

Prisoners

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Clark Kent is accused of killing Lois Lane! Is that what really happened? Or are they the victims of another one of Lex Luthor's schemes?

Set around Season 2 of Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman, episode 'The Phoenix'; some dialogue taken from the episode written by Tony Blake & Paul Jackson
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"Clark Kent, you are under arrest for the murder of Lois Lane. You have the right to remain silent..." the officer's words fell on deaf ears, as the man they were arresting was in shock.

The rain, splashing carelessly over his body, had at last awoken Clark. He felt like he had been lost in a dark abyss, one where he couldn't remember how he got there or why, but now that he had returned, he knew that the world would never be the same again. Clark looked down. There was Lois' form, the rain washing over her. Blood came from her side, sluicing with the rain. He absently watched the trail as it made its way to a nearby gutter. Lois' blood. She was *dead*?!

"Nooo!" As the reality of the moment hit him, his voice cried through the night. His body shook with wracking sobs, as he cried her name over and over, a litany for a man who had lost the one person that mattered more to him than all others, even more than himself. He reached for her, but could not touch her, as Henderson held his arms behind his back to handcuff him.

His soul cried out for hers.

Too soon, she had been taken away from him, the only woman he would ever love.

Tears poured down Clark's cheeks, indistinguishable from the rain except his tears were punctuated by broken sobs.

He had failed her. It was that simple and that tragic. Where he should have been her hero, he had been taken down by a force stronger than himself, and that had left her vulnerable to Lex Luthor. The one thing he had promised himself above all else, to keep Lois safe, he had failed to do.

As Lois Lane died, so did Superman.

"Oh, God. Lois..." he whispered raggedly, his world collapsing around him. He wanted to hold her, even if it was for the last time. But he was denied even that. He was now a

prisoner.

Inspector Henderson tugged Clark up onto his feet as the coroner prepared to take Lois' body to the city morgue. Henderson walked Clark to his car to take him back to the station. "I'm sorry, I have to. You're the only lead we have right now, Kent. I promise, I'll do everything I can -- " Henderson stopped as he saw the look on Clark's face. Clark couldn't take his eyes away from where they were taking Lois. His lips moved silently, an admission to his failure to be her hero this last time, when it had mattered most.

"I killed her. Oh, God, I killed her..."

Clark found himself in a cell an hour later, though he couldn't have said how long the ordeal at the police station had actually lasted. One of the investigating officers had tried to get a few details from Clark about what had happened, but he couldn't answer them. He just shook his head, numb, murmuring to himself incoherently about Lois. Henderson had at last rescued him, telling his fellow officers that they would have to wait to question Mr. Kent. Henderson knew in his gut Clark didn't do it, but to all intents and purposes, it appeared he had been responsible. No one else had been seen at the crime scene to be implicated, and Clark's ravings clearly showed some sort of guilt. But anyone with an ounce of sense in their head could see that Clark was also deep in grief and couldn't possibly have murdered Lois Lane. Henderson remembered the rapport between the reporting team; they were best friends if not a couple, and ones that respected and admired each other deeply. But Clark was the only suspect they had at the moment, and so Henderson had had to arrest him.

Henderson had made sure Clark was safe, put by himself in his own cell, given him what comforts he could. Henderson justified it by telling his boss that Mr. Kent was a well-respected reporter, and people were innocent until proven guilty in this country -- though throwing a grieving man into a jail cell belied that law just a bit. So, with reluctance, Henderson locked up Clark, certain he hadn't done the crime and promised himself he would help him in any way he could. At the moment, that only amounted to a warm blanket and his own cell.

"Take care, Kent. I'll do what I can," he told him, though Henderson suspected Clark barely heard him

Clark heard the cell shut behind him, it finally registering that he was being locked up in prison. For murdering Lois. How could this be true? How could she be *gone*? Forlornly, Clark looked up at the small bit of sky he could see through his bars. The rain had cleared to leave behind a full moon and a sky lit with stars. His soul cried out; he was a broken man. "Lois. Oh, God, Lois!" He shook from grief, and partially because he was still weak from the Kryptonite exposure. If he had his powers, he could bust through these bars in an instant. Go after Luthor and -- what? Could he be the hero now? Did it matter? What good would running amuck as some crazed vigilante do?

His reason for being Superman, ultimately, was gone. Lois was... gone.

Clark sat down heavily on the bench, his head in his hands. What did any of it matter? Part of him hoped he never got his powers back, that the cell would remain dark and cold until it eventually took his life from him. Because maybe then...

Clark sighed heavily, feeling the burden of grief heavy on his shoulders.

"Lois..." was all he could say, over and over, each time filled with a different shade of pain or regret.

What good was Superman if he couldn't save the one person that mattered most to him, the one who had inspired him to become Superman in the first place?

4 hours earlier...

"Lois, why are we here again?" Clark asked, unnerved by Lois wanting to chase after the rumored to be resurrected Luthor.

"Because I have to see for myself that it was really Lex I saw in the alleyway last night," she shivered. "If he's alive, Clark, then we need to know why. He should be behind bars, you know that!"

Clark sighed, at least slightly relieved that Lois only saw Luthor as a criminal and no longer as her ex-fiancé. He tried not to be too patronizing when he said, "And why couldn't we just let the police or better yet let Superman handle this?"

She smiled, not taking the bait. "Cause you know I have to be in the middle of the action, Clark! Come on!"

He groaned a protest but followed her. He had a very bad feeling about this, more than his usual worry when Lois jumped in headfirst. Something was extremely creepy about the idea that Lex had just been somehow resurrected from the dead. And something told Clark that he had not returned to make amends.

The morning after her supposed encounter with Lex, Lois had done some investigating into some of Lex's old holdings. Bobby Bigmouth had said that a rumor was going around town that the Boss had made a reappearance and had spooked some old cronies who had made off with a few of Luthor's millions. Bobby said that the rumor was that Lex was doing some dealings at an old warehouse on Hobb's Bay, trying to scare up some funds by putting the pressure on old friends. She hadn't been able to resist the idea of catching Lex in action, doing his nefarious deeds. Even though she knew he was the biggest crime boss Metropolis had seen in decades, she hadn't entirely been able to reconcile the urbane fiancé to the criminal in her mind, so well had he played the former part. To her way of thinking, this would be official closure on the whole Lex Luthor mess. Catch him in the act, report the story, and let the police arrest him. Besides, Lois hated to be made a fool of and simply couldn't pass up this opportunity for a little revenge. Odd how some second chances come about...

So Lois had doggedly chased after the lead on Lex, tugging Clark behind her. She knew he hated anything to do with Luthor, but she had convinced him that she needed to sack him herself. "I just want to get some pictures to prove what I saw and to see what he's up to. He won't even know we're here, Clark!"

They came to the edge of a large delivery door. The door was wide open and easy to sneak into. Lois could see a corner of light on the far end of the warehouse. She made a 'come on!' gesture to have Clark follow her.

They hid behind some barrels, and just as Bobby Bigmouth had told her, Lex Luthor was up to a nefarious scheme to get some of his money back.

"You will have the full backing of LexCorp once I'm on my feet again," Lex said with a beatific smile on his face, patting a briefcase that he held to his chest. "You have my word."

Lois leaned on a barrel to get a good picture. She was using a brand new camera and could take pictures without making a sound. Only Clark with his super-hearing could hear each time she made a depression on the button.

Lois leaned in more than she meant to and accidentally sent a barrel over.

Clark sighed. He knew this had been a bad idea.

"Ooops," she whispered, cringing.

The villains in the corner stopped talking. Lex himself sauntered over. "Well, well, well. If it isn't my fiancé and her precocious partner, Clark Kent. So nice of you to drop by."

He gestured for some thugs to grab them. Clark thought of throwing them off, but he couldn't be Superman at the moment. He was certain they'd leave them alone at some point, and then he'd get Lois out of there.

Lex stepped up to Lois, her camera dangling around her neck, glaring at him as a thug held her arms behind her back.

"You don't scare me, Lex!" she cried defiantly.

Lex stroked the hair off her face. "Lois, my love, how you make me sigh with longing. Our time will come, soon." Then Lex turned to his goons. "Tie them up over there. I'll deal with them in a moment."

Clark calmly let them tie them, calculating all the while. If they turned away, could he change into Superman and get them out of there? Course, he'd probably have to explain things to Lois. But he'd been wanting to tell her for a while --

"You'll never get away with this! Superman will find us!" Lois was screaming at Luthor's back, making Clark cringe just slightly at Lois' blind faith.

"Superman?" Lex turned slightly, a smile curling on his lips. "Oh, I have insurance against him coming to rescue you this time, Lois. A little leftover from our wedding."

Lois looked at Lex with a perplexed expression, while Clark went rigid. Luthor turned around. "Superman won't come within fifty feet of you and your partner, Lois. So sorry to disappoint."

He walked over to them, this time another briefcase in his hand. Clark eyed it, knowing what it contained, and suddenly kicked the box out of Lex's hands, having broken free of the binds on his legs. He hadn't gotten too good an angle on it, but it had sent the box skittering across the room.

Lex leered at him closely. "Well, you'll have to pay for that," he said dangerously.

Clark had had enough, Superman or not, he was getting Lois and himself out of there. He broke his binds and reached to undo Lois'.

"How did you -- ?" she began, puzzled.

"I'm the missing link, let's get out of here," Clark said, pulling Lois towards the entrance.

Lex ran over to the box to check the Kryptonite. He opened it to see if it had been damaged.

Clark's headache began immediately, the pain stopping him dead in his tracks. He did all he could not to wince at the pain. He felt himself sweat, as if his skin would rip right off his body. Lex noticed the reaction right away and couldn't hide his fiendish grin of triumph.

"Well, how interesting is this?" Lex said as if to himself. "Lois, have you ever noticed how your boyfriend has a striking resemblance to the Man of Steel?"

Lois looked at Clark, as if seeing him for the first time, her face a mix of concern and confusion. Clark couldn't hold back anymore. His head was splitting, and he fell down to one knee.

"Clark?" she whispered leaning over him, realization dawning on her. Then she turned swiftly to Lex. "Lex, let him go! Do whatever you want with me, just let him go!"

Clark got out a pained, "No, Lois. Don't -- "

Lex simply laughed. "Oh, it's all too -- poetic, isn't it?" Lex gestured for his thugs to tie up Lois again. "I'm afraid I'll have to leave you two to sort this out on your own. But I'll be back for you, Lois, when it's all over," he looked disdainfully at Clark. Lex chuckled, "Oh, this is too good, isn't it? Clark Kent is Superman! Very clever disguise, I must say. Ha! Too much!"

Lex began to walk away, assuming his thugs could handle Lois. He turned back when he heard the sound of a kick meeting flesh.

Lois was glad for once to be wearing slightly less than sensible shoes, as they gave her a dangerous weapon on the end of her foot. While one thug held her arms, she high-kicked the other in the chin, sending him reeling backwards.

Clark, meanwhile, was struggling to get away from the Kryptonite. He drew himself up with his last bit of strength and lunged at the thug holding Lois, freeing her, while sending her to the pavement.

"Are you all right?" he asked, still too close to the Kryptonite to feel any better.

Suddenly, Lex picked up the case of Kryptonite again, a frightening glare on his face as he walked towards Clark, fascinated by the effects of his weapon.

"So sad, really. A little chunk of home, and it's poison to

you! What strange irony, isn't it, Superman?"

"Leave him alone!" cried Lois, jumping on Luthor's back, trying to knock the box out of his hands. She couldn't seem to manage it though and just flailed around on Luthor's back, watching as Clark seemed to be getting weaker and weaker. In one last effort, Clark stood up to lunge at Luthor again. But Luthor used Lois on his back to swing her around so her foot accidentally connected with Clark's chin, sending him reeling back. He hit his head on a pipe and then was knocked out cold on the cement floor.

"Clark!?" she called, renewing her fury against Luthor. Luthor chucked the Kryptonite towards Clark, to keep him from recovering.

Lois jumped off of Luthor to run over to Clark. "You monster!" she called over her shoulder at Lex as she kneeled beside Clark. "How could you do this to him?"

She didn't realize she was crying, but the overflow of emotions was too much to contain. She was reeling over the realization that Clark and Superman were one, and now she might lose them both if Luthor had his way!

She kicked the Kryptonite away from Clark and turned to face Luthor again. Lois fell into a Tae Kwan Do stance, feeling her heart racing, as she prepared herself to confront a man she had at one time respected and had almost married.

He came near her slowly, calmly.

"Lois, let's not do this. We're friends at least, right? At one time we were more than friends," he said smoothly, his calm voice belying his vile intent.

"Let us go, if you have an ounce of a heart left in you," Lois said in a low voice, not taken in by his words. She may have been fooled by Lex once, but she'd be damned if she'd let herself be fooled by him again.

"I'm afraid I can't let you go. You see, Superman has been a long time nemesis of mine, which answers the question about why I hated Clark Kent so much," he said absently. "Anyway, you were always meant to be mine, Lois. And now, there's nothing standing in our way. We can be together again."

"We will *never* be together again," she spat, glancing over her shoulder at where Clark lay. She tried to back up slowly towards Clark so she could at least kick the Kryptonite away from him, to give him some chance. But Luthor kept her well occupied.

"Wrong answer, Lois," Luthor said dangerously, pulling out a long Japanese knife he had salvaged from his few remaining possessions.

"You wouldn't hurt me," she said, trying to convince herself it was true.

"My darling, I don't want to hurt you, but I need you to cooperate," he said with patience.

"Well, it seems we're at cross-purpose, as I have no desire to do what you say." Lois suddenly moved, coming up close to him to swing at him. She missed, but managed to kick his side.

They were suddenly fighting an over-the-head wrestle

for the knife. Luthor was stronger than Lois expected. She tried gaining control of the knife, but to no avail. She tripped him with her shoe in their bizarre dance, and they were suddenly rolling on the floor. Lex quickly got the upper hand and was as frustrated by her struggle as he was by their almost lover like position.

"That's it!" he cried, sitting above her, ready to throw the knife into the ground and claim a kiss from her.

She rolled slightly to her side under him screaming, "No!" just as he accidentally plunged the knife into her waist.

He pulled it out immediately, horrified by what he had done. "Lois! No, no, no!" he cried, watching her clench with pain as blood began to ooze out of her.

Lex heard police cars and knew he had to think fast. He wiped off the handle of the knife with a handkerchief, and walked the few feet over to where Clark lay. He put the knife in his hands, taking one last glance at Lois.

She was fading fast, and he thought she would be gone before help could arrive.

Luthor looked around, noticing his thugs were long gone. His eyes lingered on Lois as she lay dying, and he shook his head in regret. Luthor then scrambled to find a manhole to slink back to the sewers, along with all the other rats in Metropolis.

Clark curled up on the tiny cot in his cell and wished for death, praying that he might see Lois if he died. He sighed, his large frame nearly breaking the cot as he turned towards the wall, thinking morosely that maybe he didn't even deserve to see her again in death, having been unable to protect her in life.

He simply couldn't believe she had been taken from him! They were just starting to get close. Was it just yesterday morning that he had asked her on a date? And she hadn't thrown anything at him or yelled at him but had seemed intrigued by the idea. And now, he was living a nightmare... she was gone... and *he* was held responsible. He hadn't fought the charge too much, because in his own guilty mind, he felt that he may as well have plunged the knife to kill Lois since he hadn't been able to stop it.

Though he knew it was Lex Luthor who had killed her.

Clark tried not to let his anger at Lex Luthor consume him, though it was hard, especially in the darkest hours of the night. At the moments where he was most weak, he imagined killing Luthor, yet that only spiraled him into self-loathing further. In those sinister hours, he lost himself in grief and tormented thoughts. The walls closed in on him, mocking his helplessness, him, the most powerful man in the world...

Clark looked listlessly over at his window, resenting the sunlight that streamed through his cell. He hadn't deserved the gifts he was given, and he didn't want to get better, but his powers were returning. Slowly, even as he masochistically tried to stay out of the sunlight, it still found him. The rays still found him, healed him, reawakened the

good hero, ever so silently. And how Clark resented it.

He hated feeling his invulnerable strength return, knowing that one stab in the right place had taken Lois forever. His strength mocked her absence, and he couldn't accept it.

After two whole days and nights of this torture, he finally thought of his parents. Did they know he was locked away? Did they know that Lois was dead? Did they know that he had not a clue where to go from here?

It was in this state that Perry came in to see Clark.

Perry approached the cell cautious, as if approaching a wild animal. He knew that Clark didn't kill Lois, could *never* harm a hair on her head, yet he didn't know how Clark would handle the grief Perry knew must be bone deep in the man.

"Son? It's me, Perry," he said, stepping into the weak hall light.

Clark looked over, startled out of his thoughts.

"Perry, I didn't -- " he started, and then fell into a sobbing mess for the first time since he had been thrown in prison. There's always something slightly more heartbreaking about watching a strong man cry; the sobs are more wracking, uncontrollable, speaking directly from the soul. Not that women don't cry with as much feeling, but men are unaccustomed to the act; they never learned how to cry prettily or for sympathy, or even passionately when in grief, as women often did, and are therefore taken unawares when it happens, thus crying freely.

"I know you didn't do it, Son," said Perry, offering what comfort he could through the bars. "I came to tell you that the Planet is behind you one hundred percent. We're going to get you the best lawyer in the city, in the *country,* if we must."

Clark nodded, barely able to speak, "Thanks, Perry."

Perry looked at Clark, a slightly guilty look on his face.

"What is it?" asked Clark.

Perry hesitated, "It's, uh, just that, well, when you left with Lois the other day, saying you were investigating Luthor at Hobb's bay, I called the cops to let them know, thinking we might be able to bag Luthor straight away. I mean, talk about a dead man walking! And I'm just thinking that if I hadn't... well, maybe things wouldn't have happened as they did."

Clark nodded solemnly, "It's okay, Perry. I couldn't have done anything to stop Luthor. I was knocked out and he was gone..." Clark held back, wishing he had been stronger against the Kryptonite. Or hadn't been slow to act in getting Lois out of there, knowledge of him being Superman be damned. What did it matter anyway, now that Lois was gone and Lex knew?

"Now, do you remember anything that happened? The officer I talked to said you were unsure? Did you get knocked out or something?"

Clark nodded. He remembered all too well, just the shock of everything had kept him silent when he had been questioned. "Lois had seen Luthor, or thought she'd seen

him in an alley. He had been in some sort of disguise, and she had wanted to investigate," he shook his head, remembering her foolishness. Then he looked up at Perry, his heart broken, the sentiment clear on his face. "I know Luthor killed her, Perry. I was knocked out when it happened, but I *know* -- " He stopped, braced himself and went on, "How could -- that man was going to *marry* her! How could -- how -- ?" Clark choked again on another sob, unable to fathom the heartlessness of Luthor's act. He knew, too, in that moment, that he would never kill Luthor. No matter what guilt that wracked him for having been unable to save Lois, he knew he would never be driven to murder. Inwardly, he was relieved to realize it. Perry had no idea what he was really going through, could have none. Yet, all the same, Clark at least knew that Perry could somewhat understand his loss. Lois had been like a daughter to him.

Perry shook his head in incredulity at the situation. "First of all, I can't believe Luthor is back from the dead. And Lois is gone -- " Perry choked up a bit himself. "Look, Son, I can't bail you out because it's a murder charge. They are still running tests on that knife they found on -- at the scene. I think Henderson's on our side as well, as I talked to him a few minutes before I came to see you. He's going to work night and day to hunt down Luthor and get you out of here... The Planet supports you, though we can't print anything until we find Luthor... " Perry seemed doubtful a moment, but then looked Clark in the eye. "Son, I believe you that you and Lois saw him and that he -- well, we need proof, is all. Henderson has a large team on this case... looking for a dead man." Perry shook his head. "Great shades of Elvis! I can't believe any of this is happening, honestly. But as I told you, I'll get a lawyer for you. Don't you worry about that. Is, uh, there anything else I can do for you, Son?"

Clark reached through the bars to grasp Perry's offered hand, his eyes filled with sad hope. "Can you -- call my parents?"

Martha and Jonathan Kent were in Metropolis just as fast as they could be. Martha, usually cool and in control, was shaken by the idea of her son in jail on murder charges. It wasn't even a question of him being innocent -- she knew that without a doubt -- but she knew Clark must be a total mess over Lois' death.

"Perry said they'll get the best lawyer they can for him," said Jonathan, trying to reassure Martha before they went in. He touched her shoulder to turn her to him. "Martha, we have to be strong for our boy. He needs us more than ever."

She nodded, steeling herself to see her son behind bars.

"Clark!" she couldn't help crying out, racing over to the cell where he was hunched over on a cot.

Clark looked up, his eyes full of pain.

"Mom?" he asked, almost as if he didn't believe they were there.

"Yes, Son, we're here," said Jonathan.

Clark came over to the cell door, reaching for his parents

through the bars.

"I -- I'm so scared," he let out. "Not of what they'll do to me... but," he shook his head, dismissing his darkest fears. "Lex Luthor killed Lois! How could he do that to her?" he finished, his voice ragged. Clark had always believed that there was good in everyone, but this time, he wasn't so sure. He felt so conflicted and hated the anger and pain that burned inside of him.

"Clark, listen to me," said Martha, holding his hand. "Justice will be served. They will find Luthor, and you will be free as soon as possible."

"But what's the point, Mom?" he asked, his eyes pleading with her to understand. "I can't go back to being Superman, even if they did find Luthor. What is the point of Superman if I can't protect those I love? How do I go on without her?" he whispered.

Martha looked around, looking for a guard. "Can't I go in there? I need to hug my son!"

A guard who was standing far enough away not to hear the intimate part of their conversation shook his head. "I'm afraid not, m'am."

Martha gripped Clark's hand ever more fiercely. "Clark, you will get through this. You have to stay strong. Lois would want you to be strong, for her," Martha said, hating to use Lois as a catalyst for Clark to move in the right direction, but she was desperate to wipe that painful look off his face.

"I just... can't believe this is happening," Clark said to no one in particular.

"We're staying at your place until this is all over with. Perry said we can meet with you and the lawyer they hired in two days. Okay? Take some courage in that," Martha said, her eyes full of love for her son. "Meanwhile, I'll be here tomorrow and everyday after to check on you."

"Thanks, Mom," Clark said, reaching to touch the hands of his folks once again.

The lawyer, a Mr. Jason Neddlestein, sat across from Clark and his parents.

"I have the results of the forensic evaluation on the knife. Both yours and Luthor's prints were found on it. Which doesn't mean you're guilty -- or innocent for that matter, but it means we have more work to do."

Jason had defended many cases, and this was the first one where he wanted to absolutely believe the accused was guiltless. Part of it was the man's family and friends, all supporting him so fiercely, but also the man himself. He wasn't full of the remorse of the guilty but rather filled with the grief of a man who has lost someone truly beloved.

"We don't have much of a case until we at least track down Lex Luthor. But, I've got to tell you Mr. Kent, it's hard convincing people to track down a man who was declared dead over six months ago."

Clark sighed. "I know it sounds crazy, but that's exactly why Lois and I were investigating. She hadn't been sure that she had really seen him, and well, I guess she needed to

know the truth," he finished sadly.

"Look, Henderson has some guys looking for him, but I don't think the DA is convinced that was the story. If they find him, we'll have a better chance of getting you out of here. But... they have to find him first. Then we can arrest him as a suspect and try to get the complete story. You said you were knocked out? Do you have any scrapes, or bruises to show for it?" the lawyer asked.

Clark looked uncomfortably at his parents. His powers were fully back, and all signs of physical distress had disappeared as well. "No, I don't," he said slowly. "I *was* knocked out, though."

He realized his story had some holes in it, and though the lawyer seemed ready to believe him, Clark didn't know how well it would all hold up in court.

Suddenly, Inspector Henderson stepped in the room.

"Sorry to interrupt you folks, but I just heard news that is important to the case."

"Did they find Luthor?" asked Clark hopefully.

Henderson shook his head, still trying to figure it out.

"No, but we did find Ms. Lane's broken camera. I've sent it to the lab to try and see if we can access any of the pictures she may have taken on it."

Clark sighed. "She took a picture of Luthor before..." He couldn't finish the sentence, but Henderson nodded.

"Good. I need something solid to show my boss. I can't keep a team looking for a man that is known to be dead without proof. But there's something else I need to tell you."

The group looked at him expectantly.

Henderson sighed and then said, "Lois Lane's body is missing from the morgue. Either she got up and walked out, or someone stole it."

Clark sat back heavily. "I'm sure it's Luthor. He must have her. I know it. We only need to find where he's been hiding out," Clark said with determination, wishing he could be the one out there looking for him.

"Do you know how to get a hold of Superman?" asked Henderson, noticing Clark flinch at the mention of the hero's name. "I know he and Lois were close, and if anyone could find her body it's him. In fact, I've been wondering why he hasn't volunteered himself to go after the perpetrators."

Clark's eyes darted to his parents with uncertainty. He wanted more than anything to be out of this prison, looking for Luthor... But he couldn't reveal his secret, even if the Man of Steel never made an appearance again. He shook his head 'no.'

"Oh, there's something else I wanted to ask you about," said Henderson. "The labs are trying to figure out this rock we found at the crime scene. It's green and sort of glows bright. Any idea what that is?"

Clark swallowed hard, trying to repress his concern, wondering if the Kryptonite was in the prison somewhere. "No, don't know what it is."

"Hmm, okay," Henderson said, disappointed. "Well, we're going to keep trying to contact Superman. I've sent a

message to Perry White at the Daily Planet, and he said he'd put a notice in the paper that we need his help."

"I... hope you find him," Clark finished lamely, wondering what he was going to do now.

Lois began to awake from a deep, dreamless sleep. She felt herself fighting through a fog in her mind. The smell of sickly sweet flowers confused her and lulled her. She felt a tug of memory, though its only shape was a feeling of need. Someone needed her, needed her to fight through the haze...

She unconsciously clasped her side, a searing pain there that she didn't understand. She kept calling for Superman, though it was Clark's face she saw in her dream.

She felt as if she was disappearing into a hole that no one could rescue her from. A hole that would take her away forever from those she loved. LOVED. She loved Clark, and she would never see him again. Never see Clark... oh God, it couldn't be true...

"No, no, don't take me away from him... no," she cried softly in her sleep.

She was gently being woken by someone calling her name.

Was it Clark? She called his name softly, and she heard a soft curse under her waker's breath.

She slowly opened her eyes, her head hurting as she did so. Her eyes slowly came into focus.

"Lex?" she asked in surprise.

"My darling, I'm so glad to see you are finally awake," he said, reaching for her hand.

"Where am I?" she asked, as her eyes adjusted, she fought the nauseous wave in her stomach. She felt entirely disoriented and unsettled by Lex before her, who had mysteriously reappeared from the dead. "What happened?" she asked, trying to pull vague memories together to make sense of things.

"I rescued you," Lex said.

"What do you mean?" she looked around. "Where am I?"

He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture, ignoring her question. "What matters is we're together again. We've been given a second chance."

She shoved herself up off the bed, wanting to distance herself from Lex to think, but she was forced to immediately sit down again, feeling dizzy, and her side felt terribly sore.

"Why am I here, Lex? What's going on?" Lois tried not to panic but couldn't gather her thoughts to remember anything from earlier. They were in a strange underground bunker of some sort, or at least there were no windows. The last memory she had was Clark, asking her on a date... Then she had thought she'd seen Luthor in an alleyway...

She turned to look at him, startled. Lex Luthor was dead, wasn't he? Yet here he stood, changed surely, yet the same man. "You're alive," she said, latching on to the obvious.

He laughed softly. "I'm alive, Lois. And so are you. Call

it a miracle. What matters is we are together now." He moved towards her as if to kiss her cheek, but she pulled back.

"No, I... I could never... I mean..." she stammered. She felt vulnerable and irritated, hating not having control over her memories; though her instincts told her instantly to be wary of him.

Lex sighed. "Ah. I see in your eyes that I've fallen from grace. But surely a creature of such abundant benevolence would allow me the chance to redeem myself?"

She shook her head, wishing she could think clearly. "I... there's no... I don't have those feelings for you anymore."

He smirked slightly, "I don't believe it."

"I don't know why I'm here or what happened. You won't give me a straight answer, and you expect me to... what, Lex? I will never -- could never --" she stammered. Her head hurt, and her memories were foggy, but she knew that Lex was dangerous.

"Yes, I've done terrible things. But I did them for you. Provoked by the blinding light of your beauty," he said, trying to win her with charm as he had once before.

"Lex, stop!" she cried, fed up. "What is going on? Why am I here?"

"You need to recover. You were... hurt. You shall stay here until you feel better." He gently touched her chin, moving her face so he could look into her eyes. "And we can get reacquainted."

"I'm not staying here, Lex," she said, wishing she felt better to put her threat into practice. "And if you try to keep me here, Superman will find me."

Lex turned a pitying glance to her. "Superman?" He shook his head, trying to conceal a smile starting to curl on his lips. "I'm so sorry, Lois, to be the one to tell you this."

"What? What is it?" she asked, fearful and perplexed by his expression.

Lex sighed heavily. "I was betrayed," he said dramatically. "By Nigel St. John. You'll remember him?"

She nodded. "But what does he have to do with Superman?"

"Well, before my -- death, if you want to call it that -- LexCorp had many varied interests. And one of my -- acquisitions happened to be of an interesting rock from Superman's home planet."

"Kryptonite," she whispered.

"Yes, and well, Nigel St. John stole it from my vaults," Lex easily lied.

"Why did you have it in the first place?" she interrupted.

"Merely to study it. You know I have eclectic tastes. I have -- *had* a wide collection of interesting works of art and artifacts from all over the world. Why not have a piece of something that was from out of this world as well?" he said.

"So, Nigel -- what did he do?" she asked warily.

"Well, my dear, I'm really sorry to tell you this. But, Nigel used the Kryptonite." Lex paused dramatically, "Superman is dead."

Clark was flying over Kansas. It was a clear day and Lois was safe in his arms. She knew his secret and loved him all the more for it. She said she wanted to know everything about him, that they would have their whole lives to learn each other. Lois confided she loved flying in his arms, that it was the most freeing sensation in the whole world. He held out his arm, letting her stretch her arms out a little wide, so she could feel as if she were flying herself. Only their hands touched. He relished in her joy, in the sun warm on their faces, and the wind cool in their hair.

Then, suddenly, she was tumbling in the air, away from him. He couldn't catch her, no matter how fast he flew he wasn't fast enough. She was falling to earth quicker than he could fly. He could only watch as she fell faster and faster, further and further away from him.

"Lois!" he cried, waking. He was breathing heavily, his heart pounding.

"Lois," he said softer, with sadness, realizing he had been dreaming. He started to lose himself in the grief again, when he felt something or sensed something that gave him just a whisper of hope.

He said her name again, in question this time, wondering if it was her ghost that was in the room. She felt somehow in the world again, though he knew that was impossible. Had he wanted her back so much that he was conjuring her presence out of sheer desperation to see her again?

He shook his head and walked over to the tiny cell window and looked up into the night sky. "Lois..." He shook his head in dismay, "I must be going crazy..."

"Superman is dead?" Lois whispered, the words feeling strange in her mouth. They hadn't registered yet, as she couldn't believe it was possible.

Lex aimed for a concerned air. "Yes, there was an -- altercation. Nigel lured Superman to him by threatening to do you harm, and -- well, he didn't survive the encounter with Kryptonite."

She shook her head, unable to comprehend what he was saying. It couldn't be possible! Superman *couldn't* be dead! But she had seen how Kryptonite could make him powerless and hurt. Could long exposure possibly -- ? She didn't want to believe it. She didn't *feel* that he was dead. She believed she'd *know* on some visceral level if it were true.

He moved closer to her, bringing her attention back to his story. He infused warmth into saying, "I brought you here, away from -- Well, my only concern was to revive you."

"Revive me? What do you mean? What happened?" she said, though her mind and heart were reeling from the implications of what he was telling her. She couldn't focus on Lex's words as her heart was full for Superman. She remembered flying with him, of him rescuing her. Of her rescuing him from Kryptonite. And she hadn't been able to

help him when he needed her most!

Lex watched the play of emotions on Lois' face. His eyes were full of concern, even if his heart only longed to see her turn to him for comfort. He wanted to make her reliant on him, to be grateful to him. He took her hand, bringing her attention back to him as he continued. "You were in danger. I came to try and stop Nigel, and he -- when you tried to save Superman, well, Nigel stabbed you Lois. *You* were dead," he said with pained sympathy.

Her mind was spinning with his revelations. She pulled her hand from his, wrapping her arms around herself, feeling sick again. No wonder she had felt so -- awkward in her body -- *she had been dead*!

"Then how -- ?" she asked, but Lex was already answering.

"An assistant of mine, Gretchen Kelly, was a scientist who devised a way to revive the dead through cryogenics. It was how I came back to you. And so I merely brought you here, froze you, and brought you back to life in the same manner," he said with a smile, opening his arms as if she would fall into them, immediately grateful.

She turned away from him, trying to think. She unconsciously touched her side again as if to confirm that she had in fact been stabbed.

"And yet you didn't help Superman," she said quietly. She closed her eyes tightly shut, refusing to cry.

"Clark!" she suddenly said, wondering why the thought of Superman made her think of Clark. "What happened to Clark? I remember... he may have been hurt..." she said vaguely with some trepidation. There was something about Clark that she was trying to remember..

Lex almost laughed. She had obviously forgotten the little revelation his -- or "Nigel's" use of Kryptonite had brought about. Even though he wanted her for his own, Lex did not relish hurting her. He merely wanted her to turn to him, to need him.

"Lois... Clark is -- *was* Superman," he said softly.

The world seemed to stop with those words. She looked at him, her eyes bright with tears as memory came back. Clark *had* been hurt. He had been in pain because of Kryptonite. Because *he* was Superman.

"No!" she cried fiercely, her emotions too high to think rationally. "He *can't* be -- " she choked on tears, as the full impact of what he told her hit her at once. She fell on to her knees, clutching her stomach in sick pain. If Clark was gone -- then all was truly lost. She was at the mercy of Lex Luthor, and nothing would matter ever again.

"Why didn't you leave me dead!" she cried hotly, realizing the depth of her loss. Clark... and Superman.... "It doesn't matter now! If he's *gone* -- !" She cried silently, rebuffing Lex's attempts to gather her into his arms.

"Lois, please. I will take care of you now. *I* will protect you," he said, again trying to give her a hug.

She pushed him from herself angrily. "*You* had the Kryptonite! Why did you have it? Why? When you knew it could -- "

"Well, I didn't *know*, Lois," he lied again. "I was merely curious about it."

"Get away from me!" she cried, pushing herself to her feet to try to escape. She was weak and somewhat ill, but she suddenly had a desperate need to get out of there.

"Lois, you aren't strong enough yet to go anywhere," he said mildly. He surreptitiously pulled a hypodermic needle from a nearby bureau, approaching her slowly, with the needle hidden at his side.

"You need your rest, my dear," he said in a low voice, suddenly plunging the needle into her upper arm.

The strong anesthetic hit her system almost immediately. She felt woozy and very, very sleepy. Unwillingly, she let Lex lead her over to the bed, as she began to have little control over her own movements.

In moments, she was fast asleep.

The Kryptonite had been easy enough to steal back from the police. Lex Luthor smiled at the thought that anyone could be bought, just some people caved quicker than others.

Lois Lane, on the other hand, was a different matter. He had won her once before... was it less than a year ago, already? She had been so enthralled by his power and wealth that he had easily won her affection. Had he loved her, ever? Maybe. Though what love was, Luthor couldn't define to himself. He had distanced himself from all affection many years ago, instead seeking out beauty and pleasure. And he had found both, plus a startlingly sharp intellect in Lois Lane.

But had he ever loved her? Or was she simply another possession that pleased him?

She was his again, and though he had no power or wealth to win her, perhaps now he would try to love her. She owed him the chance, after all. He had brought her back to life! And now, they had a second chance to explore what they could mean to each other.

Lex had won again. He had the Kryptonite back and he had Lois Lane.

Henderson shook his head, contemplating the evidence file he was to hand over to the prosecution. The odd Japanese knife found at the crime scene had come up with fingerprints from both Kent and Lex Luthor. He was baffled, as he remembered as well as the rest of Metropolis, the megalomaniac jumping to his death from the roof of LexCorp towers. Either Kent had stolen the knife from Lex's collection, or Lex was alive and had killed Ms. Lane. He was worried at first that Clark was just delusional, broken hearted over losing his partner. But as the days passed, and the more he talked to Clark, Henderson was convinced that Lex Luthor somehow lived and had turned to being a menace in a much more tangible sense. Doing a little research told him that LexCorp had gone under, and all of Luthor's assets had been liquidated. He couldn't imagine the man having a billion dollar stack of cash somewhere, so

he assumed that the money had been distributed or even stolen, and he thought that probably hadn't pleased someone who had been the third richest man in the world. But still. It was crazy to think he lived. After all, the man had *jumped* to his death.

Henderson shook his head, taking another sip of his black coffee to focus.

And then there was the puzzle of Superman. He had completely disappeared. Henderson knew the Man of Steel had a soft spot for Ms. Lane, and he felt sorry for the guy to think of him mourning for her in some dark cave somewhere, never to return to Metropolis. But still, he thought the superhero had more backbone than that. And if anyone could find a guy like Mr. Luthor who had supposedly died, he imagined Superman could do it.

He flipped again through the file, his eyes landing on the picture of the strange green rock they had found at the crime scene. None of the forensics guys had ever seen anything like it, and analysis came up inconclusive as to what it was.

Whatever the evidence, Henderson was certain that Kent had not done the job, that it was possibly even a frame up. But chasing after a man who to all was known as dead was a hard idea to push.

The inspector's phone rang, and he answered it, "Henderson."

"Inspector, we finally got access to the chip inside Lois Lane's camera. I sent you copies of the pictures. They are definitely something you'll want to see," said the woman with emphasis.

"Why's that? What did they reveal?"

"Lex Luthor is definitely alive, Inspector. If you find him, you'll have all the evidence you need to lock him away for life."

"Thank you, Ms. Dawson," he said. "Anything else?"

"Well," she swallowed, not sure how he would take the news. "That green rock? Well, it's gone missing."

"What! How is that possible?" he demanded.

"Well, uh, we don't know sir," Dawson answered lamely.

"I want to know every badge number that has been near it! By this afternoon, on my desk!"

"Yes, sir."

Henderson slammed down the phone and sighed.

Well, at least that was partially good news. But still, alive or not, Luthor was so elusive. His men had been combing the city for over a week and had found nothing.

The bottom line was he needed Superman.

He had questioned Kent about the Man of Steel several times, and every time it made Kent uncomfortable. Henderson had puzzled over it for a while, and he had some theories. One of his theories was a long shot, but then, it might just make everything else make sense.

One thing was for sure. He needed Superman, and he was convinced that Clark Kent had the answer on how to find him.

Clark paced his cell for the hundredth time, fighting the

urge to bust the bars open and find Luthor. It had been over a week, and for a man who was used to embracing clouds, the tiny cell was hard to deal with. He was tormented by thoughts that maybe, just maybe Lois was alive, even though he knew it was impossible. He felt like his was going crazy, trying to talk to her ghost in the silent hours of the night. But the fact that her body was missing -- who would steal it? And why? That simple fact had been enough to pull him just barely out of his depression and made him eager to act.

His best guess was Luthor. That he had orchestrated the whole thing.

Henderson suddenly came to his cell door.

"Kent? I need a word with you."

Clark stood up, hopeful that they'd at least move to another room so he'd have a chance to stretch his legs. He almost sighed in relief when Henderson opened his door and gestured him to follow him.

They went into an interrogation room and had a seat. Henderson gestured for the guards to wait outside. He didn't want anyone overhearing his conversation with Mr. Kent.

Clark waited patiently while Henderson gathered his thoughts.

"I believe that you were right, that Luthor is out there somewhere. I have the pictures from Ms. Lane's camera, and it was definitely him. And besides, one thing I know for sure, Kent. You did not kill Ms. Lane."

"Thank you, sir. I've only told you exactly what I know," Clark said, relieved they had some more hard evidence to go on.

Henderson nodded. "I know. Which is why I am puzzled about one thing."

"What's that?" Clark asked.

"I think you know how to contact Superman. And we need him to get you out of here."

"What are you saying?" Clark asked carefully.

"I'm saying that I think you have a connection to Superman. He hasn't been seen since you were taken into custody and since Ms. Lane... well, I think he may be your only shot of getting out of here. Luthor is hiding somewhere in the city, I'm sure of it. He's a clever man and has eluded my team thus far. So, I think Superman may be our only chance of finding him. And possibly finding out about what happened to Ms. Lane's body."

Clark thought a moment, mulling over what Henderson had said. Clark had been ready to toss away Superman a few short days ago, lost in his guilt. But if there was even the slightest chance that Luthor had Lois -- *did* he have her alive? -- he had to know, even if he was crazy to think so. That moment in his cell when he had sensed her had charged him with an inexplicable hope that he would see her again. He didn't question it, because to do so would send him spiraling back into despair. He was sickened by the idea of searching for her body, but if by a miracle she was alive and needed rescuing, then Superman had to exist to rescue her. Clark chose his words carefully. "You're right. I -- can

contact Superman. But, I can't do it from here."

Henderson nodded, assessing what Kent was telling him.

"And why is that?"

Clark shook his head. "I promised him I would never tell his secrets. But I can assure you that Superman won't be able to hunt down Luthor while I'm behind bars."

"Well, I have this other theory. Several actually," Henderson said thoughtfully, eying Clark carefully across the desk.

"Go on," Clark said.

"Well, that green rock that was found at the crime scene? I've done some digging, and it appears that rock is not from this planet." He leaned over the desk as if imparting a secret to Clark. "I think it's from Superman's planet. And, from the information the forensics department gave me, I think its radioactive properties may be harmful to Superman," he finished, conveniently leaving out that the damn rock was missing.

"That's quite a supposition," said Clark, guarded.

"Hear me out. I think Superman may have been exposed to it. Hurt by it even, which could be another reason why he's laying low. Still recovering, as it were."

Henderson sat back in his chair, waiting for Clark to digest this information.

"And I have one other theory," Henderson began slowly.

"Yes?" said Clark, anxious, shifting in his chair.

Henderson looked him dead in the eye. "I think *you're* Superman."

Clark laughed uncomfortably. "Right. What makes you think that?"

Henderson shrugged. "Well, you were awfully ill when I arrested you. Yet you've made a marvelous recovery with no medical treatment, and all of your scrapes and bruises have healed in record time."

Clark felt his adam's apple move thickly as he swallowed. "Well, I -- just have a natural good disposition."

"Dammit, Kent!" he said, slamming his fist on the table. "I'm trying to help you! Don't *lie* to me. I won't tell anyone."

Clark considered a moment. Lois had been the only other person he had ever wanted to tell his secret to... He never imagined someone else needing to know. But, for her sake, even if it was only to bring Luthor to justice, perhaps he could trust the inspector.

Clark looked into Henderson's eyes. "Yes. I'm -- I'm Superman."

Henderson let out a low whistle.

"I swear I won't tell... But can you tell me more about what happened that night?" Henderson asked curiously.

Clark nodded, gathering his thoughts. "You were right about the -- rock. It is dangerous to me. But, I've told you everything else. So, how am I supposed to go after Luthor from here?"

"I think you know. You can leave and look for him in middle of the night. I'm scheduled for the graveyard shift

for the next week. So you will have the next five days. You can leave at midnight, but you have to be back before 8 in the morning. Before sunrise, if possible, just to be safe. Will that give you enough time?"

Clark smiled for the first time in days. "Yes, sir. I'll bring him to justice. I owe Lois at least that much."

Henderson shook his hand, "But be careful out there, Superman." He paused, his taciturn features revealing little of his concern. "I think Luthor stole back the Kryptonite."

Lois called for Clark in her sleep. Tossing and turning, her body ached from a deep pain that made her sleep restless. Dreaming, she saw the sickly glow of Kryptonite, and Clark huddled in a corner, slowly dying. She couldn't reach him. She was being held back, restrained from helping Clark. She kicked in her dream, mumbling, "I must help him!", but it was no use.

A dark shadow was in the room, an evil presence that menaced her even as it destroyed Superman. It came nearer to her, until it was at last restraining her, keeping her from Clark. She turned to see the shadow morph into Lex standing over her with a knife.

"No, Lex!" she cried fearfully, startling herself awake.

Darkness was all around her, and all she could hear was the sound of her own breathing. <<Lex?>> she asked herself, trying to calm down. Was it a dream... or a memory?

She shivered as much from the cool damp of the bunker as she did from the terrifying realization that was beginning to take shape in her mind. Lex had told her that Nigel had stabbed her, yet she had no memory of seeing Nigel St. John that night. She felt a chill go up her spine as her dream made her realize that Lex had flat out lied. With sudden clarity she remembered that it was Lex with whom she had fought, who had stabbed her! Lex who had used the Kryptonite... who had killed Clark.

She pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them to comfort herself as she felt tears come. She had no idea what to do now that Clark was gone. He had been her rock in so many ways, and she was only now realizing it! She remembered before her almost-marriage to Lex when Clark had said he loved her and then had taken it back after the fiasco. She was certain now that he had lied about not loving her, despite even his cold treatment to her as Superman when she had confessed to love his alter-ego. Knowing the truth, she could now see that she had blindly tossed away the ordinary man, frustrating him to no end. Had he then harbored feelings for her all this time? Yet why had he pushed her away then, in both his personae? She wiped tears from her eyes, thinking about how they had hurt each other over the past year, and how close they had recently been coming to starting something special. They were... *had been* about to go one their first real date.

Knowing now that he was Superman, too late, she cursed herself for not realizing the truth sooner. Would it have solved anything between them before? Would he have

told her, now that they had been growing ever closer? Or would they have grown closer even sooner if he had told her the truth before she almost married Lex... or maybe, had she known then, would the truth have torn them apart?

She sighed, realizing that she would forgive him everything and anything if she could only see him again. But now, she would never be able to tell him exactly what he meant to her. She could have never made up for how she had rejected him back then, but if given the chance, she could have loved him, with all of her heart she swore, <<I *do* love him>>...

Hindsight is everything.

Lois closed her eyes, not one to pray, but simply trying to reach for the one anchor that had ever been in her life.

"Clark, if you can hear me... I need you..." she whispered, her voice choking on tears.

She knew she had to get out of there. She would never get the whole story about that night from Lex, as he had proven he was as evil as Clark had always said he was. She suddenly sat up, ruminating on her memories of that night. If Lex had lied to her about who had killed whom, could he have also lied that Clark was dead? She thought back to what she knew about how Lex's mind worked, remembering what he had done to her to get her to agree to marry him. Lex had worked systematically to take away everything from her that was safe or was *her*. He could easily be exaggerating in telling her that Superman was dead so she would give up hope and turn to Lex. That thought angered her enough and gave her just enough hope to spur her into action.

She sat up, feeling better than when she had awoken before. The nausea was gone, though she didn't feel as strong as she would have liked.

"Clark," she cried brokenly to the dark, "I have to find out what happened to you..."

She climbed out of bed, looking around cautiously. She had no idea where Lex slept, or even if he was there with her at all. Her bed was in a corner, next to a solid brick wall. The ceilings were high, but gave the impression of being below somewhere. All kinds of scientific equipment and lab tables were set up around her, making her feel a little like Dr. Frankenstein's bride come to life. She could find no shoes, and she realized that she was dressed in the business suit, minus the jacket, that she had been 'killed' in. No wonder she was freezing! The silk shirt was no match for the cold dampness of this lair. She grabbed the thin blanket from the bed and wrapped it around her shoulders as she made her way around the room in the dark.

Her heart was pounding, as she feared Lex would spring on her at any moment. She knew that he had been drugging her. Lois thought it might have been opium or some other mind-altering substance that he had been using to keep her so disoriented. The anesthetic he had given her with the needle had nearly worn off, though she still felt the fatigue in her muscles.

Lois needed a light, unable to see even her hand in front

of her face. She felt around the worktables, fearing what her fingers would bump into. There were several drawers, and she was cautious in case they contained sharp needles or knives. At last she found a flashlight. The light was weak, indicating the batteries were wearing down, but it was a start. She moved it around the room cautiously, again afraid of coming upon Lex unexpectedly.

The flashlight hit upon a box that looked oddly familiar. She wondered if it was what the Kryptonite had been housed in. Lois stepped up to it and opened it. Sure enough, the green glowing rock that had taken Clark away from her was there. Angrily she picked it up, determined to do away with it, so Luthor couldn't hold on to his trophy of triumph.

As much as she loathed the power of the Kryptonite, ironically it would work well as a light and would help her see to get out of there.

Suddenly, she jumped, the blanket slipping off her shoulders, as she heard footsteps behind her.

"My dear, didn't anyone ever tell you that you shouldn't steal other people's property?" Lex came up right behind her; she could even feel his warm breath on her neck.

She acted faster than she would have thought possible with her muscles still weak. She elbowed him, dropping the Kryptonite and flashlight, and reached for the nearby case the Kryptonite had lain in. Adrenaline flowing through her, she threw the case on his head and picked up the Kryptonite to bang it against the case to disorient him.

"That's for Clark!" she said with feeling. "And it's not stealing when it wasn't yours to begin with."

Lex was indeed unsteady on his legs. He made a comical tableaux for a moment, his arms flailing as he tried to reach for her. Angrily, he tossed off the case and grabbed on to the edge of a table till the dizziness stopped. As he knocked into it, a steel drawer opened, revealing his stash of hypodermic needles, pre-filled with anesthetic. The room was dark except for the green glow of the Kryptonite and Lois' nearly dead flashlight, but he had memorized every inch of this bunker to prepare for any eventuality. He carefully grabbed a syringe, a determined scowl on his face as he made his way towards Lois.

Lois couldn't see too well in the darkened room but took the moment that Lex was confused to start to look for a way out. She saw him out of the corner of her eye before she could make out which direction to go, moving towards her.

Something was in his hand, but she couldn't see what it was.

"Lois, we could have been great together, you know that? Had we married, you would have had all that you desired. Wealth, security... anything you could want." He stood before her, the green from the Kryptonite outlining his features eerily.

"It's true. I would have had all of those things. But there is one thing that would have been missing, something that I've realized I really can't do without, especially when it is offered so freely, so genuinely..." she choked on tears, thinking of Clark.

"And what would this freely given thing be that I couldn't provide?"

She looked at him, pitying him for the first time as she realized that he could never understand what would be missing.

"You really don't know?" she asked, truly shocked by the depth of darkness in him as he shook his head in puzzlement.

"Love," she said simply.

Lex laughed mirthlessly. "Ah, yes, of course. I would have liked to have tried, Lois, I really would. Though, I think I've decided maybe you are too free-spirited for my taste after all -- "

He suddenly grabbed her arm, lifting it over head and making her drop the Kryptonite. She couldn't do anything with her hands, but she could kick him.

<<Thank goodness for all those Tae Kwan Do classes! >> she thought, swiftly kicking his side. "Not this time, Lex! You won't win this time!"

He staggered back but immediately lunged forward again. She could see now by the glow of the rock that he had a needle in his hand. She grabbed his wrists as he came at her, the needle pointing dangerously down towards her face. Holding his wrists, she kneed him in the crotch.

"You should know better than to try a failed move twice, Lex," Lois said coolly.

While he winced in pain, she grabbed the syringe and plunged it through his jacket into his arm, cringing as she did so.

"Hope you like a taste of your own medicine, Lex," she said disdainfully. Immediately she grabbed the Kryptonite again, as much for a light as to get rid of it. Lois looked around quickly for an exit, her heart pounding. She didn't know if she got the anesthetic in him, or if she'd merely stunned him, but she wasn't going to wait around to find out.

She needed to get out of there, as much to discover the truth as to get away from Lex. She had nothing to go on but her instinct, and for years as a reporter, it hadn't failed her. She held onto that, hoping against hope that what Lex had told her was all a lie... that maybe Clark lived. And, so with that hope, she would dispose of the Kryptonite so no one could ever hurt him again. Even as she wanted to believe he was alive, one thought came to her to gave her pause.

It had been over a week since she had been in this bunker with Lex. If Clark were truly alive... wouldn't he have found her before now?

Clark took off surreptitiously from the rooftop of Metropolis Police Headquarters, heading straight up like a shot. For a moment he let himself enjoy the freedom of stretching as fast and as far as he could in the night sky, after having been stuck in that tiny cell for over a week. He felt good to be out for another reason as well. Today he had been given the first good news he'd had since this whole nightmare began. This afternoon, his lawyer had informed

him that he would be brought to trial in a week and was likely to be released on not enough evidence. Henderson informed him before freeing him for his night investigation that if he could find a solid enough lead on Luthor, he may even be released sooner. Clark had also asked Henderson if he had any leads on who had stolen the Kryptonite, but Henderson just mumbled that he was working on it.

Clark flew around the city, noticing it was surprisingly quiet tonight. He had had to tune out the calls of the helpless while he was in prison, not able or even wanting to help, so lost in grief he had been. But being back in the skies, he couldn't help but be aware of the noises of the city again. He scanned Suicide Slum and Hobb's Bay, notorious areas for trouble, but saw no real sign of trouble or of Lex Luthor. He tried questioning a few petty thieves he tracked in Suicide Slum, but they didn't seem to know about any big goings on around the city.

Feeling frustrated and desperately needing some answers, he suddenly saw the Daily Planet globe and headed towards it, like a beacon in the distance. He felt bittersweet, looking at a place he had considered home, yet could never be home to him again without Lois. He landed on the rooftop of the Daily Planet building, suddenly inspired by an idea. Perry usually didn't question Superman's presence, but Clark wondered how he'd feel about him poking around in the newsroom a bit.

It was after midnight, and Clark was surprised to see Perry, still sitting in his office. The man looked like the weight of the world was on his shoulders, and Clark's heart went out to him. Perry was listening to Elvis, singing along with the saddest song of his Clark thought he had ever heard the chief play. Perry shook his head, singing with all his heart, "I've got the bluest kind of blues, driving me right outta my mind." Clark landed with a purposeful whoosh through the window, so Perry would have a moment to collect himself before he had to speak to him.

As Clark had intended, Perry saw the flash of cape and turned down the radio. "Where have you been, Superman?" he asked bluntly, if not with some underlying anger. "I've put notices in the paper for you for a solid week! One of my top reporters is dead and the other in prison!"

Clark held up his hands to try and calm down his editor and friend. "It's a long story, Mr. White. But I'm here now, to help where I can," Clark said with as much conviction as he could muster, wishing Perry didn't look so accusingly at him.

"Well, shouldn't you be hunting down Luthor?" Perry said with no preamble. Count on Perry to cut to the chase.

"Yes, sir," Clark acknowledged. "But first, I was wondering if you wouldn't mind if I took advantage of some of the Planet's resources."

Perry looked at him questioningly a moment. <<Superman needed the Daily Planet?>> "We'll do anything we can to help, I'll assure you of that."

"May I have access to Lois' files? Clark told me about a contact of hers that might know where to start looking for

Luthor," Clark asked, wondering again what he thought he was doing... this was totally Clark's territory, not Superman's. But he trusted Perry would understand extenuating circumstances called for extenuating actions...

"Of course, Superman," Perry said, eyeing him curiously. "The newsroom's all yours," he said generously, gesturing to the expanse of the empty newsroom, save for a few of the custodial staff.

Clark made his way over to Lois' desk, his heart constricting in sadness as he saw her nameplate. He picked it up, gently caressing the letters, not caring if Perry or anyone else noticed. The dreams he had been having continued to haunt him, of not saving her, of her slipping out of his grasp forever. He didn't want to think of what his future would be without her; even if he caught Luthor and was cleared of all charges, his life would forever be destroyed because the one person who mattered above else to him, was gone.

He remembered those horrible moments before he had blacked out when she had realized he was Superman. He had seen the way she had come immediately to his defense... Had she really cared for him, *Clark*? He believed she had been starting to care... He wondered what realizing he was Superman had meant to her in those final moments. She had become determined to stop Luthor from hurting him, that was certain. And it had cost her life to try and save him.

Clark cursed himself for all the petty worries he had had about telling her he was Superman. He had wanted her to see beyond the powers, and she was just beginning to care for Clark, he thought. But they had had barely a chance for anything to happen between them. He had finally asked her on a date only just recently... and all too quickly, she had been taken from him.

He sighed, trying to focus on why he was at the Planet in the first place, and remembering that he didn't have all night to worry over the past. He took a seat in Lois' chair, feeling awkward doing so as Superman. Her Rolodex was on the corner of her desk, as it always had been, organized but filled past capacity with odd notes on sources. Clark hoped the one source he thought might have a pulse on what Luthor was up to was in there and would be willing to talk to him.

He tried not to let himself get too sentimental, touching her things, but he couldn't help the constriction in his throat at all the things that were so *Lois* about even her Rolodex. She put notes next to sources' names like "trustworthy, but a flirt," "knows dirt on the mayor and loves freebies from DP," "talk to secretary, boss never knows the dirt," "don't take to lunch -- chews with mouth open!" Clark couldn't help but laugh at her little notes, even as they made him want to cry from missing her. At last he found the one he was looking for: "Bobby 'Bigmouth' -- bring him food, LOTS of food. And NEVER forget dessert!"

Clark called the number on the card.

"Bobby here," came a mumbled reply. Clark thought he heard the smack of him chewing on something. <<The man really does eat all the time!>>

"Hi, this -- this is Superman," he said, still trying to adjust to his idea of investigating Clark-style as Superman.

"Superman? Is this some kind of joke?"

"No. It's quite serious, actually. I'm a friend of Clark Kent's... and of Lois Lane."

"I was so sorry to hear about Lois... Great gal. But what do you want with me?"

"Well, I'm wondering if you've heard anything on Lex Luthor?"

The phone went silent a moment.

"Hello?" Clark asked.

"Aw, sorry, Supes. Had to take a drink. I only ever talked to Lois... but I know she thought a lot of you, so yeah, I might know something. Meet me at the corner of Washington and Third in a half hour. And be sure to bring me something good to eat. And with you being Superman, and all... wouldn't mind something a little authentic... I don't know... Italian?"

After a quick hop across the pond to a great little restaurant Clark new in Tuscany, he made it to the rendezvous point with five minutes to spare.

Bobby showed up, right on time. "It's a great honor to meet you, Superman," said Bobby, never looking at him, but eyeing the bag he held instead.

"Oh, wow, real manicotti. Oh, this is heaven, Superman!" he looked deeper in the bag. "And real tiramisu! Thanks Superman!" he said, digging into the manicotti with gusto. "Oh, and real Italian bread, too! I could die a happy man, you know that?"

Clark nodded, impatient to hear any news, "So, what can you tell me?"

"Well, there's a rumor that the Boss has made a comeback. But he's having trouble getting any real support, because he's broke. Intergang's who run things now, but surely you know that?" he said, taking the bread to sop up the sauce. "This stuff is amazing!"

"Do you have any idea where he's hiding out?" Clark asked, starting to show his impatience.

"Only that he's underground somewhere. I don't know what part of the city. But he had this scientist chick, what that brought him back from the dead? Gretchen Kelly. Well, I don't know about the scientist, but I know Luthor was scaring up some strange materials that may be tied to cryo -- cryogenics. Don't know what it means, but it might be worth knowing."

"Thanks, Bobby," Clark said with feeling. That last bit of knowledge gave him more hope than he expected to feel ever again. "I have to go. Thanks for the information."

"Any time, Supes. Especially if you bring me food like this! Man, this is heaven!" Bobby said, digging into the tiramisu as Clark flew off.

Lois looked for a way out, holding up the Kryptonite like a sort of lantern. She saw a particularly dark corner and walked over to it, encouraged by the sound of trickling of water. When she peered around it, her suspicions that they were underground were confirmed. A thin stream of water from the sewers slid by, coming from a source somewhere down the dark hall. She turned down it, trying not to imagine what sludge her bare feet were walking on, and praying that she wouldn't step on any rats in the process. She at last came to a metal door. She thought it was locked, and panicked for a moment that she'd have to head back into that room with Lex to look for another way out. But with a harder pull, it at last sprung open. She was suddenly standing on a metal platform, the sewers of Metropolis rushing below her. A little ways away she could see access to a manhole cover. She made her way over and before she began climbing the steel ladder to reach a manhole, she chucked the Kryptonite into the fast moving water, hoping to never lay eyes on it again.

Lois came up to street level in a non-descript alley. It was sometime in the middle of the night. No one was around; the alley around her was very quiet. She was at once grateful to end up in a place so anonymous and anxious to find out where she was. She walked to an intersection, to read the street signs and try to orient herself. Neither of the cross streets looked familiar. She had no idea what part of town she was in. Lois looked left and right, both options seeming just as good as the other. She took a chance and headed right.

She walked for a few more blocks until she finally came to a street she knew. Clinton street! By the numbers, she was at least twenty short city blocks from Clark's apartment, but she didn't care. Her heart in her throat, she started running in the direction of 344 Clinton without hesitation. Weak and tired, she was out of breath after about six blocks, but she forged ahead, a despairing hope that if she could just get to his place, somehow all would be well. At last she reached his stairwell, out of breath, sweaty, and crying. Lois pounded on Clark's door, praying by some miracle he was there and alive, and that she'd be in his arms any second. When she didn't get an answer, she looked for his spare key. "Oh, Clark," she whispered with affection as she found Clark's trusting gesture of leaving his spare key under the mat; she opened his door.

She locked it behind her, overwhelming sadness hitting her as she made her way into his living room. <<He's not here,>> she thought forlornly. The lights were off, but she'd know his place blind. Besides, the moon was full and there was a little light shining in from the 'Harry's Bar' neon sign outside his window.

<<Was he truly gone?>> she wondered. Lois sat on his sofa, thinking of the many late nights they had spent there, going over notes for a story or just watching a movie. Clark had been her best friend, her only true friend, yet so much more. The pain of losing him suddenly went deeper, summoning a sob from the depth of her soul. Clark was her

hero, in so many ways, and not just the obvious 'super' ones... and now, she was truly alone. She had to face Luthor *alone*. She realized now, that hoping he was still alive had been just wishful thinking. It had pushed her to act to get out of Luthor's clutches, but Clark's dark, lonely apartment, testified to her that he was truly gone.

She curled up onto the sofa, and quietly wept.

Martha swore she was hearing things. She laid in her son's bed, suddenly awake as she thought she heard pounding on the front door. She wished Jonathan was here, so she could send him to investigate. But he had flown back to Kansas yesterday to take care of some farm business. Martha carefully tossed off the covers and searched in the dark for some sort of defense weapon in case it was someone dangerous. She was thankful there was a full moon tonight, so she didn't have to turn on the light -- which would give away her presence -- to see basic shapes around Clark's room. She quietly opened his closet and felt around till she found what she was looking for, a baseball bat.

She walked silently to the door, preparing herself for what she was to find in the living room. She lifted the bat, getting a good stance with it for a woman who was no taller than five foot two. But something stopped her. She heard crying coming from the sofa. A woman crying.

Martha put the bat down and flicked on the light switch. "Lois?" she asked in incredulity.

Lois looked up in shock, her face streaked with tears. "Martha! What are you doing here?"

Martha came immediately to Lois' side and took her in her arms. "Oh, Lois! We thought you were dead!"

Lois, who had been crying softly before Martha came in, fell into wracking sobs. "I was! I was!" she murmured incoherently. "And Clark's gone, too!"

Martha pulled out of her hug to look at Lois. "Honey, what do you mean, Clark's gone?"

Lois' bottom lip trembled from her sobs, like a small child's. "Cl -- Clark... didn't the -- " Lois hesitated a second to let on to Martha that she knew Clark was Superman, but if he was really dead, what did it matter? "The Kryptonite. It killed him."

Martha shook her head. "Back up, Lois. Clark isn't dead," she said gently.

Lois looked on the verge of sobbing again, this time from relief. "He -- he's not?"

"No, honey. He -- well" Martha sighed. "Lois, Clark is in a *lot* of trouble."

"What do you mean?" Lois asked, trying to focus on what Martha was saying. <<Clark's alive! He's alive!>>

"Well, Clark has been accused of your murder," Martha said as gently as she could.

Lois shook her head. "Oh, my god. Clark!" she said, thinking about what he must be going through.

"But it will be all right, now! That you are here, alive! I mean, it's a miracle!" Martha said, gathering Lois into her

arms again. "First thing in the morning we'll go down to the station and get him out of there. But tell me, Lois. What *did* happen to you?"

"Lex," Lois spat the word. "I *was* dead, Martha. But he -- somehow revived me. Even though it was *he* who killed me!" she shook her head, still baffled by it all.

"He told me that -- Clark was gone." Lois said, taking Martha's hand, trying to get her to see her urgency in what she was saying. "I -- I know he's Superman. But what's worse, so does Lex."

"Oh, no," Martha said quietly.

Lois nodded but continued. "I know, I know! It's just awful! But I got rid of the remaining Kryptonite before I escaped," Lois said proudly.

"Good!" said Martha, more worried about her son than before. "We have to stop Lex, Lois. Do you have any idea where he is?"

Lois sighed, thinking about her route out of the sewers. "I know about where he was keeping me. I ... I fought him to get out of there. I think I knocked him out with some sort of tranquilizer he had used on me. But... I...oh, God, I..." she suddenly couldn't speak, the ordeal overwhelming her.

Martha rubbed Lois' back and tried to calm her. "Look, you've had a very hard time of it. Go lie down in Clark's bed. I'll sleep out here. It's three in the morning. We can't do much of anything tonight. And Clark will need you to be strong for him, though seeing you tomorrow will be wonderful for him. And hopefully it will also mean that he can get out of that horrible prison!"

On impulse, Lois reached for Martha and hugged her. "I'm glad you were here. I don't know what I would have done tonight if I still thought Clark was -- gone." Lois wiped her eyes, trying to force a sense of calmness she didn't feel. "Look, we can share Clark's bed. There's no sense in you sleeping on this sofa."

Martha smiled warmly. "Thanks, Lois. Now, let's get some sleep."

"But first, I need to take a shower," Lois said, gesturing at her appearance. Suddenly, the two women laughed, as Lois did look a fright. Her pants were messy, her shirt had an odd sheen to it, her feet were bare and slimy with God knows what, and her hair had a mind of its own. They laughed until they cried, so relieved that Lois was safe.

"Go on, sweetie. I'm climbing back into bed," said Martha with a yawn.

Lois nodded and made her way to Clark's bathroom, lit only by a nightlight. She couldn't face the glare of the real light in her state just now, so she simply stared at herself in the half-light, letting more tears come. <<Clark's alive. Everything is going to be okay,>> she said to herself, wiping her grimy face with a washcloth. She suddenly looked at her reflection a little more carefully, noticing an odd green dust on her clothes picked up by the nightlight. She looked down and almost screamed. There was Kryptonite dust all over her! It must be from when she dropped the rock so many times trying to get away from

Lex. She suddenly felt panicked, wondering how much of the Kryptonite dust she had tracked into Clark's apartment. She ripped off her pants and shirt balling it up and cried for Martha.

"What, what is it, Lois?" said Martha through the door.

"My...my clothes! They are covered in Kryptonite dust! I probably brought some into the house as well! Clark can't come here!" she cried, near hysterical.

"Calm down, Lois. We have time to get rid of it. I'll get a bag to put your clothes in and vacuum the living room. Then we can take down your clothes and the vacuum bag down to the trash. Okay? Now take a shower. Everything will be fine."

Lois shivered in her bra and underwear, trying to calm herself down. How could she bring in the one element into Clark's apartment that could destroy him? It was all too much, the stress of the ordeal with Lex, and learning that Clark was alive...

Martha knocked on the door, asking for Lois's clothes. Lois handed them to her through the cracked door. "You better take your shirt, too, since I hugged you... and check the sheets if you were already in bed before I told you! What have I done?!" cried Lois, her voice rising in hysterics.

"It will be all right, Lois honey. Calm yourself down. Get in the shower."

Lois closed the bathroom door, still unable to stop the tears from streaming down her face. She eventually got herself into the shower, feeling a little bit better. She leaned against the tiled wall, sobbing silently.

"I'm sorry, Clark. So sorry," she kept repeating. Wondering how many things she was sorry for. She was sorry for taking so long to see him as more than a hack. She was sorry for hurting him when she almost married Lex. She was sorry she hadn't known he was Superman before -- well, that was his fault, really. But in her state she put the blame on her shoulders as much as his. And she was sorry that she had been stupid enough to track Kryptonite into his apartment. So many stupid things... that all added up to a big old "I'm sorry."

Eventually she calmed herself down enough to get out of the shower and face Martha again. Martha had lain out an old t-shirt of Clark's and sleep shorts. Lois put them on gratefully, feeling enveloped by Clark somehow by simply wearing his clothes. She noticed that Martha had vacuumed and gotten rid of their contaminated clothes. They sat by the door in a plastic bag. Lois couldn't leave them there. It bothered her too much. She took the trash out, despite it being chilly and the middle of the night. She just didn't want the evidence of her stupidity staring her in the face. She dumped it in the trash with a slam and came back into the apartment quietly.

She felt incredibly drained. She made her way to Clark's bedroom and climbed into bed to fall promptly asleep.

It was almost dawn, a little after four in the morning.

Clark still had at least two hours before he had to be back at the prison. Maybe he could wake his mother and try to get some ideas for the following night. Besides, he wanted to tell her his conjecture... that he was almost certain Lois was alive somewhere in the city!

He had covered a lot of territory, motivated by the thought that Lois might be alive, but still, nothing turned up. He had then begun the tedious task of x-raying the underground sewers, but there were so many old lead pipes, that it made the task frustrating and difficult. He couldn't do much more searching tonight, and he just needed to be near something familiar.

Clark landed at his apartment, wondering if he was wasting more time by coming here instead of hunting down Luthor.

His spare key was gone from the front door, which he thought was strange. So he flew around to the large window in the living room. Luckily, it was easy to open, since it was virtually impossible for thieves to access it... unless those thieves could fly, he thought wryly.

Clark slipped in, wondering if his mother might even be up by now. It was nearing 5 o'clock in the morning, and though she tended to sleep in a little bit more in the city, she might be up. It would be nice to have a morning cup of coffee and a chat with her if she was up.

Clark wandered into the doorway of his room, his heart sinking as he was pretty certain his mom was still sleeping. He suddenly noticed that there were two figures in his bed, which he thought odd, since he knew his dad was in Kansas and especially since they both were the slight forms of women. So who...

All at once it hit him. Lois' eyes opened, and those deep pools of brown widened in recognition.

She swiftly flew out of the bed and into his arms with a gasp.

Clark could barely control the trembling in his arms but quietly pulled her from the room and closed the door so as not to disturb his mother.

When the door shut, he let out a ragged sigh, half sob. "Lois..." he said, tears pooling in his eyes as he caressed her beloved face, a face he never thought to see again.

"Clark," she said brokenly, touching his 'S' on his chest, leaving the significance of recognition of both of his personae unspoken. It didn't matter to her that he hadn't told her the truth before. She had thought never to see him again, and any recriminations she may have had, at that moment seemed insignificant.

Clark leaned in about to kiss her but hesitated a moment with a question in his eyes. She answered it by immediately closing the distance between them. She was through with pretense about her feelings for him, their feelings for each other; having nearly lost him, she knew that she loved him and would do anything for him, Superman or not.

His lips met hers, gently yet insistently; all the fear he had felt and passion beginning to speak through his kiss. She moaned slightly, tears constricting her throat, as she

understood him, their kiss speaking volumes to each other. The rush of sensation sent both of them trembling. She caressed his back under his cape, pulling him in to her, as if they could never be close enough ever again.

Clark moved on to reverently kiss her eyes and her chin, her neck, caressing her and memorizing her.

Suddenly, the emotion became all too much for him. He fell to his knees before her, holding tightly to her waist as the tears came. She leaned down, turning his face towards her.

"It's okay," she whispered, bending down to meet him, to return the gentle treatment he had given her, kissing his face lovingly. Clark pulled her further down into his lap, and she tucked her head under his chin while he held her, and both of them wept the tears of having nearly lost each other forever.

After a moment, when the first rush of emotion was over, Clark moved them over to the sofa. He wouldn't let go of her, which she didn't mind. He seemed to want to talk but had difficulty forming the words as emotion choked him.

"What... happened?" he asked at last. "You were -- *dead*. I saw you -- " he shook his head, pulling her close to him again, his arm protective around her, when it couldn't be before.

She nodded. "Yes," she said shakily, pushing her hair back behind her ear in a nervous gesture. She still hadn't reconciled the strangeness of having been dead and now brought back to life. "Ironically, it was Lex who saved me," she said, but knowing the impact those words would have on Clark, she quickly continued. "He didn't do it to rescue me but to try and control me. He -- told me you were dead," she whispered, the horror of the moment relived in her mind.

Their eyes met, the shared torture of thinking the other one was gone forever eloquent.

She reached for his hand, squeezing it as much to reassure herself of his presence as to comfort him. "He told me Nigel St. John had stabbed me and killed me. And that he rescued me through some cryogenics method. And that Nigel had... killed you."

Lois fell into tears again, and Clark pulled her against his chest.

"The past week and a half has been hell for me, Lois. But now that I know you are okay, I think everything is going to be all right."

She sniffled and then looked up at him, realizing something. "Your mother said they had accused you of..." She couldn't get it out. "You were in prison, blamed for my death all this time?"

He nodded, the memories of the past week evident on his face. "I was."

"Did you... sneak out?" she asked, wondering how Superman's ethics were justifying breaking himself out of prison.

He shook his head with a wry smile, stopping her questions. "Henderson knows. He figured it out and knew

that the best way to find Luthor was to get Superman's help. So, we've made an arrangement. He's working the overnight shift and is allowing me to hunt down Luthor at night."

She smirked unexpectedly.

"What?" he asked with a smile.

"Maybe you have something in common with Gotham's caped-crusader after all," she laughed.

He shook his head. "I do not go around pretending I'm a bat," he said derisively, his eyebrow shooting up in that quirky way that she loved so well.

She reached out and stroked his face, serious again. "I thought I'd never see you again," she said quietly, blushing now as she realized the depth of her love for him, something she wouldn't have acknowledged even to herself so readily before.

"I know," he breathed, turning his head to kiss her palm.

She reached around his neck, pulling him to her and breathing in his scent, still reconciling things in her mind. <<Clark is Superman... it's so simple and yet so extraordinary...>>

Suddenly Clark pulled away from her, shaking his head.

"What is it?" she asked, fearful she had said or done something wrong.

He looked at her, puzzled. "I don't know, I have a headache all of the sudden..."

Her eyes widened with fright as she gestured for him to sit up. He looked at her with a question but leaned forward at her insistence. She saw the evidence of what she feared on his cape from the sofa.

"I'm so sorry, Clark! I was trying to get rid of it!" she cried, running to the kitchen to get something to wipe up the Kryptonite dust from his cape.

"What do you mean? Is there Kryptonite here?" he asked in horror.

"A very little bit... You see, I was escaping Lex, and I kept dropping that stupid rock and the dust... got all over me... only I didn't know it... and now you..." she fell into a puddle of tears on the sofa next to him, taking a cloth to his cape.

"It's not much, Lois. I'll be fine," he said, his eyes strained with the headache.

Lois got the last bit of the dust off of him, and not having anything lead to put it in, she opened the large window and chucked it into the alley.

She immediately came back over to him and hugged him around his waist. "I'm so sorry!"

Suddenly he was comforting her. "It's not your fault, Lois. And I feel better all ready, really. I'll be fine."

She looked at him, all of her confused emotions evident on her face. He lifted her chin to look at him. "I'm fine, really," he said again, kissing her nose lightly.

She pulled him to her again, trembling. "It's just been so scary, Clark!"

"Everything is going to all right. We're together now. The hottest team in town, remember? And we're close to nailing Luthor..."

She calmed down a bit. "Are you sure you're okay?" she asked, her sniffles starting to die down. She inspected him carefully, looking for any change in his color.

He nodded. "Scout's honor," he said, lifting his fingers in a Boy Scout gesture that made her giggle.

"My big, blue Boy Scout," she said, kissing his cheek.

"Speaking of being your Boy Scout, I think there's one thing you haven't told me that we really should deal with."

"What's that?" she asked.

"Where *is* Lex Luthor?"

"I want him arrested and given to the law as much as you do, but do we have to deal with him right now?" she sighed, shivering just thinking of going back into that sewer again.

"Lois, can you tell me where he kept you? I can be there and back and have this whole mess dealt with..."

"I would love to be there when you get him... I left maybe two or three hours ago... He's probably still under the influence of the tranquilizer..." She turned to him, as if she made up her mind about something. "Go... twenty or so blocks down Clinton, towards the wharf. He's underground, in the sewers..."

She had just barely finished her sentence when he had dashed out of there like a flash.

"Wow..." she said, awed by his speed. Normally she would immediately chase after Superman and the bad guys, but she didn't particularly want to see this bad guy again. She could, however, get some wheels moving in other directions.

Suddenly awake and full of more energy than she felt in days, she dialed Henderson's direct line.

"Henderson, this is Lois Lane. Just thought you should know, I'm not dead after all."

Clark took off faster from his apartment than he meant to, creating a sonic boom as he flew down his street. He calculated that if Lois had managed to drug Luthor almost three hours ago, than he would be beginning to wake up by now. Now that he had a more specific idea of where to look, it didn't take him long to find the sewers as Lois had described them. Below street level, he found an open steel door. He scanned the room and saw a man, sitting in the dark on the floor, beginning to stir. Clark didn't waste a second.

He came upon Lex quickly, grabbing him by his shirt.

"So, we meet again," Clark said, feeling all the pain and anger build in him again at seeing his enemy. He let Luthor feel his strength just a bit, lifting him off the ground, just to intimidate him. He wanted Luthor to know that if he wanted to, he could crush him... more permanently than he had crushed his spirit when he took Lois away from him. Clark wanted Lex to feel that helpless despair for just one second...

"Su -- Superman?" said Lex, still coming out of the drug.

"That's right, Luthor. It's over this time."

"I thought -- you -- you -- where's Lois?" asked Luthor, trying to regain his equilibrium.

"Safe from you," Clark said. His hate started to dissipate then, feeling sudden pity for this enemy at his mercy. Lois was safe, and Luthor's helpless expression at being held by his collar got to Clark. He who could never destroy life felt compassion for even those who didn't understand its value; he relaxed his grip just a bit.

Clark took a moment to take in their surroundings a bit more in detail. Though it was dark, his super-vision helped him see the room clearly. <<Lois had been kept *here*?>> he asked himself, taking in the cold and dank atmosphere as well as the odd laboratory equipment.

"Have you turned into a mad scientist after all, Luthor?" Clark asked with some derision.

"I merely wanted to take back what was mine, what was stolen from me," Luthor answered, growing ever more coherent as he tried to shake out of Superman's hold on him.

Clark gave him a little shake, determined not to let the little weasel get away this time, "I've had enough. Let's go pay a visit to the Metropolis Police, shall we?"

"So, it seems your outing tonight was fruitful," said Henderson, gladly taking Lex into custody.

"While you were gone, I got a phone call from a very alive Ms. Lane."

Clark couldn't keep the smile from his face. "I know, Henderson. I don't understand it, but she's alive."

Luthor scoffed, fully awake now from the tranquilizer drug. "It was *I* who brought her back! You'd think she'd learn to appreciate all the things I am capable of doing for her..."

Clark turned to Luthor, wondering if it was worth the argument. He was about to speak when Henderson stopped him by saying, "You've eluded the law for the last time, Mr. Luthor. I think you're done meddling in the life of Ms. Lois Lane."

"You haven't seen the last of me, Superman... or should I say, *Clark Kent*," Lex said with icy hatred, waiting for a reaction at this revelation from Henderson.

Henderson merely looked at Luthor with pitying patience, a gesture that angered Lex to no end. "With ravings like that, you might end up in the Metropolis Mental Ward. Is that really where you want to spend your time, Mr. Luthor?" Henderson said, thinly veiling his threat. Clark smiled at the inspector's choice of words. Maybe Luthor would cease to be a threat after all.

Lex suddenly stood up, hampered by the handcuffs they had put on him, "You wouldn't dare! Don't you know who I am? I am Lex Luthor! I will get out of here and when I do, I will tell the world that their Superman has been hiding among the populace as a reporter, as a fraud! Then, they'll chase you out of Metropolis like they should have done from the moment you arrived! Do you hear me, I'll tell the world!"

Clark tried to block out Luthor's words, as they voiced

some of his worst fears. But he also realized they were the desperate gestures of a condemned man. Luthor couldn't hurt him now, and Clark was sure that Henderson would make good on his threat if Luthor even tried. It wasn't absolute security, but Clark would take what peace he could from knowing that even if revealed, his secret wasn't likely to be taken seriously if done so by a man in a mental ward.

Henderson gestured for Superman to take Luthor to his own private cell until he could be dealt with at a later time. And the irony that it was the same cell Clark had been locked in not twelve hours earlier was not lost on Clark.

Clark slammed the prison door, turning to take one last look at Luthor, debating a moment if he had any last words for his enemy. He thought of coming up with some retort to cut Luthor to the quick, but what came out surprised them both.

"Thanks for bringing her back. Take comfort in knowing that at least you were able to right that wrong," Clark said quietly, then turned away, missing the stunned expression on Lex Luthor's face.

When the roles had been reversed, when Luthor had held Superman at his mercy, he had never offered him anything other than haughtiness and hatred. In that moment, Luthor suddenly wondered if the alien creature who had stolen Lois Lane's heart was actually more human than he had thought. This enraged Lex, and he slammed his cage in frustration. The thought that the alien superman could show more human compassion in such a simple speech than Luthor had learned in his lifetime, was enough nearly to drive him to madness...

Clark walked back over to Henderson. "So, I guess this means I'm a free man?"

"Absolutely. But I also want to see Lois as soon as possible. We'll need a detailed report on what happened."

"She'll be here as soon as she can manage. You can see why I didn't want to bring her...?" Clark said, gesturing over his shoulder towards where he had locked up Luthor.

"Didn't want to bring who?" said a feminine voice. Lois stepped into the room, smiling at the inspector.

Inspector Henderson stood up, surprise written on his face. "I can't believe it, Lois! I mean, I heard it -- " he shook his head in disbelief. "And... well, you two must be the luckiest people I know, because you are the *second* homicide case in my career that solved itself!" Henderson said, realizing how Clark Kent had managed to come back from the dead when a strange reborn crop of gangsters had shot him up a year ago.

"Yeah, bizarre things like that happen to us all the time," she laughed, giving Clark a nudge.

"So, we need you to file a report on everything that happened with Lex Luthor," said Henderson, already beginning to pull the necessary paperwork to get Luthor processed and Clark released.

Lois stood up a little straighter, all business, "It's a long story, Inspector. And I'll tell you exactly what happened as long as you promise that the Planet will have the only

exclusive."

Clark couldn't help smiling at her. His Lois was back.

"What do you say we give Perry a surprise this morning?" Clark said as they left the police station an hour later.

"I think that's a fabulous idea," Lois said, willingly jumping into his arms.

"You wanna fly, huh?" Clark asked with a grin.

"You betcha. It's not every day Lois Lane comes back from the dead, you know. I got to milk it for all it's worth," she laughed, wrapping her arms around Clark's neck.

They paused just long enough for a quick kiss and then they were heading to the skies.

With proper aplomb and style, Superman flew into the Planet's open newsroom window with Lois Lane smiling and alive in his arms. Both were reminded of a similar moment, shortly after they had first met when he had swept her off her feet during the EPRAD shuttle launch. It had seemed a lifetime ago, but Lois could swear that it was way more thrilling flying in Clark's arms now than it had been those many months ago.

"I hope you know this dramatic entrance doesn't mean I enjoy playing the 'helpless woman,'" she said with a low laugh in his ear.

"You, Lois? Never," he agreed, landing them right in the middle of the bullpen. "But I can't wait to see the look on Perry's -- "

He stopped to take in the full effect of Perry's jaw dropping as he made his way over to them from his office. "Superman! How? I mean -- did she -- ?" he started, then shook his head in awe. "Great Shades of Elvis! Well come here, darlin'!"

Lois jumped from Clark's arms and ran over to Perry to hug him.

"Well, I hope you mean to tell me what happened?" said Perry, giving questioning glances to Lois and Superman.

Lois smiled. "Don't worry, I'll have an award winning article on your desk faster than you can imagine! Luthor is in prison, and Clark is set free!"

"Well, where is Clark?" asked Perry.

Lois' grin got wider, enjoying being on the inside as she thought of a cover. She tried not to glance at 'Superman' as she said, "Well, he went straight home for a shower. His mother has been keeping vigil, and he just couldn't keep her waiting with the news of his release."

Clark surreptitiously shook his head, acknowledging to himself that Lois was definitely the better liar out of the two of them.... And at the moment, he didn't think that was such a bad thing.

EPILOGUE:

Lois sat back from her computer, having just put the finishing touches on their article that brought her back from the dead, proved Clark Kent was an innocent man, and brought down Lex Luthor in front of the world for the

second time in the span of a year. She hoped this time it would be for good.

She looked over at her partner who was already starting on their next assignment. Lois watched him for a few moments covertly, thinking about the puzzle that was Clark Kent. Now that she knew he was Superman, she noticed a hundred little clues that she had failed to put together before. His sudden disappearances for one thing, almost always followed by an 'exclusive' from Superman. How he heard things before they happened. How he could be handed a stack of books and find the exact piece of information he needed in about five seconds. She was more mad at herself for *not* noticing these things than the fact that he hadn't told her.

But she did enjoy being on the inside of a story, and Clark's secret was their own personal blow-your-socks-off story. Besides, she was much better at making up excuses than Clark had ever been. She wondered how he had continued to get away with it for as long as he had. But the more she thought of it, she recognized that everyone simply trusted him; so upstanding was Clark that it was impossible for anyone to believe Clark *could* lie. She realized that was the precise reason she had never questioned his lies before either. Clark was so earnest, so genuine, that you took him for face value, and in the end, that's what saved him from scrutiny.

It was getting late, and both she and Clark had been playing catch up all day to make sure that though everyone thought they might have been down, everyone would know they were definitely not out. They were the hottest team in town after all, and Lois thought it might be about time to add a little more to that particular reputation. So, having sent Perry the final copy on the story, Lois got up and walked over to her partner's desk. She had a look in her eye that if Clark had looked up to notice, he'd know he was in trouble. But this kind of trouble he wouldn't mind at all; it was his favorite kind.

Lois had on a pencil skirt with a slit up the side, and she decided it was time to use it to her advantage. As she sauntered over to his desk, she unbuttoned the top two, no three buttons on her blouse. She swung up on Clark's desk, letting one leg reveal itself lusciously, as she recreated a move she had used when under the influence of the pheromone spray over a year ago. But now there was no pheromone spray... just simple chemistry and a growing love she thought could use a little light-hearted flirt after all they'd been through in the past week.

"Claark," she said playfully.

He looked over his glasses, his jaw dropping to see her positioned so enticingly on his desk. He couldn't form words, which suited Lois just fine. She thrilled to know she could render Superman speechless.

"Just wondering whatcha doing," she asked innocently with a smile.

"Uh.. um," began Clark, struggling to focus on what she was asking but too distracted by the lovely show of leg on

his desk. "Just... looking into this next story..."

"Well, I was wondering... were you ever going to take me out on that date?" Lois asked, pouting just a little bit.

Clark smiled at her, even if his eyes kept darting to her skirt. <<Just how high up does that slit go...?>>

He finally found his voice, as his thoughts had actually been in much the same direction for most of the day. In the direction of a date, that is. "Of course, Lois. How about tonight... But... do you mind coming to my place?" he asked, an idea forming in his mind.

She swung her long legs down to the ground, disappointing Clark that she wouldn't stay perched up like that for at least a little while longer. "What time?"

"Dinner at eight?" he asked, his eyes warming to his topic.

She leaned down, her own eyes beginning to smolder with passion. "Sounds perfect."

Lois arrived at Clark's place precisely at eight. She was surprised to find his apartment dark but found a little note taped to the door addressed to her that said simply, "Use the key."

"Okaaay," she said, wondering what Clark was up to.

She came inside and called for Clark but got no response. She felt just a moment of panic, wondering if it was some sort of trick, until Lois spotted a trail of candles near the large window and realized that she was meant to follow them. Smiling to herself at this little game, she followed the trail to the fire escape and began to climb.

"I knew I shouldn't have worn heels," she grumbled as her heel got stuck in the grating of the ladder about halfway up. <<This is not the graceful entrance I had intended.>>

As she was trying to pull her foot free, she felt a light whoosh of air by her side and turned. "Would you like a hand?" asked Superman.

She grinned. "Would you mind?"

Lois let him gather her in his arms, leaving her heels behind on the fire escape so he could carry her the rest of the way to the roof. The setting she found there was a bit of magic. Clark had laid out several tiki lights and a half dozen candles. Some soft Miles Davis was playing somewhere, and a small table was set for an intimate dinner for two. It was a clear night, not too cool, but the moon was full and helped complete the picture of romance. Clark set Lois down and walked her over to the table to have a seat.

"You always said you wanted to have a date with Superman, so here I am," he offered.

She studied him a moment, then shook her head.

"Actually, as much as I appreciate the little rescue on the fire escape, I really wanted a date with Clark. You think he could make an appearance instead?"

Clark grinned, glad that even if he hadn't intended it to be a test, Lois had proven to him that it was truly his company she desired and not the Suit. It warmed him to hear her choose *him*, laying to rest any vestiges of worry that she would still fawn over his superhero side. She could

still have Superman any time she wanted, as Clark was unable to deny her anything, but sharing dinner with Lois as Clark was exactly what he had hoped for. So Clark stepped back to turn out of the spandex and into an entirely different kind of suit. He took her breath away, standing before her in a charcoal suit and a matching *subdued* tie, for once.

"There's the man I wanted to see," she said breathlessly, reaching for him as he came to sit at their little table.

She leaned over to kiss his cheek, still a little overwhelmed by their show of passion earlier when he had found her in his apartment that morning. Loving Clark was new to her, and she wanted to savor it and take it all in slowly. No need to rush passion tonight, and she thought Clark felt the same way.

"So what's for dinner?" Lois asked.

"Well, I brought a little mix of a few of my favorite things," he said, beginning to serve her the first course.

"I have some tapas from a little place I know in Seville," he said, laying out various cheeses and meats. "Peking duck from China... a cheese course from France, and tiramisu from Italy. Apparently the tiramisu is to die for. I'll have to make a few regular trips there I think because it may become Bobby Bigmouth's new favorite bargaining chip."

Lois laughed, "You actually got Bobby to help you? Well, I suppose, meeting someone like Superman who has access to all the best food all over the world would be hard for him to ignore. I guess we'll pull out Superman when we need the real big dirt!"

Clark laughed, "Just glad I can be of service."

Lois and Clark started in on the meal, savoring each bite and each other's company.

When the meal was over and Lois had finished off the rest of the to-die-for tiramisu, Clark stood up and asked her to dance.

She took his hand and suddenly lost herself in his chocolate brown eyes. Clark pulled her close to him, and she felt her heart begin to race in anticipation. She thought of how he had rescued her over and over since she'd known him, but she was just realizing that the greatest rescue of all had been how he had offered his heart to her and his friendship. She felt herself choke up a little at the thought and laid her head on his chest so he wouldn't question why she suddenly had tears in her eyes.

Then, unexpectedly she felt lighter than air and gasped softly when she realized they were dancing -- floating! The soft candle light, the stars, and the cool jazz of Miles Davis lulled her into a sense of well-being in Clark's arms. She couldn't imagine anywhere else in the world she would rather be...

"There was one more of my favorite things I wanted to share with you tonight, Lois," Clark said softly, making her look up at him in question.

"What's that?" she asked innocently.

"This," he said, leaning in to kiss her tenderly.

She clung tighter to him, knowing that he would never let her fall to the ground, but knowing too that she was

perfectly safe for the first time in her life to fall in *love*.

"Mmm... that's one of my favorite things, too," she said.

"Can I have another?"

As Clark obliged, they continued to dance under the moon, the stars and a world full of possibility just within their reach.

THE END