

A Week in Paris

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Seven months after the events in the episode 'The Phoenix,' Clark is living a nomadic existence in Europe as a foreign correspondent. But when the world's art treasures start disappearing, Clark must deal with the circumstances that drove him from Metropolis.

Story Size: 35,473 words (196Kb as text)

Disclaimer: All recognisable characters, plot lines, etc., are property of DC Comics, December 3rd Productions and Warner Bros.

Author's note: This story was a long time in the writing and a lot of thanks are necessary. First of all, I want to thank KenJ and Trina for beta-reading (and prodding me along when needed). Thanks also goes to Trina for letting me pick her brain about her recent trip to Paris, as I've never been. Thanks also to Kismatt, Deadly Chakram, ChrisPat, Lori, Peg and the rest of the #lanekent crew for helping me translate Australian terms into American ones, and to Pava Leaves for getting this ready for the archives. And last but not least, I also want to thank everyone that read and commented on this story when I posted it to the message boards... your encouragement means a lot to me.

The alarm's insistent beeping broke into Clark's dream. He reached out and shut it off without opening his eyes. If he kept them closed, maybe he could reclaim a little of the dream... A dream where Lois loved him and he was actually happy.

Groaning, he opened his eyes and looked around at the sparsely furnished confines of his tiny studio apartment. Nope; still in Paris.

Sighing, he dragged himself out of bed and into what served as a bathroom. He splashed water on his face, trying to wake up properly. In the mirror, he dimly noted the scruffy beard. For a moment he considered just leaving it, then hesitated. Superman couldn't be seen with a beard. Sighing again, he reached for the hand mirror. Superman was the one thing that gave his life purpose any more, but it was getting harder by the day to maintain the image expected of the superhero. He refused to think about what would happen when he no longer cared about Superman either.

Six months had passed since he'd left Metropolis, leaving behind his friends, his job, his home and moved to Paris. Six, endless, interminable months of travelling from assignment to assignment as a foreign correspondent, spending only a day or two at his apartment in Paris before the next story, the next city beckoned.

Six months without Lois.

His shoulders slumped. Seven months since he'd asked her out and been shot down. He could still remember every single moment of that particular conversation. The look of surprise on her face, the automatic rejection in her eyes before she even opened her mouth... her total scuttling of all his hopes and dreams. He gripped the small vanity. Even now, it still hurt as much as it had that day in the Planet newsroom. Naively, he'd thought that maybe they could be okay, that they could salvage their friendship. That being her best friend would-have had to- suffice. But he'd been

wrong. It had been the beginning of the end. Between Lois's rejection, Mayson's death and Lois's relationship with Daniel Scardino, staying in Metropolis had become a nightmare.

Paris was turning out to be just as tortuous.

Leaning closer to the mirror, he inspected the closeness of the shave, ignoring the dark circles under his eyes and the dullness in them. Close enough. Shrugging into his suit, he left the apartment, as ready as he was going to be to face another day.

Fresh from an assignment- Brussels this time- he picked up a copy of the European edition of the Daily Planet to read with his coffee at the cafe down the street from his apartment building. Sitting down with his espresso, he opened the newspaper and prepared to catch up on what had been happening in his absence.

A small piece caught his eye, lamenting that the arms of the Venus de Milo had been taken off exhibit in the Louvre. Frowning, he folded the paper and put it back on the table. He'd heard a rumour while in Brussels that Gainsborough's Yellow Boy had been removed from show in the British Royal Academy, ostensibly for restoration. He'd thought it odd at the time. He'd seen Yellow Boy himself when he'd recovered it from that bunker full of art treasures- and his globe- under Metropolis, and to his, admittedly inexperienced eyes, the painting had seemed to be in perfect condition. But he'd ignored it. It had been two years since he'd seen the painting, and any number of things could have happened to it in the meantime.

Almost anyone else would've dismissed the idea that the two stories were in any way related. But he had been the one to find the art works. Gainsborough's Yellow Boy, the arms of the Venus de Milo, Beethoven's Tenth Symphony, the full length Mona Lisa, Van Gogh's 'other' self-portrait... They all had one thing in common.

Finishing the last of his espresso, he left a tip and ducked into a nearby alley. Paris was conveniently well provided with dark alleyways. One of his old friends was on the Louvre's custodial staff. Maybe Leo could help.

Landing out of sight a block or so away from the famous art gallery, Clark spun back into street clothes. There was a cafe nearby where the custodial staff tended to spend their breaks. If he was to find Leo anywhere, it would be there.

The cafe was busy at this time of day, full of workers heading to- or from- their places of employment. This particular cafe catered more towards the lower working class. It was respectable but not fancy, and had a local reputation of good food and strong coffee for low prices, making it one of the more popular cafes in this area of Paris.

Spotting Leo near the back of the crowded eatery, Clark adroitly made his way towards his quarry.

"Bonjour, Leo." Clark greeted his acquaintance in flawless French.

"Clark! I hadn't heard you were back in town. Where were you this time?"

"Brussels. I got back last night."

"Are you in town long?" As he spoke, Leo gestured towards a newly freed table nearby. Quickly Clark sat, knowing that if he didn't, the table would soon be claimed by someone else.

"No, I have to be in Vienna by the end of the week."

"They don't give you much time off between assignments."

"I don't mind," Clark said quietly. Work gave him something to do other than Superman duties or brood about Lois Lane.

He switched back to English, knowing that it would make their conversation harder to follow for anyone who happened to be listening in.

"There's a story circulating that the arms of the Venus de Milo have been taken off exhibit without explanation."

Leo's face darkened. "We- the custodial staff- were told that they'd been removed for cleaning and restoration."

"Funny," Clark remarked. "I saw them when I visited the

Louvre a month or so ago. They didn't seem to be in any need of restoration then. Did something... untoward... happen?"

"They didn't need any work done," Leo stated baldly. He lowered his voice. "Pascal- a friend of mine- works in the restorations department. He said that the arms weren't slated for any work to be done for almost 2 years. And- they haven't been logged into the restorations department."

"So where are they?"

Leo shrugged. "No one knows." He looked at his watch. "I must go. Marie will be expecting me." With that, he got up and exited the cafe, leaving Clark lost in thought.

Clark entered the crowded space that constituted the European bureau of the Daily Planet. It was always a bit of a rabbit warren, but at the moment it was worse than usual. Most of the travelling correspondents were back in Paris, preparing for the European leaders summit in Vienna at the end of the week.

Threading his way between the desks, he finally arrived at the editor's office. Tapping on the door, he waited for the reply of 'enter' before opening the door and sticking his head inside the office.

"Joe? Do you have a minute?"

Joe Patterson, editor in chief of the European bureau, looked up from the papers he was studying. He was close to being Perry White's polar opposite. Tall and lanky, he seemed to talk, move and think at double speed. It had taken Clark a few weeks to get used to him, but he'd recognised that Joe was almost as canny and insightful as Perry White. With that knowledge had come respect.

"Sure Kent, what do you need?"

Clark settled into the chair in front of the editor's desk and outlined what he'd found. He leaned forward. "I think there's something there. The thing is, I don't have time to investigate it until after the summit. And by then..."

"By then, more of the artworks may have disappeared." Joe concluded. "I don't have any other reporters free until then either. Between this summit and the usual news team, I just can't spare any one."

Tentatively, Clark put forward the idea that had occurred to him at the cafe.

"What about the Metropolis office?"

Joe sat forward. "You want to see if Perry White will send someone over?"

"Well, the artworks are on loan from the Metropolis Museum of Art." Clark pointed out.

Joe thought it over for a few moments. "Okay. Get in touch with Perry."

Clark nodded and left the office. Scanning the room, he found a temporarily vacant desk and logged on to the computer. He spent comparatively little time in the office, so he didn't have a desk of his own. It had irked him at first, but he'd learned to adapt.

Opening up the email program, he sat for a second, mentally composing what he wanted to say.

"Chief,

I came across something over here today. The arms of the Venus de Milo have been taken off exhibit at the Louvre- apparently for restoration. What got my attention is it's the second major artwork that's been removed for 'restoration' in a week that was found in the vault under Metropolis by Superman two years ago. The restorations department at the Louvre has no record of the arms entering their department.

It could be coincidence, but I don't think it is. Neither does Joe.

The problem is, we're short staffed here. I don't have time to investigate and Joe can't spare anyone. Can you help?

Clark."

"I didn't know Perry knew how to use email," Joe commented from behind him.

Clark turned. "Jimmy Olsen taught him how to use it a couple of months ago. Now he's signed up to just about every Elvis mailing list there is."

He'd laughed when he'd gotten the email from Jimmy. Knowing Perry's previous reluctance to use computers, he'd agreed with Jimmy's comment that collecting more Elvis trivia was the only thing that could've convinced him that they were anything more than fancy typewriters. Now Clark got regular emails from Perry and Jimmy- and the occasional one from Lois. He pushed that thought out of his head. Closing the email program, he set to work writing his latest report on the plane crash that had taken him to Brussels.

Her latest story, Lois decided, was a washout. That seemed to be happening more often lately. In fact, she had to admit the last couple of months had been a bit of a dry spell. 'Try 6 months, 'a voice in the back of her head said, 'ever since Clark left.'

It had nothing to do with Clark leaving, she told herself fiercely. She was better off without him. Besides, he couldn't possibly have cared about her, or he wouldn't have left.

No matter how many times she told herself that, it never rang true. The truth was, she missed Clark. She glanced at the vacant desk, across from hers. The only person that dared use it was Jimmy, and that was only occasionally. As far as she was concerned, it was still Clark's desk, and woe betide the person that tried to claim it as their own.

The sound of her name pulled her out of her reverie.

"Lois? Can I see you for a moment?" Perry was standing in the doorway of his office, looking at her.

Quickly she got up and joined her editor, closing the door behind her.

"How's the story going?"

"Not well," she admitted. "It's not panning out."

"Okay. Well, sometimes they don't. But now Lois, that's been a few in a row. Is uh, everything okay?"

"Everything's fine, Perry," she insisted.

"Okay then." He let the subject drop. "I've got another assignment for you. It's overseas... in Paris."

Her heart leapt in spite of herself. Paris. That's where Clark was.

"Now, I was going to send Friaz, but he can't go. His wife had an accident and broke her leg."

Lois winced, but couldn't help feeling that Eduardo's wife's bad luck had been her good luck.

"Clark sent me an email yesterday about artworks going missing. The artworks that Superman found in that vault a couple of years ago. Clark thinks they're linked, and since you wrote the original story, well, it makes sense to send you along." He leaned forward. "Is that, ah, going to be a problem? Cause when he left here, you weren't exactly getting along."

Her heart skipped a beat and she fought to keep her voice level as she replied.

"It's fine Chief. That was a long time ago."

He gave her a measuring look. "Well, okay then. You fly out this afternoon." Perry handed her the tickets. "You've got a week. I can't spare you longer than that." He paused, giving her that measuring look again as she tried to keep an expression of professional interest on her face. For a moment, she thought she was about to be on the receiving end of one of Perry's Elvis stories, but then he dismissed her to go and pack.

She left the editor's office and headed for the elevators, trying to make a mental list of what she needed to pack, and failing.

Perry hadn't said outright that she'd be working with Clark, but surely he'd be there, right? Even if only to outline what he knew about the missing artworks before moving on to whatever he was doing? Try as she might, she couldn't entirely contain the excited, fluttery feeling in the pit of her stomach at the thought of

seeing him again.

Jimmy Olsen accosted her before she made it to the elevator. Ever since Clark left, he'd been pretty much the only person at the Planet that still talked to her. Just about everyone else blamed her for Clark's leaving. Privately, she admitted that they might be right. Clark asking her out might have been the beginning of the end, but it hadn't had to finish in him leaving Metropolis.

"Hey Lois! Heading out on a story?"

"Kind of, Jimmy. Perry's sending me to Paris."

Lois kept moving as she spoke, hoping to hide the nervous anticipation she felt. Fortuitously, the elevator was already on the newsroom floor, opening its doors as soon as she pushed the button.

"Paris! When? Are you going to go see Clark?"

"This afternoon, and I'm not sure." She entered the elevator car and turned to face the doors and her wide-eyed younger friend.

"Sorry Jimmy, but I have to go home and pack."

His reply was cut off by the doors closing.

As the 7 hour flight neared its end, Lois became more and more jittery. It had been six months since Clark left. Superman had left two weeks later, citing the increasingly unstable relationship between Eastern and Western Europe as the reason. And Lois's relationship with Dan Scardino hadn't survived long past that. Since then, her interactions with Clark had been a total of a handful of awkward emails ('How's Paris?' 'Fine. How's Metropolis?' 'Fine.') and another handful of equally stilted encounters with Superman.

Funny how things worked. After his precipitous departure from Metropolis, Lois had quickly figured out that Clark Kent and Superman were one and the same person. It wasn't one big thing that had tipped her off, either. No, it was a whole bunch of little things that she'd routinely dismissed about Clark Kent that had suddenly made sense. The constant disappearances, the bizarre excuses, the miraculous return from the 'dead'. She'd been furious at first, but then she'd remembered how she'd treated him, fawning over Superman and dismissing Clark, and her fury had turned to embarrassment.

He had no idea that she knew, either. She sighed. It wasn't the only epiphany she'd had about Clark Kent since he'd left Metropolis. She'd cut him off at the knees when he'd asked her out- brutally, she realised now- out of fear and a desire to stop things from changing. She flinched away from the memory of her ill-considered words. 'I'm sorry, Clark... I just don't feel that way about you. You're my best friend. It'd be like dating my brother.'

It was only after he'd gone that she'd put the pieces together and figured out that the reason she was so devastated by his leaving was because she, Lois Lane, was in love with Clark Kent.

Lois gave herself a little shake. She had to put those feelings aside. She'd as good as told him that she would never care about him in that way, and besides, he didn't love her. If he had, he wouldn't have left.

All of this was adding to up to one awkward reunion. As the plane drew closer to Charles de Gaulle airport, she was torn between alternately hoping she'd get to spend some time with Clark (even if was just business) and praying she wouldn't have to.

"Hey Kent!"

Clark looked around and saw Joe gesturing towards his office.

"Come in here a minute, will you?"

Putting down the folder he'd been looking at, Clark made his way across to the editor's office.

Without preamble, Joe Patterson said "I've got a message from Perry White. He says that a reporter from the Metropolis office will be here this afternoon. I need you to go out to the airport and pick them up, fill them in on the way here. Here's the

flight information." He handed Clark a sheet of paper.

"Who's Perry sending?" Clark asked, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

"An Eduardo Friaz. You know him?"

Clark nodded. "He's capable."

Joe leaned back in his chair. "I'm surprised he didn't send your old partner. Didn't she write the original story?"

"Yes, she did." He'd given her the credit in the end, too relieved to have his globe back before whoever had had it had found out the truth about him. "Knowing Lois, she's probably busy with something else."

Joe waved a hand. It was Clark's cue to leave, that Joe had turned his attention to his next task. He exited the office, checking the flight information on the paper Joe had given him. He'd take the old runabout car the Planet office kept out to Charles de Gaulle. Checking the time, he headed for the elevator to the parking garage, detouring to pick up the folder he'd been reading on the way.

Clark shoehorned the battered little Fiat into the last legal park he could find close to Terminal 2, where the American Airlines flight from Metropolis was due to land.

With a judicious application of super breath, he gently nudged the car in front of him forward so it no longer overhung into his parking spot. Parking could be a little haphazard here, he'd noticed. He didn't drive much anymore, finding the local drivers to be aggressive even by Metropolis standards. Snagging the folder he'd brought off the passenger seat, he headed inside to wait.

He hadn't worked with Eduardo much while he'd been in Metropolis and thus didn't know him very well. Any connection with his friends at the Planet was welcome however, no matter how tenuous.

Finding the correct gate took a few wrong turns. Charles de Gaulle Airport was one of the busiest in the world, and was also notoriously difficult to navigate. Finally arriving, he found a seat where he could see the exit from the Customs hall and settled down to read.

He read through the material sent to him by a contact in the American embassy in London at a normal human pace, knowing there were too many people to risk using his super speed. Even so, when he got to the end of the file there was still no sign of Eduardo. He frowned. Either Eduardo was taking a very long time to get through Customs, or he'd missed the flight.

Clark leafed through the material again, pausing every couple of minutes to check for his former co-worker.

On one such glance he saw a very familiar face in the crowd of people exiting Customs. He froze, his heart skipping a beat. Slowly he rose from his seat.

Lois spotted him and called out "Clark!" waving happily as she rushed across the crowded area. Reaching him, she threw herself at him. Instinctively he wrapped his arms around her, forgetting himself enough to crush her against him and bury his face in her silky dark hair. She felt so incredibly good, like the part of his soul that had been missing had suddenly returned. He relaxed his grip on her enough for her to lean back. Their gazes locked for a long, charged moment before he let her go abruptly and stepped back, coughing to hide his embarrassment.

"Lois, what are you doing here? I ah- I expected Eduardo."

"His wife was in an accident," Lois explained. "And since I wrote the original story, Perry sent me instead." She paused, then added quietly, "It's good to see you, Clark."

"It's good to see you too, Lois." Clark replied automatically.

And it was, but it was also incredibly bittersweet. Leaving Metropolis had felt like someone had inserted a tiny sliver of Kryptonite into his heart, enough to cause a constant aching-but one he could deal with. It hurt, but he still functioned. With Lois

here beside him again, it was as if someone had twisted the sliver, ripping an ever larger hole in his heart. For a moment he almost hated Perry for sending her, of all people.

Covering the shaft of anger, he picked up Lois's suitcase and carry-on, gesturing for her to start walking. He guided her through the terminal and to the car. His lips twitched into a smile as he saw her survey the ill-treated vehicle, disbelief on her face. Finally she turned. "Nice car, Clark," she observed sarcastically.

"It's the Planet's," he informed her. Opening the hatchback, he stashed Lois's belongings inside before climbing back into the driver's seat. Realising how close he was to Lois in the confines of the tiny Panda, he surreptitiously tried to angle his shoulders away from her. Right now, the last thing he needed was any more physical contact with Lois Lane.

Getting onto the road he needed to get back to the city proper, he glanced at Lois. "Where to first? The Planet office or your hotel?"

"Hotel", she decided.

"Okay." The hotel Perry had booked her into was only a block or so from the Planet offices, not far from the American embassy. "I've got to fill you in on the story."

"So why aren't you working this story? Why get me all the way here from Metropolis?" she asked curiously.

"This" - he gestured to the folder on the dashboard - "isn't what I do any more. I'm a foreign correspondent, Lois. I don't have time to chase this down between assignments. I have to be in Vienna tomorrow night. There's a summit, a meeting of European leaders that might actually have a chance at settling the tensions between Eastern and Western Europe. In the scheme of things, some stolen artworks just aren't as important." He paused, organising his thoughts. "Anyway. Two of the artworks Superman found in the vault under the Metropolis Museum of Art have disappeared in the last week - Yellow Boy and the arms of the Venus de Milo. All the artworks are in Europe at the moment. They're on loan to various museums, all to the countries they came from." He slid the folder off the dashboard and gave it to her. "I got this from a contact, a friend of mine in London. The thieves over there had genuine work orders to remove Yellow Boy from display and take it to an outside restorer that the museum has used many times. Because they'd been signed by the head of the restorations department, no one questioned the orders. The painting was loaded onto a truck and hasn't been seen since."

She leafed through the documents in the folder. "Any security cameras?"

"They were down that day. Some kind of glitch. They'd been having issues on and off for a week."

They exchanged looks.

"Yeah I don't believe it either. The robbery here... Officially the arms are being restored. But Leo - my contact at the Louvre - says they're not in the restorations department and the head of that section suddenly took a vacation. I'll take you meet Leo later."

"Where is the section chief now?"

"I'm not sure. He's gone to ground somewhere and I haven't been able to find out where."

He indicated and pulled into the driveway of Lois's hotel.

"Got your passport?"

She gave him an odd look.

"You'll need it to check in."

After a brief stop at Lois's hotel to drop off her luggage, they made the short trip to the building that housed the European bureau of the Daily Planet. One of the premier English-language European newspapers, its outlook was a little more multinational than its American parent. It was also a smaller operation, Lois knew. But she wasn't expecting it to be this small.

It reminded her of the temporary offices they'd used after the destruction of the Metropolis office. Desks were crowded close

together, there was barely enough room for people to move around and the noise level was cacophonous. Clark noticed the look on her face.

"It takes some getting used to." Gesturing ahead towards the center of the conglomeration, he continued. "We'll just check in with Joe - Joe Patterson, he's my editor - and then try to find you a desk. It's not usually this crowded, but pretty much all of the correspondents are in at the moment, before we all head out to Vienna."

"Can't I just use your desk?" Lois asked.

He shook his head. "I don't have one."

That stopped Lois in her tracks. "You don't have a desk?"

"I'm not here often enough. Last month, I was only in Paris for six days between assignments."

For some reason that brought Lois to a forceful realisation of how much he'd given up when he moved here. Paris was supposed to be his home now - and yet he'd spent less than a week here out of the past month? He didn't even have his own work space? She'd always known he'd travelled a lot before moving to Metropolis, but he'd seemed so settled, so happy there.

She watched him as they traced a path through the desks to the editor's office. The Clark she'd known would've exchanged greetings and smiles with just about everyone he came across in such close proximity. Here, he barely even looked at the occupants of the desks.

Lois gave herself a mental shake. Don't you dare feel sorry for him, she told herself. He chose this. No one made him leave.

Joe Patterson wasn't what Lois had expected. She'd pictured someone more like Perry, an unhurried bear of a man that commanded respect, not this tall, lanky man who bordered on the hyperactive. Clark, however, seemed to respect him, and so Lois took her cue from him - for now. After the initial introductions were performed, Joe settled back down behind his desk.

"We were expecting someone else," he noted.

"Eduardo's wife was in an accident," Lois explained.

Joe nodded. "Okay. Well, that actually makes things easier. To be honest, I was surprised that Perry wasn't sending you in the first place. Clark, fill her in and find her a desk."

With that, he looked back at the layout he'd been working on.

Clark opened the door and ushered her back into the newsroom.

"Well, he doesn't waste time on small talk, does he?" Lois observed.

"Not that I've noticed." They wended their way through the desks again, this time heading for the one vacant desk that Lois could see in the place. It was in an awkward spot, wedged in between a doorway and a water cooler with not much room to spare for a chair. Only someone of Lois's slim build would be able to fit behind it - which, she guessed, was why it hadn't been claimed on a permanent basis. Clark surveyed it with disfavour. "I forgot how cramped this desk is. Do you think you can use it for now? Once we—" his gesture encompassed the rest of the crowded newsroom "head out tomorrow, I'm sure you'll be able to claim a better one."

"It's fine, Clark. Really," she reassured him. "So. What's next?"

"I've arranged a meeting with Leo - he's my contact at the Louvre." He glanced at his watch. "If we leave now, we'll just make it."

The eatery on a side street near the Louvre seemed to cater to blue collar workers, Lois thought. At this time of day it wasn't particularly full, though the noise level was still high enough to make a conversation hard to overhear. In that respect, it was perfect for meeting with sources. Clark had always had a knack for finding out of the way places like this, she reflected. Beside

her, he spotted the person he was looking for and gestured for her to precede him.

Leo was fortyish with dark sandy hair and a thin face. Dressed in a navy blue overall, he'd obviously just come from work. Clark had explained that he and Leo were old friends and that they'd met when Clark had been travelling around the world before he came to Metropolis. Leo seemed nervous to Lois, not like someone who was meeting an old friend.

They sat down at the table he was occupying and ordered coffee before Clark introduced Lois. Lois was relieved to hear Leo's lightly accented English, doubting that her dimly remembered high school French would be sufficient to get by in Paris by herself. They made small talk for a few minutes, until their coffee arrived, but Leo was unable to hide his discomfort. "Clark, can I see you over here for a moment?"

Clark looked at Lois. She waved for him to go ahead, but watched curiously as they got up and sat down at a table at the back of the cafe. The little cafe was filling up with people now, making it hard to see exactly what was going on.

"What's wrong, Leo?" Clark asked.

"I was expecting you to come alone."

"Lois is the one working the story, Leo. You know I don't do this kind of reporting any more. And I have to be in Vienna tomorrow night. So what's the problem?"

"Can you trust her?"

Clark blinked at the blunt query. Leo had never questioned the trustworthiness of one of Clark's friends, at least not in his presence.

"Yes. I trust her with my life, Leo. What is going on?"

Leo sighed and gestured to a shadowy table at the back of the crowded cafe. "I brought Pascal with me. There is something else going on at the museum, and the restorations staff has been threatened. Pascal is very nervous. I had to talk him into meeting you. I don't know if he will talk to your friend."

"Well, let's ask him."

Leo hesitated for a moment before nodding and leading Clark to the table in the shadows.

Pascal shrunk back at their approach, turning to Leo with a desperate expression. "You said he would be alone!"

Leo shrugged. "I thought he would be."

Fixing his stare on Clark, Pascal asked, "Who is the woman?"

"Her name is Lois Lane. She's my friend- my old work partner from Metropolis. She's the best reporter I've ever worked with. She won't put you in danger." Clark leaned forward over the table. "You can trust her, Pascal."

Pascal looked to Leo for confirmation. "If Clark says you can trust her, you can believe him," Leo reassured him.

Pascal sat in indecision, looking between Clark and Leo, before nodding. "Okay. I will talk to this Lois."

Clark turned and got Lois's attention, waving her over.

One she was settled at the table, Leo began.

"Okay Pascal, tell them what you told me."

Pascal glanced from side to side before beginning in heavily accented English.

"I work in the restorations department... it's my job to transport the artworks to and from the gallery, you see? And to organise transport to outside restorers. Every piece that's moved... it all goes through me, you understand?"

Lois and Clark nodded.

"The arms... I did not organise that. But the workers, they had papers. Papers from my department." He looked to Leo for help to find the words.

"Orders."

"Yes, orders. They had orders from my department to take the arms. But I did not sign them. They were signed by Cesar Mathieu."

"That's unusual?" Lois asked.

"Yes. He can order this, of course. But it usually goes through my office. All the time, it goes through my office. This time, it didn't go through my office."

He leant forward. "There is more. Two days ago, the same men came and picked up another crate. I was on my lunch... I was outside when they carried it out. The crate was badly made, not from my department. It wasn't closed properly. I saw what was in it."

"What was it?"

"La Complet Joconde," he said simply.

Lois looked at Clark for clarification.

"The full length Mona Lisa," he murmured. "You mean, the one on display..."

"Is a fake," Pascal stated baldly. "The men, they threatened my family. I sent them away and I went into hiding. La Complet Joconde has been lost for many years. I cannot let her be lost again."

"So that's why Mathieu disappeared," Clark breathed.

"Yes. The fake... it is good, but someone will notice."

"What were the men driving?" Lois asked.

"A van. Just an ordinary cargo van, a white one with Paris registration. Maybe a Renault or a Citroen," Pascal answered. "I'm not sure. I am not good with cars." He paused. "The letters on the registration were GX, I remember that much."

Pascal looked around once more, then stood. "Find her. Please."

Then he was gone.

"What now?"

"Now, we get some lunch and go back to the Planet." He was looking at her quizzically.

"What?" she demanded.

"Lois, have you ever been to Paris?"

She shook her head.

"I didn't think so. Let's get take out; we'll walk back to the Planet."

Lois protested; they only had limited time after all. Clark overruled her.

"The Tuileries is between here and the office. You should see at least some of Paris while you're here."

"When you put it like that, how can I resist?"

They entered the Tuileries from a side gate near the Metro station and wended their way through the formal garden beds to a low terrace. Spotting an empty bench, Clark moved quickly to claim it. Entranced, Lois moved to the low wall at the edge of the terrace. From her vantage point, she could see a large part of the extensive gardens, as well as part of the pools at either end. She'd seen photographs of the Tuileries before, but they didn't do it justice. Standing there, she could understand why it had been a focal point for Parisian art and life for so long. It was easy to picture Bonaparte's procession and the great Impressionist artists, as well as a host of other Parisian notables.

Finally she walked away from the wall and joined Clark on the bench. He handed over the bag containing her lunch and unwrapped his own sandwich.

"The Tuileries has a rich history," he commented.

"It's beautiful. Completely different to Centennial Park back home. It's more wild, more unplanned."

He nodded in agreement. "So how are things back in Metropolis?"

"Well, Jimmy taught Perry how to use the Internet. I think he only uses it to look up Elvis websites; he's gotten even more Elvis stories than ever before."

Clark nodded again. "I get emails from him from time to time. I was surprised to get the first one, didn't think Perry would ever

get the hang of email.”

“Well, Jimmy is persistent.”

“How’s Jimmy doing?”

“He’s good. Actually Perry’s been letting him take photos for the occasional story. You should see his face every time Perry uses one for the front page.”

“I can imagine.”

“Yeah. Well between that and the fact that he seems to have a new girlfriend every month, life’s going pretty well for Jimmy.”

“He’s young. He’ll settle down.” Clark crumpled his sandwich wrapper in his hand. “And you? How are things with you and Dan?”

The question was careful, like someone prodding an open wound.

“Dan and I broke up months ago.”

“Oh. What happened?” His voice was gentle and caring.

“Well, he was in Metropolis for two months and in that time we managed to go on six dates. Then he went back to Washington.” She shrugged. “I guess we just didn’t have a lot in common.” The excuse sounded lame even to her, but she couldn’t tell Clark the real reason they’d broken up. That by the time Dan came back from Washington, Clark had left and Superman was gone, and she’d been a wreck. That Dan had broken things off with her, telling her to go to Paris, find Clark and admit that she loved him. She’d denied it to Dan, but had had to face facts herself. She loved Clark Kent.

“I’m sorry, Lois.”

“Don’t be,” she answered, her voice soft. She caught herself looking into his eyes and glanced away, crumpling the paper wrappings from her sandwich and standing up. “We should get back to the Planet.”

Arriving back at the Planet office, Clark stopped at the bank of pigeon holes used by the transient staff to receive messages. As he hoped, there was one waiting from Brad. Reading it, he felt his heart sink. Behind him, he barely heard Lois as she asked him whom he got to do research. Not getting a response, she laid her hand on his arm.

“Clark? Is everything okay?”

He waved the sheet of paper. “It’s a message from Brad Hancock, my contact in London. Bernard Young- the head of the restorations department at the Royal Academy- has been found floating in the Thames.”

Lois looked at him, aghast. “Murdered?”

He shook his head. “Brad says it looks like suicide.” He crumpled the message in his fist. “We’ve got to figure this out, Lois.”

“We will, Clark,” she reassured him. “We’ll stop whoever is doing this.” She gave him a smile. “We always do, right?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “We do ... or at least we did. Anyway,” he changed the subject. “I don’t normally have to do a lot of research in the office, I’m usually on the road somewhere. And I’ve never had to get anyone here to do anything ... sensitive.”

Lois thought for a moment. “What about Jimmy?”

Clark raised an eyebrow. “Do you think he’d do it?”

Lois shrugged. “It can’t hurt to ask. I think he misses working with you.” She paused. “We all do.”

“I miss you guys too,” he said quietly. He checked his watch and did a rapid calculation. “It’s only 6am in Metropolis. Jimmy won’t be in yet.”

He moved towards Lois’s temporary desk and gestured to the computer. “Do you mind?”

At her assent he leaned over the side of the desk and quickly composed an email. Hitting send, he straightened back up and looked at her. “I asked him to get a list of all the white vans registered in the Paris districts with the letters GX in their plates. I also asked if he could try and trace Cesar Mathieu from his

passport, but that might take a while even for Jimmy. He’ll email the information to you, in case I’m gone by then.” He checked his watch again. “I have to be at the airport in ... just over 28 hours.”

“Can’t you take a later flight?”

Her unusually demure tone should have warned him, but he was rusty when it came to dealing with Lois Lane.

“No, it’s the last flight I can take that’ll get me there on time.

There’s a reception I have to be at tomorrow night.”

“You sure you can’t”- she made a strange gesture, like something taking off- “get there another way?”

He stared at her for a moment, puzzled, before the import of her gesture became clear to him.

“Conference room. Now,” he managed to croak through a throat suddenly gone dry.

Lois watched as Clark’s face paled from its normal olive colouring to an unhealthy looking grey and cringed internally. She should’ve chosen a gentler way to tell him she knew his secret. In a voice completely unlike his normal tones, he got out a terse command.

“Conference room. Now.”

He turned on his heel and she was left following him as best she could. As soon as she was through the glass door he swung it closed. She heard the snick of the lock engaging as he shut the blind with the other hand. Finally he turned to face her, his expression wary.

“Clark, I know,” she forestalled him.

“What, exactly, do you know?”

Making sure to keep her voice low, she replied. “I know you’re Superman.”

He sank down into a chair and closed his eyes. She watched him worriedly. He looked like all his nightmares had come true, and in a way they probably had. He must have spent his entire life trying to hide his powers, and it would’ve only gotten worse once he became Superman. He couldn’t risk any one making the connection between the reporter and the superhero.

Finally she spoke. “Clark?”

He opened his eyes and she could see the fear in them.

“How long have you known?”

“Around ... 5 months.”

“How?”

“A whole bunch of little things. The disappearances, your crazy excuses. You knowing things you couldn’t possibly have known. You leaving Metropolis when Superman was forced out. Superman leaving Metropolis when you moved to France. It just all ... kind of fell into place.”

He leant forward, his elbows on his knees. “Does-does anyone else know?”

“I don’t think so. Superman leaving a few weeks after Clark was a good idea. I only put it together because we’d spent so much time together.”

His shoulders relaxed a little and his voice dropped to a whisper.

“Are you mad?”

“I was. I was furious, Clark. And I was hurt.” She sighed. “But then I remembered all the times that I compared you unfavourably to Superman, or dismissed you and fawned over him — you — this is really confusing, you know.”

One corner of his mouth quirked, the closest thing to a smile she’d seen all day. “I talk about him in the third person sometimes. Mom hates it.”

She grinned. She could well imagine Martha Kent’s reaction at Clark talking about himself in the third person.

“Anyway, I realised how badly I’d treated you. But I do want to know something, Clark. Why didn’t you tell me?”

It was his turn to sigh. “I wanted to. I just — never knew how. By the time we were close enough for me to tell you, things just

kept getting in the way.” He paused. “I should have told you after Dillinger shot me, but I panicked. Clark Kent was dead; shot in front of an audience ... my whole life was just — just gone. I didn’t know what else to do, so I went to Smallville. I’m sorry, Lois. I should’ve told you then. I know you were upset.”

He looked so guilty and miserable that her heart went out to him. She reached out and lightly covered his hand with hers.

“It’s okay, Clark. And later I’ll probably have a million questions.” She withdrew her hand, acutely aware of her attraction to him and the closer relationship she craved. Businesslike, she continued. “But right now we have work to do.”

“Right.” He looked slightly dazed. “The story, right. What next ... partner?”

She smiled at him. She’d missed being Clark’s partner so much. “Known associates of Mathieu? As head of the Louvre restorations department he has to be reasonably well known, at least in the art world, right?”

He nodded slightly in agreement. “Let’s get to work.”

Clark commandeered the desk nearest Lois’s when its occupant left the building and together they delved into Mathieu’s background and known associates, chasing lead after lead and getting ... stonewalled.

Frustrated, Clark leant back in his chair.

“I am getting nowhere.”

Lois looked up from her computer screen. “Me neither. But there’s a reply from Jimmy.”

“What does he say?”

“Just that he’s working on it and should have the registrations to us tomorrow.”

“Right.” Clark stood and stretched. “It’s after 6. How about I go get us something to eat?”

“Sure,” she replied, not looking up from the background information she was studying.

“Chinese?”

“Sounds good.” She looked up. “Hey, you know the Chinese you got, that first night at the Planet? It didn’t really come from China, did it?”

He smiled. “Shanghai.”

As he left the newsroom he heard her grumble, “No wonder I could never find the place.”

When he returned, arms laden with bamboo containers, he found Lois asleep at her desk, her head pillowed on her arm. He smiled softly at her. He guessed the jet lag had finally caught up with her. After all, with time zone changes she’d been up more than a full twenty four hours. She looked so peaceful; he didn’t want to wake her, but he knew she’d get a sore neck sleeping like that. Gently he put his hand on her shoulder and shook her.

“C’mon Lois, you can’t sleep like that.”

She sat up and looked at him blearily.

“Come on. I’ll get you back to your hotel.”

After making sure Lois was safely at her hotel and promising to collect her in the morning, Clark ducked into a nearby alleyway. Taking off, he set course for Smallville. It was noon in Kansas. With luck he’d catch his parents at lunch.

Martha Kent heard the tell-tale gust of wind that heralded Clark’s arrival and smiled. They didn’t get to see their only son very often since he’d left the United States. His usually quick step sounded slow and heavy coming up the steps to the porch. She turned in anticipation as she heard the kitchen door swing open and called over her shoulder, “Jonathan, Clark’s here!”

One look at the heartsick expression on her boy’s face was enough to tell her what had been going on in his life. Her heart sank. Both she and Jonathan were fairly certain that Clark was suffering from depression, and it seemed like every time he started to get back to being some semblance of his usual self, something would happen and he’d be back to square one again.

She busied herself greeting her son and making tea. Trying to keep her question as casual as she could, she asked, “So. How’s Metropolis?”

“I haven’t been to Metropolis.” He sounded genuinely puzzled.

“But you have seen Lois,” Martha persisted, putting the teapot and cups down on the table. It was a given. Every time he saw her, he’d turn up at the farmhouse quiet and sad, looking like he had when he’d come to tell them he was moving to France.

She knew better than to suggest he stop visiting Metropolis, however. He couldn’t just ignore emergencies from a city of 12 million people. The problem was, where emergencies were in Metropolis, Lois Lane usually was also.

He nodded, running a hand through his hair. “She’s in Paris. On assignment.”

“You been working with her, son?” The question came from Jonathan.

“Yeah. You remember the artworks I found in that vault? They’ve been going missing. I found the story and asked Perry for help, and he sent Lois.”

“Did he have to send Lois?” Martha asked, unable to keep the edge out of her voice.

“The original story was hers. And besides, I thought you liked Lois.”

“I do like Lois. I just don’t like the way she treated you.”

“Mom. We’ve been through this. Lois can’t help the way she feels any more than I can.”

Privately, Martha didn’t think that was the problem. She’d long believed that Lois loved Clark just as much as he loved her, she just either didn’t know it or was hiding it for some reason only known to Lois herself. While she had some sympathy for Lois’s muddled feelings, it was hurting her boy and her patience was wearing thin.

“When do you go to Vienna?” Jonathan asked after a quelling look at Martha.

“Tomorrow night.” He drank some of his tea. “Anyway, there’s something I need to talk to you about.” He sounded serious. Martha quickly pushed aside her concern for Clark’s love life issues. When he didn’t continue, she prompted him gently.

“Clark?”

He ran his hand through his hair again, sure sign of internal distress.

“Lois knows. About me. About Superman.”

Martha stared at Clark in a mixture of horror and disbelief.

“Did —”

He cut her off.

“Did I tell her? No. She figured it out.”

“How long has she known, son?” Jonathan asked.

“Since right after I left Metropolis.”

Martha heaved a silent sigh of relief. “Well, then you’re safe.” She took a sip of her tea. “If she’s known for so long and hasn’t said anything before, I doubt she’d say anything now. This isn’t really a bad thing.”

“You’re right Mom, it’s not. I would’ve told her eventually anyway, if —” Clark cut himself off this time, continuing in a more subdued tone. “I would have told her anyway.” He fell silent, staring reflectively into his mug.

Bridging the awkward gap, Martha asked, “So how’s working with her again?”

Clark’s head came up and for once there was a spark of his normal self in his eyes. “It’s great. It’s been so long, but we still work really well together. It’s like all the fights before I left never happened. I wish I could stick around to finish the story.”

“You miss it, don’t you?”

“Yeah Dad, I do. Being a foreign correspondent is —fine but —”

“But it’s not what you want to do.” Martha finished for him.

“Yeah.”

Giving Jonathan a look, Martha went over to the sink, making sure Jonathan followed her, and busied herself washing dishes — giving Clark some much needed space.

The dishes done, Jonathan went looking for Clark and found him on the porch, leaning on the rail and staring unseeing out at the barn.

He turned at Jonathan’s approach.

“Mom send you?”

“She’s just worried, Clark. We both are.”

“Yeah. I know, Dad.”

He fell silent again. Jonathan let the silence stand for a few minutes before he spoke again.

“So. Lois is in Paris. What are you going to do, Clark?”

“I don’t know, Dad. I just don’t know.”

After leaving Smallville, Clark flew patrols over Vienna, Moscow, Berlin, Rome and finally Paris. When he’d moved to Europe he’d stopped focussing his time on any one city, hoping to distance Superman further from Clark Kent. He’d also starting handling mainly larger emergencies, reasoning that covering all of Europe meant that he had less time to be able to handle the more day-to-day stuff.

While he circled over Paris, he puzzled over the story. It had been months since he’d worked on a story that was actually challenging, and he missed it. The kind of reporting he’d been doing... it had its good points. You got to meet a lot of interesting people and travel the world.

But ... he’d travelled the world for years before moving to Metropolis. All the places he’d been as part of his current job ... he’d already been there. It just didn’t have the excitement, the pull of investigative journalism — at least not for him.

Their current story ... they’d hit a dead end with Mathieu’s background, and the research that Jimmy was doing for them might not pay off. What they needed was a new lead. Then it hit him.

The security cameras.

They hadn’t checked to see if the security cameras at the Louvre had been working when the artworks had been stolen. He knew that the majority of the visible security cameras at the famous gallery were dummies, the same as they were in most museums that size. Security camera systems to cover all of the massive gallery were prohibitively expensive as they would require an enormous full time workforce to monitor them all. What museums the size and prestige of the Louvre predominantly relied on was containment security — trapping any would-be thieves and preventing them from escaping with their valuable haul.

He’d bet that the security cameras on entrances and exits would be real, however. Which meant that there might be a chance of him being able to get a hold of the tapes from the days in question.

Changing course, he hovered over the Louvre, high enough to avoid detection. Using his x-ray vision, he scanned the enormous former palace and pinpointed the location of the security monitoring room. It would be easy for someone of his unique abilities to get into and out of the monitoring room without detection. All he needed was to be able to find the tape. If he could find it, he could take it back to the Planet, copy it, and return the original to the Louvre with no one the wiser.

He headed for the alleyway nearest his apartment block, hesitating as he passed near to Lois’s hotel. She might not appreciate being left out of this particular excursion, but he didn’t think he’d be able to get both of them past security and she didn’t speak French well enough to be able to bluff her way out of trouble if something went wrong. Regretfully, he left her hotel

behind.

Touching down in the alley behind his apartment, he changed back into his Clark clothes and went inside.

He was out again in a matter of seconds, this time dressed in form fitting black clothes and knitted cap, the better for hiding in the shadows.

Moving faster than the human eye could see, Clark darted past the staff in the restorations department. It had proven easier to enter through the loading dock — just as the thieves had discovered themselves. Now came the difficult part. He had to traverse a section of the public gallery to get to his destination, and he couldn’t take a chance that the security cameras he could see were fakes.

At this time of night, the public areas were lit with a low intensity red light, the better to protect the invaluable artworks from the damaging effects of normal lighting. Thankfully his vision was much more acute in low levels of light than a humans would be. He floated carefully a few inches off the floor in case of pressure sensors and made his way along the gallery, avoiding the security cameras as he went.

Up ahead there was a slight creak and a beam of light intruded on his sensitive vision. Quickly Clark levitated further, flattening himself to the roof and holding his breath as the guard passed beneath him. He super-spined the rest of the way to the monitoring room door and scanned through it, looking for at least one of the tapes he sought.

Locating one, but not the other, he shifted back into super speed. Moving at faster than detectable speeds, he was in and out of the room with the tape before the guard observing the monitors was aware of his presence.

Once he was safely away from the Louvre complex, Clark stripped off the knitted cap and ran a hand through his hair. He stuffed the cap into his pocket and continued on to the Planet office.

Once there, he borrowed one of the big video recorder units the newspaper owned and quickly ran a copy of the tape. He stashed the copy in the drawer of Lois’s desk for safekeeping and went to return the original to its rightful home.

Properly tired from the long and eventful day, he finally made his way home to his tiny apartment and collapsed into bed.

Clark looked marginally better this morning, Lois noted. The dark circles under his eyes had receded somewhat and he’d actually greeted her with a smile when she’d opened the door of her hotel room at his knock. It was a pale imitation of the megawatt grin she’d seen so many times back in Metropolis, but it was a definite improvement on the grim Clark of yesterday. He’d even brought her a cup of excellent coffee and a chocolate croissant.

She opened the drawer of her desk in the Planet newsroom to deposit her purse and hotel key inside and was surprised to see a videotape. Lifting it out, she found it was unlabelled. Showing it to Clark, she asked,

“Do you know anything about this?”

“Oh, that. I put that there last night.”

“What is it?”

He came closer, lowering his voice. “It’s security camera footage from the Louvre loading dock. From the day the painting went missing.”

Her eyes widened. “How did you get this?”

He looked around. “I paid their security office a little ... visit.”

She gathered that his visit hadn’t exactly been sanctioned — and she was willing to bet he’d employed a few of his superpowers to get the tape.

“You stole it?” she asked in amusement.

“Not exactly. I . . . borrowed it. That’s a copy. The original is right where they left it.”

“Did anyone see you?”

He gave her a small smile. “Not unless their equipment is a lot more sensitive than it looks.”

She was right; he’d definitely used his powers. Not for the first time, she wondered how often he’d used them on stories in Metropolis. They would certainly give him — them — an edge when it came to investigations, especially the more covert ones they’d embarked on.

“Have you seen it yet?”

“Not yet.” He shook his head. “I figured I’d wait for you. It’s your story.”

“Our story.”

Clark shook his head again. “I leave this afternoon, remember? I’m just helping while I’m here.”

“About that.” She leaned back in her chair as far as she was able in the cramped confines. “Do you have to go to Vienna? If there’s so many of you going?”

“Yes, I do. Look, we all do different things. Paul does economics. Pierre is our military expert. Arms talks are part of the summit, so Raoul is covering those. Michelle does trade and Alex is covering the single European currency negotiations.”

“What about you? What’s your speciality?”

“Clark is our secret weapon.” Joe’s voice came from behind her. “He’s covering all the big sessions. With his language skills, he can translate all the statements and we can get the story out on the wire while the rest of the English speaking papers are still waiting on the official translation.”

“Oh.” She could see why Joe was anxious for Clark to be at the summit. Every editor she’d ever met thought in terms of scoops, and this one would be a major coup.

“I just came over to see how the story’s going,” Joe explained.

“Slowly,” Clark put in. “But we’ve got a few leads we’re chasing.”

“All right then.” He nodded and moved away.

Clark picked the tape up off Lois’s desk. “Let’s see if there’s anything on this.”

He led the way to the conference room they’d used yesterday. There was a television with attached VCR on a stand in the corner. Clark went over to the unit and fed the videotape into the appropriate slot.

“Clark?”

“Yeah Lois?”

“Just how many languages do you speak?”

He turned from setting up the television.

“Fluently? Not counting dialects. . . . About 50.”

“Fifty!”

“I can get by in more.” He went back to looking at the TV set. She regarded him suspiciously. “How many more?”

“All together. . . . 347. But a lot of those are dialects.”

Lois’s mind boggled. She couldn’t even name 347 languages, let alone speak them.

“Is that one of your powers?” she asked, deliberately keeping her voice low.

He shrugged. “I don’t really know. I’ve always had an ear for languages, and I’ve travelled a lot. But I don’t know if it’s a super thing or not.”

He pushed a button on the front of the VCR and suddenly a picture appeared on the screen.

“There.”

He straightened up from his crouch and took a few steps back to stand next to her. “What time did Pascal say the painting was picked up?”

“Around lunchtime.”

“Right.” Judging by the time stamp on the screen, this particular tape started at around 9 o’clock in the morning. Clark

used the remote to fast forward through the first couple of hours of tape. “I hope I got it all. I used the longest tape I could find to copy the original, but it might not have been enough.”

They watched at double speed in silence. Very little activity had been picked up by the camera, mainly the various workers entering and exiting the building on their various errands and breaks. Finally, a worker approached the camera and the feed went dark.

They looked at each other. “What was that?” Lois asked.

“Looks like he covered it with something.”

Clark fast forwarded the tape again. Just as suddenly, the feed resumed. All they could see was the slight figure of Pascal staring down the road to the loading dock and the very end of what might have been a white van in the distance.

Clark paused the tape. “There.” He pointed to what looked like a shadow at the edge of the screen.

“What?” Lois asked. “That shadow?”

“It’s the worker that covered the camera.”

He looked at her. “You can’t see it?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Clark, all I can see is a blur.”

He picked up the remote again, skipping the tape back at the slowest speed possible, then pointed at the screen again. “There. Just his profile, but that might be enough.”

Lois moved closer to the television and squinted slightly.

There was a very blurry — to her — image of what might be a person’s face in profile. “You might be able to see that, but I doubt it’s good enough to give us a description.”

She turned. Clark had found a piece of printer paper and was sketching rapidly, his glasses halfway down his nose as he looked up at the screen and back down again. She’d seen him with his glasses halfway down like that many times and never picked up on the significance of the action.

“Why do you do that?”

He looked up at her, his glasses still hanging off the tip of his nose. She stifled a giggle. He looked like an absent minded professor.

“Do what?”

“Pull your glasses down like that.”

“Oh.” Self-consciously he slid them back up. “My vision powers won’t work through them.”

She looked at him strangely. As Superman, she’d seen him look through — and burn through — materials much tougher than glass, so why would a simple pair of spectacles stop him?

“Why?”

“They’re not normal glass- it’s lead crystal glass.”

“Why lead crystal?”

“I can’t see through lead. It was my parents’ idea. When I first got my powers sometimes I’d have trouble controlling them. The lead crystal stopped me from using them when I didn’t mean to.”

He stopped drawing and held up the sketch.

“Hopefully that’s good enough for us to find the guy.”

They took the sketch to the Louvre. Heading to the loading dock where Clark had entered the night before, they were prevented from getting inside by an officious security guard who was checking each worker’s identification.

By mutual agreement, they retreated to near the end of the road to the loading dock and tried to catch the attention of a passing worker.

It took time and some rapid, persuasive sounding French from Clark, but finally they found a worker who admitted knowing the man in the sketch.

Clark returned looking triumphant.

“Evan Williams,” he stated. “He’s American, and should be here any moment.”

They tried to be as inconspicuous as possible, and soon their patience was rewarded.

"That's him," Lois pointed out.

Clark called out the man's name. He took one look at them and bolted.

"I hate it when they run," Lois commented as they took off after him.

They rounded the corner to see Williams disappear into an alleyway and followed more cautiously.

The alley was littered with detritus of various descriptions. Clark paused at the entrance and retrieved an old tyre. Taking careful aim, he threw it in Williams' direction. It landed around Williams' shoulders, pinning his arms and knocking him to the ground.

Lois stopped in amazement. It was one thing to know that Clark was Superman and another to see him performing superhuman tasks with casual ease. She'd known about his alter ego for months, but somehow seeing him in action made it real for her in a way it hadn't been before.

She took a couple of deep breaths to steady herself. She couldn't let on to their quarry that there'd been anything unusual about his capture.

Clark stood the captive back on his feet. Close to, Lois realised that Williams was little more than a kid, a college junior at the oldest.

"We just want to ask you a couple of questions," he told Williams.

"You cops?"

"No. We're reporters." Clark pulled out his press pass and showed the younger man.

"I don't have to talk to you," Williams said belligerently.

Lois stepped forward. "No, you don't. But we found you on a security tape." She looked at Clark. "Do you think the police might be interested in that tape?"

"I think so."

She leant closer to the struggling man. "So here's the deal. You tell us what we want to know, and the tape disappears. If you don't talk to us, the tape ends up at the nearest police station."

The youth hesitated.

Lois turned and started to walk away.

"Okay, okay."

She took the few steps back to their quarry. "You'll talk?"

"Yeah. Just get this thing off me."

Clark lifted the tyre off the smaller man. "Start talking," he advised.

"Look, I don't know much. This guy, he comes to me and says he'll pay me to cover the outside camera for half an hour between 11:30 and midday three days ago."

"How much?"

"30000 francs."

Clark let out a low whistle.

"Yeah. I dropped out of college and I'm out of money to get back home. I need the cash. So, I said I'd do it. \$5000 just for covering a camera? It was easy money."

"The guy who paid you. What did he look like?" Lois asked.

The younger man thought for a moment. "He was French. Tall, kind of heavy, you know? Blond hair, green eyes. Looked like he'd been in a few fights."

"How tall?" Clark asked.

"Taller than you. Maybe six three, six four, somewhere around there."

"How old?"

"Late forties, I'd guess. Listen, can I go now? I need this job."

Clark put a hand on Williams' shoulder, stopping him from leaving.

"One more thing. Why'd you run from us?"

"Oh. I thought you were cops. I'm on a student visa, see. I'm not supposed to be working."

Clark lifted his hand and let him go, then turned to Lois.

"Sound like anyone you know?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No. I think we might have hit another dead end." He checked his watch. "I'm running out of time."

Back at the office, Lois made a beeline for her desk. Logging on to the computer, she opened the email program. It was a long shot considering the time difference, but ...

"Yes," she exclaimed under her breath.

Clark leant on the edge of her desk.

"What is it?"

"Jimmy sent the registration list through."

"He's in early," Clark commented.

"Or late." They exchanged looks. It was unlike Jimmy to go home before Perry did, and they both knew the editor-in-chief's work ethic. It was entirely possible that neither Perry nor Jimmy had gone home.

Lois opened the file attached to Jimmy's email and sent it to the printer. A few moments later they heard the unmistakable screech of a dot matrix printer coming to life.

"Hopefully we'll find something in that —" Clark's head snapped up and he looked off into the distance.

"Lois, I've gotta go."

"What? Go where?"

Her questions fell on thin air. Clark was already gone.

Behind her, someone called out, "Hey, turn that up!"

She got up and went to see what the fuss was. On the television set mounted above the bullpen was a news program. A 'special report' banner scrolled along the bottom of the screen, and the picture showed a plethora of emergency vehicles on airport tarmac.

"What's going on?" she asked the person nearest to her.

"An aeroplane is trying to land at Orly without engines."

There was a pause in the rapid flow of French from the television, then Lois caught the phrase "Superman est arrive."

She breathed a sigh of relief. That must have been where Clark had gone.

Dimly she was aware of reporters leaving, rushing to get to the scene — and the story. At home she would be one of them, but now she stayed where she was. She watched as the jumbo jet came into view, the enormous bulk of the aircraft dwarfing the red and blue figure beneath its fuselage.

It was hard to reconcile the man that performed all these amazing feats with the kind, unassuming, gentle man who'd worked beside her for two years. When she saw him do something like land an aeroplane — like he was doing now, she saw on the screen — she still felt a sense of awe. It was odd to think that it was done by the same man she'd shared pizza and Lethal Weapon movies with.

She watched as he settled the plane onto the tarmac and waved to the pilots, hidden behind their cockpit glass. Then he flew off, without talking to the assembled reporters — or exchanging greetings with the plane load of rescued passengers.

That was strange, she thought. When he'd had time in Metropolis, he'd always stayed long enough to at least check that his rescues were okay. He'd even had photos taken with many of them. Here, it was apparently a different story. The unusual grimness she'd noticed in Clark obviously extended to his behaviour as Superman.

Thoughtfully, she settled back down at her desk.

Clark had always been quick to laugh — a low chuckling sound that sent thrills up and down her spine — and even quicker to smile. But she'd been in Paris a full day and barely seen him smile. And she hadn't heard him laugh once. Lois had never seen a truly unhappy Clark. If he was that miserable, why didn't he just come home? Perry had never replaced him, so getting a job wouldn't be a problem.

"Excuse me."

The voice from beside her snapped her out of her reverie. Next to her desk, a paunchy, balding reporter that Clark had pointed out as one of the other foreign correspondents was watching her, an enquiring look on his face.

“You are Lois, yes?” He had a slight French accent that reminded her of Claude. She suppressed a shiver.

“That’s right.”

“I am Pierre. I am travelling to Vienna this afternoon with Clark and I wanted to see how he was getting to the airport. Do you know where he is?”

“Ah ... He went to pick up uh ... his dry cleaning. His dry cleaning, yes,” she stumbled over the explanation.

Pierre gave her an odd look. “Okay. When he returns, can you tell him I am looking for him?”

“Sure.”

“Suddenly I know why all of his excuses are so flimsy,” she muttered under her breath. It was harder to think of them on the spot than she thought it would be, and she didn’t even have the distraction of trying to get somewhere in a hurry. Lois collected the bulky printout from the printer and settled down to start reading through it, keeping one eye out for Clark’s return.

When an hour had passed without him coming back she put down the stack of papers. She’d been unable to concentrate on them anyway, being too busy wondering where he was. The plane rescue hadn’t taken that long.

Grabbing her purse out of the drawer, she left in search of a decent coffee.

Walking back towards the Planet building, she heard familiar footsteps fall into step beside her and turned her head.

“Hey. I was wondering where you’d gotten to.”

“Sorry. There was an explosion in Italy.”

It had been a bomb actually, one of the local terrorist groups protesting ... something ... by blowing up a cafe. Six people had died, and for what? His jaw clenched. Such a waste. The pointless loss of life both angered and frustrated him.

“Pierre was looking for you. He wanted to know how you’re getting to the airport.”

He nodded absently, his mind still on the appalling scene in the bombed out cafe in Bologna.

She laid her hand on his arm, bringing him back to the present. “Clark? Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine, Lois.”

She surprised him by shaking her head. “No. No, you’re not, Clark.” She paused. “Is this what you really want? Not having a place to call your own? Bouncing from country to country all the time? You’re miserable here Clark, I can see it. And we miss you in Metropolis. I miss you.” She smiled at him. “Come home, Clark. I need my best friend back.”

He stopped in his tracks, his shoulders drooping. He wanted to go back so badly. He missed Metropolis, working at the Planet, missed Perry and Jimmy ... but most of all he missed Lois, so much that it had become almost a physical ache.

But the ache was nowhere near as bad as the daily torture of spending almost every waking minute with her and not being able to express how he felt about her.

Ahead of him, Lois had realised he was no longer keeping pace with her and had turned back, her smile fading into a questioning look.

“Clark?”

“I can’t, Lois.”

“Why not?”

“You want your best friend back. And I just can’t do it any more. I can’t go back to being just Clark, your friend and partner. I can’t go back to pretending I’m not hopelessly in love with you.”

It was the first time he’d admitted that he loved her since before her engagement to Luthor. She stared at him in shock.

“Look, Lois, I know you don’t feel the same way. And it’s okay. I accepted that a long time ago.” He watched her uneasily. “Lois, say something.”

“Fine. You say you love me. Why should I believe you? You left, Clark.”

“Yes, I left. I left because it was too painful to stay! Do you have any idea what it’s like, to work and spend time with the one person you’ve ever loved and know they don’t feel the same way? To see you with Dan when I’d give anything — anything — to be in his shoes?” His shoulders sagged. “And- I hoped that if I left, maybe it would get easier. That maybe if I didn’t see you every day I might start to get over you.”

“Has it worked?” she asked quietly.

He shook his head. “No.” He didn’t think anything ever would.

“This is all my fault,” she murmured.

He started to reassure her, but she cut him off.

“When you asked me out, last year ... I panicked. I’ve never been in a relationship that hasn’t been a federal disaster, Clark. And then you asked me out and I couldn’t risk it. You’re my best friend. Every guy I’ve ever gone out with, I’ve wound up hating them and I didn’t want that to happen with you.” She took a deep breath. “So I said no and told myself that it’d be okay, you’d get over it and I’d get to keep my best friend. When you left, I took it as a sign that I was right ...”

Clark listened with a growing sense of anger and disbelief. All this ... Because she was scared? He’d been going through hell, because she’d panicked?

“Why couldn’t you just tell me that?! I left my job, my friends and my home ... I’ve been miserable for 6 months, Lois!” He took a deep breath, willing himself to calm down. As quickly as it had risen, the spike of anger disappeared.

Softening his voice, he continued, “I wish you had told me, Lois. I would’ve told you that I’m scared too.”

Her head came up. “But Clark, you’re Su—” she cut herself off, looking around and lowering her voice. “You go into burning buildings and — and eat bombs and lift rockets into orbit!”

“That’s different. Mayson told me once that Superman isn’t heroic because the things he does don’t require him to risk anything. And she was right. I rescue people knowing that I won’t get hurt. I don’t risk anything by going into burning buildings or — or catching aeroplanes. But asking you out? I was scared. No matter what you said, our relationship would change. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had, Lois. I don’t have many people that I can truly call a friend. And I knew I was risking that. Even if you had said yes, if you’d felt even a little of what I feel for you, that possibility scared me too. I’ve never let anyone in before, Lois. I’ve had to spend my whole life keeping everyone at arm’s length because of what I am. Letting anyone, even you, get that close is — is terrifying.”

He sighed. “I decided it was worth the risk, but it still took me a long time to work up the courage.” Awareness of what he’d been saying struck him and he gave a bitter, mirthless laugh.

“I’ve done it again.”

“Done what?” she asked, puzzled.

“I told myself I’d never do this again, that it hurts too much. But yet again I’ve laid myself out in front of you.” He smiled sadly. “That’s the last time, Lois. I love you. I always have. But ...” He sighed again, his shoulders drooping. “I wish you hadn’t come.”

Heavy hearted, he walked away, blocking out the sound of her calling his name. Ducking into a nearby alleyway, he changed into the Suit and took off in the direction of the airport. He’d come back for his luggage later. Right now he needed to get to Vienna.

Lois sat and waited. The single stool at the counter of Clark’s tiny kitchenette was the only available seat, so she’d perched

there. She was regretting it now. The stool was hard and uncomfortable, but the only alternative was Clark's bed.

She'd taken a gamble and come here after Clark's abrupt departure, reasoning that it had been so close to when he'd needed to be at the airport that he might just go straight there and come back for his luggage later. After all, he was Superman. It couldn't take him more than a few minutes to fly to Paris and back.

The look on Clark's face before he'd turned and walked away haunted her. She'd never seen him so ... desolate. Even when she'd rejected him and asked him to get Superman for her almost in the same breath, it hadn't been as bad. She shivered. She'd been so wrong. So utterly, appallingly wrong.

She recognised his distance, after she'd turned him down in Metropolis, for what it was now — an attempt to protect himself. She'd been doing it herself for years — people couldn't hurt you if they didn't get close to you.

She should have realised what he was doing then. Instead, she'd gotten angry. She'd picked fights over the stupidest things. And he'd fought back. The fights they'd had before her aborted wedding to Lex Luthor had been nothing compared to the ones before Clark had left Metropolis.

Fighting about Mayson Drake — the fight that had stopped him from hearing the car bomb that had claimed her life.

Fighting about the Resurrection story — a fight that had culminated in Clark blaming her for Mayson's death.

She'd all but stopped talking to him after that one. And she'd started dating Daniel Scardino.

Kissing Dan in full view of the newsroom — and Clark — had been needlessly cruel.

Perry told her after Clark was gone that he'd put in his request to transfer to Europe later that day.

He'd tried to tell her he was leaving. For two full weeks he'd tried to get her to talk to him and she'd brushed him off, holding a grudge when she knew full well that Clark didn't mean what he'd said.

And then one morning she'd come into work to find his desk bare and a letter taped to her monitor.

She sighed. She'd made such a mess of things.

Clark loved her, she had no doubts about that now. But he'd given up hope.

It was up to her to put things right. If she didn't, she was pretty sure she'd lose Clark for good.

Two hours later, she was starting to think she'd lost the gamble. She'd lost an hour trying to get his address before finally giving up and calling Jimmy. Maybe he'd ducked back here before going to the airport after all.

Finally she heard the scrape of the door handle turning and the door swung open. He looked as tired as she'd ever seen him.

"I see your lock picking skills are just as good as ever."

She chose to ignore the sardonic comment.

"I liked your place in Metropolis better," she informed him. Looking around, she suppressed a shiver. His apartment in Metropolis had been warm and welcoming, like the man himself. This place was stark, cold, unfriendly. The only personal touch in the tiny apartment was a framed picture of his parents on the nightstand. "Where is all of your stuff?"

"At the farm. I'm not here much." Walking forward, he dropped his jacket onto the bed. "What are you doing here, Lois? Other than to criticise my apartment, that is."

"I wanted to talk to you."

"I said all I'm going to say earlier," he replied, sounding defeated as he turned towards the wardrobe. "I really don't have time right now, Lois. I'm due at a reception in an hour and a half and I need my tux." He pulled a suitcase out of the wardrobe and started piling clothes in it.

She got up off her uncomfortable chair and went and stood

next to the bed, her hands on her hips.

"Damn it Clark Kent, you are not running away from this. Not this time."

He heard the anger in her tone and stopped packing, slowly turning to face her.

"That's better. Now, you sit there —" she pointed at the end of the bed "and listen."

Dumbfounded, he sat obediently.

"When you left Metropolis, I was angry, Clark. I was angry with you for leaving, and I was angry with myself for being hurt that you left. I told myself that it didn't matter, that you couldn't have cared about me or you wouldn't have left —" she held up a hand to forestall him from speaking — "and I told myself that I was better off without you. And then I came here, and I saw how unhappy you are. You rarely smile, you barely talk to anyone, you live like — like this." She gestured at the almost clinically bare apartment. "Then there's our conversation from earlier. I hurt you, Clark. I didn't know I was doing it and I didn't know how badly and I'm sorry." She looked away, taking a deep breath. She looked back to find his gaze intent on her face. "So much pain, and all because I was too afraid to admit ..." She took another breath, shakily this time, and met his gaze. He looked wary but she could see a spark of hope kindling in the depths of his eyes.

"I love you, Clark."

He stood and stepped towards her, the wariness warring with the hope in his eyes. She saw him swallow hard.

Her fragile composure broke and she flung herself at him.

"I've been such an idiot, Clark. It wasn't until you'd left and I'd lost you that I realised how much I loved you and then I thought for sure that you didn't love me and — please tell me I'm not too late, Clark!"

His reply was a groan as he crushed her against him, burying his face in her hair. She could feel him trembling in reaction as he held her close. Finally he loosened his grip, letting her move back enough to look up at him. "It's not too late, Lois. Not if you really mean it."

"I mean it, Clark. I love you."

A blinding, brilliant smile in return took her breath away. Gently he slid his hand under the curtain of her hair, cupping her cheek. "And I love you."

He dipped his head and kissed her, a sweet, tender kiss that hinted at restrained passion. Their first real kiss, instead of one designed to mislead — or say goodbye.

They broke apart for a moment, smiling shyly at each other.

Afterwards, Lois wouldn't be able to tell who moved first, but suddenly she was in his arms, her own arms looped around his neck, being thoroughly and passionately kissed.

He hoped he wasn't dreaming.

If he was, then he hoped he never woke up.

Lois was here, in his apartment, in his arms, kissing him like she'd never let him go.

There was a little voice at the back of his head, almost drowned out by the rush of passion that was fogging his mind, trying to remind him of something he had to do, somewhere he had to be.

Then Lois's tongue found his and he banished the voice, surrendering instead to the intoxicating feel of her slender body pressed up against him, the taste of her as their tongues stroked and entwined, the faint scent of her perfume ... They broke apart only to breathe before coming together again, unable to get enough of each other.

The chiming of his neighbour's clock through the flimsy wall of his apartment impinged on his consciousness finally, breaking the spell and recalling him to a sense of his obligations.

Reluctantly he broke the kiss as she moaned in protest, drawing a little away from her. He took in her kiss-redened lips

and realised that his hands were resting on her waist under her shirt and his own shirt had gotten unbuttoned at some point. He smiled at her shakily.

“Clark? Is something wrong?”

“No ... and yes.” He sighed. “I don’t want to do this, but I have to go back to Vienna.” She looked at him blankly. “The reception, remember? I have to be there.” He gently disentangled himself and finished his packing at super speed. Then he walked back to her and caressed her cheek. “Are you sure this is what you want, Lois? It can’t be a normal relationship. My life isn’t normal. I am not — normal. And I can’t promise that I’m not going to have to leave, sometimes at the worst possible moment. Are you sure you want an absentee boyfriend?”

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “I’m sure, Clark. I love you and I want to be with you. If that means putting up with Superman, then that’s fine with me.”

He grinned. Two years ago, she wouldn’t have considered Superman to be of less importance than ... well, practically anything.

“On two conditions. One ... you always come back. And two ...” she continued in a playful tone of voice. “You take me flying.”

He kissed her. “I will always come back to you, Lois.”

He glanced at the clock on the nightstand. “I have to go. I’ll come back. We’ll go flying.” He kissed her again, and with a regretful look backwards, picked up his bags and left the apartment.

Lois sipped at her third cup of coffee for the morning and pulled a face. The newsroom brew was thick and bitter, and she was already close to her personal limit for the day.

She was finding it hard to concentrate this morning. Her mind kept wandering back to the night before ... and Clark.

The look on his face when she’d told him that she loved him.

The way he kissed. The feel of his bare skin under her hands ...

She shook her head to snap herself back to the present. As enjoyable as it was, she didn’t have time to sit and daydream.

Perry had only given her a limited amount of time in Paris and it was rapidly running out. She froze.

Time was running out. Soon she’d have to go back to Metropolis ... without Clark. Last night, neither of them had mentioned what would happen when Lois’s time in Paris was up.

Surely he’d come back now? Yesterday it had sounded like she was the only barrier to Clark coming home. Now that he knew she loved him and wanted to be with him, that barrier was gone, right? But what about his job here? She knew he preferred investigative reporting to the correspondent work he was doing now, but Clark would never shirk on his obligations. Was he on a contract here?

The phone ringing next to her elbow was a welcome distraction from her unprofitable wonderings. Picking it up, she heard the unmistakable sound of international dialling pips. There was a pause, and for a moment she wasn’t sure if the call had dropped out.

“Lois Lane.”

“Lois? It’s Jimmy. I’ve got some information for you.”

“Hi Jimmy. What’d you find?”

“I haven’t been able to get into some of the European passport controls ... their systems are really locked up tight.”

She put down her pencil. She could see her only real lead evaporating, and fast.

“Jimmy —”

“But I did get a hit on his credit card. He’s at the Hotel Sacher, in Salzburg.” He spelt it out for her. “So how’s Paris? Have you been — hang on, I’ve gotta go, the Chief is calling me.”

“Bye — “The line went dead “— Jimmy.”

She put down the phone. Salzburg. She doubted she could get there, but she knew who could. She dug around and found the piece of paper that Clark had written his cellphone and hotel

phone numbers on.

Picking up the phone, she dialled Clark’s cell, squashing down the little surge of nervousness and telling herself off for acting like a giddy teenager. She must have called Clark at least a few hundred times, so why should this be any different?

Clark wasn’t sure if this level of tedium was unique to summits of this size, or if it was simply because he wanted to be roughly 700 miles west of Vienna.

He plastered a pleasant smile on his face while he listened to one of his more long-winded colleagues talk about the trip he’d recently made to Moscow, while letting his mind wander. Suddenly aware that he’d been asked a question, he was saved the necessity of answering by the buzzing of his cellphone. Stepping away with a moue of regret, he flipped open the phone and answered.

“Clark Kent.”

“Hi Clark, it’s me.”

He couldn’t help but smile at the sound of Lois’s voice. Looking around, he moved through the crowd and found a quieter spot so he wouldn’t be disturbed.

“Hey. I was just thinking about you.”

“Really? I’ve been thinking about you too. I’m not interrupting you, am I?” She sounded anxious.

“No. They’ve stopped for morning tea and a photo op,” he reassured her, knowing that he sounded a little exasperated by the whole process of the summit.

“So how are things going?”

“Slowly. I’d rather be in Paris working with you. How is the story going?”

“Actually that’s one of the reasons I called. Jimmy tracked Mathieu’s credit card. He’s in a hotel in Salzburg.”

“And you want me to go and talk to him.” Clark stated, a grin on his face. He should’ve known it wouldn’t be long before Lois started taking advantage of his ... unusual abilities ... to help an investigation.

“Can you?”

“Sure. Give me the details.” He jotted the address down on the notepad he habitually carried in his jacket pocket and repeated them back to her. “Got it. And Lois?”

“Yes, Clark?”

“I love you.”

He could hear the smile in her voice as she replied. “I love you too, Clark.”

Closing the phone, he took another look at the agenda for the day. No one would notice if he left for a little while. Leaving the function room, he found a deserted alley unobserved by security cameras and spun into the Suit.

Reaching the border city of Salzburg and finding the Hotel Sacher only took a few minutes. At hotel reception, he took advantage of the distraction of an overworked clerk to scan the register and find out what room Mathieu was in.

Locating the right room, he tapped on the door and waited. From inside, he could hear someone moving around but they didn’t come to the door. He knocked again and announced himself.

“Monsieur Mathieu, my name is Clark Kent. I’m a reporter for the Daily Planet—”

“Go away.” The voice was muffled by the door. Clark wasn’t giving up. He knocked again, more forcefully this time.

“I just want to talk to you.”

This time the door opened as far as the safety chain would allow and a dishevelled, unshaven face peered around the edge of the door.

“I said, go away.”

Clark stood his ground. “I know about La Complet Joconde.”

Through the small gap left by the safety chain, Clark saw the older man's face pale.

"You're a reporter. Why should I talk to you?"

"Because I can help you. My partner and I are trying to find whoever stole the artworks." He could see Mathieu wavering.

"Please. Before it's too late."

The door shut in his face, and from inside he could hear the unmistakable sound of the safety chain being disengaged. Slowly Mathieu opened the door, looking around warily before gesturing for Clark to enter.

He was about fifty, Clark knew from the background he and Lois had dug up, but right now he looked closer to sixty five. His dark, thinning hair was ragged and unkempt, his eyes were bloodshot and his hands trembled. He looked as close to collapse as anyone Clark had ever seen.

"How do you know about the painting?" he asked hoarsely.

"A friend saw the real one being loaded into a van."

"They'll blame me." A shudder went through the smaller man's frame. "I had no choice."

Clark guided the man to a nearby chair. Taking the one opposite, he leant forward.

"Tell me what happened."

"Late one night, I got a phone call at my home ... he said he knew I was the restorations director at the museum, and he would give me 3 million francs if I'd do what he said. He said he knew about my wife ... I asked him what he wanted. All he wanted was for me to write orders for the arms to be taken to an outside restorer, outside of the museum." He took a deep, shuddering breath, he continued. "My wife is very ill. She has multiple sclerosis ... she's getting worse. There's an experimental treatment ... it's very expensive, but it's the only thing that helps. I needed the money."

"So you said yes."

He nodded slowly, the guilt he felt written all over his face. "I met with the man. I gave him the papers, he gave me the money. Two days later, his men came and took the arms." Mathieu sighed. "I felt guilty. The money is still there, in a briefcase in my office." He sighed again. "That night, he called again. This time he wanted me to substitute the copy of La Complet Joconde. I said I wouldn't, and he laughed. He said that I would get something that would change my mind. And the next morning, I got a letter in the post. It contained a picture of my daughter, and a note." He paused. "My daughter is away, studying ballet. She is a very talented dancer, maybe even good enough to be prima one day. The note — the note said that if I didn't do what he wanted, he would cut my daughter's tendons. She would never dance again."

Clark listened with mounting anger. Mathieu was undoubtedly guilty of taking a bribe in the theft of the arms of the Venus de Milo, but threatening the man's child? No wonder he'd caved and substituted the fake painting.

"What else could I do? My daughter ... I could not let her be hurt. I swapped the paintings, and then I left town."

"I want to help you, Monsieur Mathieu, but I need some details. What did the man look like?"

"I don't know. I never saw his face. He wore a hat pulled down low, and his collar turned up high ... all I could see was his mouth."

"Can you tell me anything about him? Was he French? Caucasian?"

"He was Caucasian, yes, but not French. He was American, but well educated."

"Did he give you a name?"

"Yes. He called himself the Phoenix."

Horror struck, Clark stared at the older man in disbelief.

It couldn't be possible. Luthor was behind bars. Clark had put him there himself.

"The Phoenix? You're sure?"

Mathieu nodded, puzzled. "Yes, I am sure."

Fighting to maintain his composure, Clark stood and offered his hand to Mathieu. "Thank you for telling me this."

"Wait. How did you find me?"

Clark forced a smile. "Your credit card. Do yourself a favour. Keep moving around, and don't use your credit card to pay." He gave Mathieu his business card. "If you need me — if he finds you — call me straight away. I'll send someone to help you."

On autopilot, he headed down to the lobby and outside.

It all made a horrible sort of sense. They never had discovered who owned the vault under the Metropolis Museum of Art. What better candidate than Luthor?

That meant that Luthor had had his globe. The thought made him feel sick. Luthor had heard the messages from his father, meant for Clark's eyes only. Luthor had come so close to discovering Clark's landing place on Earth. No one had ever accused Lex Luthor of being unintelligent. There was no way he would have failed to put the information together and realise that Clark Kent and Superman were the same person.

Clark and his parents would've been at Luthor's mercy.

Clark shook his head. All of this was supposition. Luthor was safely tucked away on Stryker's Island in Metropolis. Opening his cell phone, Clark dialled a number dredged from the depths of his photographic memory.

"Henderson."

"Henderson? It's Clark Kent."

"Kent?" The usually cynical police detective's tone was laden with surprise. Clark could picture him, cup of coffee in his hand, saturnine countenance with one eyebrow raised. "I thought you were in Europe, somewhere."

"I am. Vienna, at the moment. Henderson, can you tell me something? Is Lex Luthor still behind bars?"

There was silence on the other end of the line, and for a few moments Clark thought they'd been disconnected.

"Henderson?"

"How exactly did you come across that piece of information, Clark?"

Clark closed his eyes. He was right. It was Luthor behind the thefts.

"He's here, Bill. Well, he's in Paris. I just got done talking to a source, who says he was blackmailed by a well-educated American calling himself the Phoenix."

"Paris. Thanks for the tip, Kent."

The line went dead. Clark sped up, searching for a quiet place. As soon as he was away from prying eyes, he changed into the Suit and launched himself into the air.

If Luthor was at large, Lois was in trouble.

Collecting the last few pages of van registrations from the printer, Lois made a fresh cup of coffee and settled down at her temporary desk. She didn't know what she was looking for in the printout — wasn't sure if the information she wanted was even in the printout. But she had to check. It was tedious but necessary work. The thought occurred to her that it would go much faster with Clark around — he could use his super-speed to get through these seemingly endless piles of paper in seconds. Then it occurred to her to wonder how many times he actually had used his super-speed for the purpose.

Sipping at the coffee, she scanned down the lines of registered owners, looking for something that set off her instincts.

On the third page, she came across a familiar name.

"Carlin Imports!"

It might have been a coincidence, but Lois wouldn't bet on it.

She sat back. In Metropolis, she'd have her Jeep at her disposal, but here? She wasn't convinced that her rusty schoolgirl French would be sufficient to get a cab driver to do what she wanted. For a moment she considered asking Joe Patterson if she

could borrow the Planet's car, but the thought of being cooped up in the tiny Panda, possibly for hours, induced almost instant claustrophobia.

Instead she grabbed her bag and headed out of the Planet building. Once outside, she hailed a taxi to the Gare du Nord. From there, she knew, she'd be able to hire a car.

It took her longer than she'd anticipated to make it through the press of people at Europe's busiest train station to the hire car desks, arrange the rental of a nondescript mid-size sedan, then navigate her way through Paris to the registered address of Carlin Imports, but finally she was in place.

The premises proved to be a small yard full of shipping containers, which she supposed made sense for an import company. One of the containers had apparently been converted into an office of sorts. All in all, it didn't look like a place that she'd expect to find a disgraced, fugitive ex-billionaire. But then, the last time she'd seen Lex it had been in a sewer.

She kept as low a profile as she possibly could while she surveyed the yard. It all looked deserted.

She had just made up her mind to come back with Clark in tow when her driver's side window was shattered. A strong arm was suddenly wrapped around her neck, choking the breath from her. In the rear-view mirror she caught a glimpse of the man Evan Williams had described.

It was the last thing she saw before everything went black.

Clark came to an abrupt stop, high above the Daily Planet building in Paris and pulled his cellphone out of the hidden pocket sewn into his cape. If Lois answered, at least he'd know she was safe and be able to warn her. As both her cellphone and her desk phone rang and rang, he found himself pleading with her to pick up the phone. Finally he snapped his cellphone closed. He had to find her another way.

Dipping lower, he scanned the building, looking for Lois. The building was an old one whose inner walls were coated in lead based paint and whose plumbing still contained the occasional lead pipe. It was enough to impede his vision and make it near impossible to be certain whether or not she was inside. He let his super hearing kick in, listening for her heartbeat, but the noises of a city of over 2 million people made finding any particular sound problematic, especially one as faint as a single heartbeat.

Fighting back against the edge of incipient panic that threatened to engulf him, he dropped to the rooftop and scanned again, but the vision problem wasn't improved by the closer proximity. He tried her desk and cell phones again.

Still nothing.

Almost growling in frustration, he went to change back into his Clark clothes- and stopped. How could he explain Clark's presence in Paris when he was supposedly in Vienna?

Discarding the more discreet option of the roof entrance and plain clothes, he dropped off the side of the building and hovered level with the newsroom windows.

It only took a moment before one of the newsroom staff noticed his presence and opened the window. Reminding himself that he, as Superman, did not know the staff except for giving them the occasional brief quote, he refrained from addressing Jacques by name. Instead he gave him a brief nod.

"I need to see your editor."

"Right-right away," Jacques stammered. He led the way across the newsroom and nervously tapped on the editor's door.

Even without the benefit of his super hearing, Clark could hear the resulting exchange.

"Joe? Uh- Superman is here to see you."

"What? Well, don't just stand there, let him in!"

Jacques looked at Clark nervously. "Ah- you can go in now."

"Thank you."

As he walked away, Clark could hear Jacques cursing himself for getting so tongue-tied and suppressed a smile.

"Superman." Joe offered Clark his hand. "This is an honour. What can the Daily Planet do for you?"

"Thank you, Mr Patterson. Actually, I need your help. There's been a threat against Lois Lane. Do you know where she is?"

"She left a little while ago. I can see if any of the staff knows where she was going." Clark nodded, fighting down the urge to rail at the editor for not keeping better tabs on the reporters in his employ.

Joe came back into the room a few minutes later. "It looks like she went to lunch."

Grimly Clark discounted that idea. If she'd gone to lunch, she would've answered her cellphone.

"I need your permission to look at her desk. The threat came from someone who I've had dealings with in the past. He's kidnapped Ms Lane once before." It was unorthodox, he knew. But he also knew that Superman was unlikely to be denied any reasonable request.

As it happened, the information he needed was right on top. The name Carlin Imports fairly jumped off the page. He took note of the address.

"Thank you. You've been very helpful," he told Joe, before leaving the way he'd came.

As he sped across town to the light industrial district where Carlin Imports was located, he tried to tell himself that it was nothing, that he'd probably find Lois safe and sound. But he couldn't shake the sick feeling in his stomach that Luthor had her.

He couldn't lose her. Not now. Not after last night.

When Lois awoke, it was to find herself tied to a chair- and Lex Luthor smirking at her from across the room.

"Well, this is a pleasant surprise." He stood and approached her. "I came only to Paris to retrieve the artworks that are rightfully mine, and I get you as a bonus. My dear Lois, when Henri brought you in I thought I was dreaming."

"I'm not your dear," she spat.

"Yes, I have rather fallen from grace, haven't I? No matter. My love may not be to your taste, but from now on you'll know no other." He reached out and grabbed her hair, pulling her head back and forcing her to look up at him. "And I promise you, after a few weeks in my windowless fortress, you'll come to enjoy it."

He released her hair roughly.

"But before we leave, I have need of one service from you." He took a small box from his pocket and opened it, exposing a glowing, sickly green crystal.

"That of bait."

He nodded to someone in the corner, out of Lois's line of sight. The unseen figure rounded her chair and Lois saw the face of the man who'd kidnapped her. He was as Evan Williams described; between forty and forty five, blond, green eyed, with a face that had seen more than its share of fists and broken bones. Henri, she presumed.

He took a wad of cloth out of his pocket and forced it into her mouth, tying it in place with another strip around the back of her head.

Luthor put the chunk of Kryptonite on the floor underneath her chair. Then he and the silent Henri left, swinging the heavy metal door shut behind them and locking Lois in the gloom.

As her vision adjusted to the semi-darkness, she took note of her surroundings. She was in what appeared to be a huge metal box, with a single door at one end. The only light came from a few small slits cut into the metal at the top of the wall, near the end of the box. She puzzled over it for a few moments, her head still fuzzy from her brief bout of unconsciousness, and then it came to her.

A shipping container.

She was probably still in the Carlin Imports yard, then. That was the good news. The bad news was, the last thing she wanted was for Clark to come and try to rescue her. Not with a hunk of Kryptonite under her chair. If she could just get her hands free, she might be able to do something about that.

Accordingly she started moving her wrists, twisting them back and forth as far as she could, trying to get some sort of slack into the ropes that bound them. In her experience, very few criminals knew how to tie a proper knot.

After a few minutes, it became obvious that all she was accomplishing was chafing her wrists and making her arms sore. She tried freeing her ankles from where they'd been bound to the legs of the chair, but all she succeeded in doing was knocking the uncomfortable wooden chair onto its side.

Frustrated, she lay there for a few minutes, getting her breath back and considering her next move.

High above the city, Clark found the container yard that constituted Carlin Imports' base. He dipped lower and started x-raying the containers, hoping and praying that she would be there, that Luthor hadn't taken her somewhere else.

When he found her, he dropped to the ground and broke the heavy duty padlock on the door. Sheer relief made him incautious. He swung the door wide and stepped inside, rushing to Lois. He pulled the gag out of her mouth and heard her cry out, "No! It's a trap!" at the same time as a wave of familiar, agonising pain rolled over him.

Kryptonite.

It had been months since he'd come across any of the deadly green rock. The only mercy, he thought grimly, was that it wasn't inside him like after his encounter with Diana Stride. He staggered, trying to keep on his feet as he reached down to free Lois's hands. He could feel his strength draining away like water as the horrible burning pain in his abdomen intensified. He managed to snap the rope binding Lois's wrists, but in the process grazed his hand on the Kryptonite that had been hidden by the chair.

He gasped as the toxic crystal burned his skin. The pain of it brought him to his knees.

He heard footsteps echoing on the metal floor of the shipping container and looked up, squinting a little in the bright light.

Luthor stood over him, a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

"Ah, Superman. I see you've found my little insurance policy."

"What do you want, Luthor?" Clark ground out.

"Well, I rather thought that was obvious. I want what is mine, and I want you dead." He took a step closer, looming over Clark. "And this time, there will be no escape for you. Third time's the charm. But don't worry. You'll have plenty of time to say goodbye to Lois. She's going to keep you company for a while. Then once you are dead, Lois and I will take a little trip into the Alps."

"Why leave her here?" Clark managed to gasp out. "Why make her suffer?"

"My dear Lois needs a little object lesson. Once she knows you're gone, she'll know there's no one to take her from me. You see, Superman — I always get what I want. You dead and Lois mine, forever." He leaned close to Clark's face, his voice dripping with venom. "This time I've won."

He straightened up and stepped down out of the shipping container, slamming the door shut behind him.

Lois arched forward, trying to reach her shoe. She was still tied to the chair by the ankles, and try as she might she couldn't contort herself enough.

She glanced over her shoulder to where Clark lay in a crumpled heap. His breath was coming in short, painful sounding gasps.

"Superman?" she called.

He raised his head slowly and looked at her. She breathed a sigh of relief. He'd been so still, she thought he'd slipped into unconsciousness.

"Can you move?"

He nodded.

"Can you get my shoe off?"

He gave her a quizzical look but did as she asked. After crawling the few feet he gave her the shoe then collapsed onto his belly beside her.

Her heart went out to him. She'd seen him in the throes of Kryptonite exposure before — including once when she'd been scared he'd die — but not since she'd discovered his secret. This was Clark — her Clark — that was suffering. She had to help him.

Moving as quickly as she could, she ripped the insole out of the shoe and extracted the piece of dull grey foil she'd secreted underneath it. Unfolding it, she grabbed the piece of Kryptonite and wrapped it up in the lead foil, making sure she covered every glint of green. Looking up, she saw him watching her, his body relaxing as the pain subsided.

"You keep that in your shoe?" There was a trace of his usual humour in his voice.

"Why do you think it takes me so long to get through Customs?"

He gave a weak chuckle, then rested his head back down on the floor.

Lois never ceased to amaze him.

He'd never met anyone else that would consider keeping lead foil in their shoe, just in case they ran across Kryptonite. Right now, he was exceedingly grateful that she did — and he loved her even more for it. The pain was gone, leaving him feeling shivery and weak — and afraid. Somehow he had to defend Lois, but how?

"How long do you think we have?" Lois broke the silence. "Until he comes back? Long enough for your powers to come back?"

"No," he said softly. "He'll be back before then. He'll come back to gloat."

"How do you know?" she asked curiously.

He chose not to answer, wanting to spare her pain, but he hadn't counted on her quick intellect.

"He's done this before, hasn't he?" she questioned, horror in her voice.

"Yes," he admitted. He sat up cautiously, testing each limb for the return of pain, then reached for the ropes still confining Lois to the chair.

"That's why you looked so sick ... I was so glad to see you, I didn't realise until later. That's why you couldn't save him, wasn't it? When he jumped?"

He sighed. "Yes."

"How long?"

"Do you really want to hear this?"

"How long?" she persisted.

"Two days," he capitulated. "In his wine cellar."

Lois was silent. Grimly he went back to trying to loosen the knots around her ankles.

He'd gotten one foot free when she spoke again.

"I'm sorry."

Clark paused for a moment. "You have nothing to be sorry for." He gave the last knot a tug and it came free. She pushed herself up into a sitting position and looked at him. "You're not responsible for Luthor's actions, Lois."

"But if it wasn't for me —"

"He still would've tried to get rid of me, Lois," he cut her off. "I'd stopped too many of his illegal activities." He touched her hand. "It is not your fault, Lois."

“You should have told me.”

“Why? So you could blame yourself? That’s exactly why I didn’t tell you, Lois.” He reached out and brushed the tear that was threatening to fall away from her cheek.

“I was so blind.”

“Luthor is very good at only letting people see what he wants them to see. Even now, there’s a whole group of people in Metropolis who believe he’s innocent. Even Perry was fooled, Lois.”

“You weren’t.”

“I was jealous.” He grinned at her and got a wan smile in return. “That’s better.” He leaned forward and kissed her gently. “We need to figure out what we’re going to do.”

She gave herself a little shake. “How long will it take for your powers to come back?”

“I’m not sure.” Thanks to her, it hadn’t been a long exposure — more like the first time he’d come across Kryptonite than any of the subsequent exposures. “In Smallville, it took about a day. But we were outside a lot.”

“That helps?”

“The sunlight helps.”

She rubbed at her ankles where the ropes had grazed her skin and stood up, looking around. “Will that help?”

She pointed to where the late afternoon sun was slanting through the ventilation slits onto the container wall. “It’s not much, but —”

“But any sunlight is better than none,” he finished. Clark stood shakily and went over to the small patch of light, sinking down against the wall and letting the light play over his face. He closed his eyes and a moment later felt her sit down beside him. He wrapped his arm around her waist and held her close.

“How are you feeling?”

“Tired,” he admitted.

“Go to sleep.”

He sighed, already drifting off. “Love you, Lois.”

“I love you too.”

Luthor came while they were still sleeping.

Clark had woken when the sun had gone down and they’d spent some time talking, discussing how Lois had been captured in the first place and what they’d do if Luthor returned before Clark’s powers did. Eventually, as the night had grown colder, Clark had detached his cape and draped it over them as Lois slept on his chest.

The grating noise of the container lock being opened startled them to full consciousness. They sprang to their feet, Clark moving as quietly as he could to stand behind one half of the door.

As soon as Luthor was far enough through the door, Clark jumped him.

The element of surprise only worked in Clark’s favour for a few moments. While he was somewhat restored by the sleep and the sunlight, he was only as strong as a normal, human, male. His adversary not only had the benefit of years of martial arts training, but he fought with the strength of madness.

The fight was brief but vicious, the two men trading kicks and punches as they both vied for the upper hand.

Clark could feel himself tiring. He had to get Lois away from here as quickly as he could. He dodged as Luthor picked up the chair and swung it at him.

“Run!” he shouted.

At the last second he ducked away from another blow with the chair. Luthor started to lose his balance, unable to stop his momentum in time. Clark took the opportunity to get one arm around Luthor’s neck and pulled him up, barely letting his feet touch the ground. Luthor scrabbled for a hold, unable to get a grip on the slick Spandex to try and break Clark’s stranglehold.

“Lois, run!”

This time she turned towards the doorway — and came to an abrupt stop.

The unmistakable sound of a pistol slide being racked filled the air.

“Not so fast, Miss Lane.”

A blond, heavyset man stepped up into the container, brandishing what Clark recognised as a .357 magnum pistol. From his vantage point, he could see Lois gulp as the barrel of the gun was levelled at her forehead.

“Don’t even think about it, Superman. Even you can’t move fast enough to stop a bullet before it hits Miss Lane.” The newcomer gestured with his free hand, keeping the gun trained on Lois’s forehead.

“Let him go.”

Clark capitulated, loosening the choke hold he had on Luthor and letting the former billionaire fall to the floor, coughing.

“Good. Now take a step back. Me, Mr. Luthor and Miss Lane are going to walk out of here, nice and easy. If you even think of following us, then Miss Lane here gets a bullet right through that pretty head of hers.”

Clark put up his hands and stepped back, hoping Lois understood what he had to do.

Luthor picked himself up off the metal floor and dusted himself off before joining the unknown man.

“Thank you, Henri. I knew I could count on you.”

He held out his hand for the gun and Henri handed it to him.

“But no one threatens Ms Lane.” As he spoke he fired one shot into Henri’s abdomen. The big Frenchman toppled out of the container. Clark instinctively started to move towards him and was stopped by Luthor training the gun in his direction.

“Au revoir, Superman.”

He yanked Lois out of the container by her upper arm and was swiftly gone from sight.

Clark grabbed his cape off the floor and stepped down out of the container, wincing a little. He could feel sore spots developing where Luthor’s blows had connected. Henri lay on his back beside the door, clutching at his abdomen and writhing slightly. Clark could see blood welling from between his fingers and pooling on the ground beneath him, and knew that even if he had his powers, there was no way he could get the stricken man to the hospital in time to save his life.

Wadding up his cape, he moved Henri’s hands out of the way and used the cape to try and stanch the flow of blood. He’d flattened the battery in his cellphone yesterday trying to locate Lois, so he had no way of calling an ambulance.

Maintaining pressure on the wound, he leant over Henri.

“Where is Luthor taking Ms Lane?”

“Can’t ... tell you” the dying man gasped out. “He’ll ... kill me.”

“He already has,” Clark stated bluntly. “Even if I could get you to a hospital, it wouldn’t make a difference.”

He knew he should try and reassure the man, but right now it was beyond him. If it hadn’t been for Henri’s interference, Lois might have gotten away. Instead, she was back in Luthor’s power and Clark had no idea where they were headed.

“Where is Luthor taking her?”

As he watched, the habitual sneer faded from the older man’s face and a look of fear crept into his eyes.

“Tell me!” Clark demanded.

“Cha- Chamonix.”

Clark leant back, still keeping pressure on the gunshot wound. Chamonix was a small town high in the Alps, near the Swiss border almost 400 miles away. Somehow, he had to get there before Luthor, or he knew Luthor would disappear into the fortress he’d mentioned to Lois. If that happened, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to find her before Luthor did something to her. Along the way, he had to hope that his powers came back. It would be almost

impossible to overtake them without the benefit of his super-speed.

Henri's breathing slowed and then stopped. Clark's shoulders drooped. It wasn't the first time he'd seen someone die in front of him, but that didn't make it any easier to deal with. He hated seeing the waste of human life, and Luthor had definitely taken more than his fair share.

He sighed. He had to get away from there before someone saw him, had to find a way to follow Lois and Luthor, and had to do it without Luthor spotting him.

Then it came to him. Lois's rental car. Unless someone had moved it, it should still be outside.

He picked up his now ruined cape and extracted his Clark clothes from the pocket. They too were a write off, soaked through with Henri's blood.

As much as he didn't want to take the extra time, a stop by his apartment was imperative. Luthor was demonstrably not stable. If he caught a glimpse of electric blue Spandex, even if it was someone driving, who knew what he'd do? If he went as Clark, at least he had a better chance of getting near them.

Looking around carefully, he made his way to the entrance of the container yard. The surrounding area seemed to be deserted. Just up the street he could see an ordinary sedan that might have been Lois's rental car. Doing his best not to attract attention, he walked up the car. Its driver's window was missing and he breathed a sigh of relief. Sliding into the driver's seat, he felt around the steering column and hot-wired the ignition, mentally thanking Jimmy and Lois for teaching him that particular skill.

One quick stop at his apartment later and he was on the road to Chamonix.

Lex dragged Lois around the back of the container yard's office and into the rear of a small Citroen sedan that was waiting there. Before she had time to realise his intentions, he picked her up and tried to force her into the trunk of the car. She kicked and flailed, trying to prevent him, and succeeded in landing a kick on one of his upper arms. He dropped her legs so that she was sitting in the trunk and aimed the pistol at her head. She froze and swallowed hard. From her position, it was practically impossible to knock the gun out of Luthor's hand.

"Much better."

Using his free hand, he pushed her head down and slammed the trunk lid. A few moments later, she felt vibration as the engine roared to life and the car started to move.

The trunk was cramped and dark; the only light came from the occasional flash of the brake lights and Lois had to draw her legs up to fit with any degree of comfort. In the brief moments of light, she studied the inside of her tiny prison. Like most sedans, the rear seats were designed to fold forward in two parts. She could see a tiny gap between the two halves of the seat, but try as she might she couldn't fit her hand through it. She had to find another way out.

Accordingly, she started banging on the lid of the trunk every time the car stopped, hoping that someone would hear her.

Finally the car pulled off the road and slowed down. There was a click, and the trunk flew open. Lois squinted against the sudden brightness and glared at Luthor.

"You won't get away, you know. He'll never stop looking for me."

"I know." His face creased in an evil grin. "I'm counting on it." He glanced at her. "Come now Lois, you don't think I got to where I was without considering every contingency."

"But the Kryptonite —"

He cut her off. "Was not the only piece. No, when I removed the Kryptonite from Nigel's possession, I had the foresight to have it cleaved."

Something about the way he spoke of Nigel St John made her

skin crawl.

"Removed it?" she queried

"Yes, well, Nigel had to learn not to cross Lex Luthor." He shot her a darkling look. "A lesson that you had best learn also. I know you had something to do with neutralising the Kryptonite in the shipping container. You'll pay for that when we get to our destination."

Lois shivered at the menace in his voice. He seemed more unstable, more violent, than he had even at their previous encounter shortly after his resurrection. Lois wasn't sure if he'd gone further down the path to complete psychopathic insanity or if she was just seeing him for the first time with the veneer of civilisation stripped away. She shrank away from the opening of the trunk, wanting to get as far away as the confines of the car allowed.

"I'm going to let you out for now," he said abruptly. He stepped back from the rear of the car, keeping the ubiquitous gun trained on her. She stood shakily, cramped from her time in the trunk, and looked around. They were pulled over in a roadside rest area. There was no traffic on the road, dashing her hopes of trying to attract the attention of someone in another vehicle. She stepped away from the car. Luthor immediately grabbed her arm and steered her to the passenger seat, shoving her down into it and slamming the door. She tried to open it, but it wouldn't budge. Luthor must have engaged the child lock. In another moment, they were pulling back out onto the road.

Her situation looked desperate. It would be hours at the very least before Clark got his powers back and could come looking for her — and that was dependent on Clark knowing where to look. Even if he did find her, Luthor still had Kryptonite, and Lois has no idea where he was keeping it. Her money was on it being somewhere on his person — in which case, it was practically impossible for her to get to it so she could dispose of it.

The only thing she could think of to do was try to escape from Luthor. He seemed so determined to have her in his power that she was convinced he wouldn't try to kill her if she did try to get free and failed.

Failure didn't bear thinking about. Being in Luthor's power, possibly for the rest of her life ... the idea brought a combination of terror and revulsion. She had no doubt that being Lex Luthor's prisoner would be filled with abuse... physical, emotional, mental — and worse. Was this what he'd planned for her if she'd been stupid enough to marry him two years ago? Perry, Jimmy, Clark ... all of them had maintained that Luthor was a monster, and the one time she'd asked Clark about it he'd refused to look her in the eye and wouldn't answer her.

No, she had to get away. She had to get back to Clark.

Her opportunity came a few minutes later.

After glancing at the fuel gauge several times, Luthor pulled the car into a gas station and stopped at the pump nearest the entry. Before unlocking the doors, he pointed Henri's gun at her, holding it low so it wasn't obvious from outside the vehicle.

"You may use the bathroom. If you try to escape or ask anyone for help, I will find you."

Lois nodded her head tightly, beginning to second guess her decision to try to get away ... but if she didn't do it now, who knew when she'd have the chance again? It would be dangerous, but that had never stopped her before. She was Lois Lane, notorious for jumping in without checking the water level first — even before Superman had arrived on the scene.

As casually as she could, Lois got out of the car and rounded the side of the building, studying the layout of the complex. Once inside the tiny, foetid bathroom she inspected the small window above the sink. It was made to slide open, but not very far. Judging the distance carefully, she felt sure that she could slide her petite frame through the opening, although it would be a tight fit.

Quickly she climbed up onto the metal sink and laboriously started the task of popping the screen out of the window without making too much noise. Time started playing tricks on her. Getting the screen out only took a few minutes, but it felt like hours. Unable to tell if she'd been in the bathroom for an unusually long time, she checked over her shoulder before hoisting herself up and wriggling through the window. On the other side, she checked her surroundings once again then dropped to the ground as silently as she could manage.

To her great good fortune, there was a bus pulling up to the stop she'd noticed at one side of the gas station. With a purposeful stride, she walked towards it, making sure the few franc notes she'd had in her pocket were still there. She had no idea where the bus was going, but if she could get to a train station, it would be an easy matter to get back to Paris — and Clark. Her heart pounded as she crossed the concrete, reverberating in her ears and stopping her from hearing any possible following footsteps.

She was nearly at the edge of the concrete apron when a hand clamped onto her upper arm and she felt the hard metal barrel of the pistol in the small of her back. Adrenaline flooded through her and she twisted in Luthor's grasp, intending to use her taekwondo training to break his grip. But he was ready for her move, jamming the butt of the pistol into her side, causing her to double over and hiss in pain. He half carried, half dragged her back to the car, shoving her back into the passenger seat and backhanding her across the face for good measure. The blow half-stunned and blinded her, making it impossible to resist as Luthor reached into the back seat and retrieved a coil of rope, tying her feet together and using the free end to bind her hands.

"I warned you what would happen," he hissed in her ear. "You are mine, Lois, and you can't get away. Even that pathetic, overgrown boy scout can't change that." He pushed her back into the seat before rounding the car and climbing back into the driver's seat himself.

Nemours, Auxerre, Sauvigny-le-Bois ... as the towns rolled by without a sign of his powers returning, Clark became more and more anxious. A showdown with Luthor was inevitable — had been building almost as long as Clark had been Superman. Clark had thought it was all over when Luthor had died, but his return from the dead and subsequent imprisonment had just deferred it. It had to end this time, one way or another, and Clark wanted to be in full possession of his faculties.

Being without his powers was a curious sensation. Without his usual heightened senses, the world seemed dumbed down and muffled, like he was moving through fog. He assumed that this was how normal people experienced the world. Every so often on his dash across France, he tested his powers, trying to look through the dashboard of the car ... and failing. Paradoxically, he began to worry that his attempts to test his powers were draining the tiny reserves that he was trying to build.

He'd deliberately changed into the most skin-exposing clothing he could find — a sleeveless tee shirt and a pair of mesh basketball shorts — and rolled down the remaining front window to try and maximise the amount of sunlight he received. As he passed through Beaune, south of Dijon, he started being able to hear the radios in other people's cars. It was the first sign he'd had of his powers returning and he sighed in relief. Some of the tension left his frame.

By the time he got to Macon, he felt strong enough to fly. Momentarily he considered turning in the rental car there and flying the rest of the way, but instead decided to conserve his energy and return it at the next town.

Bourg-en-Bresse wasn't a particularly large city. It was an easy matter to track down the rental car agency and pay for the car — and the window repair. Then he found a deserted spot and took to the sky.

Clark flew high over the main road between Geneva and Chamonix, scanning frantically for traces of Lois and Luthor. The road was practically deserted; so far he'd only seen two vehicles since leaving Geneva, and he was starting to worry that he'd missed them.

Then, just shy of Oex, as the road curved a little, he spotted them.

Lois was in the passenger seat, her hands and feet bound. As he dipped lower, Clark could see the right hand side of her face was swelling and turning purple.

For all that Lex Luthor had threatened Lois and kidnapped Lois, this was the first time he'd deliberately physically hurt her. Fury seized Clark.

He swooped down and grabbed the car's rear bumper, planting his feet and stopping it close to instantly. Then he strode to the driver's side. Angry and impatient, he ripped the driver's door off its hinges, reaching in to grab Luthor by his collar.

Luthor was ready for him.

As Clark reached into the vehicle, Luthor pulled a small box out of his pocket and flipped it open. Clark saw the sickly glow of Kryptonite at the same time that the all too familiar wave of pain rolled over him.

Luthor smirked evilly, then followed it with a ferocious kick to the stomach that left Clark sprawling on the gravel shoulder, close to the edge of a sheer drop.

Before he could shake it off and stand, Luthor was looming over him. He aimed another kick at Clark's side, shoving him across the sharp edged gravel. Clark felt the Suit tear and the gravel cut into the bare skin of his side. He rolled, grabbing at Luthor's legs and yanking him off balance. One of Luthor's elbows caught him across the face as he fell. Still clutching the Kryptonite despite the fall, Luthor reached over and pressed the toxic green crystal into the oozing graze on Clark's side.

Clark jerked as the Kryptonite burned him, trying to push the lump of rock away. Finally Luthor withdrew it as he stood, but the pain only lessened slightly. Clark clutched at the burn, feeling the pain searing its way along his nerve endings, radiating out from his side and making it hard to breathe.

Dimly he was aware of Luthor standing over him again.

"You'll never win, Superman." Luthor gloated. "You've been a worthy adversary, but all good things must come to an end."

He drew his leg back.

As Luthor's boot connected with Clark's side, he felt — and heard — his ribs shatter. The excruciating pain from the Kryptonite burn intensified and he screamed. Struggling to draw breath, his head dropped to the ground.

"Goodbye, freak."

He felt rather than saw the kick aimed for him, one that would push him over the edge of the cliff face. With a superhuman effort, he rolled at the last second.

The momentum of the vicious kick missing caught Luthor off guard. Unable to get his balance back, he pitched forward over the sheer drop ahead.

Clark made one wild grab at the falling man and missed, the pain of his action causing him to curl into an agonised ball.

Lois heard the kick impact and Clark's scream. She struggled free of the last of the ropes and rounded the trunk of the car just in time to see Clark curl up, the red of his cape bunched up behind him. Of Luthor, there was no sign. She rushed to where Clark lay, dropping to her knees beside him. His eye was beginning to swell shut, his face was grey and his breath was short and painful sounding — but he was alive. She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Superman?"

"Couldn't — save — him," he panted, each word clipped and strained.

“Where is he?”

“Over — cliff.”

Lois walked slowly to the edge, dreading what she’d find. Hundreds of feet below she could see a broken figure on the jagged rocks — and felt a huge sense of relief.

It was over. Lex Luthor would never return to blight their lives.

She turned away and saw a glint of green. Picking up the sickly glowing crystal, she turned it over in her hands. It seemed almost inconceivable that such a small piece of rock could wreak so much damage on a being as powerful as Clark. She had to get it away from him.

Lois went back to the car and retrieved the box Luthor had kept it in. Inspecting it, she realised it was lead-lined, explaining why Clark hadn’t known Luthor had the chunk of Kryptonite. She put the rock back in the box and made sure it was closed securely, stuffing it in the glove compartment for safe keeping.

Then she returned to Clark’s side.

“He’s dead,” she said briefly.

Clark seemed to be breathing a little easier.

“Tried to save him.”

She smoothed his hair back. “I know.” She paused. “Where are you hurt?”

“Ribs. Think they’re broken.”

She sat next to him for a few minutes, holding his hand and listening as his breathing eased a little. Finally she broke the silence.

“Do you think you can walk? Just to the car?” she asked.

He nodded, then slowly, laboriously pulled himself to his feet. When he was standing, Lois was appalled to see the horrible greyish tinge had returned to his face.

“Are you okay?”

“Just — give me a minute.”

She stood next to him, letting him lean on her shoulder for the short distance to the car, then helped him clamber into the passenger seat.

Lois slid into the driver’s seat and looked at Clark worriedly. He was leaning back against the headrest like he had no strength left, his brow deeply furrowed with pain.

“We need to get you to a hospital.”

“No!”

The vehement exclamation was followed by a groan. She glanced at him, seeing the beads of sweat collecting on his forehead. “Clark —”

“No hospital,” he repeated. “All I need is —”

Lois cut him off in frustration. “Time and sunlight. I know.”

She put the car into gear and turned it around, heading back towards Paris.

The first thing they had to do, Lois decided, was to get rid of this car. Not only was it extremely uncomfortable, but the missing driver’s door would attract attention — and with an injured Superman in the passenger seat, attention was the last thing she wanted.

She glanced sideways. His brow was deeply furrowed with pain, and every time she hit a bump, he grimaced.

“Clark? Are you sure you don’t want to go to the hospital? You could have internal injuries —”

He shook his head slightly. “I can’t risk it.”

“You went when Diana Stride poisoned you,” she pointed out. She’d always remember the horror of finding out that he’d been rushed to the hospital, close to death. While she knew he wasn’t, he’d always seemed indestructible. And if she and Clark hadn’t been fighting at the time, she might have found him earlier. As it was, it had been a close run thing.

“Had to.” He looked over at her. “I was dying then. I’m not now.”

“Fine.” She gave up. He had that stubborn, set look on his face that she’d seen a few times before, and she knew that there was no way of changing his mind. She switched the subject.

“Where can we rent a car?”

“Bourg-en-Bresse. But what are we going —” he winced as the car hit another bump “to do with this one? It’s evidence.”

“Oh.” She hadn’t thought of that aspect. “Long term parking lot? If we keep driving this, we’re going to be noticed.”

When he didn’t reply, she looked over at him.

“Clark?”

“It’s all such a mess,” Clark replied. “Henri is dead, Luthor is dead, I’m injured ... and right now, I really wish I hadn’t ripped that door off. Plus ... I’m supposed to be in Vienna.” He took as deep a breath as his injured ribs would allow. “I think we need to go to the police.” He paused, thinking rapidly. Walking into a police station dressed as Superman right now would invite more questions than he was comfortable with. Plus he didn’t know the local force, had no idea if they could be trusted. “No, you’re right,” he said slowly. “We’ll find a long term parking garage, one that’s secure, and rent another car. But first I need a change of clothes ...”

He was taken by surprise as she suddenly veered off the road and into a roadside rest area. She brought the car to a stop while he was still trying not to groan from the pain the unexpected movement caused.

“What are you thinking, Clark?”

“Okay. The way I see it, we have to go to the police. We don’t have a choice. I left Henri in the container yard in Paris, and he’s probably been found by now. The Kryptonite is still there as well. We left Luthor dead halfway down a mountain, and we have the gun with Luthor’s prints, the one that he used to kill Henri. But if we go into the local police station, I don’t think they’ll believe us. No one knows that Luthor escaped from Stryker’s Island. I only knew because I called Henderson and asked him.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“I need to call Henderson. He’s in charge of the Luthor investigation, and I told him Luthor was in Paris. Plus ... he’s the only cop I trust with the Kryptonite.”

“Henderson knows about Kryptonite?”

“Yeah.” The laconic detective had surprised Clark by searching him out the day after Lois’s aborted wedding and asking him to contact Superman. At the arranged meeting later that night, Henderson had shocked Clark even more by disclosing that he’d disposed of the cage from Luthor’s wine cellar and arranged for the Kryptonite power source to be stored in STAR Labs secure vault. Clark hadn’t yet regained his powers, and while Henderson had never outright mentioned that he knew of the crystal’s effects, the knowing look he’d given Clark had spoken volumes.

“He got rid of Luthor’s Kryptonite cage,” Clark explained.

“Oh.”

“So if Superman calls Henderson and tells him everything that happened —”

“Then we know it’ll be investigated properly,” she finished for him.

“Yeah.” He sighed. “Then this really will all be over.”

His heart sank as he said it. Getting the story usually gave him a feeling of triumph, but not this time. While it was a relief to know that they’d never have to worry about Luthor again, once the story was written Lois would go back to Metropolis. Granted, he could fly to Metropolis as often as possible, but he didn’t even know if that’s what she wanted. If it was, how long would it last? Relationships were difficult enough with the added complications of his double life and living on two different continents. They had to talk about this ... but not now. Not while they were still trying to get back to Paris, while she was still recovering from being kidnapped ... while he was barely able to walk.

Lois broke the silence that had settled over the car since their conversation before Geneva, almost an hour before. She'd thought that Clark had fallen asleep, but when she checked on him he was staring out the window, apparently lost in thought.

"Clark?"

He turned and smiled at her, but the smile didn't reach his eyes.

"Yeah Lois?"

"We're coming into Bourg-en-Bresse. Where do we go?"

"The train station."

He helped her translate the various road signs as they drove into the township, directing her to pull up at a small shopping complex before they got to the station. She gave him a questioning look.

"Why do I get the feeling you've been here before?"

"Earlier today. I turned in your rental car at the train station."

He gave her his cash card and told her his PIN, the sign of trust leaving her unexpectedly touched.

She went into the small discount department store at the back of the complex, veering towards the men's section. It was a simple matter to find a pair of sweats that looked like they'd fit Clark, but she hesitated when it came to choosing a top. She reached for a sweater, then changed her mind. She'd injured her ribs herself a few years ago, and she vividly remembered how painful it was to try and raise her arms over her head. Instead of the basic sweater, she grabbed one that zipped up the front instead. Reaching the checkout, she quickly paid for the clothes. On the way back to the car, she detoured into the drug store she'd noticed on the way in. There, she added a small first aid kit and a roll of wide strapping tape to her purchases.

Back at the car, she kept a lookout while Clark struggled into the new clothing, cringing in sympathy with his muffled groans. When he was done, she gave him a hand to tuck his cape up so it wasn't obvious. Then, forcing a brightness into her tone that she didn't feel, she turned to him and asked. "So, which way to the train station?"

It was a simple matter to find the station, park the car in the long term lot in an inconspicuous space, then make their way into the terminal itself. Clark checked the departures board, looking for the high speed service to Paris.

"Okay, we've got a choice. We can rent a car and drive to Paris, which would take about 4 hours. Or we can take the train, but that doesn't leave for another two hours."

Lois made a face. "Rent a car."

"Okay." He led the way towards the car rental companies, his injuries making his progress slow and painful.

Once there, Clark filled out the requisite paperwork, then he and Lois sat down to wait for the attendant to bring their car around.

He slipped his license and credit card back into his wallet before sitting down. "For someone that's supposed to be in Austria, I sure am making a lot of purchases in France," he commented.

She grabbed his arm. "Clark, that's it! That's how we explain why you left Vienna!"

"You lost me."

"When you came looking for me, you saw Joe Patterson right?"

"Superman did."

"What'd Superman tell him?"

"That there'd been a threat against you. Why?"

"What if we tell Henderson that you were Superman's source? He could've brought you to Paris to help look for me ..."

"And when Luthor took off, I followed to try and get you back ..." Clark continued.

"Exactly."

"Lois, you're brilliant! Do you think Henderson will buy it?"

"Why not? It explains everything, and Henri and Lex can't deny it. Plus, didn't you say you spoke to Henderson before you left Vienna?"

Clark nodded, slightly in awe of her plan. It was deceptively simple, but it might just work. "I told him Luthor was in Paris."

"See? He can vouch for you."

Clark grinned at her.

"What?"

"Nothing ... Just ... I love you, Lois."

"I love you too."

The attendant cleared his throat to get their attention just then, breaking the tableau. Clark received the keys off the man, shooting him a quelling glance that wiped the knowing smile off the other man's face.

North of Beaune, Lois found a gas station complex similar to the one she and Luthor had stopped at earlier in the day. She found a parking spot and killed the engine, pointing out the payphones next to the building itself.

While Lois bought snacks, Clark made his way to the phones. Using his credit card, he placed an international call, dialling Henderson's direct number from memory. He waited through several rings then disconnected, placing another call to the precinct's front desk.

"I'd like to speak to Inspector Henderson, please."

The desk sergeant apologised. "He's in Paris at the moment."

"I see. Do you have a number I can reach him on? It's urgent."

He listened, memorising a number he recognised as a French cell phone number, repeating it back to the sergeant before disconnecting and dialling the number he'd just been given.

"Henderson."

"Bill? It's Superman."

"Superman. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I have a location for you — of Lex Luthor's body."

"Body? He's dead? Where?"

"Off the side of a mountain pass." Clark gave Henderson the exact location.

"Can you show me where?"

"Not for a few days," Clark admitted ruefully.

"Another cage job?"

"Similar," Clark allowed. "His car is at the train station at Bourg-en-Bresse. I'll be back in Paris later tonight, so I'll come give you my statement early tomorrow. Lois Lane and Clark Kent will too."

"I should've known they'd be wrapped up in this," Henderson observed. "Oh, an interesting coincidence. A man was found dead this afternoon in a container yard. Nearby, the local force found a green rock wrapped in what looks like lead foil."

"No coincidence, Bill. I'll explain it all in person."

"I'm sure you will. Oh, and Superman? Tell Lane that the local force had a report today of someone being held against their will in a car near Dijon. Description matches her and Luthor."

"Thanks Bill. I'll tell her."

"Don't worry about the rock. I'll take care of it."

With another murmured thanks, Clark broke the connection and went back to the car.

"Well? What did he say?" Lois demanded.

"They've found Henri. We've got to go in tomorrow and make a statement. Oh, and someone reported seeing you and Luthor near Dijon."

Lois brushed that aside.

"What about the Kryptonite?"

"Henderson's taking care of it."

As they drove, they discussed various aspects of the stories

they had to write about the art theft investigation and now, the kidnapping. But as the miles passed, Clark began to shift around in his seat more frequently, like he couldn't get comfortable.

Finally, Lois asked, "How are you feeling?"

"No worse." He reached out and gently ran one finger down her bruised and puffy cheek. "I'm sorry I couldn't protect you."

The tenderness and regret in his tone was her undoing.

"Oh Clark ... What about me? I didn't exactly do a good job of protecting you back in that shipping container. The whole time you were fighting Lex, I just stood there. I — I froze. Years of taekwondo training and I didn't help you when it really mattered." She heard her voice rising with mounting hysteria but couldn't seem to stop herself. "Some brown belt I am."

"Pull over," Clark ordered.

She obeyed without questioning, trying to quell the sob that was threatening to choke her.

Before she realised he'd left the car, her door opened and he reached for her, half lifting her out of the vehicle.

She clung to him, sobbing into his shoulder from the fear and anxiety of the past two days. He held her close, rubbing one hand up and down her back soothingly. When she was calmer and her trembling had eased, he loosened his grip.

"You can't blame yourself for Luthor's actions, Lois. None of this was your fault. The only person at fault was Luthor himself." He smiled at her. "I could have stopped things from getting this far if I'd just x-rayed that shipping container instead of bursting in like a 500 pound gorilla."

She gave a watery chuckle and wiped her eyes.

"Feel better?"

"A little."

"Good. How 'bout I drive for a while?"

She agreed and they climbed back into the car. Before starting the engine and pulling back onto the highway, Clark reached over and took her hand.

Night had fallen by the time they made it back to Paris. Clark navigated through the darkened streets, occasionally glancing at Lois where she slept in the passenger seat. The fatigue and stress of the last two days had caught up with her not long after they'd changed drivers and she'd drifted off still holding his hand.

He smiled tenderly at her. Things had never gone easily for them. Instead of just being able to spend time together exploring the new depths of their relationship, she'd been kidnapped by a madman. She'd been so strong through the whole ordeal, more concerned about him than what she'd been through. Well, it was almost over now.

She shifted in her seat and opened her eyes, blinking to clear them.

"Where are we?" she asked drowsily.

"Paris. We're almost back at your hotel."

She sat up straight.

"My hotel? No."

Clark raised one eyebrow. "No?"

"No. Look, have you ever broken ribs before? Because I have. You're going to need help getting the Suit off —" he opened his mouth to comment and she shot him a look that was clearly visible even in the glow of the streetlights "— and you're going to need help strapping your ribs. You won't go to the hospital, so you're stuck with me doing it. Then I'll take a cab back to the hotel, but not before."

It was hard to argue with her logic. At the next intersection, he turned back towards his apartment.

Finding a parking spot in front of his apartment building, he turned off the engine and slid awkwardly out of the driver's seat. The long drive had stiffened the abused muscles of his side, and the sudden movement changed the dull soreness of his ribs back into a grinding ache. The pain took him by surprise and he

grabbed at the roof of the car.

Lois must have heard the exclamation he'd tried to muffle because suddenly she was at his side. Gratefully he leaned on her shoulder for the short walk up the stairs and into the elevator.

Once they'd made it into the apartment, Clark sank down on the end of the bed.

"Tired?" Lois asked.

"Yeah," he admitted.

She sat down beside him and patted him on the leg. "Come on. You'll feel better once your ribs are strapped, and then you can go to bed."

Grumbling, he stood up and headed to the tiny bathroom. Unzipping the light sweater she'd bought for him, he dropped it on the floor and caught sight of himself in the mirror.

His hair was standing up every which way; one eye was puffy and red, and the other had a big dark circle underneath it. He snorted mentally at his reflection. Even if he'd gone without his glasses, there was no way anyone would connect him with Superman, looking like this.

Reaching around with his good arm, he tried to grab the tab on the end of the zipper that held the upper part of the Suit closed. All the muscles around his injured side protested and it felt like his ribs were being pulled apart. He let out his breath in a pain-filled hiss, then tried again. This time was even worse; on top of the pain from his ribs, it felt like the skin over the Kryptonite burn separated. Admitting defeat, he called out for Lois.

She entered the bathroom, a questioning look on her face.

"I can't get the Suit off," he admitted softly.

"Okay. How -?"

"There's a zipper. In the back, under the cape."

That horrible greyish pallor was back, Lois noted. Clark's attempt to get the Suit off must have hurt him more than he was admitting. Carefully, she gathered the long cape up and slung it over his good shoulder so she could get to the zipper. Someone, probably Martha, had put an extra-long tab on the fastener to make it easier to grab. Funny, but in all of her fantasies about Superman in the beginning, it had never occurred to her to wonder exactly how he got the Suit on and off. She undid the zipper to its full length, exposing the firmly muscled planes of his back. She swallowed hard, stepping back and telling herself to maintain her composure. She was incredibly attracted to him, yes, but now was not the time.

"Can you get your arms out?" she asked, pleased that her voice remained steady. She watched his shoulders bunch as he pulled one arm out of the tight sleeve. He went to move the other arm, and winced.

"Not without it hurting, huh?"

She hadn't noticed the tear in the Spandex near his belt before this, but now that she'd spotted it she had an idea.

"Clark? This Suit is a write-off, isn't it?" Surely it was; Superman couldn't be seen in patched Spandex.

"Yeah, why?"

"Have you got a pair of scissors?"

"In the drawer in the kitchen."

It only took a few moments to cross the apartment and find the scissors, then return to the bathroom. Carefully, she slid one blade of the scissors under the end of the zipper, freezing when he flinched.

"Did I cut you?"

"No ... the scissors are just cold."

"Oh." She snipped through the zipper, cutting the Spandex to just above his belt.

"Turn around."

He stood up and faced her. As gently as she could, she pulled the Spandex down his arm and off his chest, pausing to carefully peel the torn area away from the wound low on his side, forcing

herself to concentrate only on the job at hand and not on his muscular chest.

Once she'd exposed his injured side, all thoughts of attraction vanished and she gasped. One side of his chest was covered in a massive bruise that spread almost the entire length of his ribcage. Superimposed on the livid reds, purples and bluish-blacks was a bootprint, its details so deeply impressed on his flesh that she could see the pattern of the tread. Below the enormous bruise, there was an area of red and blistered skin that looked almost like - She looked up at him, shocked.

"It's a burn. From the Kryptonite," he explained.

"It burns you?"

"Among other things."

Shaking her head, Lois went back out into the main area of the apartment and retrieved the first aid supplies she'd bought before going back into the bathroom. She opened the kit and examined its contents. She wasn't entirely sure how to deal with the burn; covering it with one of the large gauze pads was going to have to do.

She snapped the tip off one of the small tubes of saline solution from the kit.

"This is going to hurt," she warned Clark before squeezing the liquid over the burned area.

He jerked, his muscles tensing as the fluid stung the wound.

"Oh Clark, I'm sorry, but I had to clean it."

"S'ok," he told her.

She ripped open one of the gauze dressings and taped it over the burn. Then she turned her attention to his chest. She cut long strips of the strapping tape and wrapped them around his side, helping to support his damaged ribs. Smoothing the last piece into place, she stepped back.

"There. How does that feel?"

He took an experimental breath. "Much better." He caught her hand as she went to leave him in privacy. "Thank you, Lois."

She smiled at him and left the room.

Lois occupied herself by inspecting Clark's apartment more closely. The more she saw of it, the more she understood why he spent so much time away. Shaking her head, she examined the window. From the angle, she wasn't sure whether or not the apartment ever got direct sunlight.

The bathroom door clicked and she turned her head. Clark walked out, wearing nothing but the sweatpants she'd bought him.

"Does this place ever get sunlight?"

"Some. Early in the morning." He started piling pillows up on one side of the bed, creating a prop, then gingerly settled himself against it. Lois came over and sat down beside him.

"How long until your powers come back?"

"After two exposures in two days?" He thought for a moment. "Maybe tomorrow. Probably the day after." He shifted into a more comfortable position, then sighed. "Busy day tomorrow."

Lois could see he was close to falling asleep. She stood up. "I should go," she told him softly. Leaning over him, she kissed him lightly. "Goodnight Clark."

He reached out and caught her hand.

"Stay."

"Clark. You need to sleep."

"I know, and I will. But I'll sleep better if I know you're safe."

She wavered, torn between wanting to stay with him and wanting to make sure he got the rest he needed to heal.

"Please, Lois?"

The appeal in his voice got to her.

"Okay."

The smile he gave her was full of relief. "There's sweats in the bottom drawer."

She found a pair of pants with a drawstring she could cinch in to fit her narrow waist and a sweater, then ducked into the

bathroom to change. When she came out, the apartment was dark except for the lamp on the nightstand and Clark was half asleep on top of the covers. She slid under the covers next to him and he turned out the light.

Lois awoke, disoriented. For a moment, she couldn't remember where she was or how she'd gotten there. Then she recognised the quilt that was covering her; it had been on Clark's bed as long as she'd known him. In fact, from its general appearance she was willing to bet that Martha had made it to cover Clark's bed when he still lived in Smallville.

Memory of the night before came flooding back and she smiled. She'd slept in Clark's bed before but never with him in it. Ever the gentleman, he'd slept on top of the covers but his presence had been comforting nonetheless.

A muffled mild curse from the kitchenette turned her smile into a grin. So, even Superman cursed sometimes. She slid out of the bed and padded into the kitchenette.

Clark was sitting at the counter, pen in hand, surrounded by screwed up balls of paper.

"Clark? What's wrong?"

He turned at the sound of her voice. One eye was still puffy and the skin around it had gone a sickly greenish purple.

"Morning." His welcoming smile was replaced by an anxious look. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

She shook her head, trying to suppress a yawn.

"There's coffee." He pointed to the coffeepot that sat next to the sink. She poured herself a cup, adding the low fat creamer and sugar substitute she preferred. Knowing he liked his coffee with milk and real sugar, she doubted he kept the brands she liked as a matter of course. He must have gone out early today and bought them. It was a typically 'Clark' gesture.

She studied him as she took a first, cautious sip of her coffee. From the way he was holding himself, she could tell his ribs were hurting. He'd taken the time to dress for work, though his jacket was draped over the back of the stool he was sitting on, and his still damp hair was standing on end like he'd dragged his hand through it. As she watched, he did just that.

"What's all this?" She gestured to the scattered balls of paper.

He put down the pen he was holding. "Trying to write a statement for Henderson. Superman certainly isn't going anywhere today. Not like this."

She nodded. Superman couldn't be seen with a black eye; if anyone saw both Clark and Superman with black eyes, it would be much too easy for someone to connect the two. He could at least attempt to hide the current lack of his powers, but a black eye was too distinctive. Putting her cup down on the counter, she leaned over Clark's shoulder to read what he'd written. She made a face.

"I know, it's too formal."

"Yeah, but that's a good thing."

He gave her a look.

"When you're being Superman, you speak more formally," she pointed out. "You don't sound like Clark. This — this sounds like Superman. Although" she continued thoughtfully "can you type this out or something? Your handwriting is too similar."

"Henderson's seen Superman's handwriting before."

"Yeah, but side-by-side with Clark's?"

He rose awkwardly. "You're right."

"Feeling better?"

"Better than yesterday." He went over and started rifling through the closet, finally extracting an old laptop and printer. "Got it."

Lois looked at it dubiously. "Does that thing still work?"

"Sure."

With Superman's statement typed up, signed and sealed in a large envelope, Lois and Clark detoured past Lois's hotel room for

her to shower and change before arriving at the precinct where, with the cooperation of the Surete Nationale, Inspector Henderson had set up temporary headquarters. There, they gave their statements separately to an English-speaking officer before sitting down to wait for Henderson.

Finally, they were ushered into the office that Henderson had commandeered for his own use.

The laconic detective was sitting behind a cheap wooden desk, his usual non-committal expression in place.

“Lane. Kent. Even on another continent, I still come across you two.”

“If it wasn’t for us, you wouldn’t be here,” Lois pointed out. Clark hid a smile. On the surface, Lois’s relationship with William Henderson was barely civil, but he knew that sniping at each other was a cover for the grudging respect that existed between them. It was when they started being nice to each other that he, Clark, started to worry.

“I’ve got a few questions for you.”

Clark nodded. “Before we start, this was slipped under my door overnight.” He handed Henderson the envelope containing Superman’s statement. Henderson took it, turning it over and checking the seal.

“Where did he go?”

Clark shrugged, preferring not to say anything and thus lie directly to the police.

Henderson gave him a penetrating look, then laid the envelope aside, still unopened. He picked up a notepad and pen.

“So how did you two get caught up in all of this? Particularly you, Lane?”

Seated in front of Henderson’s desk, Lois and Clark exchanged glances.

“Clark stumbled onto the art treasures from Metropolis going missing and called me in,” Lois explained. “I wrote the original story, you see.”

“Uh huh. So you just happened to be in Paris. How did you run across Luthor?”

“Luthor was behind the art thefts,” Clark spoke up. “We found two separate connections — one here and one in Austria. That’s when I called you, Bill. I told Superman and we came to Paris, looking for Lois. By the time we found her, it was too late — Luthor had her. He trapped us too.”

“So he held all three of you hostage?” Henderson looked up from his notes. “Then what happened?”

Lois took up the story. “The next day, Luthor came back. He took me —”

“How —”

Clark cut Henderson off. “Henri held a gun to her head,” he said bitterly.

“So who shot Michaud?”

“Michaud?” Clark queried.

“The dead guy was a Henri Michaud. Muscle for hire. Got a rap sheet as long as my arm.”

“Luthor shot him, for threatening Lois. Then he took off, with Lois.”

“Why didn’t you or Superman report Henri’s death, Kent?”

“Come on, Henderson —” Lois started.

Clark broke in heatedly. “You know as well as I do that if we’d reported his death we would’ve spent hours being questioned. Meanwhile, Luthor had Lois and was getting further away from Paris. Even if we had reported it and let the police search for Lois, we had no idea what kind of car they were in and only a general idea of where they were headed. Would you have let someone kidnap your partner?”

Henderson raised an eyebrow at Clark’s uncharacteristic loss of temper.

“Cool it, Kent. I had to ask.”

In a clipped voice Clark continued. “We caught up to them on

the road between Geneva and Chamonix. There was a struggle; Luthor tried to push Superman over the cliff and lost his balance.”

“Now you tell us something,” Lois put in. “How come we weren’t warned that Lex was out of prison?”

She was startled by the grim expression that came over the dour inspector’s face. “Off the record? The two reporters exchanged glances, then agreed. “We didn’t know. You know the prison on Strykers Island was privatised early this year.”

Lois nodded — she’d written a small piece about it.

“One day there was a fire in the cell Luthor shared with three other inmates, and a prisoner was killed. The other three were accounted for, so the security company made sure the general descriptions matched and wrote Luthor off as dead. It was three days later before anyone thought to compare dental records and two weeks after that before the security company notified Metropolis PD. First we heard of it was the day you called, Clark.”

“Who was killed?”

“One of the firefighters. A Justin Vermeer.”

“So what’s happening with the security company?” Lois asked.

“Their contract is being reviewed.”

Henderson flipped the notepad he’d been using closed and stood up, offering his hand over the desk.

“Thanks for coming in. Oh, and one more thing. When you see Superman, tell him I took care of the rocks.”

They prepared to leave.

Clark paused at the door. “The missing artworks... You might want to check the container yard. It’s registered to Carlin Imports.” Henderson raised an eyebrow in query. “Luthor’s ex-wife, the one that tried to frame Lois? Her name was Ariana Carlin.”

“What does Henderson do with it?” Lois asked once they were safely back in the rental car.

Lost in his own thoughts, Clark didn’t reply.

“Earth to Clark.” Lois sounded amused. “What does Henderson do with the Kryptonite?”

“Oh. He sends it to Dr Klein at STAR Labs. The other piece he sent is in their high-security vault,” Clark replied absently.

Lois put her hand on his arm, stopping him from pulling away from the kerb. “Clark, what is it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Something’s bothering you, I can tell. You lost your temper with Henderson back there, which is not like you, and now you don’t seem worried about what happens with the Kryptonite.” She paused. “Is it Lex? I know you tried to save him —”

“That’s not it.” He sighed. “Okay, that’s part of it. I’ve missed rescues before, Lois. And it’s always ... hard. I hate seeing people die and I always end up second guessing myself. Could I have saved them if I’d been just a second faster, or done something just a little bit differently? I know I can’t save everybody. You taught me that.” He gave her the ghost of a smile. “But still ... it’s not easy.” He swallowed against the memories of the plane crash he’d covered in Brussels just before Lois came to Paris, the pitiful, broken bodies tumbled on the hillside ... “It’s different this time. I’m ... not sorry he’s dead.”

He hated admitting that to Lois. Although he’d never understood why, Lex Luthor was someone that she’d once cared for enough to marry, and the last thing he wanted to do was cause her pain.

She snorted, taking him aback. “I’m not sorry he’s dead either.” She saw the surprise on his face. “Clark, he kidnapped you and almost killed you, twice. He kidnapped me. If you hadn’t come, he would’ve locked me away.”

“I would have found you,” Clark stated. He would’ve searched nonstop until he did.

“I know, but what would he have done in the meantime?” He

saw a shudder run through her petite frame and wondered what Luthor had threatened her with. Luthor's controlling tendencies had been strong two years ago and had developed into full-blown obsession since then.

"Plus he's destroyed countless lives. No, I'm not sorry he's dead, Clark. I'm glad."

He grinned at her, oddly relieved that he wasn't the only one feeling the same way.

"Come on, partner. We've got a story to write."

Joe Patterson was worried.

It had been two days since Superman's surprise visit to the Planet offices. Two days without any reported sightings of the superhero — Joe had been surreptitiously checking the wires, just in case. And two days since anyone had heard from Lois Lane. Anxiously he picked at his bottom lip in a nervous habit he'd had from childhood. He was going to have to call Perry White and tell him that he'd lost Perry's best reporter, a duty that Joe didn't relish in the slightest.

As if those two circumstances weren't enough, Clark Kent had gone AWOL from Vienna and no one had seen any trace of him either. His disappearance didn't tally with what Joe knew of the younger man. Granted, he'd only known Kent for six months or so but in that time he'd proven himself to be extremely conscientious.

Joe sighed as the elevator jerked to a stop. He'd have to call Kent's parents too.

Lost in his depressing thoughts, Joe stepped out when the elevator doors opened ... and stopped.

Seated at one of the correspondent's desks, Clark leaning over her shoulder, was Lois Lane.

Joe stared for a moment, then rushed towards them.

"Clark! Lois! Where have you two been?!" he exclaimed.

Clark straightened up slowly and looked at his editor at the same time as Lois spun her chair towards him. Joe did a double take at Clark's black eye and the bruise that was discolouring Lois's cheek.

"What happened to you two?" he asked, shocked.

"We were kidnapped, Joe," Clark explained.

"So Superman was right! What happened?"

Clark looked around, spotting the small knot of people that was edging closer while trying to appear studiously casual.

"Can we talk about this in your office?"

Joe watched them as they settled into the chairs in front of his desk, noting Clark's careful movements and barely concealed wince as he lowered himself onto his seat.

"You sure you should be here? You look a little worse for wear."

"It's nothing ... some bruising," Clark explained.

Lois snorted but didn't comment.

Joe didn't push the issue, depending instead on his reporter's own assessment of his ability to work.

"Mind telling me what happened?"

Lois and Clark exchanged a look that he couldn't quite decipher before launching into a retelling of everything that had happened in the previous two days.

"So then we rented a car and came back to Paris," Clark finished a few minutes later.

"Uh huh." Joe leaned forward in his chair, planting his elbows on the desk. "Anything else you want to tell me?"

Clark shot another glance at Lois before replying with a completely straight face. "Like what, Joe?"

Privately Joe applauded the younger man for his ability and determination not to let a secret slip. He suspected that Clark Kent was in fact hiding more than most people, but in this instance he needed to clear the air.

Lowering his voice, he explained. "I know about Kryptonite."

"What do you know?" Lois asked.

"That it exists. And what it does to Superman."

"You do?"

"Yes. And from Superman's ... absence ... from your story, I'm guessing that Luthor had some."

Again the reporters exchanged looks, and Joe found himself wondering how Perry White dealt with their evident ability to communicate without letting anyone else know what they were thinking.

"Yes, he had it." Lois finally admitted.

"And you want me to leave that part out?" Joe asked. "Why do I get the feeling that this isn't the first time you two have left it out of a story?" He paused. "On second thoughts, I don't think I want to hear the answer to that. You two were part of this; are you going to be okay to write the story?"

Clark and Lois nodded in unison.

"Okay. Get going." He gestured for them to leave his office and picked up the mock-up of the afternoon edition's front page that he'd been working on before he'd gone out for coffee. Thinking better of it, he dropped the mock-up again and picked up the phone. For a story like this, he was going to need more advertising.

Lois yawned and stretched muscles cramped from being at the computer for hours.

"It's getting late," Clark observed. "Are you almost done?"

She held up one finger, stalling him while she put the finishing touches on the story. With a triumphant expression, she hit 'save' and sent it to Joe for editing. Clark suppressed a grin and held out her coat.

"Come on."

She looked up in surprise. "Clark, we don't have time —"

"Lois. We've had two front page stories in as many editions and you just sent the third one to Joe. In case you haven't noticed, it's night time out there. I think we could both use a break." Persuasively, he added "And you haven't seen much of Paris..."

She stood and allowed him to help her into her coat. "So, where are we going?"

"You'll see."

As they got out of the cab midway along the Champ de Mars, Lois looked around her in wonder. At night, the gardens were lit and the overall effect was incredibly beautiful. Then Clark touched her gently on the arm and pointed. Lois turned — and gasped.

At the river end of the Champ de Mars, the Eiffel Tower rose over the city. At this hour, the gracefull tower was brightly but tastefully lit, illuminating the iron latticework.

"No visit to Paris is complete without visiting the Eiffel Tower," Clark told her.

She slid her hand into his. "It's incredible," she breathed.

"This is one of my favourite places in Paris," he explained.

They walked up the green expanse of the Champ de Mars towards the famous tower and stopped near one of its legs.

"Can we go up? Or is it too late?" Lois asked.

Clark grinned and produced two tickets from his pocket.

"So that's where you went earlier!"

Excitedly she grabbed his hand, leading him towards the tower entry.

Standing on the second level of the tower, gazing out at Paris, she leant back against him.

"Thank you for bringing me here, Clark."

"You're welcome, Lois." He wrapped one arm around her waist. "I just wish we had more time; I'd show you all my favourite places in Paris."

She sighed and turned away from the view, facing him. "What are we going to do, Clark? I go back to Metropolis in two days."

"I don't know," he said sadly. "I wish I could go with you —"

“Why can’t you?”

“I have responsibilities here, Lois. I can’t just walk away from my job —”

“You hate your job,” she pointed out.

“I don’t hate it. It’s not what I’d prefer to be doing, but I don’t hate it.”

“So where does that leave us?”

He reached out and cupped her face, stroking her cheek gently with his thumb. “I will be there as often as I can, Lois. So often you’ll probably get sick of me.”

“But not always,” she stated.

He let his hand drop. “No. At least, not yet.”

She shivered and turned away.

“I think I’d like to go back to my hotel now.”

“I told her I’d be there as often as I could.”

“But you didn’t say you’d move back to Metropolis.”

Disapproval coloured Martha Kent’s tone even through the phone line and Clark could almost picture the expression on his mom’s face. He paced backwards and forwards in the confines of his apartment.

“No. I didn’t know what else to say, Mom. I can’t promise her that I’ll move back to Metropolis. I’ve only been in Europe for six months, and I just don’t know if they’ll let me transfer again so soon.” He flopped down on the end of the bed, ignoring the twinge from his tightly strapped ribs.

“Have you asked, son?” Jonathan Kent wanted to know.

“No. At least, not yet. I haven’t exactly had time.”

“Then how do you know you can’t move back?”

“I don’t. Look, I’m going to talk to Joe about it tomorrow. I’ll call you tomorrow night.”

“Okay, son. Glad you’re all right.”

“Thanks, Dad. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, Clark.” Martha chimed in.

“Night Mom. Night Dad.”

Lois barely saw Clark the next day.

When she arrived at the Planet, there was a cup of steaming coffee and a chocolate croissant on her desk, along with a note saying he’d gone to help retrieve Luthor’s body. She winced at the inference that he’d have to recover the body personally, but took heart from the fact that his powers had apparently returned.

She settled into her chair and sipped at the coffee gratefully. Having coffee waiting for her when she got to work was something she’d missed in Clark’s absence ... and was something she’d have to go without when she went home. She sighed.

Intellectually she recognised the justice of Clark’s argument from the night before. He couldn’t just drop everything and return to Metropolis simply because she wanted him to. He had a job, commitments, a life, here in Europe. Was it selfish of her to want him to come back to Metropolis?

Maybe it was, but she loved him and wanted to be with him, not have him stuck in another country. And she dreaded returning to an existence that had become empty and achingly lonely. Even waking up by herself this morning had felt lonely. She snorted mentally. She’d spent almost every night of her twenty eight years alone by choice without feeling lonely in the least, but somehow that had changed after two nights spent with Clark — one of which had been spent on the hard floor of a shipping container.

Lois shook her head to clear it. She had a flight to Metropolis in the morning and these reflections weren’t helping to get the story written.

When Clark got back to the newsroom, he found Lois surrounded by piles of notes, concentrating on the computer screen to the exclusion of anything else, and approached her with trepidation. She’d been angry with him last night, and Lois

certainly knew how to hold a grudge.

She had a right to her anger, he acknowledged, and the coffee and pastry he’d left her this morning had been in the nature of a peace offering.

“Lois?”

She held up one finger without taking her eyes from the screen or stopping her typing. He waited, amused, recognising the signs of Lois Lane in full reporter mode.

Finally she came to the end of her paragraph and looked up, concern in her eyes.

“How was it?”

He shrugged, unwilling to put the experience into words. It wasn’t the first body recovery he’d performed, and it wasn’t the worst. Actually it had been better than most, as the cold of the alpine pass had helped slow the process of decomposition. Even so, when he’d gotten back to Paris he’d showered until the hot water had run out and he thought he could still smell a trace of the stench of death.

“Superman took Luthor’s body to the morgue in Chamonix. I got a statement from the police.” He half sat on her desk. “Maybe we can run it as a sidebar.” He paused. “Lois, about last night —”

“Clark! Call for you on line 2!” a copyboy called from across the bullpen.

He sighed, standing and picking up the phone. “Clark Kent.”

He listened for a minute, and then put the phone down.

“Henderson wants one of us at the container yard,” he told Lois.

“Go. I’m not finished here.”

“Are you sure?”

“Go.” She waved her hand in the general direction of the elevators.

Clark watched while Henderson and his team executed a search warrant on the Carlin Imports yard, using bolt cutters to break the locks on container after container and find ... nothing. As the calls of ‘vide!’ echoed through the yard, the expression on Henderson’s face became more and more closed off. Finally, the second to last container was opened and an excited babble broke out. Gesturing for Clark to follow him, Henderson broke through the line of French policemen to see what they’d found.

Several crates were stacked at one end of the container.

Henderson motioned for an officer to come forward with the pry bar he was holding and gently lever the lid off one of the wooden crates. The officer looked up and tersely nodded to Henderson.

“Come take a look,” Henderson invited.

Clark and Henderson stepped up into the container and looked into the crate.

“I’m no art expert, but that looks like the Mona Lisa to me,”

Henderson remarked.

After meeting with Henderson and his team, watching while they searched the Carlin Imports yard and finally getting the statements he needed to write the story when the missing artworks were uncovered, by the time Clark returned to the Planet, the sun was setting. The newsroom was almost empty, most of the day staff having left and the night staff not yet starting to arrive. There were a few exceptions, including Lois, who was still almost buried under piles of notes that seemed to have gotten even bigger in his absence. He gave her a quick wave before tapping on Joe’s office door.

“Joe? Do you have a minute?”

The editor dropped the pen he was holding and leaned back in his chair, swivelling it from side to side.

“Let me guess. You want a transfer back to Metropolis.”

The shock Clark felt must have shown on his face, because Joe continued. “I know you think I’m not as perceptive as Perry White.” He tilted his head in acknowledgement of his own limitations. “And maybe I’m not. But before I approved your

transfer to this bureau, I asked around about you. Everyone I asked gave me the same answer. Dedicated. Intelligent. A damn fine writer. Outgoing. Friendly.”

He paused. “You’re definitely dedicated. I’ve never had another reporter that needed so little time between assignments. I also agree with intelligent and you’re one helluva writer. But outgoing and friendly? I would’ve said civil and courteous at best.” He leaned forward. “Tell the truth, I thought you were running from something. And then Lois Lane arrived, and it was like someone turned on the lights.” He paused again. “Is this really what you want, Kent? You haven’t been here very long.”

“Yes, it is.”

Joe was quiet for a few moments, almost an eternity in Joe Patterson time.

“As much as I hate to see you go, I’ll approve your transfer back to Metropolis. But on two conditions. You have to get Perry White’s approval and I need you to go back to Vienna.”

Clark looked at him blankly.

“The summit? Remember? It’s got another three days to run.” He paused, considering. “Lois flies out tomorrow morning, right?”

Clark nodded.

“So, go see travel, book a flight back to Vienna for tomorrow.” He looked back down at the article he’d been editing when Clark entered, clearly dismissing Clark. He looked back up before Clark had a chance to leave. “And let me know how it goes with Perry White.”

“I will, Joe. And ... Thanks.”

Joe waved a hand, his attention firmly on the piece in front of him. As Clark closed the door, he saw Joe pick up his pen and cross out a few lines, muttering to himself.

Grinning happily, Clark threaded his way through the desks. Lois was typing rapidly, her brow furrowed in concentration.

“Lois. Lo-is.”

Finally he got her attention by putting his hand on her shoulder. She looked up abstractedly.

“Oh, you’re back. What did Henderson want?”

“Oh, nothing much. Just to give us the exclusive on the recovery of the missing artworks,” he said, not bothering to conceal the triumph he felt. He half sat on the edge of her desk. “How’s the story coming?”

“They found them? Where?”

“In the Carlin Imports yards, all crated up and ready to be shipped who-knows-where.” He paused, wanting to share what Joe had told him. “I wanted to tell you —”

He was interrupted by Joe himself coming out of his office.

“Lois! Clark! I need that piece on the retrieval of Luthor’s body in fifteen minutes!”

Clark slid off Lois’s desk. “Well, guess I’d better get to work.”

Clark settled behind the desk he’d been using and flicked back through his notes. On second thought, he decided not to tell Lois about Joe’s offer until he’d cleared things with Perry. The last thing he wanted to do was raise her hopes if Perry didn’t have a job for him after all. He’d call Perry as soon as he got a chance, but right now, he had articles to write. Glancing around, he checked that no one was watching and shifted into super-speed, working at the absolute limit of what the computer’s processor and the keyboard could handle. He’d burnt out more than one computer over the years, trying to rush things.

The sidebar Joe had requested was quickly finished and he was deep into the exclusive Henderson had given them when he felt a touch on his shoulder. He sat back in his chair.

“What do you think?”

Lois leaned over his shoulder and scanned the article.

“How did you get this done so fast?” She was silent for a beat, obviously rethinking what she’d said. Quietly, she went on “You use your super-speed here? Aren’t you afraid you’re going to get caught?”

He opened his mouth to answer, but was cut off.

“What am I saying? You probably do this all the time and no one even notices, am I right?”

He chuckled. “It’s second nature... I just have to pick my moments.”

“Your life is so weird,” she commented.

Pointing to the computer screen, she tapped a paragraph.

“I’d reword this.”

Obediently he rewrote the offending paragraph, looking to her for approval. She read the new version and pulled a face. With a sigh, Clark stood and offered her his chair, taking his accustomed place behind her.

It was more than an hour later when they finally finished the story, and later still when Joe stuck his head out of his office and dismissed them for the night. Lois stood up and stretched, then went back to her desk and started emptying out the drawer. She tucked all of her belongings into her bag, and then attempted a bright smile at Clark. With a grave expression on his face, he held out her coat so she could shrug into it.

“Ready to go?”

“I’ll just go say goodbye to Joe.”

He nodded, still unsmiling.

Lois tapped on the editor’s door.

“Joe?”

He looked up and gestured for her to enter.

“I was just coming to say goodbye. I’ve got a flight back to Metropolis in the morning.”

He stood and rounded the desk, offering her his hand to shake. “Thank you for coming out here. You and Clark have done some great work.” He grinned. “I just hope that being kidnapped hasn’t turned you off Paris.”

She waved an airy hand. “Oh, it’s not the first time I’ve been kidnapped. I’m used to it. Besides, it gave me the first front page stories I’ve had in a while. Perry will be annoyed that they were on the front page here and not in Metropolis.”

Joe gave her a quizzical look. “Didn’t he tell you? Those stories were syndicated. Perry ran ‘em front page too. You’ll probably be doing follow ups for a week after you get home.”

Clark was waiting for her when she left the editor’s office.

“Now I’m ready to go,” she told him.

Together they boarded the elevator, both lost in their own thoughts.

When they reached the street, Lois tried to break the silence.

“Did Joe tell you he syndicated our stories?”

The question snapped Clark out of his introspection. “What? Oh. No, he didn’t.”

“Perry ran them on the front page.”

That got her a faint smile. “It’s been a while since either of us has had the front page.”

“Yes, it has.”

He lapsed back into silence. They walked another block before Lois reached out and put her hand on Clark’s arm, stopping him.

“Clark? Is this goodbye?”

He covered her hand with his. “I thought I’d come and pick you up in the morning and take you to the airport.”

She withdrew her hand. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“I know. Look, Lois, I spent years hoping that one day you’d love me the way I love you. I’m not going to give up over something as trivial as the distance between Metropolis and Paris now.”

The earnestness and love in his tone reassured her. She didn’t resist as he put his hands on her waist, pulling her closer to him, instead snaking her arms around his neck. “Besides, I have some very ... unique ... advantages when it comes to —”

His head snapped up and his teasing expression vanished as he listened to something only he could hear.

“What is it?” Lois asked curiously.

“An explosion in Calais.” He looked down at her, clearly torn between their conversation and the emergency.

“Go,” she told him.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Go!”

He dropped a swift kiss on her lips before turning and running towards the nearest alley. A scant second later, a faint red and blue blur darted up between the buildings. As she watched, it disappeared and his trademark sonic boom shook the nearby windows.

With a sigh, she continued walking towards her hotel. If the local news programmes were on the ball, she might be able to catch coverage of the explosion on the television in her room.

Clark pulled the Planet’s much maligned Fiat to a stop in front of Lois’s hotel and killed the engine. An early morning phone call from Bill Henderson had distracted him and now he was running late.

Lois was at the reception desk when he entered the hotel, obviously in the process of checking out.

“Sorry I’m late,” he apologised.

“I was just about to call a cab.” She signed the account the desk clerk handed her and gave it back, then picked up her suitcase. Clark took it off her and carried it out to the Panda.

“How was Calais? Did it take long?”

“A few hours.”

He hated fires at the best of times, and this one had been fuelled by toxic chemicals. The resulting thick black smoke had made it hard for even his enhanced vision to penetrate. By the time the fire was out, the resulting chemical spill was contained and everyone was accounted for, it had been very late. So late that Clark had barely had the energy to try and call Perry before collapsing into bed. He’d been unable to get a hold of the editor in chief, leaving messages for Perry to call him back instead.

“Henderson called me this morning,” he told her after they’d gotten on the road to the airport. “Mathieu has been arrested on fraud and accessory charges and they’re looking for Evan Williams.”

She shot him a look. “You don’t like that,” she observed.

He shrugged one shoulder. “What Mathieu did was wrong, but I can’t help feeling sorry for him. He just wanted to take care of his wife and daughter.” He sighed. “Henderson also said they’ve ruled Bernard Young’s death a suicide. Apparently he was being blackmailed as well. But once Yellow Boy was actually stolen, he couldn’t handle the guilt. The London police found a note in his apartment.”

He turned into a spot in the airport’s short stay parking lot as he spoke.

“So that’s it?”

“For now. If I have time, I’ll go back to the office and write one more follow up before my flight. If not, I guess I’ll be sending that one in from Vienna.”

He hefted her bag out of the tiny hatchback and gestured for her to lead the way into the terminal.

“Then Pascal can come out of hiding and the artworks can go back on display,” he continued.

“You’re going back to Vienna?” Lois asked.

“This afternoon,” he confirmed. “I did kind of leave things unfinished there. There’s still a few days left of the summit. Actually, the other correspondents will probably be a little annoyed with me. Not only was I supposed to translate for them, but our stories pushed theirs off the front page.”

After a few wrong turns, they found the departures area for the right airline and joined the queue for check-in.

“You know, I will never complain about Metropolis Airport ever again. I thought it was confusing, but this place takes it to another level.”

“It’s about to get worse,” Clark commented. “They’re building another terminal.”

Lois rolled her eyes expressively, eliciting a laugh from Clark.

Reaching the head of the queue, Lois handed over her ticket and passport and received her boarding pass. Checking the gate number, Clark wended their way through the crowds and found the right gate without any wrong turns. The gate lounge was full, with no empty seats in the immediate vicinity. They stood off to one side, not saying much, both aware that time was running out. Finally Lois’s flight was called. She turned to him.

“Well. I guess this is it.”

“I guess so,” he responded softly. He attempted to smile at her.

She threw her arms around him. “I wish you were going with me,” she told him in a quavery voice.

He held her close, feeling a lump rise in his own throat. He smoothed her silky hair with his hand. “I wish I was too.” He let her go just enough that he could look down into her eyes. There were tears running down her face, and the sight made his heart clench. Lois didn’t cry easily. He wiped away the tears and kissed her. “I will come back as soon as I can,” he swore to her. He kissed her again. “When you get home, call me. So I know you got back safely.”

She nodded.

“And call me if you need me. No matter what time it is. Even if you just want someone to talk to.” He attempted to smile at her again, aware that it was no more successful than before. His voice shaky, he went on. “I can be there in a matter of seconds.”

The last call for Lois’s flight came over the PA.

“I’d better go.”

He nodded, not trusting his voice through the growing lump in his throat and pulled her into one last hug. He held her tightly, keeping his grip one degree below crushing the air out of her, feeling her cling to him. Finally he let go and rested his forehead against hers. “I love you,” he told her fiercely.

“I love you too,” she told him. Then she kissed him and turned away, walking towards the jet way.

He watched her go. When she was out of sight of even his vision, he sighed, becoming aware of the moisture on his cheeks. He scrubbed it away with the back of one hand, feeling the all too familiar ache in his chest return worse than it had ever been. For a moment he couldn’t breathe through the pain, and it was all he could do not to chase after her.

The trilling of the cell phone in his pocket broke the spell.

Pulling it out, he opened the flip.

“Clark Kent,” he answered.

“Clark? It’s Perry White. You’ve been trying to call me.”

“Yes, I have Chief. I wanted to talk to you about transferring back to Metropolis...”

Epilogue

Clark stopped in front of the Daily Planet building and looked up at the globe on the roof. He’d stood here like this on the day he’d interviewed with Perry White, almost three years before. Some of the best years of his life had been spent working in this building, and now he was returning.

It felt like coming home.

Even so, he was nervous. When Perry White had signed off on his transfer three weeks earlier, Clark had chosen not to tell Lois he was coming home, wanting to surprise her. But now that he was here he was second guessing his decision.

In the three weeks that had passed since she’d left Paris, they hadn’t been able to spend much time together. Wrapping up his assignments at the European bureau, attempting to find somewhere to live in Metropolis, and his ever-present Superman

duties, had all taken up so much of his time that he'd barely seen Lois. Adding into the mix the fact that Lois wasn't all that fond of surprises, and he just wasn't sure what sort of a reception he was going to get.

Well, it had to be faced. Squaring his shoulders, he adjusted his grip on the box he was carrying and entered the building.

It was still early; the bulk of the day staff wouldn't be arriving for at least another half an hour. He'd timed his arrival deliberately, wanting to avoid being stopped by one of his colleagues and possibly missing Lois's entrance.

Depositing his box of belongings on his old desk, he went to check in with Perry.

Lois was in a foul mood.

Since she'd had to leave Clark at the airport three weeks earlier, things had seemed bleaker than ever. She'd only seen him twice since, not counting the brief moments of conversation when they'd met at the scene of a Superman rescue — their schedules, time differences and his Superman duties had gotten in the way. And while he called every night without fail, it just wasn't the same.

She missed Clark.

Stupidly, she'd thought it would be like before she went to Paris. She'd miss him, yeah, but it would be a low-grade thing, like a distant ache. Not this grinding, yearning loneliness. She sighed. She'd either have to get used to it ... or work on Perry to get Clark back to Metropolis, where he belonged.

The elevator doors opened with a cheerful ding at odds with her mood. She took two steps out ... and then paused at the railing.

Someone had left their stuff all over Clark's desk. Incensed, she stormed into the bullpen, intending to remove the offending items and tear strips off the person responsible. But as she got closer to the desk, something caught her eye and stopped her in her tracks.

A shiny gold nameplate. A very familiar, shiny gold nameplate.

Wonderingly, she picked it up and traced her index finger over the name engraved on its surface. She remembered how proud he'd been when Perry had presented him with his first nameplate — not this one; the original had been destroyed in the blast commissioned by Lex. Surely she was dreaming? She ran her finger over the lettering one more time to make sure.

Clark Kent.

He was back!

She spun, looking for him. Her eyes searched the newsroom—until they found him, standing next to her desk with that megawatt grin she loved and her coffee mug in his hand.

“Clark! You're back!”

She ran to him and hugged him tightly before letting him go so she could look up at him.

“How long for?” she questioned.

“Permanently. That is, if you'll have me?”

The question was supposed to come out lightly. After all, they'd never spoken about things like commitment, permanence or what kind of future they had. But his question had come out loaded with so much more meaning than just the offer of a permanent work partnership.

“Oh, Clark.”

He braced himself for her withdrawal. Instead, to his surprise and delight she pulled his head down and kissed him deeply in full view of the interested newsroom staff.

“Stay forever.”

They stood for a few moments, smiling at each other, both aware that something momentous had passed between them and oblivious to the catcalls and cheering from the rest of the

newsroom staff.

The mood was broken by Perry's gruff bark.

“Get back to work. This is a newsroom, not happy hour at Buckingham Palace!”

He clapped Clark on the shoulder as he went back to his office.

Clark stood behind Lois as she settled at her desk. Later, they needed to talk — after all, he'd practically proposed in the middle of the newsroom, and she'd accepted — but right now, he had a lot to catch up on.

He leant over Lois's shoulder.

“So... what are we working on?”

THE END