

Separate Cells

Anti-Kryptonite <dreamnovelist@gmail.com>

Rated: G

Submitted February 2011

Forced to leave Metropolis due to the unseasonal heat wave, Clark says goodbye to Lois, who realizes she misses her partner more than her superhero.

Disclaimer: Portions of dialogue, as well as plot points, are taken from 'The Man Of Steel Bars,' written by Paris Qualles. No copyright infringement is intended.

She was so far away from him. It seemed so obvious now that he had been reaching for the stars — untouchable even for him — by wanting her to love him. Ironic, he often thought, that so many people longed for greatness and found it hard to settle for normal life when all he wanted was that normal life. Greatness was something that came with too high a price, too painful a cost, too dark a future. Normality, on the other hand, was beautiful and underrated and filled with contentment accented by moments of joy and, yes, pain.

But it was this, his dearest wish, that was forever denied him.

An alien. Different. Dangerous. A hazard to others. Some had advocated quarantine, others had yelled at him to go back to his own planet, while their crude signs had commanded him to leave Metropolis immediately. Judge Diggs had said the same, caving in to pressure from the DA and the faction of scientists blaming Superman for the heat wave.

“Am I responsible?” he whispered to himself as the elevator made its torturously slow way up to the newsroom. *I don't get it, Clark*, his dad had exclaimed, *I just don't get it! You used your powers in Smallville and it never got hot.*

Clark snorted and shook his head, perfectly content to wait for the elevator since this would be his last trip up to the newsroom that had so quickly become an integral part of his life — for more than one reason.

In Smallville, he had never lifted an entire space-shuttle into space. In Smallville, he had never been hit by a missile and survived. In Smallville, he had never flashed in an instant from one end to another of the massive city that sprawled across miles of countryside to save two suicide divers. In Smallville, he had never contended with invisible robbers. In Smallville, he had never fought cyborgs or arsonists, nor had he ever rescued so many people from fires, power-line explosions, failing planes, or train-wrecks.

“I am responsible.” He spoke the words softly, but they seared their way inside him, burning and twisting until he felt as if he had swallowed crushed glass. So many people

had fled Metropolis to escape the heat; others had been hurt in car wrecks resulting from overheating engines; crimes had doubled as the response time of the police force slowed...and it was all his fault. He had tried to play the hero — tried to separate greatness from his true self so that he could enjoy his pretense of normality — and other people had paid the price.

It took a long moment after the elevator doors dinged open for Clark to shake himself free of the thoughts that were tormenting him and step into the newsroom. He took another moment to look out over what was affectionately referred to as ‘the bullpen.’

Perry's office was dark, the desks were cluttered, the coffee was all but gone, and the newsroom was empty. Almost empty, Clark amended to himself when he heard a sound that had become quickly familiar and infinitely precious to him — Lois's heartbeat, slow enough that she must be asleep.

Clark's own heart stuttered and came almost to a standstill.

He could live with leaving Metropolis. He could live with giving up his dream job and saying goodbye to Perry and Jimmy. He could even live with giving up Superman — though he didn't think he'd ever be able to give up helping people in whatever small, non-dangerous ways he could. But leave Lois? That was what made his steps drag slower and his thoughts sink.

For a little over two months, he had been given the chance to get to know Lois Lane. From the moment he had met her — adjusting his glasses instead of shaking her hand because she was too busy to really look at him and he was too taken aback to step forward — he had been intrigued by her. From the moment he had witnessed her passion for righting wrongs and being the best she could be and making a difference in people's lives, he had realized that he could very easily fall for her. And from the moment she had confided in him just what had broken her heart and built her walls, he had been in love.

Oh, at that time, it hadn't been a love that would shake the foundations of the world and soar to dizzying heights. But it had been a start; it had been the seed that was quickly growing into the sort of love that stories made legendary.

He had fallen for her...and she had fallen for Superman.

Maybe it was better that he leave. After all, how could he build a relationship on a lie? He didn't believe it could — or *should* — be done. He had allowed himself to be blinded into thinking that he could be himself around her long enough to get her to take the time out from her work to really see him and finally take his hand. But in the end, it was just another delusion in the same line as thinking he could be normal.

We don't know if that's possible for you, his dad had cautioned him when he had expressed his desire for a family.

Well, now he knew. It wasn't.

Where are you going to go? Jonathan had asked, and Clark had replied that he had to get far away from the people he loved the most. Even his incurable optimism, he

reflected, was having a hard time facing this situation.

Very carefully keeping his face averted, Clark walked past Lois's desk and moved to his own. He stood and looked at it for a moment, his perfect memory flashing before him all the long hours he had sat there and worked, shaping words into beacons of hope that would free others and see wrongdoers punished. He liked to think that Clark Kent had made some difference to Metropolis, even if it hadn't been on a par with what Superman had done.

With heavy steps, he got a cardboard box and began emptying his desk, tossing the pieces of his brief life into its depths. He kept his back turned so that he wouldn't see Lois, wouldn't stare at her as she slept, wouldn't invade her privacy and torture himself.

All too quickly, all too easily, his life had been taken apart and packed up as if he were no more than a costume. And maybe he was. Didn't people prefer Superman? Didn't Lois think Superman was more important to the world? Every hour he spent at the Daily Planet selfishly pretending that he was normal, people were hurting and dying. And now, it seemed, he couldn't even help anyone. If he did, the sun would focus its life-giving, destroying rays on him and the people around him would suffer for his actions.

What hope did Clark Kent have in leading a life if even Superman was flawed?

The letter of resignation in Clark's pocket was burning a hole in his chest, but it was nothing compared to the constant, strengthening temptation to turn and look at Lois. He couldn't just leave her without saying goodbye. Even if she wouldn't care — though he thought it was more than just wishful thinking that made him believe she would — he needed some sense of closure. He needed to remind himself that it was for her he was leaving. She deserved the best in life, and dying of heat stroke wasn't that.

"Lois?" He couldn't resist reaching out and touching her. Was this the last time he would feel her warmth beneath his fingers? Would he ever get to talk to her again? With an effort, Clark tried to stop himself from being so maudlin, but it was hard, so hard, when who he wanted to be was dying.

"Clark? I must have fallen asleep." Though her dark eyes were smoky with exhaustion, they were still filled with more life than ten people put together. And, Clark thought as his stomach clenched into a tighter knot, she didn't seem nervous at all about being alone with him. He had worked so hard to let her know that she could trust him, but what difference did it make when he now had to leave?

It did make a difference, he told himself firmly. He knew Lois smiled and laughed more now than she had when he had first joined her investigation on the space program. Whether he benefited from it or not, he could be confident that he had helped Lois in some way.

"It's late, Lois," he told her gently. "You should go home."

Stupid words, far too mundane for a lifetime goodbye, but he didn't *want* to tell her goodbye. He didn't want to walk away. If he hadn't given his word — if he hadn't been convinced that leaving was the best thing for Metropolis —

he would have changed his mind right then and there.

"There's no time." She began gathering up physics books, intent on her quest to save Superman. But who would save Clark Kent? he wondered. Who besides his parents would bother to worry about a single reporter from the Midwest when Superman was in peril?

"Here," Lois said, handing him the books, "take these to your desk and st —" Her gaze fell on the box sitting on his empty desk, and something in her expression made Clark suddenly feel like he was betraying her. "What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving Metropolis." His throat tightened until he almost couldn't speak the words, but they were forced out of him. He had given his word; there was no other choice; normal wasn't for him. Clark chanted the litany over and over in his head to keep himself from recanting.

Lois let out a scoffing breath. "Clark, I'm a little too tired for jokes."

"It's no joke." Though if it hadn't hurt so much, it might have been funny — Superman, beloved by all and forced out of his home. Clark Kent, a mild-mannered reporter too dangerous to live near anyone he cared about. An alien wanting a normal human life. It was funny, all right, tragically funny.

"Leaving?" Lois repeated, dazed. "As in quitting?"

Her obvious surprise hit him as hard as Trask's fists had, but he still forced out the lie he had prepared. "I'm going to work for the Smallville Post — managing editor. I guess I'm just not cut out for big city life."

It was a lie he knew she'd believe. Their trip to Smallville three weeks before had shown her how much he loved his hometown and his family, and she had been saying from the beginning that the hack from Nowheresville would never make it in Metropolis.

But Lois surprised him again, as she did so often, one of the things that made her so intriguing. She actually seemed to brighten. "Well, nobody's cut out for big city life — that's what makes it so exciting."

Any other time, Clark might have smiled at the realization that she thought she could talk him out of leaving. He wished she could, but he couldn't bear to endanger others just for his own selfish desires. And he couldn't bear to continue this conversation. He had to say goodbye and leave, just get it over with, turn around and not look back. "Look, I know there's no good time to —"

Lois stared at him incredulously. "We're in the middle of a crisis, Superman's on the line, and you're out of here?"

A pang of hurt sliced through Clark's heart, but he ignored it. Lois didn't know she was hurting him, and she couldn't know, not if he wanted there to be any chance for Clark Kent. But then...there was no chance anymore.

"I just wanted to say goodbye," he told her softly.

"Goodbye?" she exclaimed. "We're *partners!*"

The reminder was too much for him, and he sank into the chair beside her desk, hating himself for his weakness, loving her too much to tear himself away. "You don't *need* a partner, Lois. You never did." It hurt to make the reminder, knowing he was only making her realize that this was an

easy way to get rid of the colleague she had never wanted and often seemed to resent.

Lois looked down at her hands, placed loosely on her desk. “Well, maybe not. But I... was starting to like having one.”

The only thing that kept Clark from violating the injunction and floating into the air was the fact that Lois looked straight at him, daring him to call her on her admission. Not that he could even speak at the moment; she had robbed him of all coherent thought. *So close*, he thought to himself. He had gotten so much further into her heart than he had thought, yet the precious realization came too late.

“So...” Lois looked away. “Are you planning on giving notice?” There was more than a hint of a challenge in her voice, as if she thought she were calling him on a bluff. And because of that, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the letter he had labored over for so long.

“This is for Perry,” he stated needlessly. “I was wondering if... you might give it to him for me.”

Lois’s smile was almost bitter. “I get it.”

Clark went almost lightheaded. “You do?”

“Well, it’s obvious, Clark.” She glared at him, and he welcomed it, savored it, tried to memorize every nuance of the moment. For this instant, Lois Lane was looking at *him*, giving *him* her full and complete attention, focusing exclusively on *him* — it was heady and intoxicating. “Nobody gives up a great job in the middle of the night because they have the chance of a lifetime to edit the *Smallville Gazette*.”

“Post,” he said, not quite able to resist.

“Whatever,” she snapped, as gracious as always. “This isn’t about a job.” She leaned nearer him, her gaze suddenly intent. “Did you really think I hadn’t figured out what it was about you and Superman?”

The world disappeared beneath his feet, and he had to grip the sides of the chair. “Wh-what do you mean?” he stammered.

Her expression gentled by the merest fraction. “You idolize the man, Clark! And now he’s in trouble and you share his pain.”

Clark looked away, simultaneously relieved and disappointed. He had dreamed of telling Lois the truth, yet he had always known that he couldn’t do it, not until she stopped working long enough to see who he really was. Now, however, he wondered if it made any difference. Why should he hide the truth from her when there was no longer any chance for Clark? And how could he tell her when Superman was no longer allowed to exist?

“Look,” Lois continued. “We all feel bad about Superman, but the only way to make it right is to fight like crazy — don’t give up on him because he wouldn’t give up on us!”

Clark shook his head in exasperation, more frustrated with his own circular thoughts than her fixation on his alter ego. “Maybe you don’t know him as well as you think you do, Lois.”

“This is stupid, Clark!” she retorted, and he couldn’t

have agreed more, but it was what it was, and he couldn’t change it. “Go unpack your stuff and — and let’s get to work.” When he didn’t move, she added, almost desperately, “You’re *not* a quitter!”

With more effort than it had taken him to lift the space-shuttle toward Prometheus, Clark managed to turn away from Lois. The first step hurt like Kryptonite, the next was worse, and it didn’t get any better. Finally, he reached his desk and paused for the slightest instant. Then, knowing that Lois was watching him to see what he would do, knowing he was hurting her — hurting *himself* — he picked up the box and turned around to look at her.

She looked utterly betrayed, as if he had reached down and pulled the floor out from beneath her feet. She looked completely surprised, as if she had never before realized that there were some things she couldn’t talk him out of. She looked exactly as he had felt when Judge Diggs and the DA had asked him to voluntarily leave Metropolis. There had been mention of using extreme measures if he refused to cooperate. Clark wasn’t certain what measures they thought would stop him, but the simple fact that they had been prepared to defend themselves from him had shocked him and left him feeling betrayed.

He wanted to say a last few words to Lois, but how could he fit everything he had meant to tell her in the years and decades and lifetime ahead of them in just a spare moment? He wanted to do something that would make her suddenly stop and realize that Clark Kent was worth fighting for just as much as Superman, but as smart as his parents claimed he was, he hadn’t yet found a way to make her see past the eye-catching Suit. He wanted to stay and work with her and subtly woo her and just be her friend until she wanted more, but that was impossible now. And in the end, what did what he wanted matter next to the needs of the millions who lived in this city he had come to love?

Her eyes were locked on him as he approached her, and despite his inward thoughts, Clark couldn’t stop himself from spanning his fingers across her cheek. He instantly memorized the sensation of petal-soft skin, slender neck, the warmth of her body, the scent of her shampoo, the look of hypnotized wonder in her dark, dark eyes.

As if he had been hypnotized himself, Clark felt himself leaning down toward her, felt his hand tighten just the slightest bit on her skin, felt himself pause as if to give her time to protest. And then, he was plunged back into his body as he touched his lips to hers, doing what he had longed to do and had forbidden himself to even contemplate.

Once before, he had kissed Lois Lane. Well, it had begun with her kissing him as part of a ruse to get near enough to whisper a desperate message in his ear. Clark, however, hadn’t realized it was a ruse; he had known only that Lois had taken his face in her hands and had kissed him, softly, slowly, hesitantly. And he had seized the moment, kissing her back, reaching up a hand to finally touch her silky hair, a thousand dreams and hopes and plans for the future whirling through his head. But an instant later, she had shattered his illusion, pulling back, whispering her

escape plan, and flashing into a whirlwind of motion that had gotten her tossed off the airplane.

This kiss was different, their places reversed, though she didn't return the kiss as he had. Of course, reading Lois had never been a matter of noticing what she did do; it was all about what she *didn't* do.

She wasn't afraid to be alone with him.

She hadn't rejected him outright as a partner.

She didn't attack him with her words as she did anyone else who teased her.

She didn't avoid him when they weren't working.

She hadn't closed herself off from him when he told her he was leaving.

And she didn't hit him or any other way protest this kiss.

But Clark's own love was portrayed in the things he *did* do. And right now, the only way he could show her how much he loved her — how willing he was to put her needs above his own — was to leave her. Forever.

Clark's heart broke all over again when he pulled back enough to look one last time into her eyes. *So close, and yet so, so far.*

"Goodbye, Lois," he murmured. With aching intensity, he removed his hand from her face and stepped past her, closing his eyes to combat the image of her gazing after him. But Clark didn't need to look back; his super senses alerted him of everything that happened behind him.

It had been humiliating and degrading to walk down between the prison cells, a parade of shame no matter that every police officer had whispered their encouragement and patted him on the back and thanked him for his cooperation. That walk, however, was as nothing compared to the path out of the bullpen, up the ramp, and into the elevator. Once before, he had been imprisoned in a cell, but that prison hadn't held him nearly as surely as his fate now did, a cell that even Superman couldn't dare tear apart.

When the elevator doors finally closed between him and Lois, Clark slumped against the back of the small enclosure, all the strength draining from his body.

What was he supposed to do now? He hadn't had the heart to start packing, and Martha and Jonathan certainly hadn't been in any shape to help him. That was the only time his parents had ever turned their backs on him — not refusing or denying him, just too overwhelmed, for the first time, to face the situation.

But you're such a special person, Clark, Martha had said defiantly. It's not fair you're being punished for it.

Maybe it *was* fair, Clark thought dismally as he exited the Daily Planet building for the last time, walking into the wall of heat that was his fault. He had been given two months of happiness — welcomed by one and all despite his frightening powers, given their trust, and allowed to work at the most prestigious newspaper in the world with people he counted as friends more than colleagues. Maybe he had used up his allotment of contentment in the world; maybe he had already received more than a super-powerful alien could or should expect.

For the first time, Clark took a cab from work to his apartment, the box filled with his now-useless belongings

sitting at his side, a testament to the painful decision that overshadowed all else. He had intentions of beginning to pack up the rest of Clark Kent's life immediately, but he couldn't do it. Facing the darkened apartment, knowing that his parents were asleep, he could not pick up even one of his possessions and place it in yet another cardboard box. Worse, he realized that without his powers, he would have to do it at normal speed, dragging the entire process into slow, agonizing motion.

Not bothering to lock the door behind him, Clark turned and headed back out into the sweltering city.

The streets of Metropolis varied between deserted and overcrowded; Clark easily wove through them both. The skies were forever barred to him, but at least on foot he could say goodbye to all the places he had come to know. There was a café he and Lois had grabbed lunch at several times before. There was the Metro Club where he had gotten to hear Lois sing and managed to get a little vindictive payback for her sometimes-harsh treatment. There was the building where he had rescued ten people from a fire and pulled one out too late. There was Lex Tower where he had begun to think for the first time that he was capable of hating someone with all his being. There was the parking lot that had once been a theatre, his means of obtaining his coveted job. There was the bank where he had foiled Golden Boy Barnes and his invisible gang.

It had finally happened, Clark realized abruptly, startled. He was getting Superman and Clark Kent confused. Since he had first donned the red, blue, and yellow Suit, he had surprised himself with how well he could keep straight what was said to or spoken by Superman and what was mentioned to or by Clark Kent. But now that Superman had ceased to exist and Clark Kent was forced away from humanity, *now* it was safe to blur the two personalities in his mind.

Dawn had arrived and given way to blistering morning by the time Clark trudged back to his apartment. It had taken him longer than he would have thought to walk through the parts of the city that meant something to him, but walking everywhere was something he'd have to learn to do from now on.

Before he went inside, Clark looked up at the bright sky, glowing sapphire and gold...and empty. There was no man flying up there, red cape trailing behind him. There was nothing, not even a cloud.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Clark ducked into his apartment and came face to face with his parents. Their expressions were mingled sympathy and grief. *They* mourned him, Clark realized. They would regret Superman's absence just as he would, but it was Clark Kent they truly loved.

His dad's words rang once more through his mind. *This was your dream, Clark — a good job, a real life for yourself here in Metropolis. Why should you lose that? It's only Superman who has to leave.*

But much as he had drawn a line between himself and the superhero, Clark knew he couldn't simply stop being Superman. He had already proven that it was impossible for

him to switch off his superpowers. He had trained his hearing to kick on whenever someone called for help. He had trained his body to react in certain ways to dangerous situations. It had become a habit for him to use his heat-vision and cooling breath in everyday, mundane ways.

I can't just turn it off, Dad, he had replied emphatically. I can't look past people who are hurting, people in trouble, knowing that I could help them and having to stop myself! I just...I can't do that.

No, if he didn't want to endanger anyone, he would simply have to keep moving, always traveling so that the sun couldn't be pulled permanently down on any one place.

"Clark." His mom's voice broke his paralysis, and Clark stepped down into the embrace of his parents, finding refuge in the same place he always did. And together, just the three of them grieved for Clark Kent.

It was a long time before they were able to move from their frozen positions and sit down on the couch. Martha began to speak first, recalling the first time Clark had come back to dinner and told them about his job and Lois Lane. Jonathan chimed in with a comment about Clark's fear of being swallowed up in Superman shortly after the superhero had made his debut. And for a while, Clark allowed himself to forget everything he was losing and remember all the good times he had experienced in this collection of too-short weeks.

Finally, trying to hide a tear, Martha stood purposefully. "I think I'll start making some breakfast. What do you boys want to eat?"

"Anything home-cooked — and preferably not vegetarian," Jonathan answered instantly. "That'd be a nice change from home."

"I'll see what I can do." Martha patted him on the shoulder and moved toward the kitchen. "Why don't you guys turn on the news or something?"

Comforted by the familiar routine and the unconditional love of his parents, Clark stood and flipped the television on. He could feel his dad watching him, but he felt too raw to look back at him. Instead, he kept his eyes fixed on the TV, flipping the channels for something besides news owned by Luthor.

When he hit Channel Six, the remote fell from Clark's suddenly-slack hand and bounced on the floor. Both Jonathan and Clark's gazes were fixed on the television screen, and even Martha turned to look.

Lois clutched a microphone and stared beseechingly into the camera. "Superman, if you can hear this, come back! We figured it out — you're not causing the heat and you never were — but there's an emergency and we need you now. Meet me at LexCorp Nuclear Plant and I'll explain everything. Superman...hurry!"

Clark whirled from the television, already moving toward his room where he had packed away all his Suits. Feeling liberated, he didn't stop himself from using superspeed to dash into the bedroom and spin into a Suit. When he rushed back out into the living room, he couldn't help but stop and share a jubilant look with his parents.

"I knew it, Clark!" Martha exclaimed. "I knew you

could never be responsible for something like this."

"You had more faith in me than I did," Clark replied softly. "But if Lois wants me to meet her at LexCorp, I'd bet everything that Luthor's involved."

"Go, son," Jonathan told him, and Clark felt himself strengthened by the look of pride on his face.

With a last smile, Clark blurred out of his apartment and into the air, taking a deep breath as if it were his first in days. And it wasn't only his body that was flying, he realized. His entire being floated with the knowledge that he was *not* responsible for the heat wave.

He should have known, he thought ruefully. If anyone could save Superman, it was Lois Lane. And though she didn't know it, she had just saved Clark Kent too.

Lois Lane should have been exhilarated. She should have been rejoicing at what she had accomplished. She should have been overflowing with relief and joy that Superman was back in Metropolis to stay. She should have been hardly able to think past her happiness at having received the superhero's gentle and heartfelt gratitude.

But she was none of those things, and what was worse was that she couldn't understand why.

Oh, sure, she knew Perry, Jimmy, and even Cat all thought she should be depressed and upset over Clark's departure, but that was ridiculous. Clark Kent was a colleague — an *inexperienced* colleague — who had been foisted off on her because Perry liked him. He was irritatingly cheerful, frustratingly optimistic, exasperatingly friendly, and he couldn't spot a rejection if it bit him on the knee — and she should know since she had all but tried that a couple times. In short, there was no reason whatsoever for Lois to be upset that Clark Kent had decided on the spur of the moment to up and leave his great job, his friends, his apartment, and the city that was just getting to know him through his articles, and all for a stupid job in some small town that probably wasn't even on the map!

"I just wanted to say goodbye," she muttered derisively while squirting some toothpaste on her brush. "Oh sure, Lois, you won't mind, will you? Never mind that you just got used to me — never mind that I made you expect a cup of coffee and a friendly word and a smile that really makes you feel good for some inexplicable reason — never mind that you just started trusting me to be there every day — I'll just leave you with no advance warning whatsoever!"

Her rant had grown so angry that toothpaste landed all over the counter. With a sigh of disgust, Lois tossed aside the toothbrush and left the mess for later. At the rate she was going, she would be late for work and have to face a total disaster in her apartment when she came home — and she'd only been awake for a couple minutes!

She had left work late the night before, finding it hard — for some reason she was sure she couldn't explain — to write the story about Superman stopping the nuclear plant leak before it could explode. When she had finally gotten

home, she had been unable to sleep — again, for some reason she didn't care to explain — and had only dropped off about an hour before her alarm clock rang. And for some reason — that reason was about to be put on an endangered species list — she wasn't looking forward to going to work.

"Focus!" Lois commanded herself fiercely, glaring at her reflection in the mirror. "It doesn't matter that Clark Kent is not going to be sitting at his desk, all right? You spent enough time staring at it last night, and he didn't miraculously appear, so just forget him. Chalk it up to another person leaving you and move on. Who needed him anyway?"

Her reflection did not appear convinced. In fact, traitorously, there were a few tears gathering in her eyes. With a growl of frustration, Lois spun from the mirror and forced herself to think only about getting ready.

Half an hour later, she was showered, dressed, and ready to go. Unfortunately, she had forgotten herself and, as was her habit, looked into the mirror again to make sure she looked like the professional, successful reporter she was. And no matter that she had already applied her make-up and done her hair, there was still something sad in her eyes.

"Stupid," she whispered to herself. "When you talk to yourself, something is wrong. And why did you have to leave, Clark?"

As if hearing his name had shattered her usual control, Lois burst into tears. Furiously grabbing a few tissues to wipe them away before they made her mascara run, she finally admitted to herself that Perry, Jimmy, and Cat were right: she had lost her best friend.

"When did that happen?" she whispered to herself, the tissues falling from her numb hands. The tears had disappeared, and now her mirror-self looked totally shocked. "Clark can't be my best friend — he's...he's... I've only known him two months!"

Against her will, an image of him smiling as he danced with her in Smallville flashed before her eyes, overlaid with the memory of Trask pointing a gun at him. Lois stumbled back away from the terror blatantly exposed on her mirror-self's face and sank down onto her bed. Remnants of terror from that instant when she had thought she was going to see Clark murdered made her hands shake and her skin raise in goose-bumps.

So Clark was infuriating, she thought. At least he was infuriating in a fun, good, non-threatening way. In fact, the first and last time she had ever felt truly threatened by Clark was when Perry had demanded she partner with him to investigate the space program. There was something about the mild-mannered reporter that made her instinctively trust him — though she would have had to be an idiot to have missed the fact that he intentionally sought her trust, probably a result of her unplanned confessions while they were Dr. Baines' prisoners.

"And Clark liked me." The words were out before she could stop them, and much, much too honest — too revealing.

Suddenly eager to get out of her too-quiet apartment, Lois snatched up her satchel and stormed out the door,

putting on the pretense of purposefulness even when she felt aimless and lost.

And that made her angry. How dare Clark make her lose her sense of purpose? How dare he tamper with her single-minded fixation on being the best reporter ever? How dare he leave her dreading the sight of the newsroom and Perry and Jimmy?

Of course, she admitted silently, without Clark, Jimmy would still have been afraid of her, Perry would have hidden his concern behind his chief's exterior, and Cat would have never bothered to say anything nice to her at all. In fact, though she hadn't realized it before, a great many more people at the Daily Planet had begun speaking to her since Clark had arrived.

Ignoring the snow that had started falling the night before, Lois flagged down a cab, dodged it when it stopped almost on her toes, and ducked into the backseat, snapping out her destination. Then she slumped back into her seat. It had been a long time since she had taken a taxi to work; Clark used to walk past her apartment to get to the Daily Planet, and he always invited her to walk with him. She couldn't really remember how the ritual had started, but she missed it already and this was only the second day he had been gone.

Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, Lois straightened and forced herself to really look at the snow she had helped bring back to Metropolis. She had to stop feeling sorry for herself and reclaim her former self-confidence. So what if Clark was gone — Perry had already told her she was a great reporter on her own. So what if she wouldn't have anyone to lightly tease her out of her single-minded shell — she would get more work done and win another Kerth, maybe even finally get that Pulitzer. So what if her coffee would be cold and incorrectly mixed — she'd lose a pound or two.

"And Clark rubbed off on me *way* too much," she murmured to herself. Cynicism had always been more her style than optimism.

It was hard to force herself to forget her errant one-time partner, though, when every doorman, coffee vendor, person on the elevator, and random passerby asked where he was. By the time Lois made it to the newsroom she was about ready to scream. Sure, Clark was a nice guy, but how had he possibly had time to get to know *everyone* in the entire building? He'd only been working there two months!

Before she could work herself up to a protective level of righteous indignation, Lois caught sight of Clark's desk. Or rather, the empty desk that sat facing hers because that was where its last user had placed it.

Lois hung up her coat and placed her satchel on her desk and managed to do both without ever once taking her eyes from that desk, as if she expected Clark to magically appear. How had he so quickly become an integral part of her life? she wondered numbly. What was it about him that made him so easy to accept?

He liked me. Her own words echoed through her mind no matter how she tried to drown them out. Probably, she forced herself to realize, because they were true. Mad Dog

Lane had very few friends and even fewer people who would voluntarily and gladly choose to spend time with her. People were afraid of her, intimidated by her, or just too busy with their own lives to care about hers...but Clark hadn't seemed to be any of those things. He had seemed... intrigued, amused, even delighted to be assigned as her partner.

And Lois had liked how that made her feel. She had liked being the recipient of his focus and his smile and his proffered cups of coffee. His small acts of kindness and friendship had brightened her days, and with his absence, her own personal world had turned as clouded and snowy as Metropolis's skies, as if Clark had been her sun.

Her lips certainly still burned, as if he had touched her with essential warmth through his kiss. She hadn't expected the kiss at all, and yet when he had cradled her face in his hand and bent nearer her, she hadn't moved. The only coherent thought in her mind had been realization that Clark was leaving, that she hadn't been able to talk him out of it. Most of the time, Clark went along with whatever she did, but every once in a while, he would stand his ground, so unmovable and solid that she couldn't sway him with all her words and glares and tantrums. It was just her luck that this was one of those unfortunate times.

And then he had kissed her, and even that last thought had disappeared, leaving her gaping after him like an idiot. She would never consider Clark as a potential boyfriend — he wasn't her type, after all — but though she would never admit it, he was attractive, and his kiss had certainly affected her in some inexplicable way.

"Get a grip!" she commanded herself, appalled by her last thought. Clark *was* attractive, sure, and nice and sweet, but he certainly wasn't any Superman.

First Superman, now Clark. I don't know who I'll miss more.

Rolling her eyes, Lois abandoned her desk and fled her own words.

Perry met her while she was getting coffee, his eyes searching her face as if looking for signs that she was or was not all right. Lois forced herself to smile at him.

"Hey, Perry."

"Lois." Perry paused, then cleared his throat. "You, uh, you doin' all right?"

"Yeah, Chief, thanks." Feeling awkward and embarrassed — knowing Perry knew her better than anyone except a certain man she had decided not to name — she poured herself a cup of coffee. But then, instead of returning to her desk and facing the empty spot next to it, she paused to stare out the window.

Perry smiled as he joined her in staring at the view, his hand ghosting across her shoulder in a reassuring manner. "You did good, Lois. Snow on the ground and Superman in the sky — everything's right with the world."

She fought it with everything she had, but inexorably, Lois's gaze was drawn back over her shoulder to Clark's — no, nobody's — desk.

"Well," grumbled Perry, his expression saddening, "almost everything."

"Hey, CK!"

For an extra instant after the outcry, Lois kept her back turned to the newsroom. If it was just a fluke — if he had just forgotten something — she didn't want to have to face it. She was slowly coming to grips with his absence — she was! — and she didn't need any setbacks.

But Perry turned instantly, and his entire face lit from within. "Everything!" he amended his own statement and moved away to meet Clark — because, yes, there was Clark standing in the middle of the newsroom, that ridiculous cardboard box clutched in his hands. It was as if someone had taken a key and released her from a solitary cell. Clark was back.

Almost afraid to hope — startled by the immensity of relief flooding her being — Lois hung back, content to watch from afar. Come to think of it, only since Clark had she ever been content to remain, very occasionally, in the background.

"How many people are going to be happy to see you?" Jimmy was exclaiming, almost bouncing with glee at having his friend returned to him. Lois was pretty certain that if someone told her how many people were in the building, she could give Jimmy his answer.

"Hey, Kent," Perry interrupted, "I heard you were doing a little early spring cleaning."

That habitual expression of humble awkwardness rearranged Clark's familiar features. "Chief, I — "

"Now, look, son, in case you haven't noticed, it's wintertime out there. Now, why don't you just take this stuff and put it back on your desk, and, uh, get to work?" Though she couldn't see his face, Lois could tell Perry was smiling broadly. "I think Lois is going to need some help with that nuclear plant follow-up."

Ha! Lois thought scornfully. As if she would consent to work with a man who abandoned her at the first sign of trouble. Although...he had faced Trask twice without any hint of fear, and he had helped her catch the invisible gang, and he had been surprisingly successful in his undercover work at the Metro Club, and he had been very helpful while they investigated her father, and — all right, she admitted grudgingly, so he wasn't a coward. He certainly hadn't needed to run off on her, though.

"Thank you," Clark said simply, his eyes flickering to her briefly, as if he had instantly pinpointed her location.

Jimmy hurriedly grabbed the box of belongings. "I'll take this before you can change your mind."

Perry hadn't looked away from Clark. "And don't worry, son. That heat made us all a little bit crazy."

Clark's affirming nod was somewhat hesitant, and Lois wondered if Perry knew the real reason Clark had decided to leave with Superman. If nothing else, it certainly proved the extent Clark would go for anyone he called a friend.

He calls me a friend.

Lois ignored the traitorous thought.

"I, uh, I figure you want this back." The Chief pulled Clark's letter of resignation out of his pocket. Lois couldn't help swallowing as she remembered how hard it had been to tell Perry that Clark had quit, how close to tears she had

come when her editor had sat back with a stunned, disbelieving look that had quickly dissolved into sympathy when he caught sight of her face.

Clark examined the letter quizzically. “You didn’t read it?”

“I didn’t think I needed to.” Perry’s chuckle was genuine, a testament to how much the editor liked Clark. He patted the younger man on his shoulder as he walked off, leaving Clark alone; his gaze went automatically to Lois.

Having had plenty of time to prepare herself and rearrange her expression, Lois stepped toward him, her cup of coffee held like a shield in her hands. She couldn’t let him know how hard his absence had hit her, or how glad she was to have him back. She couldn’t afford to risk it — who knew what he would do with such information? She had had more than enough rumors spread about her by Claude to last a lifetime.

Okay, so Clark wasn’t anything like that scumbag who had previously worked here, but it wouldn’t do either of them any good to know how badly his departure had affected her. It would only complicate things that were better left simple. So...

“I knew you’d be back,” she proclaimed haughtily as she walked past him.

He followed her. “I guess you knew me better than I thought.”

When Lois turned to face him, she was a bit taken aback by the almost panicked expression in his eyes. Not that she had time to pursue the matter. For some reason — probably that infuriating one from earlier — she found herself drinking in the sight of him. There was something so right about him being there in the Daily Planet newsroom with her, as if it had always been meant to be.

“Well,” Clark remarked almost admiringly, warming up the place inside her that had so briefly been cold and empty, “you really did it. You saved Superman.”

“And he saved Metropolis, even after the way he was treated,” she replied with a quirk of her brows. For some reason — *not* the same one, she was sure — she was finally beginning to feel all the exhilaration and joy and victory she hadn’t been able to feel earlier.

Oddly, Clark gave her a tiny, almost secretive smile. “I guess he couldn’t give up after all.”

“And neither could you,” Lois heard herself say. She knew how jealous Clark was of Superman — despite how friendly he was with the superhero — yet it had not consciously occurred to her to reassure the reporter that he had good qualities too. And yet, something within her had made her blurt the words out.

Clark seemed caught by her words, an almost frighteningly intimate look on his face.

“So...” Lois cast about wildly for something else to say. Funny, there had been so much she had wanted to tell him earlier, yet she couldn’t think of a single thing now. “There was no job in Smallville, was there?”

Clark looked away, then back down at her, sheepishly. “No.”

“Well, I guess if I could forgive Superman for almost

leaving, I *suppose* I can forgive you too.” Her hands tightened over her crossed arms as she said the words, knowing they were a lie. She wasn’t willing to forgive him because of any reason other than the one that had been so prolific lately: she had missed Clark.

“Thanks,” Clark said gravely, as if he thought she were serious.

Lois smirked at him, ready to make amends for her earlier sensitive statement. “After all, you’re only human.” She sat down at her desk, relishing the fact that Clark was once again standing at her shoulder, ready to read her work. “So, what do you think of our lead?”

A startled, pleased expression passed across Clark’s face, and he willingly bent to read her screen. “That’s...not how you spell ‘aquifer.’”

Disgusted that those should be his first words after she had uncharacteristically accepted him back into her good graces, Lois rolled her eyes. “Easy, Kent,” she warned him. “You *can* be replaced. I was already starting to look.”

His grin shattered her façade, and she chuckled.

Clark was standing beside her, there to stay, just like Superman.

Lois sighed contentedly. The world was once more as it should be.

THE END