

Veritas

By Shayne Terry <byron212@yahoo.com>

Rated PG-13

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Summary: An alternate Clark Kent finds himself flying a planeload of passengers from 1993 Metropolis into real world post-9/11 2008 Washington DC. How will he deal with this new, darker world?

DISCLAIMER: I don't own Lois and Clark or any other recognizable characters. I'd like to thank Deborah Goldsmith. While she wasn't technically my beta, she sent ream after ream of notes on the grammatical mistakes I'd made after I posted each chapter. She also helped correct some of my scientific errors and gave some good advice as to how to make the implausible at least seem more plausible. Any scientific errors remaining are my own.

Breathing heavily, Lois tried to ignore the pain in her side. If it hadn't been for the heavy Kevlar vest, she'd be dead again. As it was, she knew from experience that it was going to leave an ugly bruise.

She winced as she heard the distinctive ping of a bullet and felt the sting of stone fragments against her cheek. They were pinned down, and from the frantic sounds of Captain Johnson shouting into his radio, help wouldn't be coming for several minutes.

Maybe she shouldn't have come to Iraq. More than forty reporters had been killed here in the last year, and Lois had been throwing herself into the worst part of the fighting.

Lois Lane. How often had she despised her parents for giving her that name, no matter how into Superman they had been? It hadn't been worth the years of teasing, the snickers, and the double takes when people saw her name on applications.

It hadn't helped that she'd been drawn to journalism. The name had made her have to work three times as hard as her colleagues just to be taken seriously. She could have changed it, or chosen a pen name, but by the time it had occurred to her she'd been too stubborn.

Her parents had saddled her with the name and she would live up to it.

She just had to hope that it wouldn't kill her.

Lana was going to kill him.

This was going to be the fourth time he was late

for dinner in a row, but it was beginning to be hard for him to care.

Glancing around, Clark stepped into an alleyway. Lana would have an aneurysm if she knew he was still doing this, but flying was the one thing he refused to give up. It was too much a part of him, and even with all the risk, it was one of the only things he enjoyed any more.

He rose into the air quickly, but carefully staying slow enough not to create a sonic boom. Hiding what he was had become a part of him a long time ago. Lana's countless diatribes had pushed the point home.

Yet the longer he went hiding what he was, the more distant he felt from Lana. All she saw was the image of normality that she wanted to see. He felt like he was drowning, and now that she was pushing for marriage, he sometimes found himself wishing he could fly away forever and never come back.

He'd been losing bits and pieces of himself for as long as he knew her, sacrificing the things that were important to him for her sake. It was almost as though she'd been intentionally isolating him from everyone else in order to have him to herself.

As he rose into the air, he felt the wind drop. The sky was dark, and he could see flashes of lightning overhead. A storm was coming, and with it, rain.

The first droplets of rain to hit Lois's face felt like heaven. Her face was slick with sweat, and in the horrendous Iraqi heat, there was little she could do but swelter. Her equipment weighed forty pounds; most of the soldiers she was embedded with carried at least eighty pounds. It made keeping hydrated an utter necessity.

She heard another gunshot, this one coming from her left. The soldiers behind her laid down a barrage of answering fire. If the enemy got around behind them, it would be the end for them all.

Lois was the only one who could see the lone figure lying on the road behind them. Private Chalmers was just a boy, nineteen and barely able to shave. He'd had a crush on Lois, as had many of the other men, and he'd wondered why she hadn't gone to Hollywood instead of writing about death and the dying.

Lois was shocked to find herself scrambling to her feet and lunging toward the injured man. The distance between them was only thirty feet, but it might as well have been a mile, given the volume of fire being directed all around them.

A moment later she was beside him, grabbing for his shoulder and pulling him up and away from the ground.

His pack fell, and Lois left it, staggering under the larger man's weight for the safety of cover.

The soldiers had seen him now and they were providing cover while two more rushed out to take Chalmers from her.

It was only when she reached the relative safety of the wall that the shaking began.

In the distance she could hear lightning.

When he saw lightning strike the plane he was lost.

Always before he'd been able to help in small ways, staying out of the limelight, but this was different. Fire was coming from the wings and he could hear the terrified screams of the passengers inside.

The best he could do was come up from beneath the plane. A quick breath and the flames were gone, but the engines on one side were completely fried.

The engines on the other side were failing as well, and Clark could hear the plane beginning to stall.

It was finally time to test just how strong he really was.

Reaching up for the fuselage of the plane, he found a support strut, and a moment later he began struggling to level the plane.

To his surprise, it wasn't the weight that was the problem. It was keeping the skin of the plane and the metal from ripping away in his hands like tissue paper.

Lightning struck again, and a moment later the world went white around him. He felt as though his insides were being torn apart, and from the screams of the passengers inside the plane, they felt the same way.

A moment later he blinked, his vision returning. He stared below him. Metropolis was gone.

In its place was clear land as far as the eye could see, with only isolated homes built against an ocean side highway.

He recognized the distinctive shape of Hobbs bay, and the contour of the land was mostly the same. It was as though the city itself had been erased, as though it had never been settled.

From the sounds above him, three different passengers were having cardiac problems. Whatever had happened to Metropolis, he had to find a place to land the plane.

Lois felt a chill as she watched Private Chalmers being carried away on a stretcher. Absently she lifted her arms as medics began to clean the blood off her with biohazard clean up wipes.

She'd see him again at Walter Reed Army Medical

Center in Washington. This was the end of her fourth embedment, and she was heading home tomorrow.

When she saw the medics running in the direction of the tent they'd hauled Chalmers too, she felt a weight on her chest.

For all that she hated the name Lois Lane, this was a world that desperately needed a Superman.

The lights of the Washington airport were a welcome relief to Clark. The people inside the airplane were growing desperate.

Air traffic control was being strangely hostile, demanding that the plane turn around and leave Washington airspace. They seemed curiously unmoved about the medical emergencies the pilots were claiming, and kept demanding that the pilots identify themselves and the plane.

It was the sound of the jets that alerted Clark that something was really wrong.

Fighter planes were approaching from the distance. Clark had done articles on the military, and he had never seen planes like these. They were lethal looking and from the speed they were flying clearly more advanced than the planes he was used to.

The threats to shoot the plane down if it did not leave the airspace were a shock.

It wasn't until a moment later, when fighter planes dropped from above to both sides of the commercial jet that Clark realized he was in trouble.

One of the pilots was looking him directly in the eye.

Scowling, Lois stared at the conveyor belt. Security was getting more and more onerous with the passing of every year, especially when someone was coming from someplace as contentious as Iraq.

She felt the buzzing of the satellite phone in her pocket.

"Jerry," she said. "It'll take a while to get my luggage, but I'll be back in the office as soon as I can."

She froze as she listened to the voice on the other end of the connection.

"What? Here?"

An unidentified airplane heading for Washington was ominous. There were no records of this commercial jetliner leaving from any airport in the world, and given what had happened six and a half year before, no one was willing to take any chances.

"Do you think they plan to shoot it down?"

An unidentified plane was a weapon in and of itself, but it could be carrying anything, from biological contaminants to dirty bombs to Russian nuclear weapons.

Grabbing her bag as it swung by, Lois's mind raced as she began dialing numbers.

With the equipment in her luggage she could transmit a news story from almost anywhere in the world, with anything from pictures to video.

All she would have to do was somehow find her way back through security to the areas where all the action was happening.

It was a tall order.

To Clark's shame, he let the plane drop almost a hundred feet in his shock and anxiety about what the fighter pilot had seen.

The screams of the passengers above him reminded him quickly that he needed to keep his mind on what he was doing or people were going to be hurt.

The sick passengers didn't sound like they were doing well.

He began to head as quickly as he could for the runway. One of the fighter planes was threatening to shoot the commercial jet down if they didn't land, which was what everyone needed anyhow.

The other plane

was oddly quiet.

Scowling, Clark began to drop through the clouds. As soon as he got the plane on the ground, he planned to be gone. He'd have done it anyway before, but with the way things were happening now, it was twice as important.

The world had changed, and he was going to find out what had happened to it. It wasn't just the disappearance of Metropolis. It was everything. The attitudes of the air traffic controllers, the threats of blowing an American plane out of the sky. This was a scary new world.

The sky was filled with the sound of thunder.

Standing near the chain link fence at the outer perimeter of the airport, Lois gritted her teeth. No one would give her access to any secure areas; in point of fact the entire airport had been placed on lockdown, and she'd barely gotten out with her equipment intact.

Everyone was being close mouthed about the situation, but her contacts had informed her that the airplane would be approaching from this direction. All she could hope was that her equipment would be up to the task of getting some long distance shots.

The government had grounded all air traffic; consequently the usual news helicopters were nowhere to be seen. Given traffic, it would be an hour before the nearest news crew could make it through.

That meant that she had the exclusive, if she could get any video worth having. As a backpack journalist,

Lois had everything she needed to send out a report at a moment's notice.

Setting the Sony PD150 on a small tripod on the hood of her car, Lois grimaced as she stepped back and found her mark. The camera was half the weight and one tenth the cost of a camera used by professional news crews, and by day you couldn't tell much difference. By night, the video images were grainy, which couldn't be helped.

With the lights on, Lois began her report as quickly and concisely as she could. With the earpiece in her ear, she could hear and respond to questions from the CNN anchorman.

The sounds of the planes approaching alerted Lois, and she quickly moved to grab the camera.

Through the viewfinder everything took on a greenish tint. The commercial jet was being visibly flanked by two F-22 raptors. Lois frowned. F-16's were more usually used for Washington security. The Raptors were stealth fighters.

She couldn't hear the sounds of the commercial airplane, and even from this distance it should have been apparent.

If she had been allowed onto the public overlook area, she'd have had a much better angle, able to see the underside of the plane as it passed overhead. That area had been cordoned off, leaving Lois to watch everything happening from the side.

She squinted as she realized that she could see the silhouette of something hanging from beneath the plane as it passed by a light in the distance. Lois wasn't sure if it was evidence of something badly wrong with the plane or what else it might be, but she'd go over the footage later. For the moment she was filming live.

There was something else wrong. The plane was stopping too fast, far faster than it should have been able to. It had been raining as recently as a few minutes before and the runway was undoubtedly slick. But instead of sliding thousands of feet, the plane was stopping unnaturally fast, in the space of a few hundred feet.

In the distance Lois could see a line of flashing lights as a police cars, ambulances and military vehicles converged on the airplane. They'd been situated near where the plane should have stopped, nearly a mile further down the road.

Lois gasped as a sudden sound like thunder cracked near her, blotting out all other sounds. The wind of something passing by made her stagger, but a glance up in the air showed nothing.

Grimly, Lois continued to film and narrate.

Clark grimaced as he flew. He'd hated having to fly so close to the woman with the camcorder; even though he hadn't passed any closer than a thousand feet. Any nearer and he'd have risked causing hearing damage. He might have even shattered the glass in her car.

But from this position he had the plane between him and the approaching emergency vehicles, some of which had cameras he could see.

On the other side was a public overlook, which was also blocked off by police cars.

When had they begun putting cameras in police cars?

He wasn't worried that the woman would film him; by the time the sound of his passage reached her he would be long gone. Given a choice he would have moved farther away before hitting full speed.

Cutting through the air, he slowed to flying under the speed of sound. At that speed he could fly almost soundlessly and without the risk of shattering all the windows in a neighborhood.

His ability to fly broke most of the laws of physics, but there were some even he had to follow. He flew so as to minimize his profile and reduce the sonic boom he created. If he had to, he could move his body so as to break up the shockwave. He always felt a little silly doing it, a little like he was having a seizure in midair, but it worked for the most part. If he hadn't done it, he'd have shattered not only the windows in the woman's car, but the windows in the airplane and everything else in a half mile radius.

Washington itself looked much like it had the last time he'd been there, except that there were now beige concrete planters blocking off Pennsylvania Avenue. Police cruisers were patrolling every intersection and he could see vans filled with officers and dogs in parking areas.

Where the street itself had once been was a wide swath of grass with twenty feet of pavement remaining on each side.

These weren't the sort of changes that could have been made overnight. It was as though reality itself had been changed, with the bright world Clark had taken for granted being replaced by this new, darker version.

There were men with binoculars on the roof of the White House and the whole place was a beehive of activity.

It had only been a few years since Clark had taken his one visit to the White House as a tourist. In those days, parts of the White House had been open to almost anyone. President Garner had been adamant that the White House was the People's house.

A moment later he was gone. Washington was stirred up and didn't seem safe. He needed to return to the scene of the crime.

He needed a closer look at Metropolis.

They'd arrested every single person on the plane. Lois hadn't seen anything like it. By her count, there were almost two hundred people being loaded into police wagons and taken away while men in Haz-Mat outfits entered the plane.

By the time the city affiliate reached the area, Lois was happy to turn over the screen time. There wasn't much left to say at this point, and with the passengers all almost gone there wasn't much of a story left here.

She waved wearily at the Network crew as she gathered up her equipment and placed it into the trunk of her car. Being a video journalist didn't allow for the same kind of detail that doing newspaper work did, but it paid a great deal better. The network allowed her to do work for the Associated Press as long as they got the exclusives first.

The whole thing didn't seem right to her. The plane had dropped unnaturally fast, and she hadn't heard the sound of engines. It looked the same as any other airplane that should have been landing on the runway.

"Joe," Lois said, moving toward the older man who was looking into a small compact mirror and checking his teeth while the cameramen set up their equipment.

"Lois," he said, not taking his eyes from his own image. "Good reporting."

"Do they have any idea where it comes from yet?"

He shook his head. "There isn't a single missing plane anywhere. That's a 747-400 series, and there have only been six hundred forty of them built worldwide. According to reports we're getting from Homeland Security, they've all been accounted for."

"Maybe it's a modified 747-300 or something."

The older reporter said, "The wings would be shorter."

"Well, what could it be? It's not like someone could manufacture an imitation commercial jetliner ... I mean that's a two hundred million dollar plane."

"Drug dealers have been building home-made submarines since the mid- nineties."

"World war one vintage ... not anything like this!"

Shrugging, Joe snapped the compact into place. "Why do you think everyone is so worried?"

Lois nodded, and then stepped obediently back as the bright lights of the cameras switched on. She had to remind herself that she was no longer in Iraq. She was back home in America.

In Iraq, everyone had always been worried. Here,

it was still a little new.

It was impossible.

Even with all his powers, there was no way Clark could have removed a city so seamlessly from the face of the earth. There should be signs of earth being filled back in, of the subway system, of the extensive underground excavation beneath the main city.

Hobbs Bay was still there, and the contour of the land followed what he'd remembered, more or less. But somehow more than two hundred square miles of buildings and more than seven million people had simply vanished into thin air, as though they had never existed.

He rose into the night sky, slowly accelerating.

He'd long ago learned to navigate by the stars, by landmarks and by simple experience. Sometimes it was a simple matter of looking to see that New York was here and Gotham was there and ...

It wasn't just Metropolis. In the area where Gotham city had been was now only a cluster of small towns, islands of light in a pool of darkness that just shouldn't have been there.

If towns were disappearing around the country, it wasn't any wonder that people were suspicious. Maybe finding out that the plane was from Metropolis was ringing all sorts of alarms.

The enormity of it was overwhelming. His entire life had been in Metropolis. The Daily Planet,

his apartment. His favorite baseball team. Lana.

Clark closed his eyes for a moment. At least Lana wouldn't be worried about their missed dinner date.

The thought that she might be dead created a dull ache in his heart. She'd been his only friend in a time when he'd had no one.

Yet it had taken him almost an hour to even think about what might have happened to her. Had she been abducted by aliens? Had the whole city?

He wasn't accustomed to feeling helpless, except in the context of his relationship with Lana.

Clark stared blindly off into the distance.

Despite having a woman who loved him, he'd always been a little disconnected from it all. Whether it was seeing what had happened to his parents when he was ten, or living through the foster care system, he'd always had a sense that part of him was broken inside. He loved Lana, as much as he loved anyone, but it was a shallow love.

He'd dreamed once of having something more, a deeper, more powerful emotion that would take his breath away and make his head spin. He'd wanted something like his parents had once had- passion that had grown into something even deeper. He'd wanted to

be with someone who made him look forward to waking up the next day.

With Lana there had always been a little dread.

Now, though, he was utterly alone.

It began to rain again. His suit, which had dried with the passage of the wind, was immediately soaked again.

It was par for the course. The sounds of the wind and the rain were at least almost soothing, if he filtered out all the sounds of humanity below. The automobile noises alone would have driven him crazy if he hadn't been able to filter it all away, much less the sounds of humanity. The sounds of people fighting, making love, making bodily noises. The conversations of seven million people as they went about their day.

Metropolis had been a living entity, a place with its own atmosphere, its own vibrant culture. It had been the one place he could see himself living, even if Lana had been the one to make the initial decision.

Allowing himself to make his way above the clouds, Clark sighed. His mind should have been racing with possibilities, trying desperately to find a connection, an explanation, something.

Instead, all he wanted to do was sleep. He closed his eyes and listened to the sounds of the wind and the rain. He felt exhausted suddenly, as though he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

He didn't hear the sonic boom from the missile until after it had already hit him.

The explosion knocked Clark back thirty feet and caused his skin to sting slightly. Fragments of the missile were already falling to earth and Clark grimaced as he realized that his suit, already abused, had been mostly burned away.

Only the parts of the gray business suit which had been closest to his skin remained unaffected. The rest was already drifting to earth along with the fragments from the missile. This left him wearing an undershirt and a pair of ragged pants. Even his shoes were singed.

A quick glance showed that the fragments were going to land in a field, away from anyone who might be hurt.

A glance in another direction showed two of the new lethal-looking fighter planes heading in his direction. They'd obviously spotted him on radar and had come to take a look.

It stunned Clark to think that they'd launch a missile without even visually confirming that he wasn't some sort of a passenger plane. Of course, if their radar was more sophisticated than the radar back

home they'd realize that he wasn't large enough to be any sort of a civilian plane.

As long as the pilots didn't see him, or worse, get pictures of him, he'd be fine. There wasn't anything in the air that could keep up with him.

He put on the speed before pulling up short. Other planes were coming from several different directions. While he'd be able to outdistance them easily, he wasn't sure just how far their cameras could penetrate the cloud cover.

Allowing himself to drop straight down, Clark fell at a speed just short of supersonic.

By the time the planes broke cloud cover, he was already on the ground and stepping into a building that was warm and filled with sound. They wouldn't be looking for a man, and even if they were, by the time anyone attempted to catch up with him he'd be long gone.

Maybe in the company of strangers he'd be able to find out what had happened to the city that he'd loved.

At the very least he'd be out of the rain until they stopped looking.

"They actually launched in U.S. airspace?" Lois asked, speaking into her cell phone. "Do we have any confirmation of that?"

She handed her money to the barista behind the counter and gratefully took her Café Mocha. It was difficult to get good coffee in Iraq, which was ironic considering that coffee had been cultivated in the Middle East for more than a thousand years.

Of course, when going out to a place with decent coffee could get you shot, you made do with a military grade brew.

So whenever she was in the States, she splurged on expensive coffee. Three months of carrying a forty pound pack in hundred degree weather meant that she wouldn't have to worry about her weight for a while, and the caffeine helped her deal with the jet lag.

"Get someone who is willing to go on the record," she said as she left the counter. "It's no good to us unless we have some sort of proof."

Grabbing napkins to go with her cruller, Lois headed back outside. The rain was only sprinkling now, so a mad dash brought her back to her car.

"Get me the location. I'll see what I can find."

A moment later she was back in her car. She started the engine and put the heater on full blast. After months in the desert heat, cold weather seemed to bite a little more strongly than she remembered.

She stared out the windshield. As the rain began to fall harder, she absentmindedly took a bite of her cruller.

Nothing about this made any sense. Her sources in National Intelligence admitted that there was no sign as of yet of any sort of weapon on board the plane, but the passengers had been quarantined in an undisclosed location. That spoke of fears of a biological attack, but it didn't make sense.

If terrorists had wanted to use germ weapons, all they would have had to do was infect selected people and send them through ordinary air travel. They had to have known that an unknown airplane would raise all sorts of flags.

It was an enormous effort for very little return. If the plane had held a nuclear weapon, it might have been a different situation, but as it was ... Lois couldn't make sense of it. It bothered her and left her with a feeling that they were all missing something.

National security was a business where you couldn't afford to miss anything.

Her cell phone rang and Lois realized that she'd eaten most of her cruller without even tasting it.

"You have the location?" she asked. Grabbing a pen she wrote quickly on a napkin. "I'll go check it out."

Stepping into the bar, Clark was acutely aware of his appearance. Wearing only an undershirt and a pair of pants which were scorched up to the ankles, he was soaked to the bone. He could have gotten rid of the water easily, but that might have made him stand out even more.

The first thing that he noticed as he entered the bar was the lack of smoke in the air. He couldn't recall having been in a bar when the smell of cigarette smoke hadn't permeated the joint. In most places, even when he'd gone during the day he'd been able to smell the smoke rising from every surface.

This place, though, had been painted over and from the smell of it, no one had been smoking there for at least a year.

Clark found a seat in the back of the room and slipped into it. The place was thankfully dim, and so his unusual attire might not be as glaringly obvious.

Two men at the table beside him glanced over at him dismissively, and then returned to nursing their drinks.

Several large televisions were hanging from the ceiling. On one was a football game. Statistics from a dozen other games scrolled by beneath it.

On another screen was a grainy greenish picture of a woman standing in front of a chain fence. Behind her was the commercial jetliner he'd left behind. Large lights having been set up to illuminate the entire plane with the brightness of the sun. Men in environmental

suits were going over ever inch of it, including two who had climbed up on the wings and were going over it with some sort of device.

"What's going on?" he asked, leaning toward the men sitting at the table beside him.

People in bars were usually at least a little more likely to talk to strangers than the general population. Alcohol might have been a factor in that.

The men were both wearing business suits and both looked red faced and bleary.

"Another plane attack," the first said. "I always knew the bastards were gonna try again."

"They didn't get very far," the second said. "The Feds are going to have everybody locked up until they get to the bottom of it."

"What, everybody on the plane?" Clark asked. "Isn't that a little extreme?"

"You want another 9-11?" The first man shook his head. "It's a dangerous world."

Glancing up at the screen, Clark saw the reporter stumble a little as the wind swirled around her.

"She's a real looker," the first man said. "Probably would have made anchor already if it wasn't for her name."

"Her name?"

"Lois Lane. The networks didn't think anyone would take the news seriously if it was delivered by a comic book character."

At Clark's look of incomprehension, the man leaned forward and said, "Lois Lane. You know ... Lois Lane ... Superman?"

Clark shrugged. "I don't follow the comics."

His own life was fantastic enough that he had no need for fantastic tales. Also, when he'd been old enough to want comics, his foster parents hadn't wanted to spend the money.

"Four

major movies, three or four television series ... guy in a blue suit and a red cape? None of it ring a bell?"

Clark shook his head.

"Super strong, he flies, pretends to be a mild mannered reporter during the day, grew up in Smallville?"

Frozen, Clark said, "My parents didn't let me read comic books."

The older man leaned forward. "Maybe you saw the credit card commercials on television with Jerry Seinfeld, or saw people wearing t-shirts. Songs on the radio?"

Clark shrugged uncomfortably, while his mind raced.

Was there someone else out there able to do the things he was capable of? Or was it all a coincidence

that these people seemed to dream of someone who could do what he could do?

"Have you heard of Tarzan? Mickey Mouse?"

Clark nodded.

"Well, add Superman and you have the three most recognizable icons in the world."

He felt a hand touching his shoulder and he jerked slightly. An older woman was standing beside his table. "What will you have?" she asked.

"Um ... whatever's on tap."

Nodding shortly, she left. Clark turned back to the two men, who were already discussing upcoming elections.

Clark frowned. The elections had been over for two years. Charlton Heston had beat Garner in the last election. So unless the President had been hurt or killed, they shouldn't be having another election for another two years.

He felt his gut clench suddenly as he realized that things were even more alien than he'd thought at first. Pictures of presidential candidates flashing on the screen confirmed it. He'd never heard of any of the candidates, and he'd been following politics in his work as a reporter for years.

Presidential candidates didn't just appear out of whole cloth: they were already known: governors, senators, and businessmen.

He could come to only one conclusion. This wasn't his world.

If cities were disappearing, it would be all over the news. If these people made such a big deal about a plane landing, they'd be all over the disappearance of millions of people.

It wasn't the city of Metropolis that had disappeared ... it was him and the plane he had carried.

Which meant that Lana was still going to be angry about the missed dinner date.

It was funny, the thoughts that came to mind when you were feeling overwhelmed. Clark felt numb a little as he realized that he didn't know of any way to get home.

He didn't have any way to get the people he'd brought from Metropolis home either, which meant that the families would have to go through the whole grieving process without ever really knowing what had happened to their loved ones.

The waitress set a frothing mug of beer on his table, and Clark reached for his wallet. He grimaced as he realized that it was missing, as was part of his back pocket. He was lucky he hadn't felt a breeze.

He'd stuffed a few bills in his front pocket earlier in the day, so he pulled out a ten.

He took a sip and then froze as he noticed the

waitress taking the bill over to a better lit portion of the bar.

She spoke to the bartender, who also stared at the bill. He picked up a telephone, and Clark decided that discretion was the better part of valor.

By the time they looked up, he was gone.

The men from the National Security Agency flashed their badges at her. Behind them Army trucks were blocking the view from the road, moving one after the next to cordon off the area. Men in military uniforms were moving to tape the place off.

"Are you able to comment on rumors that this is a missile launched by our government in United States airspace?"

The man shook his head. "A satellite lost orbit and fell near here. As you know, it is illegal for United States citizens to collect space debris."

"Would you give an interview to that effect?"

"No cameras," the man said. Lowering his voice he said, "Off the record, this is a National Security matter. This was one of our satellites."

Lois stared at the man, who didn't flinch.

He was trying to say that this was a United States spy satellite, and that they were retrieving critical United States spy equipment before anyone else could get their hands on it.

This was the sort of story most reporters could sink their teeth into ... as long as they waited for the cleanup to be over before they made their report. They'd get the credit for the story and the government would get their satellite. Everyone knew how the game was played.

Unfortunately, Lois didn't believe a word he was saying.

Her bureau already had sources who were admitting to the launch, and there were a spate of 911 calls which the network already had someone else investigating. All Lois needed was a picture of the wreckage and she'd have proof that it wasn't what they were saying it was.

However, in the era of the Patriot Act, there were limitations on what she could do. Tampering with evidence, trespassing, they all sounded reasonable in fiction, but in reality the consequences could be long term and severe.

Lois saw an agent she knew stepping into his vehicle. She turned to the man she was speaking to and said, "Thanks for all the help."

A moment later she was in her own vehicle following him. Agent White had been helpful to her in the past, and if she could get him alone, perhaps he would at least send her in the right direction. She had a

feeling that it was going to be very difficult to get anyone who wanted to go on the record with all of this.

As she crested a hill which blocked off her view of the flashing lights behind her, she was surprised to see that Agent White's vehicle had sped up to well over the listed speed limit.

She sped up to follow him, hoping that any police in the area would already be tied up at the crash site.

He pulled into a parking lot five minutes later. The lot was rapidly emptying, with men on motorcycles fleeing the scene. Three government vehicles were already in the lot as Agent White drove up.

Lois pulled into the parking lot and cut her lights off as a man she recognized as working in the secret service stepped out to speak to Agent White in a low voice. They both stepped into the bar together.

Lois slipped out of her vehicle. She grabbed a portable camera from her bag. Leaving the bag behind, she covered the camera with her coat.

Stepping into the shadows, she followed the two men into the bar.

Although it should have been the busiest time of night, the bar was half deserted. Lois imagined that it was the presence of the men in black that had made everyone nervous.

The remaining patrons were being questioned by six agents while two more and Agent White were speaking to the bartender and waitress by the bar.

"He just handed it to me. I thought it looked like funny money, so I took it over to the bar, and then I showed it to Joe. He slipped out before we could catch up to him."

The waitress looked tired and irritated as though she'd been through all this before.

One of the agents murmured something to her and she said "I don't know how tall he was. I didn't see him come in. He was wearing a muscle shirt, black hair, nice muscles ... not a body builder but nice ..."

At something else the agent said she scowled. "Do I have to? I've been working a fourteen hour shift and I'm tired. What about in the morning?"

The agent shook his head.

By the time the morning rolled around, the details wouldn't be fresh in her mind. The memory would fade. If they were asking for a sketch artist to do his work, they needed the freshest memory they could get.

Lois backed out of the bar as quietly as she could. Agent White wouldn't appreciate the other agents knowing she'd followed him to the scene and she'd learned what she needed to know anyway.

The Secret Service handled counterfeiting. Homeland security didn't. While Agent White might

simply be working two cases which happened to be geographically close, Lois had a feeling that the two were connected.

A missile strike in U.S. soil and suddenly Homeland Security is interested in the identity of a man who had passed a counterfeit bill five miles away?

Was the man they were looking for the pilot of a crashed ship? How many resources did the enemy have if they were able to field a commercial jetliner and some sort of smaller manned craft to invade U.S. airspace?

This didn't sound like the work of terrorists; the resources required to pull this sort of thing off required a massive infrastructure. This was the work of another country, maybe including a rogue nation.

As Lois was backing out, she stumbled a little. Glancing down she saw a dark shape lying in the grass.

Glancing around, Lois bent down to pick it up. The outside of it was charred and flaked away at her touch while the inside looked to be entirely unharmed.

Before she could look through it, she heard footsteps heading for the door. Slipping silently around the corner, Lois stood with her back to the wall, then peered around the corner when she heard a man's voice.

It was one of the dark-suited agents.

"It's just like the bills the others had," he was saying into a satellite phone. "As soon as we get a composite picture, we'll start handing them out. For the moment the suspect is described as being a six foot one and hundred ninety five pounds, dark haired Caucasian male with a slight Asian appearance around his eyes. He is described as being muscular and wearing a white tank top and ripped gray dress pants."

The agent listened to the phone for a moment before saying, "We'll cordon off the area. We'll find him."

With that he snapped the cell phone shut and headed back inside the building.

Fingering the wallet in her hand, Lois realized that this story was much more involved than she had realized.

Stepping into the brightly lit store, Clark kept his head turned away from the security cameras. The bars on the windows and the Plexiglas around the sales counter were just another sign of the general distrust this world had.

The bright fluorescent lights washed the color out of everything, painting everything in pale overtones. Clark could hear the persistent buzzing of the lights.

The old man behind the counter leaned forward and spoke into a microphone.

"What do you have for me?" he asked.

Reluctantly, Clark slipped the watch off his wrist and the ring off his finger. Lana would be furious: they had both been gifts from her, ways to ensure that he fit in better with her crowd. The suit had been a gift as well, hand tailored and handsome.

Now it was all gone.

"I'll give you thirty dollars for the watch," the man said. "Three hundred for the ring."

Clark grimaced. They were each worth at least four times that in his time, and from what he knew of this time, things were more expensive, not less. The beer had cost four dollars, more than twice what he would have paid back home.

"Ok," he said.

It was the only choice he saw. His clothing made him conspicuous, but he didn't see himself stealing clothes, and if he waited for a Salvation Army outlet to open in the morning he might be taking clothes from those who desperately needed them.

Without identification he couldn't find a job, and even if he'd still had his wallet, the money inside would have been no good.

The old man slid a clipboard into the depression under the window then pushed the drawer out. "I'll need a copy of your driver's license and social security number."

Clark froze.

"I lost my wallet," he said.

"Federal law prohibits these sorts of trades without identification."

"You can't make an exception?"

"Is this property stolen?"

Clark shook his head numbly. "They are the last things of value I've got in the world."

The old man said, "The Company can't help you." He hesitated then said, "Me now, I've been needing a watch for a while now. I've got no need for the ring, but I can give you fifteen dollars."

Clark nodded reluctantly. A moment later he had his ring back and a ten and five ones. The old man was admiring the watch which was now on his wrist.

As he left the pawn shop, Clark stared at the ten dollar bill. They had Alexander Hamilton on the ten dollar bill here? Then where was Grover Cleveland?

Lois scowled as she flipped through the wallet. This had to be some sort of joke. Money that felt real but was obviously counterfeit, credit cards that looked real except for the Lexcorp insignia where it should have said MasterCard, Visa or American Express.

She stared at the driver's license. Handsome, dark haired, listed as being six foot one, one hundred ninety five pounds- he could have easily been the suspect the federal government was looking for.

The driver's license was almost certainly a fake, but Lois couldn't understand why anyone would do it. Even Iraqi schoolchildren knew about Clark Kent and Superman. No one would be foolish enough to use a name that was that obviously fake, and then repeat it on credit cards and video club memberships.

Even now as a semi-celebrity she had to go through repeated credit checks, people staring at her driver's license and thinking she had a false ID.

She hadn't even bothered trying to smoke as a teenager, and she hadn't bought alcohol herself until she was years older than twenty one.

Any competent terrorist would know better than draw attention to himself by adding unneeded complications to his story.

In the dark the money felt real. The pictures of unfamiliar presidents on the bills though made them almost impossible to pass, which defeated the purpose of making counterfeit bills.

There were pictures inside the wallet as well, pictures of the handsome man in the picture with a hard looking blonde. She was smiling, but in none of the pictures did it seem to reach her eyes. The man on the other hand looked lonely and a little lost in the pictures.

Lois could almost credit the idea that this might be another unfortunate soul like her, trapped by thoughtless parents with a name that would follow him throughout the rest of his life, except for one unarguable fact.

The address on the driver's license was in Metropolis, New Troy.

The convenience store wasn't any chain that he recognized, but it was open at this hour of the night, and it would have what he needed. He'd buy a newspaper and a map of the United States so that he could see just how jarring the changes from world to world had been.

The teenager behind the counter looked up at him will dull eyes then returned to listening to whatever music was coming from his headphones. Clark could hear it, and to his ears it barely qualified as music.

He glanced around the store until he found the newspaper and the map. As he approached the counter he noticed a large display under glass.

Different garishly colored tickets in different denominations sat beneath the glass, all promising big winners.

Glancing down at the glass, Clark felt a moment of guilt. It was somewhat better than stealing, and he didn't see any other way to get the money he needed to blend in and get everyone home.

"Can I get a scratch off?" he asked. Setting the map and newspaper aside, he pointed to a seven dollar ticket, a five dollar ticket and a two dollar ticket.

Altogether he would win a little more than a hundred dollars ... enough surely to get a pair of pants and a shirt, and certainly enough to buy more tickets if he needed them.

The clerk handed him back the scratch off tickets and a single dollar bill.

Clark quickly used his thumbnail to scratch the numbers off, winners as he'd already seen.

He handed the tickets back to the clerk who shook his head. "They shut the computers off at eleven. You can still buy tickets but you can't collect on them until tomorrow morning at 7 A.M."

Clark stared at the clerk for a moment, and then gritted his teeth. "Is there any place nearby that'll sell clothes that early?"

"There's a Wal-Mart three miles down the road. You can't miss it."

Clark handed the clerk his last dollar and took the newspaper.

Stuffing the tickets into his front pocket, he stepped out into the darkness.

"Just take a look at it," Lois said.

Bill Bryerson was an old friend, formerly a member of the Treasury Department and now in the private sector.

"I already have," he said. "These bills are made with government paper, and they have 1990's-era anti-counterfeiting measures. If they'd chosen to put the correct pictures on the bills, they'd have been very difficult to detect."

"I don't understand why they would pick Grover Cleveland," Lois said.

"Grover Cleveland's picture was actually on twenty dollar bills made between 1918 and 1928. Why they chose to put it on ten dollar bills I don't know."

"So someone in the government would have to be involved with this?" Lois asked.

"It's a pretty sophisticated hoax," Bill admitted. "The driver's license is good work, the bills are excellent ... it's hard to understand why anyone would go to this much trouble and then ruin it all by sticking an obviously fake name and address on everything."

"Maybe it's a challenge," Lois said. "They are taunting us with what they can do. A new sort of terrorist threat- that they can be anywhere or anyone

and we wouldn't know. Maybe they want to damage our economy without going to too much trouble."

"They aren't going to damage the economy with one wallet," Bill said.

Lois suspected they had a great deal more than one wallet. This was just a warning shot, something to give to the press and stir the country up.

It left her in a quandary. She couldn't return the wallet to the military without implicating herself, but she couldn't report on it for the same reasons, not without some sort of broader picture to back it up.

She took the plastic zip lock bag holding the wallet and its contents from Bill and slipped it into her purse.

"When are you going to tell me what this is all about," he asked.

She grinned at him and said, "You'll see it on the news when I'm ready."

Sooner or later she'd get the real story. On the surface, it might seem like nothing. Someone could have made a mistake and misplaced a plane from Ecuador, and the wallet could be a practical joke someone with money was playing.

The fallen wreckage could actually be from a spy satellite, as the agent had claimed, with the claims about a launch being fraudulent or mistaken.

Lois had never been a conspiracy theorist. The sort of theories spun by most conspiracy nuts required a government that was far too competent, far too knowledgeable and far too good at keeping secrets to exist in the real world. She'd worked too long in the military and with government agencies to believe any of it.

No large group of people was able to keep a secret indefinitely. The federal government had leaks in it, leaks that were an ambitious reporter's bread and butter.

What made all of this credible was the very lack of resources available to the government. Homeland Security's assets were spread thin, and they wouldn't be spending so much time on all this if they didn't believe there was something to it.

Lois frowned. She'd take the wallet to Agent White and see what he had to say about it. If it was important, she didn't want to hinder an investigation which might be important for national security. Agent White was an old friend of her father's and he was unlikely to arrest her off hand.

She might get something out of him as well.

Somewhere, someone was going to crack, even if it was just an orderly in a hospital holding the arrested passengers.

Lois frowned and made a mental note to follow

that lead up as well. Not everyone would have signed non-disclosure forms, and if she had to talk to janitors and orderlies who might have overheard something, that's what she would have to do.

As she stepped out into the chilly but still humid darkness, she realized just how late it was. Perhaps it could all wait for the

morning. She'd been running on a caffeine high, but from experience she knew that she'd reach her limits soon enough.

She'd do better work in the morning.

The roof of the Wal-Mart was huge. More than three times the size of the largest Costmart Clark had ever seen, the Wal-Mart was amazing. The store itself covered almost seven acres of land ... almost a quarter million square feet, and the parking lot covered acres more.

He hadn't bothered going in. Anyone looking like him with no money would attract attention. But from here, with X-ray vision, he already knew exactly where he would go and what he would buy when he finally got his money.

It was amazing, the sheer variety of what they had to sell. They even had atlases, and from a poor angle it looked like he was right.

There was no Gotham, no Metropolis, no Keystone City or Central City. Where Smallville should have been was a town called Wichita.

The paper itself was filled with story after story of terrible things happening. War, terror, death. His world had had them too, but there hadn't been this feeling of overwhelming despair in people. The people of this world had given up freedom in the name of security, and Clark couldn't quite understand why.

There were references he still didn't understand. What exactly was 9-11? The paper made reference to some sort of attacks, but there never seemed to be any real details.

Who was Superman? There wasn't anything about him in the paper at all, not that Clark would have expected there to be. He certainly wasn't in the comic section. Most of the comic strips were familiar at least, although for some reason they seemed to be reprinting old Peanuts strips.

What had happened to turn this world so dark? Places like New York had always been unfriendly, but there was a certain fear in the eyes of policemen that hadn't been there in his world.

Worst of all was an almost insignificant detail that Clark had almost missed.

According to the header of the paper, it was no longer 1993. It was 2008. He'd been transported

fifteen years into the future, transported not only across worlds, but across time as well.

He was responsible for the lives of the two hundred or so people who had been on that plane. Every one of them was as displaced as Clark, but they didn't have the options he had. There would be no flying off into the sunset if everything went wrong.

He had an uneasy feeling that the passengers on that flight might just disappear if it was inconvenient for the government to admit they existed. The thought of innocent people being held in some foreign prison and subjected to humiliation and worse for information they did not possess bothered Clark deeply.

Leaning against the comparative warmth of a heating unit, Clark stared blindly into space. He didn't know how he arrived in this place, and he had no idea how to get back. Yet he had people who were depending on him to do just that.

Feeling helpless was one of the things Clark hated most. He'd felt that way with Lana from time to time, but this was different.

He could probably find the passengers, and he might even load them onto the plane. He'd have a hard time leaving US airspace without some sort of confrontation. Carrying the plane, he would not be able to stop missiles from obliterating the people above him.

Clark was many things ... reporter, linguist, occasional good Samaritan. One thing he was not was a mechanic. Even if the plane hadn't been completely taken apart looking for bombs or drugs or whatever the government was looking for, he couldn't repair the engines.

His mind raced for what seemed like hours. At last, exhausted, he pulled the papers over himself and huddled by the heating unit, lulled by the dull roar of its motors. Although the cold of the wind didn't bother him, he wanted to make himself as invisible as possible to helicopters flying overhead or worse yet spy satellites.

It made his stomach clench to think of what might be staring down at him.

As he fell asleep, he began to dream of fire and terror and death, his eyelids flickering with the knowledge that it was all going to be his fault.

Wearily, Lois dropped her luggage to the floor outside her door. The security guard in the lobby was new and hadn't recognized her, and she'd had to go through the whole rigmarole of identifying herself. It was to be expected when you didn't return home for months at a time.

Living in a high rise apartment building was expensive, but Lois appreciated the added security. With her being gone for months at a time, and with the sort of enemies she occasionally made, it was worth every penny to be able to go to sleep at night with some feeling of safety.

Slipping the key in the lock, Lois wondered how long it would be before she'd be able to find out which hospital the sick passengers had been sent to. That would give her what she needed to find someone to leak information.

Those were tabloid techniques, but they worked.

All of it assumed that her meeting with Agent White didn't yield anything substantive.

It wasn't until Lois was pushing the door open that she realized that something was wrong. She typically kept her apartment spotless while she was away. It made for less embarrassment at the thought that the maintenance people might have to come inside and see her place as being an unholy mess.

The fact that the door met resistance as she was pushing it open, as though it was pushing something fallen to the floor, told her all she needed to know.

Someone was inside.

As Lois stepped cautiously back, she saw a familiar face peering around the edge of the door.

She relaxed for a moment. Hilda was a video editor with CNN. When Lois was out of town she often checked up on Lois's apartment as she lived two floors down with her significant other. Even with the security measures in place with the building, it was important to have someone to look in periodically.

As Hilda backed away, Lois scowled. The room inside was dark and things were tossed on the floor. No one had even made a token gesture at trying to conceal what they had done; her couch cushions had been slashed and the stuffing pulled out. Her computer was gone.

What had been a beautiful apartment with an amazing nighttime view of Washington was now a wreck.

"What happened?" she asked Hilda, glancing down the hall before picking up her bags.

"Federal Agents came by the office and confiscated your computer. I tried telling them you hadn't even been back in three months, but they wouldn't listen. They confiscated all the footage from the plane too."

Lois stepped inside and wearily closed the door behind her. "They didn't say what it was all about?"

Hilda shook her head. The young woman looked worried. "They said they had a Federal Warrant."

Scowling, Lois said, "I didn't do anything in Iraq that wasn't approved by the military, and I just got into town."

"They wanted everything we had on the plane landing. I overheard some of the bosses saying that they'd hit the other networks too."

Lois walked slowly around the room before heading back to her bedroom. She winced at what she saw there.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to let me sleep on your couch?"

Hilda nodded. "Jake is out of town at a medical conference."

"Why were you here in the first place?" Lois asked. "I thought you only checked my place on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

"I wanted to warn you. I think they are going to want to confiscate your laptop and the footage in your cameras."

Lois smirked. "Obstructing justice? I hadn't realized you had a wild side."

"My uncle works for the ACLU," Hilda said. "I think you can make a case ..."

Lois nodded. "Let's get out of here."

The thought that someone had probably tapped her telephone occurred to her. If they'd heard her ask for a place to stay, she'd know soon enough.

Moving toward her kitchenette, Lois sighed. The drawers were open and silverware was spilled across the floor. It was almost as though someone was angry and was intentionally working to make her life harder than it had to be.

It took a moment to find what she needed in the middle of all the mess. A specialty post office container, correct postage ... Lois pulled the wallet from her purse and dropped it into the container. There was a mail slot on the first floor. Mailing the package to herself would keep it out of her hands for a period of several days. The last thing she wanted at this point was to be caught with it on her person.

She sighed and headed to her bedroom for a change of clothes. It was going to be a long night.

Clark tried not to look nervous as the clerk handed over the money. He hadn't realized that he would have to wait several minutes while the convenience store safe released the money bit by bit.

For security, he bought three more winning tickets. A couple of hundred dollars wasn't going to last him long, not if he was going to buy a set of clothes and find a place to stay.

He'd have to find a place to hide during the day. Not only was someone more likely to see his face in

the light of day, but he couldn't simply fly from place to place. He'd be confined to walking, unless he found a cab.

Using a cab would not only leave a trail, it would require him to use even more of the limited funds he already had. It made him uneasy to cheat at the lottery this way; he had a feeling that his parents would have thought it was wrong. He just didn't see any other way to make the money that wouldn't hurt even more people.

He could use his abilities to find gold easily enough, but who would he sell it to? With no identification, even pawn shops wouldn't take it. The same would apply of diamonds or buried treasure from shipwrecks.

Without an identity he couldn't buy a car, own a home, or even sell what little property he had.

Sighing, Clark bought a fourth ticket. When the last

of the money was handed to him, he headed out of the convenience store.

The sun had already been up for an hour. Luckily he'd found a convenience store closer to the Wal-Mart. He knew exactly what he was going to buy, but he had to hurry. He had no idea how long it would be before the average police officer was given his description. It depended on whether his problem the night before was treated as a simple counterfeiting case, or if the government of this world was as paranoid and authoritarian as they seemed.

He stiffened as he heard the sound of a police cruiser nearby. Stepping into an alley, he checked quickly to ensure that no one was looking, and then he allowed himself to fly quickly through the alley. He grimaced at the dust which was rising from his passage, but he didn't see that there was much else he could do. He wouldn't feel better until he was back into normal, undamaged clothing.

Lois woke groggily. Morning light was filling the window, and her back ached from the unaccustomed position she'd been sleeping in on Hilda's couch. It was funny; she'd slept on the ground many times and had less pain than one night back at home in Arlington. She'd assume that it was old age, but at twenty six she should still be too young to have much pain.

Of course, she was still bruised from where the bullet had hit her body armor. It left her feeling stiff and old.

The bullet wounds she'd been hospitalized for in the past sometimes ached when the weather was bad too. One had left a small scar on her hip, and the other

had struck her thigh. Taking risks sometimes meant paying a heavy price, although Lois liked to think that she had become better at dodging since then.

She blinked as she realized that Hilda was sitting at a desk, staring intently at her laptop. Her mouth felt disgusting and her eyes felt crusted over with sleep. Of course, Hilda hadn't been running on fumes after almost fifty hours without sleep either.

Lois never had been able to sleep on international flights.

"Come look at this," Hilda said, gesturing toward her without looking up.

Reluctantly Lois pushed herself out of bed, wincing as she realized that her bruises had bruises and her body was protesting. She could use a few days to recover, and if the day were more normal she'd have insisted on it.

With everything that was going on though, she couldn't afford the time.

She walked unsteadily over toward Hilda, who still hadn't looked at her.

"What does this look like to you?"

Lois stared at the screen, which had a video capture from her report the night before.

"It looks like a man is hanging from the plane," she said. "It's got to be an optical illusion."

Hilda clicked, and several other screen captures showed, one of which had been taken when the plane was passing in front of a search light on the top of the Air traffic control tower.

Lois leaned forward, staring. There WAS someone hanging from the plane.

There had been no reports of a body found on the tarmac, so whoever it had been must have somehow gotten away. That this made him some sort of combination of Steven Seagal and Rambo didn't outweigh the evidence on the video.

Action heroes were apparently real.

Money didn't go as far in this time as it had in Clark's own, despite the claims on the Wal-Mart signs. At least he had a pair of black jeans and a long sleeved black twill work shirt and jacket. With a black baseball cap to help conceal his face in case he was seen by cameras, he felt a great deal better. He could be a construction worker or a line man.

Still, in Washington D.C., the best way to blend in was to wear a business suit. Now that he had these clothes, he had the beginnings of a means to get what he needed. It was only a matter of finding a taxi and hitting a few more convenience stores.

In the meantime, Clark checked the morning edition of the newspaper. The landing of the airplane

was banner headline, and as he quickly scanned the story, he noticed that the passengers had been arrested and held by members of the Department of Homeland Security. There was no information on where they were being held.

However, the passengers who'd had heart attacks had been air lifted to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

That would be enough to start. Given his abilities, he'd be able to find out more when he reached there.

Glancing around, Clark stepped down a set of stairs toward the subway. He wrinkled his nose at the smell of old urine and body odors. He suspected it would have been noticeable even without his special abilities.

As he waited for the train, he kept glancing toward the sack he held in his hand. He'd managed to find a Superman comic, although the store hadn't sold very many of them. He'd noticed far more T-shirts and even some sort of movies on discs.

It was a little scary that they all had the same symbol he'd found on his baby blankets. A simple shield surrounding an S shape. It had piqued his curiosity, along with the comments in the bar from the man who'd talked about a reporter who could fly and was super strong.

Stepping into the train and sitting down, Clark pulled the comic book from its plastic packaging. The prices shocked him. In Metropolis you could buy entire novels for the cost of a single comic book here.

The costume was garish. Although the cape seemed like a nice touch, Clark couldn't understand how anyone would wear their underwear on the outside of their outfit. It seemed like some sort of strange kinkiness for a kid's comic book.

Clark slowly opened the book, almost dreading what he would find there.

The sick passengers were being held at the Walter Reed Army medical center, and the government wasn't allowing any press in to see them. Lois wasn't going to let that stop her. She had spent too much time tracking down leads in places where she'd been shot at to worry about breaking into an Army hospital.

She even had an excuse to be there. Private Chalmers, the man she'd helped rescue in Iraq, was being airlifted in today. She'd promised to come and see him. If she should happen to wander on her way to or back from that visit, she couldn't be blamed.

A shower and more coffee had done wonders for her, and Lois now felt ready to face the world. After the events of the night before, there was nothing that was going to surprise her.

Nothing at all.

In some ways the old motel reminded Clark of some of the third world ghettos he'd seen in his travels around the world. He could smell the rot and the black mold, and a glance inside with his special vision showed holes in the walls and ceilings and scene after scene of hopelessness and despair.

Veterans sat on benches outside the building, staring listlessly. According to an article in the paper, these people had been shelved by the military. From what Clark could see, people were missing limbs, and some had a familiar look in their eyes of misery.

The building wasn't even on the main campus at Walter Reed. It sat across the street, forcing veterans to stagger across a busy road in order to get the treatment they needed.

Clark walked across the road himself quickly, avoiding looking in the soldiers' faces. He wanted nothing so much as to write an expose about this place, to give a voice to the individual soldiers who had been trapped in a bureaucratic morass.

It wasn't in his nature to stand by and do nothing, yet this wasn't his world and these weren't his people. There wasn't anything he could do to help them, and it was painful.

The sounds of sirens in the distance made him stiffen, until he saw the source.

Five buses painted white, with windows blackened out, were coming toward the hospital. As the first of them turned into the main gate, Clark made his move, dashing onto the grounds faster than the human eye could see.

The place was huge, with a building labeled Psychiatric Services to his left and another building ahead. The main hospital was to his left, more than five hundred feet from the entrance.

Seeing a man struggling to push his wheelchair uphill, Clark walked up behind him and said, "Would you mind if I pushed you a while?"

The man glanced back at him and shrugged. "If you don't think it's too much trouble."

Clark watched as the buses pulled to a halt before the hospital. He was horrified as doors opened and men carrying stretchers began pulling wounded soldiers from the buses.

"Does this happen often?" he asked the soldier.

"Three times a week," the man said. "Rain or shine. Fresh out of Iraq or Afghanistan."

Clark pushed the man up the hill and said, "How far do you have to go?"

"Today? About a mile." The man glanced back at him and said, "But for right now I have to go inside.

We'll have to wait for the new guys."

Together they stood in the sunlight, quietly watching as the buses were unloaded. Clark felt sick and queasy. The wounded just seemed to keep coming, and the thought of what they must have been through was difficult for Clark to take.

"Do you have family here?" the man who was Clark was pushing asked.

"No, I'm a reporter," Clark said absently.

"They're closing this place in a couple of years. What's left to report?"

"They brought three people here who were passengers on that plane last night," Clark said quietly. "I'd like to find out a little more about them."

As the last of the wounded were wheeled inside the hospital, Clark and the other observers stood silently for a moment as an impromptu sign of respect.

"Good luck," the man said. "The top brass has them holed up in the cardiac ward on the third floor with guards and everything. They say that two of them didn't even serve in the military."

"One did?" Clark asked.

"Hell if I know. Scuttlebutt is that the brass is being pretty secretive about the whole thing."

"You aren't worried about talking to reporters?"

"I wouldn't give away national secrets," the man said, "But if it wasn't for those boys with the Washington Post, things wouldn't be changing around here."

From what Clark could see, a lot of things needed changing.

For a moment he fantasized that he was the one wearing the red and blue suit, that he had the power to change things. The hero in the comic books had powers very similar to his own, and he could almost imagine what it would be like to be free to fly during the day.

To be idolized as a hero yet be free to live some sort of a normal life. The Superman comic hadn't given him much information. Most of it had been filled with outlandish fights against outlandish villains, and there had been very little about the hero's personal life. The abilities and the insignia were hauntingly familiar, and if Clark squinted he could almost imagine himself being depicted in the outfit.

If only the real world worked that way. If only he could be loved instead of feared for what he could do.

If only he could make a difference. At home at least he could write a scathing series of articles about conditions here, but apparently someone else had already done that.

The feeling of helplessness was galling.

Private Chalmers didn't look much better than when Lois had last seen him a few days before. Lying unconscious and terribly still, he looked half dead. Lois scowled and felt guilty. She'd have to remember to visit in a few days when all this was over.

The cardiac unit was on the third floor of the hospital, which was convenient, as Private Chalmers' room was on the same floor.

Lois walked with her head held high toward the nurses' station. She pushed open the doors leading into the cardiac unit, and she didn't slow down as she noticed the armed guards standing outside two rooms down the hall.

In these situations it was important to look as though you knew where you were going.

As Lois approached the soldiers, she decided against trying to get in to see the passengers. She knew the type of men who did this sort of work from her time in Iraq, and all haranguing them would get her was a trip to the brig.

The people to talk to would be the janitors, the people who brought them food, the underpaid and frustrated members of the hospital underclass who might be swayed by the allure of the spotlight.

It would have been easier in a hospital not owned by the military. That was undoubtedly why Homeland Security had brought them here. The other, healthy passengers had been placed in better secured areas, and the government wasn't telling anyone where it had put them.

Lois walked past the soldiers, trying to look at them with the appropriate amount of curiosity that any passer-by would have. Not looking at them at all would have looked suspicious.

As Lois passed the soldiers, she saw a flash of movement from the rounded security mirror on the ceiling. Two men in black suits were coming down the hallway and would soon turn the corner.

Although the security guards hadn't seemed to recognize her, Homeland Security was likely to be more observant. Lois had a recognizable face, and she'd been in footage from Iraq that most Homeland security workers would likely have seen.

Glancing to the room to her left, Lois noticed that the door was open and the room was empty. She stepped inside and gently pushed the door closed behind her.

Lois had no doubt that the rooms on both sides of the prisoners' rooms were empty. She had to hope that the guards weren't fully aware of just who was in every room on the floor.

She leaned against a door and strained to listen as the two men made their way down the hallway.

"They aren't conscious yet," one man was saying into the phone. "We can't even be sure that this Evans guy really is military. His paperwork was just as phony as every other passenger on the plane."

The man stopped outside Lois's door and she tensed.

"The fingerprints do match, but we've already contacted our Lieutenant Evans in Georgetown, and he'll be meeting with us this evening. Yes ... like the others."

Lois heard the snap of a phone closing followed by the man saying to his companion, "I wish I knew what the hell was going on with all of this."

The other man mumbled his agreement and they continued on their way down the hallway.

Was that the reason everyone had been arrested? Every single person on the plane had phony documentation? If that was the case, then there was more to this story than met the eye.

The men at the metal detectors were checking driver's licenses. Reluctantly, Clark parted ways with the soldier in the wheelchair. He didn't really need to get inside the building anyway, given his abilities. All he needed was a suitable angle and he would be able to see what he needed. With a little focus, he'd be able to hear what he needed to hear as well.

All he needed was an out of the way place where he could concentrate without being found. His best bet was the psychiatric services building directly south of the main hospital building.

He started to turn toward that building when he noticed the black Government Issue cars heading in his direction. In the distance, he heard helicopters, and the distinctive buzz of agents whispering into radios.

Someone had spotted him.

Clark stepped around the corner of the building and as soon as he realized there were no cameras, he flashed across the distance to the area behind the building. He had to hope that the glare from the sun would disguise him from the cars passing on the street below. Luckily, most people never really looked up much.

He couldn't move at supersonic speeds so close to a building; the sonic boom would shatter glass and injure people. Unless he was willing to give them even more confirmation of what he could do, he had to move fast.

His best bet was to hide.

The sound of marching boots caught Lois' attention. She'd waited until the men in black were out of sight before leaving the room and retracing her

steps.

She slipped around a counter behind a deserted nurses' station and bent as though to tie her shoe.

The sound of footsteps stopped on the other side of the counter. "I want every room checked. Now hustle."

Something was going on. Lois realized that her best chance was to get back to Private Chalmer's room; she had permission to be there. Of course, if she'd somehow triggered an alert she'd just have to make up an excuse.

Her mind raced. Her best bet was that she'd gotten lost and had needed to use the bathroom. She'd stick with the story without elaborating much, and there wasn't a whole lot they'd be able to do about it.

If it was something else ... an anthrax threat or something worse, well, she'd make a call from Chalmer's room phone if she had to.

The problem was getting back. Lois waited for a long moment, and then heard the footsteps retreating. Peering over the lip of the counter, she saw soldiers' retreating backs.

A moment later she was up and moving at a quick walk. If she saw anyone she'd slow down. There were cameras at every junction and she couldn't afford to run.

Getting back to Chalmer's room was almost anticlimactic.

Unfortunately, moments after she slipped into the room, the door opened and a soldier looked inside.

"Visiting hours are over."

"It's only three P.M.!" Lois protested.

"We are having an emergency drill," the man said. "Please exit the hospital."

Lois nodded. Apparently they weren't looking for her. Had one of the passengers escaped? As cardiac patients they couldn't be very lively.

She was back out on the street shortly afterwards. Having retrieved her satellite phone, she waited the hour it took for the soldiers inside to call the all clear.

"Can you tell me what this was all about?" Lois asked, pulling a passing soldier aside.

The sergeant shook his head. "We've got our orders, Ma'am."

"If there's anything you could tell me," she said.

"Off the record?" he said quietly.

Lois nodded.

"We're tracking someone. One of our guys works for a security company, caught something on a convenience store camera matching an APB put out last night. Facial recognition programs put out a dozen hits, the last one here."

"Thank you," Lois said.

"If anyone asks, I'm congratulating you on your nomination for a Decoration for Distinguished Civilian Service."

"What?"

"Pulling Private Chalmers out of the line of fire, people noticed that. There's been talk about it for a while now for everything you've done for the men."

The Army liked that Lois had tended to side with the soldiers. It was hard not to when you lived with them for months at a time.

"Just doing my job," Lois said.

Eventually the furor began to die down. Lois sighed as she headed back for her rental car. She hadn't had a chance to learn nearly as much as she would have liked.

She'd called in the story about the evacuation, but it wouldn't end up as more than a line scrolling across the bottom of the screen. It was better than what the other networks had, and it would keep her editor happy.

The parking garage was almost deserted after the excitement of the past two hours. Families had returned to visiting their loved ones and the local crowd who would arrive after work hadn't yet arrived.

Lois started as her phone rang.

"Lane here," she said.

As Lois reached for the keys to the rental she listened to the telephone. "They what?!?"

Lois had been careful to cultivate contacts in several different branches of government; it came in handy to develop the relationships before she needed them rather than trying to develop them on the fly.

It was paying off now.

"They can't exhume her! Don't they require the family's permission?" Lois scowled. "Well they don't have it!"

Homeland security wasn't going to exhume the body of Lucy Lane, not if Lois could help it.

Hiding in the trunk of a car had seemed like a good idea. He'd chosen this car because the trunk was empty. All

the other trunks were filled with suitcases, luggage, and family gifts. Each was a sad legacy of a family story brought to a halt too soon. Some would stutter back into a semblance of their former lives; others wouldn't.

All of the occupied trunks were a risk. Even if Clark had been able to fit into them, the last thing he wanted was to face a trunk opened by a traumatized soldier's family with kids in tow.

This car was empty and sterile. It smelled like a rental. There was a risk that someone would come to

open their trunk before the pursuit was called off, but it was at least less likely to be someone with kids.

The thought that the car might be driven by a maniac had never occurred to him.

The sound of a woman cursing from the front seat was punctuated by sudden changes in direction as she spun her wheels quickly on the concrete of the parking lot.

All Clark could do was hold himself still in the trunk with one hand on the broken latch.

If he'd been vulnerable to car wrecks, he'd have been terrified. As it was, the woman in the front seat sounded a little intimidating.

She also sounded familiar. From this angle, all he could see was the back of her head. The conversation she was having on her telephone with her lawyer while driving at unsafe speeds didn't make a lot of sense either.

Why was she trying to get a court injunction against Homeland Security exhuming a sister who had been dead for five years?

Susan Nyugen was one of the best attorneys Lois knew; she'd been Lois's roommate when she'd gone to Columbia University. They'd gotten along famously. Susan had the same drive and determination that Lois had, with fewer moral qualms.

It made her the perfect lawyer, and as Lois pushed the button on her telephone, she felt a grim sort of satisfaction. The exhumation might take place, but whoever had ordered it wasn't going to enjoy the experience. Susan was like a bulldog that didn't know when to let go, and when she wanted to be, she was annoying as hell.

The Federal government had to serve her with a notice of the exhumation and they would not be allowed to exhume the body for forty eight hours after that. During that time Susan would be able to file an objection on behalf of Lois, as the only living family member.

She wasn't going to file the objection until Lois told her she'd been served notice. It wouldn't do to have the government looking into who had leaked the order.

Lois heard a beep from her telephone and cursed. The battery was low. After the report last night she should have charged it up. She'd used it again to report the evacuation this afternoon and to speak with Susan.

She glanced down to fumble through her purse for the other battery. It wasn't there.

She'd left it in the charger at home.

Glancing back up at the road, Lois gasped as she saw the car swerving into her lane. She screamed out

an obscenity and yanked the wheel rapidly to the side. There was a thump from the trunk, and Lois fought the wheel as the rental skidded onto the shoulder.

The other car didn't even slow down.

Lois gasped, her heart racing rapidly. She'd had nightmares about what it must have been like for Lucy and her parents that night. She turned and squinted, trying to see a license plate number, but the car was already disappearing over a hill. With the setting sun in her eyes, there wasn't any way she'd be able to see anything useful.

She frowned as something occurred to her. The sound she'd heard didn't sound like it had come from underneath the car or from the axle. It sounded like it came from inside the trunk.

But the inside of the trunk was empty. She hadn't bothered to put her video equipment inside, something she now regretted. Shots of streams of family members exiting the hospital would have been handy: by the time camera crews could have reached the area the evacuation would have been over.

Considering that Lois had seen helicopters in the air, she didn't imagine that news helicopters would have been welcome.

She felt her stomach clench as she realized something. The military had been looking for a dangerous fugitive in the area around the hospital and now her empty trunk had something inside it.

At this time of day there wasn't anyone on the road leading to the cemetery. This meant Lois was alone, possibly with a crazed killer in her trunk.

She didn't have a working cell phone and no one was around. If this were the movies, Lois would get out of the car, go to the trunk, open it and be hacked apart after an extended chase scene.

Lois had been to three tours in Iraq, she was a third dan black belt and she had pepper spray. She knew exactly what she was going to do.

She was going to drive to the nearest police station and pretend that nothing was wrong. She'd keep one eye in her rear view mirror in case he tried to push his way through the back seat. In no way would she act as though she knew he was there.

Putting the car in gear, she pushed the accelerator. The wheels spun uselessly.

She'd slid off the shoulder and into the mud by the side of the road. The car wasn't going anywhere.

Lois's gut clenched again. She glanced into the rear view mirror, convinced that someone was going to be rising out of the back seat at any second.

Taking a deep breath, she made a decision.

The horror movie solution it was. If he was armed she wouldn't stand a chance out in the open. Her one

chance was to catch him by surprise.

Cautiously she reached into her bag and pulled out her pepper spray. She unlatched the door as quietly as she could and pushed it open.

She cursed to herself as the interior light came on and the warning bell rang, telling her that she'd left the keys in the ignition. She pulled them out and shoved them into her shirt pocket.

Sliding out of the vehicle as quietly as she could, she crept down by the side of the car, watching the trunk carefully to see if it was opening.

Slipping the key into its slot, she held herself to one side and turned it.

It didn't connect. Whoever it was had damaged the lock. Lois was briefly happy that she always got the full insurance on these things. Given Washington traffic it always paid to be safe.

She tugged on the lid to the trunk only to find it solidly stuck. No matter how hard she pulled, the trunk would not open.

His best bet would be to hold on to the hood until she got fed up and went away. All she'd have to do was turn her back on the car and he'd be gone faster than she could see.

With the sun setting, he'd soon be able to fly anyway without worrying, so long as he was careful to stay away from sensitive areas.

He still didn't have any idea how to find out where the prisoners were being held. Agents weren't likely to mention it in casual conversations where he could overhear, and anyone who did know was likely to keep the whole situation as quiet as possible.

If this were his world he'd be able to do more. He had resources. He'd be able to use press credentials to get people to talk.

In his own world, the people at Star Labs would have a fair shot at finding a way to get people back through a portal in time and across dimensions. He had no idea whether this world had those sorts of weird scientists or not, and he certainly didn't have any idea how to get in contact with them.

It was ironic that he'd chosen to hide in the car of a member of the press, especially one he knew. Now that he knew who she was he realized that he'd seen the car before as well, back when she was first reporting on the airplane landing by the fence.

Maybe his subconscious was trying to tell him something.

Despite all his powers, he didn't know this world. He wasn't able to navigate the changes easily enough or fast enough to avoid being caught or revealing himself.

He needed help.

Lois Lane was a woman whose very name was associated with Superman. She was a reporter with the resources to find the passengers and the native knowledge of this world to help him do what he needed to do.

All he had to do was convince her that he was neither a murderer nor a terrorist. It was a daunting task.

He let go of the trunk and a moment later it flew open.

The sound of movement inside was a dead giveaway. Lois tried the trunk again, and it moved!

The moment the trunk opened, Lois held out the pepper spray and pushed down the button.

He was out of the trunk almost fast than she could follow, with his hand over his eyes wiping them. He didn't seem discomfited at all, although he reached out and grabbed the spray out of her hand.

She immediately twisted to get out of his grasp. She launched a kick at his midsection and it was like kicking a brick wall. He let her go, and she began to run.

A moment later he caught up to her and said, "I'm not going to hurt you."

He didn't try to touch her or stop her, but as quickly as she ran he kept pace with her. Other than the stench of the pepper spray when the wind picked up, Lois almost wouldn't have thought she'd sprayed him with anything worse than water.

The spray must have been defective. If Lois gouted of this she was going to complain-

"I was on the plane last night, the one you reported on."

Lois stopped suddenly. Running wasn't going to do her any good: he was faster than she was. Also, he looked vaguely familiar.

The fact that he was dressed in a nice business suit and wasn't moving in a threatening manner helped. Of course, Ted Bundy had been charming too, and anyone with money could buy a business suit.

Truth to be told, if he had a gun there wasn't anything she could do about it.

"Pardon me for feeling a little threatened by the creep hiding in my trunk," Lois said. She wasn't breathing hard; months of carrying eighty pounds for hours at a time had left her tough and strong. "But I'm going to reserve judgment on that."

"I need your help."

"Why would I remotely want to help you?" Lois asked. "What have you done for me other than jimmy the lock on my rental car?"

The man stood and frowned for a moment. His eyes weren't even red at all, although Lois could smell the pepper from where she stood just out of his reach.

"I can help you get your car out of the mud," he said. "Then you can drive off if you don't want to hear what I have to say."

"So you'll get behind and push," Lois said. "And then what?"

"Then I try to get you to help me find the other people on my plane."

Lois thought about it for a moment, and then nodded.

He held his hand out and said "My name is Clark Kent."

Lois grimaced. "Of course you are."

That's where she'd known him from, from the photo in the wallet. He was a federal fugitive, wanted for counterfeiting at the very least, and if Homeland Security was involved, possibly for terrorism.

"All right," Lois said. "Let's try that."

She marched back to her car, trying not to allow him to see the trembling in her legs. Looking as though you were in command of the situation was almost as important as feeling that way.

She got into her car and looked up expectantly at him. "Well?"

He stared at her for a moment then nodded. Heading to the back of her car he said, "Start the engine."

She turned the ignition. As the engine roared to life, she felt the back of the car rise and the vehicle slide forward slightly.

Jamming her foot onto the accelerator she watched as mud sprayed Clark whoever-he-really-was, covering him head to toe. For a moment the wheels spun, but then they found traction and the car began to move.

A moment later the vehicle was on the road. A moment after that Lois was watching Clark Kent's figure retreating into the distance.

She felt a moment of grim satisfaction. It served him right, hiding in the back of her car. As soon as she could get to a phone she was calling the authorities.

He didn't even look angry.

Agent White was waiting for her at the funeral home with the Exhumation order in his hand. Lois stared at it for a long moment, wondering why so much of it was blackened out and wondering if that was even legal.

It felt a little unreal, holding the paper in her hand.

"I'll have to have Susan look over it," she said. "I'll be filing a protest."

"You may not want to," he said. A distinguished-looking man in his early fifties, he'd always reminded her a little of Morgan Freeman.

"I'm not going to let you dig my sister up," she said. She knew she needed to tell them about the lunatic who had hidden in the trunk of her car, but she had to reiterate the point.

"We have reason to believe your sister may be alive."

Suddenly all thoughts of the lunatic disappeared.

"Do I look like I'm joking?" The older man shook his head. "I wouldn't do that to you."

Thomas White had been a friend of her father's for as long as Lois could remember. This wasn't the sort of cruel joke he'd perpetrate intentionally.

"I don't believe you," Lois said.

"I didn't believe it at first either," he said. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and flipped it open. A click of a button, and an image appeared.

Lois stared at the picture for a moment. It was a still picture of a woman in a hospital gown sitting at a table in a blank cinderblock room. The face was older than the one she remembered; the Lucy of her memory had been fifteen and angry. This was the face Lucy might have grown into if she had lived.

Staring at Agent White, Lois said, "I want to see her."

"You know how this works," he said. "Give us permission to exhume the body and we'll find out what we can."

"I'll sign a non-disclosure form," Lois said. "I won't legally be able to use anything I see unless I get it from some other source."

"You think we'd trust you with anything?"

"You trusted me enough to show me this," Lois said, gesturing with the cell phone. "I was investigated before I was embedded in my first unit in Iraq. I've seen a lot of things I didn't report, and I've been loyal."

"This changes things a little," Agent White said. "This calls some things about you into question."

"You mean it makes people think I'm involved in some sort of conspiracy to fake my own sister's death?" Lois scowled. "Why? What could I possibly gain?"

"That's the question that needs to be answered." He was silent for a moment. "You weren't involved in this, were you?"

Lois shook her head. "I don't even know what this is."

"It might be possible for you to meet with her, under supervised conditions, but you would have to sign a non-disclosure form."

"Would it be possible to have my lawyer look over everything?" Lois said, "Seeing as how I'm under investigation too."

Lois had no desire to end up in a secret prison in Pakistan for something she had no part of. Susan might be able to help her with that.

"We'd have to limit her exposure to some of the specifics of the case," he said. "We'd prefer for you not to discuss the issue with her in more than general terms."

Preventing leaks in Washington was an incredibly difficult task, all things considered, especially given the nature of Congress.

Lois nodded. "Could I borrow your phone?"

He handed her the telephone again, and Lois flipped it open. She dialed the number from memory.

"Susan, it's me. They served me the papers, but we might want to hold off on the protest."

The darkness suited Lois's mood. Taken to a nondescript warehouse, she and Susan Nyugen had then been placed in the back of a delivery van. Windowless, the only light came from a small crack at the base of the doors leading out the back. This left Lois sitting in the dark with Susan and a male guard.

She felt naked without her cell phone or other equipment. She hadn't even been allowed to keep her purse, and being frisked had been unpleasant.

Given the number of turns they were taking, the van was taking a circuitous route around the city. Lois had already counted four left turns, which should have taken them back to their starting point, and she suspected that the vehicle would be making other unnecessary changes in direction.

Susan was uncharacteristically silent.

"Thanks for doing this," Lois said. "Taking a Saturday off and everything."

Susan shrugged. "Thank me when you get my bill. How much longer do you think it will be?"

"Given traffic, at least two hours, assuming she's not actually being held in the city."

"Are you sure this is something you want to do?"

Susan asked "If you use anything you see in a story without clear documentation that you got the information from somewhere else, there won't be a great deal I can do for you."

"I have to do this," Lois said.

Susan pursed her lips. "You never did listen to advice."

"I listened," Lois said. "I just didn't follow it."

"All right," Susan said.

"Do you think they are agreeing to this to try to keep me away from the story?" Lois asked. It wouldn't

matter if it was true; this was something more important than any story. For a chance to see her sister again she'd have done almost anything.

If it turned out to be someone who just resembled her sister, Lois would be crushed.

"They need to establish whether or not she's a U.S. citizen," Susan said. "If she's not, then they can hold her without habeas corpus relief."

Lois glanced at her friend. In the darkness it was hard to tell, but it seemed as though her expression tightened.

"If she's not a U.S. citizen, they can lock her away indefinitely. The way things are now, if they can define her as an unlawful enemy combatant, they can deny her counsel, a speedy trial or appeals."

Lois nodded grimly. As bad as things could get for an American accused of terrorism, being a non-American was infinitely worse.

They were hoping that Lois would be able to expose Lucy as a fraud, which was one of the reasons they were undoubtedly letting her see her. Everything she said to Lucy would be recorded, with teams of experts looking for secret messages being passed back and forth.

Lois hadn't been sure that Lucy was even one of the passengers on the plane; Agent White could be working on a dozen different cases at the same time. The secrecy involved convinced her that her early gut feelings were correct. Everything was somehow connected in a way that she couldn't as yet see.

The truck finally pulled to a stop, and the soldier beside her looked up. From a bag by his side he pulled two black hoods.

Lois wondered whether they were trying to be intentionally offensive, or whether this was a way of intimidating both Lois and her lawyer, a way of saying that neither of them was really safe.

In the war against terror, sometimes the lines were blurred and distinctions were lost.

Many of the nightmares she'd had in Iraq had involved just this sort of hood, and Lois found herself resenting the implication.

She hesitated, and Susan stared at her for a long moment. "If you don't want to do this ... "

Grimly, Lois shook her head. In three tours of Iraq she'd thought she'd earned the trust of the United States government. She'd reported what she'd seen, but anything that they deemed important she'd left out of the reports. She'd never stepped over the line, not once.

She reached out and took one of the hoods. At least they weren't being handcuffed.

"You aren't allowed to hand her anything or receive anything from her. After the interview you will both be searched again." The man wearing prison gray looked bored, as though he did this every day, but Lois could see the concealed curiosity in his expression.

She nodded impatiently; she'd heard it all before. It was all she could do to focus on her breathing. Her stomach was in knots and she felt a little sick. A part of her dared to hope, although the rest of her knew better. The letdown was going to be incredibly painful. As much as she needed this to be true, this was the real world and people just didn't come back from the dead.

She'd

learned that the hard way.

"All right," the man said. Agent White was in another room behind a one way mirror sitting with Susan Nyugen, which left Lois almost alone.

Sliding a card through a reader by the side of the door, the guard then pushed a set of numbers, being careful to keep his body between the keyboard and Lois. A moment later the magnetic latches on the door opened, and he pushed the bar on one side of the door, opening it.

Lois stepped inside and the door slammed behind her with a resounding crash.

The room inside was bare; cinderblock walls, fluorescent lights set high in the ceiling and a small bunk attached to the wall to her left. In the center of the room was a table and two chairs; everything was bolted to the floor. It reminded Lois of prison cells she'd visited in the past, although the separate bathroom was an unexpected kindness.

A small door to the right presumably led to the bathroom and a picture window-sized mirror was to Lois's right.

There was a figure huddled under the blankets with its head facing the wall. In the harsh glare of the fluorescent lights, all Lois could see was a small patch of hair on the pillow.

Lucy always had been a heavy sleeper.

"L ... Lucy?" Lois said. Her throat was suddenly dry and it was hard to swallow.

She said it again, and finally the figure on the bed began to stir. It turned over, and Lois felt as though the world was tilting on its axis.

It was her. The face was older, the hair style was different, but this was the face of the sister Lois had loved and hated throughout her childhood.

Lucy blinked.

"Lois?"

Lucy scrambled out of the bunk and a moment

later she was charging toward Lois. A moment later she was hugging her tightly.

Despite all the rules to the contrary, Lois felt herself wrapping her arms around her sister and not wanting to let go.

"Where have you been all this time?" Lucy asked. "Everybody has been worried sick about you, vanishing like that."

Sitting across from her in the glare of the fluorescent lights wearing nothing but a hospital gown with her hair uncombed and unkempt, Lucy still looked amazingly beautiful. She'd grown, and while there were traces of the angry teenager she'd once been, this was a mature, composed woman.

"I could ask the same question of you," Lois said mildly. Finally seated, she couldn't help but stare at this woman who was like the sister she'd lost, but all grown up.

"I've been traveling," she said. For the first time she looked embarrassed. "Skipping from boyfriend to boyfriend. You know how it goes. I thought about coming home and staying with you until I found out what happened."

"What exactly do you think happened to me?" Lois asked.

"You were doing that story in the Congo and you went missing," Lucy said. "You have to call home. Mom and Dad are going to be worried sick!"

For the third time in one evening Lois felt her world begin to spin. "Mom, Dad?"

"I keep asking for my telephone call," Lucy said. "They must be going crazy not knowing what happened. Do you think it will be very long before they let us out of here?"

"Lucy," Lois said slowly. She held one hand tightly in the other in an effort to keep it from trembling. "Where do Mom and Dad live?"

"Here in Metropolis, where else?" Lucy stared at Lois for a long moment. "Are you all right?"

Lois felt her heart drop. Meeting her sister again should have been a gift, a blessing. She'd spent so many years blaming herself, regretting all the things that had been left unsaid between them. Yet staring into her sister's absolutely sincere expression, Lois could come to only one conclusion.

Lucy wasn't a terrorist or conspirator or whatever it was the government was trying to convince itself she was. The girl Lois had known would have been incapable of that, and she'd have been smart enough to come up with a more believable story.

Her sister was insane.

"You can't hold her here," Lois said as she stepped into the room on the other side of the mirror. "She clearly needs psychiatric treatment."

"It's been considered," Agent White said, looking up.

"She thinks she comes from Metropolis, in a world where the Batman is some weird urban legend in Gotham City and Charlton Heston is the President," Lois said. "A world where our parents are still alive but divorced and our father is some sort of mad scientist."

"I've heard crazier stories," Agent White said.

"She's delusional!" Lois said. "She's created a fantasy world where superheroes are real, and our parents never died. This is just her guilt over what happened expressing itself!"

"So how is it that we have a corpse in the ground with her name on it?"

"I don't know how she ended up alive," Lois said impatiently. "Maybe she ditched my parents when they went to pick her up. It wouldn't have been unlike her. They must have picked up some kind of hitchhiker on the way home. The bodies were pretty badly burned."

"There are no missing person reports matching a body like that of your sister."

"Tens of thousands of people go missing every year," Lois said. "If we knew where they were, they wouldn't be missing."

"She didn't know some pretty elementary information about you, Lois."

"Stuff that anyone would know ... like me going to Columbia or having Susan as a roommate, sure. But she knew the things that nobody else would know ... private things."

"Is there any way someone else could have found those things out?" Agent White asked. "Maybe your sister told someone before she died."

Lois shook her head. "So Lucy's hypothetical friend just happens to decide to go into international terrorism?"

"Then why doesn't she know where you went to school, who your roommate was, what happened to your parents?"

"It's all part of the delusion," Lois said. "If we grew up in Metropolis, then of course I went to Met U. She must have gotten the name Linda King from the old TV series. She always was more of a fan than I was. It was the one thing that she shared with mom and dad."

"Yet she claims to have never heard of Superman," Agent White said.

"What?" Lois asked. It hadn't even occurred to her to ask the question. If you were from Metropolis, of

course you knew who Superman was.

"She made fun of the whole notion of a man who could fly."

"Well," Lois said, "I'm not a psychologist, but I can't see how she's a danger to national security."

She glanced at Susan, who stood up. "I'll file papers in the morning seeking to have her committed to a psychiatric hospital. I'll also file a motion to have any charges dismissed."

"You haven't even heard what they are," Agent White said. "Do you really think if this was all that we had on her we'd have held her this long? We have an urgent need for cell space, and as much as it costs to house these people, it's in our best interest to get them out of custody if they aren't persons of interest."

"So what could my sister have possibly done that's a threat to the security of the United States?"

"Counterfeiting, forging identification, forging credit cards." Agent White slipped a pair of gloves on and began pulling objects out of a bag beside him.

Lois froze when she saw the familiar face of Grover Cleveland on a ten dollar bill. Her heart sank when she saw the credit cards made out to the Bank of Metropolis and Lexcorp.

"She'll also be up on charges of conspiracy," Agent White said. "According to the terms of the nondisclosure form, if you breathe a word of this to anyone outside this room, we have the right to lock both of you up and throw away the key."

"Conspiracy?" Lois asked, dreading what he was going to say next.

"Every person on that plane is telling the same cockamamie story." Agent White shook his head grimly. "Try to sell a jury on the idea that one hundred and ninety five people are all crazy, sharing the same delusion. They'll throw her ass in jail so fast your head will spin."

"Everybody on the plane?" Lois asked.

She glanced at Susan, whose face had settled into a noncommittal mask. "There isn't much of a chance that I'm getting my sister into some nice secluded hospital anytime ", is there?

Susan shook her head slightly while Agent White laughed.

"There's not much chance I'm going to see the end of this case before I retire, not if somebody doesn't break."

Glancing through the window, Lois saw her sister sitting on the bunk, staring disconsolately at her hands.

"There's got to be some kind of evidence as to where the plane came from," Lois said.

"We're working on it," Agent White said.

What had Lucy gotten herself into?

"If I can get her to turn State's evidence against the others, could she get a deal?"

"If she cooperates first," Agent White said. "I wouldn't wait too long. We're working on all the others."

Lois froze for a moment, and then said, "Lucy had a shoplifting conviction when she was younger. Her fingerprints are on file. Why would you need to dig up the body if you had proof of her identity already?"

Agent White's face settled into a neutral expression. "We had to be certain."

"Hoping to find an excuse to ship her off to Guantanamo?"

For the first time Agent White's face showed a sign of irritation. "I didn't have to tell you anything. As it is, I've pulled as many strings as I could because I thought you deserved to know."

"Because you thought I might be able to get Lucy to talk," Lois said.

"She didn't recognize me," he said. "Not even after I talked with her."

"It's part of the delusion," Lois said, "or the act. You don't exist in Superman's world, so she doesn't know you."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "DNA results will be available in a couple of days; this was a priority. If she's some kind of an imposter we'll know about it."

Glancing back at Lucy through the window, Lois wondered if she could possibly be wrong. Was this some sort of well prepared imposter? There had been a news story not so long

ago about a mother who identified the dead body of her son, only to learn that he was alive two days later when he'd returned from a trip. If someone could look so like another person as to fool their own mother ... ?

But this wasn't a body on a slab. The mannerisms, the voice ... it was impossible.

Lucy was alive and she was in trouble.

"I'll do what I can to help."

"You have to be careful what you say to them," Susan was saying. "They'll pretend they are just trying to get information on Lucy, but you can bet they are still trying to get information on you."

"So telling them I starred in a Girls Gone Wild video at an Al Qaeda training camp would be a mistake."

Susan glanced at her irritably. "Are you paying me to talk to myself?"

"Fine," Lois said. "I'll keep my nose clean. I'm due a few days off anyway."

"I need to be with you every time you do a session with Lucy," Susan said. "If anything comes to trial,

they are less likely to try something with me there."

"Lucy isn't a terrorist," Lois said. "I don't care what any of them think. The girl I knew didn't have it in her."

"It's been five years. How much do you really know about your sister? You left for college when she was eleven."

"I know enough to know that she wouldn't be involved in anything like this, not if she was in her right mind," Lois said sharply.

"They'll try to get under your skin, make you lose your temper. They can lie to you and it's perfectly legal. You need me."

Susan pulled up in front of Lois's building.

"I must be paying you a lot for door-to-door service," Lois said.

Susan pushed the gear shift into park and shifted in her seat to face Lois. "What are you going to do if it turns out that Lucy is guilty?"

"She isn't," Lois said stubbornly.

"Have you considered that this might be some kind of Superman cult?"

"They don't believe in Superman."

"They believe in Gotham and Batman. What if they are waiting for a Superman as a sort of messiah?"

"Like a Heaven's Gate sort of thing ... poisoned Kool Aid and the Hale-Bop Comet?"

"There were kids on that plane," Susan said. "You have to indoctrinate them pretty hard to get them to all follow the same line. Kids don't do politics much, but religion ..."

"That would make Lucy pretty important," Lois said.

"That would make you even more important," Susan said. "Like the Virgin Mary or something. Be careful around these people. You don't know what they are capable of."

"So you think they went up in a plane and tried to crash it, hoping that Superman would save them?" Lois laughed slightly. "You've been watching too much bad television."

"Be careful," Susan said. "My mother would never forgive me if I got you killed."

"How is she anyway?"

"Still cooks a mean spicy tofu soup."

"We'll have to get together when this is all over," Lois said. "I guess I'd better let you get home."

Susan nodded. "Jacob gets worried if I'm not home to read him a bed time story."

Lois nodded and grabbed the door handle. "We're scheduled to go back there the day after tomorrow. Apparently that's when they'll have the results they need to convince them that Lucy is actually my sister

and not somebody they can start waterboarding right away."

"Don't talk like that in front of them." Susan said sharply. "Get on their bad side and they can make your life a living hell."

Lois nodded shortly. "Tell that to my apartment."

As she stepped out of Susan's Lexus, Lois wondered briefly how it was that she and Susan, so similar in college in terms of determination and goals, had ended up living such different lives. Susan had a career, but she'd somehow managed to balance it with a husband and a child.

Lois on the other hand looked to always live alone. She wondered sometimes if she was still going to be in the same apartment fifteen years from now, living alone with only a wall filled with trophies and awards.

She grimaced as she thought of her apartment. She hadn't bothered to clean the place in the rush of the morning, and she thought irritably of all the cleaning she still had to do. The feds had torn the place apart and she hadn't bothered putting it right this morning."

Lois sighed and stepped up to the doorway. The doorman smiled at her and said, "Good evening, Ms. Lane. How was Iraq?"

Forcing a smile, Lois said, "About like you'd expect."

Heading inside, Lois headed for her mail slot. A service had been taking care of her mail and bills, but now that she was back the mail had resumed.

She scowled at the junk mail which she'd accumulated in only two days, then froze as she saw the familiar package.

The wallet had already come back to her. It was supposed to have gone to her P.O. Box, the one she kept for sources and other confidential business.

"Insufficient postage." Lois grimaced. She'd used old stamps and the prices had gone up again.

The last thing she needed was for federal agents to catch her with the same kind of counterfeit bills and identification that Lucy had. It would make her look guilty.

She needed to get more postage and resend it.

Trying not to glance around in case she was being watched, Lois put the package under her arm along with the rest of her mail and headed for the elevator.

Hitting the button, she tried not to fidget. There were cameras in the elevator, and she didn't want to give anyone reason to suspect anything.

Everything was so confusing. She didn't know what to believe. Susan's theory was insane, but Lois couldn't think of anything other than religion that would get two hundred people to stick adamantly to a

story that was obviously crazy.

Lucy had been a troubled girl growing up. Whereas Lois had learned to avoid dealing with her parents' arguments by burying herself in her work, Lucy had always had her heart on her sleeve. She'd rebelled, acted out, tried to get attention.

Toward the end, Lois hadn't been able to come home once without there being some sort of scene between her parents and her sister. If there had been time, Lois had no doubt that Lucy would have grown out of it, grown up.

Lois realized that she very desperately wanted to know her sister. Before she'd always been the annoyance, the embarrassment. There had been good times when they were younger, but there was so much that they'd missed.

Sisters were supposed to bond when they got older and out of the house. That was supposed to be their time together.

The door to the elevator slid open and Lois headed down the hall.

She was already opening the door when she realized that something was wrong.

The lights were on, the apartment was spotless, and she could hear the sounds of her shower running. Someone was in her apartment.

Given the day she'd just had, Lois wasn't in a mood to run.

For the first time Lois regretted not keeping a gun in her apartment. She'd become more comfortable with guns during her time in Iraq. She'd even practiced at a target range in preparation for a previous story about crime, and women defending themselves.

The weight of a gun would have been comforting. Instead, all she had was the dubious comfort of a malfunctioning pepper spray canister and a stun gun, which she hurriedly pulled from the bottom of her purse.

It was stupid going after the intruder like this; her safest bet would be to head for the elevator, inform security on the ground floor, and allow the police to deal with the matter.

Yet part of her was put at ease by the state of her apartment. It was hard to be afraid of someone who mopped the floor, polished the furniture and left the apartment frankly cleaner than Lois had seen it in a long time. She rarely had time to clean when she was on a story, and although she tried to clean before trips, it was never up to the standards her mother would have liked.

Leaving the door open behind her was part of her exit strategy. Lois's mind raced as she thought about

possible exits should she have to run: stairwells to the left and the right, the elevators. She'd traded keys with her intern, so she'd have a place to run to.

Lois carefully set her purse to the floor by the doorway. With any luck she wouldn't need it, and it would only slow her down if she had to run.

She glanced in the kitchenette and noticed that the intruder had mopped, and polished her black refrigerator until it shined.

They'd even washed the huge picture window, making its view of the city even more amazing than it had been before. Lois had chosen the apartment in part because of its spectacular views of the city. By night the lights of the city spread out like a sea of jewels.

Whoever it was hadn't managed to put everything back the way she'd had it, but they'd placed things as best they could.

Lois slipped into her bedroom and the sounds of the shower were louder from there. She scanned the darkened recesses of her bedroom before entering it; she'd hate to open the door to an empty bathroom to find herself attacked from behind.

The room was lit only by the light coming from the crack beneath the bathroom door, and by the lights coming from the expansive picture window. Everything seemed to be in order, from the queen sized bed to the shadowed nightstands to the closet with the mirrored doors.

Someone could be hiding inside the closet, but she'd hear the door sliding open in plenty of time to get out of the way.

Before she could get up the nerve to push the door open, the sounds of the shower cut off.

She kicked at the door, which flew inward with a crash.

Gaping at the naked torso in front of her, it took a moment for Lois to realize who her intruder was.

The man who'd hidden in her trunk was now coming out of her bathroom with his hands held high, an amused expression on his face and a towel which looked ready to slip off his hips at any moment.

Before she could open her mouth to say anything he held one finger to his lips and stepped backward into the bathroom.

He gestured, and Lois allowed herself a glance downward ... at the pile of electronics dumped haphazardly in her sink.

Lois recognized a few of them, having visited the Spy store on several occasions before undercover investigations. Some she didn't recognize at all, but from the sleek look of them she assumed they had to be cutting edge microphones.

She'd wondered if the government had bothered to

bug her apartment, but this seemed like overkill.

The man reached back into the shower and turned it back on. He stepped out of the bathroom, closing the door behind him. The apartment was once again wreathed in darkness, lit only by the light coming from under the crack in door.

He took a step toward her and Lois took a step back.

"Give me one reason I shouldn't call the police right now," Lois hissed.

"They've tapped your phone?" He shrugged.

"From the number of bugs I found when I was cleaning up the place, I'm guessing you are in almost as much trouble as I am."

"I'm not the fugitive running around breaking into people's cars and apartments," Lois said in a low voice. "Trying to pass counterfeit money...and whatever crimes you've been involved with."

"What ever happened to innocent until proven guilty?"

"You're standing in my apartment in a towel and I didn't let you in. That makes you look pretty guilty to me."

"I've got a cleaners' bill for you too," he said.

"Don't get cute!" Lois said, gesturing toward him with her stun gun. "You deserved everything you got, especially after you busted the lock on my rental car!"

He shrugged. "Well, I figured you owed me a shower at least."

"Only a crazed stalker takes a shower in strange people's houses without their permission!" Lois found her voice rising and when he glanced back at the bathroom door she lowered it again. "I'm going to call the police and let the courts decide what to do with you."

She should just open the bathroom door and speak into one of the microphones. Of course, they'd then find his wallet and would listen to whatever he had to say.

His being here at all was going to look very suspicious.

From his expression, she could see that he knew she was wavering. He spoke quietly, almost blandly. "What do you think they are going to do to your sister when they realize the truth?"

Lois froze. "What do you know about my sister?"

"I know where she and the others are being held. I know why they are being held."

If Lois could find things out from a secondary source, she could report on them. She'd have to be able to prove that the information came from somewhere else in a court of law, or she might be facing a long time in jail.

"How do you know those things?"

Lois's mind raced. His identification papers were the same as Lucy's. That meant he was a member of the cult or terrorist group or whatever it was.

"I was on the plane," he said. "I wasn't on the passengers' list."

"You dropped out of the plane when it was landing," Lois said. "Why would you do something so dangerous if it wasn't for some nefarious purpose?"

He looked startled. "I'm a reporter. I stowed away in the cargo compartment."

"That's a crime too. Penalties are up to a year in prison and a \$100,000 fine."

Lois had done a story on the stowaway back in 2003. He'd only gotten probation and a smaller fine, but if this man was really a reporter he should have known that.

He looked embarrassed. "We got off on the wrong foot. I should introduce myself. My name is Clark-

"Kent." Lois rolled her eyes. "Right."

If he thought she was falling for that one, he was dumber than he looked.

"Why don't I get dressed, and we can talk about this?"

"I'm pretty comfortable the way things are," Lois said. She allowed her glance to dip downward and was pleased to see him flush a little. "At least this way I know you aren't carrying a gun."

"My clothes are on the bed," he said. "You can check them if you'd like."

She glanced at the clothing on the bed, her body tensing. This would be a good time for him to rush her, while she was distracted.

He did nothing of the sort. Instead, his posture remained relaxed.

"Fine," she said after a long moment. She reached down and grabbed his pants, which seemed to be new and barely worn. She shook them a little and could feel no unusual weights.

She threw the pants at him and said, "Put those on."

He grabbed the pants and pushed his way back into the bathroom. A moment later he was back. Lois allowed herself a moment to be distracted by his chest before she realized he was gesturing for his shirt.

"Spoilsport," she murmured under her breath.

She could have sworn she saw him flushing again, although he couldn't possibly have heard her. She threw the shirt at him, and then watched as he slipped it on and slowly buttoned it up.

He stepped forward, and Lois stepped back. He was a large man and her apartment was small. He made it seem even smaller by his very sense of

presence.

Stepping to the side of her bed, he reached for her clock radio. Unplugging it, he marched back toward the bathroom and stepped inside. A moment later she heard the sound of the shower stopping and the sound of music from the radio starting up.

He'd selected an easy listening station, which was playing something soothing by Journey.

He stepped out and looked apologetic. "I'm not really comfortable with all of the new stuff."

Lois backed up through the doorway to her bedroom and headed for the couch. When he sat down on a chair, she returned to the hallway to close the door. Although she was still worried, it was hard to be afraid of someone who had mopped her floors and polished all her trophies.

When she returned she said, "Do you always clean up when you break into people's houses?"

"I grew up in foster care," he said. "And some of them were pretty strict about cleaning up. Now I tend to clean when I'm nervous." He stared down at his hands.

Why wasn't he trying to pretend to be Superman? Wasn't that the whole point of having a wallet filled with Metropolis references, of naming himself Clark Kent?

"Are you sure you got all of the bugs?"

He nodded shortly.

"There were cameras in that sink," Lois said. If the Feds were already on their way she needed to call. It would look highly suspicious that she was meeting with the cult leader in her own apartment.

"If they'd seen me, they'd already have been here," he said. "I'm pretty good at finding these things."

"They don't teach the basics of finding bugs in journalism school," Lois said. "Who are you really?"

"I did some freelance work in Nigeria for a while, working as a bodyguard. I picked up a few skills that have come in pretty handy over the years."

"So your parents just had a skewed sense of humor," Lois said.

She'd pretend to go along with it for the moment, but she knew he was lying. Any reporter named Clark Kent would have been commented on extensively, and she'd have heard about him long before now. The community of journalists was a relatively small and insular one, and her experiences with being named Lois Lane showed that small oddities were of big interest on slow news days.

Overcoming the prejudice of her name had required taking risks: Lois had been one of as few as nine embedded reporters while the rest of the reporting staff huddled in hotels and attempted to report the war

by telephone. Despite that, people still mentioned her name.

No reporter could have been named Clark Kent without getting at least some comment.

He shrugged. "I'm sure they didn't think it was strange at the time."

"So what kind of cult have you people gotten my sister involved in?" Lois asked.

She expected him to protest that it was a religion; most cultists were adamant about that. Instead he looked at her for a moment, and then shook his head.

"Is that what they are calling it?" he asked. "I suppose it makes sense in a way. A plane load of people land and start telling impossible stories, so you have to come up with some sort of reasonable explanation."

"What's your explanation, then?"

"What do you know about parallel worlds?" He leaned forward expectantly.

"I've seen Sliders," she said. At his look of non-comprehension she said "the television show? Jerry O'Connell, funny portals in the air ..."

He shook his head. "What about in reality?"

"It's science fiction claptrap," she said. "String theory suggests there might be ten or eleven dimensions, but entire alternate worlds? Besides, some people say string theory isn't even science. It can't be tested."

"What if I could prove to you that your sister's airplane came from an alternate reality?" He leaned forward and said, "Would you help me then?"

"Short of proving that you can fly, I don't see how you could." Lois paused. "You can't, can you?"

He hesitated for a long moment then shook his head. "I'm no Superman," he said. "I'm just here to help the people on that plane get back to where they belong."

"So how are you going to prove to me that you are from an alternate world?"

"I'm not. I'm going to tell you where to look. I'll leave, and I'll let you prove it to yourself. Then we'll get together and figure out what we can do about all of this."

"So that's it. You're just going to give me some information and then leave?"

"I didn't think you'd let me sleep on the couch," he said, "Although I'm told I'm a very good houseguest. I don't snore, and I clean up after myself."

Lois glanced around at the spotless apartment involuntarily. He gave her a look that was probably supposed to make her feel guilty, but Lois Lane had been approached by the best.

There was no way a strange man was going to

spend the night in her apartment, much less one that was unofficially a terrorist or worse.

"No," she said slowly.

When he looked up at her with those eyes, she couldn't help but feel a little guilty. She'd take the information from him, she'd look into it, and she'd go from

there.

At worst he was a terrorist planning the downfall of civilization. At the best he was a harmless lunatic being hunted down for his beliefs.

"Tell me what you've got," she said finally.

She'd prove to both him and herself that this was all a big delusion on his part, and then maybe they could get around to the real work of convincing her sister to renounce the cult, or whatever it was.

For Lucy, Lois would follow even a crazy man. The fact that he was good looking just made it all a little easier.

It had been a frustrating day. Clark Kent hadn't had nearly as much information as he'd liked to think, and all she'd managed to get from the biotech lab was that they'd had an order for twenty DNA comparisons to be rushed for Homeland Security.

Even getting that much information had been a Herculean effort, and a representative of the laboratory had explained that they didn't really have any names attached to the tests, only a series of numbers. The people running the lab tests couldn't reveal any information because all they knew were the test results, which were confidential.

According to Agent White, there had been one hundred ninety five people on the plane. Lois wasn't sure if that was just passengers, or whether that included crew as well. It seemed strange that they would only ask for DNA comparisons on twenty of them. Were those twenty people of special interest, or were other labs being used to spread out the amount of testing being done and speed the process?

Pulling up in the driveway, Lois shut off the ignition. The man calling himself Clark Kent had given her a list of five names. He hadn't bothered to explain how he'd come by the list, and Lois hadn't bothered to ask. If he'd come by them illegally, she'd find out soon enough.

Two of the names on the list were out of town. Lois had found their home telephone numbers using the internet and had called only to learn that they'd been flown to Washington D.C. and would be away for several days.

A third name had led to another gravesite; this one was already being exhumed. Apparently the family

hadn't chosen to fight the issue.

Lois tried not to think about what they were doing to the body in Lucy's casket even now. Maybe they'd be able to find out who it was, give it a real burial. It might mean actual closure for a family that had gone five years without any.

The garage was old and run down, but it seemed to be doing a fair amount of business. Lois waited in her car until an older man in a worn and stained uniform walked up to her window.

"You need an oil change?" The man was wiping his hand on an oily rag.

"I was hoping to speak with Javier Mendoza."

The man's expression turned unfriendly. "Javier's a good kid. I don't care what he did when he was younger, he's turned his life around. He doesn't need people harassing him."

"I'm doing a report on abuses of power in the government," Lois said smoothly. "I understand that someone has been giving Javier a hard time?"

"Yeah. They didn't just trash his house, they trashed his mother's house too." The man frowned. "You're that chick from TV aren't you? The one from Iraq?"

"Yes I am." Lois said. She didn't bother to give her name; getting snickered at one more time would be just what she needed to make the day complete.

"He's up for a break. Why don't you head back to the back and tell him I'm giving him an extra thirty to talk to you."

"That's very kind of you," Lois said. "What's your name again?"

"Joe ... Joseph Smith. If you could mention the name of the business on TV, that'd be great!" He smiled.

"I can't promise anything," Lois said. "Sometimes my editor picks what gets on the air. But I'll think about it."

A moment later she was parking her new rental and stepping across the weed strewn area that served as a combination between a parking lot and a junkyard.

Leaning against a stack of old tires propped against the wall was a Latino man. Although he was probably Lois's age, he looked younger. He was wearing a white muscle shirt and a pair of oil stained jeans. His head was shaved and he had a fresh bruise under one eye.

He was lean and well muscled, and on his chest Lois could see a tattoo of a rose from which emerged barbed wire with three barbs.

From previous news articles, Lois knew those tattoos indicated gang membership and at least one

prison stint of three years, assuming there weren't more barbs she couldn't see.

Lois was suddenly glad that she'd thought to buy a fresh canister of pepper spray before coming here. The last batch had been defective. It hadn't slowed Clark down at all. She casually kept one hand inside her purse, and she stopped well out of his reach.

He was turned slightly away from her and he was speaking rapid Spanish into a cell phone. When he finally noticed her he spoke into the telephone again and then flipped the phone closed.

"Javier Mendoza?"

He looked at her for a moment then looked away. "Who's asking?"

"I understand that you had some trouble today," Lois said.

Sighing, he looked up at her. "Unless you're my new parole officer, I don't see what business it is of yours."

"I'm doing a story on abuses of power by the Federal government."

In a way it was true. If Lois discovered incontrovertible proof of abuse, she would do an expose even if it damaged her relationship with the Federal Government. After all of this she doubted that she'd be able to pass a security check in the future.

There was no sign of recognition in his eyes, and Lois felt relieved.

"I don't think I have anything to say about that," he said.

Lois said "Where did you get the shiner?"

Now he looked at the ground. "I fell," he said.

"It wouldn't have happened when they were hauling you in for something you didn't do?" Lois asked.

Javier snorted. "Everybody always says they didn't do it. Nobody ever believes them."

"But you really didn't do anything, did you?" Lois stared at the young man.

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Cop sees the tats, that's all he has to see."

"So why did you get them?"

"You ever been to prison?"

Lois shook her head.

"You do what you gotta do to get by. If you don't have friends, you're in trouble."

"Joe says you've been doing pretty well for yourself."

"Three years without as much as a traffic ticket. I've been going back to school, keeping a job ... now I've got my parole officer on my back wondering why the Feds are investigating me. He's thinking about sending me back."

"Did they say what they were charging you for?"

He shook his head. "They grabbed me, fingerprinted me, stuck a q-tip in my mouth and stuck my eye in this thing ... "

"A retinal scanner?"

"Yeah. One of the cops said something about it being better than fingerprints."

Fingerprints could be changed, but other than the effects of certain diseases, retinal patterns stayed with a person for life.

"So they didn't believe you when you told them who you were?"

"My fingerprints are in the system."

"What did your lawyer say about all this?"

"I didn't get no lawyer. They kept asking me if I had a twin. Do I look like I have a twin? I don't have any kids either. They kept asking that."

Lois shrugged uncomfortably.

"You're out now."

"They tossed my mother's place," he said. "Took all the pictures of me from the sixth grade, took my little brother's computer."

"So you don't have any idea what they wanted?"

"They kept asking if I knew anything about this plane thing from the other day. I haven't ever been on a plane in my life!"

"Anything weird that they did?" Lois asked.

"It was all weird. They held me, and then they let me go without even asking me much."

They hadn't wanted anything he'd had to say. They'd wanted his DNA, his fingerprints, his retinal scan ... and they'd kept asking about twins.

"I was off work four hours." He glanced back at the building behind him. "If I didn't have a great boss I'd be out of a job right now, being pulled out of work like that. People see a guy with a record being dragged off by the cops, they don't usually ask many questions."

Lois nodded. "I don't suppose they beat you or anything."

He looked away. "The Feds weren't too bad. It was the local cops who ... never mind."

"You wouldn't happen to remember which police officers were involved, would you?"

Officer Abe Washington shook his head. "Is that little punk making some kind of accusation? That thing with his eye was an accident with the door. We already filed all the paperwork all nice and legal."

Lois shook her head. "He's just a little confused about what he was being charged with."

The officer shrugged. "I don't really know. The Feds say bring somebody in, that's what you do."

"You didn't think it was strange, them letting him go after a few hours without charging him?"

"Maybe he knew something ... he used to be in a gang, maybe he's been associating with people he shouldn't. Wasn't my call."

"The agents didn't say anything?"

"I heard one of them say he was 'just like the others,' whatever that means." The officer frowned. "What did you say this story was about again?"

"I didn't," Lois said. "Did they have you bring anybody else in for questioning?"

"Two others. They took one look at one, checked his prints and sent him off right away. The other they took downtown."

"You've been a big help."

A snippet of conversation came back to Lois, something she'd overheard the men in the hallway at Walter Reed saying.

The fingerprints are the same, just like the others.

The government was fingerprinting certain select people. They were taking DNA and doing retinal scans, which would be useful if someone had tried to change their fingerprints. Retinal scans used something like three times as many points of comparisons as fingerprints ... more than two hundred if Lois remembered correctly.

They were digging up Lucy's grave, and they'd been talking about at

least one patient having false papers indicating that he was in the military ... papers that said he was a military officer. But apparently there was another person with the same fingerprints who also claimed to be the same man.

Had they been trying to slip imposters into the military? That would explain why Homeland Security was so concerned. If someone was able to use plastic surgery well enough to fool everyone, to the point of changing fingerprints, they'd be able to slip into positions of power.

The only reason Lois could think to reveal this by loading a planeload of these people and giving them ridiculous stories no one would believe was to throw the United States military into disarray.

The threat, and the implication was that someone already had been replacing soldiers, officers and even politicians. It must be expensive to do all of that, and so it was cheaper just to create confusion and distrust in the ranks.

The scope of it all was staggering. Even discounting the plane, which must have been stolen from somewhere, this would have cost tens or hundreds of millions of dollars. The resources required

for this were out of the range of any known terrorist group.

That suggested that it was another country that was sponsoring the whole thing. Only another nation would have the sheer resources to pull something like this off, and if they wanted to put the military in disarray, that could mean only one thing.

An attack was coming.

Homeland Security would be out of its mind with worry, and Lois couldn't imagine what it was likely to do next.

She was going to need to be very careful.

Lieutenant Evans was a distinguished looking African-American man who was wearing his full dress uniform.

He hadn't made fun of her name, which was a point in his favor.

"I'm not sure how I can help you, Ms. Lane," he said. "I've come to Walter Reed for some medical testing. They tell me there's a problem with my heart that didn't get diagnosed until recently."

"Your son said your bosses called you and you had to leave right away."

"You had no right to talk to my son!" The man grimaced and lowered his voice. He fumbled in a pocket for a small bottle of pills. "They tell me I have to take these now."

He slipped a pill under his tongue.

"I was just trying to find out where you were staying," Lois said. "I wanted to speak to you about why the military fingerprinted you and did retinal scans on you ... took DNA."

He glanced up at her sharply but didn't say anything.

"They didn't ask if you'd had a twin?"

His expression tightened.

"Maybe took you to see someone who looked just like you lying on a hospital bed ... "

"I think you'd better leave," he said. "I don't have anything to say to the press."

His expression had told her what she needed to know.

Being very careful was for the birds.

Wearily, Lois unlocked her door. She was halfway inside when she heard the sound of the television playing.

She was going to have to get her locks changed, sooner rather than later. At this rate, she should be charging her intruders rent.

She relaxed when she saw who it was. Clark Kent was laying on the floor near the television staring at

the screen.

Around him were DVD cases from her Superman collection. Although she'd never cared for the shows, her parents had insisted on gifting her with them, and after they were gone she'd kept the collection up to date.

Half the cases were opened, but what was on the television at the moment wasn't on any DVD.

Lois had gotten her big break in 2001, getting to report on the one story of the year that was going to be remembered in a hundred years. She'd been barely nineteen and out of school, and she'd kept a copy of her report, along with other things surrounding it.

She was just narcissistic enough to have a friend tape ALL her reports. She watched them to critique herself and work on her stage presence.

It took her a moment to realize what was on the screen that had him so transfixed.

It was an image that had been burned into the mind of every American, one that had been played over and over and over again until it had been seared into the psyche.

Images of planes and fire and death.

The discs had been too tempting to pass up. The brightly colored pictures on the covers, the familiar insignia from his baby blanket ... Clark had hesitated at first, but given the increased security around the city, he felt safest waiting in Lois's apartment after she left carrying the box of listening devices and cameras.

The sheer numbers of the discs and the dates on the backs of them shocked him. This world had been telling stories of this Superman since at least the nineteen fifties.

He'd picked the box that looked the most worn to start with. This one was made in the nineteen seventies.

From the moment the screen went dark, and the first view of a version of the familiar Daily Planet outline came on the screen, he found himself entranced.

The music was exciting. It called to something within him that he hadn't known existed, just as the music to Star Wars had called to him when he was a child.

The image of a planet of white plains and crystalline angles thrilled him. He'd only heard a tiny fragment of his father's message once, when he'd turned twenty five, and the message had cut off suddenly.

But he knew the name Krypton, and the symbols on the actors' clothes were correct.

Was this what it had been like, this alien world of

bright, blinding light?

The images of loving parents sending him away from a dying planet ... those were difficult. He'd loved the Kents as much as he'd ever been able to love anyone, but he'd been forced to live in one household after another.

Everything would have been so different if even one of his parents could have come with him, if they could have explained what was happening to him.

His spaceship landing ... it was how his parents had told him it had happened, shortly before they'd died. These actors were old, though ... not young and vibrant as he remembered his own parents.

But after that, everything began to get more and more bizarre. If he'd had his powers as a toddler, he'd have been able to save his parents. He certainly wouldn't have created a strange, masochistic identity for himself in which he was the butt of everyone's jokes.

He'd had problems being accepted, but those were genuine problems that he hadn't known how to deal with, not something he imposed on himself.

Watching further, he wished momentarily that his father had left some portion of himself behind. What he'd heard when he was younger indicated that his father had left some sort of recording, but the spaceship had been lost, and Clark had no idea what kind of legacy he'd been left.

The suit should have looked gaudy and silly, but somehow it didn't. The actor wearing it made it almost seem majestic.

What followed was moments of sheer horror and embarrassment at the scenes with "Clark Kent" in them, and sneaking admiration at the scenes with "Superman."

He could almost imagine himself in the costume, doing those things.

Clark imagined that the movie had had the same effect on an entire generation of kids, just as watching Star Wars had affected every kid in Smallville. For a time, everyone had wanted to be a Jedi.

The difference was that the kids in Smallville could never be Jedi knights, no matter how hard they tried.

Clark could be a Superman, if he really wanted to.

Oh, he couldn't turn back time, no matter how much he fervently wished to, and he couldn't lift the entire San Andreas Fault, but he could fly, and he was strong and as far as he was aware, there was nothing that could hurt him.

Kryptonite might not even exist in his world, although if he ever got back he'd watch for it.

Of course, reality had already shown him that he

wasn't in a movie. Lois Lane wasn't infatuated with him in the least, and this one had already seen the movie. She was much more attractive than the woman in the movie, and less grating, yet Clark could see the similarities.

This Lois was determined, driven and obsessed. From the little he'd learned from cleaning her apartment, she had numerous awards that didn't even exist in his world, and yet there was very little to connect her to family or friends.

Yet he suspected that like the woman in the movie, this Lois Lane had a softer inner core. It was too bad that he'd never have a chance to get to know it.

He had to go home to his own woman. It was funny that even she'd had a place in the movie, riding along with the football players mocking him.

No wonder she'd snickered when he'd tried to convince her he was Clark Kent. Not only was he a well-known fictional character, that character was a boob, an incompetent ass.

Not at all the sort of person a woman would take seriously, especially in a world where no one believed in Superman.

Clark stared for a long moment at the other discs scattered about. He couldn't bring himself to watch any of the others, not now that he knew what he needed to know.

Seeing himself being mocked while the person wearing the suit was idolized was grating to say the least, no matter how uplifting the music was.

He tried watching television, but he found that nothing would hold his attention. Working the remote control took a little time, and then there was some sort of interactive menu that was confusing.

Was this world so lacking in imagination that it had to remake old shows like Battlestar Galactica, The Bionic Woman and Knight Rider, or was this the first time around for these shows?

A random sampling showed an incredible number of talk shows, most of which seemed to deal with sex and people who should have been in therapy instead of being exploited.

Flipping channels revealed very few of the old comforting shows from his childhood, the kind that had always been filler. Eventually Clark settled

on the news.

Seeing Lois's piece on the airplane landing playing again, he was surprised. Apparently, although there were news channels that claimed to have twenty four hour news, there really wasn't that much more news out there than there had been in Clark's world. They had to repeat the same stories over and over until something new came up.

Eventually the scrolling text along the bottom of the screen and the other information to the side began to give him a headache. It was distracting, and it made it hard to concentrate on the main story.

There were more channels and more flash and noise, but as far as Clark could see, television hadn't added much in the way of substance.

He muted the television and sat on the couch with his head back and his eyes closed. This was a nightmare world and even if he found all of the passengers and somehow got them away from the government, he wasn't sure what he was going to do with them.

This didn't seem like the sort of world that had many mad scientists; if it did, they were probably building bombs and weapons instead of advancing the frontiers of science. An examination of the telephone book had shown no listings for Star Labs or Lex Labs.

He didn't even have a clue as to how any of them had gotten here, much less an idea how to get them back. In the end, he might have to be forced to do the one thing he didn't want to do.

Go public.

If he'd inadvertently trapped two hundred people in this world, he had to make sure that they were able to live some sort of normal lives. The only way to do that was to prove that they weren't terrorists, that their stories were true.

It would be the only way to keep them from disappearing into the bowels of some foreign prison, never to emerge again. It would mean sacrificing any sort of a normal life, giving up any chance that ordinary people would look at him as just one of the guys.

The only proof that what they were saying was true lay within Clark himself. He had power that scientists would not be able to explain, and if he was public enough about it, the government wouldn't be able to cover it all up.

That would be the option of last resort. For all he knew, this world had people working on interdimensional travel at this very moment. Perhaps they already had it; Lois had mentioned some show dealing with multiple worlds.

The thought of revealing himself was one of Clark's worst nightmares. His father had warned him repeatedly that if people found out what he was, they'd cut him open like a frog.

Of course, his father might have been so emphatic as a way to impress the importance of secrecy on his ten year old mind. If Lana hadn't stumbled across the secret, he never would have revealed his secret.

Her initial revulsion had scarred him even further.

Although she'd eventually come around to accepting him, those early days of waiting anxiously to see whether she was going to reveal his secret to the world had left a deep impression on him.

The easiest way to make Lois believe him was to show her what he was, what he could do. Yet the thought of the look in her eyes when she realized he wasn't a human being was enough to make him hesitate.

Waiting for Lois to return, Clark found himself pacing the apartment. Eventually, he'd come across a series of videocassettes. He hadn't paid much attention to them before, but seeing that Lois had inexplicably moved them had piqued his interest.

Each was simply labeled with her name and a date. Clark popped the first video into the VCR. It was apparently a copy of an old newscast, one in which a young teenager stood giving a news report for a local news station.

She looked incredibly young and a little awkward, as though her face hadn't grown into her features. There was something mesmerizing about her, even though she was just giving a report on a little bit of local color. She couldn't have been more than nineteen years old.

This was apparently a compilation tape, a collection of all the reports she'd done as a rookie reporter. Clark could almost see her sitting and watching her reports obsessively, looking for mistakes she'd made and trying to think of ways to do better.

Although her initial reports for this local station were a little awkward and unpolished, they quickly improved. He could see a rapid progression from her first fumbling efforts to later, more polished reports.

By her third tape, she had transferred to a new network, CNN, which was apparently this world's version of LNN. It seemed that there was no Lex Luthor in this world. Of course, given his depiction in the movie, no one would want their child to have that name.

It wasn't until the third tape that everything changed. Unlike the other tapes, which were relatively short and recorded in good quality video, this video was slightly grainy, as though it had been recorded in long playing mode and then watched over and over again.

It wasn't long before he saw why.

The images of planes hitting buildings were interspersed with images of a younger Lois Lane, face covered with soot and lungs laboring as she attempted to report on unimaginable horror.

It went on and on, her voice occasionally failing and the misery on her face a reflection of the misery of

those around her. It was obvious that she could barely stand, but it never seemed to end, the stories of misery and death and destruction.

After a time, Clark found that he couldn't watch it at all any more. He found himself staring numbly at the screen, his shock and horror more than he could face.

This was what had changed this world, turned it into a nightmarish police state. This was what had put the suspicion on every face, turned brother against brother and made the world into a grim dystopia.

The worst part was that this possibly lay in the future of his own world. People he cared about at home would have to go through this, live through it over and over again, and suffer as the oncoming storm overtook their world before they could stop it.

He had to go back. He had the power to change things before they happened to his world, whatever the cost to himself.

Whatever it took, he was going to try to stop this from happening in his own world.

Assuming he could ever go home again.

He was so lost in his own thoughts that he didn't notice Lois until she put her hand on his shoulder.

"I see that you've made yourself at home." Lois said dryly.

The pain in his eyes surprised Lois, in part because it was the same pain she'd had to live with for the past six and a half years. She watched the video sometimes to remind her of why she was doing what she was doing. She needed that reminder of the pain that the people around her had gone through to keep her strong. She needed the reminder sometimes, during the nights when the bullets were flying overhead and she was wondering why she hadn't settled for a political beat in Washington.

The world needed the stories she had to tell. If they didn't know what was happening, they'd never be able to change things. The good, the bad and the ugly, it was her duty to report the news in hopes that people would look at some of the things that had been done and say "never again."

That being said, it had been years since Lois had seen the pain of the bombings so fresh on someone's face.

It was almost as though he'd never seen them before, as though this was his first time being exposed to something that the rest of the world took for granted.

Short of a few tribesmen out of contact with the rest of civilization, there was hardly anyone in the world who didn't know about the bombings.

It was subtle, a masterful piece of acting. If he'd planned on convincing her he was from another dimension, he couldn't have done a better job.

Because despite her conviction that this was all a scam, a setup, Lois felt the tiniest seed of doubt.

He was getting to her.

"It explains a lot," he said finally.

"What?" Lois asked.

"Why you are all so damaged."

Instantly she bristled. "We aren't ... "

"I feel damaged," he said quietly. "Just from watching this."

Despite the part of her that said it was impossible for this to be his first time to see the horrors of the terrorist attacks, Lois felt a moment of sympathy.

While she'd been in the middle of the ashes, struggling to breathe and do whatever she could to report on the situation and help however she could, Lois had felt numb, almost detached. It hadn't been until later, when she'd finally come home, that the pain had finally begun.

She'd stood in the shower until the water had run cold trying to scrub the accumulated ash and muck that had covered her entire body. No matter how she'd scrubbed she hadn't felt clean, and finally she'd just stood and let the water run over her as the horror of the day had finally struck home.

She hadn't felt clean even after getting out of the shower.

Sometimes she still didn't.

"We're under attack," she said quietly. "Every day they push just a little bit farther, and we have to push back. Sometimes we lose a little of ourselves in the process."

"How long before you lose everything that makes you different from them?" he asked.

"We're not there yet," Lois said.

"From where I'm sitting, it doesn't look like you have far to go. I've read the Washington Post. Secret prisons? Holding people without due process or access to lawyers? This is America?"

"Nobody is happy about it," Lois said. "But what choice do we have?"

"They could give your sister access to a lawyer," Clark said.

"I'm working on that now," Lois said.

The difficulty was contacting a judge without violating the non-disclosure agreement. Lois was going to do everything she could to get her sister out.

"What about the other two hundred passengers?" he asked. "What about the ones who don't have family members standing up for them, or whose families

don't even know they are out there?"

"According to you, they aren't really their families, are they?" Lois asked. "If I'm to believe you, that means that Lucy isn't really my sister ... she just happens to come from another universe and look like her."

"You share the same genetics," Clark said. "Effectively, it's no different."

"If I believed your story, that would mean that Lucy ... my Lucy really did die in the accident that killed my parents. It would mean that the girl in the car wasn't just some homeless person they'd picked up on the way back." Lois shook her head and stepped away from him. "I'm not ready to believe that just yet."

They were both silent for several long moments, and it was Clark who looked away first. Slipping off the couch, he began gathering the DVD's and tapes scattered around. "I'm sorry I went through your things."

As many times as her possessions had been pawed through over the last few days, Lois wasn't inclined to quibble over a few discs and movies.

"There's nothing here that really matters to me," she said.

It surprised her a little, the moment she said it. It was true. Her life had been empty since her parents had died. Losing her family had left a void in her life, one that had already begun on the day she'd been on that street in New York and had the foundations of her life begin to crack.

She'd had friends who hadn't made it.

Those two defining events in her life had led her to where she was today: an empty shell living alone in a home that wasn't really a home.

"I barely stay here four months out of the year," she hurried to explain.

"So why pay for such a nice place?"

Lois stared out the window at the view. She could see the Potomac River in all its glory. Washington had laws preventing high rise buildings so that the monuments and the city itself wouldn't be obscured. This meant that for someone living right across the river in Arlington, you could see the whole city spread out beneath you.

"My parents were proud that I'd made something of myself," she said. "They liked to tell everyone how successful I was. They saw this place before they died, and they were happy for me."

In the emptiness there were always ghosts.

"Lois," he said.

His voice was oddly deeper, and when she turned

to face him she felt the urge to laugh.

If he'd had glasses, he'd have pulled them off.

"If you are going to tell me you really are Superman, save it," she said. "This is the real world, not a movie."

She shook her head. She must be more jet lagged than she'd thought. She'd actually allowed the thought of alternate worlds to cross her mind once or twice.

He shook his head and deflated a little. "I'm not Superman," he said. "But there are things I can ... "

His head snapped around and he said, "Are you expecting company?"

Lois shook her head.

"Well you are about to have it," he said.

He stood up quickly and moved through the doorway to her bedroom.

A moment later her door rattled as someone on the other side pounded heavily on it.

Lois moved quickly to grab for her purse. She grabbed the wrapped wallet and tossed it into her bedroom, where she could see Clark standing indecisive.

"I found this," she said. "It's yours."

"Open up," the voice on the other side. "We have a warrant!"

Lois approached the door, keeping her new pepper spray in her hand. She peered through the peephole and barely kept herself from jumping back when it rattled again.

There wasn't any way for Clark to get out. Lois would have to hope that whatever they were looking for didn't include her bedroom.

If it did, she'd just have to think of some way to explain why she had a fugitive in her apartment.

Slipping the chain in the door, she opened it cautiously.

"I'd like to see that warrant," she said.

The men on the other side were wearing black suits. None of them were Agent White. One of them was oddly familiar.

One man handed her the warrant, which she scanned quickly.

"I'd like to have my lawyer look over this," Lois said.

"We'll break your door down," the man on the other side said. "And then we'll lead you out of the building in handcuffs. I'm sure the other news networks are going to love getting pictures of you for the evening news."

Lois undid the chain and opened the door.

"What's this all about," she asked as she stepped back.

The men stepping through the door were scanning

the apartment already, staring at every small detail as though attempting to commit it to memory. Maybe they were.

"A few days ago, in the interest of national security, you were placed under surveillance as a person of interest. Shortly afterwards, the equipment began to malfunction. We'd be very interested in knowing how you knew that equipment was there and how you managed to disable it without showing as much as a single frame on tape."

Lois shrugged. "Maybe someone was asleep at the wheel. It's hard to get good help these days."

The man in charge, a tall dark haired man gestured to the others. "Fan out. Find whatever she's hiding."

Lois said, "I'm calling my lawyer."

"Not right now you aren't," the man said.

"Where's Agent White?"

"He's been transferred," the man said. "He was getting a little too close to the case."

"I'm surprised you even bothered with a warrant," Lois said as the men began to ransack her apartment.

One of them went into her bedroom and she tensed. However, other than the sounds of things being flipped over, there was no sign of conflict from the other room.

"There's no sign of any of the equipment," The man coming from her bedroom said, "She got it all."

"So how did you do it?" he asked. "There were cameras on the front door, and none of them showed a thing. Just a flicker and that was it."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Lois said, wondering exactly how Clark had managed it. He never seemed to have any trouble getting into her apartment, despite multiple locks she'd installed herself. Of course, neither had the government. "We already found them in the trunk of your car," he said.

Lois shrugged. "Someone was illegally surveilling me. I was going to take the evidence to the police."

"If that's true, then you disturbed a crime scene."

"Since you've said it was you doing the surveilling, I guess I don't have to worry about why someone put a camera in my shower," Lois said sweetly. "You know, I've been thinking about writing an article about governmental abuses of power. I wonder how the public will feel about being spied on in their own bathrooms?"

"You visited a number of people suspected in an ongoing national security matter. As I see it, either you are involved or someone in our agency leaked the information to you." The man leaned forward slightly. "Did Agent White give you the list of names?"

"What list of names?" Lois asked. "You mean the people you are running DNA tests on? The retinal

scans didn't convince you?"

It was a stab in the dark, but the slight change in the man's expression told her she was right.

"You have people with the same fingerprints, retinal scans and DNA as people already in the contiguous United States, and you don't think that's newsworthy?"

"Any information Agent White gave you is not printable under the conditions of your nondisclosure agreement."

"I didn't get the information from Agent White," Lois said, finally realizing where she knew the man from. "Actually, I got the information from you."

Scowling, the man said, "There's no point in lying. If you don't cooperate, I'll ... "

"I'm not lying, Agent Randal." At the expression on his face Lois grinned. He hadn't introduced himself, but she'd seen his name tag and had remembered the name. "You were in Walter Reed hospital talking on the telephone about there being two Lieutenant Evans, fingerprints matching and you complained to someone ... a shorter man, heavysset man about him even being there."

The blood ran from Agent Randal's face, and a vindictive part of Lois wanted to dance with glee.

"I'll be glad to talk to your superiors about how happy I am to have had your cooperation."

"That wasn't a public conversation!" he said in a low tone.

Lois shrugged. "You had it in public place. I didn't exactly have to break into your house and listen at your door."

Angrily, Agent Randal grabbed her purse from the desk and handed it to one of the men. "Go through it."

They began pulling things from her bag, and Lois was glad she'd given Clark his wallet back.

Pulling her satellite phone out, one of them said, "She's pulled the battery."

"I'm trying to duck my publisher," Lois said, lying. In actuality she knew about the government's ability to turn cell phones into portable microphones without ever having to touch the phone. It had been used against organized crime. All of her messages went to voice mail, and she checked regularly when she wasn't saying anything that she didn't want anyone to hear.

It was a good thirty more minutes before they were satisfied, and this time they took her laptop and film equipment too.

Lois was suddenly glad she'd had the foresight to mail herself copies of her notes from several different drop boxes.

As she saw them leave, she discretely pulled the battery from her satellite phone and then locked her

door. She wondered if they'd added more bugs while they were going through her things. She'd look for them later.

First though, she had to find Clark and get him out. However he'd managed to hide in her small apartment, he wouldn't be able to do it forever.

A quick search showed no sign of him. The agents had tossed her place just as thoroughly as they had the last time.

There was literally no place to hide, and yet somehow he'd vanished.

As the wind outside began to pick up, Lois's window began to whistle. Although it had once been openable, because the building had been built before central air had become ubiquitous, the window had been sealed before she had come to live

there.

It had been air tight in the past, and now it was whistling. Unlike her living room, which had a single large picture window, her bedroom had three smaller windows.

The window closest to her bed was whistling, and Lois approached it with a feeling of dread in her stomach. She lived on the sixteenth floor. Although there were projections and cornices outside the window in plentiful supply, only someone insane would even try to hide.

As the window slid open a little under her hand, Lois let out a breath.

The sort of man who would jump out of a moving plane wouldn't let a little something like possible death slow him down.

She opened the window further.

"Clark?" she called out softly, not wanting to alert anyone listening through whatever bugs they'd left in her bedroom.

There was no reply.

Lois leaned out as far as she dared to stare at the street below. From this distance people were tiny splotches of color, but the street below was well lit, and there were numerous people walking down below enjoying the view of the Potomac River.

For a moment she almost imagined the shattered remains of a human corpse lying splashed against the ground, but it was only a homeless man who was even now being forced to move along by a police officer.

The streets were clean, and no one had fallen.

There were numerous cornices and handholds; like many buildings in the area, the facade of the building was ornate with many hand and footholds. However, the wind at this elevation blew forcefully and the ledge was only a few inches wide.

Lois had heard of a few men who made a sport of urban climbing, of climbing tall buildings, sometimes only with bare hands. But at this distance off the ground, and with the wind picking up, someone would have to be insanely daring to even attempt to climb out a window, much less make their way around the building.

Of course, a man willing to drop out of a moving plane onto tarmac wasn't lacking in physical courage. She'd already mentally compared Clark Kent to an action hero; this was just one more proof.

Lois hesitated as she went to close her window. She wouldn't bother locking it; if Clark was hanging by his fingers just around the corner she wasn't going to be the one sending him plummeting to his death.

She frowned for a moment as she stared at her window, and then she stepped into her living room to examine the window there.

Both windows had been cleaned from the outside.

The curious thing about this new world Clark found himself in was just how much faster paced it was than the one he'd left behind. It had taken him a while to notice; he'd been preoccupied with other things, but now it was quite clear.

Every city had its own distinctive sound: the sounds of thousands or millions of people going through the acts of daily living, with many or most doing things in unison. When Clark had first come to a large city it had been overwhelming, but now it was almost like music.

In this new world, that music was faster and louder. People who in Clark's world would have walked from one place to another, not speaking or looking at their fellow pedestrians, instead spoke loudly, walking with portable telephones stuck to their ears. The music was different and jarring.

In Clark's world thousands or millions of televisions would be turned on at the same time, but most would be split among less than twenty channels. Here the viewership was split among hundreds of channels, a cacophony of talking heads expressing views on politics, religion and every topic under the sun.

So when that din began to change, when those thousands of channels began to shrink as more and more televisions began to switch to a single station, Clark noticed.

What he heard left a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"It's cold and dark and there isn't a man here who isn't afraid. Those who have cell phones are sharing them; attempting to get their last messages out to the

people they love." The man speaking had a deep, melodious voice. It sounded resigned, as though all hope had been washed away, and all that was left was duty.

"Have rescuers been able to hold out any hope?" The news anchor in the studio was oddly familiar to Clark. In his world she'd worked for Lex News, not something called MSNBC. For once she looked disconcerted, genuinely affected by whatever tragedy was being explained.

"The captain is keeping in contact with them. Divers have already made six attempts, some of which were just attempts to at least bring us oxygen, but visibility is poor and we are too deep for any easy rescue. The water is cold; even with wetsuits the divers can't stay in the water for more than an hour without risking hypothermia. At this depth they also risk the bends." The voice was silent for a moment. "Once the sun sets, it's all going to be worse."

The sun had already set in Washington D.C. two hours ago. This must be happening somewhere to the west.

Muffled sobbing and the sounds of breathing made rapid by fear were the only sounds on the line for an interminable moment.

"We're sorry," the speaker in the studio said. A moment later she sighed and gave the recap.

With a reluctant glance toward Lois, who seemed to be holding her own with the government men, Clark began to rise further into the sky.

He'd spent his life flying under the radar, avoiding anything that might lead anyone to even suspect that he was something more than what he appeared to be. He'd helped now and then when he could, but never where it would have jeopardized his secret.

This wasn't some car accident on a country road where head-injured survivors talked about being rescued by an angel. This was something that was happening in daylight in front of the media and the world.

It went against everything Lana had tried to teach him. He'd been attacked the last time he went flying; these people had the means and the motivation to track him wherever he went, unless he flew low enough to cause damage to buildings through his sonic boom, or possibly high enough to go above the reach of their satellites.

Every instinct was to lie low and hide, to let the world go on thinking he was just an ordinary man. This wasn't even his world. These weren't his people, his responsibility.

Yet hearing the fear hidden in the reporter's voice ... seeing the expression on the anchorwoman's

face when she didn't think anyone was watching ... there wasn't any other choice.

These were people needing help that wasn't going to come. He had a chance to change all that, to save the lives of what the scroll on the bottom of the screen said was eighteen survivors.

He'd been given his abilities for a reason. His mother had believed that, and he still remembered her calming words, soothing his fears about being a freak and different from everyone else.

She'd believed he'd make a difference.

The fact that this world had been telling stories about him for at least twenty years before he'd been born could only be considered a sign of what he was going to have to do.

Whatever the cost to himself, he had to do the right thing. There really wasn't another choice.

When it became apparent that Clark Kent wasn't coming back anytime soon, Lois slipped the battery into her satellite phone to check her messages.

Three were from Hilda. "Turn on your television. MSNBC."

Lois hadn't heard that amount of stress in Hilda's voice in a long time. She felt her heart drop as she searched for the remote in the midst of couch cushions tossed carelessly on the floor.

They hadn't been attacked, or it would have been on all the networks. Had she been scooped somehow? If she had, it would almost be a relief. It would mean that all she had to worry about was getting her sister out. She wouldn't be responsible for the lives of almost two hundred stranded travelers ... or cultists, or whatever they were.

Finally she found the remote and switched the television on. A quick touch of the button and she was on MSNBC.

"I'm sorry, Mom."

The picture on the screen was of two tugboats and a collection of other boats in choppy waters filmed from a distance. The voice that replaced the other was a familiar one.

"That was Johnny Moran, age eighteen. This was going to be his first fishing trip, a way to earn money for college."

"What are conditions like there now?"

"It's getting colder. The batteries on some of the cell phones are running out, and most of the men have said their good byes. Most of us are huddling together for warmth, but some of the men are getting sleepy."

The voice was that of Kendall Brooks, one of Lois's contemporaries. She'd met him the first time in Iraq and had seen him at various events and fund

raisers since then. She'd competed with him for the Peabody that she'd eventually won.

According to the scroll at the bottom of the screen, he'd been doing a segment about the decline of the Alaskan fishing industry when the fishing boat they'd been in, the Celeste Marie, had collided with a Russian fishing scow off the coast of Alaska. The boat had rolled and sank. The entire surviving crew was trapped in an air pocket.

"I've been told that we have a reporter from a local affiliate who has just arrived topside. Stay on the line, Kendall, while we see if we can get any further updates on the situation."

Lois absently grabbed a couch cushion and slowly sat down, unable to tear her eyes from the screen.

"This is Michael Anguta with KTUU out of Anchorage." The reporter was a heavyset Inuit man wearing a parka.

"Have you learned anything, Michael?"

"Both Russia and the United States are sending Deep Submergence Rescue Vehicles, but it will be hours before the closest one will get here. It's not known how much time the trapped men have left."

Grabbing her phone, she dialed her producer's number.

"Do we have anyone on this?" she asked.

"We don't have anybody close enough

to get there in time."

"What aren't they telling people?"

Her producer was silent for a moment. "They're going to start dying soon, if some haven't already. How long it'll be depends on a lot of factors, but it won't be long."

Lois was silent for a long moment. "You knew him, didn't you?"

"He worked here before you came on board." The strain in her producer's voice was finally audible.

Lois sighed. "I'd like to contribute to whatever you all have planned."

"I'm editing his tribute piece as we speak."

"I'll let you get to it then," Lois said. "I'm sorry."

She un-muted the television as she noticed that men were scrambling around on the boat behind the reporter, who looked befuddled.

"What's going on?" he asked a passing sailor.

"Some damn fool just launched a torpedo. Nobody knows where it's going to hit. Brace yourselves."

All Lois could do was stare at the television.

It had taken longer to find the site than Clark would have liked. Over populated areas, he could always read road signs, but finding a few ships in the middle of thousands of miles of desolate wilderness

was harder than he had expected.

Taking a deep breath, Clark plunged into the water. The water below was murky, with sediment creating an impenetrable wall making visibility almost impossible.

Although his special vision allowed him to see through it, the sand and accumulated sediment floating in the water darkened everything, casting the area around him in a perpetual twilight which was only going to get worse when the sun set.

He could see the darkened mass of the ship half buried in the sand. Three hundred feet down, with three hundred feet of sand and water and other debris between it and the sun, the ship was a pitiful sight.

The men inside were even worse. Even with his special vision he couldn't see them now; there was no light inside the ship. They were cold and lightless and alone. He could hear their breathing though, fast paced and shallow as their bodies tried to process what little oxygen was left in the stale, fetid air remaining to them. They didn't have much time left.

As he reached the ship he realized that there was no time for decompression stops or anything similar. Without air, these men were going to die.

Hopefully, the water inside wasn't pressurized.

Clark's greatest fear was that by moving the ship he was going to somehow break a delicate seal and force icy cold water to flood into the hold, killing the men inside almost instantly.

He closed his eyes for a moment as he touched the hull and did something he hadn't done since he was a child. He prayed.

The voices on the other end of the line had gone silent at last, and even the people in the newsroom were somber.

After no explosion had occurred, there had been conflicting reports by crews of the different ships, but even those seemed to have died down by this point.

As drama, it was every newscaster's dream. Lois had no doubt that the ratings were going to be enormous. Yet the people in the newsroom looked stunned.

Kendall had been one of their own, someone they'd known personally.

Lois frowned and reached for the telephone. She'd send flowers to the studio as a gesture of respect. Kendall had struck her as a good man, and she knew he'd been well liked by his peers.

She didn't know any of the camera crew who had been with him, but the MSNBC people likely would know them.

She couldn't find the telephone book in the mess

the agents had left. She spared a thought for Clark Kent, who still hadn't returned, and she wondered if he'd made his way into an outside hall.

It was the shouting by the Alaskan reporter that alerted her that something unusual was happening.

The camera rushed to the edge of the boat, where crew were standing and staring over the port bow.

Below, through the darkened water, could be seen a massive shape. Borne along on what looked like a massive bubble of air was the form of the Celeste Marie.

It exploded out of the water and somehow managed to flip before coming to float on the choppy seas.

The crews on all of the ships rushed into action, leaving the Alaskan reporter slack jawed in amazement. He recovered quickly however, and turned to the camera. This was going to be his moment to shine.

"I ... don't have any explanation for all this," he said. "But seeing is believing. What we are seeing now is a rescue operation in action. There is no way to tell what condition the men inside the Celeste Marie may be in, but they are likely to be suffering from hypoxia, hypothermia, and possible injuries relating both to the initial accident, and to this recent miraculous reemergence."

He was silent for a moment as his cameraman got footage of men scrambling down into rescue boats that were even now racing toward the newly righted ship.

"All we know right now is that somebody's prayers were answered."

Gasping for breath, Clark broke the surface of the water. It had taken all the air in his lungs and more to move the entire boat without putting too much pressure on any one part. He'd had to duck under the rescue ships without moving too fast, or they'd be complaining about torpedoes again.

Glancing back, he saw that the rescue boats were between him and the recently recovered fishing boat. No one was looking in his direction; all eyes were turned toward the emerging drama on the boat.

There wasn't anything he could do for the survivors now. Even flying them to a hospital wouldn't give them quicker access to the decompression chambers. Those were already on the rescue ships, and the survivors were already being rushed to them. All he could do was hope that he'd managed to save at least some of them without hurting them too badly.

The way he was feeling now reminded him of how he'd felt when he'd first realized he could fly. It was euphoria, the kind of high he'd sometimes seen in sky

divers and bungee jumpers. He felt on top of the world, as though nothing could get him down.

He found himself smiling, grinning in a way that wouldn't go away. He wanted nothing so much as to shoot into the stratosphere and shout out his joy.

This was what he'd been born to do. He'd had little hints before, when he'd used his gifts to help, but nothing like this.

Clark took several more deep breaths, forcing himself to calm down. At this time of the evening, the light was on the water, but all the glare was coming from the west. He didn't dare take off from within sight of the two ships, on the off chance that someone might spot him. It would be easier with the sun to their backs. This meant that he needed to swim at least several miles before he could emerge from the water.

Maybe the cool water would help calm him, cut the feeling of euphoria a little.

Part of him hoped not. It had been a long time since he'd felt this good.

Lois found herself transfixed by what was happening on the screen, just like the rest of the nation. It was a gripping drama, the pictures of men being rushed on stretchers into decompression chambers.

It had been a close thing. Any longer, and men would have died. There was still a chance that at least some of them would die from the bends. But somehow a miracle had spared them, and it was almost certain that most of the men were going to make it.

Kendall looked haggard with an oxygen mask over his face and wrapped in heavy blankets. The men were freezing, and that would have to be cared for along with a litany of broken bones, sprained ankles and possible frostbite.

As soon as that drama died down, with all surviving crew accounted for, the discussion about what had happened began.

Some scientists offered a natural explanation. In July 2006, divers and scientists at Santa Barbara had videotaped a massive methane blowout from the ocean floor in the Santa Barbara channel.

That had created a bubble that was five thousand cubic feet ... the size of the first floor of an entire two bedroom house.

The video of this was shown repeatedly.

Other scientists disputed that explanation. The explosion in the Santa Barbara channel had been in an area of gas and oil seepage from small volcanoes in the ocean floor. The undersea geology in the area of the accident wasn't the same and wouldn't have supported that sort of an explosion.

In any case, that explosion had been as loud as a freight train, while this one had been almost soundless.

Conspiracy theorists insisted on pointing at the computer sonar records. Something had come from the east at a speed of two hundred knots before just disappearing. This was far faster than most torpedoes, and the only known weapon capable of moving that fast was the Russian Squall torpedo, which used something called supercavitation, that essentially surrounded the missile with a bubble of air so that only its nose ever hit water.

The argument was that it could have been launched from up to twenty miles away. However, the squall missile was over twenty feet long. The sonar records that were available indicated that whatever had been launched had only been two to three meters in length.

This could only be some sort of secret U.S. weapon using similar supercavitation technology, some pundits asserted, proof that the U.S. had technology the rest of the world didn't know about.

It was argued that this demonstration was to serve as a warning to some of the other nations, that it was a demonstration of American naval superiority.

Both the United States and Russia denied having any vessels in range to have launched anything, much less a hypothetical weapon designed to create silent explosions.

Everyone agreed that it was a miracle.

What bothered Lois as much as anything was the knowledge that something approximately the size of a human being had rocketed toward the sunken boat and shortly afterward that boat had been saved.

It was almost enough to make someone believe in Aquaman.

Or

Superman.

He'd ruined another outfit. Clark felt rueful as he finally began to fly at a low elevation across the country. The wind was hard enough on clothes that weren't tight up against his body; slicing through the water at more than two hundred miles an hour had ripped clothes off yet again.

All that was left were his boxer shorts and socks. His shoes were still on his feet, but they were ripped to shreds.

If he was going to do this sort of thing very often, he'd have to have some sort of outfit that was a little sturdier, or the clothing costs were going to beggar him.

It would have to be something that clung tight against his skin. As Clark considered what sort of

outfit might work best, he began to form a mental image.

Shadowy at first, it began to fill in. He'd always loved the color blue. Perhaps some sort of body stocking or ski suit. Slap a symbol on the front and people would know who he was. They might not think he was some sort of alien freak.

The underwear on the outside, that was ridiculous of course, although Clark could see how it might help to conceal certain areas of his anatomy. It might be helpful to have a belt where he could slip money in case he needed it.

Boots might be good, both to make him seem a little taller than his everyday self and to give him another place to slip things like money and credit cards. He'd lost his wallet two or three times already this trip.

At home he'd been able to fly slow enough not to destroy his clothing, but this was a faster paced world.

Clark couldn't help it that the image of a blue and red suit kept coming to his mind. The cape would have to be made of something special anyway since it wouldn't be protected the way the rest of the suit was.

Damn that movie. The theme song had been rolling around in his head since he'd seen it, and now he couldn't get the costume out of his mind either.

Hilda's face was flushed and her eyes were red. Lois wasn't surprised. In the background she could see the television muted, set to the still unfolding drama of the Celeste Marie.

Of course, it was going to be hours before there was any real word of the survivors' condition, and by this point, all the theories and explanations of what had happened were just beginning to repeat themselves.

"I need you to pick up a few pre-paid phones for me," Lois told her in a low voice. "Some government goons bugged my apartment, and I'm pretty sure they are listening in on my phone."

If the battery wasn't unplugged on her telephone, they'd be able to use it as a microphone. Of course, they had to know which phone she was using, so pre-paid was the best bet.

Hilda stared at her wide eyed. Lois handed her the money, then patted her on the shoulder. "He'll be all right."

"I just couldn't believe ... " Hilda said.

Hilda's telephone rang.

She looked at Lois apologetically then went to pick it up.

"She's right here."

Lois glared at Hilda for a moment before sighing

and reaching for the telephone.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to do a little follow up on the missile story?"

"The Celeste Marie?" Lois asked. It was a huge story, but it was a little out of her usual territory.

"No ... the one from before. The little piece you did on the missile over Washington."

"You didn't run it," Lois said.

There hadn't been enough there to run it; even Lois had known that.

"Apparently a couple of college kids were in a restaurant near Andrews Air Force Base. The place is usually crawling with airmen. They have cell phone footage of half the restaurant emptying out after more than twenty people received simultaneous phone calls."

"When was that?" Lois asked. Frowning, she realized that the mobilization had occurred only a few minutes before the Celeste Marie had turned up afloat.

She quickly began taking down notes. Even though it was well after dark she had a long way to go.

She glanced over at Hilda, who sighed. Hilda knew what that look meant, which was one of the reasons Lois found her so valuable.

It wasn't every day that Cyrus got to see an angel.

He'd seen plenty of devils in his time, when he wasn't taking his medications, but angels were something new.

The angel wasn't anything like what he'd have expected. There were no white robes, no wings, and no halo. This angel didn't wear anything, other than a pair of black boxer shorts and a white pair of socks. He even looked younger than what Cyrus would have expected, like a young man in the prime of his life.

If he hadn't been floating down from the heavens, Cyrus would have thought he was just another surfer, or maybe somebody drunk.

The angel's voice was that of an ordinary man, and there was something kind about his eyes that Cyrus immediately liked.

It took him a moment to realize that the angel was actually speaking to him.

"Could I borrow a little money? I promise I'll get it right back to you."

Cyrus stood transfixed. He was wearing everything he owned, all six shirts and three pairs of pants. He had the best pair of boots he could find at Goodwill, and despite all of it, he was still never warm even here in the California winter, which was so much gentler than New York winters had been.

Everything he owned, and all he had was a single crumpled up five dollar bill.

All Cyrus could think was that the angel was testing him somehow. Old sermons about faith and sacrifice and parables about a poor widow giving her only coin rolled through his head. Wordlessly he reached into his pocket and pulled out the grimy bill.

The angel smiled at him and walked across the street, leaving the darkness to head for the convenience store across the wide, shadowy expanse of parking lot.

He stepped inside, and it seemed that he was gone forever. Eventually, the angel stepped out and headed slowly across the parking lot, heading for the isolated section of beach that Cyrus had staked out for himself.

The angel began handing him bills, twenties, more than Cyrus had seen in a long time.

"Thanks," the angel said, rising once more into the sky.

All Cyrus could do was stare down at the money in his hands. Maybe this was a sign that he needed to go back on his medications; that he needed to make peace with his sister. She had a good shower and a roof, and she didn't complain nearly as much as he sometimes liked to think.

The money in his hands was certainly enough to get a hot meal and a bus ride home, with a little left over for incidentals.

Cyrus began to whistle tunelessly as he began to gather his things together.

Only a fool spoke to an angel and didn't let it change his life. Whatever else Cyrus was, schizophrenic, alcoholic or whatever, he was nobody's fool.

"The air base went nuts. Soldiers were scrambling, planes were flying ... it's just the same as it was the other day."

Lois fumbled with the new cell phone. She'd bought a pre-paid phone specifically so it would be traceless. She'd get rid of it and switch to another soon enough. Her own phone had the battery out.

"Are you sure of the time?" she asked.

The time he'd given her matched up with all the other reports she'd been getting. She had enough already to run with the story, but she wanted to be sure she had everything.

The homeowner, a disgruntled older man who'd recently bought a house near Andrews Air Force Base snorted. "I thought I was getting a good deal when I bought this place, but six times a day I have planes flying by overhead. I was watching the news when I heard the sirens. I know what time it was, Ms. Lane."

"You've been a big help Mr. Johnson." Lois hesitated, and then said, "Is there anything else that

you can remember about it?"

"Most of the planes haven't even gotten back yet."

Lois was in her car, ready to head for the base, which was a few miles southeast of Washington D.C. She hesitated, and then turned the key into an off position.

If the base was still locked down, they wouldn't be answering any questions until the morning. Lois's best bet was to get the information she had collected into a story and then try to talk to someone on the base in the morning.

She felt suddenly exhausted. Miracles and still more terror all in the same evening, it was a lot to take in.

Lois couldn't be held responsible if part of her deep down had a suspicion that planes had been scrambled in Alaska as well as Washington.

It was a silly thought. That traitorous part of her that craved someone larger than life was something that had to be savagely suppressed sometimes. This was the real world. Magic didn't exist and neither did superheroes.

Sometimes there weren't even enough ordinary heroes to go around.

Huffing a little as he stumbled down the beach, Cyrus wondered why it was that he felt the clearest he had in ages on the day he finally saw an angel.

He'd seen devils in the past, heard voices, and he'd had flashbacks from his time in Vietnam. The vision of an angel was already starting to seem a little unreal. If it wasn't for the fist full of twenties that he found himself staring at repeatedly, he'd have thought he was surely sick again.

Pulling his cart behind him, he allowed himself to wonder what his sister Mavis was going to say when she saw him again. It had been three years this time, and she'd have assumed he was dead if he hadn't gotten in touch after Katrina.

The dark shadows from under the dock resolved themselves into five younger men, most in their mid-teens. Instinctively Cyrus shoved the money into his pocket.

"I don't want any trouble," he said.

"Who said we were trouble?" the first youth said. He was skinny barrio trash; Cyrus had made it a point to avoid his kind. Gang members were bad news; people would do things in groups that they'd never even consider doing on their own.

Gangs liked to use minors to fight and do much of their violence; penalties for juveniles were soft. Better, street kids didn't

have much in the way of a sense of consequences.

"I'll be out of your way soon enough," he said, keeping his head down. Making eye contact was dangerous; some street thugs used it as an excuse to get aggressive.

He could see the young men gathering around him, and he realized he should have taken the street. He'd avoided it for fear of being taken in as a vagrant, but at least the police would provide him with a warm bed and a hot meal.

Being alone in the middle of the night was dangerous, especially when you were off your patch.

He didn't know this stretch of ground; he didn't have friends here who would help stand up against casual bullying.

"Give me the money, and you can go on your way." The boy's voice was pitched low.

Cyrus began shaking his head. "No ... I can't."

An angel had given him the money to change his life. If it was taken from him, he'd have to go back to his same old patch and start begging from surfers again.

Despite himself, he was shocked when he found himself shoved to the ground.

"You stink, old man! Give me the money, or I'll hurt you!"

Cyrus pulled himself into a ball. He'd been beaten before and it was always best to protect the vital organs. It was an instinct that had saved his life more than once.

The boy pulled his leg back, ready to kick Cyrus in the ribs when a voice came out of the darkness.

"Let him go."

The boy took a quick step back and turned to face the new threat.

"That's my money. He's just holding it for me."

The angel wasn't wearing just boxers anymore. Somehow he'd ended up in jeans and a T-shirt, with sandals on his feet.

"So what's the problem? Why don't you get the money from him, and give us your money too?"

The angel stepped forward and said, "It wouldn't be the right thing to do. Why don't you boys run on home and ..."

With that the leader of the boys lunged forward. There was a reflection of light from metal in his hand. Cyrus wanted to cry out, but his throat felt frozen.

The metal hit the ground and the boy cursed, holding his hand.

A moment later the other boys were on him. The angel simply stood, as though nothing the boys did could hurt him.

Hitting him hurt THEM though, and when the angel said again, "Go home," they broke and ran.

The angel stepped forward and put a hand out.
"What am I going to do with you, Cyrus?"

Cyrus took hold of his hand, and a moment later he was on his feet.

In the bleached light of the diner, the angel looked tired.

"Get whatever you want," he said. Apparently whatever need he'd had for money had passed.

The waitress approached them cautiously, her nose curling at the sight of Cyrus. It was a rare treat to be allowed inside without being pushed outside and Cyrus allowed himself to relax for the first time.

"I'll have the special," Cyrus said. "With a side of extra bacon. And coffee ... black."

The angel shook his head slightly when the waitress glanced at him, and she headed for the counter.

"It's good to be in a place where it's not mocha this or -chino that. Everybody crazy on Starbucks ... "

"Starbucks?" The angel seemed surprised.

Apparently there weren't any Starbucks where he came from.

"It's been a while since you been on earth?" Cyrus chuckled. "Gotta be if you don't know Starbucks."

"This place. . . isn't like the America I left." The angel stared at the tabletop. "It wasn't what I expected at all."

"When did you leave?" Cyrus asked. As Cyrus understood it, Heaven was timeless. If the angel hadn't been back since the eighteen hundreds, he'd be in trouble.

Hesitating, the angel said, "Isn't there someplace you'd like to go?"

"What? Better than sitting down with a real live angel? 'Bout the only thing better than that would be flying with one."

The angel glanced up at him and said, "I don't feel like an angel."

"So how long has it been?"

Glancing back at him the angel was silent for a long moment, and then said, "Fifteen years."

"Lotta changes."

The waitress came with the coffee and Cyrus began spooning cream and sugar into it. He glanced up at the angel and said, "You want to share?"

Shaking his head, the angel said, "Do you know of a safe place I can take you?"

"Unless you are ready to fly me all the way to New Orleans, closest spot is the bus station."

Nodding, the angel seemed lost in thought.

"What's wrong?" Cyrus asked after a long sip of coffee. He held the cup tightly in his hands, enjoying

the unaccustomed warmth.

"I don't recognize this place," the angel admitted.

"Things are different than they were in my time."

"It's not so bad," Cyrus said.

"They're putting people in jail without trials," he said. "Everybody is suspicious and angry and ... "

"Everybody isn't suspicious or angry," Cyrus said, shaking his head. "Except maybe the cops or the government. Most people are the same as they always were. They get up, go to work, come home ... live their lives."

"I guess it's mostly the government I'm talking about," the angel admitted. "I don't remember them being so paranoid."

"Next time you come back to earth, try coming as a black man," Cyrus said. "Then you'll get to see what paranoid is."

The angel looked surprised. "I wasn't saying ... "

"Thing is ... the government gets paid to be paranoid so the rest of us don't have to. Maybe they've been doing some bad stuff sometimes, but the great thing about our government is that you get a new set every four or eight years. Good or bad, things are gonna change."

The waitress brought his meal, and Cyrus sighed with pleasure over the bacon and eggs. It had been days since his stomach had been even halfway full.

"I guess it's just seeing it all at once," the angel admitted. "Guards and guns and people locked up without trials. I never expected to see it here."

"You weren't around in the forties, I guess," Cyrus said.

The angel shook his head.

"My father worked as a guard in one of the internment camps. They locked up more than a hundred thousand people who hadn't committed a crime other than being born Japanese."

Cyrus leaned forward. "I don't see tens of thousands of people being locked up this time around, and most of the people they've locked up are guilty of something."

"Maybe. Maybe not. How can you know if they don't get a trial?"

"Sometimes you just have to have a little faith. As a colored man, my uncle couldn't join the navy as anything more than a cook." Cyrus chuckled. "Of course, with the seasickness he had he wasn't even much good for that."

The angel didn't say anything, just sat and listened.

"The year I fought in Vietnam, it was still illegal in sixteen states for me to marry a white woman. It was legal for banks to refuse me a loan for a house in a white neighborhood. I had relatives who had to deal

with the Klan."

Cyrus took a sip of his coffee and grinned. "Now, my sister's kid is working at being a doctor. Don't tell me that things are all changing for the worse. Fifteen years ago did you ever think a black man was gonna be the front runner to be president?"

The angel shrugged, looking a little uncomfortable.

"Win or lose, it's a sign that things are changing. When people are scared for their lives, they do bad things. If they go too far though, the pendulum eventually starts swinging the other way."

"Nothing changes if people don't work for it."

"That's the beauty of the system. Everybody gets a place at the table. With many voices comes change. We don't have a perfect system, but in the long run things are getting better."

"You seem pretty well educated for someone who lives on the streets."

Cyrus shrugged. "I did some reading back when I was stable."

The angel nodded and fell silent. Although he didn't look completely convinced, he looked like he was thinking.

Winning an argument with an angel. His sister was never going to believe him. Cyrus grinned again, then reached for the salt. He finished his meal with gusto.

Lois smiled into the camera and said, "This is Lois Lane, reporting from Andrews Air Force Base."

The cameraman smiled at her. "Great job, Ms. Lane."

Lois smiled politely until he cut the light off, and then let the smile drop from her face. It wasn't as good a job as she should be doing. She had the story; on two separate occasions in three days fighter jets had scrambled in the air over Washington. Men had been found carting something away from a farm near the bar she'd visited near Williamsburg, and rumors had it that a missile had been launched.

She'd managed to get some good shots of military jets returning to the base however. By her calculation, they'd stayed in the air for more than three hours.

No one in the military would speak to her, and Lois wasn't surprised. It would have been hard enough to get a story about national security without having suspicion about her sister clinging to her. Now they were avoiding her like the plague and she had to rely on reports from civilians.

The farmer had apparently signed some sort of non-disclosure agreement, but some of his hands had not. The college students in the bar had been helpful, and their footage was going out on the air, although

the faces of the military officers involved were going to be blurred.

CNN didn't want to be accused of treason after all.

Neither did any of the military people she had tried to talk to. Most of them hadn't known why, but the word had gone out that talking to Lois Lane might be a career- ending move.

If this continued, Lois might find herself back to reporting local crime stories. Ethically, she'd have to recuse herself.

"Get that piece back to the station and get it to Hilda. She'll put it together and get it ready to air." Lois spoke to the cameraman, who nodded.

"Will you need anything else?"

Lois shook her head. "I'm going to go home and try to get some sleep."

She was lying, of course. She was going to sleep at Hilda's, at least until she could hire some people

to sweep her apartment for bugs. It didn't feel very safe at the moment, what with all the traffic recently.

For a moment she wondered where Clark Kent had gotten to. However, worrying about him seemed useless. He hadn't left any kind of splatter on the sidewalk outside her building; she'd driven around it once to check.

He seemed like the sort of person who could take care of himself.

The cameraman nodded and slammed the door shut. He headed for the driver's side of the van, and a moment later he was driving off.

This left Lois alone in the parking lot. Across a field she could see the chain link fence topped with barbed wire that encircled the entire base. The installation commander had refused her access, which wasn't surprising, given that the base was apparently in a state of heightened alertness.

It wasn't until Lois turned to head back for her car that she began to feel uneasy. Although she was much better prepared to deal with anything that came along than most women, she was alone in Maryland in a parking lot that was desolate and empty. She couldn't even see the Beltway from here.

This was a supplemental parking lot for a set of bars and clubs approximately a block away.

She began to fumble inside her purse for her keys and pepper spray even as she began to head for her car.

Once she was in her car moving she'd be all right. She kept her eyes open, careful to walk in the center of the lane, as far away from the parked cars as she could get without getting close to the cars on the other side.

Somehow her car had gotten wedged between two old beaten up heaps of metal that barely deserved to be

called cars ... an old Monte Carlo with its windows shattered out and a Buick on the passenger's side.

Lois grimaced as she slipped into the space between her car and the Monte Carlo. She didn't remember it being quite so tight when she'd first gotten here.

Of course, there had been a crowd of onlookers parking and trying to get their faces on the news. Cars had been driving in and out. Most of the vehicles now belonged to people still in the bar.

Slipping into the space between her car and the Monte Carlo, Lois slipped the key into the door. Out of habit, she checked the back seat when the light came on. It was empty.

As she began to turn the key in the lock, she felt something jab into her back.

There was someone in the Monte Carlo. In the side mirror of her rental car she could see a shadowy figure sliding out of the window behind her.

"Don't move," the voice was deep and raspy. When Lois made as though to turn around, she winced as whatever it was jabbed deeper into her kidney.

With her satellite phone unplugged, even the government people watching her had no idea where she was. She was all alone, and there wasn't anyone to save her.

Lois grimaced and wondered whether the thing sticking in her back was a blade or a gun. If it was a blade, she was probably fast enough to mostly get out of the way before getting a piece of metal in her kidney. The person behind her had to be hanging partially out the window of the car behind her, and their position couldn't be good.

If it was a gun, chances were that she was dead if she tried to move.

"What do you want?" Lois said. "My wallet is in my purse in the car."

She'd gladly give up her wallet and purse and she'd have her credit cards cancelled before her attacker was even a mile away.

"Don't look around." The voice rasped. "If you do, I won't give you anything."

Lois frowned. "Give me what?"

"Information about your sister."

"I already know about my sister," Lois said slowly. "She's dead."

The nondisclosure contract she had signed required that she not admit to knowing anything different. If this person really had something she could use, they'd already know different.

"You've already seen the other one," the voice said. "You know what's being covered up."

"If you are a source, why stick me in the back? Call me, send me an e-mail ..."

"I don't want to end up in jail for treason," the voice said. "Or lose my job."

Lois shook her head and began to turn, only to feel something jabbing her in the kidney even harder.

"Hey!" Lois said. "Why should I help you?"

"If you don't care what happens to your sister, then we have nothing to discuss."

Lois grimaced. "I don't use unattributed sources."

Given the nondisclosure contract she'd signed, she'd have to be able to prove every piece of evidence she supplied had come from a source other than what had been revealed by the government itself.

"As far as you are concerned, you never met me. This meeting never happened. Anything you learn here I'll officially deny."

"And I can't see your face?"

"I'd feel safer knowing you didn't know who I am. The government has a rather large bargaining chip locked up in a holding cell."

Lois flushed. Would she give up a source to get her sister out of jail? She'd like to think she wouldn't, but it was hard to tell until you were faced with the situation.

"Why now?" Lois asked, scanning the surrounding areas.

"Nobody is watching you right now. In a few minutes that might change. Do you want what I have or not?"

Resisting the urge to look behind her, Lois nodded.

It was going to be a long night.

For someone who had seemed so levelheaded just a few minutes before, Cyrus had screamed like a girl once they were both in the air. He'd struggled and clung to Clark, which given his unique personal odor hadn't been pleasant.

At least their journey hadn't been interrupted by military jets. Clark had taken the flight low and slow, both for Cyrus's safety and to avoid any possible detection. Flying over the major highways had long been one of Clark's navigation tricks; the long lines of flowing headlights stretched off into the distance as bright as any visible trail.

They'd skirted the city of Houston, which was larger than it had been in his world, and they'd flown over the roofs of casino-bound Texas vehicles heading for Louisiana.

It wasn't until they approached the Crescent city that Clark realized that something was wrong. The city should have been awash with light, sprawled out over

the swampland basin like a floating jewel.

Instead, entire sections of the city were dark, and in other parts lights were few and widely scattered.

The city sounded wrong. Every city had its own sound, and its own smell, but New Orleans had always been unique even among those.

It had always been a place that echoed with the sounds of jazz music, music that never really died away. Clark remembered the first time he had come to the city when he was eighteen. He'd walked the streets at night listening to the sounds of jazz and blues being played through open windows at all hours of the night.

At this time of night the live bands should have been playing. The city should have smelled of gumbo and crawfish and jambalaya, all overlaying the underlying smell of rot and decay.

Now the good smells were fewer, and the bad ones were laced with chemical smells Clark couldn't identify.

Entire sections of the town had blue tarps placed on the roofs, and as he approached he could finally see the devastation. The more affluent areas were still being rebuilt, but entire neighborhoods had been washed away.

New Orleans had less than two thirds of the people it had once had, and the sounds Clark heard from them lacked that certain sense he'd once had from the city.

This was a city whose heartbeat had stuttered and almost died.

"What happened here?" Clark asked.

"Big hurricane," Cyrus said, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. "The levee broke, flooded the whole city."

As Clark flew closer, he was horrified by the extent of the destruction.

"When?" he asked simply.

"Maybe three years ago ... I lose track."

If the city still looked like this after three years, the destruction must have been horrific after the flooding.

Clark couldn't even imagine where all the people had gone.

The frightening thing was that the levees in his own world weren't any higher than the ones he could see now.

This could happen at home.

It was starting to look like he was going to need to keep a notebook of things he wanted his world to avoid.

Just what else had gone wrong? Had there been horrific new diseases? Nuclear attacks? Famines, floods? At this point he wasn't ready to rule anything out.

The nation was in its second war with Iraq; he'd

been able to pick up that much.

He was going to have to make some decisions before he went back. He wasn't going to allow these things to happen again if he could help it. If he had to shore up levees with his own hands, he'd do it.

Was he willing to remove a dictator from power if it meant saving thousands of lives?

Just how involved should he be in politics, in matters of war and human suffering? Should he take a strictly humanitarian role, or should he be more proactive?

It was a disturbing thought, and something that he would have to consider long and hard.

Just how far should he go in trying to save his world the kind of grief and pain that this world had already experienced?

The one thing that was clear was that he was never going to be able to do enough if he tried to keep his involvement secret.

He was going to need a disguise and an identity.

That didn't mean he had to choose this world's version of a costume. He hated the idea of being shoehorned into a role, even if the costume wasn't half bad.

"This is how this is going to work, Ms. Lane. There's only so much information that I can give you. If I give you anything that's known by only a limited number of people, then they can use that to figure out where the leak came from."

"Then why are you even here?" Lois asked. "And if we are going to do this, you are going to stop sticking me with that thing."

"You won't look?"

"You have a mask of some kind on," Lois said. She'd managed to get a glimpse

of it in the car's rear view mirror. "You are wearing gloves, and that isn't your car."

"That's precisely why I don't want you looking back this way. You tend to notice small details, and I don't need anything giving me away."

"Fine," Lois said irritably.

"This investigation is straining agency resources," The voice said. "Housing and guarding one hundred and ninety five prisoners while conducting a massive investigation involving hundreds of agents ... there are only three hundred fifty-five detainees in Guantanamo."

"I'm sure it's a major inconvenience," Lois said.

"It's pulling agents from other important duties!" the voice said. "There are hundreds of people involved in this, so there is information I can share with you without jeopardizing my identity."

"Why didn't you just slip it under my door?" Lois asked. Getting a discreet envelope would have been much more pleasant than standing out in the open in a parking lot in the middle of the night.

"Your hallway is bugged," the voice said, "and they have people watching the entrances and exits."

Which begged the question of how Clark was getting in and out. Had he simply never left her building, or did he have some sort of sewer access that the government didn't know about?

"Fine," she said flatly. "What CAN you tell me then?"

"What do you think all this is, Ms. Lane?" the voice asked.

"It's some kind of hoax, obviously. Maybe a cult related thing."

"What would you say if I told you we've catalogued more than three thousand pieces of evidence that say these people are telling the truth?"

"I'd say they were a little obsessive about faking the evidence," Lois said. "Did you know that a group of Star Trek fans rebuilt the bridge of the Enterprise with their own money?"

"Where do you think all the duplicates are coming from?" the voice said, challenging. "You were nosing around the genetics lab, so I know you have some knowledge of them."

"They hired twins, surgically reconstructed people to look like other people ... what else could it be?"

Lois already knew there was more to it, but she wanted to hear her informant's explanation. With any luck she'd get some information she didn't know yet.

"Preliminary DNA tests show positive matches for all forty sets of duplicates."

"So twins," Lois said.

"With the same fingerprints and retinal scans."

Retinal scans were much more reliable than fingerprints, and they couldn't be surgically altered. Twins didn't share the same retinal scans either, any more than they shared fingerprints.

"And everyone on the plane was a duplicate," Lois said.

If true, it would be mind boggling.

"We only found about twenty percent who had analogues ... but that was still about forty people."

Forty exact duplicates of United States citizens.

"Maybe they had something done to them," Lois said weakly. "Something to fool the tests."

"That's what the boys upstairs keep insisting. They won't believe what the people on the scene are telling them ... or the experts either."

The voice continued, "Not all of them were the same age either."

"What do you mean?" Lois asked.

"About half of the duplicates were fifteen years younger than their counterparts here."

"Clones?" Lois asked.

"You watch too much science fiction, Ms. Lane." The voice was silent for a moment then chuckled, "Clones only grow as fast as the organism they were cloned from. It takes fifteen years and some months to get a fifteen year old clone. Some of these people are in their sixties."

"Gene therapy," Lois said. "Somebody altered their DNA."

"It's not possible at the moment," the voice said. "Even if it were, it'll be decades before it's remotely plausible."

Lois was silent for a long moment. "So what else do you have, other than the passengers themselves?"

"Newspapers, magazines, books, credit cards, driver's licenses, cassette players, clothing with labels that aren't produced anywhere else, money that appears to be absolutely real but obviously isn't ... do you know how much luggage a hundred and ninety-five people bring with them?"

Lois stared off toward the sea of light that was the military base. "Let me guess ... every magazine and book and newspaper was made in Metropolis, or Gotham or something."

"No. Many of the novels were published in New York." The voice sighed. "So far they haven't found anything that was published after 1993, with the exception of books that don't appear to have ever been published anywhere."

"So someone had access to a printing press and a lot of time on their hands. I can get a fake magazine or newspaper at any novelty shop," Lois said.

Of course, getting three thousand of them would be difficult, expensive and time consuming, but ...

"There were two laptops on the airplane. Everyone on the plane claims to be from 1993, but the laptops are approximately ten years more advanced than that."

"So they have a couple of five year old computers," Lois said. "So what?"

She had to play the Devil's advocate despite the growing sensation in her gut that she knew where all of this was leading.

"These computers don't use Windows, Mac OS, Linux or Solaris. They use a kind of operating system than we've never seen before ... and they are designed so that you don't lose your work even if the power goes out. The power returns and your screen pops back up where you left it."

"Macs can do that, in safe sleep mode." Lois said. "Some laptops can too."

"It works even if you pull the plug and don't have a battery."

"OK ... " Lois said.

That was a design feature that she could have wished for numerous times during her journalistic career. It wasn't possible in modern computing either, as far as Lois knew.

"Apparently produced by a company called Nanosoft." The voice paused. "We only recognize half the computer chips. The rest are vintage 1993 models. That's true in the lap tops and in the 747."

Building a factory to produce a new computer chip would cost more than a billion dollars. The possibility of this being some hoax was rapidly growing less and less likely.

"So the 747 isn't the same as one of our 747's?" Lois asked.

"All of the planes are accounted for," the voice said. "Mostly the plane is identical to a 747, although there are minor design changes. Some of these were changes that had been proposed during the design phase of the plane but rejected for reasons of cost or aesthetics."

"So these were changes that almost happened," Lois said quietly.

There was a sound from behind her that Lois didn't recognize, and she heard a soft curse.

"You've been out here too long," the voice said. "They're on their way."

She felt something shoved into the crook of her arm.

"Check the web address you'll see written in on page three. It's been verified as being true."

Glancing down, Lois saw that she'd been given a newspaper. She grimaced.

"Get out of here!"

"How will I contact you again?" Lois asked.

"You won't. I'll be watching."

Lois sighed and slid into her car. She was getting too old for this sort of thing.

She allowed herself a moment to glance into the car next to her and saw that the shadowy figure had already disappeared, although whether it had simply sank into the floorboards she didn't want to guess.

Pulling out of the parking spot, she tried not to think about the implications of what she'd heard.

Her hands were shaking on the steering wheel, and she tightened them as she fought to keep her expression calm.

If this was a hoax, it was the most elaborate, expensive hoax in human history.

Part of her wanted to cling to the idea, but deep down she no longer believed it. The truth, as

unsettling as it was, was becoming horribly clear.

Lucy Lane wasn't some deluded cultist, or even a dedicated terrorist and traitor. She was telling the truth, and the other people on the plane were telling the truth.

Which meant the sister she'd grown up with, the sister she'd practically raised, was really dead.

Lois grimaced as she looked at herself in the lighted mirror in her sun visor. Her eyes felt swollen and they looked red.

She'd had to pull over to the shoulder of the road when the truth had finally hit her. Lucy was gone and she was never coming back. All that was left was an echo, someone who shared the face of her sister, and some of the same memories, but who was no more her than a twin might have been.

Crying was something Lois hated. She hadn't been able to do it when her parents died; all she'd felt was numb and hollow. That feeling had only spread as she had tried in vain to fill that void with awards and professional success.

To have had this sort of hope and to have it yanked out from under her ... it was overwhelming.

Worse, she couldn't give in to her first inclination, which was to wash her hands of the whole situation and take a long vacation. This story was hurting her professionally; it was costing her the trust of the government and it was making her feel old before her time.

Yet this doppelganger, this twin of Lucy ... Lois owed her. If the situation had been reversed, and it had been her sister trapped in another universe, she'd have hoped that her counterpart would be able to expand the definition of family to include her.

The other passengers were going to be punished for something they had no control over. Lois had gotten into her profession to make a difference. She'd hoped to make the world a better place, and no matter what the professional cost, she was going to have to continue.

It was the right thing to do.

The house still had water stains to the four foot mark and Clark could smell the tell tale smell of mold. Of course, there was nowhere in even his own New Orleans that was free of that smell, and he couldn't smell anything that seemed to be dangerous.

Overlaying those smells were the chemical scent of lemon cleansers, potpourri and gumbo. It was a familiar mix that reminded

Clark of his own New Orleans.

Cyrus wasn't doing as well as he had been on the

flight over. He was staring into space and mumbling to himself in a voice that was unintelligible even to Clark.

Knocking firmly on the door, Clark waited as he heard a light tread.

A shadow crossed the peephole and Clark carefully stepped aside so that Cyrus would be visible. He heard a small sigh on the other side of the door, and then there was a moment of hesitation before the noise came of the chain being undone and several locks being turned.

The porch light came on and the door opened to reveal a tall, slender woman wearing a purple kaftan. Her face was dark and distinguished-looking, and there were already traces of gray in her hair.

"It's been a long time," she said neutrally, staring at her brother.

Cyrus smiled up at his sister and said, "An angel of the Lord has brought the prodigal son back to the family."

"You haven't been taking your medicines, have you?" she said.

"He seemed perfectly clear an hour ago," Clark said.

He hoped that the stress of flying hadn't been too much for the older man.

"Cyrus knows better than to tell people what he's seeing," she said. "It's only when it's at its worse that he forgets how things look to the rest of the world."

Clark didn't know what to say. Without revealing what he was, his only other choice was to allow Cyrus to look crazy.

Of course, the man was becoming visibly more withdrawn even as they spoke.

"Come in," she said finally.

The truck stop was practically deserted, which was just as Lois liked it. She would have preferred an Internet café, but this was closer and more secure. She wouldn't have to worry about anyone looking over her shoulder as she accessed the Internet.

Lois smiled neutrally at the woman behind the counter. She moved past the entrance to the small diner and headed toward the back, where the Internet kiosks were. There were also facilities for showers and bathrooms and a small convenience store which sold everything the modern trucker might need.

She was online in a matter of moments, having slipped her money into the slot. It seemed a little pricy, but it was well worth the cost to have unmonitored Internet access.

Lois hadn't even bothered to look at the paper in the darkness of her vehicle. Now her main interest was

in finding the site that was on the third page. With her luck, the government would shut the site down before she had a chance to see it.

It was a Youtube address, which surprised Lois. She wasn't aware that Youtube had any dealings with the government.

She clicked the small arrow, and a moment later the small screen within a screen brightened.

She squinted for a moment. Was she looking at the deck of a garbage scow? She could see men moving around and from the sound of it they seemed to be speaking Norwegian.

They were staring up at the sky. One spoke quietly to the other, and even without understanding their language, Lois could see that they were uneasy.

She heard the sound of thunder. The camera panned up, and Lois could finally see what had caught the attention of the sailors. It took her a moment to understand what she was seeing; it was something dark that seemed to writhe and move as it covered the entire sky.

It was a flock of birds, one so massive that it seemed to stretch for miles, and it was descending toward the ship.

The sailors took one look at the descending horde and immediately headed for the safety of the enclosed deck cabin. The view of the camera changed, pitching back and forth as it too headed for the cabin.

The view changed as the door was slammed behind the cameraman, and the camera whirled around.

The flock descended in its hundreds of thousands, and as more and more birds landed on the deck, the cameraman zoomed in on one of them.

It was some sort of pigeon, gray but reddish under its throat. Lois frowned as something niggled at the back of her mind.

She'd seen this sort of pigeon before. It wasn't the usual sort of pigeon she'd seen on the streets of Washington, or even at some of the more exotic locations she'd visited.

Clicking the pause button, Lois minimized the screen and opened a new window. She began to do some quick but pointed research.

Her source wouldn't have sent her to this site if it wasn't important. Yet although the flock of pigeons was massive, Lois couldn't see anything special about it.

After several minutes of increasingly frustrated searching, Lois froze as she stared at a picture identical to the one she had been looking at on Youtube.

She remembered where she had seen the pigeon

before.

It had been on the one trip her parents had taken them on to the Smithsonian. Lucy had been bored, even though Lois had been interested in her father's explanations of all the stuffed animals on display.

There had been a certain morbid curiosity, staring at all the dead animals with their unblinking glass eyes.

Her father had spoken at length at how lucky they were to see this one display, before it was returned to the archives.

It was a bird, of a species that had once covered the world, with single flocks that were so huge that they would take days to pass by overhead. One flock covered eight hundred and fifty square miles and had as many as a billion birds.

They'd been slaughtered by the thousands and by the millions and used as cheap meat by the poor.

She'd stared at the bird for a long time. According to her father, it had been the last of its kind and with its death had come the extinction of its entire species. She'd felt sad at the thought of just how alone that bird must have been, trapped in a cage to the very end of its life.

No being should have to be that alone.

They'd named the bird Martha, and she was the last of the passenger pigeons. She'd died in 1914.

She'd looked exactly like the birds on the garbage scow.

"We'll have to get him back on his meds as quickly as we can," Mavis said.

Clark could tell that this was a woman who was used to being in command. Her house had been recently redecorated, and he could see familiar African masks that reminded him of his time in Nigeria.

"I really can't stay," he said. "There is something important that I have to do."

The woman glanced at her brother, who was staring in fascination at one of the masks. "You've already done more than most people would have done. Most people see someone like my brother on the streets, and they look the other way."

Clark shrugged uncomfortably. "He helped me out when he didn't have any reason to. I couldn't just leave him where he was." "He knows what it's like to need help," she said. "It's when times get tough that you know who your friends are."

"I wish there was more I could do," Clark said. Cyrus was now settling onto a newish looking leather couch and his breathing was already slowing.

"He's a good man, when he isn't sick," she said.

"We'll get through this, one way or the other.

Sometimes you just have to have a little faith."

Clark nodded.

The tension on Cyrus's face had drained away and his breathing was deep and even. He was finally home.

The tall woman sniffed and stepped over to the couch. She pulled an afghan from the chair beside it and settled it over him.

It reminded Clark uncomfortably of his own mother, and for a moment he found a lump in his throat.

He hated being reminded just how alone he was in the universe. He'd been isolated, first by what he was, and then by his parents' deaths. He'd been forced to hide himself from everyone, which had left him even more alone. Mostly he'd been able to avoid thinking about it with work and sometimes with Lana.

It was funny how he'd barely thought of Lana since he'd come to this universe.

Of course, in this universe he was more alone than he had ever been, separated from everyone he'd ever known.

The only time he hadn't felt that had been when he was with Lois Lane. Somehow when he was with her, he didn't have time to think about anything else. Whether she was spraying him with mud or pepper or simply demanding his help, she seemed to eclipse everything else around her.

He'd spent too much time with all of this. He needed to get back to Washington and find Lois. He needed to gather his people and somehow find a way to get them all back home.

He'd gambled a lot on the idea that Lois was going to be all right, he could only hope that he was able to find her again.

The one thing he wasn't going to think about was why being around her felt like being home.

Mavis closed the door, and switched off her porch lights. She sighed and turned to head back into her living room.

She hesitated as she realized that she hadn't even gotten the man's name. He'd gone out of his way to help her brother, and she'd just let him walk away. With no lights on the street other than her own porch lights, he'd have a hard time finding his way back to his vehicle.

Cyrus had called the man an angel. Knowing her brother, he meant it literally. It was at least a refreshing change from the devils which were his more usual hallucinations. Perhaps this time he'd do better at staying on the medications. Her son had mentioned some possible new medicines that might

work better.

She opened the door and switched on her lights, ready to call out to the man who had helped her brother. When Cyrus was better, he'd want to know the man's name. Stepping onto the front porch, she peered out into the darkness.

The man was now standing on her sidewalk looking up and down the darkened street. His eyes met hers, and he smiled.

A moment later he was rising into the air.

As Mavis stared, he disappeared into the heavens.

Slowly she stepped back into her house and closed the door.

Lois sat staring at the computer monitor for an endless moment. It seemed insane somehow that just a few days before the world had seemed to be rational and sane

and now she was dealing with things like parallel universes.

Part of her still didn't want to believe it. She'd seen no direct evidence. Maybe her source had been lying; maybe the tests had been faked.

Maybe passenger pigeons had been alive all this time and were only now making a comeback. More likely, she'd mistaken the breed for another, similar kind of pigeon.

Yet the evidence was mounting, and the feeling deep in her gut was that the impossible was happening. She'd already accepted that Lucy wasn't her sister; that realization had brought her to unaccustomed tears.

The world had been simpler when it had been simply about guns and politics.

She glanced at the paper she'd been given, and then blinked. She stared at the masthead at the top of page three and then flipped to the front page.

Her first impulse was to assume that this was some sort of joke. Even if another universe existed which had cities named things like Metropolis and Gotham, it didn't necessarily follow that the newspaper had to be named the Daily Planet.

Yet that was the name spread across the top of the paper, and on top of each following page. She flipped through looking for the masthead on the editorial page, which would list all the members of the editorial board.

The masthead described the Daily Planet as having been founded in 1775. She scanned for familiar names; most of them were unknown to her, although Perry White was managing editor.

The date on the paper was fifteen years and four days ago, in 1993. Quickly skimming headlines, Lois

discovered that the other world apparently also had a David Koresh, and that the FBI was in a standoff at the Branch Davidian compound.

A minor grenade attack on a United States embassy in Belgrade, fighting in Angola, bombings in Algeria and Madrid.

Authorities were investigating ground zero at the World Trade Center ... this was a story that made Lois blink until she realized that it was about the earlier bombings, from a time when Ground Zero had meant something quite different.

Apparently Clark's world was already sowing the seeds that would lead to the world Lois was currently living in.

The television listings had only twenty channels, and MTV was listed as only having music videos. One of the channels was LNN. There were no other major news-only channels that Lois could see.

She recognized perhaps three quarters of the television shows as being from her own childhood; others were completely unfamiliar.

Even the comic strips were different. She recognized "Peanuts" and "Mary Worth," but she'd never seen a strip called "Out of the Tar Pits" or "Captain Carrot."

Flipping randomly through the paper; she saw sports teams she didn't recognize, and articles on things done by politicians with names she didn't recognize.

One article caught her eye; it was a piece in the Metro section by Clark Kent about the closing of a landmark theater. It was well done, tugged the heartstrings and next to the top of the story was a grainy picture of the man she knew.

Clark Kent was some sort of columnist then, not just a reporter.

He had other stories in other parts of the paper; all of them were competent and well written. It rounded him out a little and made her respect him more.

More than just a daredevil willing to climb tall buildings and leap off speeding airplanes, he was a fellow reporter. He was a member of the same once-exclusive community that Lois was. In the day of citizen journalists and bloggers that still meant something.

Lois sighed. She was going to have to find out more about the passenger pigeons. Heading for the single remaining pay phone, she began to slip quarters into it, and then began to punch in the sequences of numbers that would give her access to her voice mail messages.

"This is Pilar," the first message said. "I need to see you as soon as possible."

The tone of her voice set Lois on edge, and checking the time, she saw that the message had only been sent thirty minutes earlier.

She'd heard that tone before, and it was never good. Her stomach clenched as she began gathering her things together.

It was raining again, even more heavily than it had been for the last several hundred miles. Clark grimaced. At the heights he was forced to fly, he couldn't move nearly as fast as he wanted to go. It was taking seemingly forever to get back to Washington.

The sound of a crying baby alerted him that something was wrong. A quick glance below showed him that someone had attempted to drive across the flooded road despite numerous warnings about crossing running water.

He grimaced; this was only going to slow him down even more, and he was feeling a sudden urgency to get back to Lois.

The car gave a sudden lurch and began to slide sideways along the pathway of the moving water. The woman inside gave a sudden scream.

It was a work of only a moment to flash down and land in the water behind the car. He gave it a push and it was suddenly sliding even further in the direction of the running water. The woman inside screamed again, and Clark winced. Even with the overwhelming sounds of rushing water her voice was piercing.

As soon as he saw a suitable place for the car to emerge onto dry ground, he gave it a sudden shove.

The woman screamed again, but this time her wheels had traction, although her engine was stalled, and she was safe by the side of the road.

Clark ducked down behind the car and back into the water.

At this rate he was never going to keep a clean suit of clothes. Allowing himself to float downstream, he waited until he was hidden by a stand of trees and then he was in the air again.

He hovered for a moment to make sure that the woman was going to be all right. It was only then that he noticed the teenage boy sitting on his roof in the rain with his cell phone in his hand.

The boy was staring at him, and had his cell phone held before him like some sort of shield.

Clark froze for a moment, and then shrugged. Who was going to believe a kid who said he'd seen a man who could fly?

A moment later he was gone, missing the teenager's expression of glee.

Lois stepped into the lobby with trepidation. She'd

been with the company back before the remodeling, back when people were still working out of closets and incredibly cramped spaces.

Now the whole place was futuristic, with almost a millennial design. Ergonomic furniture, a wide open layout, work spaces in modular clusters; everything was completed by an amazing view of the Capitol, which at this time of night was lit and looked amazing.

During the day the office was a cacophony of ringing phones, murmuring voices and turned up televisions. At this time of the night, the staff was less than a fifth of what it was during the day, which left the place seeming ominously quiet.

Lois could see Pilar waiting for her near her office and she felt her stomach tightening yet again. Pilar was one of seven producers of the bureau's live production unit. At the moment, all that mattered was that she was Lois's boss.

Straightening her back, Lois fought to keep her expression calm and composed. She'd faced gunfire in Iraq. One woman with a little power and authority over her wasn't going to intimidate her.

Lois stepped into Pilar's office and was surprised when the other woman closed the door behind her. That was a bad sign. Pilar usually kept the door open so that she was available at a moment's notice. She only closed the door when she had something to say that she didn't want others to hear.

"Take a seat," she said.

Lois nodded and settled into one of three chairs. Pilar sat on the other side of a large desk, and she pulled out a remote control. She dimmed the lights with it, and then the flat screen monitor behind her switched on.

A moment later, familiar footage of an airplane landing appeared on her screen.

"Can you tell me what this is?" Pilar asked.

"My footage from the Flight 1013 landing," Lois said. "You've been playing it for the last several days."

"So why have we had eight different flight engineers and physicists calling to complain about the footage being computer generated?"

Lois blinked. "It's not computer generated."

"According to the experts, it takes an airplane that size at least a thousand feet to touch down once it's fifty feet off the ground. It takes another two thousand feet to stop. That's a minimum, and that kind of stop would likely result in blown out tires and a lot of damage to the aircraft ... damage that didn't show up in the video."

"They were under the fifty foot mark by the time they reached the fence," Lois said.

"The experts noted that, but it looks as though the

plane made the stop in half the distance it should." Pilar shook her head. "The laws of physics say that plane didn't land the way you said it did. Whoever did the computer graphics should have done their homework better."

"I filmed what I filmed," Lois said, looking Pilar straight in the eye.

"How did you fake the footage?" Pilar's voice was quiet, but steely.

"When would I have had time to fake the footage?" Lois said. "I started filming as the plane was landing. You think I keep stock footage of planes landing just on the off chance I might see an accident?"

"You might if you were involved in the cover-up."

Lois shook her head. "I don't know what you ... "

"I had a visit from an Agent Randal earlier tonight," Pilar said. "He was asking a lot of questions about your family and political affiliations."

Grimacing, Lois shook her head. "He's a bully," she said. "He likes to throw his weight around."

Pilar nodded. "If it was just him, I wouldn't be asking this. Are you involved in this case?"

Lois shook her head then hesitated. "I'm not, but someone in my family might be."

"Who?"

"I can't tell you." At Pilar's expression Lois said, "I signed a non-disclosure agreement."

"Then I don't have much

of a choice," Pilar said. "With everything that has been happening over the past few years, people have lost faith in the press. We're lucky that none of the other networks picked up on this."

Lois nodded slowly, not taking her eyes off her boss. The twisting in her stomach grew even worse.

"If anyone else had pulled something like this, I'd be handing them their pink slip right now. You've been one of our best reporters and I'm going to credit this to burnout." Pilar switched the television behind her off with the remote, and the lights in the room came back on.

Pilar pulled some paperwork out of her desk and began to fill in some lines. "As of this moment I'm placing you on unpaid administrative leave. I'll try to keep it out of the gossip network. As far as the rest of the bullpen is concerned you are just taking a vacation."

Lois wanted to open her mouth to protest, but somehow she felt frozen to her chair.

"We're attaching the words "computer simulation" to the landing footage, and we're going to hope that none of the other networks pick up on it." Pilar hesitated. "If they do, there won't be anything I can do

for you."

With her face feeling suddenly numb, Lois nodded. "I didn't do anything wrong."

"There will be a panel convened before you are allowed back to work," Pilar said. "You can make your case there."

Lois rose unsteadily to her feet.

"Before you leave, I need your press pass and satellite phone. If you want to get anything from your desk, I'll escort you to it. You won't be allowed back in the building until after the administrative review is complete ... if then."

Reaching into her purse, Lois felt a little lightheaded.

After everything she'd done for the network they were letting her go.

Flying past Lois's apartment building, Clark could see no sign of her. A glance inside the parking garage showed no sign of her vehicle either.

If she'd been taken by the government, they probably wouldn't have taken her vehicle.

Frowning, he considered his options. He could return to her apartment and wait for her, but he could already see that would require removing even more bugs.

He could look for her all over Washington D.C., but given the size of the place he'd probably never find her.

His only other option was to try to guess where she might have gone.

At this time of night there was very little shopping she could do, even in a twenty-four-hour city like Washington D.C. Her relatives were dead; he'd learned that much from listening to her speak to her sister and to Agent White.

He hadn't seen any pictures of friends or colleagues except people from work.

Ah...work. Lois worked at a twenty-four-hour news network and where else would she be at this time of night?

He'd noticed the building on a previous pass over the city. It sat in the same location as the LNN building in his world.

Apparently there was no Lex Luthor here, although given this world's portrayal of him in the movie, it was perhaps for the best. The Luthor he'd met would have hated being portrayed as an over-the-top caricature.

It wasn't until he saw Lois standing on the front steps of the building with a stunned look on her face that he finally sighed with relief.

Dropping out of the sky quickly, he stepped out of

a back alley and soon reached her.

"Lois," he said.

He was surprised when she turned and hugged him tightly.

Being touched by others wasn't something Clark had gotten to experience much of in the years following his parents' deaths. Foster care was a place meant to provide a safe bed, and it didn't always do well at providing for other basic needs. Over time he'd forgotten what it had felt like to be comfortable being touched by others.

Unexpected hugs, touches to the arm ... these all felt strange and awkward. Lana wasn't particularly comfortable with public displays of affection, except when she was trying to visibly establish her territory.

Clark had always hated that about her.

So being hugged by Lois Lane felt strange but wonderful. Clark found himself awkwardly reaching up her back to pat it slightly. It felt good being touched, even for just a moment.

After what seemed like forever, Lois looked up and said, "We need to get you off this street."

Her eyes looked a little teary, but it was apparent that she wasn't going to cry.

Clark nodded slowly. There were cameras everywhere, including cameras concealed in little black glass bulbs above them. The government had been uncannily good at tracking him in the past, and so it was for the best if he moved.

Given that they were within sight of the Capitol building, security was likely to be even tighter than it had been in other places.

"What's going on?" he asked as they began to move.

"You and Lucy and all the others ... you really are from someplace else, aren't you?"

Clark nodded. "There's no other way to explain all the missing cities."

"And you live in Metropolis?"

Clark nodded.

"And there's no Superman?"

"I'd never even heard of him until I arrived here."

Clark felt a small twinge at the truth that was also a lie.

From the sound of it, she was coming to believe that he really was from somewhere else. He didn't have to reveal himself to her to get the help he needed.

Part of him was relieved. It was difficult to change a lifetime of habits in the space of a few days and he'd been trained from the time he was small to hide what he was. Telling someone went against everything he'd had drilled into him as a child.

If Lana hadn't found out on her own, he wouldn't have told her either. That it had given her control over him was something that had made him even more cautious.

Yet another part of him was disappointed. Being in another universe had given him a new sense of freedom in using his abilities. He'd helped people in large ways and gotten away with it, and it had felt good.

What he'd done with the fishing boat had felt right. It was the sort of thing he should have been doing all along.

"Let's get into my car," Lois said. "We can talk there."

Even at this time of night they had to walk almost a block to reach Lois's car. Out of what was becoming increasingly a habit when around her, Clark scanned it.

He stepped away from her and said, "Do you think we should check for ... "

She looked at him for a moment, then her eyes widened slightly. She nodded.

Looking under the rear bumper, he said, "Um ... "

Following behind him, Lois put a hand on his shoulder as she squatted down beside him. She scowled.

"Is it a bomb?" he asked.

She shook her head. "It's a GPS tracker."

At his look of incomprehension she said, "It uses information from satellites to triangulate the car's position and send it to whoever is tracking me."

"I thought only the military had these," Clark said.

She reached under the bumper and quickly began to detach it.

"It's illegal for the police to use these without a search warrant, but the fourth amendment doesn't apply to private citizens. I've used these a couple of times."

Glancing around, she smiled. Standing up she headed for a car across the street.

"What are you doing?" Clark asked as she began to attach the tracker to the underside of the bumper of a sleek and stylish looking Mercedes.

"This is my boss's car," Lois said.

"Won't he be irritated when the government comes after him?"

"I hope so," Lois said, grinning as she finished. She stood up. "She probably won't be very happy."

Crossing the street again, Lois said, "Any other intuitions about my car?"

Clark made a show of looking under the rest of the body of the car before shaking his head.

Lois nodded then slipped her key in the door and

slid into the driver's seat. Clark waited patiently on the other side until she unlocked his door with a touch of a button.

"They're probably on their way," Lois said. "They know what you look like."

Clark glanced over at her sharply. "How?"

"From what I understand, they have footage of you in several convenience stores." Lois said. "They said something about lottery tickets?"

"I've always been lucky," Clark said weakly.

Lois switched on the ignition, and a moment later the car was out onto the street.

"There isn't anything we can do about the traffic cameras," she said, "Except for you to keep your head down. With any luck though, they'll get sloppy and will depend on the GPS. They won't check the cameras until they realize the GPS isn't where it's supposed to be."

Clark nodded, and then slid down in his seat.

It was going to be a long night.

Grimacing as she pushed the door open with her hip, Lois scowled at the man behind her. "So you are telling me that you gave most of your money to a homeless guy."

Of course he had. He wouldn't be Clark Kent if he'd thought to keep a little for himself. Lois had been kicking herself ever since the impromptu hug. It had been wrong on many levels.

In the first place he was still a stranger, despite his name. Hugging strangers just wasn't the done thing, as her mother had tried to tell her when she was young. Although her father had been affectionate, her mother had come from a wealthier family, where even family members rarely touched.

Touching led to expectations, which she'd learned to her regret in college was often the prelude to something less pleasant. Of course, she'd had a brown belt by that time and she'd always been careful about what was put in her drink. She hadn't gone through some of the things her friends had gone through, for which she was grateful.

But the emotional fallout had been difficult. It had led her to feeling more and more alone, which in the wake of her parents' deaths had been even worse.

If Clark Kent had kept some of his money, they'd have been able to afford more than one room. As it was, it had been very difficult to rent any room at all without a credit card, and the payment for the room and the two hundred dollar

deposit had eaten up most of Lois's ready cash.

Without using a credit or debit card, it was going to be difficult for Lois to do much of anything really,

and if she did use those things, they'd be able to track her.

The hug would be on camera, and as soon as the people following her realized she wasn't hiding out at Pilar's house, they'd be checking.

They'd make the connection between herself and Clark, a known fugitive, and that would give them the ammunition they needed, not only to use against her, but to use against her sister and the others.

As far as she knew, she still had her job with the Associated Press. How long that was going to last she didn't know. For all Pilar's assurances, Lois knew that word traveled fast. She was going to have to do damage control, and the only way to do that was to come up with something successful.

Flipping the light on, Lois grimaced. The place was clean at least, with two small beds. It was basic and utilitarian, a place designed for people who wanted nothing more than a safe place to sleep before moving on in the morning.

"Where did you sleep last night?" she asked Clark, as he closed the door behind him.

"On a roof," he said.

It certainly explained how he'd been able to get around the agents, but it wasn't acceptable now.

"I can do it again," he said, noticing her look. "If this makes you uncomfortable."

A lot of men would have made the offer knowing that there was no way she would accept. Looking at Clark however, Lois had a feeling deep in her gut that he meant it.

She was tempted. It hadn't been that long ago that she'd been spraying him in the face with pepper spray and attempting to run away from him.

Clark was someone Lois didn't know well, and although she was used to sleeping in close quarters with soldiers in Iraq, this was different.

This was a room with two beds. For an unmarried man and woman to be staying in the same motel room alone had certain unseemly implications.

If there was any other way, she'd never have shared a room with him. But the other options weren't good. If he slept in the car, the chances of them being discovered were a lot higher. The roofs here weren't very high, but if someone saw him climbing up one, they'd be sure to call the police.

She hadn't had the cash on her for a deposit for two rooms. As it was, this was straining the cash she had in her purse to its limit.

The truth was, she was going to have to decide either to trust Clark or not.

She shook her head slightly. "We're going to need our sleep. We'll just have to make do."

He nodded slowly. "I could use a shower. It's been tough keeping a clean change of clothing."

Lois flushed a little and she found herself looking off at the window, with its open curtains. Outside was a smooth expanse of pavement lit only by a single streetlight. The lot was filled with cars, which was reassuring; it would make checking the cars a little more difficult. Lois had parked the rental at the end of the lot, almost off in a stand of trees. The time they'd lose trying to get back to the car would be more than made up for by not having it parked directly in front of the place they were staying.

The government likely wouldn't have the staff to search every hotel or motel in a two hundred mile radius, so they'd have to use local police forces. Local police were a little easier to spot than the federal agents.

"I'm sorry," she said. "About ruining your clothes and everything."

"They're at the drycleaners," Clark said. "Some of them anyway."

He smiled slightly, as though to some sort of private joke. He then turned to close the heavy curtains.

Lois felt herself tensing slightly. They were alone now, and a lifetime of experience was making her skittish.

"Why don't you take a shower first?" Lois said. "I had one this morning."

It would give her a chance to get settled in and prepared. While she didn't think he would do anything, she couldn't help but be cautious.

"I don't suppose you brought another change of clothes," he said, sighing as he glanced down at his own clothing.

He'd had a strange fishy smell in the car, which was another reason for Lois to let him shower first.

Lois reached into her handbag and pulled out a small spray can. She tossed it to him. "They say it's strong enough for a man. Let's hope so."

"There were toothbrushes and toothpaste in the vending machine by the corner," Clark said.

"I've brought my own," Lois said.

After a night at a long stakeout, you never knew when you might need to spruce yourself up at the last minute.

Clark lay quietly in the bed by the door, trying not to listen in on the sounds of the woman showering in the next room. He himself felt clean for the first time in days; being homeless didn't really sit well with him.

He'd cheated a little and washed his clothes in the sink, using his special vision to dry them. The last

thing he wanted was to spend the next day around Lois smelling like a combination of salt water, shipboard industrial chemicals and whatever had been in the flood waters.

He closed his eyes and allowed his senses to spread outward, listening to the sounds of the city. He could hear the couple fighting in the room four doors down. Six doors down another couple was making love.

At this hour of the night most of them were asleep, and the sounds of the city reflected that. The sound of millions of televisions had dwindled down to tens of thousands of insomniacs, many of whom seemed to be watching an infomercial for something called Girls Gone Wild.

He could almost imagine himself drifting out over the city as he had many times during his years of wandering, staring out over the endless plain of people and wondering why he alone was set apart.

"Clark?"

He woke suddenly. The sounds of the city had almost lulled him to sleep. Lois was standing in the doorway to the bathroom, her form shadowy and silhouetted by the tiny bits of light coming from the skylight and overhead vent in the bathroom.

"Yes?" he asked.

She hurried from the bathroom door, slipping into her bed quickly, as though afraid he was going to see something inappropriate.

He closed his eyes and he could hear the sound of mattress springs as Lois settled into the other bed.

"Is it hard, being away from family and friends?" Her voice was quiet and subdued.

"My parents died when I was ten," he said. "I don't really have any other family. I don't have many friends either ... work keeps me pretty busy."

Lana hadn't approved of the friends he'd tried to keep and most of them had just drifted away after a while.

"You don't have anyone you'd miss?"

"Well, Perry, my editor," Clark said. "And I have this sort of thing with a girl back home, Lana."

"Perry White, Lana Lang?" He could hear Lois sitting up in the bed. "I suppose you have a Jimmy Olsen too."

"James," Clark said. "He owns the Planet. He's a computer magnate."

"Does your world have a Batman, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern?"

"Batman is an urban legend," Clark said. "Nobody believes he really exists. As for the others, I've never heard of them."

"But you have a Metropolis, a Gotham City ... a

Smallville."

"They aren't even on the map here," Clark sad. "I miss Metropolis as much as I miss anyone."

"More than you miss Lana?"

"Things weren't exactly great between us before I ended up here," Clark admitted. In truth he'd stayed with her as much from inertia as anything. He'd been pulling away from her emotionally for years.

"Let me guess," Lois said, her voice suddenly biting and sarcastic. "She doesn't understand you."

"I'm not sure she ever did," Clark said.

"You know, I actually feel a little reassured by that," Lois said. "I was starting to think you were too perfect to be true."

"What?" Clark asked.

"You come in calling yourself Clark Kent and that carries a certain something ... expectations I guess. It means you stand for truth and justice and other good things."

Frowning, Clark said, "What are you talking about?"

"It's a cliché, Clark." Lois said. He could see her silhouette sink back onto the bed. "It's the oldest line in the book. 'My wife doesn't understand me.'"

"I wasn't ... " Clark protested, but by this time he heard the springs again as she rolled over to face away from him.

He sighed slightly, then lay staring up at the ceiling.

Making a pass at her was the last thing he wanted to do. Even if he was willing to ignore the last remaining bonds he had with Lana, the truth was, he had nothing to offer her.

In this world he was literally no one. Even Cyrus as a homeless man had a driver's license which allowed him to get benefits. He had no job, no prospects and he was a fugitive.

Furthermore, he was planning to go home if he could, even though he had no idea how that might be arranged. Long distance relationships were hard enough without being separated by the veil between dimensions.

For a relationship to even be possible, one of them would have to sacrifice everything for the other, and Clark was responsible for the lives of everyone on that airplane, including Lois's sister.

He closed his eyes and turned away from her.

She was silent for a long period. He almost thought she'd gone to sleep when she spoke again.

"Does your world still have passenger pigeons?"

Too tired to even wonder why she was asking, Clark said, "No."

Sometimes Clark forgot that he was in the future. This was a darker world than his own, but the cars still looked mostly the same, the buildings hadn't changed much, and there weren't any flying cars that he could see.

Sometimes, though, he was forcibly reminded that he'd moved not only in space, but in time.

Staring at the rows of computers around him, Clark felt a little lost. He'd had a computer back at the Planet, of course, but he'd mostly used it for word processing and the occasional game of solitaire. They certainly hadn't been

connected into any sort of world wide network of computers, although he'd at least heard of the concept back home.

They certainly hadn't had these tiny-looking flat screens or sleek-looking ergonomic keyboards.

He felt a little anxious; after hiding the car in a nearby lot, Lois had taken the subway to go to a branch bank, presumably to make a withdrawal.

She was taking a lot of chances that Clark wished she wouldn't take.

"Would you like some coffee?" The waitress was perky and looked as though she was still in high school. Given the hour, though, she was probably older.

Clark shook his head and wondered again why Lois had parked him in this place. He felt exposed and conspicuous.

"If you'd like to spend some time on the Internet, it'll cost five dollars for thirty minutes."

Staring mutely at the girl for a moment, Clark dug in his pocket for a five dollar bill. There was a seat in the back row that was behind a small partition on which sat a planter. It wouldn't give him much cover, but it would protect him from someone passing by on the street recognizing him.

The girl led him to his seat, and then smiled down at him.

"If you change your mind about that coffee, let me know."

She grinned at him and bumped him with her hip.

Clark smiled up at her blandly. He'd fended off enough advances from women over the years to know better than to be too enthusiastic in responding to her. At best she was just being friendly. At worst she was interested and rejecting her would lead to a bruised ego or worse.

A moment later she was gone and he was faced with a computer screen filled with a bewildering array of headlines and pictures. It took him a moment to realize that by clicking on a headline he could read the story.

At the top of the page, a cursor blinked on a blank line, with a button next to it saying "Search web."

Hesitantly, he typed in the word "Superman."

Stepping into the Internet café, Lois looked anxiously around for Clark. Getting to her bank had taken longer than she'd planned. It helped that her bank had branches all over the country, which meant she'd had her choice of branches from which to make her withdrawal.

It wouldn't take the Feds long to notice her withdrawal despite the big hat she'd worn as a minimal disguise, but she'd timed the withdrawal to coincide with the bus schedule. By the time someone noticed, and black and white units were called, she'd be long gone.

She'd taken two more buses and a taxi just in case. She wasn't going to be able to maintain this level of paranoia for very long. It amazed her sometimes that people could live their lives this way.

Blinded, Lois stood a moment to let her eyes adjust to the darker interior of the café. The windows to the outside were tinted, leaving the interior cool and dim. The welcoming smell of coffee reminded her that she hadn't had her fix.

When she saw Clark in the seat behind the planter finally, she smiled. She gave her order and extra money for the connection and headed in Clark's direction.

The girl behind the counter scowled as Lois sat down beside Clark.

"How's it going?" Lois asked, glancing at the screen.

It showed the iconic comic book cover of her namesake sobbing, holding Superman dead.

"It says we're married," he said, looking a little stunned.

Lois rolled her eyes. "Superman is married to Lois Lane. You are just a guy from somewhere else who happens to share the name, and I'm not exactly from Metropolis. Let's stay focused."

Of course he was interested. If she'd gone to another world and discovered that people had been telling stories about someone with her name for the past sixty years or more, she'd have been interested too.

Lois took the seat next to Clark and said, "I paid for the next several hours for both of us."

"What are we doing here exactly?" Clark asked.

"We're looking for patterns," Lois said. "You tell me that there are no passenger pigeons in your world, and yet suddenly there are some here."

"Just like there was suddenly a planeload of

passengers from. . ." Clark said, as the waitress approached. ". . . Somewhere else."

Lois smiled and graciously accepted her coffee and her change. As the waitress moved away, she said, "What do you think the odds are that those are the only two things to come through?"

"OK," he said.

Lois leaned over and said, "Let me give you a few pointers about how to conduct this sort of search. We're looking for weird news ... "

He was very still and Lois realized that she had put her hand on his shoulder. The waitress behind the bar was scowling even more broadly. Lois considered taking her hand away and then defiantly left it.

As though it was any of the girl's business who she chose to touch.

Her hand burned through his shirt. It felt like a brand on his shoulder, and Clark couldn't remember a time when he had been so focused on a single touch.

She smelled fresh and clean, like shampoo and bath soap. That he found himself aware at all of how she smelled was disconcerting. It meant that he was suddenly aware of her as a woman again.

Perhaps it was all those pictures of men and women together playing Clark Kent and Lois Lane. In every iteration of the story it seemed that Lois Lane was the love of Clark Kent's life.

"Are you listening?" she asked suddenly.

In his time with Lana he'd learned the value of being able to repeat things when he was distracted, so he said, "You do this and this and this ... "

She nodded. "Let's get busy."

When she pulled away, he felt oddly cold.

It had been strange seeing his life laid out before him on the computer screen. They had the details wrong of course. His parents had died when he was ten and he'd bounced around from foster home to foster home.

But they had his abilities right for the most part, even if they were sometimes exaggerated. They had the names of his parents, his home town, even his high school sweetheart.

It was telling that in no version of the tale did he end up with Lana Lang.

They named Perry White. They had Jimmy Olsen as some sort of flunky instead of as a computer magnate, and as far as Clark knew, Lex Luthor was just a wealthy businessman.

Of course, there had been rumors ...

It didn't make sense that they would have so many of the big things right, while getting the small details wrong. It was like someone was viewing his world

through a distorted lens, and then spinning wild stories based on that view.

Clark spoke up suddenly, startling Lois a little. "They found a coelacanth recently."

Lois shook her head. "Those are just really rare. Besides, we're just looking for things that show up close to the date of your arrival."

He nodded, then clicked again.

"What about giant scorpions?" Clark asked. "Do you have those?"

"How big?" Lois asked.

Clark turned the monitor slightly toward Lois.

Her eyes widened and she leaned forward.

There was a picture of a smiling man and woman standing beside a segmented monstrosity hanging from its tail.

It was the sort of monster Lois had had nightmares about as a child, and the thought of the damage it might have done if it had washed up alive was enough to make her shudder.

What were they going to do if unpleasant things began to come through, things like Smallpox or diseases humanity in this world had no defenses against?

What if Lucy was already getting sick? There was no guarantee that Clark's world even had all the same diseases as hers did, and sometimes all it took was a small change to make a disease much more deadly.

Lois glanced at Clark. He still seemed more than healthy. Maybe their worlds were similar enough that it wasn't going to be a problem.

That didn't mean the other places things were coming through from would be so forgiving.

Clark spoke again and Lois blinked.

"It washed up on the coast of Santa Barbara after a major storm on the night we arrived."

If Clark was sick, it was already too late to do anything about it. They just had to assume the best and do everything they could to get people back into their own places before any further harm was done.

She turned to her own computer and her fingers began to fly over the keyboard.

"They've already had people from the University of California out to identify it. They are saying it's a Eurypterid ... a kind of sea scorpion that went extinct two hundred fifty million years ago."

"That would certainly seem to fit the bill," Clark said. "You say it washed up in a storm?"

Lois frowned. "There was a storm the night you arrived too, wasn't there?"

"What about the passenger pigeons?"

It took her a little bit longer, but eventually she

said, "There was a storm off the coast of France."

"So we have three things probably related, and every time there was storm activity." Clark hesitated. "Is there any way to check for storm activity all over the planet?"

Lois bit her lip for a moment then said, "I know someone I can call. Let's keep checking the news for other things; the more information we have, the better we'll be able to try to find some kind of cause."

Lois grimaced and stretched a little. The thing about searching the Internet was that it was amazingly informative, having a little bit of information about just about anything. Unfortunately, outside of porn and science fiction, things often dried up after that first rush of enthusiasm.

Clark had been staring fixedly at the screen for a long period.

"Did you find anything?" she asked.

He started, then shook his head. "You said you found that video on Youtube, so I've been looking to see if anything else like that has been put up. It took me a while to find the right spelling, and I keep getting off track ... people put the funniest things up."

"Don't get stuck on that," Lois said. "Or you'll be trapped for hours staring at cats eating with forks, laughing babies and the dramatic prairie dog."

"Dramatic prairie

dog?"

"Type it in."

A couple of clicks later, Clark chuckled.

"Why don't you get us a couple of coffees," Lois said. "Make sure the waitress doesn't spit in mine."

He smiled at her and stood up. "I'll be back in a minute."

As soon as he reached the counter, Lois slid over to his machine. The café had begun to slowly fill as the morning had worn on, and there was now a line at the coffee counter.

She checked his history, hoping that he'd found something she'd missed. Given that this was a new world to him, how would he know?

Giant supposedly extinct turtle found ... the timing was wrong, but Lois jotted down the information onto her notebook. She'd left her personal organizer behind and was having to make do.

YouTube ... chocolate rain, talking baby, superman song ... scenes from the superman cartoons, superman images ...

A piece from YouTube saying "Real Superman."

Lois frowned and clicked on the link. The picture was grainy, obviously having been taken from a cell phone.

A car sitting in the middle of a river of flowing water. There was enough light from street lights to show that it was a flooded street.

"This is how stupid my sister is," the teenage voice was saying. "I always told her she'd end up on YouTube or America's stupidest home videos!"

There was a flash of something, and the vehicle began moving.

"Whoa!"

The image suddenly jostled as the phone suddenly began to move across what Lois could now see was a second story deck built next to the roof of a house.

The car seemed to be moving on its own, even though it couldn't have gotten any traction. A moment later it left the water.

Lois could just make out a shadowy figure pushing the car out of the water.

A moment later, there was a blurry shadow, and the figure slipped back into the water.

The camera's view changed again as the camera holder rushed across the deck and then onto the roof.

He was just in time to see something hovering in mid air before zooming away.

The picture was blurry but clearly man-shaped.

"You didn't like your seat?" Clark's voice made Lois jump a little.

"Wanted to make sure you weren't missing anything," Lois said, clearing her throat a little. "You shouldn't watch this kind of stuff. Kids love to make up all kinds of hoaxes."

He shrugged, then said, "I suppose you'd know."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lois asked sharply.

The sting of Pilar's rejection still hurt, as did the implication that she would ever consider falsifying information for a story.

"This is your world," Clark said, looking surprised at the tone of her voice. "I've never even touched the Internet before today."

Lois took the coffee from him and said irritably, "It's starting to get a little crowded here. Maybe we need to go."

Clark nodded. "The waitress said the time we paid for is about up anyway."

Lois closed Clark's browser down after carefully erasing the history. It wouldn't stop a determined Federal investigator, but with luck they'd never even know they'd been here.

She did the same with her own computer.

"I don't think we're supposed to shut the whole computer off," Clark said.

"We're working for the greater good," Lois said. "Sometimes you have to stretch the rules a little."

As Clark began to gather their things, Lois wondered why it felt so freeing in some ways to be a fugitive. All the common courtesies and little rules that she'd always felt constrained by suddenly didn't seem that important.

They had a planeload of people to save, and if this thing with the pigeons panned out, they might be working to save the world.

The video of the flying man was obviously a hoax and nothing to worry about.

Still, Lois couldn't help but stare thoughtfully of the back of the man she'd met only a couple of days before. The blurred figure on the video had looked a little like Clark Kent.

Clark stroked the lapel of his suit jacket, pleased to finally be back in something reasonably formal. Part of being a reporter was getting people to listen, and for some reason people didn't take someone in jeans and a t-shirt seriously.

"Thanks for picking up my dry cleaning," Clark said.

Lois glanced at him with approval and said, "I owed you, and it'll probably be easier to fit in wearing something like that."

It was off the rack, but wearing it was like assuming a new identity. Slipping the jacket on was a little like getting some of himself back, and he felt oddly more confident than he had in a while.

"Where are we going?"

"I have a ... friend who works as a liaison between the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Treasury department."

Clark looked at her and said, "We've just gone to a great deal of trouble to stay out of the government's hands."

Lois kept her eyes on the road. "He telecommutes a lot ... works out of his apartment."

"You don't think he'd turn us in?"

"We had ... a relationship," she said. "We're still friends."

"So what do you think he'll be able to do for us?"

"He should be able to tap into the NEXRAD system. It's a network of one hundred- fifty-eight high resolution Doppler weather radars ... if anybody has weather records, he should have access to them."

"And you think he'll help us?"

Lois smirked. "He'll do whatever I tell him to."

Clark had a sneaking feeling that he also fit in that category. Of course, given his history with Lana, that wasn't much of a surprise.

The ride up in the elevator with Clark was a little

uncomfortable. Lois hadn't seen Myron in more than a year, and they'd parted on lukewarm terms. Myron had been solid and stable, but a little boring.

There was only so much Lois could hear about the weather before she wanted to scream.

Yet it shouldn't feel odd. Clark wasn't even her partner, really, and Myron was simply an ex-boyfriend. This was simply a business deal all the way around.

Myron's high rise apartment complex was nicer than hers, with new carpet and the smell of fresh paint. Lois gestured at Clark to step to the side as she rang the doorbell.

She could see the shadow crossing the peephole a moment before she could hear the locks disengaging.

The door opened abruptly.

"Lois!" Myron said. "What are you doing here?"

Myron looked startled to see Lois. His fingers tightened on the door, and for a moment Lois wondered if he had another woman inside the apartment with him.

She dismissed the thought. Myron was a small man with a high forehead. He was slender and a little taller than Lois herself. This meant he was short compared to most men. He was also finicky and a perfectionist. He was a man who didn't have any confidence outside his chosen field, and not the sort of man to have a woman in his apartment at any hour.

He'd be delighted to see her.

"I need your help," Lois said.

Clark stepped into view behind her, and Myron stiffened.

"What do you want?"

"This is my ... partner," Lois said. "We're working on a story about unusual weather phenomena."

"We're looking for unusual patterns and weird stories," Clark said. He smiled and added, "I suppose you hear a little bit of everything."

Lois tried not to grimace in annoyance. Myron didn't know Clark, and he had no reason to help him.

Myron's lips tightened. "If you're asking about the weather patterns a few days ago, we're launching a full investigation. We have people going over all the computer models to see why there were so many glitches."

Lois frowned. She'd expected Myron to have to do some research, check with his colleagues. Having the information already available seemed a little anticlimactic.

At her expression, Myron sighed. "This thing has been a black eye for the Agency. Nobody expects us to be right all the time, but to have this many storms coming out of nowhere? We've been pulling our hair

out for days."

"I can tell," Lois murmured, and then grimaced. The last thing she needed was to be making jokes at Myron's expense.

"This is what I do, Lois. I tried telling you about it often enough at dinner. Maybe if your eyes hadn't glazed over every time, you'd realize that I'm good at what I do."

"If we didn't think you were the man to talk to, we wouldn't be here," Clark said, smiling disarmingly. He glanced around the stylishly decorated apartment and said, "You wouldn't be in the position you are in if you weren't good."

Somehow he'd seemed to shrink into himself while dealing with Myron, almost as though he was instinctively slumping so that he didn't tower over the other man. Lois had expected Myron to bristle at the presence of a larger, more attractive man, but instead he almost seemed to preen.

Clark was an experienced interviewer, good at getting people to drop their guard. Lois could see it now as he spoke to Myron.

She'd have to watch out for it herself. She'd already allowed herself to sleep in the same room with him, and she barely even knew him. It would be easy to get wrapped up in him and the drama of attempting to rescue his people.

She couldn't afford the distraction.

"You'll have to be a little more specific about which storms you are looking for," Myron said. "And where ..."

"Everywhere," Lois said. "We're looking for weird thunderstorms."

Myron snorted and said, "There are more than forty thousand thunderstorms a day around the world. You'll have to be a little more exact about what you mean by weird."

"Storms where no storms should be," Clark said. "Storms where strange things happen ... where things occur that can't be explained."

Myron brightened. "What about a rain of frogs?"

Seeming a little nervous, he headed for his desk by the wide picture window. His computer was already on. He turned the laptop away from them so that they couldn't see the screen. He sat down at his desk and began typing a series of commands, glancing suspiciously up at the both of them.

"You don't trust me, Myron?" Lois asked.

"My passwords are a matter of national

security," he said stiffly. "Plus, if you had them, what would you need me for?"

He turned to the computer and began to click with his mouse. "Why didn't you call me back after the last

time we were together?"

"I was in Iraq," Lois said.

The truth was that she'd never been interested in Myron as anything more than a convenient date. Although he'd been mildly amusing the first couple of times they'd gone out, he'd quickly run out of anything to say that wasn't work related. He'd become increasingly clingy and needy.

She hadn't been able to get to Iraq fast enough.

"I could have taken care of your fish."

"Hilda lives in the same building," Lois said. "It's an hour out of your way."

"Still" He paused. "Ah ... here it is"

He turned the laptop toward them and then clicked a button with his mouse.

A video clip began to play.

Stepping outside of what looked to be a cabin, the camera holder focused on the black clouds brewing above them and the rain falling.

Something was falling, and at first it looked like hailstones. The camera followed one stone down until it landed on the ground. It was a tiny yellow frog which was soon surrounded by hundreds of other frogs, all of them scrambling over each other to avoid being hit by their fellows.

"This sort of thing happens all the time," Myron said. "It happened in Serbia in June 2005 and in Mexico in 1997."

"Then why are you showing this to us?"

"Nobody recognizes the species of frog," Myron said. "It's completely new, although it has some relatives in Asia."

"Where was this?"

"Yellowstone."

Lois pulled out a small map of the United States that she'd bought at the gas station while Clark was changing into his suit.

She'd already noted the spots where they knew strange storms had appeared...Delaware, which Clark said was the location of Metropolis, Northern California, almost in Oregon...she added a mark in Wyoming.

"What do you have there?" Myron asked.

"We've been tracking strange storms," Lois said.

"One off the coast of France, these other two."

"That's not a lot to make a pattern with," Myron said. "Let's take a look"

He turned the computer away from them again and hunched over it. A moment later, he said, "Which date?"

Lois gave it to him, adding in the time of the Delaware occurrence. They didn't actually know when the other events had happened, only the times when

the pigeons and scorpion had been found.

"Oh." Myron said.

"What do you mean, oh?" Lois demanded.

"There were a whole slew of storms that night that nobody predicted. It was a bit of a scandal. They just seemed to pop up out of nowhere."

"Any chance that you could show us which ones were like that?"

Myron worked at the computer for a moment, and then said, "The anomalous storms are displayed in red."

Lois expected to see a half dozen to a dozen storms. Surely if there were more, they'd have already heard about it.

"We've been scrambling to try to explain it," Myron said. "None of the models predicted any of these storms."

Across the United States Lois could see almost fifty storms of various sizes pulsing in a dull red.

Leaning forward, Clark said, "Do you see a pattern to that?"

According to the map, the storms were fewer and more widely spread the farther west Clark looked. They were more densely packed on the east coast of the United States, and more densely packed still off the edge of the map into the Atlantic Ocean.

"Is there any way to see what was happening closer to Europe?" Lois asked.

Myron moved his mouse and clicked and the view widened.

It was now apparent that the storms were appearing even more and more tightly packed the farther east Clark looked, until they combined into one massive super cell off the coast of France.

"Can we see it in time lapse?" Lois asked.

Myron scowled and clicked a series of buttons.

It took Clark a moment to do the calculations in his head. The first storms appeared off the coast of France almost four hours before he'd arrived in Delaware. The storms had spread rapidly, faster than any storm front should have been able to go. They'd covered the United States in a little more than three hours.

But none of the storms remained for more than an hour. Even as the effect was propagating, expanding and diffusing to the west, it was vanishing towards its beginning.

"It almost looks like a wave," Lois said.

"It's a statistical anomaly," Myron said. "It doesn't mean anything."

"How do you know?" Lois asked irritably.

Whatever affection had been between Myron and

Lois had apparently long since faded. Clark felt a small pang of jealousy. Myron was a fussy little man, but he'd gotten to take Lois out on dates honestly. He'd been able to ask her out to dinner, to dance, to a movie, all secure in his place in the world. He hadn't been encumbered by endless responsibilities. He hadn't been out to save the world.

He'd just been able to spend a little time with a beautiful woman.

Just because it had apparently soured didn't mean that Clark wasn't jealous of the memories.

"It's my job."

Clark blinked. Myron was speaking, but for the first time Clark noticed that Myron's eye was twitching.

"Are you feeling all right?" Clark asked.

He'd assumed the man's twitchiness was simply the result of his being high strung and finicky.

Instead, he could hear the man's heart rate increasing even as he spoke.

Clark glanced out the window and sighed.

"You called the Feds, didn't you?"

"I'm an employee of the Federal government," Myron said. "I have an obligation to help bring fugitives to justice."

Lois gave him a disgusted look. "I thought we were friends."

"Friends would have taken my calls," Myron said. "And besides ... I can't afford to lose this job. It's all I have."

Lois scowled at him and said, "Maybe if you'd had a spine I might have called back!"

"We've got to go," Clark said, placing one hand on Lois's shoulder. "Now."

"Agent Randal said you wouldn't be harmed," Myron said. "He said they just wanted him ..."

Clark headed for the door and a moment later they were out in the hall.

"They are coming up the elevator," Clark said. "Let's take the stairs."

"How do you know that?" Lois asked as she followed him onto the landing.

As the door clicked behind them they could hear the sound of the elevator pinging and the sounds of feet rushing down the hall.

Clark turned to move down the stairs then stopped. He looked back up at Lois and then shook his head, pointing downward.

There were agents making their way up the stairs.

He gestured up and Lois turned and began moving as silently as she could up the stairs. Fortunately Myron had chosen to live as near the roof as he could afford, which left them only three flights from the top.

"It's locked," Lois hissed. "And what are we going to do if we get outside anyway? I can't climb buildings."

"Don't worry," Clark said. He shoved slightly against the door and it clanked open. "It was just stuck."

She looked at him strangely, but moved obediently out into the night air. The roof was dark but dimly lit by the light of the moon. The view of the city would have been spectacular if Clark had been able to appreciate it.

Clark closed the door behind them then stared at it for a moment, welding it shut with his special vision and keeping his body between Lois and the glowing metal.

"It won't be long before they look up here," Lois said. "Even if we could block the door, they'll just get a helicopter with a sniper."

She jumped at a booming sound from the door as something was rammed into it from the other side.

"Do you even have a plan?" Lois asked.

"You could always pretend I took you hostage," Clark said.

"They have video of me hugging you outside my office," Lois said disgustedly. "It wouldn't work."

"Do you trust me?" Clark asked, stepping closer to Lois.

"If you hold a gun to my head, Agent Randal is likely to shoot both of us and claim we attacked him."

She must have seen something in his eyes because she took first one step backward and then another. A moment later she backed into the railing. She looked behind her and stiffened as she realized just how far from the ground she actually was.

"I'm not going to hold a gun to your head," Clark said, taking another step toward Lois. Clark could hear the sounds of helicopters approaching. He didn't have much time to make a decision.

He could leave her behind and pretend to climb down the side of the building and then vanish.

Somehow the thought of leaving her with Agent Randal wasn't even an option. He could allow himself to be captured, but he wasn't quite ready to do that.

That left one other option.

"Take my hand," he said.

Slowly she reached out for him, and he took her hand in his.

"I was telling you the truth when I said I wasn't Superman," he said. "It just wasn't the whole truth."

He pulled her into his embrace, and before she could scream they were both airborne.

As a child, Lois had believed in Superman. Her

parents had loved the movie and they'd loved the values it had represented.

She'd grown up believing that good would triumph over evil. As a child she'd believed that people lived happily ever after. Her parents had seemed immortal, all-knowing. They'd been the cornerstone of her life, and no matter how far she chose to stray she'd known she could always go back to them.

Her world had shattered the day she'd been visited by two state troopers with the news that her family was dead. Suddenly all the awards she'd won, all the work she'd done, all of it had become meaningless.

There were no happy endings and good didn't always triumph over evil. Along with the loss of her parents had come the loss of the security that everything was always going to be all right. The world was a scary place.

Yet while she'd felt threatened on an individual level, she'd still felt safe in general. She was

in the middle of the most powerful nation in the world and while accidents and crime were sometimes a problem, she'd believed people were basically safe.

Although she'd remained outwardly calm, the fall of the twin towers had shattered her world once again. She'd been forced to see the world in a different way and she'd lost what she'd thought was her last remaining innocence.

Now, floating a thousand feet in the air above Arlington, Lois found her view of the world shifting again.

Lois had always considered herself a pragmatist. Aliens weren't abducting rednecks in cornfields no matter what the National Enquirer said. Simple herbs and spices from the kitchen cabinet couldn't cure all diseases.

If life existed on other planets, it was so far away that man would never know about it. The psychic friend's network was a scam designed to take money from the desperate or foolish. John Edward couldn't speak to the dead and Ralph Nader was never going to win an election.

Although she believed in God, she didn't believe that He intervened much in human affairs.

The world made sense. If it wasn't fair and it wasn't safe at least it was real.

Other universes were just physicists' fantasies. Alternate worlds didn't exist.

Men didn't fly.

It was strange. The few times Lois had imagined being in this situation when she was a young girl she'd thought it would be different. She'd always assumed that flying would be terrifying. She disliked heights, hating the feeling that she could lose control at any

minute and go tumbling to the ground.

Yet here there was no sensation of falling. There was no sensation of movement at all. Instead it felt as though the air was still around her and as she felt her heart-rate beginning to decrease, she felt a sudden sense of calm coming over her.

She was holding onto him tightly, so tightly that had he been a normal person it would have been painful.

Instead, he said, "I've got you, Lois."

The feeling of his arm wrapped around her was reassuring. He was strong, and for some reason Lois found that she couldn't believe he would ever drop her.

"But who's got you?" Lois asked. It was the first thing to pop into her head, a line from a movie that she'd spent most of her adult life despising.

When she'd first heard the line in the movie, it had seemed silly to her, corny even. She'd been a tough audience, ready to dislike it on principle alone. Now it seemed almost appropriate.

His face brightened into a smile; he'd seen the movie and he caught the reference. His smile was almost boyish, and it made him look even more handsome. For the first time Lois felt herself beginning to relax.

As she began to relax, her mind finally began to work again. She'd been so shocked that it had felt as though her mind had come to a halt. Now that it was working again things were starting to become clear.

Her mind had been performing all sorts of acrobatics for days trying to fit the facts into her theory of the world. The truth had simply never occurred to her because as far as she'd been concerned it had been impossible.

Even now her mind should have been running over a hundred possibilities. Maybe she was dreaming; someone had put a hallucinogen in her drink; she was in a coma, or insane. Lois would have expected her mind to come up with a thousand reasons for why what she was experiencing wasn't real.

Men didn't fly and superheroes didn't exist. It should have been a constant. It had been like saying the sun rises in the east.

Yet somehow Lois couldn't seem to make those leaps anymore. Her view of the world had shifted and she knew now what she'd avoided even thinking about then.

"You weren't hanging off of that plane, were you?" She asked the question slowly, almost afraid to look at him. Below them the city began to move even though Lois still had no sensation of movement.

He shook his head slightly. "I was trying to save them."

Simple and direct. He wasn't bragging that he'd lifted an entire plane by himself, despite the obvious impossibility. But for a man who could fly, what was impossible?

"You don't climb tall buildings either."

Clark smiled slightly and shook his head.

Lois had a sudden uncomfortable realization that Clark smelled nice. He'd put on some sort of cologne and it reminded her that she had pressed herself up tightly against him.

It reminded her of another, fishy smell he'd had recently.

"Did you have something to do with that fishing boat off Alaska?"

"I did what I could," he said. "I think I could have done more if I'd gone in openly."

There had been several broken bones and cases of the bends, but no one had actually died.

"You saved a friend of mine," Lois said. "And all those other sailors."

It was stretching the point a little, but Kendall had been someone Lois had admired.

Clark was silent for a long moment, and the lights beneath them began to move even faster in the darkness. They were leaving Washington DC behind and moving out into a broad sea of darkness interspersed with small clumps of lights.

"I paid my way through college on an Alaskan crab fishing boat," Clark said finally. "I didn't have a lot of money, and it was the fastest way I knew to make tens of thousands of dollars for a couple of week's work."

Lois blinked. She didn't recall any version of Superman having ever worked as a fisherman.

"I didn't lie to you," Clark said. "I'm not Superman and I never was. But I worked with people just like that for four years in a row. I met their families ... I couldn't let them die if I couldn't do something."

"You were a fisherman?"

"I really did do security work in Nigeria too," he said. "I traveled the world after college."

At least that was the same as the last incarnation she remembered.

"I've worked as a cook in Shanghai, a dishwasher in Berlin ... worked a Renaissance faire in Kentucky ... anything that didn't require a lot of documentation or commitment." Staring out over the horizon he said, "I'm my own person, not some sort of cartoon."

For the first time Lois noticed that they were heading out over open water. "Where are we going?"

"France," he said. "Where else?"

"Just like that," she said, "We're going to France."

"Why not?"

"I don't have my passport," Lois said.

At the moment she didn't have much of anything except the purse which was strapped tightly to her side. The feds had probably already grabbed the rental car and its contents, including both of their changes of clothes.

"I don't usually bother," Clark said. "Unless I'm going to stay a while."

"It's almost four thousand miles," Lois said. "What do you really think you are going to accomplish?"

"There has to be some sort of an explanation for this," he said stubbornly. "This isn't just happening. There's a reason for it."

He still believed that there was justice in the world, that the world was safe and that it made sense.

"What if there isn't?" she asked.

"There's a pattern," he said, "and a pattern means there's a trail we can follow. I can fly us both to Paris in thirty minutes."

Lois blinked. She'd just traveled by plane from overseas and the flight had taken more than fourteen hours.

"They'll see us on radar," she said faintly.

"I'm sick of hiding," he said grimly.

As the water flew past beneath them, Clark could feel the woman in his arms beginning to gradually relax. After a while she actually seemed to begin to enjoy the flight. It wasn't some mystical magical moment like he'd seen in the movies; his Lois didn't seem like the kind of person who was intimidated by anything for long.

Although they had been skimming the water, when Clark saw the lightning flashes up ahead, he consciously allowed himself to rise. Within moments they'd broken the cover of the clouds and were looking down on them.

Lois stiffened beside him then gasped as she was finally able to see clearly what was all around her. The moonlight seemed almost unnaturally bright. She turned her head to look at him and she slowly began to smile.

It hadn't been like this the few times he'd tried to take Lana flying. He'd wanted to share this, the one thing he enjoyed more than anything. It should have been a way for them both to connect over something that was just between the two of them.

Instead she'd behaved a lot like Cyrus had, screaming before eventually becoming quiet. She'd never relaxed enough to see just how beautiful the world around them was.

Lois Lane, after one flight, was already enjoying this far more than Lana had during their whole

relationship.

She turned toward him, bringing her face close to his.

"I just don't understand," she said.

"What?"

"Why you ever come down." Her face brightened into a smile, and in that moment Clark felt his heart skip a beat.

She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

She'd been an attractive woman when he'd first met her, but somehow with each encounter she grew prettier than she had before.

One way or another, this wasn't going to end well. Clark doubted that the governments of this world would ever let him live in peace. He was too powerful, too dangerous to be allowed to live unmolested.

If he wasn't able to find a way home he would always be on the run. It wasn't the sort of life someone like Lois should ever have to live. Although he was bulletproof, she wasn't and it would only be a matter of time before someone found her when he couldn't do anything to save her.

If he did return home he would have to leave her behind. She had an entire life here, one where she was a success and he couldn't ask her to give all that up for him, especially when he had Lana Lang waiting on the other side.

All of that assumed she'd even be interested. It had taken Lana a while to get over her natural revulsion over his inhuman nature. She hadn't said anything, but it had been there in her eyes. Even now she didn't particularly enjoy being touched,

especially in public, unless she was establishing her territory in the presence of another woman.

He'd gotten the feeling that there had been times when he made her flesh crawl. She hadn't said it, and maybe he was simply projecting his own insecurities, but the feeling was there.

That feeling wasn't there for Lois, although whether it was because she simply hadn't considered the implications of his being an alien, or whether she was just special he didn't know.

All he knew was that she was one of the two people he'd met in this reality whom he trusted even a little, and the other one was a homeless schizophrenic.

The best thing he could do was keep quiet. He needed her far too much to alienate her with unwanted advances, especially when she considered him to be already in a relationship.

At these speeds, Lois felt a light breeze on her face. She suspected that without whatever it was he was doing to protect her she wouldn't have been able

to breathe or see and the unpleasant image of the wind ripping her face off kept her from questioning the whole thing too much.

The world didn't make sense, after all, so there wasn't any point in asking too many questions. It worked, and if it seemed to violate the laws of physics, well that was just a sign that nobody knew all the laws of physics yet.

She frowned as the clouds below them became lit more and more often with lightning.

Turning to him again, she said "Wow, those look really violent."

Clark had been silent for several long minutes, seemingly lost in his own thoughts.

"There aren't any storms forecasted for this region for a couple of days," he said.

"How do you know?"

"It was on Myron's screen before he called up the old information."

Lois blinked. She hadn't even noticed the screen, and she doubted that she would have remembered what it said based on a glance at it.

Just how powerful was he? She already knew he was strong enough to lift an airplane and a ship, that he could hear things from a long distance and see things she couldn't see. Did he have all the powers that Superman traditionally had?

What if he had powers that weren't in the comics? As he'd said, he was a real person and his history was different from the one she knew.

Maybe he really could read her mind.

Suddenly the image of Margot Kidder wondering the same question didn't seem so hokey. Lois felt heat rising to her face as she felt herself flushing.

Could he smell the effect he had on her? Could he hear her heart racing and did he know what it meant?

She felt him stiffen beside her and then they were suddenly diving into the storm.

Soaking wet, Lois found herself instantly responding.

"What the hell are you doing?" she yelled, heedless of whatever super hearing he might have.

Of course, considering the sound of thunder, he probably wasn't using much of it.

It was the next flash of lightning that made her suddenly mute.

A huge flock of birds was flying in the storm, birds that were immediately familiar to Lois. They were spiraling down, as though to seek shelter from the storm despite the fact that they were all above open water. They should have been flying to rise above the storm.

A moment later the rain stopped and Lois saw

something moving.

They were moving again suddenly, and for the first time Lois had a sense of the true speed they were moving at. The lightning had stopped, but the moon at broken through the clouds.

A moment before it would have hit the water, Lois saw Clark grab something out of the air.

It was the front half of a passenger pigeon, cleanly bisected.

She grimaced, but at least the thing didn't seem to be bleeding. It looked as though it had been cauterized.

Closing her eyes for a moment, she said, "Where's the other half?"

Already scanning the skies, Clark said, "I can't see it. I think it's on the other side."

"The other side of what?" Lois felt a little stupid as her mind tried to grasp what she was seeing.

"I think the other half of this pigeon is back in its original universe. I think it was coming through when it closed."

It was hard not to crush the dead pigeon in his hand. This was the general vicinity where passenger pigeons had been seen in the past, and more had been coming through the portal.

Closely parallel universes might have each produced passenger pigeons, but it was just as likely that they had come from the same universe.

"We have to go back," Clark said.

"What?" Lois asked. She was squinting at the pigeon in what must have seemed to her to be mostly darkness. The lightning strikes had illuminated the skies before, but the unnatural clouds around them were already dissipating.

"This is where the pigeons came from before," Clark said, "Or at least it seems to be pretty close."

"That means the door to Metropolis might be opening in a couple of hours," Lois said. "You might be able to get home."

"I might be able to get everybody home," Clark said.

"You won't have time," Lois said. "These things last less than an hour."

"We can at least see," Clark said impatiently. This was the closest he'd been to home since the night he'd tried to rescue the plane.

She nodded finally, and a moment later they were off.

He felt tense; carrying a passenger he could only move at a snail's pace compared to what he could do on his own. The fact that Lois was slender and small and fit into the crook of his arm made things easier. He

could fly faster with her than with someone like Lana or Cyrus, who insisted on keeping their distance.

With Cyrus he hadn't exactly wanted to get any closer than he had to; it had obviously been days since the man had had a bath. Consequently he'd had to fly even more slowly.

But thirty minutes was an agonizing slow period of time compared to what he could do on his own. At faster speeds it almost seemed as though whatever it was that protected him would constrict, so that as his highest speeds he was losing his pants if they were at all bulky. He rarely had to fly that fast, but this time he found he was wanting to.

Grimacing, Lois turned her face into the crook of his arms. When he realized that the bird in his hand was losing its feathers he forced himself to slow down.

They were already moving at close to the limits of his ability to protect her. Moving much faster would expose her body to g-forces and her face to the possibility of wind burn.

The line between a few too many g-forces and being ripped apart was far too thin in a fragile human body.

There were more clouds ahead, forming before his eyes. From the speed they were gathering, he could see how it might look like they were appearing instantaneously in the atmosphere.

As he rose above the clouds, he stared down into the storm with his special vision and he couldn't see anything. The portal, if it was there was invisible.

Squinting harder, he strained to see anything at all. There were spectrums of light that he could see that he had no words for; colors with names that didn't even exist. Mostly he ignored these as being too trivial or too terrifying to bother with.

The world seen through some spectrums was a horrifying place.

Mostly he tried to stay near what he assumed was the human norm, although he really had no way of being sure if what he saw was even close to what normal people saw.

The few times he'd tried to get Lana to help him, to see whether they saw the same colors she'd quickly changed the subject.

Utterly useless for the most part, the visual abilities were a boon now. By turning his head and squinting he could just make out the edges of the rift, which was expanding rapidly.

The edges fluctuated, and it was only a matter of minutes before they began to shrink.

Narrowing his eyes, Clark tried to guess if he would be able to make it through in time. He'd make it through along with Lois, but there was no way he

would be able to carry a plane through. The portal had barely grown large enough to drive a Winnebago through before its edges started fluctuating.

Clark tried to see what was on the other side, but he couldn't. When the rift collapsed, and the clouds began to dissipate, Lois said, "What did you see?"

"A chance," Clark said.

They stopped regularly after that, following the clouds which seemed to gather out of nowhere only to dissipate a few minutes later. Each time Clark stopped and stared intently at the cloud.

For the first time Lois felt a little left out. He was seeing things she was blind too, and the longer they were at it, the more he seemed to withdraw into himself. It was almost as though he was preparing himself mentally to go home.

When she finally saw the lights appearing on the horizon Lois sighed in relief. Although she enjoyed the flying she was getting a little impatient to be back. There was so much to do and so little time.

The gathering storm was already there, and before Lois could say anything she found that they were dropping. She found herself beside a coastal road. A moment later Clark was into the air and out of sight into the storm.

Outside the warmth of his arms Lois shivered as she was suddenly exposed to the chill of the night air. The rain soaked her almost immediately and she scowled up at the sky. What was he doing? Was he going to go home and leave Lucy and everyone else on the plane here?

It wasn't the sort of thing Superman would do, but as he said, he'd never been Superman. He was a person, and people sometimes did stupid, selfish things.

She didn't want to believe it. She'd come to admire him a little, in a way that she hadn't admired anyone since her father had died. So far as she could see, he lived up to the ideals her father had espoused.

Her disappointment would be profound if he abandoned her and her sister and all the others trapped here.

What happened if the rift closed while he was passing through? Lois doubted if even he would survive that.

The thought that half of him might be already falling to earth horrified her.

The rain didn't last much longer than any of the others had, and moments later Lois found herself standing shivering in the humid air.

She felt an odd sense of warmth from behind her and she turned. Clark was staring at her, and she could

feel steam rising from her pants. It was a little like standing next to a roaring fire, and it was all Lois could do not to moan. She was cold.

"What happened?" she asked when she finally got control of herself.

"I found Metropolis," he said. "It was right there on the other side!"

"Are you sure it was your Metropolis?" Lois asked.

"I had time to do a quick sweep," he said. "Everything is exactly as I left it."

"Part of you must have hoped that the rift was going to close behind you."

Clark shook his head. "I wouldn't do that. I'm not going to leave your sister and the others behind, even if it means I get stuck here."

Lois took a step toward him. "Then why did you go?"

"What if I had tried to take the others back through and it was a world even worse off than this one?" Clark said. "Like a world with those giant scorpions maybe, or a world with no shrimp."

At her look he shrugged and smiled sheepishly. "I didn't actually check for shrimp."

"So what now?"

"Now we find a place to hole up," Clark said. "I'll fly to France myself; I can go a lot faster without you. Then we move on in the morning."

Glancing down at the mass of feathers in Clark's hand, Lois was glad to see that it was still recognizable.

"What are you going to do with that?" Lois asked.

"I'm not sure," Clark said. "Maybe find a bag or some kind of container. I'm getting tired of holding it."

"It's a corpse from an extinct species," Lois said. "Let's do something with it."

Being a Nobel laureate didn't make writing grant proposals any easier. Malcolm Carrick stared at the blank screen in front of him and wondered if he should have gone into an easier field of study, like physics. There were still new and exciting discoveries being made there.

Working for the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology as well as his work as a professor had seemed exiting at first. Tracing bird populations, finding the occasionally species which had once been thought to be extinct but was instead only exceedingly rare ... helping to preserve the earth's ecology and biodiversity: those were the exciting parts of the work.

Inspiring the next generation with the same fire that had gotten him into the field in the first place ... that was also exciting.

The paperwork and bureaucracy behind the grant application process was not exciting. Research proving that one bird species was different than another when one only had a slightly different bill or color of head crest was a hard sell in years when Congress was looking to slash budgets.

While his work was already in the textbooks, it was generally dry and technical, known only by other scientists in his field. Sometimes he dreamed of making the one great discovery, the one that would put his name in the newspapers, giving him fame and fortune. Unfortunately, most of those discoveries were being made in the flashier sciences. He was forced to deal in small steps ... good science, but hard to get approval from the appropriations committee.

The knock at the door was a welcome relief.

He grimaced as he rose to his feet. Old bones weren't as limber as they had been. He shuffled across the floor wondering if he should have someone tidy his office, which was the usual academician's muddle of books and papers and obscure notes which made the place look a little like a tornado had hit it. Of course, then he wouldn't be able to find anything.

Opening the door, he was surprised to see two people standing on the other side. A little old to be his usual lot of undergraduates, they weren't part of his graduate program. He knew all of those students by name.

They were a handsome couple, and the chemistry between them was obvious. Malcolm wondered how long they had been together.

"May I help you?"

"Professor Carrick," the woman said. "My name is Lois Lane."

Recognition sparked. "The reporter?"

She nodded. "May I come in?"

"I haven't done anything newsworthy lately, young lady."

"I took one of your classes as an elective," she said, "that last year you taught at Columbia."

"I doubt that bird watching has done you much good in Iraq," he said. "But I'm flattered that you remembered me."

She glanced at her companion, who had his hands behind his back.

"What can I do for you?" Malcolm said.

"I came across a specimen, and was wondering if you could identify it for me?"

"Something you killed?" he asked disapprovingly.

"It was dead by the time we got to it," she said.

Her partner pulled his hands from behind his back and held a small corpse out.

Reaching for a set of latex gloves, Malcolm

grimaced. "Didn't your mother ever tell you not to pick up dead animals with your bare hands? Birds sometimes carry parasites or bacteria that can be harmful to humans."

"I'm not worried," the man said, smiling at Lois as though he'd made an obscure joke.

"Set it down here," he said, pulling a tray out of a cabinet. As the man did so Malcolm said, "Wash your hands in the sink over there. The last thing we need is some sort of infestation."

He pulled a lamp on a portable stand over the tray and then switched the light on.

"What happened here? This cut looks extremely fine and the inner surface is cauterized. Was this done with a laser?" he asked.

She shook her head.

He frowned as he smoothed some of the feathers down and looked at the other end of the bird. A moment longer he stiffened and said, "Where did you find this?"

Lois said, "Is your computer connected to the Internet?"

He nodded. Although he was reluctant to leave the remarkable specimen on the tray behind, he stepped across the aisle and set up the connection.

She typed in an address and a moment later a YouTube clip appeared on the screen.

The two people standing on either side of him waited as he stared at the screen. When the clip was over he stared into space for a long moment then gently lowered himself into his seat.

"Has anyone else seen this?"

Lois glanced at the screen and said, "About thirty thousand people."

"Anyone important?"

"It hasn't made the mainstream news, if that's what you are asking."

Malcolm tried to grasp what he was seeing.

He had half of a passenger pigeon, and apparently somewhere out there was a flock which had to contain millions of birds.

This year's grant application was actually going to be fun to write.

"So do you know of any physicists we can talk to?" Clark asked.

The old man said, "I have a number of colleagues. They tend to specialize in different things."

"What about other universes? I know some people have done some theoretical work ... " Lois said.

The old man glanced back at the bird on the table, his expression startled. "If you are saying what I think you're saying, this could be a potential disaster."

Clark blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Passenger pigeons were never part of the native ecology of northern Europe. They'll have to establish a niche in the ecology, which means that other bird species are going to have to find a way to compete. If they are carrying any sort of parasites or disease that the local fauna have no defense against ... this is something we may be dealing with for a long time."

"We need to talk to someone," Lois said.

"I have a colleague, Thomas Ledderman. He's done some groundbreaking work in string theory. He's lost some credibility recently, but he's considered one of the leading minds in the field."

"Why has he lost credibility?"

"He's suing the government over participation in a project in France. He's convinced that it's going to destroy the world."

"Your colleague ... do you know how we can reach him?" Lois asked.

"He's at a conference in Las Vegas. I have no doubt that he'll be out of contact until tomorrow morning at the very least." Professor Carrick smiled slightly. "He likes to gamble and once he sits down at the tables you couldn't get him up for anything short of the apocalypse."

Lois glanced at Clark, who nodded slightly.

"Do you know which hotel he is staying at?"

"Bally's," the older man said. He pulled his gloves off and turned to the washbasin. "If you leave a message with the desk I'm sure he'll get in touch with you in the morning, assuming he doesn't forget and rush off to the conference first."

"Do you have a picture?"

Stepping across to the computer, the older man typed in a web address. A moment later a picture with a profile appeared on the page.

Lois studied the picture carefully, even as she heard the printer running.

He was a heavyset man in his late fifties, with heavy jowls and drooping eyelids. He looked like an angry man, and he reminded her a little of her first editor. This was a face she'd remember.

No need to take chances, however. Lois took the printed picture, folded it and slipped it into her pocket.

"Thank you professor Carrick," Lois said. "You wouldn't believe how helpful you've been."

The older man smiled at her. "I've always got time for a former student, especially when they bring me gifts." He glanced back at the bird lying on the table.

"We have things to do," Lois said. "But I look forward to reading about your findings."

Professor Carrick would provide concrete,

scientific evidence that something strange was going on. It was a small step, but Lois hoped that the government didn't realize the danger until the media picked up his findings.

Ornithologists didn't usually worry the government, and by the time they realized the leak, it would be too late.

Aloft again, Clark felt himself finally beginning to relax. Things were starting to fall into place. They had a goal, something concrete they

could do instead of just reacting to everything.

Feeling helpless was the one thing Clark couldn't abide. It had happened that night when he was ten, when he'd been too slow and too weak to stop what had happened to his parents. It had happened over and over again throughout his childhood in foster care, where he'd had little to no control over the direction his life was going.

It happened every time he'd decided to not help for fear of what being seen as a freak would do to his personal life.

It was one of the things that had spoiled his relationship with Lana. He'd come to resent her continual pressure to never use his abilities, to never admit that he was anything other than the normal person he appeared to be.

Yet he couldn't blame her entirely. He'd made the decision to hide, to cover his ears and ignore the horror that he heard every night he was in a big city.

Being able to hear everything in a thirty mile radius was more of a curse than a blessing. In a city the size of Metropolis ... or Washington D.C. for that matter, there was a continuous din. The sounds of people assaulting one another, of murders, or arguments and death, part of him was always listening for these. In Metropolis, it was an nightly occurrence.

Being a reporter had helped, a little. It had satisfied his need to help and to make a difference in the world, but he'd been left with the nagging sense that he had more to offer.

Being a reporter was in many ways like being a police officer. Most days, you only came along after the harm had occurred. It was rare to get to prevent a crime.

He had the power to stop them as they were happening. The small, secretive rescues he'd done over the years had only whetted his appetite for more.

Now at least he had something concrete he could do instead of simply running and hiding.

It made him appreciate the small woman he was holding all the more. She didn't seem to look down on him for not being quite human. She didn't ask him to

stand by and listen to people being hurt or even killed out of some desire to protect her reputation and his secret.

She treated him as an equal, not as some kind of adornment. With Lana he had felt a little like a trophy boyfriend, a sort of expected adjunct to her life. He'd gone to the expected parties, made small talk with her friends. He'd done the expected thing because Lana was all he'd had.

Lois had risked everything for what she believed in. Even without knowing what he could do she'd risked her job and her freedom to help him and the people on the plane.

Best of all, she didn't seem to idolize him. From what he'd been able to gather, most of the fictional Lois Lanes had idolized Superman while ignoring Clark Kent.

It was going to be painful to let her go.

Lois closed her eyes and allowed herself to drift, enjoying the sensation of being held. Watching the lights below pass by, isolated seas of stars in the darkness was soothing, and as she felt herself relaxing, she began to wonder what it would be like to be able to do this all the time.

There were no guarantees that he was going to be able to get back home. If there was some man-made reason for the rifts to occur, it was going to be too dangerous to let them happen again just to allow the passage of a couple of hundred people.

The project was going to have to be shut down in one form or another, and Clark was going to have to deal with that. Chances were that even if the government changed its mind and suddenly became reasonable, it was going to be almost impossible to predict when the rifts were likely to occur.

Lois allowed herself to imagine what would happen if Clark was forced to stay.

They'd have to put pressure on the United States government to give citizenship to the refugees. After all, almost all of them were American citizens, even if it wasn't quite this America from which they had citizenship.

As long as the whole thing remained a secret, the government was going to be able to keep the passengers locked away.

Even if he was able to go back, he'd never be able to gather all the passengers together in time without help. For all they knew the passengers were being held in separate locations and getting them all together would be a tactical nightmare.

In that case going public would once again be their only recourse. If she could convince the public of one

impossible fact, that Superman was real, other impossible facts would be easier to swallow.

Lois frowned, her mind going over a hundred different possibilities. She wasn't a publicist, but it wouldn't hurt to hire one. A lawsuit on behalf of the people who had been incarcerated also wouldn't hurt.

High profile demonstrations of power would prove to the world that these weren't just terrorists or cultists. With the power of a Superman, a group wouldn't need bombs or planes or any equipment at all.

Clark had the potential to be a weapon of mass destruction all by himself. His using his powers to help instead would speak volumes.

Lois opened her eyes as she felt Clark stiffening beside her.

There was a glow on the horizon, but it wasn't the electric glow of city lights that was becoming almost normal for her.

They were moving so fast that it was already sliding by to the side, but Lois could see that they were slowing.

"What's going on?" she asked, leaning her head in close to his.

"A sugar refinery is burning," he said. "There are people inside."

"So set me down," Lois said.

He looked at her for a long moment and seemed to come to a decision. A moment later they were flashing forward and Lois found herself a hundred yards away from the wide expanse of a parking lot.

She could hear ambulances already on the way, and as her feet touched the ground she felt the sudden chill as Clark let her go.

He was a blur as he disappeared, and even as he vanished one of the silos exploded. Lois flinched and winced as the world seemed to go white for a moment.

She could see the growing crowd of evacuees outside the plant. Some were standing and others were lying on the ground, obviously injured.

Despite herself, Lois found herself moving forward. She'd taken an elementary first aid course before going to Iraq the first time. She knew the basics and with any luck the ambulances would be there soon enough that they wouldn't need her.

Stepping forward into the crowd, Lois saw the stunned, haggard look on most of the faces in the crowd. These people were in shock.

"Does anyone have medical experience?" she called out.

When they turned to look at her she repeated the question again. Slowly they began to look at their neighbors, who were shaking their heads.

"I had CPR training," one woman said.

With that another man stepped out from the back of the crowd and then another, and another. They seemed almost grateful to have someone in charge, especially as Lois began to point to individuals and telling them what to do.

"Does anyone have medical kits in their cars, latex gloves, hand sanitizer, blankets, and bottles of water, anything we can use? If you do bring them here," Lois said, pointing to an unused area. "We're going to have to make do with what we have."

No one seemed to notice the bodies which were appearing behind them until Lois pointed them out.

She flinched at the sound of another explosion, but she was pleased to see that one section of the fire seemed to be spontaneously dying out.

"We can't move these people," Lois said, "But we can make them as comfortable as possible. We need to keep them warm."

She began to assign tasks to people. Distributing supplies, performing CPR, loosening tight articles of clothing before swelling inevitably began. It was a never ending litany of tasks, and to the crowd's credit, no one argued.

Lois stepped in when she needed to, taking over for someone doing chest compressions or for someone else doing resuscitative breathing.

Someone somewhere had come up with a supply of CPR masks and latex gloves. Lois had to keep reminding people to change gloves and wash with hand sanitizer when moving from one patient to the next.

Without their skins, these people were going to be vulnerable to infection.

Even those who were walking were coughing. Many of them would suffer from scarring to their lungs from the fire and heat.

After her parents had died, Lois had become something of an expert on fire.

She was desperately doing chest compressions on one man who had stopped breathing despite her exhaustion, and when she felt the hand on her shoulder, she looked up.

The paramedic smiled at her and said, "We'll take it from here."

Lois had never been so glad to see anyone in her life. She fell back and found herself sitting on the ground. Her hands were shaking, and whether it was from the adrenaline or from simple exhaustion she didn't know.

Looking up, Lois realized that she was surrounded by flashing lights. They'd called in every ambulance in the area and more would probably be arriving soon.

"Are you hurt, Ma'am?"

Another paramedic reached down for her and she took his hand, slowly standing. "I'm not part of all of this. I'm just helping out. Let me show you where the worst of them are."

There were thirty people critically injured and two whom Lois believed to be dead. Most of the rest of the crowd had injuries that would have to be attended to, but they would have to wait.

The worst were on the outskirts of the group: the ones Clark had rescued. They'd been exposed to the most fire and particulate matter, and Lois doubted that some of them were going to live. She felt a pressure on her chest at the thought of the people she hadn't been able to save, but she could only imagine how much worse it would have been if Clark hadn't been there.

The paramedic left her, shouting for two of his comrades as one of the men on the ground began coughing up blood.

The world seemed to spin around her,

but Lois forced herself to remain standing. She'd already learned that you didn't fall apart during a crisis.

The time to do that was later, when you had time to grieve.

"Lois!"

The familiar voice shocked Lois. One of her CNN coworkers was striding toward her, camera outstretched.

Obviously the news of her dismissal hadn't made the rounds yet.

She hesitated for only a moment. Her face was already on live television and if the Feds were out to find her in Georgia they wouldn't be looking for her in Nevada.

She put on her best smile and stepped forward to give the interview of a lifetime as behind her firefighters were already moving forward to put out a fire that seemed to be extinguishing itself piece by piece.

Pilar was going to be furious, and Agent Randal was probably on his way already. Imagining their reactions almost made the risk worth it.

"It's a miracle that anyone survived at all," she began. "In what some survivors have taken to calling hell, over thirty people have been critically injured and two have died in a sugar refinery explosion in Augusta, Georgia."

Clark felt numb. He'd avoided more serious accidents in the past, preferring to stop things unobtrusively before they started, but this was something he'd never experienced.

The bodies were the worst. Had he arrived in time? If he'd hesitated a couple of seconds less would some of these people have lived instead of dying?

Even touching some of them was causing damage, although with most of them he could protect them from the heat at least somewhat. There wasn't anything he could do about the fumes, however, other than move them.

Finding the victims was the first priority and only then did he focus on the factory itself.

The fires burned, and when he froze them with his breath, it often wasn't long before they exploded again. It was like fighting the hydra; for every fire he put out two more started.

Worse, the whole place was coated with sugar sludge. Vats had exploded, leaving doors and walls caked with the substance. Highly flammable and sticky, it was making it harder to put fires out and keep them out.

He remained even when the fire crews arrived, aware that even more casualties could result as the crews tried to search desperately for bodies that were not there.

All he knew of the outside world was flashes as he moved back and forth. He saw Lois performing CPR and he felt a moment of admiration for her. She could have simply stood in the shadows and watched; no one had asked her to do anything more than that.

Instead she was in the middle of it, doing everything she could to help.

He felt ashamed.

His entire life had been about hiding, about pretending he was normal and doing only as much as he could without risking himself.

Lois was a federal fugitive and it wouldn't be long before police and others were on the scene, yet she was stepping forward, risking everything to help people she didn't even know.

It was only when the last of the fires was out that he finally allowed himself to leave. Flying behind the factory and circling around, he soon found Lois in the middle of a crowd of media.

Seeing him, she excused herself and a moment later they were in the air again.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"We're sticking to the plan," Clark said. His voice was grim. "We'll find a hotel in Vegas and talk to our man in the morning, assuming we can't find him tonight."

"Are you all right?" Lois asked.

Clark was silent for a long moment staring out in front of him. "It wasn't enough," he said.

"Many of those people are going to live because of you," she said.

"I should have flown them directly to the hospital," he said. "Gotten them directly into the emergency room. Instead I did what I always do and hid in the shadows."

Lois bit her lip for a moment and then came to a decision.

"We need to make a detour," she said.

"Where?" he asked.

"Illinois."

"What's in Illinois?" Clark asked, glancing at her.

"A place to stay," Lois said, "And something you need."

He nodded and they began to turn.

The nice thing about Clark was that he treated her as an equal partner. He was willing to fly halfway across the country on her word alone.

He had no idea what was coming.

Following Lois's directions, Clark followed the course of the Ohio River. Although he couldn't imagine what she needed to pick up in Illinois, he was willing to give her the time. As a guide to this new and strange version of America, she had yet to steer him wrong.

Truthfully, he was just enjoying flying with her. For the first time he was able to share his greatest joy with someone who seemed to enjoy it as much as he did. She seemed to have no fear and no reservations.

He kept being distracted by her perfume, by the feeling of her cradled against him. It was almost like being hugged, which was something he badly needed in the aftermath of the fire.

Lana would have looked at him in recrimination, either for risking his reputation or hers by taking the risk of helping them, or for failing in what he had set out to do.

The Superman in the comics made it look so easy. He was brave and strong and seemed to have an endless well of courage. He was an icon, an ideal for people to look up to.

There wasn't any way Clark was ever going to be able to match that.

"Can you see Interstate 24?" Lois asked suddenly, "Or maybe see the glow from the riverboat casino ... Harrah's."

"I don't need any more money," Clark said. "I feel bad enough about the lottery thing."

There were other casinos that would have been closer anyway.

"You don't have any ID," Lois said, glancing at him.

"Then why are we here?" Clark asked.

"You'll see," she said. "Turn left up here."

By this point he had slowed to the speed of a speeding car. He turned, and shortly afterwards he could see a small town in the distance.

It was actually a little smaller than Smallville, but it reminded him of it.

"Drop us off near the circle in the middle," she said.

They landed silently in an alley. Clark stopped as they stepped out of the alley and around the corner.

To one side stood a red brick courthouse, much like courthouses all across the country. In front of it stood something that made him blink.

A fifteen foot tall bronze statue of Superman stood in front of the courthouse. Even from here he could see the motto at the statue's base. "Truth – Justice – The American way."

"It's sort of appropriate for a courthouse, don't you think?" Lois murmured.

"What is this?" Clark couldn't take his eyes off the statue.

"The City of Metropolis," Lois said. "Population 7200."

On the opposite side of the courthouse were two maple trees. They were huge, each at least twelve feet in diameter. Lois walked over to the trees and said, "Why don't you wait here?"

There was a payphone nearby. It was in a traditional telephone booth, one that looked like it was from in the forties.

Lois stepped inside, and Clark wondered if she really thought he couldn't hear everything she had to say.

When she picked up the phone there was a prerecorded message from Superman. A moment later she had dropped several coins in the slot and he could hear the dial tone.

The voice on the other end of the line said, "Hello?"

"This is Lois," Lois said. "I'm in town."

The voice on the other end of the line sounded more alert now. "You want to come by in the morning, talk a little?"

"I was wondering if you could come out tonight," Lois said. "I'm sorry it's so late, but I need it."

The voice on the other end of the line grumbled for a bit, and then said, "I'll meet you out front in ten minutes."

Lois exited the phone booth and headed for Clark. "It'll be ten minutes," she said.

"What's going on?"

"Did you know that the citizens of this town paid

for that statue with their own money?" Lois said, ignoring him. "They gathered more than a hundred thousand dollars together by buying thirty five dollar memorial bricks. You can see the names on the paving around the statue."

"We have a lot to do," Clark said. "I can look at a giant statue of ... Superman later."

"Those people would have died without you," Lois said. The abrupt change in subject caught him off guard. "And the people who went in after them would have been at risk."

"I didn't do enough," Clark said.

"You did more than anyone else could." Lois shook her head. "There's a chance that the refinery might be saved now. If it had been allowed to burn there was a chance they'd have closed the plant. You may have saved hundreds of jobs."

Jobs were important in small towns. Clark remembered vividly the hard times in Smallville when he had been growing up, the times when sometimes it seemed as though the town was going to dry up and blow away. Several years of bad crops and bank foreclosures had led to a ripple effect as stores couldn't sell to farmers who had no money. Places had closed up shop one after another.

"But those people I did get out ... "

"They could have died in the fire. Now they have a chance to live. You couldn't have done anything more than you did."

"I could have flown them directly to a hospital, or at least to an ambulance."

Lois looked at him for a long moment then nodded. "So we'll have to do something about that."

"What can we possibly ... " At her expression he took a step back. "No ... "

"What are the odds that you are going to be able to find all the passengers and gather them together without help?"

The odds were pretty slim. He'd almost have to have the people ready to leave and something to transport them all in if he was going to get them home. That wouldn't work if they were scattered around different facilities.

Even if he was bulletproof, none of the passengers were, and they would provide a perfect group of hostages. Although Clark would hope that Federal Agents wouldn't do something like that, he had to admit that it was possible

they might, especially if they didn't see any other way of stopping him.

Desperate people did desperate things.

"If you can't get them together on your own that means that we have to put pressure on the government

to release them. The only way we can do that is to make the public believe that they really are from another universe."

"And the public isn't likely to believe that," Clark said.

It had been difficult enough to convince Lois, and she'd had a first hand seat at most of the events in question. How much more difficult would it be to convince a public watching events through a television screen, especially a public jaded by special effects extravaganzas.

The chances were that some people would never believe he could do what he could do, even if he was forced to remain in this world for the rest of his life. At least on his world there were still people who didn't believe in the moon landing.

"You'd have to appear in front of so many people that no one could denounce it as a hoax," Lois said. "So that nobody could cover it up, no matter how they tried."

"I'd never have a normal life," he said.

He'd heard enough snippets in passing to know that this world hounded its celebrities incessantly, placing them on pedestals and knocking them down again with great glee. Talking heads spouting endless drivel about people whose only claim to fame was being famous.

"You don't have a normal life now," Lois said. "And if you go home, who's to say anyone has to know?"

The odds that someone hadn't mentioned the name Clark Kent in relation to Superman were slim, but still ...

He'd been a coward for long enough.

"All right," he said. "But not this."

He glanced up at the statue towering over the square.

"Not what?"

"I should make my own costume ... make it clear that I'm not ... him."

"You can be," Lois said.

Clark shook his head. "He's perfect. I'm just a person."

Lois looked at him for a moment and said, "Clark Kent is a person. Superman is something else. He stands for something people want to believe in."

"Still," Clark said, "I think ... "

"Can you sew?" Lois asked suddenly.

"Well, no ... "

"Are you, by chance a fashion designer?"

"No."

"How long do you think it would take to make a whole lot of costumes, hoping to find something hat

both doesn't look stupid and doesn't accidentally look like something from hundreds of comic book titles?"

"I don't know," Clark said.

"Superman is one of the three most recognized icons on the planet. There isn't a country in the world where that shield isn't recognized."

"Well, I guess I knew it was famous, but ... "

"People grew up with Superman," Lois said.

"Everyone was a child once, and Superman calls to that part of us that sometimes we forget. People trust Superman."

Lois looked as though she was about to continue, but she was interrupted by the arrival of a small green car. Clark didn't recognize the model, but it didn't sound like any gasoline motor he'd ever heard.

The man stepping out of the small car was anything but small. Standing several inches taller than Clark he was a heavysset man wearing glasses and a thick moustache.

"Lois Lane!" he said. His voice was deep. "I didn't expect you in these parts."

"Jim," Lois said. "I need to pick it up."

He stopped. "If you need the money, I'd be happy to make a bid on it."

Lois shook her head. "I'm not selling it."

"Then ... " For the first time the man seemed to notice Clark.

"You must be one of the contestants," he said.

"Contestants?"

"They're having a contest for who would make the best new town Superman," Lois said. Turning to Jim, she said, "He's not one of the contestants."

"You could have come during business hours," the taller man said, grumbling as he reached into his pocket for the keys. "Is this going to be a permanent deal, or do you think I might get it back when you are done?"

"I ... " Lois glanced at Clark. "I don't know."

Jim stepped over the threshold, and a moment later the lights began to come up inside the store.

Clark stepped through and stared. Inside was a store with more Superman merchandise than he'd even imagined possible. It reminded him a little of Star Wars, back in the day.

He wondered how much a Superman costume cost and how he was going to reimburse Lois. He couldn't keep defrauding the government by cheating on lottery tickets.

The larger man locked the door behind them then led his way through a maze of aisles through a set of double doors.

The sign on the door said, "The Superman Museum."

Stepping through the door he felt his jaw drop.

Every bit of wall space was covered in Superman memorabilia, from pictures to props to animation cells and comic books. There were collectibles, movie props, costumed mannequins, theater posters and thousands of toys and plastic figures.

There were so many items that Clark had to turn and squeeze his way through narrow aisles to follow Lois and Jim.

"This is part of Jim's collection," Lois said. "There are twenty thousand items here and he has eighty thousand more at home."

"He has a hundred thousand pieces of memorabilia?" Clark looked uneasily at the tall man. That level of obsession made him uneasy.

It was hard to imagine that there were this many items in the world.

"He's got things on loan to the Smithsonian." Lois said. "This is what I was trying to tell you. Everybody knows Superman. He's a universal symbol, and everybody knows what he represents."

She was quiet as Jim stopped in front of a case.

"We'll really miss this piece," Jim said as he opened the case with a key on his ring. "A lot of people have got a lot of enjoyment out of it."

"What is this?" Clark asked.

"Three weeks after Christopher Reeve was paralyzed in 1995," Lois said. "Christies of New York had an auction."

Clark stared as the blue material began to slip off the mannequin.

"The filming company hadn't sold the suits before, because they would reuse suits from picture to picture. As they got worn, they'd be used for flying shots and then they'd be used for long distance shots."

Red and yellow and blue fabric slipped into Jim's hands. Handling it carefully he turned.

"When it became apparent that Christopher Reeve wasn't going to be able to make another movie, they began auctioning off some of the suits."

Turning to Clark, Lois said, "My father was in the audience and he had the winning bid."

As Clark stared, Lois turned and took the suit from Jim. She turned and handed it to Clark.

He stared down at the suit in his hands. Lois had just handed him a piece of history. This was what she wanted him to wear?

He hadn't even been able to keep a single pair of clothes clean and whole for more than half a day. How was he going to wear a literal museum piece?

"I can't wear this," he said. "It's too valuable."

The thought of destroying something like this

through accident or misuse made his chest tight.

"This is what my father would have wanted," Lois said. She stared at him, and for the first time he realized that there was something brittle in her expression.

Coming here, seeing all this must be difficult for her. It would have reminded her of just what she'd lost with her father. In giving him this, her father's prize possession, she was making herself vulnerable to him.

She was afraid he would reject it, and in a way reject her.

Clark had felt that way about flying. When he'd discovered that Lana would never share his enjoyment, that flying frightened her and made her think of him as less than human ... he'd wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

"Ok," he said.

The gratitude in Lois's eyes was worth the humiliation of wearing the suit.

"Are you sure about this?" Jim leaned close to Lois and said, "Those suits aren't just spandex knock offs."

Lois knew more than she wanted to know about the Superman suits. Her father had gone on often enough about them; she'd spent much of her childhood trying to ignore his constant attempts to share this thing he was interested in.

"I know," she said. "Made by Bermans and Nathans costumiers of London out of special fabric that nobody makes anymore."

"Made on a single loom in Germany that doesn't even exist any more. Every one of these is a one of a kind, and you're giving it to your boyfriend to wear?"

Lois shook her head. "You have no idea what's going on."

"All I know is that you have that man in there putting on a costume worth eighty to a hundred thousand dollars-"

There was a crashing sound from the makeshift dressing room and Lois said, "Be quiet! He can hear us."

"From this distance?"

"He's got really great hearing."

A moment later Lois heard a voice from the tiny bathroom.

"Um, Lois ... "

He stepped out and Lois had to smother a laugh. The Superman costume had four parts: the cape, the leotard, the leggings and the belt.

The leotard included the red underwear, and it fit magnificently. Lois could remember her father talking about how the suit had been built small, to accentuate

Chris Reeve's muscles.

Unfortunately, the leggings bagged at the bottom.

"Christopher Reeve was six four," Jim said smugly. "Your man here is maybe a little over six foot."

He was four inches too short for the leggings.

"I don't suppose we could buy a pair of leggings in this style," Lois asked.

"If you'll leave the original here," Jim said.

"And a cape," Clark said.

Lois looked sharply up at him.

He looked embarrassed. "I don't think I'd be very good at taking care of the cape."

Jim looked horrified. Before he could say anything Lois interrupted him. "We'll take several of those. Give me the ones from the TV show. I always liked those better, and the length will fit better."

"We've got capes in all sizes," Jim said mildly.

Lois made a shushing motion. She'd only watched as much of the series as she'd been forced to, but she knew what she liked.

As Clark handed the cape back to Jim, Lois

said, "We've got a deal."

Jim gestured for them to head back toward the store at the front of the museum. He stayed behind to shut off the lights for a moment and they preceded him into the store.

Clark leaned close to her and said, "Eighty thousand dollars?"

"If things go the way I think they will, it'll be worth a lot more before you are done with it."

If he stayed, Lois had no doubt that designers all over the world would be falling all over themselves to make him new costumes. As much as costumes worn by Chris Reeve were worth, a costume worn by Chris Reeve and the real Superman would be priceless.

In truth, the money didn't matter. This was something her father would have wanted, and that was enough.

"He's just going to wear it outside?" Jim asked as they stepped out of the museum.

The statue still stood on the other side of the square, but for some reason Clark no longer felt as intimidated. There was something about wearing the suit that made him feel taller.

Perhaps it was the gravitas of sixty years and more of history. The store and museum behind him were shrines to an ideal.

"We're going to need it," Lois said. She stepped toward Clark and glanced up at him.

If they were going to make a show of things, there was no time like the present.

"I think your memorabilia is going to get a lot more valuable over the next few days," Lois said.

"You may get some Federal Agents visiting. Don't try to lie to them. Tell them everything you know. By the time they get here it won't matter."

For the first time there was a look of uncertainty on the tall man's face. "What have you gotten involved in?"

"I never did introduce my friend," Lois said. "Jim, I'd like you to meet Clark Kent."

A moment later they began to rise into the air.

Lois was grinning at Jim's expression, and Clark found himself grinning as well. The man had spent the majority of his life devoted to Superman.

"I think the museum is going to be a lot more popular in the near future," Lois called down.

Clark intentionally took a long, slow swoop around the square before rising into the sky.

The parts of the costume that hadn't fit had cost a couple of hundred dollars to replace. Jim's expression, though, that was priceless.

"How does it feel?" Lois asked.

Lois had purchased a Superman dufflebag for his clothes and her purse, and so he had to fly slower than he normally would have.

"What?"

"How does it feel?"

"Ridiculous," he said. When he saw her face fall a bit he grinned. "It's the most expensive thing I've ever worn and I feel like I'm naked."

He could see her cheeks reddening and she looked away.

For a moment he wondered if it had been his comment about being naked, but he chided himself. He had a girlfriend and he wasn't allowed to ask that sort of question, even in his own mind.

He shifted his grip on her anyway.

"I'm sure I'll get used to it."

They were flying over Canadian airspace as Clark didn't want to risk being attacked while he was forced to fly at speeds almost within range of human technology. He was keeping his eye out nonetheless.

"When we get to Las Vegas I'll do the talking," Lois said, changing the subject. "He may recognize me, and if he's really got an agenda relating to this project in France he'll want press coverage."

Clark nodded slowly. He suspected that it wouldn't be difficult for anyone to get the professor talking: devoting years to a specific project took a certain amount of obsession. That usually translated into talking about it to anyone who was willing to listen.

Years with Lana had taught him that it was better

not to argue, however, and truthfully it didn't matter who spoke to Dr. Ledderman as long as they got the information they needed.

"If you don't have ID you can't get in." The guard at the door was adamant.

Lois scowled. "Do you really think HE'S a minor?"

The guard was a hugely muscled black man in a black suit. He shrugged. "I just do what they tell me. The rules today are that nobody gets in without an ID. You might try tomorrow, but I can't guarantee that it'll be any different."

Lois tensed to argue, but Clark touched her on the shoulder and shook his head.

"He's playing blackjack," he said in a low voice. "I'll meet up with you later."

Clark would be able to see and hear everything that went on anyway, although Lois wasn't sure if the din of the casino would interfere with that. She took a deep breath and then nodded.

She stepped inside even as Clark was turned away.

They'd landed on the top floor of the seven story Paris parking garage and had taken the elevator down. Now Lois stepped into a long hallway filled with shops. The gift shop was to her left; a jewelry store was to her right. Shops selling flowers, crystals, and nuts were on every side of her. There was a video arcade and a spa. The system was designed to drain money in any way possible even before the gambler set foot in the casino.

At this hour, nearly two in the morning most of the shops were closed and Lois moved quickly past them.

Now she was taking a set of escalators up into the casino proper. Signs were conveniently placed overhead to lead her where she needed to go and a minute later she found herself stepping down a set of steps into the casino.

For a moment Lois allowed herself to imagine that she was here on vacation. She'd always liked to gamble, and she suspected that Clark would be a fun person to gamble with, even if he didn't use his abilities to cheat.

The casino was quieter at this hour of the night, although the slot machines still made their usual assortment of noises. Lois moved through row after row of slot machines until she came upon the table games.

Many of the tables were closed. The few that were open often had only a few players. This was going to make her task easier.

Slot machines encircled the table games, but Lois knew that these machines paid more poorly than the

rest of the games in the casino. Card game players disliked the noise of a slot machine paying off, yet their spouses often played while waiting with little expectation of winning.

This meant that the area around the card tables was almost quiet.

Lois pulled the crumpled picture from her pocket and glanced at it before shoving it back in. There weren't that many players to choose from.

After several moments she found him. Thomas Ledderman looked older and less angry than he had in his picture. Mostly he looked tired. He was alone at the table and his shoulders were slumped. He looked worn.

From the meager pile of chips in front of him, it looked like he might not be at the table much longer.

Lois pulled a fifty dollar bill from her pocket. She'd pulled her ID and some pocket cash and left the rest with Clark. She hadn't wanted to bother with her purse in the casino. Setting it down on the green velvet of the gaming table she took a seat, leaving one seat between herself and the older man.

Although she wanted to talk to him, she didn't want to arouse anyone's suspicions.

He was looking at her appraisingly. Lois knew herself to be an attractive woman; she never would have made it into television journalism otherwise. While it didn't matter in print, television network executives expected pretty faces to deliver the news. So she'd had more than her share of being ogled by men. This was something different.

She played a couple of hands, losing one and winning the next.

Dr. Ledderman continued to stare at her and a moment later he leaned over and said, "Excuse me, but aren't you Lois Lane?"

Lois looked up at gave him her brightest smile. "Why yes, yes I am."

"I've been following your work in Iraq," he said. "I've been an admirer for years."

Although Lois could detect a hint of male interest in his expression, she sensed that most of his interest seemed genuine.

"When did you get back?" he asked.

"Just a few days ago," Lois said. "I was owed some down time."

She'd been fired instead of getting the leave she deserved, but that was partially her own fault. She could have stopped and taken a vacation.

Tapping the green felt table indicating she wanted another card, Lois said, "I take it you aren't a reporter."

He shook his head. "I'm a physicist. I teach at Cornell University when I can't get T.A.'s to do the

work."

"So you get to do things with Super-colliders and things like that?"

"I'm more of a theorist," he said, grimacing as the dealer gathered his chips. "I get to play around with ideas about other worlds and other dimensions."

"So you write science fiction?" Lois asked.

"Not at all," he said. "Quantum physics has shown that a single particle of matter doesn't exist in just one position. It exists in several positions at once. It can exist as a particle and a wave at the same time. Because we're all made up of those particles, it means that ... "

At her expression he stopped and said, "Let's just say the jury is out, but there are some promising leads. There was a paper back in September describing the possibility that the collision between universes may leave visible marks, things that we can actually look for."

"So it might be possible to go from one universe to another," Lois said.

"If the barriers between worlds were to collide, there would be material ejected into both sides, a transfer. Whether it would be survivable by a human being, I can't say."

"Why not?"

"What happens if the conditions on the other side weren't survivable? I'd imagine that being ejected into the vacuum of space would be rather unpleasant. The transfer could even be catastrophic for the people left behind."

"Oh?" Lois said. She'd unconsciously been accumulating a small stack of chips and Dr. Ledderman hadn't been doing badly either.

"The greatest mass extinction in history occurred two hundred fifty million years ago. There is a theory that a series of methane gas explosions caused firestorms

and global warming that destroyed ninety five percent of marine species and seventy percent of land species."

Lois shook her head.

"In 1986, a gas explosion from Lake Nyos in Cameroon killed eighteen hundred people. Carbon dioxide was held mostly to blame, but there is evidence that methane was involved as well."

"Why are you worried about methane?" Lois asked.

"Because there are four hundred billion tons of methane frozen in the arctic tundra. It would only take a global temperature change of about ten degrees to release it and start a chain reaction to destroy everything."

"But you're talking about gas from the ocean, or the ice or something. What does that have to do with alternate worlds?"

"Methane could move very easily across a rift, and with enough pressure differential it might move rapidly. The least you could expect was a massive firestorm ... if it happened over a populated area the death toll could be massive."

"So you think something like this could really happen?"

"I think something like that might very well happen. There's a project in France I'm concerned about ... "

Lois felt someone sitting down beside her.

"I'd like to hear all about that, Dr. Ledderman."

Lois felt herself stiffen at the sound of the familiar voice. Slowly she turned to stare at the man sitting beside her.

Agent White was sitting calmly in the seat beside her, and behind him she could see at least six other men in black suits.

"Lois!" Agent White said. "I'm surprised to see you here. The last I heard you were in Georgia."

"I thought it might be a good time to take my vacation," Lois said weakly.

"It's a little late for that I'm afraid. I'm going to have to ask both of you to come along quietly."

The agents were unobtrusively surrounding them, and Lois could see more coming from the rows of slot machines.

From what she could see they had every exit blocked and there was no way to escape.

The limousine moved smoothly over the road, its interior dark, illuminated only by the light of an occasional streetlamp and the reflected glow of a small laptop computer. Lois sat uncomfortably, wedged between two large agents who reminded her more of bouncers than Feds. Only their dark suits and general demeanor assured her that they were who they said they were.

She stared across the divide at Agent White and Dr. Ledderman. Dr. Ledderman was staring intently at the laptop on his lap, clicking impatiently from one piece of information to the next.

"I thought you were off the case," Lois said, finally breaking a silence of several minutes duration. "Agent Randal said ... "

"Agent Randal has been known to overstep his boundaries," Agent White said. "I've been out of town taking care of matters."

"Oh? Any place in particular?"

"I've been in Hawaii ... " Agent White began.

At that Dr. Ledderman looked up sharply. "You went to see that charlatan before you came to me? He's a laughingstock ... "

"Your reputation isn't much better than his," Agent White said, "Although our experts say that your mathematics are better."

"The things he's worried about aren't even remotely the problem," Ledderman said.

"He refused to sign the nondisclosure documents, and he was more interested in being combative than in actually looking at the problem." Agent White said. "We had to ask him despite all that; at this point we aren't ready to turn away anyone who could help."

"I've been doing some research on my own," Lois began.

"We know," Agent White said. "There's a reason you're here instead of locked up in a Las Vegas jail cell awaiting transport."

Dr. Ledderman looked up sharply and said, "How is she involved in all of this?"

"I have a full presentation ready when we board the plane," Agent White said. "For the moment I hope you'll just continue to look over my people's work and see if there are any flaws you can see."

Lois sighed and wondered where Clark had gotten to. Part of her had hoped for a glorious rescue. Given Clark's power the agents wouldn't have stood a chance.

Of course, assaulting federal agents in the middle of a casino with hundreds of cameras probably wasn't the best start to a career as Superman, especially if you were trying to get the trust of a paranoid public.

She couldn't help but stare out the window and wonder what had happened to him.

"All right, shut it down." Jacob stepped out into the warehouse. He still felt stunned in the wake of the phone call he'd just had.

His crew was still working diligently, even though it was almost three in the morning. He dreaded what he was about to tell them.

They'd already filled four of the six forty foot shipping containers in the loading dock with food, water, blankets, tents and medical supplies. Now they were busily loading the remaining supplies onto pallets so that the two men with forklifts could load them.

Trucks had been arriving all night with donations from local churches. People didn't think of California as having much of a church-going population, but they were willing to dig deep when it counted.

"We still have two more to fill." Sweating heavily, Bob looked like a truck driver. Very few people would

guess that he was a local preacher. "If we don't get them out in time, they'll ship off without us."

The ship was leaving in four hours. They'd been lucky to get the transport charges as cheap as they'd gotten them.

"The junta is turning away relief shipments."

He could see the expressions of disbelief rippling through the crowd of men in front of him.

"How can they do that?" One man Jacob didn't know well leaned heavily against a crate of water. "Those people are going to need help sooner, rather than later."

"We could send it anyway," Bob said. "It'll be several days before the ship gets close, maybe they'll have changed their minds by then."

"They've seized two shipments already, and they aren't letting foreigners into the country. The ship captain doesn't want to take the risk. He's voided our contract. He's sailing without us, no matter what we do."

The volunteers groaned almost in unison. They'd already put in a massive amount of work on this. They had been working until the early hours of the morning and the thought that it was all going to be for nothing ...

It was then that Jacob saw movement in the darkness between shipping crates. This wasn't the safest area; their charity had wanted to spend as much of the money as they could on aid instead of overhead and infrastructure.

"Maybe I can help."

Stepping out of the darkness was a man in a Superman costume.

Jacob shifted uneasily, as did several of the men in front of him. They'd had a problem with crazies in the past.

"Unless you are ready to fly these containers to Myanmar, I don't think there's much you can do," Jacob said. "There isn't much point in loading these others, except to keep them out of the rain."

At least the locked containers would provide extra security. Local drug addicts had been known to try to steal what they could.

"Where are they headed for?"

"Not anywhere now," Jacob said. "We were hoping to get supplies out to the Irrawaddy Delta, to monasteries."

Some of the men were moving away from the crazy man; no matter how reasonable he sounded you could never trust how some of these people were going to react.

He walked to the end of the container and checked to see that it was locked.

Then he bent and put one hand to the bottom of the metal container and another higher up. There was a sound of groaning metal and a moment later the entire container began to rise into the air.

The container weighed approximately twenty six tons fully loaded.

The men in front of him began to scatter and a moment later Jacob discovered that he was in the front of the crowd.

Jacobs's mouth was dry and he could hear the thunder of his pulse in his ears. His heart was beating rapidly, and the men behind him were dead silent.

As the man reached the end of the loading dock, he turned to look at them.

"Will you need these back?"

Jacob shook his head faintly. "It costs more to ship them than it does to buy a new one. We get abandoned ones donated to us all the time."

"I think these would make good temporary shelters," the man in the Superman suit said. "I'll be back for the rest of these as soon as I can."

A moment later he and the entire container were rising into the air as though being lifted by a crane. Jacob found himself rushing to the end of the dock along with the others to stare up in the sky.

The container vanished from sight in a shockingly short amount of time.

The men around him were shocked and silent. Several had faces that were white and pale. One man spoke up. "What are we going to tell the bosses?"

"We found alternate transportation," Bob spoke finally. "Sometimes God works in mysterious ways."

The group was silent again, staring at the sky.

"If he's really coming back," Jacob said, "Then we probably need to get back to work."

The men stared at him for a moment and then began to grin. As Jacob began to join in he could hear the excited murmur of conversation between the others.

Unless they were all hallucinating, the world was about to change dramatically, and they were part of it.

Stepping into the private jet, Lois was surprised. In her experience government employees didn't travel in luxury any more than was necessary, and this was obviously a luxury plane.

Dr. Ledderman was looking around approvingly. Apparently the plane appealed to his sense of aesthetics. He moved quickly and found a seat near the back of the cabin.

The plane was large enough that the cockpit was separated from the passenger section, but the cabin wasn't much larger than her living room at home, and

it was narrower.

It definitely wasn't government issue.

At Lois's look, Agent White said, "A sponsor in the Armed Service committee was kind enough to provide transportation."

As

the last agent through the door turned to shut and seal it, Lois slowly found her seat. If Agent White had connections to a senator, he had a great deal more authority than she had suspected.

Of course, members of the appropriations committee knew about secret programs as they were the ones who funded them.

"Do they believe it?" Lois asked Agent White as he sat down beside her.

"Given the evidence they don't have much choice," he said.

"You have evidence that all this is real?" Lois asked quickly.

"Other than you arriving in a Las Vegas Casino less than three hours after being seen in Georgia?" Agent White asked mildly.

"Other than that, yes," Lois said.

The front of the cabin had a relatively large flat screen television which Lois suspected was probably used both for presentations and in-house movies during flights.

Agent White reached under his seat and pulled out a remote. "As soon as we get in the air, I'm going to give a presentation. Feel free to tell me if I've got something wrong."

By all rights, Clark shouldn't have been able to lift the shipping container, no matter how strong he was. The metal of the structure hadn't been designed to take its entire twenty six ton weight compressed onto the minuscule area of two human hands. The metal should have torn like tissue paper in his hands.

Clark's best guess was that the same thing that allowed him to protect Lois from the wind and cold of moving at supersonic speeds also allowed him to better distribute the weight of a relatively massive structure. Spread thin, it didn't protect the object he was holding against anything but its own weight.

Although it wasn't nearly as fragile as a human body, a shipping container had very poor aerodynamics. It was flat and slammed into the wind instead of channeling air around it.

Because of this, he was very limited in the speed he could fly with one.

Scanning the container, he didn't see anything that would be excessively damaged by a vacuum, although radiation was always a concern.

His best bet would be to fly into space, where he could move as quickly as he wanted to as long as he could avoid orbits with high flying debris. With no wind resistance he could accelerate to almost full speed.

Unfortunately that required that he climb higher at what felt like a horribly slow rate.

He almost didn't hear the planes until it was too late.

Two of the sleek looking fighters were coming alongside him and he could hear the comments of the pilots inside.

"We have the bogie in sight. It's"

The voice stopped suddenly and Clark turned his head to look at the pilot. He wasn't concealing himself now, but it would have been useful to have a radio or some sort of way to communicate.

Undoubtedly the comic book writers would have given his counterpart something silly like super-ventriloquism.

"You'd better look at the feed for yourself."

"What is it?"

"Respectfully, sir, I'd like to stay out of the nuthouse. Just check the feed."

There was silence on the pilot's radio for almost a minute before the voice reappeared. "This is some kind of joke. It's not funny."

"You're seeing what I'm seeing," the pilot insisted.

A second plane came up on the other side of him. "I'm seeing it too, I think."

Clark smiled and waved a little.

The voice on the radio cursed for a moment. "If it's really who it looks like, he can hear you. If it's some kind of trick, then they may have a radio. Either way, deliver the message."

The pilot flicked a switch and said, "Unidentified aircraft, you are in United States airspace. Land at the following coordinates or you will be fired upon."

Clark looked at the pilot, grinned and shook his head. The extended conversation had given him exactly what he had needed. Every second had led them higher and higher, and the planes were having to drop back even as Clark was able to put on more speed. Less air meant less resistance.

This time the planes didn't fire on him, and for the first time Clark began to realize that while the suit might look a little ridiculous, there was one thing Lois hadn't mentioned about it.

It could be a lot of fun.

His grin held as he moved out into the crystal cold clarity of space.

"This was found on the ocean floor by divers

looking for bodies swept off the deck of the boat when it capsized," Agent White said.

The tattered contents of a wallet first burned and now water-logged were scattered across the television screen.

"They dredged these pieces up over an area of several hundred yards," Agent White said. "It was as though the wallet had exploded on contact with the water, or it had been exposed to water moving at very high speeds."

Leaning forward to stare at the screen, especially as the view changed to a close up of a familiar driver's license, Dr. Ledderman said, "Why is anyone interested in a fake Clark Kent driver's license?"

"Interestingly, we have footage of Ms. Lane hugging this very person in Washington DC. less than an hour after the boat's miraculous recovery."

Lois flushed as the video in question was played. It looked a lot more intimate from this angle than she'd remembered it being. It had been a spontaneous display of emotion, but in black and white it looked like something much cozier.

"Oh, that's funny," Dr. Ledderman said. "You, Lois Lane, got involved with someone going around calling himself Clark Kent."

Lois grimaced. She'd heard enough jokes about her name without having to listen to a new one.

Of course, he wasn't just calling himself Clark Kent.

Thankfully the doctor didn't focus long on the irony of her choice of people to hug.

"What's all of that have to do with the boat?" Dr. Ledderman asked. "The boat was recovered because of a geothermal vent or a methane explosion, or at least that's what the news said."

"The geography is all wrong. There isn't a pocket of compressed gas within fifty miles of that site." Agent White stared at Dr. Ledderman for a moment, as though waiting for him to make the obvious conclusion.

The conclusion that to anyone who believed in a rational world wasn't obvious at all.

For all his theories about alternate universes, Dr. Ledderman didn't seem to be ready to make that kind of leap.

"So what in the blazes happened then?"

What followed was an instructional series of slides of radar data, followed by the data from the sonar.

"I didn't realize we had anything that could move that fast," Ledderman said.

"We don't," Agent White said. "We've been tracking readings like this since the night of the first disturbance."

"You think something came through the storm?" Ledderman asked.

"We know it did," Agent White said, "And we have the proof."

As Clark descended into the atmosphere he was glad he'd thought to keep his trajectory well south of Russia and China the entire way. Setting off World War Three wasn't how he wanted to start all of this off.

Of course, this wasn't exactly what Lois had outlined either. She'd envisioned him doing high profile things to get noticed, so that the press would listen when he told his story. This wasn't high profile at all, but he didn't see that he had a choice.

It was the right thing to do.

He'd listened to air traffic control long enough to know that the plane Lois was being held on was going to be in the air for at least six hours, assuming they didn't have to divert or have any other sort of unexpected delays. He had that long to take care of everything before returning so he could learn where they were taking her.

He felt the contents shift in the container above him as he began to move in for a dive and he grimaced. He'd have to be careful that the ride wasn't too bumpy.

Whatever happened, this was what he'd been meant to do.

Dr. Ledderman's face was pale as evidence began to mount. Most of it was things Lois had heard before ... DNA matches, retinal scans, hundreds of artifacts from the other world including one set of home movies found in the baggage compartment showing the unfamiliar skyline of Gotham City.

There wasn't anything in the skyline that screamed alien, no bat signal in the sky, no overdrawn gothic architecture. It could have been any city in the eastern United States, although according to the experts it wasn't.

They had the Eurypterid which was even uglier than it had looked on the Internet. Dr. Ledderman swore softly to himself as he leaned forward to look at it.

"I assume you are having this verified."

"We're having everything verified," Agent White said.

"How in the hell have you managed to keep this a secret?"

"As far as the rest of the world is concerned, this is just a series of unrelated weird stories," Agent White said. "For the moment we'd like to keep it that way."

"That would make everything easy," Lois said.

"Sweep it all under the rug and hope it goes away. What are you going to do with my sister and the others?"

"They are being moved to more comfortable accommodations," Agent White said. "Unfortunately they are now being quarantined."

"I've already been in contact with both my sister and a lot of other people," Lois said. "If they have something, I've already spread it all over the country."

"What if the disease is on our side?" Dr. Ledderman said quietly. "Something they don't have a defense against?"

Lois settled back into her seat. "You've already had a lot of people exposed to them."

Agent White shook his head. "When we couldn't find any weapons on the plane, we assumed the people on the plane WERE the weapon. We've had most of them under quarantine conditions already."

"I didn't exactly have to wear a decontamination suit to visit my sister."

"We'd about decided that they were clean during your visit. We're tightening restrictions again."

"Of course," Lois said.

People come from another universe, the biggest story possibly in the history of the world, and all they could think was to

keep it a secret.

Everything was gone. The valley had been wiped clean and the bodies coming down the river were fouling the water. Old Thaung was already sick, and it wouldn't be long before it spread to the others.

Nanda felt numb. A week ago he'd had everything. He'd had a family that loved him, a girl who had promised to wait for him, and he'd been preparing to become an adult. If his siblings teased him about his western style t-shirts with western logos, it was only good natured fun.

Now he'd been wearing the same ragged shirt for almost a week. Despite the wind he was sitting here, outside the monastery because he couldn't stand to listen to the crying of the smallest children. They were crying because of hunger; his pain was deeper.

If it hadn't been for the thick stone of the monastery, no one would have survived; as it was, they were a sad group. The adults were still in shock and the younger children didn't understand.

He saw three dark masses floating on the surface of the water. More bodies from upriver, no doubt. When they'd first begun appearing the townspeople had tried to fish them out for proper burial. Now there were so many that people had just given up.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. He glanced up at

the smooth round face of Monk Pao. The older man had always been kind to him, and he'd once considered vows. Now with a sister and mother to take care of, those ambitions were lost.

"It is not good to focus too much on that which cannot be changed," Monk Pao said.

"Nobody is coming, are they?" Nanda said.

"It is difficult, with the roads washed out," the monk said calmly. "We are not being singled out. I have spoken with my brothers in other parts and none of them have received aid."

Monk Pao had a ham radio, as did several other monks in the area. Nanda suspected that he was part of the resistance against the government, but no one would ever confront him about it.

Sometimes it was better not to ask questions.

"What would you have me do?" he asked finally, looking up at the monk.

The monk was staring up in the sky, and his hand tightened on Nanda's shoulder. Finally he murmured something Nanda couldn't understand.

It took Nanda a moment to understand that he was seeing a man in a blue and red costume flying and carrying a large metal box.

"I heard you folks could use some help," the man said in heavily accented Burmese. "Where can I put this?"

Nanda slowly looked down at his own shirt, with its familiar red and yellow logo, and then looked up at the chest of the flying man.

The man met his eyes and smiled and for the first time in days Nanda felt a surge of excitement.

He ran inside the shadowed gloom of the monastery, shouting for everyone who could still move.

As he returned at the head of a group of despondent adults, he overheard the man in the costume ask the priest, "I don't suppose you could tell me where these things are going to do the most good."

The priest spoke quietly even as Nanda rushed forward to grab the first box of rice and other provisions.

For the first time he felt a surge of hope. In a world where Superman was real, anything was possible.

"I don't know what the hell is happening." The pilot's voice was strained. "We've lost engines one and two and engines three and four are just completely gone. How the hell are we even staying up?"

The copilot's voice was just as strained. "Controls aren't responding."

"Where did the city go? Traffic Control this is

Northwest 1013. We've lost visual contact with ... "

"There's nothing down there." The co-pilot's voice was horrified. "It's all gone."

"We just got turned around," the pilot snapped. "A whole city doesn't just vanish."

Lois glanced at Dr. Ledderman as he listened to the black box recording through the inevitable confrontation with the U.S. Air Force to its ultimate conclusion as the plane came in for a landing.

In the silence following the end of the tape, Agent White said, "That plane couldn't have flown the distance it did."

"Why not?" Lois asked.

He clicked the remote, and the screen suddenly changed to a view of the interior of a massive airplane hanger. The airplane inside was the familiar 1013 plane that Lois had seen landing. Pieces and parts had already been removed and placed on the pavement.

Half the wing was missing.

"Why did you take the wing off?" Lois asked.

"We didn't." Agent White pressed a button and the scene shifted.

"Something cut the wing in half. The cut is more precise than anything we can replicate; the nearest we can guess is that it was done with a laser. We've had teams looking for the rest of the wing, but we haven't had any luck."

Lois took a deep breath and said, "Maybe it's on the other side."

"What?" Agent White asked, his face gone still.

"Maybe they left the wing behind when they came here." Lois purposefully didn't look at either of the two men as she spoke.

The missing wing had been on the side facing away from her and her camera. She wondered if Clark had even noticed it was gone. At the time he likely would have been distracted by the fact that the city was missing and that he had a planeload of screaming passengers above him.

The screaming had been more than audible on the black box tape.

"So how did the plane even land?" Dr. Ledderman asked. He glanced first at Agent White, and then at Lois. "There's something both of you know that you aren't telling me."

Agent White clicked his remote again.

The fighter pilot's footage of Clark flying beneath the plane was much more convincing than she would have thought.

It wasn't going to be nearly enough. As Clark returned for the sixth and final container he realized that he'd need at least four times as many containers to

even make a dent in the devastation. That would require infrastructure and the help of organized charities.

He'd managed to focus on areas that were washed out and difficult to get to. With no government presence, the people were free to take the aid they needed. There were hundreds of thousands however who needed help in parts of the country where there were soldiers.

Although Clark was bulletproof, he didn't see how he'd be able to stop the soldiers from taking the goods as soon as he left. He'd seen that sort of bullying before, in his travels in Africa on his own world, and it wasn't the sort of thing one man, no matter how powerful could stop.

Dawn was breaking, and he could see that a crowd had gathered around the loading dock. The numbers of people had grown with every trip; apparently some of the volunteers had called friends and family after he'd returned for the second container.

Those people had called others, and now even at six in the morning there was a crowd of three hundred people.

There was also a news van with the inscription "KSBY Action News 6." A youngish looking reporter stood interviewing the crowd.

Although he didn't know her, he recognized the type. Young, just getting her foot in the door, and assigned to every dog show and minor local piece they could find. They wouldn't have assigned an experienced reporter to an impromptu gathering of Superman groupies.

Seeing someone pointing up at him, he deliberately slowed his descent until the reporter got the idea and looked up.

She gaped, and it took her a moment to find her composure. She gestured wildly toward her cameraman, and they followed his descent to the ground.

Rushing forward, she said, "Anita Mendoza, action news. Is this some sort of publicity stunt for a new Superman movie?"

Clark hovered four feet off the ground and shook his head. His mind raced. He hadn't planned on having a press conference so soon, and he'd hoped that Lois would be there to coach him. It seemed like the sort of thing she'd be good at.

As the reporter craned her head, obviously trying to see the concealed wires or other mechanism he was using, Clark remained quiet.

"This is a new street magic act," she ventured, obviously uncomfortable with his silence.

"The people of Myanmar need help," he said.

"And I intend to give it to them."

He landed and turned toward the last shipping container. There would be time for an interview later, when he was better prepared.

"So why the Superman outfit?" she asked, "If this isn't some sort of publicity stunt."

"People know what it means," Clark said.

Reaching the storage container he leaned down and grabbed the bottom end. From the smirk on the young reporter's face he could tell that she was waiting for the joke to fall through.

She probably expected him to stop and say something else or make some sort of excuse, despite what she'd been told by the people in the crowd all around them.

When the metal began to groan and the container began to rise, the blood ran from her face. He shifted the container and the crowd around them took a collective step back with a collective gasp. The reporter remained where she was.

Clark ignored the excited muttering from the back of the crowd.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"An accident," he said. "I flew a plane load of people through a rift from my world to this one. Now that I'm here, I'm going to do everything I can to help."

He shifted the weight of the container again and moved until it was directly over him. He then levitated four feet into the air.

The reporter was braver than he would have expected, stepping into the shadow of the storage container.

"Are you talking about flight 1013 that appeared in Washington D.C.?"

"The United States government is holding almost two hundred people who have committed no crime other than being refugees from another country," he said.

"There's got to be more to the story," she said.

"I've given the full interview to Lois Lane," Clark said.

"The C.N.N. reporter?"

He smirked a little. "It seemed appropriate."

"Do you have anything else to say?" she asked as he began to rise.

He paused

and then said, "The situation in Myanmar is worse than what they are telling you. I've been there and I've seen the bodies. I offer my help to any charity that wants it to transport the supplies these people need. People are dying as we speak."

"How will they get in contact with you? She

asked.

"I'll be around."

Every telephone line was flooded, and the word from the technical support staff was that the servers had just crashed due to massive overload.

At least now Pilar no longer had to field all the requests for information from everyone. She stared at the board of blinking lights.

The story of six unknown missile launches from the United States toward mainland China had been major news for approximately twenty minutes. She'd had a feeling of satisfaction for the first time since the Feds had broken into her house ransacking it and looking for Lois Lane.

"I've given the full interview to Lois Lane."

On the big screen the picture was six feet high, repeated across five different monitors. For the first time Pilar began to hate the way her network played the same news over and over again.

Everyone was expecting CNN. to have the story and all Pilar could do was watch helplessly as it all collapsed around her.

An aide gestured to her, and she moved quickly to a monitor to the side. MSNBC had a crew of reporters on the ground in Myanmar, and they were showing a man in a blue and red suit landing while carrying a giant storage container.

Myanmar troops were firing at him.

Her cell phone rang.

It took her a moment to realize that it was her personal telephone, not the company phone in her ear. Opening it, she checked the number and groaned. Upper management wanted to speak with her.

Perhaps firing Lois hadn't been as easy a decision as it had seemed at the time.

On one screen she could see a Fox media expert pointing to the video clip of flight 1013 landing and pointing at the shadow hanging from beneath the plane. How they'd gotten permission even to use the footage she didn't know, but that wasn't her main concern at the moment.

Her main concern was keeping her job.

As bullets bounced off the figure floating above them, spectators dived for cover. The Burmese were faster about it than the MSNBC crew, but Nelson Bradley and his crew were trained professionals. They dove for cover and kept the film rolling.

The Burmese soldiers scattered so as not to present an easy target and to surround the figure as it landed with the cargo container.

Gently it set the container down on the ground and

stood. It ignored the bullets being sent at it until a Burmese soldier crouched with a submachine gun and sprayed it.

Its hands disappeared and in their place was only a blur. This time there were no ricocheting bullets, and after a moment the soldier's gun stuttered and died.

The other soldiers kept firing for a few moments, but the gunshots began to stutter and then die off. For a long moment the figure stood motionless, smoke rising from its right hand.

Then it stepped forward, moving directly toward the Burmese sergeant who just moments before had been refusing to give the MSNBC crew an interview. To the man's credit, he rose stiffly and stood at attention as the garish figure stood less than three feet away from him.

For the first time it spoke. It spoke in Burmese for a moment and stared at the sergeant, who nodded.

It dropped the mass of metal in its hand to the ground and then took off, flying directly upward almost faster than the eye could see.

For more than a minute no one dared to move, and then the sergeant barked out an order. The soldiers began to converge on the container.

Nelson turned to his native guide and said, "What did he say?"

The guide was still staring into the air. For a moment he looked as though he wasn't going to answer, but finally he responded. "He said 'Put any name on it you want. Just get it to the people who need it.'"

The camera zoomed in on the smoking mass of metal on the ground-- bullets crushed and fused together-- then zoomed on the soldiers unloading the desperately needed supplies.

"We keep these secrets because we have to," Agent White said. "At this moment we have no idea when these phenomena will reappear, or whether they will ever reappear."

"I'd guess that was up to you," Ledderman said. "If you can stop the project, we might be able to ... "

"We've traced the first two incidents to trial runs for the project," Agent White said. "The first trial was aborted after a period of several seconds, and the second lasted almost a minute. In neither case was the system fully operational. However, the system was not running during the last incident."

"First two incidents?" Lois asked. "I didn't know there were any after 1013 came through."

"There was another that occurred three days before. That one created anomalies that didn't reach all the way across the Atlantic."

A touch of the remote control showed a screen split between three different maps. The first showed relatively few highlighted storms. The second was the familiar screen Lois had seen before and the third was the most recent incursion.

There were fewer storms and they seemed smaller, but in some places between other storms were storms which hadn't been there before.

"It's an aftershock," Dr. Ledderman said, leaning forward. "I'll have to look at the data, but I suspect that the places where the storms are forming don't completely close, at least not right away. We've managed to punch our way through to the other side and maybe there's a delay before there's a backwash of energy, reopening the rift."

At their expressions, Dr. Ledderman shrugged. "This is as new to me as anyone. Until we get hard data it'll be impossible to even hypothesize about what is happening with any degree of certainty."

"The rifts were smaller," Lois said suddenly. "The second time."

"What are you talking about?"

"The second set of storms didn't last nearly as long as the first," Lois said, avoiding their eyes. "They sort of appeared and then vanished again in a few minutes."

"How would you know that?" Agent White asked intently.

"I've seen it happen several times," Lois admitted.

As Hadi reached for the flower, a strange hand caught his.

He looked up to see a strange man in a curious costume. In the distance he could hear his mother shouting. He'd gotten away from her again and now a strange man was lifting him up and away from the flower he had wanted to give her.

Touching the man's suit, Hadi found himself fascinated by the red cape. The man was all blues and reds and fun colors, like the balloons he'd had recently on his third birthday party.

Hadi smiled up at the man, and the man smiled back at him.

The screams of his mother made Hadi look up. It frightened him a little to see her running. His mother never ran, and she rarely screamed. He clung to the man as his mother raced up the hill.

In slightly accented Persian, the man said, "I believe this belongs to you."

His mother reached for him, and Hadi hugged her. She hugged him tightly, so tightly it frightened him a little.

"It's not safe for him to be here," the man said,

looking around.

"I know," his mother said. "He keeps getting away."

His father and uncles were also running up the hill, and it was only now that Hadi remembered that he was never ever supposed to go up the hill or into the valley on the other side.

His mother seemed unusually tense around the colorful man, and as soon as she could she pulled away from him and began to stumble backward. She was muttering something about crazy foreigners when the sound of the first explosion came.

Falling to the ground, his mother began to cry. A moment later his father and uncle had caught up to them.

It was the second explosion that caught the adults' attention, followed by a third and a fourth.

The man in the red cape was walking through the forbidden fields staring at the ground in front of him. From time to time something exploded; sometimes so close to the man than it made the adults gasp.

At one point the man stood for a moment and then stomped slightly on the ground. The explosion was loud, but it didn't seem to affect the man at all, although it set the hem of his cape on fire. The man didn't seem to notice and the fire quickly went out, leaving only charred edges.

It was over in less than three minutes. The man in the costume walked toward them.

"Those are all I can see," he said. "I'm pretty sure it is safe at least out to the second ridge."

Then without saying goodbye the man shot into the air.

"So your companion knows more about the rifts than he's letting on." Agent White's gaze sharpened. "Do you think the passengers might be holding out?"

Lois shook her head quickly. "He's been consistent in insisting that coming through to here was an accident."

"We're not completely willing to rule out the idea that the rifts might have been generated from his side," Agent White said with a glance at Dr. Ledderman.

"Haven't you done enough damage to these people with conspiracy theories?" Lois snapped.

"I'm just saying ... if a world can have a Superman, who's to say it doesn't have a Lex Luthor, or any of a hundred other mad scientists who seem able to sidestep the laws of physics. By current understanding, after all, your friend should be impossible."

"The correlation with the testing-" Dr. Ledderman began.

"Isn't perfect," Agent White said. "For all we know, they have an identical collider on the other side and the effects only happen when both are running at the same time."

Dr. Ledderman was silent for a moment. "So the weaker effects could be the other collider running in the other world without ours?"

"It's 1993 over there," Lois said. "Would they even have something like that?"

"They are more advanced in some things than they should be," Agent White said.

"Which we consider to be possible evidence of mad scientist types. According to the passengers, both Star Labs and Luthorcorp are organizations known to work on what their world considers to be the fringes of science."

"Well, had any of the passengers ever heard of a adron collider?"

"No," Agent White admitted.

"Clark is a reporter," Lois said. "If anyone would know, he would."

"We'd like to bring him in," Agent White said. At her expression he raised his hand. "Not to lock him up. Anyone capable of carrying a passenger jet and surviving being hit by a two thousand pound missile isn't likely to be containable."

"I think he might be willing to deal," Lois said, "As long as you weren't asking him to do anything morally repugnant. He just wants to get his people home."

"There's not guarantee the rifts even go back to the same place," Dr. Ledderman said. "They may be random or shifting. He may never be able to get home."

Lois took a deep breath and said, "He's been through a rift already. It leads back to his home, as near as he can tell."

Dr. Ledderman looked excited. "Was the rift in the same location as it had been when he originally came through?"

"I think so," Lois said. Clark had never described exactly where he'd come through, but he'd certainly seemed to know where to look. "I think the passenger pigeons were coming through from the same place too."

"That's important," Dr. Ledderman said. "It gives us a clue as to how the rifts operate."

Agent White looked ill for a moment. He pulled a cell phone from his suit jacket and flipped it open.

"We need to get the contingency plans ready," he said. "It looks like it may happen again. Yes, Denver, what do you think I'm talking about?"

He flipped the phone closed with a snap and then

looked up at them.

"What?"

"What happened in Denver?" Lois asked slowly.

Agent White took a deep breath and reached for the remote. "There's a reason we keep things from the public. If certain things were known it would cause a panic, rioting ... the death toll would be even worse."

The screen lit up again, this time to a scene of horror.

Slamming on the brakes, Private Jacobson stared at the brightly costumed figure standing in the middle of the road. He ignored the cursing of his team, and a moment later several of them were spilling out of the car, weapons at the ready.

This was a poor spot for an ambush: bombs had leveled the buildings for a thousand yards in all directions leaving only rubble and very little in the way of cover.

The man standing in the middle of the road ignored their shouted demands to surrender, and instead he kicked a box standing next to the road.

The explosion was hot enough to be felt even from a hundred feet away. They ducked and ran for cover, only to stop and stare. As the fires died away, the man in the Superman costume still stood in the same position, although the lower part of his cape had burned away.

He looked at the cape, sighed and then shot directly into the air.

The members of the crew stared at each other for a long moment before slowly filing back into the vehicle.

As Private Jacobson shifted gears, he saw that his hands were shaking.

He was suddenly glad that he wasn't yet a sergeant. He wouldn't want to figure out how to report this, or why.

Suddenly, though, he was very glad to be alive.

The film shook unpleasantly, obviously taken by a hand held camera. Bodies were lying scattered on the ground, and as the camera moved it proved to be worse than anyone could expect. Room after room of the dead, their skins blue and cyanotic.

"How many?" Dr. Ledderman asked.

"Two hundred and twelve," Agent White said.

"There were seventeen survivors on the outskirts of the event who managed to get to their breathing equipment in time."

Lois stared at the scene at the refinery, and something tugged at her mind. "Aren't these scenes from the gas leak in Denver?"

"It was the most plausible explanation," Agent White said. "But these people were asphyxiated by chemicals not in use in the plant."

"What sort of chemicals?" Dr. Ledderman asked. "Methane?"

"There were traces of methane," Agent White said, "But hydrogen sulfide was what killed these men."

Lois glanced at the other two men, who were looking at each other. "What?"

The scene on the television was eerily still. Whoever had been holding the camera had set it down.

"It was lucky the whole place didn't go up in a fireball," Dr. Ledderman said.

"It killed everything within a thousand yard radius, and we've found small animals injured and dead at twice that distance." Agent white said. "People in Denver five miles away were able to smell the scent of rotten eggs."

"So how long would someone have to breathe this stuff before it killed them?" Lois asked.

"We're estimating the concentration in some parts of the plant to have reached twelve hundred parts per million," Agent White said. "Anything over a thousand parts per million, one whiff and you're dead."

"The people on the outside edges didn't get out?" Lois asked.

"Low concentrations smell like rotten eggs," Ledderman said. "But anything over two hundred fifty parts per million deaden the sense of smell, so those on the outskirts wouldn't have known that anything was wrong until it was too late."

"I thought people at plants like that carried gas detectors," Lois said.

"Most of them carried badges to detect poison gases," Agent White said. "Seventeen managed to get to gas masks. Twelve of those are already dead. The survivors are likely to have lasting problems."

They were all silent for a long moment staring at the screen. The scene had changed to show the outskirts of the refinery.

"To get that concentration that quickly, the gas on the other side must have been at a higher pressure relative to atmospheric gasses here." Dr. Ledderman said. "Otherwise it would have just diffused into the atmosphere and we wouldn't be seeing this."

On the screen a dead bird was shown lying on the ground next to a small marker showing its distance from the epicenter and its direction.

"Denver is downwind from that refinery," Agent White said soberly. "Residents have complained about smells coming from it before."

The voice of the pilot came over the loudspeaker announcing their arrival in Washington DC airspace in

fifteen minutes.

Dr. Ledderman was still murmuring to himself. "If I knew the size and elevation of the rift, I'd be able to calculate-"

"So essentially you are saying that after all the presumably Earth-like worlds we've been connected to, we finally hit one where a planet like Jupiter is on the other side?" Lois said, interrupting him.

This caught the older man's attention and he looked up.

"The rocky core of Jupiter is much larger than the earth; it's more likely that we're seeing the atmosphere of the Earth at another point in it's development."

"It's only going to get worse," Dr. Ledderman said. "Between the first test and the second, the number of rifts increased geometrically. If they come into full operation, there will be even more rifts and each new one has the risk of bringing just this kind of thing across."

"I think the rifts were bigger too," Lois said.

They sat and stared at each other for a long moment. If the Denver Rift had been ten times larger, it would have created a poisonous, explosive cloud of gas that might have reached the edges of Denver.

The death toll would have been in the hundreds of thousands.

Agent White's phone rang and he pulled it out.

"What?!?" he said sharply.

He kept the phone to his ear as he fumbled under his seat for a second remote. Switching the display to live television, he began to scan channels.

A moment later he'd found it. MSNBC was running footage of a brightly colored figure being fired upon by Myanmar troops.

Agent White was gritting his teeth. "Your boy just caused six separate diplomatic incidents, including accusations by the Chinese and Russians that the United States is launching missiles toward Asia."

He turned to her and said, "Since when did he think it was OK to start World War Three?"

Uneventful as the landing had been, Lois couldn't help but be disappointed that crowds of people weren't waiting for them outside the airport. Clark had named her as the one with the exclusive story, and while it had resulted in an ugly look or two from Agent White, it had given her a rush. Her position at CNN was assured if she still wanted it and a vindictive part of her wanted to make Pilar eat crow.

Yet the reports of complaints by China and Russia about unwarranted United States weapons tests directed toward Asia tempered the sweetness of the moment. Myanmar was protesting the deployment of a

new United States weapon and the violation of its national sovereignty and France, Germany and Turkey were complaining about violations of their airspace.

Agent White had spent the rest of the flight in hurried conversations at the back of the airplane while she and Dr. Ledderman had watched the news with horrified fascination.

Most news outlets were treating the whole thing as a hoax, although they were reporting the complaints and other international news as serious news.

It irritated Lois that with everything Clark had already done, most news outlets were ready to relegate him to the position of being a publicity stunt and an amusing anecdote. They didn't seem to make the connection between the serious news stories they were telling and the man in the Superman costume.

She sat in the back of the limousine and stared out the window. At this point Agent White had abandoned the two agents guarding her; they were in the car following them.

Whatever damage she could do to them had already been done. Lois had directed Clark at the media like a guided missile, and apparently in Agent White's opinion, she was as responsible for the media debacle as he was.

Dr.

Ledderman looked up suddenly. "Do we have any indications about the size of the individual rifts? I know we have a fairly accurate indication of the duration, but ... "

Agent White looked up from his cell phone and shook his head.

Ledderman looked at Lois, who shook her head. "I saw several of them forming, but they were invisible. Clark could see them, I think. He'd be able to tell you."

"I've been making my assumption based on the idea that the rift was barely large enough to pass a passenger jet. In that case, it would have required a great deal of pressure to push enough gas through to kill everyone on the other side."

"And if the rift was larger?" Lois asked.

"If the rift was large enough, even atmospheric pressure on the other side would be enough to work. If that was the case, then it could be that the world on the other side could have conditions like those on earth three billion years ago."

"Meaning we'd still be dealing with Earth and not Jupiter," Lois said.

"Of course, this would irrevocably alter the course of the development of life on that other world," Dr. Ledderman said. "A whole host of bacteria and viruses would have inevitably been drawn to the other side

and while most of them will probably die off, some won't."

Lois nodded, although she could see that Agent White was already looking distracted. He was awkwardly text messaging on his telephone and she wondered what it was he was saying that he didn't want them to know.

"If we could ever figure out a way to control these rifts, we could advance all branches of science in ways that no one ever could have imagined." Dr. Ledderman looked excited. "Want to learn about the beginnings of life? Watch it happening."

"We're trying to shut this down, Doctor," Agent White said, "Not turn it into your own personal science project."

"You don't understand the potential benefits ... "

The two men argued in low voices for the next several minutes while Lois found herself drifting off, her attention wandering and becoming unfocused. Unlike Agent White, she hadn't had any sleep the night before.

Neither had Dr. Ledderman, but it didn't appear to faze him. Apparently he was still on some version of a gambler's high, only this time it was related to science.

The limousine stopped and Agent White and Dr. Ledderman got out. Lois moved to follow, but Agent White stopped her, shaking his head.

"Your sister has been asking to see you," he said.

Lois frowned, unable to see the point. Of course she wanted to see the woman who looked like her sister, but important events were happening, events of which she was a part.

"Where are you going?" Lois asked.

"We have a presentation to make before interested members of Congress," Agent White said. "We have to prove to them just how urgent this all is, and the importance of pressuring the Europeans into shutting down the project."

"I can help with that," Lois said.

Agent White shook his head. "The Vice president will be sitting in, and the Secret Service isn't allowing us to bring you into the same city as POTUS or the vice president."

"But why?"

"Your friend is effectively a weapon of mass destruction. The limits of his powers are unknown. He dresses up like Superman, but we have no reason to believe that the traditional abilities are the only ones he has. "

"I haven't seen anything that isn't consistent," Lois said.

"And what if he has the ability to control minds?"

"If he can control minds, then I'm not sure what

difference it makes," Lois said. "Given what he can do, all he'd have to do is ask where he can find the President and move from there."

"Even if he is exactly what he claims to be, the Secret Service isn't willing to take the risk. They can't guarantee the safety of anyone as long as your friend is in the same town."

Given that he'd already survived being hit with a missile with little damage to anything other than the clothes on his back, Lois could see their point.

"What does all that have to do with me?" Lois asked. "I'm not dangerous to anyone unless I'm carrying a microphone or a keyboard."

Agent White smirked. "We have a file on you. Martial arts, gun skills ... for a civilian you can be pretty dangerous. We won't underestimate you."

At Lois's sour look he shrugged.

"The FBI has profilers working the case already, and they've told us it would be safer to keep you away from everyone."

Lois scowled. "He's not dangerous! He's just here to help."

"He believes he's Superman, and he has the power to back that up. That means that he's likely to try to ..."

"I'm the one who convinced him to put on the costume," Lois said. "He never claimed to be Superman."

"How close is the personality you've seen so far like that of Superman?" Agent White asked, staring at her for a long moment.

"He's not like the Chris Reeve version!" Lois said. "Well, not Reeve's Clark Kent anyway."

At Agent White's stare, Lois flushed. "Pretty close."

"As far as he's concerned, you are being held prisoner."

"I am being held prisoner," Lois retorted. Despite the more relaxed atmosphere of her confinement, she doubted she'd be allowed to go off on her own.

"Even if your friend is as benign as you seem to think he is, if he were to try to extract you near important officials things could get ugly."

"You mean a bullet could ricochet and hit somebody important," Lois said dryly.

"Someone who considers themselves more important than either you or me," Agent White said. "So the short answer is that no, you aren't going."

Lois was silent for a long moment. "So you are expecting him to rescue me?"

"You're Lois Lane. If he's read any of the comic books, he's going to think he has to make a career out of rescuing you."

Lois scowled at him, and he took the opportunity to back away and shut the door. Before she could speak again he signaled to the driver and a moment later she was in transit alone.

She found herself stewing. She was an independent woman who didn't need rescuing. Although she resented being sent away from the action, she was going exactly where she wanted to be.

He needed to rescue her, although he had no plans to do it in broad daylight. He didn't want to have to assault anyone or damage federal property any more than absolutely necessary. It wasn't the sort of message that Lois had wanted him to convey.

In a way he agreed with her. One of his greatest nightmares had been that the world would reject him, universally fearing him for what he could do. He'd heard Agent White's comment about him being a weapon of mass destruction.

He'd also heard the jokes that news anchors were making.

The only way to overcome both effects was to prove to the world that first, he was real, and second, that he was not dangerous.

That meant being even more active than he had been before. Instead of pulling back he was going to have to step up his activities. In the light of day, he was going to leave people with no choice but to believe in him.

As soon as he saw where Lois was going, he was going to get busy.

Agent Randal was at the safe house, looking sullen and angry.

"I'll take her," he said, reaching out as though to grab Lois's arm.

The agent driving the car stepped out and shook his head. "The Special Agent in charge said she was to be treated with kid gloves."

"I know what I'm doing," he said.

Lois ducked under his outstretched arm and headed for the building.

As he opened the door for her, she smirked up at him. "Who'd you piss off to get this assignment?"

He flushed and said, "It's none of your business."

The government was expecting Clark to try to rescue her. Either he'd simply attack, in which case there was a chance that the agents guarding her would get hurt, or he'd move her out by stealth, in which case he'd be used as a scapegoat and punished for his failure.

Obviously Agent Randal had managed to step on someone's toes. He'd been placed in a no-win

situation. If he hadn't been such a habitual bully, Lois would have felt sorry for him.

It wasn't until he pushed her into the small living room that he realized that her sister was sitting there.

"She's supposed to be in quarantine!" Lois said.

Agent Randal grinned maliciously. "Nobody told me to wear a safety suit."

"It's not just for her protection, you twit," Lois said. "It's for yours. Her world may have viruses that ours doesn't."

Agent Randal stared at her for a moment. "I think you missed your calling. You must be the best saleswoman in the world if you've got the top brass convinced of this other-worlds bull-

"They came to me with it," Lois said.

"This is all a hoax," Agent Randal said. "And I'm not the only one who knows it either."

"Tell that to the rest of the world," Lois said, gesturing toward the television.

Her sister had been watching them both with wide eyes.

"Nobody else believes it either," he said. "When they come to their senses I'll be right here waiting."

He slammed the door behind him and Lois could hear the sound of a key in the lock. A quick examination showed that the lock on this door had been altered so it could only be opened with a key on either side.

"What's going on?" Lucy asked. "Why is everything so weird on television? Other worlds?"

They hadn't told her. Lois felt a sudden chill down her spine as she realized that she was going to have to be the one to break the news to her sister.

How did you tell someone that even though you acted and looked exactly like the sister they had lost, that sister was dead and gone, and that worse, you weren't even in your own world or time anymore?

Strapped into her seat, Natasha grimaced as the Soyuz began to shake. This was always the part of the journey that she hated the most. Any part of the space program was dangerous, but reentry lacked the excitement of actually reaching space.

Instead she was always left with the nagging feeling that

something was going to go wrong. As a cosmonaut, she knew the details of just how many things could fail, and the thought that her life could lay in the hands of a worker hung over from a weekend of drinking too much vodka wasn't comforting. Sometimes all it took was one defective part out of a million to destroy everything.

Worse, there had been a malfunction on the last re-

entry, which made her feel even more nervous.

Glancing over at her American counterpart, she wondered what the other woman was thinking. She always seemed so cool and collected, not loud and brash like most of the Americans Natasha had met.

When an indicator light on the panel in front of her turned red and the ship began to shake more than it usually did, her gut clenched suddenly. This was it; the one trip she wasn't going to be able to walk away from.

"We've lost communication with the Soyuz." the voice wasn't familiar, but Clark had been listening for any hint of a response from the White House.

"They've gone into a ballistic descent."

"How many American astronauts are on that flight?"

"One, and two cosmonauts." The voice was grim. "We're going to have to spin this. The other side is going to-

Clark blinked. As far as he could tell, the President wasn't in residence, so he'd been eavesdropping on someone who seemed to be the chief of staff, hoping to hear what the American response was going to be to him. If it was going to be aggressive, he wanted to know so that he could form a response that was non-threatening but firm.

"Where do you think they are going to come down?"

"They were supposed to be landing in Kazakhstan. There's no telling where they'll end up now."

That was all Clark needed to hear.

As the ship shuddered around her, Natasha found herself muttering prayers that her grandmother had taught her. Religion was still frowned on in some circles, but at the moment she didn't care.

The sudden jerk as they hit the thicker parts of the atmosphere almost made her black out. She felt her neck snap back slightly and the pressure on her body felt as though she was being crushed.

The roar of the wind outside sounded like the end of the world.

It took her a moment to realize that the pressure on her was gradually easing. Strangely, the sound of the wind outside was vanishing as well. Natasha wondered if she was going deaf.

"Did the parachute deploy?" her American counterpart asked in a strained voice.

Yuri, her partner glanced at her, white faced and silently shook his head. The feeling of the parachute snapping into place was distinctive. This wasn't it. Natasha could see that the two men knew it as well as

she did.

"Maybe we passed out and have landed already?" Yuri's voice was hopeful.

Natasha shook her head and gestured toward the instrument panels. They were still in the air, but they had somehow impossibly decelerated to a speed that was unsustainable. Furthermore they were changing direction without feeling much of a sense of acceleration.

"You people have something you haven't told us about yet?" the American asked again.

"Whatever this is, it isn't of our doing."

The radio crackled, and a moment later communications were restored.

Nikolai scowled as he gestured with his rifle toward the last of the civilians. The evacuation of Red Square had taken longer than he would have liked. In the old days before Glasnost things would have gone much more quickly. There wouldn't be Russian camera crews waiting just outside the perimeter like vultures waiting for a corpse to fall.

When word had come that the Soyuz was going to crash in Red Square, he'd wondered how they could be so precise. Given the distances involved it would be easy to be off by three blocks, and if the thing landed in the midst of a crowd of bystanders he had an uneasy feeling that he would be the one to get the blame.

"Keep those people back!" he shouted, gesturing toward some of the men under his command.

He started to issue another command, but then stopped, staring up at the sky.

The familiar shape of the Soyuz was coming quickly over the horizon, but it didn't look like it was going to crash at all. It looked like it was flying.

Two Mikoyan Mig-29 fighter planes bracketed it. As it approached, Nikolai could suddenly see why they were so certain the ship was going to land here.

It was being carried.

"Where do you think you are?" Lois asked, sitting down finally on the cheap couch across from the woman who looked like her sister.

"They didn't tell us," Lucy said. "All I know is that they started splitting us up a few hours ago. I saw people being loaded into at least a dozen different trucks."

Lois grimaced. The moment the government had decided that Superman was real, they'd split the passengers into at least a dozen different locations. If they were careful about just who knew where those locations were, and only talked among themselves when he was being recorded on the other side of the

world, it would be hard for even Clark to find the passengers.

Unless of course they were to yell, "Help, Superman." Lois suspected, however that the government wasn't allowing most of the passengers any access to television or movies that hadn't been approved. Agent Randal's sloppiness with Lucy was just a minor act of cruelty.

"What's going on?"

"What year was I born?" Lois asked.

"Why are you ... ?" At Lois's expression, Lucy said, "You were born in 1967, of course."

Lois shook her head. "I was born in 1982."

Snickering, Lucy said, "You're very well developed for an eleven year old."

"It's not 1993," Lois said.

"Maybe you've lost a little time from being in the jungle, but it was 1993 last week and it'll be 1993 tomorrow."

Lois sighed and grabbed the remote from the cheap coffee table. She flipped channels impatiently until she found what she needed.

"See?" she said.

Lucy glanced at the television and shrugged. "See what?"

The list of channels and programs scrolled by.

"Look at the header," Lois said. "Look at the date."

Lucy stared at the screen for a moment then blinked. "That's a weird error," she said. "Someone should call and report about it."

"It's not an error. That's today's date."

"So you're saying I've traveled in time ... the whole planetload of us did?"

Lois nodded slowly.

"Was it something Star Labs did?" Lucy asked. "Can we get back?"

"I don't know," Lois said. "We're looking into it."

Lucy reached out to touch Lois's face and said, "Then why are you so young?"

"I should be an old hag in my early forties you mean," Lois said dryly.

Lucy pulled her hand away. "Well, yeah. You should be old enough to be my mother unless ... did you time travel too?"

Lois switched the television off and glanced back at the closed door. She'd have done this better with a night's sleep she was sure. As it was her head felt fuzzy and this was a conversation she wasn't looking forward to.

"How much do you know about parallel worlds?"

"You mean like in Star Trek, where Spock had the beard?"

Lois nodded slowly. She'd forgotten how quick

Lucy could be at times.

"So what you are trying to say is that I haven't just been transported in time, but that I've been moved to a different dimension."

"Different universe," Lois said absently. "Different dimension means something else."

"So did the Nazis win in this universe, or what?"

Lucy was staring at Lois with an odd fascination.

"What are you talking about?"

"You just said this was an evil dimension. I was just wondering when everybody turned evil."

"I didn't say that," Lois snapped. "This isn't the evil dimension."

"The government arrested everybody and didn't give us a lawyer or a phone call or anything. That seems pretty evil to me."

"I'm sure it would," Lois said. "It's just that some bad things have happened since 1993 and things have changed."

Lucy stared at her and said, "So are you like part of the government conspiracy?"

Shaking her head, Lois said, "No, of course not! Why would you ask me that?"

"My sister gave her life to uncover conspiracies, and so I guess evil Lois helps cover them up. That's how this works, right?"

"I'm not the evil Lois!" Lois protested. It was so easy to fall back into old patterns with this woman. They'd always argued when they were children, with Lucy taunting her with leaps of logic that wouldn't satisfy anyone.

Wait.

"What?" Lois asked.

Lucy was watching her calmly.

"You knew I wasn't your sister?"

Lucy nodded slowly. "I've suspected from the beginning."

"How?"

"You had a lot of the details wrong. I thought at first that you were trying to tell me something because people were listening in. But you were really confused about some things, things that my sister wouldn't ever forget."

"So you knew all this time and didn't say anything?"

"I didn't know, really, but I suspected." Lucy looked down at her hands. "I didn't want to believe it. We spend so much time looking for you ... her ... and we never really knew what had happened to her."

"I'm sorry," Lois said. She'd thrown herself into plenty of danger in the Middle East, but she hadn't had anyone worrying about her back home. If she'd died, she'd have been a minor news story and a forgotten

footnote in a week.

"I thought a lot of things," Lucy said, still not looking at her. "I thought maybe they'd brainwashed you, so you really didn't remember, or that you'd had a bump on your head. I thought you were somebody made to look like Lois," Lucy said. She looked down at her hands. "To try to get me to talk. But you knew all these things that only Lois would know, and so I hoped ... "

She'd hoped they were keeping Lois alive somewhere to provide the details they needed for those conversations.

"I guess she really isn't coming back," Lucy said. Her expression crumpled and a moment later she flung herself forward to embrace Lois tightly.

Lois returned the hug, awkwardly

at first, but then with more enthusiasm. This woman even smelled like her sister, and she was the closest thing Lois had left to family.

"At least you still have some hope that your Lois might be alive," Lois said.

"You don't?" Lucy pulled back.

Lois shook her head.

"Mom, dad?"

Lois looked away, staring at the carpet.

"I'm so sorry," Lucy said. She reached out and grabbed Lois's hand and squeezed it.

"It gets easier," Lois said, knowing as she said it that it was only partially a lie.

As the garishly dressed figure landed gracefully, it set the ship down gently. This required that it hold the ship with one hand for a moment, which to Nikolai seemed impossible. The ship and its occupants weighed more than three metric tons.

The figure then knocked on the hatch to the capsule, even as all around hundreds of rifles were lifted onto shoulders and men were taking aim with tanks along the three accessible sides of the square.

Nikolai gestured urgently. If someone shot at the man in the bright suit with a tank, he'd risk killing the cosmonauts inside. With the press watching, that would be a political nightmare, especially as there was an American on the crew.

The fact that the man was dressed in the costume of an American fictional character didn't necessarily mean that he was an American. It was an outrageous ruse that Nikolai refused to accept.

Of course, Nikolai had no explanation as to how he was doing this, and part of him couldn't help but wonder.

The crowd behind the barricades roared as a cosmonaut opened the door and blinked at the light.

When the man in the bright costume stepped aside, and an ambulance crew surged forward. These people had been without gravity for months and it would take time for them to reacclimate.

Seeing the media, the figure levitated into the air and slowly moved forward despite shouted commands from the commander on the west side to stop.

"I am here to help," he said in flawless Russian.

A moment later, even as the troops closest to him began to surge forward he rocketed directly into the sky.

Nikolai wondered what the troops had planned to do. Tackle a man who was able to lift a three ton spacecraft in one hand?

Despite the barricades the members of the press surged forward, and the flashes of light as the downed reentry module was photographed over and over again against the backdrop of St. Basil's cathedral.

"So what are we to each other then?" Lucy asked finally, wiping tears from her eyes.

"Genetically we're sisters," Lois said. "Maybe it's like discovering that your sister had a twin separated at birth or something."

Lucy shook her head. "We're closer than that. Twins are completely different people but you seem a lot like the sister I remember."

"You don't," Lois said. At Lucy's shocked expression, Lois said, "The sister I remember was a brat, not a relatively mature woman."

Grinning, Lucy said, "I'm still a brat. I'm just not used to being locked up."

"I hope I get to know you a little better," Lois said, "Before you go home."

"We're going home?" Lucy's expression was shocked.

"I have a friend who is working on a way." At Lucy's expression Lois quickly said, "It's not a sure thing, and it might not be workable at all, but there is a chance, as long as he can get the government to agree to let you all go."

Lucy visibly deflated. "So we probably won't get to go then. Are you sure we aren't in the evil mirror universe?"

"I'm fairly certain," Lois said. "Beards aren't really all that popular in my circle anyway."

"So who is this Superman they kept asking us about?" Lucy said. "I saw him on television."

"What did they tell you?" Lois asked.

"They made fun of the whole idea. They asked us a lot of questions about famous people like Bruce Wayne and Clark Kent. I guess you have them in this world too?"

Lois said, "Apparently not everybody has a counterpart."

"But if Superman is real, why did they act like we were crazy when we said we were from Metropolis?"

"You talked to some of the others?"

Lucy nodded. "They put us together in small groups after questioning. I think they were listening in to see if we would let something slip while we were together."

The door opened and the two women looked up, startled.

An agent stepped into the room; Lois recalled that he had been one of the men with Agent Randal when they'd ransacked her apartment.

"Turn on the television," he said.

Two other agents trailed in behind him. Agent Randal didn't show. Reaching for the remote, Lois switched on the television.

CNN had footage of a spacecraft being carried into the middle of Red Square.

"This is obviously a hoax by the Americans!" The Turkish ambassador's face was flushed. "As a cover for testing of a new weapon."

The French ambassador didn't look any happier. "Our sovereign airspace was violated without prior notice. If we had known you had this superweapon, we would have ..."

"His presence is just proof of the larger problem," Joel said. "You've seen the evidence. The Large Hadron Project must be shut down until these results can be investigated."

"You think we do not know the difference between fiction and reality?" The French ambassador shook his head. "You helped finance this project and now you want it shut down?"

"Why the sudden interest in an obscure project only of interest to physicists?" The British ambassador was at least more polite than the others.

"You have something to hide," the Chinese ambassador said. "We want to know what it is."

Joel was losing them; it was hard enough trying to convince them that something as fantastic as other worlds were real without trying to convince them of the existence of a clearly fictional character. That the character was clearly impossible didn't make it any easier.

The heat of the sun on his back from the large picture window behind him was making him want to sweat. In this crowd that would be a mistake.

It was already uncomfortable enough trying to cram ten other men into his office without moving his desk.

"Does it seem likely that we have anything that could move that quickly in space and then stop in mid-air?" he asked.

"We all know of American ingenuity," the Israeli ambassador was usually more sympathetic to the American cause, but Joel could see that in this, none of the twenty men in the room believed a word he said.

"Look, I'm the Deputy Chief of Staff. I'm currently the highest ranked person in the building."

"What?" For the first time he saw doubt and confusion in their eyes. They began to look concerned. This was the most powerful nation in the world, and when its leaders had to evacuate, something was definitely wrong.

"Congress, as you may have noticed, has suddenly decided to take an impromptu vacation. There's a reason for that."

"You are just trying to misdirect us!"

"He looks like the comic book character Superman, but we have no idea who he really is, or what abilities he really has. For all we know he took this form just to make us let our guard down. There is no indication that he doesn't have all sorts of abilities we've never even thought of."

The French ambassador was the first to recover. "Everyone knows ... "

The sounds of gunfire made them all flinch.

Two secret service men opened the door and rushed toward him. "Sir, we have to get you out of here."

They stopped suddenly and one of them pulled his gun. He could see the faces of the men in front of him suddenly going pale.

When he heard the sounds of knocking on the window behind him, he turned slowly. He was on the second floor and there were no balconies near his window.

Floating in the window was the figure they had been discussing for the last hour.

What followed was mass confusion as everyone raced for the door.

Clark grimaced. All he'd wanted to do was set up a meeting with someone who had the power to free the passengers.

Instead, he was being shot at, over and over again.

Rising slowly toward the roof where two men had guns on tripods, he was surprised when a small anti-tank missile slammed into his chest and exploded.

He was close enough to the building that the façade caught fire. A quick burst of breath blew that out and he continued on toward the roof.

More and more agents were streaming onto the roof through an access panel; now there were thirty men and women standing in front of him, all in suits and all standing at ready. Their faces were impassive, although Clark could hear the sounds of their racing hearts.

One man stepped forward.

Clark guessed that the agent was going to try to arrest him despite the obvious impossibility of it. Before he could say anything, Clark said, "I want a meeting with someone in charge."

A moment later he was in the air and moving away from them, faster than their eyes could see.

If they were going to refuse to meet with him, then it was time to get serious.

Tiredly, Susan Nyugen rubbed her forehead. She hadn't heard from Lois and she was beginning to be worried. Lois's satellite phone didn't seem to be working and she wasn't at home.

She'd even tried calling Lois's workplace. They'd given her the runaround until she'd described herself as Lois's lawyer, and then she'd gotten an earful.

Apparently her boss very much wanted her back and didn't want to be sued.

She was still a little confused about the circumstances of Lois's departure, although from what she'd heard it sounded like government harassment had had something to do it. Pilar had complained incessantly about having her own house searched.

She felt a familiar tug on her shirt.

"Mommy, Superman is in the back yard."

Susan blinked and said, "That's nice dear. Just stay away from the door."

"Daddy is talking to him."

Susan frowned. She hadn't been watching television much recently; children had turned her television life into an unrelenting round of Barney, Teletubbies

and Disney films. For some reason children liked to watch the same movies over and over and over again.

As Molly left the room, Susan frowned. It wouldn't hurt to see if someone really was in the back yard. At Molly's age she couldn't discriminate reality from fiction, but if she mentioned the back yard then something was out there.

She rose and moved quickly toward the back window.

Her husband Jared was sitting at the picnic table with a man in a very authentic-looking Superman suit.

Stepping through the patio doors, Susan watched as both men looked up. The man in the Superman outfit stood up as he saw her emerge.

"Ma'am," he said. "I'd like to hire your services."
"Dressed like that?" she asked.

Her husband stared at her and said, "I guess you haven't been watching the news."

As though to answer her question, the man levitated six feet in the air.

Susan stared at him for a long moment before saying "Oh." She suddenly felt an intense urge to sit down.

"I hope you don't mind being famous," the man said.

"I don't suppose you have any money," Susan said. "This world's money ... I heard about your problems with currency."

Clark looked embarrassed. "I was hoping you could do it pro bono. The fame would probably do your business a lot of good."

"Assuming that the government doesn't sweep the whole thing under the rug in the name of national security," Susan said, glancing at her husband.

"I wouldn't let that happen."

"If the judge issues a gag order, you wouldn't have any choice," Susan said. "If you didn't want to risk your entire case."

"Honey ... " Her husband stared at her with a pleading expression. He'd always been a Superman fan and Susan groaned. If she didn't accept the case she'd be hearing from her husband.

"You need to go away," she said, making a shooing motion toward the house. Someone needed to stay with Molly anyway. "If I do accept the case, everything we talk about will be privileged, protected under lawyer client confidentiality. Anything you overhear us saying won't be."

Her husband brightened at the suggestion that she might take the case, even as he looked disappointed that he wasn't going to get to stay.

As soon as he stepped into the house, Susan continued with the conversation. "There's an opportunity cost here. You aren't talking about some two hour quickie divorce ... you're talking about taking on the United States government in what amounts to a class action suit. This would involve hundreds of hours of work, time I could be spending on other clients."

"If you can get me legitimized somehow, there are things I can do," he said. "When I was in college I found a couple of sunken treasure ships back home."

"What did you do with them?" Susan asked.

"I left them where they were," he said.

At her expression he said, "Finding them would have exposed me to scrutiny. I've spent a lifetime

staying out of the spotlight." He gestured down at his suit. "All this is new to me."

"Weren't you somewhat famous as a reporter?" Susan said. She vaguely remembered hearing Agent White say that the passengers had recognized Clark Kent's name.

"People knew my name," he said. "But they didn't know my face."

"Are you even sure that those ships haven't been found on this side yet?" The image of treasure chests filled with gold bullion and jewelry WAS tempting, but Susan was proud of her practical nature.

He shook his head. "I haven't checked. It's not even certain that they sank in this universe in the first place. But if I found two, I can find others. It'll just take a little time."

"And what about in the meantime?" she asked.

"Do you have any other way of making money?"

"I can recover ghost pots in Alaska, I guess," he said. "I paid for college working on a crab boat, and there were times where you'd lose the crab traps. There was a program to recover the traps in my world where they'd pay you fifteen dollars for each one you recovered."

"Don't those things weigh like eight hundred pounds apiece?" Susan had watched enough episodes of Deadliest Catch with her husband to know a little of what he was talking about.

He shrugged. "I can probably collect several hundred of them, if I can get someone to pay for them without identification. Those ghost traps keep killing crabs, which damages the crab industry. It'd be a public service."

Susan stared at him for a moment, then glanced back toward the house, where she could see her husband staring at them through the window. She sighed.

"Do you have a dollar ... a real, United States dollar?"

He was silent for a moment, then reached into his boot, pulling out several crumpled bills. He handed her one.

"This may end up taking a long time," she warned. "I may have to shift some or all of my other clients to other members of my firm. It could end up being costly."

"How much is gold going for these days?" he asked.

Susan smiled slightly. "What do you want to accomplish?"

"There's a good chance that we may never be able to get home," he said. "If it means endangering this world, I'm not willing to try to reopen a rift home. If

we can't go home, I want those people to receive status as American citizens, and to have a chance to make some sort of life here without being prisoners."

"Was everyone on the plane American?" Susan asked.

"Um ... I'm not sure," he said. "Then they should get asylum here if their country of origin doesn't want them."

"And for yourself?"

"I can't do what I do alone," he said. "I want to help the people of Myanmar, but unless charities are willing to work with me, I won't have anything to take to those people. If I were to try to stop crime, the police could refuse to hold anyone I captured."

"There are some serious legal issues related to stopping crime," Susan said. "Ones we'll need to go over. Even though you aren't a citizen, you could make citizen's arrests in every state except North Carolina. There you can only detain someone, but you can't transport them."

"And in other countries?"

"The laws are different in every country. You have to be careful. People can sue you for almost anything and the one inevitable fact is that they will. If you arrest someone, they are going to try to claim that you hurt their arm or caused whiplash or infringed on their rights in some way and they'll try to get as much money out of you as they can."

"I suppose that's a good reason to wear a disguise," he said. "If nobody knows who you are they can't serve you up a subpoena."

"Everybody already knows who you are," Susan said dryly. "And I doubt that a pair of glasses is going to be enough to disguise you, especially if we somehow got the government to set up an identity for you."

He sighed and stared at the picnic table for a moment.

"You need to be careful even in rescuing people. You aren't in as much risk in other countries, but in this country if you rescue someone they may still sue you. There are Good Samaritan laws that may provide some degree of protection, but it's not complete. In Minnesota and Vermont there is a duty to assist, which usually only applies to people at the scene of the crime. Do you have super hearing?"

He nodded.

"Then in those jurisdictions you might be liable for NOT assisting," she said. She was quiet for a moment. "Are you certified in performing CPR?"

He nodded.

"In this world?"

He shook his head.

"Then you'll need to get that renewed."

"So you are saying I shouldn't even try?"

"I'm saying that if you want to do this, you're pretty much going to have to keep a lawyer on retainer at all times."

"What if everyone knows I don't have any money?" he asked.

"That would help," she admitted. "But everyone will also know that you have almost unlimited money making potential."

At his look she said, "Sports stars make tens of millions of dollars in endorsement deals a year. If you are really who you say you are, you will very rapidly become the most famous man on the planet."

He glanced down at his hands uncomfortably. "I don't exactly feel comfortable shilling for one company over another."

"You may not have a choice," she said. "There are a limited number of treasure ships out there, but human greed is unlimited."

"All this should be simpler," he said.

"If this were the comics it would be," she said.

"But this is the way that it is."

"You make it sound like I should just give up on the whole idea," he said. He was silent for a long moment. "I can't do that. I can't see people hurting and not do everything I can to help. Not anymore."

Susan nodded approvingly. "You wouldn't be who you are if you did anything different. You just have to get the best legal protection you can get and hope for the best."

He sighed and nodded soberly. "So what's the game plan?"

"I'd like to get Lois out first," Susan said. "She's already my client, and the rules applying to her are going to be different from those applying to the rest of you."

Clark nodded. "So what do we do?"

Susan began to lay out a strategy. It was a rough draft, but with time she'd polish and improve it. Luckily she'd already had time to think about it, because she'd been working on a strategy to get Lucy out.

With any luck the government wasn't going to know what hit them.

Mary-Lou knew they were in trouble the moment the rain hit. It poured down in sheets so thick that the windshield was covered in water and no one could see anything.

The clouds had been gathering all afternoon, turning a dark, ugly color, but she'd thought they'd have more time.

She glanced into the back seat where Suzy was tightly strapped in, staring out the window wide eyed.

"Everything's going to be OK honey," she said. "Daddy's going to pull over until the rain dies down a little."

She glanced over at her husband who was desperately trying to see through the windshield, a hopeless task despite the best efforts of the windshield wipers. He sighed,

a disgusted sound, and pulled carefully over to the side.

"I hope nobody plows into the back of us," he muttered. He switched the engine off, carefully setting his emergency blinkers.

Without the sounds of the engine, the sounds of the pounding rain sounded even more like thunder. The wind howled, and the car rocked in the wind.

In the back Suzy began to cry and Mary-Lou looked at her husband for a moment.

"We're here," she said. She reached back to grab her daughter's hand. "We're going to be all right."

The sound of the wind began to grow louder. It turned from a howl into an overwhelming roar.

The rain let up just in time for them to see the tornado.

As the car jolted and Mary-Lou's head snapped back painfully she realized that they weren't going to be all right. They weren't going to be all right at all.

As her daughter began to scream, so did Mary-Lou.

The power of the wind lifted their car and flung them into the air.

It still amazed Clark that this world had a channel devoted to nothing but the weather. In his world the weather was something that got talked about in a short segment on the news, unless there was some sort of emergency.

Hearing about the tornadoes in Kansas had been something of a shock.

He'd lived through tornadoes in the past, and he'd even helped out once or twice. Never in his lifetime however had he had to do much; mostly the tornadoes hadn't hit populated areas and people had been lucky.

Today, there were multiple tornadoes all over the country, and he wondered if the rifts had anything to do with it. Undoubtedly the energies released in their creation had to go somewhere and that could cause global weather changes.

He didn't recall his own world having so many tornadoes or so much bad weather.

Kansas had enough tornadoes that he'd taken a little time to think about what he'd do if he ever had to

stop one. Even a small tornado had the power of a nuclear weapon. A small tornado with two hundred mile per hour winds could generate a billion watts of energy. A monster tornado could generate forty trillion watts of power. A class five hurricane generated as much power as all the world's power plants combined.

The one thing he was certain of was that he wasn't going to be able to blow any but the smallest tornadoes off course.

But tornadoes were constructs of heat and cold, and those were things Clark had some power over. It wasn't something he'd tried before, and he ran the risk of making the problem worse, but he had to do something more than just try to dig survivors out.

There was a learning curve to all this, and the one thing Clark feared was that while he was learning, people were going to be dying.

It was perhaps selfish to go to Kansas first, but there were analogues of people he knew here. Even if Smallville didn't exist here that didn't mean that its people weren't scattered throughout Kansas.

The storm clouds were on the horizon, and as Clark sliced through the air, he heard the sounds of screaming.

They were flung free of the wind, and despite the wind the windshield wipers were still running. The rain had slowed enough for Mary-Lou to see the ground rising up toward them, and in her pain filled mind she felt a sense of regret.

There were so many things she hadn't gotten to do. She wasn't going to take back the things she'd said to her husband. Their arguments suddenly didn't seem important at all. She was never going to be able to make things up to her mother.

She was never going to get to see Suzy grow up.

The tears in her eyes were almost blinding, and Mary-Lou closed her eyes tightly, waiting for the end. She tensed involuntarily, even though she knew that was the worst thing you could do in a collision.

She felt a jolt, and she stiffened, but it wasn't a crash.

They didn't crash at all. After several moments she opened her eyes. The ground was no longer rising up at them. Instead all she saw was clouds.

It took her several moments to understand. They weren't falling; they were flying. She wondered if perhaps they had died and she simply didn't remember the crash. Perhaps they were heading to Heaven together.

If they were heading for heaven, her neck wouldn't hurt this much.

At least Suzy had stopped crying. Mary-Lou tried

to turn to look at her daughter, but the effort caused a stabbing pain in her neck.

"Are you OK?" her husband asked.

"My neck hurts," Mary-Lou said. "And I think I banged my knee."

"Are you OK honey?"

Suzy was slow to respond. Mary-Lou twisted her entire body, ignoring the twinges of pain in her spine. She repeated her husband's question. "Are you OK, honey?"

Her daughter was staring out the window. "I'm OK," she said. She was silent for a long moment. "I thought you said Superman wasn't real."

"He's not," Mary-Lou said.

At this age Suzy sometimes had trouble distinguishing reality from fiction.

"Then who's flying the car?"

It was always busy in the emergency room, but it was even worse at a time like this. People were coming in injured from flying glass and debris, and word was coming in that another tornado was heading for town.

Houses had already been destroyed and casualties were coming in.

Being a first responder in times like these was difficult. Luckily Thomas was an adrenaline junkie. He reveled in the chance to save lives and the thrill of speeding down the highway, racing against time. It made the job easier, enjoying that excitement. It helped make up a little for the times when there was nothing they could do.

In his time as a paramedic, Thomas had seen everything.

Everything but a man in a Superman outfit flying, carrying a car over his head in a pose that reminded Thomas a little of the cover of Action Comics number one.

The man set the car gently down and called out. "These people need help. I think one of them has whiplash. She may have a concussion as well."

He ripped the door open and moments later he was in the air again.

Thomas blinked as he saw what was on the horizon.

"Move, move, move!" he screamed, gesturing toward the other paramedics who were standing around staring.

Three tornadoes were visible and they were headed directly for town.

Against them stood a lone figure floating in the air.

The central tornado was the largest, almost a thousand feet in diameter. The two smaller tornadoes were a quarter as wide and orbited the larger one. Clark hesitated for a moment, his mind racing for what he knew about tornadoes.

They received their energy from warm, moist air rising from the base, while cold air dropped from above, and they dissipated when the cold air from above wrapped around the tornado and cut it off from the energy supplying it.

Taking a deep breath, Clark began to go to work, spraying cold air as close as possible to the base of the smaller tornado to his left. With any luck he'd be able to dissipate that one more quickly than the central storm and would be able to do the same to the other.

Each of the tornadoes was equally deadly, although the central one was going to carve a wider path.

"Get away from the window," Anita said. "We're moving to a safe place."

"But it's Superman out there," Jacob said, his eyes wide and shining. He was unnaturally thin and bald and it had been a long time since Anita had seen any expression on his face other than pain and sadness.

All the other windows in the hospital had already had the shades drawn and drapes pulled, to minimize damage from flying glass. Jacob must have opened the blinds himself.

She glanced out the window and was startled to see a single figure floating several hundred yards away, as though he was going to stop the tornadoes with his bare hands.

"The others have already moved," she said.

If Jacob hadn't disappeared, they'd have already moved into the basement. He was at least ambulatory, as were most of the other children. All of the patients were being moved into the hallways and the doors were shut, but with the tornadoes on them, Anita knew they didn't have any more time.

She grabbed Jacob, absently noting that he weighed almost nothing. Over his protests she carried him out the door, kicking it closed behind her.

She made for the stairs; the elevators had already been disabled as being unsafe. Rushing through the heavy steel doors, she began to head for the ground floor as quickly as she could. If she could reach the basement it would be even better.

Although there were no windows and the stairwell was reinforced, there was really no safe place if the hospital was directly hit.

Ahead of her she could see some of the more mobile patients trying to make it down the stairs. One

man stumbled on the steps and fell to one knee, moaning as he tried to drag his intravenous drip tube behind him, trying to use its stand as a cane.

She hesitated, but was pleased to see another man slow down and offer the older man a hand.

The sound of the wind became a deafening roar, and she tried to move faster, only to be slowed by the people ahead of her. She felt the entire structure of the stairwell begin to shake as the wind directly outside the wall rose to a deafening scream.

People below her began to scream, and she grabbed Jacob tightly and crouched on the stairs, hoping to use her body to shield his.

It wasn't as easy as Clark had hoped. The moment he'd begun to freeze the air at the base of the first tornado, it had begun to move wildly, unpredictably.

After a moment he decided to try something else. Blasts of heat at the top of the tornado followed by blasts of cold at the bottom. He could see that it was having an effect, but not fast enough.

He turned to the next tornado and winced as he saw cars from the parking lot flying through the air. It was going to be close, no matter what he did.

Clark was learning, but it wasn't fast enough, and while he was learning, people were going to

be dying.

It was then that Clark began to see a pattern to the behavior of the tornado's movements in response to what he was doing.

If he couldn't stop the storm in time, perhaps he could change its course.

The structure held, although a door slammed open above and it sounded like the end of the world. Anita huddled, and several others huddled with her, protecting each other from the unnaturally cold air coming from above.

The emergency lights flickered off, and then on, then off again, plunging them into total darkness. People screamed again, and Anita heard the sound of someone stumbling on the stairs.

After a time, the door above slammed shut and the sounds of the wind began to die down into the normal rhythms of a storm, with the sounds of crashing thunder in the distance.

Anita's hands were shaking, although she tried to calm herself. It wouldn't do to let Jacob see that she was afraid. Children took their cues from adults, and as long as she didn't show fear, he would be all right.

She was surprised to feel his tiny hand patting her on the arm.

"It'll be all right," he said into her ear. "Superman

will save us."

She heard the sounds of a door opening from above, and then she saw a sudden shining light.

A man was floating down the stairwell carrying a powerful spotlight in one hand. In the darkness she could barely make out the outline of his cape, and she was blinded as light passed over her eyes.

"Is everyone all right?" he asked.

Everyone around her stared up at him. He floated downward, careful now to keep the light off their faces.

"I think this man fell," Anita said, pointing toward the man who'd stumbled.

The man in the Superman outfit looked at him and said, "He has some abrasions, but nothing is broken."

He lifted the light and shone it down the center of the staircase and stared downward. "Everybody else looks all right too."

"I think there were a couple of critically injured patients in the E.R." Joe, a paramedic Anita barely knew said, "They could probably be transported to the nearest hospital if power doesn't get restored."

"There are some power lines down," the man in the Superman suit said. "I think they'll have the emergency power back on in a few minutes."

Pointing toward the paramedic, he said, "Would they be better off being transported by ambulance?"

"There are trees down and downed power lines; we'd never get there in time."

"You would if you had a boost," the man said.

The lights came on, and Anita found herself craning her neck looking for the wires the man was suspended by. There weren't any.

The man hovered, dropping lower until he was level with them.

"If you'll show me where the people are, I'll help with the transport."

Jacob waved his tiny hand, and the man turned toward him.

"Can you heal me?" he asked.

A stricken look came over the man's face, and he glanced at Anita. She shrugged slightly. Jacob's case could go either way.

"I wish I could," he said. He glanced at Jacob for a moment and then said, "It's a problem in your bones, isn't it?"

The boy nodded.

"I'm not a doctor," the man said. "But it looks like the bad cells in your body aren't doing so well. That's a good thing."

"The medicine makes me feel sick," the boy said.

"I'd say you have a pretty good chance." The man smiled sadly. "If you do what your doctors tell you."

"That's what everybody says," Jacob said.

"That's because they know what they are talking about." The man tapped his eye. "I can see the bad cells in your bones, and they don't look very healthy."

That was true enough, although how the man knew Anita wasn't sure. Unfortunately, his healthy cells weren't doing much better. Chemotherapy had been particularly hard on Jacob.

"Can I go flying with you?"

The man smiled. "Maybe later, when you are feeling a little stronger. No promises though ... I have a lot of people to save tonight. If I get a chance to come back and see you I will. What's your name?"

"Jacob Richardson," the boy said.

In the reflected light of the lantern, Jacob's face almost seemed to glow.

Lois had finally fallen asleep despite her best efforts. It had been a long past several days and despite the continually updating news she was wiped out. The stress had been emotional as much as physical.

It was a surprise when someone shook her.

Susan Nyugen was at the door along with several Federal agents. "I have a judge's order for Lois Lane to be released."

"What about Lucy?" Lois asked, wishing she didn't feel so muddle-headed.

"She's going to be reintegrated back with the other passengers." Susan scowled. "They are still using the national security excuse."

Lois turned to Lucy and said, "We're going to get you out, I promise." Turning to Susan she said, "We are, right?"

"Along with the others," Susan said. "Your friend is going to try to meet with the people in charge and see what he can do."

Lois glanced back toward the television and Susan nodded slightly.

"All right," she said. Glancing at Lucy she said, "I can do more for you on the outside anyway."

There was a strange sense of elation that came with mastering the elemental forces of nature. Since Clark had been young, nothing physical had ever been a challenge for him. His only real challenges had been interpersonal, where his abilities had been of no use.

But against the power of the storm he actually had to make an effort. There was nothing he could grab hold of with the wind, and even though he was gaining experience the tornadoes could be unpredictable at best. The patterns he'd seen before had proven to be only partially reliable.

For the first time he felt the thrill of whatever his body used in place of adrenaline. It was exciting to be able to finally let loose, and if the people he saved didn't exactly cheer, he could at least understand their stunned silences.

It was getting easier as he was getting the hang of it. The second set of tornadoes was easier to move than the first, and the third was easier to move than the second. As long as he steered them clear of populated areas, Clark felt he'd done his job.

He winced as he saw the storm plow through a field of corn. His parents were farmers and he'd grown up with a deeply entrenched understanding of the importance of a crop to the farmer.

Unfortunately he didn't have a lot of choice. He had to choose human life over property, even though this left him vulnerable to the host of lawsuits Susan had warned him about.

Still, even the small bits of incidental property damage weren't enough to dispel the feeling of elation that he'd had throughout the afternoon.

This was what he had been born to do.

The only time he could ever recall feeling even close to this good was when Lois had hugged him.

As the dying tornado moved off into land which had already been harvested, Clark looked around and felt a sense of pride. The town of Parkersburg would be safe. The tornado was already losing force and dispersing, and soon there would be only the storm to worry about.

He was finding that the easiest way to find the next storm was to follow the news reports on people's radios and televisions. During storms like this most people had them playing, and usually they were tuned to the same stations.

The news reports had reported tornadoes headed for New Hartford at the same time as they had been heading for Parkersburg. He'd chosen Parkersburg first because according to the news report it had three times the population of the smaller town.

With a glance through a wall, he noted its position on the map on the television.

He felt a sudden sense of foreboding. The towns were less than ten miles apart, and yet he didn't hear the sound of wind. The sound of the tornado had been roaring in his ears blocking out everything else, but he should be able to hear the approaching storm.

Instead all he heard was silence.

He moved quickly, and he was flying on the outskirts of town in less than a second. In the space of a single glance the elation he'd been feeling turned to ashes in his mouth.

Where tidy rows of houses should have been were

piles of collapsed rubble. The storm had already moved, and now the only sounds were those of rapid breathing from inside some of those piles.

Other piles were ominously silent.

"As dusk hits the devastated city of New Hartford, once a city of six hundred and fifty people, at least two are confirmed dead and thirty homes have been destroyed."

The reporter stared at the camera and then gestured behind him. He was young, younger than Lois. To Lois's eyes he looked uncertain and anxious and terribly green.

She'd been that way once, although she hadn't stayed that way for long.

Lois had found herself glued to the screen as citizens in the affected areas sent in video footage and clips from cell phones and digital cameras and camcorders recording Clark in his journey across six cities that had been threatened by the tornadoes.

Already three farmers and two car owners were threatening lawsuits. Susan only sighed and muttered something about Clark coming through with treasure soon.

On the screen, a huge pile of shattered wood and shingles rose into the air and moved slowly to the side. As it did, rescue workers scrambled over the mound of debris surrounding the center mass, and Lois could see the remains of a heavy pool table which had sheltered the family hiding beneath it.

Their faces were streaked with tears and the mother had abrasions on her face, but it looked as though they were going to be all right.

The accumulated mass of wood and roofing material landed in what had been the back yard with a crash. From behind the mass floated a familiar figure, solemn and with its shoulders slightly slumped. Viewed on Susan's large screen television, Lois thought Clark looked rather magnificent, even if he did look tired.

He landed and spoke quietly

to a fireman as they moved toward the next building. The reporter rushed forward, but Clark floated into the air and ignored the shouts from below. He moved to the next house and the procedure began again.

The reporter turned and said, "According to sources, the man claiming to be Superman has helped identify survivors both living and dead."

Lois snickered and murmured to Susan. "The dead aren't survivors."

"Some people in New Hartford wonder why he wasn't here for them," the reporter was saying, "when he saved everyone else. With almost a quarter of the

buildings in town devastated, they wonder why he didn't get there any faster."

Lois's sudden sense of outrage surprised her. "They're lucky he's there at all," she said. "Who knows how long they'd be buried under all that before people could dig them out."

"If he does this for very long, he's going to have to get used to people taking him for granted," Susan said. "Not everyone is as grateful as they should be for help."

For all that Lois spent her time looking at the underbelly of society, at least she didn't have Susan's job. Susan saw the worst humanity had to offer on a daily basis.

The next house was different. The mound rose and pieces slid off the side, but then the figure flashed down into the remains.

Clark came up floating. A rescuer ran up, apparently to castigate him for touching the victim. The man took one look at the body in Clark's arms and sighed.

A small arm hung limply in Clark's, the only part of the body visible from this angle. The expression on his face reminded Lois a little of the expressions she'd seen on the faces of firefighters on 9/11.

Someone stepped forward and a light flashed in his eyes. Clark turned away stiffly and marched toward the door of the ambulance.

This was the picture the world was going to see when they opened their papers in the morning, a picture of a hero who looked as though he was fighting off tears.

Clark's lips tightened and he stepped forward quickly, depositing his armload into the ambulance to waiting hands. The camera crew rushed forward, but Clark deliberately moved one door to block the view of the camera, and then he closed both doors solidly.

On Susan's big screen Lois could see the indentions his fingers had made in the metal of the door.

"What can you tell us about ... " the reporter said, oblivious to the tragedy before him.

From the expressions on the faces of the rescue workers behind Clark, Lois could see that she wasn't the only person disgusted by the reporter's behavior.

"This isn't the time," Clark said sharply. "You should give these people a little privacy."

The reporter stared at Clark for a moment, as though he didn't understand the concept. He leaned forward and said, "So you aren't doing this out of a need for fame and glory? Who are you really and how are you doing this?"

"I'm doing the best I can," Clark said grimly. His

expression was tight and closed. "Unfortunately, today that wasn't good enough."

Staring at his drawn expression on the television screen, Lois felt as though her chest was actually aching. She wanted to hold and comfort him, and it took her a moment to realize that these feelings were something more intense than what she'd feel for just anyone.

He was getting under her skin, making her feel things she hadn't felt in a long time. It was just a reminder of how emotionally dangerous he could be.

Lois closed her eyes for a moment and sighed. What was she going to do if he did find a way back through the rifts, if she was separated from him forever?

She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

"They kept the footage," Lois said. Staring at her bag she felt a moment of fury. Agents had gone through everything and then hadn't bothered to put anything back in her bag neatly.

"You should be thankful you got anything back at all," Susan said. "They wanted to keep the camera but I talked them out of it."

They probably thought that with her fired and with no camera she'd be less of a journalistic threat. They were wrong, of course. Lois had always been more dangerous with a keyboard than a television camera. It was just that television paid more.

Rifling through the bag again, Lois was satisfied that she had at least the basics back, including a last blank tape.

"If they wanted to drag their feet on this they could," Susan said. She glanced at the television, where the endlessly repeating loops of Clark were being played over and over. "You'd almost think they were trying to get on your good side."

"I was already on their side until they started tossing my apartment and taking my things," Lois said. "You'd think they'd give me a little credit."

Glancing at the screen again, Susan said, "Like they are giving him?"

Lois scowled. "They wouldn't know the truth if it bit them in the eye."

At first it had been isolated stories popping up, treated by the news anchors as a joke or a publicity stunt. There had been a stir over the initial video, with open speculation about the release of the next movie and how the movie company had pulled it all off.

As the tornado stories began to pour in, however, with footage, Lois had seen the first uncertainty in the eyes of the people behind the news desks. This wasn't something they were prepared for, and most of them

had been exceedingly cautious. None of them had wanted to be the first one to fall for the biggest hoax in history on air, to become the laughingstocks of the nation.

Even now, with an ever growing pile of footage and with story after story coming in, they were careful in how they described him. There was a sort of slyness to their presentation, as though they were sharing a joke with the rest of the world.

Their voices had begun to grate on her, the same news stories playing over and over, so she'd turned the sound down.

In the last footage she'd seen, he'd looked tired.

Lois knew how he felt. It had been an emotionally draining day, and she hadn't slept in more than thirty six hours with the exception of a restless cat nap while in Federal custody.

She felt too exhausted, but almost too tired to sleep. She couldn't get the last picture she'd seen of Clark out of her head. His face had been devoid of expression, his shoulders stiff as he'd moved lumber and unburied bodies. It was clear to Lois that he was hurting, and it was difficult to watch.

Lois started as she felt Susan's hand on her shoulder. She looked up, finally tearing herself from the television.

"You need to be careful," Susan said.

"What?" Lois was confused until she saw Susan glance back at the television, where they were showing a close-up of Clark's face as he spoke to a fireman. "Oh."

"It's hard to beat being able to fly," Susan said. "We all sort of grew up wanting to be swept off our feet, but he can do it literally."

"I just want to help him," Lois said. She pulled away from Susan and turned to pick up her bag. "It's unjust what's being done to him and my sister."

"So you are telling me you have no interest in him?"

"He's the biggest story in the world," Lois said. "Of course I'm interested in him."

"You know what I mean."

Lois ignored her purposefully, opening the closet door and slipping inside to set the bag down in a safe place near the back. This wasn't a conversation she wanted to be having right now, and if Susan was less of a friend they wouldn't be having it at all.

"He's good looking," Susan said.

"I've got eyes," Lois said. Stepping back out into the hallway and closing the door firmly behind her, she said, "It doesn't have anything to do with my helping him."

"You risked your career for him," Susan said.

"Risky going to jail. That's not like you."

"I've risked plenty," Lois said, stung. "I've been shot twice."

"Stretching the rules a little, not breaking them and taking on the full force of the United States government. You know this can't end well for you."

"People have taken on the government before and won."

"What happens if you succeed ... get everything he's asking for? He'll get to go home along with the others and you'll still be left behind."

"There's no guarantee that he can go home," Lois said. "It looks like it would be too dangerous."

"So he stays," Susan said. "Are you going to share him with the rest of the world? It'll be worse than being married to a police officer; they at least get some time off. He'll miss dinner dates, anniversaries, holidays. You'd be a widow throughout half your relationship."

Lois was silent for a long moment. "It'd be worth it."

"Your life would be a circus. You'd have to deal with paparazzi, with constant media exposure to your life."

Shrugging, Lois moved to tidy up the couch, fluffing pillows idly.

"You'd never have a life of your own again. You think that people like Paris Hilton and Britney Spears have odd lives, just wait ... you'll have tabloids talking about you having an alien's love child and church people wondering if you are committing a sin by being with someone who isn't human."

"He's the most human person I know!" Lois froze for a moment, shocked at the intensity of her response. In a lower voice she said, "He had a chance to go home and he didn't take it. He stayed to try to save my sister and the others."

When she was around him she lost some of her cynicism. Despite his fear he still had a sort of overwhelming optimism. He was loyal to people he didn't even know, and that was a quality that Lois rarely got to see in anyone. He still had faith that people were good and worth saving. It was something that Lois had lost somewhere along the way, and being near him made her feel like there was still hope that there was something more than just the corruption, death and despair she saw in her work on a daily basis.

"So he's a good man," Susan said. "It doesn't mean that you have to be involved with him as anything more than a friend."

"I

never said I was getting involved with him," Lois said, looking quickly away. "He's got a girlfriend back

home anyway."

Not wanting to see Susan's expression of sympathy, Lois turned and dropped bonelessly onto the couch. She reached for the remote and switched the channel, pushing the button to turn the sound up.

She'd watched too much cable news and it hadn't been good for her anyway.

She relaxed as the familiar music of the Tonight Show began to play. She felt the couch depress beside her as Susan sat.

"I'm here, whatever happens," she said. "Unless you get divorced. I don't do those."

At Lois's expression Susan grinned. "I like my illusions about the sanctity of marriage the way they are, thank you very much."

With that, Lois finally began to relax. Perhaps she'd been too hard on everyone else. She'd been expecting other people to believe something on television that she hadn't believed even in person.

It had taken actually getting yanked into the air and flying to make her believe what she'd subconsciously known all along. How could she fault people for having the same disbelief she'd had, with far less evidence?

Video footage could be faked. It would only be when the evidence became overwhelming that most people would accept it, and even then there would be hold outs.

Some people still didn't believe that Man had gone to the moon.

The problem was that Lois didn't know how long he had before the government tried to use him in some way, whether it was by holding the passengers hostage or using some other means to get control of him.

They wouldn't stop until they found a way.

"They say there have been a lot of Superman sightings today. In related news, they've discovered drugs in city tap water. It sort of makes sense that he'd be seen in California."

Lois stared at the screen and then glanced over at Susan, who shrugged slightly. The show had obviously been taped before the tornadoes had hit, or before the story had taken on any sort of credibility.

"They say he's having problems with the government. Apparently the INS is after him for being an illegal alien ... "

Lois sank down in her seat. It was going to be a long night.

The loading dock was quiet, finally, all the reporters and bystanders and other people having finally left for the day. It seemed unnaturally empty, quiet in that overwhelming way that occurred only in

the absence of excessive noise.

Jacob wiped his hands slowly on a rag. The last of the deliveries had finally come in and it was time to shut it all down. He'd lock it all up and then head home.

It had been overwhelming, the reporters and the crowds and the sudden influx of people making private donations while looking up in the sky as though expecting a repeat of this morning's performance. The day had been incredibly busy, and he hadn't had a chance to sleep the night before.

If the government of Myanmar cooperated, they'd actually be able to do a little good this time around.

Jacob could only hope that the interest in community giving lasted beyond this afternoon's fad. There was only so much he could do with local churches without help from the wider community and corporations.

He struggled with the gate for a moment. It hadn't quite fit since a truck driver had been careless, and now it was a struggle to slip it into the slot.

"Would you like some help?"

The voice from behind him made his heart jump. No one should have been in the yard with him, and he turned slowly before unconsciously straightening as he realized who it was.

It was him.

He stepped aside, and the man ... and Superman stepped forward and did something he couldn't see to the gate. It slipped seamlessly into place and taking the lock, he locked it.

"I see that people have been generous."

There was something in his expression that Jacob hadn't seen during the earlier trips, a kind of tiredness around his eyes. Other than passing references from reporters, he hadn't had a chance to look at a television or do anything else other than work.

"For now," Jacob said. "We're the hot new thing."

Superman smiled, his expression a little strained. "That's not always good."

He'd know, of course.

"What matters is the work." Jacob finished wiping his hands and set the rag into a toolbox inside the docking bay. He pulled a rope attached to the sliding door overhead and a moment later the door came down.

"Why do you do it?"

"What?" Jacob asked absently as he pulled a second door closed.

"This." The man in the blue suit gestured to the empty yard. "You're in a terrible location, most people don't even know what you do, and you never even get to see what you do make a difference."

Sighing, Jacob turned. "I do get to see it make a difference."

"I don't get to hand any of this out, but I know it's going to get there. It makes me feel good to know that I can help." Jacob leaned against the brick wall beside the third door. "When it comes down to it, fame, fortune, none of the rest of it really matters. All that matters to me is that I'm doing everything I can to leave the world a better place than it was when I got here."

The other man nodded slowly. "And what if you can't do anything?"

"Then you try to do better the next time, or you move on to somewhere that you can help. Nobody can be everywhere and do everything. All we can do is our best."

Silent for a long moment the other man finally said, "Well, if you'll tell me which shipments are going to Myanmar, I'll do my best to get them there."

"You might try flying lower this time," Jacob said. "I hear that a lot of the rice came out looking like popcorn the last time. Apparently space travel isn't that good for it."

The other man sighed and as he turned away Jacob thought he heard him mumble something that sounded suspiciously like "Everybody's a critic."

The tap on the window woke Lois with a start. She turned slightly, and saw a familiar figure standing outside the sliding glass door.

Susan had long ago gone to bed, and so Lois quietly rose to her feet and headed for the doorway. She unlocked it, wondering why people in the suburbs seemed to think that a big door made out of glass was going to keep anyone out who wanted in.

He stood in the darkness, his face shadowed and she stepped forward.

"Clark?" she asked uncertainly. "Are you all right?"

He sagged slightly and she reached out and put her arm around him. "Why don't you come on in?"

He nodded and followed her over to the couch. She switched the television off, which plunged the room into semi darkness.

"I'd turn on a light, but I don't want to wake Susan's little girl," Lois said in a low voice.

"I cleaned bodies from the river tonight," he said. At her expression, he clarified, "In Myanmar."

"I'm sure people were grateful," Lois said.

"That's not why I do any of this," he said.

Hesitating, Lois said, "Were you serious about that interview?"

"Which interview?"

"The one you told the reporter you'd already given me."

He had the grace to look embarrassed. "I assumed you'd put something together from everything we've talked about over the last few days."

"People need to see you," Lois said. "Right now they only half believe in you, but there's going to come a point where it sinks in that you aren't just real, you are dangerous."

"I'm not dangerous!" he protested. At her expression he lowered his voice. "I'm not! All I ever wanted to do was help."

She reached over and took his hand in hers. "I know that. But if you want people to feel safe with you, you are going to have to let them think they know you."

"I don't want to lie."

"You won't have to," Lois said. "People believe the version of you they see on TV. If they see a warm, caring person, it'll help when the government starts labeling you as a terrorist."

He drew in a short breath. "You think they'd do that?"

"Not if we tell the whole story before they can stop us," Lois said. "Once it's out on the networks, it'll be on YouTube and out on the net. They won't be able to stop it."

"And then they'll have to make a decision in the light of day," Clark said. "With the whole American populace watching."

"With the whole world watching," Lois said.

Taking a deep breath, he nodded. "Ok, let's do it."

"You know there are three different unmarked vans surrounding this place," Clark said, as Lois retrieved her bag. "Maybe we should do this somewhere else."

"You mean they've been listening in on me after all this time?" For some reason, Lois's cheeks were flushed and rosy.

"They're having a little problem at the moment," Clark said, "But I didn't do anything permanent. I doubt we have more than a few minutes before they realize how easy it is to fix the problem."

Lois took a deep breath and then said, "Then we need to do this somewhere else."

Clark nodded. "I think I know a place."

She reached for him, and he hesitated only a moment before taking her in his arms. She was as soft as she had been before, but she smelled even better. There was something about her that made the pain he had been experiencing more tolerable.

No matter how he failed, she somehow made him

feel like he was the person he'd always wanted to be. With her he wasn't Clark Kent, foster kid. He wasn't the aimless drifter who had taken years to decide on a goal or direction in his life.

He wasn't the person who hid and turned a deaf ear to people he was fully capable of helping.

With her he felt like he could do anything. He felt like he really was Superman.

"I know it's not much," he said, "But at least the government doesn't know we're here."

"It'll be fine," Lois said, setting up her camera. She wouldn't have expected the wind to cooperate, but tonight it was eerily still. It made sense, doing the interview on a rooftop, but his choice of background was outstanding.

Doing the interview on a roof with a view of the Potomac River and the

city strung out behind them like a sea of glittering stars was going to be a little more interesting than the plain white wall she had envisioned.

He'd found several portable flood lights from somewhere and was setting them up. Lois was pleased to see that she wasn't going to have the ugly greenish look that her camera produced with its night vision.

Of course, this was only a three story building, and someone was sure to notice the lights, but Clark assured her that no one was in the building down below. By the time anyone investigated, they'd be long gone.

"Just hook this to the back of your belt," she said, reaching for it before stopping and flushing suddenly.

"This is all a little new to me," he said. "I've always tried to avoid cameras."

"This will make sure the audience hears you and not the wind," she said. As he tucked the boxy unit into the back of his belt, she ran the small wire up his back and slid the microphone around his neck. Her fingers brushed the side of his neck and she found herself flushing a little, wondering if he could hear her heart racing.

She tucked the microphone into the neck of his costume and hastily stepped back. Normally the wire would have had to go up inside the shirt, but with the cape she thought it would work out all right, especially as she planned to have him sitting at a three quarters profile.

Stepping back she turned to make sure that the lights were in their best position and the camera was ready. It wouldn't be the same as working inside a studio, but it would work. The view would make a statement, telling the world a little bit about how this man saw it from above in all its beauty.

Finally setting the camera with her remote, she moved forward and said, "Are you ready?"

He stared at her for a moment, as though debating whether or not to tell her something. Lois found herself holding her breath.

"All right," he said. "Let's go."

She sat in the chair across from him, hoping that Susan wouldn't mind that she'd borrowed them.

"My name is Lois Lane," she said turning slightly toward the audience. "I've spent most of my career trying to overcome the name my parents gave me. But tonight, it serves as more than just a tribute to a fictional ideal."

She glanced at Clark and said, "I first reported on the emergency landing of Flight 1013 several days ago. Over the course of the last few days, I've struggled with my beliefs in just what is and isn't possible."

"Tonight we will explore the mysteries of Northwest Flight 1013 and its passengers, including one person who has become the subject of numerous news reports over the past day."

"In 1978 movie producers told you that you would believe a man could fly. Tonight you will know he can."

She turned toward Clark and said, "You wear a Superman suit. Are you claiming to be Superman?"

"Until I came to this world, I didn't even know who Superman was," Clark said. "Yet I am able to do things that seem pretty similar to what the character can do."

There was no need to go into the fact that his name actually matched that of the comic book character. That was a coincidence that would stretch people's sense of credulity.

"So you wear the costume as a homage to the character."

"I wear it because people know what it means," Clark said. "I have seen the insignia in Myanmar, in Iraq, in Turkey, and in the Soviet Union. People who have never seen a word in English still recognize the costume and they know what it means."

"What does it mean?"

"It means I'm here to help."

Pei was the most beautiful girl in all of Deyang city. It was difficult to Cho to concentrate on his schoolwork-- or on anything at all-- when all he wanted to do was to stare at her all day. It was as though the universe itself seemed to shift around her.

The portions of his day when he was away from her felt muted and dull. He was only truly alive when he was near her. Even though he'd never told her how

he felt, or really talked to her much at all, it didn't matter. He knew they were meant to be together.

She glanced at him for a moment and then looked away, a slight smile all the encouragement he needed. Even when the teacher began shouting at him, he barely noticed.

It wasn't until the earth itself began to shake that he was able to pull himself from his dream.

The teacher began to shout out commands for an orderly evacuation, but some of his classmates were already running out into the hall. They were on the third floor, and it was a long way down in the middle of an earthquake.

Cho felt his stomach knot with fear. He'd been through earthquakes before, but none had been this severe. He waited on Pei, whose bag had caught on one of the desks.

It wasn't until he heard the sound of rumbling that he realized just how much trouble they were in. The students who had gone before him screamed as the floors gave way, and as Cho began to slip and fall, he felt a small hand slip into his.

He turned slowly and saw Pei staring at him, even as his grip was ripped away from her. He tried to scream, but a moment later everything descended into darkness.

"I have to go," Clark said as Lois was moving to change tapes. The battery was running low, and she was going to have to change it too.

"Why?" Lois asked, although she knew why. It was what Susan had warned her about, the world calling to him.

"There's been an earthquake in China," he said.

"You can hear it all the way from there?"

He shook his head. "We're only a few blocks from your news office. It's already hitting the wire."

She felt a sudden wind and suddenly the area around her was dark again. The chairs had disappeared, and she hoped he'd gotten them back to Susan without scorching them.

"It's time to go," he said.

"Take me to the CNN building," she said. "Drop me off a couple of blocks away. I know an editor who owes me a few favors, and if I can get inside the building, I can have this up and ready for sending out tonight."

"You should get some sleep," he said.

He was making all the right gestures, but she could tell his heart wasn't in it. He wanted to be gone, to help.

If he didn't, he wouldn't be the person Lois had come to ... admire.

"Let's go," she said.

Being buried alive was worse than Cho could have imagined. He was blind, the darkness in front of him more total than any he'd ever experienced before.

Worse, he could only breathe shallowly, and when he tried to move he could feel something shift painfully in his chest. It hurt to breathe.

In the distance he could hear the sounds of the others, those who were still alive trying to call out. He wondered if Pei was even still alive, if his brothers and sisters were all right. Would his parents even have a body to bury?

He heard a groaning sound above him, and suddenly it was even harder to breathe as rubble shifted above him, shrinking the tiny pocket that had sheltered his body.

If he'd had the breath he would have screamed and screamed. As it was, all he could manage was a whimper. He felt a tear coming to his eye. He blinked, but the dust wouldn't let him wipe it away, and the worst of it was that he couldn't move.

He was trapped and he wasn't ever going to see his family or anyone else again.

His face tight, Colonel Kwan ignored the crowds milling aimlessly in the streets. He stared out the window, his mind racing. The reports had already come in; five schools in the city had simply collapsed. Part of his duties as an officer of the People's Liberation Army was to assist in disaster preparation and relief.

He knew just what the chances were for the survivors and how little time they had.

His wife was already racing toward the site of the elementary school where their younger two children had been studying. That left him with the grimmer task. At least their children in the elementary school were safe; it had been a newer, one story building, and the reports were that everyone had gotten out.

The high school hadn't been so lucky. He'd often been disappointed in his son Cho: his grades were substandard, and he knew the boy didn't apply himself enough.

Now all he cared about was seeing that his son was safe, and seeing that as many people came out of this alive as possible.

They'd received criticism enough for having three children, although as both he and his wife were only children the province had allowed them two. Twins didn't count against them, and so they had a surfeit of children.

For too many parents, however, one child was all

they would ever be allowed. Many had been sterilized after their first child, and if they lost them here, that would be all they would ever have.

"Drive faster," he muttered to the private beside him.

The young man nodded, his face drawn. He knew what was at stake, what the next few days were going to be like.

As they rounded the last corner, followed by truckloads of men, they pulled to a sudden halt.

"What are you-" Colonel Kwan asked before seeing it for himself.

A man was floating in mid-air above the collapsed remains of the high school, staring down at the rubble.

Pulling himself free of his seat belt, Colonel Kwan opened the door and stepped out. He ignored the other military vehicles pulling to a halt around them, and he noted that the private had pulled his weapon.

The man flashed downward and threw several chunks of rubble away from the top of the pile before stopping and cocking his head as though he were listening.

Each of the chunks he had thrown weighed several hundred pounds.

The man turned and floated toward him.

"I need your help. There are fifty dead, but the other eight hundred are still alive. I can move the rubble, but I'm afraid of shifting it and making things worse."

The costume had been bothering Colonel Kwan; he'd seen it somewhere before. It occurred to him now: his son had dragged him to see the silly western movie about an American

who could fly.

This man however spoke Mandarin with a strong Shanghai accent. He'd probably learned to speak Wu first.

Colonel Kwan tapped the arm of the private, forcing him to bring his weapon down. A gesture caused the men around him to do the same.

"I can't do this without you," the man said.

"I can't do this without you," he said, staring into the camera. "Without the help of ordinary people I can't do what I need to do."

"What exactly is that?"

"To help."

"Some people would say that's a slippery slope, that some of the worst crimes have been perpetrated in the guise of helping others." Lois thought she looked a little pale on the small screen, but that was something that was easily corrected.

The Clark on the screen said, "What else can I do?"

It's easy not to help as long as you can tell yourself that you can't make a difference. I don't have that luxury. I can hear people crying out for help every day and if I look, I can see them."

Lois was silent on the screen and Clark turned to the camera.

"Could you listen to someone screaming in pain and know that you could save them and turn away? I can't."

Lois stopped the footage for a moment and turned to Gabriel, the editor who owed her more than one favor. "What do you think?"

"The sound quality is good," he said noncommittally. "I don't know what the network is going to say about you going non-exclusive with this."

"They fired me," Lois said. "As far as I'm concerned they can go suck a lemon. If they don't want what I have, they can go without the footage while the other networks run it."

He shook his head. "They'll complain a little, but they'll go along with it. Just don't tell them that I did the editing for you."

"And give them some sort of claim on the work? As far as I'm concerned we're just having a friendly chat during your break."

He was silent for a moment. "Is this real? All this sci-fi stuff about the rifts and everything else?"

Lois nodded. "We were one step away from having everything go to Hell in a hand basket. There are things I haven't even put in here because I signed some non-disclosure agreements."

They were planning to stop any further experiments, Lois assumed and so downtown Denver ought to be safe enough. She felt a vague sense of guilt. This was exactly the sort of story she had been born to tell, and she was hesitating.

The fact that she needed the government's goodwill to help her sister and Clark played more into it than the desire not to go to jail.

"OK," she said. "Let's add the YouTube sequence in here, and the bit from the meteorologists here."

He glanced at her. "Don't tell anybody I'm helping you. I hear the food in Guantanamo is particularly bad."

"This isn't an anti-American thing we're doing," Lois said. "It's our duty as journalists to be the watchdog, to give the people the information they need to make informed decisions."

"Even so," he said, "I wouldn't want to be within a hundred yards of you when this hits the press."

Lois shook her head irritably. Once this was out she would actually be safer than she had been before, because no one would be able to make her just

disappear. There would be questions asked and inquiries and it would all be more of a hassle than it was worth with the information already released.

Trapped within the darkness, unable to move and knowing in his heart that he was going to die, Cho wondered why he had wasted so much of his life dreaming. He should have taken chances, risked rejection, asked Pei out.

There was very little that he could remember ever doing that he regretted. It was the things he hadn't done that pained him, the things he was never going to get to do.

At least with him gone, people wouldn't give his parents so many problems for having three children. People had twins all the time. They'd at least have a normal life.

For a moment he almost thought he heard voices, and he grunted as loudly as he could.

The rock shifted around him and he bit off a scream, but a moment later he was blinking, blinded by the blazing brilliance of the light.

He felt arms lifting him out of the rubble, and a moment later he was on a stretcher.

He blinked as he saw his father, but he knew he had to be dreaming. His father had always been calm, impassive, and difficult to anger. He'd never been one to show his emotions.

But at this moment he felt his father's hand wrapped around his and his father's eyes glistened suspiciously. Behind his father floated a familiar figure in blue and red.

When his eyes finally focused enough to see what he was seeing, he knew that the drugs had already kicked in. He worried for a moment about the hallucination, and then decided not to mention it.

There was no point in worrying his father.

"Pei?" he said. "Is Pei all right?"

His father nodded. "We found her first. She asked about you."

At the prick of an injection, he realized that he hadn't had any medications until this moment. He stared up at the floating figure above until his world faded to black in a haze of painkiller induced delirium.

The one thing he knew was that as long as his father was there, everything was going to be all right. His father could do anything. He was the closest person to being Superman Cho had ever known.

Current hallucinations notwithstanding.

With the help of the outlander, rescue work which should have taken weeks had taken hours. Colonel Kwan was exhausted, but he knew the death toll

would have been much higher if they had been forced to rely on their own devices.

Five schools had collapsed, and despite the stranger's help, they'd found all too many bodies that should not have been there. The media had gotten wind of what was happening and they had been filming.

To Colonel Kwan's surprise, orders from above were to allow the journalists to do their work. It wasn't what he was used to, but as the focus seemed to be on the brightly clad stranger, he wasn't worried.

The Army did its work whether or not anyone knew about it.

He'd already had several calls from his superiors about the stranger. Initially, they had been suspicious, but Colonel Kwan had been emphatic in his support of the stranger. Children were living who would have died lightless and alone.

The last call had been more than an hour ago, and he could tell from the tone of it that his superiors' attitudes were changing. Doubtless they were seeing the live news footage and they were seeing what he was.

They needed the stranger for as long as they could keep him.

A private tapped him on the shoulder. He turned and took the heavy phone he was handed. Lifting it to his ear, he listened.

Moments later he grimaced at the news he was receiving. He'd been so focused on the damage to his home town that he'd ignored any reports about the wider scope of the problem. His job was to save these teenagers right now. Strategy and planning was left to those further up the chain of command.

He murmured, acknowledging that he understood.

The epicenter was in Wenchuan, and according to his superiors, roads were blocked and damaged, bridges had been washed out and destroyed, and heavy rains had kept the rescuers from getting where they needed to go. No one knew exactly how bad the situation was, but consensus was that it was going to be very bad.

He grimaced again as he felt the ground shake. Already there had been aftershocks, and they couldn't be making the situation any better.

As he was the one who had been working with the stranger, it had suddenly become his problem. His superiors were asking the one thing of him that he hadn't expected.

They were telling him to ask the stranger for help.

Returning the telephone to the private, he turned slowly and headed up the pile of rubble, watching his footing carefully.

"Daifu," he began. He didn't know the man's name and he was unsure of his title. A simple "sir" didn't seem respectful enough. The term meant "great man" although it had a more colloquial use.

"I'm not a doctor," the man said, turning to him. He smiled, although the expression didn't reach his eyes, "though at times like this I wish I were."

"My superiors have expressed their appreciation for the great work you have done here," Colonel Kwan said.

"It's nothing more than any man would have done," the man said.

Colonel Kwan hesitated, then said, "I must ask more of you."

As he explained the situation, he could see the blood run from the man's face, followed by a look of sudden determination.

He had seen it on the faces of every one of his men. There was work to be done, and no matter how long it took, they were going to do it.

It seemed mercenary, selling the story to all three networks, but Lois was technically unemployed, and she suspected she was going to have legal bills sooner rather than later. At least the government had unfrozen her bank accounts.

As she left the bank, she felt dizzy for a moment. She'd been up almost forty eight hours, and if she didn't get some sleep soon, all the coffee in the world wasn't going to help her keep awake.

Still, the story had gotten out, and combined with the increasing weight of evidence in the form of more and more news from the Chinese, newscasters were beginning to take Clark more seriously.

As a first step toward a dialogue with the government, it was a good one. According to Susan, the ACLU was interested in taking the case of the detainees, and Amnesty International was inquiring about their living conditions.

It wouldn't be long before the trickle of interest became a flood, and when that happened Lois intended to be there.

As Lois moved to get into her new rental car, she felt something sticking into her back.

She'd been more tired than she realized to have been caught like that, even in the open.

"My money is in my purse," Lois said slowly.

"I'm not after your money, you stupid-"

As it turned out, there

was nothing at all wrong with her pepper spray. As the man behind her shifted, she jerked the cannister she had palmed and sprayed it into his eyes.

He yelled, and as Lois turned she realized that it

was someone she knew. Agent Randal had staggered backward and was fumbling for his gun.

Lois heard the sound of tires squealing, but she didn't dare look away from the blinded man. He didn't need to see all that well to start firing in her direction, and if he did there was a chance that he'd be able to hit her. Contrary to Hollywood depictions, a car door wasn't heavy enough to stop bullets.

"Put that down!"

Agent's White's voice snapped like a cracking whip across the intervening space and although Agent Randal hesitated, he slowly holstered his weapon.

"He didn't identify himself," Lois said defensively.

Agent White gestured at two of his agents, and they immediately moved to the agent who had staggered to one knee and was clawing at his eyes.

"You're under arrest!" Agent Randal said loudly.

Fortunately he wasn't even looking in Lois's direction and she quickly stepped back out of his line of fire.

Agent White scowled and said, "Get him taken care of."

"It wasn't my fault," Lois said again. "He put a gun at my back and—"

"Get in," Agent White said. It was the first time she'd heard his voice angry, and instinctively she slipped into the opened door of the limousine.

Agent White slipped into the seat across from her, and the door was slammed behind him. A moment later the limousine was in motion.

"I don't know why you keep using him if you know he has a personal problem with me," Lois said. "Wouldn't it be smarter to reassign him someplace else, like the arctic?"

"Agent Randal had political connections," Agent White said, "Ones I can't ignore."

"Well, maybe you should put him on guard duty or—"

"I thought you were going to keep your boy under control," Agent White said, his voice tight with controlled anger.

"Clark?" Lois said. "The interview was my idea."

"He's taking orders from the People's Liberation Army in China," Agent White said.

"It's probably the most efficient way to coordinate the rescue efforts," Lois said. "They know where to send him."

"They've apparently seen your interview. They've made an offer of asylum for him and any of the other passengers who want it."

"I doubt any of them would be tempted," Lois said, "Unless they were from China in their own world."

"It's an embarrassment to the country."

"Maybe the embarrassment is how the country is treating these people." Lois stared at Agent White, and despite his expression, she didn't look away.

The pressure was already beginning.

The rumbling from above was enough for Sergeant Wen to yell for his men to fall back. His men obeyed immediately, but the civilians weren't used to taking orders without questioning, and they were still in the middle of the rubble of the road. There had been reports of other workers killed in landslides, and adding to the death toll wasn't going to do anyone any good.

The light drizzling rain was already making the footing treacherous. It was loosening the soil above the roadway, and it made the mass of stalled cars and debris blocking the roadway even more difficult to remove.

All of it was keeping aid from reaching the people who needed it.

Turning to his aide, he was startled to see something moving in the sky in the distance. For a moment he assumed it was a helicopter coming to offer more immediate aid than could come in by ground transport.

It moved too quickly to be any helicopter he knew of.

He squinted, and a moment later he glanced quickly at his aide. It wouldn't do to admit what he thought he was seeing. Being thought to be mentally unstable would hurt his career.

Others were seeing it too, and thankfully the civilians were finally moving off the roadway.

Everyone had stopped what they were doing and were staring. The roar of the road from behind them was a shock.

Turning, Sergeant Wen saw the earth give way in a massive flood, washing the vehicles off the side of the road and down the side of the hill. His heart sank. It would take massive earth moving machines to make a dent in the mud which was blocking the pass, and with all other demands on the equipment, it might take days.

The victims of the earthquake didn't have days. They needed food, water and rescue teams now.

"Did we lose anyone?" he asked quickly.

A quick head count showed that everyone was accounted for. By the time that was done, Sergeant Wen heard his aide gasp.

Turning, he saw a man in an absurd costume carrying a troop transport vehicle. As he watched, the man set it down.

Before any of his men could raise their rifles,

another man leapt out of the cab of the truck.

He stood at attention as he realized he was facing a colonel.

"What is the situation here?" The man's voice was clipped and impatient.

As he'd been trained, Sergeant Wen gave a quick appraisal.

The colonel nodded to the brightly clad man, and a moment later, the man was gone.

The colonel was staring at the landslide behind him, and Sergeant Wen instinctively turned. He felt his jaw begin to drop. Remembering himself in time, he forced himself to stand at attention.

The man in the ridiculous costume had ripped the bed of a large truck from its remains, and he was now using it to dig the road out in massive scoops.

Sergeant Wen had an engineering background. He knew fully well that the man was moving hundreds of thousands of pounds of earth per scoop. Although the metal of the truck bed was sturdy, it had never been designed to take that sort of weight.

He glanced at the Colonel, who shrugged.

A moment later the man dropped the truck bed down the mountain. He then blurred into motion, leaving a red and blue streak where he had once been.

He'd scooped out ugly chunks of earth from above the road, and to Sergeant Wen's eye, it looked like it would be safe, but he couldn't be sure.

A moment later, the stranger was in front of him.

"The road seems essentially safe for the moment," he said. "You might want to double check my work. I've done seven other of these, but every job is a little different."

"I need a list of your personnel," the Colonel said suddenly. "We're taking a faster route to the epicenter, and I'll trade you soldiers for doctors or medics."

Glancing at the costumed man, Sergeant Wen wondered if he was some sort of new technology stolen from the Americans, a robot of some sort. He looked human enough, but he was doing things that no one else could do.

"I have six people you might use," he said. He raised his voice and quickly called out their names.

"Your orders are the same as they were," the Colonel said. "Get to the epicenter and render whatever aid you can. The men I'm giving you have some training in rescue work, so I won't be leaving you entirely understaffed."

It was the work of only a couple of minutes before the truck was aloft again, with Sergeant Wen and the others staring after them.

It began to drizzle again and Sergeant Wen began to shout. "Check the road. If it's safe, let's get ready to

move. Time is of the essence."

Whatever wonders existed in the world, people still needed to be fed and sheltered. Helping their countrymen was more than just a duty. It was part of what it meant to be human.

Repairing roads when he should be digging people out of the rubble was counterintuitive, but Clark understood the reasoning behind it. With the roads blocked, he'd have to transport all the injured himself. He'd have to provide what limited medical care he could fly in and feed people with supplies he'd flown in from somewhere.

With the roads open, twenty thousand soldiers were going to converge on the area. They'd be able to provide supply lines and services far in excess of what he'd be able to do alone.

At least he'd won one argument. They were skipping Hanwang and Dujiangyan; those towns were more accessible by the streams of rescue workers already on their way. They were heading for Beichuan, a city of 160,000 people that was going to be difficult to reach even with Clark's help.

Clark had been to Beichuan in his own world during his travels after college. He'd spent most of his time in Shanghai, but had traveled to less common places in search of who and what he was.

He'd spoken with holy men and fakirs, priests and monks. He'd eaten exotic foods and tasted ways of life he'd never known.

Beichuan had been an idyllic stop on the road, a pleasant, if poor town whose people had been accepting of him. It had been a town nestled in one of the world's most beautiful valleys, with buildings built onto the sides of the valley walls. He'd found peace there for a short time, and he hoped that he might be able to help some of the analogues of people he'd once known there.

That hope died as they reached the top of the summit. As they crested the ridge, Clark could hear the gasps of the men in the cab of the truck above him.

It was a scene of horror, reminding Clark of scenes he'd seen of the Nagasaki explosion.

The devastation was almost total. With buildings built onto the valley walls, higher buildings had collapsed onto lower buildings. There were very few structures left standing. Even large structures had collapsed, crushing smaller ones.

Clark slowly lowered the truck as they landed on the edge of the wasteland.

The ruins of the city were eerily quiet. To the human ear all that would have been apparent was the sound of the wind and of a single solitary voice

wailing with the sound of inconsolable grief.

With his special hearing, Clark should have heard the heartbeats of tens of thousands of people. Instead all he heard was the sound of less than two thousand heartbeats, scattered throughout the rocky landscape. Those heartbeats he did hear were muffled and strained. Some were already slowing

and stuttering to a halt.

He glanced back at the rescuers filing slowly out of the truck. Their expressions reflected his own horror, and for a moment Clark wanted to do nothing more than run.

It was overwhelming and he had no idea where to start. Every person he chose to save meant he wasn't saving someone else.

Clark felt frozen, paralyzed with indecision. It was as though the entire world was slowing around him.

He wasn't going to be able to save everyone. The realization of that felt like a lead weight in his stomach. How was he going to decide who was going to live and who was going to die?

How was he going to live with the guilt of his failures?

He felt Colonel Kwan's hand on his shoulder. He glanced up at the older man, who was looking at him with an expression of sympathy.

From his expression, Clark could see that Colonel Kwan had faced this sort of decision before, although probably not on this scale. The man looked him in the eye and said, "Let's start with the school. The parents would want it that way."

Clark felt the breath rush back into his body as the world snapped back into focus. Suddenly it all seemed very clear.

It didn't matter who he saved as long as he saved as many as he could. He'd already learned a great deal about shifting rubble in his work on the other schools and he wasn't as afraid of causing collapses as he had been before.

He moved forward, his body suddenly a blur. He'd be faster this time; he had to be.

People were depending on him.

"The offer is just a gesture intended to embarrass the United States," Agent White said. "It's retaliation for our support of an independent Taiwan and Tibet."

"You have no way to know that," Lois said.

"We've hit them enough times on human rights violations that they're enjoying this chance to turn the tables on us."

Pulling into a turn, the vehicle changed directions.

"Maybe they just appreciate the gesture," Lois said. "Maybe the offer is genuine."

Agent White stared at her for a moment and then smiled slightly.

"What?"

"I wouldn't think you'd have been able to keep your naiveté, given everything you've seen."

"It's not naïve to think that people might actually want to do something good for a change."

"People have the luxury of compassion," Agent White said. "Governments don't. Governments are built around suspicion and paranoia and a lust for power."

"Maybe your government ... " Lois began.

The government she'd grown up with hadn't been like that, except in little ways.

"All governments," he said. "Why do you think governments exist in the first place? If we were able to really trust our neighbors to do the right thing, there wouldn't be a need for government."

"Government helps people who can't help themselves ... from things like earthquakes," Lois said.

Agent White nodded. "There is that, I suppose. Something happens like that, your neighbors are in as bad a shape as you are."

"So I don't see how you can say-"

"What are the major purposes of government? It keeps your neighbors from hurting you, from taking things that aren't yours. On a larger scale it does the same thing to people from other countries."

"Well, there's that, I suppose," Lois said.

"It helps those who can't help themselves- and then it devoted massive amounts of manpower to making sure that people can't cheat the system. The main reason for bureaucratic red tape is to make sure that people don't get benefits they don't deserve."

"Nobody actually helps people then?"

"It happens sometimes, despite the best efforts of the bureaucrats."

"That's very cynical," Lois said.

"It's being a realist. The whole point of having a government is that it exists to be suspicious, to be a watchdog so that you can go about your business without having to worry about everything."

"Ok," Lois said. "I still don't see why anyone would be so upset about Clark helping out in China. He's not doing anything the Red Cross wouldn't do. He's just getting there faster, in time to actually help people."

"We've been pushing China about Tibet and Darfur. We want them to put pressure on North Korea and Iraq to stop their nuclear programs; we want them to push the yuan higher against the dollar."

"I don't see how anything Clark does is jeopardizing that."

"First, as terrible as these earthquakes are from a human standpoint, they are giving the Chinese government a chance to prove to its people that it's doing what it promised to do ... protect them."

Lois nodded. After 9-11, even many liberal people who had always been suspicious of the government had been glad of the sense of security at the idea that the people in power knew what they were doing.

A lot of them had changed their minds in the intervening years, but the initial feeling had been there.

"This is the first time the people of China have been bombarded by these kinds of images. Americans remember where they were the day Kennedy was shot, when the Challenger exploded, when the twin towers fell. Those images are indelibly burned into the minds of those who see them."

"The Chinese have been through disasters before," Lois protested.

"They haven't been allowed to see them, not played back over and over again."

"I can see that," Lois said.

Her entire career had been predicated on the power of television to reach people on a visceral level that print just couldn't attain.

"So if one point four billion people are seeing image after image of the People's Liberation Army saving people, it gives the government a major boost in its image."

"Just like seeing people not being helped would tarnish it," Lois said. She wondered if he saw the irony in what he was saying.

"So what happens when China announces that it's acquired the one being on earth who can fly faster than any missile, who can break into any military base and who can presumably be the most effective spy in history, able to listen in on every secret conference, able to steal every piece of technology ... a being who is reputedly so unstoppable that using him is nothing short of an act of war?"

"Clark wouldn't do that!" Lois protested.

"How do you know?" Agent White said.

Lois opened her mouth, and then stopped.

"All we know of him and the other passengers is what they've chosen to tell us, and whatever evidence we've been able to find. We don't really know anything about them."

"Clark wouldn't do that," Lois repeated firmly. "I'd know."

"I want to believe that too," Agent White said, "but there are people whose jobs are to examine every worst case scenario."

"Clark wouldn't get involved like that," Lois said.

"That's why I say the purpose of the Amnesty offer is to embarrass us. The Chinese probably don't think he'd accept any more than we do. They make the offer betting on a long shot, and in the process they get to embarrass us. Even the threat of having him work for them increases their political clout."

"All he wants to do is help people," Lois said.

Agent White shook his head. "If it was easy, everybody would be doing it."

As night fell, Clark felt his frustration grow. He was fast, and he'd already freed three hundred people from spaces that would have been tombs. He'd focused on the most badly injured, thinking to leave the others for rescue later. Yet despite everything he could do, he wasn't fast enough to save people, and the people he'd brought weren't able to properly care for the people he'd already rescued. Even with his improvements to the main arteries of traffic, that sort of help was going to be days away.

The hospital had been a charnal house, with only four survivors out of a staff of one hundred sixty. At least those doctors were attempting to put the horror of their situation behind them and help their fellow survivors.

"It's got to come off," the medic said.

The teenage boy was only partially conscious, unable to see the shattered ruin of his leg trapped under a ten ton piece of rubble.

"I can lift the building off the leg," Clark said. "It's not going to collapse anything."

"Is there anything under there left to save?" the man asked.

Clark stared into the rock and then winced.

"The seal is all that's keeping him from bleeding out. It's going to be messy and it's going to take time. There are major arteries involved and ... "

Clark hesitated, and then glanced at the other medic, the one who'd brought him here. He stared at the man, who nodded slightly.

Clark grimaced. This wasn't what he'd envisioned when he'd set out to help people. "Hold onto him," he said.

The first medic did as he was told, although Clark could tell from the look in his eyes that he didn't understand. Clark closed his eyes for a moment, and then let out the briefest puff of air. He hated doing this.

Unfortunately, every moment he spent debating this was one less moment someone else had to live.

He glanced down at the juncture of leg and rock.

The smell of sizzling flesh made Clark nauseous.

As the man screamed and pulled away from the rubble unconscious, the medic stared at Clark.

The men around him had already gotten used to the idea that he could fly, but the idea that a man could become his own scalpel still astonished them.

When he found the second medic gesturing toward him, Clark said quietly, "I can't do this again ... not so soon."

This was the third time he'd had to do this; Clark wasn't sure he'd be able to bear a fourth.

"There is no need ... yet," the man said. "Colonel Kwan wishes to speak with you."

Clark found himself looking anywhere but at the medic, even as the men behind him sprang into action. Cauterizing a wound was sometimes the only treatment for bleeding, but burned flesh was susceptible to infection, and in this environment, that was only going to be worse.

The boy was going to be lucky if he kept as much of the leg as Clark had left him.

Clark had never imagined that rescuing people was going to

involve maiming them. The thought of just how easily the heat he projected had cut through vulnerable flesh was making him nauseous.

His mouth still tasted like bile. Twenty minutes earlier he wouldn't have imagined himself as ever doing anything like this.

Yet when faced with a woman who wouldn't stop bleeding no matter what heroic efforts the medics made, he'd made the only choice he could. Cauterizing wounds was the oldest yet most effective method of staunching bleeding, and he was able to make a more perfect cut than anything human short of a laser.

He'd followed the instructions precisely and he'd managed to keep himself together for almost a minute.

It had never occurred to him just how humiliating it was to throw up. It was the one human experience he had never had, and it was one he never wanted to have again.

The looks of sympathy from the soldiers had only made it worse.

These were people who regularly made the hard decisions, decisions that not only saved lives but often came with horrible costs.

Feeling his stomach roiling, he quickly turned and said, "There are three people alive in the school three hundred meters northwest."

He wouldn't humiliate himself again if he didn't have to.

Clark felt a touch on his arm. He turned and looked at Corporal Kwan.

"There are forty patients already who will die if we do not get them to a modern hospital," Corporal Kwan said. "We are running out of supplies rapidly,

and we need more men."

"I can't leave the people who are still buried," Clark said.

"You have already been freeing those who were in the most danger."

"And if there is an aftershock?"

"It is dark," Kwan said. "You may be able to work without lights, but we can't. You need to bring more equipment if we are to do our jobs, and more men. If you are going to do this, you might as well take the patients out with you."

It wasn't quite true. Clark could fly much faster with just material. Bringing truckloads of people back and forth would require him to fly at an excruciatingly slow pace, conscious every moment that people were dying.

But there wasn't time to argue. He could see that the men around him were already flagging. He hadn't slept in almost three days, but he didn't need to sleep as much as they did, and he didn't tire nearly as easily.

"Tell me what I have to do."

The images on the screen were identical to the ones she'd been shown on the plane, except for the CNN logo and the scroll of news running by underneath it.

"I didn't have access to this footage," Lois said. "I very specifically didn't report on it in my story."

"We know," Agent White said. He looked almost as tired as Lois felt. "And we've been keeping close track of your friend's location this whole time."

So they didn't suspect Clark either. That was comforting in a way. Lois wondered if she should mention the man who had contacted her in the parking lot, pointing her to the YouTube video with the pigeons.

She decided against it. If there was a leak in the agency, they'd find it on their own. Whoever it was had their own agenda, and they'd made their own choices.

Besides ... reporters protected their sources.

"Then why are you locking me up?"

"You're being held in protective custody," Agent White said. He didn't look at her.

Glancing at the other screens on the wall, Lois could see that it had made all the 24 hour networks. It explained why Agent White had been so irritable.

It had kicked the footage of Clark off the air. Despite the allure of his being Superman, this was a story that hit closer to home.

"We're tracing how the video was distributed," Agent White said, "But it's going to take time, time we don't have."

A picture of one heavysset man flashed on the screen with a quick sound bite. He was claiming that he hadn't been informed about the danger to his constituency and that he would do his best to get to the bottom of it.

"He knew," Agent White said. He glanced at Lois. "He and the others are going to be looking for scapegoats in all this."

"None of this is my fault," Lois said. "I just reported ..."

"Oh," she said finally.

If they were looking for a scapegoat, Agent White was a likely candidate. He'd participated in the cover-up, he'd been in charge and he was presumably more easily disposed of than some of the other candidates.

"They ordered that the whole thing be kept concealed," Agent White said. "They thought it would lead to panic."

A flicker on the screen to her right showed MSNBC broadcasting pictures of a major traffic jam in Denver.

A certain portion of the population had suddenly decided to take a vacation all at the same time, despite repeated government statements that the situation had been contained. Unfortunately, the people in the affected areas weren't the ones who were leaving. People living in the shadow of oil refineries usually didn't have the resources to go anywhere else.

"There have already been twelve deaths attributed to the congested traffic," Agent White said. "And people are talking about resignations and criminal charges."

Fox News was showing pictures of long lines at the gas pumps, with motorists turned away as tanks ran empty.

"Everyone wants to fill up with gas in case they have to leave quickly," Agent White said. "People are getting stranded by the side of the road; they are getting into fights over supplies."

"You've got the rift thing covered, right?" Lois asked.

"The Europeans have agreed to halt all testing until further investigation looks into the potential for damage. Unless there's another aftershock, or the thing really is triggered from the other side, we ought to be fine." Agent White said. "We've already assigned a crisis unit on standby nearby to help with any needed evacuation, and city officials are running through disaster preparation drills."

Night had fallen over the city of Beijing, which on the surface didn't look to have suffered any damage.

"Are they sure he's going to be here?" Nelson

asked.

"He's been distributing the wounded out to hospitals in major cities that weren't much affected by the earthquakes. He's certain to come here sooner or later."

His assistant Mihoshi was staring at her iPhone as though it had the answers to the mysteries of the universe. Half Japanese, she stood out almost as much as the other members of the MSNBC crew.

"I don't like waiting," Nelson said. "If things are as bad as people are saying we need to be out there getting footage."

At least the Chinese authorities were a little more accepting than the Myanmar juntas had been. They'd been lucky only to be kicked out of the country after sending out footage of Superman making fools of the local military.

"I can't believe they're going to give us the kind of access they're promising," Mihoshi said.

Nelson had reported from China before, and in previous years the government had kept a tight lid on news stories and foreign journalists. The promises they were making now seemed too good to be true.

Only time would tell how sincere they were.

"If they do, this'll be the opportunity of a lifetime," Nelson said. "And we're stuck waiting in a hospital parking lot."

"We just got here. The story isn't going to go away."

There was a crowd already in the parking lot. It was reassuring to see members of the Chinese news media, because it meant that something was expected to happen here.

The other members of the crowd seemed to be civilians. They'd been filing in slowly in groups of three or four at a time. Most of them were young, college age, but there were some oldsters as well.

"I guess they decided to dress for the occasion," Mihoshi said.

It took Nelson a moment to realize what she was saying. At least half the crowd was wearing some sort of Superman insignia on their t-shirts. The rest were dressed more normally, but the shirts, mostly white, stood out in the dimness of the night.

"Tell Joe to get some footage of this," Nelson said when several people began handing out candles.

They were lit, and Nelson saw that the crowd had grown even more than he had thought. Almost a thousand people were standing around the parking lot talking quietly among themselves.

When one man pointed to the sky, the whole sea of faces began to turn and stare in one direction.

Nelson looked and then hissed, "Tell me Joe is

filming."

The lights from the hospital were enough to illuminate the descending truck. Paramedics shouted at onlookers below, and a circle free of humanity appeared on the pavement as people backed away.

A moment later he was down, setting the truck onto the ground and the paramedics were rushing forward.

Superman--in Nelson's mind anyone who was literally faster than a speeding bullet pretty much had to be Superman-- stared as the crowd pressed forward. Nelson watched as he glanced behind him; if the crowd got too close they'd start to impede the paramedics.

He stepped forward into the crowd.

In America that sort of mob would have been screaming, loud, raucous. This crowd was eerily silent, a sea of faces and grasping hands that reached out to touch him as though to assure themselves that he was real.

He didn't flinch. Instead he simply moved forward until the crowd began to part in front of him and they turned away from the truck and paramedics pulling out its human cargo.

Reaching the edge of the crowd, he turned and spoke for the first time.

"Help each other," he said.

A moment later he was airborne and out of sight.

Somewhere someone began a slow chant, and the gathering turned into some sort of prayer for the dead.

At the cameraman's curt nod, Nelson relaxed. It hadn't been the interview he'd been hoping for, but they had the government's promise of a helicopter ride further inland.

The world was changing, and he planned to be there to document it all.

"Your client isn't under arrest," Agent White said. "She's

in protective custody."

"I'm not sure I understand," Susan said. "why a famed reporter should be in protective custody at a time when it was convenient for the government to have her out of sight."

Lois leaned forward. A night's sleep in government custody hadn't been enough to overcome the sort of bone wearying exhaustion that being up for days had left. She wanted to know what justification Agent White could possibly provide for holding her without charges.

Of course, these days he didn't actually need much justification. In the name of National Security, he could do a great deal.

"There have been death threats," Agent White said reluctantly.

"Death threats?" Susan asked. "I haven't heard anything about death threats."

Agent White sighed. "Contrary to what you may believe, this isn't the only case we're working on. We've intercepted transmissions from certain extremist groups ... "

"Foreign extremist groups?"

"No," Agent White said. "Domestic groups."

"So you are surveilling American citizens on American soil?"

"Technically the FBI was doing the surveillance operation," Agent White said. "They were kind enough to send us the transcripts."

"Why?" Lois asked, speaking for the first time. "Why would anyone be making death threats against me?"

"The group who is making the threats is a hate group that likes to cloak itself in the trappings of religion. They've had racist leanings in the past."

"I still don't understand why they'd be making death threats."

"They've concluded that your friend is the Anti-Christ, and that you are the Whore of Babylon."

Lois stared at Agent White, shocked.

"There are other groups that don't particularly like your friend. Fringe groups, radicals ... even the average American can see the danger of someone with the sort of power he has. To people who have always hated those with power, it's even worse."

Agent White hesitated, then said, "Some have accused you of bestiality."

"What?" Lois stared at Agent White incredulously.

"By his own admission, your friend isn't human. Some have interpreted that as ... "

"But we haven't done anything!" Lois protested. "Not that there would be anything wrong with it if we did, but ... "

"One thing you learn in politics is that it's not truth that matters. It's perception. In the mind of the public, you and your friend are inextricably linked. There are going to be suspicions about your relationship no matter what you tell people."

Lois glanced at Susan, who nodded.

"How credible are these threats?" Susan asked.

"Honestly?" Agent White shook his head. "The risk is only moderate. At the moment there is just a lot of talk, although I wouldn't trust one of them not to take a shot at you if they saw you on the street."

"Then why do you have five agents guarding my client?"

"Perception," Agent White said. "My superiors are

concerned that if anything should happen to Ms. Lane, her friend could become ... unmanageable."

Lois found herself flushing. "What makes anyone think I'm that important to him?"

Agent White just looked at her for a long moment, then turned his attention back to Susan.

"The last thing anyone wants is to make your other client angry. To paraphrase a different comic book character, we don't think we'd like him when he's angry."

"So what are our options then?" Susan asked. "My client is interested in the disposition of his people and of his own status."

"The passengers have never been mistreated," Agent White said, "But we've upgraded their accommodations as a gesture of goodwill. Their eventual disposition has yet to be decided."

"When can that happen?"

"We can talk about arranging a meeting," Agent White said. "Although really you should be speaking to White House counsel. I don't speak lawyerese."

"And Lois?" Susan asked, glancing at her friend.

"That's not negotiable, at least until we talk with your other client and he's made aware of the danger she's in."

Lois felt herself sagging. "Well, what about getting some access to the Internet, some clean clothes, other media?"

"Well, that's ... " Agent White said. For the first time he looked uncertain.

Susan smiled slightly and Lois felt a sense of relief. If she couldn't win her freedom, at least Susan would get the best deal possible for Lois.

Given the nature of Lois's friend, nobody wanted to push things too far.

"What do you want?"

The voice on the other end of the line was an unpleasant reminder of a past he'd thought he'd left behind.

"I don't do that anymore," he said. "I have a life now, a family."

He listened to the reply and shuddered. On the surface it was a simple congratulation on the acceptance of his daughter into a new school. The underlying message was clear.

They knew where he lived, and they knew where his daughter was. The implied threat was enough to send a chill down his spine. He knew full well the sort of things these men were capable of.

"What do you want me to do?"

When he'd been young and foolish he'd been filled with anger and hatred. He'd done things of which he

wasn't proud.

If whatever they asked of him was something he couldn't stomach, he'd call the authorities and seek protection.

He listened for a long moment then said reluctantly, "I can do that."

It was a small thing they were asking, and that alone made him suspicious. The people he remembered from his youth hadn't been interested in small things. They'd reveled in big gestures, in creating the maximum amount of pain and damage with the least amount of effort.

If he was careful, no one would even know he had been involved.

Yet the nagging feeling of worry remained. What were they going to do and how many people were going to be hurt?

He'd finally found a rhythm. While rescuers were preparing to receive the next survivor he would fly away and open up another road or he would fly another truckload of rescuers into the site. There were enough of them now that he was having to ferry in truckloads of food and other supplies and sanitation was beginning to become an issue.

It had been four days since he'd last slept and now he was finally beginning to feel tired. He'd found his second wind, but he knew that if he stopped the feeling of exhaustion would return.

The rescues were coming more quickly now. In the beginning he'd focused on the people who were most badly injured. In many cases those were the people who were the most deeply buried. The people remaining were those who were trapped, but conventional rescuers could still reach.

During slow times he released those who looked to be uninjured. Many of those, after receiving water and food had turned and begun to work at digging out their neighbors.

As the ground began to tremble again, Clark was silent, listening. His one fear was that an aftershock would shift rubble and hurt someone he hadn't yet freed, turning someone who had been relatively healthy into someone who had been hurt ... or dead.

He frowned after a moment. No one else seemed to notice the rumbling he did.

It was then that he finally recognized the sound. Without explanation he rose into the air and stared out at the horizon.

Lines of trucks were coming through recently reopened highways, and above them were dozens of helicopters; it was a welcome sight.

The cavalry had finally arrived.

Lois had largely been insulated from the sheer ugliness that sometimes appeared on the web. As a reporter overseas, she had been too busy to do much surfing on the web that wasn't related to work.

Now with nothing to do other than surf news channels and web sites, Lois was sometimes sickened by what she saw. On the web, people had a sense of anonymity that left them feeling emboldened to say anything at all, no matter how hurtful or rude.

The people making the comments sometimes seemed to have no concept of the value of spelling or punctuation. They simply lashed out, spreading their ugliness as far as they could.

Most people seemed to be cautiously optimistic. There was an underlying well of good will attached to the costume, good will that bought Clark the benefit of the doubt. If he'd chosen a different costume or no costume at all, people would have been much more fearful.

Yet the fringe elements were there. Agent White hadn't been lying about the speculation about her relationship with Clark.

There were even fan sites springing up, not only of Clark, but also of her. It shocked Lois to see some of the pictures they'd managed to find. It was a little chilling, because whatever these seemingly well meaning people could find someone with ill intent could find just as easily.

Someone had even posted a picture of the front of her apartment building.

It was chilling just how much information people were able to discover about a private citizen on short notice. As a reporter, Lois was enough of a celebrity to lose some of the protections private citizens enjoyed.

Lois sighed and leaned back in her chair. There wasn't any point in worrying about things she couldn't change. People were going to think whatever they were going to think. She and Clark knew exactly how far their relationship had gone and it didn't matter what anyone else thought about it.

It still hurt, some of the things people were saying.

The scandal was starting to heat up as well. What people were saying about her and Clark paled in comparison to what they were saying about the government. Some of the criticism was well warranted in Lois' opinion, but much of it was not. Some of it was almost paranoid.

Of course, in a world where the government had been concealing the existence of other dimensions and at least one alien, stories about Area 51 suddenly sounded a lot more plausible.

There were dozens of cities and towns that needed his help, but he wouldn't be much use to them if he didn't get some sleep. Although he was still strong, his attention was beginning

to waver, and given what he was doing a moment's inattentiveness could get someone killed.

Clark moved quickly across the ocean, skirting those countries that had complained the first time. He didn't have time to bother with countries that didn't want him; there were too many people needing help elsewhere.

When he'd first gotten into this it had sounded plausible; with the costume he'd finally be able to do what he needed to do to help people without having to give up his private life.

Now that he'd been through it, he was beginning to see the sheer magnitude of the task he'd set for himself. The sheer amount of human misery was overwhelming, and for every person he saved there were ten he had been too late to save.

If he worked every second of every day he wouldn't be able to relieve even one percent of the suffering in the world.

Even now as he sliced through the night sky toward Washington D.C. he could hear the screams of grief from the mothers who had lost their sons, the wives who had lost their husbands, and the whimpers of survivors who had been in too much pain to even draw breath to cry out.

In one collapsed home, a rescuer had shouted out as he saw someone through gaps in the stones. Clark had known the woman was dead, but he'd heard a smaller heartbeat underneath, and he'd pulled the remnants of the house out from around the woman.

She'd died on her knees protecting her baby, who had been lying in a red quilt with yellow flowers. The baby, three or four months old, had been completely unharmed and sleeping peacefully. He'd been handed from rescuer to rescuer, and the exhaustion on everyone's faces had lifted for just a moment as they'd looked at him.

It hadn't been until the doctor had unwrapped his blanket and found the cell phone that Clark had realized that something was wrong.

The cell phone had been handed from one worker to the next, and Clark had seen suspicious hints of moisture in the eyes of several of them.

When the cell phone had been handed to him, he'd finally seen what the others were looking at. All it had been was a simple message. "Dear baby If you are still alive always remember that I love you."

She'd been alive long enough to kneel in the dark, typing out a dying message to the baby she was never

going to know. Had he passed her by as being too close to the surface as he'd looked for the more severely injured?

Was he responsible for a child growing up motherless, orphaned as he himself had been twice over?

It hadn't been until Colonel Kwan had touched him on the shoulder and pointed to the time stamp that he'd felt relieved. The message had been written hours before he'd even arrived. It didn't mean the mother might not have been alive, but she hadn't been typing out the message while he was hundreds of yards away digging for someone so badly injured they might not even make it.

He should have released all those he could easily help first and allowed them to help with the others.

All he could hope was that Lois was all right. He wouldn't have left her alone for so long if he'd had any other choice.

It was night again when Lois heard the knock at her window. She'd been given a room on the third floor, presumably to make her less accessible and to make it more difficult for her to escape. She'd been warned away from the windows, which were kept covered with heavy drapes.

She heard the sound of metal grinding for a moment, and then she saw the red boot stepping through the drapes.

She relaxed as she realized that it wasn't a member of a skinhead group out to kill her for fraternizing with someone who wasn't even human.

The surge of pleasure she felt at the sight of him surprised her. It wasn't just relief that they'd finally be able to talk. It was pleasure at seeing him.

She thought back to all the nasty things people had said about the two of them and suddenly it didn't seem to matter so much. Seeing his exhausted face was enough to make it all seem unimportant.

Rushing forward, she reached out and touched him. His cape was missing again, and his suit looked grimy and in need of laundering. His face was streaked with soot, and yet he looked good to her.

Despite the superficial covering of grime he didn't smell of anything other than the north Atlantic, a salty clean smell that she was coming to associate with him.

"Have you been back in the ocean?" she asked.

He shrugged and looked embarrassed. "There was a stranded ship on my way back."

Taking his hand in hers, she pulled him toward a chair. "Sit down. It must have been days since you've had any rest."

He shook his head. "If I sit down, I'm going to go

to sleep."

"Would that be so bad?" Lois asked. It wasn't as though they hadn't slept in the same room before, although she wondered what the agents would think when they checked in on her in thirty minutes.

He sighed and allowed himself to be led to the chair.

As he sat, Lois found herself reluctant to release his hand.

"Are you all right?" she asked. There was something about the set of his shoulders, about the look in his eyes that hadn't been there before. There was a sadness and a sort of melancholy that was tempering his natural sense of optimism.

Looking down at his hand held in hers, he looked up at her and said "I am now."

They were together at least, and Lois felt a sudden surge of optimism. Everything was going to be all right.

It felt like an eternity since Clark had seen Lois. He stared at her for a long moment, wondering how he'd forgotten how good she looked. It was almost as though she'd become even more beautiful since the last time he'd seen her.

There had to be something wrong with his hearing because suddenly all he could hear was the sound of her heart beating, the sound of her indrawn breath. It was an effort to look away from her long enough to make sure no one was waiting outside the door.

She was staring at him strangely, her face slightly flushed and her breathing uneven.

"Are you all right?" he asked, "They haven't hurt you?"

"They've been good," Lois said. She smiled up at him and her breathing began to slow. "I think some of them are coming around to being the good guys."

Her smile brightened the room and Clark felt something tight in his chest begin to relax. He'd hated having to choose between her and the rest of the world.

Lois glanced down at herself and suddenly flushed even more. She pulled away from him and grabbed the comforter off the bed, wrapping it around herself. At his expression she looked down at the floor and said, "I'm a little cold."

She'd been wearing a short robe, but Clark couldn't see why she'd have a reason to be embarrassed. She could have worn a robe covering her head to toe and he'd have still been intoxicated by her scent, by the sound of her breathing and the ...

His face felt hot and he was suddenly glad the lights in the room were dim.

Lois sat back on the bed and for a long moment they did nothing but stare at each other.

"I'm glad I found you," Clark said at last. "I don't know what I'd have done in this world without you."

"I've just been a tour guide," Lois said. She looked down at her lap. "You'd have found someone else fairly easily."

"You gave me the courage to stand up and do what I should have done a long time ago," Clark said. "Not everyone can say that."

"I should be thanking you," Lois said. She was silent for a long moment before finally continuing. "Since my parents died, I've been pretty numb. It was easier than actually feeling things."

"I felt that way for a long time after seeing my parents die," Clark said. "It helped me get through some of the bad years in foster homes."

"Bad years?"

"Nobody wants a kid who sets fires and breaks things," Clark said. "Even the nice ones. And once you get the reputation as a bad kid, it follows you. You learn to blend into the background and not make waves."

"Setting fires?" Lois asked, glancing up at him. Realization set in. "I guess you didn't learn how to control your heat vision right away."

"Or the rest of it," Clark said. "I broke a foster brother's arm when I was thirteen. The look on my foster mother's face ... that was the day I decided I wasn't going to hurt anyone ever again."

The smell of seared flesh came to his nostrils and he looked away from Lois. He'd violated that promise in China already, and even though it had been to save lives, it still sickened him.

"I got so angry after I found out," Lois said. "Bitter and angry and hating God. I begged Him to give them back to me, swore I'd do everything different, be a better person."

"You managed to get Lucy back," Clark said. "If that's not a miracle, I don't know what is."

Lois nodded soberly. "There are people who'd give anything they had for just one more day with the people they love."

Clark glanced at Lois covertly and wondered if there was going to come a time when he felt that way about her. It was already getting harder and harder to leave her.

He'd always felt like an outsider, like the stranger staring in at a world he would never truly be a part of. It had taken traveling to another universe to find someone who understood him the way Lois had.

The desire to return home had been a burning need since this entire debacle had begun, but strangely he

was beginning to feel content about the idea of staying.

Opening the door quietly, the agent froze for a moment as he realized that security had been breached. Despite the alerts by the others that there had been a momentary lapse in the security cordon, he'd hoped not to have to deal with the situation on his watch.

His hand hovered near his weapon, but he'd been briefed thoroughly about the target's capabilities. He hesitated and then let his hand fall away from his weapon.

They'd been waiting for this opportunity for several days after several mistakes earlier in the week. He closed

the door gently and then began walking away. He murmured into his lapel, setting a pre-planned series of events in motion.

He'd followed many orders that he hadn't agreed with, but this one made perfect sense. Letting the target get a few hours sleep before waking him was prudent and sensible. Sleep deprived individuals were irritable and had short fuses. They made mistakes, certainly, but this wasn't a bank robber who would accidentally step into the line of fire.

If this man, or robot or alien or whatever he was became irritable, people could easily get killed, and according to the brass, it would take something more powerful than a two thousand pound bomb to take him out.

Everyone assumed that a nuclear weapon would take him out, but even that wasn't completely certain.

No, this was better. It was his job to protect national security, but being able to do that without getting his face burned off with some sort of alien heat ray was a definite plus. He was a patriot, not an idiot.

Part of him was able to maintain objectivity. The target was something to be tracked and monitored closely until it was proven dangerous or hostile. It was in the unique position of being both a distinct military threat and a potential military asset and being able to make his own decisions.

A nuclear warhead with the ability to make its own decisions was a nightmare for any strategist.

Yet there was something about the suit that called to another part of him, a part that he'd suppressed long ago. He'd grown up reading the comics, and Superman had been one of his early models for what it meant to be a hero. Superman had helped people and had done what was right even when it wasn't easy. He'd had a code.

Helping people and having a code of honor had

brought him into the marines and later into national security. It had shaped his life; the thought of giving his life for his country wasn't something he looked forward to, but it was something he was willing to do.

It had been disappointing to learn that some of his superiors let pragmatism supplant that idealism. Others, especially the civilian leadership, appeared never to have had any honor at all.

Yet it didn't change the value of the ideal. No country ever lived completely up to its ideals, because human beings were flawed. They made mistakes and sometimes allowed emotion to override judgment. Sometimes people were corrupt.

The man on the chair wasn't a human being. He was something else, and by all reports he was working to represent that dream. As dangerous as this man was, he had a chance to make more of a difference than anyone.

He'd set the highest standard for himself when he'd donned that costume, and the agent hoped that he didn't stumble and prove to be as corrupt as most men with power became.

A fictional Superman had made him aspire to be a better person when he was a child. How much more influential would the real thing be?

Heroes inspired people to be better. With the right inspiration, and enough people, it was possible to truly change the world.

If there was even a spark of something within this man that really was Superman, then he wanted to be around to see it.

He hummed a familiar tune as he walked down the hallway. Things were already in motion.

Clark woke with a start and then felt embarrassed. He'd fallen asleep on the chair while talking to Lois. A glance at the bed showed that she'd wrapped a comforter around herself and had fallen asleep as well, although now her eyes were open and she was looking at him.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"I feel fine," he said. He glanced at the clock and started; he'd slept longer than he'd intended to. Almost five hours; the heavy drapes had kept the sunlight from waking him, and he'd been very tired. On a normal night he only slept three.

He stood easily and stretched. A normal human would have had pain from having slept in an odd position throughout the night; he had none.

The footsteps coming purposefully down the hall startled him. He considered leaving, but he had vague recollections of people looking in on them throughout the night, and of murmuring voices downstairs.

They knew he was here and there wasn't any reason to hide.

The doorway opened and a man in a business suit looked in on them. "Breakfast is almost ready," he said, looking unsurprised to see Clark standing in the middle of the room.

Now that he mentioned it, Clark could smell the scent of coffee and bacon. His mouth watered. He'd eaten very little over the past few days and though he didn't seem to need to eat, he enjoyed it.

"There's time for a shower," the man continued, "And there are clean clothes waiting for you in the main bathroom."

Clark nodded, surprised at the simple courtesy. He glanced at Lois.

"I have my own bathroom," she said. She looked slightly embarrassed. "I'll get ready."

The clean clothes waiting for Clark were a simple black t-shirt and a pair of black jeans. He looked good in them, but Lois wondered if part of the reason for the change was psychological. Talking to someone in the suit would be harder than talking to someone in normal clothing.

There was a nondescript man waiting for them at the breakfast table. He was dressed in a business suit that would make him blend in with thousands of other functionaries throughout Washington D.C.

As Lois and Clark stepped into the room, the four agents who had been lounging around the room stood suddenly. They glanced at the man, who nodded at them. They quietly filed out of the room.

"My name is Joseph Smith," the man said. "I'm the new head of the EAD."

"EAD?" Lois asked.

"The Extraterrestrial Affairs Department," the man said. "As of this moment I am the only member of the Department, which came into existence approximately three hours ago."

"So the government is creating a department just to deal with Clark?" Lois asked. "That seems a little extravagant."

"Properly speaking it should be the Department of Extradimensional and Extraterrestrial Affairs," the man said, "But that made us sound a little too much like we were in drug enforcement."

"So you are going to deal with the passengers as well as Clark," Lois said. "When do you plan on releasing them?"

"It's not that easy," Mr. Smith said. "While we're willing to expedite the naturalization process for them, being as they are displaced people and inadvertent refugees, there are questions to be answered."

"What sort of questions?" Clark asked as he slowly sank into a chair. Lois followed suit.

Mr. Smith began scooping spoonfuls of eggs onto their plates.

"These people don't have valid social security numbers. They don't have drivers' licenses. They don't have any possessions other than what they brought in their luggage."

"That can be remedied," Lois said.

"They'll have to completely start over from scratch. None of them have a place to live. They don't have jobs or family who can help. They don't even have any friends."

"I'm going to help my sister," Lois said. "She can live with me until she gets acclimated."

"There are three or four other people on the plane who have analogues who have died. They're the lucky ones ... they have family who might be willing to help them."

Clark took a bite of his bacon and was surprised how good it tasted. It felt good to be clean again and doing something as normal as eating breakfast instead of sifting through rubble in hopes that he would find someone else in time.

"But only maybe a third of the passengers have alternate versions of themselves. The rest of them have no one. They are utterly alone. Even if they do have alternate selves, they run the risk of being rejected by their alternate families."

Clark tried to imagine how it would have felt to find his parents alive again, only to have them reject him in favor of someone who looked like him and had been raised throughout his life by them.

"Some families will see these people as intruders. Some might accept them, but none of them have alternate families who are wealthy enough to help much."

"So basically the government is going to have to help them get a new start," Lois said.

The man nodded. "Worse, there are certain extremist elements of society who have been making threats. We suspect it'll only be a matter of time before those threats extend to the passengers, especially after the news media gets to them. We may have to set them up with new identities through witness protection."

Clark scowled. When he'd tried to save the plane he hadn't intended to disrupt so many lives. He'd only intended to save them.

"They need new driver's licenses, birth certificates, and social security numbers. There is a mass of paperwork involved in setting up a new life, and it's complicated."

"So the plan is to release them," Lois said.

He nodded. "We'll want to keep in contact with them in any case. We have geneticists who want to track them to see if they have vulnerabilities to diseases that don't exist on their world. They may need specialized health care. They may need psychiatric care to help deal with what they've been through."

"I don't understand why they'd create a whole new department for this," Lois said, interrupting. "Couldn't FEMA or Homeland Security or another agency handle a planeload of passengers?"

"How long do you think it will be before this happens again?" Mr. Smith said. "If we're surrounded by worlds that are similar to our own, then it's only a matter of time before more of them develop the same technology."

Clark felt a sudden sense of alarm. The idea of a whole cluster of worlds developing the same technology at nearly the same time alarmed him. It meant that his own world was in just as much danger as this one, but with fewer defenses because they were fifteen years behind and without someone like him to defend them.

"My agency is also going to oversee grants for the development

of extradimensional technology," Mr. Smith said. "I've got a dozen grant applications on my desk and the department isn't even three hours old yet."

"Are you crazy?" Lois asked. "You know how dangerous this is, and-"

"We need to know how to shut rifts down if they happen," Agent White said, interrupting Lois. "And we need to know whether it can be controlled without creating worldwide devastation. The potential gain is incredible."

"So you can look at extinct animals?" Lois asked.

"So we can see if the other worlds nearby have cured AIDS or diabetes or cancer," Agent Smith said. "So we can find lifeless worlds where we can dump toxic wastes and use as sources for minerals that are getting rare here. So we can learn what's out there."

"What if you don't like what you find?" Clark asked suddenly.

"Then we need to know that too," Mr. Smith said. "Because it's only a matter of time before those worlds come here."

Lois began to spoon eggs onto her plate. "So your agency is going to be dealing with Clark too?"

Agent Smith nodded. He took a sip of coffee and said, "I have some ideas about that. I think we could have a partnership that's beneficial to both parties."

"We meaning me and the United States government," Clark said. He hesitated, then said, "I don't think I'd like to work for the military."

Mr. Smith gestured dismissively. "As long as you don't work for any one else's military we don't have a problem with that."

Clark glanced at Lois. This wasn't what he'd expected to hear from the government, and he wondered just how much authority Mr. Smith was going to have to back this all up.

Mr. Smith continued, "The problem, as I see it, is that you aren't seeing the full potential of your abilities."

"What do you mean?"

"You say you are here to help, and so far you've been living up to that. Yet there are other ways to help people."

"I have my hands full as it is," Clark said. He was suddenly reminded that there were tens of thousands of people in China who still needed help. "I really shouldn't be here at all ... "

He rose suddenly.

"How would you like to be able to feed two million people in Africa, steer hurricanes away from populated areas and cut the sources of human disease in half?"

Clark sank back into his chair.

"I'm listening."

"I'm a little suspicious of any offer that seems too good to be true," Clark said.

"Just hear me out," Mr. Smith said. "At the moment you are saving people's lives one at a time. While that's personally satisfying, there are limits on just how many people you can help. Even you can only be in one place at a time."

Clark stared at the table. It was one of the greatest failings of what he was doing now. He'd saved hundreds of lives already, if not thousands, and all he could think about were the thousands he wasn't out there saving.

"What you need is a way to maximize your impact. You've said your goal is to help. I assume that means you want to reduce human suffering?"

Clark nodded slowly.

"Then what you need is money," Mr. Smith said. "A lot of it."

"So what do you want him to do?" Lois asked. "Star in Nike commercials?"

"Insurance companies own fifteen billion dollars worth of communication satellites many of which have nothing wrong with them other than needing minor repairs ... repairs that aren't available at any price. What happens when Superman offers to repair those satellites for \$5 million apiece?"

"People will think he's sold out," Lois said.

"Say he repairs three satellites for fifteen million dollars ... do you have any idea what he can do with that?"

"Buy a mansion in Beverly Hills?" Lois asked.

"He could buy approximately 1,875,000 bushels of corn. How many starving Africans or Burmese or Chinese could he feed with that?"

Lois was silent.

Mr. Smith spoke again. "Of course even if you got that food to them, there's no guarantee that their bodies could process it. Starving people need a lot of special care ... children especially. There is a product currently on the market called Plumpy'nut. It's a peanut paste specifically designed to have the right combination of vitamins and minerals to return a starving child to health."

"I've heard of that," Lois admitted. "It's used by Doctors without Borders."

"With two packets a day you can turn a child dying of starvation into a healthy child able to keep down regular foods in two weeks. In the past you had to have medical supervision to restore the malnourished to health. Plumpy'Nut is so easy to use that you can give it to the parents to take home. That means you suddenly have doctors who are able to focus on the injured and diseased instead of caring for millions of malnourished children."

"That sounds good," Clark said cautiously, "but ... "

"Five million children die a year of malnutrition. For fifteen million dollars you could provide enough Plumpy'nut to restore 2,142,857 children to health. For thirty million you could get nearly all of them."

Clark stared at Mr. Smith for a long moment.

"What then?" Lois asked. "You bring them back, but there's no food available."

"You spend more money," Mr. Smith said.

"Provide cheap meals to children who go to school and you've killed two birds with one stone. Give the children an education and a chance to be healthy."

"Don't food subsidies cause part of the problem?" Lois asked. "American corn sent over, wiping out the local market so that local farmers don't plant and can't afford to live?"

"Not if you buy food locally first," Mr. Smith said. He glanced around. "I'm supposed to tout the value of American produce, but if you really want to help the poor, you invest in their local economy."

Clark wondered who was pushing Mr. Smith to talk about the virtues of American farm goods and just why Mr. Smith had mentioned it. Was it a ploy to buy their trust?

Mr. Smith spoke again, "Dean Kamen recently

unveiled a water purification system called the Slingshot. A single unit purifies one thousand liters of water a day. You can use any water source ... the ocean, puddles, chemical waste, poison, urine and what is distilled is pure clean water. No filters, no charcoal, nothing else is needed."

"They had water distillation even in my time," Clark said.

"The Slingshot only uses two percent of the power of conventional water distillers ... and it's run by an engine that can produce up to a kilowatt of additional power. It can use almost anything that burns as fuel, including cow dung."

"I'm not sure why you're telling us this," Lois said.

"According to the inventor, it has the potential of eliminating of the source of fifty percent of all human disease. He has a tendency to exaggerate a bit, but three and a half million people really do die from waterborne illnesses every year. Most of them are children."

"So what does it cost?" Clark asked. Mr. Smith had the sound of a salesman.

"He's hoping to get the price down to one to two thousand dollars a unit. With fifteen million dollars you could buy provide clean drinking water for more than a quarter million people."

"There can't be that many satellites up there that need fixing," Lois said. "He'd run out of them sooner or later, and then all he'd have left was the loss of his credibility."

Well, that and the thought of millions of children who would have died except for him, Clark thought, staring at the two of them. Lois was trying to defend him, but Clark wasn't sure he needed defending.

"There's a critical point in the life of a child. Malnourish them before the age of three and they suffer from brain damage, stunted growth and permanent ill health. Feed them by the age of three and you've bought them a lifetime of health and productivity. Do it for a few years, and you've changed the lives of an entire generation of people."

"This wasn't what I was expecting to hear from you," Lois admitted. "I thought you'd talk about Clark working for the government."

"You were thinking we'd want to use Clark as a weapon?" Mr. Smith asked. He smirked. "We don't actually need him. As long as nobody else uses him as a weapon we're reasonably content."

Lois looked as though she wanted to argue.

"Now if he should happen to be flying through Afghanistan one day and happen to see Osama Bin Laden, we wouldn't turn the help away," Mr. Smith said, smiling slightly. "We'd be happy to donate

another twenty five million to the Foundation."

"I'm not sure if I'd ... "

"I know," Mr. Smith said. "If I thought you would, we'd be having an entirely different conversation."

"You seem a little different than the others," Clark said. "I thought you were going to try to sell me on promoting American interests."

"I am," Mr. Smith said. At Clark's look he said, "These things I'm suggesting are very much in the best interest of America."

"So feeding the hungry, preventing water borne diseases ... "

"Where do you think most of the new diseases come from?" Mr. Smith said. "They tend to come from places where people are hungry and already sick, where their bodies have compromised immune systems that are perfect incubators for a new disease to learn its way around until it's virulent enough to spread to everyone else."

"So this is about self interest?" Lois asked.

"Very much so," Mr. Smith said. "Those African immune systems are the world's first line of defense against the next super-plague."

"It still doesn't change the fact that there's a limited supply of satellites that need a space repairman," Lois said. "So in three or four years he's right back where he started, except that people will see him as someone who has sold out to the special interests."

"Do you really care?" Mr. Smith asked, looking at Clark. "Being a hero isn't about being liked or being popular. It's about doing what needs to be done, even if no one ever knows what you did."

"I'm sure that's the government's mantra," Lois said acidly. "I don't suppose

you were a spy before you moved into this job."

"I worked in the corporate sector for a little while," Mr. Smith admitted.

"Thus the capitalist spiel," Lois said. "Hasn't big business done enough damage to the environment?"

"Actually," Mr. Smith said. "I have some thoughts about that too. What Clark needs is a source of income that keeps producing even when he isn't around. That way if something happens to him ... say he finds a way home in six or ten years, he'll leave a lasting legacy."

"All of this just serves to tangle Clark up with business and government," Lois said. "If he wants to help people, he has to be seen as being above money and politics. He has to be as acceptable to people in Kabul as he is in New York or London."

Clark nodded. The things Mr. Smith was suggesting would only serve to enmesh him in contracts and rules and would create the suspicion that

he was in the pocket of one organization or another.

"Couldn't I just set up a Superman Foundation and accept charitable donations to do the same thing?"

Clark asked. "Maybe license the use of my name and image ... "

"DC comics already owns that, unless you want to change to a different suit," Mr. Smith said. "They'll be collecting on all the posters and action figures and underroos for years to come. It's the only reason they aren't suing you for copyright violations."

"Still, there is charity ... "

"How many disasters have there been this year alone? People are getting tired of giving. There's a limit, and people are reaching it." Mr. Smith shook his head slightly.

"Then what do you suggest?" Clark asked, frustrated.

"Solar power satellites." Mr. Smith said. He grinned at the expression on both of their faces.

"What?" Clark asked. "Aren't satellites solar powered already?"

"I'm talking about solar power stations in geosynchronous orbit above the Earth. They provide power twenty four hours a day, and the same mass of solar cells can produce ten times as much power as they could on earth."

Clark sighed. Things had been going so well. He'd been taking what Mr. Smith had said seriously, but now ...

"That's science fiction," Lois said.

"The Japanese already plan to have a small plant in space by 2025," Mr. Smith said. "The technology is here already."

"So why hasn't it been done yet?"

"Because launching the materials into space would cost twenty times as much as the satellite itself. It'd cost up to 320 billion to launch a 4 gigawatt station, which isn't economical when the same amount of power could be produced by ten coal plants costing seven billion."

"So you're saying the station itself would cost sixteen billion? How is that at all economical?" Lois asked. "Twice as much for the station?"

"Because a 500 megawatt coal plant burns 1.43 million tons of coal a year. Eight of those plants would burn over eleven million tons of coal, at a cost of \$100 a ton. That's not counting the employees needed to run the plant, or any of a dozen other costs associated with disposing of waste and the environmental cost."

"It'd still take seventeen years to pay for itself."

"Four gigawatts would produce 35 billion kilowatt hours a year, which could be sold at five cents a kilowatt hour to produce profits of \$1.75 billion a year

... without having to buy a billion dollars worth of coal every year for the next thirty years."

"Nobody is going to fork over sixteen or seventeen billion dollars for an unproven solar technology," Lois said.

"T.Boone Pickens is building a four gigawatt, ten billion dollar wind farm already," Mr. Smith said.

"And that will only produce power 30% of the time. People are hungry for this kind of technology. Give them the chance and they'll come through."

"And what does Clark get out of this?"

"Ten percent of the profit from now on."

"That's going to make him look really impartial," Lois said. "Superman ... billionaire industrialist."

"He doesn't have to take a dime for himself.

Instead, every year the Superman Foundation receives \$175 million dollars to disperse as he sees fit. I've already told you what fifteen million dollars can do ... multiply that by a factor of more than ten to see the possibilities."

"There are already charities out there that give a lot more money than that," Lois said. "The United way gave away more than three billion dollars last year. Why would this be any different?"

"Normal charities have administrative costs. They spend an average of fifteen percent on overhead, and there are costs they can't get away from, like the cost of transporting goods."

"Clark can help them with that," Lois said. "In fact he's already started."

"He could do it just as easily from his own Foundation ... or actually he could do both, enabling charities to buy more food to compensate for lowered transport costs, and using local charities to point him in the direction of places where existing charities aren't keeping up."

Clark spoke finally. "Are we talking about shooting a four million kilowatt beam of power to earth? That sounds an awful lot like a weapon to me. I won't have anything to do with planting weapons in space. Even if it's not a weapon, what happens when a piece of space debris hits the station and the beam moves across a populated area?"

"The receiver would cover an area of several miles," Mr. Smith said, "so that the beam could be dispersed enough to be safe for people to walk through."

"How is that any different than solar cells then?" Lois asked.

"You can't do much with solar cell land," Mr. Smith said. "But the area under a solar power satellite rectenna can be used to grow crops. It'd be fenced off for safety of course."

"I can't believe it'd be as easy as you are making it sound," Lois said. "Or there would be a lot more people talking about it."

"It'd take slightly more than the current annual solar cell production capacity of the entire world," Mr. Smith admitted, "And there have been supply shortages. The silicon producers would have to build new facilities, which they would do if they had a guarantee the demand would hold up."

"What makes you think enough could be even produced for this?"

"They've doubled photovoltaic production every two years since 2002. With this much money pumped into the system new factories would open, and thousands of jobs would be created. People would be able to make an honest living and achieve the American dream, and in the end the prices for ground based solar power would drop due to economies of scale. You'd have a cleaner environment, money for charity ... everyone would win."

"Not coal miners," Clark said. "Or people in the space industry."

"The rocket makers would only lose money if the project were going to go ahead with or without you. The coal miners ... even four gigawatts won't make much of a dent in the huge increases in coal."

"Then why bother?" Lois asked.

"Because if it can be done one year, it can be done again and again. Imagine if they were able to create two or even three plants in a year. If Clark was here twenty years he could have as many as sixty of those stations up and running ... creating enough electricity to power sixty million households and providing ten billion dollars a year to the Superman Foundation."

"You said something about stopping hurricanes," Clark said faintly.

"Solar power plants can be used to heat masses of air, steering hurricanes away from populated areas. Eventually we could create a world where tragedies like Katrina or what happened in Myanmar just don't happen anymore."

"This all seems ... so pie in the sky," Clark said. "How big are we talking about these stations being?"

"Four thousand to eighty thousand tons ... thus the transportation problem. They'd be kilometers wide too. It wouldn't be an easy job," Mr. Smith said. "I won't lie to you. It would be huge and difficult. The problem is that anything worth doing usually is."

"So you want me to basically sell out ... "

"Partner with," Mr. Smith corrected.

"Private business," Clark continued. "What does the government get out of this?"

"Clean energy, cheap telecommunications,

thousands of jobs in the solar sector with the taxes associated with that. The United States' dependence on foreign oil would be lessened to some extent."

"And you don't think the government would interfere with me?"

"No more than it would interfere with any other citizen," Mr. Smith said. "People are afraid of you now because you're a loose cannon. You could decide to join Al Qaida tomorrow and there wouldn't be anything we could do about it."

"But owning stakes in a company or even a Foundation ... "

"It creates a sense of stability. You'd have assets that could be seized, legal penalties that could be assessed ... you'd be part of the system. People would feel that the Foundation would be important to you, so you could in some way be held accountable."

"So basically people in Congress would feel safer if Superman was a businessman, because that's something they can understand," Lois said.

"They'd feel better if he had ties to the world," Mr. Smith said. "Because those ties make it seem more likely that he's going to try to be a law abiding citizen."

"They make him easier to control," Lois said.

Mr. Smith nodded. "At some point you are going to have to make a decision about why you are doing all this. If it's for the glory, then fine. But if you really want to help people you're going to need help. Partnering with business is going to be the fastest and easiest way to do that."

"It's a lot to take in," Clark said, glancing at Lois. "And I'm not exactly ready to start signing contracts."

"You've got time to think about it," Mr. Smith said. "But don't just dismiss it. These things I've been talking about really can happen. I can show you feasibility studies done on the solar satellite idea, and I could have signed contracts on satellite repair by the end of the week."

He pulled a business card from his jacket pocket and gave it to Lois. "I'd hate for it to get lost in the middle of the Atlantic somewhere."

Clark scowled. Apparently everyone had been briefed on his problems keeping a wallet.

"As an apology and a gesture of goodwill, we've had three replacement costumes made for you," Mr. Smith said, turning to Clark "Your friend at the Superman Museum was helpful as to the measurements, and he says he'd like the original back. He thinks you've quadrupled the value of the suit by having it be worn by the real Superman."

Lois stared at him for a long moment. "That wasn't

why I ... "

Mr. Smith shrugged. "Also, the SETI researchers want to talk to you. They'd like to pinpoint the part of the galaxy that Krypton is in."

"Why?" Clark asked. In the movie, Lex Luthor had used that information to find kryptonite. He wondered if the government was looking to see if any existed on this world as well.

"Given that our worlds are so analogous, they wonder if maybe the reason a version of you doesn't exist here is that Krypton never exploded."

Clark stared at the other man, suddenly speechless.

"You may be our best chance of actually contacting an extraterrestrial civilization," Mr. Smith said. He smiled suddenly. "At the rate things are going I may start having to hire a lot of people."

"You have no way of knowing whether Krypton even exists here," Lois said, "And even if it did, signals would take years to go back and forth."

She glanced at Clark, who looked stunned.

"Chances are that if the planet exploded or was hit by a supernova or whatever on your world, it happened here too. The only difference would be whether a spacecraft made it out or not."

"How do you know it didn't?" Clark asked.

At this, both Lois and Mr. Smith turned to stare at Clark.

"What?"

"I've been in hiding all this time on my own world," Clark said. "What makes you think there isn't a version of me here?"

"Well ... the whole Superman thing started here," Mr. Smith said. "It's fiction."

"Maybe my counterpart landed earlier than I did," Clark said. "Maybe he inspired the comic book guys to come up with the Superman idea."

"He'd have to be more than a hundred years old by now," Mr. Smith said. "But then ... who knows what kind of potential lifespan you have?"

Lois touched his arm. "Clark ... do you really think that any version of you could have seen what's been going on in the world and not get involved?"

Clark suddenly seemed to deflate.

"I suspect that if you'd been around in World War II, things would have gone very differently," Mr. White said. "Even if you had to make it all look like a coincidence."

"I couldn't have stood by once I found out about the Holocaust," Clark said. "Or once I saw how many people were being killed."

"That's why you shouldn't stand by now," Mr. Smith said. "You should be proactive. Change the

world."

"You keep pressuring Clark to get in bed with business," Lois said. "To do all these things with charity money. But I don't see how the little bits of money he'd be able to raise would make all that much difference when we've already thrown trillions of dollars at the problem."

"You talk about me spending eight billion dollars a year," Clark said, his expression still distant. "But that would be a drop in the bucket compared to what the United States government could spend ... or Japan or France or Britain for that matter."

"You're expecting too much of democracies," Mr. Smith said. "Which tend to be notoriously short sighted."

Lois shook her head. "That's just an excuse. The governments could do something if they really wanted to."

"How do you explain giving billions of dollars to some third world country when people in your own congressional district are homeless? How could you explain giving health care away to Africa when millions of Americans don't have health care?"

"Maybe they should," Lois said.

"And by the time the money for that goes through, there won't be anything left for the kind of projects we're talking about."

"You said these things are in the self interest of the United States."

"How many senators bother to look at what's actually good for the nation? Most of them only worry about their own state and the rest of the country can go hang."

"That's cynical," Clark said.

"Where do you think pork comes from? You get projects producing corn ethanol that take a gallon of petroleum to make a gallon of ethanol when you could use the same amount of petroleum to make five gallons of sugar ethanol."

"The corn farmers like it," Clark said.

"And they vote. South American sugar growers can't vote, and so instead of an ethanol product that makes sense, we get something that's popular. That's what pork is all about ... stealing money from the other forty nine states to give to your voters."

"Ok," Lois said. "But there are aid programs out there."

"Aid programs with strings attached," Mr. Smith said. "No government gives away money for free. There is always a price. If we give massive amounts of aid to an African nation, then we're going to insist that American farmers grow the food. We're going to insist on having a say in that country's internal affairs."

"And when we flood the market with American corn, the bottom drops out of the African corn market."

"Which means African corn farmers can't make a living growing corn ... and so they don't. That in turn means that they don't have enough food and need more aid next year."

"Then all Clark would be doing with this money is doing the same thing," Lois said. "Tarnishing his reputation for nothing."

Mr. Smith shook his head. "He'd have the chance to take the long view. Even charities tend to prefer short term solutions. You give a child a vaccine and he doesn't get sick. You get instant gratification. Teaching new agriculture techniques and providing farm implements ... the rewards of that sort of thing are too far away for most people."

"The things you were talking about before were instant solutions," Lois pointed out.

"Because they are the easiest things to sell. Long term change can take a lifetime of dedicated, thankless work, and it's a tough sell sometimes." Mr. White said. He shook his head and looked tired for a moment. "I'd be happy to talk all of this over with you in the future, but I'm going to be spending the day in hearings."

"Hearings?"

"With the Appropriations committee. I don't actually have any funding as of yet, and they have to decide just how much all of this is going to cost."

He reached into his pocket and handed an envelope to Lois.

Glancing suspiciously at him, she used her butter knife to open the envelope. She glanced inside and grimaced. "A subpoena?"

"At the moment you are the world's greatest Superman expert," Mr. Smith said. "The committee wants to hear from you."

"Um, I'd have thought I was the world's greatest Superman expert," Clark said.

Mr. Smith looked embarrassed. "As far as the committee is concerned, letting you testify would be like letting a man with a submachine gun into the senate chambers. There's no known way to disarm you, and they'd really prefer that you be out of hearing range when the hearings are going on."

"Because they want me to be able to speak freely," Lois said. It was a little insulting to Clark, but it was better than some of the treatment they'd had in the past.

Clark sighed, then started. His face settled into a grim expression. "I've got to go. There has been a major aftershock in China."

"The new costumes are in the living room," Mr.

Smith said.

They barely felt a wind as he vanished from sight.

"He can hear all the way to China?" Mr. Smith asked, his expression startled.

"CNN is playing down the street," Lois said.

She sighed and picked up a piece of bacon. "So what are they expecting me to wear to the hearings?"

If they'd left a single unwrinkled item in her closets at home she'd be surprised.

Making copies of his keys had been nerve wracking. He'd kept expecting someone to come around the corner to arrest him, and he'd wondered if the locksmith had been looking at him strangely.

This was worse; the security passes would be checked soon; if they discovered them missing, it wouldn't be long before the investigation began pointing in his direction.

Slipping them into his pocket, he stepped outside and hoped that the next shift was going to be sloppy. Otherwise he was risking more than his career.

They had his family.

Getting involved with them in the first place had been a mistake, but he'd been young and stupid. The world had seemed like a different place, more black and white without all the shades of gray he'd seen since moving here.

His only consolation was that this was all going to be over soon.

The aftershock wasn't as bad as the news had predicted. The people were prepared this time, and had generally stayed safe. Those trapped under rubble hadn't fared as well, and Clark wondered if he could have saved them if he'd simply skipped breakfast.

It was raining again, and this was becoming as much of a problem as the earthquakes.

"We must release the pressure, or the dam will burst."

The Chinese engineer was gesturing and showing him a series of planned sluiceways to release the pressure. Looking at the waters built up behind the dam, Clark could see that they weren't going to make it in time.

How much of the rain was an aftershock from the rifts that had brought him here?

He'd been wondering more and more just what sort of impact all of this was going to have on the world. Were the recent tornadoes and storms simply aftereffects of the phenomena that had brought him here, or were they signs that global warming was finally causing nature to strike back?

Was Mr. Smith right? If it really was global

warming causing the problems, then he should be doing everything he could to help reverse it.

Mr.

Smith hadn't wanted to say it, but Clark knew that some of the strongest contributions he could make would be to allow scientists to study him. Over time they'd learn the secrets that allowed him to fly. Then they'd be able to launch their own satellites.

If they could figure out his energy source, the world would never need any other source of power.

Yet his abilities also had the potential for creating terrible weapons. His father had warned him against revealing himself throughout his childhood. The fear had been that he would be locked up in a government laboratory somewhere and would never get out.

He'd had nightmares of being dissected by people who didn't see him as human.

What was right? Was selling out ultimately the thing that was going to do the most good for people? Or would he be better off maintaining his impartiality?

Confused, he allowed himself to focus on the man in front of him. If the water behind this dam wasn't removed, a city of forty eight thousand people was going to be washed away.

"I'll build canals here, here, here and here," he said, pointing to the map. The engineer nodded emphatically.

The places he was going would create channels that would send water into uninhabited areas. It would take days for the Chinese Army to get where he was going, but that was why he was here.

At least this was clear and simple.

The hearings were anything but clear and simple. All seventeen members of the United States Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security were in attendance; apparently the prospect of talking about Superman and the other recent problems was enough to catch the members' interest.

Lois was already getting a headache. They were going over the same subjects over and over again, and she was beginning to feel irritated.

She blinked as she realized she was being questioned.

"My sister is one of the detainees," Lois said, leaning forward into the microphone. "I'm willing to give her a place to live. Most of them aren't so lucky."

"The woman you are talking about isn't actually your sister, is she?"

This had already been discussed on at least two occasions since Lois had entered the session. Although it had taken her time to believe the truth, at least she'd understood it almost right away. Lois suspected that

some of these people still thought the Internet brought messages through tubes.

"She's an analogue of my sister, genetically identical and in some ways closer than a twin," Lois said. Irritably, she said, "I thought that had already been established."

Susan leaned close to her. Covering the microphone with her hand, she said, "Don't antagonize them. Do you really want to be charged with contempt of Congress?"

"So why are you taking her in?"

"She's the closest thing to a sister that I'm ever going to have," Lois said. "I'm sure there are a few relatives out there who will feel the same way, but not all of them will have the resources to help."

Another senator leaned forward. This one seemed a little brighter than the other one. "We've shut off the power to that cyclotron thing ... why do we need to bother with an agency to deal with one man, no matter how powerful? These people can be dealt with through Immigration and through FEMA, and he can be dealt with by the Pentagon and Homeland defense ... or maybe other agencies."

Mr. Smith leaned forward. "We aren't the only universe out there, and at least some of the others are near the same technological level of development as we are. It's only a matter of time before they develop their own devices."

"So it's going to be a waiting game, and in the meantime taxpayer dollars are going to be hemorrhaging while we wait for something that might never happen."

Mr. Smith had been right. Democracies were shortsighted.

Lois sighed. It looked like she was in for a long afternoon.

"It's going to take at least two weeks to warm everything back up again ... and weeks after that if we want to repeat the experiment." Piers stood, staring up at the massive device above him. He'd been working on this project for years and it seemed like a terrible waste of time to stop now.

"We can't continue if even part of what the Americans are claiming is true." Lars shook his head. "And it's going to be a while before we have enough information to know either way."

Two thousand scientists working in a ring of tunnels twenty seven miles in diameter on a project costing ten billion American dollars and they were going to shut everything down.

"It's junk science," Piers said. "This is all going to turn out to be a mistake ... or some kind of political

thing by the Americans."

Of course, teams of American scientists were part of the project, but none of them were in the room. Piers didn't particularly like the American teams. They tended to be too loud and aggressive for his tastes, and he didn't like their politics.

Plus, the blonde had snubbed him.

"What can we-"

The first sounds echoing from the distance sounded like firecrackers popping.

Piers frowned. Nothing should be exploding, unless a seal had broken and super cooled parts had interacted with the warmer exterior.

Lars was a tall, dark haired Swede, and he stood staring off into the distance. A tall man, he often seemed to have trouble with the claustrophobic nature of the tunnels, sometimes bumping his head on the pipes overhead. At over six and a half feet and skinny, he could have been a basketball player in another life.

The popping sounds were coming closer.

Lars paled. "That's gunfire."

"What? No ... why would anyone?"

Piers gasped as Lars grabbed him with a surprisingly strong grip and pulled him down the hallway.

"We've got to hide," Lars said.

Knowing it was probably useless at this depth, Piers pulled out his cell phone and tried to dial out for help.

There was no signal, only dead air.

He began to run.

"Do you realize how many jobs this scheme of Mr. White's would cost? He's talking about putting thousands of coal miners and truckers and power plant workers out of jobs!"

"The project would create thousands of jobs in the solar energy sector," Mr. Smith said.

"Which is undoubtedly why my esteemed colleague sponsored this," the senator said. "This is a project that would steal thousands of jobs from my state and give them to his state."

"The coal industry isn't going to be hurting for a long time," Mr. Smith said. "My project would just slow the growth a little."

"It would divert eighty billion dollars a year away from coal toward solar," the speaker said. "That's a lot of money taken from average working class Americans to benefit a few fat cat investors."

Lois stared at the speaker, who was a heavyset man with small, squinty eyes. He reminded her a little of a pet pig a friend in college had owned. The pig had been bad tempered and stupid, a poor example of its

breed.

"Some of us don't think that's such a bad thing, Robert," another speaker said, "And we're getting off the subject again. Mr. Smith's suggestions are outside the purview of his office."

"I still don't understand why we have to have a separate office for this!" another senator said. "I don't appreciate having the vote on this held while most of us were out of town."

Lois should have known all of their names by now, but her head was swimming and she desperately needed a break.

Before the first senator could speak again, several doors opened at once, and six men in black suits stepped into the room.

One of them approached the chairman of the subcommittee and whispered into his ear.

"We're adjourning this until next week," the man said hastily. He leaned over and whispered to the two people beside him, who paled.

Lois was startled when she felt someone's hand on her shoulder.

"Miss Lane? I need you to come with us."

"What's going on?" Lois asked.

The man glanced at Susan and said, "That's classified."

"My client ... " Susan began.

"Is needed in the situation room," the man said quietly. "You aren't invited."

To her side, Lois saw that Dr. Ledderman was getting the same treatment. She nodded shortly at Susan then stood up. As soon as they were out of earshot of the others, the man beside her leaned forward and said, "We've lost contact with CERN."

CERN was the European agency that oversaw the Large Hadron collider.

"We've attempted to contact Mr. Kent through the Chinese, but they say he's out of contact, digging water sluices in the mountains."

Dr. Ledderman had caught up with them by this point, and he paled. "The previous tests only lasted for less than a minute and a half. If they get that thing up and running ... "

Lois stared at him for a moment. If they left the power on at the collider, then the effects would likely expand and grow far beyond anything they'd seen so far.

"Have they started the evacuation of Denver?" Lois asked.

At the look on the guard's face, she picked up her pace until they were all almost running.

She'd spent too long just reporting on things other people did. It was time for her to step up. If this was

the beginning of the end of the world, then she had to do everything she could to help.

"I need to remind you that the confidentiality clauses you have already signed remain in full effect. Anything you see or hear inside the situation room is not to be disseminated to the press under any circumstances without prior permission by the White House."

The White House legal counsel walking along with them looked harried and off balance.

"Cell phones aren't allowed. There are detectors installed in the ceiling so don't even try to send a message out."

Lois nodded. She'd given her cell phone to Susan before the hearings anyway.

"Why do you look so upset?" Dr. Ledderman asked.

"I don't know why you are going in there, and that means I don't have any way of formulating a legal strategy ... "

"You don't need to know," the

Secret Service agent beside them said. He held the door open for Lois and Dr. Ledderman and turned to the lawyer. "This is as far as you go."

There wasn't just one situation room, of course. It was actually a complex of several rooms covering five thousand square feet. Lois had seen pictures of various presidents in the situation room throughout the years, but it was different now since the recent upgrade.

In the past, the situation room had been far more primitive than it had been depicted in movies and in the media. It had been a place of mahogany wall panels and quiet elegance.

This too was something that had changed over the past seven years. The entire place had been upgraded with flat screen panels on the walls and it had a modern sort of elegance. This, the main conference room, was dominated by a large oval rosewood table.

What surprised Lois was the quiet sense of power she had from this place. She'd traveled among the rich and important in the past, but this was where the work was really done. Maybe it was the scent of the industrial cleaner used on the place.

Black ergonomic chairs circled the table, and most of those chairs were already filled with men Lois vaguely recognized. Generals, cabinet members and close associates of the President were all sitting and staring at the screen at the front of the room.

A few glanced in their direction as they entered, but Lois and Dr. Ledderman slipped into two chairs near the center of the table.

On the overhead speaker Lois could hear the

sudden sound of gunshots.

"That was the last contact we had with the staff at the CERN control center."

The men around them murmured among themselves before one man spoke up. "How serious is this threat?"

Dr. Ledderman cleared his throat. "We should start evacuating Denver at the very least. The rifts only seem to move at the speed of the earth's rotation, so we have at least a six hour head start on it."

"Are we sure they even intend to turn the thing on?"

"It doesn't have any strategic or symbolic importance except for this one thing," A young man sitting beside a general said. "It would be like stealing a nuclear weapon and thinking it won't be used."

"What is the potential damage if they do get it working?"

"It depends on how long they can keep it running. It takes a team of engineers to keep the collider calibrated, or eventually the beams will rip through the magnets and the whole process will stop."

"So we're looking at a downside similar to what we've seen before?"

Dr. Ledderman shook his head. "The worst of the storms occurred after the collider was running for just 90 seconds. With a full support staff the system is designed to run for ten hours. Just how long they'll actually be able to keep it running is anyone's guess."

"If that happened, what are the potential casualties?"

"There's no way of telling," Dr. Ledderman said. "We know that there are half a million people in Denver who are at definite risk of dying if the refinery rift expands beyond its previous size. If there are other rifts leading to similarly dangerous atmospheres, and they open over someplace like Los Angeles or Beijing ... "

"We need to keep the Chinese in the loop about this. If they were to think Beijing had been nuked ... "

The room was silent for a moment. The Chinese had been building their nuclear capabilities for years, and they had submarines to deliver them.

Lois glanced at the faces around her, and she saw their expressions hardening. There was a grimness in their expression that hadn't been there before.

"How long do we have?" the man at the head of the room directed his question to Dr. Ledderman.

"If they can get the scientists to cooperate, it takes twenty minutes to get the system to running at full capacity."

"The attack occurred thirty minutes ago," one of the generals said. "Do we have anyone in the area?"

"It would take an hour for our agents on the ground to reach the complex and another twenty minutes to infiltrate the place. We don't know how many of them there are or how they are armed."

"It wouldn't be that hard to get in; there are several buildings along the path with access points, buildings holding compressors, ventilation equipment, control electronics and refrigeration parts. The actual control mechanisms are all aboveground."

"That will make things a little easier. I wasn't looking forward to trying to hit something covered in a hundred fifty to five hundred feet of dirt."

"What happens if we hit the refrigeration units?" One voice near the back of the room asked. "Doesn't the system have to be super cooled for the superconductors to work?"

"It would take weeks for the system to heat back up, unless it's in use," Dr. Ledderman said. "I'm afraid we're going to have to hit the CERN control center."

Lois frowned. "Are we talking about bombing the Hadron Collider? There are two thousand innocent scientists working there."

"It's only a matter of time before some of them give up and help the terrorists."

"You don't think much of your colleagues," Lois said.

"When someone has a gun pointed at your head, it's hard to make the brave decision," Dr. Ledderman said.

"It's a big complex," Lois said. "Twenty seven kilometers in diameter. Surely they haven't been able to get control over all the buildings along that pathway. Can't you get scientists on the other part of the ring to sabotage things?"

"That's not a bad idea Ms. Lane," the younger man in the suit said.

"There are automatic safety systems that will shut the whole system down in only three revolutions of the system ... and the particles will be revolving around the system eleven thousand times a second," Dr. Ledderman said.

"You'll need to work with us on the easiest ways to sabotage the system," the younger man said, nodding at Dr. Ledderman.

Lois felt herself beginning to relax. "So you won't launch bombers ... "

"We launched bombers from Germany fifteen minutes ago," the man said. "That gives us thirty minutes to come up with another solution."

"We just have to hope the scientists hold out that long."

"We've got to call security," Lars said.

"It's probably one of the Americans," Piers muttered. "Gone postal. Everybody knows how gun crazy they are."

"Eh, they're not that bad," Lars said. "I thought you liked the blonde, what was her name?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he muttered.

They moved quickly through the tunnels hoping to reach the access tunnel leading to the surface. From there they'd be able to contact security in hopes of getting whoever it was shooting under control.

"If they set this project back any further, I'll kill them myself," Piers muttered.

They hadn't heard the sounds of any more gunfire, and that made Piers nervous. As long as they could hear the gunfire, that meant they knew the crazy person was far behind. Silence meant they could be anywhere.

He was surprised to feel himself sweating, given the coolness of the underground tunnels.

As they turned the corner, he found himself resenting Lars' imperturbability. The big man didn't look worried at all, just cool and competent. Piers had always resented his height and his luck with the ladies, but this was different.

He didn't like to think of himself as a coward, but his stomach was knotting up as it seemed to take forever to reach the surface.

At last they saw the heavy metal doorway in front of them. Piers sighed in relief as Lars reached out to open it.

All Piers could see were the muzzles of the guns on the other side.

"Why don't you just pull the plug?" Lois said. "Cut the power. They'll still have the hostages, but ... "

"The whole complex uses about two hundred thirty megawatts ... the collider uses a hundred and twenty megawatts. It was too much power for either the Swiss or the French power grids, so it's powered by both."

"Will getting just one of the grids to shut off power be enough to stop the process?"

Dr. Ledderman nodded. "We've had problems with power failures in the past."

Several men stood up and headed for teleconferencing rooms set off from the main room. Lois assumed they were going to attempt to convince the power utilities to cut power.

Lois could only hope that they were able to convince officials to act in time. It would take time to convince the officials in those countries to act, and given the slowness of bureaucracies, it might happen too late to stop things.

"Are you sure Superman can't be contacted?"

"The Chinese have been alerted," the man next to her said. "They'll tell him when he next sees them."

"He doesn't have to see them," Lois said.

They stared at her uncomprehendingly. She began to lay out her plan.

Lars held his leg, grimacing in pain as blood began to darken his thigh. Piers held a shirt against the wound, grimacing.

"As I understand it, we only need thirteen of you to operate this machine. There are more than thirty of you in the room. Those who elect to cooperate will live."

Piers had a momentary vision of himself jumping up and wrestling the rifle away from the man facing them, then spraying the others arrayed around the room like some sort of an American action hero.

He didn't move.

Lars had tried to be a hero, and this was what it had gotten him. Piers suspected that they'd be less forgiving of the next person who tried it. Looking around, he could see the same realization on the faces of the others.

"Why would you do this?" One of the American scientists was the first to speak.

Piers winced at the sound of a rifle butt striking flesh.

The man speaking to them said, "You will provide us with what we need, if we have to kill all but thirteen of you ... and those thirteen don't have to be completely healthy either."

"There aren't enough of us to monitor the experiments," Lars gritted out.

Piers was surprised. He'd thought his friend was going into shock.

"We don't

need to monitor any experiments. Just turn the thing on and keep it running."

"You'd destroy the entire world ... why?" Lars' voice faded in and out.

"That's just American propaganda."

Piers frowned. If they didn't believe the collider was going to create environmental effects then why were they here?

"No other nation was affected," the man said. "So they had to lie and say it would hurt the rest of us."

"If it was so bad, why would they tell the world about it at all?"

Piers grimaced. Lars wouldn't shut up. Despite the bullet in his leg he was still trying to argue. At the rate he was going he was going to get a bullet in his head.

"Because their media are stupid," the man glanced

at his comrades. "They have no loyalty to their own country."

Lars sighed and sagged against the wall. His energy was fading and if he didn't get medical attention soon, he would die.

For all his faults, Lars was his only friend.

Piers found himself speaking. "I'll do it."

"What?" Lars stared at him for a long moment.

"I don't believe we caused those problems at all," Piers said. "I'm not even sure those problems really exist or if they are just another attempt by Fermilab to get a head start on us."

"If there's even a chance ... " Lars said.

"We've dedicated years to this," Piers said. "Put our careers on the line. If they shut it down all our work is going to be for nothing. This is our chance to prove that it was all a big understanding."

Piers felt as though he was standing outside his body saying these things. He felt odd and numb, almost dissociated.

Gesturing toward a woman on the other side of Lars, he waited until she'd replaced his hold on the cloth covering Lars wound. "The sooner we do this, the sooner these men will get what they want and get out of here. Then we can get you to a hospital. Nobody has to die here today."

He stood up, and after a moment first one and then another and another of the other scientists did as well.

"Neither the Swiss or the French are cooperating," one man reported, looking harried. "We tried going directly to the power companies, and they refuse to believe us. We're trying to go through diplomatic channels now."

Lois grimaced. She supposed it would have been difficult for the French government to convince a private power company to cut off power to New York City, but this was frustrating.

Wasn't there some sort of red phone to cut through this sort of bureaucracy?

One of the analysts looked up from his computer screen. "There was a spike in power usage from both grids starting fifteen minutes ago."

It took twenty minutes for the machine to power up.

"How far are the bombers?"

"They are still ten minutes away." The analyst looked harried.

"Do we have anyone able to hack into their power grid and shut it down from here?"

"They've been beefing up security," the analyst said. He looked embarrassed. "I've already been trying to get in. I haven't had much luck."

The tension level in the room was rising. The bombers were going to arrive five minutes too late, and there wasn't any telling just how bad things were going to get if the system was allowed to run for more than three times as long as it had before.

"I have an idea," Lois said.

Colonel Kwan listened to the radio and then turned and relayed the instructions to his subordinates. The same instructions were being relayed to unit after unit throughout a hundred mile radius, the efficiency and organization of the Chinese military finally being put to the test.

The men around him relayed the instructions to each other, and they gradually fell silent.

Colonel Kwan raised his voice and for the first time in the history of the world yelled two words not as part of an entertainment, not as part of a movie or radio act or play, but in all seriousness.

"Help, Superman!"

His voice was echoed by those of his men, and he knew they were being echoed by the voices of units all through the region.

According to the news reporter Lois Lane, Clark Kent could hear everything in a thirty mile radius. If there was even a chance that anyone was close enough it had to be taken.

Colonel Kwan shuddered at the thought of these rifts reaching China. China had all it could handle with the earthquakes and floods.

Neither it, nor the world needed any more disasters. What it needed was Superman.

"I've got something!" For the first time an analyst's voice held something other than stress and anxiety.

He flipped a switch and a picture of the globe appeared on the main monitor, replacing the satellite picture of the CERN facility.

"Holy ... " one of the generals stared at the radar picture. "He can really move."

"At this rate he'll get to CERN in under two minutes."

An audible groan went through the crowd. It had taken too long to relay the messages, even as efficient as the Chinese military apparatus had been.

The collider was going to go on line in just under one minute.

He was going to get there too late.

The analyst staring at the screen cleared his throat. "Um ... check that. He just left the atmosphere and he's speeding up."

The analyst went pale. "He's slowing down over

Switzerland."

"What?" The general in charge of the meetings looked up from his own monitor.

"He's there already," the analyst said. "He's slowing down. Estimated arrival time is thirty seconds."

Lois glanced at the men around her. Thirty seconds wasn't a lot of time to assess the situation, break in and stop the collider. The tension in the room was palpable, and it was rising.

The screen switched back to the satellite picture of CERN, where the debris of what appeared to be an explosion was rising up from the side of one of the main buildings.

The explosion of the wall behind them caught them all by surprise, the terrorists as much as any of them.

For the space of a single instant they all froze, and that instant was enough to make all the difference. Lars couldn't see much of what was happening, as his view was blocked by the lap of the woman who was holding him.

If he wasn't in so much pain, he'd have laughed. Piers was an ass. Sometimes he wasn't sure why they were friends. The man was jealous and judgmental. He was a small man with a Napoleon complex, and somehow he always seemed to fail with the women.

Lars didn't actually believe that the Large Hadron Collider was causing the rifts any more than Piers did, but he hadn't been willing to take the risk. Piers had, gambling the world on the idea that he was right.

The blue and red clad figure standing amid the rubble suggested strongly that Piers had made the wrong choice.

Lars groaned slightly as he tried to sit up.

The terrorists were on the ground, groaning and holding what looked like broken hands. The guns were nowhere in sight.

It did explain one of the questions Lars had always had about the American superhero: With all his powers and skills, why didn't he use the door?

It was clear to Lars now. That moment of horrified disbelief as the wall shattered bought him time, time to grab guns and stop bullets and do so with minimal harm to others.

"Shut the Collider down," the man said.

He was shorter than Lars would have thought, certainly several inches below Lars' height, but there was something about him that demanded compliance.

Piers was the first to react, turning to activate some of the safeguards that would abort the procedure.

He pushed a series of buttons, then frowned,

pushing another set of buttons.

"It's not working," he muttered.

Lars closed his eyes as he saw the displays flickering to life describing what the detectors were recording. The collider was in operation.

"I can't shut it down either."

"We're getting some sort of sensor echoes, as though we're seeing the same particles three different times."

The blue-clad man grit his teeth. "Any idea where they are coming from?"

"We shouldn't have three times as many particles in the system as we put in there ... "

"What if it's the same particle," Piers said, his face slowly going white. "In three different universes."

"You wouldn't be able to see them in this one," the woman holding Lars said.

"Unless their universe and our universe are partially superimposed." Piers looked horrified. "We DID cause the rifts."

In that moment the whole complex went black. There were screams from the back of the room until the emergency generators kicked in.

"That's it, then," Lars said. "They've cut the power."

The blue clad man in the red cape shook his head. "It's still running."

"The system takes a hundred twenty thousand kilowatts to run. There's nothing powering the system." The woman holding Lars spoke again. He found himself wishing she would hold his wound closed a little tighter and talk a little less.

"The other two colliders are powering it," Piers said.

"What can I do to stop it?"

"The power is out." The man on the other end of the video screen looked incensed. "Now we will deal with the matter of the violation of sovereign French airspace."

"It was an emergency," the young man said. "An unavoidable happenstance that wouldn't have occurred if you'd kept the lines of communications open and shut the power down yourselves."

The man on the screen was turning red.

"We're going to have other diplomatic problems over this," the man next to Lois said, "but at least it's over with."

"We still have to deal with the rifts," Lois said.

"The system was running a third as long as they did the last time. We can handle that," the man said confidently.

Lois wished she felt so sure.

As he moved the magnet slightly, the cold hit him like a wave. It wasn't just liquid helium; it was a cold deeper than that of space.

It was the cold of the place between the end of one universe and the beginning of the next, and as he moved the magnet the beam was deflected and it hit the mass of concrete and earth

behind him with the power of a bomb.

The wreckage rained around him, but he was relieved to hear the machine no longer humming. It was silent at last, and he wondered just how long it had been on-line.

A moment was all it took to return to the control room, where an American woman and three Swiss scientists were sitting with guns held on their former captors.

"How long was it on?" he asked.

"Ninety seconds," the small Frenchman said. "But there is no way to tell if the effect is going to be the same. We didn't have this sort of sensor echo before, and having two other universes in synch may exaggerate the effect." Clark looked down at the bleeding scientist on the floor and sighed.

"The police are going to be here in about four minutes. It may take them a little longer to get through the building. Can you hold these men until they get here?"

The blonde woman nodded. She held the gun competently, as did both of the Swiss scientists. Given that they'd likely had military training it didn't surprise him. The woman did a little.

She smiled up at him, and Clark noticed the smaller Frenchman staring daggers at him. "I grew up in Texas with a lot of brothers."

Clark nodded. He turned to the bleeding scientist on the floor and said, "I'm going to take you to the hospital."

At the rate things were going this was only the beginning.

"The rifts are bigger this time around," Lois said, staring at the satellite pictures. "It looks like they're talking longer to form."

"But you think these are going to stick around a little longer," the general beside her said.

"I've seen at least a dozen come and go, and none of them lasted this long."

"You were just seeing the aftershock that occurred after the first set of rifts," Dr. Ledderman said.

"Perhaps these are just going to be the same ... "

"There are more of them too," Lois said, nodding toward the screen.

One of the analysts helpfully brought up a screen of the first set of rifts, which he colored green. The second set he colored red.

"It's going to be wider spread," one of them said. "Maybe hitting as far south as South America."

"We're going to need to step up the evacuation of Denver," one man said quietly.

"How long to we have?" another man asked.

"Whatever it is that is causing the rifts doesn't seem to move," Dr. Ledderman said. "It just seems to move because the earth is moving along underneath it. Because it expands, it ends up looking like a cone."

"So we have about three hours before it hits the East Coast," the first man said. "And another two or three hours before it hits Denver."

"I hope it'll be enough time."

"It'll have to be."

"As of this moment, we are in a state of national emergency. All air traffic is suspended and with the exception of the citizens of Denver Colorado, we ask that you remain within your homes."

Junior stared at the small flickering television. The President wasn't in his usual office; from the hum, it sounded as though he was broadcasting from Air Force One.

As speeches went, it was a little clumsy and forced, but Junior suspected that the speechwriters hadn't been on the plane. He had no doubt that the speech was being watched from around the world.

After all, it was on every channel.

"Most of the rifts have proven to be relatively benign in the past, so there is no reason to panic, but there is reason for concern."

Junior felt his granduncle's hand on his shoulder. The old man was looking better since he'd been back on his medications.

"They're going to call you in," he said.

At Junior's look, he said, "What else are they going to do?"

"All National Guard units are going to be mobilized, and I ask again that people remain in their homes to leave streets open for emergency responders."

The telephone began to ring, and Junior sighed.

Cyrus smiled at his grandnephew and said, "Have I told you how proud I am of you?"

"The problem is that he can't be everywhere," Lois said. "He's been working off of news reports, but those have to be filtered and sometimes they don't get through until after the fact."

"We're mobilizing the National Guard and all the

Army units we can," one analyst said. Everyone knew that most of the National Guard units had already been deployed to Iraq; the remaining units would be stretched thin. "It would be helpful if he could work with us, instead of against us."

"We need a way to filter the information in one central location," Lois said, "we won't know which rifts are bad until we have eyes on the ground."

The analyst stared at Lois for a moment, and then looked around. "What do you think this place is for?"

Lois shrugged slightly. "We'll see."

Her experiences with FEMA hadn't impressed her with the federal government's ability to collate large amounts of information and quickly get a grasp of the big picture. Of course, the military was a completely different animal, and it tended to be better organized.

"Get me in touch with CERN."

Piers stared at the blood on the floor where Lars had been lying. Because he'd stepped forward, his friend was going to live, but thousands or millions of people were going to be put at risk.

It didn't help that the American blonde kept shooting irritated looks at him. He wished she'd keep an eye on the men on the floor. A woman holding a gun made him feel nervous.

He felt irritated that she was looking at him as though he'd failed some sort of personal test of courage. He'd done what he'd done to save lives, not take them. If he'd realized just what he was doing, he'd have made a different decision.

The hollow feeling in his stomach made him feel worse.

When the telephone rang, he was disgusted to realize that he'd jumped. Grabbing the telephone, he said, "Hello?"

The woman's voice on the other end of the line was just as irritating as the blonde staring at him.

"He'd flying Lars Johanssen to the hospital." He listened to the voice on the other line. "No, the Swiss one. Lars has a crush on a nurse there."

The blonde threw him a dirty look and he shrugged. "It's true!"

It wasn't his fault that women seemed to like Lars.

He listened to the voice on the other end of the line and then sighed. "It's only ... yes."

Setting the telephone receiver down on the desk, he stepped closer to the rubble around the hole in the wall. "SUPERMAN! YOU HAVE A TELEPHONE CALL!"

He'd never felt so stupid.

"He can hear anything in a thirty mile radius, more

or less," Lois said, "b-ut there's a lot to filter out. Certain things like his name catch his attention and that's why the Chinese thing worked. I was hoping that at least one unit was within thirty miles of him, and since they were scattered ... "

Lois brightened as she listened to the voice on the other end of the line.

"I need you to meet me outside the White House. I'm going to help coordinate the rescue operations and there's something I have to give you."

The formerly quiet conference room was now as full of noise as a telemarketing center at dinner time. Every person in the room was on a telephone with at least one other person, if not more, and several of them had scattered to the side conference rooms to get more quiet in which to work.

"The Secret Service won't shoot at you this time, I promise," Lois said, glancing up at the secret service man standing next to her. He nodded grimly.

"Just get here."

"Any one of us could work as his liaison," the analyst beside her said.

"He trusts me," Lois said. "And besides, my doing it frees up one of you to do something else."

"He's on his way," the analyst on the other side of her said.

"I'd better head for the front," Lois said. "He'll be expecting me."

It wasn't until she reached the White House lawn that she realized there was an audience. In the distance she could see the crowd staring at her through the fence.

"Don't they know they are supposed to go home?" Lois murmured.

The Secret Service agent beside her shook his head. "They are tourists. They aren't the brightest group either."

It was the sound of the crowd in the distance that alerted her to look up.

He was coming in fast, and Lois could see the men around her stiffening instinctively. When he landed and walked forward, however, they relaxed, although their expression of calm readiness remained.

"Are you all right?" Clark asked.

"You keep asking me that," Lois said. "I'm fine."

He stared at her for a long moment before nodding to himself.

"I stopped it in time," Clark said. "But there was something wrong ... "

"We know. CERN is briefing Dr. Ledderman as we speak."

Lois turned to the Secret Service man beside her and held out her hand. She turned back and showed

him the small device she was carrying.

Clark raised an eyebrow. "A hearing aid?"

"It's a cell phone," she said. "You should have service anywhere in the contiguous United States. With it, I'll be able to clue you in on the places that are going to need your help."

He nodded.

She reached up to place it in his ear and then realized that his eyes were on her. She flushed, realizing suddenly just how close she was standing to him. She forced herself to go through the motions of placing it in his ear.

"This will go behind your belt," she said.

His hands covered hers for a moment as he took the main unit from her.

"You won't lose it, will you?"

"Lose one wallet and a few capes," he muttered, but there was a twinkle in his eye.

"There has to be a line of sight with the satellites," Lois said, "So it won't work underground."

At fourteen dollars a minute, Lois hoped the service was everything it was touted to be.

She realized that he hadn't released her hands a moment later and she looked up at him, suddenly more aware of him than ever.

"I ... " he said. "You make me feel ... "

He was struggling for words and Lois felt a moment of sympathy. She knew exactly how he felt because she was feeling

that way herself.

She pulled him down to her and kissed him.

Feeling the earth moving had always seemed like a hackneyed cliché, something bad writers used when they couldn't come up with anything more creative.

But in this case Lois felt her center of balance giving way and she felt suddenly dizzy. She closed her eyes and it was as though the entire world faded away from around her.

It wasn't until she heard the cheers from some people in the crowd that she opened her eyes and saw the flashes of photographs being taken.

Damn.

Although she was a reporter, this wasn't something she wanted to share with the entire world. It was going to go out on YouTube, and it was only going to fan the flames of the bigots who were trying to kill her.

She smiled up at Clark anyway.

"There are some things we ought to talk about," she said, "When this is all over. Preferably not over a military phone line."

He nodded quietly, but still didn't let go of her hand.

"It's time to get to work," she said finally.

A moment later he was airborne.

Staring down at the choppy gray Atlantic waters, Charlie sighed. "What are we supposed to be looking for again?"

"Storms in the sky that shouldn't be there."

Glancing up at the oppressive cloud cover, he shook his head. "And how are we supposed to tell if a storm shouldn't be there or not?"

The man beside him shook his head. "Hell if I know. You can't believe half the things they say on television these days. They're claiming Superman is real."

"Why do you think they have us looking out for weird storms?"

"Who cares? They only have us looking for the next four hours, so just keep an eye out for anything strange."

The crack of thunder in the distance was sudden but not unexpected. It had been looking like it would rain all day.

"So what would you call strange then?"

Staring out at the sea, the man beside him ignored his question. "When did the fog roll in?"

There was a sudden smell of ozone, and both men instinctively stepped back from the rail.

The shadowy shape rising from the water was a surprise, and both men took another step back as it loomed above them for a moment before retreating back into the water.

Charlie stared at the retreating figure.

"I guess I'd call that weird."

Seeing the Loch Ness monster in the middle of the Atlantic had to qualify by anyone's definition of the word.

"We're getting the first reports in from Navy ships in the Atlantic and from the coast guard," one of the analysts announced. "And we have a problem. They're reporting rifts at sea level. There has been at least one sighting of a plesiosaur."

Dr. Ledderman scowled. "The rifts haven't just widened horizontally then ... they are appearing at different elevations."

Lois said, "You need to warn people ... these things are invisible."

The thought of thousands of people driving into rifts and never coming back was horrifying. Worse, it might be possible to walk into your kitchen from the living room and suddenly find yourself somewhere else.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" one of the generals asked. "Run the damn thing in reverse or

something?"

"Even if we could, it's damaged now and would take weeks to repair," Dr. Ledderman said. "And it wouldn't stop the generators in the other universes from running."

Lois murmured into her microphone. "The rifts are going to be appearing lower. You need to watch out for things on the ground."

Things had gone from bad to worse. As long as the rifts remained in the sky it was likely that most places would remain unaffected, unless a rift to somewhere like the Denver rift was opened.

Dr. Ledderman said, "The good news is that it looks like the dispersal isn't going to be as wide as we thought horizontally. The new rifts are wider apart and more dispersed once they leave the original pattern."

"So there won't be a rift every five feet on the ground?" Lois asked. If there were, it would mean the end of civilization as half the world's populace ended up somewhere else.

"Hopefully the main activity will still be at the same level," Dr. Ledderman said.

"You think we'll still see the same universes we saw before?" one of the Generals asked.

"The aftershock Ms. Lane experienced led Mr. Kent back to his same universe. That may be just an effect of the same rift reopening. However, I'm hoping that the reason we saw this was that the points of intersection between universes are the same."

"Shouldn't they change when the Earth moves through the galaxy?" The younger man looked up at Dr. Ledderman. "We're already thousands of miles from where we were ..."

"We're moving more than eleven million miles a day on a galactic scale," Dr. Ledderman said. "All I can think is that gravity is having an effect, dragging the rifts along behind the different alternate Earths. Why the rifts seem to be stationary with respect to the earth's core I don't know."

"We won't know if we're seeing the same universes until the storms hit Delaware," Lois said. "Clark can look through and see if it's still his universe, if there's time."

"If it is, then Denver's in trouble."

"We'd better hope the universes continue to match up from the last time," Dr. Ledderman said. "If they don't, there's no way of telling which city is going to be hit with poison gas until it's already too late."

"It's not something I want to discuss right now," he said irritably into his cell phone. The other passengers were glancing at him covertly and he was uncomfortably aware that he was the only person in

this section of the train on the telephone. "I deserve a chance to see my daughters before the end of the year."

Divorce was an ugly thing when it was only between two consenting adults, but when you brought children to the mix it was abhorrent, especially when you had one parent trying to use custody as a weapon against the other.

"If I have to call my lawyer again about his, you're going to regret it!" he said finally.

He closed his telephone with a snap. When it buzzed again he glanced at the screen and pushed a button. Arguing over this wasn't going to do either of them any good until they could calm down.

The few other passengers on this section of the train looked away quickly. At least the train was sparsely populated at this time of the day. He preferred traveling during off peak hours to avoid the crush.

In this case it meant there were fewer witnesses to his argument with his ex- wife, which was a further bonus.

He heard the pattering of little feet as the door to the section in front of them opened. A little girl, barely school age, came skipping through and behind her he could see a harried looking mother trying to carry a toddler in one arm and pulling a stroller with a baby in the other.

"Slow down!" the woman said irritably.

He stood to help her when suddenly everything went white.

The front of the cabin was gone and the little girl was falling backwards. He lunged forward and grabbed her by the arm, pulling her forward into his arms.

It was then that he saw that there was no sign of the track. Instead of the rolling hills of the Philadelphia line, there was only death, a dry riverbed with a jungle rising on both sides.

He grabbed the little girl and wrapped his body around hers. When the train car finally slid to a stop, it was immediately slammed into from behind and the two of them went flying through the air.

Behind them, without a track to stand on, the train cars began to slam together and back further still, in another world the train began to derail.

All of this happened as a mother stared in horror at the suddenly missing rear half of the car- and train, that had been cut in two.

"There is a train derailment in Philadelphia," Lois said grimly. "Witnesses say it cut the train in half."

"Which line?" Clark's voice was coming through clearly. Maybe it was going to be worth the fourteen

dollars a minute.

"It parallels I-95," Lois said. "About three miles from the southern Philadelphia border."

"That'll do," he said grimly.

Lois glanced around her at the men and women who finally seemed united in something other than political cynicism. Most of them had joined the military because they believed that there was something precious about America, something that could only be protected by blood and sweat and tears.

Politics and grim reality had worn that idealism off most of them, but it was still there at their core. There was an energy to them now, a clarity of purpose that wasn't there before.

This wasn't some politically confused war in a distant country. This wasn't a situation where there were a thousand confusing shades of gray. This at last was clear cut.

The country was in imminent danger and they were out to fight it. In the end, the entire world was at risk.

Lois only hoped they all made it through.

Consciousness returned unexpectedly.

He was surprised to wake up. He should have been killed by being thrown off the train, or crushed by the thousands of tons of metal coming from behind. Instead he'd been thrown to the side and the oncoming train had twisted off in another direction.

Moving cautiously, he started to stretch out. He grimaced in pain. His back protested his move sharply, and he hoped that he hadn't done anything permanently damaging.

The little girl in his arms groaned, and he was grateful that she was still alive.

He forced himself to stretch again, and he wondered how long it would take the ambulances to arrive. The smartest thing to do would be to lie here and wait for help.

The little girl in his arms began to cry and he sighed.

"It's going to be all right," he said. "My name is Ben, and I'm a teacher."

At her expression he said, "I teach people about bugs."

Best to keep things simple. As she smiled shyly up at him, he knew he'd made the right choice. Children trusted teachers, and at this age they still

liked bugs. She was a little young to understand about college tenure and marital problems and financial stress.

If it hadn't been for the divorce, he'd have been driving to work instead of being stuck out in the

middle of nowhere.

He stared up at the canyon walls. He wasn't sure how they'd veered off the track and onto a dry riverbed, but he knew that this was a major disaster. There were going to be plenty of lawsuits over this, even if no one had actually been killed. If anyone actually had been killed it would be worse.

When he didn't hear anyone coming for him, he carefully rolled onto his back, ignoring the bite of the gravel, scrabbling to get a foothold in the loose earth underneath.

Three cars were piled on top of each other, with several more stretched out behind. They'd been in the rear third of the train, and the front two thirds were nowhere in sight.

Grabbing the little girl's hand, he muttered, "Let's go find your mommy."

"The trees look funny," the little girl said, staring wide eyed at the scene around them.

"I don't know what happened to them," he said.

"But the sooner we get out of here the better I'll feel."

As they walked hand in hand through the gravel, he noticed that there didn't seem to be any power lines or telephone poles. He couldn't hear any sounds of traffic and there didn't seem to be any sounds of human existence at all, except for the sounds of people shouting from further back along the line.

The first three cars were piled on top of each other, and several cars behind that were turned on their sides. As they came to the first car that was upright, he saw a small group of people standing outside the train.

"What happened?" A heavysset man was the first to speak as he saw them.

As they came around the corner, he could see that three other passengers were helping people crawl through the door of the car ahead of them.

"I don't know," he said. "Some kind of explosion or something. Ripped the car I was in in half."

"You look ok," the man said skeptically.

He shrugged. "I don't know what happened. One moment the front of the train was there, the next it was gone."

"We've got injured!" someone shouted.

The group in front of him didn't look particularly athletic. He sighed and turned to the girl. "There are people hurt inside there. I have to help them."

Glancing up at a matronly looking woman, he said, "Could you keep an eye on her?"

"This your kid?" the heavysset man asked; apparently the woman was his wife.

"No. We're looking for her mother." He stared at the man for a moment. "Are you going to help?"

The man nodded after a moment and gestured

toward his wife.

The little girl's hand tightened in his and he said, "It'll be all right. I'll check on you in a little while."

"I can't get any reception," he heard a teenager complain behind him.

He reached for his own telephone, only to discover that he'd lost it in the crash. At the expressions on the faces of several of the others he grimaced.

Great. They'd apparently crashed in a dead zone.

He could only hope that wasn't prophetic.

It took Clark longer to find the train than he would have thought, because only two cars were in view.

One of them was bisected, and by squinting he could see that it was stuck partially inside the portal with the majority of the car being on the other side and invisible to him.

The call had apparently come from the portion of the train which had passed through before the rift had formed.

He was going to have to go through and assess the injuries.

"I'm going to need emergency teams here," he murmured into his headset. "I can't even begin to assess the casualties yet, and the majority of it is on the other side. I'm going to be out of contact while I go across to assess the situation."

"Don't get stuck on the other side," Lois said faintly.

He frowned. Reception was poor here. Some sort of interference from the rift?

"I'll do my best," he said.

He was sweaty and exhausted, but they were making good time. As he helped more and more people get free from the compartments ahead, more and more people turned to help him. They'd formed a line, passing the injured carefully from person to person.

It was strange how easily they all slipped into it, a clarity of purpose that stripped them of differences, white or black, Democrat or Republican, Arab or Jew. They were united in their need to help each other.

For these few moments all they saw of each other was someone in need.

He'd found two nurses and a doctor on board, as well as a paramedic. The paramedic was in the front, assessing injuries and checking to see which passengers couldn't be moved. Under ordinary circumstances, they'd have been left until help was to come, but it wasn't at all clear that help was coming.

It had been almost an hour and no one had come yet, and out of two hundred people, not one had been

able to get any sort of reception at all.

One teenager had walked to the back of the train and reported seeing the rear car bisected, just as the front car was.

As he emerged into the sunlight, he blinked as the heavysset man approached him. "There's movement on the ridge," he said, glancing nervously up the sides of the canyon.

He could see three of the younger teenagers crawling up the steep sides of the canyon heading for the crest of the ridge. Instinct made his stomach knot. Something wasn't right about this situation.

"Have you heard any animal sounds at all?"

"No birds, no familiar insect noises ... it's been quiet except for the sound of the wind."

"Then ... "

He didn't get a chance to continue as the boys started screaming and sliding down the slope.

What was following them was impossible, something out of a nightmare. A swarm of yellow and brown insects far larger than anything he'd ever seen in nature.

"Everybody needs to get in the car!" he screamed.

Working as an etymologist didn't pay the kind of salary his wife had liked, but it did let him recognize the species that was coming.

Japanese giant hornets ... three inches long and capable of injecting poisons so powerful they could melt human tissue. They were vicious and deadly and known to kill between twenty and forty people a year in Japan.

It didn't make sense. They didn't exist in this part of the world, and certainly not in such numbers.

The boys were running as quickly as they could, but it was apparent that it wasn't going to be quick enough.

He grabbed the little girl and shoved her into the train car. There was a stampede on both entrances, and at least it looked like people were going to be able to fit.

The swarm descended on the boys like a biblical plague, but a moment before it hit them a sudden breeze arose. It struck with the power of a fist and the boys were visibly staggered, but the swarm was dispersed behind them.

The red and blue figure floating above them was a sudden shock, and he felt his world suddenly shifting on its axis. A lifetime of devotion to science and biology hadn't prepared him for the existence of Superman.

"We're going to have to move quickly," Superman said. "The rift is closing gradually, and there will come

a point where it will be too small for anyone to pass through. At that point you'll be stuck here for at least three days."

Glancing at the ridge and knowing what was on the other side, Ben noticed several of the other passengers reaching the same conclusion.

Staying wasn't an option.

"I need everyone to hold on and keep their hands and feet away from the sides of the car," he said.

A moment later the door shut behind him.

Everyone looked at each other and then almost as a group decision huddled together in the center of the aisle. By this point the car was full, with some unhappy people forced to sit on the aisle seats while others huddled in the middle.

No one was prepared for the jolt as the train began to move backwards.

"He's pushing the whole train," someone muttered in awe.

Shaking his head, Ben said, "He's pulling it."

These cars hadn't opened, and there were still passengers in several of the cars behind them. There hadn't been time to transfer them all to just two or three cars.

Pulling them was the only thing that made sense, though the sheer power that it would have taken to pull thousands of tons of weight over gravel and sand was mind boggling.

It wasn't until the first telephone began to ring that people realized that it was over. First one ring, and then another and then another again. It seemed as though the entire car was filled with the sound of ringing telephones and for the first time it wasn't the sound of annoyance or just the noise pollution of daily life.

It was the ringing bells of victory.

"He went back in with one of the nurses and a doctor," the voice on the other end of the line said.

"May I ask who's speaking?" Lois asked, struggling to keep her voice calm. They were already getting reports from other parts of the country and he was spending too long on this. If he spent too much time he was going to end up trapped in some sort of hellish other world and the people of Denver were going to be lost.

"Professor Benjamin Hanover," the voice said. "I work with bugs."

The man's voice had a sense of gentle irony to it.

"There he is! It looks like that's going to be the last batch. Oh ... that was close."

"What?" Lois asked.

"He just lost half his cape."

Lois closed her eyes and tried to keep her teeth from grinding. Even he wouldn't survive being cut in half, or having part of him in one world and another part on the other.

If he kept taking risks like that she was going to kill him.

Dropping her cell phone was just another indignity in the wake of a terrible day. Kristin stared at the cracked screen and grimaced. She didn't have the money to replace it now, not with casting calls being so slim and prices going up.

Worse, this

wasn't even her stop. She'd been so distracted trying to get in touch with her boss that she'd stepped off one stop too early.

It had been just one thing after another. Her alarm hadn't woken her and she'd been late for her first casting call. Her second and third hadn't been any better, and if she didn't get to work she wasn't going to be able to make her half of the rent this month.

To top it all off, she was having a bad hair day. It wasn't all that humid, but for some reason there seemed to be a lot of static electricity in the air.

As she shoved the cell phone into her pocket, Kristin noticed that the subway station was deserted. It wasn't the busy portion of the day, but she'd never seen a deserted station at this time of day.

It was an eerie feeling, and years of being a city dweller made her instinctively take a step back.

Eerily, the lights flickered, and she grimaced. If she'd been watching a horror movie, she'd have been yelling for the heroine to get out. Standing alone in a deserted subway station wasn't the act of a smart woman.

Still ... the train was due in less than five minutes, and once she got on there would surely be other people.

Click, clack.

The sound echoed from the darkened expanse of the subway tunnel and Kristin took another step back. She wasn't alone, and if there was some crazy homeless guy waiting to jump out at her she wanted to be ready.

Click, clack.

The sound was coming from the other end of the tunnel, much closer to her and Kristin froze. She began to slowly back up toward the turnstiles. There should have been attendants there, but recent modernization efforts to automate the system had left the place deserted.

Click, clack, click, clack.

The footsteps behind her were moving faster and

faster and coming closer and closer. Kristin glanced behind her and screamed as she saw something scaled with huge teeth. She shoved her way through the turnstile and ran up the stairs.

The sounds of footsteps behind her had stopped, but Kristin didn't stop running. She screamed again and moved up the stairs three steps at a time.

As she came up onto the street, she was shocked to see that the street was almost deserted. It was like some sort of post apocalyptic nightmare, and the few people who were on the street looked as shocked and confused as she did.

She glanced back into the darkness of the staircase and decided that discretion was the better part of valor. She began walking quickly down the street until she finally met up with a group of three women who were walking slowly.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Normally accosting another New Yorker was considered rude, but these women looked concerned.

"I don't know. The streets just started clearing out a half hour ago and nobody said anything."

"I thought I heard sirens earlier, but they were cut off," the second woman said.

"Did anybody see anything on television?"

The first woman lifted her head slightly and said, "I don't watch television."

It sounded like a point of pride with her. Kristin glanced at the other two who shook their heads.

Kristin watched television but she'd been busy.

Staggering toward them, a bearded man dressed in multiple coats and staring fixedly said, "It's the end of the world."

All four women took an unconscious step back. Scaled things with teeth were scary, but aggressive homeless people were a danger they were all familiar with.

"It's all coming apart," he said. "What's real ... unreal ..."

He took another step toward them and vanished.

Kristin stared at the spot where the man had been, and then she blinked. She glanced quickly at the other women, who looked just as confused as she did.

A moment later the man staggered backward, his face fearful.

"Run," he said, before turning and doing exactly that.

Kristin's stomach knotted, and she instinctively took a step around the place the man had vanished. It was lucky that she did, because a moment later a huge reptilian head emerged and snapped at her.

For the first time Kristin was glad that her heels had snapped off earlier in the day, because she'd

brought her sneakers to work with her. She screamed as she ran, glancing back to see that the head was apparently too large to fit through whatever entrance to Hell it was coming through.

She felt herself yanked to a stop. She screamed again and then stared in horror as she realized that her arm was missing. It felt wet, and at first she thought it was with blood. As she fell back her arm reappeared, and she realized that it had simply vanished like the hobo had.

She froze as she realized that there could be invisible portals anywhere, that with a single step she could be in the home of those scaly things.

When she heard the rumble of a vehicle approaching, she felt a sudden burst of hope. As the vehicle rounded the corner she saw that it was a SWAT van. She waved frantically and the van slowed.

The driver stared at her. "You need to get off the street, Miss. It's not safe."

"There's a thing right here," she said, pointing at the place her arm had vanished. "And another thing back down the street."

The man nodded and spoke into a microphone on his shoulder.

Several men filed out of the back of the van cautiously and they approached the location she'd indicated. Several of them snapped out long folding canes, like Kristin had seen used by the blind, and they began to check the area methodically, using the canes to test the size and shape of the invisible thing.

They began spraying a careful circle onto the pavement beneath the thing, along with a cryptic set of numbers.

"I don't think we'll have much of a problem with this one," one of the men said. "It's only a two footer, elevation five feet. If it was on the street it would have been nasty, but ... "

"You know where there's another one?" the leader asked, ignoring the trooper.

Kristin nodded. "There was something trying to get through. I think it was too big."

"What kind of something?"

"It was scaly and had a lot of teeth," she said.

"Like something out of Jurassic Park."

"You saw a dinosaur?"

"There were two smaller ones in the subway tunnel."

"Crap," one of the men said. "Cleanup is going to be ... "

The leader gestured and the men quieted down. "We'll deal with one thing at a time. First we'll deal with the things on the street, then we'll worry about the subway."

The men began to file into the back of the van.

"If you'll ride in the front, you can show us where this other portal was," the leader said.

Kristin hesitated.

"These things are appearing inside people's houses," the man said. "There's not going to be any place safe for at least another half hour."

"It goes away in half an hour?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. No less than that."

Given that the choice was between getting caught by more of those scaly things or riding in an armored truck along with a group of men with guns, Kristin nodded.

Slipping into the passenger's side, Kristin was startled as the man said, "We're going to be going pretty slow. We've already lost two vans to microportals like the one you had your arm stuck in."

At her expression he said, "From one direction they don't even exist. From the other ... it's like hitting an immovable ring. It'll ruin your transmission. They occur at head level too, so watch your head."

As they turned down another side street, she saw what he meant. Three cars were wrecked and burning. And two had large dents in their sides.

"It's playing holy hell with ambulance services and police. If this lasts very long, a lot of people are going to start dying."

"It's not this way," Kristin said.

"We have a detour to make," he said. A moment later they stopped beside one of the burning cars and the men jumped out. They checked the location and quickly circled the area with red spray paint.

They jumped back inside and a few moments later they were back on the road. When they turned down a road which already had circles sprayed, he speeded up, carefully avoiding the boundaries of the circles of paint.

"We'd run out of barricades if we tried to use them," the leader said. "Once an area is cleared we can move a little quicker."

"How did you know there was anything back there?" she asked, gesturing in the direction of the last circle they'd left.

"We've got help," he said, gesturing toward the roof of the vehicle.

"What?" she asked. "Who?"

As they turned the corner and headed for the street she'd been on, she gasped and stared.

Something huge was moving over them. It loomed, like a nightmare from the movies. She'd avoided dinosaur movies as a child because they'd scared her too badly, but this was one even she would recognize.

Apparently the smaller brother of the earlier monster had managed to squeeze through the gate.

Yet it was being pushed backward by an even more familiar figure floating in the air over the street. He was pushing it back, and for all its massive power it wasn't making any headway.

"Him," the man beside her said, grinning.

Kristin couldn't stop staring. For once her unflappability as a New Yorker deserted her and she found herself looking up with her mouth open, as openly as any gawking tourist.

Slowly, her mouth twitched into a grin. For the first time this morning, Kristin felt a sense of elation. Everything was going to be all right.

The voice coming over the loudspeaker was speaking so fast Lois could barely understand it. One of the analysts was recording it and playing it back more slowly to relay to the authorities in New York.

Clark was flying over the city rattling off the locations of the rifts that only he could see. He'd managed to describe the location of rifts throughout a third of Manhattan already.

When the flow of words stopped abruptly, Lois leaned forward.

"What's happening?"

"There's a Tyrannosaurus. I'm pushing it back through the gate."

Dr. Ledderman spoke. "There's

no chance you could just stun or incapacitate it? It would be of enormous value to science."

"I don't think the Bronx Zoo has a Tyrannosaurus cage ready," Clark's voice said dryly. "This thing is twenty foot tall and it weighs seven tons. It'd eat the elephants."

A moment later Lois could hear a sound like firecrackers.

"Is somebody shooting?" she asked.

"The local SWAT team is helping out with some of the smaller ones," Clark's voice said. "It looks like you'll have your specimens, Doctor."

"Well, not me," Dr. Ledderman said, sounding abashed. "I'm just a physicist. I just meant in general."

A moment later Clark's voice came again. "It's through the rift and I've stacked three cars up in front of it. It won't be coming through again."

"How's it looking up there?" one of the generals asked.

"Mostly quiet," Clark said. "Not a lot of people on the streets."

"You don't hear people screaming in their homes?" Lois asked. She winced; she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

"Not much more than normal," Clark's voice said impatiently.

He began rattling off locations and addresses again.

They all glanced at Dr. Ledderman, who shrugged. "Animals don't pack themselves in like humans do. They roam over large areas and the chances of an animal wandering over a particular space is pretty slim."

"We're hearing a lot of reports ... " one of the analysts said.

"Not nearly as many as you'd expect, given the number of rifts. I'll bet that the reason we're getting more traffic on the roads is because some of them were built on old animal trails or near watering holes. Those kinds of places probably have a much higher chance of seeing traffic crossing over. Given that current ground level in Manhattan is higher since humans inhabited it, I expect the subways will have most of the traffic, and hills."

Dr. Ledderman was silent for a moment then said, "Really, I'd expect us to mostly get humans, rats and roaches. Statistically speaking, those would be your best bet, assuming humans are even on the other side. Otherwise, I'd expect more insects than anything."

"So we need to worry about more visitors," one of the generals said flatly.

From the expressions of the people in the room, it was clear that they considered the ones they already had as being more than enough trouble without adding potentially thousands of others.

"They may not even know they're in the wrong world until it's too late," Dr. Ledderman said. "They aren't what worry me."

The men closest to them looked up and stared at him.

"The rifts are numerous and small on this end ... but the pattern seems to be that they are getting less frequent but bigger as they head west. It doesn't look good for Denver."

Lois glanced at the screen in front of her. "It doesn't look good for New Orleans either."

She spoke into the microphone. "Clark, there are reports of flooding in New Orleans, and it hasn't rained in a week."

Dr. Ledderman paled. "Most of that area is below sea level, so a lot of the analogues ... "

Animals might not pass over a certain spot for days, but below sea level there was nothing but water, water and more water.

"Not this time you bastards!"

Junior shifted gears and pushed the accelerator as

hard as he could. Fifty tons of metal moved underneath him pushing forward through the water. The metal tracks shoved against the ground and against all odds the bulldozer moved forward another three feet.

If he could get it close enough, he'd be able to bring the blade down, and the men behind him would be able to move the sandbags forward to block the spray of water.

The water was getting deeper; it was already three feet in places and it looked like the rift had formed in a natural depression. There was no telling how deep it was going to get. At least this water didn't have the sewage smell so ubiquitous around parts of New Orleans these days.

"Get ready!" he shouted at the men behind him.

They were a motley crew. A few National Guardsmen, more men from the local neighborhood, even a few people he'd once have classified as thugs.

There was a look of determination in their eyes that he hadn't seen before. The things that had been happening to New Orleans had been beyond their control, acts of God that left them feeling helpless.

This was something they could fight. It wasn't the only rift, but it was the one they could deal with.

He felt a sense of elation even as they pushed further into the water. This was going to work! For once the power of man would dominate over the power of nature. Fifty tons of metal and ten men were going to stop this part of their city from being violated again, no matter what it took.

The motor began sputtering.

"Son of a ..." he cursed to himself, shifting gears again and giving it every last bit that he had.

Ten feet. Five feet. The bulldozer jerked several times and he hastily pushed the control to bring down the scoop on the front.

The bulldozer shuddered again as the scoop dropped into the water and the engine stalled and died.

For all intents and purposes they were trapped in the middle of an expanding pool of water. It was a situation he would have cursed at anyone else for getting into. Even a small amount of moving water could send cars careening down the street.

Luckily he'd planned ahead.

"We'll have to do it by hand," he said, turning to the others.

Attaching a trailer to the back of a bulldozer wasn't the safest thing to do, but his grandmother's house was in the path of the flood. At least the trailer was loaded with sandbags he'd dumped onto it using the bulldozer scoop.

It was still going to be risky. There was a chance

that someone would fall as they passed the sandbags hand over hand toward the front.

At least he hadn't been stupid enough to try to hit the rift head on. The water on the other side of the rift was a solid wall, and he doubted that even the bulldozer would have been able to force its way through that kind of pressure.

Loading the bags from behind was going to be easier until they reached the level of the rift, and then the wall of water was just going to push the bags out of his hands.

He didn't see anything else he could do though other than hope to get enough sand in front of the wall to slow it down.

Crawling out onto the scoop, he felt a moment of uneasiness. He'd chosen the most dangerous job for himself.

Somehow it seemed important to make his grandmother proud.

When he was set, he said, "Get moving. We don't have all day!"

Glancing back at them, he saw that none of them were moving. Instead they were staring up in the air.

He glanced upward, then felt himself gasp.

He'd dismissed the news reports as cruel pranks, and he'd dismissed his great uncle's story as just another hallucination.

Yet floating above him with a thousand pound bag of sand under each arm was a figure in blue and red.

"You're the angel," he said, his eyes widening in realization.

"You know Cyrus?" the man said.

"He's family," Junior said.

The man smiled slightly and said, "While it looks like you guys are doing a good job, I was wondering if you could use some help?"

Junior scrambled out of the scoop quickly, aware that it would be too dangerous for the man to drop the sand with him in the scoop.

As he crawled back into the driver's seat, he could hear something in the distance, even through the roar of the water.

It was coming from the left of him and also from the right.

As the bags began dropping rapidly, he realized what that sound was. It was the sound of men cheering.

A moment later his voice and that of his crew were added to that sound as the last of twenty sandbags sealed off the portal. "Say hi to Cyrus for me," the man said from above him.

A moment later he was gone.

Dying for a story was bad enough, but the thought that the story might not even make it on the air was maddening.

Anita Mendoza straightened her shoulders and then looked grimly into the camera and tried not to cough. The exhaust fumes this close to the highway were pervasive, but it was important that she be here.

Cell phone networks were down all over the country. So many people were calling, trying to find out if their loved ones had survived or were surviving, that the call volume was overwhelming the networks. She'd tried to call her mother, but had only gotten a busy signal. No one on the rest of the crew had managed to reach their families either.

Her satellite feed was all right for now, but there were no guarantees that anything was going to get out.

Interviewing Superman on that shipping dock had seemed like the break she'd been waiting for. It had done great things for her career, getting her a shiny new job with a major network. She'd gotten a higher salary and a higher profile. When they'd called she'd jumped at the offer.

It hardly seemed like it had just been a couple of days. She'd taken the job, and with it had come an airline ticket and a story.

This was supposed to be her first big story for the network. Instead it was going to be her last.

"My name is Anita Mendoza, and I am reporting from Interstate 70 ten miles west of the beltway in Denver Colorado. With all airline traffic stopped, people are resorting to other means to evacuate the city."

She gestured behind her, where from their position on the hill they could see traffic stretched out for miles. "According to reports traffic on Interstate 70 is gridlocked. Traffic stretches back into the city for a distance of seventeen miles. My sources tell me that the other major highways heading west, north and south are all similarly gridlocked."

People had panicked, and in their haste, there had been accidents. Now people were trapped. Many of the people on the road weren't even in their cars. They were standing outside of them in small groups, craning their heads to stare off into the distance.

"Cell phone traffic all across

the country is down, and with the deadline rapidly approaching, it is apparent that for the majority of these people, this is the end of the line."

Anita sighed slightly. "There's no news helicopter waiting to pull me and my crew out. All such vehicles were commandeered several hours ago to transport city officials and their families."

It was difficult to keep the anger and bitterness out

of her voice. What those people had done was criminal and craven, and she hoped that whatever came out of the wreckage of all of this, they'd pay for deserting everyone.

Her parents were watching, and she wanted them to be proud of her. She stared into the camera and said, "All of this while tens of thousands of poor and middle class families are stranded on the road or in their homes waiting for the end to come."

Clearing her throat slightly, she said, "We'll continue to report for as long as we are able."

She saw something in the distance and her cameraman turned.

All she could see was a streak of color, red and blue moving almost faster than the eye could see. It streaked ahead, out of sight.

Cars began honking up ahead and she could hear an unfamiliar sound from up ahead.

"I hear something," she said. "It sounds like ... cheering."

A moment later her cameraman filmed a crushed car flying smoothly overhead, borne aloft by a familiar figure in blue and red.

"He really is Superman," Anita murmured to herself. Realizing she was on camera again she flushed and said, "We have a new development. Traffic is starting to move."

When the lights went out, there were a few screams and Melody could hear the sounds of people sobbing in the darkness. She held tight to her father's hand and listened to him praying under his breath.

The last of the busses had left an hour ago, and it was becoming clear to everyone they weren't coming back. The few parishioners who had cars were reporting that the interstates were jammed with the cars of those desperate to leave.

The wealthy had left days ago, and all that were left were the people least able to take care of themselves.

According to her father, the church was on a hill at least, so it might provide some sort of protection from the bad gas that everyone said was coming. There was something the adults weren't saying though, a look in their eyes that frightened Melody in ways that nothing else had.

She'd seen that look before, when her family had lost their homes in New Orleans. It was a look of defeat and anger and hopelessness.

Everyone had gathered together in the old church, and people who hadn't spoken to each other in years had hurried to mend fences. They'd said what needed to be said, because in their heart of hearts everyone

knew this was going to be their last day on earth.

Her father had tried to get her on one of those busses, but they'd been too crowded. There weren't many children in this crowd; most of her friends had managed to catch the bus, although there wasn't any guarantee that they'd ever see their family or friends again.

Melody felt people moving around her as people began to calm down.

That calm shattered a moment later as the sirens began to sound. It was a sound she'd only heard before when there were tornadoes coming, but Melody knew this meant something else, something much worse.

A tornado would destroy houses and individuals. This was going to destroy everyone.

She leaned against the window and tried to stare outside. It seemed to take forever for her eyes to adjust, especially as there were no street lights outside. The only light came from the fullness of the moon, and viewed through a distorted piece of stained glass, she couldn't see anything.

The sound of the sirens droned on and on, and deep in her soul Melody realized that this was the end of the world.

"Come away from there," she heard her father say distantly. "It's not safe."

He pulled her on top of one of the pews, as he'd once put her on top of furniture in the face of the rushing waters. "We'll be safer up here."

She felt someone unfamiliar hug her from the other side and she stiffened before relaxing. Human contact was what she needed at the moment, and it comforted her a little.

In the darkness she heard a deep voice begin to sing. It was a song that she'd heard as long as she could remember, but she'd never heard it with such conviction or beauty.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound ... "

Another voice, shaking a little took up the song, and then another and another. Soon she found her own voice rising with the others.

For a little while, at least, their voices drowned out the sounds of the sirens and they were together.

It wasn't going to be enough. He'd cleared the roads to the west, but there wasn't going to be time to get everyone clear. It was only a matter of time before there were more accidents. People were nervous and edgy and in a hurry. It was a bad combination.

He could hear the sirens starting in the distance, and he knew what they meant. It was time to face the rift that had already killed dozens of people.

There was no way of telling just how large it was

going to be this time around. The East Coast rifts had been larger in the air but smaller as they'd approached the ground. The rifts had been growing gradually larger as they'd moved west.

The rift above the petroleum plant had already been a large one the first time around, at least as large as the Metropolis rift. This time it was going to be larger. The question was just how much larger.

The sky was dark, and the sun was just falling behind the horizon. To the people down below it was already night; the high mountains brought sunset early in these parts.

The petroleum plant was deserted, with everything securely locked away and wind whistling across the deserted parking lot.

There was a memorial in the middle of the lot, a small shrine covered in flowers and pictures of the men who had died. It sat abandoned and forlorn.

Clark spoke into his microphone. "I'm about to deal with the Denver Rift. I don't expect to be available for a while. Unless you have something that's going to kill more people than this will, don't call."

Lois's voice spoke. "We understand. The people here want to thank you for everything you've done."

A chorus of voices rang out in his ear.

"I want to thank you," Lois said. Her voice sounded hoarse, throaty, and Clark had a moment where he wondered exactly what she meant.

The sky began to glimmer, reminding him a little of the aurora borealis. It took him a moment to realize that this was it.

The rift seemed to cover half the sky.

"Oh ... " he said.

"What?"

"It's here," Clark said. "And it's huge."

Driving the news van across the median and onto private property hadn't been easy, even with the easing congestion on the roads. Anita comforted herself with the knowledge of just who was in the air above them.

If he really was everything he said he was, then they were going to be safe.

If he wasn't, then it wasn't likely that they were going to be able to get far enough to be safe anyway. Traffic was still moving slowly, and it was only a matter of time before another accident or three stopped traffic dead in its tracks again.

If she was going to die, she was going to be remembered. This was her chance to show the world what she was really made of.

She'd given them Superman. Now she was going to prove it.

Setting up the cameras took only a matter of moments. She stared up in the sky at him, and a moment later a sound that reminded her of a jet engine emerged from above, even though not a single gust of wind touched her skin.

Yet all she could see was him floating in the middle of the air standing up.

It took her a moment to remember.

The rifts were invisible. The gas was invisible. Visually this was going to be a bust.

"We may as well pack it up and try some of the back roads," she told her cameraman. "Let's not make this any harder for him than it has to be."

There wasn't any point in risking her life if nothing exciting was going to happen.

This sky glimmered and shone above him with a sort of ethereal beauty. It was something he wished he could share with Lois, although to the naked eye it would have been invisible.

Taking as deep a breath as he could, he began to blow.

This wasn't his most powerful ability, and it wasn't one he'd have chosen for himself. Yet at this moment, the fate of the people on the highway and the people back in down depended on his ability to hold back the wind.

The knowledge that there were a thousand rifts opening all across the Midwest even now bothered him. If there had been a way to use sandbags to block the portal away, he'd have done it.

Yet here it was, seemingly covering half the sky, and all he could do was hold the line.

He blew, and for a moment he feared that it wasn't going to be enough. After a moment he realized that he'd increased the pressure on this side enough that nothing was getting through.

Now all he had to do was hope that his breath lasted longer than the portal did. The time it would take to take a single breath would be enough to disperse a massive amount of gas over a huge area. Even tiny amounts would be lethal.

No matter what happened, he had to hold on.

"Is it getting bright outside?" the driver asked.

The cameraman was putting his camera away.

"Get it out," Anita said. She slammed the door to the van shut and said, "You're going to have to shoot it through the windshield."

Half the sky seemed to be brightening above them. Unfortunately, it was the part behind Superman.

"Watch out!" she found herself shouting, forgetting that the reporter was supposed to be simply

an observer, not part of the story.

Then the sky caught fire.

Another rift was opening, and this one was at least half as large as the other one. The sound of thunder almost distracted him, but he forced

himself to keep blowing.

Everything was brightening, and it took him a moment to realize that the new rift was on fire.

It took him a moment to realize what was happening. Although he was holding most of the hydrogen sulfide back, some was still leaking through, at least at the upper levels, and with the fire emerging from the second rift, it was only going to be a matter of time before—

The world exploded into flame and involuntarily he took a breath.

Anita barely had time to scream as the flames engulfed the van. It took her a moment to realize that they were not on fire. Somehow the flames were around them but not touching them.

The heat was rising inside the van, and Anita coughed. It was getting a little hard to breathe.

It took a moment for her light dazzled eyes to see the silhouette of a figure standing in front of the van. Superman's arms were outstretched as though he was going to hold the fire back with his arms.

For a seemingly endless moment, nothing seemed to happen. Finally the monstrous fireball began to move back.

The fireball was massive, covering the entire sky. In truth it was probably only a mile wide, but to Anita it seemed like it covered everything. Worse, it didn't fade or burn away. It was as though the fire was continuously being fed from inside the rift.

The sound of the wind was like a hurricane, but this time it wasn't something to fear. It was the sound of Superman saving them.

Anita glanced at her cameraman. His camera was up and the light was on. They were broadcasting. Whether anyone would see it was anyone's guess.

He pushed, and the fire moved back. His only consolation was that the fire seemed to be burning the hydrogen sulfide off as fast as it could enter the atmosphere. He was tempted to grab the van and run, letting a small area burn, but there were cars just across the ridge.

Worse, he could hear the sounds of people singing just down the road. There was a church on a hill there, and the people had to see the light of this by now. They should have been screaming in fear or fleeing for

their lives.

Instead they were singing, raising their voices over the sound of sirens and wind and fire.

He couldn't let them down. He wouldn't. If there was breath left within him, he'd stop them from burning.

Clark felt light headed, but he continued to blow.

Staying as close to the flames as he could without actually being inside them, he beat them back one step at a time. If he could get them close enough to the top he'd be able to dash away and get a gulp of air before the flames were able to rush down and envelope everyone.

As he closed with the first rift, he tried to stare into the second. He didn't know where the fire was coming from, but there didn't seem to be an end to it and no matter how he blew, there always seemed to be more.

It wasn't until he was almost to the rift that he saw the shadow inside the second rift. It took him a moment to realize that it was coming toward him, like the shadow of a shark coming from deep inside the water.

Before he could react it was coming through.

It was a 747 and it was on fire. If it had been empty, he'd have let it crash. He had more important things to do than grab an empty piece of machinery, and the plane would have missed the news van in any case.

But there were people inside the plane, and they were screaming.

He felt time begin to freeze around him as his body went into overdrive. At this speed the plane seemed frozen above him, trapped in a hideous sort of limbo where people were trapped between hell and a better place.

Even through the brightness above him, he could see the light of the first explosions from the chemical plant. Some of the fire had managed to drift downward far enough to light something important. He wasn't sure what sort of chemicals this plant produced, but there was no way to be sure that the fumes weren't going to be as toxic as the ones from the first rift.

With the news van and the highway filled with motorists behind him and to his left, the church downwind and to his right and with the airplane coming in from above him, he had a choice to make.

He wasn't going to be able to save all three. Even Superman had his limits. At this speed he could conceivably grab the van and move it out of the way, but the people inside would be turned into a paste. There were limits to how much protection he could give to things.

Clark could pull the airplane up and away from the fire, but that would incinerate the news van, and the fires would hit the church.

Clark felt a moment of hopelessness. It was what he'd always secretly feared, even more than being rejected as an alien freak. He'd hidden and told himself that it was because he didn't want to be hounded by the world. The truth was far simpler.

He'd failed his parents the night he was ten. He'd been too slow, too weak, and he'd been forced to watch them die and burn. The reason he hadn't done any of this until he'd been prompted by Lois was because he'd known he was going to face choices like this.

Because of him, people were going to die.

If he grabbed the plane from below, he wasn't going to be able to maintain the wind that was the only thing keeping the fire from engulfing them all. If he grabbed it from above, there was a good chance that the skin would rip despite all his power and the people inside would plummet to the ground.

If he let the people in the plane die, there wasn't any guarantee that he'd be able to keep this wind up long enough for the rift to close. His lungs were already screaming for air, and it was only going to get worse.

The plane moved slightly and he realized that whatever happened, he had to make a choice.

The world seemed frozen for a moment as Clark floated, indecisive.

At last he straightened. He'd made his choice. One of the three groups had to die.

Like hell they did.

The world burst into motion around him and he grabbed the plane from the side. He let the other side dip, ignoring the screams of the passengers as he continued to maintain the wind.

It took him a moment to register how cool the surface of the plane was, given that it had just come through a sea of fire.

His breath screamed within his lungs as he slowly dropped toward the ground, letting the fire above him expand. His fingers dug into the side of the plane, holding the ribbing.

The ribbing began to snap and the thin skin of the plane began to peel like tissue paper. He was going to drop them and all of this was going to be for nothing.

Suddenly the plane buckled under him and he felt it slipping. He couldn't even afford to look down.

He scrambled to find a handhold, a place where the plane didn't tear itself apart under him. The slide stopped suddenly and Clark risked a glance down.

There was a hand coming from the underside of

the wing, and a moment later a face appeared from behind it as well.

The face was his own.

For a moment they both froze, staring at each other. It was like looking into a mirror, but oddly off balance. It was as though the face he'd looked at all his life was reversed, left to right, right to left.

The other man didn't stop blowing, however, and a moment later Clark felt the slight thud as the plane hit the ground.

A moment later the man was in the air and now Clark could see that their outfits were slightly different. The outfit the other man was wearing was a darker, richer blue and it was made all in one piece.

The man rose until he was level with both rifts and then he began to spin faster and faster. He began moving so quickly that he looked like a blur even to Clark's eyes, although Clark could squint and make him out if he wanted.

The flames from both side of the rift began to rise, drawn upward by wind he was generating.

Clark stared upward at him, his jaw dropping. For the first time he understood how some of the people who had been staring at him felt.

The other man would be able to maintain that spin much more easily than he would be able to continue blowing. Clark wasn't sure that what he was watching was even possible given the rules of physics as he understood them.

Of course, nothing Clark himself did was explainable by physics either.

He stared upward, his one worry that if too much of the flame was drawn upward that the hydrogen sulfide would be doused and then distributed over an even wider area.

Almost as though reading his mind, the man visibly slowed, and the flames stopped flickering and brightened once more.

He heard the sound of the aircraft emergency door opening, and the sound of the emergency slide being inflated and deployed. Glancing to make sure that the people in the news van were safe, he gently dropped toward the plane.

Men and women were evacuating the plane quickly and efficiently. Most wore business suits or expensive outfits. Almost everyone was in their forties or older.

As Clark landed gently on the parking lot, he felt his knees buckle a little as he saw the figure standing in the doorway to the aircraft.

Almost involuntarily he moved forward in time to catch her as she reached the end of the slide.

"Lois?" he asked.

The woman in his arms was visibly older than his Lois. She was in her forties and she'd grown even more beautiful, if anything.

She glanced down at his outfit and murmured, "What happened to your suit?"

"Clark?"

The voice in his headset was that of his own Lois.

"Lois, I...um..." he said. He stepped quickly back from the older Lois.

"There are two of you," the voice in his earpiece said. "Two of me, too."

He glanced up sharply. "How do you know?"

"We've been watching everything," she said. "The whole country has."

It was then that he noticed the reporter and her camera crew rushing across the parking lot. He smiled weakly into the camera.

The Lois Lane on the screen was larger than life. She was older, but there

was a certain elegance about her that Lois hadn't realized she was missing until this very moment.

She was the first person Lois had ever hated on sight.

This Lois didn't speak like a reporter. Instead she spoke like a politician, her words falling into a smooth, almost hypnotic cadence.

"My fellow passengers and I are refugees from a dying world," she was saying. "A collection of the greatest minds our world had to offer."

"It's too good to be true," one of the men beside her murmured, glancing at Lois.

For once Lois was inclined to agree with him. How much that was influenced by the sight of the older woman in Clark's arms she wasn't sure.

The cameraman was undoubtedly shooting from one knee, filming up so as to get the first onscreen interview with passengers from another world and to get a view of the action above.

Lois was gratified to see that her Clark had joined in; she didn't want this Lois Lane to think her Superman was somehow superior to hers.

It was surprising how possessive she felt toward him. Usually she just felt this about awards and stories and family and ...

She felt this way about things and people that were important to her.

It was harder than it looked, and as the last of the rift faded, Clark stopped spinning. The world seemed to spin around him and he felt dizzy, but the man floating across from him seemed unaffected.

Unlike this version of Lois, this Clark didn't look any older than Clark himself did. Yet there was something about the way he carried himself, a certain confidence that was a little intimidating.

"Um," he said. "Hello?"

The other Clark Kent was staring at the place where the rift had once been, and there was a wistful look on his face. He was silent for a long moment and then he said, "Is this happening everywhere?"

"It's heading west," Clark acknowledged.

"Then we have to stop it." The other man's face hardened. "Nobody else is going to die today."

Lois's voice came through his earpiece. "What's he saying?"

The cameras below were pointed up at the two of them now, their first meeting being witnessed by the entire world.

"He wants to help," Clark said into the mouthpiece. Looking up he said, "I'm in contact with ..."

"I'm familiar with the setup," the other man said. He gestured toward the earpiece around his own ear. This one seemed more sophisticated than Clark's and it didn't seem to have any sort of main unit. "Give me the frequency and we can get to work."

Stung, Clark complied.

Flying over the endless expanse of whiteness, Clark was startled to see a rift even larger than the ones over Denver. It was fifty feet in the air, and even as night was falling it created a waterfall with hundreds of thousands of gallons of water spilling onto the whiteness of the salt below.

Clark began to slow, but he heard the other Clark say, "Leave it. We don't have time."

Speeding up to follow him, Clark said, "But it's going to leave a big mess."

"We worry about people first," the other Clark said. "The government can keep an eye on it, and if the lake gets too large, we can always come back."

Clark wanted to argue, but by this time they were already over an area of burning trees. He could see fire fighters struggling to get their equipment set up.

The other Clark blew, extinguishing the fire and leaving a small sheen of permafrost. They were gone before the fire fighters could even turn around.

"And the environment?" he asked.

"It's a salt flat. Nothing lives there."

The other man didn't even look at him. He simply scanned the horizon before flashing off again.

Clark followed. He was beginning to get a little irritated. Somehow the other man had taken charge, and this wasn't even his world!

It wasn't Clark's either, really, but the other man had no way of knowing that.

Catching up to the other Clark, he was surprised to see the man simply floating in mid air, motionless.

Glancing down, he felt his own jaw drop slightly.

Ordinarily, I-10 was one of the busiest freeways leading into Los Angeles. Today, however, residents had apparently gotten the message because traffic was very light. However, traffic was backing up.

The rift was wide, and the herd of buffalo moving through it was growing even wider. They were scattering as they moved out onto the unfamiliar feel of the pavement and some of them were charging at cars for short periods before retreating back to the safety of the ever growing herd.

"Does this world have buffalo?" the other Clark asked suddenly.

"I think so," Clark said. "I really don't know."

He'd been busy with other things.

The other Clark was looking at him suddenly, with narrowed eyes. Clark shrugged sheepishly.

Although the news media were hampered like anyone else by the lack of cell phone reception, word did get around. The west coast rifts tended to be huge and there weren't the sort of micro-rifts that had made east coast travel so difficult.

The two Supermen were on every channel, and it seemed like they were everywhere. Whether it was herding buffalo into an abandoned culvert, putting even more of the fires that seemed to be springing up here and there, or entering rifts where bystanders told of carloads of people vanishing, they seemed to be on every street corner, and on every street.

Lois's throat was raw by now, from murmuring what information they actually were able to gather from the overstressed communications system. More often the two of them seemed to do it on their own.

Members of local agencies in Denver were already collecting the newest planeload of passengers.

Suddenly though, it was over, at least as far as mainland America was concerned.

As the other Clark shook the hand of the Chinese Premiere, Clark wondered how easy it had all seemed. The other man never said more than he had to, but there was something about the way he spoke that made people listen. He spoke with such assurance that it was almost impossible not to do what he said, and yet somehow he managed to do so without sounding threatening or arrogant.

With the organization of the People's Liberation Army, China would be as safe as it possibly could be

given the circumstances.

Japan had already been contacted by the American government and was prepared as well.

The news from back home was encouraging. The rifts had stopped growing and they had continued to disperse, growing farther and farther apart even as there were fewer of them.

As they rose into the sky heading east, Clark wondered if he was even needed at all. The other man fit seamlessly into the role of Superman as though he'd been born to it. Next to the other man Clark felt hopelessly incompetent and clumsy.

It was a little depressing how easy the other Clark Kent made it all look. Clark had learned more in the first few minutes of clearing ships out of the path of danger than he'd learned since putting on the suit.

The other Clark was polished, somehow, as though he'd done all of this a thousand times before. Yet he didn't look any older than Clark himself did.

The thought that this man had chosen to be a hero instead of being a coward and hiding bothered Clark. Was this who he might have become if he'd had a modicum of courage?

The fact that the other man barely spoke to him at all made Clark wonder if he'd already been judged and found somehow wanting. This man was in the unique position of being able to know exactly how Clark felt, and yet somehow the other Clark could barely look at him.

As they arrived over the skies of Hawaii, they saw that the boats were all being beached and people were heading for their homes as instructed. The sun was setting again; this was going to be their sixth sunset of the day. They'd outraced the sun over and over.

Clark was startled to see the other Clark pull to a stop over Pearl Harbor. The other man had been a whirlwind, and this was the first time he'd simply stopped moving.

As Clark floated around to face the other man, he realized that the other man had his eyes closed.

"It's good to hear it again," the other man said. It was the first time he'd spoken to Clark in hours, and Clark was a little startled.

"What?"

"Life." The other man didn't open his eyes. "I'd almost forgotten how good it sounds."

To Clark's ears, Honolulu and the other cities sounded quieter than usual. The sounds of daily life were muted as people vacated the streets and sat in their homes. The usual sounds of people screaming at each other, arguing, going about the business of daily life were missing.

"It's a little quiet," Clark said.

"It's been a while since I heard it at all," the other man said. "Every city has its own sound."

"I know," Clark said.

Opening his eyes, the other Clark looked at him. "I guess you would."

They stared at each other wordlessly for several seconds.

"It's a little weird," Clark said. "Like having a brother who remembers the secret crush you had on your teacher Ms. Jamison in the third grade."

"You had her too?" The other Clark smiled slightly, although it didn't reach his eyes. He was silent for a long moment then said, "I don't know what to say to you."

"I'm doing the best I can," Clark said defensively. "I'm new at this."

It irritated him a little that he'd been here first and the other man had just taken charge the way he had. This world could have been completely different from the world he'd known, and yet he'd started giving orders almost as soon as he'd come through the rift.

He didn't have any room to judge Clark.

The other Clark ignored him, seemingly lost in his own thoughts. "I'm starting to think I'm a bad omen. I skipped out on two dying worlds and here I am in a third. I should be better at this."

It was a thought that had passed through Clark's mind several times, especially since he'd put the costume on for the first time.

"I'd like to thank you."

"For what?" Clark asked.

"This

isn't my world," the other Clark said, "but after everything that's happened ... I have to keep busy. If I think too long about what I've lost ... "

"There's a lot to do here," Clark said. "Earthquakes in China, tornadoes, floods."

"Business as usual, then," the other man said. He sighed. "I've spent the last fifteen years dealing with exactly that sort of thing, and what have I accomplished really? Saved two hundred lives out of eight billion?"

Clark frowned. Fifteen years? At the age of eleven he hadn't had the power to save his parents from a burning car. He certainly hadn't had the power to deal with earthquakes and other natural disasters.

"How old are you?" he blurted.

"Forty one," the other Clark said.

Clark stared. As far as he could see his other self hadn't aged a day in fifteen years.

Aging wasn't something Clark had ever thought about. The thought that he would remain young long

after Lois was something that left him feeling a little numb.

Worse, once the other man started talking it was like the floodgates had opened. Clark wasn't sure why he was suddenly so anxious to talk, although as a teenager he'd often dreamed about having a brother. The thought of having someone who could understand exactly what he'd been going through had been a dream he'd had for a long time.

What this Clark was saying, however, wasn't something Clark wanted to hear.

"Weather patterns all over the world were getting worse and worse," the other Clark said. "We'd started environmental controls, but China and India kept spewing increasing amounts of pollution into the air, and the average temperature worldwide kept rising.

"You forget how fragile civilization is, how interconnected. There came a point where there were too many storms for me to handle. Hurricanes and tornadoes, tsunamis ... they started appearing in unusual times of the year, and soon they were appearing all year long."

"Things didn't go well, I gather," Clark said. He'd noticed that the weather on this world seemed more volatile than the weather in his own. He'd assumed it was a side effect of the rifts, but ...

"The infrastructures started to collapse, first in the third world and then it started to spread. The economy collapsed and people started to riot. There were wars and new diseases. People went hungry ... and people started dying.

"I did what I could, but it was never enough. There were always more people slipping away. If it hadn't been for Lois, I don't know what I'd have done. Imagine seeing thousands of people dying every day and knowing there wasn't anything you could do."

The other Clark's jaw twitched and he was silent for a long moment.

"I thought we could turn it all around. I still think we could have, but the world kept getting hotter and hotter and the ice kept melting. That was the beginning of the end."

"The peat bogs in Siberia were releasing billions of tons of methane into the atmosphere, methane that was twenty times as effective as carbon dioxide as a greenhouse gas. Scientists had predictions and models for just how fast things would turn bad, but they didn't take into account what was happening. It was worse than their most pessimistic predictions.

"There were four hundred billion tons of methane hydrate in the permafrost ... and all it took was a release of one half of one percent of that to double the speed of global warming. The hotter it got, the more

methane was released. Eventually the methane pockets in the ocean started to thaw as the water got warmer. There were fourteen trillion tons in the oceans.

The other Clark grimaced.

"The first firestorm burned the city of Irkutsk to the ground." The other Clark paused and took a deep breath. "I'd thought I'd dealt with every possible disaster, but this killed half the population and left a quarter with horrible burns. A quarter of a million people ... "

The smell of burning flesh from one amputated leg haunted Clark. He couldn't imagine what an entire city must have been like.

"Tensions between Russia and India were already high because of ... well, it doesn't matter now. They went to war, and while I was dealing with that, firestorms began appearing in other parts of the world ... Jakarta, North Korea, Brussels. Millions of people were being killed and there wasn't any way to predict where it was going to happen next. People started to panic and governments fell.

"When people get desperate, they do stupid things. They started going to war over natural resources. A year ago, a billion people were dead. Six months ago, half the world's population was gone. Plague and Famines, War and Death ... the world didn't end with a whimper."

The two Clarks had obviously forgotten that their microphones were still on; Lois sat at the table staring at the other men and women around her. Generals and analysts, bureaucrats and professional soldiers, all of them looked stunned.

The crowd had thinned considerably since the rifts had left the mainland.

Before anyone could say anything, Lois flipped the switch, shutting off the connection. The new Clark sounded as though he was ashamed and she didn't want him to know that they'd been listening in. Some things should be private.

It was a sobering realization for a reporter. She hadn't felt this way a week ago.

"We've got time that they didn't have," Lois said. She cleared her throat. "And we have the value of hindsight. Nothing is set in stone."

"What if they need to call back?" the analyst beside her protested.

"The new Superman has our number. They'll call if they need us."

"Comic books? That's just creepy," the other Clark said.

"That's what I thought," Clark said. "Once I'd had

time to think about it. They had most of the details right ... the Kents, Perry White, Lois ... "

Once the other man had finally admitted his failings in the other world, he'd finally started to relax.

"Do you think they had a visit from another alternate universe?"

"Seventy years ago?" Clark asked.

"We're thirty years apart. Why is seventy years any more unbelievable?"

"If I had a secret identity, I wouldn't exactly be blabbing it to everybody in the first bar I came into." Clark paused. "Did you have a ... "

"Ten years running," the other man said. He smiled slightly. "It was the new facial recognition programs that got me ... once they compared my face to my driver's license picture in the system, that was it. I tried blurring my face for a while, but I got sloppy."

"Blurring?" Clark asked.

The other Clark looked up and shook his head rapidly. To a human eye his features would have appeared blurry.

"I was getting too busy to keep my other alias anyway. Once they'd gotten around to tagging everyone, I'd have been caught one way or the other."

"They tagged people ... "

"Just government workers and prisoners. Eventually they'd have gotten around to everyone else."

"So everyone you brought with you on the plane ... "

"All of them are easily tracked by satellite. They have GPS locators implanted under their skins."

The government was going to love that. The idea bothered Clark on a basic level, but the longer he talked to the other Clark, the more he realized that the other man was comfortable with things in the name of security that would have been abhorrent to the people of 1993.

If anything, it sounded like this Clark and Lois were going to find this world a breath of fresh air.

Clark decided to ignore the issue. There wasn't any point in arguing over something he couldn't change.

"Ten years" He said slowly. "The glasses thing really worked for you?"

The other man shrugged. "Nobody ever said anything ... and I'd know."

Given his hearing, Clark could believe it.

"There's something I've been trying to figure out," he said. "Where do you put the cape and the boots when you're wearing a business suit?"

"It's over," one of the men said. "The last of the rifts caused an explosion in Syria, but it's being

handled."

"We're sure that's it?" Lois asked.

"It's been two hours and there haven't been any more sightings."

"What are the Supermen doing, then?"

"Clean-up in China," the analyst said. "Working the earthquake from what I hear."

Clearing his throat, the man behind her said, "It's time to go, Ms. Lane."

The rest of the people who had been working the Situation Room had begun clearing out over an hour ago.

Apprehensively, Lois looked up. "Where am I going?"

She'd been in the middle of everything, and even if she was never able to report on it, it had been thrilling to be part of something bigger than herself. For the first time, Lois had thoughts of going into politics.

"Where do you want to go?" the man asked. "You aren't a prisoner."

At her expression he said hastily, "You can't stay here though. The President is on his way back, and he's blocking access to the press."

"That's a mistake," Lois said.

There were going to be political consequences to all of this. Every single American had been made to feel vulnerable in ways that even 9-11 hadn't begun to touch. This wasn't something that occurred in a foreign country or even three thousand miles away in a city people might never visit.

This had happened in people's home towns, in their living rooms and on their streets. Every person in the country had known what it was like to be afraid to leave your couch for fear that you might step into somewhere else and never be able to get back ... or have something step through and come for you.

The other man shrugged. "Your sister has been asking for you. I can take you there if you like."

Lois nodded shortly. She suspected that people around the country were trying to reconnect with family in the wake of all that had happened.

Lucy was the closest thing she had to family left in all the world.

Despite her exhaustion, she ended up sitting up late with Lucy watching television. The coverage

reminded her of a combination of election night coverage and what she remembered of her own time covering the collapse of the Twin Towers.

The eyes of the country were riveted to the screen, and it soon became apparent that the fallout was going to be severe. All three major candidates declared that an accident of this scope wouldn't have happened on

their watch. All of them were jockeying to take political advantage in a way that left Lois feeling disgusted.

Mass firings were expected by most of the talking heads, some of whom were quite angry and vehement.

The same YouTube video of a dinosaur sliding out of thin air in a Texas Ranch home and then running around panicked was played over and over. Six feet high and eleven feet long, the thing had skidded on floors and smashed into windows before being knocked unconscious by the father with a baseball bat.

The family was apparently now hoping to find a breeding male, as they had an ostrich farm.

The experts were debating as to whether it was a Thescelosaurus or Parkosaurus, as though anyone actually cared. The paleontologists had to be excited of course.

Word was coming in of hundreds of isolated incidents of extinct animals coming through. Most had been herbivores, which one expert explained as being understandable, since herbivores outnumbered carnivores by a wide margin.

Even in the days of the buffaloes, the prairies had been mostly empty.

There were arguments over the disposition of the buffalo herd in Los Angeles. There were concerns for the cattle industry and fears they might have non-native parasites that would interfere with the beef industry.

As Lois finally fell asleep with her sister's head on her shoulder, the debate raged on.

The next day was filled with more of the same. There were news of firings, unusual with this administration, and people on all sides of the issues were jockeying to divert the blame.

Church attendance was up, with people giving thanks or praying for people in those areas where communications had been lost. The true count of the missing still wasn't known.

What news was coming from China suggested that two Supermen were exponentially more effective than one. Rescue and reconstruction work was taking place at an unheard of rate.

Various government agencies in California were arguing over who had custody of the buffalo in Los Angeles. Residents were complaining of the odor, which apparently stretched for miles when the wind blew the wrong way.

Bulletin boards were being set up for survivors. YouTube videos of strange creatures encountered in people's homes were all the rage.

One couple had registered to keep a turkey sized

lizard as a pet, although local authorities were arguing that as a wild animal, it didn't comply with city ordinances.

Mostly Lois spent the day finally talking with Lucy. It had been the first time in months that she'd really been able to relax. It was the first time in years that she'd actually been able to laugh.

In the middle of it all she realized that she'd been lying to herself about family after all this time.

It really was important.

On the morning of the second day, Lois found herself in a limousine with darkened windows heading once again for the White House.

The crowd of protesters outside weren't able to see her, and they slipped through a heavily guarded back entrance.

She was surprised to enter an almost empty conference room. Dr. Ledderman was there, as was Mr. Smith and Agent White. On one screen was another, identical Dr. Ledderman as well as the older Lois Lane. On another screen were several men she hadn't met before.

Dr. Ledderman looked excited. "I've really enjoyed getting to know my counterpart. He and his people are from fifteen years in the future, and they have knowledge we haven't even dreamed of."

The other Dr. Ledderman smiled. "Our developments weren't exactly the same, and the good doctor was able to find some theorems that my world hadn't developed counterparts for."

Trust Dr. Ledderman to fall in love with his own reflection. Lois couldn't say the same. Staring up at the monitor at the other Lois Lane, Lois wondered why she felt jealous and catty whenever she saw the other woman.

"Why am I here?" she asked, glancing up at the older Lois. The woman had somehow managed to pack an exquisitely tailored burgundy outfit even in the midst of escaping a dying world. Apparently being the girlfriend of a super hero had its advantages.

"The new arrivals have had a little more time to work on the rift mathematics, although they scrapped the program several years ago due to fears it was too dangerous as well as budgetary concerns."

"So?"

"They say we need to be ready for an aftershock to happen tomorrow. We don't need to worry about the smaller rifts, but the largest will reopen. It won't last long, but they tell me they can accurately predict the time the rifts will open."

"You'd just have to follow the ones opening across the Atlantic anyway," Lois said faintly.

She sat back stunned.

"You're telling me that Clark and the others ... including my sister, can go home?"

"Two who are in the hospital are still too critically ill to risk moving ... but everyone else can go home," Agent White said.

The Dr. Ledderman on the screen said, "I won't lie to you. There's a risk involved. The new rifts will be less stable and will collapse faster than the original set. According to our calculations there should be time to get the plane through ... but there's a margin of error."

Lois closed her eyes for a moment as an image of a bisected pigeon came to her mind. If the rift collapsed while they were in transit ...

"Maybe it's too much of a risk," Lois said slowly. "What right do we have ... ?"

"We've asked them already," Mr. Smith said gently. "They've all decided to take the risk except for two more who want to stay ... one has a version of his dead mother on this side and the other wants to stay with one of the cardiac patients."

One of the men on the other screen spoke. "It's a win-win situation for everyone. We won't be stuck footing the bill for a couple of hundred people with skills that are fifteen years out of date, and the people we do get will be paying their own way."

"They brought a database with them," Dr. Ledderman said. He grinned. "From what we've seen so far it'll be worth a fortune. They'll pool the proceeds to pay for their re-integration into society."

As scientists and doctors, they'd have had an easier time being naturalized than a group of average people with average skills in any case.

The other Lois spoke. "I was hoping to at least see Lucy onscreen before she goes back. In my world ... I wasn't any luckier than you were. I won't be out of quarantine early enough to see her in person, but ... "

"I'll arrange it," Lois said numbly.

The thing about joy in life was that as quickly as it came it could be taken away.

"You didn't really see him."

"I did. I swear!" Jacob said. He coughed a little and wondered why he was feeling even worse these days. He hoped it wasn't anything serious; he couldn't bear to see his parents looking any more afraid. Their faces had become more drawn and distant over the last few days.

"You just saw a guy in a suit," the boy in the bed next to him said. "They're hiring them out for birthday parties now, like they used to do with clowns."

"He promised to fly with me," Jacob said stubbornly. "Said everything was going to be all

right."

"You can't ever depend on what ... " The other boy stopped suddenly, his jaw dropping a little.

Jacob turned to look. Floating outside the window was the familiar figure of Superman. In his arms he held an asian woman in a business suit.

He grinned through the window, and Jacob's smile suddenly lit up like the sun.

The bed was empty. Janice looked wildly around the room, and seeing that her son wasn't there, she felt her knees go weak. It wasn't time for his treatments, and if he wasn't in his bed, it could only mean that something was wrong.

The other children were gathered around the window, staring longingly outside.

She sagged back against her husband. The fear had been a daily companion for so long that the feeling of tightness in her chest was an old familiar feeling. She choked back a sob, and they backed quickly out of the room. No reason to alarm the other children.

They walked slowly to the nurse's station, dreading the answer they were going to get.

"Where's Jacob?" Janice asked slowly, her stomach clenched as she waited for the bad news she was sure to hear.

The nurse smiled. "He's outside. You can see him through the windows in the children's ward."

Janice felt her pulse suddenly racing again, and she rushed along with her husband to the window.

She gasped at the sight of her son being carried by the man in the blue suit, flying in graceful curves over the parking lot. Jacob saw her suddenly and his face widened into the sort of gap toothed grin she hadn't seen in a long time.

A moment later they were gone.

"Where did they go?" she asked. "They can't just give my son to a strange man without our permission."

"My client can be quite persuasive if he wants to be."

At the sound of the voice behind them they turned. A professional looking Asian woman was watching them.

"My name is Susan Nyugen, and I represent the Superman Foundation. My client is offering to pay for your son to see a specialist in Washington D.C."

"They've already consulted with everyone. There isn't any hope."

"There's always hope," Susan said. "Among the newcomers from the plane in Denver are a pair of skilled surgeons who have knowledge of techniques that haven't been developed here. My client wants to see that happen."

"Why? Why is our son any different than anyone else's?"

"My client is good at finding buried treasure," Susan said, smiling slightly. "He made

a promise to your son and he thinks he's someone special."

When Jacob returned from his flight, flush with excitement, he was surprised to see his parents crying. Yet as they turned to him, he saw that there was life in their faces that he hadn't seen in a long time.

He smiled brightly at them and as they hugged him he was sure everything was going to be all right.

It was a good day.

Once the plans were made, things proceeded with remarkable efficiency. One of the things the United States Army was good at was logistics, and it was known that everyone had to be back in the remains of the plane before the rifts manifested themselves.

The weather had finally changed, the cold patch from before being replaced by muggy heat. Lois didn't welcome the change. Her hair felt matted to her face, and the business suit she'd chosen had her sweltering.

Why she felt she had to look her best she wasn't sure. She'd hadn't even seen Clark in more than two days and Lucy was too excited about getting to go home to care.

The gathering crowd of passengers was murmuring to themselves as they stared at the wingless plane.

"How are we supposed to get home in that?" one man asked irritably. "Flap our wings?"

Lois felt a sudden surge of optimism. Perhaps the paranoia of the United States government had done Clark a good turn for once. These people had obviously been sequestered for the majority of the time they'd been in custody.

"We'll be getting a boost," Lois heard Lucy say confidently.

She heard another woman mumbling something about the whole other dimension explanation being a government hoax, some sort of twisted psychological experiment.

"There'll be a thousand conspiracy theories on the Internet as soon as you all get home," Lois said.

"The Internet?" Lucy asked blankly.

Lois shook her head. This Lucy, at least, wasn't technically minded. The Internet existed in Clark's world she was sure, it just wasn't everywhere.

She saw Mr. Smith and Dr. Ledderman approaching from the door to the hangar. Both were pulling large suitcases.

"What's going on?" Lois asked.

"I'm going with them," Dr. Ledderman said.

"Why? I thought you were getting along great with your double?"

"He knows everything I do now, and I really don't want to have to compete with him. Besides, he's got this disgusting thing going with my ex-wife, and ... "

"I thought they were still in quarantine?"

He shrugged irritably. "They fell in love by telephone. The other version of me lost his wife before she revealed how evil she was. The fool ... "

"He wants to be the one to give fifteen years worth of scientific knowledge to the other world," Mr. Smith said.

"I always wanted to be a celebrity," Dr. Ledderman said. "Well, here's my chance."

"Are you going too?" Lois asked.

Mr. Smith shook his head. "The other planeload of passengers gave me the idea. We haven't had time to interpret their information yet; the systems are quite different than ours. However, I've spent the last two days putting a quick reference library together. I included advancements in solar power and renewable energy, the latest on treatments for AIDS and the solar satellite plans ... and anything else I could throw in given the time I had allowed."

"Why?" Lois asked.

"We're moving forwards on rift research," he said. "And one day we'll be visiting. It'd be nice if the people on the other side had something to offer us. Once they catch up, maybe they will."

"Are you crazy?" Lois hissed. "We just saw what can happen ... "

"And what happens if someone one universe over starts everything up? According to the reports from CERN, there were at least two other universes involved in this last fiasco. We need to know how to stop it, and the only way to do that is to do the research."

"I ... " Lois said.

She didn't complete her thought because that was the moment that Clark made his entrance, hovering in the open hangar doorway.

The gasps of the crowd around her and the pointing fingers were reassuring.

"It's time," he said.

Lois reached out for Lucy, who hugged her tightly.

"I wish you could come," Lucy said. "Mom and Dad would love you."

"They ... " Lois said, then stopped. She couldn't say they wouldn't really be her mother or father, because that would mean Lucy wasn't her sister.

"It's time," Mr. Smith said gently. "Everybody needs to be on board before this thing hits."

Reluctantly Lucy pulled away and Lois felt a sudden sense of emptiness.

What did she really have to look forward to when Lucy left? A cold, empty apartment and a life that was going to feel just as empty without Lucy in it ... or Clark.

Worse, she'd see Superman every day on the news, and it would be a constant reminder of what she'd lost. The other Lois had the other Clark Kent wrapped around her little finger. From what little she'd heard of him, he seemed colder and more distant than her Clark, hardly the same person at all.

The polite cough behind her made her turn.

Clark was staring at the ground. "I'm sorry I didn't come by," he said. "They didn't tell me we were going back until this morning, and I thought we were going to have time ... "

"You've been busy," Lois said. "Lives take priority. If I didn't understand that, I wouldn't have put you in the suit in the first place."

"I ... I'd hoped that we could ... "

"Me too," Lois said. She hesitated for a moment, and then said, "You have someone at home."

"Lana was there for me at a time when I needed someone ... anyone. But she's not healthy for me. I just didn't realize it until it was too late."

Staring up at Clark, and seeing that the passengers were already loaded, Lois pulled him to a spot under the plane, where nobody could see them.

"Kiss me," she said.

He looked at her for a moment and then said, "I ... "

"Just do it," she said.

He only hesitated a moment more before leaning down to kiss her.

Closing her eyes, Lois felt the world move. She'd known how she felt about him for days already, and she'd been lying to herself all along. Deep down, she'd made her decision the moment she'd heard they were all going home.

When she opened her eyes she realized that they were both floating a foot above the floor.

Clark was looking at her and smiling sadly. "I'm sorry ... you just make me ... "

Lois cleared her throat and looked up at him.

"Smallville," she said, "I'm starting to think you need serious help."

"What?"

If she was going to live as Lois Lane, she might as well start getting into character now. Lois smirked slightly.

"You need someone to watch your back. Now that I've put you in the suit, I can't just let you go off by

yourself."

He stared at her for a moment, and then he started to smile.

She leaned closer to him and whispered in his ear. "Put me on the plane and let's get going."

Flying in a plane without wings was unnerving. The usual sounds of flight, the roar of the engine, the vibration of the plane, the sounds of the air filtering through the vents ... none of it was there. There hadn't been time to reconstruct the plane completely, and so all the systems were turned off.

The only sounds were those of the people inside shifting quietly in their seats. No one spoke. They all understood the danger they were in, although none as vividly as Lois did. The image of the pigeon cut in two still haunted her.

If Clark was on one side when the rift closed, the plane would be cut in two and the people in the front half of the plane would fall to their deaths.

If he was in the front when it happened, it would happen to the people in the back.

There was every chance that the people in the middle would be cleanly cut in two as well. The chances of disaster were huge, and as they silently moved through the night, Lois felt her stomach clench.

She'd been through Iraq and yet she'd never felt so helpless.

Everyone around her was staring out the windows at the suddenly gathering clouds. The others had apparently been briefed about what was going to happen, despite what anyone believed.

The land below was utterly dark, the last light of the fading horizon doing nothing to illuminate the ground below.

As the last people on the plane, Lois and Dr. Ledderman were sitting in the front seats.

The transition, when it came, was smooth and seamless. One moment Lois was looking outside at an empty field of darkness below. The next, her window exploded into a field of stars beneath them as an unfamiliar city sprang into view.

It was more beautiful than she would have imagined.

Glancing back she could see the location of the rift by the differences in the windows. Those on the forward side were brightly lit from below, while those on the other side were shrouded in darkness.

It wasn't until they heard the scraping sounds that they realized they were in trouble.

The plane lurched forward as the sound of metal screaming could be heard. Lois's stomach clenched as she realized that the rift was collapsing and they were

only two thirds of the way through it.

The people behind her began crying and praying as the noise grew louder and louder.

The Metropolis Meteors were having their worst game of the season when the pitcher, Paco Escobar, stepped off the mound. He was heading for the batter, who had just winged him with a ball. The expression on his face promised hell to pay, and the crowd perked up. A fight on the field couldn't help but make the game more entertaining.

Leaving the mound saved Paco's life as a huge piece of twisted metal fell onto it.

A moment later people in the crowd were pointing upward, where a plane seemed to be hovering in midair a thousand feet or more above them in defiance of all known laws of physics.

When the plane began to fall, the crowd sat frozen in horror.

The sudden substitution of open space for the rear of the plane seemed like the end. No one was lost, although the people in the

rear seats began to scream.

The plane began to fall forward, and everyone was yanked forward in their seatbelts. Lois felt herself pushed back into her seat as the whole plane lurched forward and began to accelerate toward the ground.

It only lasted a moment, and then the plane began to right itself. They continued to drop rapidly, but this was a controlled drop.

The baseball stadium below reminded Lois a lot of Wrigley field.

"He wouldn't," Lois said.

"He may not have a choice," Dr. Ledderman said quietly. "If we've lost enough of the hull, he needs to get us on the ground before the whole thing falls apart."

The ground rose rapidly, and a moment later they heard the sound of the hull hitting the surface. The plane began to tilt; without the wings or the inflatable ramps, the only way to exit was going to be through the doors. By tilting the plane he was leaving them close to the ground.

Dr. Ledderman struggled free of his seatbelt first, then he turned to help Lois.

A moment later he was staggering to the front doors, which the flight attendant was opening.

The lights on the other side of the door were blinding. Dr. Ledderman blinked, then grinned. He stepped onto the field and raised his hands into the air.

The crowd roared.

As Lois reached the door of the plane, she hesitated a moment before stepping out into the spotlight. Deciding to come to this world on an impulse was one thing. Becoming a public spectacle was quite another.

She stepped back into the darkness of the plane and gestured for the person behind her to step outside. One after the other the people began filing out of the plane. There wasn't much luggage; most of the passengers' luggage had been left behind in Lois's version of Washington D.C., scattered among dozens of forensics laboratories. There hadn't been time to gather it all.

At least these people had homes to go back to. Lois smiled to Lucy as she passed. At Lucy's expression she shook her head. She began heading for the back of the plane, which was open to the sky.

Clark was waiting for her.

"There aren't any cameras back here," he said. As the pilot and co-pilot stepped outside the plane to the roar of the cheering crowd, Clark took Lois in his arms, spread his new cape as wide as it would go, and flew straight into the air. He could hear a few gasps in the audience but was reassured that all they saw was the back of him. It was good that Lois was so much smaller and fit so comfortably in his arms.

A moment later they were above Metropolis and heading into their new lives.

"As far as Perry is concerned, I've been investigating the gunrunner story that killed your counterpart. I got stuck in the hold of a cargo ship and have been cooling my heels out in the Atlantic for several days."

"Bringing me back with you ought to make it all seem a little more plausible," Lois said.

Clark had already flashed into his apartment and cleaned. He'd changed clothes too. Finally being in his own clothes again after all this time felt amazing.

Lois glanced up the small set of stairs. "You have a balcony back there?"

"Not much of a view ... perfect for sitting and reading in the sun ... or flying in unannounced."

The heavy pounding on the door made them both jump slightly. Had they already been discovered? A quick glance through the door caused Clark's heart to sink.

Wordlessly Lois stepped through the doorway into Clark's bedroom. Clark's stomach clenched. It wasn't going to look very good.

Opening the door, he planted a false smile on his face and said softly, "Hey, Lana."

He hated the way his shoulders were instinctively

slumping and his tone of voice changing, becoming more deferential. Lana had spent years molding him into who she wanted him to be, and it was difficult to overcome that immediately.

"Don't hey me!" she said, her nasal southern twang jarring his ear after a week adjusting to Lois's more northern accent. "Where the hell have you been for the past week?"

"I've been in another universe," he said quietly. There wasn't any point in trying to lie to her. Lana knew enough to ruin any chance he would ever have at a normal life.

"Don't lie to me!" she said. "I saw that stunt you pulled at the ball park. What were you thinking? Now you are going to have to work twice as hard to hide."

"I'm not going to hide any more," Clark said. He forced himself to stand straighter, summoning a little of the feeling he had while he was wearing the suit. "I've got important things to do with my life."

She stared at him for a moment, incensed and for the first time since he'd known her, speechless.

"What can you possibly have to do that's more important than our life together?" Lana asked. "Prance around in some sort of circus costume acting like a freak?"

"He has to save the world, one life at a time," Lois said evenly. She stood in the doorway to the bedroom with an unreadable expression on her face.

"Who is this?" Lana asked. She glanced from Lois's face to Clark's and then back again. "Why is she here?"

"Lana," Clark said, "we need to talk."

Sleeping at Clark's had been a little uncomfortable. This was his place, with a bed that smelled a little of him, and every possession was a little reminder of who he was.

They were taking it slow by unspoken mutual consent. The breakup with Lana was too new and raw to try anything just yet and this was too important to get wrong.

Clark had spent most of the night making sure he put in appearances as Superman anyway. The lack of Internet or twenty four hour news was disconcerting, but the news was full of reports of Clark's rescues.

He'd decided to make a big splash immediately, to keep the government from covering everything up.

This government didn't even try. Within twenty four hours the passengers were already being released. They weren't even required to stay in quarantine, something Lois felt was a mistake.

Even in the short time she'd been here she was feeling a disconnection. Although superficially things

were the same, the details were different. There were no Wal-Marts here; only something called Cost-mart.

Being taken shopping for clothes by Clark had been informative. Brands were different. There were designers she'd never even heard of, and some she'd thought essential were missing.

No one walked down the street talking on their cell phone.

There were no twenty four hour news networks here, although Lex News was apparently considering making the transition.

There were less than twenty channels and some of the shows were quite different than what she'd remembered.

In many ways it was an alien world. Everything seemed strange and new.

Yet when she looked at Clark, that feeling of disconnection faded and she felt like she was home, as though she belonged.

"Are you sure about this?" Lois asked.

They were standing outside an unfamiliar house in the suburbs, and Lois's stomach clenched. It was one thing to know that you had alternate versions of your parents in another world. It was another to knock on a door and confront them.

The thought that they might reject her because she wasn't their daughter was paralyzing.

"Lucy is with them," Clark said. He looked good in his charcoal suit. He reached out and took her hand, squeezing it a little. "This is a gift ... If I could see my own parents again ... "

Lois nodded slightly and squeezed his hand in return. With the other she reached out and knocked on the door.

It took a moment for the door to open, a moment in which Lois felt her knees weaken. She'd faced gunfire in Iraq that had made her less nervous than this.

When the door finally opened, Lois heard a gasp as she stared at an older version of the woman who had raised her. A moment later she was enveloped in an embrace so tight she could barely breathe.

It was good to be home.

Filthy and deserted, the alley was the perfect place for Clark to change into his suit and fly. His counterpart had told him to always be on the lookout for safe places to change, and this one seemed as good as any.

Everything was falling into place. Dr. Ledderman was enjoying his newfound celebrity status as the only human from another universe. He wasn't likely to jeopardize that by admitting that he was one of two.

Better yet, everyone seemed to be assuming that Superman had come from that other universe. With Clark Kent having a life history in this world, it made his secret identity just a little more plausible.

Even the other passengers seemed to believe it. Clark suspected that a few of them knew more than they were telling. He'd seen a couple of sharp looks when he'd appeared at the press conference as himself. Yet somehow they all seemed to have an unspoken pact not to talk about what had happened.

In a world without YouTube, or tabloids paying outrageous sums for gossip, people were more polite and genteel.

Of course, the fact that he could throw an airplane might have had something to do with some of their silence. Clark tried not to think about that. There was an implicit threat by his very existence that he worked every day to deny.

Lois thought everyone was treating him with kid gloves because they were afraid he would go away.

Even Lana was keeping quiet. Clark had always known that she'd been ashamed of his alien heritage. The last thing she wanted was to become fodder for the National Inquisitor: "I had an alien's love child."

Lana would keep his secret, if only to preserve her own reputation.

Clark began to spin, changing clothes faster than the human eye could see. His capes were lasting longer these days, since his talks with his counterpart, but he'd probably have to have some replacements made.

As he lifted into the air, he heard the pile of newspapers behind the dumpster move. Clark grimaced; he was going to have to be more careful if he was going to keep this secret identity thing.

A

pair of rheumy eyes peered out from a ski cap and a massive amount of clothes. "Are you an angel?"

Clark blinked. "Cyrus?"

"You know me?"

"In another world," Clark said. He dropped to the ground and held out his hand. "Let me help you."

Clark didn't know how things were going to turn out. All he had was faith that it would turn out for the best.

Cyrus reached out and took his hand, and Clark smiled suddenly. "Everything is going to be all right."

A moment later they were gone.

Stepping out of the shadows, the small man in the Victorian outfit sighed. He wasn't needed here any more than he was in the other world. It was enough to make him feel old and useless.

He'd done well enough with the Lois and Clark of his own universe. Picking up a hitchhiker from the future hadn't been the best idea, but he'd managed to stop Tempus from killing Superman as a baby and everything had turned out in the end.

He'd done Tempus a favor, really. Being trapped in a causality loop wasn't a fate he'd wish on anyone.

Killing Superman as a baby would have meant that Tempus had never heard of Superman ... which would have meant he never went back in time to kill Superman as a baby. That would in turn mean Superman did exist, which would mean Tempus would go back ...

Trapped in a paradox, Tempus would have been trapped forever in an unending loop, unable to move forward and doomed to forever repeat the same mistakes over and over.

It was the great limitation of time travel, and the one the small man regretted the most.

An entire world gone up in flames, and now that he knew about it, there was nothing he could do to change it.

H.G. Wells had invented the time machine to make a difference, and ironically he'd only then discovered just how helpless he really was.

Yet there was a difference between changing events and making sure that certain things happened. Smiling slightly, the little man headed back into the alley for his time machine. There was one last thing he could do for the Superman of this world.

"A bald villain was good for one story, Joe," Jerry said. "But we need a hook to keep the readers. We can't keep writing about a bad guy."

The two boys sat huddled together at the counter nursing their ice cream floats and hoping the soda jerk wouldn't kick them out. Times were hard with the Depression.

At the age of nineteen, they'd actually sold a story, but money was tight and nobody was buying their mimeographed fanzine. There had to be a way to make money from science fiction.

A voice from the end of the counter said, "Perhaps you should write about a hero."

The voice was British, and the man who stood up and approached them was wearing clothing that looked thirty years out of date. He was wearing a bowler hat and everything.

"Pardon me," the man said. "I couldn't help but overhear."

"I was already thinking about that," Jerry said. He tapped the comic book on the counter. "Detective Dan, Secret Agent number 48 ... we need to write a hero

like that."

"He looks like a strong jawed, heroic type," the older man said, looking down at the crudely drawn picture of the detective holding a gun on a villain while another crept up behind him."

Ignoring the stranger, Jerry said, "Everybody is doing private detective stories. We need to do something that stands out."

"I'm tapped out of ideas," Jerry admitted.

Noting that the man was still standing behind them, Joe said, "Look mister ... "

"Call me Herbert," the strange little man said. "I read your story 'The Reign of the Super-man' and thought it was inspired."

"You're a fan?!?" Joe said, his face widening into a grin. "Why didn't you say so?"

He jumped off his stool and moved over one. "Take a seat!"

The small man sat and called to the man behind the counter. "I'll have an ice cream, and two more for my friends here."

Both boys perked up involuntarily. Free ice cream was almost as good as finding a fan.

"So you were saying you needed to write about a hero, but you wanted him to be something special ... something more than a man."

"No ... but that isn't a bad idea," Jerry said.

"Somebody who can fight crime, but isn't a detective."

"A reporter maybe," Joe said, suddenly excited.

"A reporter isn't exciting," Jerry said. "He's just a guy."

"Maybe he hides how special he really is," the stranger said. "Wears a disguise when he needs to do something special."

"Like a secret identity?" Joe asked. "I guess it would be easier to fight crime if people didn't know where you lived."

"He'd have to be strong," the stranger said.

"The strongest man ever ... like Samson or Hercules," Jerry said. His mind was already racing. He watched as Joe grabbed a napkin and pulled the pen out of his pocket.

"He'd have to be fast." The little man's voice was almost hypnotic.

Joe's sketch showed the outline of a man holding a car over his head. Joe felt a shiver down his spine as the idea began to spring to life.

"Faster than a speeding bullet," Jerry said. He glanced at the outline Joe was drawing and said, "Put him in a circus outfit, like a strong man. He needs something distinctive and colorful."

Staring at the sketch, he said, "Add a little Flash Gordon."

Joe sketched the trunks on the outside, like any self respecting strongman, but it still wasn't right.

"Perhaps a cape?" the stranger said.

Joe drew a small opera cape, and the stranger shook his head. "Perhaps something larger."

Jerry stared intently at the figure on the napkin. The cape was now flowing majestically out behind the figure, floating in the wind. There was something exciting and dynamic about it, even despite the fact that he was holding a car in the air.

"We need a name," Jerry said. "Maybe I'll call him Gable Taylor."

The small man blinked. "Gable Taylor?"

"Well, this guy is going to be a little like Clark Gable and a little like Kent Taylor ... strong jaw, good looks ... "

"Perhaps turn it around," the other man said weakly.

"Taylor Gable? That's a little obvious." At the man's look he said, "Clark Kent? Hey, that's not bad."

Joe said, "He could fight crime ... the mobsters and gangsters and bad element. Do all the things the rest of us wish we could do."

The two boys looked at each other. In the world they lived in, gangsters were a very real threat, something that people tolerated because they had to. With half the police force on the take ...

"Better set it in another city ... " Joe said. "But I don't know any other cities ... "

Finding pictures of New York or somewhere else was going to be expensive, and there were enough people who'd been there that if Jerry drew it wrong, people would notice.

"Why don't you create a city?" the stranger asked mildly, passing over the fifteen cents for their three ice creams.

"What, like Fritz Lang did with that movie Metropolis?" Jerry asked.

"Metropolis ... " Joe said, his mind racing. "Clark Kent ... a mild mannered reporter in the great city of Metropolis. Secretly he fights for truth and justice ... "

"And the American way," Joe said.

"He needs a dame though," Joe said. "A guy always needs a dame. Maybe a reporter just like him ... sort of like Torchy Blaine, that reporter in the movies."

"She's played by the actress Lola Lane, isn't she?" the stranger asked.

"Can't use LolaLois though, that has some potential." Joe said.

"So Clark Kent works with Lois Lane, the dame he can't ever have ... because she's in love with his secret identity ... whatever you call it ... "

"I think you already have a name," the stranger said. He pulled a copy of their story 'Reign of the Super-man' from inside his jacket.

"Superman ... faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than ... a locomotive. Secretly working as a reporter named Clark Kent, he stands for truth, justice and the American way." Jerry felt excited about this idea in a way he hadn't in a long time. This was an idea that had legs.

"So he's strong and fast," Joe said, "But sometimes that's not enough."

"He'll be bulletproof too," Jerry said, his expression darkening. After the death of his father, dead of a heart attack when his store was robbed, bulletproof was something a hero almost certainly needed to be.

His father had been a hero ... an immigrant.

"He'll be an immigrant ... the ultimate immigrant. The last survivor of his whole world ... " The ideas were flowing faster and faster now.

"Perhaps he could fly, faster than any plane," the stranger said. Pulling the antique pocket watch from his waistcoat, he said "I have places to be, my boys. I wish you luck with your story."

A moment later he had stepped out of the ice cream shop, and all they could hear was the sound of his whistling as it faded away.

"Fly?" Jerry said.

Joe smirked. There were limits to what people would believe. The guy had given them some good suggestions, but he obviously wasn't a writer. Flying was simply too much for people to accept.

"Maybe we'd better stick to 'able to leap small buildings in a single bound,'" Joe said.

The little man smiled. All was right in the world.
THE END