

Snowy Secrets

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Rated PG

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Summary: Lois and Clark are in Smallville on assignment during a Christmas snowstorm... so is Trask, looking for Superman!

Thanks as always to my betas, Kenj and Female Hawk!

Takes place Season 1. Some dialogue taken from "The Green, Green Glow of Home," written by Bryce Zabel and "We have a lot to talk about," written by John McNamara

"I can't believe I let Perry convince me there was a worthwhile story in Smallville," I muttered under my breath for probably the hundredth time since we left Metropolis.

Clark gave me a patient smile, which was just this close to smug, and I almost wanted to slap it right off his face. "Lois, you know that Perry asked you if you'd rather stay in Metropolis for Christmas... you had the chance to back out."

He was right, and I bit my tongue. I supposed spending Christmas out in Smallville on a story was better than dealing with my parents. I had jumped at the chance to escape. It didn't mean I had to like it.

I grumbled as we got into the rental car, regretting my hasty decision. I wondered if we were going to have to drive far to get to Clark's parents' house. It will no doubt be in the middle of nowhere. They probably won't even have electricity!

"Lois, I can practically hear your thoughts screaming out how horrible this all is. Look, I'm sorry, but Perry sent us out here on assignment. If you loosen up just a bit, you might even have some fun. Smallville is really nice at Christmas."

I crossed my arms and glared at him. "We're here for work, not 'fun'!" I said snidely, glaring out the window.

Reluctantly I let out a sigh, knowing I wasn't being entirely fair to Clark. To be honest, I was just nervous about spending so much time with him and his family. I kept waiting for him to prove to me that he was like all the other men I've known – and especially the good-looking ones. They were usually the worst. But somehow, Clark had yet to show a sign that he's really one of those guys... and maybe that's what scared me more.

"So, how far is it to your parents' place?" I asked a few minutes later, in an attempt at civility. I had been pretty close to being a raving banshee up to now and was starting to feel guilty. I didn't want Clark's parents to think I was a stuck-up city girl.

"Less than an hour. Just sit back and enjoy the ride, Lois. Feel free to turn on the radio, if you want."

Did he have to be so accommodating all the time? Didn't the man have any flaws?

I knew that I was full of them... and being mean to Clark for no reason was definitely one of them.

I flipped on the radio... "*I need a hero... He's got to be strong and he's got to be fast and he's got to...*" I switched the dial... "*...shaping up, could hit the Smallville area by late tonight or early tomorrow morning. Expect 6-8 inches.*"

"Of snow? I blurted. "Great. I'll be stuck in Nowheresville for a month," I grumbled, forgetting my earlier pledge to try to be more pleasant.

I glanced at Clark and could see a slight smile playing on his lips. "It probably won't be that bad, Lois. We usually don't get the really bad storms until January or February. I don't think you

need to worry."

"Well, just in case, maybe we should stop and get some supplies. Is there a Cost-mart between here and your folks'?" I asked hopefully. Surely, we weren't that far removed from civilization!

"No, there's not a Cost-mart in Smallville... However, we can stop downtown if you want. It's on the way."

Clark was so patient that it was galling. Most men hated shopping in all its forms. But he just waited for me at the checkout, making small talk with the shop owner, who apparently Clark knew personally.

Small towns make me nervous. I feel too conspicuous. Give me the anonymity of a big city any day. Here, I can't imagine having people wanting to know about every facet of my life. Or the gossip that inevitably emerges if I decide to wear sweats to go grocery shopping. Even though I spend my life learning about the news of the day and digging into people's business, I don't like the idea of people digging into mine. Call me a hypocrite, but that is just the way I feel.

Eventually, I laid my survival kit on the checkout belt. Everything from ice cream to cereal. All stuff I could manage preparing on my own if I had to.

"My mom will probably have plenty of food for us, Lois," Clark commented, obviously trying to sound diplomatic about my choices.

"I don't want your parents feeling obligated to take care of me. And be sure to tell them the Planet will reimburse them for any added expense I'll cause," I said magnanimously.

"Lois, my parents are happy to have you," he said in that soothing voice of his, the one that I sometimes could feel to my toes and often made me want to be mean to him – mean because I was terrified of how his voice pleasantly affected me.

I moved past him to the cashier, his chest suddenly like a wall that was blocking me. I didn't look at him as I brushed past, feeling my cheeks flush red at the close contact. "I just want to be sure I'm contributing," I said, waiting to see the total. "Oh, Clark! Batteries! I almost forgot! Would you mind grabbing me a pack? I'd hate to be stuck in a farmhouse with a foot of snow and no batteries."

"I can't believe all that food only cost \$18! You could never get away with those prices in Metropolis," I said, eying my receipt appreciatively as we made our way back to the car.

Clark instantly took over and helped put the bags in the trunk. He was doing it again – being a nice guy. I got that jumpy feeling, that I should insult him or make a joke, or find some way to distance myself from how he made me feel. But instead I got in the passenger seat and surreptitiously watched him in the rearview mirror.

Actually, all I could see was the expanse of his wide shoulders as he moved bags around, but the rippling of his muscles was oddly fascinating. He's always so... mild-mannered. I forgot how in-shape he was sometimes... Though there was that one time, when he had first moved to Metropolis and was living at the Hotel Apollo. I had caught him just as he had come out of the shower in a towel... Now that—

Clark climbed back in the car, which was a good thing, because my thoughts had been moving into dangerous territory.

"So, why do you think the government is involved in small town pesticides, huh? Perry wouldn't have sent us out here if he didn't think it was for a good reason," I rambled, thinking that talking about work was safer than letting my mind wander.

"I don't know, Lois. But we'll find out."

Eventually we pulled into a long driveway, literally in the middle of a cornfield. I had never felt so out of my element

before.

I got out of the car and headed to the trunk to help bring in the groceries, but Clark was already unloading them. “Don’t worry, Lois. I’ve got it. My parents are eager to meet you.”

No sooner had he said that, than they appeared on the front porch.

“Clark!” called a diminutive woman, who I assumed was his mother. She was wearing an apron, and as we approached the house, I could smell a delicious home cooked meal being prepared inside. I felt a little ashamed about my pathetic contributions to the pantry, seeing that the Kents were indeed prepared to feed me as well.

“You must be Lois,” she gushed as she came closer. I reached to shake her hand, but she pulled me down for a hug. “Nonsense! We hug around here. Clark has told us so much about you!”

He had, had he? I glanced at him, but I couldn’t see his eyes as the porch light was reflected off his glasses.

“Here, Clark, let me help you,” his mom offered, and I suddenly felt totally out of place, not carrying anything but my purse.

“Can I take something?” I asked, but they both told me not to worry.

I walked up the porch and into the house, immediately struck by how settled in and homey their farmhouse felt. I could already see they were so different from my family — who were divorced and living in multiple homes. I felt a slight tightening in my throat, looking around, seeing family photos and evidence of a loving home all around. An afghan that Mrs. Kent had probably made lay on the sofa. Clark’s high school football trophies lined the mantle. A picture of a fishing trip with Mr. Kent and Clark sat perched on a bookshelf.

They had even put up a Christmas tree, blending into the country hominess of the place. It wasn’t very big, but it filled the room with warmth and light, and I could see the ornaments were a hodgepodge collected over the years, each obviously tied to a pleasant holiday memory.

I suddenly felt so small and unworthy. I was always so petty and even mean to Clark, thinking that he had ulterior motives whenever he was nice to me. But I was beginning to see that with him, maybe what you see is what you get — just a nice guy with wonderful parents.

And that’s why the guilt of how I’ve been treating him is now eating me alive.

The Kents warmly welcomed me into their home.

I felt more like a friend or even girlfriend of Clark’s than his work partner, and I secretly admitted to myself that it wasn’t such a bad feeling.

Over dinner, we chatted about Clark growing up on the farm, and I said as little as possible about my own dysfunctional family. I laughed at their stories, and every now and then would catch Clark watching me, as if he’d never seen me before. I guess I hadn’t shown this side of myself so much when we were at work. I was always constantly on my guard and hunting down the next story.

Sitting around the Kent kitchen table, I felt the protective wall I had built up around myself start to crack, ever so slightly.

After dinner, Clark and his dad went out to the barn to go look at something. I stayed behind and helped Martha clean up the dishes.

“Thank you for dinner,” I said sincerely, not used to people doing such nice things for me. “That was really wonderful. Though you didn’t have to go through all that trouble.”

“Nonsense! We are happy to have you here. You don’t have to help clean up either. If you’re tired you can go straight upstairs —”

“No, please. Let me help clean up. It’s the least I can do,” I said, gamely reaching for a sponge and turning on the water. I was used to using a dishwasher, but I really was grateful and wanted to help.

“Martha!” I heard coming from outside. It sounded like Mr. Kent, and he sounded like it was urgent.

“I’ll be right back. Don’t worry. It’s probably just the cow’s water bucket got knocked over again,” she said with a smile, quickly moving out the back door.

I continued to wash the dishes, but I was instantly intrigued by what was happening out back. I couldn’t see anything from my vantage point, but I was close enough to the barn that if I turned off the water, maybe I could hear something.

I stopped washing the dishes and leaned over the sink towards the window. I couldn’t really hear anything happening in the barn.

Eventually I saw all three Kents heading back into the house, and I immediately turned the water back on and started washing again, not wanting to appear as if I had been curious at all as to what had gone on.

“Is everything all right?” I asked as they entered the kitchen.

Martha nodded reassuringly. “Everything’s fine, Lois. Just— Clark’s not feeling all that well.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“Yeah, um, a cold, I think,” said Mr. Kent.

“Sorry to hear that, Clark,” I said, though my reporter’s instinct was telling me that something was off. The urgency in Mr. Kent’s call earlier had seemed to warrant a much more dramatic response than just cold medicine. But I let it slide... for now.

Clark wasn’t really looking at me but he said, “I think I’m just going to head to bed now. Lois, you can have my room and I’ll sleep down here.”

“Oh, but Clark, if you’re not feeling well, wouldn’t you rather sleep in your own bed?” I asked. Clark was definitely chivalrous to a fault.

He shook his head. “No, I’ll be fine. I’m going to watch TV until I fall asleep. Goodnight, Lois.”

“Goodnight,” I said, turning off the tap as I finished the last of the dishes.

“Come, Lois. I’ll show you to your room,” Mrs. Kent offered.

As we headed up the stairs, I watched helplessly as a miserable Clark flopped onto the sofa. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he was wallowing. But over what, I had no idea. Surely not just over a cold.

“Now, Jonathan and I have to leave early in the morning. He has a doctor’s appointment in Wichita, but we’ll be back by the afternoon,” Mrs. Kent told me as she handed me a fresh stack of towels. “You just make yourself at home.”

“But what about the snowstorm that’s coming?”

“Don’t worry about us. If it gets bad before we head back, we’ll stay at a hotel. We still have two whole days before Christmas Eve. Goodnight, dear.”

I watched her walk down the hall and couldn’t help but feel a little trepidation. If the Kents stayed in Wichita, that would mean that Clark and I would be here alone. And while I didn’t think I had anything to fear from being with Clark alone, I worried if I could handle it. I didn’t want to be the bossy partner that I usually was with him at work, and I certainly didn’t want to be his nursemaid if he was sick... but it was possible that being those other things... being more than a partner, and getting to know him on a deeper level that had me worried.

I quickly headed to the bathroom to change for bed and brush my teeth, contemplating being alone with Clark. We had already done a few stakeouts together, and secretly I admit that we had had a good time. But out here, in the middle of nowhere, on his

home turf? I feared facing things that I had felt in passing about Clark. Things that I had always been too afraid to closely examine.

I sighed. One thing at a time. We still had a story to do. Just focus on work like you always do and everything will be fine.

I switched off the bathroom light and made my way to Clark's room. It wasn't very big, but it was cozy. There were lots of pictures of him growing up all around the room. I noticed one of him in high school, his arm wrapped around a girl. I was almost relieved to see this evidence of his womanizing past. Sure it was high school, but come on. Was anyone really as innocent as Clark pretended to be?

Eventually I climbed into bed. Unbidden thoughts hit me as I realized this is Clark's bed, and though the sheets were fresh and clean, I imagined I could smell his Clark-ness somehow on the pillow. I found it oddly comforting, as I reached to turn off the side lamp.

It didn't take me long before I drifted off to sleep.

I woke up, noticing how oddly quiet the house was. There was no roar of street noise, no blaring alarm. Just the calm country quiet. I found it a little unsettling. Wasn't there such thing as too much quiet?

I got out of bed and was surprised to see slippers by the bed. Had Mrs. Kent left them here for me? That made me remember her plan to go to Wichita and I immediately got up to check the weather outside. There was just a dusting of snow on the ground, and it didn't seem to even really be sticking. The Kents' truck was gone, so I assumed they'd left, but if the snow kept falling at this pace, they'd probably be back by this evening.

I was relieved, honestly, that I wouldn't be stuck alone with Clark this evening. I just thought the potential for disaster was too high... I'd either make an idiot of myself or he'd get on my nerves. Having the Kents here would be a nice buffer.

I slung on my robe and bounded happily down the stairs. I glanced at the sofa, but Clark was up and about, so I guess he wasn't that sick. The smell of bacon, eggs, and coffee reached my nose and I immediately headed to the kitchen.

"Good morning, Lois. Would you like some breakfast?"

Clark asked, wearing one of his mom's floral aprons around his waist over his sweatpants and a t-shirt. My eyes went helplessly to his biceps as he flipped the bacon, and I was distressed by how comforting I found his display of masculine domesticity.

"Clark Kent can cook?" I teased, sitting down at the kitchen table. "Well, that must be the biggest well-kept secret of the year!"

He gave me a look, his mouth slightly gaping like a guppy, and I laughed. "What? What did I say?"

"Nothing," he answered, pushing up his glasses on the bridge of his nose as he turned back to the frying pan. A few seconds later, he brought me a plate. "I'll get you some coffee, too. How did you sleep?" he asked, reaching for a mug.

I hadn't realized it until he asked me, but I had slept really well. Nothing had woken me during the night. In Metropolis, I usually get out of bed at least once to go to the bathroom. But here, I hadn't stirred all night.

"Um, not bad. You?" I hedged, taking the mug of coffee he had fixed for me.

"Yeah. Not bad. I always sleep pretty well at my folks'."

"Are you feeling better this morning?"

Clark put salt and pepper on the table and then fixed his plate before sitting down across from me. "Uh, yeah, sort of. But... definitely not back to normal yet."

He seemed to be acting like the tough guy who hates getting sick, and I snickered. "Clark, it's okay if you aren't feeling well. Everyone gets sick," I said, thinking I was being very generous.

"Yeah, I suppose," he said glumly, his fork meandering

through his scrambled eggs.

I rolled my eyes. Men could be such babies.

"So, what should we do to look into this pesticide thing?" I asked, noticing Clark had also set out toast, butter, and what looked like homemade strawberry jam. I could get used to eating like this...

"Well, we should definitely get an early start. The snow is light on the ground now, but I think we should be home by early afternoon, just in case it picks up."

I glanced outside. The dusting on the ground seemed very non-threatening. "I think the forecaster overstated his case. There is barely anything going on out there."

"Lois, trust me. We'll go see my friend Rachel Harris, and then do some research back here, before the weather gets bad. She's already putting together the pesticide history of the last ten years for us to go through, to have something to compare this to."

"Papers on pesticides? Be still my heart," I grumbled. "Can we at least stop at the video store? If we do end up holed up here tonight, I want to have something to do."

"Well, my parents already arranged to stay in Wichita. Dad couldn't delay his appointment. He'd been trying to arrange to meet with this cardiologist for months... but we'll be all right. We have a whole wall of board games," he grinned at me. "And I'd like a rematch."

"You're on, buster. If we have to pore over pesticide reports, then the least you can do is lose yet another game to me."

Rachel Harris immediately got on my nerves.

She simply gushed all over Clark, and it didn't help that I recognized her from the photo I had seen in Clark's room the previous night. Apparently, they had dated. Albeit a long time ago, but still. She had had her chance, and it was time for her to move on!

It didn't help that Clark was his usual charming self with her. He would laugh self-deprecatingly at her mention of old memories and flash his megawatt smiles at her that for some reason, I had believed he had reserved for me.

It made me feel very petty and perhaps just a little bit jealous. But why? I had done all I could to distance myself from Clark. He was the hack from Nowheresville, and I was the seasoned reporter. He was Mr. Green Jeans, and I was Top Banana. Now why all a sudden did I feel just a bit irritated that someone else should be privy to his charm and good humor?

It didn't make any sense, and it just made me feel grumpier as we left the sheriff's office where Rachel worked.

Add to that, we now had a stack of files a mile high to dig through — on pesticides, no less!

"I knew that coming out to Smallville would be a waste of time. I mean, pesticide reports? Really?" I grouched as we got in the car.

"We need all the background research we can get. It was really generous of Rachel to give them to us. They usually aren't readily available to the public."

"Who is this Rachel Harris to you anyway?" I asked, and then immediately blanched, realizing how I had sounded.

Clark flashed me a smug look, enjoying that he had caught me out. "Is someone jealous?" he teased.

I crossed my arms and then angrily reached for my seatbelt. "No, of course not! Why should I be? I just never heard of her before today, that's all. And I saw an old picture of the two of you in your room and I—I—just wondered. No big deal."

Oh, God. Could he see my cheeks flush red? I did a quick glance in the mirror and indeed could see a red stain on my cheeks. Damn my fair skin.

"No big deal," he echoed, still apparently enjoying my discomfiture. I wanted to slap him. After a moment, he conceded. "Rachel and I did date — but it was a long time ago. We're just

good friends now,” he admitted. Then when I didn’t respond, “Happy now?”

“I told you, I don’t care. Why would I care about your love life, Clark? Past or present!”

I stared glumly outside, noticing the sky was starting to darken, much like my mood. I felt trapped, and I couldn’t explain why. I was jumpy and nervous and agitated, and I didn’t want to be any of those things. Seeing Clark flirt with someone else had upset me, and I was afraid to look at the reasons why. Maybe I was a little jealous, though I certainly wouldn’t admit it to Clark. And now, as snow started falling, I started feeling jittery at the thought of spending the night alone with him.

Another shot of fear went through me. What if this got back to the newsroom? It would be like Claude all over again, and I’d be humiliated, even if nothing happened between us. I’d never live it down that I had spent the night with Clark Kent, one way or the other. Either I would be thought of as a slut, or an ice queen for not giving in.

We were heading towards the edge of town, and there was still another five miles or so before we got to the farm. I was tempted to ask Clark to drop me at a hotel. But I quickly thought through the implications of that, and Perry would be angry if I expensed it, especially when we had a perfectly good offer at the Kents’. Besides, at Christmas, even nowhere Smallville likely had all the local hotels already booked.

The edge of the town passed us by, and there was nothing but rows of cornfields for miles. Snow was starting to fall heavier, and with a sigh, I realized I was stuck.

I was quiet all the rest of the way back to the farmhouse, uncomfortable with the prospect of facing Clark and snow all alone. Yet this *was* Clark we were talking about. I knew he wouldn’t maul me in the hallway, and yet a part of me sort of wanted something to happen between us. And maybe that’s why I was scared. I really liked Clark, and despite how I’ve treated him, I thought that to some extent, he liked me too.

We were definitely friends, and yet I remembered when he first came to the Planet, and we were up late one night eating Chinese, he had looked at me like he may have been interested in more. I had doused that fire even before it had started, and now—what did I want?

I sighed, starting to daydream. Superman... that’s who I wanted. My heart was ready and available for him. But even I knew Superman was in some ways the easier choice. The ideal man was always easy to love... but Clark?

I swallowed something uncomfortable in my throat at the thought. Could I ever love Clark?

“Well, we’re here. Just in time, too. It’s really starting to pick up,” he said, jostling me out of my daydream.

I fought the urge to say something biting, realizing suddenly that I didn’t want to be crabby old Lois anymore. Seeing him flirt with Rachel Harris today had made me sit up and look at something I hadn’t wanted to admit. I really liked Clark. And suddenly, I really wanted him to like me, too.

We went inside and I immediately headed to the sofa with the pile of pesticide reports. “The sooner we get through these, the sooner I can beat you at Monopoly!” I said playfully.

“Don’t get too smug, Lois. I played with my dad last time I was here, and he showed me a trick or two... I’ll just brew us up some coffee and we’ll get to work, okay?” Clark said pleasantly as he headed into the kitchen.

I nodded, glancing out the window at the snow. Was I so naïve this morning not to think that maybe the forecast was just off on timing? It certainly looked like it would be a six-inch snowstorm or better... Even though it was only around four o’clock, the clouds outside made it seem much later. I reached

over to turn on a lamp and switched on the TV to catch the headlines.

“...*flights cancelled in and out of Wichita. This storm will affect most of the area overnight. Expect school closings in the morning...*”

“Well, it’s going to be hard doing much investigating in this,” I groused, just as Clark came in the room carrying a cup of coffee for me. I reached out and took it, immediately taking a sip. I smiled because it was fixed exactly how I like it. “Thanks, Clark.”

He grinned down at me. “Did Lois Lane just thank me for something?” he teased, though I was a little hurt. Do I really treat him that badly?

He sat down next to me, and I hit his arm playfully. “Stop it, Clark. I thank you all the time,” I said, though I realized with a shock that I was lying. I couldn’t think of the last time I had thanked him for anything.

“I know. I’m just teasing,” he said lightly, taking a seat next to me on the sofa. “So? Any news? Is the world about to fall apart with you out of Metropolis?”

“Very funny. No, just checking the weather. It looks like it will get worse overnight. Your folks could have made it back, but I guess it’s too late now, huh?” I said, glancing at him, surprised by the sudden feeling of butterflies in my stomach. I had spent many nights alone with Clark, doing stakeouts. This somehow seemed... different. More intimate perhaps... I tried to hone in on why I was feeling so uncomfortable about it, as I stared into my coffee, and Clark continued to speak.

“Yeah. Mom left a message on the answering machine that they had already found a hotel.”

It felt very cozy, sitting there with Clark and our coffees on the sofa. His parents’ sofa was definitely more comfortable than mine.

Clark suddenly got up and started making a fire. He expertly stacked some small logs and stuffed some old newspapers in between to get the fire started.

“None of those better be any of my stories,” I teased.

“Don’t worry. These are just old copies of the Smallville Gazette. I send my folks’ our big stories, and all of those get put in a scrapbook.”

He struck a match, and suddenly the room was filled with a warm glow. It only added to the intimate feeling of the evening, which made me immediately decide that we should get to work. I split the stack of reports and sat half of them by his side. “Okay, so what should we look for? Anomalies?”

“Locations. Just see if they’ve ever had a problem on or nearby the Rig’s farm before,” he said, lighting the fireplace. It didn’t take him long to get it roaring, and he quickly settled into scanning the files. He handed me a slip of paper. “Check for these addresses. They are all in the vicinity of where they are investigating.”

“Well, whatever it is they’re doing, they surely aren’t getting anything done tonight. Not with this weather,” I said, glancing at the window.

I muted the TV, but left it on in case any interesting news came on while we worked. Clark turned on the radio and we got to work while cheesy Christmas carols played on in the background. Despite the rocky start to our partnership, I really liked working with Clark. I had made a big show about him being a naïve farm boy and not at all cut out for reporting, though honestly, he’s proven to be quite good at it. And secretly, I admit to enjoying the work we do together. Our work habits were similar, and we’d often make lists and exchange them, comparing notes and ideas. Some of our best work came about when we bounced ideas off each other, and to be honest, it was only in the throes of work that I would sometimes let my guard down and forget to be mean to Clark.

About an hour and a half later, I knew the detailed history of pesticides in Smallville, but we were no closer to detecting why the government had suddenly gotten involved on Irig's property.

I sighed and got up off the sofa to check the snow. The sun was gone, and there was nothing but a white blanket outside.

"I wonder how much snow has fallen?" I asked, glancing at Clark who was just setting aside his pile, looking as bored as I felt.

"I don't know. Let's have a look." Intrigued, I followed him to the front door. He pulled a yardstick out of the closet and stepped out on the front porch. "It's more accurate than waiting for them to tell you on TV," he said, dipping the stick in the snow just off the porch. "I'd say four inches. But it doesn't look like it will stop any time soon. Good thing we have plenty of supplies," he grinned at me.

"Hey, I just picked up things I needed," I said defensively, heading back inside to where it was warm. The wind was starting to pick up as well.

"I'll make us some fettuccine, and then, I want a Monopoly rematch!"

"You're on!" I laughed, following him into the kitchen. I leaned on the doorframe, watching him. "I guess you're feeling better?"

He turned to look at me, with that strange deer-in-headlights look he gets sometimes and then answered me. "Yeah, a little bit... I hope I'm back to normal by tomorrow though."

"Well, like I said, we aren't likely to get much investigating done tomorrow until the weather clears up... How long does it usually take until they get out here to plow your road?" I asked, and by Clark's look, I was a little afraid of the answer.

"Usually no more than two days—"

"Two days?!" I protested. "I thought we'd be out of here by then, have this story all sewn up! There's real journalism to be had in Metropolis that I'm missing!"

"Lois, calm down. Actually, it might be longer, since we're two days away from Christmas Eve... Think of it as – a much-deserved vacation. Come on, I promise... it'll be fun."

An hour later, we were sitting on the floor in the living room playing Monopoly. Clark was losing big, but he was taking it well.

"Go to jail!" I cried gleefully, as he had another bum turn.

The wind was howling outside, and it momentarily distracted me from our game. Suddenly, there was a loud crack and the electricity went out.

I heard Clark sigh. "Great. Sounds like the transformer blew. We won't be able to get it fixed until they clear the snow first... But sit tight. I had stacked some extra wood earlier, just in case we'd need it. There's a huge pile on the porch. I'll be right back."

I saw the shadow of him move past me. It was suddenly feeling chillier in the room, and I reached for the blanket that had been slung on the sofa and wrapped it around my shoulders.

I waited in the dark silence until Clark returned with a pile of extra wood. I reached my hands out towards the dwindling fire, as they had already begun to feel cold. He added a log onto the fire, creating a much needed explosion of warmth in the room. "Man, I wish I had bought some marshmallows."

Clark grinned at me and then disappeared into the kitchen. He came back a moment later with skewers and a bag of Stay-Puffed marshmallows.

I giggled like a kid. "My hero," I said, greedily reaching for a skewer. "I haven't roasted marshmallows in ages."

We sat for a few minutes in companionable silence, cooking our marshmallows. I knew we probably should be working, brainstorming what could have the government interested in Smallville. But truth be told, Clark was right. I did sort of need a little vacation, and this was as good an excuse as any.

I glanced over at Clark. His glasses were mirrored reflections of the fire, so I couldn't really see his eyes, but I wondered what he was thinking about. I'm usually so focused on a story or avoiding any kind of intimacy with Clark at all costs, that I sometimes forget how to relate to other people on a personal level. I felt like an idiot for not asking about the doctor's appointment that his parents' had gone all the way to Wichita for.

"So, how's your dad?" I asked shyly, trying to make up for not saying something earlier. "You said he had to go to this cardiologist in Wichita?"

"Yeah... he has high blood pressure and cholesterol. Mom keeps telling him to eat more Cheerios, but when you work on a farm, you need more energy. So he eats bacon and eggs every day."

"Every day? Well it's no wonder—" I realized I was about to criticize Clark's dad, and I thought better of it, laying a reassuring hand on Clark's arm. "I'm sure he'll be fine."

He nodded. "Thanks, Lois."

"So, do you think we can finish the Monopoly game in this light?"

Several hours and several wins later, I was really getting sleepy. But the thought of crawling upstairs away from the fire was not a pleasant thought.

I yawned one too many times, and Clark finally gave in. "It's time for bed, Lois. You're exhausted. Do you want to sleep down here by the fire? Or upstairs in my – in the bed?"

Honestly, I didn't want to sleep in either spot alone. Down here, I thought I might get scared once Clark headed upstairs, the creaking of the farmhouse not being something I was used to. And upstairs was certainly likely to be cold after hours of the heat being off... However, at least upstairs was familiar. I had slept well last night. Perhaps once I got under the covers, I'd go right to sleep.

"I'll be fine upstairs. But thanks, Clark."

He got up and handed me a flashlight, with some of the extra batteries I had bought. "Guess these will come in handy after all. Let me know if you need anything during the night, okay?" he asked, his voice low and warm.

I took the flashlight, and had the urge to give him a good night hug, but resisted. We were work colleagues, and I needed to keep that distance.

"Good night, Clark," I said as I headed up the stairs.

I did all I could to get warm under the covers, but it was no use. My teeth were practically chattering, and even with an extra sweatshirt and double socks, it was still too cold to sleep.

Eventually I gave up and quietly headed down the stairs, hoping the fire might be still going, but that Clark was asleep.

I glanced at the clock and saw that it was just after one in the morning. Clark had apparently banked the fire, so it would burn throughout the night, but it was much lower than when we had gone to bed. I was relieved to see that Clark looked like he was sleeping, and though I didn't want to wake him, I was desperate for some warmth. I came over to where he lay by the fire, and stretched out my hands to what remained of it, though it wasn't nearly enough to get rid of the chill from upstairs.

I pulled the blanket I had taken from the sofa earlier around my shoulders, debating what to do. I didn't want to go back upstairs to where it was really cold, yet I couldn't very well sleep on this hard floor either.

"Lois, are you okay?" I heard Clark say beside me, almost in a whisper.

I turned to him, surprised by his voice. "Did I wake you?" I asked.

"I wasn't really sleeping yet... are you cold?"

I was afraid to tell him I was, worried he would think I was

hoping to get snuggly under the covers with him. Yet, body heat was the best in the cold...

I nodded.

"Here," he said, getting up to wrap his blanket around me. The blanket was warm from his body heat, and I sank into its folds.

"What about you? You were the one who wasn't feeling well."

He shrugged. "I'll be all right. See? Here's another blanket," he pointed out, reaching for a blanket I hadn't noticed that was slung over his father's armchair. He scooted over to sit next to me by the fire. "I think maybe I should start it up again, what do you say?"

"Well, we surely aren't going to be able to sleep the way it is now."

Clark got up, leaving his blanket around his shoulders almost like a cape. It made me think of Superman, and I realized that I hadn't thought of him all evening. Clark and I had had so much fun that I'd had no time to even bother worrying about if the Man of Steel even cared that I wasn't in Metropolis...

"Too bad you aren't Superman," I muttered. "Heat vision would sure come in handy right about now."

"Yeah, it would," he answered dryly with a sigh. "Guess it's the old fashioned-way for us tonight." He threw on a few more logs, shoved in some old newspapers until they caught fire from the still hot coals; Clark had the fire roaring again in no time.

Clark came to sit down next to me, and we huddled together to get warm. We sat in companionable silence by the fire, just listening to the wood crackle now and then. I yawned, and felt the tug of sleep come over me, yet I didn't want to go back upstairs to Clark's cold bedroom. My head lolled to the side, and somehow my head ended up on Clark's shoulder.

"Lois? Do you want to sleep down here?" he whispered to me. "I can go upstairs and—"

"No, it's okay, Clark. You can stay down here," I said, though I didn't really think that through.

I just hated the idea of being down here all by myself. Maybe it was the city girl in me, afraid of the stillness of the country.

"Okay, then you take the sofa, and I'll sleep here," he offered, suddenly stretching out by the fire.

"Clark. Your back will be miserable in the morning if you do that. How about we sleep on opposite ends of the sofa? It's large enough, I think."

I got up and lay down on the end closest to the fire. Clark stretched out on the other end. The sofa was long enough so that my feet reached about as far as Clark's hips and vice versa. Close enough that we'd be cozy, but not too close.

"Goodnight, Lois."

It reminded me of the night we had staked out at the honeymoon suite in the Lexor Hotel. I smiled to myself, remembering how annoyed with him I had been that night. I heard myself answering, softly, "Goodnight, Clark," before rolling onto my side to sleep.

A noise woke me some time later, sounding like it had come from outside.

I glanced over at Clark, and with just a low glow coming from the fire, it looked like he was sleeping. He was still wearing his glasses though, so it was hard to tell for certain. I sat up a little and nudged him. "Clark?"

"Hmm?" he murmured, probably still asleep.

"Clark," I nudged his leg with my foot again, slightly harder. "I heard something outside."

He sat up a little. "I didn't hear anything," he said, as if that ruled out all possibility that there could have been a noise.

"Clark! Go check it out – or I will," I said, getting to my feet. I shivered. "But if I do, then I'm taking the blanket with me," I

warned, making a reach for it.

Clark harrumphed, but got up. "What do you think you heard?"

"I don't know... something outside."

"Maybe it was one of the animals... sometimes the cows get loose and—"

"In the middle of a snowstorm?" I asked, incredulous. Surely any bovine creatures would want to stay tucked up in some warm hay in the barn and not stalk around outside. I knew I sure would...

"You have a point. All right. I'll check it out. You stay here," he said, although I followed a few paces behind him.

Clark grabbed a flashlight, put on a heavy winter coat, and slipped into some work boots that I assumed were his dad's. He turned to me, "Lois, stay here. It's cold outside. No need for both of us to freeze," he said, opening the back door. Feeling the wind sweep in, I reluctantly agreed, and nodded my consent.

"Just... hurry back."

He turned and smiled at me, looking beatific, especially in the light of the flashlight. "Why? Will you miss me?"

I sighed with annoyance and crossed my arms. "No... I... just don't like the idea of sitting in this creaky dark house all by myself!"

"I'll be right back, Lois."

I ran to the sofa to grab the blanket and then ran back to watch him through the kitchen window. I don't know what I thought I heard, but I was suddenly regretting sending Clark out there all alone. He was the one who hadn't been feeling well... and even if it was some stray cow, surely it wouldn't get far in this snowstorm. I saw him walk over to the barn, a shadow against the white of the freshly fallen snow. It was dark outside, but the snow seemed to give off its own light.

Clark stepped into the barn, and then, his flashlight fell into the snowdrifts nearby the barn door. I rolled my eyes at his klutziness, waiting for him to come back out to get it, but he never came. The flashlight shone upwards out of the snow, like a lonely lighthouse.

Had something happened to Clark? I opened the screen door, pulling the edges of the blanket tighter around me against the cold. I almost called out Clark's name, when I thought I heard voices coming from the barn. Someone else was out there... and I didn't think it was a friend.

I hastily closed the door, grabbing my flashlight and looking for the kitchen phone. Calling the police would mean calling Rachel Harris, and as much as I didn't like her, I couldn't take the chance that Clark was in trouble. I didn't know if she could get out here in this weather, but I had to try something.

I found the phone, but was thrown into a panic when I realized the phones were dead! Had the storm knocked out the phone lines, or was it whoever had waylaid Clark in the barn?

Breathe, Lane. I told myself. Perhaps it was just a recalcitrant cow and Clark was just having some difficulty with it. I paced the kitchen with the flashlight off, thinking what to do. After another few minutes ticked by and Clark still hadn't emerged out of the barn, I knew I had to face the cold to see if I could help him.

I ran upstairs with the flashlight and dug into Clark's closet, looking for something warmer to put on. I grabbed a blue sweatshirt and a third pair of socks. Back downstairs, I went to the same closet Clark had got the coat and boots from, and I put on the other pair of boots, which I assumed were Martha's and grabbed one of the winter coats. I reached up for hat and gloves as well, something Clark hadn't bothered with earlier.

A prickle of fear went up my spine, as I worried that maybe Clark was in more danger than just dealing with a cow... maybe he had hurt himself. Or maybe... someone else really was out there.

Again, I shook off the notion, realizing out here in the

country, that it was highly unlikely in a snowstorm, that some random criminal would be hanging out in the Kent barn. Still... I needed a weapon, just in case. I went back to the kitchen to look for something. I immediately ruled out knives, because the idea of using one in self-defense made me nervous. I needed something small enough to hide in my coat pocket, and yet strong enough to knock out any threat. Martha's rolling pin? Maybe... Feeling like I was wasting valuable time, I took it with a frustrated grunt, and slipped it inside my jacket. There was a small pocket inside, and the handle end slid in, so I could hold it against my hip nearly inconspicuously.

I decided to leave my flashlight inside, so I could sneak up on whatever was going on in the barn. I just needed to follow the light of Clark's flashlight anyway. The snow was coming down heavy again, and was a little more than halfway up my boots as I trudged across the lawn. The wind was biting, and through its whistle, I tried to hear what was going on in the barn.

Seeing that flashlight, so discarded, gave me an ominous sense of foreboding. There had to be something serious going on in the barn for him not to have retrieved the flashlight already, especially how weird he was about saving discarded objects. I remember when I had thrown out a pen, and he had given me some grand lecture about our throwaway society. No, there was definitely something amiss, and I would find out what it was.

As I neared the barn, I resisted the urge to call out Clark's name, hearing something of a scuffle going on inside. As I edged to the barn door, I thought I heard a punch make contact with a face.

"Where is he?" said a man's voice.

My heart hammered in my chest as I peeked around the corner. I caught just the glimpse of a man in military uniform standing over Clark, who was tied up in a chair. I couldn't make out the thug's face, but that voice was very familiar.

"I told you... I don't know," I heard Clark answer, sounding weary and defeated.

"Give up the alien!" said the man, slapping Clark once more. I realized with a gasp who he was.

Trask! But what was that military rogue doing out here bothering Clark in Smallville?

Suddenly, my rolling pin didn't seem nearly as adequate, and I wish I had opted for a kitchen knife after all.

Trask stood over Clark, menacingly. "I'm going to make you a deal, trusting that your stay in Metropolis has put some sense in your head. Give up the alien, and I'll let you live."

Clark seemed a bit worn out, but he answered back rather defiantly. "What makes you think I could do that if I wanted to?"

I knew it was imperative for me to stay hidden, and luckily, it was easy to do with so little light in the barn. I stepped inside and hid behind a stack of hay bales, watching for my moment to jump in and help Clark.

"Superman came to Smallville around the time you were born. There has to be a connection. Tell me, and you live."

Was that true? Why had Superman ever been to Smallville? And why would Trask think that Clark knew anything about it?

"There's nothing to tell. I'm learning all this for the first time now," Clark answered, cool and reasonable. He seemed more perturbed by the interrogation than worried about how much danger he was in. I watched him carefully from my position, though I could only see him in profile.

Trask suddenly stomped angrily towards Clark, leaning over him, intimidating. "I'm trying to save humanity from an alien invader, Kent!"

Clark calmly answered, "You have no proof of that."

"There's another possibility," Trask mused as he paced around Clark, beginning to look entirely unhinged. "Perhaps the alien has taken over your mind, infused you with its power."

"Nobody's infused me with any power. Nobody's taken over

my mind," Clark said calmly. He glanced ever so slightly my way, and then did a double take, as a look of horror crossed his features. He quickly schooled them though, as he turned back to Trask. "How did you even get out here in this storm? What did you expect me to do?"

Trask grinned. "Wouldn't you like to know? I found something on the Irigs' property. Something that will save the human race from the alien invasion. Call Superman here, and I'll show you."

"Superman's in Metropolis," Clark said logically, though his face had gone pale. "I can't summon him here."

"But you do know how to contact him?" accused Trask.

"Superman... is a friend— to the whole city of Metropolis. He's no threat, Trask. You are."

"Ah but, if he is your friend, then eventually he'll come for you, won't he... or if not you, I bet he would if that nosy partner of yours were in danger."

"Lois?" Clark whispered, seeming to resist the urge to glance in my direction. "She's in Metropolis. You can't get to her," he strangled out.

Trask laughed, making me jump out of my own skin. "I know she's here in Smallville. I have a small group searching the city for her... between the two of you being in danger, Superman is bound to show up."

I saw Clark glance quickly in my direction, a strong note of warning in his eyes. He obviously wanted me to leave the barn. But to go where? Back in the house, where Trask would eventually find me anyway?

I longed to have Superman's phone number in that moment on speed dial, some quick and easy way to call him and tell him the danger we were in. But at the same time, it seemed that Trask had a ready trap for Superman, though I couldn't fathom what on earth it could be.

Somehow, Clark and I had to shake this madman on our own.

My legs were getting cramped from crouching behind the hay. I debated heading back into the house anyway, to think of a plan, but moving from my spot might just give me away. Besides, what could I get from the house that would help me? Jonathan Kent's hunting rifle? Yeah, right. I was intimidated as it was by just Martha's kitchen knives. I had no way of defending us... Wait. A kitchen knife could come in handy. If I were caught, I could possibly use it to cut through the ropes. Or if Trask left the barn, I could free Clark. Why hadn't I thought of that sooner?

I stepped just outside the barn, judging the distance to the house. It seemed far away, now that I had the fear of Trask spotting me. However, he seemed preoccupied with intimidating Clark for the moment. It was now or never.

I tripped over Clark's flashlight with a dull thud, kicking snow over it so it was buried in the drifts around it.

"What was that?" Trask said suddenly.

"Uh, the wind?" I heard Clark suggest.

I got to my feet and clamored towards the house, fearful that Trask had seen me. The rolling pin was still awkwardly sitting inside my jacket, and only the fear of it being used against me later kept me from discarding its weight in the snow. I didn't turn back until I reached the door, and sure enough, Trask was there, coming after me.

I slammed the back door shut, and threw the lock, knowing that it would only buy me a bit of time. He could smash the glass and reach in—

I tried not to think about it as I headed to the kitchen drawers, looking for a weapon. Where before I had hesitated against selecting cutlery, I was now searching for the biggest knife I could find. It was mostly dark inside, as only the distant fire in the living room was giving off any light. However, I was glad I had helped with dishes the other night so I had an idea of where

to look.

Inevitably, I heard banging on the back door. I took out the rolling pin and grabbed two knives. One butter knife I slipped into my boot, and the other, a larger chopping knife, I kept close to my person. Perhaps I could hole myself up in here for a while... Banging on the door wasn't getting him anywhere, as I certainly wasn't going to let him in.

The noise stopped for a second, and I wondered if he had given up, or gone to the front door. I hastily ran across the house to the front, and locked it. Just as I reached it, I heard a shot ring out from the kitchen. He had shot the lock with a gun!

I dove up the stairs, trying to keep my footsteps as silent as possible.

"Miss Lane?" he called, heading into the living room. "I know you're in here."

I made it to Clark's room. I shut the door and grabbed a chair to put against the handle. Like a frightened child, I got under the covers, trying to think what to do. We had no electricity, no phone service, and a maniac was coming after me. What do people do in these situations – besides call for Superman?

Die! a terrified voice inside my head screamed. But no, I wouldn't give in to panic. Trask wanted Superman. He wouldn't kill Clark or me until he got what he wanted, right? I didn't let myself dwell on the thought that he really only needed one of us to lure Superman...

How were we to get Superman way out here, anyway? Couldn't Trask have stalked us in Metropolis, where Superman was easily found?

I heard boots on the stairs, and I glanced over at my makeshift blockade. The chair would stall him, but it wouldn't keep him out forever. I longed to call out for Superman, even if we were in backwater Smallville. I also wondered what had happened to my partner. Had Clark managed to get free from Trask's ties?

I simultaneously worried and hoped that he was on Trask's heels to back me up. Another shot rang out, as Trask shot through Clark's door. He easily pushed through the chair blockade, and I looked up at him from Clark's bed, my hands suddenly in the air in surrender.

"What do you want, Trask?" I asked, though of course I already knew.

"Superman. And you will bring him here, one way or another."

He shoved me to my feet, the larger knife clanging noisily to the floor. He gave me a disgusted look, then kicked it under the bed. Trask made me walk in front of him, the gun lodged in my back between my shoulder blades. It was dark in the house, and I wasn't sure if that made things better or worse. Maybe I could find my moment to slip out of his grasp... but I had to choose it carefully.

"What have you done with Clark?" I demanded.

"He's waiting for our hero in blue to appear in the barn," Trask said from behind me, in a voice that gave me chills of fear. "Let's go and see if he's showed up yet, shall we?"

I held onto the railing as we walked down the stairs, every second calculating when I could make a move. But the steel of the gun in my back was making it hard to concentrate. I felt tears burning in the back of my eyes as we went past the living room. What a dolt I had been to worry about getting too close to Clark. You'd think I would have learned by now not to rule out the possibility of crazy psychopaths getting in the way of me spending too much time alone with my partner!

"Why are you doing this, Trask? Why here? Why not chase down Superman in Metropolis?"

"Because here... I may have just found something to stop Superman once and for all."

I didn't like the sound of that one bit. I stumbled out onto the

back porch, and Trask grabbed my arm to keep me walking. "Don't try any false moves, Lane. I may want to keep you alive as bait for Superman, but I am not averse to injuring you to keep you from running, got it?"

I nodded, stark terror cutting through me.

As we neared the barn, I could see an odd green glow coming from the barn. "What is that?" I asked, fearful of its eerie cast on the freshly fallen snow.

"A present in case Superman shows up."

As we rounded the barn, I could see the bright green glow of a meteor rock, sitting a few feet away from Clark. Clark himself was slumped over in his chair, looking like he was asleep or worse...

"Clark!" I cried out, turning to Trask. "What have you done to him? He hasn't been feeling well these past few days, and this cold can't be good for him. Have you no trace of humanity in you?"

Trask moved over to the strange green rock and set it back in its case, all the while keeping a gun trained on me.

He sat me down roughly in a chair behind Clark, though Clark still didn't seem to have awakened. Trask tied my hands behind my back, and I could just feel the tips of Clark's fingers. I didn't know what Trask expected to do with us, or how he thought Superman would find us out here on the Kent farm.

"Clark?" I called over my shoulder, needing to hear his voice, to hear that he was okay.

But he just groaned.

"He's obviously sick, Trask! He needs to be in bed! He may need the hospital for all you care!" I shouted, exaggerating my partner's condition to match the intensity of my fear.

Would Trask just have us sit out here in this freezing barn until we somehow got a hold of Superman? The man was a lunatic!

"No... hospitals," I thought I heard Clark murmur behind me.

"There, you see? He doesn't need a hospital, he's just not feeling very well," said Trask, his hand on that lead box that held the strange green rock. "Just call for Superman, and all of this will be over," he instructed.

I glanced fearfully at the box, afraid of what that rock could do to Superman. Trask may be a lunatic, but he seemed to be one who had thought out all of his moves.

"You can't just keep us holed up here forever, Trask," I spat defiantly. "It's madness! The storm hasn't even let up and—"

Trask marched over to me, leaning in, his breath a heavy stench of cigarettes and aftershave. "You've harbored the alien. I should have you tried for treason! You've lauded him as a hero in the press, all the while he has been planning our demise!"

"No..." Clark groaned behind me.

"It's not true! Superman stands for everything you don't, Trask! Everything that's good in the world! It's just too bad you can't understand that!" I cried, my vehemence coming out stronger because I was so afraid. "And Clark needs to go inside! He'll freeze to death out here!"

"I never knew you cared for your partner so much, Miss Lane," Trask said snidely. "I thought you had your sights set on Superman."

"Clark's a good person! And any normal person would see he needs care!" I cried. I tried glancing over my shoulder at Clark, but couldn't really see him. "How are you holding up?" I asked quietly.

"Just a... bad headache."

Trask crossed his arms, looking down at me with a smug grin. "Look, just hand over Superman and I'll let you two go. It's that simple. So... how do you get in touch with him?"

"Well... I usually just... call," I said a bit at a loss.

"Like on the phone? You can call him?" Trask seemed intrigued by this possibility.

“No, like this — help, Superman!” I cried at the top of my lungs. I felt Clark flinch behind me, and I felt a little bad, knowing how when you have a headache, a top-notch scream is not what you want to hear. “Sorry, Clark,” I whispered over my shoulder, and then glanced back at Trask. “But you see... it is to no avail. Certainly not in backwater Smallville. Trask, you are barking up the wrong tree.”

“No, I’m barking up the right tree... so if you can’t get Superman, perhaps your partner has a way? He does seem to get about as many Superman exclusives as you do... and I’ve yet to hear a story about Clark Kent yelling for the Man of Steel to come rescue him,” Trask said, a note of inquisitiveness in his voice.

“It doesn’t matter how I know him. Superman... can’t show up here now anyway,” Clark said sadly. I felt his pain, knowing how far away we were from Metropolis. Trask was insane. There was no way Superman would find us all the way out here.

“You can’t hold us here indefinitely. We’ve told you — it’s impossible to reach Superman,” I said, hoping to appeal to some logic in Trask.

He paced around us, shaking his head. “No, no... I’ve done my research... I know that no matter where you two are, Superman can find you. I believe he can find you even out here.”

“Then why didn’t he show up when I yelled for him?” I asked boldly.

“Maybe he knows what I have for him... “ Trask said, glancing at the box with the strange meteor rock. “Or maybe... you aren’t in enough danger...”

Trask suddenly took his gun and aimed it at my chest. “How about yelling for Superman now, Miss Lane?” he smirked malevolently.

“Superman,” I whispered, too terrified to draw breath.

Clark moved and instantly seemed to come alive again.

“Trask, no! You—you don’t know what you’re doing!”

“I’m getting that alien creature to appear. I know exactly what I am doing,” he said, and I heard the click of the hammer as he readied to shoot. I scrunched my eyes shut, wishing I were anywhere but there. Even reading pesticide reports with Clark was better than this!

“No—you—can’t! I mean—I —” Clark was twisting in his chair, and I felt his head clunk against mine as he struggled. “Superman won’t come from Metropolis... and you’re right to notice he always appears when we’re around, and always rescues Lois...” his voice took on a melancholic tinge to it, and I wondered what he was getting at. “And he always will... no matter what the cost,” he muttered. Clark paused and then let out a heavy sigh. “Trask, I am Superman.”

I stifled a laugh, but then immediately sobered, still staring down the barrel of a gun. “Clark! Don’t be ridiculous!”

But there had been an urgency, a seriousness to his voice that made me very nervous. Surely Clark was kidding, just trying to buy us time, right? He couldn’t possibly be Superman... he would have told me!

Would he, Lois? Asked an insidious voice in the back of my brain. What reason would he have had to tell me? I had fallen all over Superman, and Clark — well, I mean I liked him. Most of the time. But still — it just couldn’t be true!

I was pulled out of my thoughts when suddenly Trask swung the gun to take aim at Clark.

“If you are Superman, then you have no need to fear bullets, do you, Kent?” Trask asked smoothly.

“No, Trask, don’t!” Clark shouted, but it was too late.

I heard a shot ring out, and tried to look over my shoulder to see what had happened. I felt Clark slouch, and cold fear shot through me as I worried that Trask had killed him!

“Clark!” I cried frantically.

“Don’t worry, he’ll live. But he proved he was bluffing.”

Trask answered calmly.

“Clark! Answer me! What happened?” I cried hysterically, my mind in a whirlwind. Did Clark just take a bullet for me? Was he dead? Why would he be so stupid as to say he was Superman?! Why, of all the stupid, idiotic things to do!

“Please, you have to let me help him,” I cried, trying harder than ever to loosen the bonds around my wrists.

“Loi...s,” I heard Clark say behind me, and I nearly broke my neck trying to turn to see him.

“Clark? What happened? What did he do?”

“My... arm... Don’t worry... it... will all be... okay,” he got out in slurs.

“You maniac!” I screamed defiantly at Trask. “Look what you’ve done! You’ve shot an innocent man! Some protector of humanity you are!” I spat angrily.

“It was necessary to prove he was lying,” Trask suddenly and unexpectedly cut my ropes. “We’ll go into the house, and you can fix him up. But try anything else—and neither of you will be so lucky. I know you can reach Superman, and I’m not leaving this farm until I get him.”

I turned to Clark, as Trask cut his bonds, a gun still trained on both of us. Clark’s forehead was warm and his eyes seemed to be having difficulty focusing. He was feverish. No wonder he had become so delusional as to say that he was Superman! “Clark? Clark, look at me?” I said, taking hold of both sides of his head to face me. “What kind of madness was that, you crazy fool?” I admonished, though there was little bite to my words, so choked was I with tears that he had gone so far as to take a bullet for me. “Come on, let’s get you cleaned up.”

I struggled to get Clark to his feet, and he wasn’t able to do much of the work. As we slowly made our way to the house, I was disheartened by the clear track of blood he was leaving in the snow. How much blood had he lost already? What if he didn’t make it?

“Clark? Listen to me. You’re going to be fine, you hear? Just keep focusing on putting one foot in front of the other, nice and steady,” I went on, encouraging him with each little step. Eventually I got him to a seat in the kitchen. It was still quite dark, though the sun was starting to rise, just barely.

Clark nodded towards a cupboard. “Mom keeps extra... towels in there. And there might be some candles, too.”

I glanced at Trask, wondering if he’d let me move to the cupboard, and then he nodded. “But I’m keeping an eye on you, Miss Lane. Don’t tempt me to use another bullet,” he warned, his gun trained on me.

I opened the cupboard and immediately saw the towels. There were bandages and rubbing alcohol as well. I didn’t see any candles, but my hands bumped into something else of interest... a small vegetable peeler. It wasn’t a knife, but it might do in a pinch. I slipped it into my pants pocket, hidden from view behind the cabinet door, before I shut it.

I came over to Clark, who had a puddle of blood just below his elbow. I tried not to think of the blood, but tossed a towel on the ground to absorb it as I tended to his arm. I don’t know when he had lost his jacket, but he was only wearing a plaid shirt and a t-shirt underneath.

“Think you can get this over shirt off?” I asked gently, struck by how pale and weak he seemed. I couldn’t recall a time when Clark had been sick or even really tired. He always seemed fresh and full of energy. It angered me deeply that not only had Trask struck out at Clark when he was already not feeling very well, but that he had taken away that light in his eyes when he looked at me, which now was gone. Clark looked so... helpless, and lost, and seeing that look in my partner put more fear in my soul than anything else that had happened to us tonight so far.

Clark nodded assent as I lifted him a little to take off the shirt. I could see the injury clearly now; the bullet had grazed his

bicep, but wasn't – thank God—lodged inside it. "What were you thinking, provoking him like that?" I whispered fiercely, my hands suddenly shaking as I realized how serious a situation we were in.

He was quiet, but then with his other hand, he lifted my chin to look in my eyes. "Lois... I—I'd do anything for you," he said simply, his eyes warm with emotion. Suddenly, those fears of intimacy with Clark came rushing back, distraught by how his words snuck so easily into my heart and warmed it. Traitorous tears crept back into my eyes, and I swiped at them with a sleeve.

"Clark..." I started, but had no idea what I wanted to say. There was such depth of emotion in his eyes, such hurt even, and I couldn't make sense of it at all.

"Are you almost finished?" Trask said harshly, standing over us.

"We'll get through this, partner," I whispered, as I finished tying the bandage around his arm. I had a little experience with field dressing when I had been an imbedded journalist for a very short time in my early days at the Planet. But I quickly had realized that war zones were not my thing, and that I preferred your everyday city villains to the confounding dangers of war.

Clark gave me a weak smile, but it was a smile nonetheless, and it gave me courage as I turned to face our captor.

Trask suddenly looked nervous and he ran his fingers through his hair, the gun still in his hand. "I left it in the barn," he muttered, frustrated. "Damn it!"

"Um, what?" I asked, finding myself amused despite the situation by his self-berating.

"The meteor rock!" he answered as if I were stupid. "We have to go back to the barn to get it."

"You could always just leave us here," I said innocently.

Trask trained the gun back on Clark and kicked out a kitchen chair. "Kent, you sit here." Clark, apparently still not doing very well, did as Trask asked.

He kicked another chair out and moved it back to back with Clark's. "Lane, here."

I obliged him, hearing my heart hammer in my ears as I hoped he didn't think to check my person and discover my peeler... or my butter knife. I gave a little fight at being tied up, enough for him to know I wasn't happy about it and to hopefully put away any suspicions that I might have a plan of escape.

He tied Clark and me back to back, our ropes around our wrists, but not tied together. When he was satisfied, he headed out the back door. As soon as it shut, I turned as best I could towards Clark.

"Clark? I have a peeler in my pocket. I can't reach it. Can you?"

I shifted in my chair, grateful that the chairs weren't tied together, so that my hip was closer to Clark's tied hands. "Can you reach me?"

I kept trying to glance out the window, knowing we only had a few minutes at best until Trask returned. Clark still seemed a little weak, but he understood this could be our only chance.

I felt him grab onto my chair, and I tried to angle my hip to be in a better position for him to reach into my pocket. He accidentally touched my butt and let out a quick, "Sorry."

"You can apologize later, Clark. Just get the peeler," I said, feeling his fingers get inside my pocket. A few seconds later I heard, "Got it!" and I breathed a sigh of relief.

I tried to hop my chair back around to where Trask had left us. I could see his shadow on the porch, knowing we only had seconds to appear as if nothing had gone on in his absence.

"It will be okay, Lois," Clark whispered to me, just before Trask opened the door. I felt oddly reassured by his statement, knowing that like Superman, Clark was always there for me. I knew he wouldn't give up on me any more than I'd give up on him.

Trask set the heavy box on the kitchen table, giving it a reverent pat. "Superman doesn't have a chance as long as I have this... It puts you two in quite a dilemma. Give up Superman, or risk your lives to save him. One way or another, I will get what I want."

"Superman obviously isn't in Smallville," I reiterated, though I could see it didn't matter to Trask. His eyes seemed cold, but also distracted and off-kilter. His obsession was pushing him into the boundaries of madness, and logic wasn't going to work with him.

"But you are. And I know that whenever Lois Lane is in trouble, Superman always finds a way to rescue you. I will just bide my time... I've already delivered a message to the Daily Planet. Either Superman shows in the next twenty-four hours, or their favorite reporters will be taken into government custody indefinitely."

"You can't do that," I said. "It's illegal. You have no legal reason to hold us hostage."

Trask scoffed. "Aiding and abetting an enemy of the State? I'd say that's reason enough..."

"Superman isn't an enemy of the State, Trask. You just made that up," Clark clarified.

I suddenly felt Clark's fingers move against mine. I could tell from the movement that he was trying to saw through his ropes. We needed to keep Trask talking so he would be distracted from what Clark was doing.

"Perry White will know you're bluffing, Trask," I chimed in. "You were dishonorably discharged from the military after your last escapade going after Superman. Everyone knows that."

"I still have friends high up who believe in me. Don't think that I don't have the ability to make you both disappear."

His warning sent a chill down my spine. I wasn't sure what resources he had at his disposal, but I didn't like the idea of pushing the boundaries to find out what he was capable of.

I heard a slight grunt behind me, and felt Clark's fingers on mine as he started to cut through my ropes. He was free! Maybe we could get out of this without Superman after all. My confidence restored, I started looking around the room for our next move. Should we both try to rush Trask and take the gun from him? No, that could end up getting one or both of us killed... and in this weather, it wasn't like we could call the police to back us up either. I suddenly wished for telepathy so I could know what Clark was thinking.

I felt my wrists free from the ropes, and Clark's warm hands were suddenly holding mine as if to calm me. Or to tell me not to move just yet. Maybe Clark had a plan after all?

Trask still had his eye on us, but was radioing someone about whether or not they had heard a response from the Daily Planet. I couldn't hear the answer, but I suddenly heard a whisper over my shoulder.

"Don't move, Lois," Clark said, a note of warning in his voice. "Do you trust me?"

The question came as a surprise, and before I could think about it my answer came, "Of course I do."

I had never really thought about it before, but I did trust Clark. He was my best friend, and if I had to be tied up and held hostage by a madman, there wasn't anyone better to be tied up with. Well, other than Superman, I suppose. But Clark Kent had proven to me time and again that he was reliable when it counted.

Trask finished his radio conversation and turned his full attention on us. "I hope you're comfortable. Superman is nowhere to be found, and we aren't moving until I know he is coming for you two." He walked back into the kitchen and laid his hand on the lead box with the strange green rock in it. "Yes, the government is very curious about how this rock can stop the alien invasion..." He suddenly lifted the lid to inspect its contents, and I heard Clark grunt behind me.

“No, Trask, don’t—” he said.

Though I couldn’t see Clark, I saw the reaction in Trask’s eyes to Clark’s comment. They became wide with fear, and perhaps a little curiosity. He lifted the box and came closer to us.

“It’s— you, isn’t it?” Trask said, a strange mix of loathing and awe in his voice. “You’re him. Superman.”

I felt a chill go up my spine, seeing the look of relish that came over Trask’s features as he brought the rock ever closer. I could hear Clark grunting in agony, and I suddenly put the puzzle together myself.

Clark had admitted it only a short time before. “*Trask, I am Superman.*”

And yet, neither Trask nor I had believed him. Because he had been vulnerable, made vulnerable by that horrible green rock because Clark – was Superman.

I felt the breath leave my lungs, as my thoughts tried to catch up with my emotions. A cool, rational wave calmed me, as I put the myriad pieces together.

Clark always disappearing at odd moments and with the lamest of excuses.

Never seeing Superman or Clark at the same place.

And the cool distance with which the hero always treated me – the very same cool distance I gave Clark on a daily basis.

Yet Clark had lied to me. Repeatedly, and on purpose!

I temporarily stemmed my anger, deciding instead to direct it at Trask. Clark would get a good talking to if we got through this, but first, I had to make sure that Trask wouldn’t hurt him.

Trask was inching ever closer, his attention fixed on his victim. Good. Perhaps he wouldn’t notice me.

Trask walked past me, his eyes wide with a horrid fascination as he went after his quarry. He seemed mesmerized by the effect the green rock was having on Clark. I felt sick watching him, hearing Clark struggle just behind me. The strongest man on the planet, menaced by a green rock. It was a disturbing irony, and the humiliation of it must be killing Clark.

I felt the ropes in my hands, getting angrier by the second as Trask approached. He was at least twice my size, if not more, and I knew that at best I would be able to distract him. I would have to get the rock away from him somehow so Clark would have a chance to recover.

Had Superman ever told me about this rock? I suppose not, and I wondered, from Clark’s reaction to it, if he even had known about it before either.

As soon as Trask’s back was to me, I jumped out of the chair, and lunged up on its seat to reach Trask’s shoulders. I jumped on his back, using the rope to try and strangle him. As I had feared, he was too strong for me, though it did distract him enough so that he dropped the green rock. It rolled somewhere near Clark, and I could see him crumple up in ever more acute agony...

“Can you close the lid, Clark?” I called, being tossed around on Trask’s back like a monkey on an angry lion.

I couldn’t see him, but I heard the box close. Just as I tried to look over my shoulder at Clark, Trask managed to toss me into the wall, where I fell off, landing on the floor with a thud.

“Don’t touch her, Trask.” I heard Clark say from behind Trask, who was looming over me, now with the ropes in his hand.

He glanced at Clark, and I could see that Clark had somehow gotten Trask’s gun.

I felt stupefied, dumbfounded — use whatever adjective you wish — when I had a moment to let the revelations of the last few minutes wash over me. Clark stood now, holding the automatic pistol pointed towards Trask’s chest. He shook with the tension of holding the gun, something I doubt he had ever done before. But his gaze remained fixed on Trask, determined to intimidate him if not stop him entirely. I knew Clark would never shoot him, but I wondered if Trask knew that. Perhaps his own fear of the ‘alien’

he had created in his mind made him believe Clark was capable of anything.

Clark was standing over Trask, yet it wasn’t him. I mean, it was Clark. But it was also Superman, and that realization kept my eyes fixed on their tableau, for reasons more than concern over the situation itself.

I felt a little foolish; where previously I would have bet my reputation on Clark not being Superman, his reaction to that green rock had been undeniable. He wasn’t wearing tights or the cape, but I knew the fullness of the truth, of who he really was... and how often and easily he had lied to me.

I wanted to be angry with him, but my fascination over the revelation held my anger at bay, at least for now. Perhaps it was the curious reporter in me, but all I wanted to do was ask Clark a hundred questions about his double life, though I knew I couldn’t do it with Trask still here. In this weather, we were stuck with him for the foreseeable future so I was left to simmer in my tumbling emotions and burning questions.

Clark turned to me, his face eloquent with apology. “Lois, could you—?” he said, gesturing to the lead box that held that deadly poison for him. “Take it somewhere, anywhere. Just don’t say where so our — guest doesn’t get any ideas.”

I nodded wordlessly, lifting the heavy lead box, still puzzled as to how it had hurt Clark yet not wanting it to do further damage to him.

Trask watched me, and I could feel his hate radiating towards me.

“You’re making a big mistake, Miss Lane. The world will judge you harshly for aiding and abetting this alien creature!”

I glanced at Clark, but he hid his gaze from me. Was he afraid I agreed with Trask on some level? I wanted to reassure him. To tell him that despite how upset I was that he had hid this secret from me, I could never believe what Trask was saying.

But I knew that first I had to get rid of the poisonous rock. No matter how much Clark had lied to me, he’d saved me more times than I could count. Despite my anger at the deception, I still would do anything I could to keep Trask from getting the upper hand.

I put on my boots, hat, gloves and jacket once more. I looked over again at Clark, who despite being Superman, looked like his arm was getting tired of holding the pistol at Trask. I wondered what he would do in my absence and just prayed it wouldn’t be something foolish. I knew Superman to be levelheaded and capable, but Clark... Had his bumbling excuses all been an act, too? I suppose so, and I couldn’t resist staring at Clark a moment before leaving, trying to reconcile what my brain knew, but what my heart was still processing. His glasses were gone, and there was a curl of hair on his forehead, that sometimes slipped out of place when he was Superman. But the worry and the tension in his face... was purely Clark.

He glanced at me and tried to send me some sort of reassuring smile. But my world was upside down, and I didn’t know how to handle it, how to face him. That smile melted my defenses when I saw it on Superman, and when Clark dared it, it always threw my wall of sarcasm up. Knowing that the two were one and the same was humiliating, really, and despite my anger at his lies, I knew I had done my fair share of mooning after Superman. Enough that I even wondered if Clark had had a few laughs at my expense.

“I’ll, uh, be back,” I said vaguely in Clark’s direction, carrying the harmful lead box out of the house, happy to have a moment alone with my thoughts.

Snow was coming down heavier than we had anticipated, based on what the local radio had predicted. I guess a country foot of snow was more than a city foot, or something like that. The wind was still howling as well, and made it difficult to see very far ahead of me. The barn, however, was large and red,

which made it a reasonable target to head towards. At first I was thinking of just leaving it there, but then again, if Trask managed to escape from the house, I didn't want him to be able to find it. I wondered if Clark would even recover from the exposure he already had. The thought that he might not shot a fear of terror through me. How could he live with himself if he never got his powers back? To be the most powerful man on the planet and to be suddenly be rendered — normal? I had to believe that there was a way—that he would recover. The world needed Superman, and so did I.

I did go in the barn, but only to purloin a shovel. I would bury the box somewhere away from the house, somewhere where I thought Trask wouldn't be able to find it. That meant I had to get far enough away as to not be seen from the house.

The lead box was heavy under my arm, but I wasn't about to let that stop me from my mission. As I trudged through the snow, my mind wandered back to the salient revelation of this little trip to Smallville — Clark is Superman. But without his powers. Even if we hadn't had Trask to deal with, I felt guilty about the idea of yelling at him for lying to me when he himself was probably feeling so vulnerable.

I walked on, the snow coming down heavier and disrupting my vision. I was somewhere on the edge of the fields, I think. I could still make out the outline of the barn, and the house lay just beyond. I thought I was far enough away, yet close enough to easily find my way back.

I began shoveling the snow, thinking that the ground underneath was pretty solid. I just needed to bury the box in the snowdrifts, and Clark could deal with it later.

The wind was whipping my hair in my eyes, and the cold made my nose feel like it would break off at any given moment, but I kept working.

I couldn't even remember the last time I had held a shovel or done any physical labor. I had vague memories of helping my mother in the garden as a child, but the shovel felt heavy and foreign in my hands now.

I managed to dig a hole, though the snow kept sweeping in what I had dug out. Still, it was enough I thought to get the job done. I laid the box in the hole and threw more snow on top, noting that the snow drifts would quickly bury it anyway.

Satisfied that it wouldn't be easily found and that Clark would be safe from its effects, I turned to head back to the house.

I panicked a little as I realized the snow was coming down harder than I thought. I couldn't see the outline of the barn! I started walking in the direction that I remembered it being, but the wind and my own confusion made me feel less confident with every step. I used the shovel as a sort of walking stick through the drifts, though I felt it was the only solid thing I could see in this wintry world. I called out Clark's name, hoping he might hear me despite the wind. The irony that with his powers he definitely would have been able to hear me wasn't lost on me. I longed for my hero in red and blue... but I didn't know if he'd ever come back to me. And even if he did, I'd have to get to know him all over again, as Clark.

Suddenly, someone out of nowhere grabbed me from behind. I felt terror seize me and I dropped the shovel. A scream was about to rip out of my lungs, but a hand holding a cloth covered it before I could.

Was it one of Trask's men or just another fluke of living out in the country? I think Smallville has more weirdoes than Clark gives it credit for.

I struggled, kicking with all of my might. Then I felt myself drifting as if in a fog, my muscles feeling weaker and softer.

As I faded out of consciousness, one thought drifted to the surface: "Damn. Chloroform."

I awoke sometime later in the back of a van, my hands tied

and my mouth gagged with a bandanna. I couldn't see anything, though I assumed we were parked somewhere since the car wasn't moving. My captor had seen fit to give me a blanket, but it was little defense against the bitter cold.

My feet were tied as well, though in the weak light I seemed to be facing a door. I gave it a shove, but my feet just contacted metal.

Suddenly, the door opened, and a whirl of wind came rushing into the small van. My eyes strained against the bright light and the wind. Last I had remembered, the sun was just coming up, and yet now it seemed as bright as noon.

"You. Grab the girl," I heard a voice say, and suddenly I was being tugged out of the van.

"What's going on here?" I demanded, my arm feeling like it was about to be twisted off.

"Take her out back with Irig. We'll wait until we hear orders on what to do with them."

"From Trask? He's tied up at the moment!" I spat, hoping it were still true. But even if he wasn't, he knew Clark's secret, and I had no doubt that he wouldn't rest until he'd exposed Superman's identity to the world.

The thugs ignored me and dragged me into a barn at the back of someone's property. I assumed it was Wayne Irig's, because despite the snow, about ten men were working with heavy equipment, digging and scanning around the area. They had set up huge tents around the farm that helped keep some of the snow at bay so they could work. I assumed they were looking for more of that green meteor rock that had hurt Clark. I wanted to scream with the futility of it all. If Clark did show up here, even with his powers and there were meteor rocks present, we were all doomed.

They set me down on a chair next to a kindly looking farmer, and tied up me up. We were being watched by some man with a gun. Obviously it would be difficult to maneuver away, but I didn't see any harm in talking to him. "Are you Wayne Irig?" I asked to confirm my supposition.

He nodded glumly. "This is all my fault... I wish I had never dug up that green rock."

"Don't blame yourself."

"I just don't understand what they want it for."

Tears unexpectedly clogged my throat. *They want to use it to kill Superman.* Clark may have lied to me about Superman since I'd known him but he wasn't the kind of person—alien or otherwise—who would hurt a living soul. No matter his deceptions, he obviously had good reason to keep it a secret. Even from me. Sure I was hurt that he hadn't wanted to share his secret, but I guess on some level I understood why. But no matter what, we had to get out of this without Clark being exposed to any more of that horrible green rock!

"How well do you know the Kents, Mr. Irig?"

"Please, call me Wayne... Well, I've known the Kents practically my whole life. They're good people. Especially that son of theirs. I've never met a nicer fella. I'm surprised he hasn't found himself a girl yet."

The tears that had been in my throat made their way to my eyes, and I was unable to stop one from rolling down my cheek. What a fool I had been... I hadn't seen what was right under my nose the entire time. Not that Clark as Superman had helped any. He never gave me any indication as to who he really was.

And maybe he never would have told me.

Besides, what had I done to deserve to know? I had fawned all over Superman while putting down or flat out ignoring poor Clark! I felt my cheeks burn with shame. Even just for Clark's sake. He had never deserved for me to treat him like that and yet he had tolerated it. Why?

Had he hoped that I'd see through the suit and flashy cape to Clark underneath? Or had Clark hoped that I'd see something of

the hero in him?

Either way, I had missed, on both counts.

And now, I wasn't sure if I'd see him again. Who knew what these thugs would do to us, or whether Clark had managed to contact the police to deal with Trask. For all I knew, Trask had managed to shoot Clark while he was still vulnerable, and that thought absolutely terrified me.

My worry was beginning to exhaust me; plus, I didn't think the chloroform had entirely worn off. Sometime between talking to Wayne and going round in circles in my head, I had fallen asleep. I know I had, because I was woken up by a strong, southern yet authoritative accent.

"You do not have a permit to dig on Wayne Irig's property. Now, who is in charge around here?"

I was never so relieved to hear the voice of an ex-girlfriend of Clark's as I was to hear Rachel Harris'.

"Sherriff Harris! In here!" I cried out, just before the guy with the gun came to tie another bandanna around my mouth. Wayne was apparently shocked into silence, as they didn't seem to feel the need to gag him.

I feared I had missed our chance of salvation when two officers with guns entered the barn. "There are hostages back here, Sherriff!" shouted one, aiming his weapon at the heavy that had been keeping an eye on us.

Trask's hired man didn't seem to fear anything, and shot at the officer, hitting him in the shoulder. The second officer immediately shot the guard in return. Neither men appeared dead, but both men were down. I tried not to look at the blood oozing from the thug's body onto the dirt floor.

A few seconds later, the uninjured officer came to Wayne and I and cut our ropes. "Are you all right?"

I immediately thought of Clark, fearing the worst.

"Yes, but we have to get over to the Kents' immediately! Their ringleader, Trask, is there with my partner. When I left, Clark had him at gun point, but he's not the kind of guy to use guns and I have no idea what will happen!"

"Clark's in danger?" asked Rachel, in between delegating her men to round up the workers while at the same time radioing for backup.

"I'm afraid so. We need to get back to the Kent place now!"

My nerves were on edge the whole way back to the Kents'. The snow was slowing us down, and even in a pickup truck, we weren't able to go any faster than 20 miles per hour. The fifteen minutes it took to get there were the longest minutes of my life.

I feared what we'd see upon arrival. What if Clark was weaker than ever and Trask had gotten the best of him? What if Trask had gotten his gun back and – I didn't even want to think about it.

My heart was in a roil over Clark as it was. I had to deal with my infatuation with Superman and the fact that I really liked my partner. But I couldn't even begin to sort out my heart until I knew we all were going to be okay.

As we finally pulled up into the driveway, we could see two figures fighting in the snow. It was obviously Clark and Trask, though it was hard to tell who had the upper hand.

Rachel stopped the truck a good distance away and turned to me. "Wait here where it's safe, okay?"

I nodded, even though I wanted nothing more than to run to Clark and be sure he was going to be all right.

Rachel had one of her deputies follow her, and I watched as she approached the two men. The snow had stopped, though I couldn't hear from this distance if they were talking. I worried that something about Clark being Superman was being said and what Rachel would make of it all. I just hoped that if she did hear anything, she was a good enough friend of Clark's that she either wouldn't believe it or know enough to keep it to herself.

The suspense was killing me, though, and suddenly, I couldn't sit still a minute longer. Before I could stop myself with common sense, I hopped out of the truck. I had to know what was happening. I planned on staying out of the sightlines, even if the only thing I could really hide behind in the open field was what I thought were a couple of large hay bales. With the layer of snow over them, I figured they'd be large enough for me to hide behind, so I could hopefully hear what was happening.

I made a run towards the hay stacks and heard Rachel say a curse under her breath. She wasn't happy about me not staying put. But obviously she didn't know me very well.

As I darted up the drive, Clark glanced towards me, which drew Trask's attention. Rachel was already by the house, and Trask apparently knew it was now or never. I thought he was quite far from me, but it didn't stop the quake of fear I felt when I saw his gun aimed in my direction. I dove near the first hill of hay and covered my head.

I heard Clark yell, "No!" and the sound of gunfire cut through the cold open air.

I swear my heart stopped and I was a little surprised not to find a bullet lodged in me.

When I opened my eyes, there Rachel Harris stood, aiming her still smoking gun at Trask, who had just fallen into the snow, apparently dead.

I clamored to my feet through the snow, still trying to absorb what had happened. My eyes found Clark, and all I knew was that his arms would be the safest refuge. "Clark!" I said, running towards him. He met me half way and gathered me up in his arms, as I instinctively knew he would. "Are you okay?"

"Am I okay? You are the one Trask just shot at! I'm fine," he said, holding me close.

That was when I realized that either my dive had been just in time or else Rachel's bullet had spoiled Trask's aim. I clung to Clark in relief until we were rudely interrupted.

"Um, Clark?" Rachel said from behind us, some moments later. "Do you two have a minute? I've got a few questions..."

Rachel finally left an hour later after interrogating me and Clark about Trask. We were both as honest as we could be about what happened without revealing that Clark was Superman.

We'd probably eventually have to testify in court against the men that had been on Irig's property, but the whole nightmare seemed to be over for the moment.

I let Clark say good-bye to Rachel alone while I went into the kitchen to get another cup of coffee. Though the electricity was still off, Clark had boiled some water over the fire, and I took the kettle to pour hot water into the French press. I wasn't sure if I was doing it right, but a little while later I was able to sit down in the living room with a passable cup of coffee. I stared into the fire as I drank, replaying the events of the last day in my head.

Clark is Superman.

How could I not have known? I glanced over at the doorway, seeing his broad shoulders nearly meet both sides of the frame. He was an imposing figure and yet the gentlest of souls.

And I just couldn't stop feeling like I had messed everything up.

Yes, I was mad that he hadn't told me the truth. But how could I forgive myself for treating him so appallingly, while practically worshiping his alter ego? I must have come across as shallow and petty, and now I was worried about where we would go from here.

I heard the front door shut and waited for Clark to come into the living room. My heart was in a mess of emotions, and I wasn't sure which would come to the surface first: relief that we both survived our encounter with Trask, anxiety over whether Clark would regain his powers, or the fact that I had made a fool of myself time and again with my infatuation of Superman?

Or simply, the fact that he was Superman?

“You want some company?” I heard him ask quietly from behind me.

“Yeah, sure,” I managed to say, feeling my throat tight with tears. I glanced up at him, and he must have seen my look as he sat right down next to me.

“Lois, are you okay?” he asked solicitously, which only intensified my urge to cry.

I turned to face him, tears in my eyes, though I couldn’t express exactly why. Stress over the events of the day, sure. But something else was there, too. Something akin to humiliation, or perhaps the fear that I would lose him.

I found myself in his arms somehow, as he set my mug of coffee on the table. Tears streamed down my face and I kept sobbing, “I’m sorry, Clark,” into his shoulder, over and over. “I just didn’t know.”

He rubbed my back, like he would a child’s. “I didn’t mean for you to know, Lois. It was safer for you not to know.”

I eventually sat up, and he handed me a tissue. “I mean, of course I didn’t know. You never told me!” I said, hitting him in his uninjured shoulder out of frustration. “But—I should have known, on some level... some investigative reporter I am.”

“Lois, don’t do this. Please. Look, we both had a stressful day.” He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair before speaking again. “I uh, I just need to know one thing.”

I blew my nose and turned to him, seeing the stress of the day for the first time in his eyes, too. He took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose and then looked at me. “Are you going to tell Perry?”

I glanced at him, at first shocked that he would ask me that. I sighed and sat back into the sofa, musing over the idea. “Do you mean will I write an article about what I know? That Clark Kent is Superman?” I knew it would be the headline of a lifetime, sure. Any reporter worth his or her salt would kill to know the identity of Superman and write about it.

He shifted anxiously, not looking at me, and I reached out to touch his arm. “But the world’s hero is also something else to me,” I said softly. “He is my partner and my best friend.” I couldn’t get out all that I wanted to tell him, how I really felt. How I loved how he let me stay over at his place when criminals were on the loose. And how he always rescued me when I needed him the most. And sometimes, that he even does it without wearing a cape. I simply smiled at him, and I saw him watching me, unsure whether to trust my intention. “You’ve saved my life more times than I can count, Clark. I owe you so much... Both of you.”

Despite my reassurances, I could still see anxiety in his expression. Perhaps he feared that Lois Lane, award-winning reporter, would still emerge triumphant. Maybe he feared her ambition would get the better of me and the better of him, and that I would write this most extraordinary and once in a career story.

And the fear that he thought those things about me, which would have been so accurate in the past, made me feel deeply ashamed.

I wanted him to know that I was his friend no matter what. That yeah, I could be a tough cookie on the outside, but that he had reached my tender center more often than I had wanted to acknowledge. I wanted him to know that he could trust me as much as I trusted him. I trusted him with my life – even before I knew his secret. I always ran to Clark first when I had a problem.

I reached for his hand and squeezed it in mine, making him look at me. “No, Clark. I won’t tell a soul. Your secret is my secret.”

We sat for a long time in the living room, just idly talking as we both tried to decompress, sitting on the sofa by the fire next to

each other, but not touching. I kept wanting to reach out to him physically, perhaps to reassure myself that we were okay. But it didn’t seem appropriate, so I just asked him all the burning questions I had wondered about Superman but had been too intimidated to ask before. Realizing that my hero was also my best friend opened up possibilities that I had never thought I’d have the chance to discover.

“So you actually do get tired? And hungry?”

“Sure. Just... not as tired and not as hungry, I guess... But Lois... I still don’t know if I’ll get my powers back,” he said, massaging his shoulder where he’d been injured.

“How’s the bullet wound?” I asked, remembering the deep distress I had felt fearing he was dead.

“It’s healing,” he said, showing me where he had put on a new bandage. “Rachel had a medical kit, and I fixed it up a bit. It’s sore, but it’s getting better. But you know, that—meteor rock... I’ve never encountered anything like it. And actually, right now, I kind of just want to enjoy feeling normal.”

“How ironic, huh? The moment I learn that you are so much more than normal is the time when you actually are just a regular guy.”

He sighed moodily, and I wondered if I had said something wrong. “Lois, all I’ve ever wanted...” he shook his head in seeming frustration. “Never mind.”

“What is it, Clark?” I asked, wanting desperately for him to open up to me. I had a burning desire to understand the hero I had been infatuated with and how he reconciled with what I knew of my best friend. I knew they were an amalgam of the two, and yet I still couldn’t see the picture clearly.

He stood up to add more wood to the fire, and therefore wasn’t facing me as he continued speaking.

“I guess I always hoped that you’d see something special about the ordinary guy side of myself. I can’t help feel that now you know—” he sighed again, using the poker to move the logs.

“What? Tell me. What is it, Clark?”

“Well, just that—you like me more now. And I just don’t want it to be because of my powers...”

I understood his insecurity. I had chastised myself enough over basically the same fear. But we were friends. And I wanted him to know that I put that first. “Well Clark, you are an ordinary guy. At least for the time being, right?” I teased, trying to lighten the mood.

He glanced at me, skeptical.

“Clark, this is confusing for me, too. I mean, my hero is also my best friend. And I just have to sort of... figure out where we both stand. I—I don’t want to lose you. Not because I’ve been so blind and stupid, you know? I mean, it’s not like we are dating or something. It doesn’t have to be complicated.”

“But Lois, it is. You see, only those who are closest to me know my secret. And that secret won’t go away. It will always be there. Which is exactly why I didn’t want to burden you with it. We’re sort of stuck with each other because of it. If we ever went our separate ways... I know it sounds selfish, but I’d worry about you telling someone. And I’d worry about you knowing. People could use you to get to me... and that—really terrifies me.”

“Clark, my lips are sealed, I promise. And no matter what bad guy tries to pry the secret from me, I won’t tell. You shouldn’t worry, really,” I said as confidently as I could, unable to fathom the scenarios that were probably going through his head.

He shook his head, once more staring down at the fire. “I will worry, Lois. If anyone tried to hurt you—”

“Clark, look, no one will know I know,” I said, doing my best to reassure him. I just didn’t know what he needed to hear. He still looked pensive. Did he just not trust me?

“It’s more complicated than that, Lois,” he said glumly.

“Why? It doesn’t have to be. So I know your secret, big deal. No one else will know.”

“Lois... forget it, okay? It’s been a long day for both of us. Let’s just get some sleep.”

I didn’t understand his abrupt change of subject. He was acting so strange, almost as if he were afraid of me. Or maybe just afraid of what I knew. I didn’t want it to be a burden for him, though I had no idea how to reassure him. Did he not trust our friendship?

“Shall we camp out here on the sofa again, then?” I suggested, my heart suddenly racing a bit at the thought. I couldn’t shake my infatuation with Superman so easily, despite my brave words, and I was intrigued by the idea of sleeping next to him again.

“Yeah, sure. I’m just going to run upstairs to change. Here’s a flashlight. You can use the downstairs bathroom.”

“Thanks, Clark.” I said, taking the flashlight, and feeling reminded once again of how I had taken him for granted so often.

As I brushed my teeth in the light of the flashlight, I made a resolution to myself. Clark obviously felt responsible for my knowledge of his secret, and he worried if I could handle that burden. I felt a little insulted that he thought I couldn’t handle it, but at the same time, I could see why he felt so vulnerable. He didn’t know my deepest darkest secrets. And I wondered if I did tell him, would that help bolster his trust in me?

Sometime later, we got cozy on the sofa again. This time, Clark did take off his glasses, with a twisted smile at me as he did so. “These were my only disguise, Lois. I wanted you to see the man underneath... underneath the glasses and the suit,” he said with a sigh, turning on his side.

I didn’t know how to take that. Could that mean he cared for me more than just as a friend? I worried I was flattering myself by reading too much into that statement, but if it were true, well, that would explain a lot. It would explain why he felt so burdened that I knew his secret. I could destroy him with one article in the paper, and what did he have over me?

My infatuation with Superman?

I released my own sigh, realizing suddenly that maybe I wanted a deeper relationship with him than that. And if he had secretly longed for a relationship with me... perhaps there was a way to move forward from here.

I lay there, listening to the crackle of the fire, thinking. Eventually, I started talking, searching for a way to reach him, to make him understand that I trusted him and I wanted his trust in return. “I had a huge fight with my dad my senior year and I moved out on my own before I was eighteen,” I said at last, breaking the still silence of the room.

“You never told me that.”

“And I sometimes sit at home alone in a schlumpy robe and eat chocolate ice cream while watching cheesy soaps.”

“Lois, why are you telling me this?”

“I guess... I don’t know. I’ve learned a huge secret about you and I guess I want you to know that you can trust me with it. I guess I’m trying to give you blackmail material to make you feel better.”

“It’s okay, Lois. I do trust you.”

“Do you?” I asked, the surprise evident in my voice. “Then why didn’t you tell me before?”

“It wasn’t because I didn’t trust you, Lois. It was because I had wanted to keep you safe.”

“Oh...” I said dumbly, thinking over what he said. “But am I really any less safe now? I mean, no one else knows that I know. Only Trask knew, and he’s dead. I think there’s more to it, Clark, and I wish you’d tell me.”

I heard a sigh from the other end of the sofa as he adjusted his position once more. “Just... let it go for now, will you, Lois?”

I couldn’t help but feel I was missing something, though Clark seemed loath to talk about it. I sighed and turned over on my side. “Sure, Clark... Goodnight, then.”

“Goodnight, Lois.”

The next morning I woke up feeling very chilly. The fire had gone out, and Clark wasn’t lying on the sofa across from me.

“Clark?” I called out to the empty room. I felt a thrill of fear after recent events, wondering if there weren’t more of Trask’s men in the area. What if Clark had run into them and he still didn’t have his powers? What if—

“Clark?” I called out again, more fearful.

I gathered the blanket around my shoulders and made my way into the kitchen. He wasn’t there, but I saw him chopping wood outside the kitchen window and let out a breath of relief. He was all right. And he hadn’t abandoned me.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I had worried about that as well. I couldn’t help but feel that I made him nervous now that I knew his secret. I wouldn’t have blamed him if he had disappeared for a few hours to clear his head...

I caught a glimpse of my own head in the hall mirror, and though I admit I usually don’t look terrible in the morning, today I felt pretty rough. There were circles under my eyes, and my hair needed a good combing. I didn’t want Clark to come in and see me like this, even if he may have caught a glimpse of me while I was sleeping. That would have been through no fault of my own. Awake and aware of this mess, however, would be entirely unforgiveable.

I made my way upstairs to take a shower. I went to Clark’s closet to pull out my suitcase, when I spotted an old box buried in the back of it. Although I knew Clark’s secret, I still felt like I was learning who he really was, and for some reason this nondescript, ordinary box intrigued me. My curiosity got the better of me, so I tugged the box out of the closet, wondering what else I might learn about him from its contents.

I desperately wanted to understand him. How did an extraordinary farm boy decide to become the world’s hero and not want a thing in return? Clark was the most selfless person I knew, in both his personas. And yet, what had made him don the suit in the first place?

The box was labeled with his name, and I supposed it carried old keepsakes and whatnot from his childhood. I felt a second’s hesitation, fearing I was prying more than I should, but then dove in anyway, too curious not to.

As I had suspected, there were high school yearbooks, trophies, pictures of friends... and something at the bottom of the box... I dug through until I could pull it free. It was a telescope. I wondered if he was still interested in astronomy. Did it start when he learned where he was from? Or had he been drawn to it before he knew the truth about himself? When had his parents explained his origins? What did I really know of his origins anyway? I just knew he came from a planet called Krypton. But how he got here or when exactly, I didn’t know. Yet I recalled seeing pictures of Clark as a young boy downstairs on the mantle. So he must have come here as a baby... such an extraordinary story.

I felt my reporter’s blood kicking in, and I did my level best to tamper it down. I wanted to know more because I wanted to understand Clark, not to exploit him.

The telescope was a well-worm brassy color, and it felt cool to the touch. It looked like it had been well-loved, once upon a time. I hadn’t really thought of a Christmas present for Clark, but I wondered if he’d mind if I cleaned up his telescope for him. Would he think it was too personal? That I had invaded his personal belongings? Or would he see it for what I wanted it to be — a gesture to show him that I care and that I wanted to understand him?

I heard Clark enter the house, and I quickly put the box and the telescope back where I had found them.

“Uh, I’m going to take a shower, okay Clark?” I called down the stairs.

“Sure. I’ll have breakfast ready when you finish.”

I smiled, remembering seeing Clark in his mom’s apron the other day.

“Okay, sounds good.”

I came trundling down the stairs a while later to the comforting smells of bacon, eggs, and coffee. I had a smile on my face, as I had decided that I would indeed fix up Clark’s old telescope, and I couldn’t wait for him to open it tomorrow morning. I knew I was getting ahead of myself – as I still wasn’t sure where I’d find polish on the farm without asking Clark or whether I could get away for a sufficient amount of time to do a good job on it – but the idea of doing a little something for him made me happy.

“Well, for being tied up and nearly shot at yesterday, you’re in a good mood this morning,” Clark said, using a camp stove to cook up breakfast.

“We survived. And, we have a story to send to Perry,” I added, then blanched, as I realized what Clark must think I meant.

“I thought you weren’t going to tell Perry anything,” he said slowly.

“No, you misunderstand me, Clark,” I said, rushing to correct myself. “We can still write up a story. Perry’s going to expect something for the Planet on the um, pesticides.”

Clark sighed, expertly finishing the scrambled eggs with some red pepper garnish. “What do you propose we say?”

“Well, Trask is dead. I think that’s newsworthy. And we can just say that... Trask was delusional. That he thought somehow he had found a rock capable of hurting Superman. Something like that.”

“I don’t know...” Clark hedged, clearly uncertain.

“Look, I’ll write it up, and I’ll let you edit my copy however you like,” I suggested magnanimously with a big smile.

“Really?” he asked, seeming to warm to the idea. “However I like? I do like the sound of that.”

“Careful. Don’t want you getting cocky,” I teased. “But seriously Clark, we’re here on the Planet’s dime, and Trask’s is an interesting story. We’ll be very careful about not linking you to Superman, promise.”

He nodded. “I know. You’re right.”

Suddenly, the house hummed to life. “Electricity is back on!” I cried happily. “At least we won’t have to write our story by candlelight.”

“It’s practically a Christmas miracle! Smallville Electric and Power has never been this efficient before!”

I glanced outside at the snow and back at Clark, a flutter of nervous excitement at the thought of spending Christmas alone with him. Alone with Superman, even without his powers, was still a bit for me to take in.

Snowbound in Smallville was turning out to be not so bad after all.

“Lois,” Clark said, looking out the back window in the kitchen. “What exactly did you do with the uh, green meteor rock?”

I was relishing the fact that we had electricity again and was perched beside the heater in the living room, working on my laptop. “What’d you say, Clark? Let me just finish this sentence...”

He came into the living room, and leaned lazily against the doorframe, a small smile on his face.

“What?” I said, reaching up to check my hair. Was he laughing at me?

“Nothing. It’s – just obvious that you are in work mode. How’s the story coming?”

“Almost finished... But Clark, I wonder what we should call

the green meteor rock. It’s sort of a mouthful as it is...”

“Well, the world knows Superman comes from Krypton... and it is pieces of my home planet—”

“How about kryptonium?” I proffered, not sure if the word suited.

“It is a meteorite, so technically kryptonite would be more appropriate,” he gently suggested.

“Hmm... sounds better too, I suppose,” I admitted, editing in ‘kryptonite’ into the article.

“And, in the end, Jason Trask’s obsession caused him to search for a mystical rock he alone imbued with destructive powers, and to confuse one reporter with the target of his fixation, Superman. He came to see this strange visitor from another planet where he was not, and to see enemies where there were none. It was an obsession that for Jason Trask would prove fatal.” Clark read over my shoulder. “You’re quite a writer, Lois.”

I smiled at the compliment. “Thanks... you, too,” I added, in my effort to compliment my partner more. “And you’re sure you don’t want to share the byline?”

“No, it’s better this way. I’ll just tell Perry that I’m too close to it, being in Smallville and all.”

I read through the article one last time and poised my finger over the send button as Clark read over my shoulder. “Anything else you want to add? Last chance.”

“Looks good. Go ahead and send it.”

I pushed the button and closed the lid on my laptop with a satisfied sigh. “Well, now we have no more work to do until after Christmas.”

“I’m sorry you can’t be at home with your folks, Lois. And if Superman were on line, I’d take you back—”

“Clark, I wouldn’t be spending Christmas with my folks anyway,” I hastily reassured him, before I realized I’d have to explain why.

“You would have spent Christmas alone?” he asked incredulously, and I winced a little at his tone. It felt like an accusation.

“My parents got divorced a long time ago, and the holidays are just... awkward for us. I usually try to work through them,” I admitted sheepishly, brushing a lock of hair behind my ear nervously.

“Lois, when was the last time you spent Christmas with someone?” Clark asked in that warm, low voice that spoke to a part deep and vulnerable within me. I felt tears clog my throat and tried to avoid looking in his eyes. *Superman’s eyes*, I reminded myself. He had enough compassion for the whole world, and when it was trained on me, I melted.

“Look, I don’t want to talk about it, okay? Let’s just do a simple Christmas. Maybe your folks will be back in time... The tree’s decorated... and I—” I hesitated, about to tell him that I had a present I wanted to get ready for him. “Well, how do you feel about teaching me how to bake?”

“You, baking? This I gotta see,” he teased.

“Okay, I admit I haven’t a clue how to bake, but if you do... it might be fun,” I said, tapping him in the shoulder with a light fist. It suddenly reminded me of his bullet wound, and my smile fell.

“What’s wrong?”

“Your shoulder. That—bullet wound. How is it doing?”

He unbuttoned his top three buttons and showed me his shoulder. I caught a glimpse of the smooth plane of his chest, and tried to be clinical about it as I inspected where he had been shot. It was practically healed!

“Wait, does that mean your powers are coming back?”

“Yeah, but slowly,” he said ruefully, as he shrugged back into his shirt. “I chopped some wood in the sun earlier and it felt like... I don’t know. The sun seemed to make me feel better.”

I studied him closely. “Do you think... the sun heals you somehow?”

He shook his head, buttoning his shirt back up. “I don’t know. But, I feel better. And my heat vision almost started the fire this morning... so, at least I know they’ll come back.”

“Good. Because the world needs Superman...” *and so do I*, I finished silently.

“Oh, but Lois – you still didn’t tell me what you did with the green –the kryptonite. I need to know where it is so I can get rid of it.”

“I sort of buried it in the snow,” I said, knowing that wasn’t a specific enough answer. “We’ll have to wait for it to melt to know exactly where, I guess.”

“Or until my powers come back. Do you know about where?”

“Just behind the barn, I think. What are you going to do with it?”

“I don’t know. Throw it into the sun... bury it in the sea,” he said with some relish. “Something. I just have to make sure it never gets into the wrong hands again.”

I stared into my coffee mug, thinking. Superman had always been this godlike hero to me. I never could have imagined that he was my partner who fetched me coffee and tagged along on stakeouts. I never could have imagined there was something out there that could hurt him, either. It made me feel suddenly protective over him, and I worried about how Perry would read my story. Would he or our readers see between the lines to the truth? That there was something out there that could hurt Superman – and my dear friend?

“Clark, how do you do it? How do you manage the balance between Clark and Superman?” I asked suddenly. “I always imagined that Superman had a life, I guess... I just never thought it might involve... chasing after stories with me,” I admitted shyly. “Or how dangerous that balance is... I mean, if someone like Trask ever learned who you really are—”

He nodded, and I didn’t have to finish. “That’s exactly my fear, Lois. And why I didn’t tell you,” he said with a heavy sigh.

“Well, it’s not like you can erase the knowledge from my brain... but I guess what I want to say is, I’m happy to carry the burden, Clark. And I promise to do all I can to protect it.”

His hand reached out towards mine, and he gave me a smile. “I appreciate that, Lois. But I don’t want to be a burden to you. It’s the last thing I want... I don’t know. There are times where I’ve thought of leaving Metropolis, and trying again somewhere else. But being Superman, working at the Planet, working with— you,” he said, the last word sounding like an admission of something more. “I would miss those things. I always knew that a possible consequence of us working closely together would be that you would figure out my secret. I know you are an amazing investigative reporter, and I always feared, well, that you would learn the truth. What I hadn’t counted on—” he paused, running his fingers through his hair nervously.

“Was us becoming friends?” I suggested, but I knew that wasn’t quite right. I had sensed from both Clark and Superman on more than one occasion that he was attracted to me, just like I was to him. But was it more than that?

“Friends,” he echoed the word, sounding unsure whether he liked it or not. “Yes, of course, friends... For a while, though, I wasn’t sure you even liked me.”

“I admit I was – infatuated with Superman. And I’m deeply sorry for how I ignored you as Clark... even before I knew your secret, I knew I was—distancing myself, I guess.”

He looked at me with curiosity. “Distancing?”

Now it was my turn to run my fingers through my hair nervously. I guess we had that in common. “Yeah...” I sat up straighter, determined to try to work this out with him. “I guess what I mean is, as a reporter, I assume everyone has an angle. And it bothered me that you never did. You were just – nice. And

I—well, I guess it made me nervous.”

He chuckled. “How can someone being nice make you nervous, Lois?”

“Not just someone. You. A—gorgeous farm boy with impeccable manners, who was considerate to everybody... I just couldn’t believe someone like that existed without an ulterior motive.”

He smiled shyly in my direction, the truth slamming me in the chest again that my friend was Superman.

“So... now what do you think of me?” he asked, his face open and guileless.

I sighed. “I’m not sure...”

He dipped his head, and seemed to pull away from me. “Is it—because of the alien thing?” he choked out.

He looked so hurt and vulnerable, that I reached out and touched his arm. “Clark, how can you say that? You have to know... I never treated Superman differently because he was an alien, did I? And the fact that I know you are him, or he is you—” I shook my head. “I guess what I am trying to say, is it doesn’t matter to me. I just want to understand you. The real you.”

He glanced up at me, his eyes intent on me, as if working up the courage to say something.

“What is it?” I asked softly.

“Nothing,” he said, suddenly moving off the sofa. “So, now that the heat is back on, you want to sleep in my old room?”

I felt as if something had shifted underneath me, though I couldn’t articulate what it was. Clark had closed himself off to me, and I felt hurt because I couldn’t think of what I had said that might have upset him. I had tried to be honest with him and that I wanted to understand him. Was that not what he had wanted to hear? Was he still afraid of the reporter in me?

I stood up awkwardly, feeling embarrassed as I gathered my laptop. “Sure. Thanks for the offer.”

It was only around nine, but I got the distinct feeling I was being dismissed. I tried not to sound hurt as I headed up the stairs. “Goodnight, Clark.”

As I entered the bedroom, I realized that I would have some time to myself to fix up Clark’s old telescope. I didn’t have any polish, of course, and I couldn’t think of an excuse to give Clark to go trudging around outside in the barn looking for some either. But there was an old flannel shirt lying near the box that looked way past its prime, which I thought might do the trick – at least to clean it.

I sat at Clark’s desk and slowly started wiping away years of grime from the smooth, cool surfaces of the telescope. My thoughts started drifting as I worked, remembering when I had first met Clark and how I had completely misjudged him. I just hadn’t trusted his good looks or his naïve charm. And I realized that Superman had shown me some of those same qualities, and yet, I had immediately and implicitly trusted him. How could I have not seen that they were the same person?

The telescope was looking much better, and though I really had no experience with such things, I found this one fascinating. I suppose it was because it belonged to Clark. How often in his youth would he look through this telescope, wondering where he came from? What did he know about Krypton, and how did he learn the name of his home planet anyhow?

And why did it seem to me that while Clark being an alien explained a lot, I actually felt more comfortable with him? I had always been on the outside I suppose, in many ways. The pain of my broken family had pushed me to be ambitious and singular, in all its varied definitions. I wanted the singular achievement of a Kerth Award. I wanted the singular triumph of being the most successful reporter at the Daily Planet. I wanted the singular interview from the Man of Steel... and all these ambitions had left me singularly successful and yet also, singularly...single.

Not just in the sense that I didn't have many boyfriends, but even with my peers I had often been alone. No one had understood me until Clark came along. And despite how atrociously I had behaved, he had become my friend. And I have come to value that friendship above all else in my life.

I have dreamed of being the love of Superman's life, but I knew that loving him was pure fantasy, as he had seemed so unreachable and impossible to get close to. But Clark Kent was a real man—who happened to fly around in tights saving the world. Surely the real man underneath the suit wanted more? Wasn't that the reason he had donned the disguise in the first place? To have a life?

It made sense to me, but I knew only Clark himself could explain it to me. Yet he seemed reticent to divulge any more of his heart to me, fearful of the knowledge that I already possessed about him. How to earn his trust? How to show him that I cared about him—that I—

"Love him?" I said aloud to the quiet solitude around me, those words sending a frisson of pleasure and fear through me. I had held back from Clark, and even attacked him, all in an effort to fight what I found admirable and attractive about him. But if we both laid our vulnerabilities on the table, could we find a way to each other?

How does he feel about me? I wondered. There was an attraction between us, sure. But Clark being Superman could complicate things. He had put upon himself a duty to help the people of the world, and maybe that didn't leave a place for someone to love... or could it mean that love could give him strength to continue doing what he did?

The telescope looked presentable now, and I sighed as I laid it back in the box, weary of my musings. I had felt something with Clark from the start, though had done my best to keep a wary distance. And I had thrown myself at Superman... if he felt something for me, I could only hope that we'd find a way to each other.

It was Christmas Eve morning... I stretched as I got out of bed, and could see the sun was reflecting brightly off the snow just outside the window. It was a golden white, as far as the eye could see... In Metropolis, I had only seen patches of white, like in Centennial Park. This expanse of it across the country horizon was entirely breathtaking.

I put on a robe and headed downstairs, my heart pounding at the thought of talking to Clark again. I wanted to tell him how I felt about him, but I was so nervous about how he'd interpret it. I had to prove to him that my feelings were genuine, and weren't simply a result of my Superman infatuation.

As I came into the living room, I didn't hear him in the house. "Clark?" I called out.

"Out here, Lois," came his reply from the front porch.

He was standing on the porch, his eyes closed, washed in the pale golden yellow of the early morning sun. When he heard me approach, he turned to look at me. "I don't know what it is, but the sun... it's like it is recharging me somehow."

"Are your powers back?" I asked gently, fascinated at seeing him standing with his shoulders thrust back in his t-shirt and sweatpants without his glasses, a mix of Clark and Superman.

He reached for his aforementioned glasses on a side table by the swing. "Yeah," he answered, putting them back on.

I let out a laugh, stating the obvious. "Clark, I know who you are. Why are you still wearing your glasses?"

He cleared his throat, "Lois... it's not just a disguise. The glass is made from lead so I don't accidentally use my powers as Clark... it's kinda like a safety on them."

"But you would never hurt anyone with your powers, not on purpose," I said assuredly.

"No, of course not," he bristled, seeming uncomfortable with

the topic. "But I've worn them so long as Clark, that... I just feel more comfortable with them."

"I guess I can understand that," I responded, though I barely did understand. I wanted to, but I guess it is simply too difficult to fathom what it must be like for him on a daily basis. Perhaps I would never understand, but I was game to try. "So, are we going to do some baking today?" I smiled, hoping to lighten his mood.

"Sure. Let's have breakfast and get dressed... and then we'll make some famous Kent Christmas cookies."

Was it bad that I just wanted to see him in that adorable apron again and could give a fig about learning to cook?

"You're on, partner."

An hour later we were standing in his mom's kitchen. Clark, as advertised, was wearing the adorable apron and a tight black t-shirt. Seriously, my partner should come with a warning label, he looked so delectable.

Every time he brushed by me, my heart went into my throat, and what was more surprising, was that this actually was not a new occurrence. I had just never paid attention to it before. I had so suppressed my attraction to Clark, afraid of getting too close to him—and if I am honest, afraid of him breaking my heart—that though I had felt those jolts of attraction before, I had always chosen to ignore them.

And though I now acknowledged that I was attracted to him, I knew that he could still reject me, or say that being Superman didn't allow him to have a relationship with anybody. Or any number of things... but I knew he felt something for me. There is absolutely something there, and I felt desperate to explore it.

I watched him expertly crack half a dozen eggs into a bowl.

"Grab the flour and sugar in the cabinet, would you?" he asked casually, turning the knobs to preheat the oven.

I got both and returned to where the bowl of eggs was lying on the counter.

"I can't believe you've never baked cookies before, Lois," he said, clearly amused.

"Well, I mean, I've tried... they just usually don't turn out so well..." I admitted, remembering several failed baking attempts, usually around the holidays. I'd either burn them or not add the right amount of ingredients. Sometimes I'd manage to make a batch that was salvageable, but more often than not, I'd end up getting store-bought cookies.

"Well, the secret is having the right balance of ingredients... and timing." I watched as he measured out the flour and sugar and then tossed the ingredients into a bowl.

"Don't you need a mixer?" I asked, happy to prove my competence by pointing out a fact that he had missed a step.

He glanced over at me with a smile, and winked at me. I was so distracted by that little charming move, that I almost missed his hand in the bowl, mixing the ingredients himself with his super speedy finger.

"Isn't that kinda... messy?" I said, not sure how I felt about his um, technique.

"No, my hands are clean. And it is a lot more efficient than using a mixer. I can easily tell when the batter is ready. Okay... did you grease the cookie sheet?"

Oh, right... my one task. I handed him the greased sheet.

"Lois, I told you it needed an even coating," he chided gently. He took out the Crisco tub once again and a paper towel, folding the towel and dipping it into the grease. "Like this. You have to cover the whole sheet, or you'll end up with some less than perfect cookies."

"Heaven forbid," I grumbled at Mr. Perfect, enjoying him enjoying teasing me.

He chuckled, a warm sound that reached in and squeezed my heart. "Sorry. You do want to learn how to make cookies the right way, don't you?"

“Fine, Clark. I get it. The whole sheet needs to be greased. What’s next?” *And do you know that I am totally in love with you and I don’t care one whit about learning to bake cookies?* I stood next to him, with my arms crossed, almost afraid I’d reach out and grab onto him and never let go. Emotions were roiling in my heart, but I knew now wasn’t the time to deal with them. I just needed to try and relax and enjoy hanging out with Clark. The rest would come...at least I hoped so.

Clark breathed some Superman arctic breath over the dough, casually commenting. “You usually have to chill the dough for an hour. But with a bit of super breath, we are ready to move on to the fun part,” he grinned, handing me some cookie cutters. “I’ll roll out the dough, and then you can cut them into these little shapes, okay?”

“I think I can handle that.”

I watched as he rolled out the dough, the ripple of his biceps endlessly fascinating to me. I thought of how strong he could be as Superman, and yet how gentle as Clark. The contrasts were amazing, and yet, I realized the balance of how to be gentle versus when to use his powers had been instilled in him growing up on this farm, learning to do chores and helping his mother bake cookies. His parents had taught him so much, and I believed his innate goodness had only enhanced those lessons. I felt my throat go tight watching him, either with awe or love, I wasn’t sure.

As we made cookies, I was able to banter and tease with him verbally, but inside, I wondered if he could sense what was going on. My heart was pounding every time I was near him, or when we would brush past one another. He’d glance at me, and I could swear he saw more than just my cooking mistakes. His eyes seemed to soften, and then he’d make an easy comment about how to get more cookies out of the batter or something.

I realized after about the second batch of cookies, with the warm sugary smells lingering in the air, that he was being this way on purpose. He was essentially trying to make me comfortable and perhaps even to forget about Superman for a while. He seemed to sense that I was stressing over the whole thing. Perhaps he thought I was worried about knowing his secret. He had no idea that I was just – completely in love with him.

I knew then that I had to tell him. He had to know how I felt. He had to know that I didn’t think of his secret as a burden, but as a cherished honor. I would do anything for Clark, and I needed him to know that.

A few hours later, we sat listening to Christmas carols on the radio eating cookies and milk companionably.

“You make it look so easy,” I said, dipping another cookie into my milk glass. “I don’t think I could cook these half as well in my kitchen back in Metropolis. I’d never remember all the steps.”

“Well, I can help you make them anytime you want,” he answered generously, and I suddenly had an image of him in his tights and cape baking cookies. It made me smile.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing... just, you are full of surprises, Clark Kent.” I had meant it as a compliment, seeing as how I had repeatedly stated in the past that he was like an open book. But somehow I had made him uncomfortable. “I just mean... I wish I had taken the time before, to learn who you are. I mean, not just about Superman—” I sighed in frustration, feeling like I couldn’t get the words right. “I mean you. You are a really, really... nice guy, Clark.”

My words weren’t adequate, and I found it ironic that while being a wordsmith was my job, when I needed to express what was deep in my heart, words were failing me. I looked down at my plate, just full of crumbs now.

“I appreciate that, Lois.” He said it in soft tones, his warm

brown eyes trained on me. But I felt some distance, like he meant it as a friend. And I realized my words had sounded like someone who wanted to be his friend, too. But I wanted so much more. I just didn’t know how to tell him.

“The cookies were really good,” I said to fill the silence.

“Well, you helped. Here, I’ll take care of the dishes.” I handed him my plate and watched him head into the kitchen.

I was feeling so silly, and so uncertain as to where we stood. Partners. Friends. Secret keepers. Those were all important words. They meant varying levels of trust and friendship. But the word that I wanted for us— relationship? Dating? Lovers?—was still elusive. I felt in my heart that there was something strong between us, but I worried that my own behavior and Clark’s seeming reluctance to trust me, would keep those labels at bay.

Let’s face it. I had never been good at relationships anyway. My last one had been a federal disaster with Claude. I had let him walk all over me, swept up by his European charm. And I never had really learned to open up to anyone. Even the men I had slept with, they only knew a small side of me. I realize now that Clark was the first man to ever try to get to know the real me. And yet, my armor of sarcasm and insults had perhaps ruined any real chance I had had to be with him.

I heard the porch door close and immediately called out Clark’s name. It was dark out now, and we had plenty of firewood in the house. What could he be doing?

I went into the kitchen and peered out the back window. I saw Clark, a shadow on the snow, heading towards the barn. His head was lowered, and I wondered if he was x-raying the snow to find the buried kryptonite. Why he wanted to deal with that now was beyond me.

I saw him trip, and he called out my name.

I didn’t hesitate, but ran to the hall closet to get my coat and a flashlight, and scurried down the snowy steps.

“Clark! What is it?” I called, running across the lawn to him.

“The kryptonite... was it sealed in the box when you buried it?”

I tried to think back, to remember that awful night. “I—I’m not sure, why?”

“Because I can feel it is nearby...” His gaze shifted across the yard, and he nodded his head towards the right of the barn. “And I can see it over there, under the snow. The lid is slightly open.”

I glanced over to where he was looking, but I couldn’t see anything. “What do you want me to do?”

“Get the shovel in the barn. I need you to dig it up, close the lid, and I’ll dispose of it.”

“Why do we have to take care of it tonight, Clark? Why not deal with it in the morning, when we can – I can see better?”

He looked at me, his voice sounding apologetic in the cold night air. “I haven’t slept well, knowing it’s out here,” he said quietly. “Please, Lois. For me?”

“OK, sure, Clark,” I said, suddenly hating Trask all over again for torturing Clark with that rock to begin with. Of course Clark was worried about it. I had put it out of my mind, occupied with other things, and I suddenly felt selfish for not realizing that just having the kryptonite nearby had to be a mental stress on Clark.

I headed into the barn to get a shovel. No matter how irrational the fear, I kept expecting Trask to pop out at any second. I whipped my flashlight around the barn, fearing the shadows I lit upon, searching for the shovel. When I found it, I quickly headed back over to where Clark was standing.

“I can’t get any closer, or I’ll start to feel the effects of the kryptonite. I’ll be your eyes, okay?”

I nodded and followed his instructions until I came to be standing right over the spot where I had buried the kryptonite. I shoveled away some snow, and sure enough, I saw the eerie green glow staring back at me. I leaned down and immediately closed

the lid, horrified that I had been so careless. Clark was suddenly at my side, as Superman.

“Thanks, Lois. I’m going to take care of this. Go on back in the house... I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he said, automatically slipping into his more authoritative voice.

He took the lead box and flew off into the night sky. I looked up into the vast heavens, lit by a million stars, but he was already gone.

But I wasn’t worried. I knew he’d be back soon.

I went back in the house, curious as to what Clark would do with the kryptonite. He had seemed almost desperate to get rid of it. What must it be like for him to be so powerful and yet know that a tiny stone can rob him of that strength?

To have something to do while I waited for him to return, I began to do the dishes. I swear I haven’t done so many domestic chores in the last few years as I have over the last few days. I usually just fill up the dishwasher over about a week – seeing as how most of my cooking involves reheating takeout — and then run the dishwasher. But out here I didn’t mind it too much. It felt so homey and comfortable in Martha Kent’s kitchen, and I enjoyed embracing that warmth.

As I put the last pan away, I wondered what was taking Clark so long to return. I turned on the TV, hoping to see some news about Superman helping out somewhere, which would explain his delay. But there wasn’t a mention of him on any channel. I knew I shouldn’t worry about him, but knowing it was just Clark under the suit made me more concerned about what could be taking him so long. He seemed so much more vulnerable to me now.

But while he was gone, it would give me a chance to do some snooping around for wrapping paper. Thankful to have electricity once again, I turned on practically every light in the house, and began searching high and low for Christmas supplies.

I finally came across some in the upstairs hall closet. There was a box full of ribbons, paper, tape, and a pair of scissors. I selected what I needed to wrap Clark’s present and got to work.

The telescope looked beautiful, now that I had shined it up. I hoped that Clark would appreciate the gesture, and not see it as some sort of invasion of privacy. The awkward round shape of the telescope made wrapping it difficult, though the end product looked pretty good. One could see the many messy folds I had made in the gold and red paper I had selected, but I took a creamy velvet bow, and tied it around the middle to cover up my sloppy handy work.

“There. All ready for Christmas,” I said, gathering up the remainder of the supplies to put them back.

I heard the back porch door slam shut, and felt myself jump despite myself. “Clark?” I called down the stairs, the ribbons and paper still in my arms.

I didn’t hear a reply, and suddenly became nervous, wondering if it was one of Trask’s stray goons. I shoved the remaining Christmas supplies in the hall closet, and looked for a weapon in case my fears were founded.

All I came across was a spare curtain rod, but it was better than nothing. I edged my way down the stairs, fearing every little creak I heard on the old wooden steps. My heart was pounding, as many horrific scenarios played out in my head.

I made it down the stairs and slowly headed into the kitchen, the rod held in my hands like a baseball bat. I came to stand next to the doorway, afraid to peek in, lest someone was about to pounce on me first.

Slowly, with my rod still raised, I leaned in to see what was around the corner.

There was no bad man ready to make me his hostage, as I had feared. No goon lurked in the kitchen, ready to attack me. I recognized that I was still traumatized after our brush with Trask.

The rod fell out of my hands, and I let out an involuntary gasp at the scene before me.

Superman was seated at the kitchen table, his head in his hands, with his majestic cape sweeping down behind him. The kitchen light above him shone like a sort of simple halo, casting a soft glow over my weary hero. He didn’t look up at my entrance, and I thought I saw his shoulders shake.

“Sup—Clark?” I asked gently, coming to sit across from him. “Are you okay?”

“I—” he looked up suddenly, and I saw a deep pain in his eyes, a look I had never seen in him before. He looked as if he had been crying. “I couldn’t save them all, Lois... those... children...”

My hands reached across the table to him, and he quickly grasped on to them. I caught the faint whiff of smoke on his clothes, and noticed smudges of soot on his uniform. He bowed his head once more, and I sensed that he was trying to gather himself. I sat there, watching him, appreciating that if I was to mean more to Clark, I needed to be his strength now. I didn’t know what solace I could offer, but I would be there for him, however he’d let me be.

“I took the kryptonite, and dropped it into the deepest part of the Indian Ocean...” he eventually said. “I watched it for longer than I needed to, seeing it fall deeper and deeper into the cavernous sea... just wanting it to disappear forever.” He sighed and looked up at me, his face a calm facade. “I don’t have to tell you all of it, Lois. I’ll be all right—I—just need a minute.”

I suddenly realized that he had done this many times, that a distant coolness was coming over his features. In the past I had always assumed that look was one of indifference, trying to hide how he felt about me. I felt myself blush in shame, finally grasping how often that look had probably been a result of some harrowing rescue that he just absorbed the pain of on his own; grieved for, on his own. Perhaps in the past, he had come to my apartment to check on me or tease me, only to fly away to wherever and grieve, like I saw him doing now.

But I didn’t want him to feel alone anymore. I didn’t want him to shut me out.

I got up and walked around the table and sat next to him. Gently, I touched his shoulder. “Clark, it’s okay. Tell me what happened.”

I heard the wind whistle through the screen porch door, feeling the cold air pour in. I glanced over and saw that it had started to snow again. Quietly I closed the door, giving Clark a moment to gather his thoughts. I sat down again next to him, waiting for him to speak.

“I was heading home, towards China. I thought I might stop in Shanghai for that really good Chinese food you liked.”

That stopped me in my tracks a second. I remembered the Chinese food he had bought, a few days after he had started work at the Planet. It had been divine, and I had pestered him for days after to tell me where he had gotten it. Son of a gun... It had been Chinese food from – China.

“I had felt so relieved and well, happy to be rid of the kryptonite, that I thought I’d earned a lazy flight home. So I slowed down, and then my super hearing kicked in. There was a fire. At an orphanage in Bangkok. I—flew as fast as I could, Lois. But I wasn’t fast enough. The fire had started in the middle of the day, when most of the administrators were out to lunch. But there were classrooms full of children, that had no idea what was going on. There was no alarm to warn them...”

Sometime during his explanation, he had reached for my hand again. He squeezed it gently now, and looked in my eyes, perhaps needing to convince himself that he was all right.

“I helped where I could... but half of the orphanage was already on fire... several of the classrooms there were—” he couldn’t speak, but I could tell from his distress what had

happened to the children in those classrooms.

“But you did save some of them, didn’t you?” I asked softly.

He nodded. “Yeah... about fifty kids, and three teachers. But the rest, Lois... I – just wasn’t fast enough.”

I saw a bit of soot on his cheek, and I tentatively reached out to wipe it off. “Clark, you did what you could, and that is so much more than most people could have done. You can’t beat yourself up about it. I bet those people that you saved are so grateful... remember, it’s important to do what you can. You only fail if you don’t try.”

His eyes never left mine, and for the first time since he got back, I saw just the barest ghost of a smile. “When did you become so wise, Lois?”

I felt surprised by the compliment. “It’s how I keep myself going as a reporter. I know I can’t fix all the world’s ills. But I do what I can. *We* do what we can,” I said, giving him a slight nudge. “I tell you what, why don’t we write a story about this orphanage in the Planet? Perhaps we can get some public outcry about the lack of alarms in the orphanage, and perhaps get them some charity money to help them rebuild?”

He nodded, seeming to warm to my idea. “Yes, and actually, I have been thinking of setting up a foundation... I get offered money now and then for my work as Superman, and I just never know what to do with it. Perhaps this could be the impetus to start one. And we can use the Planet to announce the plans to the world.”

I smiled at him, admiring his heart and his courage.

His eyes rested on mine, and for the first time, I felt his guard slip away. His eyes became tender, and he reached to cup my cheek. “Lois... thank you,” he said simply.

“What for? I didn’t do anything,” I answered, feeling those butterflies kick up a whirlwind in my stomach at his touch.

“You did... you gave me hope. Some way to make something good out of a bad situation. Thank you.”

“Clark, you give me hope every day,” I said, my heart in my throat. “And I don’t mean just as Superman. That’s the obvious one.”

“What do you mean, Lois?” he asked, his voice sounding careful and guarded.

I sighed. It was now or never. “Clark, you give me hope that maybe there really are still journalists out there who want the truth as much as I do,” I said, taking his hand on my cheek and holding it in my own. “You give me hope that there are still nice guys out there in the world... that maybe everyone doesn’t have a hidden agenda,” I said, my words becoming softer as my throat tightened with inexplicable tears. “Clark, somewhere along the way... I think I fell in love with you.”

There. The words were out. I felt on the verge of tears and as if my heart were about to explode. I needed a positive response from him, as I didn’t know if I could survive his doubt of my true feelings.

“Clark, say something, please,” I whispered.

Instead, he cupped my head, bringing me close to him. His eyes locked with mine, and I suddenly knew... it was going to be all right. He felt the same way about me. My fear about him worrying that I loved only Superman suddenly became moot. He could see right into the very soul of me, and I suspected, he always had.

I closed my eyes, just as our lips met. I melted into his embrace, surrendering all that I was to him, and I felt his love in equal measure.

I had kissed Clark on several occasions, almost all of which had been under some sort of duress. And while I had secretly acknowledged to myself that Clark was a good kisser, nothing compared to this roiling feeling of total trust and surrender.

There were no more secrets between us.

I couldn’t have been more terrified and yet so free...

I loved Clark, and he loved me.

Sometime later, Clark changed out of his Superman uniform and we snuggled up to a fire, listening to Christmas carols.

We shared stories about childhood Christmases, and while his were nigh on idyllic, mine were fraught with family arguments and dysfunctional get-togethers. For each story Clark told of simple Christmases on the farm, I tried to search for a Christmas that could even hold a candle to his, and I failed miserably every time. When I pointed that out to him, he seemed shocked.

“Lois, it isn’t a contest. I’m just happy to share memories with you.”

“It’s just that your Christmases all sound so homey and wonderful, and I—every year it has always just been an effort to get through the holiday.”

He turned to me, laying a hand gently on my shoulder. “Lois, then we’ll just have to make new and better memories.”

There was that frisson again, making my stomach flip. “Does that mean you might want to spend more than one Christmas with me?”

His arm moved down to grab my hand, securely cradled in his. “Lois, I suppose I should say it. You were brave enough to tell me how you feel... “ He took off his glasses, holding them in his hands. “These represent my disguise, my fears, but also my hopes... to have a normal life, to be—loved as a normal man. Lois, you know more about me than probably even my parents do. I trust you with my secret, and I trust you with my heart. I love you, Lois. I always have... always will.”

“Really? You’ve always loved me?”

He nodded, slipping the glasses back on. “Crazy right?” he laughed ruefully. “But there was something about you, from the moment you burst into Perry’s office my first day at the Planet... I just knew...”

This thrilled me beyond measure, solidifying in my mind and my heart that Superman had always belonged to me, as selfish as that thought was. But it was the vulnerable man that I was drawn to now. I thought of how he always looked after me, in both of his guises, and how the truth had been there all along, if I only had been brave enough to see it.

“Must be love, Clark... Cause I was a world class—itch to you, on more than one occasion,” I said ruefully, scooting closer to cup his cheek in my hand. “I hope you’ll let me make it up to you.”

“We’ve got all the time in the world, Lois. I can’t think of a better Christmas present than hearing you say you love me.”

I brought his face closer to mine, gently set aside his glasses, and held his face in my hands. “I love you,” I whispered, kissing his cheek. “I love you,” I said again, kissing his other one. “I love you,” I whispered a third time, almost as if under a trance, and kissed him on the lips. “Merry Christmas, Clark.”

We fell asleep on the sofa, wrapped in each other’s embrace. We had kissed and talked into the early hours of the morning, neither of us wanting to part the other’s company to head upstairs to bed.

I lay pillowed on his chest...one I had often admired in the blue spandex and had had the luck to peek at once, when he had first moved to Metropolis. I couldn’t believe that my dream man was really that – a dream, and a man...

“Merry Christmas, Lois,” he whispered, nudging me more fully awake.

“Christmas morning!” I suddenly squealed like a kid, like I hadn’t done in years. I scrambled off my very cozy place next to Clark and dived upstairs to his room to fetch his present.

“Lois, where are you going?” he called after me, laughter in his voice.

I bounded down the stairs a few moments later, a wide grin

on my face, holding out his present. “Open it! Open it!”

“Lois, you didn’t have to—”

I shook my head and shoved the present into his hands. “Of course I had to. Just open it, okay?”

He took the present and made a show of shaking it and feeling the paper, though I thought he probably already knew what it was. When he opened it, he let out a long sigh, heavy with memories.

“Lois, where did you find this?” he asked quietly, turning it over in his hands as he inspected it. “It looks in much better condition than I remember last seeing it.”

“Don’t be mad... I did a little snooping upstairs. I couldn’t help myself, Clark... And well, it just seemed like it had been well used and therefore well loved, and I — I just wanted to do something for you.”

He looked down the lens, pulling it out to its full length. “I got interested in astronomy when I was about ten... I had no idea then where I came from. But there was something about the stars, that drew me towards them... I wonder now, if I had been searching for home.”

“Then, you aren’t mad that went through your things?” I couldn’t resist asking.

“Lois, I know you pretty well. I actually expected you go snooping in my room...” he answered wryly, the melancholy look of a moment ago all but vanished. “Thank you for reminding me about this... and for cleaning it up. Perhaps we can have a look at the stars together sometime?”

“I’d love that.”

The front door suddenly opened. “Merry Christmas everybody!” said Mr. Kent, wearing a Santa hat.

“Dad! I wasn’t sure if you guys would make it back today,” Clark said, heading to the door to help his parents with their luggage.

“Well, the snow is melting, and we got an early flight back from Wichita,” said Mrs. Kent. “Hello, Lois. I guess you survived a few days out here after all? Clark take good care of you?” she said, glancing between the two of us. I swore she could tell something had shifted between me and Clark, but we just stood there, unsure of where to begin.

“Um, yeah... kind of. It’s a long story, Mom. I’ll tell you and Dad all about it.”

Clark may be able to fly, but I was amazed at how quickly Martha Kent was able to whip up a Christmas dinner. Within minutes of arriving, she had basted a turkey and was peeling potatoes. Clark and I helped — well, Clark helped. I handed things to people now and then, and helped Clark recount our misadventures with Trask.

“So... that’s how Lois found out I’m Superman... and now —” he glanced over at me, his gaze warming me to my toes. “We’re closer than ever before.”

Martha stopped her multitasking of chopping onions and checking the turkey to look at us. “I can see that... I’m happy for you two. And I’m glad you get to spend Christmas with us, selfish as that sounds. I’m sure you’d rather be with your family?”

Clark tried to ward off the comment, but I patted his arm, letting him know it was okay. “Trust me, Martha. I’d much rather be here with you guys. My family is a bit of a mess... especially around the holidays.”

Martha gave me a sympathetic smile. “Aw, well then I’m glad you are spending Christmas with us... Clark honey, could you set the table? We won’t eat for a few hours yet, but I like to have everything ready.”

Hours later, we were all sitting around the Christmas tree, sated from a fantastic meal. I was still in awe of how Martha had

whipped it up out of little more than thin air and a few groceries, but I certainly appreciated it.

We learned that Jonathan might need a bypass surgery, and that he had to watch his diet. So Martha had fixed him a very meager plate, with very little butter. Clark seemed worried about his father’s health, but I knew that Superman would see that he got the best care in the world.

Martha and Jonathan headed into the kitchen to clean up, leaving Clark and I to our own devices in the living room.

We sat close to one another, holding hands and enjoying the soft sounds of old Christmas classics. Bing Crosby was crooning White Christmas on the radio, and I couldn’t believe how relaxed I felt. It was more than the tryptophan in the turkey, that was for sure.

I just couldn’t believe how far we had come in such a short amount of time... I was almost thankful for Trask putting us through that hell! Without his intervention, how many lonely months would Clark and I have spent, dancing around our feelings for each other?

“Hey, you want to take a look at my telescope? I think the sky should be pretty clear tonight,” he whispered in my hair.

“Mmm... sure. But I feel so comfortable where I am now. Clark, I don’t think I ever want to leave your parents’ place,” I admitted, voicing a tiny fear that things might change once we returned to Metropolis.

“I admit, that despite the mess with Trask, this has been an — enlightening, shall we say? — couple of days.”

“Yeah, it has... Clark, we haven’t even gone on a first date yet. Aren’t we doing this a little backwards, confessing our I-love-yous way up front,” I said lightly, though secretly I was worried about how we would go on from here.

“Then we’ll remedy that when we get back. How about a date for New Year’s?”

I smiled, imagining him in a classy tux, and us dancing in some upscale club in downtown Metropolis. “Could be fun.” I started to scoot myself out of my cozy nook under his arm. “All right. So now that that’s settled, how about we take a look at this telescope?”

We headed out to the front porch, the night sky blanketing Smallville with a perfect mantle of diamonds, scattered as far as the eye could see.

“Well, we couldn’t have picked a better night,” I said, shivering despite my winter coat. Clark noticed my shiver and pulled his glasses down his nose. I suddenly felt toasty all over. “Wait... was that your—buzz buzz?” I asked, gesturing towards his eyes.

“Buzz buzz?” he laughed. “You mean my heat vision? Yeah. Do you feel warmer?”

“Actually, I do. Thanks.”

Clark had dug out an old tripod that I had failed to find in my fortuitous expedition through his belongings. He set the telescope on it, and adjusted the settings, aiming at heaven knew what. The sky was filled with stars tonight... any one of them would be magnificent under the telescope, I imagined.

“There it is...” he said finally, gesturing for me to have a look.

I peered into the telescope, but all I could see were a bunch of stars, some brighter than others. “What am I looking at, Clark?”

“Do you see the three brighter stars, that sort of form a triangle?”

It took some searching and focusing on my part, but I eventually spotted them. “Uh huh.”

“And to the left of them, some lesser stars, but all together they sort of form a kite shape?”

“Oh yeah...”

“That’s Libra.”

“Wait, is this an astronomy or an astrology lesson?” I asked,

glancing up from the telescope.

“Both,” he smiled back. “Libra means balance... I know it’s your star sign, and I think it makes a whole lot of sense... because you—you bring balance to my life, Lois.”

I stopped caring about the stars, suddenly more enthralled with the man before me who had so captured my heart and my imagination. That I could mean so much to him, knowing what he meant to me — well, it stole my breath.

I threw myself in his arms, and he caught me, as I knew he would. As I knew he always would.

“Just when I don’t think it’s possible to think you are more amazing, you surprise me. Every time,” I whispered.

“Well, then I hope you are ready for one more surprise, Lois. Because I haven’t given you your Christmas present yet.”

I stifled a giggle. “You have a present for me, more amazing than what we’ve already shared?”

“Hold on,” he said softly, and suddenly, we were floating.

We floated up above the farmhouse, and then even higher, until it felt like we could reach right out and touch any star in the sky.

“Usually when we fly together, it’s because I’m rescuing you from some crazy bad guy... I wanted to take you up here... just us... with no pressing crisis to attend to, no article to write... I just wanted to show you this.”

We floated even higher, high above the landscape. The universe seemed massive and extraordinary, a shimmering sea of light above us. “It’s so beautiful,” I whispered, completely in awe.

“I used to come up here a lot by myself and just... drift. Not part of the stars, not part of the Earth. Not knowing where I fit in... till I met you.”

“Oh Clark... I love you so much... and I want you to know, you are not alone anymore. I’ll always be there for you.”

“I know, Lois... I love you too. And perhaps, that is best gift we can give each other this Christmas, and all the many more to come... because, my love won’t change. It is more constant than the stars... I promise you, Lois.”

He cradled me close to him, and we drifted in an endless sea of stars.

I had been determined not to let Clark into my life, let alone my heart. But now that he was there, I realized, he was my balance too. I needed his constancy, just as he needed mine.

I hadn’t understood Clark Kent when I met him, too wrapped up in my own insecurities to recognize his guileless love. For it had been there, since the beginning, despite all my faults, despite all my defenses.

My best friend, my hero.

We were more now, stronger together than we ever were alone.

The labels didn’t matter, because I knew we were everything to each other.

Friends. Partners. And so much more.

THE END

Happy Holidays, everyone!

On the boards, VirginiaR had offered up a holiday recipe for sugar cookies. She generously gave me permission to include the recipe with my story. So, enjoy!

HOLIDAY SUGAR COOKIES

From C&H Sugar

Ingredients

1 Cup Unsalted Butter (2 sticks), softened
 1 Cup Granulated (White) Sugar
 2 Eggs
 1 tsp Vanilla
 3 Cups all-purpose Flour
 1/2 tsp baking soda
 1 tsp salt

In large bowl, beat butter and sugar until fluffy. Beat in eggs and vanilla. Combine flour, soda and salt; stir into sugar mixture. Divide into two equal-sized disks, place in plastic wrap and chill 30 minutes. Preheat oven to 375° F.

On flour covered board, working with one disk at a time, roll out dough to 1/8 inch thickness. Cut out stars, snowflakes and other shapes. Place cookie shapes 1 inch apart on cookie sheet. Bake 5 to 8 minutes until lightly browned. After cooling, decorate with icing and sugar crystals.

Makes 3 to 4 dozen (depending on size of shapes).

Virginia’s Notes: Cookies also taste good unfrosted. If using salted butter, only add 1/2 tsp of salt. I’ve also made dropped cookies with this dough, omitting the chilling time and rolling each cookie ball in white sugar before placing them on a cookie pan. Bake in the 375° F for roughly 8-10 minutes.

ROYAL ICING

This icing will air dry for decorated cookies and isn’t sticky (after drying). I use (clean) craft brushes then to decorate the cookies. Lots of fun for the kids.

Ingredients

4 Cups Powdered Sugar, sifted
 1/2 Cup Water
 1/4 Cup Meringue Powder
 1 tsp Vanilla

In large glass or metal bowl, beat all ingredients at high speed to 10 minutes, or until very stiff.

Hints: Use immediately. Keep covered with a damp cloth or with plastic wrap to prevent drying. Thin with a few drops of water or thicken with additional powdered sugar.

Serving size: Makes 3-1/2 Cups.

Virginia’s Notes: Follow the recipe for the icing. It will get a little thinner when liquid food coloring is added. If it gets a little hard in the bowl, just add water to thin. This recipe makes A LOT of icing, so often I only make half... or end up throwing out extra icing after the cookies are iced. It’s good to make a full batch, so that you can make a variety of colors to decorate with.

Bon appétit!