

That Old Clone of Mine

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Rated: PG for “off-screen” violence
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Description: New twists abound in this episode adaption of That Old Gang of Mine, and Lois and Clark will have new realities to face because of them. How will they make it through?

Disclaimer: I don't own anything in the Lois & Clark universe except the plot to this story and one new character (Jillian). All other characters belong to Warner Brothers and DC Comics. As every good FoLC will realize, this story is a spinoff from the events of the episode “That Old Gang of Mine,” which was written by Gene Miller and Karen Kavner. Some dialogue was borrowed from that episode. I have also borrowed a few lines of dialogue from the episode “And the Answer Is...,” written by Tony Blake & Paul Jackson. I would guess most fans of L&C will recognize all of the borrowed lines when they see them. The episodes The Green, Green Glow of Home, written by Bryce Zabel, and Vatman, written by Michael Norell, are also alluded to. My thanks to Iolanthe and Corrina for their fantastic, thorough, and rapid beta reading. And my thanks also go out to General Editor Erin Klingler, for her eagle eye, encouragement, and expertise in ellipses. This story is much the better for their suggestions. Any remaining errors in structure or content are, of course, solely my own.

Lois' eyes flew open, and her entire body stiffened as she realized the implications of what “Clark” had said earlier that night:

“Well, Superman found me just after they dumped my body. He froze me with his super breath to preserve my tissue, then took me to Professor Hamilton's lab and followed the procedures in his manuscript, so it's as if I never died.”

In her earlier excitement of having Clark back, she had overlooked what was now obvious to her. Professor Hamilton had grown new bodies from tissue samples taken from the gangsters; in other words, he made clones. So the person who spoke those words to her tonight was NOT Clark. It was only a clone of him. Clark — her Clark — had died. And she hadn't even mourned for him since that conversation with his clone.

As Jillian Trask put her late brother's key into the appropriate slot of his safe deposit box door, she thought back to the reading of his will.

“... And to my sister Jillian I lovingly bequeath my music collection, the contents of my safe deposit box, and

all my stocks, bonds and bank accounts.”

The probate process was coming to an end, and the safe deposit box was at last unsealed. After months of waiting, Jillian was finally going to have access to its contents. She waited while the teller put the bank's key into the other opening on the front of the box door. When the door finally opened, she slid the box out of its cubby and brought it into one of the designated private rooms.

Jillian hurriedly opened the box. On top of a stack of papers were two glowing green rocks and an envelope addressed to her whose contents she rapidly unfolded and read.

My dear Jilly,

If you are reading this, then my mission to neutralize the alien has failed. The two rocks in this safe deposit box are now the most valuable assets on earth. They, and they alone, will protect you against the alien invasion force. They will kill the aliens if they get too near. I wish I had more to give you, but these small pieces were all I could obtain from the one sample to which I currently have access; I dared not take more lest their absence be discovered. I hope to get more on my coming mission; but if you are reading this, then I did not succeed. Use the rocks wisely! Use one as you see fit to kill Superman, if he is still alive; for your own protection, keep the other one on you at all times.

I wish you a long and happy life. Take care of yourself and never let your guard down.

Love,

Jayjay

The daily staff meeting had just wrapped up, and Clark could finally ask the question that had been uppermost on his mind the entire time.

“Hey, Chief, where's Lois?”

“Oh, uh, Clark. She asked for a few days personal leave. I guess seeing you ‘killed’ and nearly dying herself was a bit too much even for her. She'll be back on Monday.”

Clark decided to swing by her apartment on his way to his first interview of the morning. His concern was heightened by her delay in answering his knock. He could hear her shuffling her feet, so he knew she hadn't gone anywhere for the day. But he was not prepared for Lois' appearance when she finally opened the door.

She was dressed entirely in black. Her eyes were as puffy and her cheeks as tear-stained as he had ever seen them. Her shoulders drooped. She was devoid of all her usual drive.

“Lois, what's wrong?”

He went to give her a comforting hug, but she pulled away. She still clung to the partially opened door, blocking him from entering her home.

“You are what's wrong. Clark died last night — for me. You aren't Clark; you're just a clone — a copy of him.”

Clark cringed. He apparently hadn't salvaged his Clark Kent persona yet, after all. Of course Lois would believe the lie he had told her — but oh! The horrible implications of it were now apparent! He let the hurt and rejection he felt enter his voice. “Lois, in every way that matters, I am Clark.” He tentatively tried to cup her cheek with his hand,

but she knocked his arm away.

“Don’t you know how easy it would be for me to pretend you were him? You look like him, you sound like him, you even act like him. But you are NOT him. And I’m not going to cheapen the friendship I had with him by using you as a substitute.” She took a step forward to close the door. “I think you had better leave.”

Before Clark could fully take in what Lois had said, the door had been closed in his face. He briefly considered trying to get her to open the door again; but if she did so, what could he possibly say to her? He could just imagine himself saying, “Hey Lois, guess what? I really am Clark. I’m not a clone; I’m just a liar. And — oh yeah, I meant to tell you, but it must have slipped my mind — I’m also Superman.” Yeah, right! That would go over well. And no matter how prettily he dressed it up, anything he could possibly say would have to boil down to that.

Clearly, having a discussion with her right now would not help matters any. It would be better to give her a few days to calm down. And perhaps after they worked together again for a while, he could regain her trust, or at least be able to talk some sense into her.

In the meantime, he reluctantly went to conduct his first interview. Although he managed to do a passable job, neither his mind nor his heart was in it. He kept replaying their conversation in his mind. Lois was behaving worse to him now than she ever did toward the “hack from Nowheresville” she believed him to be when they first met. And at least then, he wasn’t having to compete with himself. (As if he hadn’t already had enough of that this past year with Superman!)

Jillian Trask smiled. She had figured out a way to kill Superman. That *thing* had killed her beloved brother. Oh, a small-town sheriff may have been the one to shoot Jayjay, but that wouldn’t have happened if he hadn’t been trying to keep the world safe from that alien and its ilk. The alien was responsible, and now she knew how she could make it pay for its crimes against her brother and all of humanity. She knew just how she could get the rock to it.

She and Jayjay had spent many happy hours as children playing with rockets and making homemade fireworks. Jayjay taught her everything she knew about explosives. He was always so patient with her! He was the brains of the family, and could plan out just how much of the explosives to use and how to set them off to get the biggest boom and still keep the two of them safe. And after a lot of coaching, she also learned how to do so, as well. She would send the alien atrocity a mail bomb with the rock in it. When the alien opened the package, the bomb would detonate and hurtle the rock at Superman, thereby maximizing its impact.

But her brother had always emphasized the importance of attention to detail and practicing critical moves, if possible, before executing them. She would need a dry run. She would build a mail bomb with an ordinary rock about the size and weight of the green ones. And she knew just who she would mail it to — that pesky neighbor of hers who always played her music so loudly. If the ordinary rock killed her neighbor, then the green one should kill the alien.

A thought struck her: She’d be using a rock to silence the rock music. She couldn’t help but laugh at the irony.

She began to collect the materials she would need to assemble the bomb.

“Lois! Clark! In my office, now!”

When the two reporters came into his office, Perry noticed that Lois kept her distance from Clark and refused even to look in his direction. This was bad. She was acting even worse toward him than she had when he was first hired. This had to end; he would not let his star reporting team break up. They were too valuable to the Daily Planet, and they meant too much to each other personally. Lois had had her time off to regain her emotional equilibrium; now she would have to deal with the fallout of that awful night. And if she wouldn’t interact with Clark voluntarily, it was time to force the issue.

“I have a lead on a mail bomb story. Woman killed out in the Greenwood development. You two are on it.”

Right on cue, Lois began objecting. “Perry, this doesn’t sound like a story that needs two people. Let C.C. follow it up. I’m busy with the Anstruther trial.”

“C.C.?”

“Clark’s Clone. I won’t call him Clark; that’s not who he is.”

This was even worse than Perry thought. She wasn’t even acknowledging her partner by name. A glance over at the male reporter revealed that her words had cut him deeply.

“Uh, Clark, would you mind stepping outside for a few minutes? I need to speak with Lois privately.”

Clark answered quietly, deflated. “Sure, chief.”

When Clark had closed the door, Perry addressed Lois. “I’ve got a paper to run, and Clark has proven himself to be one of my best journalists. That man out there has Clark’s memories, his personality, and his investigative and writing abilities. You two are partners, and I expect you to work with him.”

“Clark was my partner, and Clark is dead! Whatever else that clone out there may be, he is *NOT* my partner!”

“Lois, honey, I know you feel bad about everything that happened, and this is a hard time for you. You don’t know exactly what to make of the man out there. Heck, I don’t know what to think about him myself — I know as much about metaphysics as Elvis did about rocket science. Could the clone have Clark’s soul? I don’t know. But what I do know is that whoever that man is out there, he’s probably hurting as much as you are.”

Lois muttered, “Not likely.”

“It can’t be easy to be rejected by the people he thinks of as friends. Could you at least try to be civil to him? If that really is ‘our’ Clark returned from the dead, doesn’t he deserve that? And even if he isn’t ‘our’ Clark, don’t you think ‘our’ Clark would want that man to be treated civilly? Clark was the politest man it has ever been my privilege to work with, and I can’t see him wanting anyone to be treated the way you have been treating the man who just left the office.”

Lois thought for a minute before giving a grudging reply.

“Fine, I’ll do it in memory of the real Clark. I’ll be civil, and I’ll be his work partner. But that’s *all* I’ll be.”

“That’s all I’m asking you to be, darlin’.” Perry knew that, for Lois, being civil was not only all that he could ask of her, but also almost more than he could hope. Time would tell how successful she was at keeping her promise.

As Clark walked back to his desk, he struggled with the temptation to eavesdrop on the conversation taking place in Perry’s office. He knew Lois thought of him as only a clone of himself; but when he had heard that she wouldn’t even call him by name, his despair deepened. How could he win back her confidence? If he confessed everything to her, she would know that he was really Clark, but she would probably feel so betrayed because of all his lies to her that she would treat him even worse than she was doing now, if that were possible. And there would be no recovering from that.

No, he would just have to be himself around her and maybe over time she would come to develop the rapport with him that they had had until just recently. Of course, he knew that consciously trying to be himself wouldn’t be easy. How do you do deliberately what used to come naturally? Well, he would just have to do his best.

When he heard the office door open, he looked with trepidation to see Lois approaching him.

“All right, C.C.. Our first stop is to see Inspector Henderson.”

She was being all business, but at least she was talking to him. It was a start. He smiled. “I’m with you, partner.”

Lois was true to her promise to Perry. Although she did not initiate any conversations with C.C., she responded to any he began. They mostly discussed business on the drive to see Inspector Henderson. But even so, C.C. surprised her by thinking and responding so much like Clark would have done. If she didn’t keep up her guard, she could easily forget that he was only a clone.

The Inspector took in her attire. “You changed your clothes. Cement was a good look on you, Lane.”

“Ha ha. Very funny. What can you tell us about the mail bombing in Greenwood?”

“I’m feeling well; thank you for asking. Now that’s what I like about you, Lois. You always make time for the pleasantries.”

The inspector changed his tone from bantering to business. “The victim was Heather Meese. Twenty-three. She might have survived the bomb blast, but she was brained by a rock that had been in the package.”

Lois asked, “Could we examine the remains of the package and its contents?”

“The remains of the bomb are in our labs being analyzed. The rest are being held in evidence, but I’ll send a uniform over to retrieve them.” Henderson reached for the intercom.

After Henderson had made the request, they resumed their conversation. C.C. chimed in with a series of questions. “What do we know about Ms. Meese? Was she married? Working? Any enemies?”

Henderson replied, “She was single. Waited tables at the Greenwood Pink Lobster Grill. No known enemies. No known friends, for that matter. Near as I can tell from the neighbors, she pretty much kept to herself. Spent her free time listening to music on her stereo.”

“Anything else to go on?”

“Nada. And unless something else turns up, this case is likely to remain one of our unsolved mysteries.”

The uniformed officer knocked on the door, and then presented the two reporters with an evidence bag containing a few charred scraps of cardboard and a nondescript rock about half the size of Lois’ fist. The latter had dried blood on it; blood that had already been identified as belonging to the victim. Lois grabbed the bag, studied the contents from all angles, and passed it along to C.C. for his inspection. He apparently didn’t learn anything more from it than she did, and he rapidly gave it to the uniformed officer to return to storage. Lois noted that C.C. thanked the uniformed officer every bit as politely as Clark would have done. In fact, throughout this entire interview, he had behaved just as Clark would have. She really was already finding it increasingly difficult to remember that he wasn’t Clark. She didn’t really believe in an afterlife; but if there were one, she only hoped that if Clark were somehow watching her and possibly even reading her thoughts, he would forgive her for occasionally mistaking his clone for him.

Jillian could not have been more pleased with the results of her experiment. Her noisy neighbor would never bother her again. The mail bomb performed exactly as she had hoped. She once again thanked Jayjay for teaching her so much about explosives. Now that the dress rehearsal was complete, it was show time. She assembled a new package, almost identical to the first. But in this one she placed one of the glowing green rocks instead of the more common one she had used in the other package. She had done her research. She knew that Clark Kent wrote many of the Superman-related articles in the Daily Planet. And since her brother died on Kent’s parents’ farm, it was only fitting that Kent be the intermediary to give the alien the deadly present. A quick check in the phone book revealed his address. She wrote on the outside of the package:

Superman
c/o Clark Kent
344 Clinton Street
Metropolis, New Troy 10134

She smiled all the way to the nearest post office collection box.

The next few days were relatively uneventful. Lois and C.C. were partnered on more stories, and Lois found it harder and harder to keep C.C. and Clark distinct in her mind — C.C. was just so much like his progenitor! His smile, his thoughtful gestures — such as bringing her her coffee just the way she liked it — even his gentle teasing was so much like Clark’s. She would never forget Clark, but would it really be so wrong to be friends with his “identical twin”? Couldn’t she honor Clark by befriending C.C.?

Those thoughts came to a head when she was called into

Perry's office. She knew at once from his demeanor that something was wrong — very, very wrong.

"Ahhh, Lois," he mumbled, "thank you for coming in. I just got a phone call, and... I thought you should know... The call came from Stryker Island. Dillinger and Capone have died of unknown, but apparently natural, causes. Bonnie and Clyde are very ill and will likely die soon, as well."

"I'm on it, Chief."

"Um, Lois. I think you better prepare yourself..."

The penny dropped. Lois paled and staggered to a chair. "My God. C.C.!"

"Probably. I'm sorry, honey. But maybe the clones have just caught an illness at Stryker. It might not affect Clark. In any event, I am keeping him off the story, just in case. And I don't want you on it, either. You're too close to it."

"Chief, I'm a professional! I'll get the job done."

"There's one other reason. You work with Clark. I don't want you going there and then acting as a carrier and giving it to him. It's too dangerous. I'm assigning Eduardo to the story; he and Clark almost never work together. And, uh, I wouldn't say anything about this to Clark until we have more information; no point in worrying him needlessly."

Lois just swallowed and nodded.

"Have any non-clones become ill?"

Perry's voice was as sympathetic as his expression. "No, darlin'. I'm afraid not. I'm sorry. If you want to take the day off, you still have plenty of personal leave left."

"Thanks, Perry."

Shakily, Lois got up and left Perry's office. As she entered the bullpen, she dazedly thought about the interactions she had had with C.C.. She had just started to come to grips with his presence, to feel that they were developing a bond similar to the one she had had with Clark, and now she might lose him, too, and so soon!

Well, one thing she knew for sure. She was still haunted by the fact that she had never told Clark what she had felt for him. She wouldn't make the same mistake with C.C. — she would make sure that C.C. knew all that Clark had meant to her, and also that she had been starting to think of C.C. as a friend. She would have preferred to play her cards closer to her chest for a while, but she obviously didn't have that luxury of time now.

She decided to invite C.C. over to her place for a nice dinner that evening. Even if she couldn't tell him the reasons for her sudden openness, she could at least make sure that she expressed her sentiments while he was still healthy enough to appreciate them. For his sake, she would somehow manage to share with him her feelings without revealing the impetus behind her expressing them then.

Clark had been held up on Super business that morning and consequently came to work slightly late, albeit with a "Superman interview." He knew as soon as he entered the bullpen that something was amiss; Lois had been looking at the elevator doors when he entered, and her heart rate shot up when she saw him. She looked as though she were struggling to maintain composure. He knew her well enough to know that she would deny that anything were wrong if he were simply to ask; she might have responded well to

"Clark's" asking, but she would just close up if "C.C." were to ask. The indirect approach would be best; he would pretend not to notice and perhaps she would say something.

Clark decided to make his greeting neutral. "Hey, partner, what's up?"

"Up? Why should anything be up? There's absolutely nothing up. No news today. In fact, Perry gave me the day off. I'm going to have the whole day free. I think I'll even try cooking something today. Want to come over for dinner tonight and taste the results?"

Clark chuckled, "Gee, Lois, I know what your cooking's like, and I value my life. How about some takeout instead?"

The feisty response he had anticipated was nowhere to be seen; instead, she seemed to be struggling to keep from crying. All she said was, "Yeah. Perhaps you're right. You deserve to get a good meal. So... Will you come over for takeout dinner tonight?"

Clark was thrilled by the inroads he had apparently made; this was the first time Lois had invited "C.C." to her apartment, much less to dinner. If only she didn't look so distraught, he would be on cloud nine. As it was, he couldn't help but smile when he agreed to come over.

"How 'bout I bring a movie with me?"

"Sure. Sure. A movie would be good. So, you'll be at my place at, say, 6:30?"

"6:30 it is."

Perry had given Clark a fairly easy assignment, but one that kept him out of the office most of the day. He still had a couple of hours free before he had to leave for the video store en route to Lois' apartment. He decided to swing home for a little while and do some laundry while writing up his day's work. Just as he was sending the finished article to Perry, he heard someone knock at his door. A quick super-glance revealed it to be a postal carrier. Funny — he hadn't been expecting any packages.

As he approached the door, he started to feel a bit lightheaded. He became positively dizzy when he opened the door. There had to be kryptonite nearby, and he suspected that he knew where it was. His suspicions were quickly confirmed — As soon as he took hold of the package, his hands felt on fire. He had briefly contemplated refusing delivery, but he figured that it would be better to have the kryptonite in his possession where he could dispose of it. If he were to refuse the package, Lord only knew into whose hands the kryptonite would fall, and under what circumstances it would resurface.

He somehow managed to keep his composure until he could close the door behind him. As soon as he was out of sight of the delivery man, he dropped the package and fell to the floor in agony. His hands burned. The room spun. He felt as if a giant had grabbed his stomach, squeezed and twisted it, and was trying to pull it right out of his body. His head seemed to be reenacting the explosion of Krypton.

He just wanted to stay curled up in a fetal position and whimper. But to do that would be to give in to death. He had too much to live for. There was his job at the Planet. His job in tights. His parents. And Lois. Always Lois. Lois — his partner, his friend, and he hoped, someday, maybe more.

If he were to give up now, they'd never have a chance to be together. She'd never know of his love for her, never even know of his alter ego. What would his death do to her! As far as she was concerned, Clark was already dead. But then to have "C.C." die and Superman disappear so soon afterwards... That would just be too much for her to bear. Or worse... If she noticed that "C.C." had died mysteriously while in the presence of Kryptonite and put two and two together, she would learn after his death that he was Superman. *"*IF* she put two and two together?"* What was he thinking? Of course she would do the math! This was Lois, after all. And the belief that he didn't trust her enough to share his secret — that would devastate her.

He simply had to get away from the kryptonite and dispose of it. He always kept a large lead box in his bedroom for this very purpose. But he had to get there first.

He gritted his teeth, extended his legs, and rolled onto his stomach. He didn't have the strength to stand up, but he could soldier-crawl. He dragged himself, ever so slowly, across the floor. A few inches and then a rest. A few more inches and another rest. Over and over. He kept reminding himself that with each inch separating him from the package, its contents would affect him slightly less. But oh — he knew how a marathon runner must feel. He had to reach his bedroom and the lead box. He had to! But the trek across his living room had drained him of every ounce of energy.

For himself, he couldn't go on. But for Lois and his parents, he had to. A few more inches. A rest. And then another few. A little further forward. He finally got to his closet and just stayed still for a while — he had no idea how long, all sense of time having fled. When he had finally recovered his breath, he opened the door and retrieved the box.

But now a new problem arose: How to get the package into the box? If he had had his powers, he could have blown the box through the air until it were over the package and then simply let it drop. Or if he even just had the strength of a normal human, he could have carried the box across the living room and placed it over the package. As it was, he would have to crawl back toward the green poison and push the box ahead of him. The thought of making the return journey — with a burden, no less, was sheer torture. But perhaps he could use the box to shield at least part of his body from the deadly radiation.

He lay down behind the box and tentatively pushed it forward with his hands. When his arms were fully outstretched, he squirmed forward until his head was inches from the box. He could do this! He repeated the process several times, each time getting closer and closer to the green bane.

Although the pain grew with his increased proximity to the package, it wasn't as bad as it had been before; the lead box was providing him some protection. Even so, he was expending more energy in his trip across his apartment than he usually did in a trip around the world. And his stomach hadn't felt this bad when he had swallowed a bomb.

And yet he had to keep going. He was almost there. Another push of the box, a squirm, and a rest. Again. And

again.

He finally got the box near the package. But how was he going to get the package in? He didn't think he had the energy to lift the package. He struggled to a sitting position and put his weight on an edge of the box, overturning it so that its top was facing the package and the lid had dropped open onto the floor. He dragged himself around the box and toward the package. Once he was out of the box's umbra, the pain seared into him in full force.

He was so close to accomplishing his task. He had to focus. Think of Lois. Of their dinner tonight. He had to forget the pain and keep going. He clawed the package into the box and shut the lid.

The pain stopped increasing, but he knew it would be some time before it disappeared. He sat immobilized until the pain ebbed somewhat. He knew he would be weak and achy for his dinner tonight with Lois. A few weeks ago, he would have called her to cancel. But after the recent events, he didn't dare. Her invitation to dinner was such a big breakthrough, he couldn't risk the setback that a cancellation might bring.

And so, when he was finally able, he stood up and wobbled to his closet to change into his dinner clothes — grey slacks and a black shirt.

He glanced at a clock — He had just enough time to catch a taxi to Lois' place. He certainly couldn't walk, much less fly, in his current condition. He would take the box to Henderson tomorrow, in case there was a connection between this mail bomb and the one that had killed Heather Meese. No time now for a trip to the movie rental store. He selected a few videotapes from his collection and went outside to wait for the cab.

Darn that Kent! Why wasn't he answering his pager? Perry had planned to tell Clark about the clone situation when the reporter returned to the office this afternoon. Even though there had been no substantive developments, what they already knew was too newsworthy to hold onto. It had to be published in that evening's paper. And he had wanted to have the discussion with Clark ASAP; he didn't want him to have to learn of the situation by reading it in the newspaper. But that blasted reporter never did return to the office, and he must have turned off his pager. Perry had also left a message on Clark's answer machine, for all the good that did him.

Poor C.C.! Poor, poor C.C.! He looked awful. Pale. Weak. Barely able to stand. Could it really be happening so soon?

Lois' thoughts were interrupted by C.C.'s subdued greeting.

"Hi, Lois. I was running late and couldn't get to the video store. I'm sorry. But I brought a few of my own tapes."

C.C. held the tapes up for Lois to inspect. 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame.' 'Cyrano de Bergerac.' 'La Belle et le Bete.' Lois noticed a theme; could C.C. have been sending her a message? Did he have feelings for her that he believed to be unrequited? ("Believed to be"? Where

did that phrase come from? Of course they were unrequited. He was only C.C., after all, not Clark! Maybe, in time, if they had had any left...) Did he think himself unworthy of her? A monster?

A nagging voice inside her asked her how he could think otherwise, given the way she had been treating him since she first realized he was a clone. She may have been polite enough with him at work, but she had otherwise been making it clear that she considered him to be what he was — an imitation of the man she loved. (Loved? Yes, loved! She could admit it now, there was no risk in doing so anymore.) But he was a fantastic imitation and he had feelings in his own right — feelings that she had been trampling on. She renewed her vow to herself that that would change — starting now. For however much time he had left, she would be nicer to him.

She made a point of being friendly toward him throughout dinner and even sat next to him while they watched *Cyrano*. The credits started rolling. She suddenly felt a bit shy, but she was determined to say what she had invited him here to say.

“C.C., I guess you must be wondering why I invited you here tonight, and why I have thawed out toward you.”

“Well, Lois, I wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth, but now that you mention it...”

Lois couldn’t resist injecting a little levity into a conversation that she knew would prove serious all too soon. “Are you calling me a horse?”

C.C. gave her the look she had seen Clark give her that night they first ate dinner together, when they were working on the *EPRAD* story. “Lois, the last thing you are is a horse. Compared to you, Marilyn Monroe was a horse.”

“Yes. Well. Um. Thanks.” She paused to regain her composure. “Anyway, C.C. I’ve been thinking. Sometimes you think you’re immortal and you start to think the people around you are, too. It can just take a second to realize how wrong you are about everything. What I’m trying to say is, I lost Clark almost before I even realized what was happening.” Lois walked over to the window and gazed out. She knew that if she looked at C.C., she would never have the courage to keep speaking. “I never told him that I loved him. And now I’ll never have that chance. But I do have a chance to start anew with someone who was, quite literally, a part of him — someone who really is like him in so many ways. So I just wanted to tell you... You’re not so bad. And the more I think about you and Clark, the more I have come to realize that he would have been OK with my being friends with you. So... What do you say? Friends?”

She turned to face him. As discomfited as she had been when speaking, he seemed ten times as flustered now.

“You — you loved Clark?”

“Yeah.” Then, more firmly, “Yeah, I did. I didn’t admit it, even to myself, until very recently. But I loved him. I still do. He was the best thing to happen to me in a long time. Ever, actually. I just wish I had realized it when I had the chance to do something about it.”

“I know you meant the world to him, Lois. He really did mean what he said on that park bench; when he denied his feelings later — that was the lie.”

C.C. looked as though he wanted to hug Lois, and Lois had almost decided to let him do so. (After all, Clark and she had hugged as friends lots of times.) But then, abruptly, C.C. backed away.

“Um, Lois. It’s getting late, and I don’t feel too well. I had better go. But thank you. Thank you for a wonderful evening, and thank you for your friendship. Of course, I’ll be your friend. I’ve always thought of myself as your friend. I’m just glad you’re willing to be mine, now, too. See you at work tomorrow.”

“C.C., if you need anything tonight — if you start feeling worse and want some company — call me. OK?”

“Sure, Lois. And thanks.”

“And then what happened?”

“And then I thanked her for her friendship, made my excuses, and left as quickly as I could.” Although Clark hadn’t recovered enough to fly to Kansas, he had recovered enough to be able to pace the length of his living room while talking on the phone to his parents.

“Oh, honey, you didn’t *tell* her you were Clark?”

“Mom, I couldn’t! If I did, she’d think me a world-class jerk. I’ve let her mourn for a man who is still alive.” He laughed bitterly. “And I guess I’ve gotten what I deserve. She loves me, only she doesn’t know it’s me, and I can’t tell her!”

“The longer you wait, the harder it’s going to be. If you love her and you trust her, you have to tell her. And the sooner you do, the better.”

“Your mother’s right, Clark. You’ve told us you trust her not to reveal your secret. She loves you and you claim to love her. But if you truly love someone, you are honest with them. You ‘died’ for her; but are you willing to live for her? Tell her, son. Sure, she’ll be mad at first; but if she really loves you, she’ll come around.”

“Yeah, I know I should tell her. But how? When?”

“You have to decide that yourself. But make it soon!”

“Thanks Mom, Dad. I wish I could be with you now. Love you.”

“You, too.”

“Bye, son.”

“Bye.”

The next morning, Clark, as Superman, entered Inspector Henderson’s office carrying the lead box containing the package he had received.

He held the closed box up, but did not yet release it to the inspector.

“Inspector, I believe the contents of this box may be of use to you. It contains a package that was meant to be delivered to me care of Clark Kent. When he gave it to me, I looked inside it and noticed that it held a bomb ready to detonate the moment I opened the package. It also contained a very unusual rock which originated on my home world. When I explained to Mr. Kent what the box contained, he brought to my attention a similar incident which you are investigating. This parcel may prove of use in solving that case. Be sure to have the bomb squad on hand when you decide to open it.”

“Thank you, Superman. I’ll get right on it.” He reached out to take the box. Superman, however, did not relinquish it just yet.

“Oh, one more thing. When the contents of the box are no longer needed for evidence, would you please give them to Lois Lane? She will know by then how I wish the contents to be handled. The box itself belongs to Mr. Kent.”

“I’ll return the box the next time I see him.”

Clark, about to take his leave, surrendered the box to Henderson. He left before the inspector had a chance to open it and re-expose him to its deadly contents.

Clark decided that he needed to talk to Lois about his alter ego that evening. He wished he could tell her earlier, but he wouldn’t be able to get her alone before then. But at least he could, as Clark, fill her in on the package.

Lois was delighted and surprised to see C.C. looking more like his usual self. The other clones had steadily deteriorated during their fatal illnesses.

C.C. went directly from the elevator to sit on the edge of her desk. He told her how, after he arrived home the evening before, he had found a package on his doorstep addressed to Superman. When the Man of Steel responded to his summons, he found it to be a mail bomb with a green rock which, he confided to C.C., was kryptonite - a remnant of his home planet. For some reason, Superman seemed reluctant to approach the package, and had requested C.C. to put it inside a lead box which he knew Clark had bought as a memento during one of his earlier overseas journeys. C.C. had complied and Superman took the box, promising to deliver it to Inspector Henderson first thing in the morning.

“Thank God Superman is all right. He *is* all right, isn’t he?”

“Yes. He’s fine. I remember Trask had said he thought that kryptonite could incapacitate Superman, but we never did see any evidence of that, did we?”

Lois thought back to the kryptonite bullet she removed from Superman’s shoulder. But of course, only two other people knew of that bullet. One was behind bars now and the other was Superman himself. Lois had no intention of telling anyone, even C.C., that kryptonite had the power to do real damage to Superman.

“This could be a huge break in the investigation. Let’s go talk to Henderson.”

“Oh, um, I have another appointment in fifteen minutes. I tell you what: You head over to see him, and while you’re on your way, I’ll call him and fill him in on what I know.”

“Fine. Let’s meet up for lunch; say, by the fountain in Centennial Park. We’ll swap info then.”

“Clark, could I see you in my office for a minute?”

Clark was surprised at how subdued Perry’s request sounded. When he closed the door and took the seat which Perry offered him, his boss looked at him with a sympathetic expression.

“Clark, did you get a chance to read yesterday’s paper?”

“Sorry, chief, I was busy last night.”

Clark had expected Perry to complain about him falling down on the job. Instead, his boss actually seemed ...

relieved.

Perry spoke softly. “That’s just as well, son. There was something in it I had wanted to talk to you about in person, but I couldn’t reach you last night. How are you feeling?”

Clark wasn’t following Perry’s seemingly abrupt change in topics. “Um, fine, I guess. A little under the weather, perhaps. Why?”

“The clones at Stryker Island have all been getting sick. Real sick. Some have died.”

Perry’s eyes were full of sympathy. Clark immediately understood the implications, and he deeply regretted having to put Perry through the emotional wringer, but he saw no way of avoiding it without revealing his secret.

And Lois! So *that* was why she was suddenly so nice to him last night. She had mistaken his kryptonite poisoning for the first stages of a fatal illness. That just made more firm his resolve — He must tell Lois all about himself, and sooner, rather than later. That very night, in fact.

But all he told Perry was, “I don’t feel that bad, Chief. I just have a bit of a headache. I think Superman may have improved the cloning process when he made me. I’ll be fine.”

Perry gave him an inscrutable look, and said, “Well, son, I just thought you should know. If you need anything — time off or someone to talk to, anything at all, just ask.”

“Thanks, Chief.”

Lois entered the inspector’s office immediately after knocking.

“OK, Henderson. Here’s the deal: I have some information that may prove useful for your mail bomb case; but in return, I want an exclusive for the Planet.”

“What have you got?”

“How much do you know about the mail bomb intended for Superman?”

“Kent talk to you? Of course he did. Forensics is checking the outside of the parcel now. The bomb squad is with them on standby. As soon as they have finished examining the outside of the parcel, the bomb boys will do their thing so that the package’s contents can be inspected. From what Superman told me, its contents sound similar to those of the first mail bomb, except for the rock.”

“Yeah, I know. What I want to tell you is about that rock. But before I do, you must swear to me that what I say will NOT leave this room. You are not to tell anything I say to ANYONE — not anyone you work with, not even your wife — NO ONE. Is that clear?”

“As a blue lagoon. What’s so ultra-secret?”

“That rock in Superman’s package is no ordinary rock. It’s called kryptonite. I have had a couple of dealings with it in the past; but as far as I know, only a handful of other people even suspect it exists.

“The first time I heard of it was a bit over a year ago when it was mentioned by a nutcase called Jason Trask. He worked for a covert military agency called Bureau 39. He suspected that it might be connected with Superman. He was killed shortly thereafter.

“This past summer, Arianna Carlin had fashioned a bullet out of kryptonite and shot Superman with it. Of

course, Superman is fine, and she is in jail. But as far as I know, she and Trask are the only two people who had known about kryptonite and had connected it with Superman.”

Henderson had been jotting down notes as Lois spoke. When he looked up, he seemed pleased to have new leads. “Hmmm... That could be useful. But leave the investigations to us for a change. Anyone gunning for Superman would have no qualms about disposing of a nosy reporter who was getting too close.”

“You’ll tell no one about kryptonite, and the Planet will get the exclusive?”

“I already said so. Now get.”

Lois was sure Henderson had noticed that she hadn’t promised not to investigate. But those investigations would have to wait a day or two. She had an interview with Senator Thomas this afternoon.

Clark wanted to tell Lois about his alter ego. He really did. But just as he planned to go over to her apartment, a five-alarm fire broke out in a chemical plant across the city. He spent the next several hours helping at the scene. By the time the fire had died down, it was nearly midnight. Far too late to go over to Lois’ apartment. And he knew that the next night, Lois would be busy with her Tae Kwon Do. Two nights’ hence it would have to be.

The next morning, Clark felt recovered enough from the kryptonite for Superman to be able to fly to Lois’ window before she left for work.

“Hello, Superman! What brings you here so early?”

“A favor. I’m sure Clark told you about the package I delivered to Inspector Henderson?”

Lois nodded.

“I’ve asked the inspector to deliver the contents of the package to you when it is no longer needed as evidence. Would you dispose of the kryptonite it contained?”

“Of course, Superman.”

“I seem to be making a habit of this, don’t I? First a bullet and then a rock. Is there anything I can do to thank you for your troubles?”

Lois looked at him shyly. “Well, Superman, I would normally never ask. But since you offered... Would you take me flying some time?”

Clark smiled. There were few things he would enjoy more than to have Lois in his arms again, whatever the reason. “Certainly.”

Inspector Henderson read over the forensics’ report on the mail bomb case. He then looked over his earlier notes on the case. He smiled. This lead was almost too obvious. He saw that a neighbor of the first mail bomb’s victim was a “Jillian *Trask*”. Clearly she warranted another visit.

Jillian heard a knock on her apartment door. Before she went to get it, she reached for the green rock. She remembered the letter with Jayjay’s final words of advice to her. She would see no one without having the green rock on her. She put it in her pocket. But what if it didn’t work

through fabric? She made sure that it was sticking half out of her pocket, just in case.

“C.C.! Great news! While you were sleeping late, I was on the phone with Henderson. They’ve made an arrest in connection with the mail bombings! Seems Trask’s sister was behind it all. She lived next door to Heather Meese. And do you want to hear something funny? She made it easy to pin the rap on her — she answered the door with a piece of green rock sticking out of her pocket; it was the same type that had been found in the second package. Can you believe that? And to make the case even more airtight, her fingerprints match those found on the second bomb. Case closed. Story written and on Perry’s desk.”

As Lois lay in bed awaiting sleep, she thought about C.C.. He was still quite healthy. Whatever had killed off the clones didn’t seem to be affecting him. He must have just had a cold or something the other day. But, she figured, he should have been affected by now.

She still couldn’t get over the similarities between Clark and C.C.. She really couldn’t see how their recent lunches together would have gone any differently if it had been Clark himself she had been eating with. C.C.’s gentle teasing had been exactly like Clark’s. His mannerisms were identical. He even had all of Clark’s detailed knowledge of the workings of the Planet, of the recent news, and of the people they knew.

She thought back on Superman’s clone. Although his body looked like Superman’s, his mind was that of a child. He certainly didn’t possess the knowledge or maturity of his progenitor. The more recent gangster clones, in contrast, had seemed to know everything that their forebears did, and to have the attitudes and personalities of the originals. Wait a minute! They couldn’t have known everything their originals did; surely Dillinger’s clone wouldn’t have been dumb enough to get himself arrested in the same way his original had been. Perhaps Dr. Hamilton had taught them about their originals, but had left out some details. She wondered how long they had been living in Dr. Hamilton’s labs before making themselves known to the world.

And that brought her back to C.C. He obviously hadn’t had the time or the opportunity to study up on Clark. And yet he was *exactly* like him. More alike than any identical twins she had met ever were — and identical twins spend the formative years of their lives together. C.C. obviously had never met Clark. So how could they be so identical?

A crazy thought occurred to her. What if C.C. and Clark behaved so identically because they really were one and the same person? Not in the soul-transference sense; she’d never believe in that nonsense. But what if, somehow, Clark hadn’t died that awful night, but had only pretended to do so?

But that was ridiculous. Why would he do something like that? And how could he possibly have survived the gunshot wounds? Only Superman could have survived.

Only Superman could have survived... Lois started to think back about all the times that Clark left and Superman immediately appeared. To all of Clark’s feeble excuses. She

mentally compared Clark's face and Superman's.

That creep! He hadn't died at all. He knew she was in mourning for him; he saw how much his 'death' had affected her, and yet he just let her grieve.

If he hadn't wanted to tell her he was Superman, fine. It hurt her that he kept his little secret, but she could kind of understand that. But not to tell her that *Clark* was still alive — that was beyond the pale.

She shot out of bed and started getting dressed. She was going to go give Clark "Superman" Kent a piece of her mind.

Clark couldn't sleep. He knew he ought to wait until tomorrow to talk to Lois. It was 10:00 now — possibly not too late for an ordinary visit, but definitely too late to drop the bombshell.

Then again, if she were awake, she would probably be tired at the end of the day. That might actually work to his advantage. She wouldn't have the energy to get into as raging a fit as she was wont to do. All right, that was a rationalization. But still, the dread of the confrontation that would surely come was driving him crazy. He couldn't take it anymore.

He flew to an alley a couple of blocks from her apartment, spun into his Clark clothes, and walked up to her building. As he started climbing up the stairs, Lois opened the door.

He was glad that she didn't have heat vision; if she had, he would have been disintegrated — invulnerability or no invulnerability.

"You! In my apartment! Now!"

Not a promising start to their conversation! When Lois sounded like Perry, it could not bode well for him. He briefly contemplated postponing "the talk" for another day, but now that he had "walked" (flown?) the last mile, so to speak, he just wanted to get it over with.

Nothing more was said until she closed and locked the door behind her. When she turned to face him, both spoke at once:

"Lois... You deserve to know. I'm Superman."

"Clark... Don't deny it! You're Superman!"

Each just stared in shocked silence as they processed what the other had said. Finally, Clark spoke first.

"Um, yeah. And you called me 'Clark'!"

"Well, you're Superman, so you're obviously not a clone. Kryptonian, yes. Clone, no. I can't believe you just told me you were Superman! I finally figure it out on my own, and now you tell me! You're not even going to give me the satisfaction of getting mad at you for keeping it a secret, are you?"

Clark breathed a sigh of relief. He wasn't out of the woods yet, but this was going much better than he had feared. Apparently his disclosure had knocked some of the wind out of Lois' sails. He ventured a tiny, lopsided grin. "Nope."

"But how dare you let me grieve for you all this time? I thought you were dead!" She pummeled his chest. Of course, they both knew that a few punches wouldn't hurt Superman - at least, not physically. But Clark didn't want

Lois to hurt her hands, so he took them gently in his own and held them to his chest.

"I am so sorry, Lois. The truth is, I was scared."

Lois snorted. "You? Scared? What does Superman have to be scared of?"

"First of all, I'm Clark. I just disguise myself as Superman so I can help out openly. And I was scared of you — of losing you. I knew you'd be mad at me for keeping my secrets. And I don't blame you. It's just that, by the time I finally knew you well enough to trust that you wouldn't turn me into your first Pulitzer, Luthor had come into the picture and complicated things. And after that, well, it seemed like too much time had gone by. I didn't feel that I could have told you earlier, but I also felt that I ought to have. And I was afraid you'd be so mad at me that I hadn't — well, I kept postponing it. And that just made matters worse.

"And then I got shot. Even though I didn't die, I thought that my life as Clark Kent was over. I managed to bring him back, after a fashion, but you were so cold to me as 'C.C.'. You wouldn't let me get close enough to you to tell you the truth."

He looked at Lois with an equal mixture of apology, love, and hesitancy. "Lois, I'm sorry I hadn't told you before. Will you forgive me?"

She was silent for a few seconds, obviously considering what he had just said. Her manner softened a bit, and he realized that she thought he had made some strong points. He mentally breathed a sigh of relief.

"In time. But first, I have a lot of questions. And I want answers, buster!"

The twinkle in Lois' eye told Clark that he was off the hook for having kept his secret, but the "Mad Dog Lane" facial expression let him know that, as far as she was concerned, he had better answer whatever she asked.

"So ask!"

"I want to hear all about Clark and Superman. How you do what you do. How you manage living two lives. Who you really are. But first... "

"Yes?"

She suddenly blushed. "Did you mean what you said the other day... About what you had told me in Centennial Park and in front of the Planet building?"

Clark kept holding Lois' hands with his left hand, but with his right, he reached up tenderly to slide his cupped hand across her cheek. "Every word of it. I loved you when I was in the park and when I was in front of the Planet. I've never stopped loving you, Lois, and I never will."

"And I meant what I said about loving Clark." She withdrew her hands from his hand and gave him a hug. He enfolded his arms about her and rested his head on hers. They stood there quietly for a few minutes, simply basking in each other's presence.

Lois leaned back to look at him. "But there's still one more thing."

"What's that?"

"You owe me a flight, flyboy!"

Lois looked on in delighted astonishment as Clark spin-changed into the Suit, scooped her up, and flew off into what, a few hours earlier, would have been the sunset.

THE END