myth that she couldn't get Perry to let her write a story on. But this! This was a man out in the open, a true hero who wanted to help.

<<Were there several heroes out there? Or were they one in the same? And if so, what had made him come out of hiding?>>

Lois sipped a coffee they had given her, already beginning to write notes for the story. One of the men had recounted to her how the flying man had rescued her and the crew from a nearby bomb. The flying man had even carried her to the watchtower in his arms... She wished she had been awake to remember that!

But she also knew it would make one heck of a story that Perry would want to print right away!

As the rocket left the area and business began to return somewhat to normal, Lois decided to call Clark. She had to tell him what had happened with Lex and to see if he thought this new superhero and the blur might be the same man — and, if she were honest, she missed him. He may have secrets, but she knew he was no Lex Luthor. Clark would never harm her and that gave her some comfort.

She glanced at the clock, seeing it was half past nine. She assumed he was probably worried with how her interview with Lex went. And though she really didn't want to hear an 'I told you so,' she desperately wanted to hear Clark's voice.

She tried his apartment, but got only his answering machine.

Then she tried his pager, but didn't have a number to leave for him to call her back.

Lois sighed. It was just as well. He was probably out there trying to get the story on this flying man anyway.

She tried one more number, at the Planet, and got Perry.

"Lois! I mean, Linda — I hope you are on this story about this — flying man! Judas Priest! I can't believe it! Any idea what that 'S' on his uniform stands for?" He finally paused a moment, "By the way, where are you?"

"I'm at EPRAD," she began.

"That's my girl! Is Clark with you?"

She felt disappointed realizing Clark wasn't at the Planet either, as she answered, "No. I was hoping he was there with you. I can't reach him, Chief." Where was he? Would he give her another lie when she saw him again?

"That's strange... Keep trying him. Meanwhile, see if you can't get an interview with this — I don't know! At least find out what to call him."

She laughed nervously, still feeling shaken up over her dinner with Lex. She wanted to tell Perry what had happened, but he was wrapped up in the excitement of this superhero and she didn't want Perry to worry. She hoped that the buzz this superhero created would keep people occupied for a while, including Lex. Lois also hoped Lex thought she was still aboard the shuttle... it would buy her time, at least.

"I will do my best, Perry," she said, forcing optimism.

"I know you will. We'll see you back at the Planet as soon as you have something I can print, you hear? I'll be here as long as it takes — this story is going in the early morning edition!"

“Got it, Chief.”

Lois sighed as she hung up the phone. She had no idea where Clark was, but at least she had something to do — get the story!

She went around and interviewed as many of the eyewitnesses as she could. Lois still couldn't believe that she had been in the midst of the biggest story of the century and had slept through it — all thanks to Lex Luthor!

Now if only she could get an exclusive with the flying man... ‘Hmmm... Perry wanted a name for him?’ Lois looked over the shoulder of one of the technicians at one of the computer screens that had a few semi-close-up shots of the amazing man lifting the rocket from the launch pad. Perry had mentioned an ‘S’... and the crew members that hadn't been part of the launch, but had rushed aboard when the mission aborted, said the man had stated he was a ‘friend,’ but gave no name.

He was super strong, could defy gravity — and if he was the blur, was invulnerable. He was like a man with super powers... a super man...

It was simple, yet it made so much sense. The man appeared modest of his abilities, but he was definitely no ordinary man.

Above her notes, she scribbled a simple yet decisive headline: “Superman saves the day!”

It was so easy.

That's what Clark would remember about lifting the shuttle into space. It had been — easy. Gravity had never been a problem for him, and even though the shuttle wasn't like lifting his parents' sofa, he could do it with very little effort.

There was only a moment, as they entered the weightlessness of space, that he had felt the shuttle almost slip from his fingers, as it became too light to navigate. He himself felt tingly in space's atmosphere, but he had no trouble flying, and he knew he could easily hold his breath long enough to do what he had to.

Once he adjusted to the change in gravity, it had been a simple task of navigating the shuttle to land properly at the docking area.

Clark had saved the day, possibly hundreds of lives, and it had been no more difficult than chores he used to do around the farm.

It was an exhilarating feeling.

After the shuttle clicked into place and he waved good-bye to the crew, he turned back towards Earth. He took a moment, knowing he was one of the privileged few who got to see the Earth this way. Its blues and greens blended together in a harmonious globe, a lush spinning jewel in the infinite space around him. His vision telescoped to see Mars and Venus in the distance, just as beautiful, but not full of the life of Earth.

The Earth below him called to him in a way that he had never experienced. He knew he was alien, but he also knew that he belonged there, for better or worse. He didn't know why he had been sent to Earth, but he now had a purpose that hadn't become clear until he had found the Suit his Kansan mother had so lovingly made for him.

And Lois. She was a wounded soul who had suffered because of her choices. But he loved her deeply. He hoped someday he could share all that he was with her, and that she would in turn, do the same with him. He had no idea what to expect when he returned to Earth. He didn't know if cameras had captured his face or if Lois had already figured out his secret.

But he wasn't afraid anymore. Somehow, even if she didn't already know, he'd tell her. He had to share this — this feeling of freedom and rightness of having helped in a way that made a difference. He wanted to share that with her — and wanted Lois to know that she needn't be afraid ever again.

Lost in his thoughts, Clark floated above the earth, listening to the quiet of space. But the more he listened, the more his superhearing began picking up on things. He heard the low hum

of the earth spinning slowly on its axis. He heard the boiling crackle of the distant sun and asteroids moving through space. Life was out here — large and mysterious, moving in an infinite dark.

And life was below him, on Earth, where he could make a difference.

Suddenly, he wanted more than anything to feel the solid ground below his feet, to hear the hum of Metropolis, to see Lois Lane. He knew she would be on the story of his debut and he was anxious to see what she had made of it all. But most of all, he wanted to see her, to hold her again, to kiss her.

She didn't know it yet, but she grounded him. Since his parents had died, he had been a wandering soul, uncertain. But her faith in the blur had seeded a much needed faith in himself. And when he had found the Suit in his Fortress of Solitude, his way forward suddenly had become clear.

Clark wanted to tell Lois. Tell her everything.

He dived towards Earth, his heart and his eyes aiming for Lois and the truth that was there waiting for him.

Lois had taken a cab after she had gathered enough notes for the front-page story. On the ride back, she had tried not to think of Lex and what she would do. She needed to talk to Clark, and he was nowhere to be found. When she got back to the Daily Planet, it was past midnight, and only Perry was left, waiting for her story. While he read through it, she tried Clark's apartment again and left him a page. Where was he?

“Is that really his name?” asked Perry, coming over to her desk with her copy in hand.

“No,” she hedged. “But you got to run with something... I mean, we don't even know if we'll see him again. And, well, I don't know about you, but I think a man who can fly is pretty super, don't you?”

“Hmmm. Well, all right. It does have a sort of ring to it. And it's certainly better than that blur story you were peddling the other day. I don't know what you were thinking, Lois.”

She crossed her arms defensively. “What I think is that Superman, *is* the blur. He just decided to don tights and show himself. But I'll find out why, Chief. You know I will.”

Perry smiled. “I do indeed! It sure is great to have you back in the newsroom, Lois. This place just hasn't been the same without you.”

Suddenly the elevator dinged open. Lois felt her heart lurch, realizing she was still on alert after what had happened with Lex. She was relieved to see it was Clark.

“Clark!” she cried, rushing over to him.

He gathered her into his arms, and it was as if they had been separated for far more than a day.

“Are you all right? I mean, how was your date with Luthor?” he asked.

“I'm fine. I'll fill you in on Lex in a minute,” she said with a shiver. “But where have you been? There has been some excitement around here that you just won't believe!”

She walked him over to where Perry had the mock-up of the headline.

“Superman?” he asked, seeming uncertain.

Lois felt herself blush. “Yeah, well he was pretty impressive, Clark. I mean, haven't you heard? I know the television media has been all over it. And this is going in the early edition. I wish I had seen him up close...” she said wistfully.

“Lois, we need to talk,” Clark suddenly said.

“Yes, we do...” she answered, glancing at Perry.

Perry easily took his cue. “I'll uh, just put the finishing touches on this and get the paper to bed. I'll be in my office.”

As Perry shut the door, Lois turned to Clark, “You first.”

“You first,” he said almost on her heels and they both smiled.

“I missed you,” she said quietly, thinking of the hours since

she had last seen him. The interminable and disastrous dinner with Lex... and then, Superman.

“Does this mean you forgive me for the other night?” he asked.

She looked up at him, “Only if you’re ready to tell me the truth.”

‘Only if you’re ready to tell me the truth.’

The fear was suddenly back. The niggling doubt in his mind that she wouldn’t understand. He suddenly wanted to read that article she had written about him. What did she think of him? Had she made him into some unattainable figure that she didn’t understand? What would she think once she realized her pretend husband was the alien flying around in tights? The confidence he had felt in space seeped out of him.

Why couldn’t he get the words to form?

‘Superman?’ What kind of arrogant name was that? Was that what she saw?

He remembered when she had said that she couldn’t say she loved him just yet — that she had her own problems to sort through. Would telling her the truth put more undue pressure on her? The last thing he wanted was to push her away from him.

“Clark, say something,” Lois said, snapping him out of his thoughts for a second.

“Sorry. I — I want to know what happened at dinner with Luthor. I was comparing our notes—”

“You went through my notes?” she asked with some anger.

“Lois, we were going to compare them together, remember? And well, we — haven’t had time,” <<because you were angry at me for lying.>>

She sighed, “No, you’re right. And you were right about Lex. Clark, he knew who I was. I think he is the Boss.”

“I know. And I think he is too.”

“You know?” she asked in surprise.

“Yeah, I pretty much figured it out while you were at dinner with him.”

She nodded. “And he kidnapped me and put me on that space shuttle, and I think wanted to kill me. There was a bomb,” she explained dryly.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yeah, I think so,” she said, suddenly reaching for him. He willingly took her in his arms. “I know you have your secrets, Clark. But I also know that you would never deliberately hurt me, right?”

He pulled out of the hug to look in her eyes. “No, of course not. I — just need you to trust me.”

She sighed, “I want to, Clark. I just don’t know why you won’t be straight with me.”

Suddenly, Clark heard two sirens. He would often hear them in the city, but had only chosen before to help in cases where he wouldn’t be noticed. But now that he was visibly a hero, he could help a lot more often.

And maybe soon, he’d get up the courage to tell her the truth. As she had said, when this business with the Boss was over — and they were both sure of where they stood with each other.

“Why don’t you head home... I’ll meet you there. I — have to pick up something on the way,” he said, trying not to notice the hurt look on Lois’ face. “Have Perry take you home,” he said as an afterthought.

“Clark?” he heard her cry, sounding disappointed, but chose not to answer her. Right now, someone needed Superman, and that seemed a lot safer than baring his soul to Lois.

Clark was on a natural high after helping at the fire. The firemen he had helped were initially skeptical of him. But their concerns had quickly turned to gratitude when he had cooled off the fire and flown the hose up to the twelfth story window. He

had even rescued a child’s puppy that had been left behind.

The exhilarating feeling of having helped made him wonder why he hadn’t gone public before. People were looking at him now like he was a hero and not a freak that they couldn’t understand. He knew, though, that once the novelty of him wore off, there would eventually be questions. These were skeptical times, and the last thing he wanted were the news hounds suspecting there was some sort of alien invasion coming or that he was here for a nefarious purpose.

Whatever Lois had written in her article, he knew she had to have written it mostly on speculation. Ever a professional, she would have merely written down what had happened — and he could only hope that what she had seen and what others around her had told her about him had been presented in a positive light.

That still left unanswered questions that he knew he couldn’t hide from forever. He wasn’t sure how he would answer all of them, but he knew he could trust Lois to put together a credible exposé about him. Which would mean facing her in the Suit. She might see through him right away — and she might not.

Honestly, he wasn’t sure which he preferred. Part of him wanted to get it over with and just tell her. But the vulnerable part of him, the part that was uncertain as to whether she really loved him, was content to just let her continue to think Clark was an ordinary guy.

Regardless, the professional in him knew that it was best to put his story out there. And he felt too close to it to trust himself to write it as Clark Kent. What if someone read between the lines and somehow figured out that Clark Kent was Metropolis’ new hero? His life would be ruined. No, it was better to get it in a different writer’s voice, and so, he had to face Lois as... Superman.

Clark flew back to the Planet, surprised to find she was still there. Perry had left, and Clark wondered what Lois had said to convince the editor to leave her alone in the newsroom so late at night. She looked despondent, and before he flew in, he saw she was typing from a stack of notes on Luthor. Was she already working on a story to expose the criminal billionaire?

Clark gently blew open the large picture windows that led into the newsroom. A soft breeze rustled Lois’ papers and she looked up with a small gasp. He could see both admiration and curiosity in her eyes. But he didn’t see fear, of which he was glad, and he didn’t see recognition, which tore at his heart.

“S-superman?” she asked breathlessly, standing to come towards him.

He nodded. “If that’s what you want to call me,” Clark said, finding he was speaking to her in a lowered pitch, different from his own normally soft toned voice.

“Do you have a name? I didn’t know what else to call you,” she said with awe.

He floated down to stand by her. His arms were crossed over his chest, slightly defensive, thinking that at any second she’d call him out and see he was Clark — the man who had lied to her.

“I — I am not sure,” he answered hesitantly. He couldn’t give her Clark’s name, and he had not thought of another for his new persona. “Superman is fine.”

They were almost toe-to-toe now. He looked into her eyes, hoping to see the recognition click, but it never did. Did she know him so little, then?

“Why are you here?” she asked simply.

“To help. I have abilities —” He tore eye contact away from her and began pacing as he prepared to share what he wanted her to print about him.

“No,” she interrupted. “Why are you here, at the Daily Planet?” She smiled at him shyly, a smile that Clark didn’t get to see often, and it mesmerized him.

“I — I came for an interview — you are a reporter, aren’t you?” he asked innocently.

“Yes, I am,” she said, and her assertion warmed him.

“And, are you a good reporter?” he couldn’t help goading.

“As a matter of fact, I’m the best,” she said with a charming smile. Lois was coming back to herself, embracing what she had always done best.

Clark grinned ear to ear.

She peered curiously at him then, and he stopped cold, certain she had figured it out, had seen something in his smile that she recognized. But then she laughed to herself, in a semi-scoffing manner. Lois picked up her pen and pad, and turned to him, all business.

“So, Superman, what would you like to tell the people of Metropolis?”

In the end, the interview only lasted about ten minutes. Clark didn’t have that much to tell except to explain how he wanted to help and about his abilities. It almost felt good to just tell her that he could see through walls, had super breath, about his heat vision, and even his invulnerability, even though she didn’t recognize him as Clark. She had seemed admiring and interested — just how he had always hoped she would look at what he could do. He hedged about where he had come from though, saying that he was from another planet, but that he didn’t know anything about it, which was true. It was only his suspicion after all. She asked him if he suffered from memory loss from the journey, and he had nodded in agreement, just because it was plausible.

She was professional and wonderful. Kind, insightful — but not insightful enough to see he was Clark. By the end of the interview, he almost wanted to just spin out of the Suit and show her, feeling so frustrated by her intelligent questions and her blindness as to who he really was.

In some small way, he had felt she had failed him, just a little. But like a teacher who wants his student to find the right answer, he decided to try one more thing, give her one more chance to see the truth.

“Would you like a ride home?” he asked, as she began to gather her things.

“I can get a cab—” she said, but stopped, when she realized what he was asking. “Wait, do you mean a *ride*?” she asked, moving her hand in a sort of swooping motion to indicate flying.

He nodded with a small smile.

“Um... well, Clark is probably worried...” she said, hesitantly. But then her face seemed to harden slightly, possibly remembering how he had left her behind earlier, and Clark felt immensely guilty. She suddenly nodded, “Sure. Why not? It’s a once in a lifetime opportunity!”

Clark smiled wanly, wishing he had the courage to just tell her everything. But it was so easy to hide behind this new persona he had created, no matter how much he wanted her to see him for who he really was.

“I’m just going to lift you in my arms,” he explained as he slipped his arms under her knees and around her shoulders. “Hold on, I’ve got you.”

Superman.

Whether or not that was his real name, he was most certainly super.

Lois had been surprised to see him come to her at the Planet. She had convinced Perry that she needed to work on a story—the one that she hoped would put Luthor away for good. Part of her had wanted Clark to worry about her. She had wanted him to come looking for her, had wanted him to realize that he should stop running from her.

And then, Superman had shown up and she had forgotten to worry about Clark or Lex.

Superman was fascinating. He seemed shy, yet confident at

the same time. He shared with her his abilities, yet he seemed uncertain of his past. He was even unsure of his future, uncertain how the people of Metropolis would ultimately receive him.

And now, she was flying in his arms. He took her out the window and straight up by the spinning globe on top of the Planet building. From there, he slowly swept her around the city. She felt safe in his arms and beyond excited by flying through the air on this cool beautiful night. The lights of the city shimmered like jewels below them. She wanted to reach out and touch them, unattainable stars that twinkled across the city.

They didn’t talk on the flight, except when he pointed out places of interest, or views that were new. She got the sense that he had wanted to share this with someone for a long time — only secretly did she wish that that someone could be her.

When she directed him at last to Clinton Street, she remembered the one question that she had been dying to ask him since she had seen him lift that space shuttle into the sky. She hadn’t asked him in the interview, because she was afraid she’d scare him off. But now, after that thrilling flight, surely he would trust her to tell her the truth.

“One more question, off the record,” she said as they descended slowly onto Clark’s balcony.

“Sure. If I know the answer, I’ll tell you.”

She took a breath, looking deep into his eyes, haunted vaguely by their familiarity. “Were you the one who saved my sister? And then me a few days ago?” she asked quietly.

He seemed to hesitate a moment and then answered clearly, “Yes.”

She looked up at him in gratified surprise. “I knew it was you... why—were you—hidden before?” she asked carefully.

He sighed, seeming to weigh his words. “I wasn’t sure if I could help — openly until now.”

She thought there was more he wanted to say, but he didn’t go on. He simply looked at her with a slightly helpless expression that almost reminded her of Clark. She suddenly wanted to show him some sign of her gratitude for what he had done, and for taking her flying tonight.

Lois stepped up next to him and reached to kiss him chastely on his cheek. “Thank you,” she said simply.

His eyes seemed to melt into hers and she saw a tic in his jaw as if he was holding back some strong emotion.

It unsettled her a bit, so she stepped back, cleared her throat and gestured to the door behind her. “My—husband should be home. I must go in,” she said, feeling her cheeks flame. She was confused by the emotions Superman had stirred in her — they were so close to the emotions she felt for Clark. And besides, she didn’t want to appear wanton to Superman, who seemed so pure and good, and she had already crossed that line somewhat by enjoying flying with him so much.

“Good night, then,” he said.

He looked like he was about to take off, and Lois realized she had no way of contacting him, no way of knowing if she would ever see him again.

“Wait! Will I ever see you again? How will I find you?”

He lifted slightly off the ground, and turned to her with a smile, “I’ll be around.”

Lois was a little dazed when she entered the apartment. She was almost glad that Clark wasn’t home yet, as she didn’t want to have to explain the dreaminess she had felt with Superman. She cared deeply for Clark, but Superman was just another level of *wow*. He was an unattainable dream that the girl inside her couldn’t help but fantasize about. Besides, she still didn’t understand why Clark was lying to her, and now, he had disappeared on her when she needed him. At least Superman seemed ready to be there for her.

Lois changed into a pair of Clark’s sleep shorts and a

University of Kansas t-shirt. The whole place reminded her of Clark, and she couldn't tell if it comforted her or made her sadder. She couldn't help but feel she was losing him, and it made it that much easier to reach out for this sudden new hero in her life, Superman.

She crawled into bed, emotions creating constriction in her throat. She fell into a restless sleep almost immediately as tears slipped quietly down her cheeks.

...The sound of wind, like a helicopter...

A shadow pursued her under harsh halogen lights...

She was hurt and afraid.

Suddenly, the hurt was gone, chased away, though she didn't know how.

Arms comforted her, lifted her from the ground.

His voice was warm on her ear.

She felt weightless, a gentle breeze in her hair; yet held in strong, comforting arms. The distant sounds of birds and surf... below her? Her feet dangling over an endless expanse of sky... the sun warm on her cheek...

Lois woke abruptly, her dream so real that her mind had almost kicked her awake to look at it. She shivered in the cool night, but got out of bed anyway. What was that dream? It had felt like she was... flying? And so real—Was she just putting together her flight with Superman and Clark rescuing her from the Congo—

Suddenly, the truth hit Lois like a ton of bricks. She had to be sure, had to write it all down, see it in print, like she always did when pursuing a story.

Her briefcase was by the sofa, where she noticed Clark was now sleeping. He looked so sweet asleep, a thick lock of hair flopped carelessly over his eyes...

But she had to know, had to be sure... She grabbed her briefcase and walked back to the bedroom. Flipping on the light, she drew out her yellow pad and pen and began writing.

How did he get me back from the Congo? No idea how long it took... but it seemed shorter than a normal (!!) flight would have been...

The smooched bullet I found... What if it had been someone invulnerable and super fast who stopped it and grabbed it??

Her pen suddenly slipped from her fingers, and she got up to walk back over to Clark. She kneeled down next to him, looking at him carefully, wondering if it were true—wondering if she only *wanted* it to be true.

"You're insane, Lane," she whispered to herself. <<He would have told me tonight who he really was if it were so...>>

Clark's eyes suddenly opened and she realized he hadn't really been asleep.

"Hey," he said softly.

"Clark... tell me something..." she began, wary. If he was who she thought he was, then she was about to open a can of worms. If he was Superman, then he *knew* she had shot him in the Congo. He *knew* — and yet he had said he loved her.

That took her aback a moment. She realized that with that declaration of love, Clark had forgiven her even before she had begun to forgive herself.

Tears constricted her throat, as she was torn up over the grace he had given her, and the grace she had refused him, confused by his actions.

Clark sat up and turned on the side lamp. "Lois, what is it?" he asked gently.

She trembled and he reached to take her in his arms. "You *knew*," she whispered quietly against his chest. "How could you forgive me... when you knew..." she said and began to weep.

"Talk to me, Lois. Please. Why are you so upset?"

She pulled away from him suddenly, and got up and walked over to his leather jacket. She dug in the pocket and wasn't surprised to find the bullet still there. She held it in her hand a

moment, weighing it and contemplating what this would mean. It would mean admitting everything to him and forcing him to admit the truth to her. It would mean admitting that she wasn't worthy of his love or his trust, as she had so quickly doubted the truest man she had ever known. It would mean the end of secrets, and the beginning of life without him.

She sighed heavily, and then walked over to him, each step feeling like lead.

"How — did you get this bullet?" she asked quietly, dropping the condemning object into his palm. "Just tell me the truth this time Clark. Because I think I already know."

Clark looked at her face in the dim lamp light. She was in agony, he could see. There was so much self-condemnation in her eyes. The very same that he had wanted to avoid putting there since the moment he had taken her with him on that helicopter. But it had come to pass anyway, inevitably.

He realized it was much more than the Boss they had to face. It was this. This was what was separating them, even more so than Superman was. Because this represented an ultimate betrayal, even before anything real had begun between them.

He knew that the truth would have to come out. But his love would have to be stronger. *Their* love would have to be stronger.

Gently, he took her hand and opened her palm face up. He lovingly placed a kiss on it and then looked in her eyes as he placed the bullet back in her palm and slowly closed her fingers around it. He held her fist loosely in both of his hands, and met her eyes, which were wet with tears.

"You are right. I know what really happened that night. I know that you shot me," he said, feeling her fist jerk from his. But he held on, gently, reassuringly. "But I know it wasn't *you*. The night we made love, I learned so much about you. That you were scared and hurt and were running from something you couldn't control. This is your past," he said solemnly, indicating the fist-covered bullet. "I want to be your future." Clark brought her fist to his chest, placing his palm over her hand. "This bullet couldn't wound me, but you can, Lois, if you reject me. I love you and I accept you — all of you. And now," he sighed bracingly, "I need you to accept all of me."

"I don't understand," she said weakly, through her tears. "How can you forgive me — forgive my c-cowardice? I never wanted to hurt you, but I was too damned scared to try and fight —" Sobs wracked her body again and Clark gathered her in his arms.

"Lois, listen to me. Since you've been back, you've shown more courage than you know. Going to the Planet, talking to Perry. Talking to your sister... Even going to dinner with Lex took courage, Lois."

"But you see... it's *you*, Clark. You gave me the courage to do all of those things. Even before I knew it was you, when you were just that force of goodness out there. Without you I was — lost. Terrified..."

He froze a moment, just catching what she had said. "Wait... then you already know?" he asked in surprise.

She nodded. "I only just figured it out—"

"That I'm —"

"The blur... or Superman. Yeah," she smiled. "I was so stupid not to realize it the moment you came into the newsroom tonight. It took me a few hours... but I got there."

"I've wanted to tell you, Lois. But—"

"Hush," she said, touching his lips with her fingers. "You don't need to apologize to me, Clark. I have been the fool. And I do love you, Clark. More than I've let myself admit because I've been so scared — of my past, and of myself. I still think you are way more than I deserve... but I do accept you—all of you."

"See. You do have courage," he said with a smile. "If you can accept me—"

“Who? A superhero who flies and rescues a space shuttle?” she finished for him, finally smiling through her tears.

He nodded, “Yeah... I’m sorry for lying, Lois.”

She lifted his face to meet hers. “Oh, Clark! You don’t need to apologize. I’m sorry, Clark. So sorry, for everything... I wanted to see a hero, and I forgot to look at the one I already had.”

He smiled, “Tonight I had hoped that you would just recognize me — but at least we know the disguise works,” he said wryly.

“I was just blind, Clark. Unable to see what was in front of me because I was too tied up in my own fears and drama. I’m sorry ...”

Clark cupped her cheek and gently lifted her face to look at him. “We’ve both made mistakes.” He hushed her when she tried to protest. “It doesn’t matter what they were, just that we forgive each other. And move on ...”

“Then, I guess this means you still want me around?” she said lightly, though her voice shook a little.

“Absolutely.”

She leaned in and Clark closed the distance to meet her lips. She fell into his lap, and they couldn’t seem to get close enough. Clark suddenly tasted the saltiness of her tears and stopped, but she shook her head, cupping his face. “They’re tears of happiness, Clark. For once, they’re tears of joy.”

It felt so wonderful to be held by Clark, kissed by him. His strong arms wrapped around her, his soft hair threaded between her fingers. She kissed his cheek, his nose, coming back at last to his mouth, feelings of contentment surging through her.

This was where she belonged. With Clark Kent, with no more secrets.

It was bliss.

... Almost.

She wanted to let it go, and just trust that he always had had her best interest at heart. But Lois simply couldn’t let things go any further until she had the answer to her one remaining question of doubt.

“Clark?” she said, trying not to let herself be distracted by how good it felt to be held by him again, feel his kisses on her, breathe in his own unique scent.

“Mmm?” he said, nuzzling her neck.

She pulled back reluctantly. “I hate to break the mood ... but I have to know ... where were you the other night? Really?”

Clark looked at her in surprise, his mouth slightly agape and wet from her kisses. His hair was tousled and she had to resist the urge to smooth it back.

“I just don’t want there to be any more secrets between us, Clark,” she said simply.

He slowly nodded in agreement and then unexpectedly chuckled, “You know, even with you knowing who I am—it sounds crazy.”

“Clark, just tell me. You can’t imagine the crazy scenarios that have been spinning around in my head ... please?” she asked, gently rubbing his arm for encouragement.

“Well, I got a call from an old friend — not a girlfriend,” he amended quickly. “An old family friend. Wayne Irig. He said he needed me to see this rock he had found nearby my parents’ old property. I thought it would take me an hour at most—”

“Where did your parents live?”

“Smallville, Kansas.”

“Smallville? What kind of name is that?” she scoffed, then seeing his look, she schooled her features to be serious. “Sorry. Continue.”

“So I flew out to Kansas. Wayne showed me the rock and — I don’t know how to explain it, but — it took away my powers. I couldn’t fly, couldn’t do anything! Luckily my powers came back

the next day, but I had no way of explaining it all to you ...”

“What is this rock that did this to you? Is there more of it? What did you do with it?” she asked with alarm.

“Calm down, one question at a time ...”

“Sorry ... I’m just — did you know such a rock existed before?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No idea. Lois, I didn’t even know where I come from — I still don’t, exactly—let alone that rock. But Wayne actually told me a little bit more, about how I got here. And I told you everything I know tonight in our interview.”

“But you told me you didn’t remember coming to Earth.”

He gave her a sheepish grin, “Okay, I didn’t tell you everything. It was just easier than the truth. They found me as a baby — but I have no idea where I came from.”

He suddenly got up from the sofa and went into the bedroom. He came back with a leather diary and handed it to her. “I found this while I was in Smallville. It’s my whole story—or at least as much as my parents’ knew. My mom wrote it all down.”

Lois thumbed through the pages, awed by what Clark was revealing to her. These very personal memories were all he had left of his family and she felt privileged that he wanted to share them with her.

“Oh, Clark,” she said as she read. “How wonderful that you found this.”

She was about to hand the diary back to him when he took it and turned to a page his mother had sketched of him in the Suit.

“This is what gave me the idea ... my mother actually made the Suit,” he said with a wry smile.

“Wow, Clark. Your mother must have been some woman,” she said with awe, admiring her rendering of a hero.

“Yeah,” Clark said softly.

She suddenly looked up at him and noticed he had tears in his eyes.

“Clark?” she asked with concern.

“It was really hard to go back ... I had no idea all of the amazing memories that I had left behind—because I was simply running from my past.”

Lois suddenly reached to pull him into her arms, tears coming to her own eyes. She realized how incredibly vulnerable his heart was, even while it was his strength of heart that moved her.

“I know all about running from one’s past, Clark. You don’t have to explain,” she said softly, holding Clark’s shaking body till his tears subsided.

When Clark had calmed down enough, she handed him a tissue.

“What happened to the rock Wayne found? Were you able to destroy it, get rid of it?” she asked.

Clark sighed heavily, “Now, I don’t want you to worry—”

“Oh, no. This can’t be good ...”

“I think Luthor has it. In fact, I *know* he has it.”

“What?” she cried in alarm. “How? When?!”

He smirked at her ability to barrage him with ten questions every few seconds. It took a Superman just to keep up with her!

“Well, when you went to dinner, I followed you,” he said, hesitantly.

She saw his wariness and gently took his hand, “Clark. I’m glad you were there. It’s okay. I was so — foolish to think I could handle Lex Luthor all on my own.”

Clark nodded gratefully and continued. “I noticed that he wasn’t taking you back to our apartment —”

“*Our* apartment?” she interrupted with blush.

“Yeah ... *ours*,” he smiled in return. “Anyway, I flew along the outside of the car and tried the handle and that’s when I felt it—the rock that could take away my powers. I had stored it here, in the apartment, and apparently, Luthor had broken in. Or one of his minions, more like.”

“What does this rock look like?” she asked.

"It glows an eerie green. Brighter than an emerald."

"He had cufflinks made of it," she said with disgust. "At least he doesn't know it can hurt you — yet. We'll have to be very careful."

"And you — once he sees Linda Kent's story tomorrow morning in the Planet, he'll know you made it off the shuttle."

Lois felt only slightly guilty. "Are you mad that I wrote that story? That I didn't stay out of the way with Luthor still loose?"

He smiled at her. "No, Lois. I wouldn't expect anything less."

She grinned in return. "Good. 'Cause I'm terrible at staying put — just letting you know. Good thing you're handy with the 'whoosh'," she said, making a swooping gesture with her hand.

Clark sighed indulgently. "I know things will never be dull with you, Lois. But please, try to stay out of trouble."

"I'll see what I can do," she answered with faux exasperation.

"You'd better," he half-teased, pulling her back into his arms.

Their light banter disappeared, as their contact stirred passion once again. Leaning against Clark, she could hear his heartbeat accelerate slightly at their closeness. She sat up a little to look at him. Clark gently cupped her chin, as he resumed his kisses from a few moments earlier.

Lois moved herself to sit on his lap to give him better access. He caressed her back under her light t-shirt, sending shivers up her spine. She slipped off Clark's t-shirt and found her fingers smoothing over the planes of his chest. She kissed his chest, trailing kisses from his pecs up to his neck, until she met his eyes.

He sat watching her, waiting for what she would do next.

Slowly, Lois slipped off his glasses, folded them, and set them aside.

"No more secrets," she whispered. "Right?"

He shook his head. "My soul is laid bare, Lois."

She cupped his chin, marveling at how far they had come together, and from how deep in the dark she had come before stepping into the light.

"You were right ..." she said, through a constriction in her throat. "You laid my soul bare the night we first made love ... I knew ..." she took a bracing breath and then continued, looking directly into Clark's eyes. "I knew I'd never be the same."

Clark kissed her as she reached around his neck, suddenly scooping her up in his arms, much as he had done as Superman, for their very first flight.

Lois clung closer to him, her head lying on his chest as he took them into the bedroom. "I love you, Clark Kent ... Superman ... you ... my soul knew yours, before my head or even my heart," she said solemnly, as he set her gently down on the bed.

"Ah, Lois," he said lovingly. "I love you—with everything I am ... but it's not enough to just say it."

She pulled him down to lay with her, to be with her as they both needed.

"Then show me ..."

Lois awoke in Clark's arms, contentment enveloping her. Clark's warm body pressed against hers, reminiscent of their passionate embrace during the early morning hours. For once in her life, she felt cherished and protected, and it made her want to cherish and protect in return.

Lois wasn't afraid anymore, even though she knew the Boss still would be after her and Clark might have to face that horrid rock again. It didn't matter because they were together and in love. And the two of them together would be stronger than anything they had to face alone.

Lois turned slightly in Clark's arms, in order to look at him. His handsome features were in repose, his hair slightly messy in a charming sort of way. She didn't know she could ever love someone so much. But she did, to her very soul.

Unable to contain her happiness, she leaned over him and

kissed him on the cheek. She was rewarded with his eyes fluttering open, and a smile coming to life on his lips.

"Hey there," he said, his voice husky from sleep.

"Hey," she said in return, brushing a lock of hair from his forehead.

"Did you sleep okay?" he asked, rubbing his hand down her arm.

"Mmm ... quite possibly it was the best sleep I ever had ..." she said appreciatively.

Clark pulled her in close to him, tucking her head below his chin. "You think Perry would notice if we didn't come in this morning?"

Lois laughed warmly, "Yeah, I'm pretty sure he would ... besides, we have a follow-up interview to print about Superman — and Lex Luthor is still at large."

He sighed, "I know ... just let's lie here for five more minutes, what do you say?"

She giggled in agreement, enjoying snuggling deeper into Clark's arms.

Suddenly the phone rang.

"I'll bet that's Perry," said Lois, reluctantly reaching from under the covers to answer the phone. "Hello?"

"Where are you two? I need my star reporters down here, pronto! There is buzz aplenty about this Superman — we need a follow-up!"

Lois sighed, giving Clark a reluctant look. "We'll be right there, Chief."

She hung up the phone and snuggled again into Clark's arms.

"I thought we were getting up," said Clark, through a laugh.

"We are ... eventually," she said with a contented sigh, moving to give Clark a few more kisses ...

When Lois and Clark finally entered the newsroom, Perry approached them, all fires blazing. "Where in Sam Hill have you two been? I need a follow-up on the Superman story, the biggest news story—"

Before Perry could get further, Lois passed him her article on her exclusive interview with Superman. "Done and done, Perry," she said with a smug smile.

Perry beamed in return and nodded at Clark, "Didn't I tell you she was the best?"

"You sure did, Chief," said Clark, giving Lois an intimate smile that made her blush.

Perry glanced between the two of them. "Uh, I guess you two made up, then?"

Lois nodded, slipping her hand into the crook of Clark's arm. "Yeah, we did."

"Good, good. Glad to hear it ... now, Lois, since you are the only one who has spoken to this Superman, I want to know what you can tell me about him."

"Well, Chief, all the printable details are in the article I handed you. But the main thing is, he's here to help, and I think the Planet should stand behind him."

Perry looked at her thoughtfully, "Hm, sounds good to me ... I must say, you can't exactly doubt a man who saved a whole rocket shuttle. It will make one hell of a story for some time to come ... now I need you two to chase up something for the evening edition ... so get!"

Lois turned to Clark with a smile, "It feels so good to be doing this again ... and it's even better doing it with you."

"Mrs. Kent? A phone call for you on line one," said one of the copy boys.

Lois glanced at Clark, her contentment dissolving as she wondered who could be calling her at the Planet. "Hello?"

"Lois? It's Lucy—" the phone sounded as if it were wrenched away and Lex's smooth voice suddenly came on the receiver.

"Hello, Miss Lane. As you heard, I have been talking with your

sister. I hope she can convince you to come to an arrangement—”

“Let her go, Luthor! It’s me you want,” Lois said, looking at Clark who had come over to listen to the call when he’d noticed her distress.

“Actually, I would like to propose a business deal, Miss Lane.”

“What kind of business deal?” she spat with disgust.

“I would like you to work for me, here in Metropolis,” Luthor offered amicably.

“What?” she asked in surprise.

“Yes, you see, I could use a person with your —special talents. I’ve been discussing things with your sister, and well, I would like you to come and discuss matters with me at LexCorp within the hour. It’s imperative, in fact, that you come as soon as possible.”

The phone went dead. Lois stared at the receiver, uncertain what to think. What was Luthor doing with Lucy and why did he want Lois there within an hour? She turned to Clark, feeling slightly stunned and very uncertain.

Clark gently took the handset from her and hung up the phone.

“Are you all right?” he asked needlessly.

She shook her head, “No, I’m not all right, Clark! What does he want? And why does he have Lucy? Clark, what am I going to do?”

“You mean, what are we going to do. You don’t have to face Luthor alone, you know.”

“I know,” she said, giving him a wan smile. “But you can’t just swoop in there and grab Lucy, either ... not with that strange rock still lurking about ...” she whispered.

Clark sighed. “Look, we have quite a lot of evidence on Luthor already ... Maybe I can get Henderson to write up a warrant for his arrest ...”

“Is it enough? I mean, we need witnesses, and the only ones we have are you and me! No, Clark, let me go over there ... and ... I’ll think of something. Maybe I can promise him I’ll work for him, just long enough to get Lucy out of there —”

“You really think he’ll just let her go?” asked Clark skeptically.

“I have to, Clark,” she said despondently.

“Lois, it’s more likely just a trap to get you over there—and you don’t want to be put in the position where you feel forced to do something you’d regret in order to save your sister,” Clark said earnestly.

She sighed, “Look, the clock is ticking ... I’ll go to LexCorp towers, to stall him. You go to Henderson with all of our files and see if there is anything he can arrest him on with such short notice ... one way or another, I know you’ll get me out of there,” she said, leaning to give him a quick kiss. “We’ll figure this out, Clark. Together. I trust you.”

“Lois!” he called, stopping her on the landing.

She turned to him expectantly as she pressed the elevator button. As the doors dinged open, Clark followed her inside.

“Clark, what are you doing?”

“Let me take you there ... then I can check things out a bit before you go in, get an idea of how much time we have.”

Lois crossed her arms, “I don’t want you near the place until we have back-up, Clark. If Lex is still wearing that rock that can hurt you, we’ll both be sunk. Please?”

“Let’s call Henderson before we leave, to give him a heads up — and then I’ll just take a quick look around and drop you off ... I don’t want you going on Luthor’s turf without us having more of a clue about exactly what we’re up against. “

“Fine,” she said, with no heat, relenting. “I guess—I’m used to doing things alone ...”

“But now you don’t have to,” Clark answered with a reassuring smile.

“Maybe I could get used to this partner thing ...” she said with sudden enthusiasm, stepping into his arms.

“Me too, Lois. I like having you around. Which is why we need to do this together.”

She leaned up to kiss his cheek. “You got it — partner.”

Clark hadn’t seen anything immediately alarming on his quick flight around LexCorp Tower. That didn’t mean Lois wasn’t shaking as she entered the LexCorp building alone.

She had put on a brave face for Clark, but inwardly, she wanted nothing more than for him to be there with her, as she faced this. She knew he would be back as soon as possible, and she just had to hold onto that thought while she tried to stall Lex until Clark could get there. They had spoken to Henderson briefly before leaving the Planet and had been pleased to hear that Henderson already had a file on Lex. It would make it that much easier to catch him ... Lois only hoped they could organize quick enough to get her and her sister out of there safely, without exposing Clark to that dangerous rock.

The elevators opened onto an elegant floor that served as a study and a reception area of sorts. Sumptuous furniture filled the space, as if Luthor had the area designed to be a homey office, filled with all the best luxuries. Lois heard classical music playing in the background and cautiously stepped out of the elevator, wondering what game Lex was expecting her to play.

“Miss Lane, so glad you could come on such short notice,” came Lex’s voice from the far corner of the room, nearly scaring her out of her skin.

Lois walked towards him, determined not to show her fear. She could see the eerie green glow of his cufflinks, which deepened her concern as she approached. She was glad Clark was off getting police back-up.

“I’m here for my sister. Where is she, Lex?” Lois demanded, trying to sound brave.

“Lucy is fine, I assure you. I simply want us to discuss business details. Here, have a seat,” he gestured for her to sit at his large oak desk.

“No, thank you. I’d rather stand,” she said, crossing her arms defensively.

Lex made himself comfortable behind the desk and shrugged nonchalantly. “Have it your way. Now, Miss Lane, since you refused to cooperate with me last time, I see no reason to trust you will listen to reason now. So for insurance, I have brought your sister here,” Lex said, gesturing to a nearby door where Lucy appeared bound and gagged, with Lex’s servant, Asabi, standing by.

“Let her go, Lex. Your quarrel is with me,” said Lois, feeling her resolve waver at seeing Lucy in distress.

Lex’s casualness dissipated as he got down to brass tacks. “First I want your word that you will break all ties to your friends, family, and the Daily Planet and come work for me, as you were trained to do, here in Metropolis.”

“I —” she hesitated, unable to say she would do any such thing. She had planned on agreeing to whatever he wanted in order to stall for time, but she just couldn’t get the words out to agree with him. “I don’t know ...”

“Wrong answer!” he said, gesturing to Asabi who brought out a large scimitar that he held by Lucy’s side. “Want to try again?” he asked threateningly.

“I — how can you ask such a thing of me?” she asked, hoping to appeal to his humanity, if he had any. She saw no sympathy in his eyes, only a careful disdain. But Lois knew he was attracted to her, had flirted with her. “You said you liked me, Lex. Why are you doing this to me?” she asked, trying another tactic.

He looked almost regretful as he answered. “My dear, I think, if we had met at another time, there might have been something

for us—something real between us, perhaps. But unfortunately for you, you know too many of my secrets. I've worked too hard to build LexCorp up to what it is today, and I cannot afford to have a nosy reporter out there — ” Lex gestured to Asabi again, and he lifted the blade to Lucy's throat.

“All right!” Lois conceded, fearful for her sister's life. “I'll do it! Only—let Lucy go.”

“You will break all ties to those you know here in Metropolis? Be at my beck and call?” asked Lex, seemingly suspicious that he had won so easily.

“If I do it, will you let Lucy go?” Lois asked, hesitant to believe that Lex would let her sister go no matter what she promised.

Luthor smiled at her with sly charm. “I'm a fair man. Give me what I want and I'm sure we can come to an agreement that's good for all parties.”

Suddenly, Lois saw through the large picture window behind Lex that Superman had landed on the terrace. She grinned knowing the troops had arrived. Lois approached Luthor's desk, spotting a button labeled ‘window’, which she assumed would open it to let Clark in. She placed her palms on either side of the desk, leaning over it as if she had suddenly decided to seduce Lex, which distracted him long enough for her to hit the switch on the desktop to throw the window open. She cried to Clark, “Get Lucy out of here!” hoping he could remain far enough from the rock Luthor wore to rescue Lucy.

Lex looked behind him at Lois' cry, but he had already missed seeing Superman, as with a whoosh of air, Superman had swept in and took Lucy. Lois smiled triumphantly as Luthor turned back to her, knowing his bargaining chip was safely out of reach.

He turned away from her with disgust, but when he faced her again, he had a pistol in his hand, taking away her momentary sense of victory. She wasn't out of the woods yet . . .

“No matter. I still have other options,” he said, moving towards her with the pistol. “You are beautiful, Miss Lane. I'd almost hate to have to kill you . . . ”

Lois truly began to panic, as she knew Clark couldn't swoop in and get her with her so close to the strange rock Lex wore. And if they could avoid Lex Luthor learning about what it could do to Superman, so much the better. The best thing she could do was to try and maneuver distance between them and hope it would be enough.

Lois slowly backed towards the elevator.

Lex matched her step for step.

He never took his eyes off her and the gun never wavered.

She was afraid to move too quickly, fearing he would just pull the trigger.

Lois glanced over Lex's shoulder. She could see Clark as Superman standing back on the balcony ledge outside the window. She made eye contact with him, and shook her head just enough to indicate that she would be all right.

Clark shook his head in answer and swept in anyways. Lois gasped in fear, as she didn't know what would be worse — Luthor shooting her or Clark being felled by the rock Lex wore.

But Clark kept his distance from Luthor and used his heat vision to sear the gun out of Lex's hand.

Lex looked up at Superman in horror, but tried quickly to school his features back to calm control. “Well, Superman. Glad we finally meet.”

Just then, the elevators dinged open behind Lois, causing both her and Lex to turn in surprise. To Lois' horror, her worst nightmare stepped out of the elevator—Jon from the Congo, the man who had trained her to be an assassin, and who had threatened to kill her on more than one occasion if she didn't follow orders.

“Ah, Jon, so nice of you to join us,” said Lex casually, his

confidence returning.

“Actually, Lex. I have a surprise for you.” Jon suddenly and easily moved Lois behind him. He flashed an FBI badge and what must be a warrant in Lex's face. “You are under arrest.”

“What is the meaning of this? I *pay* your salary, Jon!” Lex protested in shock, trying to back away from Jon.

Jon gave Lex a wry smile, “Well, I am a turncoat, Lex. I don't know why you are surprised.” Jon began to put handcuffs on Luthor and called into his communicator for back-up. Lois stepped aside, looking at Jon in shock.

“I—I don't know what to say,” she stammered.

“Well, it had been in the works for months, but shortly after you left, the FBI provisionally hired me as a double agent to finish trapping Luthor. I was promised immunity if I could get this job done, proving myself, as it were.”

Lois suddenly looked up at Superman who reached to shake Jon's hand. “Clark met Jon down at the police station,” Superman explained. “They'd been planning a sting for months. But when Clark told Jon what was going on, they decided to move on in today.”

Suddenly, the elevators dinged open again and more FBI agents flooded the building.

As the officers took Lex away, Lois touched Jon's arm, still surprised that he had turned out to be her rescuer. “I don't understand. I always thought if you got the chance — you'd kill me for leaving.”

“Lois, I told you in the Congo, it was a job. And now I hope to be working for the FBI full time. I've learned a lot in the past months, and I think I like working on the side of the good guys much better. I owe you for the hell of those months, Mad Dog. I want you to know I made sure your name was never associated with what went on down there, not officially anyway. Your crimes will be forgotten,” he smiled at her, a sight that she thought would always terrify her, but now held a friendliness that was entirely unexpected. “Here, I'll give you my beeper number. If ever you need anything, give me a call.”

Lois watched him walk away, stunned beyond words. She turned to Clark, her mouth open with shock.

Clark reached to squeeze her shoulder gently. “I told you, Lois. There's good in everybody.”

Lois was ready to make her comeback official. More than finally putting her by-line — her real by-line — alongside Clark's for the article that told the world about the downfall of Lex Luthor, she wanted to *look* like Lois Lane again.

Lois stared for a long time at her reflection in the mirror the hairdresser had given her after the cut and dye work was done. There were tears in her eyes, and the hairdressers around her shared secret smiles over how a color change and a cut could make someone so emotional. Lois touched her short bob, content to see her hair dyed back to its natural dark brown. It was such a silly thing, but coming back to her old look meant the end of fear, the end of hiding, and the beginning of a life she hoped would redeem her past.

“Thanks, ladies. I love it,” she said, at last handing back the mirror.

Lois stepped out onto the busy Metropolis street a few moments later, the sun warm on her face. She didn't even bother putting on sunglasses, not wanting to feel like she would be hiding again. Instead she embraced the sunshine, embraced who she was and who she would become. Confidently, she walked towards the cafe a few blocks away, where Clark waited for her to have lunch.

She spotted him sitting at a small table on the outdoor terrace, reading a menu. Lois made her way over to him, her heart pounding with only slight trepidation, hoping that he would like her new look. It was ridiculous to worry over, but his acceptance

of this change was the last little hurdle in her mind to reclaiming Lois Lane.

“Hi,” she said shyly, distracting his attention away from the menu.

“I’m sorry, miss, but I am waiting for my girlfriend,” he said, barely glancing at her and looking immediately back down at the menu.

She touched his arm, moving the menu away from his face so he would look at her. “Clark, it’s me! Lois!” she said with a little bit of alarm.

He gave her a disarming smile as he set the menu aside. “I know it’s you, honey. Don’t you know I’d know you anywhere?” he said, taking her hand to kiss it.

She smiled in return. “You’d better,” she laughed good-naturedly, taking a seat across from him in the warm sunshine. “But do you like it?” she asked, fingering her bob shyly.

“I love you—no matter what you look like, Lois. And I’m glad you finally feel like your old self.”

“Thanks, Clark. I needed to hear that.”

He gave her another dazzling smile, and she leaned back slightly to feel the warm sun on her face, a sense of peace and rightness filling her. At last, she was fully able to embrace the light.

Clark got a call from Wayne later that day telling him he had found something interesting out in his parents’ old barn. He promised it was no kind of glowing rock, but all the same, he thought Clark should see it for himself.

Clark decided it would be a perfect opportunity to introduce Lois to the Irigs, and to his old life in Smallville.

“Hey,” he said as they left the Planet for the evening. “How do you feel about taking a little trip?”

She turned to him with a smile. “I love little trips—but where are we going?”

Clark tugged her into a side alley and lifted her into his arms. “Smallville.”

They arrived on the farm a short while later, just before the sun had fully set. Its afternoon rays made the wheat look like gold around them as they landed at the old Kent farm. Clark gently set Lois down and led her into the farmhouse.

“Wayne?” Clark called as they stepped onto the porch.

Margaret came to meet them instead, wiping her hands on her apron as she opened the screen door. “Clark! So glad to see you!” she said, leaning to give Clark a quick hug and a kiss on his cheek.

“You must be Lois. We’ve heard so much about you!” Margaret said, turning smiling eyes on Lois.

“Nice to meet you,” Lois said, pleasantly surprised by the warm greeting.

“Wayne told me to expect you, Clark. I didn’t know you’d bring someone ... but I think we’ll have more than enough for dinner. Come on in you two.”

They followed Margaret into the farmhouse, delightful scents of roast beef, vegetables, and fresh bread wafting in from the kitchen. “Wayne will be back within the hour ... Make yourself at home, kids.”

Clark smiled and gestured for Lois to follow him. He took her on a short tour around the farmhouse. The Irigs hadn’t changed much around the house as they hoped to be able to buy back their old farm within a year. Besides, the Kents’ stamp was still strongly on the house, and until Clark could feel comfortable boxing up old memories, the Irigs were content to leave the house as it was. Clark showed Lois old pictures, including some of his mother’s artwork. He shared with her various memories that he hadn’t talked about in years, finally feeling free to let it all out — this time with no pain, only the joy of remembering happy times.

His tour ended upstairs in his old bedroom that seemed like it was frozen in time. Nothing had changed there since he was ten years old.

Lois walked in, almost reverent as she touched his old bookshelf, picked up his old catcher’s mitt.

“Oh Clark,” she sighed, turning to him. “This whole house is full of sweet memories ...”

“I know ... it’s also why I avoided it for so long — after.”

She reached to squeeze his hand. “Well, I’m glad you’re here now.”

He gently tugged her closer. “I’m glad *you’re* here, now.”

She smiled, reaching around his neck to kiss him.

Margaret suddenly popped her head in the door.

“Oh, sorry kids. Um, Clark? Wayne just called. He’ll be here in about fifteen minutes. He said you should meet him out at the barn.”

The barn was musty from disuse. Wayne evidently hadn’t gotten to sorting it out yet, and Clark promised himself he’d take care of it before he left. Lois and Clark waited just outside the barn as the smell of old hay kept making Lois sneeze.

“I told you, I’m a city girl, Clark. As pretty as it is out here, at least I don’t have allergies in the city.”

“Sorry, Lois. You don’t have to wait with me. I’m sure Margaret wouldn’t mind you hanging around the kitchen.”

She scoffed, “Right. The kitchen is so not my territory, Clark, you know that. And I don’t mind. I’ll survive a little hay.”

A short time later, they saw Wayne’s truck pull into the driveway. Wayne made his way over to them with a smile.

“Good to see you, Clark,” he said, giving Clark a hug. Wayne then turned and reached a hand out to Lois.

“A pleasure to meet you, Miss Lane. Any gal who’s captured Clark’s here heart has got to be a good one.”

Lois blushed gracefully. “Nice to meet you, Wayne. And please, call me Lois.”

Wayne nodded and then turned serious eyes back on Clark. “Um, Clark?” he asked hesitantly. “I’ve got something in the barn to show you, that your, uh, parents left behind,” he said carefully, glancing at Lois.

“It’s okay, Wayne. Lois knows everything. There’s no need for secrecy.”

Wayne smiled apologetically at Lois. “Well, good. I’m sorry, Lois. Just looking out for Clark, here.”

“I understand.”

Wayne smiled briefly and then moved ahead of them to go into the barn. “I started to clear it out last weekend, and that’s when I found this,” he said, gesturing to an oddly shaped object draped in canvas.

Wayne lifted the cover to reveal a small silvery blue vessel. It didn’t look to be from Earth, and immediately Clark knew what it was.

“This brought me here,” he said in awe, moving to touch it. A small stylized ‘S’ was on the nose of the vessel, exactly like on his baby blanket and now on his Superman suit. He wondered what the symbol represented, and suddenly felt desperate to know more about where he had come from.

As his fingers touched the ‘S’, the hatch of the vessel opened. Clark glanced at Lois who gave him an encouraging nudge to investigate further. Clark leaned in to look into the tiny quarters that had carried him from a far away planet. He felt sad suddenly and almost angry with whomever had decided to send a little baby on such a journey.

He almost stood up to close the hatch, when a silvery glow caught his attention. In the folds of the material in the vessel was a small globe. Clark reached for it and it began to spin in his hand. The glow became stronger and a holographic image of a man was suddenly projected against the barn wall. The man wore

all white except for the stylized ‘S’ across his chest.

Clark reached for Lois’ hand as the image began to speak.

“My name is Jor-El. And you are Kal-El, my son. You have traveled far, my little Kal-El. But we will never leave you ... even in the face of our death.” As Jor-El spoke, images of a strange blue and red planet exploding appeared behind him, and of a tiny spaceship being hurtled through space. “You are the only survivor, the last son of the planet Krypton. Even though you’ve been raised as a human, you are not one of them. I have sent you to Earth to live as one of them, Kal-El, to discover where your strength and your power are needed. They can be a great people, Kal-El, they wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you ... my only son.”

The globe suddenly stopped spinning, and the image of Clark’s father, Jor-El faded. Clark stood holding the globe, shaken. “My... father. My real father,” he whispered.

Lois squeezed Clark’s hand and turned him to face her. “Are you okay, Clark?” she asked softly.

Clark nodded, still reeling from the shock of learning he was from a planet called Krypton. That his father had sent him to Earth because he had had no choice.

He felt Wayne’s hand on his shoulder and it startled him, having almost forgotten the old farmer was there. His eyes were kind and full of concern, though, and that reassured Clark. “I’ll be in the farmhouse, Clark. I think you are in good hands,” he said, nodding at Lois. Clark nodded, thankful that Wayne understood so well that he needed some space to process what he had just seen.

Lois looked down at him, doubt in her own eyes. “Do you need some time alone? I mean — I can go inside too and wait —” she hesitated.

Clark reached out for her hand. “No, stay with me, Lois. It’s all right. I just — need to sit a moment.”

Clark stared at the globe, watching as it morphed from the familiar blues and greens of Earth to the blues and reds of Krypton.

“I guess this is absolute proof that I’m an alien,” he said in an attempt at levity, but it came out shaky to his ears.

“Well the flying around and super powers should have given you a clue,” Lois answered with a wry laugh.

Clark laughed slightly then nodded. “At least I know I wasn’t just abandoned... my father wanted to save me.”

Lois sat down beside him and looked at him seriously. “And now you save others every day.” She was quiet a moment, staring at the globe he held. “Clark, I can’t help but feel that you were meant for a great destiny ... one much larger than a mild-mannered reporter who moonlights as a superhero.” She said it lightly, but Clark could see there was an underlying concern in her words.

“Perhaps ... it certainly seemed my father had great expectations for me,” Clark said, looking at the globe that now sat in his hand, quiet and unilluminated.

Lois stood up again and crossed her arms, looking away from him.

“What is it, Lois?” he asked, seeing in her body language that she wasn’t entirely comfortable with it all.

She turned to him, her eyes filled with sadness. “I just — can’t see how — I fit in to all of this Clark,” Lois said, gesturing at the spaceship. “I mean, you obviously don’t need me. I think — I think I might slow you down.”

“Lois,” Clark said with feeling, reaching for her hand. “You need to understand ... Come with me a moment,” he said suddenly, standing up. “There’s something I want to show you.”

“As long as it’s not another spaceship,” she said lightly as she followed him out of the barn.

“No, it’s not. I promise ... it’s over here. Another part of my

past,” he said, walking around the farmhouse to the backyard. A moment later, they were standing in front of his old tree house.

“Clark, I love the trek down memory lane, but what does this have to do with — all of that?” she said, gesturing behind her to what Clark assumed was the spaceship and the strange globe.

“Lois, I have always felt like I didn’t belong anywhere. My father built this tree house when I was eight — I called it my ‘Fortress of Solitude.’ Lois, I have been alone for most of my life, searching for my place on this Earth — and when we met — I at last felt like I had found it.”

She looked at him, her brown eyes incredulous and filled with tears. “How can you mean that? You’ve been sent here for a larger purpose, to do good on this earth, to save people’s lives — and I want to believe that in some small way the stories I write might make a difference — but our destinies don’t compare, Clark.”

“They do, Lois,” he said with conviction. “You *do* make a difference.”

She looked up at him, her heart in her eyes. “But Clark — I will always have my past to haunt me, no matter what you say or what Jon did to erase it,” she said sadly. “I want more than anything to believe that I can stand by you and help you, but Clark — how can I?”

Clark took Lois’ hands, fixing his gaze into hers. “Lois — we’ve all made mistakes. I know that more than anybody does. I may have figured out how I can help, but I need you to stand with me, so I don’t have to face the world alone. There are so many questions I still have left to find the answers to, but Lois, I don’t want to find the answers alone. I’ve already lived isolated and cut off from others because they didn’t understand me—but Lois, you do. I believe that together, we *will* make the world a better place. I promise.” He leaned to kiss her forehead.

“But as much as I love you, you can’t move forward until you forgive yourself for the past. I can’t do that for you. The way has been made clear for you to start over, to make a difference each and every day through the stories we write at the Planet.” He sighed, trying to make her understand. “Lois, it was a leap of faith I took when I put on that suit for the first time and flew into that space shuttle. I didn’t know how it would turn out, and I still don’t know the full consequences of showing the world who I am. But I do know that it’s what I was meant to do — just like you are meant to write stories for the Daily Planet. I think — we’ll make quite a team,” he said with a smile.

“I was never good at forgiveness, Clark,” she said deprecatingly. “My parents never taught me how, and I learned early on that holding onto a grudge was way easier than letting people in to hurt me more.”

“Lois, I will never hurt you,” Clark said, cupping her cheek.

She reached up to touch his hand on her face. “That’s just it, Clark. I know you would never mean to hurt me, but you might anyways ... And as for forgiving myself, you’ve already helped me begin to do that — by creating Superman. Clark, when I wrote that first article, I felt—like I was making a difference, that I was somehow righting a wrong by lifting up a true hero. But I can’t live in that shadow forever. I will support you in every way I can, but as for finding forgiveness for the past, you’re right. I have to do that on my own.”

“And I’ll support you every step of the way.”

“I know you want to, Clark ... but can you? And still be the hero that everyone needs? I just worry that I’ll either get in the way — or get pushed aside, whether you mean to or not.”

“I love you, Lois. And I would never willingly hurt you, you have to know that. I need you in my life — But I also need to know that you need me, Lois.”

She suddenly threw herself in his arms. “Oh, Clark! Of course I need you! I just don’t want to hold you back.”

“You won’t, Lois. Your faith in the blur was what gave me

the courage to come out of the shadows. We need each other ... and I think that's as good a place as any to move forward from."

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to give it a try ... I mean, we've already conquered the Boss ... maybe there's nothing we can't face — as long as we're together."

Clark beamed a smile at her. "That's the woman I fell in love with."

"And you're the man I fell in love with," she said softer, leaning up to seal their confessions with a kiss.

The next day at the Planet, the news had spread about Lois Lane being back on the beat. Everyone had seen her stunning article that tore down LexCorp and rumor had it that she was next in line for the Pulitzer. The next inevitable question that was whispered all around the newsroom was whether or not she and Clark were really married.

Lois fielded questions with grace, explaining it had been a cover, while Clark was safely off most of the day chasing down Superman quotes.

Lois especially wanted to hide when Cat Grant came charging after her like a lioness on the hunt, her eyes blazing with excitement about the news.

"Lois Lane — I got to say, your cover was pretty good. Never had me fooled though—and let's face it, that Boy Scout Kent is so not your type!" Cat laughed.

"What do you mean, he's not my type?" Lois asked, slightly offended.

"I *mean* Mad Dog Lane? With Clark Kent? Come on, Lois! You are too much of a hardcore newswoman to be with a softy like that!"

Lois laughed it off, to send Cat away. But it made Lois remember a painful side to herself that she hadn't wanted to reclaim with the return of Lois Lane — the woman who was always after a story with no time for romance. But being with Clark had changed that sentiment, though she didn't know how far he would ultimately take it. Lois wanted to believe that their heart-to-heart yesterday had proven that they could be together as a team, but she didn't know if their duo would make it as far as a wedding altar.

Clark at last came back to the office in the late afternoon while Lois was finishing writing up a story on his latest save.

"So, any more quotes you want to add before I send this to Perry?" she asked, trying not to convey the feeling of abandonment she had felt all day. Everyone wondered where Clark was and thought it was awfully convenient how he had disappeared for the whole day it had come out that they hadn't really been married ...

"I'm sure the story is perfect, Lois." He came to read over her shoulder. "I told you we'd make a good team," he said, squeezing her shoulder gently.

"Is that all we are?" she asked quietly, staring at her screen.

He swiveled her chair around to face him. "Hey, what's this all about?" he asked gently, as she tried to hide the tears that came to her eyes.

"Clark, you have no idea what it's been like today — fielding questions about our cover—the—the marriage. People have been welcoming me back all day, meanwhile laughing right after about how they weren't surprised that you weren't really married to me."

"Oh, Lois — I'm so sorry. We should have thought this through a bit more ..."

"Meanwhile — Superman has been off saving the day and I've been left here to deal with it all. Clark, I don't want to sound petty, because I know you said we'd be a team — but I think we need to define that team a bit more."

"I know. I have been thinking —"

Lois wasn't listening, as she had turned on babble mode,

needing to get out all of the issues on her heart that had been tearing her up all afternoon. "I mean, you said you love me — and you know how I feel about you. Maybe we should date or maybe not—office romances can get messy and with you with your second job—"

"Lois!" Clark said firmly, finally stemming the babble tide.

"What?"

"Will you take a walk with me? There's something I want to talk to you about, but not here."

"Sure," she said in surprise, reaching for her jacket.

As they rode down the elevator, Lois feared she had said too much. She was terrified of pushing Clark away and at the same time, of getting too close to him. She wanted to help him, be there for him — but she needed him there for her as well.

They walked across the street for a stroll in Centennial Park. The late spring afternoon was warm and comfortable. Even amid the cars on the busy Metropolis street, the song of birds could be heard in the park, along with kids playing nearby. It was nice to have this haven in the middle of the city, just across from the Planet.

"So, what's the big story, partner?" Lois said lightly, though she was still feeling nervous.

"Lois, I'm sorry I left you alone for most of the day. Some days, it's going to happen that way, but I should have made it back sooner so you wouldn't have to deal with the fallout of the reveal of Lois Lane. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Clark. I understand ... really, I do. And you got me a great page-one for tomorrow, so I really can't complain," she said with an encouraging smile.

"I'm glad. But Lois ... the thing is — I know we've done this all backwards, and we may need more time to iron out details. But nothing can change how I feel about you, how I've always felt about you."

"Nothing can change that for me either, Clark. What's this about?"

"I don't care if it's tomorrow or next year or five years from now — but Lois—I want the world to know that we belong to each other. And while we were in Smallville, I found something that belonged to my mother. I think she would be honored if you accepted it."

Clark kneeled in front of her at the fountain in the center of the park and held out a small gold ring with an oval diamond setting. "Lois, will you marry me?"

She looked at him in awe and surprise. "Clark? Are you sure?"

"Lois, I'm as sure about you as I am about anything in my life ... there's no rush ... but I want you to know that I'm yours — forever."

"Oh, Clark!" she said, throwing her arms around him. "There is no one else ... of course — yes!" she cried happily.

Clark slipped the ring on her finger and kissed her sweetly. "Like I said, there's no rush, Lois. But I just want you to know that we are a team, in every sense of the word."

"I like the sound of that," she said happily, enjoying the diamond sparkling in the afternoon sun. She looked into Clark's chocolate brown eyes, drowning in their depths. Every day this man seemed to find new ways of astounding her.

Clark cupped her cheek, his fingers playing in her hair. "I love you, Lois Lane."

"I love you, Clark Kent — or whatever alias it is you go by these days," she tried saying flippantly, but emotion clogged her throat.

"What matters is that we're together — that no matter what guise either of us wears — that our love binds us."

Lois leaned in, cupping his cheek as he had hers, their eyes meeting. In his eyes she saw a reflection of love, of acceptance. Suddenly Clark closed the distance between them, as they moved

closer together, to give her a passionate kiss. She felt his arms encircle her, and she pulled him closer, wondering if she could ever be close enough to him.

Clark suddenly pulled away, his gaze fixed on the distance.

“What is it?” Lois asked, still dizzy from their kiss.

“A fire, at a school,” he said, looking back at her regretfully.

“I’m afraid we’ll have to finish this later, Lois.”

“Don’t worry, Clark.” She patted his arm, “Go on, save the world.”

He leaned down for one more quick kiss.

“Come on, let’s see some tights,” she said playfully, tugging at his tie.

“I’m going, I’m going,” he laughed. “But don’t worry ... I’ll be back to finish that kiss.”

With a whoosh, Clark was gone. She looked up at the sky and smiled, “You’d better.” But she was content — all seemed right in the world with Clark out there to save the day. She felt she had a purpose, and she knew that she and Clark would always be a team. Lois stood up and rushed over to a phone booth to dial the Planet.

“Perry? It’s Lois. Save some room on the evening edition ... I just got another Superman exclusive ... ”

~THE END~

... or is it? People on the boards wanted an epilogue ... So —
~Epilogue~

Lois walked back into the Planet, feeling like she could rule the world. She thought surely everyone would immediately notice her ring — or at least the bounce in her step.

She stopped to get a coffee at her usual vendor, ever so casually flashing her ring as she handed over her \$1.50 for her cup of joe.

Nothing.

She was certain to use her beautifully beringed hand as she flashed her press pass at security — she had updated her look after all, they needed to see it. But they waved her in without so much as a hello.

She stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for the news floor with her newly engaged hand, just under the nose of one of the copy boys.

Nada.

She was starting to feel really annoyed. Why wasn’t anyone noticing? She felt as if her whole life had been spun around and made right and no one cared to acknowledge it!

Exasperated, she hurumphed off the elevator and headed towards her desk. Perry was there to drop off a final edit on one of her stories from earlier.

“Lois, where have you been? Have you seen Clark?”

She grinned suddenly, knowing Perry would understand. She flashed the ring at him, “I most certainly have seen Clark!”

“Well, it’s about time he made it official,” said Perry matter-of-factly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Lois asked.

Perry leaned in close to her, patting her on the shoulder as he whispered, “I told you he wouldn’t go through all that trouble unless he really cared, didn’t I?”

Suddenly, Lois’ hand was yanked up to just under Cat’s nose. “Isn’t this one of the signs of the Apocalypse — Lois Lane engaged?”

Lois pulled her hand back from Cat, and with as much dignity as she could summon faked a laugh, “Ha ha. Just shows you how much you know!”

Clearly skeptical, Cat said, “Do you mean to tell me that *Clark Kent* proposed to you?”

“He most certainly did,” came Clark’s voice from behind Lois.

Lois turned around and gave him a grateful smile.

Suddenly, word began to spread around the office like

wildfire as more people came by to see what was going on.

Before long, everyone had stopped working and started applauding for the happy couple.

“You know what I think?” Clark said, whispering in Lois’ ear.

“What?” she asked with a smile.

“I think they want us to kiss. I do owe you from earlier, after all,” he said, giving her a lopsided grin.

She blushed beautifully, and before she could protest at the public display, he took her in his arms and kissed her soundly, giving the office fodder to gossip about for months to come. Catcalls and whistles, and more applause followed.

Cat leaned on a rail, her arms crossed as she watched the couple with incredulous and envious eyes.

“Never thought I’d see the day.”

“What?” asked Lois, though she kept getting distracted by kisses from Clark.

Cat rolled her eyes. “You—in love.” She started to saunter off to her desk, but turned to give Clark one last look over. “Too bad, too. ‘Cause *we* would’ve been great together,” she said with a wink.

Clark shook his head at her remark, and leaned in to give Lois another kiss.

Perry had found champagne somewhere and was pouring them all glasses.

“Hell, the paper is nearly ready to be put to bed—there’s no reason why we can’t take a few minutes to celebrate the news!” he said, handing Clark a glass.

Perry handed one to Lois and then raised one for himself. “To Mr. and Mrs. Kent! The hottest team in town!”

THE END