

Homecoming

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Summary: While investigating a football scandal in high school, Lois Lane is helped by Clark Kent, a mysterious boy who has more than one secret of his own.

DISCLAIMER: I don't own Lois and Clark or any other recognizable characters.

Sneaking into the boys' locker room wasn't like her at all. Lois didn't even go to parties, much less wander around looking through jockstraps and dirty underwear. Still, if she was going to uncover the dirty laundry she was looking for, she didn't have a choice.

If Louie would show her how to pick locks like he'd promised, she'd have been able to slip into the school at night, without the risk being caught. As it was, her only option had been to slip in after the football team began their early morning practice and and hope for the best.

Lois took a deep breath. The entire team was out in the field practicing and she'd seen the coach and assistant coach out there as well. It was now or never; the last thing she wanted to do was wait until a player got hurt practicing and came back to the locker room.

She took one last look around and she slipped inside. She was immediately overwhelmed by the intense smells of dirty socks, sweat and urine.

She'd thought the girls' locker rooms were bad; at least there the combined smells of dozens of perfumes, lotions and deodorant covered up any possible other odors. It was so strong that it often gave Lois a headache, but it wasn't nearly as offensive as this was.

Pursing her lips, Lois stepped inside. If she didn't need the *Daily Planet* internship she wouldn't be here now. Given the smell, the only place worse would be a sewage plant.

She reached into her purse for her camera, one of the few items that she had in there. Getting caught in the boys' locker room would ruin her reputation, what little there was of it. Getting caught in the boys' locker room with a camera would put an entirely different spin on the rumors, the kind of spin that might get her kicked out of school.

Holding her breath as long as she could, she was glad to see that the layout of the boys' bathroom was almost a mirror image of the girls' although it had fewer stalls, and instead of the standalone urinals Lois would have expected, there was a ten-foot-long trough. She wondered for a moment how that would work, then shuddered. Unlike the girls' restroom, the boys' stalls didn't have doors.

Apparently no one was expected to stay any longer than absolutely necessary.

The coach's office, luckily enough, was in the same location. The blinds were down, so Lois checked the door, hoping it wasn't locked.

It wasn't; she'd banked on Coach being too lazy to carry his keys in his sweatpants and she was right. She slipped inside, knowing that she wasn't going to be as lucky with the filing cabinets. However, she suspected that he'd be lazy enough to hide his keys just out of sight.

Five long minutes later she found them, stuffed into an old

boot. She grimaced as she fished the large ring of keys out and made a mental note to wash her hands at least ten times. There was a daunting number of keys on the ring, at least thirty. Time was slipping away, and she scowled.

Another five minutes later she'd found the keys to the filing cabinets.

She flipped through the first set of files. There didn't look to be anything out of place; the second was the same, and Lois felt her heart begin to sink. She'd been so sure; she'd banked a lot on being able to prove what she thought.

The third set of files was different. She flipped through them and felt a growing sense of excitement. The school was changing grades for athletes so that they'd be eligible to play under the new no pass-no play rules. New Troy had been the second state to adopt the rules after Texas, and the coaches weren't happy about it.

She began clicking her camera.

Although she was already persona non grata among the other students, this was going to derail the winning Metropolis High Lions. Going to Ireland for the exchange program in the spring would be the only thing that would keep her high school future from becoming a living hell.

Of course, the *Daily Planet* internship would secure her real future.

Lois stepped out of the coach's office, carefully pulling the door shut behind her. She wasn't out yet — she still had to get out of the locker room without being caught, most importantly with her camera.

She froze as she realized that she could hear the sounds of running water. At least one of the showers was running. Her heart raced. If there was one player, there could be others.

Moving carefully, she rehearsed her excuses. 'She'd gotten lost' wouldn't work; the smell alone would have told her where she was if the trough urinal hadn't. If she blamed other girls for locking her in the boys' bathroom, she'd be asked to name the conspirators.

Altogether, it was best if she got away without being caught. She couldn't think of any good reason to be here.

The water shut off. As Lois approached the door she'd come through earlier, she could hear voices approaching. She scowled again, wishing that she'd dared to start earlier. She'd been afraid to start too early for fear that she'd be found by stragglers.

The door she'd come through led outside; if this locker room was like the girls' she had to head for the other door leading into the school. She risked being caught by someone in the halls, but she didn't see that she had any other choice.

She turned a corner and slammed into what felt like a wall of flesh. The floor was slick and wet and she fell backward, but before she could hit the wet floor, she felt her arm being grabbed.

A muscular chest and arms, a towel wrapped around slender hips, it took Lois a moment to recognize the face. It was Mark, or Park or something... Kent. He hadn't made much of an impression on her in class, but she couldn't help but stare now.

He'd caught her with one hand, his other hand holding a gym bag.

Lois felt frozen, unable to speak. A moment later his towel fell and she found herself completing the fall to the floor.

Staring at herself in the mirror, Lois realized she was still as red as a beet. Worse, the back of her pants was wet and she'd been caught.

What had he been doing there? He wasn't part of the football team, although given what she'd seen of his body, he should have been. Now that she didn't have bare skin staring her in the face, she could remember. It was Clark Kent.

As far as Lois could tell, he looked like any of the other

shaggy-haired stoner kids, but he didn't hang around any of the stoners. He walked with a slouch and wore clothes that were oversized; Lois had never realized that he had any muscle definition at all, much less the physique of a bodybuilder.

He wasn't one of the popular kids, either; he didn't really seem to fit into any of the groups. He sat alone in the cafeteria at lunch and she'd never seen him with any of the other kids. He obviously wasn't rich; he only had a few t-shirts that he wore over and over, although as far as she could tell they were always clean.

Blending into the woodwork was supposed to be Lois's specialty, but Clark Kent was better at it than Lois had ever been. He was quiet and he didn't make waves.

There wasn't anything she could do about Clark Kent. If he told the coach, it wouldn't be long before the hunt began. At least she'd managed to hide the camera, so that if they went through her car and locker nobody would be able to find it.

She'd just have to lie and deny everything. Kent was the only one who had seen her and he didn't have many friends. If he tried something, she'd show him just how vicious the Lanes could be.

It didn't make sense. Lois had been waiting all morning, expecting a call over the loudspeaker or a heavy hand on her shoulder. She'd watched carefully for hidden glances, or people laughing as they looked at her.

Other than her wet pants, which had caused her friends to make a few snide comments in the morning, she hadn't seen any sign that anyone was interested in her at all.

It was hard for her to imagine that Kent wouldn't have told someone. Surely he wasn't that much of a social pariah that he didn't have at least one friend to tell. In high school, once you told one friend, it wasn't long until the entire school knew.

The day dragged on interminably as Lois waited and waited for the hammer to drop. It never did.

The class she shared with Kent was the last of the day. Of course it would be; this would be the place where he would humiliate her, his chance to climb the social ladder by pushing her down.

Lois sat in her seat, tense, waiting.

He stepped into the room. Looking more carefully, she could see hints of the well-muscled form she'd seen in the locker room. He moved carefully, slouching almost as though trying to be unnoticed. He didn't look at anyone as he moved to his seat.

It was as though he didn't notice her at all, not even glancing in her direction. Lois waited for the inevitable, but it never came.

As the last bell of the day rang, Lois watched as he got up quickly and slouched his way out of the room. It didn't make sense and it gnawed at her.

If there was anything that Lois hated it was unanswered questions, and the more she thought about Clark Kent, the more questions she had.

"Hey!" Lois called out, irritated in spite of herself.

Clark Kent ignored her, hurrying across the expanse of pavement outside the school toward the row of bicycle racks.

She wasn't sure why she was angry. Kent was doing what she would have asked him to do, if he'd only given her the choice. If she was smart, she wouldn't ask any questions. She'd write up her story, submit it to the *Daily Planet*, and she'd have her internship after she returned from Ireland in the spring.

Racing after him, Lois was surprised at how quickly he'd unlocked his bike. By the time she reached him, he was already speeding away.

He didn't look at her once.

Lois stood, staring after him. He'd seen her, she was sure of it, but he'd acted like she wasn't there.

While she had been the one to run out this morning, she at least had the excuse of trying not to look at him naked.

It irritated her. People might not like Lois Lane, but nobody ignored her. At least, no one outside her own family.

She stared after him, a speculative look on her face. It couldn't be helped; she didn't know Clark Kent and she didn't want to know him. She'd have to hope that he kept silent, at least long enough for her to get her story submitted.

In the meantime, she needed to retrieve the camera from its hiding place in the girls' room. She wouldn't be able to relax until she was at home and had a chance to get the pictures developed.

As she headed back into school, Lois couldn't help but wonder about Kent. He wasn't acting like most of the boys she knew. Most of them would have been bragging. They'd have exaggerated the encounter until people at school were saying that she'd been in the locker room naked waiting for the entire team to get back from practice.

She wished she could be grateful, but she couldn't until she knew why.

Getting film developed at CostMart was always a chore. Lois always felt like the pimply teenager behind the counter was ogling her photos, looking for bikini pictures or anything racy. Today he'd been replaced by an older man, a manager, and she felt more confident that she'd get quick service.

She considered going somewhere else, but she couldn't exactly trust the guys in the photography club at school, or the staff of the school newspaper. At least with CostMart she could get next-day service, which was more than could be said of the place down the street with the staff that always smelled like marijuana.

She slammed the door to her Volkswagen Rabbit. It was fifteen years old and the diesel engine left a cloud of black smoke behind her wherever she went, but her father had been deeply offended by the energy crisis. He'd gotten her the one car that got fifty miles to the gallon, even if it had a lawnmower engine.

A lot of her friends didn't even have cars, but her father insisted that she be independent. Independent was code for not needing him to drive her anywhere, because he was busy with his work as a sports physician.

Of course, many of the times he'd claimed to be out working, he'd returned with lipstick on his collar. That was the one thing that hadn't changed since her parents had been together.

As a car flashed by, Lois bit back a curse. If she ever got a place of her own, the one thing she wanted was her own parking spot. Her father had his own spot in the back, but Lois had to park out on the street.

In a lot of ways, it felt like it represented her whole life. Sam had bought this place as a bachelor, and Lois had shoehorned her way in almost as an afterthought.

She climbed the wide, gray steps to her front door, even as she fumbled for her keys.

The sound of the telephone ringing from inside made her curse; she struggled with the lock, which was sometimes stiff, and a moment later she was inside, racing for the telephone against the wall.

"Lane residence," she said as she dropped her purse onto the end table and her backpack on the floor.

"Lois?"

The sound of her mother's voice made Lois freeze. Leaving her sister had been the hardest thing she'd ever done, but as long as she stayed she'd just been enabling Ellen. She'd hoped that the responsibility of raising a ten-year-old girl alone would have helped sober Ellen up, but she wasn't sure how it was going yet.

"Hello, Mom," Lois said. It was hard to keep the note of resignation out of her voice, knowing what was coming.

For the next thirty minutes Ellen was going to try to use guilt to bring her back home. The thirty minutes after that would be spent listing all the reasons why Sam Lane was a terrible father

and an even worse husband. Even though Lois agreed with some of the things her mother said, it would just be a rehash of the same arguments they'd had a thousand times before.

It was the last thirty minutes Lois always hated the worst, when Ellen got weepy and emotional and started promising to change.

Part of Lois always hoped; no matter how hard she tried to harden her heart, she loved her mother. Yet every call always ended the same way, with a heated argument.

Lois glanced outside at the fading light and sighed. With all her schoolwork, she wouldn't have time to work on her article, not if she had to listen to her mother.

It'd be easier if she didn't still care for the woman. Sighing, she sank into the dark brown leather couch by the telephone. From long experience, she knew that she'd better get comfortable.

"This is a better school district," Lois said tiredly. "Besides, all my friends are here. You and Lucy moved out of the district."

She winced into the telephone. "It doesn't matter whose fault it was that you had to move to a cheaper place. The schools in Midvale really aren't as good."

It worried her that Lucy was stuck there. Her mother's alcoholism was as much at fault for her current economic situation as was Sam Lane's stinginess, but Lois knew better than to bring that up. The last time she had, her mother hadn't spoken to her for two days.

Lois closed her eyes. "You don't have to cry. I still love you; I just can't live with you right now."

The sound of the doorbell was like a sudden reprieve.

"There's somebody at the door," Lois said. It was disheartening how relieved she felt. "I've got to go."

The doorbell rang again.

"No, really. I've got homework anyway. Maybe you should talk to Lucy."

Lois felt guilty for throwing her sister under the bus, but it couldn't be helped. "I'll talk to you in a couple of days. I've got a project I have to work on tomorrow."

The bell rang again, this time more insistently as someone held the button down.

Hanging up the telephone, Lois raced to the door. She hadn't locked it, and she winced as she thought about what her father would have said.

Opening the door, she stared. Standing outside was Clark Kent, holding a package.

"Look, you're on the list," he said. "If you'll just sign here, I'll give you Sam Lane's package and you can go."

"I'm not signing until you come inside and talk to me," Lois said.

Her father used bicycle couriers on a regular basis — they were able to get through traffic jams even when the city was at its most congested — and she was accustomed to signing for his packages. Kent was younger than the usual couriers she dealt with, most of whom were in their early twenties.

The fact that he was trusted with valuable documents made her think a little better of him. It wasn't easy getting a job in Metropolis as a teenager that didn't involve fast food.

"There's nothing to talk about," he said. He held the clipboard out.

"I say there is."

He stared at her for a moment. "I'll list this package as refused."

"You won't get your commission. And I'll tell the company you didn't show up with the package."

Losing a good job was nothing to sneeze at, although Lois felt a little guilty about the threat.

His expression hardened. He looked back toward the street, where his bicycle was locked onto the ornate iron fence. Stepping inside, he didn't look around. He simply looked at her for a long moment.

In a flat tone, Clark asked, "What do you want?"

"You haven't told anyone about—"

"There's nothing to tell." He extended the clipboard in her direction.

Lois studied him. She believed him when he said he hadn't told anyone, but she still didn't know why.

"You don't want to know why I was there?" she asked, knowing even as she spoke that she was making a mistake. Yet somehow it was like a sore tooth that she had to keep poking and prodding.

"I really don't."

Lois was irritated by the undertone of hostility in his voice. "What's your problem with me?"

"I don't—"

"Don't say you don't have a problem," she said. "I can hear it in your voice."

He was silent for a long moment. "You really don't want to know."

"Try me."

"You threaten my job, you try to push me around, you yank my towel off and then I'm the one who has a problem?"

Lois stared at him. "You dropped me on my butt."

"You wanted me to drop the towel instead? Next thing I know you'll be complaining to your boyfriend, and then I'd be forced to..."

"Forced to what?"

He shook his head. "You're obviously trouble. Whatever kind of prank you were pulling, I want no part of it."

"Right...a prank," she said slowly. Lois felt a sudden surge of relief.

Of course he thought she was involved in a prank! Who in their right mind would think that she was doing what she'd been doing. She'd had nothing to worry about this whole time.

Obviously Kent was the kind that wanted to keep his head down. He was obviously a hard worker if he worked for the courier company her father used.

Maybe she'd misjudged him. Now that he wasn't a threat, Lois could see him as almost cute, although his hair and his oversized clothes would need a lot of work to be presentable.

What she'd seen in the morning had shown that he had nothing to be ashamed of physically.

She grinned at him. He stared, thunderstruck, a sudden look of awareness in his eyes where she'd only seen irritation before.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you." She grabbed the clipboard and quickly scrawled her name.

He took the clipboard and handed her the package, still looking confused. Maybe it was her sudden change in mood, or maybe it was something else.

He stepped out the door, brushing by her. Lois couldn't help herself. "By the way, I don't have a boyfriend."

She smirked as he stumbled a little. He turned, but she closed the door before he could say anything. She felt relieved and a little vindicated.

Nobody ignored Lois Lane, not even Clark Kent.

Now nothing could stop her. The *Daily Planet* internship was as good as hers.

"What do you mean you don't have my pictures?" Lois asked. It was an effort to not allow her voice to rise into a shriek. "I gave them to you yesterday."

The man behind the counter shrugged. "The pictures didn't turn out. There was nothing but blanks."

"No. There's nothing wrong with my camera. I use it all the

time.”

“It happens sometimes. The film slips off the rollers. Maybe there was a mistake at the developers. We subcontract the work out to a local company. In any case, there’s no charge.”

“Are you sure it’s my pictures we’re talking about? Check again.”

The man flipped through a drawer filled with pictures and prints, then shook his head. “I’m sorry. We don’t have any other pictures for you.”

As Lois turned to walk away, she swore she saw the man smirk.

Getting the information on the subcontractor had taken almost two days, but eventually Lois managed to discover that her prints had developed without any problem, and that they’d been delivered to CostMart without any problems.

She’d double-checked, hoping that maybe they’d gotten mixed up with another batch and gone to a different store in the city.

As far as she could tell, the pictures had arrived at her CostMart branch and then disappeared.

It didn’t make sense. These weren’t naked pictures that were likely to disappear into some store clerk’s personal collection and be labeled as lost. No one would have any interest in those pictures other than Lois.

She’d double-checked her camera as well, taking pictures and having them developed both at CostMart and at the place down the street with the stoners. There were no problems.

This left her in the uncomfortable position of having to do the whole thing all over again. The risk of discovery the first time had been high. The risk of being discovered again was even worse.

Lois looked around nervously, and then turned the door handle to the coach’s office. It was locked.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and she shrieked, jabbing her elbow backward as she’d been taught in her beginner’s martial arts classes. It was like hitting a brick wall; her arm immediately felt numb.

Turning, she saw Clark standing there, his hair wet and his gym bag in his hand. He was dressed this time, and Lois couldn’t help but feel a surprising pang of disappointment.

He didn’t look like the jab to his stomach had affected him at all. Instead, he looked annoyed. “You’d better get out of here,” he said. “They’ve been watching for you for the last couple of days, and they’re already on their way back.”

Lois grimaced as she cradled her arm, but nodded.

For a moment, his expression softened. “Let’s go.” Gently taking her by the arm, he led her toward the entrance into the school before he froze.

A moment later he lunged for one of the lockers, pulling it open and shoving her inside along with his gym bag. Lois gasped as the locker door slammed closed, followed by the sound of a lock being placed on the door and snapped shut.

The locker was dark and smelled even more strongly of dirty feet. Lois felt trapped, with the metal walls closing in all around her. If she wasn’t as slender as she was, she’d never have been able to fit in it at all. As it was, she felt herself gasping for air even though the locker was well ventilated, with slats she could see through.

She stilled at the sounds of multiple feet approaching.

“She’s in here somewhere.” Lois could see glimpses of the team captain, Tom Church, through the slats. “We don’t stop looking until we find her.”

Players began opening and slamming lockers shut. Lois couldn’t help but tremble, and held her breath as the boys reached the lockers on either side of her.

She tried not to move as a boy jerked at the lock of her own

locker for a moment. He paused, and for a moment Lois was afraid that he would call out, that he’d seen the whites of her eyes through the slats.

After a moment, however, he moved on to the next locker.

It seemed forever, but couldn’t have been more than five minutes before the sounds from the team retreated and everything became silent again.

As she stood in the stinking locker, she tried to shift her position to get a little more comfortable. She gasped and her chest felt tight as she realized that she couldn’t move. Worse, her elbow throbbed and she couldn’t even reach around to massage it.

Her nose itched, and it was driving her crazy.

It occurred to her that it would be better to be caught by the team than to be trapped in the locker for hours. Weren’t there kids who died in refrigerators? Even though there were slats for ventilation, the smell of dirty feet made her feel lightheaded.

She thought he was helping her, but Clark Kent had locked her here. Maybe he was working with the team as a probationary member. Someone had obviously tipped the team off to what she was trying to do; why not him?

Just as Lois considered screaming, hoping that her air would hold out long enough for someone to hear, she heard the sounds of movement in the room outside.

The rattling of the lock caused her to slide forward a little; when she saw Kent’s familiar face, she felt her breathing begin to relax.

The door opened and she squinted into the light.

He pulled her out of the locker, his hands gentler than when he had shoved her in. Lois grabbed him and held on, she was so grateful to be free that she could have kissed him.

She’d never realized that she had a touch of claustrophobia. Being in crowds or elevators had never bothered her. Being trapped in a tiny metal box, though, especially when she thought she’d been abandoned, that was different.

His grip tightened for a moment, then he released her.

“What in the hell was that?” she asked. Now that the shock was wearing off, she was getting her emotional footing back long enough to realize that he’d been the one to shove her in the locker in the first place.

“I overheard them this morning,” Clark said. “They were watching for you to go into the locker rooms. Whatever they were planning didn’t sound good.”

Lois’s eyes narrowed. “You have a lot of practice shoving people into lockers?” she asked. He’d shoved her into the locker awfully quickly, as though he’d been already been thinking about it. If she hadn’t been slender, the experience would have been even more difficult.

He shrugged. “I’m a quick study.” He didn’t look at her, instead staring at the wall separating the gym from the rest of the school with an odd expression on his face.

Lois looked around. “Where did you hide?”

He was too large to fit in one of the lockers; it had been a tight fit even for her. The bathroom stalls had no doors. It wasn’t like he could climb through a ceiling panel; as far as Lois knew, they wouldn’t hold the weight of a person.

“Who says I hid? Unlike you, I actually have a right to be here.”

Something in his expression told her he was lying. He wasn’t part of the team and he was hanging out in the locker rooms before school even started. This was the second time she’d seen him with wet hair.

“Why are you showering at school anyway?” she asked.

He looked at her for a moment, then sighed. “I have a paper route before school. I don’t always have time to get home and shower before class. It’s this, be late for class or stink all day.”

“You have two jobs?”

“Not everybody has a rich father to buy them things,” he said.

"If I'm going to college, I have to get there on my own."

He pulled his bag from the locker, closed it and slipped the padlock into the bag.

"Why do you have your own lock?"

"You think those gorillas out there wouldn't love to steal someone's clothes while he was showering?" Clark asked.

Right. Given what she knew of the football team, it had been a stupid question. Before she could say anything else, he put his hand on her shoulder. "It's clear."

She was out in the hallway before she could protest, only to find that he was right.

"How did you know?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I've got good hearing."

She looked him dubiously. While it was true that the guys on the team tended to be loudmouths, they could just as easily have been quiet, lying in wait for Lois. Of course, if they'd been waiting for her for a couple of days, they were probably a little less vigilant. None of the guys on the team seemed like the kind of people who could sit still for a long time.

"You need to watch out for the team," Clark said. "I don't know what you did to them, but they're coming after you. You probably need to stay out of the locker room for a while."

"I'll be happy if I never see another one," Lois said quietly.

It was true. The coach was obviously going to be on his guard from this point on. She'd have to get a little bolder and get what she needed from the principal's office. She would be more careful about where she developed her prints next time as well.

"Good," Clark said. For the first time she saw what might be a flash of something other than impatience. "I'd hate to have to make a habit of rescuing you."

A moment later he was heading down the hallway without so much as another word or a look back.

Lois rubbed her elbow, which still throbbed. If the look at his body she'd seen before hadn't convinced her that he was in great shape, the pain in her elbow would have. Clark Kent had abs of steel, probably from spending so much of his time riding bicycles.

Getting into the principal's office wasn't going to be easy. Maybe she needed to lean on Louie about teaching her how to pick locks.

Maybe she was getting ahead of herself. First, she had to survive whatever hazing the football team came up with. At least it was Friday. All she had to do was get through the day, and she'd be able to escape from the harassment she was sure was coming her way. She'd hoped to have the internship in hand with it almost at the end of the semester before anyone found out what had happened. She wasn't looking forward to the rest of the day.

As far as they knew, she hadn't done anything yet anyway. It wasn't like the CostMart people were going to go around showing her pictures to the team. There were just rumors and she'd live through it if she kept her head held high and denied everything.

All she could do was hope.

"Hey, Lo-Lo."

Lois forced herself not to grimace at the sound of Joe Malloy's voice. She hated the nickname Lo-Lo, but Joe thought it was cute and insisted on using it at every opportunity. Because he was the quarterback, and popular, some of the others had picked up on it. She pretended not to mind, because letting him know that he was getting to her would let him win.

It had obviously been a mistake to eat at the school cafeteria. She normally did so because it didn't seem worth fighting Metropolis traffic to have five minutes gulping down cold, greasy fast food sludge. Normally her friends would have sat with her. Today, ominously, she was sitting alone.

At least it wasn't strange that Joe was talking to her. He'd

been teasing and harassing her all semester. Some of her friends were even acting like they were a couple of some sort.

As if she'd ever fall for his cheesy lines.

"What do you want, Joe?" Lois asked. She couldn't help the note of tired irritation in her voice. She'd been getting veiled looks from members of the football team in her various classes all day, and was starting to feel a little paranoid.

The football player slid into the empty seat beside her and grabbed the banana from her lunch box. "I can't believe you eat that crap...raw fish is nasty."

"Sushi isn't—" Lois forced herself to stop talking. "At least I'm not a walking heart attack like you and the rest of the boys."

"We're young and we're gonna live forever!" he said, grinning. "Haven't you heard?"

He put his hand on Lois's back and she flinched. Breaking the star quarterback's fingers wasn't going to win her any points with the team, or with the rest of the school. The fact that she was getting angry looks from some of the other players' girlfriends now was telling.

"Anyway," he said. "I've been hearing some nasty rumors."

Lois grimaced. "I don't know what you heard, but I'm sure it's a big fat lie."

"I've heard that you aren't exactly pulling for the team," Joe said. "That you aren't showing a lot of school spirit."

Twisting out from under his hand, Lois turned to look at him. "I've got as much school spirit as anybody."

"So why don't you come to the game tonight? Prove it to everyone." There was something in Joe's voice that Lois hadn't heard before, and Lois looked him in the eye. "The Lions are loyal, isn't that what they say?"

His expression was tense, the teasing note in his voice gone.

"I'll think about it," Lois said. She hesitated. "What are people saying I've done?"

"Nobody's saying anything in particular," Joe said, his expression unreadable. "But people are getting worried."

"I think they've got me confused with someone else."

Joe grabbed her hand. "Let's make it a date."

"Joe..." Lois said. This was an old argument, and sometimes Lois almost thought he was wearing her down, but moments like this reminded her why she'd avoided dating him like the plague.

"Being the quarterback's girlfriend, that makes a real statement," he said.

Lois looked down at her meal. Without the banana, she was going to be hungry. It was just another sign of how her day was going. "Maybe we can talk about this later."

His grip on her hand tightened. "Don't wait too long. I'm a hot commodity," he said, taking a big bite of her banana and reminding her of why he wasn't.

He finished the banana and tossed the peel onto the table. A moment later, he rose to his feet. "Be at the game. Or else people might get the wrong idea."

A moment later he was sauntering away, his body language a clear sign of dominance. Lois had been raised around athletes her entire life. She found confidence to be as attractive as any woman. What she hated was a sense of entitlement. Football players felt that everyone owed them something, whether it was a grade or a date, or even part of someone's lunch.

There was no doubt that Malloy was playing the good cop, but she'd heard the threat underlying his words. If people got the wrong idea about her loyalty to the Lions, others might not be as magnanimous.

She'd heard rumors about some of the team members and how they treated girls. Not all of them were gentlemen.

Lois hated bullies. Part of the reason she'd been looking into the grades scandal was that she was tired of seeing people being bullied.

The crash of a tray hitting the floor made her jump. She

turned in time to see a heavyset girl with glasses fall to the floor.

“Eating oatmeal again, fatty?” one of the players said. “It’ll do a lot more good on your face than in you, at least until we can find a paper bag.”

The girl’s bowl of oatmeal rested on the floor, having survived the fall. The player bent down and smeared oatmeal onto her face. “Hey! It’s an improvement!” he said.

The football players sat together at a long table and they all started laughing, even Joe. If Lois had been in the least attracted to him, it was gone now.

Lois was outraged, but looking around, she didn’t see any teachers. Most likely they were out on one of their many smoke breaks.

In the corner, she saw Clark Kent. She’d been watching him for the last few days. He always ate in the cafeteria, and he was always alone. He sat hunched over his food, as though afraid that someone was going to try to take it from him.

Now, though, she could see his shoulders stiffen, even though he hadn’t turned to look at the little drama behind him.

The girl — Annie, Anna... maybe Annette, Lois couldn’t really remember — pulled herself heavily to her feet. The parts of her face that weren’t covered by oatmeal or acne were red and flushed. She ran out of the room, leaving her tray on the floor.

The player grinned at Lois maliciously. She recognized him now: Tom Church. Of all the rumors she’d heard about players, the rumors about him were the worst.

“I can’t believe you touched that,” said one of the cheerleaders, snickering. “You’d better go wash the nerd off.”

Everyone was staring at the players’ table, which was just as the players liked it.

There was a sudden burst of wind, which shouldn’t have happened in a closed room like the cafeteria, but Tom Church reacted as though he’d been slapped in the back. He stumbled and fell, shoving his knee into the bowl of oatmeal.

Somehow, his own meal went flying and hit him in the back. A combination of sloppy joe mix, chocolate milk and cheese fries slithered wetly down his body.

Tom Church scowled and looked around wildly, as though daring anyone to laugh. In spite of that, Lois heard a few sniggers behind her, and as he stood up and left the room, there were isolated laughs, even from the players’ table.

Church obviously wasn’t liked much even by his own people, but he was a good player.

Lois noted that Clark had finally turned to look at the spectacle. His lips were pursed, as though he was about to whistle. He saw her looking, and his expression smoothed back into neutrality. He turned back to his meal, his shoulders more relaxed.

She could have sworn that for a moment she’d seen a smirk on his face, but it was only there for a second. A moment later, his expression was back to its normal neutrality.

Lois wondered why she found herself watching him even now that his possible betrayal was a moot point. Either he’d already done so, or Lois had slipped up somewhere else. Either way, there was no more need to worry about him; she had her own worries now.

Her choices were getting more limited. Anyone who would assault a girl in the middle of the cafeteria at lunch would have even fewer compunctions about doing worse if he could catch her behind the bleachers after a game.

Accepting Joe’s protection rubbed her the wrong way for a number of reasons. First, he’d make a lousy boyfriend, even if there was a certain status from dating the quarterback. Second, as soon as she found another way to get her pictures and write the story, he’d turn against her just like the others.

Third, and most important, sometimes he made her skin crawl, although not nearly as badly as Tom Church.

He kept calling her Lo-Lo. Lo-Lo was a child’s name, or the name of a brainless bimbo. Lois Lane wanted her name to be one to be reckoned with. She wanted Lane to be a household name like Woodward and Bernstein, or Norcross and Judd.

She wasn’t going to get there by cowering in her room, or by hanging all over the arm of the local football hero.

Going to the game was going to be tricky. She’d have to make sure that she was never alone at any time.

Lois went through a list of people she called her friends and scowled to herself. Those who were loyal weren’t brave. Those who were brave weren’t particularly loyal.

She slowly packed her lunchbox, black and lacquered with oriental symbols. Her stomach was still rumbling, and for a moment she wished she’d brought a sandwich instead of getting fancy.

Rising to her feet, she kept a wary eye on her surroundings. It would be just like someone on the team to trip her, either now or in the halls.

Dropping her trash in the gray thirty-gallon bucket by the door, she was startled to realize that Clark Kent was behind her, slipping his tray into the window where the lunch ladies collected them from the students poor enough or dumb enough to actually eat the cafeteria cooking.

She turned toward him. “I don’t suppose you’d want to go to the game tonight, would you?”

The one thing she’d learned about him this morning was that he was a quick thinker. He was strong, and she had a feeling he was brave, although she couldn’t be certain.

He looked at her for a long moment, and for a second Lois had the feeling that he’d been listening to her conversation with Joe. That was impossible, of course, as he’d been all the way across a crowded, noisy room. He hadn’t even been looking at them, so he obviously wasn’t a lip reader.

“Not a date,” she hastened to add. “Just... friends.”

Lois got the impression that he was struggling with himself. The student behind him grumbled, waiting to put his tray away. Finally he shrugged. “I’ve got a little time free.”

For some reason, Lois found this reassuring. Even though he was the person who’d thrown her into a locker, she had a feeling that he’d be pretty good at getting her out of any scrapes that might come along.

She only felt a little guilty for using him. It wasn’t like he didn’t owe her anyway. After all, he’d thrown her in a locker and hadn’t even apologized. He wasn’t going to be her date, he was going to be her bodyguard.

So why did she feel a little flutter in the bottom of her stomach?

The silence in the car was deafening. In the five minutes since Clark Kent had slid into the passenger side of her VW Rabbit, he had stared out the window without saying a word.

He hadn’t even bothered to change his clothes. Lois had cleaned her car and taken it to the car wash and agonized over what to wear. It bothered her. Even though she’d said it wasn’t a date, it still felt a little like one. The fact that he hadn’t even gone to an effort to dress up suggested that he really didn’t think of this as anything special.

It wasn’t as though Lois went on a lot of dates. She’d asked around — no one knew anything about Clark being connected to anyone. The fact that she’d asked had gotten her strange looks from her friends, to the point that she regretted asking.

Clark Kent wasn’t unpopular, exactly. No one disliked him, but at the same time, no one ever saw him hanging out with any friends. He didn’t fit into any of the cliques... he wasn’t a stoner, a jock, a geek, or a prep. He didn’t lead any group, but he was no one’s flunkie. He didn’t register in the popularity hierarchy at all.

Lois cleared her throat. “Have you been in Metropolis long?”

Clark hesitated for a long moment. "I've been here for the past two years."

"I didn't see you around last year," Lois said. She swerved around a slow driver and saw Clark wince.

"I was...homeschooled," he said. He looked away for a moment before looking back at her.

Lois frowned. In her experience, the homeschooled kids were either geniuses, excessively bullied, or from families that were weirdly religious.

"You from a religious family?" Lois asked. Clark looked too big and muscular to be bullied, although his oversized clothes did seem to indicate a desire to avoid attention. He had too many muscles to be a genius; most geniuses didn't have a lot of time to spend in the gym.

Of course, it wasn't like Lois actually knew a lot of geniuses. He frowned. "That's a personal question."

"How are we ever going to learn anything if we don't ask questions?"

"I've found that you can learn a lot by listening," Clark said. He turned back to look at the setting sun again, sighing.

Lois noticed that although he acted as though he was perfectly calm, his hand tightened on the armrest of the door every time she made an aggressive move on the road, like swerving around old lady drivers or slamming on her brakes to avoid sideswiping an idiot who was driving too fast.

He should have been used to Metropolis traffic as a bike messenger. Of course, he might not be used to being in a car. A lot of Metropolis residents used the subway and couldn't afford taxis.

"So, did you see Letterman last night?" Lois asked.

"Who?"

"David Letterman," Lois said. The show had only been out for a few months, but a lot of her friends watched it religiously. Lois had been initially reluctant, but it had grown on her.

"I don't know him," Clark said. "Is he a senior?"

"David Letterman...the guy on television," Lois said.

Everybody knew of David Letterman; was Clark Kent living in some kind of bubble?

"I don't watch a lot of television," Clark said.

Lois stared at him. She was considered a freak among her friends for only watching a little television, but even if she wasn't into Letterman, she'd at least heard of him.

"Are you some kind of alien?" she asked.

He turned to stare at her, his hands tightening on her door handle. Lois heard a strange metallic sound.

"What?" he asked, his voice flat.

"A red-blooded American teenager who doesn't watch television?" Lois said. "You've got to be a space alien."

He stared at her for a moment more, and then relaxed. "I work too much to watch television."

"Nobody works that much."

"I've got the bike messenger job until nine, and then I have to be up by three in the morning for the paper route. It doesn't exactly leave a lot of time to sleep."

"You were serious about the paper route?" Lois asked. He only had six hours to sleep? When did he have time for homework?

"Why would I lie? Unlike some people, I have to make every dollar count if I'm going to get into college."

Was that a crack about her father's money? Lois stiffened. Just because her father had a nice house didn't mean they were rich. He might be able to send her to college, but there were strings attached to that, which was one reason she was trying to get the internship, and eventually, a *Daily Planet* scholarship.

She forced herself to stay calm; her family was a sore spot for her in more than one way. It wasn't fair to take it out on Clark because he saw only what other people saw. On the outside, she

was sure they looked like any other affluent family. That was all they wanted the world to see.

"What about the weekends?"

"What about them?"

"Surely you've got time to watch television on the weekends."

"I do odd jobs on the weekends. Lawn work mostly, or shoveling snow in the winter."

It didn't seem humanly possible that anyone would work that many hours, but it would explain why Clark was such a nonentity at school. He didn't have time to spend in the normal teenage social scene.

Suddenly it occurred to her that Clark might have been working up until he stopped at her house. He might not have had time to change.

"Why did you agree to come with me if you're that busy?"

Lois asked. "Isn't this cutting into your work hours?"

"I got done early," Clark said, looking down at his hands.

"No, really," Lois said. "You took off work to do this. Why?"

"Because I don't like bullies," he said, after several moments. "And like I said, I listen. I overheard some of the team members talking about things they could do to you at the game tonight, and I wasn't about to let that happen."

"You could have just told me to stay away from the game," Lois said. She felt a little guilty now. She'd brought Clark as a bodyguard without asking him, not knowing he was volunteering. "It's not like you can take on the entire football team by yourself."

"Hopefully, I wouldn't have to," Clark said. He looked at her. "But I'm not going to let them hurt anyone, especially you."

Lois felt herself flushing, and now she was the one who looked away.

"Why aren't you on the football team? You have the build, and it's a good way to get scholarships."

Mentioning his build had been a mistake. Lois felt her flush deepen; she was sure she was turning beet red. She averted her gaze, hoping he wouldn't notice. The last thing she wanted him to think was that she'd noticed his body when she'd yanked his towel off.

Especially because she had.

"Football is a good way for someone to get hurt," he said.

His tone suggested that he wasn't the one worried about being hurt. Lois wondered how he could be that confident, unless he'd actually been the one doing the hurting in the past.

She realized that she'd only met him a few days before, and she didn't know much about him. Usually her emotions didn't swing back and forth like this with other people. She normally formed an opinion of someone and stayed with it. Clark was an enigma, though, and she didn't really know what to think.

"What kind of music do you like?" she asked.

"I don't have a lot of time to listen to music," Clark said. "I hear some in passing, and I like what I hear, but I really don't know a lot of artists."

"You could get a Walkman," Lois said. "Cassettes aren't that expensive."

"I wouldn't know what to buy," Clark said. "And on my bike, I need to hear when the traffic is coming."

The car fell uncomfortably silent again. Clark Kent wasn't exactly the easiest person to talk to. The usual teenage things Lois talked to her friends about didn't seem to interest him at all, and it wasn't like she was going to talk with him about boys.

She certainly wasn't going to talk to him about her plans for the football team and the *Daily Planet* internship.

If this had been a date, she'd call it a bust. Luckily, it wasn't.

"Maybe I'll play a little music," she said. She reached down and turned the knob on her radio and cassette player, swerving a little as she did so. She noticed him stiffen again.

She was embarrassed to hear the music from her cassette playing instead of the radio. She reached out to push the eject button, but Clark put his hand on hers.

“What is this?” he asked.

She found herself intensely aware of his hand on hers; the tingle that shot through her spine surprised her.

“I’m sorry. I’m going to Ireland next semester and I was hoping to go across to France, so I’m working on my French,” Lois said. She pushed the eject button.

“No,” Clark said. “What was it?”

“Uh...the *Les Miserables* concept album,” Lois said.

“They’re thinking about making it into a play in France. This has been out for a couple of years, but my father got me a copy a couple of months ago.”

“They’ve made *Les Miserables* into a play?”

“Not yet...” Lois said. “You’ve heard of *Les Miserables*?”

“I’ve read the book,” Clark said. “It’s one of my favorites.”

“Why?” Lois asked. She loved the play too, but Clark didn’t strike her as much of a reader.

“It’s about redemption,” Clark said. “I like the idea that no matter what you’ve done, you can turn your life around and become a better person.”

For the first time that evening, Lois thought she saw Clark starting to relax.

“Even if the law doesn’t agree?”

“Even then,” Clark said. “We can’t control what other people think about us, we can only work on being the best people we can be.”

That wasn’t the message she’d gotten from the play, but she’d only listened to the album and hadn’t read the novel.

“Can I hear some more?”

“It’s all in French,” Lois said.

“Je sais parler français,” Clark said.

Lois stared at him. His accent was better than hers.

“You take French?”

He shook his head. “Not until next year. It just turns out that I have an ear for languages. I picked up some languages from people in the neighborhood.”

“More than one?”

“I speak a little Spanish and Mandarin. And French.”

“From people in the neighborhood?”

“I spent some time in Chinatown and around Cubans, and there’s a place downtown where there’s a lot of guys from Quebec.”

“How do you have time for all of that?”

“I listen,” Clark said. He grinned suddenly and the tingling from where he had touched her hand intensified. “And I don’t watch a lot of television. Besides,” he said, “I wasn’t old enough for the courier job last year, so I spent a lot of time in the library.”

He was silent again, but Lois was surprised that it wasn’t as uncomfortable as before. She found herself glancing down at his hand, which was back on his knee.

“Can I hear some more?”

She nodded.

The rest of the trip was much more enjoyable. Unfortunately, it was over all too quickly as they reached the stadium.

As she parked in the lot, Lois felt her stomach tighten. It was time to face an entirely different kind of music.

The game was well underway when Lois and Clark reached the stands. Lois couldn’t help it; she’d spent so much time getting her car cleaned and deciding what to wear that she forgot to eat. Apparently a little sushi — minus a banana — wasn’t the most filling of meals and they made a stop at the concession stand.

Lois had to concede that Clark impressed her. Most of the boys she’d been out with would have been impatient to get to their seats and the game. Clark seemed content to simply wait with her.

He hadn’t bought her food, but she hadn’t expected him to. She would have refused on principal, although it would have been nice to be asked. Of course, he didn’t buy himself anything either, saying that he’d already eaten.

Lois’s nose was fairly sensitive, and she was sure she would have smelled it if he’d had a hamburger on the way to pick her up. She wasn’t sure why he’d lie about it, but she bought him a drink anyway.

Given how hungry she’d ended up being, both of their hands were full anyway as they approached the stands.

Lois looked up at the stands and grimaced. She’d expected her friends to save her a couple of seats; she’d asked them to, but the stands were crowded.

She caught Julie’s eye, but Julie looked down quickly, shaking her head and leaning over and saying something to one of the girl’s next to her.

That stung. Lois had known that Julie was planning to get into the cheerleading squad next semester, but she hadn’t expected her to turn against her.

One by one, Lois looked at her other friends, and they all looked away from her.

Cowards.

She scowled, oddly comforted by Clark’s solid presence behind her. Because of the crowds, he was standing close enough that she could feel his body heat.

There was a space in the middle; Lois stormed up the steep steps the moment the people in front of her turned to the side, getting the last available seats near her friends.

Clark followed her, his hands filled with snacks.

She slid carefully down the row of outstretched knees and awkwardly placed feet. She always felt a little like a sardine in the middle of the crowd, and she suspected that this wasn’t going to be much of an exception.

Glancing over at the stands for the opposing team, she felt a moment of envy. Those stands were less than half full, but the Lions always filled the stands to capacity.

She sat on the metal bench gingerly, hoping that she didn’t get spilled soda or butter on the back of her new jeans. Three hours of sitting on the cold hard surface was going to be a pain, but at least her sweatshirt would keep her warm, as would the press of the crowd.

Clark sat beside her, and as people kept filing by, he was forced to scoot closer and closer until their legs were touching.

“Are you sure you got enough food?” he asked dryly. He handed over her hot dog, chili fries, pretzel and bag of licorice.

“I was hungry!” Lois protested. “Besides, I barely had anything for lunch.”

It wasn’t as though there was anything to worry about. Lois had a fast metabolism and was able to eat whatever she wanted. Of course, worrying about her mother often kept her from eating like she should.

“I’m just worried about your health. There’s enough fat in all this to clog a drain.”

“You only live once,” Lois said, grinning as she grabbed a cheese fry.

She’d never be one of those women who kept nothing but tofu and diet food in her refrigerator. She had relatives like that, and she always felt sorry for them.

Lois grimaced as she was jostled forward by people moving into their seats on the row above them. She glanced backward and saw an older, balding man and a man in his mid-twenties sitting down.

“I still don’t see why I’ve got to be here,” the younger man said.

“It’s important to support your brother,” the older man said. “That’s what family does, it means being there for each other.”

“Like you were there for me?”

"I had a business to run. I sent you to Harvard, didn't I?"
Lois glanced at Clark, who shrugged. She grabbed another fry.

"Business is better than ever," the younger man said. "So why do you have time for Tom and not for me?"

Lois forced herself not to look back. Were they talking about Tom Church?

"Your brother isn't exactly Harvard material," the older man said. "This is what he's got."

Tom Church was at the top of the list of players who would be suspended if the grade changes came out. As far as Lois could see, he either didn't try at all or he was dumb as a stump.

She felt highly uncomfortable and self-conscious; she was happy that the two men didn't know who she was.

Soon, she was able to lose herself in the game, although occasionally she heard the men behind her talking.

After a particularly brutal play, the older man shot to his feet. "That's my boy!"

The younger man grumbled throughout the game.

The Lions won, of course. They were the frontrunners in the district, and the enthusiasm of the crowd was a little scary.

Looking around, Lois realized that a lot of people were going to be angry when she published her story.

Dropping the story would be the safest option, but Lois had never been interested in what was safe.

By the end of the game, Lois felt a little queasy from the excess of rich food. Clark hadn't eaten any of it, unless she made it clear that she was absolutely done with it, and then he ate it slowly and carefully as though savoring every salty or sugary bite.

She actually felt bad about not buying him anything other than a drink.

Clark gathered the detritus of Lois's eating binge. As the people next to Clark rose, he started to rise as well.

Lois rose as well, her rear end smarting from the hard seats. She turned and was startled to see the two men behind her hadn't stood up.

The older man smiled. "It's Lois, right?"

Lois froze. There was no reason for this man to know who she was. She'd never seen him before, not even at school functions. Although the man's expression was pleasant, Lois's instincts were screaming that something was wrong.

She glanced at Clark, and although his expression remained neutral, his hand tightened a little on her arm.

"Have we met?" Lois asked, although she knew that they hadn't. She forced herself to remain calm with a pleasant expression on her face.

"I'm sure I would have remembered if we had. I'm Bill, and this is Junior."

"So how do you know me?"

"I take an interest in my son's classmates," Bill said. "Who's your date?"

A sharp look from Clark made her say, "We're not dating. He's just a friend."

"You should be careful who you spend your time with," Bill said, and Lois couldn't tell whether he was talking to her or Clark. His smile vanished. "Hanging out with the wrong people can lead to a bad end."

Lois forced herself to smile. "I'm always careful." Feeling Clark's hand on her arm, she said, "It was nice meeting you."

She forced herself to keep smiling until she turned away. The smile vanished from her face as soon as she did, and she leaned closer to Clark. "Let's get out of here."

He nodded soberly, and Lois found herself impressed again. Three-quarters of the boys she knew would have completely missed what was happening, taking everything at face value — pleasantries exchanged, nothing to talk about.

Clark was quick to catch on, and he didn't argue as Lois put her hand on his back to urge him down the steps, even though he was hemmed in by the people in front of him.

Lois forced herself to keep looking forward, even though she kept expecting to feel a hand on her back shoving her down the stairs.

"You need to be more careful," Clark said.

They were walking through the parking lot, with clumps of people spread out looking for their cars. Although the stadium was still brightly lit, this was the first time Lois noticed just how dimly illuminated the parking lot really was.

"I'm always careful," she said absently.

Clark snorted.

Lois looked at him. "What?"

"I'm just wondering if there's a universe where that's actually true," Clark said. "From what I've seen, the only time you aren't taking chances is when you're thinking up new chances to take."

"You make me sound like some kind of Evel Knievel."

"I've ridden with you," Clark said dryly.

"And I suppose you don't take risks out in the middle of Metropolis rush hour traffic every day?"

"That's different. And I'm serious about being careful."

"You don't have to worry—"

"Who's the dweeb?" Joe's voice was loud.

Lois felt her heart sink as she saw Joe approaching with four other members of the team, including Tom.

"Let's go," she said to Clark, and she started picking up her pace. Unfortunately, as they'd arrived late, her car was on the far end of the parking lot, a long walk from where they were at the moment.

"What do you want, Joe?" Lois asked, coming to a stop as she realized they were being surrounded.

"I'm just wondering why you showed up for our date with this loser?"

"We're not going out," Lois said. She scowled; he'd harassed her all semester and there was a point where she'd considered giving in. That time had passed. "We never were. You can ask me a thousand times and the answer will always be the same."

"People have been going easy on you, Lo-Lo," Joe said. "Being as you're my girl and all. If that's not true anymore..."

He leaned closer to her, and Lois was shocked to smell alcohol on his breath. They were barely off the field!

"I'm not anybody's girl," Lois said, unable to keep the irritation from her voice. "We're not dating, we were never dating, and we aren't ever going to be dating!"

There were incredulous laughs from the gathering crowd. One of the players slapped Joe on the back and laughed, but Lois could see Tom Church in the back, scowling.

Joe's face flushed. "Fine. Good luck on your own." He stepped to the side and made a sweeping gesture.

"Let's go," Lois said to Clark, grabbing his arm.

She saw movement to her side and ducked.

Tom Church stood in their path. "You can go, but not him."

"What are you talking about?" Lois asked.

"Lions are loyal," Tom said with a sneer. "Not that you'd know anything about that."

"So?"

"You may be a cheating slut," Tom said, "And you'll get yours, don't worry, but he's the guy who stole a girl from our brother. He's got to pay for that."

Lois looked beseechingly at Joe, hoping he'd speak up, but Joe looked away.

Several of the other guys on the team began to surround Clark, and Lois found herself being pushed out of the way.

Some of the onlookers began to shout encouragement to the team, and Lois looked around helplessly. There weren't any

adults in sight.

It looked to her like the players were working their courage up for a beating and there wasn't anything she could do about it. She should never have gotten Clark into this.

What struck Lois was how utterly calm Clark looked. Anyone else in her acquaintance would have at least looked concerned that six burly football players were threatening to beat him into a pulp, but Clark didn't look worried at all.

"There's no need for any of this," Clark said. "I'll be happy to walk away."

Tom Church grinned, his expression nasty. "You won't be doing any walking after this. Crawling, maybe, if you're lucky." Clark sighed. "Which hand?"

"What?" The expression of confusion on Tom's face was matched by the expressions on the faces of the other players.

"Which hand do you want me to break?" Clark asked. "I wasn't paying attention to which hand you use on the field."

Tom's face twisted and he lunged at Clark.

Clark barely moved, but somehow Tom missed.

One of the guys behind Clark rushed him. Clark stepped to the side and the player plowed into Tom Church, who fell to the ground cursing.

The running back grabbed for Clark, who did something Lois couldn't see. A moment later the player was screaming. The rest of the team froze. Somehow, Clark had twisted the player's right hand behind him at a painful angle.

"What happens to the team if the running back is out with broken fingers or a broken wrist?" Clark asked, tightening his grip on the player's hand. The player yelled.

Another player tried to grab Clark, but somehow Clark tripped him and the player landed in the dirt. Clark didn't let go of the player's hand.

"Right now, we haven't really gotten into a fight," Clark said, twisting slightly to avoid a punch from the running back. "The six of you might get lucky, get a few punches in—"

He ducked, pulling the player down with him, as a punch passed over his head. The player behind him tripped and fell to the ground on top of the player already on the dirt.

"—but it's really easy to get hurt in a way that means you won't ever play football again," Clark said. "And maybe losing one of you might not ruin the team's chances for a championship, but what happens when two or three of you are in the hospital? Can the team do it without you?"

He let go of the player's hand, and the player slowly backed away from him.

"What kind of freak are you?" Tom Church snarled as he pulled away from the other players.

Lois could see that the other players had lost a lot of their enthusiasm for the fight, but Tom was only more enraged.

"Have you heard of Aikido?" Clark asked.

At the blank look on Tom's face, he said, "It's kind of like Kung Fu, with less punching and yelling."

Tom charged at him, his arms spread wide in his patented tackle position. Clark sighed, and a moment later Tom was flying through the air.

A moment later Clark was on top of him, one hand on Tom's chest. Tom snarled again and tried to get up, but Clark didn't budge.

A look of fear crossed Tom's face.

"If I let you up, are you going to attack me again?"

Tom tried to spit at Clark, who pressed down slightly. Tom shook his head with a look of pain on his face.

Clark stood up, pulling Tom to his feet. He clapped the football player on the back, and Tom staggered forward, looking as though he'd had the wind knocked out of him.

"As far as I'm concerned, there was no fight here," Clark said. "Tom tripped and I helped him up."

The running back was still staring at his fingers. He muttered something to the others, who stared sullenly at the ground as they got to their feet. The momentum to attack Clark was gone.

Only Tom still had a look of hatred on his face. He turned to the crowd of onlookers. "What are you all looking at? There's nothing to see here!"

Clark stepped through the crowd, which parted hurriedly in front of him.

"This won't be the end of it," he said under his breath as he came up beside her. As soon as they were past the crowd, he grimaced. "Two more months. It couldn't have waited two more months?"

Someone had egged her car and scrawled epithets all over her windows in white shoe polish. "Traitor" and "whore" were the least objectionable.

Somehow she couldn't even find it in herself to be surprised.

Lois stared at the damage; in the dim light she couldn't see whether any of the shoe polish had gotten onto her paint, but she knew that permanently etching any of those hurtful words on her car would mean she'd have to get her father involved. The car would have to be repainted and her father would want to prosecute the people involved.

"I know a place we can clean this up," Clark said, touching her on the arm.

She would have objected to his touching her in such a familiar manner if it hadn't felt oddly comforting.

Headlights played over them, and Lois heard a roaring engine from behind them. She turned, blinded by the lights, and a moment later the car was accelerating toward them.

Clark stepped in front of her, and Lois felt her stomach drop. The football players weren't crazy enough to try to run them over, were they?

Clark seemed confident that they wouldn't; he simply stood his ground. Lois tensed in anticipation of dodging to the side, but Clark was utterly relaxed.

At the last moment, the car — which only now Lois was able to see was Tom Church's black Trans-Am — swerved to the side, tires squealing.

Something came flying through the air heading directly for them, and suddenly Clark's hand was in front of her face, holding a full beer bottle. At first, Lois couldn't understand where he'd gotten it; it took her a moment to understand that Tom had actually thrown a beer bottle at her head.

The Trans-Am skidded to a stop, all four of the guys inside staring at Clark with wide-eyed surprise. Lois was thankful to see that Joe Malloy, at least, wasn't one of the guys in the car.

For the first time, Lois felt Clark tense up. He cocked his arm back as if to throw the bottle, and the Trans-Am suddenly roared away.

Clark stared after them with a look of intense concentration.

"It's all right," Lois said, tugging at his upraised arm, even though she wasn't really sure it was all right at all.

That glass bottle could have blinded her, maybe even killed her. She'd never expected things to escalate to this point.

"They could have hurt you," Clark said, still watching the car retreat into the distance.

"They didn't. Thank you for that, by the way."

He looked back at her, and then looked at the beer bottle in his hand as though he didn't recognize it. He shuddered and offered it to her. "I don't suppose you drink?"

Lois couldn't help her expression of revulsion. Given the problems she'd had with her mother over the past few years, she wasn't sure she ever wanted to drink.

"I don't know where Tom Church's hands have been," Lois said. "And I really, really don't want to know."

He looked at the bottle in his hand, grimacing. He stared into

the darkness, and then threw the bottle, which disappeared into the night.

“That’s just going to make a mess,” Lois said.

“I know,” Clark said. For some reason he chuckled.

Lois’s head swiveled as she slowly drove past the sight of Tom Church’s Trans-Am, pulled over by the side of the road, with both back wheels flat. Somehow, the rear window had completely shattered. The boys were all standing outside the car staring at the vehicle.

They were on a side road, away from the streaming mass of cars heading away from the game. As far as Lois could see, there was no one behind her.

Clark began to roll the window down.

“Clark!” Lois said. After what they’d done, she was in no mood to offer them any assistance. As far as she was concerned, they could walk all night through Suicide Slum.

She heard two small explosions; a sudden look showed her that the front tires had somehow blown out as well.

Lois pressed her foot down on the accelerator and they sped past the boys.

“What was that all about?”

“I thought about saying something about karma,” Clark said. “But I was afraid they’d think I was talking about candy.”

What...oh...caramel.

She grinned at Clark, who smiled back.

“This won’t be the end of it,” Clark said, his smile fading.

“Monday, things could go one of two ways: the team could pretend nothing happened, or they’ll go to the coach and principal and start making accusations.”

“You barely touched anybody! There was a whole crowd of witnesses!”

“That’s the problem. You know how the gossip mill works. By the time Monday rolls around, the story will grow and get exaggerated. People will start saying I’m Bruce Lee or something.”

“Aren’t you?” Lois stared at him for a moment before looking back at the road. “You looked pretty impressive out there.”

“I’ve only been studying Aikido for a year and a half,” Clark said. “I’m strong and fast, so it makes me look better than I really am. The guys who know what they’re doing, it takes at least ten years of training.”

“I’ve never even heard of Aikido,” Lois said. “I’m taking Tae Kwon Do.”

“It’s been around for a while.”

“So what made you get into it? I’m taking Tae Kwon Do for self-defense. You look like you’re strong enough not to need it.”

Clark stared at his hands and chuckled bitterly. “You’d think so, wouldn’t you?”

“Clark?”

He was silent for a long moment, not looking up. “I wanted something where I could learn to not hurt people. Aikido is as much about protecting the other guy as it is about defending yourself.”

“It must have been expensive,” Lois said.

In her experience with Tae Kwon Do, it wasn’t just expensive in terms of money. Getting good took a lot of time and dedication, and from what she’d seen, Clark looked very good. It was hard to see how he’d have time to keep up, given what she knew of his schedule.

“It was important to me.”

His tone of voice didn’t invite any questions, and so Lois let it lie, no matter how many questions it raised in her mind.

He’d saved her life and put himself on the line for her, and she wasn’t going to forget that.

Lois pulled into the empty bay and shut off her engine. Despite being deserted, the self-service car wash was well lit, and she was a little reluctant to step outside and see exactly how much damage had been done to her car. What she’d seen in the darkness had been bad enough.

Clark touched her forearm reassuringly. “It’ll be all right.”

Staring down at his hand on her arm, Lois nodded. Time was of the essence, but even so, Clark had insisted on stopping at a convenience store. He’d known his way around the neighborhood and directed her to one that was still open at almost eleven at night.

He grabbed the paper bag he’d gotten from the store and opened the passenger door.

Lois stared at her arm where his hand had rested, and she wondered why she seemed to respond better to him than she had the other boys. It wasn’t just that he had saved her life. It had started long before she realized that he was brave when her friends were cowards, bright where they were slow, and kind.

Clark hadn’t even asked for money, and from what she’d seen, he was careful with his money. He didn’t spend money on frivolous things, even food for himself.

She sighed and pulled her keys from the ignition. She’d already washed her car once today; she wasn’t looking forward to doing it again, even if it was an unusually warm September night.

She winced when she saw the damage. It was more extensive than she’d thought. Shoe polish didn’t come off, and they’d written all over the side of her car. She wasn’t sure, but it looked like the egg shells might have chipped her paint, and the graffiti on her windows made driving a little difficult.

“We need to get the shoe polish off the paint first,” Clark said. “It’ll ruin your paint job faster than the eggs will. We’ll worry about the windows last.”

He began pulling the supplies from his bag and setting them on the hood of her car. He leaned back in the car and pulled out the bucket he’d bought.

“They sell buckets?” Lois asked. It didn’t seem like the sort of thing a convenience store would sell.

“I know the owner. He was happy to lend it to me,” Clark said. He said, “The first thing we’ll try is a mix of alcohol and water. If that doesn’t work, we’ll try something else.”

Lois carefully rubbed a soft cloth over her car.

In the background, music came from her radio set on low. She hadn’t felt like trying to translate French in her head, so she’d left her *Les Miserables* cassette off. Instead, she could hear the sounds of Foreigner crooning about love, about hearts broken. It was soothing, which she needed badly.

“It’ll work better if you do it this way,” Clark said. “Let me show you.”

He was behind her and it surprised her. For a person of his size, he was surprisingly quiet when he moved. He wasn’t at all like the football players, who made sure everyone knew when they entered a room.

Leaning forward, he gently put his hand over hers and moved her hand in a different direction. It was an easier stroke, and she was surprised to see that the polish came up just as well, with even less scratching than she’d seen before.

“Don’t scrub at any spots that won’t come off. We’ll use the clay on those.”

“Um,” Lois said. She found herself intensely aware of his presence beside her. He was close enough that she should have been able to smell the usual teenage boy smells: stale sweat, soap, overly heavy applications of cologne.

Instead, he smelled fresh and clean, like sunshine. It wasn’t a scent she could identify, but she found herself leaning closer to him.

“Anything you do to get the shoe polish off is going to take

some abrasion. The trick is to do it without taking the paint off too.”

“How do you know all of this?”

“I did some car detailing work before I was old enough to get a real job. This sort of thing happens more often than you’d think.”

He continued to move her hand gently, the cloth in her hand moving over the surface of the car.

Lois understood what she was supposed to do almost immediately, but for some reason she didn’t say anything. She just stared at the rhythmic motion their hands were making together.

The song changed, and the smooth voice of the DJ came on the air.

This broke the spell. Clark jerked his hand away from hers as though he’d been scalded, and it was his turn to clear his throat uncomfortably. “That’s, uh...that’s how you do it.”

“Thanks,” Lois said.

He retreated to his side of the car and she couldn’t help but watch him.

It had taken almost an hour, but her car was finally clean. There were a few spots where her paint had been chipped, but those blended in with the other preexisting paint chips. It was much better than being forced to drive around with the word “whore” written in gray primer across the side of her car.

To her disappointment, Clark hadn’t returned to her side of the car to show her what to do again, although he’d wielded the spray wand of the washer with a calm competence.

They’d had to use razor blades from his bag to scrape the words off her car windows.

It was painstaking, meticulous work, yet Clark didn’t complain even once. As late as it was getting, Lois felt herself beginning to lag; while she normally wouldn’t be so exhausted so late on a Friday night, it had been an emotionally exhausting evening.

Clark didn’t look tired at all. It occurred to Lois that once they got home he’d have to ride his bicycle back to wherever it was that he lived.

As he slid into the seat beside her, she said, “I can’t thank you enough for tonight.”

He smiled slightly. “It was the weirdest not-date I’ve ever had.”

“Do you go on a lot of not-dates?”

“This is my first one,” he said. His lips quirked.

Did he mean he hadn’t gone to a lot of events just as friends, but that he had been on a lot of dates? Or did he mean that he hadn’t been on a lot of dates either?

She’d have heard if he was dating anyone at school, but Clark seemed like the type who’d be fine dating someone from out in the community. He was good at keeping secrets.

“When we get back to the house, would you like me to drop you off at your house?” Lois asked as she pulled out on the street. “It’s getting pretty late to be riding on a bicycle in the dark.”

“I ride in the dark every morning,” Clark said dryly. “I doubt I could fit my bike in your trunk anyway.”

“I keep a bike rack in my trunk in case I have to pick up my little sister,” Lois said. “I don’t keep it out all the time so that people don’t make fun of me.”

“You don’t strike me as the kind of person who worries a lot about what people think.”

“This?” Lois said, gesturing at her car. “This is different.”

“You’ve never even told me what this is about. Although I can make a few guesses from what I’ve heard.”

“It’s not right what some people get away with. It’s one thing to worry about what people think over something silly, like fashion. That’s just part of high school life.”

“That’s why it’s okay for them to call you Lo-Lo.”

“Not after tonight,” Lois said. “It was easier just to go along with it, but sometimes you have to put your foot down and make a stand.”

Clark nodded, but looked down at his hands.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to drive you? It wouldn’t be any trouble at all, especially after everything tonight.”

“I’ll be fine,” Clark said.

“You aren’t working tomorrow morning, are you?” Lois asked. It was already late, but at least she’d be able to sleep in.

He shrugged but didn’t say anything. The paper ran every day rain or shine.

“I’m sorry I kept you out this late. You should have said something.”

Clark shook his head. “Leaving you with all that to clean up? My mother would have been ashamed.”

“Would have been?”

“My parents...” He was silent for a long moment. “I don’t talk about them a lot.”

“You don’t talk about anything a lot,” Lois said.

“There was a car accident when I was ten. Neither one of them made it.” Clark stared at his hands.

“Oh...” Lois said, temporarily at a loss for what to say. “I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago,” Clark said. He looked out the window. “I try not to think about it.”

That meant he still did. As much as Lois struggled with her own mother and father and her complicated family, she couldn’t imagine losing them.

His body language was tense and stiff, as though he regretted telling her. It occurred to Lois that this wasn’t the sort of thing that he’d share with just anyone. In a way she felt touched that he’d felt open enough to share it with her, even if he’d closed off almost immediately.

His tone of voice suggested that the discussion was closed, and so Lois struggled to find something else to talk about. For some reason, her mind kept drawing a blank.

She didn’t want to talk about her story, and her strange physical reactions toward him were likewise off limits. She wasn’t even sure what it meant, why she was reacting to him in ways that were different than she’d experienced with other boys.

This wasn’t a date; she’d been clear about that from the beginning. So why did it feel like one, and why did Lois find herself wishing it might be?

“Maybe a little more *Les Misérables*,” she said, pushing the play button.

Eponine began singing about her unrequited love for Marius, and Lois couldn’t help but keep glancing at Clark.

He didn’t look back at her, simply staring out the window.

Lois closed the door and locked it behind her, sagging with relief. She was exhausted after the evening she’d had, and if she continued to move forward with the story and the internship, it was only going to get worse.

Clark was going to be a complication. She had to stay focused on her goal; of all the things her father had taught her, this was the one that she’d actually accepted. She couldn’t afford to be distracted by a nice set of eyes.

If she had wanted to date someone with muscles, she could have accepted Joe Malloy at any time. After tonight she was happy that she hadn’t, of course. He was a stupid ape.

She couldn’t imagine him staying up late to help her painstakingly clean her car; he hadn’t even defended her from his own friends. He wasn’t smart or brave, and he certainly wasn’t kind.

He didn’t make her skin tingle when he touched her either.

Damn.

Clark seemed just as single-minded as her, if not more so. He kept a grueling schedule that would have worn her to a frazzle, and he'd pared his life down to just what he needed to go to college and have a good life.

She didn't know what his home circumstances were like, whether he was living with relatives or stuck in foster care, but he didn't talk about it. Usually people talked about things that were good. That was why she herself didn't talk about her family life with anyone.

Lois knew about keeping family secrets just as well as anyone.

She had no way of knowing if he was even interested in her, although his reaction suggested a positive response.

Yet even if he accepted, their time together would take time away from his dream as well as her own.

Could she do that to him?

The thought that he might reject her was the final nail in the coffin. It would be better to remain friends instead of risking it all on something that wouldn't serve either one of them well.

Lois fell into bed without even taking her clothes off.

The telephone by her bed rang, and for a moment Lois was disoriented.

"Wha..." A glance at the clock showed that she'd been asleep for less than thirty minutes.

She picked up the receiver, the sounds of sniffing audible on the other end of the line.

"What's going on? Lucy?"

"Mom didn't come home," Lucy said, sniffing. "I'm scared."

"It's not even two yet," Lois said, keeping her voice calm. "You know how Mom gets."

Lucy's voice was tearful. "She wasn't supposed to leave. We were gonna have movie-and-popcorn night."

Lois sighed. "Can you call Uncle Mike?"

She'd hoped that being forced to raise Lucy alone would be enough to stop her mother from doing this; it hadn't been so bad before Lois got her driver's license, but once she had, nights like this became all too common. She assumed that Lois could take care of Lucy just fine and so she was free to go out as she pleased.

Night after night of waiting up for her mother, worried that the telephone would ring and she'd find out that her mother had been in an accident, that she'd killed someone or herself had been enough to drive Lois into her father's house.

"He's gone on a fishing trip," Lucy said. "He made Mom promise not to do this."

The word of an alcoholic wasn't worth much. Lois had learned this a long time ago, but it seemed to be taking Lucy a lot longer to catch on. It was as though she still had hope, and she kept reaching out to Ellen. It hurt Lois to see the disappointment in her sister's eyes.

Lois had been thinking of her mother as Ellen for a long time, but to Lucy she was still Mom.

"Do you want me to come pick you up, or do you want me to try to find her?"

There was silence on the line. "Find her," Lucy said at last. They both knew that by the time Lois reached Lucy in Midvale, the bars would be closed. Lois didn't have a chance of finding her after that, not until she came home.

She'd been gone an entire weekend once.

"Okay," Lois said. "I'll make some calls."

As Lucy hung up, Lois grimaced. A school counselor had once talked to her about enabling behaviors in alcoholics. Lois hadn't let her know about her own situation of course. One of the basic truths about living in an alcoholic family was that you kept the family secrets, no matter what.

Family laundry stayed in the family.

Lois didn't even talk to her friends about this. She'd tried, but the few who had understood didn't necessarily have any good advice to offer.

Was she enabling her mother by going out and dragging her out of whatever gutter she'd gotten herself into? Lois wasn't sure; moving was supposed to have been a solution to this dilemma. But if her mother died in a car accident because Lois hadn't bothered to look for her, Lois knew she'd never be able to live with herself.

Lois began making the calls. She had a list of all the local bars written down, but some of the numbers she knew almost by heart, for despite living in Midvale, her mother preferred to drink in Lois's neighborhood. In part it was because these were the bars she knew.

The other part was that her mother had gotten a job as a nurse in Midvale and she didn't want any of her coworkers or patients to know what she was doing on weekends. There was much less risk of running into someone she knew in her new neighborhood when drinking in her old neighborhood.

Of course, this made her risk of having an accident while driving drunk much higher; it was at least a thirty-minute drive from Lois's neighborhood to Midvale, and that was at night when there wasn't much traffic. During the day, it became a two-hour nightmare, more sometimes.

It took almost ten minutes to find the right bar; Lois had made a point of getting to know as many of the bartenders personally as she could. It hadn't been hard given that her mother hadn't always confined herself to weekends when Lois had been there to clean up her messes.

"I found her," Lois said after Lucy picked up the telephone. "She's at Kavanaugh's."

Her sister sighed. She was almost as familiar with the bar as Lois was; she'd had to sit outside in the car, and had even been brought inside a couple of times before the owner threatened to ban Ellen if she continued.

"Bring her home," she said.

It was Lois's turn to sigh. It was never easy to get her mother to give up the keys; getting her to leave before a bar closed was even harder.

Life in an alcoholic family was a laugh a minute.

Lois could feel the pulsing music from Kavanaugh's even as she sat in the parking lot in her car. Her entire car vibrated from the noise.

She hesitated, her hands on the wheel. Did she really want to go through this again? She'd done everything she could to get out, even moving away, yet somehow her mother kept pulling her back in.

At least she could see her mother's car parked somewhat awkwardly two rows away. More than once she'd driven to a bar only to find that her mother had already left to find another. Of course, this close to closing time that was unlikely.

Ellen Lane liked to stay until last call.

Lois looked at her watch and wondered if it would just be easier to wait until last call. Ellen would make a big scene, she always did, but she would be easier to handle once the alcohol stopped flowing and the bar closed.

She thought for a moment, then grimaced. There was always a chance that her mother might end up going home with someone. While Ellen wasn't normally loose, once she got blackout drunk, her judgment went out the window.

It was better to nip it in the bud now, before things got too out of hand.

Sighing, she pulled her key from the ignition and she pushed her door open. She really didn't want to do this.

The twenty yards to the door felt like two hundred, and Lois found herself dragging her feet. In front of anyone else she had

no fear, but her mother knew her buttons, and she was an old hand at exploiting all of them, every lingering piece of guilt and vulnerability that Lois had left.

Lois reached the door and saw the bouncer.

“Hey Tim,” she said.

He’d given her hell the first few times she’d come to collect her mother. State law said that sixteen year olds and younger had to be accompanied by a parents to get into a bar, although some bars refused to let anyone in under the age of twenty-one. Trying to come in without her mother had been a problem for him.

Of course, now that she was seventeen he was much cooler about it, especially as he’d had to help escort Ellen out of the bar on more than one occasion.

“How’s she doing?” Lois asked.

The beefy bouncer shrugged and gestured toward the bar.

Ellen was already slumped over her drink, laughing loudly at her companion, a swarthy Hispanic man. Long experience told Lois that Ellen was seriously drunk; her body language was unmistakable.

Sighing, she muttered a thanks to the bouncer and headed for the bar, skirting the dance floor.

Her mother had convinced her to try dancing a time or two, but dancing with men in their forties and fifties while they leered at her wasn’t her idea of a good time.

The music was so loud that she had to shout as she reached her mother.

“Mom!” she said, touching her mother on the shoulder.

Ellen swung around in a wide, exaggerated arc, startled, and Lois felt the wetness on her shirt as Ellen’s drink splashed onto her.

“Lois!” Ellen said. “Wha—” Her voice was slurred and her eyes were unfocused. Her breath smelled of alcohol.

“It’s time to come home,” Lois said.

It was only fifteen minutes until last call; maybe Lois would get lucky.

“I’m not gonna...go home with you,” Ellen said. She swayed in her seat. “Pedro’s gonna take care of me.”

“It’s Miguel, actually,” the dark-skinned man said. He looked embarrassed. “I just suggested that she might want to get somebody to drive her home, and she thought I was volunteering.”

“I’ve got it,” Lois said. She’d already suspected it was something like that even as she walked up to them. He’d been leaning away from her with a trapped look on his face, one that Lois had seen all too many times on her own face in the mirror.

Ellen began crying. “Nobody wants me. I gave the best years of my life to your father and now I’m a used up old hag.”

Lois had once heard that there were stages of grief. What she knew was that there were stages of any conversation with her mother. There was self-pity, anger, blame, depression and guilt.

As Miguel rose quickly, Lois settled into her seat. It was going to be a long fifteen minutes.

“The bathroom’s inside,” Lois protested as her mother stumbled out into the alley.

This was another unfortunate part of her mother’s illness, having to hold her mother’s hair back as her body expelled the poisons she’d insisted on filling her body with.

They’d always made it to the bathroom before, but this time Ellen had taken a wrong turn.

Ellen lurched across the alleyway, already heaving.

Instinctively Lois followed her. It was only when she heard the click of the door behind her that she realized they were locked out.

Her stomach dropping, she whirled and grabbed for the door. Tugging on it didn’t help; they were locked out.

Even though bar bathrooms were disgusting, they usually had

toilet paper for her to wipe her mother’s face. Out here they had nothing and the bar was closing.

Lois turned her head at the sound her mother was making, and she grimaced. They were going to have to walk all the way around the block to get to their car, and with the way her mother was moving, Lois would be lucky if she didn’t have to carry her.

She saw headlights turning the corner, illuminating her mother and the whole shameful event. Lois winced, squinting her eyes as the headlights approached. She could only hope it wasn’t a police officer out to arrest people.

It wasn’t. It was a battered white pickup filled with Mexicans. None of them were nearly as well dressed as Miguel had been.

The truck pulled up, and one of the men in the truck jumped out.

“What are you putas doing out here?”

“We just...” Lois said, her mind racing. Something about these men made her wary. Before she could come up with a good story, Ellen lurched to her feet and said, “Pedro!”

She staggered over to the man, and before he could react, she vomited all over his white t-shirt.

The man shoved Ellen away, cursing. Ellen fell to one knee. Other men began jumping out of the battered truck.

“Hey!” Lois shouted. “You can’t do that to my mother!”

“I can do whatever I want to, pu—” The man’s swarthy complexion paled and a moment later he was racing back to the truck. The men climbed into the truck almost as if they were on fire. A moment later the wheels of the truck sprayed gravel as it spun into reverse, roaring as it moved backward down the alley at a breakneck speed.

Lois winced. Whatever they’d seen behind her couldn’t be good.

“Lois?”

She turned and stared. Clark was standing by the dumpster. His bicycle had a cart attached to it, filled with plastic garbage bags.

“What’s going on?”

Before she could reply, she heard the sound of her mother retching again as she staggered to her feet. Lois flushed with embarrassment.

As much as she liked Clark, there were some secrets she’d never intended to share. This was one of them.

“Lois...” her mother said. Her voice was a low moan.

For a moment Lois was tempted to pretend she didn’t know her. She was mortified, and her skin felt flushed from her head to her feet.

Clark glanced from Lois to Ellen, and to Lois’s chagrin, an expression of understanding passed over his face. He wasn’t carrying his messenger bag anymore. Instead he was wearing a blue fanny pack with the bag facing forward.

It should have looked stupid, like most of the fanny packs Lois had seen over the last couple of years, but he wore it like an electrician’s tool belt. He unzipped it and reached inside.

Stepping forward, he said, “Maybe this will help.”

In his hand was a pack of baby wipes. Lois stared at them for a moment as he held them out. Glancing back at her mother, she winced.

“Thanks,” she said. She took the wipes and walked back to her mother, who had fallen to her side. She helped her mother clean up as well as she could, cleaning her face and hands and what she could of her hair. Her mother’s breath smelled foul, and Lois wished she’d brought a breath mint.

There had been a time when she didn’t go anywhere without one, but since she’d moved in with her father, she’d thought all of this had been left behind. She glanced up at Clark, who was pulling bags out of the dumpster and piling them on his cart and purposefully not looking in their direction.

She gathered the dirty baby wipes and returned to Clark. “Are you done?”

He glanced inside the dumpster, and then nodded.

Lois threw the dirty wipes into the dumpster, and then carefully wiped her own hands with a clean wipe. It was only then that she returned the rest of the pack to Clark. “Thanks for this.”

He looked at her mother, who was still sitting on the dirty alley floor behind her, swaying.

“Are you going to need some help?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. I’m not sure she can walk. I’d bring my car around, but I’m afraid to leave her by herself.”

“Your car is out front?”

Lois nodded.

“Let me help you,” Clark said. He put the remaining baby wipes in his fanny pack, zipped it up and walked toward Ellen.

“Ms. Lane? My name is Clark. I’m a friend of your daughter’s from school.”

Ellen squinted at him and shook her head. “Lois doesn’t know any boys.” She swayed; obviously shaking her head had been a mistake.

Lois grimaced. Just because she hadn’t introduced any of the boys from school to her mother didn’t mean she didn’t know any. It just meant that it was too much of a risk; sober Ellen was bad enough, but drunk Ellen was a nightmare.

He reached out and took her hand. He tugged, and she rose to her feet. She staggered and fell onto Clark, hugging him.

Lois winced. She wasn’t sure she’d gotten Ellen completely clean, given the dimness of the alley, and given the smell of her breath...she rushed forward.

Clark acted as though nothing had happened. “Can you walk?”

Ellen swayed, and as Lois reached her, she slid to her knees. Undoubtedly the skirt she was wearing was going to be ruined; somehow Lois suspected that she was going to be blamed for it in the morning. It wasn’t as though she could carry her mother.

Clark knelt and put one hand behind Ellen’s back and the other underneath her knees. He stood up effortlessly. Glancing back at Lois, he said, “I’ll get her to your car if you’ll grab my bike.”

Lois nodded uncertainly. Her mother wasn’t a small woman; she had to weigh a hundred and fifty pounds. There was no way he’d be able to carry her like this for very far, although she thought the effort was sweet.

She went back to his bike and kicked the kickstand into place. Pulling it, she was surprised at the weight the wagon added.

“What do you have in here?” Lois asked, “Bricks?”

“Aluminum cans and glass bottles,” Clark said. “I’m saving the earth and all that.”

Lois couldn’t help the expression of disgust on her face. “You dig through the trash? I thought you already had a couple of jobs.”

“I can make forty bucks in a couple of hours easy. Neither of my other jobs pay near that.”

“You make twenty bucks an hour digging through trash?”

Lois’s voice echoed in the alley. Most of her friends were making three dollars an hour working in fast food or at the mall. She didn’t know many adults who made that kind of money, other than her father.

“On weekends. Pickings aren’t as good on school nights so I don’t bother.”

“I still don’t understand how it can possibly pay that well,” Lois said. “Trash?”

“Aluminum prices are high,” Clark said, shrugging, which was impressive since he was still carrying her mother.

“Eventually everybody will start doing it, and the prices will

drop, but in the meantime every dollar I make is one step closer to college.”

Lois felt a flash of guilt; Clark had spent money helping her clean her car earlier and he hadn’t asked her to reimburse him. She should have insisted. She hadn’t realized that he was going to these kinds of extremes to make money.

It couldn’t be safe, digging through the trash at bars. Lois had heard of people being stabbed in these places. She’d been lucky never to have seen it for herself, but knowing it happened had increased her anxiety about her mother’s safety.

Ellen moaned and snuggled into Clark’s shoulder and Lois winced. There was no telling what his shirt was going to look like. He’d been crawling through garbage and he still smelled a lot better than her mother.

“I’m sorry about all this,” she said uncomfortably.

“I was going to the Laundromat after I finished here anyway. It’s no big deal.”

“And then you deliver papers? Don’t you ever sleep?”

“I’ll nap after I deliver the papers,” Clark said.

It almost made the six to seven hours of sleep Lois allowed herself seem like a luxury. She was exhausted even now, and the weight of pulling the bicycle and the wagon behind it was making her arms burn.

Clark didn’t even seem winded. Given the way he’d caught the beer bottle earlier in the evening, there was no question in Lois’s mind that he should have been on the football team. It was strange — although he obviously rode miles and miles a day, he didn’t have the lean build of a bicyclist. He was built more like a football player.

“Have you ever considered joining the team?” Lois asked.

“After tonight?”

“Before that. You’d get a scholarship easy.”

“How do you know I’m any good?” he asked, smirking.

Lois glanced pointedly at her mother, and Clark looked down as though he’d forgotten all about her. They were almost back to Lois’s car, having circled the block.

Clark staggered a little. “She’s getting a little heavy.”

“I’m serious. You’re working yourself to death when you could take an easier way out.”

He stopped and turned. “There’s no guarantee that I’d get a scholarship, and football takes a lot of time. I wouldn’t be able to work and stay on the team. It’s pretty expensive to be on the team anyway; players are expected to pay for a lot of the trips.”

Lois could tell that these weren’t the only reasons; he was looking away from her as he said it. The fact that he’d thought about it and decided it wasn’t for him made her a little sad.

Of course, if he had been on the team, he’d have been as upset as the other players when Lois’s story came out, so maybe it was for the best.

“If you’ll get the door,” Clark said. He grunted and sagged a little, as though Ellen was getting heavy, but the timing was off somehow. It was almost as though he was faking being tired.

Lois raced for the passenger door and opened it.

Clark gently leaned forward and slid Ellen Lane into the passenger seat.

Lois had done this very thing more times than she cared to remember, and in her experience, maneuvering someone’s dead weight was clumsy, exhausting and difficult. There’d been times it had taken Lois ten minutes just to get Ellen in her seat and the seat belt snapped in place.

Clark made it look easy.

He leaned forward to snap the seatbelt into place, and to Lois’s horror Ellen woke up.

“Pedro!” she said.

For a moment Lois had the horrible notion that she was going to try to kiss Clark. Ellen sometimes got overly affectionate, especially with men. She sought constant reassurances that she

was still young and beautiful.

Ellen wrapped her arms around him and started sobbing.

Clark tensed for a moment, and then he relaxed, although he was still bent over her. He said something to Ellen in a low, soothing tone, and a moment later she released her grip. He clicked the seatbelt into place and then he said something else to her.

A moment later he closed the door.

There was an odd expression on Ellen's face, strangely thoughtful. Lois hadn't seen that expression on her mother before, and certainly not when she was drunk.

Clark turned to face her.

"Thank you so much," Lois said. "I don't know what I'd have done... I couldn't just leave her in the alley."

"You'd have figured out something," Clark said. He reached into his fanny pack and pulled out a card. Handing it to her, he said, "If it gets to be too much, you might consider calling these people."

Lois glanced at the card and scowled. "You don't know anything about my family! You think church is going to fix any of this?" It surprised Lois how quickly gratitude turned to anger. How dare he judge her? How dare he judge her mother? Lois could judge Ellen all she wanted, but no stranger had the right to look down on her.

From his expression, Lois could see that Clark realized how upset she was getting. He frowned and seemed to struggle with himself for a moment.

"I had three foster parents who were alcoholics," Clark said. He looked at her and didn't look away. "Some of them could get mean sometimes."

Lois opened her mouth, and found that she couldn't think of anything to say. As quickly as the anger had appeared, it vanished. Obviously, this wasn't the kind of secret that was shared lightly; she knew just how hard it was to open up about it.

"Brother Wayman was able to help me make some sense of it all," Clark said. "He's got a lot of connections and he could probably find somebody to help."

The parking lot was almost empty, with just Lois's car, Ellen's car and the cars of four other people in the lot. It suddenly occurred to Lois that she might have been able to bang on the back door and gotten some help.

"I'm sorry," Lois said. "It's just..."

"Family," Clark said. He smiled wistfully. "You love them no matter what."

Lois stared at him for a long moment, wondering what it was about his expression that made her chest tighten up.

"I should get going," Clark said. "I have clothes to wash and papers to deliver."

"Right," Lois said, feeling suddenly awkward and embarrassed. "I'm sure Lucy is going out of her mind by now. We'd better get back."

He nodded and stepped forward, taking his bicycle from her.

"If you need anything, just let me know."

Moving the bicycle a little away from her, he mounted it and rode off into the darkness.

The fights started early Monday morning.

It wasn't as though Lois's weekend had gone very well; she'd had to stay with Lucy and her mother until Sunday, when her mother was sober enough to pick up her car. That had taken most of the day and led to the first of many arguments between Lois and her mother.

It had been bad enough when Lois was there to protect Lucy, but for Ellen to endanger Lucy enraged her. Lois said things she hadn't meant to say, and her mother alternated between being angry and regretful, then blaming Lois's father.

Lois had heard it all before, and as far as she was concerned,

the day was wasted.

Seeing the first fight between the football players during first period had been surprising; the fights that happened later throughout the day had been an eye opener. Apparently the football players who hadn't been at the fight were teasing the ones who had.

The story somehow grew over the past day and a half to make those team members look like clumsy buffoons. Lois suspected that many of those spreading the rumors were more than happy to make the team look bad. For all their success and popularity, they treated people lower in the pecking order like dirt.

Even some boys who were not on the team took shots at some of the football players, as though their position in the hierarchy had been threatened and people were hoping to topple them.

So Lois wasn't surprised after lunch when she was called to the principal's office.

"What's this I hear about a fight Friday night?" Principal Hardwick asked. The balding man was heavysset, and he always reminded her a little of Boss Hogg from the Dukes of Hazzard. His piggish eyes stared at her suspiciously.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Lois said primly, sitting with her backpack in her lap.

"The Kent boy attacked several members of the team, and from what people are saying, you were with him."

"That doesn't seem likely," Lois said. "One boy attacking the football team out of the blue."

"I've got a dozen witnesses," Principal Hardwick said.

"What I saw was the team tripping all over themselves," Lois said. "Probably because of all the beer they were drinking to celebrate the game."

Principal Hardwick did not acknowledge her statement. It didn't surprise her, given his record of overlooking other indiscretions by the football team.

There was too much money riding on the team for him to do anything to damage their chances. LuthorCorp had recently renovated the high school stadium in exchange for naming rights. Apparently billionaire prodigy Lex Luthor was determined to cover everything in Metropolis with his name.

CostMart advertised wherever they could, and there were other corporate sponsors. Lois suspected that the principal was taking payoffs, but she hadn't been able to prove it.

Last year's coach had been fired because Tom Church hadn't played as much as his father thought he deserved. This year Church was all but second on the team. They'd tried him as quarterback, but he was too slow to keep up with all the plays.

"Kent attacked them." The principal stared at her. "You may not know this, but he has a record of doing this kind of thing before."

Lois locked gazes with him. What was he trying to get her to say? Was he expecting her to betray Clark, who hadn't been trying to do anything other than protect her?

"He never hit anyone," Lois said. "Anyone who says otherwise is lying or mistaken."

She'd be able to say that under oath, although if she was asked about him throwing people or grabbing them, it would be a different story.

The principal looked disappointed. "That's what the team members involved said — they were just tired and clumsy after the game."

Undoubtedly they'd been trying to keep their humiliation to a minimum, but Lois was grateful. It was going to be hard enough for Clark now, especially as the principal was a sycophant to the football interests.

"I'm sure," Lois said dryly. "Alcohol being involved probably contributed."

“You should stay away from that boy,” Principal Hardwick said. “He’s bad news.”

The door opened suddenly and the secretary said, “Teachers are reporting fights in the gym, the cafeteria and Miss Simmon’s class.”

Principal Hardwick stood, an irritated expression on his face. The one way he didn’t remind her of Boss Hogg was that he was almost as tall as he was fat. He was six-and-a-half feet tall and he was physically imposing when he wanted to be.

“I’m not done with you, young lady,” he said, before he strode out of the office.

Lois waited a moment, and then unzipped her backpack. She had another disposable camera in her bag, and she pulled it out.

Glancing back at the door, she rose to her feet and stepped around the desk to the filing cabinets located behind the desk. Principal Hardwick was known to keep permanent records close at hand in order to help intimidate students.

With the number of fights happening throughout the day, Lois had suspected that he wouldn’t keep them locked. She was pleased to see that she was right.

She began pulling files as quickly as she could. There was no way of knowing how quickly the fights would be resolved or how soon the principal would be back. For all Lois knew, the secretary could check in on her at any time.

Luckily her experience in the coach’s office had shown her exactly which files she had to pull. She didn’t bother with the team members who were passing. Instead, she focused on the ones who wouldn’t be able to play if their grades weren’t changed.

There were letters in the boys’ files from teachers who complained about having to change the grades. Lois suspected that there were other teachers who hadn’t even bothered to protest. She knew that Tom hadn’t been passing science, for example, but his grades didn’t reflect that.

A lot of players were careless with their completed assignments, and Lois had gathered a mass of papers with the grades altered. Some teachers were more blatant about it than others, and some of the teachers seemed almost honest. Those were the ones who had left written protests.

Lois knew that she couldn’t get testimony from those teachers, however. Beyond the risk of being outed before she submitted her story, she knew their jobs were at stake. They were unlikely to talk to a high school junior who couldn’t change anything.

Lois carefully replaced the last chart, sighing in relief. As she was about to close the file cabinet door, she saw the name Kent, Clark on the header to one file.

For a moment, she struggled with herself. Clark had treated her with nothing but kindness, and looking at his file would be a horrible violation of his privacy.

Of course, Lois had already looked at her own file. There hadn’t been a lot there, for which she was relieved.

Clark’s file looked much thicker.

Finally curiosity overcame prudence, and Lois pulled out the file. Opening it, she was surprised to see the results of several test batteries. The WISC-R, an IQ test taken when he was eleven, suggested that he was gifted, although his grades didn’t match his accomplishments.

Before the age of ten, he’d been a straight-A student. After the age of ten, his grades had dropped. He’d struggled in school for the next three years, and then his grades had started to get better again.

A psychologist’s report was attached. Lois skimmed as well as she could. There were a lot of things she didn’t understand about the various tests involved, although it looked like even at eleven Clark had been ahead of his grade level on the tests.

Lois felt her heart drop as she saw the psychologist’s

summary. The psychologist had seen Clark on multiple occasions for the school, first when he was eleven, then at thirteen and finally when he was fifteen. Clark had seen his parents killed in a car accident in front of him, and the psychologist had diagnosed post-traumatic stress symptoms and conduct disorder.

He’d set a lot of fires beginning about eight months after his parents’ deaths, and there had been escalating numbers of injuries to the other foster children he lived with in multiple homes. Authorities had been unable to explain how some of the injuries had occurred; in some it looked like they’d hurt their knuckles punching a solid object.

Three of the foster fathers had similar injuries on their knuckles.

Clark always claimed no wrongdoing, but had been sent from foster home to foster home. He’d deliberately broken a refrigerator door, torn doors from their hinges and he’d set a toilet on fire.

Despite this, no one ever claimed to see him acting out in anger. This made the psychologist believe that what Clark was doing was cold and deliberate.

He’d even been accused of harming a family pet, although he’d claimed that the biological son in the family had been responsible.

According to the doctor, bed-wetting, harming animals and starting fires were three of the signs of a developing sociopath.

His records from Wichita, Kansas suddenly stopped when he was fifteen, and the year after that he was noted as having been homeschooled.

This school year his grades were exemplary. He was back to making straight As, and there were no reports of behavior problems.

Lois frowned; the report about Clark being a sociopath didn’t match the boy she’d spent Friday evening with. Still, how well did she actually know him? He’d talked about *Les Miserables* and its theme of redemption.

Maybe he’d turned his life around.

She looked for his address, wondering if she’d be able to drop the money off that she owed him. She frowned; the address was somehow familiar.

A noise came from the outer office. Lois slammed the file shut and shoved it back into place. She slid the drawer closed and returned to her chair.

She’d just sat down when the principal opened the door and pulled Clark into the room.

Lois’s mind raced; the address she’d seen for Clark couldn’t be right. According to the school records he was living with Louie, her father’s friend. Lois was friends with Louie’s daughter; they planned to go to college together, although they hadn’t been as close lately.

Still, she would have heard if Louie had a foster kid in his household, either from Louie himself or from his daughter.

Clark glanced at her, but Lois sat still and impassive.

Louie had been known to procure illegal documents for people and to falsify people’s identities. He’d done it for at least one Cuban baseball player her father had treated; that was how they’d met.

Although Clark’s file had seemed legitimate, his current living situation wasn’t. Lois wasn’t sure why he’d go to the effort of paying Louie to fake an identity and then include all those damning details.

If she was creating an identity she’d have created something a little more normal. She might have thrown in some poor grades for verisimilitude, but she’d have made it as bland as possible.

Lois was intensely aware of the camera in her bag, but suddenly the football story seemed a little less interesting.

Who was Clark Kent really? Was he a tormented orphan who was lashing out? Was he some sort of psychotic sociopath who

was really good at pretending?

If he was a sociopath, why wasn't he out making himself popular? It had only been six years since Ted Bundy's capture, and Lois remembered reading that the prosecutor had said, "Sociopaths are egotistical manipulators who think they can con anybody."

Was he manipulating her? Lois had been the one who'd forced herself into his life, not the other way around.

None of it made sense, and if there was anything Lois hated, it was an unsolved mystery.

Principal Hardwick stared at Clark. The silence in the room became uncomfortably long, and Lois shifted uneasily in her chair.

Lois had seen this technique used by her father. Most people were uncomfortable with silence and they'd rush to fill it with anything, even if it was in their best interest to keep quiet. Lucy had been caught numerous times, back when her father had been around.

Clark, though, sat calmly. Although he was sitting straight, his posture was clearly relaxed. He was motionless and calm, not the fidgeting mess the principal was undoubtedly used to seeing in his office.

Finally it was Principal Hardwick who spoke. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Clark lifted one eyebrow and said, "Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I'm not sure why I'm here," Clark said. "So I'm not sure what you want me to say."

Apparently Clark hadn't been involved in any of the fights; Lois wasn't surprised. There'd been a big enough crowd watching the fight on Friday night that no one was likely to try anything with him. The rest of the football team was currently showing the school they were still on top, and if he'd easily beaten six of them...nobody was that stupid, not even Tom Church.

"Do you deny being in a fight on school property Friday night?"

"I do," Clark said.

Principal Hardwick scowled. "I have reports from more than a dozen students that you are lying."

"That hardly seems likely," Clark said.

"Are you saying I'm lying?" Principal Hardwick's face flushed and he leaned forward.

Clark shook his head. "I'm saying you're mistaken."

"So you're saying there wasn't an altercation between you and several members of the football team on Friday night?"

"No."

"No, what?"

"That's not what I'm saying," Clark said.

"You just said there wasn't a fight on Friday night. So was there, or wasn't there?"

"That's not what you asked. You asked if I was involved in an altercation on school property. I wasn't."

Most of the teenage boys Lois knew would have had an annoying tone when they said that, but Clark spoke as though it was a simple statement of fact.

Lois blinked. Now that she thought about it, the stadium's parking lot had been full; the Lions always had a huge turnout. She'd had to park in the parking lot next door, which technically belonged to a deserted Target store. It had been driven out of business by CostMart and people parked on the edges of the parking lot all the time at big games.

She tried to recall whether the fight had been on stadium property or not and she couldn't remember.

"Don't play games!" Principal Hardwick said. His face was red by now. "So you got into a fight with the boys on the team."

"I didn't hit anyone, if that's what you are asking," Clark

said. "I still don't see why it matters."

"You attacked the members of the team," Principal Hardwick said, scowling. "And you threatened to break the hand of the most promising running back the team has had in years."

"Even if that were true," Clark said, "and I don't recall things happening that way at all, it still happened off school property and not during school hours."

"I should suspend you now for being such a little—"

"Nobody got as much as a bruise," Clark said, and there was a certainty in his voice that made Lois think that he'd checked.

"Making threats against the team won't be tolerated!"

Lois wondered if he counted pep rallies, which sometimes got out of hand.

"Did anyone on the team make a complaint?" Clark asked. At the principal's sudden silence, Clark nodded. "So really all you have is a lot of hearsay from people who are jealous of the team."

Principal Hardwick frowned. "What do you mean, jealous?"

"There are people who don't wish the team well," Clark said.

This was true; increasingly Lois found herself being one of them.

"I'm sure they'd love to tell stories about how the team was so weak that they could be beaten up by one guy," Clark said. "I'm sure there are a lot of guys who'd like to take a shot at the guys on the team."

"And you're saying that it didn't happen."

"Isn't a more likely scenario that the guys were just horsing around after the game and fell all over themselves? Do I look like the kind of guy who could beat up six football players at the same time?"

"I'm seen your record," Principal Hardwick said dryly.

"Anybody able to set fire to a toilet has to be endlessly creative."

"Whatever might have happened on Friday night, it wasn't on your watch," Clark said. "Do you really want to be responsible for everything students do off campus?"

"You're trying to manipulate me," the principal said, but the redness in his face was fading and his voice was calmer.

"Right now, it's important for the Lions to feel invincible,"

Clark said. "You know how important team spirit is for the game. If you suspend one kid for beating up half the team, what's that going to do to the other teams?"

"You've already done the damage," Principal Hardwick began to scowl again.

"How long do you think these problems are going to go on?"

Clark asked. "It seems to me the guys on the team are working pretty hard to prove that they aren't the kind of weaklings who can be beaten by one guy."

"So you're admitting you're responsible for all the problems we've had today?"

Clark shook his head. "I'm just saying that it'll die down as soon as people see that the team is still on top. I can promise you I'm not going to do anything to jeopardize that."

"You really are a little sociopath," Principal Hardwick said, but his expression was more relaxed. "Fine. If I find out you're bragging or doing anything to threaten team spirit, I'll have you expelled from school."

Clark nodded. "I'll do my best to keep under the radar."

"Get out."

Clark rose easily, and a moment later Lois followed him into the outer office.

Clark never actually lied, Lois realized, but he'd shaded the truth quite expertly. He would bear watching, especially now that she'd seen what was in his permanent record.

"Did you just blackmail the principal?"

Clark shook his head. "I got lucky. The next time something like this happens, I won't be able to talk my way out of it."

"You need to stay away from that boy," Louie said. "Take my

advice.”

“You’ve got him listed as your foster kid! How bad could he possibly be?”

“I’m not going to ask how you know that,” Louie said, leaning forward. “But you know as well as anybody what kind of business I’m in.”

Lois flushed. He’d gotten her a fake ID, along with a lecture about drinking.

“So he doesn’t actually live with you.”

“I don’t know where he lives and I don’t want to know,”

Lois said. Unspoken was the implication that if Louie knew where someone lived, there was a problem.

“I still don’t understand why you think I shouldn’t be around him,” Lois said.

Louie sighed. “If you weren’t Angie’s best friend, I wouldn’t tell you anything.” He rose slowly to his feet and reached behind the bar, pulling out a bottle and a shot glass.

Lois smiled at him winsomely and he scowled back.

“He’s wanted in Kansas on assault charges,” Louie said. “He beat a kid pretty badly, gave him a concussion and some broken bones.”

“But he’s just going to school? You applied for records from his home state and nobody came for him?”

“I gave him the option of forging records,” Louie said, shrugging. “But I told him it probably wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Why not? The school here contacts the school there, they call the police, and he’s caught.”

Louie laughed. “I’ve known guys who killed a guy in New York, moved to New Jersey, and lived out in the open without any worries. You cross state lines, the cops don’t bother trying to get you back. It takes a lot of money and time to extradite somebody, and they have to want you pretty badly.”

Lois was outraged. “So they know he’s here, and they just don’t do anything about it?”

“The kid he beat up was just a foster kid,” Louie said. “If he’d been some rich guy’s kid it might have been different.”

Maybe football scandals weren’t the best story to lead with when applying for her internship. There were real scandals out in the world and suddenly football seemed pretty small.

“So he gets away with it?”

“Statute of limitations would run out in a couple of months if he was still in Kansas,” Louie said. “You leave the state, they suspend the time and don’t start it again until you come back.”

Lois relaxed. “So if they catch him in Kansas, he’ll get charged.”

“Well, since he was fifteen at the time, the statute will run out in a couple of years no matter what.”

Lois closed her eyes, her brow furrowed. The thought of anyone getting away with hurting someone made her angry, but she hadn’t heard Clark’s side of the story. It was hard to reconcile everything she’d heard today with the gentle, considerate boy who’d helped her on Friday night.

“Half the guys you know have assault charges,” Lois said. “So why do you want me to stay away from this one?”

“I like to know who I’m dealing with,” Louie said. “So I looked into the assault charge. Witnesses say he only hit the kid three times with his fist, but that’s not what the doctor’s report says. They said the damage was more consistent with hitting someone with a baseball bat. He was lucky he didn’t kill the kid.”

“That’s pretty bad,” Lois admitted. “But still…”

“The guy’s got a reputation around town,” Louie said. “Guys who try to lean on him, accidents seem to happen.”

“Accidents? He’s killing people?”

Louie shook his head. “No. Accidents. A tire blows out in front of the police when a guy has stuff he shouldn’t have in the car. A guy’s drugs catch on fire, or he loses his money. One guy had his gun blow up in his hand. The guy is never around, and

nobody knows how he’s doing it.”

Like football players with flat tires and a shattered window. “What do you think?”

“Most guys think he’s a jinx,” Louie said. He brought the shot glass to his lips and tilted his head back. “Me, I just try to stay as far away from him as possible.”

Louie set the glass on the bar. “A guy who beats somebody hard enough to break bones isn’t a good guy. At the very least he’s got what they call anger issues. I’ve never seen a guy with anger issues do right by a woman.”

“I’m not thinking about dating him! I barely know the guy.”

“You think I don’t see the look in your eye when you talk about him? Angie’s mom used to have that look for me, back in the day.”

“You’re talking crazy,” Lois said. “My only interest in him is as a friend.”

“Friends like him you don’t need,” Louie said.

Lois shook her head. “Thanks, Louie. I’ll show myself out.”

Oddly, Louie’s advice only made her feel a little more drawn to him. Lois had never been one to follow parental advice, especially considering the parents she had.

Still, his past was a little shadier than the usual high school bad boy. She’d have to be cautious around him.

Lois glanced at her purse and patted it. She still had to drive out to Midvale to get the pictures developed. Her mistake had been using a local CostMart. They used high school students there. Obviously someone from her school had seen the pictures, stolen them and warned the team.

Her best bet was to drive thirty minutes away and to go to one of the independent stores, preferably one that didn’t use high schoolers. Having someone from another school find the pictures would only be slightly less disastrous than having someone from Metropolis High finding them.

In a couple of days she’d get the pictures back, and the ball would start rolling.

“Have you started your project yet?” Julie asked.

Lois was still angry at her for deserting her on Friday night, but she could understand how difficult it was to go against peer pressure. Julie was planning to join the cheerleading squad next semester and she had a lot to lose if the team turned against her. Julie was risking a lot just by talking to Lois in the hallway.

“What project?” Lois asked begrudgingly.

“We were assigned group projects in Mr. Johnson’s class.”

“What? No we weren’t.”

“It happened when you went to the principal’s office,” Julie said. She smiled at a passing cheerleader.

“Why didn’t anybody say anything?”

“It’s not like people owe you anything. You know what people were saying you tried to do.”

“Well I didn’t expect anybody to just stab me in the back. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I’m saying something now,” Julie said. “What do you want from me? You’re lucky I’m still talking to you. I need to make a good impression if I’m going to make the squad.”

“You’re a real hero,” Lois said dryly. Apparently courage only went so far.

“Everybody else is in a group of three,” Lois protested.

“There is an even number of people in the class,” Mr.

Johnson said. “What do you want me to do?”

“Someone could’ve told me,” Lois said.

“It’s every student’s responsibility to get his assignments for time he’s missed,” Mr. Johnson said. “One of your many friends should have informed you of your assignment.”

“I was only gone for 15 minutes.”

Mr. Johnson didn’t reply, simply looked at her with raised

eyebrows.

“Who is my partner?” Lois asked tiredly. At least she’d only lost two days to do the project.

“Young Mr. Kent, of course,” Mr. Johnson said. “As he was the only other student missing from class when the assignment was made.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” Lois said.

“Everyone else made an effort to be in class on time,” Mr. Johnson said. “It’s only fair that they be given some input into choosing their partners.”

“There are only two of us.” She didn’t actually mind having to work with Clark, but she might be able to wheedle some sort of concession out of Mr. Johnson.

“Why do you think teachers like group assignments?” Mr. Johnson asked.

“Less grading?” In her experience, teachers were just like anyone else. Anything that made their work easier was appreciated.

“In part,” Mr. Johnson admitted. “There are other considerations as well. Have you ever wondered why good students such as yourself are usually paired with students like Mr. Church?”

Usually one or two people in the group ended up doing all the work while everyone else coasted. Given that Lois invariably ended up being one of those doing the lion’s share, she was less than thrilled with the idea.

Mr. Johnson said, “In an ideal world, the poor students would learn from the better students.”

Lois’s eyes narrowed. In her experience, the poor students didn’t learn anything more than they had to. When there was someone to do all the work, they did nothing.

“It also provides an opportunity to pad the grades of the poor students so that it’s not necessary to see them again next year.”

Mr. Johnson wasn’t well liked by most students. He was known for being tough, but fair. He was also one of the teachers who had objected most strenuously to changing grades.

“That doesn’t seem—”

“Fair?” Mr. Johnson stared at her. “I understand you are hoping for a career in journalism. One of the first lessons you’ll learn is that fairness is an ideal which isn’t often achieved in the adult world.”

Lois nodded slowly, although part of her still wanted to argue the issue. Part of the reason she wanted to become a journalist was to restore fairness to the world.

“In any case, you and Mr. Kent are two of my best students. Had you been in class, I would have put each of you in a group with two of my slower students. Apparently no one wanted to work with any of them. In the end, I suspect this will work to your advantage.”

Lois frowned. In a way, it could almost be considered a kindness.

“Given recent difficulties, I’m sure neither you nor Mr. Kent wanted to work with Mr. Church or his associates anyway.”

Lois froze, and then forced herself to smile. It was a kindness indeed, and also a way to lower the grades of Tom Church and his cronies. Although they were superficially popular, they were academically lazy, and some of them were actually stupid. No one wanted to do all the work for them.

“So tell me about the assignment,” Lois said.

“Are you sure he didn’t say we could work alone?” Clark asked.

Lois stared at him. Where was the thoughtful guy who’d helped her almost a week ago? “It’s a group project.”

Her voice was flat, and he rushed to explain himself. “It’s not that I don’t want to work with you, it’s just that I work a lot better alone.”

Had he caved to peer pressure at last? Lois had thought he was practically immune to it.

“Apparently we’re stuck with each other,” Lois said, her tone icy.

Clark seemed to realize that he was putting his foot in his mouth. “I’m a speed reader. How else do you think I can get through my classwork with my schedule?”

“So you think I’ll slow you down? My grade point average is just as good as yours.”

Her overall GPA was better, considering the years he’d let things slide. She couldn’t exactly taunt him with that without letting him know just how she’d come by that information. It was tempting, though.

“It’s not that, exactly...” Clark said, but she could hear the lie in his voice.

He wasn’t avoiding her because of peer pressure, or even because of the principal’s threats. He actually thought she’d slow him down!

At the look on her face, he crumbled. “Fine,” he said. “When can we get together?”

Clark’s weekday schedule was insane. “What about Saturday afternoon?”

Clark nodded slowly. “I help serve lunch at a soup kitchen, but I should be done by 2:00.”

Lois stared at him for a long moment with one raised eyebrow. Given everything else he was doing, there was no way he had time for charity work. She’d heard guys make claims like that before, usually to make themselves look good. They were the same guys who claimed to be going into the Peace Corps after graduation, yet somehow they never seemed to end up there.

Clark flushed and looked away. “It’s no big deal,” he muttered.

Lois realized that she’d hurt his feelings somehow. “I’m sorry. Maybe we can meet at your place?”

She’d been dying to know where he was really staying. He was obviously using Louie’s address in order to get into a better school district, but if he was on a bicycle, he couldn’t be as far away as Midvale.

He looked uncomfortable. “I’m really not allowed visitors. Maybe we can meet at the library downtown. I spent a lot of time there last year, and we’ll have all the resources available to work with.”

“Maybe I can pick you up from the soup kitchen,” Lois said. If he was going to make that kind of claim, she had to call him on it.

He frowned for a moment, and then nodded. “It would give you a chance to meet with Brother Wayman. Maybe he can talk to you about options.”

“Clark,” Lois said. “I’m not ready for any of that.”

He held up his hand. “No pressure.” He reached into his backpack and tore off a piece of paper. “Here’s the address. Two o’clock on Saturday.”

The soup kitchen was further downtown than Lois realized, and she felt uneasy as she drove through the streets. This was obviously a bad part of town; everything was in disrepair and the people standing on the street corners had a look of hopelessness.

Some of them had a different look as she drove by — anger, or avarice. None of them looked like they had any business standing around, even in a pedestrian city like Metropolis.

It took her almost three trips around the block to find the nondescript building, but the smells coming through her window told her she was in the right place. She had to find a parking spot in an abandoned lot three buildings away and walk, and she felt terribly self-conscious.

She reached the doorway, which was opened by a stocky black man in a dark-gray suit. His skin was dark, but he was

graying at the temples. There was something about his eyes as he smiled, warm in a way that was somehow more real than she'd experienced from most adults.

"You must be Lois," the man said. His voice was deep and resonant, and he clasped her hand in both of his. "I'm Brother Wayman."

"Oh," Lois said faintly. "You're Clark's friend."

She tensed, waiting for the pitch. Join us, convert to our religion, and give us your money. Her father had been skeptical about religion, and some of his cynicism had rubbed off on her, despite her determination to be her own person.

If he started trying to get her mother stuck in rehab, she was leaving. Her mother would never agree, and there wasn't any point in even trying.

"Come on in," Wayman said.

The smells filling the air were appetizing; Lois was glad she'd eaten before she came, or she'd have been tempted. There had to be a special place in hell for someone who stole a meal out of a hungry person's mouth.

The room was filled with tables, and she saw Clark standing beside one, leaning over and talking to a black man. Incongruously, there was a gigantic St. Bernard sitting at the end of the table, snapping up scraps as fast as the man could give them to him.

Lois watched Clark for a moment. At school, he always seemed to be relaxed, although he tried his best to be inconspicuous. She hadn't realized just how guarded he'd been, though, until she saw him now.

He laughed at something the man said, and he rubbed the dog's head. His face lit up as he laughed, and it startled Lois to realize that she'd never seen him smile, at least not as openly as he did here.

"Clark has been a real blessing to us," Wayman said from behind her. "There's not a man here that he hasn't helped."

Lois jumped a little, startled. She'd forgotten the man was even there. "I'm sure he's good at passing out the food," Lois said. "But how much help could he really be?"

He was a teenager, and even if he was some sort of martial arts master, there wasn't a lot teenagers could do to change the world. Lois fought against that every day; she wanted nothing more than to make the world better. Even so, she knew she'd have to wait until she was actually a reporter to do much.

"Ask anybody here," Wayman said. "Ask them what he did for them, and see what they say."

"I don't see how he has the time to do anything else," Lois said, still staring at Clark. "His schedule is crazy already."

"He takes time." Wayman shook his head. "Sometimes I think he doesn't sleep. Anytime someone needs him, he shows up like a miracle."

Like he'd shown up for Lois and her mother last week.

It confused Lois. How could she reconcile what she'd seen in his records and what she'd heard from Louie with the boy she'd known for the last week, much less the person she was seeing now?

He laughed again, and Lois realized that her throat was suddenly dry and her chest felt tight. She wasn't sure what was wrong with her; she felt a little dizzy.

He looked up and his eyes met hers across the room. His smile widened.

Lois forced herself to smile back, even though her heart was racing in her chest. Her hands were trembling. What was wrong with her?

Why did he suddenly seem ten times as handsome as he had before? It felt like her world was tilting on its axis and she didn't know what to do.

Lois stumbled a little as she stepped forward, her heart still racing. She wasn't sure what was wrong with her, but she didn't

have much of a choice other than to press forward and hope it went away. Possibly she shouldn't have had a third cup of coffee before getting up and dropping her film off at a small shop in Midvale.

She didn't particularly like using that shop; it was owned by an octogenarian who acted as though teenagers should be shipped off to another country. It was also agonizingly slow. However, there was no chance that a curious teenager would look through it and cause problems.

Thinking about her story helped calm her. By the time she made her way through the crowded benches to reach Clark and the people he was talking to, her heart was almost back to normal.

"Lois!" Clark called out. "Come and meet the guys."

Lois was surprised to see that the food had already been cleared off the table and someone had pulled out a deck of cards.

The man with the dog was the only one who still had a plate, and he was feeding him biscuits. He smiled as Lois approached and he rose to his feet. His clothes were somewhat loose on his frame, but he had broad shoulders.

"It's nice to meet you," he said. "Charlie King, and this is Rufus. Clark's told us a little about you."

Somewhat puzzled by what he'd said, Lois absently took his outstretched hand. His smile widened.

One of the men who was seated said, "You should be honored. Clark never talks about his life outside. You're the only person he's ever brought here."

The men scooted to the side, making a space at the end of the bench across from Charlie King and next to his dog. Clark remained standing.

Lois sat gingerly, and Charlie beamed. "Clark was right about you. Never knew an uptown girl who'd even think of sitting where one of us had been."

Forcing herself not to flinch, Lois smiled and leaned forward. She'd still been a little stunned by her reaction earlier and hadn't thought about where she was sitting. Now, however, her imagination was running wild. She could almost feel things crawling on her.

She wasn't going to let the silent challenge she saw in the men's eyes go unmet, and besides, the last thing she wanted to do was embarrass Clark in front of his friends.

"Cornelius Carver," the man seated next to her said.

The other men introduced themselves in rapid succession and Lois found herself having trouble following their names. If she was going to be a reporter, she'd have to work harder on her memory; of course part of the reason that she was distracted was that Clark had moved around behind her.

"Be nice to Lois," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "She's been good to me."

Lois had no idea what he meant by that; as far as she could see, it had been strictly one-sided. He'd kept her secret in the locker room, taken her to the ball game, protected her from the players and cleaned her car and carried her mother. All she'd done was play a cassette tape and gotten him in trouble.

He'd carefully constructed his life so as to blend in with everyone, and all she'd done was bring that crashing around his ears. She was lucky he was still willing to speak with her.

He removed his hand, but she could still feel her shoulder tingling from where it had been.

"Clark told us about your tape...he even sang a little."

Charlie King grinned

Glancing back at Clark, who was flushed, Lois asked, "Clark sings?"

"Like an angel," Cornelius said. He grinned. "If the angel had laryngitis and gargled with Drano."

"You're just a music snob," Charlie said. He looked at Lois. "He keeps bragging about having perfect pitch, but he won't sing

as much as a happy birthday. Clark's no Frank Sinatra, but he's not tone-deaf either. From what he sang, it sounds like a pretty good deal. You think they'll make a play out of it?"

"It's a concept album. It would be a pretty good play, I think," Lois paused. "How do you know about *Les Miserables* anyway?"

"We're not all illiterate cavemen, except for Charlie here," Cornelius said. "Some of us even went to college."

Charlie shook his head. "Again with the college. It's not like you aren't digging through the same trash as the rest of us."

From their expression and tone of voice, Lois gathered that this was what passed as good-natured teasing between the two men.

"It's not like you've been digging much lately anyway," Cornelius said.

Charlie scowled. "Betty doesn't want me doing any more dumpster diving. Says it's a nasty habit and dangerous."

The other men chuckled.

"The woman's the devil! No more donuts or bacon or fried anything...I've lost thirty pounds in the last six months and Rufus here is nothing but skin and bones. Why I let Clark talk me into going to live with her, I'll never know."

Rufus looked more than healthy to Lois as he snatched the last biscuit from Charlie's hand.

"Your sister is just looking out for you," Clark said. "It was good of her to give you a roof, three meals and keep paying for your medicine."

Charlie let Rufus lick his fingers, and Lois reminded herself to wash her hands before she left. "I smell like a flower shop! She won't buy anything that's not scented."

"You were the one who told me that the winters were getting colder as you were getting older."

"I suppose now that I've let her starve all the protective fat off me, I'm stuck with her," Charlie grumbled.

"You're getting soft, old man," Cornelius said, chuckling.

"I hear Clark's been talking to Mabel," Charlie said, leaning forward. "Your turn will come up."

A panicked look appeared on Cornelius's face for a moment before it smoothed out. "In order to educate some of the less... well-read members of our little group, Clark has been reading *Les Miserables* after these dinners for the last couple of months."

Lois looked at Clark, who'd moved to the side of the table and crouched down next to Rufus. He shrugged.

"It's not like we have television," Charlie said. "Well, I do, but unlike some people I don't like rubbing it in people's faces."

"She makes you watch soap operas all the time," Cornelius said. "I'd as soon do without."

"Anyway," Charlie said. "Any entertainment is welcomed. That's why we've got the cards, and why Brother Wayman lets us play even though this is technically God's house."

Lois could see the preacher across the room, leaning over a different group of men.

"He'd make a good Bishop Myriel, wouldn't he?" Clark said.

The men around him all nodded.

Bishop Myriel...in the novel he'd been the priest who had taken in a desperate Jean Valjean and accepted him, fed him, and sheltered him. After Valjean had stolen from him, he'd given him more, but only with the promise of becoming a better person.

Clark saw himself as Valjean, Lois realized. He'd committed a crime and run from the police, yet somehow he'd found a haven here. No wonder he felt comfortable here, and no wonder he identified so much with *Les Miserables* and its themes of redemption.

"Speaking of cards," Clark said. "We're keeping the guys from playing, and we've got our own work to do. I'll go grab my stuff and I'll be right back."

He rose to his feet and a moment later he was gone.

Lois should have felt uncomfortable in the middle of a group of homeless men (and Charlie, who was apparently no longer homeless contrary to all appearances). Yet somehow, Clark's trust in them helped her relax.

"You know who else would make a good Valjean?" Cornelius said. "Clark."

The men around her nodded.

"He found me in the snow and carried me to the hospital on foot," Charlie said. "And this was back in my fat days. It must have been a mile from where I collapsed, but somehow he got me there."

The men around him nodded; apparently this was a story they'd heard more than once.

"He saved me from a group of young muggers," Cornelius said. "He faced five of them like he wasn't afraid of anything."

No one looked surprised. Clark's skills at fighting were obviously well known; now that Lois thought about it, the men who'd bothered her and her mother the week before had obviously known Clark at least by reputation.

"He gave me his shoes."

The voice from the corner of the table was low and quiet, and Lois almost missed it.

"What?" Lois asked.

The man who spoke was somehow shabbier than the others, and his shoulders were more slumped. He was staring at the table as he spoke, as though everyone would yell at him for even speaking up.

"He gave me his shoes." The man was quiet for a moment; there was something odd about his accent that Lois couldn't identify. "In the winter. Somebody took them...a man can lose his feet without his shoes."

"He gave me his jacket," the man next to the shabby man said. "Right off his back, on the coldest day of the year."

The shabby man spoke again. "Why'd he do that? A man can lose his feet..."

Cornelius sighed. "You'll have to forgive Cyrus here, he's new. Clark talked him into coming here, and apparently he's still a little jumpy."

The man mumbled to himself, and Lois wondered if there were medications he needed to be taking.

"He pulled me out of a trash truck," the last man at their table said. "It was one of the coldest days in winter and the shelters were all full. I crawled into a trash bin filled with newspapers. I fell asleep and the next thing I knew I was upside down and falling into the back of the truck."

The others in the group visibly shuddered.

"The guy who was supposed to be watching heard me screaming, but by the time he stopped the crusher, I was unconscious. Clark crawled into the back of the truck, pulled what had to be hundreds of pounds of trash off me and performed CPR."

"He learned that from Brother Wayman," Charlie said proudly.

"I'd be dead now if it wasn't for him," the man said quietly. "He's a hero as far as I'm concerned."

"I wouldn't have any feet," Cyrus said glumly.

Clark came back through a set of doors at the back of the room with his backpack in his hand. He stopped as he approached them and frowned, then continued toward them.

"Are you all right?" he asked Lois.

Lois nodded. The racing heartbeat was back, and it was hard not to stare at him. She forced herself to look down and smile. For some reason her eyes burned.

It wasn't just what they had to say about Clark, although that loomed heavily in her mind. Their stories hinted at a world that was alien to Lois. She'd never even thought about a world where nights were so cold you had to sleep in the trash, where a single

pair of shoes or a jacket might mean the difference between life and death.

“The guys were just talking about clothes,” Lois said. “I had no idea they knew so much about fashion.”

Clark frowned suspiciously. “The guys like to kid around. I wouldn’t believe a thing they say.”

“They seem pretty honest to me,” Lois said.

The men smiled broadly at her, some showing teeth which obviously needed dental work. Yet there was something beautiful in their ability to smile in the midst of lives which sounded like a nightmare.

“Let’s go,” Clark said, holding his hand out to Lois.

Clark slid into the passenger seat, closing the door behind him. He’d secured his bicycle to the rack on the back of Lois’s car, and now he set his backpack on the floor in front of him.

“I want to thank you,” Clark said.

“For not getting you killed on the way to the library?” Lois grinned. “Wait until we get there.”

He shuddered. “Not that, although I’d appreciate it if you’d make an effort.”

Considering that he made his living weaving in and out of rush-hour traffic in a city with more than eight million people, Lois didn’t think he had a lot to say about her driving. Of course, he might be one of those people who were only comfortable when they were in control.

Given her current warm and fuzzy feelings toward him, Lois didn’t care.

“Why are you thanking me?” she asked as she turned the ignition. Her diesel Rabbit sputtered to life.

“You treated the guys like human beings,” Clark said.

Lois froze with her hand on the gear shift. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“It doesn’t happen very often. They’re invisible to most people, and the ones who do see them are usually condescending, even the ones saying they’re trying to help.”

“I..” Lois said.

“You sat right next to them and talked to them like they were people,” Clark said. “You didn’t wipe the seat off or wash your hands. I was proud of you.”

Lois felt a moment of shame. She’d felt a little squeamish about sitting next to them. If she hadn’t been so confused about her feelings for Clark, she probably would have hesitated. She still wondered if she was feeling something moving in her shirt. Worrying about lice and fleas was only natural, under the circumstances.

“Thanks,” Lois said. She forced herself to smile. Telling him the truth would only hurt him, and she suspected that she’d need all the credit with him she could muster. Once her story went through, it was possible he might have some problems from the principal or the team.

For a moment she considered killing the story. Unlike Clark, she could always turn to her father when it came time to go to college, although there would be a price for that. Clark had been through a lot.

She frowned slightly and put her car into gear. She turned and began backing out of her parking space.

Depending on her father would cost more than she was willing to pay. She’d just have to make sure that when the time came, none of the blame could be assigned to Clark and be careful about being seen with him at school.

“What?” Clark asked. He was watching her intensely.

“I was just thinking about the assignment,” Lois lied.

Clark nodded. He unzipped his bag and pulled out the paper on which he’d written the assignment.

“Analyze the different explanations for the Great Depression and how the New Deal fundamentally changed the role of the government. Discuss the human toll of the Depression, natural disasters and unwise agricultural practices and their effect on the

depopulation of rural regions and on political movements of the left or right, with particular emphasis on Dust Bowl refugees and their social and economic impacts in California.”

“Is everybody getting the same assignment?” he asked.

Lois shook her head. “I talked to some of the others. Some of them are getting assignments on the major developments of the 1920s, some about race relations since the 1920s, and some about World War II.”

“So he’s not just picking on us,” Clark said.

“He’s just like that,” Lois said.

There wasn’t much either of them could say to that.

“How’s your grandson, Agnes?” Clark asked the woman at the reception desk.

The woman had to be as old as Lois’s grandmother, but her face lit up at Clark’s question. “He’s doing a lot better. Your advice helped.”

The librarians all seemed to know Clark. They called him by name, smiled at him and seemed to go out of their way to be helpful.

Clark seemed to know them all as well. Although Lois had always thought libraries were supposed to be quiet, he asked each of them questions about their private lives and families.

What he didn’t ask was where to find what they were looking for. Instead he simply smiled and headed into the stacks.

“Aren’t we going to go to the card catalogue?” Lois asked.

“I know where to find the books we’re looking for,” Clark said. At her questioning look, he said, “Before I was old enough to get the jobs I have now, I spent a lot of time in the library last year.”

It took him less than a minute to reach the section they were looking for, and he began pulling books from the shelves.

“We’re not going to have time to go through all of these,”

Lois said, feeling a little panicked. She wanted to have some weekend left, and she doubted that the library would be open on Sunday.

“I’m a speed reader,” Clark said. “Remember?”

True to his word, he found a table for them set back in the stacks. There were three chairs set out for people to sit and read, but otherwise they were alone.

It soon became clear that Clark wasn’t lying about his reading. Somehow he was able to flip through books and find relevant passages almost instantly, although Lois didn’t believe he was reading every word. He was just very good at skimming, but it was a skill she found herself envying.

Homework would be a breeze if she could master that skill.

If it weren’t for the subject matter, she’d have enjoyed herself. Clark was an excellent partner. Most of the people she’d worked with before either let her do all the work, or they tried to take over the project and ended up spending more time arguing than getting things done.

With Clark, there was a kind of synergy. She was on top of her game, and they got things done at a record pace.

Lois found herself being horrified by what she was learning, however.

Clark found microfiche and even old film strips, and they listened to first-hand accounts on old recordings. Apparently, President Roosevelt had sent legions of people out to record and photograph everything as part of his jobs program.

Images of people huddled in cardboard houses, homeless and dressed little different than the men she’d seen in Brother Wayman’s church battled with images of skies darkened with dust or sometimes with locusts.

Farmers had plowed up prairie lands held down by native grasses for millions of years; the Great Depression had hit and grain prices dropped. Farmers tried to farm even more land to make up for the lost income. Drought had occurred and the

topsoil had been blown away in the wind.

The dust storms stretched across the country; after particularly bad ones, President Roosevelt could run his fingers across his desk in the Oval Office and pick up dust from Oklahoma.

Although the first-hand stories were vivid, they wouldn't have affected Lois so much if she hadn't found herself looking at Clark.

He spent a lot of time with people just like this every day, people who lived like the world hadn't moved on from the Great Depression even though they lived in the middle of the most prosperous city in the world.

Clark's insights were always on the money, and he didn't seem to mind her furtive glances, even though they made Lois feel horribly embarrassed.

She tried not to keep looking at him, but somehow she couldn't. Part of it was her curiosity about what he thought; the rest of it was a weird fascination with the shape of his face.

How could she have gone almost two months ignoring him? He'd walked by her every day in class and she'd barely acknowledged that he'd existed. Yet now she couldn't help but look at him and think he was beautiful.

People came and went, sitting in the chairs to read before they moved on. Lois barely acknowledged them.

After they'd been working for three hours, Clark stopped her.

There was a teenager sitting slumped in one of the chairs. His presence had barely registered to Lois, but Clark carefully rose and walked over to the boy, who seemed to be about their age. The boy tensed as Clark approached, but as Clark spoke to him in low tones, Lois could see the boy's body relax.

Clark handed something to the boy, who got up and left.

"What was that about?" Lois asked as Clark returned.

"I gave him some information about where to find a shelter," Clark said. "And a hot meal."

"Who, him?" Lois asked. The boy hadn't looked any different than any of the other boys she saw at school every day. He certainly hadn't looked like any of the men at Brother Wayman's.

"His backpack was full of clothes," Clark said. "If it was filled with books it would hang differently. A lot of homeless people come here because it's warm in the winter and cool in the summer and people don't harass you if you fall asleep."

"Maybe he was going to the gym."

"He had the look," Clark said, shrugging. "I'd rather risk insulting someone by being wrong than let somebody be hungry and cold when I can stop it."

"Okay," Lois said.

It was a philosophy that wasn't anything like what her parents had taught her. Her parents' view had only been reinforced by her time in school. They believed that what was important was what people thought. It was important to avoid embarrassment at all costs, even if it meant keeping secrets.

It was hard for Lois to imagine just walking up to someone and asking if they were homeless and needed help.

Somehow it only made Clark seem even more attractive.

"We should write this up at home," Lois said. "I've got a computer and a printer."

"You've got a computer?"

"A Commodore 64," Lois said proudly. Of the gifts her father had given her, this was the only one she really cared about. Not having to use correction fluid on her copy was going to make her story much easy to write, even if she could only write three pages at a time.

"I thought we couldn't do this at your house?" Clark asked.

"My father has a weekly poker game Saturday afternoons when he's not out of town," Lois said. "Usually he's done by now and off with his girlfriend of the week."

Clark nodded. "I don't have anywhere to be until later this evening."

Right. It'd take people a while to drink enough to generate the cans Clark would collect.

"You don't have any courier jobs?" Lois asked.

"I don't usually have any on a Saturday unless I pick up a shift from someone," Clark said. "Most courier business is on weekdays anyway."

"Great!" Lois smiled, despite the sudden butterflies in the pit of her stomach.

Her computer was in her room, and they were going to be alone. It had occurred to her that they might need to type up their paper, so she'd carefully cleaned her room and hidden anything that might be embarrassing.

Still, they would be alone in her room. It hadn't seemed like a big deal when she'd thought about it earlier in the week; he was only a helpful friend who made her tingle a little when they touched. Avoiding temptation simply meant not touching him.

Now, though, she was having trouble looking away from him. Over the past few hours it felt like she'd mapped every contour and plane of his face a thousand times in her mind.

Being alone with him was feeling more dangerous by the moment, yet Lois found herself gathering up their notes. All that remained was to type up the project, which she could easily do on her own.

Somehow, although it would make sense to tell him to leave, she couldn't make herself do it.

Was that all it took to tempt her? A handsome face and a kind heart? Admittedly she'd only realized this evening just how quick his mind was, and she'd already known he was loyal and strong.

Why did she suddenly feel like everything was happening too fast, careening out of her control?

Although Lois's stomach tightened as she pulled up on the street outside her house, she was glad to see that the lights were off. She couldn't face her father after the thoughts she'd been having about the boy sitting in the seat next to her.

Clark had been quiet on the trip from the library, staring out the window and humming. Lois thought she could make out the tune; "I Dreamed a Dream" from *Les Misérables*. Why he'd be humming Fantine's song about the unfairness of her life Lois didn't know, unless it was just catchy. She resolved to play him more of the cassette if they had time.

Lois parked her car and turned off the ignition. Switching the lights off, she hesitated for a moment. Did Clark expect something from her? Did he expect more than she was willing to give? Although she was coming to trust him, what did she really know about him personally?

He looked at her. "Is everything all right?"

Lois nodded. "I'm just thinking about what we'll need to get this written up." The lie rolled easily off her lips and she forced herself to smile.

Clark smiled. "I'm kind of excited to see your computer. I've never seen one before."

"I was the first one of my friends to get one. It helps to be the daughter of a renowned sports surgeon."

"My parents were farmers," Clark said. "Metropolis will probably have flying cars before Smallville gets computers."

Lois frowned. Smallville? His records had talked about him being from Wichita, Kansas. Of course, she'd only skimmed through them and might have missed a few details. People did move.

"Let's get this done," she said. She grabbed her backpack and purse and opened her door, careful not to step into traffic.

A moment later she was up the steps to her front door. She set her belongings down and she fumbled with the keys, intensely aware of Clark behind her.

A moment later she'd managed to get the door open and she

was through, pulling her purse and backpack with her. Clark held the door open for her and then followed. She waited for him to pass by her, overly conscious of how close they had to get to each other before she locked the door behind her.

This was Metropolis, and the one lesson drilled into her as a child was that you always locked the doors behind you.

Of course, this meant she was locked in with the boy that she was growing to like all too well. In a way, he was more dangerous to her if he was everything he seemed to be. If he was secretly an ass, she'd dump him faster than she'd dumped Joe Malloy.

But if he was actually kind and smart and good...Lois had never understood her classmates who put a boy over their self-interest. A friend's older sister had given up a scholarship to a good college in order to go to a community college closer to the boy she'd liked. They'd broken up halfway through her first semester and the scholarship was long gone.

The fact that she'd even fleetingly thought about dropping the story to protect Clark shocked and worried her. If anyone could protect himself it was Clark. It wasn't like he had a reputation or friends to lose at school. He seemed to have a vibrant life outside of school, but saw school as a means to an end.

Losing the internship, or even worse, the exchange program to Ireland, would change the course of Lois's entire life. She couldn't afford to lose focus.

She switched the lights on and winced. Her father had left evidence of his poker game everywhere to see. Lois was grateful that Clark had been in the house before, so he could see that this wasn't how it usually was.

"My room is upstairs," Lois said. She hoped it didn't sound like some kind of come on; she wasn't in the habit of inviting boys to her room.

She made her ways up the stairs without looking back at him. She reached her door and she hesitated before opening it. She was thankful that she'd thought ahead and cleaned it carefully, but still, a person's room gave all sorts of details about them.

Opening the door, she switched on the light.

Her father had tried to get her to decorate everything in pink; some of her friends had rooms that looked like Pepto-Bismol had exploded and covered every surface. Her room, by contrast was done in white and red, with red walls and white furniture, including a large canopy bed covered with a red comforter and throw pillows.

She'd thrown all her stuffed animals deep in the closet, concerned they would make her look too much like a little girl.

What worried her more were the posters on her wall: Harrison Ford from *Star Wars*, Billie Joel, Rick Springfield. Compared to what her friends had on their walls, these were conservative. The *Close Encounters* and *E.T.* posters didn't help matters any. At least he couldn't fault her Einstein poster or the Life Magazine poster with Neil Armstrong on the moon.

Against the far wall, her computer sat on a small table facing a large window that looked out on the setting sun. The curtains were pulled open, and her room looked out over their postage stamp of a yard. Lois was proud of that yard, although her father groused that it was more trouble than it was worth. It wasn't as though he was going to allow them a dog anytime soon, even if her schedule permitted it.

Lois glanced at Clark, wondering how he was going to comment on her room.

He didn't. He simply looked at everything once, and said, "Where can we get set up?"

Lois headed for her desk. She noticed that Clark left the door behind him open and she felt a little better.

"This is it," Lois said.

There were two cork boards on the wall, one on each side of the window. The left had the usual pictures of her and her friends

and notes tacked to it. The other side was conspicuously empty. She'd been keeping her notes on the high school football scandal there, but pulled them down when she was cleaning her room. There wasn't any point in letting Clark know anything that was going to end up hurting him.

Somehow, he seemed oblivious to every trick in Lois's book. She'd laughed at everything funny he'd said, flipped her hair, even touched his hand a time or two and leaned close to him as he was typing.

He was fascinated by her computer. Although loading required several floppy discs and almost ten minutes, he had numerous questions about the computer and what it could do.

Although he admitted to never having used a typewriter before, he watched Lois intently and before long insisted on taking his part of the writing process.

Learning to type had taken Lois six months in the seventh grade. Clark took to it seemingly within minutes. Lois wasn't sure whether he was lying about never having typed before, but it was soon clear that he was faster at typing than she was, even if he did still have to look at the letters.

Still, he loved being able to correct his mistakes. At first they were frequent, but he always corrected them before Lois could say anything. As time went on, though, they became less and less frequent. It was almost frightening to see how quickly he learned.

It was confusing. He didn't reject her or pull away, but he also didn't respond at all. Yet despite this, Lois realized that she was having fun just working with him.

The project seemed to flash by; they'd already done the research and all that was left was putting it together. Lois tended to focus on the facts, while Clark wanted to focus on the human aspect of things. Together, Lois could see that what they were writing was better than what either one of them could have accomplished on their own.

He was utterly focused, and Lois wasn't sure whether she was relieved or disappointed. What she did know was that she enjoyed just working with him. Was this what working with an equal always like?

After they finished, Lois began the laborious process of printing what they had. She'd had to open six files, as none of them could be larger than three pages, and printing was a somewhat tricky process. If the printer was off by even a little she'd have to reprint it again, and Lois sometimes thought she could type as fast as the printer printed.

"Well, that's it then," Lois said. "There's no way Mr. Johnson can be disappointed with this."

Clark shrugged. "In my experience, people can be disappointed no matter how well you do."

He'd acted out after his parents had died, from what Lois remembered of his file, and he'd been sent from foster home to foster home. It was hard for Lois to even imagine what that must have been like; life with two parents was hard enough, in her experience. Life with multiple sets, having to get to know new sets of rules every few months must have been hard.

"I'm glad we got partnered together," Lois said. "Could you imagine having to work with Tom Church, or Joe Malloy? Even half the cheerleaders would have made either one of us do all the work."

Clark grimaced.

The printer clattered on and they were both silent for a while. Finally Clark said, "You get to see the sunset from your window?"

"Every day," Lois said. "Other than being away from my mother, it's the one thing I like living here."

Of course, there were buildings in the way, but the sky was still outlined in pinks and reds. It startled Lois to realize that writing the entire paper had taken them less than two hours. Clark

was a faster typist than she'd realized.

"You get a better view standing up," she said.

She stood up, and he slowly followed. It was true; from a standing position the horizon was visible, even if it was covered in buildings.

Lois realized that she was standing a little closer to Clark than she'd meant to. She looked up at him and smiled nervously.

"You've been really good to me," she said. She reached up and pushed her hair away from her face. "Better than could be expected."

He looked at her and smiled. "You deserve better than you're getting."

Lois felt a sudden twinge of guilt. She didn't really. From one point of view, she was about to stab all of her friends in the back for her own self interests. The fact that she was uncovering wrongdoing and serving the common good would be lost on most of them.

"Clark," she said, putting her hand on his chest.

He froze, looking down at her hand. "Uh..." He glanced around the room, almost as though he was looking for a way out. He finally settled on her posters. "I liked *E.T.*"

Notably, he didn't step away, but Lois could see that he was visibly uncomfortable. Although she wasn't an expert, it looked like he was as torn as she was.

Maybe he wasn't ready; Lois certainly wasn't sure she was ready and she didn't plan on pushing him into something he didn't want.

The look in his eyes, though, said something different than the nervousness in his voice.

Lois stepped away carefully, taking her hand from his chest. She frowned. "I thought you didn't have time for television. You have time for movies?"

She found herself suddenly grateful to him for deflecting the conversation. If they'd had to talk out whatever reasons he had for not acting like a normal teenage boy, she'd have felt mortified.

Of course, part of the reason she liked him was because he wasn't like a teenage boy.

"There's a dollar theater down on Fifth Street," Clark said. "You may have to wait a few months, but you can get all the movies everybody else watches."

The theater Lois and her friends went to cost almost five dollars; of course, Metropolis prices were higher than those in the rest of the country, but still.

"You had time to go to the movies?"

"I get some free time Saturday afternoons," Clark said. "I had a lot more time last year. I particularly liked *E.T.*"

"The flying," Lois said. "I loved the flying."

"It was the first movie I'd ever seen where the aliens weren't out to enslave everyone, or abduct them," Clark said. "If a species is advanced enough to come all the way here, surely they'd be... better than mindless monsters."

"It'd be nice to think that," Lois said. "But I don't see why aliens would be any better than people. There would probably be good ones and bad ones, and there would probably be politics. Considering how people are..."

Now Clark did step back from her. "I think you're selling people short. There's a lot of good in people. You just have to give them a chance to show it."

"I've lived in Metropolis my entire life," Lois said. "Maybe you've seen the good in people, but what I see is people hurting each other. Part of the reason I want to become a journalist is to keep that from happening."

Clark looked at her. "I can see how you'd see things that way, and I'm sorry about that."

Lois forced herself to smile. This wasn't about her parents, even if it somehow felt like it was. "I'd love to see the world like

you do. I just don't understand how you can."

"I listen," Clark said. "Sure, I hear all sorts of terrible things happening, but I see acts of kindness every day. I see people do things that are beautiful; they just don't talk about it."

There was a simple, honest sincerity in his expression that touched Lois. It pierced right through her wall of cynicism. Her smile now was unforced as she recalled the smiles of the men at Brother Wayman's. Obviously Clark was able to bring something out in people.

Although his view of the world seemed too bright and simplistic, it appealed to her. She'd love to be able to let go of the dark cynicism that seemed to color everything she did.

"Maybe you can show me sometime," Lois said. Her voice had grown husky, and she stepped toward him.

For the first time he stepped toward her. "Lois—"

A moment later his head snapped around. "Someone just pulled up around the back." He grabbed his backpack. "I'll sign it before class on Monday."

A moment later he was gone, presumably to pull his bike from the back of her car. Lois felt flushed and wondered if he had simply run away because he was afraid.

It wasn't likely that he had a girlfriend; when would he have the time? He rode a bicycle, which wasn't the best way to take a girl on a date. By his own admission, he'd been homeschooled last year and swamped at work this year.

It confused Lois. He seemed knowledgeable and worldly about everything else; it seemed weird that he'd be so inexperienced in this one area of his life.

The sounds of movement from below startled her. Moving to the top of her stairs, she saw her father coming in with his floozie of the week. She closed her bedroom door tightly behind her and turned the music up.

A thought occurred to her. Just how good WAS Clark's hearing?

The projects were due over the next week, two groups a day, with only Lois and Clark scheduled for Thursday. The assignments were due at the end of each class, after their regular assignment. In a way, Lois was glad Mr. Johnson had done it this way; most of the assignments were poorly done and excruciatingly boring. If they'd gone through all the assignments in two days, it would have been overwhelmingly bad.

As it was, Lois found Clark glancing in her direction more often than she'd expected, especially during the presentations. He was surprisingly subtle; what she'd have communicated with one of her friends with a whisper or a giggle, he managed with a glance or a twitch of his lips.

It became almost a game, making fun of the presentations without anyone noticing. Most of the projects were simply uninspiring and dull. A few were obviously bad. Tom Church didn't do any of the reading; instead, he'd watched the movie *Scarface* and did a disjointed, awkward report over that. The fact that *Scarface* was about a modern gangster and they were studying the 1920s and 1930s seemed to entirely escape him.

Unfortunately, Lois wasn't as careful during Tom's presentation. Tom saw her smirking in Clark's direction, and he flushed red.

Lois didn't have much time to prepare with Clark during the week, given their respective schedules, but they got together during lunch on Friday. Lois felt confident as they began their presentation.

Although the football players looked as bored as they always did, she could see some of the brighter students perk up as they began their presentation. She'd been afraid that Clark would have trouble with public speaking, but had forgotten how confident he'd been at Brother Wayman's. He was quiet because he chose to be, not because he had to be.

Although her facts were going to be the basis for their grade, it was Clark's description of the human toll that caught people's interest. Even Mr. Johnson leaned forward in his chair. He'd been as visibly bored as anyone with the previous presentations, so Lois felt encouraged.

Putting a human face on the Great Depression, along with carefully photocopied pictures, helped make for what Lois felt was the best of all the presentations. Of course, going last had helped as well; Lois had seen and avoided the mistakes made by everyone else.

When they finished, they got a scattering of applause. It wasn't much, but considering that the class had stared at the other presentations with the dead eyes of absolute boredom, Lois took it as high praise. In this classroom, three people clapping was as good as a standing ovation.

Mr. Johnson gave them their grades after class. Lois didn't know what anyone else had gotten, and she didn't care as long as their grades weren't higher than hers.

Lois's grade was just as good as she had expected, and Mr. Johnson's praise gave her a warm glow.

When things had been hard at home, Lois had always been able to depend on her teachers' compliments to make her feel better about herself. Everyone needed a little ego stroking sometimes.

Even Clark seemed to have a jaunty walk as he left for work.

"It'll be okay," Lois said, gripping the telephone.

It was amazing how quickly circumstances could change. She'd been so enthusiastic at the end of school after her project with Clark had gone well. Getting this telephone call had been a shock.

"At least she hasn't lost her license," Lois said. "They'll just send her to rehab and keep an eye on her for a while. Maybe this'll be a good thing."

Lucy was crying; she'd been crying for the past thirty minutes. It had been all Lois could do to console her.

Apparently their mother had forgotten that she'd switched shifts with another nurse the night before; when she'd gotten called in, she'd already begun drinking. Her employers at the hospital had been less than amused.

"You'll stay with Uncle Mike," Lois said. "Dad's place is too far from Midvale. We'd never get you to school on time."

They could have done it if they'd had to, but it would have required Lois to get up an hour and a half earlier every morning for the next twenty-eight days. Lois didn't want to keep hours like Clark unless absolutely necessary. Unlike Clark, she needed her sleep.

In any case, it wasn't like Sam Lane would be around any more than he'd been for Lois. At least Uncle Mike would go out of his way to make Lucy feel wanted. He'd hug her, tuck her in at night...thirty days of that might be the best thing of all for Lucy.

"I'll come spend time with you," Lois said. "I promise. I won't abandon you like some people."

Lois felt herself beginning to relax. At least Lucy wasn't as hysterical as before. Dramatic hysterics took a lot of energy. Lois had learned that by watching her mother all these years, as well as how ultimately self-defeating they were.

"Maybe we'll get lucky," Lois said. "Maybe Mom will change this time. I've heard good things about the rehab they're sending her to."

She'd called Brother Wayman as soon as she found out where her mother was going. He assured her that it was one of the better places in the region, although he'd warned her not to get her expectations too high. Most people only got out of treatment what they were willing to put into it.

He stressed that the important thing for her and Lucy was to protect themselves and offered a number of different Al-Anon

meetings in both her area and Midvale. Although Lois didn't think she needed them for herself, she was willing to go with Lucy.

Unlike Lois, who'd escaped, Lucy was still very much trapped.

Despite his warnings, she felt comforted after talking to him. He helped her feel like it wasn't the end of the world, and Lois had tried to convey the same message to Lucy. Somehow it didn't seem as convincing when Lois said it, however.

"Look," Lois said. "I'll come see you over the weekend at Uncle Mike's."

The doorbell rang, and Lois felt a moment of gratitude. Lucy had learned the art of being difficult to hang up on from their mother.

"There's somebody at the door. I'll have to talk to you later."

Lois hung up as quickly as she could. Lucy would stay on the line for another two hours if she let her, and Lois felt emotionally drained already. She tried to leave all the drama at home, but somehow it kept following her wherever she went.

The doorbell rang again, and someone held the buzzer down.

Lois made her way to the door quickly, looking through the peephole. She didn't recognize the man outside, so she slipped the chain on the door and eased it open.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

In Metropolis it was always better to be cautious when strangers came to the door, but her father had messengers and others who occasionally came to make deliveries.

This man didn't look like a messenger. He was dumpy and balding, with a huge gut barely held in place by a belt. He wore a trench coat that was a little too long.

"Are you Lois Lane?"

"Why are you asking?" Lois asked suspiciously. No one had come looking specifically for her before.

"Name's Ralph Rogers. I'm with the *Daily Planet*."

"Let me see your press pass," Lois said.

He held it out and she took it through the partially closed door. She examined it closely. "You have more hair here."

"It's been a bad couple of years," he said.

She handed him back the pass and undid the chain holding the door closed. "Why are you here?"

"You got the internship, kid."

He held out a packet. She took it from him and ripped it open, pulling the papers out from inside. She read through them with growing excitement.

"I didn't expect them to actually send somebody. I thought they'd send it in the mail."

Ralph shrugged. "I was hoping to get a look at what you've got on the scandal. The brass was impressed with what you've got so far, and I was wondering if you had any more."

Lois nodded slowly. "It's my story."

"You got the internship. You want a byline too?" Ralph chuckled, although it didn't reach his eyes. "You think the boys upstairs are going to let a seventeen-year-old kid write for one of the best papers in the country?"

"No," Lois said. "I was kind of hoping for Perry White, or maybe Norcross and Judd..."

"White had to bow out — conflict of interest. He's friends with the parents of one of the football players you wrote about. Norcross and Judd are out on assignment."

Lois stared at him and he sighed. "I'm sure this story seems like a big deal to you, but the *Planet* deals with real news about things that matter. This is barely a step up from covering dog shows."

"So why bother?"

"It's been a slow news week," Ralph said. "And it's a pity to have all the work you did go to waste."

Lois sighed and reluctantly let the man in.

It wasn't until he left with copies of everything that it occurred to Lois that Ralph might just be lazy. It would be just her luck if he used what she had given him, did a tiny bit more work and called it his own story.

He'd promised to keep her name out of the investigation, which was the one bright spot in the entire affair. Although Lois was elated to have the internship, she'd never had any real doubt in her mind that she'd get it. Giving up the story now, though, left her feeling a little empty.

The story had been part of her life for months now, and she wasn't sure what she was going to do with her time.

Still, she was excited. Her mother had already gone to rehab and her father was out of town again. Lois wasn't sure whether he was legitimately working or whether he was off on an early weekend with his latest conquest. Either way, she had no forwarding number.

Calling Lucy or Uncle Mike was out if she didn't want to endure hours of drama, and she couldn't exactly share the news with her friends for fear that they'd warn the football players or the school.

Because of this (and for no other reason, she kept reassuring herself), Lois found herself excited to see Clark at lunch. She could share the news with him and not worry about it being all over school by Monday.

She was completely blindsided when she found herself being shoved into the boys' locker room. She fell to the floor, stunned and not even sure just what happened.

It took her a moment to focus; when she did, she saw Tom Church standing over her, his face flushed beet red and his fists clenched. He was hyperventilating as he stared down at her.

"You bitch!" he screamed.

Lois scrambled backwards, leaving her purse and backpack where they lay.

"You think I don't know who's responsible for all this?" he shouted, not caring who heard.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Lois said, stalling for time. Whatever had caused Tom to go off the deep end, she needed to keep him talking. Eventually someone would contact the principal or the coach.

"I got cut from the team! Half the guys are gone!"

Apparently Ralph hadn't been as careful in asking questions as he said he'd be.

Tom cocked his fist and lunged for her, and Lois found herself wishing she'd spent more time in her Tae Kwon Do classes.

This was going to hurt.

As he lunged forward, Tom tripped over her backpack, stumbling and trying to get his balance. This gave Lois time to roll to the side and come to her feet.

"I didn't do anything!" Lois protested, trying to edge her way back towards the hall. He might be a little less likely to attack her if it were out in the open where other students could see.

Technically, Ralph had done whatever it was that had gotten Tom kicked off the team, so she wasn't even lying that much.

Tom held himself up using the lockers and he stared at her, his expression murderous. "You think I'm stupid? You show up with pictures a couple of weeks ago and I'm out now. You do the math."

Lois forced herself to avoid making a comment about Tom's negligible math skills. In this situation it wouldn't help at all.

As Lois edged again toward the door, Tom moved to intercept her.

"What do you think this is going to prove?" Lois asked, ducking back. She had no doubt that Tom was faster than she was; she'd seen him move on the field. Although he looked like two-hundred-fifty pounds of dumb beef, he moved with the speed

of long experience.

He was used to tackling people who were trying to get away from him. It was the only thing he was good at.

Her only hope was to surprise him, and given his anger, she wouldn't have much time.

Lunging forward again, he grabbed Lois as she tried to hit him in the nose. He shoved her against the wall and she felt the breath leave her body all at once. She couldn't breathe, and the fight went out of her at once.

Tom grabbed her by the throat with both hands and started choking her. "Maybe this'll shut you up."

Lois clawed at her throat, her mind racing, trying to recall what her Tae Kwon Do instructor had taught about this very situation. It was hard; her rising panic made concentration almost impossible.

She should have screamed. Her only fear had been that it wouldn't be heard and that it would have enraged Tom even more. However, she hadn't dreamed he'd go this far.

Vision darkening, Lois wondered if this was it.

He released the pressure on her neck for a moment, grinning. Life-giving air brought awareness back. There was something in his expression that bothered Lois deeply. He enjoyed seeing her fear and pain. Holding back was just a way to increase her anticipation.

Memory flooded her and she twisted, turning her throat into the web of his hand even as she ducked her chin and tightened the muscles in her neck.

Instead of clawing at her throat, she jabbed her thumb in his eye.

He staggered back, letting go of her and holding his eye.

Lois fell to her knees and gasped for air. She didn't have the strength to run for the door, and she could see that Tom was already recovering. She hadn't done more than scratch his eye.

The pleasure in his expression was gone, replaced by rage.

"You're gonna pay for that, bitch."

He raised his fist, and Lois found herself flinching as it came toward her face. She closed her eyes, but the blow never came.

Clark had appeared out of nowhere, and he had Tom's fist in his hand. Tom's face flushed red, and he pushed and pulled, but Clark never moved an inch.

Lois heard a sound, and Tom groaned out loud.

"Get off him!"

The coach was suddenly there; Lois hadn't seen him come in. She wondered if she was going into shock. Everything seemed unreal somehow.

"What's going on here?" Principal Hardwick asked.

"Kent here just attacked Church," the coach said. "From what I hear, he's got some kind of grudge against the team."

Lois tried to speak, but couldn't.

"That's not what happened," a new voice said. Mr. Johnson was here as well. Lois found herself wondering if everyone could teleport, or whether she was really that out of it.

"What do you know?" the coach said. "You weren't even here."

"Mr. Kent warned me this was happening, and I saw him run in here less than thirty seconds ago. He's been with me the rest of the time."

"So he makes up some kind of trumped-up story. It just means that this was pre-planned."

"You can let go of him now," Mr. Johnson said quietly to Clark. "Ms. Lane is safe."

For the first time the coach and Principal Hardwick noticed Lois. Their faces darkened; obviously they'd both come to the same conclusion Tom Church had.

"The boys' locker room is off limits to young ladies," Principal Hardwick said. He glanced at the coach. "Detention would seem to be in order."

Mr. Johnson said, "From what I understand, Mr. Church pushed Ms. Lane into the locker room and proceeded to assault her. Ms. Lane would be fully in her rights to go to the police."

Principal Hardwick shook his head. "There's no proof of that. It's her word against his. Tom Church is an upstanding member of the community. His parents—"

"Ms. Lane's father is a respected physician with ties to a number of wealthy celebrities," Mr. Johnson said. At Lois's surprised look, he nodded slightly. She hadn't known that he knew anything about her family. In a softer voice, he said, "Let go, Mr. Kent."

Clark relented, stepping back.

"If you've damaged his hand—" the coach said.

"He'll be fine," Clark said. He turned toward Lois and helped her up.

"I'm so sorry," he said in a low voice. "I should have come right here instead of getting Mr. Johnson."

Although the attack had seemed to last forever, it couldn't have actually lasted more than a minute of two. Lois couldn't see that Clark had reason to be sorry for anything.

"There's no way to prove who started anything," Principal Hardwick said again. He had a sour expression on his face. "Let's just get everybody back to class."

"I'll hold on to Church," the coach said. "Get his hand checked out by the nurse."

He shot a murderous glare toward Clark. Obviously, although Tom was currently suspended, he hoped to somehow reverse the decision.

Lois wondered why Tom was going to the nurse when she'd been the one who was choked.

"Are you going to be okay?" Clark asked.

"I'll be all right," she said. Her voice was somewhat hoarse and raspy, but she was already breathing better.

Mr. Johnson led them both out into the hallway, where students had gathered. The coach was quick to disperse them.

"If you feel the need to press charges, I'll support you," Mr. Johnson said.

Lois was touched; that kind of support could cost Mr. Johnson his job. He might not be officially fired because of it, but he'd undoubtedly be let go for some sort of trumped-up reason.

As she walked down the hall with Clark and Mr. Johnson, she wondered how Clark had known. When Tom pushed her into the locker room, there hadn't been anyone watching, yet he'd told Mr. Johnson exactly what had happened.

Lois closed the door and locked it. The rest of the school day had been difficult; she'd been shaken and her classes seemed to pass as though they were in a fog. Although Mr. Johnson was sympathetic, the teachers in other classes were not.

The story of what had happened to the team spread throughout the school after lunch, and Lois had been the recipient of numerous angry stares. It wasn't just the football players either; ordinary students who weren't even involved in the program had given her vicious looks.

Her friends, who should have gathered around her in sympathy, instead avoided her like the plague.

It was going to make for a very long rest of the semester if this kept on.

The only bright spot was Clark. Somehow, he always found a way to bump into her between classes, even though their earlier classes weren't close at all. He had given her supportive smiles and murmured supportive words, even while the rest of the school ostracized her.

He'd even stopped a second outbreak of violence. One of the cheerleaders had bumped into Lois, knocking her down, but before anything could start, Clark was there helping her up.

His reputation had only grown at school, such that he only

had to look at students and they backed down.

Clark had even insisted on riding home with her from school, checking all her doors and windows. He'd suggested staying, but Lois knew he had deliveries to make and didn't want him jeopardizing his job for her.

She'd be fine, she insisted, even if she wasn't sure. Her mother was gone, as was her father, Uncle Mike was taking Lucy fishing for the weekend and her friends had deserted her. She'd never felt so alone.

Clark promised to get his deliveries done as quickly as possible and then return.

Lois set her purse on the table that held the telephone and dropped her backpack on the floor. She stared at herself in the oval mirror hanging above it. She looked pale, her eyes sunken. She'd managed to conceal the bruises around her throat using makeup, but suspected they'd only get worse tomorrow.

Was this the sort of price she would have to pay for her chosen career? If it was, she'd have to start paying a lot more attention in Tae Kwon Do classes.

She'd have to become a lot more thick-skinned. Being rejected by friends and acquaintances still hurt. Knowing that she had the internship helped, but it was cold comfort in the face of being rejected by everyone she knew.

Of course, her other choice was to ignore what was going on, even though it was blatantly unfair. One of the few good things her father had taught her was that it was important for everybody to play by the same rules. This was as true in life as in sports. Stock traders, politicians, athletes... they all were held up by society and rewarded with fame and wealth. When they cheated, they didn't just cheat the people they took advantage of. They also caused people to lose faith in the system.

The press was there to bring those people to account, and sometimes there was a lot of pressure to kill a story. Lois still remembered watching the Watergate scandal as a child, and seeing what it had done to the trust people had.

She stared at herself in the mirror. If she was going to become a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, she'd have to be willing to take more than a few bruises.

Still, she was glad to have Clark. He was proving to be a better friend than girls she'd known for years, even if she had more and more questions about him.

Lois woke with an uneasy feeling. She'd fallen asleep in front of the television, exhausted both physically and emotionally by her day. She glanced at the clock; it was a little after nine. Hopefully Clark would be finished with his route soon, as she was looking forward to talking with him about some of the questions she had.

How had he known she was in trouble? Just how strong was he? What he'd done to Tom Church hadn't been the result of some sort of martial art; he'd just held his fist like it was nothing. Lois hadn't seen any sort of special technique, just raw strength.

Clark wasn't a hugely-muscled guy; he was well built, but Lois wasn't sure if even a seven-foot-tall weightlifter could have held Tom as easily.

Why did she see guilt on his face every time she'd seen him after the attack? As far as she could see, he'd arrived as fast as humanly possible, faster really, since he shouldn't have known she was in trouble.

The house was dark; the sun had been out when she'd fallen asleep, and now the only light came from the flickering of her television.

Darkness had fallen outside; she could see that through a window to the backyard. Not even the last streaks of sunlight remained.

Maybe she should turn the lights on... she wouldn't want Clark to leave because he thought she'd gone to bed.

The television suddenly went black. Without the background noise, everything was silent. Lois moved as much by memory as by sight to the far wall, reaching for the light switch. Nothing.

A blackout?

She moved to the window and frowned as she realized that the streetlights were still on.

This was a neighborhood of young urban professionals; on Friday nights, most of the neighbors left to do whatever young wealthy people did. It was a sign of her father's mid-life crisis that he'd moved into this area at all since he was older than the usual inhabitants.

Maybe she'd blown a fuse. It didn't seem likely, since nothing had been on except the television, but Lois had to check.

She felt her way toward the closet near the kitchen, where the fuse box was located.

She opened the door and began to flip breakers. She started with the living room; she'd left the light switched to the on position in there, so she'd see immediately if the power returned.

Nothing happened. None of the other switches seemed to make much of a difference either.

Lois left the closet and headed for the telephone.

The line was dead.

Lois frowned. Wasn't the telephone supposed to be powered separately from the rest of the house?

It was then that Lois heard a sound from the kitchen. She stilled for a moment, then moved quietly in that direction.

The possibility that her father had decided to come home early flashed through her mind, but Lois immediately dismissed it. Her father was nothing if not loud when he came home.

She turned the corner, hugging the wall, and looked into the kitchen.

It was small and dimly illuminated from the lights outside. It had a door leading to the back and to her father's parking spot.

Lois could see a pair of silhouettes and the doorknob slowly turning.

Lois moved back into the living room. The smart thing to do would be to go out the front door, get into her car and leave. She could reach a pay phone at a convenience store in a few minutes and call the police.

Unfortunately, her keys were in her purse upstairs. By the time she got upstairs and back down again, whoever was outside could already be in the house.

She darted toward the fireplace.

Although her father never used it, it fortunately had decorative fireplace pokers. They were heavy and made of iron, perfect for bashing someone's head in.

She grabbed one of the pokers, and then darted up the stairs. She heard the sound of cursing from the kitchen, followed by the sound of breaking glass.

Lois hurried into her room, grabbing the purse off the computer desk. Her purse was light; she rarely carried much inside and sometimes wondered why she bothered. A heavy purse could at least be used as a weapon.

She considered locking the door to her room, but knew that the thin interior doors wouldn't last long against someone determined to get in. Lucy had once fallen through one running too hard. A good strong kick would break through, although it might give her time to use her poker.

Still, getting out was probably the better option than trying to hide. Her father's place wasn't all that large, and it wouldn't take them long to find her. If she was hiding in a closet it would be easy for them to pull her out.

After her experience this afternoon, she didn't think much of her chances against even one large male, much less two.

She moved to her door and listened carefully. She heard the sound of breaking glass and she grimaced. They were in the living room, and weren't making much of an effort to be quiet.

Locking the door to her room, she ran to her desk and wedged the chair under the doorknob. It would buy her a little time, but if they were determined to get in, there wasn't much she could do.

She ran to her window. Unlike the windows on the ground floor, this one didn't have bars on it. Unfortunately, there wasn't a ledge she could crawl out onto and it was a fifteen-foot drop straight to the concrete. If she broke her ankle in the drop, she'd be helpless.

Lois felt her heart pounding in her chest and her breathing felt unnaturally loud. She wasn't sure what to do; it was possible that these were just garden-variety burglars, in which case her best option was to keep quiet and let them steal whatever they had come to steal.

But if it was Tom Church...he could have choked her to death and enjoyed it. If he was coming after her now, it meant that he was ready to finish the job.

For the first time Lois wished that her father carried a gun; any weapon would be better than a fireplace poker.

Calling for help would be smart, but it would also alert Tom to her location. The neighborhood was deserted on a Friday night and Lois didn't think she had very good odds of being heard.

She froze as she heard the sounds of footsteps outside. Her doorknob rattled.

"What are you doing with that knife?" Lois recognized the voice; it was Joe Malloy. "You said you were only going to scare her!"

Heated whispering from the other side of the door was followed by a thud as her door vibrated. She heard a curse from the other side of the door.

Lois screamed; there was no point in hiding now.

She ran to the window as the door behind her thudded again; the drop to the ground would be punishing, but it was her only option left.

Crawling onto the table, Lois was startled as she heard two even louder thuds from behind her, loud enough that her corkboards fell off the walls.

"Lois!"

Lois froze; she could hear Clark's voice from the other side of the door.

"Clark?" Lois said. He'd said he was going to meet her after work.

She crawled off the table and ran to the door.

"Is it safe?"

"It is now," Clark said.

Lois grabbed the chair and pulled it away from her door. As she opened it, she could see that the door jamb was splintered.

Clark stood outside, with Tom and Joe lying on the ground, stunned.

Lois rushed into his arms. She sobbed, and he stroked her hair. She'd managed to hold it together, but now that it was over her hands were shaking.

From her open window, Lois could hear the sound of a car pulling into her father's parking spot.

Her father wasn't supposed to be home yet.

Clark followed her to the window and they both looked down. Bill Church was getting out of the car, followed by three other men, all armed.

"Cover all the exits," Bill said. "We need to get this done as soon as we can."

Lois glanced at Clark, her heart pounding. Clark was good at fighting, but he wouldn't be any good against men with guns.

Clark frowned, and then turned to her. "We'll go out the window."

All three men were entering the kitchen; it was too late to get to the front door.

"I'll go first," Clark said. "Then I'll catch you."

Lois nodded, not seeing any other way out. She returned to the door and replaced the chair, and then she and Clark moved her desk. It wouldn't hold the men long, but it got the desk out of their way.

Clark hopped up on the windowsill and a moment later he was gone.

Lois heard the sound of voices from the hallway, and a moment later her door vibrated with a sturdy kick. Apparently whoever was doing the kicking knew what he was doing, because the door jamb shattered completely with one kick. Only the chair kept the door from opening, and Lois realized that it would only take one more kick.

She dropped, trying not to scream as she fell.

A moment later she was in Clark's arms. He held her for a moment, and then froze.

There was a sound from the doorway; apparently Lois hadn't been as quiet as she thought when she fell. The man covering the doorway looked out into the back yard, but neither of them was there.

Lois felt a sudden burst of wind buffeting her body. She must have blacked out, because she and Clark were suddenly on the other side of the fence in her neighbor's yard and she didn't remember how they got there.

Clark gently lowered her to the ground, and then held one finger up.

Lois turned and looked through the cracks in the fence. She couldn't understand how they'd gotten here. The fence was too high to jump and there was no way Clark could have run all the way out into the alley and around to her neighbor's yard.

The man was on the other side, checking the low bushes that bordered parts of the fence. He had a flashlight, and Lois closed her eyes a moment before it passed over them.

A moment later, Bill Church, Sr. came out with the two boys.

"I'm glad you called me about this," he said to Joe.

"He said he was just going to scare her, but he was acting crazy," Joe said. "I didn't know what else to do."

He could have called the police, Lois thought savagely. Even Principal Hardwick would have been a better choice.

"I can't believe you were this stupid," Bill Church said, looking at Tom. "What were you going to do? Play with her?"

"I just thought—"

"You didn't think!" Bill said. "That's your problem! I always knew you were dumber than a box of rocks, but this..."

Tom stared at the concrete.

Bill Church turned to Joe. "I've always liked you, son. You come from a good family."

Joe nodded.

"Would you hold this for me?" Bill asked, holding the gun out to him in black gloved hands. "I need to teach my son a lesson.

Joe stared at the outstretched gun, and then gingerly took it.

"The first lesson is this," Bill said. He grabbed Joe's arm and forced it upwards toward his face. There was a sound like a heavy dumpster lid falling, and it took Lois a moment to understand what she was seeing.

Clark tensed beside her, but Lois grabbed his arm and shook her head.

"You never leave witnesses."

In the dimness of the streetlight, it was hard to see Tom's expression as his teammate's body hit the ground, but Bill Church reached into his pocket and wiped something off his face with a handkerchief.

"Here's what's going to happen. I've got a hundred people who will swear you were with me at a fundraiser for the mayor tonight. When the police come to you, and they will, you tell them that Joe here was even more upset about this whole football thing than you were."

"He killed himself," Tom said, staring at his friend's body.

"Maybe you aren't entirely stupid after all." Bill chuckled.

"At least you were smart enough to come here in Joe's car."

"The cops won't believe it."

"They'll believe what I want them to believe! I've got guys on the force on the payroll," Bill said. "There will be gunpowder residue on his hands, and our man in the coroner's office will smooth over any discrepancies."

"There's no sign of them, boss," one of the men said, coming from inside the house. He glanced down at the body.

"Get the gas cans," Bill said. "No telling how many fingerprints Stupid here left. It'll be better to get rid of everything."

Lois watched helplessly as the three men entered her house with gasoline cans. Several times Clark jerked in her grasp, but Lois only held him tighter.

Bill Church spoke to the men as they left the house. "We need to get everybody looking for Miss Lane and the Kent kid. Offer a hundred grand to whoever caps them both and twenty-five grand for any information leading to them being taken care of."

As the men left, she could see a sudden brightness coming from inside her house.

Lois hesitated — everything she owned was in that house, with the exception of the little she had in her purse.

They could wait for the fire department, get in touch with the police. Of course, there was no guarantee that the police she talked to wouldn't be on Church's payroll.

Her mother was safe in rehab, her father was out of town and Uncle Mike and Lucy were away. She'd only endanger their lives by getting in contact with them.

"I didn't know," Clark muttered. "I didn't think he'd actually —"

"There was nothing you could have done," Lois said, staring at her house. She wondered if there was any way of saving anything. Surely six gallons of gasoline couldn't set things on fire that quickly.

Clark flinched as though she'd struck him. "If I'd only—I could have—"

"Gotten both of us killed," Lois said. She winced as she saw flames coming up from her living room. "We need to get out of here."

"We can go to the police," he said, still seeming dazed.

Lois knew she'd replay what she'd seen over and over in her mind, but now wasn't the time to check out mentally.

"You heard what they said!" Lois said. "They've got cops on their payroll!"

The thought occurred that he might have said that just for their benefit, but Lois suspected that if he'd known they were listening, he'd have simply killed them.

"I need you to focus," she said. "Is there some place we can go?"

He stared at her for a moment, then seemed to gather himself. "I've got a place."

"Okay." She turned away from her house; she couldn't bear to see it burn.

A whooshing sound came from behind her, and a moment later everything went dark. Lois fell forward, and then got back on her feet.

The light from her house was gone.

"What just happened?"

"A freak windstorm?" Clark offered feebly. "We need to get going. They may have people watching the neighborhood already."

They carefully made their way to the back gate. Lois wondered again how Clark had gotten her into her neighbor's yard.

Too many things about Clark didn't add up.

Of course, she knew she was fretting over this because it was easier to think about than either of the things she'd just seen or what was likely coming next.

If she thought too much about it, she'd collapse, and she didn't have time for that. She had to live in the moment.

It was the only way she'd be able to survive.

"We've got to get to my car," Lois said.

They were in the back of the house and her car was still parked in the front. She had the keys, and once they were on the road, their chances would be much better.

"It's the first thing they'll look for," Clark said. He looked back at her house and stared for a long moment. "I wouldn't be surprised if they had someone out there watching your car right now."

"So what do we do? You didn't leave your bike in the front, did you?"

Clark shook his head. "I dropped it when I heard you scream."

Lois frowned. Wouldn't it have been faster to ride his bicycle than to run?

"I'll get it when we get to the end of the block," Clark said. He looked carefully in both directions, and they headed up the dark alley.

"Wouldn't it make sense for them to be looking for us right here?" Lois asked. "It's not like there's a lot of places we could go."

The alley was a bad place to be. Lois was pretty sure that her neighbors kept their postage-stamp-size-yards and garages locked tight, and there weren't many hiding places.

Clark glanced at the streetlights above. They were sparse here, a fact that her father had complained about numerous times as he took this route to park his car.

One of the lights burst above them, followed by another, and then another.

Lois clutched Clark's arm in the sudden darkness, stumbling a little. Her heart began to race again. Was someone shooting out the lights?

Clark pulled her to the side, through a gate, just as lights appeared at the end of the alley. He pulled her down, shutting the gate only moments before the car's headlights played over the gate they'd just come through.

Lois crouched down as the car moved slowly down the alleyway. Lois peered through the fence and she could see some sort of dark vehicle with floodlights playing up and down the alley.

Dogs were barking sporadically up and down the alley, sensing that something was wrong.

Lois froze as she heard the doors to the vehicle open and men got out. They had flashlights and they were trying gates to see if any were unlocked. This caused some of the dogs to go into even more of a frenzy.

They were approaching the gate Lois and Clark were hiding behind.

The gate was secured by the same kind of latch Lois had in her own backyard, the kind that gripped a metal bar unless pushed up, or unless something was inserted into it, like the bar from a lock.

Lois didn't think she had anything that would work. A pen wouldn't feel the same, and it wasn't as though Clark could hold the latch closed without it giving enough to warn the man on the other side. Nobody had that kind of gripping strength.

Tensing, Lois readied herself to fight as well as she could, although she suspected the men had guns.

The man rattled the gate for a moment and moved on.

Lois stared at Clark; the questions about him kept mounting.

"I didn't know the bus even ran in my neighborhood!" Lois said. Clark had gone to retrieve his bike and his bag, and somehow managed to come up with a coat and a hat from his bag, even though it didn't make any sense for him to have them. The night was only cool.

There had been a whooshing sound when he went to retrieve his bike and bag, a sound Lois was coming to associate with Clark's oddness. His bike had even been unnaturally warm for some reason. He stuffed her purse in his bag and put both in a plastic bag, the kind he used to collect cans.

"Before I got my bicycle, I learned the routes pretty well," Clark said. "Bus and subway. You'd be surprised how easy it is to get around that way in Metropolis."

What surprised Lois was how thoroughly invisible she became once she put the coat and cap on. Clark smudged her face and taught her the basics of looking homeless, somehow also coming up with his own outfit.

Both smelled clean but looked smudged and dirty.

Clark admitted that he sometimes used them out among homeless men who hadn't met him before; he said he kept a second coat to give out if someone needed it.

None of that explained how he had both coats on a night that was only a little cool.

The men in the dark truck had driven right by them and hadn't taken a second look at them. When they got on the bus, the few other passengers purposefully made a point of looking away from them. It was like they were ghosts.

It was horrible in a way, although Lois was glad to be overlooked.

He took her to a public restroom and encouraged her to use the facilities. Trying to wash her face had been a mistake; whatever he'd used had smudged even worse and Lois now looked like a refugee from a Dickens novel.

Now Lois stared at the expanse of chain link fence in front of her.

Clark led her until they came to a gap in the fence, and he slipped his bicycle through with what looked like a lot of experience. He held the links of the fence open for her.

"What are we doing here?" Lois asked.

They were in a self-storage facility not too far from the bar where Clark had helped her with Ellen Lane.

Lois had been forced to help her mother move her furniture into a place like this after she moved out; her father, of course, had used a moving company.

Clark held his hand up in a gesture that obviously meant she needed to be quiet.

He led her to a building on the edge of the property, near the gap in the fence. The storage units all had roll up doors, a little like garage doors.

Clark quickly unlocked a combination lock and pulled it off. He carefully lifted the door until it was high enough to admit his bicycle, and then he gestured Lois inside.

The lights here were dim, and Lois could only see blackness inside the unit. She looked at him for a moment and he gestured again, glancing down the path toward what presumably was the manager's office.

They'd seen a murder together, and Clark had risked his life for her. If that wasn't a good basis for trust, Lois didn't know what was.

She stepped inside and Clark followed her. He lowered the door, slowly enough that it didn't make much of a sound.

She stood in the darkness for a long moment before she whispered, "Clark?"

He switched the light on, and she gasped.

It was a unit that was ten feet wide by fifteen feet long. A battered futon covered in a black quilt was on her right against

the wall, with a nightstand made of a milk crate and an old lamp on top. Next to the milk crate nightstand was a mini-fridge set up on concrete blocks.

He'd made bookshelves out of boards and concrete blocks and they were covered with old paperbacks.

Instead of posters, the walls were covered with tools: rakes and hoes, even a small hand mower, the kind that didn't use gasoline.

He had several battered chests, in all sorts of different styles. Nothing matched — it was as though he'd gone shopping at a flea market for everything he owned.

Notably, there was no television, no toilet and no sink.

It took Lois a moment to understand what she was seeing, even as Clark turned on the lamp and turned off the glaring overhead light.

"You live here?" she asked, stunned.

Clark hung his bicycle up on pegs on the wall. He took a deep breath before he turned back to face her. "Does it matter?"

Suddenly a lot of things began to make sense. He showered at school because he didn't have any other place to shower. He was friends with the homeless because he essentially was homeless.

He didn't watch television because he didn't have one.

Clark grabbed an iron bar leaning against the wall and he stuck it in the track that allowed the garage door to open and close. He wedged it so that if anyone tried to lift the door, it wouldn't open.

"Won't someone notice the lock isn't on the door outside?" Lois asked.

"I mostly don't come here until it's pretty late, and I leave early," Clark said.

"Why?" Lois asked.

He didn't have the usual girly posters on his wall that most teenage boys seemed to have; there was no Heather Locklear or Farrah Faucett. All she saw was equipment to work.

"I got in trouble when I was fifteen," Clark said. "I ran away. I lived on the streets here in Metropolis for about a year before Charlie helped me rent this place."

"Why not get an apartment?" If Clark was on his own, he was essentially emancipated. She'd seen a movie about it once.

"You know how much it is for even a roach-infested apartment in the worst part of town?" Clark asked. "About nine hundred dollars a month. I get this place for sixty-five."

With no water, heating or cooling, Lois could believe it.

"So Charlie knows you're here?"

Clark shook his head. "Charlie thinks I keep my tools here. I had to have his help because I couldn't rent the place underage. The good part is that there's no paper trail leading here, and the owner has never even seen me."

"This can't be legal," Lois muttered.

"It's a civil matter," Clark said. "Not criminal. The owner would have to go to small claims court to get me out, although I don't plan on ever making it an issue."

It still seemed to stretch an ethical line to Lois, although she could see how it would be better than being stuck outside.

"It's important to have some place to keep things," Clark said. "When I didn't have a roof over my head, it was hard to work. Now I do yard work in the summers and dig snow in the winter."

Along with being a bicycle messenger, having a paper route and being a can and glass recycler.

"You stay here in the winter?" Lois asked. It seemed like it would get pretty cold even with the heat from the lights.

"I'm pretty tough," Clark said. "It doesn't bother me much."

"Why are you doing all this?"

"I've got enough money collected for my first year of college if I live like this. If I have to stay in the dorms it's enough for half a semester."

It made Lois's struggles to win a scholarship so she wouldn't have to owe her father seem petty.

Clark began stripping the futon, putting the heavy blankets on the floor. He went to one of the chests and pulled out a fresh set of sheets.

For someone who lived in squalor, Clark was remarkably neat and tidy.

It occurred to her that Clark had never smelled bad, even when he'd just gotten off work. She'd assumed that he showered again, but he showered at school for a reason. Most of the bicycle messengers who delivered things for her father smelled bad.

"How do you keep everything from stinking?" Lois asked. She flushed as she realized what she'd just asked, but it was a valid question. She hadn't been in many teenage boys' rooms, but the ones she'd been in had smelled a lot like the boys' locker rooms at school.

This place smelled fresh and clean.

"There's a laundromat nearby," Clark said.

"No, I mean...you. Everything should smell like sweat."

"I don't sweat much," Clark said.

"Everybody sweats," Lois said skeptically.

He shrugged. "Not me."

Although some of her questions had been answered, many more remained.

Lois tossed and turned. The futon didn't smell bad, but it wasn't comfortable either, and worse, she was sleeping in her street clothes.

"Are you all right?" Clark asked.

"I'm hot," Lois admitted. She knew it was silly, but the air felt stuffy, and knowing they couldn't open a window or turn on an air conditioner made her feel as though she were suffocating.

The darkness was oppressive, darker than anything Lois had ever experienced in her life. She felt as though she was trapped in a grave.

Joe's death kept playing over and over in her head, making sleep elusive at best. It was as though her mind was a record player skipping, stuck in one position and repeating the same part of the song over and over.

Clark was silent for a moment, and then the now familiar whooshing sound occurred again. Lois felt cool air passing over her skin.

Lois sat up straight and fumbled for the lamp by the bed. She switched the light on.

"What did you just do?" Lois demanded. "How do you keep doing these things?"

Clark stared up at her from the floor with a startled expression.

"You keep doing things nobody can do, impossible things, and you can't expect me not to notice," Lois said. "You owe me an explanation!"

Lois knew she was taking it too far; he'd saved her life more than once and he didn't owe her anything more than what he was willing to share. Yet he couldn't think she'd be so stupid as not to notice.

He'd been a lot less careful since Joe died. It was almost as though he was begging her to notice.

Staring at her for a moment, Clark finally looked down at his covers and sighed.

"I could have saved Joe tonight," Clark said. "If I'd understood what was happening."

Lois shook her head. "I told you once already, there was nothing you could have done. It wasn't humanly possible."

"Whoever said I was human?"

Lois laughed uneasily. "No, really, what's your secret? Are you some kind of magician?"

Clark hesitated. "Would you prefer to believe that?"

“Maybe one of your foster parents was a stage magician. I’ve never really gotten a good look at what you keep in that bag of yours.”

“So I keep all sorts of gadgets hidden in my bag and use it to trick people?”

“It’s the only explanation that makes sense,” Lois said.

Clark was using his bag as a pillow. He sat up and unzipped it, dumping its contents out on the blanket in front of him: some clothes, a wallet, soap, shampoo and deodorant. He seemed angry for some reason.

Lois looked at him, wondering why he was getting angry.

“I’ve never shared this with anyone,” Clark said, his gaze fixed on the blanket in front of him. “My parents knew of course, but I never told anybody else.”

“Told them what?”

“I’m not human,” Clark repeated.

“Well, your workload certainly isn’t human,” Lois said, “And you certainly don’t act like the other boys, but that’s no reason to get down on yourself. It’s an improvement, really.”

Clark sighed; it was an irritated sound. “My parents weren’t really my parents. They saw what they thought was a meteor crashing, and they found a small spaceship.”

“How small?” Lois asked, trying to keep from sounding like she was humoring him.

“Small enough to hold a baby,” Clark said. “Me.”

“So your parents found you in a mock spaceship... maybe it was a hoax.”

“Government men came a few days later and the ship disappeared,” Clark said. “My parents pretended that they adopted me from a relative.”

“Maybe your parents were just telling you stories,” Lois said. “Trying to make you feel special. I know I sometimes wish my parents had tried a little harder.”

Clark was silent for a long moment, then he chuckled. “I’ve thought about what this moment would be like for a long time. Sharing this is a big deal for me. For some reason, it never occurred to me that people wouldn’t believe me.”

“You start talking about being from space, people are going to put you in the loony bin,” Lois said. She regretted saying it almost immediately, considering that he probably had more than one friend who had actually been in a psychiatric facility.

She wondered why she couldn’t just be quiet and act accepting. Wasn’t that what you were supposed to do with a crazy person?

The problem was that Clark was the least crazy person she’d ever met. His life should have been a shambles given the challenges he faced every day. However, he was steady in a way that she only wished she could emulate.

She was going to need him over the next few days if she was going to survive; this wasn’t the time for him to break down.

“My parents thought I might be human,” Clark said. “Maybe Soviet, part of some sort of rocket program. They used to put monkeys and dogs in capsules, why not rockets?”

“If the Russians had launched a rocket into the middle of Kansas, we’d probably be standing in a radioactive crater.”

Clark nodded, seemingly less irritated. “It wasn’t until I got older that they started to realize I was different.”

“This is starting to sound like a bad *Children of the Damned* rerun,” Lois said uneasily. Clark didn’t seem crazy.

“I always hated that movie,” Clark said. He shuddered. “I hated *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, too. I had nightmares about being abducted, taken because of what I was.”

“You were saying you were different?” Lois asked. She was getting better at sounding sympathetic; maybe she’d just been caught off guard.

“I never got sick,” Clark said. “And after the age of three I never got hurt. I kept getting faster and stronger; by the time I

was ten I could run a two-minute mile.”

“Don’t you mean a ten-minute mile?”

“Two minutes. My dad timed me once,” Clark said.

The best athlete in the world couldn’t run thirty miles an hour, not even while sprinting, and certainly not at the age of ten.

“It got worse after my parents died. By the time I was thirteen I could lift refrigerators with one hand. My senses started getting sharper; I could see things and hear things that nobody else seemed to be aware of.”

“Not voices,” Lois said, a little horrified.

“I got accused of spying a lot,” Clark said, as though he hadn’t heard her. “Then I started setting fires with my eyes.”

Lois frowned. It sounded like the sort of rationalization a young child would make for why he was setting fires. The urge to set fires came from somewhere within him, probably because of his anger over the death of his parents.

She resisted the urge to reach out and pat his hand, knowing that it would seem condescending.

“It started getting harder to judge how much force to use; sometimes it seemed like my strength was doubling every month. Effort that was fine one time would have me slamming a door the next. I broke a lot of things, and sometimes when I played with the other children I’d leave bruises.”

Clark stared at his hands. “None of that works very well in foster care. I couldn’t tell anyone; my father had warned me that I’d get cut up like a frog if I told anyone, and I was terrified someone would find out.”

What he was saying fit with the record she’d seen, if he was rationalizing away his real behaviors.

“So when I came on a bully beating up one of my foster brothers, I tried to be careful. I barely tapped him, but when I did, I could hear bones breaking.”

Louie said it looked like someone had hit the kid with a bat, even though witness said otherwise. Lois frowned.

“I thought I’d killed him,” Clark said. “I got scared and I ran.”

“You didn’t kill him,” Lois said. Louie would have told her if he had, and there was no statute of limitations for murder.

“He had to have physical therapy,” Clark said. He shook his head. “I swore then that I’d never hurt anybody again. What scares me is that it hasn’t stopped. I’m still getting stronger every day, and it’s not showing any signs of slowing down.”

“It can’t be that bad,” Lois said. “You were able to fight the guys on the team without hurting them.”

“I keep having a dream,” Clark said, closing his eyes. “Everybody is made of tissue paper, and no matter what I do, everything I touch dies.”

“I can see how hard this is for you to tell me,” Lois said, “But you can see how it would be a little hard to believe.”

Clark looked up at her for the first time. Without taking his eyes from her, he reached over and grabbed the leg of the futon with one hand. A moment later Lois found herself three feet higher than she had been.

She stared at him, her mouth open.

“Maybe you’re a mutant,” Lois said. “Or part of some scientific experiment. It didn’t have to be the Russians.”

“This isn’t *Star Trek*,” Clark said. He kept staring at her like he was waiting for her to reject him. “Nobody has that kind of technology, not even S.T.A.R. Labs.”

At her look, he said, “I had a year where I didn’t do anything but read, and I read a lot faster than most people.”

“The government wouldn’t exactly publish books about it if they did have that kind of technology.”

“Even if they were able to do it, why would they stick a valuable mutant baby in a rocket and just launch him into space for no reason?”

“Why would aliens?”

Clark shrugged. “My mother had a theory. You remember the story of Moses in the basket?”

Lois shook her head. Her father hadn’t approved of church and her mother had found it inconvenient.

“The Pharaoh ordered all Hebrew boys drowned at birth. His mother hid him in a basket and put it in the river to keep him safe.”

Lois had seen the *Ten Commandments*; now the story came back to her. “So you’re saying they put you in a ship to save you?”

“Maybe,” Clark said, although he looked doubtful. “I’ll never really know. Did they abandon me, or did they save me? Why didn’t they come with me? What kind of parents would abandon their child?”

It was obvious that he’d thought a lot about this. The question wasn’t just about his hypothetical alien parents, though. Lois could see that it was about more than that.

“I don’t think your parents meant to leave you,” she said. “They just died.”

“I was there,” Clark said. “I just wasn’t fast enough to save them. Kind of like tonight, except that I would have been.”

“Surely you can’t be—” Lois began, then she stared.

Clark was standing across the room, his blankets folded up neatly where he’d been. She hadn’t even seen him move, although she could feel the wind of his passage.

“How strong are you?” she asked.

“I was strong enough to throw a pickup truck a hundred feet at fifteen,” Clark said. “I’m much, much stronger now.”

He paced. “I can hear everything in a thirty-mile radius. I can see the flag on the moon left by the Apollo astronauts. I can see through anything I want, except lead. I should have known.”

“You can hear people pee?” Lois asked, horrified. Obviously he was more concerned about what had happened to Joe, but she was actively trying not to think about that.

“I hear everybody pee,” Clark said. “And everything else too. I can block it out sometimes, if I focus on just one thing. It took a while to learn how to do it, which made school really different. Imagine trying to listen to your teacher in the middle of a crowd of thousands. Luckily I had it under control by the time I came here, or I’d have gone crazy.”

Lois stared at him. It was hard for her to imagine having gone through that alone.

“I was seeing through people’s skin for a while,” Clark continued. “And it took me a while to realize that I see at least thirteen colors that ordinary people don’t. I remember what it was like before, but it looks different to me now.”

It made him sound superhuman, and in many ways he was. Yet somehow, despite everything, he was the most human person Lois had never known.

“I keep going over and over in my head, the things I could have done,” Clark said. “I could have made his gun so hot he couldn’t hold it. I could have jumped over the fence and ripped the gun out of his hand so fast he couldn’t see me. I could have stood up and let him shoot at me. Instead, I just crouched there, frozen.”

“Could you have made it hot enough to make him drop it in time without making the gun explode?” Lois asked.

Clark frowned, then reluctantly shook his head.

“If you’d grabbed it out of his hand, wouldn’t you have ripped his hand off?”

“I could have put my finger in the barrel.”

“You know how well that worked for Bugs Bunny,” Lois said dryly. “The gun would probably explode anyway, and then you would have revealed what you are to them.”

“Joe would be alive,” Clark said stubbornly.

“Are you sure about that? Could you watch him every second

of every day, especially once they knew who your friends are?”

Clark looked at her, stricken.

“Joe Malloy was pretty much Tom’s only friend in the world. Nobody else could do much more than tolerate him,” Lois said. “Bill Church knew that, and still shot him in the head not two feet from his son. If he’s willing to do that, what would he be willing to do to Brother Wayman, or Charlie or any of the others?”

“I wouldn’t let that happen.”

“You can hear what happens in thirty miles... what happens if they round your friends up all at the same time and take them to another city?”

Clark closed his eyes. “That’s what I’m most afraid of... that I let Joe die just to keep my secret.”

“You didn’t have any good options,” Lois said. “Have you ever thought about what kind of weapon you’d make?”

Clark’s brow furrowed.

“If I was Bill Church, with the morals of a weasel, I’d kidnap your friends and make you work for me,” Lois said. “He could make you rob banks, knock over armored cars, even break people out of prison. You could be a weapon of mass destruction, and the minute he found out about it he’d be thinking of ways to use you.” Lois leaned forward. “It’s not just the Churches you’d have to worry about, either.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Clark said, although it was clear from his expression that he did.

“If the government found out about you, they’d use you like a one-man army. If they’d had you, the hostage crisis would have lasted like a minute and a half.”

Straightening, Clark said, “I wouldn’t mind stopping terrorists. All I ever really wanted to do was help people.”

“What happens when they want you to invade Nicaragua? Maybe the Middle East? Worrying about the politics of losing too many soldiers is one of the few things holding us back, but if they had you... that kind of power would be addictive. It might not start out that way, but eventually they’d end up using you to conquer the world.”

“I can hardly hold an entire country by myself,” Clark said dryly. “I can only be in one place at once.”

“You could kidnap government leaders until somebody was elected that they liked,” Lois said. “You could destroy oil refineries, factories, airports... just the threat of you would be enough to make some countries give in.”

“I think you’re exaggerating,” Clark said, but he looked troubled. “The United States can already do that kind of thing.”

“At a million dollars a missile,” Lois said. “Using you, it’d be fast, and it’d be free.”

Clark scowled and stared at the floor.

“On the other hand,” Lois said, her mind racing, “that means you’re more dangerous than you realize.”

“I won’t kill anyone,” Clark said. “I just... can’t.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to. As long as they don’t know about you, what you are gives us a whole world of options.”

Clark looked up.

Lois explained the basics of the plan that was forming in her mind. Getting justice for Joe wasn’t their only priority. As long as the Churches controlled a criminal organization, neither they nor their loved ones would ever be safe.

They were going to have to go to war.

“Lucy?” Lois called.

Uncle Mike’s house was unnaturally quiet. It was always filled with the sounds of movement and noise; now, though, Lois couldn’t hear anything other than the labored sound of her own breathing.

A sense of dread was spreading into the pit of her stomach. “Lois?” There was something wrong with Lucy’s voice. It was pitched higher than normal and she sounded afraid.

“We need to get out of here,” Lois said as she turned the corner.

She froze. There was blood on Uncle Mike’s prized hardwood floor, blood that was spreading even as she watched. It was darker than she would have thought, so dark that she couldn’t look away.

Uncle Mike’s body was by the piano.

Lois’s heart raced. She dashed forward, darting around the body and pool of blood, and came to a stop as she saw her sister.

She was being held by Bill Church, who was grinning at Lois.

“We don’t leave witnesses.”

The sound of thunder woke her up.

She gasped into the darkness and reached out.

Although she couldn’t see anything other than flashes of light in the back of her eyelids, Clark was able to find her hand and hold it.

This was the fourth time she’d woken to a nightmare, and she wondered whether Clark was sleeping at all, or if he was simply waiting for the next wave of nightmares to pass.

The earlier dreams had been repeats of the night before, of watching helplessly as the boy she’d once considered dating, if only briefly, was killed in front of her.

Clark tightened his grip reassuringly, then she felt another wave of cool air washing over her. She relaxed and felt herself drifting off again.

It occurred to her that while Clark couldn’t kill, she couldn’t afford to be as picky. Lucy depended on her, and she’d do whatever she had to do to keep her safe.

She could only hope that the plan they’d worked on the night before made all that unnecessary.

“I’m still not comfortable leaving you here,” Clark said.

They stood on the flat roof of a restaurant which, according to Clark, was owned by the Church family. Her stomach rumbled at the smells from below. A few stale donuts in the morning were hardly a substitute for fine Italian cuisine.

It made her a little nervous, being right over the heads of the people who wanted to kill her, but this was where the action would be taking place, and Lois couldn’t see herself being anywhere else. In truth, the thought of staying in the darkness of the storage unit during the stifling heat of the day left her feeling claustrophobic.

At least here she’d feel like she was making a difference.

“I’ll be fine,” Lois said.

Clark had welded the hatch leading down to the interior of the restaurant shut. It would make it difficult the next time a crew had to service the air conditioning, but Clark wasn’t exactly worried about that now.

Reaching out, Clark took her hand. “You know I’d never let anyone hurt you.”

He said that, but he couldn’t be everywhere. There were too many people he had to protect and not enough time. Still, the thought was comforting.

Lois forced herself to smile, and Clark tightened his grip on her hand reassuringly.

“If you need me, all you have to do is call out.”

Looking down at her hand in his, Lois sighed. “I wish we didn’t have to do this.”

If she could turn back time, she’d have gladly given up the story. It wasn’t worth having even one person die, much less having all the people she loved threatened.

Clark shook his head. “You’ll never be safe until we get this done.”

They were past the point of no return. There was no way Bill Church would trust any promise they made not to tell the police.

He needed them dead, and the sooner it happened the better.

They couldn’t trust the police. Clark had heard rumors from people in the homeless community about what exactly happened at CostMart.

Police payoffs were the least of it.

Getting the equipment had required dipping into Clark’s savings. He kept half with him in cash and half in a bank. He admitted that he kept the cash for fear law enforcement would finally decide to come after him and freeze his accounts, but kept some in the bank for fear of coming home one day to find his possessions stolen.

Apparently being robbed was an occupational hazard of the homeless.

Buying the video camera had been expensive. The seven hundred dollars it had cost Clark probably represented a month’s salary or more, and yet he’d paid it without comment. He tried to hide the wince when he saw the price tag, but Lois saw him hesitate a moment before handing over the money.

Lois promised herself that she’d get her father to pay him back every cent. If her father wouldn’t pay, she’d get a job and pay it herself, even if she had to wear a wiener hat and work fast food.

She was most concerned with the bulkiness of the camera, and how much noise it made. At least they got a model that didn’t have to be plugged in, although the battery life was shockingly low. The microphone was the best they could find; they just had to hope that the wind wouldn’t make any recordings useless.

“Wish me luck,” Clark said. They still had an hour before the meeting and Clark intended to make the best use of their time.

A moment later he was gone.

Lois stared out into the distance, feeling helpless. She was still dressed as a homeless person; it was her best defense if she should run into trouble while Clark was gone. She couldn’t depend on it, of course, but even if it bought her a few seconds, Clark assured her it would be enough.

She wasn’t worried about the people on the ground — by the time anyone got through the welded door, Clark would have plenty of time to get to her. What worried her were the taller buildings all around them. Although they were mostly abandoned because it was a Saturday, it would only take a curious janitor to call the police and start trouble Lois didn’t need.

Hunkering down, Lois spread out the sleeping bag Clark had provided. Along with the homeless clothes, it might be enough to keep onlookers from being too curious.

Still, Lois couldn’t help but feel like she was in the crosshairs of a gun. Bullets were supersonic; by the time Clark heard the shot, she’d be dead.

Clark had argued at length over this part of the plan, but Lois had been stubborn. She couldn’t sit alone, helpless, while people threatened her and her family.

They couldn’t trust the police, but Lois couldn’t believe that Bill Church had moles in the FBI. The FBI specialized in organized crime, and just in case, they’d make copies of everything they had and deliver them to the U.S. Marshall’s office and the *Daily Planet* as well. If Church had managed to infiltrate all three organizations, they’d keep fourth and fifth copies and would take them out of state, to Washington, D.C. if they had to.

Clark thought it was overkill, but Clark didn’t have a vulnerable sister, father and mother whose lives were on the line.

Although Clark hadn’t made the connection with the Church family before, he’d heard numerous stories about CostMart from the homeless, enough that he had a fairly good idea what to look for.

Even now he was moving around the city at super speed, scanning for incriminating evidence, breaking into places using his x-ray vision to pick locks and steal papers, then making

copies at the college library.

The building Lois stood on was one of several buildings, owned by Church, with secret underground complexes which Clark planned to investigate.

Lois sat and pulled out the notebook Clark had bought her. Her own notebooks had been lost in the fire, and her house was still under surveillance, although the police and fire departments were already there.

She began to write everything she could remember. If she was going to be a reporter, it would be important to tell a story and have it ring true. She was likely going to have to sit on a witness stand and stare Bill Church in his cold dead eyes as she described exactly what happened.

If she didn't make it, she wanted there to be some way to bring Church to justice.

Lois heard a noise from below.

Carefully looking over the edge, she groaned inwardly as she saw a Chevy Impala pulling into the alley. It was too early! The meeting wasn't supposed to start for another hour, at least according to Clark.

She grabbed the camera, fumbling with the knobs and buttons, hoping she remembered Clark's instructions correctly. She'd never used a camera like this, but Clark had done his best to prepare it.

Glancing over the edge again, she saw Bill Church stepping into the alley.

The man who stepped out of the Impala was dressed in civilian clothes, but according to what Clark had overheard, he was a police detective.

Lois struggled to remove the lens cap from the camera and set it on the ledge while turning the camera on. She carefully leaned out and focused the camera on Bill Church, holding the Parabolic microphone in her other hand. She cursed under her breath. This was really a two-person job. She wished Clark was here, but she didn't dare call out to him.

It was hard balancing both the camera and the microphone, and it was all Lois could do to keep one or the other from going over the edge.

"You left your boy's fingerprints all over a crime scene," the man in the brown trench coat said. "You aren't usually that sloppy."

"So he was dating the Lane floozie," Bill Church said. "He's a big-shot football player; all the girls are after him."

Lois stiffened.

"I'm sure he'll confirm that," the man said dryly.

"He's dumb as a stump, but he can follow a script," Bill said. "Especially if he gets a few softball questions."

"I'm not the only one on this," the man said. "Henderson is likely to be a problem. We've got a dead kid with bruises on his wrist; Henderson saw them before the ME could cover him up."

Bill scowled.

"Give him a story he can buy," Bill said. "The Kent kid is already wanted in Kansas for felony assault, and he attacked the entire football team a few weeks ago."

"Nobody cares about a foster kid getting beaten up," the man said. "Kansas knows where he's at and they haven't even bothered to extradite him."

"He was making time with the Lane girl. Maybe he got jealous of Tom and the Malloy kid," Bill said. He leaned forward. "Sell it."

"Say we bring him in," the man said. "Who says that Henderson doesn't listen to his story, start asking questions?"

"If he does, you'll be missing a partner," Bill said, his voice suddenly cold.

The man in the trench coat stiffened. "If you kill a cop, it'll raise all kinds of questions you don't want asked."

"That's why you're going to make sure Henderson doesn't

get to talk to either of them. If you get them alone, make sure they never reach the precinct. If you can't do that, throw them both into general population. I've got people there who will take care of things."

Bill reached into his pocket and pulled out a packet covered in a brown paper wrapper.

"It's all here," he said.

The other man took the package.

This was exactly what Lois had hoped to see; with pictures of Bill bribing a police detective, their stories about conspiracies were less likely to be dismissed.

Lois's nightmare was that they would turn her away because she was just a kid.

She leaned further out as Bill said something she couldn't hear. She felt her sleeve catch on something, but her hands were both full. The lens cap fell, and to Lois it almost seemed like it was falling in slow motion. She tried to pull back, but the sound of the cap hitting the pavement caused both men to look immediately up.

Lois found herself staring Bill Church straight in the eye.

"Keep an eye on her," Bill Church said to the man in the trench coat. He slipped inside the building.

Lois pulled the camera and microphone back from the edge. If she dropped them, this would all be for nothing.

"We can make a deal," the man called out. "Give us the tape and I'm sure we can work something out if you promise not to talk."

"Clark," Lois hissed. She considered shouting; they'd be less likely to kill her if there were witnesses, but Clark's secret was also more likely to be jeopardized.

There was also the chance that Bill Church would simply take care of any witnesses.

She was startled when she felt hands on the camera and antenna. She looked up to see Clark; a moment later he was gone, and with him, the camera.

Banging noises came from the doorway that Clark had welded shut. Lois watched this cautiously, but the weld seemed to be holding. She doubted that the men could get much leverage from below anyway.

She heard the sound of an engine from the alley below. Peering over the edge, she saw a black pickup pulling into the alley even as the police detective left. Apparently he didn't want to be involved in whatever was about to happen.

The pickup pulled up as near to the wall as possible. She heard the sound of something breaking inside the restaurant, and men came out carrying a table, which they proceeded to load onto the pickup bed.

Lois stared for a moment, doing the math in her head as she saw men climbing up onto the metal table. She scrambled to her feet and began to back away from the edge. The roof she stood on was only one story high, approximately fifteen feet above the alley.

"Clark!" she called out again in a whisper.

He reappeared just as two men began grabbing onto the edge of the roof; Lois had no doubt that more were helping to lift the others from below.

Clark pulled her by the hand and they jumped even as the sound of a shot rang out behind them. Lois could have kicked them in the face, but she was glad she didn't have to.

Clark somehow twisted around beneath her and caught her. They landed on an old, disgusting mattress shoved up against the side of the building. It hadn't been there earlier when they'd arrived at the restaurant.

"Plausible deniability," Clark said, grinning.

They had to explain how they'd gotten down the side of the building without hurting themselves, so Clark had set this up.

Before Lois could ask, he grabbed her by the waist and

placed her onto the handlebars of his bicycle.

“Hey—” she exclaimed, but the sight of the men on the roof looking down at them and shouting changed her mind.

Clark was on the bicycle faster than she would have thought possible. A moment later, they were speeding down the street.

She heard the sounds of shots ringing out, but Clark simply pedaled faster. Once they got out of sight of the men, they’d be able to ditch the bicycle and Clark would carry her. Lois did her best to hang on until then.

It was terrifying, the wheel spinning underneath her and her stomach so tense that she felt ill.

Lois groaned when she looked back and saw the black pickup truck careen around the corner, the table flying off the truck bed as it made the turn.

Still, she knew that Clark would keep her safe.

She screamed as the Chevy Impala suddenly appeared on her left, the engine roaring as the police detective tried to ram them.

Clark barely pulled out ahead of the Impala, which spun behind them. Lois forced herself not to scream again. Clark was under enough pressure without her making this any more difficult than it had to be. Keeping his secret was worth this, but she wasn’t certain how long she’d be able to balance herself on the handlebars. She found herself wishing she’d spent more time in gym class.

The sky overhead was overcast, and to Lois’s disgust, it began to sprinkle rain.

She cursed under her breath, aware as she said it that Clark probably heard every word. She glanced back at him; he was leaning to the left so he could watch the road in front of them; given what he’d told her, he probably could have just looked straight through her, but that wouldn’t have kept his secret very well.

Her hands began slipping as the handlebars became wet.

“Clark?” she said, a little panic creeping into her voice.

“We’ll be fine.”

It began raining harder, and he turned down the next street. Lois could feel the tires slipping underneath them and she moaned as they pulled out into traffic.

The two vehicles behind them skidded as well, but even worse.

Clark was pedaling like mad, and they slipped between two slow-moving cars, the mirrors close enough that Lois could have lost an arm if she hadn’t been using them to stay up.

“I can’t...hold on,” she bit out. Her grip kept slipping.

“Just a little longer,” Clark said.

Lois suspected that Clark didn’t really have any idea about human physical weakness. He could probably hold himself up for years. She, unfortunately, was even weaker than she’d thought.

He turned into an alley; Lois could see that the alley was mostly blocked by old furniture and the detritus of a move gone wrong. There was a trail on the left, however, one too narrow for a car.

The Impala squealed around the corner just as they made their way through the opening and Lois breathed a sigh of relief. He’d have to stop and they’d be able to escape.

She heard a crash from behind her and looked back as the Impala plowed through the furniture, although not without damage.

Apparently the detective, whoever he was, thought they had the tape on them and wanted to make sure they couldn’t get it to anyone.

So much for his promise of making a deal.

Clark made a sharp right. Lois suspected that he was using his enhanced vision, because he swerved around a dumpster that was inexplicably placed out in the street.

He charged across the street between oncoming cars and Lois suppressed a scream as she heard the sounds of a crash behind

them. The Impala had plowed into the dumpster and was currently stalled.

Clark darted between two narrow buildings. A moment after that, Lois found herself being lifted off the bike handles and the world blurred around her.

“That’s a pretty incredible story.”

Special Agent Pierce stared at them from across his desk. His desk was covered in files in a sort of organized mess that Lois had seen in her father’s workplace. He was balding and he looked overworked.

“It’s all there if you look for it!” Lois said. “There’s a boy dead in my back yard, my house is halfway burned down, and we’ve got Bill Church on tape bribing a police officer.”

“Are you sure he’s an officer?” Agent Pierce asked. He raised his hand as she began to protest. “I’m not saying I don’t believe you, but the Church family will be able to afford very good lawyers, and they’ll be asking the hard questions.”

“Watch the tape,” Lois repeated.

“Fine,” he said.

He stepped into an audio-visual room while they waited.

Clark stared at the wall intently while Lois fidgeted. They were unwilling to let the evidence “disappear,” even if Clark had made five copies earlier, and it was important to know if this agent was crooked.

Lois relaxed as Clark nodded slightly and his lips quirked in a smile. Lois had been afraid they’d be recorded, so they’d prearranged a signal. So far everything was working out as it was supposed to.

Returning, Agent Pierce stared at them for a long moment. “All right. What else have you got?”

As it turned out, Clark had managed to steal quite a bit.

Lois’s earlier, cursory examination revealed financial records of protection rackets, illegal brothels, and smuggling and illegal bookmaking. He’d even managed to acquire numerous sets of books indicating the Church family was cheating on its taxes, all of which he’d copied at a local copy shop multiple times.

Agent Pierce’s eyes widened. “How did you get all these?”

“I make part of my living going through the trash,” Clark said. “Mostly I pick up cans and glass bottles, but sometimes I find other things.”

Lois glanced at Clark. He hadn’t actually answered the man’s question. He was good at lying by omission, but for some reason he was still uncomfortable with a direct lie. This was the part that could make the case fall apart, and this was where he’d have to make the Bureau believe him.

“I’m worried about my family,” Lois admitted. “If they get to them...”

Agent Pierce shook his head. “Let me talk to my superiors. I usually get to talk to the cranks; we do it because every once in a while something pans out.”

He got up and left the room.

Lois watched Clark, who had an intense look on his face. She reached out and took his hand. He smiled slightly, but the intense expression didn’t leave.

She felt oddly closer to him since he’d revealed his greatest secrets, both of them. They were sharing something that no one else in the world knew, and it delighted Lois to know what Clark’s occasional strange expressions meant.

He’d trusted her with it when he’d trusted no one else, and she couldn’t help but feel that this meant something.

Clark fidgeted. He wasn’t giving any of their prearranged signals that he was sensing anything bad, but he looked uncomfortable.

Everything had taken longer than they thought. Getting everything copied couldn’t be done at superhuman speeds; they were limited by the equipment. Copying the tape over and over

had taken an excruciating amount of time.

Even getting into the FBI office on a Saturday to talk to Agent Pierce had taken a lot longer than Lois had hoped, even with her on the telephone while Clark was copying the tape using two VCR's he'd "borrowed" from friends Lois knew were out of town. Normal business hours were Monday through Friday, and only her father's reputation had opened doors for her.

Debbie owed her, and Clark had returned everything in the same condition as he'd gotten it, although he'd been uneasy about the arrangement.

Going to the FBI had been Lois's idea, one which Clark hadn't been comfortable with. He'd been uncomfortable with going to any member of law enforcement, but not because of the threat by Bill Church.

He was worried he'd be sent back to Kansas.

After all, just getting this information had involved multiple crimes: breaking and entering, trespassing, burglary. In the hands of a hostile agency he could be charged with multiple felonies and he wouldn't be able to do anything but run.

Although Lois had tried to share culpability, Clark insisted on doing everything illegal himself. Lois tried to point out that she could be charged with conspiracy, but he was adamant.

It was hard not to look at him and see something heroic, even if the rest of the world would only see a criminal.

Agent Pierce stepped back into the room.

"My supervisor is coming in. If he agrees with me, we'll put you up in a safe house for a few days until we look further into all this. Your parents and families will be protected too."

Lois glanced at Clark, who tensed.

"We'll need to know where to find them," Agent Pierce said. "We'll have them picked up and brought to you."

Lois hesitated. At this point, trust was in small supply, but she had to trust someone. Reluctantly she gave Agent Pierce her information. While giving the information might expose her family to danger, she was certain that the Church family had people watching her parent's houses and maybe Uncle Mike's.

Not telling the FBI might be the exact thing that got them kidnapped.

"What about you, Mr. Kent?"

Clark looked intensely uncomfortable. "I've been on my own for a while. I've got friends on the street, but you'd go broke trying to put them all in safe houses."

Lois couldn't imagine Clark's friends allowing themselves to be rounded up and put away by law enforcement; after the first few were caught the rest would undoubtedly scatter and hide. It wasn't as though any of them but Brother Wayman and Charlie actually had addresses anyway.

Agent Pierce muttered something uncomplimentary that Lois couldn't quite make out. Clark's ears turned red.

"So we wait."

Minutes stretched into hours as it had taken time to convince Agent Pierce's supervisor, the Supervisory Senior Resident Agent, and then his boss's boss, the Assistant Special Agent in Charge. More and more agents had trickled in, and there was a growing feeling of excitement among the agents.

Apparently, several of the agents held pieces of the puzzle, but hadn't been able to put it together until documents Clark had collected linked things together.

It was decided that the safe house was definitely in order, but even that had taken hours to arrange. Lois felt herself lagging as time went by, exhausted. She hadn't slept well the night before, and all she could think about now was that she was likely to miss school for a while.

She felt guilty for wondering if that would endanger her trip to Ireland. A boy was dead and all she could do was think about how it affected her.

It made her uncomfortable, feeling like a bad person, but it was better than closing her eyes and hearing the sounds of the gunshot.

By the time they were finally ready to go, word had come that her father was already at the safe house. She'd been allowed to talk to him, and it had been all she could do not to break down crying.

Mike and Lucy were still gone, but Lois had been assured that they'd be taken care of.

Still, stepping out into the darkness of the parking garage made her feel uncomfortable. It was almost ten in the evening and the weather was hot and muggy. The sky, what little she'd been able to see out the windows, was heavily overcast and it looked like it might rain again.

Two men in black suits waited by a black SUV. Lois's skin prickled as she wondered if she was even now being targeted by a sniper's rifle. Bullets were supersonic, and Clark couldn't stop what he couldn't hear.

She felt his hand on her shoulder, reassuring. He was scanning the horizon, and a moment later they were ushered into the back of the SUV.

The doors looked odd, and they shut with a solid thunk that was unfamiliar. The windows seemed odd as well.

Clark leaned over and whispered, "It's armored."

Lois felt herself relax almost immediately. They were taking this seriously, and she wouldn't have to worry until she got out of the vehicle at the safe house, wherever that was.

One of the agents glanced back at her as the doors were locked. "Buckle up, kids. Everything will be fine."

Lois snapped her seatbelt in and Clark did the same.

They pulled out and began to descend the parking lot toward street level. Lois found herself watching Clark again. Once they got to the safe house, her father was going to have a lot of questions, and her time alone with Clark would come to a quick end.

Pulling out into the street, the agents moved cautiously out into traffic. The streets were still surprisingly busy given the hour. Of course, it was Saturday night, and Lois usually wasn't out at this time.

They'd been driving for thirty minutes when Lois noticed that the driver kept glancing into the rear view mirror.

He murmured something to his partner. Clark stiffened and glanced behind them.

A moment later, fire enveloped their car. Lois found herself being thrown forward, the seatbelt biting into her shoulder.

The driver desperately fought with the wheel, but the SUV was top heavy. They flipped several times. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion.

They came to a rest hanging upside down. Lois was confused; she couldn't understand what had happened. She felt something wet trickling down the side of her face.

The smell of smoke filled the car and she began to struggle with her seatbelt.

She managed to turn her head and look at Clark, whose expression showed a rage she'd never seen before. His eyes were starting to glow a hellish red.

"Clark..."

"They'll just keep doing this," Clark said. His eyes were still glowing. "Killing people, taking things, doing whatever they want."

At least he wasn't setting anything on fire, but the light from his eyes cast a reddish glow over the inside of the vehicle.

Lois squinted, trying to see whether the agents in the front seat were okay. Both of them hung limp, although one of them coughed. As far as she could see, they were alive but hurt.

She only hoped that they stayed out of it for a little bit longer. The last thing either of them wanted was for one of the agents to

look in the rearview mirror and see Clark doing something inhuman.

“I’m choking,” Lois said.

It wasn’t true, of course. People who were actually choking couldn’t talk. The seatbelt WAS biting into her neck and she suspected that the agents in the front seat weren’t in any better shape.

The look on Clark’s face was frightening her. He’d controlled his anger as long as she’d known him, and after their talks she knew why. He lived in a literal world of tissue paper, and had learned a long time ago that getting angry had consequences.

He glanced at her, and seeing the blood on her face he grimaced.

The world blurred around her and Lois found herself leaning against the wall of an alley, the two agents beside her. She turned her head and she could see the door to the SUV still flying through the air. The back of the vehicle was on fire.

“Clark…” she said.

He was facing away from her, his figure upright and tense, his fists clenched.

“Don’t do it,” she said in a whisper.

Turning slightly, he stared at her. “They tried to kill you. They’ll kill your family, Brother Wayman, Charlie, everybody I know. They’ve got to be stopped.”

“Please,” she said.

Earlier she thought that she’d be able to kill to protect her family. She still did, although she suspected that it would leave a void in her soul.

Clark couldn’t take that step; once he decided to stop one criminal by killing him, what would stop him from doing it again and again? The thing about rage was that indulging it simply made you better at being angry. She’d learned that, if nothing else, from her mother.

“Leave it to the law,” she said. “They’ll be punished.”

He laughed harshly. “Like I was? I broke a kid’s bones and all I had to do was cross state lines and nobody even bothered to try to find me.”

“You are a good person,” Lois said. “It was an accident.”

“Was it?” he asked. “You act like I’m a saint, but I wanted to hurt him. He was a bully, and he just kept pushing and pushing and pushing. I didn’t want to hurt him as badly as I did, but—”

“Stopping when you saw how hurt he was wasn’t the act of a bad person,” Lois said. “The important thing is that you learned from it and won’t do it again.”

Lois could see that three vehicles had pulled behind the burning SUV. Men with guns were getting out of the black vans.

She didn’t have much time. In the mood he was in, Clark could hurt the lot of them in ways that would permanently damage him.

He stepped toward the men, but notably only at normal speed.

“Remember how ashamed you were?” Lois called out.

He stopped.

Lois had done some reading about her mother’s condition once, and she’d read something about the difference between guilt and shame. Guilt was the feeling that one was a good person who’d done a bad thing. Shame was the feeling that a person was worthless.

His shoulders slumped. “What do you want me to do?”

“You were raised by good parents,” Lois said. “I can hear it in your voice every time you talk about them. What would they tell you to do now?”

He was silent for a long moment. “People are already calling the police.”

“Make them think we’re dead,” Lois suggested.

He smiled slightly. He turned back to the SUV, and a moment later it exploded into a fireball. The men who had been

approaching stepped back, and some of them began to file back into the vans.

One of them, a tall man in a black shirt and jeans with a ski mask, stopped. He pointed a gun in Clark’s direction and fired.

“We’re just leaving the agents behind?” Lois asked.

They were back on Clark’s bicycle, for which he’d momentarily blurred away to retrieve. Lois couldn’t even remember where in the city he’d stored it, and she couldn’t imagine what the world must look like when he moved at that kind of speed.

“They’re after us,” Clark said. “All of them. The police will be there within two minutes and both agents have strong heartbeats. They’ll probably wake up on their own soon, although they probably shouldn’t drive.”

As far as the thugs in the vans were concerned, Clark had just grabbed a bike off the streets.

Lois could hear the sound of guns being fired and sometimes Clark grunted. Once he plucked something out of the air by her ear.

In the darkness there was no way for the men to know whether they’d hit anything or not, and shooting moving objects was notoriously difficult, whatever Hollywood said.

Still, the gunfire behind them sounded a little like a bag of popcorn in the microwave; without Clark, Lois would have been dead long ago.

Again, she was struggling to hold herself up. If they got out of this she promised herself she would work out more.

“I can’t keep this up,” she said. “My hands are going to slip.”

“The police are close,” Clark said. “I’m heading toward them.”

Lois was silent for a moment. “Are you sure they won’t outgun the police?”

“They’re going through ammunition quickly,” Clark said. “By the time the cops get here, they’ll have to surrender. Just give them a couple more minutes.”

He grabbed at something before it could hit her shoulder.

“I don’t think I can hold on for two more minutes,” Lois muttered.

Before Clark could reply, they heard the gunning of an engine in front of them. The Impala came squealing around the corner and Clark cursed under his breath. Apparently he’d been so busy with the bullets and keeping up with the police that he’d missed this.

The Impala charged straight toward them and Clark swerved to avoid it.

They went over a curb and Lois screamed as they plowed down an embankment into a construction area. Someone had left a gate open and Clark swerved for that. If Lois wasn’t on the front of the bike he could easily have plowed through the chain link fence, but this way was better.

Undoubtedly he looked out of control from behind, and Lois could hear the Impala swerving to follow, along with the black vans.

She had a moment to wonder what was being dug out as they plunged downward into a large pit. Maybe it was the basement for a large building.

All she knew was that they were heading for a large mound of dirt in the middle of the pit. Clark picked up speed, heading for the ramp of dirt leading up to the top of the mound. Her hands were slipping and she screamed.

A moment later they were in the air. Clark’s arm wrapped around her stomach as they launched off the ramp, and she heard a crashing sound from below as the Impala and vans tried unsuccessfully to follow.

They didn’t come down. Instead, they simply hung in the night sky motionless against the stars.

“Don’t worry,” Clark said. “I’ve got you.”

“Who’s got you?” Lois couldn’t help that her voice sounded a little shrill and hysterical.

“Uh... I don’t know,” he admitted. “This is new.”

The bicycle dropped from underneath her and a moment later they were dropping. He grabbed it with one hand.

Lois could see police cars surrounding the construction site. Apparently assaulting FBI agents merited a big response.

The men were spilling out of the vans, which were wrecked. The Impala was totaled.

Lois twisted around in Clark’s grasp until she could stare at him. “You didn’t know you could do this?”

“I thought I’d make the jump,” he said. “I was going to grab you and ditch the bike on the other side. I kept thinking I just needed a little more altitude.”

“Well, you’ve got it now,” Lois said.

“This changes everything,” Clark said, seeming stunned.

“So you just happened to find a bicycle unlocked in Metropolis at 10:30 at night,” Agent Pierce said. “And you managed to outpace three vans full of armed men for ten minutes, leading them to the construction site for Lex Luthor’s new skyscraper.”

“I’m a professional bicyclist,” Clark said. “Sort of. I’ve been dodging traffic in Metropolis for almost a year now.”

“Then you made what had to be a fifty-foot leap in the dark without so much as a bruise.”

Clark shrugged. “We got lucky.”

Agent Pierce stared at them for a long moment, then shrugged. “It works for me. We caught twenty of Bill Church’s thugs; at least one or two of them would have been happy to testify.”

“Would have been?” Lois asked, her voice rising. “What do you mean would have been? You can’t be dropping the case. There are two FBI agents in the hospital and my parents are in danger. Who’s—”

Agent Pierce shook his head. “It’s a moot point now. When we went to the Church residence to arrest them, we found Bill Church and his two sons dead. They were killed execution-style.”

Lois sat back in her chair. “What?”

“There have been rumors of a new player in town,” Agent Pierce said. “Someone in competition with Intergang. Apparently, when Bill Church pulled some of his bodyguards from the protection detail to come after you, they took advantage of the situation to take out the head of the competition.”

Clark was pale, and Lois knew how he felt.

She was responsible indirectly for the deaths of all three men. Counting Joe Malloy, four. If she hadn’t been so determined to show her father she could do it on her own by writing her article and getting the internship, all of those men would still be alive.

“I hope you’re cleaning up his organization,” Lois said.

“We’re trying, but the new player is snapping up Intergang’s members faster than we can catch them.” Agent Pierce hesitated, looking suddenly self-conscious. “None of this is for publication, by the way.”

Lois shook her head. “I’m not writing any more articles for a while.”

She would eventually, but she’d have to do a little soul-searching about the effect her words had on people’s lives.

“Is my family in any danger?” she asked.

The last thing her mother or Lucy needed was some thug coming after them bent on revenge.

“If it was the Mafia, you’d have some problems. Those organizations are all about family bonds and loyalty. Intergang, from what we’ve been able to see, was set up like a business. The only loyalty was to whoever was in charge.”

Agent Pierce leaned forward. “Whoever the new guy is,

you’ve done him a favor.”

Lois stared in the mirror for the twentieth time.

The weeks after Joe and Tom’s deaths had been difficult at Metropolis High. People had been so stunned, even the suspension of a large part of the football team couldn’t eclipse the scandal.

Opinion toward Lois had wavered back and forth, but the coach’s resignation kept the team from being completely unable to play. Principal Hardwick was still under investigation.

Lois had been surprised at how involved both her parents had been in the case; apparently almost losing her had brought them together in some ways. Her mother only complained about her father every other time she called. They were both united in their push for Hardwick to be fired.

The assistant coach had turned out to have unexplored talents. Although he was a quiet man, he’d been to every game and he helped several of the suspended members get their grades up to the passing mark in time to play.

Clark was still something of a pariah, but he really didn’t care. Now that he could fly, there was a strange sort of joy that she could see in his eyes every time she looked at him.

The doorbell rang and Lois took one last look at herself in the mirror. She’d spent more than she could afford on the dress, and she’d dabbed on a tiny amount of perfume. She couldn’t smell it, but she knew Clark would be able to.

“Pumpkin!”

Her father’s voice came from downstairs, sounding irritated as he always did these days.

He didn’t approve of Clark at all, the homeless criminal who’d almost gotten his precious daughter killed. As far as he was concerned, Clark wasn’t worth the effort to step on.

Yet she’d overheard him tell her mother that she was different when she was around Clark. Her step was lighter and she was happier.

It was true, of course.

She ran down the stairs and stopped. He was standing at the base of the stairs in a tuxedo, a large corsage in his hands. He’d never looked so handsome.

They landed in the darkness outside the school.

“Wait,” Lois said.

Clark stopped and turned toward her.

“I’ve been thinking,” Lois said slowly. “What if I DIDN’T go to Ireland in January?”

“Haven’t you been planning that for longer than I’ve known you?”

Lois looked down. “Yes, but—”

“Why would you even say something like that?”

Lois looked at him. “We’ve just started this, and long-distance relationships don’t work very well.”

Clark chuckled.

Scowling, Lois said, “I don’t know what you think is so funny. This is important to me.”

“You’ll never know how much it means to me. Lois Lane giving up something she wants?” He grinned. “But you don’t have to.”

“Not seeing you for four months,” Lois said. She shook her head. She’d never understood how girls could be so stupid as to give up their dreams for a boy, but now that it was her turn it seemed to make perfect sense.

Clark was unique, and if she lost him she’d never find another person like him.

“I can fly,” Clark said. “I’ve already flown to Dublin three times; I got lost the first couple of times, but it’s a five-minute flight now.”

He was silent a moment. “I wouldn’t ask you to give up

anything for me. You're the one who's giving me the gift."

"Shut up," Lois said. She pulled him down and kissed him.

The homecoming game this year wasn't going to be the usual easy win, not with the team decimated as it was, but Lois didn't care. She was with Clark and he was with her.

She'd struggled since her mother and father separated, never feeling like she belonged in either of their houses. They loved her, but she already knew she was going to leave them as soon as she could. When she was with Clark, though, she felt different.

Being with him felt like she was coming home and she was sure that he felt the same way about her.

No matter what happened, homecoming was going to be grand.

They stepped forward into the light.

Epilogue

"Chief!" Perry said, bursting into Perry's office. "I think there's a story here and we should check that guy out...the crazy one from this morning. His name is Samuel Platt and he was an engineer for EPRAD for ten years."

"Can't you see I'm in the middle of something here?" Perry's voice was gruff.

"Oh," Lois said. She stood in the doorway, waiting.

Perry sighed. "Lois Lane...this is Clark Kent, the new owner."

Clark rose to his feet and turned to smile at her. There was a mischievous look in his eye, and he reached out as though to shake her hand.

"Hey, Clark," Lois said, barely glancing at him, almost unable to keep herself from grinning. "Anyway, this guy worked on the Messenger, and so—"

Apparently, her nonchalant act wasn't convincing. Staring at them, Perry said, "You two know each other?"

"We've been friends since high school," Lois said. "He's taking me to the White Orchid ball tonight."

"You never mentioned that you knew THE Clark Kent," Perry said.

"I know lots of people," Lois said. "I just don't keep everyone apprised of my social calendar. I'm not Cat Grant."

"Lois wanted to make it on her own," Clark said. "Without any rumors that she got where she is today by associating with me."

The fact that their initial association had led to the deaths of Perry's friend and his children also played into it. It had been hard enough in the first years before he forgave her; she was hardly going to bring it up again now.

"So why buy us out now?" Perry asked.

"I believe in a free press," Clark said. "When I heard that certain other parties were thinking about buying it, I had to protect it."

After all these years, Clark sometimes sounded like a politician. It was a hazard of what he did, Lois supposed. She was glad he was still himself with her.

"So you aren't planning on making any major changes...or asking for special favors?"

"Not at all," Clark said.

"In that case, what happened to that mood piece I gave you?"

Lex Luthor kept staring daggers at Clark. It obviously galled him that Clark had come, but as a guest of Lois Lane there wasn't much he could do about it without seeming openly rude.

"Lex," Lois said. "I understand that you and Clark are old acquaintances. He's the new owner of the *Daily Planet*."

Over the years, Lois had learned that the best way to get what she needed was to keep someone off balance. Lex Luthor was a master at keeping his emotions hidden, but Clark always kept him off balance.

He'd been somewhat open about the fact that the only person he hated more than Superman was Clark Kent.

"I had no idea you were on the guest list," Lex said sourly. "Or I'd have made special arrangements."

Clark's lips twitched. "I'm flattered that you'd go out of your way to do anything for me."

"I've never understood why you two don't get along," Lois said, lying. She'd been listening to Clark for years about the matter, and they were gradually gathering evidence to prove Clark's suspicions. Clark's only regret about coming out as Superman was that Lex had immediately taken anti-Superman measures.

Lead-based paint had made an immediate comeback in Lex's businesses. Soundproofing had also been installed, although it wasn't as foolproof as Lex thought.

"We've got very different views of the world," Lex said. "I believe that effort should be rewarded, he believes that people should get handouts."

"We give people a chance to get back on their feet," Clark said mildly. "With dignity and respect."

"If you cared so much about these people, why did you turn down my donation?"

Clark had refused Lex's donation to the Superman Foundation; Lex had been trying to get Superman to work for him since Superman's debut, and he'd wanted him to help launch his LexCorp satellite.

The weapons platform Clark found hidden in Lex's copy of the plans hadn't been in the one provided to the Superman Foundation.

"There were strings attached that were unacceptable," Clark said. He looked out over the ballroom floor. "The party seems to be going well."

"It's not like you aren't double-dipping yourself," Lex said. "Using the alien to launch satellites in orbit, then paying the Superman Foundation, which you control."

Obviously this irritated Lex, although from what Lois understood, he'd never been worried about fairness in his dealings with others.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you weren't using the alien to help you find all those sunken treasures," Lex said.

"Everybody knows that Superman only showed up three years ago," Clark said. "I've been in business for almost ten. Superman has nothing to do with my salvage business; I take care of that myself."

Clark had turned the wrecks into a vast fortune. The three-billion-dollar platinum find from a World War II-era wreck had only been the basis of his fortune. The other wrecks had enlarged it. Clark's business dealings had expanded it even further.

"You're worth one-fifth what I am, and people act as though you're the richest man."

"There's more to wealth than money. You might try philanthropy that doesn't involve putting your name on everything."

"Like you put the Superman logo on everything? At least I don't collect a residual every time somebody buys a pair of panties or a T-shirt."

"Actually, you sell those things at LexMart."

Lex had gobbled up the old CostMarts and renamed them in his own image. Quality had suffered, but profits had never been higher.

That they competed directly in the aerospace field irritated Lex to no end. He'd been trying to get control of Superman almost since the alien had appeared.

"I'd like to know what kind of leverage you've got against the alien," Lex continued.

"What makes you think I'm controlling him?" Clark said. "He's got his agenda and I just do what I can to make it happen."

“Putting worthless human refuse up in free housing is the best use of money either one of you can think of?” Lex shook his head. “You’d be twice as rich if you did the sensible thing and invested in colleges and concert halls.”

“I like to invest in people,” Clark said. “Helping people be happy helps everybody.”

What galled Lex more than anything wasn’t the competition. It was that Clark was more popular than he was. He’d never completely own the city as long as Clark was there. While Lex signed their checks, Clark had their heart.

Of course, not everyone was a fan.

“The unions aren’t exactly happy with you,” Lex said, with a hint of smugness. “Having the alien build housing is a threat to honest construction workers, electricians and laborers.”

Blaming Lex for this would have been easy, but as far as Lois could see, the unions were fighting Clark all on their own. Oddly, Clark had no problems with the unions in his actual business ventures, but they were actively trying to block his charitable building program.

“I didn’t think you were a fan of the unions,” Lois said.

Ignoring her, Lex continued. “I’ve heard there’s been some problem with people who weren’t homeless taking advantage of the problem... why pay rent when you can get housing for free?”

“We’re instituting controls for that,” Clark said.

“It’s not popular in the actual neighborhoods you build them, either,” Lex said. “Although I have to admit that it gets the riff-raff off the street, which makes life a little more tolerable for the rest of us.”

There were always zoning restrictions, public complaints and referendums. People didn’t understand that Clark was trying to create something more hopeful than the dead-end crime cesspools that public housing often became.

Each one of his centers provided not only housing, but job skills training, mental health and chemical dependency needs, and other medical care. He was careful to make each one a community where people helped each other. The last thing he wanted was the attitudes of despair seen in many public housing projects.

“Everybody’s life is better when the poorest are taken care of.”

Lex’s lips thinned. “I’ve heard you make the arguments before. Weakened immune systems make them perfect breeding grounds for disease. On that we can agree. It would be simpler to re-institutionalize them. We didn’t have this epidemic before they were released onto the street like a plague of vermin.”

Clark’s fist tightened, but he didn’t show any other sign of anger. He’d gotten better at hiding his anger over the years, although Lois could still tell.

“I’m surprised you’ve decided to go forward with your own space station plans now that EPRAD has theirs up and running.”

“I noticed that they refused the alien’s help,” Lex said.

“He helped with some of the construction,” Clark said. “But EPRAD wanted to prove that they could make deliveries to and from the station without Superman’s help. After all, there are times when he’s called away to do other important work.”

Lex had manipulated them into the decision; part of the reason Lois was here tonight was to try to find out why.

“I feel like dancing,” Lois said to Clark.

If the two men were allowed to continue, they’d argue all night. They’d never gotten along, not since Lex realized that people saw Clark as his social equal.

Lois could only hope Clark could help her; Lex was a canny customer about covering his tracks.

Impossibly, Lois could still hear the music playing from below them. It was a trick of the thermal currents; she shouldn’t have been able to hear anything at this distance. For some reason,

Lex was playing “Fly Me to the Moon.”

The moon was actually visible, full and high in the sky. They were floating slowly above Lex’s tower. They’d made their excuses and left the party shortly after Lex had made his presentation. A little of Lex was all Clark could take.

He was in his costume, as he always was when he flew these days. Clark Kent was almost as famous as Superman and it wouldn’t do for a photographer to catch him flying in his business suit especially since the two men had been seen together at multiple events. Clark had stumbled across a young actor who’d been thinking of being a Superman impersonator and hired him instead to be his body double.

The man thought Clark had a mistress on the side, and he’d been used occasionally for non-Superman related events so he wouldn’t make the connection.

“He’s up to something,” Clark was saying. “I can’t prove it yet, but—”

Lois put her finger to his lips. “I’m tired of talking about Lex. Did you realize it’s our ten-year anniversary?”

He frowned. “That’s not for a few weeks.”

“Of the first time we met... in the locker room.”

“We were in the same class for weeks before that,” Clark said.

Lois ran her hand down his chest. “It was the first time I really noticed you.”

Clark was silent for a long moment. “I noticed you the first day we were in class. You didn’t know I was alive, and I wasn’t exactly in a position to ask you out for a date, so I tried to forget about it.”

“I’m glad you didn’t give up on me.”

He spun her around, his cape flaring out behind him in the way that he knew she loved.

“Maybe it’s time we went public,” he said.

Lois frowned. “Superman has done a lot of good. Without him, you wouldn’t be able to do a lot of what you do.”

“I meant about us,” Clark said. “You’ve already won four Kerthys, and a Pulitzer isn’t out of the question the way things are going. You’ve proven that you deserve everything you deserve.”

“And how would I keep getting the stories if I WAS the story?” Lois asked. “We’ve talked about this before. Lois Lane can go places Lois Kent can’t.”

Clark nodded. A moment later they were descending through the clouds, heading for his home.

Unlike Lex, Clark lived in a modest home near Lois’s apartment. He’d bought a ruined two-story building in the middle of a bad neighborhood, then worked to remodel both the building and his neighbors.

It was a different sort of place now, filled with flowers and children’s laughter. It was one of his proudest accomplishments, although outside forces kept trying to get his neighbors to sell.

They landed in the middle of the park a block from his house. It was built on the site of a former crack house but was now filled with flowers. They sometimes came here in the evenings after most of the neighbors had gone to bed.

After checking for others, Clark spun back in his tuxedo.

“I wish you’d reconsider,” he said. He pulled out a ring from his pocket.

Clark was a billionaire, but the ring was deceptively plain and simple. It was the sort of ring that a young farm couple in love might have been able to afford in the sixties.

He’d tracked down some of his parents’ possessions once he’d gotten the money, and this was his most precious. His mother’s wedding ring meant the world to him, and by offering it, he was offering her everything.

Slowly dropping to one knee, he looked up at her, his eyes shining in the moonlight.

Lois hesitated, her mind racing. In the end, though, there was

only one answer she could give him.

“Do you ever think about how things might have been different if your parents had lived?” Lois asked, staring up at the sky.

In most of Metropolis the constant light hid the stars, but they were lying on top of a gazebo in the middle of Clark’s park.

“Less since I met you,” Clark said. “Before that, I thought about it every day.”

“Do you think you’d be different?”

“I probably wouldn’t have worked as hard,” Clark admitted. “I wouldn’t have worried as much about money.”

Lois reached out and took his hand. It probably would have been easier to accept him without all the fame and money. Someone like Clark tended to overshadow everyone around him.

She’d have accepted his offer years ago without it.

“But I’m okay with how things are,” Clark said. “I’m where I’m supposed to be.”

Coming from any other billionaire, it would have seemed like arrogance, but Clark had never cared about money, not really. It had always been a tool to use to help people.

“It might have been easier to be poor and anonymous,” Lois said.

“I might never have met you,” he countered.

“I’m the top reporter at the best newspaper in the world,” Lois said. “There’s no way I wouldn’t have met you, even if I’d had to throw myself off a bridge.”

“I’m glad you aren’t that reckless,” Clark said.

Knowing that Clark was always there to save her had made her more cautious, not less. She wanted to prove to him, as well as herself, that she could do it on her own. That she’d still gotten her Kerths was a source of pride for her.

She kissed him.

Now that the decision was made, there were a hundred other decisions to follow. Her life was about to change in ways both good and bad, but after all these years it was time.

“Let’s go home,” she said.

THE END