

# All Shook Up – Matchmaker Style

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Summary: Clark has to deal with Nightfall, but now when he goes missing his wife, Lois, is searching desperately for him and when she finds him is desperate to restore his memory.

This is a sequel to Honeymoon in Metropolis – Matchmaker style

Disclaimers: The characters in this story are property of DC Comics, December 3<sup>rd</sup> Productions and Warner Bros. No copyright infringement is intended. I have just borrowed the characters for a short time.

My thanks go out to my betas — Artemis and Ray for their help.

Lois and Clark now live in Clark's 'old' apartment.

In this particular story a lot of the dialogue is taken from the script text. I wish to express my thanks to my beta readers Artemis and Ray Reynolds for their invaluable help. This was a VERY rough draft when it first landed in their hands.

\*Words in asterisks\* denote emphasis

<denotes thoughts>

As always comments are welcome. (ken.janney@kjanney.com)

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## Chapter 1

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha -34 x Gamma 255 x Tau -225

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Lois awoke slowly. She was lying on her right side and she could feel the very solid presence of her husband's body spooned against her back and his left arm draped across her stomach. She reached down with her left hand and gently picked his hand up and moved it up so that it rested on her breast. She didn't know if he was awake or if it was simply a reflex that caused him to squeeze ever so gently. Whichever it was she reveled in the feeling of connection and the contentment that it produced. A few seconds later she had her answer because she felt feather-light kisses on the back of her neck. She said, in a throaty whisper, "Good morning, Husband."

The kisses stopped and she felt the breath on the back of her neck as he responded, "Good morning, Wife," as he gave her breast one more gentle squeeze.

She scooted around so that she was facing him and gave him a kiss. "I just love waking up this way, with you here in bed with me. I miss you so when you have an early morning rescue and I wake up alone."

"I'll have to keep that in mind and try harder to get back before you wake up from now on."

She gave him another kiss. "You're so thoughtful. It's almost more than I can stand. I'm so in love with you."

"I think that it's a tie for who loves whom the most."

Just then the alarm clock on Lois's side of the bed began to ring.

With an irritated sigh she rolled back over, reached for it and shut it off. Flopping onto her back she looked at the ceiling and said, "Oh, well, I guess that means it's time to get ready for work."

Clark eased out from under the covers and stood. As he did, Lois propped herself up on her elbows so that she could watch him as he slowly walked from his side of the bed, around the foot and toward the bathroom.

He was aware of her perusal and took pains to move slowly. As he walked he did an early morning stretch, flexing his arm and shoulder muscles making them stand out and ripple like steel cables under his skin. He could hear Lois's breathing rate increase and then her gasp when as he neared the bathroom he started to slide his sleep shorts off. Looking back over his shoulder he could see a look of pure lust in her eyes. Once he had them off, he turned around and casually asked, "Do you want the usual this morning or should we pick up a coffee at Daryl's?"

Lois's mind was definitely not on her morning beverage as she sat there and stared open-mouthed and almost drooling at the sight of her very naked husband in all his glory.

Clark smiled a happy smile. He was thought, <Yes, two can play at that game. Now you know what you do to me all the time.> "I think we'll stop at Daryl's this morning for a change of pace."

She felt like her brain had turned to mush. It suddenly dawned on her that he had been speaking, but not one word had registered. "Huh?"

As he turned away he said, "I said, 'We'll stop at Daryl's today for coffee,'" and disappeared into the bathroom.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Lois came out of her lust-caused stupor. She almost shouted, "Clark Kent, you get back here, this instant!"

Opening the door, he looked out and said, "Yes, dear?" As soon as the door was open, his super sense of smell picked up the aroma of her arousal. Smelling that caused a reaction in his own body.

The desire in her eyes was obvious as she said, "You just can't do that to me." As she watched him emerge from the bathroom she saw his response. Seeing that caused her breaths to start coming in shallow gasps and her heart-rate to increase.

"Do what?" Her scent was becoming stronger and he started to move in her direction. The closer he got to her, the stronger his response was.

"You know very well, what I'm talking about. Get over here, husband mine and fulfill your marital duty by filling your wife." Her eyes were glued to him as he walked toward her. She threw the covers off.

"But, we'll be late." He was now at her side and reaching out grasped the waistband of her panties and started drawing them down her long slender legs.

At his first touch she let out a sigh which slowly became a growl of desire. Then she growled, "Right now, I don't care if we are. It'll be worth it."

Once he had her panties off he slid his hands up her legs, caressing them as he moved up to her torso. He caressed her hips and the curve of her waist before his hands moved under her top and he found her breasts. His hands circled her breasts and squeezed gently while his thumb grazed over her erect nipples. Each time he did she would release a small gasp.

She pulled her top up to her neck to give him unobstructed access to her breasts and he moved in. When he did, his tongue flicked out and laved her hard nipple, wetting it slightly. Then he pulled back and blew on it, not enough to freeze the saliva, but enough to cool it. Once he had chilled her nipple he lowered his

mouth to her breast and took her cold nipple into his warm mouth, flicking his tongue over it and applying some suction.

Lois was whimpering her desire as he did all of this. Her hips began to move of their own accord. She buried her fingers in his hair and pulled his face from one breast to the other.

That started a period of marital intimacy.

When she finally released him he lay next to her and caressed her breasts and body as she slowly relaxed.

After several minutes she exhaled, deeply, and said, “Wow. That was something to remember.”

He replied, with heartfelt emotion, “I’ll never forget.”

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After parking the Jeep they walked hand in hand to Daryl’s Coffee Cart. There were pedestrians bustling to and fro around them, but they were in their own little world as they strolled along.

Taking a deep breath and looking up Clark said, “I love the morning. Anything’s possible in the morning.”

The smugly satisfied grin that she had had on her face since their coupling was infectious. In a tone so low only he could hear it, Lois quipped, “Especially when it starts the way this one did.” Then reality began to intrude and she raised her tone. “Now we have to deal with the real world, because, as of this moment, we don’t even have the tiniest fragment of something that might someday, with a lot of work, resemble a story.”

Catching her smile, Clark said, “C’mon. We had a \*great\* story yesterday.”

In a tone that approached being cynical, Lois said, “You know Perry. You’re only as good as today.”

As they approached, Frank, the vendor, spotted them and started preparing what they usually ordered. When they reached the cart he had their orders ready. As he handed Lois hers he said, “Short non-fat mocha, decaf, no foam, no sugar, no whipped.” As he handed Clark his he said, “Grande latte, full caf, whole milk, three sugars.”

Lois looked up and said, “Sorry, Frank, can I change mine?”

Frank gave her a wary look. “How?”

“Just add one sugar and a dash of cream. Real cream, not that half-n-half stuff.”

Frank took it back and made the changes. “Here you go.”

“Thanks, Frank.”

As he handed it to her he said, “I don’t see you guys around here much anymore. What happened?”

Lois turned to him and said, “Oh, you don’t know? We got married!”

“Congratulations! That keeps you away?”

Clark replied, “Well, no ... it’s just that ...”

Lois finished for him, “Well, you see it’s this way ... Clark usually makes us coffee in the morning. We were running a little behind today.”

Frank said, “I thought something had changed. I saw the hand holding as you approached.” He gave them a knowing look before he said, “Running late. I know how it is. I was a newlywed once upon a time myself.”

Lois started to blush.

Clark said, “Thanks, Frank,” and placing his free hand at Lois’s low back, Clark guided her away. Lois took a sip of her coffee and grimaced. She said to him softly, “Yours is much better.”

“It has a secret ingredient.”

“Oh, what is that secret ingredient?”

He stopped her and looked her in the eyes as he said in a low tone, “Love.”

Lois’s knees suddenly felt weak and she had to reach for his arm to steady herself.

The arm that had been at her back was suddenly around her waist pulling her against his body and her knees became weaker

still. She just stared up into his dark brown eyes and marveled again that this man was her husband. She just couldn’t believe how fortunate she was. <He is one in a million. No, billion. No, trillion. Oh how many people are there on this planet anyhow? And he’s all mine.> Her lips parted in anticipation and he didn’t disappoint her. He bent down and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips.

After some time she managed to get herself together, indicated her drink and quipped, “If I drank this all of the time, I’d have to spend half the day in the gym.”

With a leer, he said, “I don’t know about that. You expended a lot of calories this morning and you weren’t in the gym.”

Playfully she slugged his arm and said, “I guess you may be right. I’m just maintaining my energy levels.”

Before Lois could say anymore she was interrupted by a sudden reduction in the light around them. As they looked around it grew darker and darker.

With concern in his voice, Clark asked, “What’s going on?”

Lois offered, “Solar eclipse?”

Shaking his head, Clark said, “Nah, they always announce them in advance. Astronomers know when and just where the shadow will fall. About twenty-three or twenty-four years ago, while I was a kid, we took a vacation and went to Canada, Nova Scotia actually. Anyhow, we got to Antiganish just before an eclipse was scheduled to occur. That’s the first one I can remember seeing. It looked like this though. Could the astronomers have missed this one?”

As he finished speaking the light continued to fade. Clark, knowing that he might be needed, quickly handed his coffee to Lois to free his hands. Quickly the darkness became profound. The darkness was unbroken by streetlights and drivers had been surprised by the sudden change in the light level. A car that had been making a turn overshot and skidded around a corner near them. Clark could see pedestrians in the way that would be hurt if the driver didn’t regain control. The driver also saw the pedestrians and panicked. He slammed on the brake which threw the car into a worse skid, totally out of control. Clark looked around and most people had their heads back, staring up into the sky so he used his superspeed to get in front of the car. He braced himself and as the car came within reach he put his hands on the hood. To avoid injuring the driver by stopping the car dead like it had hit a tree, he allowed his feet to skid along the pavement using them to brake the car. When the car was about at a standstill he saw people starting to turn to look so he jumped back as if he had been hit, landing on a pile of boxes and miscellaneous trash that was piled for pickup.

When Lois looked and saw that Clark was missing she looked around and saw him flying through the air into the trash pile. She rushed over to him and helped him up. Under her breath she asked, “How’d this happen?”

As he straightened his tie he said, “Tell you later.”

Clark feigned confusion after the collision, but looking up asked, “What happened?”

Lois shook her head. “The sun just ... blacked out! But why?”

Nodding, Clark agreed with her. “Good question.”

Smiling, Lois said, “Yeah. But it’s going to be an even better story.” She pulled him in the direction of the Planet as she said, “Come on. This could be our lucky day.”

While Lois dragged him in the direction of the Planet, Clark was distracted by all that was happening around him. People were wandering about aimlessly, dazed and confused from the sudden darkness even though it was lifting. He closely examined the streets in the immediate vicinity and didn’t see any mishaps like the one he had prevented. Then he looked up and used his telescopic vision to try and determine the cause of this astronomical anomaly as he allowed her to drag him away.

They made their way into the lobby and found the door to the

elevator standing open. Quickly entering and pushing the button for the newsroom floor they waited for the doors to close. As soon as they were she was in his arms once again. They were both careful of their coffees that they didn't spill them on each other as their lips merged and their bodies melted into one another.

They had taken this trip so many times that they both knew just how long they had and seconds before the doors were to open they separated. By the time the doors were open they were standing side by side with their free hands entwined. Like a switch had been thrown, as soon as the doors were open, Lois was all action. She threw herself down the ramp, nearly at a run, placed her coffee on her desk, dropped her bag on her chair and shouted, "Jimmy!"

Anticipating her, Jimmy had been approaching. "Lois?"

"Jimmy, call the observatory!"

"Which observatory?"

"I don't care, any observatory. We need to know what caused ... that!"

Jimmy turned away and as he did, said, "Already on it."

Lois was startled and asked, "Already?" Then Lois noticed what was happening in the newsroom. She had been too focused to see anything but her objective.

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## Chapter 2

When they entered the newsroom pandemonium had broken out. People were scurrying hither and yon. The big screen TV was on LNN and blaring out reports of accidents all over the city, all of them minor. All of this had gone unnoticed by Lois.

Perry spotted them and yelled, "Lois, Clark, my office. Pronto!"

They headed for his office. As they entered, he said, "Close the door."

Clark was closing the door as Perry settled into his chair. Perry said, "I just had a call from the Public Affairs Office at EPRAD Headquarters. They're calling all of the major media outlets to let them know about a news conference being held in one hour. I want the two of you over there on this story."

Lois asked, "Is it about that phenomenon that just happened?"

"That'd be my guess, but at this point it's only a guess. Get over there and get the facts."

Clark replied, "We're on it, Chief."

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Over the PA system Professor Daitch said, "That concludes our presentation on the so-called Nightfall asteroid. Phones are available for those of you who need to file your stories immediately."

The doors to the Extra Planetary Research and Development (EPRAD) Headquarters burst open and people flooded out. If an observer didn't know better they would be convinced that they were all fleeing a fire. Near the head of the flood of humanity were Lois and Clark.

Lois was wishing that she hadn't chosen to wear heels today. Her choice had not been driven by practicality. It had been driven by what she had chosen to wear. The skirt of her business ensemble was rather short and bright red, a red that pretty well matched Superman's cape. It had a red jacket over and she wore a blue shell under the jacket. The blue of the shell was a near match to Superman's blue spandex. The heels she was wearing were her favorite for that outfit. The height of the heels added length to her already long shapely legs, but they gave her calves definition and she wanted to look especially good for her husband today after their wonderful morning tryst.

Now however, they were proving to be a hindrance. They had just been to the news conference and as they were released everyone was making a mad dash for the public phones in the

kiosks just outside. Unfortunately, the number of reporters far exceeded the number of phones available. It was first-come-first-served and Lois was determined to be one of the first ones at the phones.

Lois indicated a TV reporter by the name of Frank Madison, who was on their heels, to Clark and said, "Take out Madison. He's behind you."

Clark was incredulous and said, "Why bother? Lois, these TV guys all get on the air before our afternoon edition anyway."

Suddenly Mad Dog Lane made an appearance. She gave Clark a push which sent him into Madison, knocking him down.

Clark offered Madison his hand and said, "Sorry. Sorry, I ..."

While Clark was helping Madison, Lois was behaving like a tight end in a broken field run for the end zone. She bobbed and weaved her way to the phones and managed to grab a handset just a nanosecond before it was going to be snatched by a reporter from the *Star*. She gave him a smug look as he said, "Give me a break, Lane," in a whiny tone.

As Clark finally approached, Lois was punching in the number for the *Planet*.

"Lois, was that really necessary?"

Lois's reply was succinct. "Kill or be killed."

Clark was taken aback. "Lois, you're talking about war. This is journalism!" Clark marveled that Lois had changed so much and she still hadn't changed that much. In her personal life she was sweet and tender, but at work she was still a success driven journalist.

The phone was starting to ring as she said, "See? Your problem is you think there's a difference." The phone was picked up and she heard Perry's voice. "Perry? Lois. Here's the story. It was an asteroid. What? Oh, okay." To Clark she said, "He's transferring me to Re-write." When the phone was answered, she began dictating the story. "Okay, it was definitely a solar eclipse, but get this, it was caused by this huge asteroid nobody's ever heard of before. I think there's more here than they're telling us ..."

As Lois was dictating the story, Professor Daitch, the man who had conducted the briefing, came out through a side door and approached the phone kiosks. Spotting the object of his search, he approached Clark. When he was close, he said, "Mr. Kent? Might I have a moment of your time?"

Clark nodded and after the professor looked around assessing the situation he inclined his head and the two of them stepped away from the milling throng so that they could have some privacy for their conversation.

Clark was curious of the reason for the private conversation. Why should he be singled out from all of the reporters? He asked, "Is there an update to the briefing?"

Professor Daitch shook his head and his face was tight, giving the impression of a person under a lot of pressure with no time for idle conversation. He got right to the point. "I understand the *Daily Planet* has a 'special' relationship with Superman."

Being careful how he replied, Clark said, "We've gotten our share of exclusives."

Daitch looked around to make sure that they weren't being eavesdropped upon and asked, "Can you get a message to him?"

Still being careful, Clark answered, "I could try."

Daitch said, "I need to see him ... here ... this evening."

Clark's curiosity was getting the best of him and he asked, "What's the message?"

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Lois had been curious about why Daitch had pulled Clark aside and had been watching as they stepped away and started talking. She was so distracted that her dictation of the story had some long pauses as she tried to hear what was being said.

Lois hung up the phone, but continued to stand in front of it, blocking access. She was so occupied that she didn't hear a

female voice at her side saying, “Lois, you done? Lois! Hello!”

The professor simply shook his head and seeing Lois was finished her call and knowing that she would be joining them shortly, he simply said, “Please,” and walked away.

As Daitch was leaving, Clark returned to Lois’s side. Lois gave Clark an inquiring look. She asked, “What’d he want?”

“He wants us to pass a message to Superman that he wants to see him, tonight.”

As she picked up her bag and stepped away from the phone, that same female voice said, “Thank you,” in a sarcastic tone.

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It was later in the evening when they returned to the Planet. Perry called a staff meeting so Lois and Clark joined their colleagues in the conference room.

As Perry entered, he said, “Okay, people, I know we’re working late, but this is a big one. I got us an extra half-hour before we go to press. Let’s make the most of it.” He looked back and forth between Lois and Clark then said, “Lane, Kent. One of you should be writing.”

Lois and Clark traded looks. Lois knew that Clark had to meet with Daitch so she said, “Clark, why don’t you . . .”

He looked at Perry and said, “I’m on it, Chief.” Clark gathered up their notes and left the conference room.

Since everyone else was in the conference room, Clark brought up his computer and started his word processor. Keeping his speed down to a point that the computer could keep up with him he typed up what they had, referring to the notes frequently. By using super speed he was able to accomplish in a minute what would look to anyone else to be an hour’s work.

Satisfied that what he had would pass muster, he sent it to Lois’s computer and scrawled a note, “Lois, be right back,” and dropped it on her desk. He knew that she would cover for him, but the note would help.

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While Clark had been doing his thing, the meeting had progressed. Perry had turned his attention to Jimmy. “Jimmy, how’s the lab coming with the slide from the telescope?”

Jimmy answered, “They said it’d be ready on time.”

Perry’s anxiety was obvious as he said, “I want you to go down to the lab, grab one of those folding chairs, set your fanny down and wait. The second that picture’s ready, I want it in lay-out.”

Jimmy couldn’t help, but feel that would be a waste of time and spoke up. “Okay, but I was thinking I could be more help—”

Perry glared at Jimmy and said, “Jimmy, I am in the ‘order mode,’ not the ‘discuss mode.’ Now which one are you in?”

With a hang-dog expression, Jimmy replied, “The, uh, ‘grab-a-chair-at-the-lab mode.’”

With a smile, Lois said, “Good choice.”

Jimmy jumped up and headed for the lab.

Perry turned to Cat and asked, “Now, Cat, where were you when the lights went out this morning?”

With an innocent look, Cat replied, “In bed.”

Even though their relationship had changed somewhat now that Lois was firmly with Clark, Lois just couldn’t resist the little jab. “What a surprise.”

Shaking his head at the banter, Perry continued, “I’m talking side-bar here, ladies. Cat, I want you to call all those big names in that Rolodex you keep locked up in your desk and get me some human interest. If you need help, ask Applegate.”

Applegate was sitting next to Cat. He was a skinny guy with lank hair, a dour expression, very prominent Adam’s apple, a scrawny neck and to top it all off, an old-fashioned bow tie and black-rimmed glasses. In other words, he was everything that Clark was not.

Applegate looked at Cat expectantly, eager to get the chance to work with the stunning auburn-haired beauty. Cat turned to

Perry and said, “I work alone.”

Perry accepted her statement for what it was and said, “Then do it fast.” To indicate that the meeting was finished, he clapped his hands. “Okay, boys and girls, it’s show time. Let’s go.”

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After leaving the note for Lois, Clark had headed for the stairwell. Running up to the roof, he spun into the Suit and took to the air.

The EPRAD center was located outside of town and the complex was arranged like a wheel around a mountain with the observatory on the peak looking like the hub of a wheel, the wheel being the administrative complex.

After a leisurely flight, Superman arrived above the complex. Earlier he, along with Lois and the other reporters, had all been gathered in a large auditorium in one of the buildings below the peak in the administrative area. Unsure of just where to go he first listened with his super hearing. Hearing servo motors running he headed for the observatory and landed outside of the doors. Finding them unlocked, he opened them and walked in. After passing through an atrium with a vacant receptionist desk he passed through a door into the dark observation chamber.

Professor Daitch was sitting on a stool under the eyepiece of the large telescope that was the purpose of the entire building. The professor was so absorbed in what he was viewing that he didn’t even realize that he was no longer alone in the room. One of his hands was on a control and constantly moving it, causing the servo motors that Superman had heard to run, adjusting the focus.

Superman waited patiently until Professor Daitch looked away and picked up a notepad to record his observations and then said, “You wanted to see me, Professor Daitch?”

Startled by this voice from the dark, Professor Daitch almost dropped his notepad, but turning in that direction realized quickly who it was that was addressing him and blurted out, “Superman!”

Superman stepped closer and indicating the telescope asked, “Mind if I have a look?”

Surprised by this request, Professor Daitch stepped aside and said, “I thought you had enhanced visual capabilities.”

With a small chuckle, Superman stepped up to the eyepiece and as he started looking through the telescope replied, “I do, but I have my limits too.”

When Superman looked through the lens he saw what looked like a small globe, however it didn’t have continents and oceans. It also didn’t look like the moon or any other celestial body he was familiar with. He asked, “What am I looking at Professor?”

“Oh, that’s 4581 Asclepius. It’s a relatively small NEA or Near Earth Asteroid. I was hoping that by studying that I could develop some ideas on how to handle Nightfall.”

Stepping away from the eyepiece, Superman asked, “It’s \*not\* Nightfall?”

“Uh, no. Nightfall is on the sunward side of the planet. We’re facing away from it right now. That is why I was studying 4581 Asclepius. I do have some slides that I took earlier today.”

Professor Daitch led Superman over to a desk with a computer setup. After bringing the computer up he called up the pictures. “These are Nightfall. Note the umbra . . . these were taken during the eclipse that it caused. We only have an optical device available here. With the sun behind the object we can’t see any detail.” A note of envy crept into his voice as he continued, “We’ve been in contact with a radio telescope facility and they have sent us some detailed images.” He called up a different set of pictures.

Superman asked, “Is it a difference in magnification or is this object . . . larger?”

“You’re right, Superman, it isn’t an optical illusion or a difference in magnification. This object is much larger. It’s approximately seventeen miles in diameter.”

Superman let out a low whistle before he said, “Fascinating what kind of surprises the universe can turn up, isn’t it?”

Daitch said, “Yes, I have to agree with you, Superman. Seventeen miles and travelling at close to thirty-thousand miles per hour.”

Superman looked away from the monitor where he had been studying the object and facing Daitch asked, “You told Kent and the other reporters as much at the news conference. Why am I here?”

Directing Superman’s attention back to the monitor, Daitch called up a program. A computer animation began to play and as it did they were distracted by a stylized, digital countdown on a big screen, next to the one showing the animation, complete with the EPRAD space logo which popped into existence. The clock read the hours, minutes and seconds as they counted down. Turning back to the animation, they watched as a marble-sized object approached a baseball-sized object and then ... impact. Daitch said, “The large sphere represents the Earth. The smaller one represents Nightfall. If my calculations are correct, in a little over four days, it’s going to hit the Earth.” He indicated the countdown clock and then continued, “The sky, literally, is falling.”

Grasping the seriousness of the situation, Superman asked, “What kind of damage could that cause?”

Daitch said, “Okay, I see you’ve grasped the gravity of the situation and want to cut right to the chase. You’re right, there’s no time to beat around the bush. Superman, this could knock the Earth off its axis. Even throw us out of our current solar orbit. Depending on the angle of impact it could accelerate or retard the Earth’s orbital speed. A slight increase and we would move farther out, possibly to a point where all of the water on the earth would freeze. A slight decrease and we would move closer to the sun and all of the water could evaporate. The tolerances are very slim either way. This is \*far\* larger than the meteor that caused the extinction of the dinosaurs. Even if it doesn’t disturb the Earth’s orbit, the ejecta from the impact crater alone will throw enough dust into the air to start a new ice age.” Professor Daitch paused as he saw Superman’s brow furrow. Then he resumed, “I know it’s a lot to get used to.”

But Superman’s brow had furrowed because he had heard a soft sound. Checking to see what had caused it he had used his x-ray vision to look through a door. When he did he saw two men. One was a somewhat portly older man who wore a business suit. The other a distinguished looking black man in an Air Force blue dress uniform which had several rows of ribbons representing medals over his left breast pocket and over them was a set of flight wings and a row of four stars lined his shoulder epaulettes.

Superman held up his hand and said, “No, it’s not that. We’re not alone.” Turning toward the nearby door, Superman said, “Might as well come out, gentlemen. I know you’re there.”

In response to his invitation the door opened and the two men he had seen came into the observatory and approached Superman and Daitch.

The officer spoke first. “Superman, my apologies. We felt you should hear the news from Professor Daitch before we were introduced.” He extended a hand to shake Superman’s as he performed the introductions. “I’m General Robert Zeitlin. This is Secretary John Cosgrove.”

There were formal handshakes all around.

Superman assumed that they were here to tell him that the government was going to keep a lid on this information and said, “You can’t keep this secret.”

Secretary Cosgrove spoke up. “The president will tell the public, but he wants to avoid panic, too. He simply wants to get you on board before making an announcement.”

Superman asked, “I take it this means that you agree with the professor’s calculations.”

General Zeitlin replied, “Yes. But, unfortunately with something this size, there is no military option. We’re looking into modifying a rocket but, at best, it would be a fifty-fifty proposition.”

Secretary Cosgrove hastened to add, “We need to improve those odds. The country needs your help, Superman. In point of fact the world needs you.”

Superman maintained his outward calm although inside his emotions were running wild. He said, “Of course. But you’re asking me to fly a million miles into space to stop a piece of rock the size of Metropolis that’s travelling faster than any spacecraft we’ve ever made.”

This answer worried Cosgrove. He asked, “Can you?”

Superman considered his answer and finally had to say, “I don’t know.”

Zeitlin was serious when he said, “You’re our only hope.”

Turning to Daitch and referring back to his earlier comment, Superman said, “I guess we’re about to find out what my limits really are.”

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### Chapter 3

Superman gave them permission to notify the president that he would commit to the mission and that they could begin the preparations before he excused himself.

His mood was very introspective as he flew back to the Planet. He landed on the roof and spun back into his work clothes before descending the stairs back to the newsroom floor. When he exited the stairwell he looked for Lois, finally spotting her in Perry’s office. Lois was standing in front of Perry’s desk as he approached. Clark knocked and without looking up, Perry waved him in.

He was stone-faced and Lois was chewing on her lower lip apprehensively while he read their copy. She had finished what Clark had started and submitted it.

Finally Perry looked up and smiled.

Lois released the breath she had been holding in relief.

Perry said, “If Elvis had gone into the newspaper business, he would have written like this. It simply ... sings! It has that Lane and Kent touch. It’s unmistakable.”

Lois looked at her watch and said, “Fifteen minutes to spare.”

Perry was happy. He said, “I tell you, when the *Planet’s* running, you can’t stop it ...”

Clark leaned down to Lois’s ear and whispered, “We need to talk.”

Lois nodded and said to Perry, “Chief, if that’s all, we’re going to get out of here.”

He was reaching for the phone to call Composing and said, “That’s fine. See you tomorrow.”

Clark said, “Goodnight, Chief,” and closed the door as they exited.

His apparent calm deserted him as soon as the door was closed. Lois spotted it and asked, “What is it?”

Looking around, Clark noted a number of staffers milling around, he said, “Not here. Let’s go home.”

Picking up on his concern, Lois hastily packed her bag and grabbed her jacket. As soon as she was ready, Clark hustled her into the elevator and they were on their way to the garage. Clark was quiet the entire way home and Lois knew better than to quiz him. Even though it galled her to have to wait, she held her peace until they were in the door of the apartment.

As soon as the door was closed behind them, Lois dropped her bag and turned on Clark. She was about to ask him what was happening when he grabbed her and pulled her into a hug. She didn’t know how, but she could feel the desperation in the move and it worried her. Her arms tightened reflexively around him as she finally asked, “Clark, what’s going on? It’s the asteroid, isn’t it?”

Mutely he just nodded in reply.

“It’s worse than we thought, isn’t it?”

Another nod.

Worried now, Lois asked, “How bad?”

He finally released her and answered her in a single word.

“Doomsday.”

Lois gasped. Her incredulity was evident as she said, “How?”

He took her hand and led her over to the sofa. Once she was seated he sat next to her and said, “The Nightfall asteroid is seventeen miles across and it is on a path that will cause it to collide with the Earth.”

“How soon?”

“A little over four days.”

“What are they doing? Are they going to launch ...”

“There’s not enough time and they don’t have the resources.”

“Then, what ...”

“That’s why they wanted to see Superman. They’ve asked me to intervene.”

Shocked, she grabbed him and blurted out, “How? That’s too big. You can’t do it. I won’t let you. It would kill you!”

Gently he took her hands in his and said, “Lois ... I have to. Don’t you see? If I don’t do this everyone on Earth will die. You’ll die. I could never live without you. I have to do this so that \*you\* will live, even if it kills me.”

Lois was weeping openly by the time he finished his statement. Clark pulled her into an embrace and smoothed his hands along her back to comfort her as he said, “Lois, it’ll work out, believe me. Just think. It has to work out. You have memories of our married life, together. Our baby. I have to come back to you. We both have to live in order for that to happen.”

Lois sniffed a couple of times as the realization of what he was saying penetrated her fear. Finally she wiped her eyes and said, “Yeah, you’re right. It has to work out. I was so scared for you.”

Clark smiled and said, “So was I, until I thought of that. I can’t let that make me over-confident however. Remember, you could already be pregnant and we wouldn’t know it yet which means you could still have our baby without me being around.”

Lois corrected him. “No, that’s not how I remember it. You were there.”

“Okay, there, you see. Somehow it’ll all work out. Now, we have to work on a Superman interview.”

Lois perked up and grabbed her bag. Reaching in she pulled out her notepad and pencil. “Okay, shoot.”

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As soon as Lois had everything written they started typing it up. Within a few minutes they had the new article prepared and e-mailed it to Perry.

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Perry heard the beep of an incoming e-mail and almost ignored it because he was putting the finishing touches on the layout of the current edition. Finally his curiosity got the better of him and he checked. The more he read the more excited he became. He hit the print command and grabbed the phone. He hit a couple of buttons. When it was picked up at the other end he shouted, “Stop the presses!”

When the special edition of the *Daily Planet* hit the streets it had a forty-eight point headline:

\*PANIC IN THE SKY!: Superman To The Rescue.\*

\*By Lois Lane and Clark Kent\*

“In an exclusive interview with Superman he confirmed that at the request of the president he will be flying into space to do battle with a seventeen-mile wide asteroid that threatens the Earth. This ‘killer’ asteroid had been named ‘Nightfall.’ ...” Story continues 2A

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As the paper hit the streets, Clark was in his Superman Suit

and Lois was with him. They were both at the EPRAD Headquarters and Lois was there to report on Superman’s departure.

Lois had managed to find a secluded area away from the rest of the newshounds so that she and Clark could have a few final words together.

They were both speaking in very low tones.

Looking up at him she asked, “How are you feeling?”

His reply was succinct. “Confident. This is going to work.”

“I wish I was as confident as you, memories notwithstanding.”

“Lois, how are \*you\* feeling?”

“I’m scared enough for both of us.”

In a very familiar gesture, Superman cupped her cheek with his hand and looked deeply into her eyes. He tried to reassure her by saying, “I’ll be back. I want to see our baby.”

“I need you. Come back to me.”

“I will. Count on it. Nothing can keep us apart, not even a seventeen-mile wide asteroid.” He looked around. There was a cluster of military officers, government types and scientists, including Daitch, Cosgrove and Zeitlin a short way off. Most of the rest of the media were behind a barrier a short distance off.

For the benefit of the media a monitor had been set up to show the countdown clock. It now read 83:37:21, and it was counting down.

Seeing the clock, Superman said, “I’ve got to go.”

Lois said, “Good luck,” and then impulsively threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, deeply. As she broke the kiss, she whispered in his ear, “If you don’t come back to me, I’ll never forgive you.”

He smiled and whispered back, “I’ll always come back to you, my love. One way or another.”

Neither of them realized that the kiss had been televised. Fortunately, their faces were not visible to the cameras so not even a lip reader could tell what was being said.

\*\*\*

In his apartment, Lex Luthor started chortling. “Ahh, my lovely. Another example of your dalliance with Superman while married to Kent.” He pushed a button to eject the tape he had been using to record the momentous event. “A few more like this and perhaps Kent will see that Lois is being untrue to him and he will divorce her.”

\*\*\*

When Lois finally released Superman, he strode over to the scientists. She watched with concern as several technicians prepared Superman for his mission.

General Zeitlin stepped over to him and gestured to some of the equipment, “Frankly, Superman, you have presented us with some unique problems. We are used to outfitting astronauts. Because of your superpowers you won’t need the bulky spacesuit that we used for the space shots and moon walks. I don’t know if that will be a problem or not.

A technician handed Superman an elastic band and said, “Clip this band around your neck, Superman. The microphone will pick up the vibrations from your vocal chords and convert them to sound. As you know, sound does not travel through a vacuum. This ear bud will sit in your ear and the vibrations of the incoming transmission will be converted to sound in your ear the same way. If you were wearing a space suit it would all be internal. Everything you say will automatically be relayed by satellite link and received by EPRAD.”

The technicians attached a belt around his waist on which were a couple of cylinders.

As he did Professor Daitch explained, “We’re assuming you’ll be out there longer than the twenty minutes you say you can hold your breath. The cylinders look small, but they contain a highly compressed oxygen supply. By giving you pure oxygen

we were able to reduce the cylinders size. Since the Earth's atmosphere is only about sixteen-percent oxygen we were able to use tanks one-sixteenth the size we would have used otherwise. You have enough oxygen there for about six hours. The mask is like a first-responder mask. It should fit snugly and only cover your nose and mouth. That way your vision and vision powers will be unhindered."

Superman wrapped the band around his neck and said, "Testing. Testing."

He got a thumbs-up from a technician at a console on the side. Then he heard, "Test, one, two, three," in his ear and signaled the tech that he had heard him.

Turning to Daitch he said, "I'll have to moderate my speed until I'm out of the atmosphere because of all this equipment, but then I'll be able to accelerate so getting there fast won't be a problem."

Before he put on the mask, General Zeitlin stepped up and said, "Superman, I want to offer you the tactical nuclear option one more time. You'd simply be acting as our delivery system."

Superman shook his head in the negative. "Thanks to the information gathered by the radio telescope the EPRAD science team has given me a clear indication of the asteroid's structural weak point. If I hit it at maximum speed, it's their opinion I'll achieve a non-nuclear fifty-megaton explosive force. I think we should try that first and not risk the fallout. Because of the trajectory of the asteroid the Earth's orbit would take it right through the cloud that would be created."

General Zeitlin nodded. He saw a limousine arrive. He stood back, erect, and saluted.

Secretary Cosgrove said, "He's here."

As he was saying this a silver-haired man got out of the limo and move toward Superman. Seeing him, Superman realized that it was the president.

Stepping up to him, the president extended his hand to Superman and said as they shook hands, "Superman, it takes commitment and courage to accept this responsibility. I know I speak for my fellow Americans, but I also think I speak for the entire world, when I say thank you and God bless you."

Superman smiled gravely as he said, "I'll do my best." Then he turned to the crowd and said, "I think everybody should stand back ... now."

With a soft whoosh, Superman took to the sky, accelerating slowly as he adjusted his mask.

Everyone stared after him as he gained altitude.

Lois was among those watching him leave and she muttered to herself, "Come back to me, Clark. I wouldn't want to live without you in my life anymore."

Lois hurried back to her Jeep and at near break-neck speed headed back to the Planet. She listened to the live feed from EPRAD as she drove.

"Mission Control to Superman. Do you read us, Superman?"

"I read you loud and clear."

"Superman, we are tracking you and you are on course, but your speed isn't what it should be."

"Mission Control, I'm using orbital mechanics. Once I left the atmosphere I accelerated just enough to leave Earth's gravity well. There is no need for me to continue to use my flight power at this point. I can conserve my energy and coast to the interception point. Once I have visual acquisition, I will then accelerate to maximum and drive in."

Lois said to the radio, "That's smart, Clark. Save your energy."

"Superman, EPRAD Control, we estimate that it will take you a little over three-and-a-half hours to arrive at the intercept point at your current velocity. You may not have enough reserve oxygen for the return trip."

"Control, that is what I would guess. Thanks for the

confirmation. The return trip will be faster since I will be entering Earth's gravity well."

"Superman, Control, will you have enough distance to achieve maximum velocity?"

"I need to be close before I put on speed. If I go too fast I will change my orbital characteristics and miss the target."

"Understood. We will monitor."

\*\*\*

Lois had time to make it all the way back to the Planet before interception and she along with everyone else there was staring at the TV in the newsroom watching the coverage from EPRAD Headquarters.

There was a full screen graphic that read, "\*SUPERMAN FOR THE EARTH.\*"

Suddenly there was a voice-over, "Continuing our special LNN Report: Superman For the Earth. And now, here is Frank Madison at EPRAD Command and Control."

The graphic faded and was replaced by the image of Frank Madison, the reporter that Lois had shoved Clark into. He started speaking, "Several hours ago, Superman said his final goodbyes to the crowd. He was described as calm, but determined. Witnesses say his last words were to the president, 'I'm quoting now, 'I'll do my best.' And with that he took off, gaining speed as he rose into the sky. And this time the entire world was watching."

Suddenly the screen switched to a montage from around the world. The banner headlines of many papers in as many languages flashed across the screen and over that was heard JAPANESE, SPANISH, SHONA, and RUSSIAN in voice-over. The only word common in all the broadcasts was "Superman."

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All eyes remained glued to the TV. The people in the newsroom hardly dared to breathe.

The graphic across the bottom of the screen was the count-down clock and it read, 79:56:17 when Madison put his finger to his ear to seat the earphone he was wearing more securely. Then he started to speak, "I'm being told we have a transmission from Superman. Let's take that 'live' feed, direct from Mission Control."

The screen switched back to the \*SUPERMAN FOR EARTH\* graphic. The count-down timer was still at the bottom and suddenly a chyron appeared which said, "\*Voice of Superman\*" and his somewhat distorted voice came from the set. "I can see it now. In fact, it's hard to see anything else. It's immense."

The feed from EPRAD switched from the graphic to a tracking monitor. There was a large blob in the center of the screen and a small dot was approaching it from the side.

Then the voice of ground control cut in. "Roger, Superman. We copy you on the ground. Do you have stress point acquisition in visual?"

Superman replied, "Yes, I do."

Ground control replied, "Stand by for final briefing procedure."

Even though it was somewhat distorted, Superman's voice was calm and confident as he replied, "I know what I have to do."

Ground control replied, "Superman, you're cleared for initiation on your cue." There was a brief pause and then ground control was back. "And there's a lot of people here who want you to know you're the best friend Earth's ever had."

Superman's reply was short. "Thanks. Well, here I go."

Lois winced. Even though she knew what her memory contained, she was scared.

The next thing they heard was Superman. "I look like an ant next to this. I'm going as fast as I've ever gone before, actually maybe faster."

Superman came back on with a count-down, “Ground control, Superman, impact in five, Here I go, four, three, two—”  
Ground control announced, “Impact! The asteroid has been shattered into pieces. We’ve lost track of Superman.”

They apparently tried to cut to Superman, but when they did all they got was loud static.

“Ground control to Superman. Come in Superman.”

Again there was static.

“Superman this is Ground Control. If you can respond, please do. Come in Superman.”

More static.

Ground Control came back on. “This is EPRAD Ground Control, we have lost all communication with Superman.”

All eyes turned toward Lois. They all knew how close she and Clark were to the superhero and they all hoped that she would be able to answer the questions that were on everyone’s mind. “Is he still alive and will he come back?” But Lois didn’t have any answer. All she could think to say was, “His mic went out, that’s all.” But her words were unconvincing, even to herself. Fortunately, Perry White was standing next to her and when, as she finished speaking she started to collapse he caught her. With her hands covering her face she allowed Perry to escort her to his office.

All of the *Planet* staffers were reacting with shock at the loss of contact, but none as much as Lois.

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#### Chapter 4

Some minutes earlier.

Out in space, where no one could see him, Superman started his run at the asteroid. He was surprised to see the actual shape. In the animation it had been spheroidal. This was more an odd cylindrical shape. Perhaps it was tumbling slowly and when EPRAD had gotten their shots it had been end on. Hoping that their calculations as to the weak spot held true, he accelerated as quickly as he could to an unbelievable velocity. The closer he got to the asteroid, the smaller he seemed in comparison, like an ant approaching a basketball. As he accelerated his orbital mechanics were affected. His plan was not to hit it head on, but at the last possible second to flip over and hit the object feet first. He followed his plan, but the effect on his orbit, small though it was caused him to hit just slightly off his mark. There was a silent explosion ... silent only because of the vacuum of space. Though it was silent, it was violent, throwing debris in all directions.

Superman’s plan was to use a principle that Lois had taught him about karate. When you strike, the force of the strike is transmitted to the surface that you strike and unlike a boxer you do not follow-through. You instantly recoil once the force of the blow has been transmitted. That was what he did. The instant after he struck he reversed course. There was one slight flaw in the plan however. The release of fifty-megatons of energy resulted in no small portion of that force being converted to heat and light. That heat burned away Superman’s cape, which wasn’t so bad, but it also burned away his communications gear, the mask and the tubing from the oxygen tanks. The tanks themselves ruptured and the oxygen released added to the conflagration. Realizing that he now had to make it all the way back with no oxygen he ‘poured on the coal’ gathering as much speed as he could in the direction of the Earth.

\*\*\*

Perry looked around and saw that there was panic and shock on all of the faces of the staff. He knew that something had to be done or they would all be one big, collective basket case within an hour. He barked out, “Hey, hey, hey! We’re professionals. We have a job to do. Let’s get back to doing it. Jimmy, I want photos of what’s happening out there. Ralph, Eduardo, man-on-the-street interviews. Cat, start calling your celebrities, get their take on this. Hop to it people. We’ve got a paper to get out.”

\*\*\*

In the penthouse atop LexTower, Luthor had been watching the LNN coverage of the mission. When they lost communication with Superman and the static was broadcast, he had a satisfied smile on his face. He lifted his cigar and placing it to his lips took a long pull on it. Turning to Asabi, he said, “Static, Asabi, implies the absence of something. It’s a beautiful sound, wouldn’t you agree?”

As Luthor continued to puff on his cigar, Asabi agreed, “Quite pleasing, sir.”

Suddenly, like a switch being thrown, Luthor’s mood changed and he slammed his palm down on his desk and began to rant, “I have been deprived of my greatest victory over Superman and you think I should be \*pleased\*?” He turned his back on Asabi and said, “Leave me.”

Asabi was confused by the mercurial nature of Luthor’s moods and left.

Luthor looked out the window and glowered as if the sky had taken his favorite toy, or most valuable prize.

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Superman was pushing himself for all he was worth to accelerate away from the asteroid and toward the Earth, toward ... home, toward ... Lois. Faster, faster. He had to make it back to her. He had been flying for almost twenty minutes and he knew that he was nearing the end of his air reserves. Soon he would be unconscious, but as long as he could hold on to any shred of consciousness he would continue to push himself to, or perhaps even beyond, his limits. Faster, faster. He had to ... for Lois’s sake and his own. He didn’t want to die and he knew that Lois didn’t want that either. They were meant to be together. They needed each other to be complete. Faster, faster. Using his telescopic vision he could see the blue-green orb that he called home and he zeroed in on it, focused all of his attention on it. Faster, faster. <Lois, I’m coming, Lois. I’m coming back to you.> Faster, faster. He was already traveling faster than he had ever flown before, but that didn’t mean anything, He knew that he had at least a little more in him and he would use all that he had to get back to her, to Lois. Faster, faster, ever faster. He started to develop tunnel vision. In the dark of outer space it was hard to tell since everything was dark already, but slowly he could detect the darkness creeping in and starting to blot out the Earth. He knew he was nearing the end. Faster, faster. The pain in his chest from his empty lungs was becoming unbearable. Like a drowning man his body was crying for air, but unlike a drowning man if he opened his mouth to take a breath he wouldn’t even have water to fill his lungs. All that there was, was ... nothingness. The utter vacuum of space. His last conscious thought was <Lois, I’m sorry.>

\*\*\*

After Lois’s near collapse in the newsroom, Perry had taken her to his office. She had nearly fallen completely apart. She wasn’t crying, but it might have been better if she had been rather than the state she was currently in. Her shock and dismay at losing all contact with Clark had completely unnerved her.

In an undertone, she kept muttering to herself, “He’s okay. He has to be okay. He’ll come back, back to me. He has to be okay. He has to come back.”

\*\*\*

At EPRAD headquarters the scientists and technicians were taking observations and using uplinks to satellite-based detection systems to analyze the effect that Superman had had on Nightfall. They contacted radio telescope facilities and requested data feeds. Virtually every telescope of every variety was focused on the area in question so there was an abundance of data available. It would take time to correlate all of the data into a cohesive picture. A preliminary evaluation showed that it appeared that Superman’s mission had been a startling success. But ...

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Perry left Lois alone in his office and went out into the newsroom. “Steve, Frank!”

As Steve approached Perry saw Frank coming from another direction. When they were near he started giving orders. “Look, Steve, I know this isn’t exactly your thing, but look at it this way, there’s a lot of travel between here and that asteroid. Frank, you’re the food writer, Superman has to be hungry when he returns.”

Frank muttered, “If he returns.”

Perry was irritated and said, “Hey, hey, hey. None of that! He will be back. I want the two of you to go to EPRAD headquarters and sit on them until you get me some information.”

They both said, “Right, Chief,” and turned away.

Perry shouted, “Jimmy!”

Denise shouted back, “You sent him out to take pictures.”

“Eduardo!”

Peggy said, “Man-on-the-street interviews.”

“Clark!”

Peggy replied, “I haven’t seen him all morning.”

Perry muttered to himself, “Where could he be?” He looked at his office and realized that Lois was in no condition for him to ask where her husband was. “I guess he’ll show up, sooner or later with a big story.” Shaking his head he turned toward his office. <I wonder if she would be this upset if it was Clark that was missing. That’s probably unfair. Clark’s her husband and she would naturally be upset if he was missing. I just wonder who she would miss more.>

\*\*\*

Superman had held onto the last shreds of his consciousness for as long as he could. His lungs were screaming for air. His vision finally failed completely and as the darkness absorbed his vision it also absorbed the remains of his consciousness. He became an uncontrolled projectile moving at tremendous velocity through the emptiness of space headed for that blue-green globe that had been his destination. As he finally lost consciousness his autonomic nervous system took over and made him try to relieve his lungs by taking a gasping breath, however there was nothing there to fill his straining lungs. The oxygen deficit finally started to affect the medulla and it started shutting down bodily systems. The deficit also started to affect the higher brain functions while other systems went to a low energy state. The only thing that kept him from dying completely was his invulnerable body. As long as he was in the light of the yellow sun and not exposed to Kryptonite his body would continue to live. He coasted at constant speed toward the Earth, toward home, and toward ... Lois.

\*\*\*

Lois was finally starting to come out of her blue funk. She looked around taking in her surroundings as if seeing them for the first time. She saw Perry at his desk and asked, “How’d I get here?”

“Well, darlin’, when they lost contact with Superman we lost contact with you too. You kinda’ checked out on us. You okay now?”

“I, uh, I think so. How long have I been out of it?”

“Almost half an hour.”

“What’s happening? Is there any news?”

“No, nothin’. By the way, where’s that husband of yours? No one has seen him all day.”

Lois was now in a quandary, what should she tell Perry?

Whatever it was, she had to make it good. “Clark, uh, well, you see, he was going to go out and do a series of interviews, you know, man-on-the-street stuff. Then he was going to try and get hold of his folks. You know how he worries about them.” Shakily she stood up and said, “I think maybe I should, you know, head home. Clark will be wondering about me.”

“Okay, now you take it easy going home. It’ll be a madhouse out there.”

“I’ll be okay, Perry. Thanks ... for everything.”

“Take care of yourself, and I hope Clark’s folks are okay.”

\*\*\*

The object was approaching the Earth at tremendous velocity. The angle of approach took it into the atmosphere at a shallow angle and it passed through the Thermosphere and the Mesosphere, but then skipped off of the Stratosphere and back toward space. The lack of streamlining however added a significant amount of resistance to its passage building up heat as speed was converted to energy through friction. By this time the Earth’s gravity had a firm hold on the object and it continued to slow as it re-passed through the Mesosphere and into the Stratosphere again. All of this time it was leaving a fiery trail across the sky in its trip completely around the globe. After a few more skips it had finally slowed sufficiently to start falling through the Troposphere. It looked like a fireball and was still traveling very fast when it finally came to ground with a crash. The object passed through several structures in its angled approach finally crashing to the ground creating an impact crater.

Superman had been unconscious from lack of air for an extended period. His body’s invulnerability had been maintained by his aura; however it had been weakening with each passing minute and was barely existing when he crashed into the atmosphere. The heat generated by the friction had almost completely overwhelmed his aura. His aura had protected his body, but was too weak to even protect his skin-tight covering. His cape had been incinerated in the impact, but when he entered the atmosphere at least most of the Suit went the same way.

As the atmosphere became more dense air started to enter his lungs. As soon as this happened his autonomic nervous system sensed the increased levels of oxygen and started his diaphragm moving. Each breath pulled in a different amount of air as he skipped from atmosphere layer to layer. It wasn’t until he entered the Stratosphere that the air actually was dense enough for his system to respond.

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In Suicide Slum the fireball was seen by numbers of people, but only one homeless man was brave enough to investigate. He wore a mish-mash of clothing that he had collected from numerous agencies. On his head was a knit woolen cap. Perched on this cap were a number of pairs of sunglasses and other glasses. It looked like a hobby of sorts so numerous were they. Braving the unknown, he wheeled the shopping cart with his belongings before him as he entered the alley.

There was a residual glow from the heat released by the impact as well as a cloud of dust and loose debris which drifted on the air currents.

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After the impact Superman’s body was able to take great gasping lungfulls of air and his skin, which had been almost the same color blue as his now vaporized spandex suit, started to return to its normal color. With the return of oxygen in his system his heart started to circulate the oxygenated blood to his brain, but it had been deprived of oxygen for an extended period. Only very slowly consciousness started to return. With the return of consciousness there was a memory of excruciating pain, but that was rapidly replaced with a sense of well-being.

Slowly he started to open his eyes to check his surroundings.

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Warily the homeless man approached the crater that he could see at the end of the alley. When he got close enough to look over the brink into the crater itself he was surprised at what he saw and almost couldn’t believe his eyes. He almost doubted his sanity, but not quite. Living on the streets had put him in situations where he had seen a lot of unbelievable things, this was

just one more to add to the list. This was one for the books. In the bottom of the hole in the ground was what appeared to be a naked, or near-naked man. As if he couldn't trust his eyes or what he was seeing, he traded one pair of glasses for another and looked again. What he was seeing didn't change significantly, just a little more blurry so he went back to the first glasses.

Superman sensed the approach of the homeless man. He didn't know what to make of it. He was curled up in a fetal position which was his body's way of protecting itself.

As he sensed the man's approach he started to stir and look around.

The homeless man didn't know that it was Superman that he was looking at, but he could see a look of dazed confusion on his face. Seeing his obvious weakness and vulnerability, how threatening is a naked man anyhow, he addressed him in a nasally, gravelly voice. "Hey, man, whatcha doin' there? You gotta be freezin'."

Turning to his cart he sorted through his possessions and finding a stained and ripped work shirt and matching trousers he bundled them up and tossed them to Superman. He said, "Here, put these on. They're almost clean. I only wore them a couple times."

Catching the bundle, Superman said, "Thanks," and started pulling on the pants.

While he was doing that the homeless man turned back to his cart and dug around until he found a pair of shoes that were worn down at the heel and had holes in the soles. By the time he had found these and turned back to the crater, Superman was buttoning up the shirt. The homeless man tossed him the shoes and said, "Here, you need something on your feet or you could get frostbite."

It was a slight exaggeration because it wasn't nearly that cold, but Superman caught the shoes and put them on anyhow grateful to have something to cover his body. He expressed his appreciation. "Thanks for everything."

The homeless man shook it off and said, "Those of us that live on the street, we gotta stick together. Where ya from anyhow?"

A look came over his face as he searched his memory and finally he answered, "I don't know."

The homeless man looked at him with understanding. "Yeah ... no past. Starting all over. I been around myself. Started over a few times. You hungry?"

Searching himself he replied, "I think so. Maybe."

The homeless man reached down a hand to help Superman out of the crater. Once he was out the homeless man said, "If we get a move on we can catch us some breakfast at the shelter."

Superman shook his head and said, "Don't let me hold you up. You go ahead."

The homeless man let out a snort and said, "Don't put down no shelter, brother. You been sleepin' in the altogether inside a pile o' junk." Looking at Superman he decided to sacrifice part of his collection. Taking off a pair of his glasses he handed them over and said, "Here. Put these on. Make you look smarter."

As the homeless man started away, pushing his cart, Superman shrugged his shoulders and donning the glasses moved off in his wake.

As they were walking the homeless man waxed eloquent. "This thing in the sky hits, we all gonna be sleepin' rough, way I see it." As if he suddenly remembered something he said, "I'm Henry O. You got a name?"

Superman's response was less than helpful. "I ... I can't remember."

Henry O. said, "Been there myself, man."

\*\*\*

The scientists and technicians had been working feverishly, analyzing the data being fed to them from all of their sources and

a picture was beginning to form.

Professor Daitch had been going over the data and as each new piece was added he had updated his projection. Finally he had enough data to feel comfortable with his analysis. It was with a heavy heart that he picked up the phone. When the operator answered, he said, "Get me the president."

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Lois was frantic. When she had gotten home there was absolutely no word from Clark. She wandered around the apartment listlessly. Suddenly it occurred to her that if she was worried, Clark's parents must be also. She ran to the phone and dialed.

When it was answered, Lois recognized Martha's voice and the tone of her voice told just how worried she was, "Clark?!?"

"No, Martha, it's me, Lois."

"Oh, Lois, honey. I thought it would be Clark. Is he there?"

Lois started to break down in tears. "No, Martha, he's not. I haven't heard from him. Martha, I'm so worried. Where could he be? He can't be dead. I'd know it if he was dead, I just know I would."

Martha tried to console her daughter-in-law, "Lois, honey, we both know that there isn't much that can hurt Clark. He has to be okay. Maybe he just isn't back yet. You know, he could be taking a victory lap or something."

Tears still in her eyes, Lois laughed at that suggestion. "He wouldn't do that to me ... us ... and you know it. He'd come directly here or there. Since he isn't here and he isn't there he must not be back yet, but he's going to run out of air!"

"We've been watching LNN and they haven't said anything about the asteroid since his interception. What do you suppose is happening?"

"Oh, I don't know. They're probably checking their data."

"Lois, they just made an announcement. The president is going to be making a speech."

Lois reached for the remote and turned on the TV. LNN came on and the chyron read "\*The President speaks.\*"

Suddenly the picture shifted to the Oval Office and the president was behind his desk. He started speaking, "My fellow Americans, it is my unpleasant duty to inform you that the Nightfall mission was not a complete success. Apparently Superman's impact was slightly off target and complete disintegration of the object was not achieved. There is a mass of slightly less than twenty percent of the original still on a collision course with the Earth.

"It is also my unhappy duty to inform you that we still have had no contact with Superman. The time elapsed since his departure puts him outside the safety margin of his air supply. I'm sorry to say that it is our belief that Superman gave his life in his effort to save his adopted planet. I mourn with you his loss. I now pass you to EPRAD for more details."

The EPRAD spokesman came on and said, "The composition of the asteroid was almost a cross between a comet and meteor. The way a comet is an agglomeration of ice and rock this asteroid was a collection of lower-weight rock and some medium-density materials surrounding a dense, a very dense core, but the core, a mass approximately three miles across has the character of a nickel/iron meteor. As such, with its mass it will not burn up as it passes through the atmosphere as a smaller meteor would, but will, at impact, be virtually undiminished. There is also a cloud of the smaller debris, ninety-plus percent of which should burn up while passing through the atmosphere. It should provide an amazing light show." He stopped before saying, "As if anyone would be around to see it."

They returned to the Oval Office and the president came back on, "As more data is collected and we know better where the impact will occur further announcements will be made by EPRAD's scientists. That is all we have for now. I would urge

calm. The impact may occur on the other side of the globe from us, so please, do not panic.

“I know that the American spirit is strong and we will come through this stronger still. My fellow Americans, I bid you good day.”

Lois almost dropped the phone, but then realized that Martha was still on it and lifting it to her face said, “Martha?”

All she heard was weeping. Again she said, “Martha?”

There were some snuffles and then Martha said, “Yes, Lois.”

Lois was firm in her conviction that Clark would return. She said, “Martha, why don’t you and Jonathan come to Metropolis. I’m sure that when Clark returns he’ll want you guys here.”

“Lois, honey. Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I know he’d want you here.”

There was a pause and Lois could hear a muffled conversation in the background and then Martha came back on the line. “Okay, Lois. We’ll catch the first flight we can. We’ll see you soon.”

“Okay, Martha. I’ll see you soon,” and she hung the phone up.

She started pacing, the TV forgotten and was repeating, over and over, “Where are you, Clark? Come on, Clark, come home to me.”

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## Chapter 5

The president had just spoken and Luthor had turned off the TV.

He was in a thoughtful mood as he moved out onto his balcony. A bonsai tree that he had been in the process of pruning before the announcement was awaiting his attention.

Luthor moved to the railing and looked out over the cityscape. He thought, <Sunset over Metropolis, a lovely sight to behold. How many more will there be?>

Luthor turned and approached the bonsai, he picked up the scissors and without looking at him, addressed Asabi in a philosophical or introspective tone. “You begin to take it for granted. You assume that every day the sun will rise in the east and set in the west. You assume that every night the moon will be there for your inspiration. You assume that spring will follow winter.”

He turned to face Asabi, gesturing with the scissors in hand. “I shall use this moment as a constant reminder for the future.

\*Assume nothing\*.”

Asabi replied with Sikh wisdom, “Hope for the best, plan for the worst.”

Luthor gave a slight bow and said, “That has always been my credo.” Putting an arm around Asabi’s shoulders, Luthor continued, “Asabi, see to it that Miss Lane is ‘invited’ to our little party. And let’s make sure she has all the comforts of home.”

Asabi put his hands together in a salaam and gave a slight bow. Straightening up he left the balcony as Luthor proceeded to trim the bonsai tree.

\*\*\*

Lois was restless. Now that the announcement had been made she was filled with nervous energy and the only place she felt that she would be in control was the Daily Planet. Even though it was growing late, Lois headed downtown.

No sooner had she dropped her bag next to her desk in the bullpen then her phone rang. Grabbing it she practically shouted, “Clark?”

She heard a dry chuckle from the receiver in a voice that was not familiar then the other party spoke. “Ms. Lane, this is Asabi, Mr. Luthor’s valet. He has asked me to pass along a message to you. He has something which may be of interest to you. He would like you to come see him at your earliest convenience.”

The only thing that would be of interest to Lois right then was Clark and there was a chance that Luthor had him. She had

to take the chance. “Tell him that I’ll be right over.”

\*\*\*

A short time later Lois parked her Jeep and headed into LexTower. She was met in the lobby by an individual wearing the apparel of a high-class Indian servant.

He gave a salaam with a small bow and introduced himself. “I am Asabi, valet to Mr. Luthor. He has directed me to take you to him.” He held out an arm in the direction of a bank of elevators, “This way please.”

Lois moved in the indicated direction. After entering the elevator, Asabi inserted a card into a slot which allowed him to override the limits and push a button that otherwise would not respond. Lois felt the car descend.

Luthor was waiting for her when the doors of the elevator opened.

Luthor was at his most urbane as he spread his hands in welcome. “Ah, Lois, my dear. I’m so glad that you chose to join me.”

“What do you mean, ‘join me’? I came because I thought you had some information on Superman.”

He replied, “Tsk, tsk, tsk. No such thing. I called you here to show you something.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. What do you want to show me?”

He spread his arms again and said, “This.”

Looking around, Lois saw white-on-white steel walls and asked, “Okay, just what is ‘this’?”

“Please come this way and I’ll explain as we go.” As Luthor started to take a leisurely stroll down the corridor he pointed out some of the features. They stopped at a schematic diagram and he said, “This is a drawing of this complex.”

Looking at the representation, Lois said, “It looks like a complete, underground city.”

Smiling at her perspicacity, Luthor said, “You are standing precisely five hundred meters below Metropolis street level. Surrounded by sixteen-inch reinforced concrete walls, originally designed to survive a nuclear attack.”

Lois summed up, “A bunker.”

Luthor shook his head in negation as he replied, “I prefer to think of it as an ... ‘Ark.’ We have room for two hundred people. Enough supplies to last three years. Tools and implements for farming and manufacture for when we re-emerge.”

“So, even if the world dies, you live?”

“The survival of a species does not depend on the survival of all its members. Indeed, were the dinosaurs possessed of somewhat larger brains, they, too, might have escaped their fate. Fortunately for us, they did not, and now, the next chance is ours.”

Imitating his earlier gesture and with some asperity, Lois threw her arms wide and asked, “Did you ask me here because you want me to write about this?”

Luthor was almost shocked and replied, “No, no. I seek no publicity. In fact, considering the circumstances, advertising the existence of this would seem to be rather cruel.”

Lois was exasperated and it was in her voice as she asked, “Than why \*am\* I here?”

Their stroll had taken them to a particular door. Luthor pushed the door open and gestured for Lois to enter.

When she did, Lois was shocked. The inside was a duplicate of her old apartment. It held the same furniture and fish tank. She even recognized her fish. She gasped out, “This is my apartment!”

Luthor was smug. “Well, at least a reasonable facsimile thereof. I hope you like it.”

“What’s not to like? I decorated it.” She stopped looking around and looked back at Luthor. “But I am more than a little confused.”

Luthor replied to her unspoken question, “I’m offering you a

chance, Lois, to be a passenger on this ark. To be my special guest on mankind's next great adventure."

Luthor moved to a window and threw it open to reveal a bright sunny day with a view as seen from Lois's window.

Lois thought to herself, <That's the window I always left unlocked for Superman.>

Luthor had been speaking while she had thought this. "... an illusion, of course, but, nonetheless, better than a wall. To help you remember the way things were and how they might be again."

Lois was dumbfounded. "Why me, Lex?"

Luthor seemed to be sincere as he replied, "Because I care. And, I must admit; because three years will be a long time without ... 'companionship'."

Lois looked aghast. "Lex, you seem to forget, I'm a married woman."

Luthor played what he thought was his trump card. "A married woman who is still carrying a torch for another man. I've been collecting evidence and if I were to present it to Kent, he just might divorce you. It could be a moot point in any event, when that asteroid fragment hits, he could very well be history."

Lois was wondering about these statements. Who could he be claiming she was carrying a torch for? Certainly not Claude! She hadn't seen him in years. Patrick? She hadn't seen him since her stay in Ireland. Then it hit her and she smiled a Mona Lisa smile. <Superman. He thinks I'm cheating on Clark with Superman! If I play along maybe I'll get more information.> "So, you're offering me what, life, but with strings attached. I don't know."

Luthor thought that he had won and said, "Think about it. Look around before you decide. I'll await your decision." He turned and exited through the door.

Curious and deciding that she needed more information Lois moved into the bedroom. When she opened the closet she saw what looked like her clothing hanging there just as she had left them, when was that, oh, yes, while they had been away in Smallville. She pulled open a couple of drawers in the bureau and was surprised to see 'her' lingerie. Suddenly she was furious, but realized that if she revealed that she might never get out of here. She had to frame what she said in such a way that Luthor didn't become suspicious or decide to keep her captive.

She hastened out the door and stopped Luthor before he turned the corner by calling to him, "Lex!"

Convinced that he had won his point he asked, "May I send someone to pack your personal belongings?"

"No. I've got a partner and husband who needs me. I've got friends at the paper that are like family to me. And I'm not giving up on Superman either. I can't stay here."

Luthor tried his last argument. "Lois, mob rule is not a pretty sight. You don't have to see it."

Lois shot him down. "Yes, I do. If what that asteroid does is destroy the world as we know it, I have to be there to see what takes its place. It may be the best comeback in history."

Cynically, Luthor said, "Or the fastest knock-out."

Lois replied, "Either way, I have to see for myself."

Luthor was gracious because he still had hopes of Lois changing her mind so he had Asabi take her back to the surface.

\*\*\*

Lois returned to the Planet. Once there she placed a call to the Twelfth Precinct, Bill Henderson.

"Bill, I need to report a missing person."

"Not my department, Lane. You of all people should know that."

"I do know, Bill. I'm asking this as a favor."

In a long-suffering tone, Bill asked, "Okay ... who's missing?"

"My partner."

Bill lost his façade of urbanity as he blurted out, "Kent? You

need to keep better tabs on him, Lane."

"Bill, this is serious. Clark is missing. He's been gone all day."

"Look, Lane, do you know how many missing person reports we get on a daily basis? Most of them turn up within twenty-four hours, that's why the department policy is to wait forty-eight before processing a missing person report. Maybe he just got tired of working with you, did you consider that?"

Lois started to weep. "Bill, you don't understand! We aren't just partners anymore. We're married! Clark wouldn't just run out on me. He loves me."

"Well, there's no accounting for taste. Okay, as a favor to Kent, I'll put out an APB. I'll see what we can find."

"Thanks, Bill. I owe you one."

"Go home and get some sleep. If he shows up, remember to call and cancel the report."

"Okay, I will. My dearest hope is that he walks in through the door and I can do just that."

Lois cleared her desk and headed home, to 344 Clinton. It seemed like hours before she was able to fall asleep.

\*\*\*

When Lois awoke in the morning she discovered that she had fallen asleep on the couch and that her head had been at an odd angle which had given her a crick in the neck. She stood and started rubbing her neck and massaging the muscles in an attempt to loosen them up. Heading into the bedroom she hoped to see Clark in the bed, but seeing the still-made bed she was disappointed.

Her desolation was profound and she went through her morning ablutions on auto-pilot. As quickly as she could she headed for the Planet where she hoped to hear something about Superman.

When she arrived at the Planet she was again disappointed. Perry was already there and when she asked if there was anything new his negative answer sent her into another fit of depression.

After she had been there for almost an hour she realized that she might have accomplished as much at home as she had at her desk because the sum total was ... nothing. She hadn't been able to concentrate on anything but Clark. She looked at the notepad sitting on her desk and all she saw was doodles, hearts with the initials CK & LL in the middle and a slightly misshapen pentagonal with a stylized 'S' in the center.

Seeing this Lois broke down and placing her head in her hands started to cry.

She was just starting to give vent to her emotions when her phone rang. She controlled herself enough to answer; however, there was one final sniffle before she was able to say, "*Daily Planet*, Lois Lane."

A familiar voice came out of the earpiece. "Lane, Henderson here."

She brightened. "Hi, Bill. Do you have something for me?"

"Yeah, I'd appreciate it if you would come down here and collect your property."

Lois was confused. "Property? What property? I didn't report any robbery."

"None-the-less, I need you to come down here and claim your property. Now, Lane."

He was being emphatic and that was unusual for the usually phlegmatic detective, so her curiosity was piqued. She replied, "Okay, Bill. I'll be there shortly."

"You do that, little thing. I need the space."

Lois was in a quandary as to exactly what property Bill could be referring to, but she knew he wasn't one to play practical jokes. She stood up, put on her jacket, picked up her bag, fished out her keys and headed for Perry's office. Sticking her head in the door she said, "Perry, I just had a weird call from Henderson. He wants me down at the precinct. I'll let you know what it's all

about once I find out.”

“Be careful out there, Lois. Things are starting to heat up again.”

“Don’t worry, I will.”

\*\*\*

When Lois arrived at the Twelfth Precinct she went up to the desk sergeant and said, “Hi, Coop. I had a call from Henderson. Do you know what it’s all about?”

“Sorry, Ms. Lane. All I know is that he is back at Interview #3. You can go on back ... just down that hallway.” He pointed off to the side.

Lois looked where he was pointing and nodded in understanding. “Thanks, Coop.”

“Don’t mention it.”

When she turned away she didn’t see the broad smile that creased his face as if he was in on a surprise that was about to be sprung.

\*\*\*

Some time earlier.

Because of the situation following the announcement of the remaining asteroid fragment there had been a commotion at the Fifth Street Mission and the police had been summoned. Bill Henderson had been out on another call and was on his way back to the precinct when the call came in and since he was nearby he stopped in when the uniformed officers arrived.

The disturbance was quickly quelled and as it was, Bill couldn’t believe his eyes. Sitting quietly at one of the tables, not having been involved in the disturbance was Clark Kent. Bill approached him and asked, “Clark, what are you doing here?”

Clark looked up and there was obvious confusion in his eyes. He asked, “Who?”

Bill took in his attire and thought, <Somebody must have mugged him and taken his clothes as well as his money. They must have hit him on the head pretty hard. It’s like he doesn’t remember who he is. No wonder Lane couldn’t find him and why he didn’t come home.> He said, “My name is Bill Henderson, Detective Bill Henderson of the MPD. I’d like you to come with me.”

Clark had worry in his eyes as he said, “Why? Am I under arrest? I didn’t do anything. It was those guys.”

“I know. I’m not arresting you. I need you to come with me because there are some people that have been looking for you.”

“Oh, you know me?”

“Yeah, you could say that. I’ve known you for a while now.”

“We’re friends?”

Bill found himself saying something that in normal circumstances he would never admit to. “Yeah, we’re friends. Will you come with me?”

Clark picked up his tray and carried it over to the serving line and returned it, scraping the remains into the waste receptacle and placing the dishes and utensils in the bins for washing. He turned to the servers and said, “Thank you for the meal.”

The head server replied, “You’re welcome. Come again.”

Looking back over his shoulder at Bill he said, “I don’t know. He says he knows me so I may actually have a home nearby.”

“Good luck, buddy.”

“Thanks.” He turned and joined Bill.

Bill put a hand on his shoulder, said, “Come on, let’s get out of here,” and led him to his unmarked car for the trip to the precinct.

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## Chapter 6

After they arrived at the precinct, Henderson led Clark to Interview #3 and said, “Why don’t you have a seat here while I make some calls. While you wait, I’ll have someone come in to ask you a few questions. Is that okay?”

“What kind of questions?”

“We need to see how much you remember.”

“Oh, okay.”

“The person that I want you to talk to is Jerri McCorkle, Doctor Jerri McCorkle.”

As Henderson left, Doctor McCorkle who had already been summoned arrived.

Doctor Jerri McCorkle, a department psychiatrist, came in and sat down opposite Clark at a table. She pulled out a notebook and started taking notes as they spoke.

After introducing herself, she said, “Well, I’ve been told that you don’t remember much.”

His reply wasn’t encouraging. “Yeah, I don’t remember much at all.”

She put on an encouraging expression and said, “Well, let’s look on the bright side, you still remember English. You understood my question and replied. Let’s see how much more you remember. We’ll start simple. Do you remember having a favorite color?”

Clark replied, “Blue. No, wait a minute. Red. I don’t know, Doctor. Maybe yellow?” he said in a questioning tone.

The doctor tried to ease his obvious worry. “Don’t try so hard, there’s no right or wrong answer. Let’s try something else. Everything you remember about the last few days.”

Clark’s reply was actually helpful, “Only the shelter. Then the police officer bringing me here. That’s it, I’m afraid.”

The doctor tried another tack. “Have you eaten?” In response to his nod, she said, “Fine. Now, if I told you your name was Clark Kent and that you were a reporter for the *Daily Planet*, what would your reaction be?”

He wasn’t sure how to respond, “Clark Kent? Do you know that for a fact?”

“That’s what I was told.”

She went on to ask a number of questions until they were interrupted by Bill Henderson.

\*\*\*

When Lois entered the hallway she saw Henderson and headed in his direction. As she approached she was irritated that he had pulled her away from the Planet where she thought she would get any word about Superman early. She said, “Henderson, this had better be good. I’m working the asteroid story with my partner AWOL and —” Bill interrupted her tirade and pointed through what Lois thought was a window. When she looked her heart leapt in her chest. Relief flooded through her when she saw Clark and she blurted out, “What’s he doing here? Why didn’t he come home?” She waved and said, “Clark?”

Bill said, “He can’t see you or hear you. That’s one-way glass. You can see in, but he can’t see out. It’s also multiple paned so that it’s soundproof. It wouldn’t matter, though. He doesn’t remember a thing. His name, where he works, me, you.”

Lois let out a little sob. “He doesn’t remember me?” What’s going on? Who’s that in there with him?”

In his normal, deadpan tone, Bill said, “He couldn’t remember who he was. We picked him up at the Fifth Street Mission. I was working the case and brought him in. As soon as I was sure it was him, I gave you a call.” Bill pressed a button and spoke into a microphone, “Doctor?” While waiting for the doctor to come out he said, “It looks like he was mugged. The muggers must have taken everything, including his clothes, that is, of course, unless he was working undercover as a down-at-the-heels mechanic or something. The only explanation I can come up with is that they must have hit him over the head and he has a concussion. His memory has been affected.”

“Where was Bobby?”

Mystified, Bill asked, “Bobby, who?”

“Bobby Bigmouth, he’s one of our snitches. He works at the Fifth Street Mission. If he’d been there, he’d have recognized Clark and called me. I’m gonna have to give him a piece of my

mind next time I see him.”

“Don’t be too hard on him. Transportation being what it is and all he might not have been there.”

Just then Doctor McCorkle stepped out through the door and Henderson performed the introductions, “Doctor Jerri McCorkle, Lois Lane, his partner and I now am led to believe, his wife.”

By way of confirmation, Lois held up her left hand to display her rings.

When Doctor McCorkle had exited the interview room, Clark had stood and approached the mirror. He started looking at himself and his apparel.

Bill continued, “Doctor McCorkle is one of the department shrinks.”

Lois was glancing frequently at Clark as she talked with the doctor. “What could have caused this? Bill said that he thinks he might have been hit on the head.”

“There are several possibilities. I’d guess anxiety caused by this asteroid could be a factor. On the other hand, these cases are often triggered by some kind of physical trauma. I’ve seen cases of concussive amnesia where a severe blow to the head has been the cause. I’ve also seen it in severe anoxic cases where the victim was deprived of air for an extended period of time. There have been cases of mountain climbers that have run out of air at high altitude. The lack of oxygen to the brain affects the higher functions and often memory.”

Lois knew that she would have to provide cover for Clark. She searched her memory for something, anything that she could say that would protect his secret. Finally she remembered, “He got knocked down by a car and hit his head! But that was the day before yesterday.”

Doctor McCorkle offered, “It could be a delayed reaction.”

In order to muddy the waters even farther, Lois offered, “When he disappeared he was wearing his suit (she said it without the implied capitol.) so I guess a mugging can’t be discounted.” In a small voice she voiced her concern. “Is he going to be okay?”

Clark was still looking at himself in the mirror and had gotten to the point of checking his dental health.

In an effort to reassure Lois the doctor offered, “Physically, he’s fine. Whether he’s going to regain his memory immediately, I don’t know. Based on the battery of questions we ask, it seems Clark suffers from what we call the ‘Superman Complex.’”

Lois was concerned that Clark might have revealed something that under normal circumstances he would not have, so trying to deflect she said, “Don’t we all?”

Undeterred, Doctor McCorkle continued, “What I mean is that he’s a chronic do-gooder who thinks he can handle anything. This kind of setback can be very frustrating.”

Anxious to end this and get Clark away before his secret was compromised, Lois said, “Tell me what to do.”

Understanding a wife’s anxiety for her husband, in reply Doctor McCorkle said, “Clark needs to be in familiar places, surrounded by familiar people, and do familiar things. It should all come back to him in time. Be patient with him.”

Bill couldn’t resist a parting shot at Lois, “That’s asking a lot, Doc.”

Lois was very defensive as she said, “Bill, things are different now. I’m different now. He’s my husband. I can be patient.”

“Okay, Lane, well, he’s all yours. Like I said, I need the space. Get him outta here, please.”

Lois replied, “Thanks, Bill. I really owe you for this one.”

“Pay me back by staying out of my hair for a while, okay. I have enough on my plate right now without having to deal with you and your partner, uh, husband.”

Lois was smiling as she went through the door.

Bill watched through the glass as Lois approached Clark.

Clark looked at her. It wasn’t exactly recognition in his eyes,

but there was at least interest.

Stepping up to him, Lois put her hand on his arm and said, tentatively, “Clark?”

He looked at her and asked, “I know you, don’t I?”

Lois smiled at that and said, “Yes, yes you do. In fact you know me very well. Better than anybody else. I’m ... I’m your wife.”

At this statement, his smile lit his face. He said, “I was hoping it would be something like that.”

Lois took his hand and said, “Come on, Husband. Let’s get out of here and get you into some decent clothes.” Lois hustled them out of the precinct because she wanted to get him into the Jeep as quickly as she could without seeming to be desperate even though that was exactly what she was. Desperate to get him away before he revealed his secret accidentally.

\*\*\*

After exiting the Twelfth Precinct Lois had taken Clark to the Jeep and driven home. As soon as they got in the door, Lois said, “Look, why don’t you go on in to the bedroom and pick out some clothes, take a shower and get dressed. I have some calls to make.” Seeing his confused look she pointed and said, “Right through there.”

He nodded, turned in the indicated direction and headed off to get ready.

Lois grabbed the phone and dialed Smallville. The phone rang several times and then the answering machine picked up and Lois heard Martha’s voice, “Hello, this is chez Kent. You can leave a message after the beep.”

Rather than leave a useless message, knowing that it meant that Jonathan and Martha were on their way to Metropolis, Lois hung up and dialed another number. After one-and-a-half rings she heard, “*Daily Planet*, Perry White.”

In an excited tone, Lois almost shouted, “Perry, Lois!”

“Lois, honey. What’d Bill want?”

“Bill found Clark! Perry, he has amnesia. He can’t remember anything.”

“Wow, what can we do?”

“The department shrink said that he should be surrounded by familiar people and objects. I’ve got him taking a shower and changing clothes. Maybe that will trigger a memory. I was thinking that I’d bring him in. Maybe seeing the bullpen and his desk will help. Of course, I’ll be spending as much time with him as I can.”

“Sounds like a good idea to me. We’ll all do what we can to help him recover his memory. Bring him on in.”

“Okay, Perry, see you in a while.” She hung up the phone.

Lois moved into the bedroom and was checking the clothes that Clark had pulled out as he came out of the shower with a towel wrapped around his hips.

Seeing him, Lois gasped and goggled at him.

He smiled in response and looked down at himself. “Is this okay,” he asked.

Lois walked over to him and placing her hands on his chest stood on tip-toe to give him a kiss, “It’s more than okay. I always enjoy looking at you. It’s one of my special perks as your wife. Unrestricted ogling of my husband’s body. Ooooo, I just wish you had your memory because this could have led to so much more. Right now we have to concentrate on you getting your memory back. Come on, get dressed. I called Perry and he is expecting us to come in. Oh, and your folks are on their way. They’ll probably be here before the end of the day.” Lois was wondering just how much she should tell him and how soon. She decided that first he had to be comfortable with her. Hopefully that would be enough to restore at least some of his memory. Telling him about his powers and the fact that he was Superman would have to wait.

He had a mystified expression as he said, “My folks? My

parents? Are they local?"

"No, we are in Metropolis, New Troy and they live in Smallville, Kansas. They said they would catch an early flight. They didn't answer their phone so they must be on their way."

\*\*\*

When they arrived at the Planet, Lois restrained herself as they rode up in the elevator. She wanted so much to just throw her arms around him and kiss as was their habit. Then the thought hit her, Familiar things, familiar people, familiar \*activities\*. Throwing caution to the winds she turned to him and asked, "Familiar?"

He shook his head and said, "No."

She threw her arms around his neck. Her hand played with the hair at the back of his head as she pulled his face down to hers for a kiss.

He was startled at first, but then quickly moved to deepen the kiss.

As the doors opened, Lois pulled back, breathlessly and asked, "Anything?"

With a wry grin he asked, "I don't know how I could have forgotten something like that, but no."

Taking his hand she led him down the ramp to his desk. "This is your desk. Look familiar?"

He looked at the desk and the few things on the surface. He fingered his nameplate and said, "I'm sorry. No."

Trying to think back to the days before they were married, Lois looked around. Catching sight of the break area she walked in that direction as she was saying, "You always come in and grab a donut from the coffee area. You usually like the cake things with the frosting. These are a little stale. Are you hungry?"

"I can't remember anything. I'm not starving. I'm fine."

Lois crossed to Clark's desk and pulled out a drawer. She pulled out a spare pair of glasses and handed them to him. "Here, these are one of your spares. I'm sorry I didn't think to grab a pair from home."

Clark removed the glasses that Henry O. had given him and put these on. Out of curiosity, he pulled them off and put them on a few times to see what difference they made. He asked Lois, "Are you sure these are mine? They don't seem to do very much."

Lois moved close and whispered, "They do plenty. Just wear them and I'll explain later."

He nodded and put them on. "Whatever you say."

Lois asked, "How much did Bill tell you?"

"Well, he told me we were a reporting team. Then you told me that we are married."

Lois couldn't help taking advantage of the situation. She said, "Yes, we're married and in that we are equal partners, but here I have seniority because I've been here longer so I'm the senior partner."

"So, you call the shots?"

"You could say that."

Acquiescing easily, he said, "Okay, what should I do now?"

Feeling a little guilty about taking advantage of him in this way, Lois relented and said, "Well, actually, we're a team, full partners. Nobody works for anybody. Although, for the immediate future, you may want to follow my lead."

Clark nodded his understanding. "Probably a good idea."

Cat came strolling by and seeing Lois and Clark moved to join them. "Clark, welcome back. What happened to you?"

Clark looked at Lois questioningly.

Lois answered his unasked question. "This is Cat Grant. She writes the \*gossip\* column for the paper. We write \*news\*." She turned to Cat and said, "Clark has amnesia."

With a startled look, Cat asked, "Is there a punch-line I'm missing?"

Clark replied, "She's telling the truth, Miss Grant. I don't

remember much of anything."

Lois said, "The police psychologist said that familiar places, things and people might help restore his memory."

Cat looked back and forth between Lois and Clark and then made up her mind. She said, "Excuse us a moment," she grabbed Clark's arm and pulled him a few feet away.

Cat pulled Clark around to face her and said, with all sincerity, "Oh, honey, it's me, Cat. How can you not remember what we've meant to each other?"

Clark replied with uncertainty, "I guess we work together, huh?"

With a leer, Cat said, "Oh, honey, we do a lot more than that."

Surprised, Clark asked, "We do?"

Cat lowered her voice to a whisper, "We've kept it a secret. You're so worried about what people think." Cat indicated Lois. "Especially her." Cat put on a grief-stricken act and started to tear up as she continued. "Now you don't even remember ... \*us\*."

Cat reached out and pulled him into a hug. "Does this refresh your memory?"

Pushing Cat away he looked at Lois apologetically and said, "I don't believe a word of it. I may not remember much, but I do know that I wouldn't cheat on my wife."

Cat was crestfallen. "Oh, she told you, huh?"

"Of course she told me and I believe her."

"Rats. Oh, well. Can't blame a girl for trying."

Just then Perry approached and cleared his throat. Cat smiled and said, "See ya around."

Perry stuck his hand out to Clark, "Perry White, son. Lois told me what happened. Sorry to hear about it." He noted Jimmy's and said, "This here's Jimmy Olsen."

Jimmy held out his hand to shake as he said, "Hi, Clark. Actually, I always call you 'C.K.', 'C.K.'"

Perry turned to Clark and asked, "Now, how you feelin'? Up to going to a news conference?"

Clark's answer was encouraging. "I think so."

Perry called Lois over. "Okay, something's cookin' at EPRAD. I've had Steve and Frank down there since yesterday. I want the two of you to get down there and relieve them."

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## Chapter 7

Since the news conference was being held downtown, Lois and Clark caught a cab. When they exited the cab, Lois paid the fare and joined Clark. As she approached, she noticed that he apparently had a tickle in his nose because he appeared to be fighting a sneeze. Seeing this she was thoughtful, <He's invulnerable. What could cause an invulnerable man to sneeze? Perhaps he's more human than even I realized.>

Suddenly he lost the battle and he sneezed, with force.

Lois had been watching Clark in fascination as he sneezed but her attention was pulled away from him when she heard tires screeching and looking around saw the cab skidding sideways across the street and crashing into a fire hydrant. The fire hydrant sent a geyser of water into the air and seeing this Lois knew exactly what had happened and grabbing Clark's arm led him away. In case anyone was listening, she said, "One thing you need to re-learn right away is that Metro cabbies cannot drive. Never trust them. Oh, and it is polite to cover your mouth when you sneeze."

Clark nodded his head and followed Lois.

For the time being, Lois decided that it would be best for him to believe that Superman was someone else, so she said, "Now this news conference we're going to is about Superman and the asteroid I told you about."

Clark's response told Lois that her plan was working. "This Superman — sounds like he means a lot to you."

Lois didn't want him to get the wrong impression and said, "He means a lot to everybody, Clark. It's just that he is ... special

to you and me. Our relationship to him is different from anyone else's. I'll fill you in later."

"Okay, Lois."

As a result of the preparations for the news conference they had been required to leave the cab a block and a half from City Hall. As they completed their trek they saw a platform that had been erected on the front steps.

Thanks to Lois's aggressiveness and also her reputation among the press corps they managed to get to a position near the front of the pack before the conference began.

Shortly after they were in place Professor Daitch, Secretary Cosgrove and General Zeitlin stepped up on the platform and as a group approached the microphones.

Secretary Cosgrove was the first to speak. "We have just completed a briefing with the Federal Emergency Management Team. This meeting was called to discuss the scientific assessment from EPRAD about yesterday's mission. Professor Daitch."

In response to his name, Professor Daitch stepped to the microphone and began, "Superman's impact on the Nightfall asteroid was substantial. It was not, however, decisive."

Lois shouted out, "Are you telling us there's still something out there?"

Giving Lois the benefit of the doubt, Daitch said, "Perhaps you missed the president's announcement. This press conference was called to give slightly more detail. Yes, there's still something out there, a large portion — approximately three miles across — remains on an impact course with the Earth." He consulted his watch and then said, "It is due to impact about fifty-five hours from now."

Very well aware that she had Superman standing right there next to her, but unable to reveal that fact and knowing that she had to cover for him, Lois asked, "Is Superman really dead or does this mean that he actually returned, secretly? Is that really why we haven't heard from Superman? Is it that he's working on a return mission?"

Daitch was not a politician and answering questions of this nature truthfully could cause a panic, so with a deer-in-the-headlights look he turned to Cosgrove.

Cosgrove stepped to the mic and said, "We have not yet heard from Superman although we expect to soon."

Lois thought to herself, <Just as soon as I can get him to remember that he's Superman.>

While Lois had been thinking this there had been a collective gasp from the audience and press corps alike.

Cosgrove held up his hands for silence and said, "There is no need for panic. Even without Superman's help, we are confident we can handle this latest challenge with existing resources." He turned and looked at Zeitlin as he said, "General?"

General Zeitlin stepped up to the microphone and said, "We have several delivery systems, notably the Asgard booster, which we are in the process of re-programming. At the same time, we're currently attaching nuclear payloads which, if we can deliver them, will finish the job Superman started."

\*\*\*

The press conference was being telecast and at the Daily Planet, Perry, Jimmy, Cat and other staffers were watching it unfold.

When General Zeitlin finished, Clark spoke up. "Are you looking for Superman?"

Perry had been wearing a serious expression as the conference proceeded, but when Clark asked his question, he broke out in a grin. He said, "Kent asked a question. That's a good sign!"

General Zeitlin was trying to answer a question to which he had no really good answer, "We're trying to stop a catastrophe. Our opinion is that Superman knows how to find us much easier

than we know how to find him."

Having seen quite enough political doubletalk for one day, Perry turned away from the TV and said, "I'll be in my office."

Jimmy had been doing some checking of his own and had been itching to do more than he had been allowed to do so far. Seeing Perry headed for his office he decided that it was going to be now, or never so he followed Perry to his sanctum. Closing the door after him he said, "Chief, I need to talk to you."

Perry was irritated and it was in his tone as he answered, "Not now. We got a crisis going on here."

Undeterred, Jimmy pressed on. "That's why we need to talk."

Jimmy's persistence caught Perry's attention and he relented, somewhat. "Okay, son. Talk fast."

Jimmy had his argument ready. "Clark's right. Somebody ought to be looking for Superman."

Jimmy had managed to raise his hopes somewhat, but this didn't satisfy. "You heard 'em, son. They got their hands full with that rocket."

Jimmy decided to try to make it personal. "You know how many times your VCR's been in the shop? Things break. Things don't work. And they gotta hit this moving target and get it right the first time. I don't want to bet my life on a rocket, Chief. I'm twenty-one years old. You've had a great career. I haven't even written my first story. I'm not ready to give up."

Perry showed that he was weakening, when he asked, "What have you got in mind?"

Jimmy pulled out a map he had been working on. He unfolded it and laid it out on Perry's desk as he explained, "Lois asked me to make some calls. Anyway, right after Superman broke the asteroid up the other day, well, there were reports from all around the world of a shooting star. That's not so unusual by itself, but a bunch of people near Hobbs Bay reported seeing the shooting star up close and personal. They thought it crashed in Suicide Slum."

Skeptically, Perry offered, "Maybe it was a piece of the asteroid."

Jimmy had his argument ready. "How? I mean, how would it get here ahead of the rest of it? But Superman could."

His skepticism only slightly in abeyance, Perry said, "That's a real long shot."

Jimmy challenged, "'You got a better idea?'"

Many thoughts passed through Perry's mind over the next few seconds, doubt that this would lead to anything, the possibility that it was a total waste of time, but finally that it actually wasn't the worst idea he had ever heard. He sighed and then said, "Let me get my coat."

Jimmy blurted out, "You're going with me?"

"In for a penny, in for a pound."

\*\*\*

Lois and Clark had returned to the Planet and written up the article on the news conference. Lois was working on her computer typing up the final version when Clark came over and started reading over her shoulder he said, "I think it's spelled Z-e-i-t-l-i-n."

Lois looked back at him and said, "You're always editing my copy! Look, the rule is 'i' before 'e' except after 'c'."

"Yes, normally, but this is a name and it doesn't follow the rule."

Suddenly it hit her, what had just happened. She sat there and stared at him. "Are you remembering something?"

"I don't know. This does feel familiar," he said and he gave her a smile which she returned.

They finished up the article and headed to dinner.

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Earlier, when Martha hung the phone up from her conversation with Lois she said, "While you try to get us a flight, I'll start packing. See if we can get a flight out of Wichita." When

she finished giving this order she was off, almost running up the stairs.

By the time Jonathan joined her she had her suitcase packed and had his out on the bed.

“I called and most flights have been grounded because of that thing up there. I called the train station and they do have several runs coming through and with changes we can make it to Metropolis. It will be round-about, but we will get there.”

“In that case, I’m going downstairs to pack some food to take with us while you pack. As soon as you’re ready, we’ll head out.”

It had been an uneventful trip into Wichita and they found a long-term parking lot near the train station.

Almost as soon as they entered the depot there was an announcement for a train to Baltimore. They knew that they would be able to change trains there for one to Metropolis so they hurried and got their tickets.

Late the next day, after nearly twenty-four hours of travel a travel-weary but undaunted pair exited the Metropolis train station. When they did they were accosted by sights that they were not used to seeing on their trips to Metropolis. There were men wearing sandwich boards proclaiming, “Doomsday: Is Your Conscience Clear?” and other messages referring to the approaching asteroid fragment.

As usual there were those individuals that took advantage of the situation. There was a pickup truck parked near the doors and an individual selling bottled water from a load in the bed for three dollars a bottle.

Martha almost dropped her bag when she saw the number of cars in the street and the fact that they were at a virtual standstill. She exclaimed, “My God, Jonathan!”

Jonathan’s reply had a sardonic tone as he said, “These city folks don’t know the first thing about keeping their heads cool in a crisis. I’d hate to see how they’d respond to a tornado warning siren.”

Nodding, Martha asked, “Should we try to get a cab?” Even as she asked, she realized the futility because the noise of the car horn almost drowned her out.

Fortunately, Jonathan was near and heard her. He replied, “Even if we can get one, it’ll take forever. Let’s find a phone and try to call the Planet again.”

Taking a firm grip on her suitcase Martha started to move determinedly toward the corner where she could see a couple of telephone kiosks. She was only partway there when Jonathan saw her veer off and start across the street right between the cars that were sitting there gridlocked.

Shocked, Jonathan shouted, “Where are you going?”

“Their apartment. It’s closer than the Planet and we can get rid of these bags. We’ll get there faster if we walk. Won’t take more than an hour or so.”

Jonathan questioned, “Are you serious?”

Martha turned on him and the look of determination on her face was blindingly obvious. “Jonathan, our boy is missing. Do I look serious?”

Jonathan marveled. He had been married to this woman for more than thirty years and she still managed to amaze him. Then he started to think about his new daughter-in-law and he started to chuckle to himself. It seemed as though the Kent men were alike in their preferences in women because both of the Kent women were cast in the same mold. As horns were blaring at them from crossing through traffic, even though the cars were not moving, he started to chuckle to himself.

Martha caught him and stopped, right there in the middle of the street and asked, “What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Martha put her bag down, crossed her arms and said, “Oh, it’s something all right, now what is it.”

Now Jonathan was almost laughing. He turned to the driver

honking his horn at them and said, “Keep your shirt on,” as he reached for her bag and said, “I was just thinking how much Lois is like you. No-nonsense, stubborn and determined. You see what needs to be done and nothing will stop you from doing it. It’s one of the many things I love about you and I’m sure Clark would say the same about Lois.”

Martha smiled and reached for her bag.

\*\*\*

Lois decided that it was time to seriously work on his memory when they returned to the apartment. Accordingly, when they entered and removed their coats, Lois said, “This afternoon you didn’t have much time to look around. All you did was shower and change. Take a few minutes to look around and see if anything stimulates your memory.”

As he started looking around, Lois stood on the top landing and observed. Starting at one side he looked at the titles of the books on the shelves. Working his way around the room he found an autographed football which he picked up and, holding it to his nose, smelled it.

Lois said, “You played football in college. Your play won the game so you were voted MVP and given the game ball.”

Clark nodded and put the football back in its holder. Next he picked up a photo of an older couple. He looked at Lois inquiringly. “My parents?”

“Yes, they should be here sometime soon. I called them last night. I tried to call them this morning to let them know you had been found, while you were in the shower, but there was no answer so they are probably on their way. I haven’t known them for very long. Actually, the weekend that I met them was the weekend that we were married. Even so, they are the nicest people. When we got married it was a shock to them, but they were so accepting. They took me into the family virtually sight unseen and loved me, I think it was because we were so in love and it showed. They have always wanted the best for you and when they saw that I made you happy, well, that was enough for them. I’m only their daughter-in-law, but they treat me better than my own parents do. I love them to pieces.”

Clark put the picture back where he had found it.

Lois asked, “Any memories?”

Shaking his head, he said, “No, none.”

Lois finally came down the steps and into the living room. She walked up to him and taking his hand she led him to the sofa. After taking his jacket off and putting it over the back of the chair she had him sit on the sofa. Once he was settled, she sat next to him and snuggled up to him.

His arm found its way across her shoulders and she sighed in contentment.

He said, “We do this a lot, don’t we?”

Lois brightened up. “You’re remembering something?”

“I don’t know. This just feels familiar . . . natural.”

Banking on the fact that his strongest memories would be of her and them and what they meant to each other, Lois decided to pull out all the stops. Twisting around she initiated a kiss.

His response was tentative, at first, but then he went with it and by the time they broke the kiss, they were both breathless.

Sitting back he released a heartfelt, “Wow.”

“Anything?”

With a cheeky grin he said, “No, not yet. Maybe some more of that therapy would help.”

Lois smiled and said, “Are you sure? That’s just what you would have said before in an attempt to just spend more time kissing.” She kept her tone light and bantering although she was feeling the desperation of needing him to have his memory back. Then a thought struck her. Some of the strongest memories should be of their intimate times. Slowly she pushed herself upright and took his hand. Standing she pulled him along behind her as she started to move in the direction of the bedroom.

Seeing the direction that she was leading him, he became somewhat apprehensive. He stammered, “Uh, are, uh, are you sure, uh, sure that we should ...”

She quickly turned to face him, “Clark, some of our most memorable times have happened —” she nodded in the direction of the bedroom, “— in there. Come on, honey. We are married after all. I need you to get your memory back. I need you and the world needs you.”

He stopped her and questioned her statement. “I can understand you needing me, but the world? I’m just a reporter.”

Lois was trying to get his memory back without telling him about Superman, but she would if she had to. For now she said, “Oh, honey, you are more than just a reporter. You are a part of the team of Lane and Kent. Perry teamed us because he could see the potential for greatness. You don’t want to let him down do you?”

“Well, if you put it that way.”

“Besides, it’s been more than twelve hours since we made love and I’m having withdrawal symptoms.”

By this time, Lois had him in the bedroom and standing with his back to the bed. She removed his tie and started undoing the buttons of his shirt.

When the buttons were all open she put her hands inside his shirt and sensuously slid her hands up across his pecs to his shoulders, across and down his arms, pushing the shirt off. His breathing deepened as she did and she knew that he was aroused as a result of her actions. She leaned in and started trailing kisses across his chest. She took one of his nipples in her teeth and nipped it. He jumped and started as he felt her hands on his belt buckle, but quickly accepted what she was doing. He toed off his shoes and when she had loosened the belt she undid the button and zipper. When his pants fell to pool around his ankles he was standing there in a set of boxers.

Stepping back, Lois began to undress, doing a slow striptease for her husband. By the time she was down to her bra and panties she knew she had his full attention. Closing the distance she placed a finger on his chest and pushed causing him to fall back onto the bed. She crawled up on top of him and with as much skin to skin contact as possible started another kiss.

His hands came around her back and she was encouraged when he unclasped her bra. Pulling back she allowed it to fall away. She swayed her upper body to make her breasts swing to and fro in front of his face. He took the bait and used his lips to capture a nipple. He reached for and grasped the waistband of her panties and started drawing them down her long slender legs. At his first touch she let out a sigh which slowly became a growl of desire.

Once he had her panties off he slid his hands up her legs, caressing them as he moved up to her torso. He caressed her hips and the curve of her waist before his hands found her breasts. His hands circled her breasts and squeezed gently while his thumb grazed over her erect nipples. Each time he did she would release a small gasp.

He continued working her breasts. When he did, his tongue flicked out and laved her hard nipple, wetting it slightly. Then he pulled back and blew on it, not enough to freeze the saliva, but enough to cool it. Once he had chilled her nipple he lowered his mouth to her breast and took her cold nipple into his warm mouth, flicking his tongue over it and applying some suction.

Lois was whimpering her desire as he did all of this. Her hips began to move of their own accord. She buried her fingers in his hair and pulled his face from one breast to the other. Even as all of this was happening, Lois was hit with feeling of déjà vu because this scene was playing itself out exactly as it had the last time they had made love.

Her hands moved to his back and her fingernails clawed at the flawless skin that they found there. When that happened, the

flood of emotion and the endorphins released in his brain triggered a sudden flood of memories. Memories of other times that they had been together this way. The love they shared. Suddenly, Clark Kent was back.

When she finally released him he lay next to her and caressed her breasts and body as she slowly relaxed.

After several minutes she exhaled, deeply and said, “Wow. That was something to remember.”

He replied, with heartfelt emotion, “I did remember.”

Hearing this, Lois was excited. She asked, “You remember?”

“Yes, I remember. I’m Clark and you are my wife and I love you.”

Afterward, in the afterglow of their lovemaking session, they were cuddling. Lois was lying next to him with her right leg across his and her right breast on his chest, her right arm across his shoulder and her face pillowed on his near shoulder. She said, “Wow, that’s something you haven’t forgotten. You are just a gentle a lover now as ever. You were just super.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Say what?”

“That I was super.”

Lois decided that this could be a good way to ease him into it. “Because you are.”

“I thought only Superman was super.”

With a wicked little grin, Lois said, “He is and you are.”

His confusion was apparent. “But if only Superman is super, how can I be super too.”

“It was only an expression, but actually ... in this case it is true. You, my dear ... are ... Superman. I have had to be careful to keep you from revealing what you can do.”

“But from what I’ve heard, Superman is an alien and doesn’t really mix with people.”

“Superman is a disguise that you put on so that you can help people and still have a normal life with me. You, my dear, dear husband are Clark Kent, adopted son of Jonathan and Martha, the sole survivor of the planet Krypton. Your biological parents sent you to Earth, to the Kents, to me because your planet was destroying itself and they wanted you to live. They loved you so much that they sacrificed themselves so that you could live. That’s why it’s so important that you get your memory back. The world needs Superman. There’s still that large chunk of rock headed this way.”

Just then there was a knock on the door and a shout in a voice that Lois recognized as Martha Kent’s. “Lois?”

Lois jumped up and grabbed a couple of robes. She threw one to Clark and said, “Your parents, you wait here. I’ll let them in.”

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## Chapter 8

Jimmy was directing Perry as he drove. “I tapped into the reports of the fireball and it completely circumnavigated the Earth. It was like a shuttle reentry only a lot smaller. Radar tracks had it coming in low and skipping up higher like skipping a flat rock across the surface of a pond until it finally slowed down enough to drop to the ground like the pebble finally dropping below the surface of the pond only in this case it still trailed a fireball. Witnesses in this area reported seeing it.”

Perry was looking at the conditions and the panicky, dispirited people and said, “You know, I covered Beirut before the Marines showed up in ‘82, and it was never as bad as this.”

Jimmy pulled out the map and used a flashlight to check it. He had marked the reported sightings. “I got four people. All of them claim they saw the same thing.”

Perry acted like he hadn’t heard Jimmy as he continued his reminiscence. “Bob Kerns and I got caught in a free-fire zone. Somebody shot our tires out.”

Reassuringly, Jimmy said, “I don’t think that’ll happen here.” He looked around, checking his bearings and said, “Chief, slow

down.”

Perry was still reliving the past. “We dodged out of there and started walking, but that just made us a target. Well, Kerns was a real charming guy and absolutely fearless, so he just marched into this little restaurant, ordered drinks for the house and that’s where we ended up spending the night.”

Jimmy interrupted Perry’s flow of words. ““Pull over!” He shone the light on the map and then pointed at an alley across the way, “If you draw a line between all the sightings, they intersect right here!”

Perry pulled the car to the curb, Jimmy threw open his door and jumped out.

As he did, Perry shouted, “Jimmy! It’s not safe out there!”

With some asperity in his tone, Jimmy replied, “Chief, you’ve taken strolls in war zones! Give me a chance.”

Jimmy pointed to a large hole in a metal fence. A graffiti tagger had written “The End is Near.” Underneath someone had written “No Kidding.”

Excited at his find, Jimmy almost shouted, “Look! Who do you think could make a hole like that?”

Perry looked, got out of the car and slammed the door shut. He followed Jimmy as he headed for the alley.

Jimmy stopped at the mouth of the alley and looked back. When he did he saw that if he looked through the hole in the fence he was lined up with a hole in a billboard. With a smile on his face he turned and hastened into the alley with Perry trailing along behind.

Jimmy was eager to see what he could find so he quickly moved down the alley.

Perry was puffing slightly as he attempted to keep up. He asked, “What are you looking for?”

Jimmy was flashing the light around sweeping it from side to side of the alley as he replied, “I don’t know yet.”

Jimmy started kicking debris aside as he moved toward the back of the alley. When they neared the end Jimmy let out an exclamation as he saw the crater, “YES! Look, Chief!”

Perry asked, “What do you see?”

“It looks like an impact crater.” He shone the light into the hole and said with mounting excitement, “There’s no rock in the bottom. Nothing that could have made this hole.”

Perry offered, “A sink-hole maybe?”

“Nah, look at the sharp, well defined edges.” Jimmy jumped down into the hole.

Perry admonished, “Hey, you don’t know what’s down there!”

Perry saw Jimmy bend down and examine the bottom of the hole closely and when he stood up he had something in his hand. With awe in his voice he said, “I think I’ve been looking for this.”

He held it out for Perry to see and shone the light on it. When he did, Perry let out a gasp because he immediately recognized what it was.

Jimmy was holding up a burned, torn, ripped and smudged piece of cloth. As Perry got a look, he realized it was a small red-and-yellow piece of the Superman insignia.

In a hushed tone Perry said, “He made it back.”

Jimmy was happy for the confirmation, but was still in a quandary. He asked, “But where is he now?”

They both simply stood there for a minute stunned, contemplating the ramifications of their find.

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Lois had let the Kents in and accepted hugs from both. Standing back she allowed them to descend the stairs.

As soon as she hit the bottom Martha turned on Lois and asked, “Have you heard anything yet?”

Lois smiled and said, “Well, I’ve got some good news and some bad news. Which do you want first?”

Noting Lois’s smile, Martha knew that any bad news couldn’t be all that bad so she said, “Good news first.”

Lois replied, with an even broader smile, “We found him.”

Martha’s relief was palpable. “Whew, that’s a relief. Okay, what’s the bad news?”

Lois’s smile faded slightly. “He has amnesia. We’ve been working on getting his memory back.” She pulled her robe closer around herself as she said, “I’ve been trying some ... therapy. The doctor said familiar people, places and ... activities ...” By the time she finished she was blushing.

Martha smiled and simply asked, “Well, did it work?”

“I’m not sure. He remembers me all right. He just doesn’t remember much else.” Turning toward the bedroom she called, “Clark, honey, your folks are here. Come on out.”

Somewhat hesitantly, Clark came out through the archway that led to the bedroom and said, “Hi, Mom and Dad.”

Clark stepped over and gave his mom a hug.

Jonathan said, “It’s good to see you, son.”

Not releasing Martha, Clark gave his father a smile.

Seeing this Lois asked, “Are you remembering?”

With confidence, he said, “Yes, your therapy worked. I remember you and me and us and them and the *Daily Planet*. But ... I still don’t remember ... Superman.”

Partially relieved, Lois asked, “Martha, Jonathan, how did you get here?”

Jonathan answered for them. “We caught a train in Wichita, changed trains in Baltimore.”

“How did you get from the train station here?”

Martha replied to that one. “We walked.”

Shocked, Lois said, “Oh, no, that’s a long walk. Would you guys like some coffee?”

They nodded and Lois went into the kitchen to make it while the Kents talked to Clark.

Martha was very solicitous of Clark’s physical condition and asked if he had had dizzy spells or anything that might go along with a head injury and explain the amnesia.

When Lois came back to the living room she had the coffee, cups, cream and sugar on a tray. She set the tray on the coffee table and everyone started to help themselves.

Clark was watching her as she did and seeing her take the regular coffee and add real cream and two spoons of sugar, he commented, “Hey, I’m remembering something else. You don’t drink real coffee with real milk or with real sugar normally.”

Lois smiled and replied, “Normally, no. I just recently changed. We decided I needed the calories. I’ve been burning them off.” She started to blush as she remembered how she was burning them off and wondered if Jonathan and Martha would guess.

Seeing Lois’s blush, Martha was able to make the logical leap and patted Lois’s hand and said, “Don’t worry, honey, we were newlyweds once ourselves.”

Lois’s blush just deepened.

Just then, Lois was literally saved by the bell as the phone rang. She hastened to answer it.

Perry’s gravelly tones came out, but she could hear Jimmy’s excited voice in the background, “Lois? Lois we have some good news! Jimmy found a piece of Superman’s uniform! That means he made it back, but we didn’t find a body which means he wasn’t dead. We don’t know just where he is, but he is somewhere in Metropolis.”

Lois had some concern about this and said, “That’s great news Perry. Well, you know how he is, Perry. With his power of flight he could be just about anywhere. He doesn’t have to be here in Metropolis.”

Perry knew how upset she had been when they had lost all contact and her reaction stuck him as odd. With a wary tone he asked, “What do you know that I don’t know? I expected you to

be more excited about this news than you appear to be. Have you seen Superman?”

Lois was startled that she had been careless. “Who, me? No, uh, no. No, uh, I haven’t seen Superman. No, I haven’t seen him since he left on his mission.”

“Now, you look here missy, I know just how close you and that husband of yours are to Superman. You’re holdin’ out on me. What do you know?”

“Look, Perry, this has to be kept totally confidential, okay?”

Perry’s tone became conspiratorial. “Totally confidential, okay. What do you know?”

She looked over at Clark with his parents and said, “Yes, he made it back, but he was hurt. He needs time to recover. I haven’t seen him and Clark doesn’t remember how to contact him, but he got hold of us just a short while ago. Listen, Perry, I’ve got to go. Clark’s parents just got here. I had called them when he was missing and now they are going to try and help him get his memory back.”

“Okay, but, look as soon as you hear from him again, you let him know that we need him. Say ‘Hi’ to Clark’s folks for me.”

“I will, Perry.”

After hanging up the phone, Lois noted the time and said, “Clark, why don’t you pull out the sofa-bed while I get the linens. Your parents have had a long trip and I’m sure they’re tired. We can work on your memory some more in the morning. I know I’ll sleep better tonight having my husband in bed with me.”

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Martha was the first one up and Lois awoke to the aroma of breakfast cooking. She nudged Clark and said, “Time to get up, sleepyhead. Your mom is making us breakfast.” Sliding out from under the covers, Lois headed for the bathroom.

When she came out she said, “With four people this apartment is going to be crowded. I think we need to head into the office and see what’s happening. That will give your parents the apartment to themselves.”

As he headed to the bathroom he said, “Sounds like a good idea. Maybe I’ll recover some more memories.”

\*\*\*

When Lois and Clark arrived at the Planet it was a bustle of activity. Lois grabbed Jimmy as he was passing and asked, “What’s the latest?”

Jimmy was obviously excited. “Well, we found that piece of Superman’s uniform. Then Perry talked to you so now we’re trying to locate Superman. We’ve been checking the hospitals and nobody is saying anything.” Jimmy broke off and headed for Perry’s office.

A few minutes later, Jimmy exited the office and approached Clark. “C.K., grab your stuff. Perry says since my first long-shot paid off, I can try another one. You’re comin’ with me.”

Clark looked at Lois questioningly, but she only shrugged and nodded so he grabbed his jacket and followed Jimmy out. Clark asked, “Where are we going, Jimmy?”

“Tell ya on the way. Let’s go.”

Knowing what he had been told last night, he couldn’t see how any effort would be rewarded with success, but he went along anyhow.

When they got to the street Jimmy hailed a cab and when they got in he gave an address that he read from a notepad. The cab took off with a screech of tires.

Fifteen minutes later they were dropped off in front of a non-descript building on the west side. As they stepped to the curb, Jimmy checked the address and nodded. He led the way to the door and knocked.

Once they were admitted, the room that they entered smacked of part *Arabian Nights* and part *Gypsy*. Their host, who used the name Mystique, had them sit at a small round table in the center of which stood a crystal ball. Mystique, an attractive black

woman, was dressed in flowing robes and had a scarf on her head like a gypsy.

Jimmy asked, “Are you really a psychic?”

She looked at him and asked, “Do you think I do this all for show?”

Jimmy was somewhat skeptical, “Others have. Carny shows, gypsy fortune tellers ...”

With some asperity she replied, “This is no side-show act. I can give you testimonials of how my readings have come true.”

Jimmy relented in his cross-examination and pulled out the piece of Superman’s uniform that he had found. Before handing it to her he said, “We think this was Superman’s. We’ve had it analyzed. It’s emitting very weak cosmic rays. That means it’s been in space, which supports our contention that he made it back. We’re trying to find out where he is because we need him to divert that fragment of the asteroid that’s still out there. Do you think you can find him?”

“I don’t know, honey, but I can sure try.”

Jimmy finally handed her the fragment and she rubbed it thoughtfully between her fingers for several seconds. She was concentrating on what vibes she was receiving and finally spoke, “I am feeling Superman’s presence strongly.”

Jimmy challenged, “Then he is alive?”

Mystique’s reply wasn’t reassuring. “I don’t know. I feel his confusion. Often, the recently dead are quite rattled by the experience.”

Jimmy said, “We’ve had independent confirmation that he is alive.”

“Okay, so he’s alive, but very confused.”

Clark had been warned by Lois and his parents to be careful not to reveal the secret, so he asked, “We need to find Superman. Do you have any idea where we might start looking?”

After Clark asked his question, Mystique settled back in her chair. Jimmy was skeptical because it all looked so theatrical. She had her eyes closed like she was going into a trance. Jimmy exchanged a look with Clark that said, ‘I’m afraid this was a waste of time.’

Suddenly, Mystique jumped out of her chair and started to pace around in a very agitated state. She almost shouted, “He’s here!”

Jimmy looked around, but all he could see was Mystique and Clark aside from himself. In an attempt to humor her he said, “We know he’s here. That’s why we’re \*here\*, but we know he isn’t here ... here. Just somewhere near here, but where, that’s the question.”

There was awe in Mystique’s voice as she was speaking. “His life force is incredibly powerful.”

Clark moved over next to Jimmy so that he could whisper, “I think she’s confused.”

Mystique overheard Clark and was exasperated by their apparent unbelief. “No! I’m feeling this very strongly. My senses tell me that he is definitely alive. I feel the vibration of life in his images. Have either of you just talked to him?”

Jimmy was almost laughing as he said, “I think you might be tuned into the wrong channel.”

Mystique was feeling insulted as she retorted, “I know what I’m feeling. This is unmistakable.”

Jimmy was having serious doubts about what happened and exchanged a look with Clark.

Jimmy recovered the fragment of Superman’s uniform from Mystique.

She said, “Look, I can see that you don’t believe me, but I’m telling you, I could feel him, very close. His vibe was so strong ... it was like we were in the same room. Are you sure one of you isn’t ...”

The look Jimmy gave her was one of total disbelief. She looked around as if Superman could be hiding behind the drapes

in some part of the room as she said, “No, I guess not. Anyhow, it was strong, so strong it was overpowering. He’s around.”

Jimmy said, “Thanks anyhow,” and he and Clark saw themselves out.

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After they returned to the Planet the feeling of gloom and doom was becoming more and more prevalent. It was even affecting Cat. She was even willing to take solace in Lois’s company. The two women, for a change, were not sparring, verbally. They were speaking in very serious tones.

As Jimmy and Clark approached Clark’s desk Lois spotted them and moved to her own desk to pick up her things so that she and Clark could leave. She was feeling the pressure to have Clark get his memory back. With each passing minute it was becoming that much more important.

As Lois moved to her desk, Cat approached Clark. She was carrying a small duffle bag which she dropped on his visitor’s chair. She started going through it, enumerating the contents as she did. “Batteries, flashlight, food, water —” she held up a bottle of champagne, “— survival supplies. Do you want to ride this out at my place or yours?”

“Cat, I don’t think it would be appropriate for us to barge in on you. I mean, my folks are here so there would be four of us and our place is crowded with the four of us as it is. If it didn’t mean a sleepover, we might be able to have you over, for a while.” He smiled to take out the sting as he said, “Besides, you and Lois don’t really get along that well.”

When Cat replied the depth of her fear and her vulnerability shone through. “I ... I just don’t want to be ... alone. When this thing ... I just don’t want to be alone. We’ve always been friends even if Lois and I haven’t always seen eye-to-eye.”

“I don’t know if it would work out. Let’s wait and see what happens between now and then, okay?”

Cat packed up her supplies and walked forlornly back toward her desk.

As Cat walked away, Lois came over to Clark and asked, “What was that all about?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I feel sorry for Cat. With all of the names she has in that Rolodex of hers she says she doesn’t have anyone that she really considers a friend to be with when, if, that thing hits. She was asking if we could get together.”

“Wow, she must really be desperate.” Lois looked with pity in Cat’s direction and then whispered, “Let’s do what we can to see to it that she doesn’t have to go through that,” then she raised her voice, “Come on, Clark, let’s get out of here.”

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## Chapter 9

As Lois and Clark were leaving, Jimmy was approaching Perry’s office to give him a report on his and Clark’s trip to the psychic. Stepping into the office he saw Perry with a collection of baseball cards spread out on his desk. On one corner there was a container of French fries, and a chocolate malt. In his hands was a triple cheeseburger of which he had just taken a large bite and was chewing. Behind him was a small TV. It was muted and showing scenes of riots. Across the bottom of the screen the chyron showed the countdown clock provided by EPRAD. When Jimmy glanced at it he saw 18:34:47.

Jimmy approached the desk and said, “We struck out, Chief. Sorry.”

“Me, too.” He indicated the corner of his desk and asked, “Fries?”

Jimmy was shocked and blurted out without thinking, “Do they let people with high blood pressure eat that stuff?”

Jimmy’s unthinking question earned him a glare from Perry.

Seeing that he realized what was up and said, “Yeah. Right. Who cares?” The realization was sinking in and Jimmy was getting scared. “I mean, it’s going to take a miracle to get us out

of this one.

Perry put down his burger and wiped his hands on a paper napkin. Looking down he surveyed the cards spread out there. He picked up one and started reciting from memory the stats as an object lesson for Jimmy, “Ted Williams. Batted .406 in the 1941 season. Miracles \*do\* happen.”

Hesitantly, Jimmy asked, “So, uh, you want me to write up my notes?”

Perry shocked him when he replied, “Heck, son, you might as well just write up the story.”

He spluttered out, “\*The\* story? The ‘Superman is alive and we have proof’ story?”

Nonchalantly, Perry replied, “Why not? It’s yours.”

Jimmy’s self-doubts started to get the better of him as he asked, “Oh, wow, Perry. I don’t know if I’m ready.”

Perry tried to be encouraging as he said, “I don’t know if you are either. Seems like a good time to find out.”

Determined to justify Perry’s faith in him, Jimmy said, “I won’t let you down.”

Seemingly unconcerned, Perry said, “Just do your best.”

As Jimmy started to turn to leave the office, Perry stopped him. “Hey, hey, hey.”

Jimmy had been about to pass through the door when he turned back to Perry. When he did he saw that Perry was reaching into a drawer in his credenza. As he watched, Perry produced a typewriter, a relic of an earlier age. He lifted it carefully, almost reverently, and gently placed it on the corner of his desk. Without looking up from his treasure, he said, “You might want to use this.”

Surprised, Jimmy asked, “What is it? I mean I know it’s a typewriter ...”

Speaking with what bordered on reverence, Perry answered, “Not just any typewriter. Cleve Johnson gave it to me after carrying it all over the world writing for this paper. I was a copy boy. Wrote my first story on it.”

Jimmy was now in awe of this piece of history sitting on the desk before him. Feeling inadequate, he mumbled, “I can’t —”

Perry interrupted him and reassured him, “Sure you can. It’s good luck. And we could use a spell of that right about now.”

With the care and reverence due to an art treasure, Jimmy picked up the offered typewriter. He wanted to say something, but he was too choked up with emotion to speak. Finally he said, “For good luck.”

Perry watched as Jimmy walked out of his office carrying the typewriter as if it were a crate of eggs.

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Lois and Clark had returned to the apartment and joined Clark’s parents. They were all brainstorming for ways to help Clark recover his memory.

Clark said, in an offhand way, “I know you all say that I’m this Superman, but I still don’t see how that’s possible. I mean, he can’t be hurt, right? And here I am with no memory. That implies that I was hurt somehow, doesn’t it?”

Clark and Lois were standing together, facing Martha when he said this. Jonathan was behind them and said, “It sure looks like he needs convincing.” What Lois and Clark had not seen was that Jonathan had picked up a baseball bat. Martha had seen it and she nodded in understanding. Jonathan said, “This is gonna hurt me, more than it does you.”

Clark started to turn around to give Jonathan his attention and as he did, Jonathan swung the bat with all of his strength, hitting Clark in the stomach. The bat flew into pieces like when a batter swings at a fast ball and hits it wrong, winding up with a broken bat single instead of a home run.

Clark’s eyes widened in astonishment. He looked down at where he had been hit and the stub of the bat in Jonathan’s hands realizing that he had felt no pain as a result. The evidence of his

senses was incontrovertible and undeniable. He was in fact Superman.

Lois went to the secret compartment and pulled out a Superman Suit. She held it up and said, “This is your uniform.” She indicated the compartment and the row of costumes. She nodded to Martha. “You have to thank your mom for these. She is the one that sewed them for you.”

“But that means that I’m not even from this planet. How can you be my parents?”

Martha spoke up. “Clark, honey, we adopted you after we found you in your spaceship. We never told anyone. As far as anyone knows you were the child of a relative of ours that couldn’t keep you. We even managed to get the local doctor to give you a birth certificate. Then we got some friends in city hall to make up the adoption record. You were only about four months old when we found you. You’ve been our son ever since and no one has questioned it.”

“But if I’m Superman ... how do I do all those things? I can’t remember doing them.”

Suddenly their conversation was interrupted by the TV switching from a blank screen with a chyron of the countdown timer to the timer with the LNN Anchor, Frank Madison. The countdown timer read – 15:23:37 and was still counting down. Frank started reading his prepared notes, “Since Superman has not been found and has failed to contact EPRAD work has progressed on fitting a nuclear payload to the Asgard rocket. That rocket was launched as soon as it was ready. This is a last ditch effort to prevent the remaining portion of Nightfall from impacting the planet. According to EPRAD Mission Control, the Asgard rocket with the nuclear payload should detonate against the Nightfall asteroid any second now. Let’s go to EPRAD.”

The picture switched to a radar plot of the trajectory of the missile. The large chunk of rock that was what was left of Nightfall was a round circle at the center of the screen. A smaller dot representing the Asgard rocket was seen moving across the screen. While they watched the dot representing the rocket bypassed the large target and continued on into space.

Immediately the feed was switched and there was the voice of the Mission Control spokesman coming from the speakers, “Tracking telemetry zero, niner, alpha.” There was a brief pause then with some despair evident in the voice, the Mission Control person continued, “The Asgard rocket has missed its target. Repeat, the Asgard rocket has missed its target.”

There was a collective gasp as they all realized what that meant. They now had about fifteen hours for Clark to recover his memory sufficiently to intercept the asteroid if disaster were to be avoided.

Lois was worried and grabbed her husband in a fierce grip as if she wouldn’t let him go.

Jonathan was more pragmatic. “The world needs you now. More than it ever has, I expect.”

Martha looked at Jonathan and said, “He already tried once and look what happened.”

Lois looked up into his face and reaching up brushed his little forelock aside and added, “I don’t want to take a chance on him being hurt again.”

Again, Jonathan was the pragmatic one. “What choice is there, but to try again? The alternative is unthinkable.”

Stepping up to Clark, Jonathan put a hand on his shoulder and said, “I’m confident that that thing has done its worst to you. What more could happen?”

Lois fretted, “If he could only remember how it happened. The doctor said it could be the result of a blow to the head. Did you crash into it head first?”

Clark was frustrated. “I really don’t know.”

Lois was convinced she was right as she said, “I don’t think you would have. You and I have discussed many things and one

has been karate. I think you would have, I don’t know, kinda ... kicked it since the legs are stronger.”

Martha asked, “If he kicked it, how would his head and memory be affected?”

Lois thought for a few seconds, trying to dredge up from her memory what the doctor had said. Finally she had it and snapping her fingers, almost shouted, “Oxygen! We were worried that he wouldn’t have enough oxygen for the return trip. The doctor said that mountain climbers who have lost their air supply suffer from anoxia and they can lose their memories, at least temporarily. That has to be it. His air must have run out and his brain was starved for oxygen. That has to be it.”

Jonathan asked, “Did the doctor say how long it took for the effects to be reversed?”

Lois replied, “No, but I would suppose it would depend on extent and duration. Was he totally without or was it just reduced and for how long.”

Martha pointed out, “Well, he has started to recover some memories. And he didn’t forget you. That’s probably a good sign. What about a hyperbaric chamber? They can use them for hyperbaric oxygen treatments.”

Lois asked, “How would we explain using that to treat Clark’s amnesia? Remember, Clark was here in Metropolis, not out in space. What was he doing here in Metropolis that would deprive him of oxygen?”

Martha countered, “What about Superman?”

Lois said, “I don’t think we can. How could we explain both Superman and Clark having amnesia at the same time? That would be too risky. It’s better if he stays hidden. They’ve figured out that he made it back, but the rest is a mystery. Let it stay a mystery, at least for the time being.”

Clark finally spoke up. “Well, you guys have convinced me that I’m Superman, but I just don’t remember how to be Superman. How can we get that back? Things like making coffee and making love to my wife, they come naturally. Flying into space to stop an asteroid doesn’t exactly come naturally. Does it?”

With a shake of his head, Jonathan said, “You’re the only one who can do it, son. You’ve done it once already so we know that you can do it.”

Clark was still Clark, memory or no memory and he could feel the need to do something to avert this disaster. With something bordering on desperation in his voice he said, “You guys need to help me remember how to be Superman and if I can’t remember, at least teach me how to be him.”

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Jimmy was at his desk and he had the typewriter front and center where his computer keyboard usually sat. Because of the different feel of the keys as opposed to what he was used to he was reduced to almost a hunt-and-peck style of typing. He was so absorbed with what he was doing that he didn’t even know that he was there until Perry put his hand on his shoulder. With a start, Jimmy jerked around.

Perry gently said, “We’re gonna need that copy, Jimmy.”

Jimmy sighed, pulled the paper out of the typewriter and handed it to Perry.

Perry accepted it and started reading.

As he did, Jimmy said, “I don’t know. You guys make it look so easy. Pretty lame, isn’t it?”

Perry looked at it thoughtfully and then said, “It could use some polish. Listen, Jimmy—”

Jimmy interrupted him and said, “I know. You gotta give it to a real reporter.”

Perry shook his head and said, “No, I was just thinking that maybe I should partner you with someone on this.”

Jimmy was astonished and blurted out, “Partner? Who’s gonna want to partner with me?”

With a smile, Perry put his arm across Jimmy's shoulders and said, "Let's step into my office. Maybe we can work something out. It's been a while since I've had part of a byline."

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Cat was nervous. She was about to do something that she hadn't done all that frequently and just the thought made her apprehensive. As she crossed through the doors she pulled some cloth from her purse. It was a very feminine bit of black lace, a bit larger than a handkerchief. Folding it into a triangle she placed it on her head demonstrating that it was in fact a mantilla and that she had just entered a church. Clutching the bottom to hold it in place, Cat made her way to the small cubicles off to one side of the church. Shortly after entering one side of the cubicle a young priest, barely out of his novitiate entered the other side of the same cubicle and to signal that he was now ready he slid a partition aside leaving only a screen blocking him from the other side. He sat back so that if the penitent were to try to look into his side he would be mostly obscured.

Cat had nervously been handling a set of rosary beads, but upon hearing the partition being moved, she began the ritual, her own inimitable way, "Bless me Father for I have sinned ... and sinned ... and sinned."

He had been taught well and moved to the next step. "How long has it been since your last confession?"

Cat was silent for some time. It was apparent that she was mentally calculating before answering, "Twenty, uh, twenty-two years. But I've meant to get in more. I've just had a busy schedule."

He was shocked at this. He had heard some confessions and most of the time they were short, the penitent having been in the confessional at most a week previously. He instantly became worried about how long it would take to confess the sins accumulated over a twenty-two year period and said, "I'm sure you realize the time constraints we're operating under. Perhaps you should limit this confession to the most recent transgressions."

Cat said, "Oh, all right, well let's see. Oh, I have it; I told a man who has no memory that he desires me. Oh, and his wife was standing nearby."

The priest couldn't help, but be curious. "Does he?"

"Well, he ought to. Although before they were married he was playing awfully hard to get. Why he decided to marry her, I could never tell you. They do look happy though. I guess there's no accounting for taste."

Trying to cut to the chase, the priest asked, "So you are confessing to the sin of lust by attempting to take advantage of a vulnerable man, who is also married?"

In an off-hand manner, Cat continued, "It's kind of a pattern I see in my behavior. I just don't want to meet the maker fresh off this one."

Trying to fulfill his duty and get to the root of the problem the priest asked, "Why do you feel you've lived your life this way?"

As if he could see her, Cat shrugged and said, "I guess I've always found meaning in meaningless relationships." Cat paused, trying to decide if she should confide her deepest fears. She decided to go for it, "I called everyone I know. They all have someone to be with. It's taken the end of the Earth to get to this point, but I'm totally alone."

The priest took this in and asked, "But what you want now is reassurance that you're never alone, that you are loved for your soul. Is that right?"

Cat brightened. He understood! She said, "Exactly. Aren't there some things you passionately want to experience just \*once\* before you die?"

Being just out of his novitiate and having some of his own issues because of Nightfall this was hitting too close to home. He

slammed shut the partition and fled the confessional.

Cat heard the partition close and didn't understand why. She questioned, "Father? ... Father?" Then she heard his rapid footsteps receding from the confessional. Realizing that the session was indeed over, Cat pulled off the mantilla and used it to wipe her eyes before putting it back in her purse and exiting the church.

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The next morning, while Jonathan and Martha worked with Clark, trying to re-teach him how to be Superman, Lois went in to the office. Compared to the last few days the city appeared to be deserted. Where there had been traffic jams and jammed sidewalks there now were empty streets and almost empty sidewalks.

On the sidewalk in front to the Planet building stood a newspaper vending machine. Through the Plexiglas window the headline stood out big and bold – "\*SUPERMAN CAME HOME\*" with the sub-headline, "Where Is He Now?" The byline read, "By Perry White and James Olsen."

Small clusters of people stood on the street looking into the sky. They were either trying to get the first sight of Superman or else their doom. A few cars were driving along. In the window of an electronics shop across from the Planet a TV showed the countdown clock which explained everything. The chyron read: "Estimated Time to Impact is now 3:09:35" and it continued counting down.

Lois made her way to the newsroom and her desk. She had picked up a copy of the morning edition on her way up and sat at her desk simply perusing what she had.

Jimmy was at Cat's desk and he was showing her his article, his first byline. Cat was suitably impressed.

Perry came by and Lois stopped him. "That was a nice thing you did for Jimmy, Chief."

"Jimmy's a good kid, Lois. It's been a month o' Sundays since I had a byline and I didn't mind sharin' it. After all, it was his story."

Lois nodded. "He earned it. As long as we know Superman got back to Earth, there's still hope."

Looking around, Perry said, "There isn't much goin' on. You don't have to be here now. I know that you and Clark's folks are trying to restore Clark's memories. He should probably be your priority now. It's your choice, but I think you ought to go be with him. What about your family?"

Lois had a somewhat regretful expression as she replied, "We already managed to get everybody together on an open phone line. Mom and Dad even acted like they cared about each other. It was nice. You?"

Perry looked down. "Alice was visiting the boys when it all happened. She can't get a flight out of Des Moines."

Lois reached out a comforting hand. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Making the best of it, Perry said, "She knows how I feel about her and what she's meant to me. That's the important thing."

Lois reached to shut down her terminal and said, "At least there's that. Thanks, Perry. I think I will go home and be with Clark and his folks."

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## Chapter 10

After Lois left for the office, Martha and Jonathan started going over what Clark needed to know to be Superman. They did it in such a way that they hoped it would stimulate memories.

Martha said, "Let's see ... the first power you showed was strength and then invulnerability. Even as a kid you couldn't be hurt too easily. We're just lucky that it didn't manifest too early. When we took you for your shots, if the doctor had broken his needles trying to inject you they would have started asking questions."

Jonathan picked up at that point. “As I recall the next power was hearing. You kept complaining about the dog barking all night and keeping you awake. First, we didn’t have a dog and second the next closest farm with a dog was more than two miles away.”

Clark started to blush and Martha saw it. She challenged, “You’re remembering something, aren’t you?”

With a shamefaced expression he said, “Yeah. It wasn’t really a dog I was hearing.”

Jonathan was lost. “Oh, what was it?”

Clark was blushing brighter and brighter red. “Do you really want to know?”

Martha barked out a laugh. She jabbed Jonathan and said, “I wish we’d known that before. We would have been more careful.”

Suddenly, Jonathan realized what the two of them were talking about and said, “Ooooooh. Yeah, I wish you’d told us sooner.”

Martha brightened up. “Hey, that’s a good sign. That’s a childhood memory. Do you remember why we got you the glasses?”

“Lois said that it was so I don’t go around seeing people in their underwear . . . or worse.”

Jonathan chuckled. “Yeah! You came home from school one day and you were very upset. You had been in gym class and all of the sudden you were looking into the girl’s locker room. Since it was like x-rays and they use lead shielding to protect people from x-ray exposure, I made up the glasses with lead crystal lenses. It worked too.”

Clark summarized, “Okay so I’m strong and can’t be hurt. I can hear sounds at great distances and see through things. How did I get to the asteroid?”

“Your power of flight was the last one to develop. You were about eighteen at the time.”

Martha said, “Let’s go out on the balcony and try.”

Once they were out there, Martha said, by way of encouragement, “It must be like riding a bicycle, Clark. You probably don’t forget how to fly, once you’ve done it. Give it a try.”

Thinking that perhaps he had to give it a literal jump start, he gave a little hop, ala George Reeves, but it had no effect.

“How do I do it? Do I flap my arms or something?” Clark looked at them for guidance.

Jonathan said, “You don’t flap your arms or anything, it’s like you just will yourself to fly and it happens.”

Jonathan and Martha stood back and watched expectantly as Clark tried to concentrate. Nothing happened. He turned back to them and asked, “Is this like something out of *Peter Pan*? Do I need pixie dust and happy thoughts, or what?”

Martha struck a pose with her right arm up and her face looking up and said, “Usually when you fly, you do something like this.”

Jonathan said, “It’s just instinct, I think. You just want it to happen and it does.”

Clark turned toward them again and said, “But you said I didn’t fly until I was eighteen. So I had to figure out how to do it. And right now, I can’t remember.”

Jonathan pointed out, “Clark, we didn’t know you would have powers and when they started to develop we didn’t know what or how many there would be. It isn’t like we knew you would be able to fly and you had to figure it out. It just happened.” Jonathan indicated the edge of the balcony and said, “Maybe if you were on the edge there it would look like you were flying and you’d remember.”

Apprehensively, Clark walked over to the edge and tried to strike the pose that Martha had demonstrated. He stared up and then looked down. When he looked down he saw the drop to the

alley and had an attack of vertigo. He swayed uncertainly. The attack of vertigo unnerved him and he backed away from the parapet. He said, “I don’t know about this.”

Martha sounded positive as she said, “Honey, it’ll all come back to you once you get going.”

Clark was still unconvinced as he said, hesitantly, “Okay. If you say so.”

Martha asked, “Look, do you want us to help you?”

Clark said, “Okay. Why don’t you give me a count?”

Martha said, “I think it would be better if you got up on the parapet.”

Clark looked at her skeptically before actually climbing up on the railing.

Once he was up there and had assumed the pose, Martha started to count, “On three. One, two—” At the count of two she suddenly moved forward and shoved him off the railing.

With a scream, “Gaaaaaaa,” Clark plummeted from the railing and fell like a brick all the way to the floor of the alley.

It was as if there had been an unspoken understanding between Jonathan and Martha and Jonathan had known just what his wife was going to do and he joined her at the railing to watch their boy plummet to the ground. After he hit, Martha looked at Jonathan as if to say, ‘we tried.’

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After shutting down and packing up, Lois made a beeline for her car and with as little traffic as there was she made it home in almost no time at all. She had just parked the Jeep and headed for the apartment when she heard Clark’s scream and then the clatter of trashcans in the alley. She diverted her path to see what had happened and saw Clark as he came out from behind a dumpster. He was dusting himself off as he walked.

She asked, “Clark, what are you doing down there?”

He looked around before answering to make sure the he wouldn’t be overheard. “Mom tricked me. They were trying to help me remember how to fly and she . . . pushed me off the balcony. I’m glad I can’t be hurt.”

Lois chuckled. “I don’t know if I would have thought of that approach. I take it that it didn’t work.”

With a rueful expression he admitted, “I fell like a rock.”

Lois reached for his hand and took it in hers as they started to walk back to the apartment. She said, “Clark, we really need you to remember. We have less than four hours until impact.”

Thoughtfully, Clark said, “Maybe if you told me about Superman, I’d remember.”

Thinking that was a good idea, Lois started telling Clark about his alter-ego.

“The first time I saw Superman I was a stowaway on the Prometheus Shuttle. I had snuck aboard and since I didn’t have an assigned position I found a side compartment that was vacant that had a seat. I was strapping myself in for blastoff when I spotted a bomb. I needed some way to alert EPRAD about the problem so I grabbed some cutters and started cutting wires, indiscriminately. It did have the effect of stopping the countdown, but it didn’t solve my problem. I was in the compartment with the bomb and when it exploded I would be killed. Suddenly, with the timer on the bomb getting closer and closer to zero this man wearing blue tights and a red cape came in. He pulled the detonator off of the bomb and swallowed it. Seeing what he was doing, I was frantic. I called him crazy and a few other things, but when the detonator went off and the only effect it had was to make him burp, quietly I might add, I was stunned. How could a man eat a bomb and not be killed when it went off? Then, to top it off, after I debarked he lifted the shuttle into orbit. Even better than that, he came back and picked me up and flew me back to the Planet. Landing on the newsroom floor and putting me down right next to my desk. I have to admit, I was captivated. Talk about hero worship! I had it and I had it bad.”

Lois went on to recount more times that Superman had rescued her. As she had been speaking they had made their way into the apartment where Martha and Jonathan were also interested listeners.

“It wasn’t too long after that we were invaded by a group posing as federal agents looking for information about Superman. They wound up kidnapping us and taking us up in a plane. They were using us as bait to lure Superman out into the open. Incidentally, that was our first kiss. They were about to throw us out of the plane, without parachutes and I asked if I could kiss you goodbye. It was a nice kiss and I realized right then and there that you were dangerous, to me at least. I had been unlucky in relationships and was afraid of being attracted to any guy and right then and there I knew that I was attracted to you, but I refused to admit it to myself. Anyhow, I was thrown out and you dove out after me. Superman caught me before I hit the ground and flew me back to the Planet. What we didn’t know was that a homing beacon had been planted on me. They fired a missile and it homed in on the beacon, me and Superman. Superman flew up and intercepted the missile and sent it into the stratosphere where it exploded. That was the second time that he directly saved my life.”

“The next time was when we were tracking down the invisible man. Some criminals had stolen these invisibility suits so that they could rob a load of gold bullion from a vault. Well, anyhow, I got caught and they left me locked in the vault. The air was running out when Superman busted through the wall and rescued me again.”

“Then there was the time in Smallville, that’s when I first met your parents. That same group of rogue government agents was looking for the Kryptonite that Wayne Irig had found. The Kryptonite took away your powers and Trask almost killed you. We had just gotten married the night before and I just couldn’t let him do that. Well ... he died instead.”

“Wait a minute; you killed him, didn’t you?”

Lois smiled. “You’re remembering?”

“A little. Keep going.”

Almost an hour had elapsed and she had gotten to the event of him rescuing her from the tsunami. His visage had been changing slightly as she had been speaking.

When she finished relating this latest incident, Clark said, “Hold that thought,” stood up and strode to the secret compartment. After opening it he pulled out one of the uniforms and said, “Excuse me for a second.” He stepped into the bedroom. They heard a wind and then Superman stepped back into the living room.

Lois whispered in awe, “He’s back!”

Clark crossed to Lois and taking her in his arms kissed her and then said, “You brought me back. First, by loving Clark and now by telling me how I had rescued you as Superman, you rescued me. Mom, do you still have that SCUBA gear at the farm?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact it was recently hydro’d and refilled. It’s in the downstairs closet.”

“I remember what happened. The energy release generated by the impact destroyed my air supply. This time I won’t simply hit it. What I’ll do is push it. This part is a lot smaller and I should be able to affect its orbit by changing its velocity and vector. If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a job to do.”

Lois smiled at him and said, “Come back to me.”

He looked at her sincerely and said, “I’ll always come back to you. I love you. Right now, I have to save you again, all of you. There’s a rock out there that needs to go away and I’m the only one that can send it away.”

Lois gave him another kiss and said, “For luck.”

“I don’t need luck when I’ve got Lois Lane.”

She looked at him up through her lashes and coyly said,

“Always, lover.”

In a gust of wind he was gone. Lois turned on the TV and tuned in LNN. The chyron showed 2:42:17 until impact. Lois, Martha and Jonathan settled in to watch. With a sense of relief now, Lois asked, “This should be a good show. Anyone for popcorn?”

They had known that it would take Clark a while to reach the asteroid. The Mission Control specialist came on and announced “This is Mission Control. The Nightfall fragment is still on track and on time. We are fourteen minutes and counting from the projected impact of the Nightfall asteroid. Impact is expected to occur just off the coast of the Eastern seaboard. The tsunami created is expected to cover all of the landmass east of the Appalachian Mountains.” Suddenly he paused in his recitation and with a startled tone said, “Wait a minute. What’s happening? Stand by!” The audio was cut off. Two minutes later it came back on and the excitement was obvious, “This is Mission Control. Mission trackers reporting an anomaly. Switching to back-up computers for corroboration.” There was a brief pause, then, “Roger, confirmation. The asteroid’s vector is changing.”

“The trajectory of the asteroid has changed and continues to deviate from the projected path. It is beginning to move in a direction perpendicular to the plane of the ecliptic. Estimates at this time are that the asteroid will miss the Earth with a wide safety margin.” A few minutes later the announcer said, “Incredible. We seem to be ... the asteroid appears to be leaving the vicinity of the Earth entirely and on a course that will take it completely out of the solar system.”

“We are stopping the countdown clock at this time.” There was a short pause and then the announcer said, “It’s gotta be \*Superman\*! Speculation is that Superman has returned and saved the Earth once again. We don’t know where he’s been, but we’re sure glad he’s back.”

The feed from EPRAD was cut and the screen read, “Please Stand By.” Then a voice announced, “We will now return you to our regular programming.”

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The next morning, Lois was at the Planet bright and early thanks to Martha preparing breakfast again. Clark had to respond to an emergency so she had gone in by herself. He would be with her shortly.

Looking out the windows from the newsroom, the staff marveled at the crowd in the streets. It rivaled the crowd seen in Times Square in New York City on New Year’s Eve. There were line dances forming and all kinds of noise-makers in use.

In the newsroom itself a party atmosphere prevailed. The sound of champagne corks popping happened a few times and glasses were filled.

Jimmy, with the lack of expertise of a novice, popped the cork only to have part of the contents bubble out in a foamy geyser drenching his hands and the floor. He managed to get some into a glass and holding it up in salute said to his boss and mentor, “Perry, these last two days were the best days of my life. Even if it was almost the end of the world.”

Perry clapped the younger man on the shoulder and said, “You did a good job Jimmy. You hustled, you didn’t give up, you got the story. I’m proud of you, son.”

Jimmy was suddenly very subdued. “That means a lot, coming from you. I just wish I could write better.”

By way of encouragement, Perry said, “Nothing wrong with being a photo-journalist with a nose for news. You keep at it, son. Never know what’ll happen.”

Suddenly a roar went up from the crowd that drowned out the conversations in the newsroom. Jimmy grabbed his camera and threw open the window so that he could get some pictures. He saw that everyone was looking up and some were pointing at the sky. Following their track he saw Superman so he brought up his

camera and started snapping picture after picture and was very pleased when Superman made a close approach and waved to him.

As soon as Jimmy had snapped a couple of pics, Superman put on a burst of speed and disappeared from view.

Looking around in anticipation, Lois watched the door to the stairwell. She wasn't disappointed when, literally seconds later, her husband stepped through straightening his tie. She smiled at him as he approached. When he was close she reached out to finish straightening his tie and said, "That was a nice thing to do. I'm sure it encouraged Jimmy. Perry was just talking to him about the importance of being a photojournalist."

Clark reached up, tapped his ear, said, "I know," and smiled a smile which she returned.

She mumbled, "Softie."

He and Lois move over to the window and looked down at the crowd. It was celebratory and not riotous and being rather peaceful. Loud enough so that those nearby could hear, Clark asked, "Did I miss something?"

Lois replied, "Your buddy Superman just made a flyby, that's all."

Perry was exuberant and as he approached Lois and Clark he said, "A real day to remember," then he caught himself, suddenly remembering Clark's amnesia. "If you'll pardon the expression."

Lois smiled and gave Clark a hug. Without breaking it she said, over her shoulder, "Not to worry, Chief. He's all better now, aren't you, honey?"

Perry was all smiles as both he and Jimmy approached to shake Clark's hand.

Lois added, "I just knew that a bump on the head wouldn't keep him down."

Cat came over and it looked to Lois as if she were going to try to kiss Clark, but to Lois's surprise that's not what happened. Lois was surprised when Cat walked up and put out her hand and said, "Welcome back, Clark. I'm glad you got your memory back. I have to say, even without your memory you're still the nicest guy I think I've ever met. I'm just sorry you chose Lois and not me."

Noting the tear at the corner of her eye, Clark said, "Cheer up, Cat. I'm sure that the right guy for you is out there, somewhere. You just need to slow down and let him find you."

Lois pulled Clark aside and asked, "Honestly, truthfully, when did your memory come back?"

"I was starting to get little flashes, but when we went to bed a lot of Clark returned. I never really forgot you. It was me that was lost." Looking around to make sure no one was listening, he added, "When you were telling me how Superman had saved you so many times, that's when he came back. I also remembered how I dealt with the asteroid. I used that karate technique you taught me. You know, I think I should learn more about karate."

Lois said, in a quiet tone, "I think so too. You can join me at the dojo. It'll be nice. We can practice together. Now that your memory is back, I think it's time we talked about Luthor. You are not going to believe this story."

"I think that later tonight will be soon enough. As Perry would say, We have a paper to get out."

Lois smiled and swatted his arm before she said, "How right you are. We have to write up the 'Superman Saves the World' story, but that's yesterday's news." Looking around to make sure she wouldn't be heard and dropping her tone to a conspiratorial level, she said, "I think that our next big story is going to be Lex Luthor."

Clark quirked an eyebrow and wondered what Luthor had done to put that particular bee in her bonnet. Whatever it was, he was happy he had done it. Only time would tell where this would lead.

THE END