

Erased

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Summary: As Lois Lane prepares to marry Lex Luthor, Clark Kent goes missing without a trace. Lois becomes consumed with finding her missing best friend, but the way back home proves to be far more complicated than anything she could have prepared for.

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Author's Note: This fic was inspired by Nobody, written by Nostalgiakick and [Delusions of Grandeur](#), written by Folc4evernaday, who were answering the challenge issued by Queen of the Capes on the Lois and Clark FanFic Message Boards. The challenge was to have Clark Kent committed to a mental health facility, for any reason and in either of his identities. Both Feli and Val were terrific sounding boards as I worked on this story, and I owe them a huge debt of gratitude. Also, a big shout out to Endelda, who let me bounce ideas off of her and always willingly devoured whatever snippets I decided to run past her. I owe you one, E!

Warning: I broke ALL the things. There are a couple of violent scenes that are actually shown, though the vast majority of violence takes place off-page and is merely referenced/alluded to.

Soft organ music wafted through the hallways of Lex Tower. Not the sad, somewhat creepy, somber tunes that usually popped into Lex Luthor's head when he thought of organ music. Like the dull, gray, monotonous funeral music that had been chosen for his parents' funeral when he was but a mere teenager on the cusp of manhood. No, these were different songs. These were bright, happy, cheerful, if not sonorous tunes meant to put people into a festive mood. It was a welcome departure from respectful, but dead, tones. It mingled well with the scent of fresh flowers – a light, airy scent of roses and carnations and even some plumeria, imported directly from Oahu. Lex hadn't allowed lilies at the event. Their heavy scent smelled like a mortuary to him. And while death didn't bother him, he didn't want such a grotesque association on this wonderful day. This was a happy event, in a way that was different from the day he'd buried his parents – and his past – and become the sole heir of the Luthor empire.

Lex checked his appearance in his full-length mirror for the twelfth time in as many minutes. He had to look his very best. This wasn't some run-of-the-mill board meeting. This wasn't even some boring corporate takeover. This was his *wedding day*. Not *just* his wedding day, he mentally corrected himself, but the day when he would *finally* claim Lois Lane as his own. In less than an hour, he would listen as she pledged her love and her life to him and him alone. Never again would he be in danger of losing her to anyone else. Not Superman. And certainly not Clark Kent. She would be *his*, from this day until her dying day.

Lex smiled to himself, pleased with his reflection. With confident steps, he crossed his study to the small bank of monitors hidden behind a false panel of phony books made so well it was

virtually impossible to distinguish them from the real thing. He gently pressed the correct series of book spines – each of them corresponding to a number that, when put together, made up the date of his parents' shared death-date. It always gave him a little thrill to punch in that number. Sure, he'd become an orphan that day, but he'd also become the sole heir to the Luthor family fortune. From there, it had only been a matter of time and a willingness to be as ruthless a businessman as necessary in order to grow his empire of LexCorp.

The wall slid to the left, revealing the monitors. Lex quickly located the one in the dressing room where his bride-to-be was waiting for her cue to head down the aisle to the altar and her destiny. He'd restrained himself from peeking into her room all day, regardless of how strong the temptation was. He would see her disrobed form soon enough, he'd reasoned. No need to spoil the moment by first viewing her nakedness over a grainy, black and white monitor. He turned up the volume as his lovely wife-to-be stood before her own full-length mirror, already decked out in the wedding gown he'd had specially made for her and imported from Italy.

"Lois...Luthor," she said to herself as she stared into her own reflection. But where Lex expected her to be bubbling with enthusiasm, he heard only a sigh of unhappiness. "Lois Luthor-Lane," she tried again, but her mood didn't seem to improve. "Lois Lane-Luthor." She shook her head and Lex frowned. What was wrong with her? Didn't she realize that she was about to become the luckiest woman on the planet?

A loud sigh echoed over the monitor. Then, tentatively, Lois spoke again.

"Lois...Kent?" she whispered to herself, in a voice so feather-light Lex nearly missed it.

"Kent?" Lex roared, shutting off the monitor before he did something regrettable, like punching out the screen with his bare fist. "Kent?" he raged again, the word ripping his throat on its way out of his body. "How *dare* she even *contemplate* that gible!" He pressed a button and the faux panel slid back into place, concealing the monitors from his sight again.

"I'm the one she's supposed to be thinking about. Not that miserable little weakling," he seethed as his hands clenched into tight fists. He turned angrily away from the wall and stalked across his study once more in a predatory pace. "I have to do something. It's bad enough she's had feelings for that alien, Superman. But now to find out she's thinking about Kent with just moments to spare before she belongs to me? This is unacceptable."

"Indeed," came the dry, even voice of his old friend, Nigel St. John, who'd been watching everything from the doorway. He stood in a relaxed, but attentive, stance, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Ah, Nigel, tell me you have some good news to share," Lex said as he turned to face the other man. He beckoned the man to step inside the room and to take a seat.

Nigel cracked a tiny, cryptic smile as he did as Lex bid. He sat in one of the plush armchairs and steepled his fingers thoughtfully. "What would you say if I told you I've put an end to an investigation into your personal affairs?"

Lex raised an interested eyebrow. "I'd tell you to go on," he encouraged, taking his own seat across from Nigel.

"Let's just say that, while I didn't have to kill anyone," Nigel offered with a hint of regret in his voice, "I've muddied the trails linking you to the city's organized crime. More precisely, when the former Daily Planet crusaders try to prove that *you* are a villain, they will, instead, find themselves pinning the blame on a certain head of Intergang."

Lex's eyes kindled with a hungry, malevolent light. "Excellent."

Lex Luthor was on top of the world.

Everything was going according to plan. *Almost*. If only Lois had said “I do,” then everything in his world would have been perfect.

His eye twitched and he absently massaged the area around his eyebrow in an effort to calm the reaction. He *hated* that annoying little tick of his, though it seemed to intimidate most people. It was an outward sign of the roiling rage within, and anyone with two brain cells to rub together would know that provoking him was ill-advised, at best.

Lex clenched his fist and ground his teeth together so hard that his jaw ached as he resisted the urge to growl in frustration. He didn’t lose. It wasn’t in his nature. But, somehow, he’d lost Lois that day.

If only she’d...

No.

He mentally shoved the thought aside. He couldn’t afford to think of “what ifs.” The fact of the matter was that the skittish little shrew had said “no” and left him to look like a fool in front of the world just a mere week ago. He was loathe to admit it, but her rejection had wounded him, taking him by surprise. No one *ever dared* to say no to him. *Ever*: Not in business matters. Not in private matters. He said “jump” and people automatically asked “how high?” – not “no, thanks” or “I can’t.” He knew he had the looks, the brains, and certainly the wealth to impress any woman in the world. And for a long time, all of that had dazzled Lois’ pedestrian tastes. And then, their wedding day had *finally* arrived and everything had suddenly changed. What *exactly* had changed, he wasn’t sure.

He sighed, deep in thought as a small, malevolent smile pulled ever so slightly at the corners of his mouth.

No, he *hadn’t* lost anything. He was *certain* of it. She’d merely gotten cold feet. That *had* to be the explanation for her unexpected bout of insanity. She only needed a little more time and space, then she would see how much of a mistake she’d made. She would come crawling back sooner or later and *beg* for absolution of her traitorous sins. Then, like the benevolent god he was, he would have some fun breaking that harlot before taking her back. The next time she wore his diamond, she wouldn’t *dare* run again.

In the meantime, he would pretend to lose interest in her and be content to love her from afar. He supposed he could expend his time and energy pursuing her, but his spies had alerted him to the fact that her former colleagues at the now-defunct Daily Planet had been sniffing around into Lex’s personal business. He had to tread very, very carefully – now more than ever before. He could not afford any slip-ups if he wanted to retain his freedom. Not that it probably mattered much now, he supposed. After he’d had the building blown up and framed that smart-mouthed little street urchin, he doubted he’d ever see that accursed publication ever again. Still, if he knew anything about Perry White and company, it was that they would pursue even the *hint* of a story to the ends of the Earth, if need be. Paper or no paper, they could still make trouble for him if they went to the police with any suspicion of foul play.

No. Lex’s good spirit had nothing to do with Lois Lane or the demise of the Daily Planet. He was in good spirits *despite* Lois’ attempt to embarrass him by running from their wedding. His good mood came from a different victory.

While Lois would have – should have – been his trophy wife, he’d gained perhaps an even *better* trophy, of a sort.

He stood staring at the closed-circuit monitors that he’d had set up in his wine cellar to keep tabs on his prisoner. A satisfied grin slowly spread across his face as he watched the Kryptonian writhing in pain on the floor of his glowing green prison cell, though the grainy images were in black and white, rather than color. But Lex knew the bright green glow well enough and considered it to be the most cheerful, joyful, wonderful shade of

any color in the entire world. He’d been a little skeptical, at first, when he’d heard of the mythical stone that could reduce Superman into a weak, helpless sack of mortal flesh. But his people had assured him that the rock was, indeed, very real and did exactly what it was rumored to do.

No price had been too high for Lex as he’d acquired as much of the Kryptonite as was possible. He would have gladly paid with his own blood for the deadly piece of alien terrain, so long as it did its job. And it had. Oh, how it had worked better than any of Lex’s wildest dreams! All those months trying to best Superman, trying to outwit him, testing his limits, and all he’d had to do in the end was use a bit of glowing rock to take the godlike freak of nature to his knees. Now, it was just a matter of what Lex wanted to do with the alien.

He *could* kill Superman.

It would be easy. Lex wouldn’t even have to physically bloody his hands to kill the Kryptonian. All he’d need to do would be to continue to expose his hated rival to the radioactive stone. And if he *did* want to get his hands dirty, Superman’s muscles were like water. He wouldn’t be able to fight back at all. Lex wouldn’t have to take any risk at all if he stepped into that cell with a gun, knife, axe, or cloth to smother the bothersome alien with.

Or he could keep Superman alive and...

Lex grinned.

The possibilities were endless.

And, truth be told, he had to acknowledge that the caped nuisance *had* saved his life before. Most recently, the idiot had cauterized a bullet wound in Lex’s shoulder, right in front of his friends at the Daily Planet. Of course, none of those blithering morons had noticed – Superman hadn’t been wearing the blue suit then. He’d been covering behind the mask of that pathetic loser, Clark Kent, Lex’s other most loathed rival. Lex knew, from the moment he felt the searing pain in his shoulder, that Kent was Superman in disguise and that his heat vision, rather than that random mixture of conveniently accessible food items, had stopped Lex from bleeding out all over the bullpen floor.

Wisely, Lex had chosen to feign obliviousness. And from his careful watching and listening, it was clear that none of the others were in on the secret. That was when Lex had lost a great deal of respect for his fiancée-to-be. How could it be that Lois worked alongside the hero she practically salivated over and not realize it? How blind or stupid could one woman be? He’d nearly considered discarding her after that. But somehow, her low intelligence aside, he still found himself unable to deny the attraction that drew him to her like a beacon in the darkness.

He sometimes wondered why that was. She was beautiful, certainly, but he’d bedded scores of women that Lois’ looks couldn’t hold a candle to. Perhaps it was the knowledge that, by claiming her for his own, he would solidify his victory over Superman. After all, there was *nothing* sweeter in life than utterly obliterating an enemy. Or perhaps it was because Lois herself had presented herself as forbidden fruit when they had first crossed paths. He knew *all* about how delicious a taste of the forbidden could be. He’d partaken of it his entire life. He’d even considered if Miranda had hit him with the one hundred percent solution of that asinine pheromone spray of hers – the one that had the potential to permanently rewire a person’s brain.

No matter.

Whatever the reason was for his obsession with her, it was only a matter of time before he claimed her for his prize. He was Lex Luthor, after all. No one dared deny him *anything* he desired. Least of all a reporter too stupid or too blind to see what was right in front of her face.

A slow smile finally spread across his features, smoothing away the lines of anger that had been there only moments before, as the possibilities unfurled in his mind. If *Lois Lane*, of all people, couldn’t piece together something as idiotically simple as

her partner's compulsive need to traipse around the city in a skimpy costume acting as an overbearing hero with a god complex, well, that could only bode well for how easy it would be to hide his own underhanded dealings from her. Coming to a sudden, immutable decision, he'd dismissed the thought of tossing her to the wayside and continued his courtship of her. Beautiful but stupid most definitely had its advantages.

Still, Lex had been pleased with his new-found information. It had definitely been worth getting shot for. It had allowed him to formulate a plan that was *sure* to lure the alien into his trap. First, the trap itself had been needed – a simple cage of steel bars, augmented and strengthened by a coating of Kryptonite so expertly manipulated that Lex could cover the ground-up stone with a thin veneer of yet more steel. That had been his best decision, if he said so himself. Not only had it prevented Superman from detecting the Kryptonite's presence prematurely, but now he had the option to "turn off" the radiation if he wanted to keep his prisoner alive. Next, the bait – Lois had served that purpose quite well, and Lex hadn't even needed to kidnap her for that. Both Superman and Kent were notoriously taken with the woman. Claiming that he was worried about her had been a surefire way to lure Superman in. And finally, the timing had to be right. He'd needed to spring the trap at just the right moment. Too early, and he risked Superman wizing up to the fact that Lex had something up his sleeve. Too late, and he risked Superman using his powers to escape his fate.

But none of that had happened. Superman had been too cocky, too arrogant, too busy looking down his nose at Lex to realize what was about to happen. And that had been the alien's downfall.

In one fell move, Lex had neutralized the threat both Superman *and* Clark Kent had posed to him.

But what to do now?

Kill the extraterrestrial? Or spare him and...what then?

"Killing him would give me but one fleeting victory," he decided in a whisper to himself. "If I keep him alive, his every waking moment in captivity is a victory."

But what to *do* with the captured nuisance in a cape? For the first time in his life, Lex found himself without a clear plan. And where that should have unnerved him, he found the notion intriguing somehow. The future was full of possibilities. And he was determined to figure out how best to destroy the creature who'd sought to bring about his downfall.

Feeling elated, Lex watched the monitor for a long time before finally shutting down the power that kept the Kryptonite exposed. After all, he didn't dare kill Superman before utterly destroying him.

Lois sat cross-legged under the familiar weight of her bed's comforter. Idly, she smoothed away a few creases as she waited for the phone to finish dialing, her stomach churning queasily. She'd always hated having to speak with a friend's parents on the phone for as far back as she could remember, even if her friends' parents had always seemed to like her. But this was different. Could she still consider Clark her friend? She'd been so awful to him lately. So awful, in fact, that she couldn't bear to consider using his parents' first names as she sat twining the curly phone cord around her pointer finger.

"Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Kent?" Lois asked, her voice shaking with worry and remorse. She cradled the plastic headset of her favorite red phone between her head and her shoulder, clutching it for dear life, as though it alone could save her from drowning in her sorrows. "It's me, Lois."

"Lois?" Mr. Kent sounded surprised to be hearing from her. Lois couldn't blame the man's wonderment. After all, she and the farmer's son had barely been speaking as of late.

"I know I probably have no right to be calling you, but..." She took a shuddering breath. "I was wondering if you could help me.

I know I don't deserve it. But I was hoping...could you help me get in touch with Clark?" She bit back tears as she said the words, her heart aching so badly for want of her friend that it was difficult for her to draw breath. "Please, Mr. Kent. I know Clark and I have had our differences lately but...I need to speak to him."

"Please, call us Jonathan and Martha," the kindly older man gently reminded her. But his voice sounded guarded and his words seemed more reflexive than anything else.

"Okay, Jonathan," she complied, forcing the words out. "Maybe Clark told you not to tell me where he is but, I've been trying to get ahold of him for over a week. He's not answering his phone. I've been by his apartment. Everything is there except for him. Jimmy and Perry haven't heard from him since the day before my..." She paused and gulped, making herself say the words. "My aborted wedding. We're all a little on edge. Have you heard from him?"

Silently, she willed them to say yes.

"I'm sorry, but we haven't heard from him either," Martha said in a soft, concerned tone that screamed of concealed panic. "Have you tried his cell phone?"

"He's not answering either one of his phones – the landline or his cell," Lois said, trying hard not to burst into tears.

"He often gets wrapped up into things he's working on," Jonathan said with a measured tone, carefully selecting his words. "I'm sure he'll surface soon."

But the gentle farmer couldn't completely mask his distress and Lois' heart sank.

"If you *do* happen to hear from him...can you please...tell him I'm sorry. I miss him. If he could just call me or stop by..." She couldn't stop a sob from escaping her. That was the beginning of the end. Within seconds, she was full-on crying. "Please. Tell him I know...how much of an idiot I've been lately. I want to apologize. I should have listened to him. Please."

"Of course we'll tell him, honey," Martha soothingly told her, but Lois could hear the pain in the older woman's voice. Clark's disappearance wasn't normal – even given the extraordinary circumstance of Lois almost marrying a man he clearly loathed – and it had all of them worried.

"Thanks. And I'll do the same if I hear from him. Tell him to call you, I mean." Lois made herself sound optimistic. She knew how close Clark was to his parents. If they hadn't heard from him, something was *definitely* going on.

"Thank you, Lois, we'd really appreciate that," Martha said softly.

Lois managed a quick, awkward goodbye, then hung up the phone. Her stomach was churning and she felt flushed, the way she always did when she was ill at ease. Something just felt *wrong*, though she didn't know what it was.

Perhaps it was the fact that she was still reeling from having fled from her own wedding. But no. Maybe not. Shouldn't she feel *good* that she'd avoided making what she knew now would have been a huge mistake? And despite her initial, worried ponderings that she'd taken the wrong course of action, she was sure now that saying "no" to the Archbishop had been the only correct response. Clark had been right when he'd challenged her in the park. As she'd stared into the future of a life with Lex, she'd known for certain that she didn't – and couldn't – love the billionaire. He didn't give her butterflies in her stomach the way Clark did, even though she didn't want to admit it out loud. So she'd done the only thing possible when she'd said "no" and run from Lex Tower.

Guilt had followed her. All those people. Family members, mostly, who had taken time out of their busy schedules to fly into Metropolis for her wedding. All eyes had been on her – expecting to see her blissfully embarking on the greatest adventure of her life. Instead, she'd disappointed everyone she knew. Or...*most* of the people she knew. None of her – admittedly few – close friends had attended her wedding. Jimmy and Perry had admitted to being

caught up investigating Clark's theory that Lex was a crime lord. They hadn't managed to find any solid evidence against him though. And Jack was still in jail for allegedly planting the explosive device that had blown up the Daily Planet.

Clark...

Clark hadn't shown up. *At all.*

And, to make matters worse, *no one* knew where he was.

Not Jimmy. Not Perry. Not Jack – Lois had made a point to visit her young friend in jail a few days after her aborted wedding. Not a single former coworker from their days at the Planet. Not even Clark's landlord had seen him.

This wasn't like Clark at all. Sure, he would sometimes occasionally disappear for minutes or hours during any given workday. But to completely vanish without a trace for just over a week now? There was *nothing* normal about this.

"Where are you, Clark?" she whispered miserably to herself.

She sighed heavily, then pulled back the comforter and sheets from her bed. With a sense of determination, she wedged her feet into her favorite battered pair of sneakers. Grabbing her purse, she headed out of her apartment, locking the door behind her. She rushed down the stairs to the lobby, then sprinted down the block to where her Jeep was parked. Throwing the car into gear, she made a beeline for Inspector Henderson's precinct.

A little while later, she made her way back home, feeling only marginally better for having filed a missing person report for Clark. But when she arrived back at her building, she didn't go straight back to her apartment. Instead, she made her way up to the roof. It was as good a spot as any, she figured as she called out into the night.

"Superman? Help! I need you!"

But silence was all she received and her hero never showed.

Lex Luthor grinned a private grin as he poured himself a tall glass of very expensive imported wine. He poured until the glass was nearly full of the deep red wine, then he reinserted the cork into the bottle. Picking up the wine glass, he gently swirled the dark liquid around before inhaling the heady aroma. To his highly trained nose, the vintage smelled perfect, just as it ought to for the price he'd paid. A pittance for someone with as much money as he did, but which would easily put the average man into debt. He took a small, experimental sip and held it on his tongue, letting the flavor infuse his mouth before he swallowed it down.

"Excellent," he proclaimed, before turning around to his old friend, Nigel. "Are you certain I can't tempt you, Nigel?"

The older man shook his head slightly. "Thank you, sir, no." Lex shrugged. "Well then, let's get down to business, shall we?"

"Let's," Nigel agreed, taking a seat at a gesture from Lex.

Lex held his glass in one hand, as he meandered about the room, letting his feet take him where they would as he talked. He was in too high spirits to be still. And his anticipation was bubbling over. He could hardly wait to tell Nigel his plans and set them into motion.

"Now then," he began grandly, gesturing wildly. He took a sip from his glass. "As you know, a little over a week ago, I captured Superman in a cage in my wine cellar. The bars, of course, are coated in a special mixture of Kryptonite. I can control whether or not the alien is exposed to the deadly rock, rendering him completely powerless."

"Yes, so you've mentioned," Nigel replied evenly, his voice and facial features giving none of his thoughts away.

Lex nodded. "I've spent the last week deciding what to do with my rival."

"You want me to... finish the job? Is that it?" Nigel asked, raising a questioning eyebrow, his eyes gleaming just a bit at the idea of ending Superman's life.

Lex grinned over the rim of his wine glass. "Not quite. We're

going to end his life all right, but not quite in the way you're thinking."

"Oh?" Nigel sat up straighter in his chair, silently relaying his intrigue with his posture.

"I'm going to make his life disappear. I'm going to make *him* disappear right before his very eyes," Lex explained as he began to divulge the plan that had slowly coalesced in his mind over the past two weeks.

He inhaled deeply, enjoying the way Nigel inched himself a little closer to the edge of his seat. A satisfied grin slowly unfurled across his face as he exhaled again, and a rush of adrenaline surged within him. He turned to Nigel in an almost playful manner as he let a dramatic pause reign before continuing.

"It might interest you to know that Superman has been operating under an alias," Lex nearly purred.

"Oh?" Nigel said again. "You know this for certain?"

Lex nodded as he swallowed another mouthful of his expensive wine before setting it down on a small table. "Yes. I had an... encounter... with him in his alter ego not too long ago."

Lex gestured vaguely, reliving the night before his waking eyes. The sound of the gun cracking as it went off. The acrid smell of gunpowder. The blinding pain as the bullet shredded his shoulder. The disbelief that someone – some common *thug* at that – had had the *gall* to *shoot* him, Lex Luthor, the god of Metropolis! Reflexively, he clenched his fist, then slowly relaxed his muscles.

"I witnessed things that can only be explained as otherworldly. There is no other way to describe it. He made up a flimsy cover story about some medicine man's cure, then used his heat vision to cauterize my gunshot wound."

"Who?" Nigel asked, curiously, but Lex cut off his question before it could be voiced, too caught up in his monologue and high on the dramatic build up to his revelation.

Lex paused and took a deep breath, letting it all out again through his nostrils before forcing the next words out. "He thought I didn't notice; that the pain I was in would numb me to what he was *really* doing. And perhaps I *would* have overlooked things and chalked it up to the agony I was already in, if my life hadn't been hanging in the balance. Did you know, Nigel, how much your senses heighten when you're certain you're about to die?"

"I can't say that I've ever been in that position, no," Nigel dryly replied.

"Yes, well," Lex said, brushing off Nigel's remark as his tone grew darker. "As much as it pains me to say, I might have died if not for him blowing his cover, though I'm sure he was too full of his own misguided ego to think that a lowly human such as myself would figure it out."

Lex began to move around his office as Nigel rubbed at his chin, letting his fingertips caress some of the priceless treasures he'd accumulated over the years until they at last came to Alexander the Great's sword. He picked the weapon up with practiced ease, studying the blade just as intently as they first time he'd ever held it in his hand. He pointed the sword at Nigel as though challenging an enemy commander to one-on-one combat.

"But he underestimated me, Nigel. I noticed it *all*."

A light of understanding dawned over Nigel's face. "You're talking about the night you were held hostage at the Daily Planet." There was a little awe and wonder in the elder man's voice. He sat up a little straighter in his chair as his interest was piqued.

Lex nodded grimly as he lowered the weapon. "That's when I put it all together. Superman was arrogant enough to think he could infiltrate normal society by playacting as a human. A pathetic weakling of a man at that. All this time, my great enemy was hiding under the guise of my *other* hated rival, Clark Kent – a mild-mannered *nobody* who wrote tedious stories for a now-extinct newspaper." He slashed outwardly with the sword as his temper got the better of him. The thought of that alien in a man's

clothing made him seethe with barely contained rage.

“Kent? Really? Seems like an...unlikely alias,” Nigel replied thoughtfully, his fingers steepled together as he took in what Lex was saying.

“Unlikely? Perhaps,” Lex allowed, replacing the ancient sword on its display. “But not, in retrospect, all that strange. No one ever really cared to look twice at Kent, except, maybe, for my wayward ex-fiancée. In theory, pretending to be Clark Kent would have offered him a perfect cover. He could keep abreast of the news and know where to stick his nose. He’d blend in. No one ever questions the average nobody walking amongst them.”

“Indeed,” Nigel agreed with a slow nod. “But are you certain he was merely *pretending* to be Kent? After all, he’s got a full history of a life lived as Clark Kent – parents, adoption records, school records, a litany of newspaper articles written for papers around the globe. Whereas Superman only appeared a year or so ago, give or take a few months.”

Lex scowled and balled his hands into fists. He slammed his right fist into the wall next to the sword’s display case. “Does it matter? Kent...Superman...neither one is human. Both only *pretend* to be. And both have been a thorn in my side for *far* too long.”

Nigel dismissed the argument with a wave of his hand. “Fair enough. How do you want me to dispose of him?”

Lex grinned malevolently. “We’re going to destroy him piece by piece until he is absolutely no one at all and the world has forgotten *both* of the men he pretended to be.”

Nigel cracked a hungry, deadly smile. “Do go on,” he encouraged.

Lex drained the rest of his wine with a flourish. “We’re going to erase him from history, so thoroughly that even *he* won’t remember who he is. And then, in time, when I tire of my game, I’ll consider slitting his throat. But first, I’m going to enjoy tearing him down.”

Nigel cracked his knuckles in anticipation. “When do we begin?”

Lex smiled as he set down his wine glass on a nearby table. He spread his arms wide as if to encompass the entire world. “There’s no time like the present.”

Pain.

It wasn’t the same intense, searing, engulfing pain that had made even death seem preferable to the unending torment of the Kryptonite poisoning. It was a dull ache that would not cease, one that had settled deep into Clark’s bones and made any movement unwelcome. It was the shame that burned in his heart, knowing how stupid he’d been to get himself captured. He’d been too overconfident, too reliant on his powers. He’d *known*, with unshakable certainty, that he could outthink, outwit, and overpower Luthor.

But the billionaire had surprised him. Luthor had gotten his slimy hands on Kryptonite.

Of course.

Why wouldn’t he have? He would have read about it in the papers, back when Bureau 39, under the direction of Trask, had stormed Smallville in search of a stone he – correctly, unfortunately – believed could kill Superman. And although Lois’ article had never confirmed the existence of Kryptonite, even the *chance* that it might be real would have proven to be irresistible to Luthor. After all, Luthor was made of money. No price could *ever* be too high, if it meant he had a chance of bringing Superman to his knees.

And Luthor *had*.

Clark was helpless in his cage. Weak, in residual pain, and powerless, he’d tried everything and anything he could think of to break free of his prison in the days since his capture, whenever he wasn’t being tortured with the Kryptonite. He’d been thwarted at

every turn. The steel bars were too thick – he didn’t have a *prayer* of bending them. The key that Luthor had so arrogantly and tormentingly left in plain sight was out of reach. Clark had no super breath with which to try to suck in enough air to create a sort of vacuum in the hopes of dragging the key any closer. Nor could he use the cummerbund to reach it. The silky material simply didn’t reach that far, and even if Clark *could*, somehow, stretch the material far enough, there was no way to hook the key.

If only he had a fraction of his strength. If only he could summon up some final blast of heat vision – just enough to destroy the lock to his cage. If only he could freeze a couple of bars so that he could shatter them. If only...

Clark’s head immediately swiveled in the direction of the stairs leading down into Lex Luthor’s wine cellar as he heard the door above open. How long had he been down here? A week? A month? Time stood still in that endless twilight of the dimly lit room. He’d long ago lost any sense of time, unable to judge it even by the meager meals that were left out for him from time to time, all of them delivered while he lay on the floor, unconscious, after the Kryptonite coating on the bars was exposed and allowed to drain the life from him.

So far, he’d seen no one since his capture, however long ago that may have been. Not only hadn’t he *seen* a single soul, he’d *heard* no one else either. Not a whisper in the darkness. Not a squeak of a shoe on the floor. Not a sneeze. Nothing. He’d been in total isolation.

For a time, he’d sent up silent prayers begging for Lois to find him in his cage. He wasn’t ashamed to have been tricked and caught like an animal in a trap. He wasn’t afraid to show her his vulnerability. He didn’t fear what she might think of him or that she might figure out his secret. All he wanted was to live and to whisk her away from Luthor.

Had she married him? Clark wasn’t sure. When Luthor had first come to gloat over his perceived victory, taunting Clark with a choice of what color cummerbund he should wear to the wedding, Clark had been able to hear the organ music some floors above. They’d all sounded like traditional wedding songs to his aching ears; the kind of music one would play while the guests waited for a wedding to begin. And he knew Lois too well. As much as she tried to prove that she was a one-of-a-kind, think-for-herself, break-the-mold woman – and she was, in the best way, he lovingly admitted to himself – she was also a traditionalist when it came to things like weddings. There was no way she would walk down the aisle to anything other than “Here Comes the Bride.” And she would *definitely* walk out to “The Bridal March.”

Clark furrowed his brow in concentration. He’d heard “Here Comes the Bride” – he was sure of that. It had shattered his heart and made him want to get sick all at the same time. But had he heard “The Bridal March?” His head had been swimming in residual Kryptonite poisoning at the time. It had been difficult to stay conscious, let alone focus on the absolute sin going on above him.

“No,” he whispered to himself now. “I only heard ‘Here Comes the Bride.’ There was no more music after that.”

Something had happened. The wedding hadn’t gone as planned. Something – or someone – had put a stop to it. Jimmy? Perry? Jack? Had they somehow been able to prove what a criminal Luthor was? Had they brought down the entire MPD on Luthor’s evil head?

Footsteps started down the steps.

Clark held his breath. Had Lois finally found him? Had Perry connected the dots between the wedding and the fact that Clark Kent had been missing for as long as he had? But even if Perry had, he’d be looking for *Clark*, not Superman. Unless...had Perry ever figured out his secret? Clark wasn’t sure but he’d sometimes suspected that the Chief knew more than he let on. Clark pulled himself to his feet in anticipation.

Elegant Italian leather men's shoes appeared in his line of sight and all of Clark's hopes died in that instant. Terror welled up inside him and he found himself wishing for the complete isolation once again. This could only turn out poorly for him, he knew, and a second later his fears were confirmed as Lex Luthor entered into the wine cellar. Still, Clark would put on brave airs. He would not let his adversary see his weakness. He would show no fear. He was Superman, after all. And Superman was the epitome of calm collectedness, even in the worst situations.

A second set of footsteps followed Luthor down into the cellar and Clark wasn't entirely surprised to see Luthor's henchman, Nigel St. John, following his master's heels like a loyal dog. Still, it gave him pause. What was Luthor up to? Why would he want – or need – Nigel there?

"Ah, here we are!" Luthor exclaimed gleefully, clapping his hands together once in excitement. "Our pretty little bird in his gilded cage."

"What do you want, Luthor?" Clark asked, crossing his arms before his chest.

Luthor stepped to the side so that Nigel could stand next to him on his right side. The older English gentleman stood silent and motionless, merely regarding their captive. Luthor, however, seemed barely able to contain his delight over whatever scheme was parading through his head.

"To talk," Luthor replied simply, though his tone of voice suggested there was something more sinister than that lurking beneath the surface.

Clark arched an eyebrow, giving his best pretense of bravado while his heart beat madly in his chest. He felt like he might have a heart attack from the way it was racing. Because if Luthor was here, in the wine cellar with him, it could mean only one thing; Clark's suspicions about the wedding *had* to be true. The ugly thought that had constantly invaded Clark's mind over the past... how long had it been? Weeks, perhaps? It couldn't be true. Days or weeks, it had been far too short a time for a honeymoon to take place – especially the lavish kind he *knew* Luthor would have insisted upon, even if Lois *hadn't* divulged the details to him. Now confident that Lois had escaped the bleak future that had awaited her as Mrs. Lois Luthor, he couldn't resist a smirk.

"Isn't it a bit early for these visits? Aren't you supposed to be on your honeymoon? Did your bride get bored of you already?" he hurled at his enemy, wanting to wound the man with his words. After all, his wits and words were the only weapons left in his arsenal against Luthor.

He snapped his fingers and let out a low chuckle. "Oh, I know! She didn't even let you get that far, did she? What happened, Luthor? I'm guessing Lois finally saw you for who you really are and left you standing at the altar, all alone and looking like a fool. Didn't she?" he pressed. "I mean, why *else* would you be down here, wasting your time with me?"

Luthor spread his hands as though absolving himself of whatever accusations Clark wanted to throw at him. "Ah, ah, ah. Careful. One might think you have a vested interest in her. Not that she could ever love an alien like yourself." The glare he shot at Clark was so bitter it could have curdled milk, and Clark knew he'd struck a nerve. "Don't worry your extraterrestrial little head about what may or may not have transpired at my wedding."

"She didn't marry you." It wasn't a question. Clark was confident that the wedding hadn't taken place.

"Why so interested... *Clark*?" Luthor responded slyly, tossing the name out with such casualness that it was almost as if he didn't want Clark to notice. But a flash of malice shot through his eyes anyway, confirming Clark's suspicions.

"Clark?" Clark asked, feigning confusion.

How? The word shot through his mind like an icicle, leaving raw, frigid fear in its wake. His brain instantly started working overtime, trying to construct a way out of things.

"Don't play coy with me," Luthor snapped. "I've seen past your flimsy disguise for quite some time now."

"Disguise? You're crazier than I thought," Clark coolly replied, brushing off Luthor's words while secretly wondering what had tipped the man off. He bored an unwavering stare into his nemesis' eyes that screamed 'drop it.'

But Luthor was more stubborn than Clark had imagined. He gave Clark a *tsk, tsk* and a wave of his finger. "Oh, come now, Clark. We're going to be together for a long, *long* time. Trust me. Things will be *so much easier* if we don't keep secrets from one another."

"You're delusional," Clark scoffed with a sneer, dismissing the threat Luthor had laid before his feet with a confidence he only partially felt.

"On the contrary," Luthor smoothly and calmly replied, "*you* are the delusional one. Thinking you could hide out amongst the *real* humans, pretending you could be just like us, trying to woo the perfect – and very *human* Lois Lane."

"Wow, her rejection must have been a *doozy*. It's been... what? A couple of weeks now and you're still licking your wounds," Clark said, gritting his teeth against his rising anger. If he could provoke Luthor into a rage, perhaps the billionaire would make a crucial mistake and Clark could seize an opportunity to get away. Besides, throwing Luthor's failure in his face felt good, even if Clark had been raised better than that. "Well, guess what? If she rejected you, *you* pushed her into it. I'm guessing she finally saw through that façade of yours and discovered who you truly are."

But Luthor didn't rise to the bait. He shrugged casually as if Clark's words were nothing more than harmless wisps of smoke. "*I'm* bitter. That's rich. Sounds to me like you're upset that you never even had a ghost of a chance with her." He paused a moment, then began to pace. "But we're not here to discuss Lois. We're here to discuss *you*."

Clark's eyes followed as the billionaire continued to move. But his lips remained closed.

"Now then," Luthor said after a moment. He quit moving and looked sharply at Clark. "I'm tiring of this little game with you. Either admit to me that you've been living as Clark Kent or..."

"Or, *what*, Luthor?" Clark interrupted impatiently. "You'll turn on this cage again?" he scoffed with faux bravado.

No one can ever find out about you, Clark heard his dad say in the back of his mind. *Some scientists will hunt you down, put you in a cage, and dissect you like a frog.*

Involuntarily, he gulped hard. *You were half right, Dad. Only my captor isn't a scientist. Just a psychopathic billionaire.*

"Well, yes," Luthor answered with an eerily dismissive tone of voice that sent a shiver down Clark's spine. The billionaire shrugged. "That and... I have my private jet standing by."

"Oh, very impressive," Clark said with a yawn.

Please, please don't mean what I think you mean, he inwardly pleaded.

"Don't play stupid with *me*," Luthor snarled. "I have but to say one word and I'll be flying to a certain pathetic little Kansas farm. Do you understand what I'm saying? I'll kill your parents right in front of your eyes. And if that doesn't break you... Lois Lane's death just might."

"You wouldn't *dare*," Clark growled.

In his mind, he saw himself back in his parents' kitchen, fretting about Lois' relationship with Luthor.

You love her? his father had asked.

Yes.

Then tell her, Jonathan had urged him.

What? That I'm Superman?

He remembered the gripping fear that had accompanied the thought of Lois finding out about his alter ego. He hadn't wanted Lois to love him for his powers. He'd wanted her to love him for who he really was. But it had been *more* than just how Lois would

respond to the news of his super side that had given him pause and had frozen the confession on his lips. It had been the fear that someone would discover that she knew who Superman really was and hurt or kill her for that information. Now it appeared that his worries had been misplaced. Luthor had already somehow discovered his secret, but Lois' life was still being threatened.

Luthor locked his piercing gaze on Clark. A malevolent fire burned in his eyes and Clark knew the man wasn't bluffing.

"Wouldn't I?" came the icy response.

"Leave them out of this!" Clark roared before he even realized he was speaking.

"I will, *if* you do what I've told you to do." The condescending smirk in Luthor's voice was unmistakable.

Clark said nothing as his mind whirred and his stomach lurched. Admitting his secret filled him with paralyzing fear, but so did the prospect of watching Luthor kill his parents. The choice was obvious, and yet, he found himself speechless.

I have to protect the people I love at all costs. Even if it costs me everything. It's the bargain I struck when I decided to take on the identity of Superman. This is all my fault.

"Nigel? The phone," Luthor said after half a minute of silence had passed.

Clark saw Nigel reach into the pocket of his suit jacket. A heartbeat later, a phone emerged from the dark brown material and a fresh burst of panic propelled Clark's tongue into motion.

It's now or never. Save Lois. Save Mom and Dad.

"Wait!" he cried out, reaching futilely toward the two men.

"Fine. Have it your way, Luthor. I *am* Clark Kent. But you've got it all wrong. I've *never pretended* to be Clark. Superman is the disguise. Happy now?" he challenged.

Luthor's face split into a grin that sent a bolt of pure dread into Clark's heart. "See, was that so hard to do?" He chuckled darkly. "I appreciate the honesty. But you're wrong. Clark Kent *never* existed. You are *Superman*. You are not and have never been Clark Kent."

Clark wrinkled his brow in confusion. What was Luthor getting at? Why would he demand Clark admit to his true identity and then insist that Clark was wrong about it? What sick game was Luthor playing?

"Do you understand?" Luthor asked, the words coming slowly as though speaking to an idiot.

"No," Clark admitted as he set his jaw in defiance. "Clark is who I am. It's who I've *always* been."

"Not when I'm through with you," Luthor promised.

Suddenly, something Luthor had said on the day he'd been set to marry Lois struck Clark. It hadn't really registered in Clark's mind at the time. He'd been too busy thinking over his options as he'd tried to formulate an escape plan.

Strange to hear you say my name and know it's probably for the last time. Luthor had paused then, looking contemplative. *Is this a mistake?* he'd wondered aloud. *Will the pain of losing the challenge you represent be worse than the discomfort of constantly losing to you?*

Fresh fear washed coldly over Clark as he realized that Luthor wasn't going to grant him a quick, clean death. Whatever the man was scheming, Clark knew he would be suffering for a long, *long* time to come. In that moment, the terror of living *far* outweighed the dread of death and the worry about whatever might or might not come after a person passed on.

I'll never give him the satisfaction of breaking me, Clark thought determinedly, but he knew the neutral, unreadable mask of Superman had slipped in the same moment.

Lex must have seen the fear light up in Clark's eyes. He grinned devilishly as he looked over to Nigel. "Go on."

Nigel nodded stiffly and then advanced toward the cell. It took a great effort for Clark not to shrink away at the murderous look in Nigel's eyes. Luthor produced a key from his pocket – a twin to

the one he'd left out to torment Clark with - and unlocked the cell door, then relocked it once Nigel stepped inside. Clark mentally ran down a list of his options in his head and found it disappointingly limited.

"What is your name?" Nigel asked in a deadly even voice.

"Clark," Clark threw at him. Now that his secret was out, there was no sense in pretending he *wasn't* Clark, and it was clear that it was *not* the answer Luthor wanted from him.

In a stunningly fast move, Nigel kicked Clark in the groin, sending shockwaves of pain throughout his body and sending him instantly crashing to the ground, his hands uselessly cupped around his freshly injured area.

"What is your name?" Nigel asked again.

"Clark," Clark maintained, panting this time as stars continued to explode before his eyes.

Nigel reached out and grabbed Clark's right wrist. Before Clark could react, the man took hold of Clark's middle finger and, with a single jerking motion, snapped the finger bones. A blinding pain seared through Clark, flooding his vision with a white-hot haze, and he screamed out, despite his earlier decision not to let Luthor see any weakness in him.

"What is your name?" Nigel asked again, his tone of voice flat and unchanging.

"Clark," Clark wheezed determinedly.

I'll die before I give you what you want.

This time, Nigel reared his fist back and struck Clark in the jaw, hard enough that Clark's teeth clacked together painfully. Clark wondered if his jaw, like his finger, had been broken. He was grateful though when he ran his tongue experimentally over his teeth and found none to be shattered, loose, or missing.

"What is your name?"

"Clark," he managed around his aching jaw.

The fist hit him again, this time in the nose. Blood gushed from the wound as his nose crunched and broke. Clark cried out again, but he refused to back down. If Luthor wanted Clark to deny his identity now that it was out in the open, he had another think coming.

When the abuse finally ended, more than an hour later, Clark was left bruised, bloodied, and with a few cracked and broken bones. But, beaten as he was, he was determined to continue to fight to keep his identity. For whatever reason, Luthor didn't want him to be Clark. And that was all the reason Clark needed to maintain that he was, indeed, Clark Kent.

Lois' hands shook as she dug through her purse and extracted the special keychain hidden within its depths. Holding it tightly, she clutched it against her chest for a long moment, then she inserted the key into the lock. Turning it, she swiftly opened the door to Clark's apartment. She wasn't sure what she expected to find inside, but she was determined to uncover *any* clue as to her friend's whereabouts.

She pocketed the key as soon as she was inside, and patted her jeans over it for good measure, taking comfort from the fact that it was safe. Unbidden, the memory of when Clark had given her the key flashed through her mind. Clark had still been new to the Planet...

It had been an ordinary, boring morning. Nothing had been even remotely special about it. They'd been in the break area, fixing cups of coffee before tackling the day's To Do list. Clark had seemed uncharacteristically nervous, which she'd only really noticed in retrospect.

"Lois? With Perry's decision to keep us as permanent partners...and now that I have an apartment instead of that...less than ideal hotel room, I thought you should have this," he'd finally said, breaking the fragile silence between them.

Lois hadn't slept well the night before, obsessing over the fact that Perry had saddled her with a permanent partner. Clark had

been meant to be paired with her only for the duration of his first assignment! She'd grudgingly babysat him as he'd learned the ropes and they'd investigated the sabotage of the space shuttle. But that had been meant to be the end of things. Why was Perry torturing her? He *knew* she didn't play well with others and did her best work alone.

"What is it?" she'd grumbled, carefully measuring out the small amounts of cream and sugar she allowed in her coffee.

He'd reached into his pocket and pulled out a single, shining key on a hand-carved, painted wooden gecko keychain. It wasn't until months later that she'd finally asked him about the lizard and he'd told her the story of how he'd found it in a little mom-and-pop shop during his travels through New Zealand, and how he'd bought it with the intention of giving it to a friend one day.

"A spare key to my apartment," he'd told her simply, expecting nothing from her in response – not a word of thanks, not a key to her place in return.

Warily, she'd taken it.

"Why?" she'd asked.

Clark had shrugged casually. "I just figured it made sense with us being partners and all. We'll probably have a lot of late research sessions and there's no sense in staying in the bullpen until all hours of the night. You might need to get into my place when I'm not there." Then he'd smiled that goofy, endearing – though at the time it had been more irritating to her since she hadn't *wanted* to befriend him – grin of his at her. "Besides, I trust you not to make off with my good silverware." He'd chuckled lightly, and it had forced her to crack a small smile of her own.

"You never know," she'd tentatively joked. "I may decide yours is better than the hand-me-downs that I have."

He'd laughed then and his eyes had sparkled with his amusement. "Well, in that case, what's mine is yours."

She'd rolled her eyes at the cheesy line back then, but now she knew that Clark had meant it. She could have purloined all his silverware and he wouldn't have even mentioned it, let alone gotten upset with her. He'd been so trusting of her, even though they'd barely known each other and she'd been actively trying to avoid becoming his friend. But he'd opened his heart to her without a second thought. How stupid she'd been to fight against his gentle, easy charm and freely given friendship. The thought brought a tear to her eye and she brusquely wiped it away with the back of a hand. Clark had always treated her like the center of his universe and she...

No. I won't go down that path.

"There has to be a clue around here somewhere," she muttered to herself as she shut the door behind her and went down the steps into his living room.

Placing her purse on the couch, she stood still for a moment, just taking in the familiar sight of his apartment. But something about it felt off. There was a musty, neglected feeling to his home, even though it was barely more than two full weeks since he'd disappeared – now confirmed by Perry, who'd seen Clark just a scant twenty-four hours before Lois' aborted wedding. She'd seen his mailbox on the way in – a sticker from the post office had been plastered onto it, informing him that they were holding his mail until he could clear out his box. A layer of dust could be seen on his bookshelves and tables. There was a faint smell in the air. She followed it to the fridge and cautiously opened the door, immediately regretting her choice as a putrid stench of moldering and rotting food slapped her in the face. She slammed the door shut as she gagged. That, more than anything, was proof to her that something bad had happened to Clark. He wouldn't take off to parts unknown and leave behind food to spoil in his fridge.

She checked the bedroom next but found nothing of note there. His bed was perfectly made, which came as no surprise. Clark was probably the neatest, most organized person she knew. She checked his dresser and found the drawers full nearly to the

top. He definitely hadn't packed any bags. And his closet was the same way, with no evidence that he'd taken anything before he'd vanished. Frowning in thought, she padded to the bathroom and found that to be in immaculate condition too. A check of the hamper showed her that Clark hadn't even done his laundry before he'd gone missing; another sign that he hadn't disappeared by choice.

Sighing and feeling slightly defeated – though she hadn't *really* expected to find anything that would tell her exactly where Clark had gone – she went back out into his living room. Without any true hope, she checked the closet by the stairs and then the one closer to the kitchen, but nothing seemed out of place. Except...

"What's this?" she asked herself as her fingertips brushed against what felt like a barely-there opening in the back of closet as she rifled through the coats Clark kept there.

Curious, she pushed the coats aside. There was *definitely* a gap between the back of the closet and the wall. She furrowed her brow as she slipped her fingers into the crack.

"I wonder," she said, just before attempting to open up the gap a little more.

To her surprise, the faux panel slid noiselessly to the left, without much effort at all. And behind the panel...

"What the hell?" she gaped.

An entire hidden rack of Superman suits hung neatly in a row, and several pairs of the hero's red boots were perfectly arranged on a low shoe-rack. Lois ran her fingers over the fabric of one of the unitards. She'd flown with Superman more times than she could count. She'd been the only person on the planet that he'd allowed to get close to him. She'd touched him so many times – a hand on his chest, a caress of her hand down his arm, even a hug when she'd been rescued from a close call. The moment she felt the silky Spandex beneath her fingers she knew, without a doubt, that they were the real thing, not some home-made knockoff to fulfill some weird fetish. She checked the capes too, which were hung separately from the main part of the uniform. She shook her head in wonderment as she realized that the heavy material was also the real deal.

"Clark?" she whispered to herself in amazement, unable to keep the words confined to her mind. "Could it be...?"

She wished she could ask him directly, to have him either confirm or deny that he was Superman. She needed to know. But even as she stared, wide-eyed, at the evidence before her, second-guessing the conclusion she'd come to, she knew it *had* to be true. Because not only was *Clark* missing, *Superman* was suspiciously absent from making rescues as well. *Neither* man had been seen in weeks.

She staggered back a few steps as the pieces of the puzzle fit together in her mind and she felt like the wind was knocked out of her.

Clark was Superman.

Superman was Clark.

"Oh, God, it's true," she whispered again as the two men in her mind merged seamlessly into one.

But what to do with the costumes? She couldn't leave them here, where they had a chance of being discovered if the apartment was broken into. But she couldn't very well bundle them all up in her arms and carry them out to her Jeep. Late though it was at night, she dared not risk the random passerby happening to see the uniforms. Suddenly, an idea struck her, and she hurried back to the closet near the door. A beat-up old suitcase was on the bottom of the closet. She smiled as she ran her fingers over the faded light blue material, picturing Clark traveling the world with his meager possessions stowed away within the suitcase.

And then she began to cry.

She sank down to the floor, sobbing and heaving with the effort to get enough air into her lungs. All her terror for Clark came shooting to the surface now that she *knew* he was Superman.

His disappearance was all the more dire to her with that knowledge – not because the world needed its greatest hero, but because he was *Superman*. His powers should have gotten him out of whatever situation had arisen. The fact that he was still gone meant that he was probably gravely hurt somewhere or – and here she gave a strangled cry of realization – possibly even dead.

“No,” she choked out between sobs. “He’s *not* dead. He’s alive. I just need to find him,” she repeated as she took the suitcase over to the hidden compartment in the other closet.

I’ll find you, Clark. I promise. If I have to travel to the ends of the Earth, I’ll find you. If it’s the last thing I ever do, I’ll find you. If it takes every last cent I have, I’ll find you. There’s nowhere I won’t go. There’s nothing that can stop me.

She began to lovingly take the Superman suits off their hangers, fold them, and store them inside the battered piece of luggage.

Don’t worry, Clark. I’ll make sure these stay safe for you, she thought with a watery smile as she lovingly ran a hand over the bold S design on one of the unitards, as though it would help her feel more connected to her missing best friend.

But...how to find him? He could fly around the globe within minutes. He could be literally anywhere – deep in the Amazon rainforest, in the Swiss Alps, on a glacier in Antarctica, on the beach of a deserted island, exploring some vast network of caves, even brooding inside the caldera of a volcano. How could she *ever* hope to find him?

“Think, Lois,” she reprimanded herself as she forced away her tears. She squared her shoulders and huffed away the remnants of her instinct to break down again. “You *know* Clark, his little secret aside. You know how he thinks. You know his likes and dislikes. You know the way his heart works. What makes sense?” She paused and thought. “Perry said he and Jimmy were working with Clark to prove that Lex was The Boss. But all their leads wound up pointing to Bill Church and his son. Clark disappeared in the midst of their investigation. I need to talk to Jimmy and Perry and find out *exactly* what leads Clark was looking into before he vanished. But first...I need to do something else...something that I *hope* helps me find him.”

She was about to start packing away his boots when she realized something that made her stop short.

“Wait a minute. There’s a suit missing,” she said to herself out of habit. Living alone for as long as she had, she’d gotten into the habit of talking to herself out loud, just to feel less lonely.

She quickly counted the suits and capes, then the number of hangers. Both pieces of the uniform each had an extra hanger in the closet that now hung empty, and there was an empty space on the shoe-rack where a pair of boots should have been.

“Clark’s too tidy to have extra hangers around. He would have had a suit on every single one. It would have driven him crazy to have extras in there for no reason. And he would have spaced the boots differently to fill in all the unused space.”

Realization hit her, and she could feel the blood rushing away from her face. She felt simultaneously cold and hot and she broke out into a clammy sweat.

“Whatever happened to him, it didn’t happen to Clark. It happened to *Superman*. I need to track his last known whereabouts.”

With a new determination brought about by finding her first clue – meager as it was – she set back to work and packed away the rest of the boots.

“I think I know where to start,” she told herself with a resolute nod.

Lois bounced anxiously on the balls of her feet, her stomach twisted into knots as she raised her fist to the worn, battered storm door before her. But before she could knock, she hesitated, wondering if she was doing the right thing. After all, she wasn’t

exactly an *expected* guest. For all she knew, her recent, abhorrent behavior might earn her nothing more than scorn and an unkind rejection. She wished she could go back in time and stop herself from being so horrible to Clark. The things she’d said to him, the insinuations she’d made...all of it made her mentally cringe as she recalled it all. She should have known better. She should have known *Clark* better. He *never* would have been jealous of her and Lex, even if he *had* been telling her the truth when he’d confessed his love for her in the park that day. And she *knew* he’d been telling the truth. Lying wasn’t Clark’s style, his secret life as a superhero aside. He’d been trying to save her from herself, from Lex...

I can’t go down that road again, she admonished herself, shaking her head. That had been all she could think of on the trip out here – the mistake she’d nearly made in marrying Lex and where on Earth Clark could have disappeared to.

Yes, she couldn’t be turned away once she knocked on this door. And she wouldn’t blame the Kents one bit for doing so. But she had to try...

For Clark, she thought with a sad sigh.

Summoning what little courage she felt she had, she forced herself to knock gently, praying that someone was awake and would answer. She held her breath and waited, straining her ears for any sound that might indicate that someone had heard her. She knew Clark would be listening with his powerful hearing if he’d been there. His childhood home or not, he wasn’t the type who would just walk in unannounced. A minute passed and Lois was about to knock again when she heard the sound of the inner locks being disengaged.

“Lois?” Martha asked, blinking in surprise as she opened the farmhouse door.

“Hi,” Lois said sheepishly. She gave the woman a slight, awkward wave. “I know it’s early and I wasn’t exactly invited here...”

“Come in, come in,” Martha beckoned, unlocking the screen door, which opened with a mournful creak. “You look exhausted,” she added in concern.

Lois fought back a yawn. “I took the red-eye flight,” she admitted. “I know I should have called but I was so worked up that I wasn’t thinking clearly,” she said as she stepped into the Kent’s cozy farmhouse.

“Martha? Who was at the door this early?” Jonathan called from the kitchen. Lois could picture Clark’s father puttering about making coffee or scrambling up some eggs for breakfast.

“It’s Lois,” Martha called back.

“Lois?”

Lois could hear Jonathan putting down whatever it was he was working with in the kitchen and then his footsteps grew closer. In a moment, he appeared in the doorway, an old, but clean, dishtowel draped over his shoulder.

“Hi, I’m so sorry to intrude,” Lois said by way of a greeting. “I don’t mean to be a bother but...I needed to talk to you about Clark’s disappearance and I was afraid to discuss things over the phone.”

“You’re never a bother, dear,” Martha reassured her. “Is...” She swallowed hard before continuing and Lois could see her fighting back hope that Lois had news to share. “Did you...find anything about Clark?”

Lois took a deep breath before replying. “Not yet,” she admitted sheepishly. “But I think I understand where to start a little better now. *I hope.*” She fidgeted nervously as Martha led her over to the couch. Together, the women sat down, while Jonathan opted for the high-backed armchair. “I went to his apartment last night. I’m sure he probably told you that he gave me a key a while back.”

Jonathan nodded. “He told us the night he gave it to you,” he said gently, with a far off look in his eyes as he wandered through

his memories. “He asked us if we thought he’d done the right thing in giving it to you so soon.”

Lois chuckled softly, just once. “That sounds like Clark all right. What’d you tell him?”

Jonathan smiled tenderly. “I told him if I was paired up with a beautiful woman – from his descriptions of you, of course – I’d give her my key too.” He laughed softly.

Lois blushed; her entire face heating up suddenly. She self-consciously tucked a strand of hair behind her left ear. Then she cleared her throat, wanting nothing more than to get back to the subject at hand and not on Clark’s now-obvious crush on her.

“Anyway,” she said, fidgeting again and putting her hand on the light blue luggage she’d taken from Clark’s apartment, as well as her own. “I went looking for clues. I had no idea what I was looking for, but I hoped to find something – anything – that could tell me where to start looking for him. But instead of...I don’t know, some map with a big circle made in red ink...I found...well...something else.”

She pushed the luggage closer to Martha, who looked at it questioningly.

“What...” Martha began, but she did not finish.

Lois cleared her throat, finding it suddenly difficult to say the words. “I found his Superman suits.”

Jonathan and Martha exchanged a silent, panicked look which broke Lois’ heart. Instantly, she knew what they must be feeling – the worry over if they could trust her with the truth or if they should lie but potentially risk Lois missing something critical as she tried to locate their son.

“I brought them with me, figuring they’d be safer here than at his place,” she continued, nudging the luggage a hair closer to Clark’s mother. “I’m not going to expose his secret, if you’re worried about that.” She had to reassure them that her intentions were pure. “He’s my best friend even if I’ve been acting like a spoiled brat toward him lately. I’d never do anything to hurt him. I just want to...have all the facts, so I can try to find him.”

Martha slowly nodded. “He never wanted anyone to know.” She shook her head. “Although, I think he would have told you, in time. He just wanted to make sure that you saw him for who he really is first, not for the things he can do.” She reached out and patted Lois’ knee. “I hope you aren’t too upset with him for deceiving you.”

“In other circumstances, I think I might have been,” Lois admitted slowly. “But finding out like this? It just makes me all the more scared for what might have happened to him. No one has seen Clark *or* Superman in weeks. Which means he’s not able to use his powers to get home. Has anything like that ever happened before?”

Jonathan nodded. “Once, when you two came to Smallville during the CornFest. Come on into the kitchen. I’ll make us all some coffee and tell you all about it,” he offered, standing.

Lois nodded her thanks and stood, prepared to follow him into the kitchen. Martha stayed put for a moment. Lois watched as Clark’s mother opened the suitcase, pulled out one of the blue unitards, and hugged it to her chest before her tears started to fall. Lois put a hand on the woman’s shoulder, trying to impart some comfort.

“I promise you, Martha. I won’t rest until I find Clark. I don’t care how long it takes me.”

“Say it!” Luthor commanded as Nigel delivered another savage blow to Clark’s midsection, the fist feeling as though it had been cast from steel rather than flesh and bone.

Clark coughed up a small globule of blood at the impact to his once invulnerable body, wheezing with the effort of pulling in enough air to keep from blacking out. The blood hit the concrete floor and splattered there – a horrific red reminder of the beating he was taking. And yet, it was just one of dozens of such splashes

of his precious life fluid covering the floor. How many beatings had he taken so far? He’d lost count. How long had he been Luthor’s prisoner? Too long. He knew where each drop of blood had come from – the big one to his right was from when Nigel had sliced his stomach – more than once – with a razor-sharp knife, the smaller, vaguely Virginia-shaped one was from his most recent split lip, the tiny cluster before his knees was only a few days old from when he’d once more coughed up blood, the old dried, nearly black blood covering the cage bars was from Nigel’s attempt to break him with a cat of nine tails...

Clark mentally shook himself out of such thoughts. It served him no purpose to follow such a train of thought down into the darkness. He had to focus on the here and now.

“*Say it!*” Luthor roared.

“My name is *Clark Kent*,” he managed through gritted teeth, his eyes blazing from both pain and determination not to give in to whatever sick game Luthor was playing at.

Nigel delivered a vicious blow that broke one of Clark’s ribs. Clark felt the bone snap and his breathing immediately changed. Each new breath felt like lava in his chest as the expansion of his lungs forced the newly broken rib to shift. Bits of his flesh tore away from his chest as Nigel ripped his hand back, readying himself for another strike with his brass-knuckle encrusted fist.

“You’re rather stupid,” Lex quipped, clearly enjoying the show before him. “All you have to do is give up on the Clark hoax and the pain will stop.”

“It’s *not* a hoax,” Clark growled back.

He didn’t *dare* give up so easily. If he let Luthor determine what identity Clark could claim, there would be no telling what the insane billionaire would do next.

Luthor sighed like a disappointed schoolteacher with a particularly strong-willed and disobedient student. He waved a dismissive hand in the air.

“Nigel,” he said along with the wave, in a way that suggested the man take *carte blanche* with Clark.

Nigel nodded, his face passive and unreadable, but a delighted fire was in his eyes. A ripple of fear coursed through Clark’s veins as he wondered in terror at what the older man would do next. Nigel appeared to be mulling over his options and Clark found himself both dreading the decision and just wanting whatever it would be to be over and done with. A few heartbeats later, he wanted that time back as Nigel stuck. The man’s hands shot forward with all the speed and accuracy of a striking cobra, and before Clark fully registered the danger he was in, his right wrist had been snapped. Clark screamed and instinctively grabbed for the injured wrist, but Nigel intercepted him and with a violent twist, broke Clark’s left wrist as well.

Pain cloaked Clark’s entire world in shades of red and black, and he mercifully passed out.

Lois swiped the card key into the lock on her hotel room. The green light blinked and the lock released, granting her access to the room. She shoved the door open with a bump of her hip as she dragged her luggage behind her. It was just a small, carry on suitcase on wheels but she didn’t need much. She wasn’t planning on staying in Washington, D.C. for long. Just a night or two, depending on how quickly she could locate the woman she needed to speak with. Then she would be on the next flight out back to Metropolis. She’d promised Perry she wouldn’t be gone long, now that the Daily Planet had been bought, rebuilt, and was back in operation, thanks to Mr. Stern, who wanted nothing more than to fly the paper’s success like a banner in the face of Lex Luthor. Lois didn’t blame Mr. Stern one bit. Though nothing had even been pinned on Lex, she had the nagging sensation that his ownership of the paper right before it had been bombed was more than just a way to woo her. Clark had been right – Lex had implemented too many changes, too fast, causing more than half

the staff to lose their jobs or be sent to other areas of the building, resulting in serious pay cuts.

He'd wanted to destroy the Daily Planet from the inside out, leaving his own news networks to thrive in the paper's demise.

She still had the sneaking suspicion that Lex wasn't entirely innocent in the bombing either, but all the leads had circled back to Intergang. At least Jack's name had been cleared, even if the two young members of Intergang still maintained their innocence. Lois allowed a tired smile to cross her lips. As blusterous and smart-mouthed as Jack could be, she missed him. He hadn't wanted to stay in the city after being blamed for a crime he hadn't committed, and she couldn't fault him for that. Still, she missed having him around and, though they kept in contact over emails and phone calls, she knew Clark would have hated that Jack felt forced out of the paper.

The heavy door slammed shut behind her as she moved further into the room. She inhaled the scent of the cleaning products – a smell that had rapidly become *very* familiar to her as she continued her crusade to find Clark. She sighed and sat on the queen-sized bed closest to the door, letting go of the luggage's handle as she did so. She leaned back and let herself fall backward onto the clean, white comforter. It was amazing, she thought distractedly, that all hotel rooms looked and smelled the same, no matter where in the country she went.

"Ugh," she moaned, rubbing her temples.

The flight had been a nightmare. She'd had a mother with a screaming infant sitting next to her, a seven or eight-year-old boy who'd repeatedly kicked her seat sitting behind her, and someone in the vicinity of the seats in front of her – or had they been seated across the row from her? – who'd absolutely *reeked* of body odor, despite the fact that it was freezing out. And then there had been the turbulence. It was snowing in D.C. and, though the storm wasn't too bad, it had made for some rough air and one of the worst landings of Lois' life.

"I hope this trip is worth it," she said to herself, pinching the bridge of her nose.

Clark.

It all came down to him.

"If this woman can help at all, it'll all be worth it," she reminded herself.

She forced herself to sit up again and rummaged through her suitcase for a minute before extracting her pajamas. She brought them into the bathroom with her, took the hottest shower she could stand, then dressed and brushed her teeth. As soon as her head hit the pillow, her exhaustion hit in full force and she was asleep within moments.

The following day dawned bleak and overcast. The previous day's storm had mostly moved on but had left a trail of lighter snow showers in its wake. By the time Lois had dressed, eaten a hasty breakfast, and hailed a cab to her destination, small, frozen flakes were lazily drifting through the air to add their coverage to the snow-blanketed city. Lois pulled her faux-fur hat down more snugly onto her head and pulled on her black leather gloves with the matching cuffs and fleece lining.

She nervously tapped her fingers on her knee as the cab driver navigated the well-plowed and salted streets. Her eyes watched the city passing by outside the car's windows, but they were as well defined as ghosts to her and she barely even noted them, not even when they drove right past the White House. Her mind was only on her destination and what she had to do once she got there.

It wasn't long before the car stopped and the cabbie turned toward her to inform her that they had arrived and what her fare was. Distractedly, she fished the money out of her wallet, making sure to tip the man, and exited the vehicle. The cab drove off as soon as she shut the door, the driver eager to pick up another fare. Lois was left all alone facing the Themysciran Emissary. She took

a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and prayed that her source wasn't wrong. Then she crossed the street at the crosswalk and, with bold, confident strides, mounted the steps up into the building.

Please, let me find her; she begged the universe as she got to the last step.

At the top, she took a moment to catch her breath, taking in the beautifully imposing building before her. It looked as though it had been plucked from a tourism guide featuring ancient Greek temples to the gods and goddesses of Olympus. Tall, white marble columns framed the massive doors and held up the triangular roof. Men, women, and beasts of myths and legends decorated the roofline; all of them carved with such precision that they looked alive. Lois blinked more than once at the illusion that they were moving, breathing, locked in battle, or simply watching the passersby.

"Wow," she breathed in quiet awe of the building.

But she wasn't here to gawk at the architecture. She was on a mission. She just hoped she could find the woman she was looking for.

A grim smile ghosted over Lois' lips as she recalled the first time she'd heard of Wonder Woman. Clark had been missing for nearly three months at that point. It had seemed like new heroes had been popping up like daisies in the wake of Superman's absence. But something about the woman who'd flown into a warzone, disarmed the terrorists, and single-handedly ended the conflict without so much as shedding a single drop of blood had caught Lois' eye. Perhaps it had been *because* it had been a woman to do that. Or maybe it was because it felt *so much* like what Clark would have done. Either way, Lois had known instantly that she needed to enlist Wonder Woman's help in finding Superman.

Getting to her had been a problem though. Lois wasn't exactly local to Washington, D.C., and Wonder Woman didn't keep regular office hours. Between the rescues she made and whatever private life she might have, it was impossible to predict when she might be at the Emissary. It had taken Lois months of trying and failing, but now it seemed the heroine was in town. And Lois would talk to her, if it was the last thing she ever did.

Once more determined, Lois crossed the small courtyard in front of the building and went inside. She'd taken not more than a dozen steps into the lobby when she stopped short.

"Oh my God, you're *her*: Wonder Woman," she breathed in awe as she gazed at the tall, muscular Amazon woman talking to the receptionist at the front desk. "I can't *believe* I finally tracked you down."

The woman gave Lois a guarded, but friendly, smile. "Always nice to meet a fan."

"Oh, I'm not...I mean I *am* a fan. But that's not why I'm so glad to run into you," Lois started to explain at a breakneck pace. "My name is Lois Lane. I'm a reporter from..."

"The Daily Planet. Yes, I've read your work," Wonder Woman supplied warily. "But I'm here on business. I have no time for an interview, I'm afraid."

"Oh...no!" Lois stammered, chancing a step forward. "I'm not here for an interview. I mean, in the future, it'd be amazing to sit down with you for one," she added hastily, hoping she hadn't offended the woman. "At least...someday it would. But the reason I'm here today...it's...something else. I need your help," she continued, her voice dropping a little as though to shield prying ears from listening in. "My friend is missing and I..."

Wonder Woman's brow furrowed in concern. "That must be *some* friend if you came to seek me out," she quipped, though not unkindly.

"He is," Lois replied, moving closer so that she could whisper her next words. "He's Superman."

Wonder Woman stepped back as though slapped. Her eyes

were troubled as she regarded Lois. Slowly, she nodded, then waved Lois on as she turned on her heel and started down the right-most hallway that branched out of the lobby.

“Come with me. We need to speak in private.”

Lois let out a relieved sigh. Wonder Woman was going to listen to her plea for help! Or maybe, just maybe, she had some information to share with Lois. Lois tried to calm her racing heart. She squelched the flicker of hope that sprung up in her chest. Better to kill it now than to suffer the heartbreak that would come if Wonder Woman *didn't* know of Clark's whereabouts.

Wonder Woman walked with a quick, purposeful stride, easily navigating the complex series of corridors until she stopped before a large set of elegant chestnut colored doors. She pushed open the right door and held it open for Lois. Lois nodded her thanks and followed the heroine into an expansive office. Lois took it all in as she trailed Wonder Woman across the office toward a sleek, curved, polished desk.

The office was comfortable – a deep maroon carpet cushioned their footsteps – but light and airy. Here and there, swords and shields decorated the walls – all of them artfully and lovingly displayed on rich wooden plaques. There was the occasional marble bust displayed on marble pedestals as well – all of them strong, noble women; clearly heroes and loved ones from Wonder Woman's home of Themyscira. Sunlight flooded the space, courtesy of a full wall of floor to ceiling windows lining the back wall behind the desk. To the right, a hearth burned with a merry fire. Wonder Woman gestured to the plush, maroon colored armchairs that stood before the fireplace. Lois sat, still a little uneasy in the presence of such a powerful woman.

Perhaps it was her silence that unnerved Lois. She was used to the cheerful banter she'd always enjoyed with Superman. Perhaps it was just the gravity of the situation. Even after all these moments of trying to find leads that would bring Clark home to her, it hadn't gotten any easier to accept the fact that he was missing.

Wonder Woman selected a few fat pieces of wood and gently eased them into the blazing fire. She studied the flames for a moment, then pushed at them with the poker that stood nearby. Satisfied, she sat across from Lois and folded her hands in her lap.

“I've heard about Superman's disappearance,” she said at last, her face and voice deathly serious. “The whole world is talking about it. I never had the honor of meeting him, mind you. Unfortunately, our paths never crossed and I've spent the last few months back home, tending to some urgent business.” She fell silent and seemed to appraise Lois with her gaze. “Tell me, of all the people in the world, how does it fall on the shoulders of a reporter to seek out my help?”

Lois swallowed hard against the lump in her throat. “Superman is a close friend of mine. I've been working relentlessly since he vanished in the late spring, trying to find him...or at least what happened to him. A lot of people...people who don't know him like I do...they think he's abandoned us. They think he's left Earth...gone searching amongst the stars for more of his own people. They've...given up on him. They don't care about what really happened...they just want to hate him for not being around to fix the world for us.”

“Are you so sure that *isn't* the case? That he *hasn't* simply gone in search for other Kryptonians?” Wonder Woman asked thoughtfully, though there was no accusation there.

“I'm sure,” Lois said with all of her conviction in that one, tiny word. “I *know* him, Wonder Woman. He'd *never* do *anything* like that without letting the world know what he was up to. And he would have promised to come back. This disappearance...this *isn't* right. Something bad has happened to him. I can't explain how I know. I just do.”

Wonder Woman nodded solemnly. “There's more that you aren't telling me,” she rightly deduced.

“I...” Lois stammered. “It doesn't matter,” she covered a moment later. “It doesn't affect what I'm telling you. Superman is missing and I have *no clue* where he is, why he's vanished, or even if he's still alive. And it's *killing* me. Please...help me,” she pleaded, choking back tears.

“You love him,” Wonder Woman said softly, clearly moved by Lois' emotion.

“He's my best...” Lois said, unable to finish the statement. “Please...”

“I'll help you,” Wonder Woman promised, “but you'll need to tell me everything you know.”

Lois nodded. “I'll do my best. It's, unfortunately, not a lot. I know he went missing around May twenty-eighth...I was supposed to get married that day but I said no and...” She stopped herself. “Sorry, I'm babbling. He always used to call me out on that.” She smiled bittersweetly. “That's all I really have. I've followed a ton of false leads. I've been all over this country trying to track down as many other superheroes as I can find to enlist their help in the search. Central City to find this Flash guy, New York City to find this guy who's more machine than a person...”

“Cyborg, yes,” Wonder Woman confirmed with a nod.

“Right,” Lois nodded in turn. “Took me a long, *long* time to get in contact with him. Much longer than I would have liked,” she sheepishly admitted.

“He's a bit...skittish...at first,” Wonder Woman allowed with a gesture.

“I took a boat out into the middle of nowhere and screamed my lungs out until I *finally* got Aquaman's attention,” Lois continued, ticking each hero off on her fingers. “Spiderman, Iron Man, Captain America, Green Lantern, Captain Marvel...no one knows anything. No one has seen Superman. There's not even the *whisper* of rumors of his voice being heard anywhere.”

“Batman?” Wonder Woman suggested.

Lois' shoulders slumped. “I haven't quite gotten that far. He's next on my list, though he might be just as hard to find as Aquaman. I doubt the Gotham PD will give me carte blanche to go light up that bat-light of theirs to flag him down. I'm going to *try*, of course,” she added with determination.

“Don't bother. He and I know each other. I'll talk to him for you, plus a few others that I can think of,” Wonder Woman said, a steely look of resolve in her eyes.

A rush of air whooshed out of Lois' lungs in gratitude. “You will? Thank you! Thank you so much!”

But Wonder Woman looked thoughtful and a little saddened. “I wish I could do more. I wish I had some information to share.”

“Just having your eyes – and those of whoever you get to help in finding him – is a great help,” Lois assured her, reaching across the scant distance between the chairs to boldly take the heroine's hands.

But Wonder Woman shook her head. “I hope it's enough.”

It was happening again. The bars of the cage were lit up with a bright, but sickly, green glow as the Kryptonite was exposed. Clark lay on the floor, writhing in pain, his eyes shut tight against the poisonous assault of the stone. He could scarcely breathe and when he *did* breathe too deeply, he coughed until he was certain his lungs were going to explode. There was a deep-seated wheeze in every inhalation and a world of pain with every exhalation.

A part of him almost wished Luthor would keep the Kryptonite exposed long enough for it to do its job and kill him. He'd known nothing but torture for...how long had it been now? Months, certainly. He'd suffered from more broken bones than he could count – many of them broken repeatedly as he continued to rail against his captors by refusing to admit to any name other than Clark Kent. He could barely stand as his broken ankles had healed improperly. His fingers were mangled and freshly broken. He doubted the bones would ever set correctly. His left eye was

currently swollen shut from a black eye Nigel had given him just two days prior.

Everything hurt all the time and Clark wasn't sure how much more he could endure.

When the relief of the Kryptonite being shut away again came, Clark was vaguely disappointed. He almost didn't care that his death would give Luthor the final victory over him. He just wanted to be out of Luthor's reach. He just wanted to leave his mortal body behind to free his soul from the daily torture he was subjected to.

And yet, he knew he had to fight. He just didn't know *how*. Locked in his cage, powerless and physically broken, he had no hope of escape. All his hopes rested outside the walls of Luthor Tower, with Lois. If anyone could save him, it was her.

"Now, tell me...who are you?" Luthor crooned, looking down on him like a hungry predator sizing up their next kill.

"Why are you doing this?" Clark spat back, mustering up what miniscule amount of strength he had left. "Why not just kill me and be done with it?"

Luthor grinned darkly. "A tempting offer, I must admit. But...no. If I kill you now, my victory is set...over and done with in one messy moment of lost restraint. By keeping you alive, I've secured a daily victory. Seeing you here, groveling before me, helpless against the man you tried to tear down...it's *far* too good to pass up." He gripped the bars and leaned down to squat, affording him a better view of his victim. "I'm *enjoying* chipping away at you, eroding what you used to be, erasing you from memory, just as you tried to do to me. Already, the people have turned on their supposed 'hero.' They are convinced you left them high and dry, a fickle alien who thought himself too good for the petty problems of this dystopian planet. And it's only January. I give it another year before not a single person even utters your name anymore and the monuments to you are torn down and discarded."

January? Clark thought in disbelief. *Has it really been that long? Lois, if you're out there...please...find me.*

"That bothers you, doesn't it?" Luthor asked, a hungry glint in his eyes.

"That it's January?" Clark asked, using a fraction of his remaining strength to lift one eyebrow, though his voice trembled with the effort of his aching lungs.

Luthor reached in and grabbed Clark by the collar of his suit and slammed his head against the bars of the cage with such force that Clark's ears rang and he saw double.

"That you'll soon be forgotten – not even in the tiniest little footnote of history," he sneered.

"I represent an idea," Clark said in a measured tone. "The desire to help, to bring about a more peaceful world, to bring out the best in society. You *can't* erase an idea, Luthor. With or without me, that desire to make the world a better place will live on. *Despite* the efforts of criminals like you," he added, half expecting the billionaire to slam his head into the bars again.

But Luthor surprised him. The man stood and dusted his palms off on his pant legs, as though touching Clark had been akin to touching some disgusting, slimy object. Although, Clark had to wonder when he'd last been blasted with the icy water of the hose Nigel had rigged up in the cellar, for the sole purpose of keeping Clark from stinking too badly. Clark was actually more surprised that the sadistic Englishman hadn't used it to waterboard him yet.

"Shall I?" Nigel asked, jerking his head toward the cage.

Luthor pondered the offer for a moment, then shook his head. "No, I don't think so. I've got a better idea."

Two weeks passed after Lois's meeting with Wonder Woman, and not a single new lead had turned up as she searched for Clark – not from her own digging, not from her street sources, not from Wonder Woman or any of the other heroes she'd recruited to her cause. She'd spoken to Clark's parents only once in that time - the

night she'd secured Wonder Woman's help. She wondered if she should call the Kents, just to check in, but she didn't really have the heart to deflate their fragile hope. So, she kept herself busy every day until it was far too late to call, justifying her radio-silence that way.

A knock sounded at her door and she answered it, finding the local Chinese food delivery man standing in the hallway. She gave a very tired – and very fake – smile to him as she grabbed the money from her pajama pants pocket.

"Hi, Miss Lane," the man greeted her.

"Hi, Shen," she said in return.

"Second order this week. You must have a big story you're working on," the young man impishly joked with her.

"You can say that again," she replied, her heart heavy as she threw an involuntary look over at the pages of research and open laptop that now dominated her entire coffee table.

"Any luck finding Mr. Kent?" the man asked gently, his eyes downcast.

Lois could only shake her head.

"Not yet, huh?" His false optimism reminded her of Clark in that moment and it made her want to cry.

"Not yet," she agreed huskily, choking back the frustration and anguish that haunted her. She handed him the cash for her meal, plus a few dollars in a tip.

"Thanks. Oh, and I threw in a packet of almond cookies," Shen added, pointing to the brown paper bag encased in a white plastic bag with a big yellow smiley face on it as he handed it over.

"Thanks, that was really nice of you," Lois said with a slightly more genuine smile.

Shen shrugged. "You're my best customer."

Lois managed a half-hearted chuckle. "Tell your grandmother to keep making food as tasty as she does and I'll never order from anywhere else."

But the statement tore a fresh hole in her heart as she remembered past meals shared with Clark. He'd always found the best takeout places – both within Metropolis and, as she now surmised, outside of the country. If she had to guess, that Chinese food he'd brought for them to share while they'd worked on their first story together had likely actually come *from* China. And those amazing tacos he'd buy whenever she had the craving for Mexican food? Probably from Mexico. And those Swiss chocolates he'd bring her for no reason other than 'hey, we both had a rough day at work yesterday'? Certainly authentic and straight from the source. Thinking about the way he'd go out of his way – even if he *could* fly around the world in minutes – broke her heart anew.

Shen nodded. "Will do, Miss Lane. See you soon!"

Before she could formulate a reply, he was already sauntering off down the hall, pocketing the cash she'd given him. Lois shut the door and brought her dinner over to the couch. Even with it now being over half a year since Clark's disappearance, she still felt the weight of every passing second. She didn't waste time in portioning out the food onto a plate. She popped the cartons of food open and dug in with the provided chopsticks. But as she chewed a mouthful of boneless spareribs, she had to admit that she was feeling a bit defeated. And she had no idea where to look next for even the *hint* of a fresh lead.

"Oh, Clark, where *are* you?" she whispered miserably to herself as she tossed aside the paper she'd been staring at. Her computer dinged and she refreshed her email robotically. Her eyes popped open and she set aside her food as she read the sender's address. "Wonder Woman?" she mumbled to herself, and her heart gave a little hopeful flip in her chest. "Maybe she's found something?" She took a deep breath and closed her eyes before opening the email. "Don't get your hopes up, Lois," she warned herself.

Opening her eyes once again, she clicked the email and fear,

rather than optimism, flooded her heart.

Lois, the email began, it's me, Wonder Woman. I've been doing all I can in trying to locate Superman. We need to speak further on the subject. It seems odd to me that the date you provided (May 28th) is also connected to another missing persons report you filed. Another friend of yours, to be precise. A Mr. Clark Kent.

I'm concerned about the timing of these two disappearances. If there's any connection between the two, I need to know. And so do my other friends. It's possible we may find one if we find the other, if you catch my meaning.

I understand your hesitation in mentioning both people at our meeting, particularly if I'm right in surmising that the two men are...shall we say...connected. As a gesture of good faith on our behalf, my friends and I are willing to divulge that we all have our own secrets identities that we use to keep our personal lives separate from our more public personas. All of us are committed to keeping Superman's secret safe as well, if he indeed has one.

This email is encrypted so that only you and I can access it. Any reply you send will remain between you and me, without the need to worry about someone else gaining access to the information within. Please, contact me at your convenience. My friends and I want to find Superman, but we need your help to do it.

Sincerely,

Wonder Woman

AKA Diana Prince

AKA Diana, Daughter of Hippolyta, Princess of Themyscira

Lois felt sick to her stomach as she read the email over and over again. Wonder Woman – Diana – was right, of course. It could well be that Clark was somewhere as himself, rather than Superman. But his secret was *his*, not hers to give away. And yet, by keeping the secret, she could be endangering any chance of finding him.

For a few terrifying minutes, she was paralyzed with indecision, the email mocking her until she finally shut the lid of the computer, as though having the words out of her sight would make her feel any less panicked. She gulped hard, trying to calm her racing heart, then she picked up the phone, and with trembling hands, dialed the now-familiar number from memory. She drummed her fingers on her thighs and cradled the headset in the crook of her neck as it dialed. But as soon as she heard the tone change and the tentative “hello?” from Martha, she gripped the phone like it was her lifeline.

“Hi, Martha? It’s Lois,” she said, trying to keep the concern she had out of her voice.

“Hi, dear,” Martha said warmly, though Lois could tell the woman was restraining herself from jumping straight to the ‘any news on Clark’ questions.

“Martha? Is Jonathan there with you?” Lois asked cautiously. “I have...an important question to ask you both. Something...” She paused, trying to come up with the correct words to convey just how shattering her question would be.

“Is...has there been some development?” Martha responded, her voice hitching a bit.

“No leads, I’m afraid. But a new ally in our search,” Lois answered carefully.

“Jonathan? Pick up the extension,” Martha instructed her husband. Her voice was muffled a bit and Lois imagined that she’d pulled the phone away from her ear and held it against her chest.

There was a click and a sound of static, as though the mouthpiece of the phone was being dragged across some fabric, then Jonathan’s voice.

“Lois?” he said.

“Hi, Jonathan,” she greeted him. “I wish I was calling with better news,” she began. “But, as you know, I’ve been contacting

other...powerful individuals...you know, ones like Clark...as much as possible, hoping they can help us find Clark. I wish I’d been able to track down more of them at this point, but trying to pinpoint where any one of them might be at any given time...” Her voice trailed off. “I digress. Two weeks ago, I was able to speak with Wonder Woman.”

“We remember,” Jonathan commented softly, encouraging her, and she could picture Clark’s father nodding his head.

“She promised to get in touch with some of the others that I haven’t been able to,” Lois added.

“She’s better equipped for the task,” Martha said in turn. “It helps when you can fly around the world and all.” There was a touch of sadness to her words.

Lois nodded, though Clark’s parents couldn’t see. “I just got an email from her. She’s...made a tenuous connection between Clark and...who I asked her to find,” she said uneasily, not quite trusting the phone line to be secure.

Too many science fiction movies, she determined, but the worry was there nonetheless.

“She...offered me her...true identity, no strings attached,” she informed them, still reeling a bit from the unexpected email and information.

“Why?” Jonathan asked. Lois could tell from the tremble in his voice that his guard was up, his suspicions aroused.

“Jonathan, please,” Martha said soothingly, though Lois could tell she was on the defensive too. “Let Lois talk. I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation...” She let her voice trail off, allowing Lois to pick up the conversation.

“She wants me to trust her. And to confirm her suspicions and...and...I don’t know what to do.” Lois bit back a tormented sigh. “I don’t want to be the one to give up his...personal information. But if there’s *any* chance it might help our search...”

She let her voice go dead. The silence on the other end of the phone was deafening, and she could only imagine how badly Jonathan and Martha were reeling. Still, she wished one of them would say something – anything – to break the awkward quiet. She wanted desperately for them to tell her what to do. If *anyone* had the power to make the decision to divulge Clark’s secret, it was the people who’d raised him.

“Ahh...” Jonathan said, stammering, clearly at as much of a loss as Lois was.

“I don’t know what to tell her,” Lois said, nearly repeating herself.

“Is she trustworthy?” Martha asked, her tone of voice suggesting she was deep in thought.

“I’ve only met her the one time but...I felt like I could trust her, yeah,” Lois replied slowly, thinking back on her meeting with the Amazon warrior. “And from what I know about her, her values are the same as Clark’s.” It was important to point that out, in her mind. That, if anything, proved that the woman was someone they could trust.

“You said she gave you her own identity?” Jonathan asked thoughtfully. “No strings attached?”

“She wants me to know his secret will be safe, by offering up her own. She knows I’ll blast it all over the front page of the Daily Planet if she so much as *thinks* about telling the world who Clark is.”

“And she’ll keep this information completely to herself?” Clark’s father inquired.

“No. She’ll tell the others, so they can *all* keep an eye out for him. Or any trace of information about Clark,” Lois said with certainty.

“How can we trust them?” Jonathan wondered. “We don’t know these people from a hole in the wall. How can we be *sure* they’ll use the information only for its intended purpose?”

“We make them trade their information for ours,” Lois replied with cold determination. “Di...Wonder Woman said that every

single one of them has a private life.”

“Do it,” Martha said with grim resolve.

“Martha! You can’t be seriously agreeing to giving up our boy’s entire identity,” Jonathan exclaimed in surprise.

“It’s what Clark himself would choose. This may be our *only* chance to find him,” Martha replied.

Jonathan took a deep breath and noisily blew it out again. “You’re right. Lois, you have our blessing.”

Lois found herself trembling with the incredible sense of responsibility that now rested on her shoulders. “I will. Thanks. I...couldn’t have made that decision without your input,” she told them.

“No, thank *you* for everything you’ve done so far for our son,” Martha replied.

“I’ll call you in a day or two, once I’ve had a chance to talk to Wonder Woman,” she informed them.

“Thanks,” Jonathan acknowledged.

“This’ll work,” she promised. “It *has* to.”

Lois stood on the roof of her apartment building, shivering in the frigid night air. It was now well after midnight, and she was tired as well as cold, and more than a little hungry, though her stomach revolted at each thought of food. She hadn’t been able to eat any of the abandoned Chinese food. She’d been sick to her stomach with the idea of telling anyone – even someone as good and pure as Wonder Woman – that Clark was Superman.

I have no choice. I need her help. It’s been far too long since Clark vanished. I need all the help I can get. Because if I don’t...I fear what might happen to him. I fear what may have already happened to him. I need to bring him home, no matter what.

“I’m glad you decided to meet me,” Wonder Woman said, startling Lois out of her brooding thoughts as she came to a light touchdown before Lois.

“I’m glad you decided to come, rather than do this over email,” Lois replied. “Encrypted or not...I wasn’t comfortable having this discussion in printed words.”

Wonder Woman nodded in understanding. “Ever the reporter,” she said with an amused smile. “Everything is evidence to be found by the right person, even if it’s impossible to be found.”

“Clark’s investigative skills are proof that nothing is ever *really* safe,” Lois countered, fondly remembering how many ‘impossible’ leads he’d uncovered and how many ‘dead ends’ he’d busted through, though now she knew to attribute at least some of his success to the surreptitious use of his powers.

Wonder Woman’s smile grew. “Fair enough,” she allowed.

“The thing is, Wonder Woman,” Lois began.

“Diana, please. We’re partners in this investigation, Lois,” the Amazon gently corrected her. “Leave the ‘Wonder Woman’ title to the fanboys.” She smiled again and her eyes twinkled.

Lois found a tiny chuckle escaping her lips. “Okay. Diana.” She paused and sighed. “I hate admitting this but...you’re right. I was holding information back. I was scared. It’s not something I can ever...fix, if things go wrong. I didn’t want to be responsible for ruining my best friend’s life. But...after some thought and a conversation with Clark’s parents...well, I’m not exactly happy to be sharing this information. I just know it’s necessary, if we stand a chance of bringing him home. Clark...is Superman.”

For Lois, it felt like she’d dropped a nuclear bomb by divulging Clark’s secret. But Diana seemed unfazed by the revelation. The Amazon merely nodded to herself, as if confirming to herself that her suspicions had been accurate.

“Thank you, Lois. I know that wasn’t easy for you to tell me. But I’m glad you did. My friends and I will keep a sharp watch for *both* of his personas. You’re doing the right thing in trusting us.”

“I hope so,” Lois replied queasily.

Diana put a supportive hand on Lois’ shoulder. “You are. And I think, once we find him, Clark will agree that you had no other

choice. Here,” she said, slipping a small slip of paper out from beneath her gauntlet. “Take this.”

“What is it?” Lois asked, even as she accepted the paper.

“The others agreed with you in that if we were asking you to entrust Superman’s identity to us, then you should be privy to ours,” Diana replied, gently curling Lois’ fingers around the paper. “Commit it to memory, then burn the paper.”

“I’ll keep the information safe,” Lois promised. “You have nothing to worry about.”

Diana smiled softly. “We know. We’re all impressed with your dedication to find Clark, you know. Especially given how fickle the populace can be. So many have already forsaken the man they once revered.”

“I love him,” Lois admitted in a whisper. “He’s my best friend, my partner...the one man I was thinking about when I was getting ready to marry another. Clark’s the reason why I couldn’t go through with it. Even without being there, he saved me from the biggest mistake of my life. Please, bring him home to me.” What had started off as a staunch defense of Clark had devolved into a plea by the end.

“My friends and I will move Heaven and Earth looking for him,” Diana promised, stepping forward to envelope Lois in the hug that she sorely needed in that moment.

It was dark. So very dark. It was oppressive, suffocating, life-draining. How long had it been since he’d seen light – of any kind? Weeks, certainly. Months, more than likely. A year or more? Who knew? Even the *concept* of light felt like a fantasy – a cruel farce dreamed up by Satan’s minions to torment those who lived in the eternal pitch-blackness of this Hell on Earth.

Clark blinked, and it was only that sensation that allowed him to know that his eyes had, indeed, been open. There was no other way to tell. He couldn’t see so much as the hand in front of his face. He could only tell when there was food in his miserable little cell when he fumbled out in his forced blindness and bumped into the tray on the floor, or on the rare occasion when whatever he was served had enough of a pungent odor as to allow him to smell his way to his meal.

At least there was *one* upside to never seeing any light. It meant he hadn’t seen the glow of the Kryptonite bars for however long it had been since his world went dark.

But that was the *only* positive to the inky, eternal blackness he lived in. He never saw another human being. Even when his meals were delivered, it was done under the cover of darkness and without so much as the squeak of a shoe on the concrete floor to alert him to the presence of another person. He supposed they were brought during the times when sheer exhaustion allowed him to pass out for brief rests. He had to wonder if whoever was bringing the meals was doing it with the use of night-vision goggles. There could be no other explanation for how they were getting around in the dark.

Being robbed of his sight also meant that Clark could never prepare himself for anything that happened to him. Sometimes, out of nowhere, a powerful spray of cold water would drench him, cleaning both his suit and his body in one slipshod effort that usually had him gasping for breath under the torrent and left him with chattering teeth long after the water was shut off and he was left to drip dry. Sometimes, various noises were heard in the blackness – strange, intentionally terrifying noises that frayed what courage he had until he imagined it as a torn, bleeding animal inside of him.

He lost all sense of time. Not only was he restricted from knowing if it was day or night, or even what hour it was, he was never allowed to sleep more than what was likely an hour at a time. Mostly, he was assaulted with a loud, unending recording of a demonic, yet robotic, sounding voice.

You are Superman. There is no Clark Kent. There has never

been a Clark Kent. You are Superman. Only Superman. You will never be anything other than Superman.

Alone in the dark, with bloodshot eyes, a desperate need for sleep, and the oppressive isolation, Clark found his grasp of reality slipping away.

All was quiet, calm, and peaceful. It was just as it should be, Lex thought to himself as he shifted in his tall backed, leather desk chair, the color a deep mahogany that perfectly matched his desk. Only the crackling of the warm, cheerful fire in the hearth broke the silence, as well as the barely audible ticking of the grandfather clock on the opposite side of the expansive room. And, of course, the satisfying scratch of his favorite chiseled-tipped Mont Blanc pen as he glided it effortlessly over check after check. It was music to his ears as he thought about all of the businesses – both local Mom and Pop shops and nationally recognized giants – he was conquering and bringing to heel under his own empire.

“Sir?” Nigel announced stiffly as he poked his head into Lex Luthor’s office. “Miss Lane is here to see you.”

Lex looked up from his checkbook, but only after signing his name on the appropriate line. He capped his expensive pen, not wishing the ink to dry up. He could easily afford more, but why waste things unnecessarily? He gently tore the check along the perforated line and stuck it into the envelope he’d set aside. He held it out to Nigel.

“Excellent,” he said, as Nigel came into the room and accepted the envelope. “Ensure this gets to where it needs to, would you?”

“Of course. Shall I see Miss Lane in?” Nigel asked, sticking the envelope into the breast pocket of his jacket.

“Have her wait ten minutes, then escort her in,” Lex replied coolly. “Waiting that long is the *least* she can do after running from the altar the way she did.”

“Indeed,” came the flat, emotionless response. Nigel turned and took a step toward the door.

“Oh? And Nigel? Be a friend and tell Chef Andre that I’m hosting a business dinner here this weekend. I’ll be expecting six very important guests. He is to prepare a seven-course meal of his best dishes. But I’ll be selecting the wine.”

“Of course,” Nigel said, turning back to Lex and giving him a short, formal bow. A wry smile crept over his face. “All this time and he’s still oblivious to your ‘guest’ in the wine cellar, hmm?”

Lex chuckled slightly. “One of the perks of affording servants who do exactly as they are told and who never ask questions.”

Nigel nodded. “I’ll see to Miss Lane now.”

Lex waved him away with one hand. “As you will.”

Lois’ stomach was in knots as she trailed behind Nigel St. John, one of Lex’s most trusted friends. Of course, she’d met Nigel before, if only briefly. She knew him better by his reputation than by talking to him; that is, she’d listened intently to all the stories Lex had told her about Nigel. It had seemed that the man was constantly busy; every time she’d asked about him, Lex had informed her that Nigel was in London tending to a business matter, or in Nicaragua inquiring about a new business venture, or in Zaire picking up samples of some new product or another that Lex was contemplating incorporating into his business empire.

Now that Nigel was here, in front of her, Lois found herself liking it better when he’d been nothing more than a shadowy ghost-figure in Lex’s stories or the occasional formal, aloof manservant she’d sporadically had dealings with. There was something intimidating about the elder British man, though she couldn’t place her finger on what it was. Her was perfectly polite to her, if not a bit stiff and gruff, but who could blame him, really? After all, she’d jilted his friend at the altar. And it wasn’t like she wasn’t used to intimidating people. She *was* a reporter, after all. She’d met plenty of people who made her nerves stand on alert.

But Nigel was different, somehow. Like he was a man who would do *anything* for those he was loyal to and it disquieted Lois to know that Lex would befriend such a man.

She said nothing and stood a good two paces back from Nigel as he led the way through Lex’s home, as if she wasn’t already intimately familiar with the lavish maze of rooms. But at last, they reached their destination. Nigel’s knuckles gently rapped against the thick, dark wood of the door leading into Lex’s study. Lex was inside, his back to the door, prodding at the blazing fire in the hearth with the iron poker. A piece of burning wood snapped and a swirl of red and orange sparks were tossed up, only to die out a heartbeat later. But the fire burned brighter for the sudden influx of air into the space where the wood had been a few seconds before.

The billionaire looked up a moment later and beckoned Nigel and Lois in. “Come in, come in,” he encouraged.

Lois tentatively stepped into the room, still at war with herself. She hadn’t spoken to Lex since just after their aborted wedding, and she felt like an intruder now, coming back into his home, not to seek forgiveness for her actions but to ask for his help. Her stomach was churning in apprehension and she felt goosebumps springing up on her arms. She had a weird feeling like she was being watched and judged. But she also felt a sense of determination and purpose. She *had* to do this. Not for herself, but for Clark.

“Lois. I was surprised when I was informed that you’d asked to see me,” Lex said, his expression giving away nothing.

“Lex...I...” Lois began.

Come on, Lois, you’ve practiced this a thousand times at home, she admonished herself.

“I know I’m probably the *last* person you want to see right now,” she forced herself to say, feeling more and more ill at ease in her heart.

“That remains to be seen,” Lex replied coldly. But then his expression softened in the slightest degree. “Come, have a seat.”

“I’d rather stand,” Lois gently refused. “To be honest, I’m not looking to take up a lot of your time. I’m sure you have plenty of other business to attend to.”

“Suit yourself,” Lex said with a shrug. “So, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

“I wanted to apologize, for the way I acted after I realized that I couldn’t...” She swallowed hard, then began again, rephrasing what would have sounded awful. “For avoiding you after I...ran out of our wedding. I wasn’t ready to face how much pain and embarrassment I must have caused you.” She looked down at the floor, her cheeks reddening just a bit. She could feel the heat beginning to burn there. She hated apologizing, especially when she didn’t particularly feel like she was completely in the wrong. “I’m sorry.”

“Yes, well, I *would* have preferred a bit of a warning that you were having second thoughts,” he answered, and Lois got the impression he was just trying to save face by being polite about it. “Was that all you came to say?”

Lois toed the carpet for a second, then resolve settled over her. “Actually...no.”

“Come to ask for a second chance with me?” A steeliness was in his eyes.

“I can’t, Lex,” Lois said by way of apology.

“I see.” His voice took on a stony quality.

“I...need your help, Lex.” The words came out strong and unwavering; she refused to beg.

“Another interview for your newspaper?” he nearly scoffed. “I’m afraid I *must* decline.”

“What? No!” Lois gaped, shocked that he would think he was merely a story. “It’s actually a bit more...personal. You remember Clark?”

Lex nodded, then turned his attention back to the fire. He used

the poker to push a wayward piece of burning wood back into the heart of the flames, rather than off to one side as it had fallen away from the rest of the log it had come from.

"Of course," he said, leaning the poker to the side of the hearth, against the rich marble façade.

"He's missing, Lex."

"So? That's a matter for the police, is it not?" he inquired, sounding the slightest bit annoyed that she seemed to think he was able to help her.

"They've been working on the case, yes," Lois admitted. "But I thought...since you two knew each other, you might..."

"Might *what*?" he coaxed out, putting his hands into his pants pockets.

Lois tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Clark disappeared around the day of our wedding. I've been organizing search parties, chasing leads all over the place, looking for any sign of him."

"And...what? You think I know where he is?" Lex lifted an amused eyebrow.

Lois shook her head. "No. I know you and Clark weren't exactly friends. But you *did* know him. I thought you might... help," she finished lamely. "You're one of the most powerful and influential people in this city."

Lex didn't respond right away. He seemed to be thinking things over. The silence left in the wake of Lois' request seemed to stretch on into eternity. The only sound to be heard was the popping and snapping as the wood in the fireplace burned. Then, he nodded to himself, as though reaching some inner agreement that only he was privy to.

"Kent and I were never on friendly terms, though I'm not sure why," he finally replied. "He had some kind of problem with me. Undeserved, I might add. But, he's *your* friend. And, even though you broke off our marriage at the last moment, I still find myself unable to deny you anything. So, I will help you. There is a reward for anyone who knows of his whereabouts, or who can provide a lead that will bring you to him, yes?" he prodded.

Lois nodded and swallowed hard; her mouth suddenly bone-dry to the point where her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. "That's right."

"How much is the reward set at?"

"Five thousand," Lois said, feeling like a pauper under the eyes of the world's third richest man. "It might not be a lot, but it's all I have."

"I'll publicly pledge an additional forty-five thousand dollars to whoever can help you find your friend, for a grand total of fifty thousand," he promised. Then he shrugged. "Unfortunately, I don't have the same contacts you have as a reporter. My place is in the business world, not out on the streets. My informants know of mergers and sales and corporate takeovers, not crimes or runaways or other such things."

Was Lois imagining it, or was he putting down her career? His voice was devoid of any accusation or snark, and it *was* the truth; reporters often dealt with the seedy underbelly of society and the most unsavory characters imaginable. But theirs was also a noble profession, without which, society would crumble into lawlessness, even with the police keeping tabs on criminals. And yet, Lex *appeared* to be merely stating facts, rather than any opinions. Either way, it sent a jolt of revulsion through her that she carefully hid.

"Thank you, Lex. That's *more* than generous," she said instead, feeling grateful for his offer, even if it meant enduring a little criticism from a man she'd once tried – and failed – to love.

Lex cracked a thin smile. "Perhaps, if he's found, Kent will think better of me going forward," he said in a mildly hopeful tone.

Lois gave him a matching smile in return. "I'm sure he will." From within her purse, her cell phone started to ring. As though on

autopilot, she reached inside, found the phone, and checked the number on the screen. She gave Lex an apologetic look. "That's Perry. I should go."

Lex nodded and gestured to the door. "By all means. But... Lois? Should you ever decide to give us another shot..." He left the invitation open and hanging. Lois hesitated to respond. When Lex saw her indecision over what to say, he nodded again. "I see. Well, if I *do* happen to hear of anything, I will let you and the police know."

"Thank you, Lex. I appreciate anything you can do to help bring Clark back home."

Something was wrong.

Completely and utterly *wrong*.

Clark's hands immediately flew up to cover his eyes against the harsh assault of actual light hitting his once-blind eyes. It hurt so very, very much and he wanted nothing more than to shrink away from the unwelcome intrusion on his unadjusted eyes. He forced himself to sit up, leaning against the accursed bars of his prison, thankful that the Kryptonite was shielded at the moment. After languishing in the dark for so long, with barely enough food to sustain his life and less sleep than he'd ever imagined it was possible to survive on, he barely had any strength left to do more than sit up and blink slowly as his mind lurched into motion.

The recording was gone. Other than the sudden influx of light, that was the first thing he *should* have noticed. But it had been playing on a loop for so long that Clark barely even noticed it anymore. It was simply always there, the soundtrack to his imprisoned life, whittling away at what remained of his mind. As it was, the message replayed over and over in his brain. It was an all-consuming thought. It forced out any attempts to remember what his life had once been like. He couldn't recall if he'd ever been anything other than Superman. If he tried to think back on his life, he found nothing but vast stretches of blankness, like an unpainted canvas, pristine white. Just as the canvas had never known the touch of paint, his mind had never known life outside of Superman.

Then there was the problem with expending the energy to even *try* to think past the walls where his memories no longer existed. It required focus and energy, and he had neither. He didn't know when he'd last slept without being jarred awake by some hideous, terrifying noise. He didn't know when he'd last drifted off without shapeless night terrors haunting his mind while it attempted to gain some of the rest it so desperately called out for. He didn't know when he'd last eaten a meal that had given him more strength than it took for him to chew it and swallow it down.

Clark's eyes slid closed against the light, half in an effort to protect his sensitive eyes, half because his eyelids were remarkably heavy. But he wasn't allowed to rest, as usual. There was the sound of a throat being cleared, and Clark's eyes snapped open out of habit more than curiosity.

"Do you remember me?" crooned a smug Lex Luthor. "I know it's been years. But do you know who I am?"

"I..." Clark stammered. The man before Clark looked so familiar, but his brain felt like it was misfiring as he struggled to recall the name that went with him.

Luthor smiled in a creepy manner that made Clark's hackles rise. "Good." He rubbed his hands together gleefully. "Tell me, if you have no idea who I am, do you know who *you* are?"

Clark's voice croaked as he forced the words out of his throat, past his dry, cracked lips. His vocal cords felt rusty from disuse. But his answer was immediate and his conviction was there.

"I'm Superman."

"And what about Clark Kent?"

"What about him? He doesn't exist. Never has. I am Superman."

“Nigel?” Lex Luthor asked as he swirled a glass of deep red wine lazily in one hand.

“Sir?” his old friend asked, his curiosity already piqued by the sound of his voice.

“I think we may be ready for phase two of my plan.”

“Phase two, sir? Might I ask what that is?” Nigel inquired.

Lex grinned as he looked up from his wine. He gestured to the glass he’d poured for Nigel. The Englishman nodded, sat down in the armchair across from Lex, and took the glass. He waited for Lex to drink, then indulged as well. Lex appraised the drink for another moment before speaking again.

“Phase two,” he mused darkly. “We destroy that which we’ve created.”

“And just what is it that we’ve created?” Nigel asked over the rim of his glass. “You’ve had a lot of successes over the past ten years. LexCorp is more profitable than ever. You’ve expanded to – and absolutely dominated – the global market. Almost all of your competitors have been either swallowed up by LexCorp or been crushed completely.”

“They have,” Lex confirmed with a self-satisfied nod of his head.

“You’ve long ago left the world of tens of billions of dollars in your pockets to hundreds of thousands of billions,” Nigel continued.

“A modest fortune,” Lex replied, holding back his delight.

“People associate you with honesty, integrity, and quality products,” Nigel added. “You could probably run for President and win with ease.”

Lex smiled and held up one finger off his wine glass. “Ah, yes. Something to consider, perhaps, in the future. But, for now, I’m focused on Superman.”

“Superman?” Nigel’s eyebrows crept up his brow in interest.

Lex sipped his wine, then nodded. He crossed one leg over the other in a relaxed manner. “We’ve reached the point where we can do no more with him. At least, not here, in the wine cellar.”

“So, by destroy what you’ve created, you mean it’s time to execute him,” Nigel said with bland confidence.

“No.”

“Sir?”

“Nigel, my old friend, we have a golden opportunity before us.” Lex made a broad, sweeping gesture with his hand held like a crossing guard calling for a stop. It was as if he was painting a picture in the air for Nigel.

“And that is?”

“We’ve erased Clark Kent from the world. He exists nowhere other than a few, select memories. His parents. Some of his former coworkers. Lois Lane. Other than that, no one on this planet recalls him. Even the police will have long since stopped looking for him. It’s been ten years. Ten years without even so much as a *rumor* of his whereabouts.”

“Ten years too long, if you ask my opinion,” Nigel grumbled. “Every day that we keep him alive, we run a risk.”

“Of what?” Lex asked, his arms flung wide to embrace all of the invisible possibilities. His wine sloshed inside his glass but did not spill. “Not a soul knows he’s here, or he would have been rescued by now. Not even Lois has poked her nose around here and she’s been a bigger driving force in the search for him than even the police. Superman can’t escape. He’s completely helpless. And, even if he *did* make an attempt at this point, I control the Kryptonite in his cell. He’ll fold like a ragdoll, just as he always does, the second I activate it.”

“So... what then? We let him continue to languish in the basement until one of you dies?” Nigel asked sourly.

“Of course not,” Lex nearly purred in his excitement. “Now we begin phase two. We’ve destroyed Clark Kent. We’ve fully transformed the alien into Superman. Now, we destroy Superman.”

“And how do we do that?” Nigel asked with a passive shrug.

Lex’s eyes lit up with a twisted spark of hunger. “The same way we broke him from pretending to be Clark Kent. We reduce his mind to ashes.”

Nigel sat forward in his seat, clearly intrigued. “Go on.”

Lex’s grin grew even bigger. “What we have in the wine cellar is nothing more than an average man who believes he’s Superman. He’s vulnerable. He has no powers. He can barely string a coherent sentence together that isn’t about him professing how he’s Superman. He’s, in every sense of the word, insane. And there are places that lock away people like that.”

“An asylum?” Nigel guessed stoically.

“Not just *any* asylum, but one with a certain... *reputation*,”

Lex said, his glee bubbling over past his typically more controlled expression. “One with a penchant for dealing with the worst of the criminally insane. One where greased palms will do *whatever* is asked of them without asking any annoying questions of their own.”

Lex set aside his glass and stood, energized by the mere thought of getting closer to his goal. “No one is looking for Clark Kent anymore. You will escort one of my associates to the asylum, with the story of having found this poor, unfortunately, gibbering soul on your doorstep, professing over and over that he’s Superman when he’s clearly *not*. The associate will then offer the doctor assigned to his case a hefty amount of money. All the doctor needs to do is keep the homeless drifter’s presence in the asylum quiet and to erase the idea from his mind that he’s Superman, *whatever* it takes. And I do mean whatever it takes, even if it’s illegal or against the normal course of treatment. Make it clear that the lunatic ranting about being Superman is to never set foot outside the asylum again, for his safety and that of the public.”

“More torture?” Nigel asked, sounding a little disappointed to not be the one getting his knuckles dirty anymore.

Lex shrugged with a flourish. “If need be. They can lobotomize him for all I care. And, just as the world has been slowly forgetting the ‘hero,’ he *himself* will forget until he has no identity left and dies with *nothing*, not even a name by which to call himself.” As he spoke, he made his way to his desk.

Nigel thought it over and nodded his approval. “And which institution will be the lucky one to wipe Superman from his memory?”

Lex merely grinned as he opened a drawer and took something out. He held it out to Nigel, who stood, crossed the room, and took it. The older Englishman’s eyes swept over the barely filled out admittance form. He eyebrows arched in approval and a ghost of a smile crossed his lips.

“Perfect,” he said.

The wind was whipping fiercely as the storm came inexorably closer. The sky was a bruised purple-black, tinged with orange, even at this late hour. A far-off rumble of thunder rolled in the distance, but Nigel thought this one sounded quite a bit closer than the last few he’d heard. He watched from the tinted windows of the unremarkable black station wagon as Tito stood before the asylum doors. Beside him, the remains of what had once been Clark Kent looked around with wild eyes, a crazed expression on his face. The man sported a new and cheaply made Superman costume, the type one would find in a pop-up Halloween shop for under thirty dollars and branded as “SuperGuy” to avoid any potential copyright infringement. The blue was the wrong shade – too sky blue and flat, not at all the deep, vibrant, almost shimmering blue of the Man of Steel’s uniform. The boots were nothing more than pleather shoe coverings that went halfway up his calf. The yellow belt fit poorly over the fire engine red briefs, and the thin cape was tied around his neck, rather than attached to the inside of the unitard’s shoulders. It even lacked the S logo on the back and

the one on the front was too small and slightly lopsided. Plus, it was filthy, as though the wearer had been homeless and living in the gutters for a long, long time.

Nigel grinned. The costume was *perfect*. There would be no mistaking it for the real thing, which meant that, even with the passing resemblance the seriously underweight and frail-looking man had to the hero, no one would believe his outrageous claim of being the *real* Superman. Or so Nigel hoped. He'd tried to talk Lex out of moving Superman to the facility. It was too much of a risk. Not that Nigel didn't trust the shady doctors and nurses within. Even here, outside of Metropolis, Lex' influence ran deep. A full half of the city's criminal circuit was under his command, and that included the sadistic medical staff housed within the asylum's walls. None of them would ever breathe a word of Superman's residency here, even if they made the connection. They all knew only too well how much torture they would suffer before the release of death if they so much as breathed wrong.

It was everything leading up to Superman's admittance into the building that had Nigel on edge. It was no secret that the – admittedly mostly dead – search for Clark Kent was out there. But it was also whispered that certain other super-humans were still out there searching for the missing Superman, even if the Man of Steel had slipped from the public's consciousness. He feared that one of those irritating meddlers might happen to glimpse the asylum's newest charge before he could be ushered into the last building he would ever know in his lifetime. Especially in *this* city. It was no secret that this wretched place was under the protection of Batman, and that the lunatic in the latex mask operated under the cover of darkness. So, moving Superman in the middle of the night wasn't without risks, however slight it might be that the Bat would be in the area.

Nigel sighed. He admired Lex's ambition, and it was true that the billionaire couldn't house Superman in his wine cellar indefinitely. It was enough that the alien had been imprisoned there for the past ten years. But it was still unsettling to bring the broken hero out into the open, even though the average citizen wouldn't be around to notice. Yet, despite his misgivings, Nigel knew his duty. And that was to execute Lex's commands to perfection. He was very, *very* good at his job, Nigel thought to himself with a smirk. He'd never been linked to a crime yet, and he'd been on the outside of the law for the vast majority of his life.

Nigel scratched his chin and adjusted the night vision goggles he was wearing. Carefully, methodically, he slowly scanned the rooftops, looking for a caped figure in black. But the buildings were lifeless and nothing could be seen, not even a brooding stone gargoyle left over from a time when the city's architecture had taken a fancy to more classical themes. Despite this, Nigel dared not breathe a sigh of relief. Every nerve ending was on high alert for any threats. In his ear, a tiny speaker lay nestled, picking up the heavy, nervous breathing of Tito as he waited for someone to answer the asylum's door.

"What if they don't answer?" Tito asked in a light whisper.

"They will," Nigel coldly replied into his microphone. "Ring the bell again."

A few seconds later, Nigel heard the faint sound of the buzzer ringing, letting whoever was supposed to be at the front desk know that there was someone at the door. Nigel waited silently, every muscle coiled like a cobra waiting to strike. He didn't wish to get out of the car and approach the door himself, but he was ready to do it if need be. But a minute later, the door cracked open just a bit. Whoever it was stayed just out of sight, inside the doorway, perhaps due to the threatening weather.

"Visiting hours are *over*," the unseen man's voice growled suspiciously.

"We're not here to *visit*," Tito challenged back.

"Oh?" The door opened a little wider, but whoever was on the other side still couldn't be seen from Nigel's viewpoint and he

dared not risk moving the car and drawing attention to himself.

Tito jerked a thumb at Superman. "Got room in the inn for one more?"

The door fully opened and the man stepped out a bit. Nigel could see that he was a lanky Caucasian man in his early to mid-twenties, dressed casually in a pair of blue scrub pants and a white t-shirt, with a lanyard and badge around his neck. He stood and appraised Clark for a moment.

"And he is?" the young man prompted in a bored tone.

"You don't know me? I'm Superman!" Clark puffed out his chest, showing off the logo ironed onto the costume.

"A drifter," Tito said. "My brother found him squatting on his property. Guy's a complete lunatic. But, well, you can see that for yourself."

"I'm *Superman*," Clark pressed with urgency. He jumped a little as if trying to take off and fly away, an impressive feat with ankles that were ten years fused in the wrong positions.

"We were told a Dr. Fulton would be capable of handling this. But, I gotta warn you, this guy? He might look frail but he's dangerous. Broke my brother's jaw when he tried to escort him off the property," Tito lied easily.

The man looked uneasily at Clark. "Yeah?"

Tito shrugged. "Why else would he send *me* and not come himself?"

"And what about the police?" the man inquired cagily.

Again, Tito shrugged. "As it so happens, I *am* an officer," he replied, flashing a fake badge quickly enough to avoid too much scrutiny of it. "Look, is Dr. Fulton there or not?" he finally asked in an annoyed tone.

"Yeah, yeah, the doc is here," was the answer.

"Good. Now go get him. And tell him to bring whatever he needs. This one ain't gonna go quietly." He jerked his head slightly in Clark's direction, but Clark was more interested in staring at the building, as though he could blast holes in the walls with his heat vision.

Nigel smiled to himself. Superman was digging a bigger and bigger hole for himself. He *definitely* appeared to be out of what was left of his mind. This was almost *too* easy.

The young man pulled the walkie talkie from the waistband of his scrub pants and used his thumb to press down the talk button. Nigel heard a hiss of muffled static in his earpiece.

"Dr. Fulton? It's Jeremy from the front desk. There's a new patient up here. Potentially violent."

"No, no! I'm a hero!" Clark slurred, swaying on his feet from the severe lack of sleep Lex Luthor had imposed to make him even more unstable before the transfer to Arkham Asylum.

"Superman is a friend to all! I would never hurt anyone!" His words drowned out whatever Dr. Fulton was saying over the walkie talkie.

Jeremy frowned. "He's really gone around the bend, hasn't he?" he whispered in Tito's direction.

"Poor idiot must have hit some hard times," he replied.

"Or some hard drugs," Jeremy joked.

"I'm perfectly *fiiiiiiiiine*," Clark declared, his words sloppy and loud. "I'll prove it. Hit me. I'm invulnerable."

"Yeah...I don't think so," the younger man said warily.

"Hit me!" Clark demanded.

"Not a chance."

"*Hit me!*" Clark roared.

He stumbled forward, but the young man mistook it for an act of aggression. Jeremy tensed and balled his fists, delivering a blow to Clark's face. Clark's nose broke, blood gushing from the fresh wound and running down over his lips to his chin. Clark staggered back, truly seeming surprised that his invulnerable aura hadn't protected him. His own fists balled and his stance stiffened, ready to fight.

In the doorway behind Jeremy, an older, white-haired man

appeared and for a moment, as Nigel looked on without the benefit of his night vision goggles, it was impossible to tell what was paler; the doctor's ghostly complexion or his wispy, barely hanging on hair. But, old as the man appeared, he was spritely. He dove at Clark, preventing the lunatic from sucker-punching Jeremy. Clark was tackled to the ground and the straight jacket the doctor had held was knocked off to one side. He struggled to get the upper hand, and after a long, tense scuffle, he succeeded in stabbing Clark in the neck with a syringe. He depressed the plunger and Clark immediately went limp, almost as if he'd died.

"Jeremy, give me a hand," the doctor said with a scarcely-there glance over his left shoulder. "Grab the jacket, would ya?"

Jeremy did as was asked and, together, the two men bundled Clark into a secure self-embrace. Dr. Fulton checked and tightened the straps one final time. Then he nodded at Jeremy.

"Thanks. Take him downstairs, please."

"On it, doc," the man said with a grim nod as he called for another nurse to help him move Clark's unconscious form.

Dr. Fulton changed his attention to rest it on Tito as Tito handed over a manila envelope stuffed thick with cash, as well as a note promising a yearly bonus if the man purged Superman from the patient's mind.

"For your troubles," Tito said gruffly. "My brother thanks you."

"Don't worry, sir. 'Superman' won't be causing anyone else any trouble at all," the doctor promised, gripping the envelope tightly.

Clark's eyes frantically darted around the tiny, cell-like room he'd been ushered into more than...how long *had* it been? There was no telling. He tried to count how many meals had been served to him - if the even more meager rations of food than what he'd been given before could rightly be called meals. But these days, it was hard to concentrate on anything at all. His thoughts were jumbled and almost staticky, blitzing through his brain faster than even *he* could follow. It reminded him of...someone. Someone who used to...what? Was it run? Or...walk? No...that wasn't it. Something like walk. T...alk? Talk? Yes, that was it. Talk. Someone who used to talk a lot, and fast. Someone who took it past the point of talking into something else entirely. But what was the right word for it?

The image of a bubbling pot of water popped into mind, but he hadn't the faintest clue why. Did it have something to do with the person's talking? Did the person...bubble?

Clark sighed as he tried to grasp the correct word for what he meant but his frenzied thoughts refused to be still long enough for him to find what he was looking for. He couldn't even remember if it was a man or a woman he was thinking of, though he imagined it might have been a woman. There was just something vaguely feminine about the ghostly, blurry shape in his brain.

He growled out loud, frustrated with himself and he once again tried to break free of the straight jacket that bound him. All to no avail. The sturdy material held tight and the seams refused to pop and give him even a false hope of escaping. He threw his head back as he struggled, and the soft padding cushioned the blow. Why was he here? Didn't they know he *wasn't* crazy?

"I am *Superman!*" he bellowed in response to his own jagged thoughts. "You have to let me out of here!"

He fought again against the bonds that held him. Where was his super strength? What had it abandoned him? Was there Kryptonite around? He couldn't recall how long it had been since he'd last been able to feel his powers rippling just beneath the surface, ready to aid him at a moment's notice.

"I demand to be freed!" he snarled, spittle flying from his lips. "I know what you're up to! You want to ruin the world by keeping me locked up here! You won't succeed! Nothing can hold Superman for long!"

He was about to launch into a further tirade when the door opened silently on well-oiled hinges. Dr. Fulton stepped into the room, his hands shoved deep into his lab coat pockets. Clark involuntarily flinched, knowing the doctor usually kept a syringe full of a powerful tranquilizer in his pocket. Memories of sharp pricks of pain in his neck followed by almost instantaneous blackness were fresh in his mind, even if the rest of his memories were muddled or missing entirely. Clark had been subjected to that violation of his consciousness more times than he could count.

"Let me out of here!" Clark demanded, as soon as he saw the doctor and despite his growing fear of the needle. "The world needs my help!"

"Still on this Superman fantasy I see," Dr. Fulton said, an audible *tsk tsk* in his voice. "A shame. And here I thought we might be finally getting somewhere after all these months."

"It's *not* a fantasy," Clark flung back, venom in his words and an icy hardness in his eyes. "I'm *really* Superman!"

"Superman would never allow himself to remain in this facility," Dr. Fulton pointed out, gesturing palm-up to the cell around them.

"Something's wrong with my powers," Clark admitted sheepishly. "*That's* what I need help with. Not my mind."

"And how, pray tell, did you lose your powers?" Dr. Fulton humored him. "Industrial accident? Full moon? Ate too many bombs?"

Clark shook his head, abstractly grateful that he could still move at least that much of his body, even if his torso was bound almost too tightly to breathe.

"Well?" Dr. Fulton asked, inviting him to answer.

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head again, his mind once more coming up with a blank nothingness as he tried to remember any relevant details of his life.

He couldn't even remember where he'd been before being admitted into the asylum. He *knew* he had to have come from *somewhere*, but it was like trying to peer through a fog so dense he couldn't see the hand before his face. Blackness ruled his memories and he had this unsettling feeling that he'd *lived* in darkness, rather than it being just a failure of his brain to recall where he'd been.

"I see," Dr. Fulton said in that irritatingly patronizing way of his, the tilt of his voice suggesting that he knew he was speaking with an idiot.

"Why won't anyone believe me?" Clark pressed.

Dr. Fulton rubbed his stubbly chin a moment in thought. Then he snapped his fingers, as though an idea had come to him.

"I know *exactly* what you need to clear this Superman fantasy you've concocted right out of your head," he said with a disturbingly gleeful twinkle in his eyes.

Clark glared at the doctor, trying with all his might to turn the man into a smoldering pile of ashes. But nothing happened and Clark's eyes soon began to twitch with the effort. Dr. Fulton merely shook his head, as if he knew exactly what Clark was up to. He stepped forward and Clark shrank back involuntarily.

Behind Dr. Fulton, two burly orderlies appeared, looking more like professional weightlifters than part of a medical staff. Each one of them grabbed Clark by his shoulders and dragged him to his feet, heedless of Clark's increasingly vigorous and snarling protests. Clark wasn't going to go quietly. They were trying to kill him, he was certain of it. Then they would brag to the world about being the men who'd killed Superman. Just like...Clark drew a blank. It felt like he'd had run-ins with someone - maybe more than one someone - who'd tried to kill Superman before. Or was that some barely remembered nightmare of his coming to the surface?

"Take him to the Tank," Dr. Fulton ordered in a cold, hollow voice. "And ready a more...traditional room. I have a feeling we won't be needing the padded one for much longer."

Clark's heart was racing and his eyes darted about the cold, sterile, extremely threatening room. He tested the ankle restraints that bound him into the padded chair, but the thick leather and heavy duty Velcro held tight and his twisted, misshapen ankles – a permanent mark of the torture he'd received in Lex Luthor's wine cellar, if only he could remember it – screamed in protest against the awkward movement. Walking was hard enough, though he'd long ago adapted to his ill-gotten physical limitations. Trying to break free of his bonds was out of the question.

The same held true for his wrists. Those too had been broken on multiple occasions, and had healed improperly as a result, though not *quite* as severely as his ankles. He allowed himself to exert a greater amount of force against the wrist restraints, but all he received in return was the barest sound of the too-tight leather creaking and a cold, tingling sensation in his hands as the flow of blood was cut off from the effort.

Moving his head was out of the question. A thick band of leather held his head in place. He couldn't do so much as move his head a millimeter to either side. His ears still rang and pain throbbed dully on the right side of his head from where one of the orderlies had clubbed him with a fist as Clark had tried to shove the man and knock him down to make an escape. It hurt even to keep his eyes open, but he was *Superman*. He wasn't a coward. He would face whatever was to come, not cower behind closed lids as he imagined the worst.

Dr. Fulton didn't enter the room until Clark was securely in the chair, unable to move a muscle. For a moment, the doctor stood on the far side of the room, his practiced eyes taking in all the details, assuring himself that his patient was helpless before he took a single step closer. Clark glared at him but Dr. Fulton seemed not to notice or care about how uncomfortable Clark was. He boldly stepped toward Clark until Clark could smell the overwhelming stench of Brut wafting off the doctor's body like a noxious cloud. It made Clark's eyes water and he wanted to gag from the assault to his nostrils. The doctor checked, then double checked, all of Clark's restraints, then he set about putting electrodes on Clark's head and chest, presumably to monitor his vital signs.

Silently, the doctor pried open Clark's lower jaw and stuck a long rod of hard rubber in his mouth. Clark tried to spit the offending item out, but Dr. Fulton held him still until some of the fight went out of Clark while he tried to formulate a different plan. He didn't have time. Dr. Fulton moved with practiced speed and grace. He backed off as his orderlies came forward, one holding Clark's jaw closed while the other pressed two cold probes against Clark's temples. Dr. Fulton stood to one side, adjusted a few dials, and then, with a blinding jolt of pain, electricity was sent into Clark's brain.

Lois distractedly reached for the phone as it shrilly rang for the third time. Ignoring the caller ID in favor of trying to remove a long strip of tape that had become tangled around the fingers of her right hand while she attempted to wrap her sister's Christmas gift, she pressed the answer button and tucked the receiver between her shoulder and her ear.

"Hello?" she said, half expecting it to be Lucy calling for gift ideas for their mother.

"Lois?" a man's voice replied. "It's Bill."

Lois immediately lost interest in her failing gift-wrap attempt and she gripped the phone, switching it from her left ear to her right. "Henderson? What's up?" she asked, wondering if the police chief had some news for her on one of the stories she was in the midst of investigating. "Do you have IDs on those dead hookers?" she guessed, referencing her most recent, and pressing, case.

"Er...no. I have some news for you on a case. An old one," the man cautiously began. "It's...ah..." he stammered, clearly at a

loss for the right words.

"Bill, what is it?" she asked as her stomach churned and a cold fear broke over her body. She'd never heard that uncertain tone in his voice for the more than twenty-five years she'd known him.

"A friend of mine in Gotham...Commissioner Gordon?"

"I know him," Lois confirmed though it hadn't really been a question directed at her. "Well...of him. We've never actually met," she immediately corrected herself.

"He got a tip...Lois, I don't know how to say this," Henderson said carefully, and she could picture him shaking his salt-and-pepper head. "But...he found something. *Someone*. Lois...it's... he found Clark Kent."

Thunderstruck.

Lois had never quite understood the full meaning of the word until that moment. It was as if a bolt of lightning had struck her mind and sent shockwaves searing through the rest of her body. But if it was in relief, joy, fear, or some other unidentifiable emotion, she wasn't entirely sure. The world was too busy spinning around her at a terrifyingly fast pace for her to make any sense of anything. Vaguely, she had the sensation of wanting to vomit from the sense of vertigo she was experiencing.

"F...Found?" she ventured. "Good found or...?" She couldn't force the rest of the words out.

"He's alive," Henderson confirmed for her, and Lois began to sob in relief.

"Where? How? When?" she asked, rapid-fire.

"I'm on my way to your apartment. I'll explain it all in the chopper to Gotham," Henderson said guardedly. "At least, I'll share what little I know right now. We'll find out the full story once we get there."

"G...Gotham?" Lois stammered.

"Can you believe it?" Henderson replied wonderingly. "Just a couple of hours' drive away after all this time."

"How soon can you be here?" Lois asked with grim determination.

"I'll be there in ten."

"Make it five," she said, before hanging up the phone without waiting for his response.

The heavy *whump-whump-whump* of the helicopter's blades as they sliced the air deafened Lois. The whine of the engine as it raced them toward Gotham was almost more than she could bear. The pilot spoke over the headphones embedded in their protective ear-coverings only when necessary, but Lois' mind was elsewhere and she hadn't heard a single word of what was said. Even Henderson had given up on trying to talk to her, not that he was an overly chatty man as it was. But he'd tried to calm her down at least, even if Lois hadn't really listened to him. It wasn't that she *wanted* to ignore him. She simply *couldn't* stop her mind from whirring around in worry.

Something was wrong, she knew it deep down in the marrow of her bones.

It made goosebumps rise on her skin and it twisted her stomach into knots. She could taste the cold, coppery taste of fear in the back of her throat and it was an effort for her not to throw up. She felt alternately stifling hot and drenched in coldness as her mind concocted one horrible scenario after another.

There was something Henderson deliberately wasn't telling her, she decided. It wasn't so much what he *was* saying to her that clued her into that fact, but what he *wasn't* telling her. So far, all she really knew was that Clark had been found, alive. But where in Gotham and the circumstances of his discovery were being withheld from her. She didn't believe for one hot second that he didn't know the facts. Of all the policemen Lois had ever worked with over the past two-and-a-half decades, Henderson was the best. He was *always* knowledgeable on details of his cases, even when they weren't *really* his cases. For him to feign ignorance

now only served to fuel her suspicions and, in turn, feed her fears.

“Prepare for landing,” the pilot said over the headphones they all wore, his voice sounding distorted and robotic and somewhat staccato.

Lois instinctually tugged on the strap of her seatbelt, though she knew it was already as tight as it was going to get. She’d done a lot of traveling over the years looking for Clark, some of it out to Kansas to be with his parents, some of it in chasing dead-ended, false leads. By this point, she hated traveling by air, whereas once it was her favorite mode of transportation. The years of broken dreams and fresh wounds to her destroyed heart had taken their toll on her. And yet, she missed being scooped up into Clark’s strong arms, snuggling into his broad chest, and being flown with such care that the world melted away while they defied gravity. Of course, she hadn’t known it was Clark back then. Her dashing hero in the vibrant blue suit and regal red cape had merely been Superman at the time, until Clark’s parents had reluctantly confirmed his dual identities with her as she’d searched high and low for her missing best friend.

It was funny, she had often wryly thought to herself. Even before she’d been made privy to Clark’s secret by her own investigative nosing around, she’d been more aware of Clark’s disappearance than she’d been of Superman’s. Superman had almost ceased to be on her radar in those early days, when she’d first started trying to find Clark. It was only weeks after her wedding, and after calling out for Superman’s help more times than she could count, that she finally realized that he wasn’t ignoring her, but that he was missing as well. And then she’d found the suits in Clark’s closet and had known the horrifying truth about why the hero was gone.

The helicopter went into a hover. Lois leaned over slightly to peek out the window. Below them, at the top of the Gotham PD’s building, she could see the huge blue and white landing pad, spread out like a target for the chopper to land on. And next to the rooftop access door, a huge metal contraption stood. Lois squinted against the bright winter sunlight.

Henderson noticed. “The Bat Signal,” he said, pointing.

Lois nodded. “I always *did* wonder what it looked like.”

“Impressed?” the man asked with gentle sarcasm.

Lois shrugged indifferently. “Not really.”

“Cynic,” he tossed back with a grim smile.

Lois shrugged again. “Why? It’s completely impractical. What if there’s no cloud coverage? How does Batman see the signal? What if he’s in a place where he can’t get a good view of the sky? I mean, it’s 2013! Yeah, okay, maybe that worked twenty years ago, but now? Really? A big light? Can’t the Gotham PD just...I don’t know? Drop him a text message or something to get his attention? You know ‘Hey, we need you, Harley Quinn is trying to blow up a building and The Penguin is robbing the bank?’”

She was aware that she was babbling, but she couldn’t help it. Her nerves were practically raw and bleeding from the anticipation of seeing Clark again and learning what had happened to him.

Henderson made a motion with his hand for her to tone her criticisms down. “As far as I know, it’s never failed,” he said in a simple defense of the Bat Signal. “Now, hold on. We’re beginning our descent.”

True to his word, in the next moment, Lois felt the helicopter drop in altitude. It was a bit of a gusty day, so the descent was anything but smooth. The chopper lurched and bumped its way down to the rooftop, but the skilled pilot made sure the touchdown itself was as smooth as glass. Lois ripped off her headset and jumped out of the helicopter as soon as it was possible. Then she was practically sprinting toward the white-haired, older gentleman standing near the doorway that led into the building.

“You must be Commissioner Gordon,” she said as soon as she reached him, nearly yelling with the effort to be heard over the whine of the helicopter’s rotors. “Lois Lane, Daily Planet.” She

extended her hand.

The man nodded as he shook her outstretched hand. “Glad to meet you. I’ve been expecting you. Come on inside,” he added as Henderson jogged up. “Bill, good to see you again.”

“Jim,” Henderson said, inclining his head with the word. “It’s been...what? Seven years?”

“Nine,” the Commissioner automatically corrected as he pulled the door open for them.

“Nine. Geez,” Henderson replied in wonderment, shaking his head as he entered into the stairwell behind the door.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Lois impatiently interrupted, blurring the words out. “I’m sure you had a lovely time at his son’s graduation or your daughter’s birthday party or whatever. Where’s Clark? What’s happened to him? When can I see him? Is he here, in the station?”

Commissioner Gordon chuckled darkly. “Bill warned me you’re a bit of a feisty one,” he said affectionately. Then he sighed softly. “I’m afraid Clark is *not* here at the station. I actually haven’t been to see him myself. I called Bill as soon as my officers confirmed that it was him, then waited here for you.”

“Is he okay?” Lois asked pleadingly.

Commissioner Gordon sighed again as they walked down the flight of stairs to the top floor. He punched the button to call the elevator as soon as he was within reach.

“I’m afraid things are a bit more...complicated...than your friend being okay or not,” he said, each word sounding painstakingly chosen.

“Wh...” Lois tried, the word getting stuck in her throat. She swallowed hard and tried again as she stuck her hands into her coat pockets to hide the fact that they were shaking. “What do you mean by that? Where is he?”

“He’s...he was found...locked up in the Arkham Asylum,” the man said, his words dripping with regret.

The world seemed to tilt on its axis and begin to spin at a dizzying pace, just as it had in her apartment. Lois felt herself sway on her feet. She would have lost her balance if not for Henderson’s strong arm reaching out toward her. His hand came to rest on her shoulder and she felt herself steadying at his reassuring touch.

“What...why...is he *there*? And why hasn’t he been brought to the station?” she demanded after a moment; each word painful to speak as they ripped from her bone-dry mouth.

“He’s...not in good shape, Miss Lane,” Commissioner Gordon replied, averting his eyes so as not to look her in the face as he made the admission. “My officers report that he’s...almost catatonic. I was hoping that, if he sees you...” The implication was left hanging unvoiced in the air.

“Catatonic?” She could barely squeak out the word. “But...he’s...Clark.”

His condition *couldn’t* be true! He was Clark Kent - the strongest, kindest, most wonderful man she’d ever met. He would see her and be back to his normal, vibrant self in no time, she decided, knowing deep down that it was going to be more complex than that.

“My officers are investigating the circumstances of his admission to the facility, but if he’s that bad off, he’s probably been there for some time,” the Commissioner gently warned. “Just...prepare yourself, Miss Lane.”

The elevator arrived then, softly dinging as the doors slid open. They stepped into the open car and Commissioner Gordon pressed the button for the parking garage.

“I’m truly sorry to be the one to deliver this news to you,” he added as the doors closed once more.

The police cruiser ground to a stop, the tires crunching on the old, cracked pavement of the worn and uncared for old parking lot outside of the ancient-looking, imposing Arkham Asylum. Gravel

was haphazardly thrown into potholes as a cheap and unskilled way to fill them in. Pieces of broken asphalt littered the ground. *Actual* litter was strewn about the edges of the parking lot, blown against the barbed-wire topped chain-link fence by uncounted windy days. Lois didn't care what the parking lot looked like. She was just glad the drawbridge out to the place was in a much more reliable and trustworthy looking state.

Still, the building before he gave her the creeps. A sense of foreboding and doom seemed to emanate from the very stones it was built out of. A darkness was there, as though a storm cloud hung over the place, though the winter sky was devoid of even the thinnest gossamer wisp of a cloud. A chill ran up her spine and she pulled her coat tighter around her neck, though she knew it hadn't been caused by the wind. For just a moment, she took stock of the police cars and ambulances on the scene. There were plenty of both, she noticed, and that fact only served to unnerve her more, rather than comfort her.

What's going on here? she wondered with trepidation as she and Henderson walked side by side, following the Commissioner.

"We got a tip," Commissioner Gordon began, as though reading her thoughts, "that the patients here haven't been...treated well." He gestured to the nearby ambulances. "Hence the overabundance of EMTs."

"What do you mean by 'haven't been treated well?'" Lois demanded.

"We're sorting it all out, but the tip we received said there were at least five dead bodies left abandoned in their rooms," the older policeman said without so much as glancing in her direction.

"So, your source is on the inside then?" Lois asked, her reporter's instincts kicking in.

The Commissioner shook his head. "Not unless one of the doctors or nurses has a supply of batarangs to use to pin notes to the precinct door." He hesitated a moment. "At least, that's what I heard."

"You didn't see it with your own eyes?" Henderson asked, surprised.

His friend shrugged. "I was supposed to go fishing today. It's my day off."

"Yeah?" Henderson asked, sounding intrigued. "Where?"

"Right here in the harbor," was the immediate, easy reply. "A buddy of mine has a boat. We try to go once every month or two." "Good fishing in these waters?"

Commissioner Gordon shrugged. "Not the greatest, but it's not too bad either. I've pulled in a few trophy-worthy fish over the years."

Lois rolled her eyes behind the Commissioner's back. "Wow, I'm sure Clark *really* cares about the fishing around here," she all but sneered.

"Easy, Lois, just trying to lighten the mood," Henderson said soothingly.

"I don't *want* a lightened mood," she snapped. "I want to see Clark."

"Patience," Commissioner Gordon gently retorted as he gestured toward the building. "We'll be there in a few minutes."

Patience? Lois' mind growled angrily. *Patience? Is he kidding me?*

Henderson chuckled darkly. "Lois Lane doesn't *do* patient, Jim."

Lois ground her teeth together in an effort to ignore the barb. But her entire body was on edge and she quickly lost what control she had over her tongue.

"You think this is funny, Bill? I've been searching for Clark for *twenty years!* Now I'm being told he's right there in *that* building," she said, stabbing her finger in the direction of the asylum, "in bad shape, and you're...cracking *jokes* and talking about *fishing?*" she accused, venom dripping from every thorny word she flung at him.

Henderson stopped and turned to her, an apologetic look on his face. "Hey, look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. I'm just...trying to help, okay?" He sighed. "I've been in places like this before, Lois. You have no idea how...depressing they can be. And with Clark being close to catatonic...I was just hoping to give you something else to focus on for a couple of minutes, that's all. I didn't mean any harm by what I said." He reached out and put a steady hand on her shoulder.

Lois sighed in turn. "I guess I can appreciate that in a way. But...I'm scared, Bill."

He nodded in acknowledgement, knowing how rare it was for Lois to admit her fears. "I am too. Clark's a good guy. I don't know how he wound up in a place like this, but I don't for a moment believe he deserved it."

"Then let's not waste any more time," Commissioner Gordon interrupted in his gruff, gravelly voice. "Let's go get him out of here."

As dark and depressing as the outside of Arkham Asylum had been, nothing had prepared Lois for the way the *inside* of the facility made her feel. There was nothing overly *wrong* with the place as she looked around. It was clean, modern, well-kept, and the doctors and nurses she came across *seemed* normal enough. But there was something in the air, a feeling that she couldn't quite put her finger on. Something that made her hackles rise and bile froth into the back of her throat. Pinpricks of gooseflesh broke out down her arms and she felt indescribably cold, though the interior of the asylum was kept comfortable – neither too hot nor too cold. Her stomach roiled and it took a lot of effort for her to shove aside the instinct to vomit and run from the place.

Lois silently padded along after Commissioner Gordon. Everywhere they went, Lois felt eyes on her. Hostile eyes – from locked patient doors and the medical staff alike. Indifferent eyes – glassed over under the heavy shroud of sedative medications. Curious eyes that clearly asked without words who these unknown and unexpected visitors were. Pleading eyes that silently begged to be released from this place.

Lois was no stranger to being scrutinized, but somehow, in the asylum, her usually thick skin just wasn't there. Every stare bored into her very soul and gave her the creeps, though she knew the patients were locked away and unable to threaten her safety in any way. And even if one did, somehow, break free from their tiny, cell-like rooms, the contingent of uniformed police officers surrounding her would stop any would-be assailants in their tracks. Still, even with that knowledge, she couldn't shake the uneasy feeling she had.

"Where's Clark?" she whispered to Henderson as she glanced from side to side, checking every visible face in every visible window in every locked door, hoping to catch a glimpse of Clark's familiar face.

"Not on this level," Commissioner Gordon darkly said as he strode down the hall to the elevators.

"Higher up?" Lois guessed.

The Commissioner shook his head. "The lowest floor. Where they keep the...uh...criminally insane."

Lois stopped dead in her tracks and blinked in surprise. It was as if the commissioner's words had physically slapped her in the face. "*The criminally insane?*" she practically screeched.

"Shh!" Henderson warned with a finger to his lips. "Lois! Please!"

"Oh, get off your high horse, Bill!" Lois hissed in a dangerous whisper. "Clark? Classified as criminally insane? That doesn't seem *wrong* to you?"

"*Of course* it does, but there's no sense in yelling about it," Henderson replied. "We can't change what happened. All we can do is get downstairs, bust Clark out of here, and figure out what happened while the Gotham PD deals with the rest of the

accusations against this place.”

“We still don’t know that Clark didn’t...do...something to deserve being here,” Commissioner Gordon carefully reminded them.

“Clark would *never* do something to deserve being locked up in this hellhole,” Lois snapped back with certainty. It was a tremendous effort not to rip the policeman’s head clean off his shoulders.

“We’ll see,” was the only reply before the group once again began to move.

In another minute, they reached the elevators. One of the officers, a woman with J. Parson on her badge, hit the call button and within seconds, the doors slid open. Lois pushed her way forward to board the car first. Caution no longer mattered now that she was this close to seeing Clark again. She could practically hear Henderson rolling his eyes behind her head, but she didn’t care. All she wanted was to get to Clark and rescue him from this well-polished prison.

She didn’t have to wait long. As soon as Commissioner Gordon stepped onto the car, he pressed the correct button, then selected the door close button. In just a few heartbeats, they were on their way. And half a minute later, the car came to a stop and the doors opened again into a harshly lit hallway. Above her, the fluorescent lights buzzed incessantly, a fact that would have driven Lois crazy any other time. But not now. Now, she hardly even noticed the annoying sound.

Down here, the air was colder than up above and, though the hallway was impossibly bright, the windows set into the cell doors – smaller than the ones on the main floor, Lois distractedly noticed – seemed to be darker than normal. The doors looked more worn here as well and far thicker – she could see evidence of painted-over rust spots, scratches, dents, and age. The walls were cinder block as opposed to the typical sheetrock she’d seen when she’d first walked into the asylum. There was a vague sense of dampness too – not enough to make anything she brushed her fingertips against wet, but it *did* give her a general sense of suffocation.

And the prisoners!

Whereas those on the main floor had been mostly quiet for one reason or another, those locked away in this underground section of the building were rowdy, loud, animalistic, and lewd. Lois did her best to ignore them.

“There,” Commissioner Gordon said, pointing down the hall. “The very last cell.”

It would have been hard to miss. No less than four armed officers stood guard – two flanking the open door on either side. The cell beyond was completely dark and the fluorescent light in the hallway had clearly burned out and had never been replaced. It was as if Clark’s cell was meant to be forgotten in the shadows.

Lois took off down the hall at a sprint, nearly crashing into the EMT who was just emerging from the cell. She didn’t spare a breath to apologize as she vaulted around him and into the cramped, dark cell where Clark waited for her. She was moving so fast that she barely caught a glance of the man in the cell before she launched herself at Clark, engulfing him in a tight embrace. Her tears came then – great heaving sobs as all her pent-up fears and frustration and all the long years of missing him came rushing to the surface like an erupting volcano. But the man she was hugging didn’t react other than to stiffen up slightly at her touch. He didn’t speak. He didn’t make a move to hug her back. He didn’t make a single sound.

How long Lois hugged him, she didn’t know. But, eventually, she pulled away to study him. And what she saw broke her heart all over again.

Though Clark looked much the same as he had the last time she’d seen him, a little over twenty years prior, everything about him was different. He was paler than Death and had a vacant look

that went far beyond simple confusion. His eyes were dull and lifeless, as though his mind had been switched off to leave a great nothingness behind. He barely even blinked at her, and when he did, it was ponderously slow and only drove home how little was going on in his head.

And he was thin. Painfully, skeletally thin. His arms, visible beneath his t-shirt, were little more than bones with a fragile patina of skin covering them. His cheeks were sunken in and hollow. His glasses were missing, and his hair was long and unkempt. His hands...Lois winced as she noted how gnarled and deformed they appeared.

“Oh, Clark,” she said, taking his face in her hands, smoothing away the new wrinkles that had formed over his features during his years of captivity.

Clark stiffened again and pulled away slightly, as if her touch burned.

“What’s wrong? It’s me, Lois. Don’t you remember me, Clark?” she asked pleadingly.

Again, his face changed ever so slightly, but the look he now bore was one of haunted terror.

“Clark? What’s the matter?”

Confusion mixed in with his fear, as though he couldn’t comprehend his own name.

“No...he’s *afraid* of his name,” Lois murmured to herself.

“But...why?” She looked over her shoulder to see Commissioner Gordon entering the room. “What’s happened to him?” she demanded. “He doesn’t seem to know his own name. Or, maybe more accurately, he’s *afraid* of it.”

“What makes you say that?” the man asked, peering more closely at Clark.

“Clark?” Lois asked softly, to illustrate her point.

Clark – or what was left of him – instantly gave her a look of desperate fear as he flinched away, though he never spoke a word. Lois reached out to him and stroked his arm.

“Hey, it’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m here to *save* you. I promise,” she told him.

“Commissioner? I found something you need to see,” said one of the other officers, sticking his head into the cell.

“What is it?” Commissioner Gordon asked with a scant glance backward, his gaze mostly fixated on the broken man before them.

“The medical file. It took some doing. This guy’s name isn’t even on it. We had to do a *lot* of digging to figure out who it belongs to,” the man explained, waving the thin file like a prize before him.

Lois looked sharply away from Clark and her mouth dropped open. There was no telling how long Clark had been locked away from the world in this depressing little cell, but the slimness of his file shocked her nonetheless.

“That’s *it*?” she barked, making the officer blink in surprise.

He shrugged indifferently, trying to regain his composure.

Lois scowled at him. “We’re lucky we found even this much, lady,” he said in a thick Brooklyn accent.

Lois noted the man’s name – T. Williams. She made a mental promise to herself to complain about his attitude to Commissioner Gordon later. But right now, her focus *had* to be on Clark.

“What did they do to him?” she asked, swallowing down the lump of righteous rage against the policeman with great difficulty.

Officer Williams handed the slim folder to the commissioner, who opened the file and began to read. Lois resisted the urge to rip the folder from his fingers to read it herself.

“Says here that he was admitted by an unknown man.

Apparently, his – that is to say, Clark’s – identity was...and remains...unknown as well. But when he was admitted, he was, and I quote, ‘stark, raving mad, insisting that he was Superman’ and that ‘no amount of talk therapy could purge such illusions from his mind.’ It goes on to say that ‘more drastic measures may be needed.’” Commissioner Gordon went silent a moment as his

eyes darted back and forth, raking across the page with a speed Lois had only ever seen from Clark before.

"They did something to his mind," she said, more to herself than to anyone else.

"Indeed," Commissioner Gordon said, a tremble creeping into his voice. "Lois, look. I'm no doctor. I think, before I say anything else, I'd be more comfortable having a doctor look over the file. The EMTs can only do so much, you know?"

Reluctantly, Lois nodded. "Dr. Klein in Metropolis," she immediately offered, knowing that, if anyone could be trusted with Clark's secret and his health, it was him. After all, Dr. Klein was the only one who'd ever worked as closely with Superman as he had.

Still, she had to wonder what Commissioner Gordon wasn't telling her. Or could it be that he wasn't entirely sure what the various terminologies written in the file meant? Next to her, Clark looked blankly on.

"What aren't you telling me?" she demanded after a moment.

Commissioner Gordon closed the file and removed his glasses. He rubbed at his eyes a moment before answering. "I'm not entirely comfortable trying to decipher the file," he finally said. "There are terms in here that I'm not familiar with. And some that...I'm not sure I'm interpreting them correctly. And even if I was, I'm certain that I can't answer the questions I know you'll have. Dr. Klein is in a better position to answer your questions than I am." He used his shirt to wipe a spot off one of his lenses. "We'll arrange for Clark to be taken to him with as much speed as we can muster."

"Is he...okay to travel?" Lois asked worriedly, looking at how heartbreakingly frail Clark looked.

"We'll double-check with the EMTs, obviously, but as long as he gets the green-light, we'll get him to Metropolis," Commissioner Gordon assured her.

"Hear that, Clark? You're going home to Metropolis," Lois told her long lost best friend in a whisper-soft voice.

He shrank from her in response and she mentally kicked herself for using his name. It was clear some kind of trauma was associated with his name and she didn't want to cause him any more harm than he'd already suffered through. And yet, she knew she'd never be able to prevent herself from saying his name. She had to restore it to him, to make him be able to hear it without resorting to fear.

She took his hand in hers and gave him a reassuring squeeze. He tensed under her touch, but she was determined to show him that she was there to help and support him, not hurt him. She refused to remove her hand from his.

"It's okay, I won't hurt you," she promised, her voice baby-soft. "I just want to help. I don't know how much you can remember, but we were best friends. We still are," she continued, letting her own inner tension bleed out into a babble. Maybe, if she spoke enough, Clark would remember. He always used to tease her good-naturedly about her babbling. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you again. And your mother! She's going to be over the moon that you've been found. Can you remember her?" She had to bite her tongue against calling him Clark.

Clark looked at her blankly, not reacting at all beyond a blank stare.

"Please, none of the doctors or nurses are around. If this is an act, you can drop it," Lois pleaded, knowing it *wasn't* an act. "No one is going to hurt you. If you're able to speak, please, tell us what you've been through." A single tear leaked from her eye and raced down her cheek.

She half expected Clark to reach out and wipe away the tear with the gentle brushing of his thumb over her cheek, the way he had in the past. But he seemed to be completely unaware of the fact that she was crying. That, more than anything, convinced her that her friend might truly be gone for good, and her tears came

harder.

"Lois?" Henderson asked, concerned.

Lois waved away the question, not wanting to lie through her teeth and say that she was okay. "Just get the damn EMT to sign off on Clark's transport," she growled. Then she stood up from the rickety cot in Clark's cell and helped him to stand as well. "Can you walk?" she asked, not expecting an answer.

Slowly, shakily, Clark got to his feet. Lois ducked under his armpit and eased some of his body weight onto herself so that she could support him. He felt feather-light in her arms, a far cry from the solid mass of muscle she'd once know him to be.

"Where do you think you're going? The EMT hasn't said..." Commissioner Gordon began before Lois cut him off.

"I'm getting him out of this building," she replied, her tongue lashing out the words like a whip. "You don't like it? Arrest me," she challenged.

"We don't know the extent of any injuries he might have," came the man's defense.

But Lois wasn't listening. She helped Clark to stumble his way out of the cell, all the while wondering when was the last time he'd been outside of that cramped, crypt-like little room. Clark was weak but still stronger than Lois had anticipated. He continued walking and seemed to need to rely on her help far less than she'd thought he would. He made it all the way to the elevator before the doors opened, revealing the EMT Lois had nearly crashed into earlier. This time, the man was wheeling a gurney before him.

"Stop," the EMT commanded, blocking the way to the elevator.

She had no choice but to listen. Clark silently followed her lead.

"Here," the EMT said, a little kinder this time. "Let's get him up on the bed. He'll be safer that way."

"So long as we get out of this building," Lois replied with a shrug. "I don't want him in here a second longer than need be."

The EMT mutely nodded as he helped Clark onto the gurney. Then he expertly strapped Clark down, ensuring that the restraints were snug but not oppressively tight. In the next minute, the three were heading back to the main floor, leaving Henderson and the commissioner to wait for the elevator to return for them. Lois felt different once they reached the main floor. The creepy feeling she'd experienced on the way in had morphed into an overwhelming sense that the place was demonic. She prayed that the inevitable investigation into the facility would see everyone involved in running the place arrested and the asylum itself shut down.

It was a relief when they finally stepped back out into the frigid, but bright outdoors. Clark shut his eyes against the sunlight as though it pained him greatly, sending a jolt of worry through Lois. From everything Clark's parents had told her on the night they'd divulged their son's secret in desperation to Lois, the sunlight healed him and fueled his powers. To see him looking as though it hurt him to be in the sun was more than a little distressing.

How long has it been since he's last seen the sun? she wondered as her heart shattered.

Clark seemed to huddle into the blanket that had been thrown over his restraints as though wanting to hide from the sun's luminous afternoon rays. He shivered against the cold and that too hammered home just how much was wrong with him. His Kryptonian genetics should have made him immune to the freezing temperature.

The EMT wheeled him over to one of the ambulances parked nearby. He threw open the rear double doors and started to load the gurney – and Clark – inside. Clark seemed oblivious to this new development.

"I'm coming with him," Lois informed the EMT.

“Suit yourself,” the man replied. “Just stay off to the side and don’t get in the way.”

“Lois?” Commissioner Gordon called, running up to the ambulance.

“I’m going with Clark. I’ll let you know more once I get some answers,” she promised.

“Take this.” He handed her Clark’s medical file.

“Thank you,” she said sincerely. “And thank you for finding Clark for me.” She looked at Henderson. “What about you, Bill?”

“I have a few things to square away here, then I’ll head back to the city,” he told her. “Just do me one favor?”

“Yeah?”

Henderson cracked a barely-there smile. “Take good care of Clark, okay?”

Lois smiled wistfully in return. “I swear it.”

“Good.” Henderson patted the side of the ambulance, signaling that he was finished speaking.

The EMT quickly shut and secured the doors, then he called out for the driver to start moving. Lois watched in fascination and dread as the EMT checked Clark over again and started an IV drip to help replace some of Clark’s fluids. Perhaps it would give him nutrients too, Lois thought, uncomfortable with the fact that she knew next to nothing about medicine, despite having a surgeon for a father and a nurse for a mother. The EMT hung a second bag – possibly antibiotics – but Lois couldn’t be one hundred percent sure what it contained.

The IV had her on edge. If Clark’s body started to gain back its invulnerability during the ride to Metropolis, things could go from bad to worse. How would she explain the situation without completely blowing Clark’s secret?

No, she told herself as she tried to calm her racing heart and the terror zipping through her veins. He’s barely had any sunlight. There’s really only the front windshield and doors that have windows. There’s no way he’ll get enough sun to heal. Besides, there’s no telling how long he’s been locked away underground. Or...is there?

Her eyes shot to the file Commissioner Gordon had entrusted her with. She opened it up and scanned it.

Admission date....admission date...ah, there. June 9, 2003. Almost ten years to the day that he went missing. Oh, God, she realized with fresh horror, he’s been in this hellhole for ten years!

As her heart sank, she felt the ambulance lurch into motion. After twenty years, Clark was *finally* going home.

The ambulance practically flew them to Metropolis at a rate that rivaled the once invincible superhero Clark had portrayed. Thinking of Superman had made a lump rise in Lois’ throat. Looking at Clark, it was nearly impossible to reconcile the frail, broken, dead-eyed shell of a man before her with the god-like hero who’d chased down villains, lifted a rocket, swallowed a bomb, and destroyed an asteroid the size of Metropolis two decades ago. She closed her eyes for a few precious moments, summoning up images of the hero she’d once known, befriended, and flown with, but it hurt too much to cling to the ghosts of the past. She opened her eyes again and kept them fixated on Clark as he lay, unmoving, on the gurney while the EMTs spoke to one another in a litany of medical terms that was as alien to Lois as any foreign language.

When Clark had been cleared to leave the accursed Arkham Asylum, Lois had been furious with the decision to bring him to Metropolis via ambulance rather than by a medical helicopter, but the ride into Metropolis hadn’t been too bad. Though Clark was undeniably in bad shape, he wasn’t in critical condition. At least, that’s what she kept reminding herself during their ride. He was breathing and moving on his own, despite his skeletal appearance. But the ride had given one thing the shorter trip a helicopter would have robbed her of; it had given Lois time to think and make

decisions. Among those was the absolute need to share Clark’s identity with Dr. Klein when they arrived at S.T.A.R. Labs.

Dr. Klein.

Lois flashed back to when she’d introduced Clark to the esteemed scientist, a little over twenty years ago. She hadn’t known Dr. Klein all that well or for all that long when she’d made the decision to introduce him to Clark. In fact, in a lot of ways, she and Dr. Klein had still been in the very early stages of building what had started out as a simple reporter and source relationship and had gone on to become a strong friendship over the ensuing years.

She almost smiled at the memory. Almost. It had been a few weeks after Clark had been made her permanent partner – well before she’d learned to accept Clark’s friendship. Clark had been working on a rare solo assignment and had asked for her help in locating an expert opinion for his investigation. Perhaps it had been because he’d been on a *solo* assignment – and, therefore, hadn’t been the competition. Or maybe it had been because he’d gone out of his way to bring in what she now knew had to have been *authentic* croissants that morning for them to share – a sweet gesture given how rude she’d been to him just the day before. Or maybe it had just been her wanting to assert her dominance as the senior partner. Whatever the reason, she’d immediately given him her aid by taking him to S.T.A.R. Labs.

Looking back now, she wondered if some part of her had accepted that it was a part of being partners – sharing sources and supporting one another. And while she’d never once thought of herself as the partner type, Clark had changed all of that. He’d been decent and smart, sometimes goofy but always determined, and he’d never once sat back and refused to pull his own weight. Never in the years before Clark or in the decades spent frantically searching for him, had Lois ever found anyone else she could stand to be partnered with.

She sniffled and wiped away a single tear as she recalled bringing Clark to S.T.A.R. Labs and how easily the two men had befriended one another. Later – as she learned from Jonathan and Martha – Clark had turned to Dr. Klein, trusting the gentle-hearted scientist to be Superman’s physician in the rare event he might need a doctor.

And now, more than ever, Clark needed a doctor.

The EMTs had called ahead when they were just a few short blocks away from the lab. Dr. Klein had been ready for them, waiting impatiently for the ambulance to arrive. As they waited for Clark to be unloaded, Lois took note of how anxious Dr. Klein was – evidenced only by the way he rocked back and forth on his heels and the way his features seemed pinched together. As soon as Clark was out of the ambulance, he’d motioned for the EMTs to follow him to an exam room he’d prepped in advance. Lois was just a scant few steps behind, her heart racing, her stomach churning in dread, and the world around her seeming to move in slow motion. As soon as the EMTs had left Clark in Dr. Klein’s care, Lois breathlessly unveiled the secret that would be crucial to Clark’s treatment and, hopefully, recovery. She could only pray that it would be enough.

Shock wasn’t the word to describe the look on Dr. Klein’s face when she dropped the bombshell that Clark – her best friend, her former partner, the simple, unassuming man Dr. Klein had befriended so long ago – was also Superman; the man who’d saved the world from total annihilation by destroying an asteroid with his bare hands. The more Lois told him, the whiter Dr. Klein’s face became, until he looked like a man who’d never once seen the sun in all his life. A range of emotions played across his features – everything from shock, to horror, to understanding, and even disgust. He’d looked like she’d slapped him across the face with an old, dead fish as he stood in place, eyes practically bulging out of his head and his jaw hanging low and slack. But, to his credit, he recovered his wits quickly and ushered Lois to another room

while he turned all business to examine Clark.

"How is he?" Lois asked as soon as Dr. Klein stepped back into the room, what felt like hours later.

Dr. Klein didn't immediately answer. Instead, he slowly paced across the room to the rolling chair in the far corner. With two hands, he steered the chair over to rest next to the one in which Lois sat. All the while, he was silent and a grave expression was on his face, making Lois all the more worried. Her stomach churned as her imagination kicked into overdrive and all kinds of worst-case scenarios ripped through her mind with lightning speed. Was Clark dying?

"Dr. Klein?" she prompted him again, aware that her tone of voice was more pleading than before.

"He's...things..." Dr. Klein futility began, gesturing helplessly.

"Just tell me," Lois prodded.

Dr. Klein sighed and rubbed at his temples for a moment. "I'm afraid the news...isn't good."

"How bad is it?" Lois asked, choking down a sob.

"Bad," the man said simply. "He's...probably been tortured," he admitted in a pained voice. "Mentally *and* physically."

"Oh God," Lois moaned as she fought back the sting of tears.

Dr. Klein sighed again. "He's malnourished, for starters. How he's still alive is beyond me, to be unfortunately blunt about it. I don't know when he's last seen the sun. His body needs it, as much as possible. I didn't think Superman could survive this long without the nourishment it provides him."

"I'll make sure he gets plenty of food *and* sunlight," Lois vowed.

"I wish that was the extent of it," Dr. Klein continued, looking away for a moment, as though he couldn't bear to look her in the eyes. "Clark's got a number of bones that were broken, probably at all different times. The x-rays show that some of them healed well. But others...there are some serious malunions going on."

"Mal...unions?" Lois asked, breaking the unfamiliar word apart.

"His bones didn't heal correctly. Some of them are... grotesquely misaligned," Dr. Klein explained, swallowing hard around the difficult news. "I'm sure you must have noticed some of them. Every finger. Every toe. Both ankles. His wrists. His right tibia. His left fibula." He indicated the bones in question by pointing to his own leg bones. "I would bet my medical license that his bones were broken repeatedly, based on what I can tell from the x-rays. Of course, unless the breaks are noted in the medical file, there's no telling for sure, nor can I tell you how long ago they happened. I'll read the file over more thoroughly tonight, once I have a chance to sit and really give it my full attention. I only had the chance to gloss over it, looking for anything that stood out. My main focus was on evaluating Clark's condition."

"Is there anything that we can do?" Lois asked, her mind already spinning. "For the malunions, that is."

Reluctantly, the doctor nodded. But he looked far from happy. "He'll need to be vulnerable, of course, but I can...rebreak his bones and set them correctly. With casts and splints, I can make certain that they heal properly."

"Does it have to be now?" Lois asked, horrified.

Dr. Klein shook his head. "No, of course not. Clark's been living this way for probably a long time now. He doesn't seem to be in much discomfort, so I think it's safe to wait until his natural healing aura returns to speed up the regrowth of the bones. He may or may not need physical therapy afterward to help him regain his proper strength and to relearn how to use the broken areas the correct way again. For better or worse, he's adapted well to using his malformed bones the way they currently are."

"So...what then? We just let Clark continue on as is for...how long? A week? A month? A year? What if he's in pain but can't communicate it to us?" Lois demanded.

Dr. Klein gave her an apologetic look and spread his hands in a helpless manner. "I know it sounds inhumane. Believe me, I *want* to correct his injuries as soon as possible. And I would do it right now if I felt confident enough to do so. But he's been through a *lot* of trauma. I'm afraid if I broke his bones now, it might be the straw that breaks the camel's back, so to speak."

"You mean it might *kill* him?" Lois gulped around the words.

"Maybe. The pain involved...there's a number of malunions I'd have to correct. But the greater potential for damage is against his mental state." He tapped the side of his head for emphasis.

Lois shuddered. Clark's mental state scared her more than any physical needs he might have. "How bad is it?" she ventured, her voice lower than it had been a moment before.

Dr. Klein closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose before answering. It appeared he was gathering his thoughts, or maybe just his courage, before delving into things.

"I don't know...how to say this," he stammered. "He's...nearly catatonic. He shows no true awareness. He knows that you or I are there and talking to him. But he doesn't seem to be able to react to us at all...at least nothing past fear and confusion. He doesn't react to his own name in the way I'd expect. It's like he doesn't even recognize that it belongs to him."

"When I saw him in the asylum, I used his name. I called to him. I hugged him and said his name," Lois said with a shake of her head. "He pulled back in terror. I think he's *afraid* of his name. I just don't know why."

"I...*may* have an explanation for that," Dr. Klein cautiously stated, rubbing his chin in thought. "In going through the file the police seized from the raid on the asylum...it looks like he was... experimented on."

"Exper..." Lois choked on the word and was unable to get the vile thought completed.

"Not in the way you're probably thinking," Dr. Klein quickly amended, gesturing frantically. "But he was subjected to a *lot* of... electroshock 'therapy.' Or torture, as I – and most scientists – prefer to call it."

Lois felt like her old friend had slapped her in the face. Her stomach lurched and her mind went reeling. She blindly grabbed the trash bin next to her and threw up in it as the full extent of what Clark had gone through hit her. She vomited until her stomach was empty, then dry heaved a few times before she felt confident enough to put the garbage pail back down. Dr. Klein crossed the room and filled a small clear plastic cup with water from the sink and offered it to her. Lois took it gratefully and sipped gently at the drink.

"Thanks. And sorry," she said after a moment.

Dr. Klein shook his head. "Don't apologize. I nearly did the same when I read about it in the file."

"What...what does this mean? For Clark?" she fearfully ventured a few seconds later as she stared at the water in her cup. She couldn't look up at Dr. Klein, not yet at any rate.

"It means...his brain is...damaged. His memory...it's not there, Lois."

"What does that mean?" She gulped around the question, dreading the answer.

"It means...the electricity they shot into his brain...it's destroyed some of his brain tissue. Normally, for regular people like you and me, once that tissue...once those cells...are damaged, they don't heal," Dr. Klein said quietly, his voice a bare-whisper so fragile it seemed made of the thinnest glass.

"But...he's *not* a regular person," Lois asserted. "He's *Superman*. If his bones can heal, can't his brain heal itself too?" It was a faint hope and a poor comparison, but she couldn't give up what dim hope there might be for Clark to return to normal.

Dr. Klein sighed and it almost looked like he was holding back a sob. "I wish I knew."

"He *has* to be able to come back," Lois said, more because she

wanted it to be true than because there was any evidence that it could be true.

"I hope so. But we have to be realistic here, Lois."

"I am. If *anyone* has a chance to beat this, it's Clark," she declared with resolve.

"Lois, you understand, this isn't a disease or infection. There's nothing to beat here," Dr. Klein stressed gently. "We can do the best we can to give him what he needs – we can fix his broken bones, we can give him all the sunlight and nutritious foods possible, we can fill his days talking about his past and who he is. But we may not be able to 'fix' – for lack of a better term – *all* the things that are wrong with him. We may be able to help his body heal...but his mind? There's, unfortunately, nothing we can do to make the dead tissue regenerate." He took both of her hands in his, forcing her to make eye contact with him. "As much as I want to make promises that he can come back from this, the truth is, it's far more likely that he'll never recover. Even *if* his powers return."

Lois looked up sharply. "If?"

Dr. Klein let go of her hands and shrugged helplessly. "He's gone without sunlight for a long, *long* time, Lois. For all we know, being shut away for so long might have...altered...his body's ability to recharge in the sunlight. It's possible he might never recover the use of his powers. Which, in his current mental frailty, might not be the worst thing in the world. Imagine, for a moment, what a disaster it could be if he suddenly regained his heat vision without his memories of how to control it."

An involuntary shudder raced up Lois' spine. "We'll cross that bridge if and when we come to it," she vowed. She squared her shoulders to bolster her own confidence. "So...what do we do now?"

"It's too dangerous to admit him to the hospital, and I don't have the resources to keep him at S.T.A.R. Labs," Dr. Klein said slowly, as though the ideas were coming to him in that exact moment.

"He can stay with me," Lois decided as the scientist paused in thought.

"I'm not sure..."

"Help me bring him to my place," Lois insisted. "I have a spare bedroom. He can be comfortable and have his privacy. No one will be the wiser that the freshly rescued Clark Kent is also Superman. If you need to set up IVs and the like to give him medication, he'll be able to receive those too without gossip and prying eyes. Just give me the chance to get my car and I'll take care of all the rest of the details."

"Here we go," Lois said late that night as she parked her car in front of the house she'd bought a little over eight years before. "Home sweet home."

She glanced over to Clark, who looked straight ahead with blank eyes. He seemed not to notice the townhouse on his right. Lois sighed internally. It was heart-wrenching to see how little he seemed to take in of the world around him. She wished there was some sunlight, so she could set up a chaise lounge chair on the small patch of lawn she owned, in order to get the healing process started for Clark. But even then...how much *would* he heal, if at all?

"I know, I know," she said, just for the sake of talking. The silence she was met with from Clark was more than she could bear. "It's a lot different from my apartment. Who would have imagined it, right? Me, a homeowner?" She laughed nervously, wishing he would respond in some way. "There was a time when I couldn't imagine tying myself to a house. It just seemed so... permanent. Like putting down roots. After you disappeared...I wasn't sure if I even wanted to stay in Metropolis. So many reminders..." Her voice trailed off and she cleared her throat.

Clark continued to look uncomprehendingly ahead.

"Anyway, the more I thought about it, the more I *needed* to

stay. Especially once the Daily Planet was rebuilt. Can you believe it? Perry found a buyer for the paper and, within a couple of months of the bombing, we were back in business, our office better than ever. So I stayed. And, honestly, I had hope that you'd find your way back to my apartment one day."

Clark blinked slowly and his mouth opened. For one torturously slow moment, Lois had hope that he would speak. But all he did was release a small yawn and Lois' hopes turned to ash.

"Then my apartment building got sold," she continued, as she shut off the Jeep and unbuckled her seatbelt. She turned more fully toward Clark. "Overnight, the rents were more than doubled and I had to find a new place. Jimmy and I busted this weird mad-scientist lady in this house and then it went up for sale. It wound up being pretty much dirt cheap. People don't want houses with crimes associated with it. My mortgage payments are cheaper than my rent ever was. So...here I am, with a house on Hyperion Avenue."

She paused then, giving Clark a chance to make any noise of acknowledgment, but he didn't.

"Yeah, I know. I talk too much. Okay, let's get inside. I kept some of your old clothes in storage in case you ever came back home and needed them. I'm guessing they'll be a bit big on you now, but they should serve until I can pick up some new stuff for you."

She opened the door and clamored out, then quickly went around the front of the car to help Clark. He didn't move, so she opened the door and helped him unbuckle his seatbelt, then she took his arm to help him out of the car. Clark allowed her to help him shuffle down the sidewalk and up the few steps leading into the house. She helped him stay steady as she unlocked her front door, wondering if he truly needed her help, but unwilling to risk him collapsing or hurting himself. He was so painfully frail-looking that she felt she needed to protect him against even the gusts of icy wind that were blowing. She shouldered the door open and helped him inside.

As soon as they were in, Lois kicked the door closed, then reached over with her free hand to lock it up again. She wanted the cold to remain outside, and she had the nagging instinct to shut out the entire world so that Clark could recuperate in private. She snuck a peek at him as she guided him deeper into her home, hoping to see him taking some interest in his surroundings. She wanted – needed – some sign that the man she knew was still somewhere inside, even if hidden down deep within. He *couldn't* be gone. He was *Clark*. His personality was vital to everything that made him so extraordinary.

But Clark merely stared ahead with glazed eyes and an unchanging, neutral expression.

"So...what do you think of the place?" Lois found herself asking before the words were given permission to pass her lips. "It's a bit cozier than my old apartment, that's for sure. Lucy – you remember my sister, don't you? – helped me pick out some of the furniture. She always hated the stuff at my old place. She said it was...stiff and uninviting. But you never said you disliked it. Still, she might have been right," she continued in a nervous babble, "the new stuff is a *lot* more comfortable. I think I feel more at home now than I ever did in my apartment. Heck, I used to feel more at home in *your* apartment than I did in mine."

She guided him to the living room, showing him the Christmas tree that stood in one corner, all lit up in white lights and bedecked with a scattering of ornaments – some obviously newer, some older and harboring a thousand memories within them. He looked impassively at it, as though not comprehending what he was seeing.

"It's a few weeks before Christmas," she told him in a soft voice. "It's always been your favorite holiday. You used to tease me when I said I never really enjoyed it. You couldn't understand how anyone could hate the 'happiest time of the year,' as you used

to put it. I'll never forget how much your eyes sparkled when you talked about Christmas back home on the farm in Kansas."

She felt compelled to keep bringing up the past, praying silently that something she said would trigger a spark in his mind that would bring all his memories cascading back like an avalanche to envelop his brain and restore who he'd once been. But Clark didn't react at all to her story.

"Come on," Lois said after a moment of indecision. "Let's get you upstairs to your bedroom and into some clean and more comfortable clothing," she added, shuddering to look at the dirty hospital garb he'd been forced to wear.

Silently, Clark complied as she brought him to the stairs. For a moment, she was uncertain about how well his malformed ankles would handle the challenge, but with a jostling, shambling, wobbling motion, he mounted each step one by one until they were at the top of the staircase. The way he had to force his body to move looked uncomfortably unnatural to her eyes, but he didn't seem to be in any pain, so she took what solace she could in that fact. Curious to see how well he actually *could* move on his own, Lois only took him gently by the elbow as she helped him find his room. He seemed not to know what to do when she ushered him inside, merely standing in the middle of the room. Lois patted the chair near the window and he sat with eerie obedience. Lois went to the closet.

"After I took in some of your things, I put your clothes in the closet," she explained as she rifled through the assorted sweaters and sweatshirts that hung neatly from a variety of different colored plastic hangers, like ancient relics from a bygone era. "I never saw you use pajamas, not even when we had our overnight stakeouts from time to time. At first, when we were in the Lexor, I thought maybe you were just shy, but, no matter what time of night I showed up on your doorstep, you were always in shorts or sweatpants with either a t-shirt or sweatshirt."

She threw a look over his shoulder but not even *that* reminder of his past appeared to strike a chord with him. She continued her search. "I think I have some things that are a little on the smaller side...ah, yes! Here we go!" She triumphantly extracted a brandy-colored Midwestern State University sweatshirt from the closet and a pair of faded black sweatpants from the nearby dresser. Next, she found a pair of his old boxers and socks and laid it all out on the bed.

"I know, creepy, right, that I have all this stuff? Like I said, I kept hoping you'd show up and wanted to make sure I had everything you might need in case you did. We've made some enemies over the course of our careers, and for all I knew, you'd be on the run from someone and be unable to get out to the stores to pick up the essentials." She deliberately refrained from mentioning Superman. Clark didn't even know his own name. He probably didn't recall Superman at all, and she feared what dropping that information on him might do to his already precarious mental state.

She pointed to the door on the far side of the room. "You've got your own, private bathroom in here. Come on. I can trim your hair for you," she offered, looking at his unkempt, shaggier than normal locks. "And help you shave if you need it." The coarse, days-old stubble told her that he likely wasn't capable of tending to things like that and the doctors who'd kept him locked in the asylum hadn't made it a priority of keeping him bathed and groomed each day.

Clark stood like a mute ghost and shambled across the room to the bathroom. Lois had him sit down on the closed lid of the toilet seat while she first shaved his face back to his smooth, neat, familiar looks. Then she used the buzzer she'd found in Clark's bathroom, back when she'd been helping Martha and Jonathan clean the place out – one of the many props Clark had collected over the years in an attempt to appear as normal and unremarkable as possible. With hands that only trembled twice, she sheared

away the tangled mass of knots and dirty, oily, limp hair to give him a neat cut that resembled his former preferred style. Stepping back, she frowned a bit.

"I think I may have gone a *little* shorter than you used to keep it," she decided. "But, I promise, you look as handsome as you always did." She gave him a smile that he did not acknowledge. Then she put the buzzer away and gestured to the tub and shower. "It's all yours," she offered. Clark stood in what seemed to be a vague awareness of what she wanted, then he peeled off his shirt and let it fall to the floor.

"Oh, I didn't mean to disrobe in front..." she began before a gasp of horror cut off her words.

Clark's chest and back were a roadmap of old scars. Some were short, others were long. It was abundantly clear that some ran deep, as though chunks of flesh had been torn from his body. He was pockmarked and bruised. There appeared to be burn marks mingled amongst the wormy-white scars that crisscrossed his skin in a nightmarish dance. He was so thin she could count every bone in his torso. His clavicle bones were so prominent they looked like the shoulder padding he would have worn during his college football days and his hip bones stuck out well beyond his shrunken waist.

"Oh, God," she said, the words nothing more than a sob that stuck in her throat. "What did they *do* to you, Clark?"

She almost regretted using his name as he flinched in fear from the word. *Almost*. But she was determined to restore ownership of his name and identity to him. And for that to happen, she *had* to make him see that Clark belonged to him and that he was Clark. She needed him to not only accept the name but to *embrace* it the way he once had. She reached out to him but he instinctively drew back and she let her hand drop. Was he afraid that she was going to add to his horrific collection of scars? Did he imagine that she was going to abuse him as badly as his former captors had? And that was how Lois viewed the doctors and nurses at the asylum – as nothing more than sadistic captors who'd hurt Clark in unspeakable ways.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't find you sooner," she apologized to him. "I'd do anything to go back in time and save you from... whatever they did to you." She sighed. "Take whatever time you need. Everything is right here for you. And when you're done, I'll be waiting, okay?"

With tears pricking her eyes, she turned and left Clark to his shower. How much humiliation had that poor man suffered? How much torture had he endured before – or after – his electroshock therapy? And here Lois wasn't sure which was worse – being fully conscious of what was happening as he was abused or being unaware and unable to advocate for himself.

"He needs food," she decided, mostly to give herself something to do. She needed to focus on a task – *any* task – to keep her mind from wondering about his scars.

She went down to the kitchen and took stock of her fridge. As usual, she'd put off grocery shopping until she was almost in the "dire need" stage of desperation. Still, she had a pound of ground beef and some ziti. She checked and double-checked her fridge – no cheese.

"So much for baked ziti," she sighed as she set to work making meatballs and sauce. "Looks like we're having just regular pasta tonight."

By the time she was finished preparing the meal and setting it all on a tray to bring to Clark's room, she heard the water in the shower shut off. She took the meal upstairs to Clark's room and found him dressed and sitting on the bed. Was it her imagination or did he look almost forlorn? Did he know how much he'd lost in the last twenty years?

"Hey, I made us a late dinner," she said gently from the doorway. Slowly, his head left his chest and he looked at her. "And you don't have to worry. I can actually cook now. Well...sort of."

There's a few things I can do well. Shocking, I know," she teased with a shy smile. "I kind of gave Lucy and my mother food poisoning, oh, about ten or twelve years ago. Lucy's Christmas gift to me that year was cooking lessons. She thought it was hilarious," she said as she brought the tray to the bed and sat across from Clark. "Joke's on her though. After almost setting the school's kitchen on fire five or six times, I now make a better roasted chicken than she ever did." She grinned widely, partly in pride, partly in hopes that it would encourage Clark to react.

He blinked once at her, then his eyes dropped to his plate. Methodically, he picked up his fork and wordlessly ate his meal. After ten or fifteen minutes, Lois noticed that he hadn't touched the can of Coke she'd brought for him, so she reached over and popped the tab for him.

"Drink up," she encouraged with a gesture at the can. "It's always been one of your favorites. I guess they didn't give you stuff like this when you were...in the hospital," she said, forcing the words out and swallowing her disgust with the place. "I promise though, you'll like it."

Clark stared at the can for a long moment, then went back to eating. When he was finished, he picked up the can of soda and drained it robotically. Lois scrutinized his features, waiting for some flash of recognition or joy – anything to show her that the taste of the drink had brought back some remembrance of his likes and dislikes. But his face was a blank slate. Lois shoved aside her disappointment.

"It's been a long day," she finally settled on after debating on how to proceed next. "You should get some sleep. Tomorrow we'll make sure you get plenty of sunlight and I'll go food shopping and start making you all the things I know won't send your stomach into a protest." Brazenly, she reached out and took his hand in hers. He tensed but looked too afraid to pull his hand away. "We're going to figure this out, I promise. I just don't know how yet. But Dr. Klein and I will do everything we can. I know you're still in there, somewhere. Fight, Clark. If not for me, do it for you. Find that spark I know you have inside."

Clark's only response was a tired blink as he slipped his hand from hers when she loosened her gentle grip on it. Lois stood and collected the remnants of their dinner – and she was pleased to see that Clark had eaten every last bite of food on his plate – before heading for the door. She turned back to look at him one last time for the night.

"Good night, Clark," she whispered and her heart yearned to hear him say it back, just like he used to on the phone after their stay in the Lexor.

But Clark simply sat in the darkness as Lois turned off the light.

Lois paced her living room, knowing what she had to do now that Clark was home but wondering how she was supposed to do it. Her stomach was knotted and her palms were sweaty. For how long had she dreamed of this moment? How many times over the last twenty years had she envisioned herself doing what she was about to do? But, never, in her darkest moments, had she imagined the circumstances to be like this.

"Better just to rip off the band-aid," she muttered to herself as she slowed her pacing. For a moment, she turned and faced the direction of the kitchen, contemplating a cup of coffee, but as the clock struck eleven, she shook her head. "Too late for that. And I'm wound up enough as it is."

She sat down on the couch, suddenly feeling exhausted. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the gift she'd been attempting to wrap earlier in the day when Henderson had called. It was still unwrapped and the tape on the tape dispenser was still twisted uselessly on itself.

"Was that *really* just today?" she wondered out loud. "Feels like a year ago."

She shook her head, then reached for the cordless phone she kept on the side table. She wanted to lay back and relax, but she felt like every muscle was coiled like a spring, even though Clark was out of immediate danger. It was the call that had her worried, she knew. How could she verbalize everything that had happened?

With a heavy sigh, she stretched her back until she heard and felt a satisfying *pop!* Then she pulled the number from her phone's contact list and listened as it dialed. For one, heart-stopping moment, she wasn't entirely sure she *wanted* the phone to be picked up. But in the next second, she heard the sound of the phone being answered.

"Hi, Lois," Martha greeted her tiredly, clearly holding back a yawn.

"Martha, hi," Lois said in turn. "I'm sorry to call you so late."

"It's okay, dear," the other woman said, and Lois could hear the small smile in her voice. "I was up watching a movie anyway. What's going on?" Once upon a time, Martha had started every conversation asking if there was any news on Clark. But in the past couple of years, she'd strayed further and further from that routine as it became more and more apparent that Clark might never be found.

"I...have some news," Lois began cautiously. "Something happened today. Something I..." She swallowed hard; her mouth had gone dry. "I asked the police not to call you until I...knew more. I didn't want you getting half-answers and partial stories."

"Are you alright?" Martha asked with concern. "What happened?"

"I'm fine," Lois answered immediately. "It's actually not about *me* at all. It's about Clark. We found him, Martha."

Stunned silence filled the air between them. Half a minute passed and Lois wondered if the poor woman had gone into shock.

"Are you...sure?" Martha asked cautiously when she found her voice again, too scared to be hopeful.

"Positive."

Lois could hear Martha swallowing hard. "Is he...?" Her words were thick with the threat of tears and she didn't seem capable of asking the rest of the question.

Lois felt her lips trembling even as she almost smiled tenderly, as though the look could quell Martha's fears. "He's alive, Martha. He's...here...with me. At my house," Lois said gently.

A choked sob came from the other end of the phone line. "Oh, thank God," Martha murmured. "How is he? Is he okay? How did you find him? After all this time..."

"I...didn't," Lois sheepishly admitted. "Batman did."

"Bless him," Martha said, her voice reverent. She paused for a moment, as if gathering her thoughts. "I'll be on the next flight out, I promise."

"Martha...wait," Lois softly said, putting a stop to Martha's babbling. "He's...things are...complicated," she finally settled on. "I don't have all the details yet. The police and Dr. Klein are working on piecing things together. And I will too, as soon as I can. But Clark...was found in Arkham Asylum. He doesn't have any of his powers right now, to the best of my knowledge. It's clear that his invulnerability hasn't been intact for some time now, at any rate."

"He's been without his powers before," Martha replied staunchly. "When you were both in Smallville, not long after he started at the paper, he discovered what Kryptonite can do to him. He was able to recover then. He'll recover now." Determination to see her son well and whole again was in the woman's voice.

"I believe it," Lois agreed. "But...I wish that was *all* that was wrong. I...they...when he was at the asylum..." She swallowed down the lump that was forming in her throat as she beat back the tears that were pricking at her eyes.

"What?" Martha asked, her words heaving with dread.

Lois swallowed again. "He was there for about ten years, Martha. During that time...or before...we're not sure as there was

no history of what happened before he somehow ended up in that awful place..." She sighed and started over. "He's been clearly abused. I'm sorry. I wish it wasn't true."

"A...abused?" The word sounded foreign on the older woman's tongue.

Lois nodded though Martha couldn't see it. "He's got a lot of bones that were broken and which healed improperly. Dr. Klein thinks he can fix them once Clark's powers return. There are... scars, Martha. So many scars."

"My son!" Martha sobbed.

For a long moment, Lois quietly listened to Clark's mother as she grieved. It broke Lois' heart to listen as she wailed, sobbed, and, at one point, dry-heaved. Lois didn't blame Martha one bit. She knew, perhaps, a little of what the older woman was going through. They'd gotten Clark back only to lose him all over again.

"Scars..." Martha finally got out, swallowing hard as she bit back fresh tears. "Scars will fade, in time. Bones can be reset. Can't they?" She was pleading for good news.

"Dr. Klein thinks he might be able to fix them...in time," Lois said carefully, not wanting to give Martha false hope.

"If that's the worst of it, we can get through this," Martha asserted, and Lois knew it was simply her way of trying to take a bad situation and gain control over it. "For so long, I feared my boy was dead. It's like..."

"Like a resurrection, of a sort," Lois supplied when Martha's voice tapered off. "I know."

"It's a miracle. But, oh God, I almost gave up hope of ever seeing him again." A new bubble of grief spilled out into Martha's words. She sniffled a little.

"Martha? There's...something else. Something that...I'm not sure how to tell you," Lois cautiously offered after a moment. "Something...worse than his...physical deformities."

"What can be worse than abuse?" Martha asked in a small, wary voice.

"The abuse...I wish that was the worst of things," Lois forced herself to say. "I wish I could tell you that a surgery or two will solve all of Clark's problems. I wish..."

She stopped for a moment as her voice trembled. She cleared her throat and took a deep breath before continuing. "The asylum...they made him undergo..." She closed her eyes and tried to steady herself. "Electroshock treatment. He...his mind...he's...in a fragile state, Martha."

There was a strangled wail and the sound of retching. A tear slid down Lois' cheek and she wished she was anywhere else doing anything else than delivering this news to Clark's mother. Sniffing and the muffled sound of a nose being blown came across the phone lines. "Electroshock?" Martha asked, horrified.

"I just...I want you to prepare yourself, Martha." Lois felt a lump rising in her throat and she worked hard for a moment trying to push it back down. A tear slid down her cheek that she felt too lethargic to wipe away. She took a deep breath to steady herself as she relayed the traumatizing and horrific reality before them and all the potentially impossible hurdles Clark would have to overcome. She heard her own voice crack as she forced herself to continue. "He...he doesn't seem to know who he is right now. He doesn't know me. When I called him by name...he's *afraid* of his own name, Martha."

A sob bubbled up in her throat and she feigned a cough as she tried to keep the panic out of her voice. "I know you can't wait to hold him and see him again, but...he's not the Clark we remember. Not right now."

"People...they don't come back...they're never the same after electroshock." It was as much a statement as a question, but Martha's voice was hollow, as though she herself had been the one to be stripped of her essence.

"Dr. Klein isn't sure in Clark's case." She paused for a couple of heartbeats as she readied herself to relay the *other* reason for

her call. She pinched the bridge of her nose, hating what she was about to say. "Martha...there's...something else I need to tell you. The thing is... I...had to tell Dr. Klein. About Clark. About Superman." Lois apologized. "I'm sorry, Martha. I hate it every time I have to admit it out loud, even when it's for Clark's benefit, but he's the only one who's ever worked closely enough with Superman to possibly be of some help. He needed to know the *whole* truth so he can treat Clark."

"I understand, dear," Martha said, and Lois imagined the tearful, but approving, accompanying nod. Lois had to abstractly admire the brave front Martha was putting on.

Lois cleared her throat again. "He said...Clark's suffered some brain damage from the electroshock."

"Brain damage?" Martha squeaked out in disbelief. "Is...is he...?" She didn't seem able to finish her thought.

I know, Lois thought to herself. *It's like Clark died twenty years ago only to be brought back to die again.*

Only this time, that death was worse, she knew, because they were forced to live with him right here before their eyes. The finality of death wasn't there. That sense of saying a final goodbye and learning how to move on with life had been stolen from them. Instead, they had the chance to fight for Clark, to go to the ends of the Earth if need be, trying desperately to restore him to his former self. But no matter what they did, it would never be enough. His healing, or lack therefore, was completely out of their control.

It's up to him, his powers, and maybe the grace of God or the universe or whatever is out there, Lois thought with a sigh.

"We don't know yet," Lois said, answering the unvoiced question. "Dr. Klein said that, for you and me, once the brain cells die off, they don't repair themselves. But Clark's body is different from ours. He can recover from trauma a lot faster than you or I can. There's a slight possibility that his brain might benefit from his healing aura once it returns. But..." Her voice trailed off as she found herself unable to continue.

"Don't get my hopes up," Clark's mother filled in for her with despair.

For an uncertain moment, Lois thought the woman might crumble on the other end of the phone line. But Martha Kent was stronger than that. She'd been broken down and now she was ready to rebuild herself stronger than before. This was a woman who'd once beaten every conceivable odds to become a mother to an infant who'd dropped out of the sky. She would not take no for an answer.

"But, Lois, I don't want to hear about what this Doctor Klein thinks. *You* know my son. What do you think?"

"I..." Lois paused. She'd been so busy that day that she hadn't really gotten the chance to examine how she felt about the situation. "Honestly, I'm not sure," she finally answered. "At first glance, he looks so much like his old self. But then...I look at him and he's a stranger, Martha. He's not..." A few silver tears slipped past her defenses and rolled down her cheeks. She didn't bother to wipe them away and her breath shuddered as she continued to speak. "There's an emptiness in him now. It's like Clark is gone and a ghost was put in his place. I want to believe he's in there somewhere, buried deep inside. But how can anyone go through an ordeal like that and not lose themselves?"

She shook her head, wishing the movement could clear out her bleak thoughts. "I'm not giving up on him though. He's *got* to be in there still. He's *Clark*. He's the strongest person I've ever known." She paused and took a shaking breath. "I think you should come and see him, if you're up for it. He's too weak to do any traveling right now. And I have to warn you...he's..." She gulped around a new lump in her throat. "He's nearly skeletal. Dr. Klein is shocked Clark can still move around at all. He's severely malnourished."

"I'll help you prepare all of his favorite meals," Martha said with determination. "I'll get my boy back to the picture of health."

Lois smiled warmly. “I know you will,” she encouraged. “And when he’s cleared for travel, I promise, I’ll bring him out to Kansas for a visit. Maybe being home again will help jog his memory. In the meantime, I’m telling him as many stories as I can, hoping that something lights a spark in him.”

“I know,” Martha replied gently. “I’m glad he has you to take care of him.”

“He has you too, even if he doesn’t remember it,” Lois countered softly. “We’ll get him through this,” she vowed. Then she paused. “Listen, Martha...I was...able to convince the police to withhold the fact that Clark was found from the press...for now. But, sooner or later, it’s going to get out. I can write the story for the Planet but...I can’t control what the other news outlets will say. Or do. You may want to consider getting away from Kansas for a while.”

“It’s going to be a madhouse here, isn’t it?” Martha asked thoughtfully.

Lois nodded. “It’ll be worse here if the press gets wind of the fact that he’s staying with me,” she said in a sobering tone. “If it weren’t for my worries about Clark being able to travel, I’d try to find somewhere else to lay low until it blows over.”

A thoughtful silence followed before Martha spoke. “I’ll be there as soon as I can book a flight. If it gets bad, we’ll have a press conference.”

“If it gets out about his mental state...if he ever recovers...” Lois began as her thoughts took a terrifying twist, “there’ll be no hiding it. It could jeopardize his secret.”

Martha took a deep breath. Lois could hear it over the phone and could imagine Martha’s worry. “We’ll cross that bridge if and when we get to it.”

Lois sighed. “You’re right.”

“I’ll call you once I know when I’ll be in Metropolis,” Martha stated, as if to say goodbye.

“Okay, I’ll get the extra guest room ready for you,” Lois replied. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

Gently, distractedly, Lois hung up the phone and held it in her hand, staring at the black and silver headset as though it would give her the continuing strength she would need. She wished she was done with phone calls for the night, but there were others who needed to be told the news, as happy and grim as it was. She decided Perry should be first, though their former boss was long since retired. Then she figured she would call Jimmy. Already, she could hear the excitement in the younger man’s voice as he learned that his once best friend had been found alive. As luck would have it, Jimmy was also her editor now, and she knew it would be no problem when she asked for time off to nurse Clark back to whatever would pass for health.

It was after midnight by the time Lois got off the phone with Perry and Jimmy, and she was immensely grateful that Batman had been the one to find Clark, since she figured the caped hero of the night would alert the other supers to the fact that Clark/Superman had been found. She didn’t think she could handle a conversation with Wonder Woman that night. In truth, it was closer to one in the morning than midnight, and she was tired all the way down to her soul.

And yet, she couldn’t sleep. She wanted to. She tried. She showered and had a cup of the herbal tea Clark had once introduced her to, claiming it would reduce her stress and help her relax. She’d found it to be helpful during the long years of searching for him, and always kept some on hand as a bittersweet reminder of her best friend. She tried the melatonin gummies she’d occasionally relied on – with varying success - to help her sleep when she couldn’t. Nothing worked. She tossed and turned for over two hours before climbing back out of her bed and padding down the hall to Clark’s room.

She was greeted with the deep, even breathing that only sleep

could bring as she peeked into his room. She’d deliberately left the bedroom door open. She hadn’t wanted him to feel locked in, like he had for ten years in that cramped and depressing little cell in the asylum. She’d needed him to know that he was free and safe here. He could come and go as he pleased. He didn’t need to worry about ever being harmed again. He was home, if he wanted to stay with her. Or, if he seemed more comfortable when she eventually took him to Kansas, well, she would grieve his absence but understand his need to get back to his roots.

She hoped he would stay.

I’m being selfish, she acknowledged to herself. He doesn’t belong to me. How often did I reject his friendship? How many times did I warn him not to fall for me? How many times did I turn a blind eye to the affection he was so obviously throwing my way? How badly did I break his heart that day in the park, when he told me that he loved me?

I should have loved him back. I did. It’s why I couldn’t bring myself to marry Lex. Why every relationship I’ve had since then has went up in smoke. And now...it might be too late. He doesn’t even remember me.

Lois watched him sleep for a few long, almost peaceful moments. It *would* have been peaceful, if not for the horrors that she saw as she gazed at the way Clark was curled up on his left side, his body tightly pulled into a fetal position. His left arm was tucked beneath his head. His right arm was pulled up against his chest, his fist above his heart. Everything about the way he held himself spoke of defensiveness, down to the way his head was bowed, his chin resting against his protruding collarbones. Lois’ heart broke as she realized that, even in his sleep, Clark was trying to protect himself from some kind of physical trauma. She wondered *exactly* what had happened to him.

A tear slipped down her cheek as she remembered the way he’d once been. How he’d always stood so tall and proud, even in his humblest moments. The way he’d always carried himself with such fluid grace it was hard to picture him as a mere mortal. The effortless way he’d navigated his world, always finding something to laugh or smile about. The sunny, optimistic way he’d viewed life. The easy way he’d made friends wherever he went. The brilliant smile that had never strayed far from his lips. The spark of intelligence and love that had eternally blazed in his eyes.

Now, he was a different man that Lois didn’t recognize. Sure, he physically looked much the same – a little older, a lot paler and skeletally thin – but he *wasn’t* the Clark she’d known once upon a time. The person sleeping before her on the guest bed in her spare bedroom was nothing but the shell of a man. *Everything* that had made him Clark Kent was missing.

His movements were slow and clumsy. His steps were shuffling as though he lacked the energy to make a proper footstep. His body was bowed – hunched over as though to minimize his presence in the room. He had yet to speak and Lois worried that his voice and laughter had rusted away to oblivion or been burned away as the electricity had been mercilessly shot into his brain, over and over again. Thinking back over the day, she realized she’d seen only three emotions cross his features thus far – terror, confusion, and an unnerving blank stare that completely hid whatever might be going on in his abused mind. His eyes were glassy and dull, unfocused at times, and nearly lifeless, as though he’d long ago lost the will to live. Lois wondered if that wasn’t the case. Perhaps his soul had died during his imprisonment but his body hadn’t quite gotten the message yet.

And the burnt, scarred flesh around his temples was an ugly reminder of the torture he’d been subjected to. Each crease of his marred skin represented another memory, another piece of his soul, lost to the inhumane electricity that had been remorselessly blasted into his skull. Each pucker of his flesh was the remnant of another cruel ‘treatment’ that had robbed him of his identity. Each burn he’d endured had stolen away his personality and everything

that had made him Clark.

And those scars were just the ones that were always visible. How many more lurked beneath his clothing? How many dozens of faded pink and white marks covered his chest and back? Lois hadn't been able to count them all when she'd helped Clark to shave and given him a haircut before he'd showered and dressed in clean clothing earlier in the night. She'd wept at the sight of them, then wept harder at how Clark had merely looked at her with a fleeting expression of confusion. What had happened to him? Had the sadistic people who'd fried Clark's brain also physically attacked him? Had he gotten those wounds during the still unaccounted for ten years between his disappearance and his admission into the Arkham Asylum? But if that were true, then he'd been without his powers before he'd been locked away in the asylum's basement. What on Earth had Clark endured?

More tears followed the first as Lois thought about all that Clark had lost during those years he'd been locked away. How much of himself he'd lost. How many people he'd once loved who'd died in the intervening years. How Lois had begun to realize her budding feelings for him around the time he'd gone missing. How they could have possibly become a couple. Lois bit back a sob. *Everything* had been stolen from Clark!

"I swear to you," she whispered at the sleeping form of her best friend. "I'll find a way to bring you back, Clark."

Clark whimpered in his sleep – the first sound Lois had heard him make so far – and began to tremble – from the cold or from some nightmare, Lois wasn't sure. He'd fallen asleep on top of the comforter, so Lois crept to the closet and retrieved a couple of warm, hand-made, crocheted blankets that Martha had given her. *Favorites from Clark's childhood*, Martha had told Lois. Carefully, so as not to awaken Clark, Lois deposited the pile at the foot of the bed, then, one by one, she draped the blankets over his shaking form. When the last one was arranged to her liking, she gently sat down on the bed next to him. Stretching her body, she twisted a bit and hugged him, with her hand smoothing the hair away from his brow, until, at long last, Clark finally calmed.

Lois awoke hours later, shivering from the cold that had settled in the house as the outside temperature had dropped. Like Clark, she'd fallen asleep atop the comforter, but unlike him, she didn't have the benefit of Martha's blankets to help keep her warm. She sat up, feeling refreshed and she rubbed the heels of her palms into her eyes, clearing out the last remnants of sleep. Having Clark in her arms had done wonders for her state of mind, she realized, though she knew the real work was just beginning in her fight to bring him back from the yawning abyss inside his mind.

She slipped off the bed and, with frigid feet, hustled back to her bedroom to dress before going downstairs to adjust the thermostat. She shook her head. With all that had happened the previous evening, she'd forgotten to check the settings and it was colder in the house than she liked it to be. She cranked the heat up to seventy and waited impatiently for the house to reach temperature. In the meanwhile, she knew she had to check on Clark.

He was awake when she got to his room, sitting quietly at the edge of his bed, staring blankly into the distance. Lois knocked on the door, but Clark barely seemed to acknowledge the noise. She entered and sat next to him, placing a loving hand on his right knee. He flinched slightly at the contact, but Lois thought – imagined? – he was less fearful of her touch than he had been the previous day.

"Good morning," she told him, smiling as brightly as she could, given the circumstances. "Hungry?" She gave him a chance to respond, knowing he wouldn't, then she continued. "I'm starving. Come on downstairs and I'll see what I have in terms of breakfast. I need to go food shopping, but I should have *something*

in the pantry."

Carefully, she took him by the hand. He understood enough to stand and follow along behind her as she guided him back downstairs and to the kitchen. She showed him the little breakfast nook and he sat quietly, with no expectation, no judgment, no sense that he was aware of anything. Lois rummaged around in the cabinets for a moment, then emerged with a tall can of oatmeal.

"This should do," she told him as she set about boiling water. "Listen, I called your mother last night. She's working on trying to fly out to see you. She's... your disappearance has been hard on her. She's..." She shook her head, searching for the right words. "Ecstatic," she finally settled on. "She can't wait to see you, Clark."

Again, she saw the heartbreaking fear cross his features at the sound of his name. She sighed. "I wish I knew what they did to you. Why they made you so afraid of your name. I hate that you're hurting so badly. I just wish I knew what happened so I can help you heal from it." She paused, then suppressed a chuckle as she measured out some oatmeal into two bowls. "I guess this is a start," she said, allowing a small smile to cross her face. "Feeding you something actually edible, for once. You used to bring me the most delicious meals, do you remember? Pizza so good I had to restrain myself from eating half a pie in one sitting. Authentic Chinese food that I could eat for days and not get sick of. Tacos that were out of this world." She sighed again. "And I used to be able to burn water. Oh, I'm not saying I'm a gourmet chef by any means, but at least my food won't kill anyone."

She poured some of the now-steaming water into the oatmeal and mixed it before bringing it over to the table. She set a spoon and one of the bowls before Clark, before returning to the island in the middle and fixing his coffee the way she remembered him liking it. "Although," she added as an afterthought as she examined the watery, soupy mess in her own bowl, "oatmeal making still eludes me. It either comes out like soup or like wallpaper paste. There has never been an in-between for me," she said as she settled in her seat across from him. "Careful with the coffee, it's hot," she warned, not wishing to see him cause himself pain by scalding his mouth on the drink.

Clark looked at the coffee like it was something from another planet. She wondered how long it had been since he'd last had a cup. No matter. She would allow him to rediscover it at his own pace. In the meanwhile, she poured him a glass of orange juice instead.

"I made it just the way you used to," she said after a long moment of watching him simply stare at the mug of coffee. "Mostly sugar, some coffee, and a healthy dose of full-fat cream. I used to tease you all the time about how you could drink it like that and never gain a pound. Meanwhile, just *smelling* your coffee would make me feel like I needed an hour on the treadmill." She smiled, hoping he'd know she was just joking with him.

If he understood that she was jesting with him, Clark didn't show it. Instead, he gingerly set to eating his meal, with Lois surreptitiously watching him out of the corners of her eyes. The way he had to hold his spoon looked painful to her as he worked around his mangled fingers.

"Dr. Klein thinks he can help you," she said at last. "Once you've recovered a bit, he wants to try resetting your bones so they can heal properly." She gestured to the awkward way he had to hold his spoon. "He just doesn't want to do it right now, while you have so much other recovering to do."

Clark finished his oatmeal and his stomach rumbled loudly. Lois wordlessly rose and prepared him a second bowl, which came out thicker than the first, but still not the proper consistency. But Clark ate it all the same as she pushed her own oatmeal around in her bowl, eating small bites of it here and there.

"I called Perry and Jimmy last night, after I spoke to your mother," she finally said after swallowing down a bite of her food.

“Do you remember them?” Clark didn’t pull his gaze from his food. “I hated telling them that they shouldn’t come by just yet, until you’ve had a chance to heal a bit. But, Clark, they were thrilled to know you’re alive. I think Perry was crying. I’ve *never* seen or heard that man cry before. Not even when his son got sentenced to life in prison for his various schemes and other illegal activities.” She cleared her throat. “And Jimmy? I’ve never heard that level of excitement come out of him about anything, *ever*,” she recalled with a ghost of a smile.

Clark simply focused on his food, then looked at her when the bowl was clean. Taking a guess, she made him a third bowl, and he seemed to have no problem devouring that one as well, even though it came out too thick for Lois’ taste. He didn’t appear to want to wait for her to water it down a bit more to thin it out. When he was done, he drained his orange juice then looked with confusion at the coffee cup.

“Go on,” Lois encouraged, sliding the mug into his right hand. “I remember how you used to like it. I hope I did it justice. *You* used to make the coffee for the both of us. You always seemed to know exactly when I needed a cup – be it at work or when we hung out together after hours. And you *always* made it better than I did. I remember, you learned how I like my coffee within the first week of us working together. I was still sore over having a partner and you were still green when it came to working for a *real* newspaper. I wasn’t being particularly nice to you...but you?”

She shrugged and smiled over the memories as they came floating back to her. “You never gave up on me, Clark. With nothing but your natural friendliness, optimism, and impeccable manners, you cracked my defenses. Oh, that’s not to say you didn’t know when to give as good as you got,” she added, waving a hand dismissively as she watched him take an experimental sip of his drink. She thought she saw a hint of his confusion melt away and he took another sip. He liked the coffee, even if he didn’t remember that once upon a time, he’d almost lived on it during some of their tougher cases.

She decided to continue to feed him tidbits of his past, hoping to fill in some of the holes in his memory. “I once shamelessly stole your story, so you sent me on a wild goose chase at the Metropolis Sewage Reclamation Facility. When I *finally* stopped wandering around – after hours, mind you – I found a Godzilla doll that you’d left for me.” She chuckled lightly at the memory. “It sounds terrible, but...I’d earned it. And you showed me that, as willing as you were to befriend me, you weren’t going to let me take advantage of you. You weren’t the naïve ‘hack from Nowheresville’ I’d initially taken you for. I respected you for having the guts to put me in my place, even while I was furious for having wasted my time and smelling like something had crawled under my skin and died. Not to *mention* the mosquito bites.”

Clark blinked dully at her before drinking again.

“You never gave up on me,” she repeated as she paused to take a sip of her own coffee. “And I never gave up on finding you. Now that you’re safe and home again, I’m *still* not giving up on you, Clark. No matter what it takes, I’m going to find a way to help you,” she swore, ignoring his continued distress over his true name.

A day and a half.

That was all the respite Lois and Clark got before the news broke that the missing reporter had been found alive after twenty years.

Then the hordes of unrelenting reporters descended upon Lois’ home, camping out in the freezing temperatures for the slightest chance of sneaking a peek at the man holed up within. Grudgingly, Lois was forced to keep the blinds closed and the drapes pulled tight to hide Clark from their prying eyes and merciless cameras. It hurt her to keep Clark in the dark. She wanted him to experience as much sunlight as possible to aid in his healing process. But the

one hour where she tried keeping the curtains open on the upper floor, one of the news stations sent a drone up to try and catch a glimpse of Clark, who, as luck would have it, was on the main floor eating lunch at the time.

They would go away in time, Lois knew, but in the meantime, they were driving her crazy. She felt like a prisoner in her own home. And, worse, she had to wonder if *Clark* felt like a prisoner, albeit in a bigger cell and without the abuse he’d suffered through. But whatever Clark was thinking – if he was thinking at all – was kept locked in his tortured mind. He said nothing and didn’t react at all to the change in his surroundings – not for the positive and certainly not for the negative.

But, again, Lois knew that, once the story grew stale and it was clear that no one would be seeing Clark, the reporters would drift away, dispersing with no stories, no pictures, and a lot of wasted time. And the sunlight would still be there when that moment came, and Clark could use it to heal his wounds. The more immediate problem was getting Martha into the house without the media bombarding her with a thousand questions she couldn’t answer and a thousand cameras shoved into her face to splash the image of the relieved mother all over the news.

Henderson solved that problem for them in the end.

Lois was just sitting down at her laptop, attempting to draft the statement she knew she and Martha would be forced to make eventually. She’d just sent off her version of Clark’s discovery and rescue to Jimmy, hoping to beat the other reporters to it. She wanted the Daily Planet to be the first to report the facts. People tended to remember the first version of a story. And, besides, the Planet was Clark’s paper. It should be the first to report that their colleague and friend had been found. There was a knock on the door and, at first, Lois ignored it.

“Probably another one of those pesky Dirt Digger reporters,” she said, spitting out the word ‘reporters.’ It was a stretch for her to consider anyone who worked for such a rag to be a journalist.

But the knocking continued and her telephone rang. She checked the caller ID, then immediately answered the call.

“Lois, open your damn door,” came the gruff, annoyed voice of Henderson. Then he abruptly hung up.

Lois stuck the cell phone in the pocket of her sweatpants and rushed to the door. There, behind the wood and glass, was Bill and a uniformed officer. In the background, beyond the police tape cordoning off the area around her house, she could see the media scrambling to snap her picture, though she suspected that she was blocked from their view by Henderson’s strategically placed body.

“About time,” Henderson quipped, cracking a partial smile.

Lois shrugged. “I thought you were one of those Dirt Digger nutjobs.”

“You gonna invite us in or not?” Henderson grinned.

“We need to see Clark,” the uniformed officer said, sliding her sunglasses down her nose a bit.

Lois gaped. “Martha?!” She quickly gestured for the two to come inside, then she locked the door behind them once they were in.

Martha was laughing. “I borrowed a page from my son’s playbook. No one sees past the costume,” she chortled.

Lois blanched. “Wait...what? Does Henderson...?”

Henderson nodded once. “You don’t think I made the connection back when Clark first went missing?”

“He asked when he picked me up from the airport,” Martha explained, citing the arrangement they’d worked out to get Martha to Lois’ house without alerting the media, “and I told him.” She sighed tiredly. “I don’t like telling people, but, right now, Clark needs as many of us on his side as he can get.”

Lois nodded, then gave Henderson a hard look. “You never asked *me*,” she said pointedly.

Henderson shrugged and grinned. “I knew you’d lie to me.”

“Where’s my son?” Martha asked, looking around with

troubled eyes.

“He was resting when I last checked on him,” Lois said, nodding in an upward direction. “He tends to nod off here and there. I’m not sure if he’s legitimately tired or if it’s a force of habit from having nothing to do while he was locked in the asylum. Or if his body is using the sleep to try and recover,” she added thoughtfully.

“I’ll give you your space then,” Henderson said, stepping back a pace.

“Bill?” Lois said, reaching out to him with one hand. “Thanks. For getting Martha here. For keeping Clark’s... uniqueness a secret.”

Henderson put a hand on her shoulder. “Believe me, it’s been my pleasure. Listen, if you need anything else, let me know, okay?”

Lois smiled. “Actually, there *is* something. If the media doesn’t let up, I’m probably going to need my groceries delivered in the foreseeable future. Someone will need to beat a path through those vultures for the poor delivery guy.”

Henderson laughed. “You have my word.” He reached up and touched the brim of his hat. “See you around then.”

“Thanks again, Bill.”

Lois showed him to the door, then locked the house back up again. She turned to Martha and flung herself into the older woman’s arms. For the first time since Clark had been rescued, she felt a fleeting sense of relief, born from the knowledge that she was no longer alone in her fight to save Clark. His mother was here. Surely, she would know what to do. Surely, she would find some way to crack open the vault of Clark’s mind so that he could once again find his way back to his true self.

To her surprise, she found herself sobbing as she clutched Martha. A gentle, reassuring pat on the back followed, and when Lois pulled away again, she saw tears pooled in Martha’s eyes. They both simply looked at each other for a few heartbeats, then they both gave each other a wobbly smile.

“Let’s go see if he’s awake,” Lois offered. Then she paused as she went to help Martha with her suitcase. “Or, actually, it might be better if you change first. I don’t know what Clark will think if he sees a police uniform. The last time he saw one, he was locked in his room in Arkham.”

Martha nodded as she started to undo the buttons on the blue dress shirt. “Don’t worry, dear, your friend had me put this all on over my clothing. We were in a bit of a rush to get here.”

Lois nodded. “Leave it to Bill,” she said wonderingly.

Martha quickly removed her costume and gathered it all in her arms to deposit in her guest room. Lois led the way up the steps, letting Martha leave her possessions in her room first. Then she brought Martha to Clark’s room.

As usual, the door was open. As the afternoon had grown old, deep shadows had crept into the room from the waning light that managed to seep in around the edges of the heavy curtains. The bedside lamp was on, throwing a soft orange glow. Clark was awake, sitting on the edge of the bed, staring without really seeing, in the direction of the windows. Lois imagined she saw a bit of longing in his eyes as he fixated his gaze on the weak shafts of light.

“Clark?” she called to him, in little more than a whisper.

She saw the way his spine stiffened at the name. It would be a long time before his name ceased to be a source of terror for him, she knew. Still, it broke her heart to see it each time she used his name. But she was determined not to let him see how much his reaction hurt. This wasn’t about her. It was only about Clark.

“Clark? Your mother is here,” she continued, as Martha stepped around Lois and, with a quickness that belied her age, rushed to her son.

Martha appeared to almost collapse as she took in the sight of his face for the first time in twenty years. But, somehow, she

remained on her feet and she reached toward Clark, enveloping him in her arms for the first time in an eternity. She hugged him tightly and finally let her tears flow freely.

“Oh, Clark!” Martha exclaimed as she held him, one hand on his back, the other on the back of his head. She kissed his cheek, but he didn’t respond other than to flinch at the contact with her. “I’ve missed you so much!”

A lump formed in Lois’ throat and she blinked away a fresh set of tears. She’d thought she’d be prepared to see mother and son finally reunited. After the emotional rollercoaster of the past few days, she’d thought she could handle anything at this point. She’d been wrong. So, so wrong. Happiness and sadness dueled in her heart and she wasn’t entirely sure if one or the other would win out.

“I never gave up on you,” Lois heard Martha telling Clark. “Even when the formal searches and investigations tapered off, I *knew* you had to be out there, somewhere. And Lois? She fought harder to find you than anyone. Oh, Clark. There’s so much to tell you. So much has happened in the last twenty years. I just wish your father was still here to see you here now. He never stopped wondering where you were. Never stopped believing you’d be found one day.”

Clark looked blankly forward, and Lois had no idea if he was even comprehending what was being said. He sat board-stiff and with a look of confusion and terror as Martha continued to use his name.

Feeling suddenly awkward, Lois silently excused herself from the room, stepping backwards until she was back out in the hall. She pulled the door mostly shut to give Martha her privacy without making Clark feel closed in. Then, though a part of her was burning with curiosity to see if Clark showed any recollection of his mother, she forced herself to go back downstairs.

She busied herself with the press conference statement she’d been about to draft when Martha and Bill had shown up on her doorstep. She kept it vague but adequate enough to satisfy the media – or so she hoped. She wanted nothing more than for the press to lose interest in Clark and his story so that he could recuperate in peace. She knew Martha wouldn’t mind that she’d taken the lead on it. After all, Lois was practiced in these kinds of things. She’d been the one to help the Kents navigate the first press conferences after Clark had vanished and the search parties had been formed. And she’d attended more press conferences than she could recount – almost all of them boring, uneventful, and giving little to no new information on a situation.

Martha returned to the living room some time later, Clark following in her footsteps like a puppy brought to heel. Lois cringed. It was devastating to see how broken he was, to the point where he couldn’t seem to do anything independently, with the notable exception of using the bathroom when the urge struck him. She missed the kind, but fiery, passionate, independent, occasionally headstrong man he’d once been. She wanted him to take the lead, to tease her mercilessly, to touch her heart with the small, sweet gestures he’d always done, expecting nothing – not even her affections – in return. She wanted to see that mischievous glint in his eyes when they were working on a case, side by side, or when he was gently making fun of her, or when he – as she had come to understand too late – was about to use his abilities to give them the upper hand in an investigation. This silent, vacant-eyed ghost that wandered her home had broken her in too many ways to count, and she knew that things were only just getting started as she tried to help him regain his memories, his personality, his identity, and his place in the world.

“Lois? I thought I might get started on dinner,” Martha said in a quiet tone of voice that suggested how much pain she was in from seeing her son in the condition he was in.

Lois looked at the clock. It was a tad early, but then her stomach rumbled at the thought of a meal she didn’t have to cook.

“Sure thing,” she said with a nod. She saved the file she was working on and shut the computer. “I was just working on the statement we should make for the press conference.”

Martha frowned and her forehead creased in disgust. “I hate those things,” she said with distaste.

Lois nodded. “I know. But maybe it’ll get the press off our backs if we give them just enough for them to use in their articles and news clips. Don’t worry. I’ve worded it vaguely enough so that they won’t know how serious Clark’s condition is. They’ll never be able to connect him to...” Her eyes flickered over to Clark, who was staring with dull eyes at some of the framed photos Lois had hung in the living room. She lowered her voice to whisper out her next words. “Superman’s continued absence.”

Martha looked relieved. “Good.” Then she sighed. “I still feel like this is all just a dream. Like any minute I’m going to wake up from this nightmare and find that it’s still 1993 and my boy is whole and safe.”

Lois sighed in turn. “Me too.” She stood, then went and took Martha by the arm, carefully linking them together. “I’d give anything I own for a time machine to go back and save him.” She shook her head at the ridiculous notion. “Come on. I’ll help you in the kitchen. Clark? Do you want to come to?”

If his name made any impact, he didn’t show it. He lumbered over to one of the armchairs and sat, turning his hollow gaze to the lights on the Christmas tree. Lois shrugged. Maybe it was a good sign that he wanted to bask in the tree lights. Maybe some part of him recognized how much he’d loved the holiday once upon a time. But she knew better than to say anything to Martha about it. False hope was just as bad – perhaps worse than – no hope at all.

“Martha, that was a delicious meal,” Lois complimented as she dabbed at her mouth with her napkin.

It hadn’t been anything fancy, just a basic meat lasagna, but Lois meant what she’d said. And she wasn’t a lasagna lover by any stretch of the imagination. But Martha had made it taste truly divine somehow and Lois had needed to force herself not to eat a third helping. Clark, on the other hand, had eaten a full three helpings and probably would have eaten more if his last helping hadn’t polished off the remainder of the tray.

“Thank you, Lois,” Martha said, smiling, perhaps pleased to see that her son had appeared to still enjoy one of his old favorites. “Whatever Clark eats, I’ll be sure to give you the recipe for,” she added as she helped Clark wipe a dollop of sauce from the corner of his mouth. “There, all clean now,” she told him, and instantly, Lois could envision what it must have been like to watch Martha mother him as a small child.

“I think he enjoyed it,” Lois affirmed, purposefully neglecting to mention that he’d also put away three *extremely* ill-made bowls of oatmeal his first morning in her house.

“I’ve heard it said that, sometimes, taste memories can be the strongest,” Martha said wistfully. “I guess there’s a part of me that hopes I’ll wind up making one of his favorite meals and triggering his memory. A foolish hope, perhaps.”

Lois shook her head lightly but somberly. “No, it’s not foolish at all. We need to do everything and anything we can to try to jog his mind. I know Dr. Klein said his brain tissue is damaged, but I refuse to believe that he can’t heal his mind just as well as his body once his...aura returns,” Lois said cagily.

Martha nodded shallowly. She understood Lois’ staunch refusal to discuss Superman in front of Clark. They didn’t want his first memories to return to be of flying around saving people as Superman. The caped hero wasn’t a necessity. Clark could live without Superman returning if push came to shove. But Superman couldn’t exist without Clark as the driving force behind the character.

“In that case, I’ll whip up a couple of apple pies tonight that we can have for dessert tomorrow,” Martha said.

At the mention of apple pie, Clark’s eyes slid shut, but there was no way of knowing if it was from some tingling sensation of a vague memory or if he was just tired. And he seemed to *always* be tired. In five heartbeats, the moment was gone, however, lost to the past and not to be repeated. Then Clark yawned ever so minutely, leaving Lois conflicted in her heart. She *wanted* to believe that some deeply buried memory had been stirred but it looked as though that wasn’t the case. She flicked her eyes over to Martha, but Clark’s mother seemed to be at just as much of a loss as to what to think.

“In the meantime, I have Twinkies, Ho Hos, Snowballs, Ding Dongs, Yodels, Oreos, and half a dozen other junk foods that were his favorites,” Lois offered, hoping to brighten Martha’s mood a bit.

“The Twinkies,” Martha said in answer to Lois’ unspoken question. “I used to have to practically buy them by the case when he was in high school.”

Lois smiled as she stood and started to clear the table for dessert. “Sounds perfect,” she said.

A gentle knocking sounded on the Oval Office’s door. President Lex Luthor looked up from the stack of papers before him, his mind still firmly fixated on the sneakily worded laws that would lower the tax rates on the super-rich, like himself.

Well, not quite like myself, he thought with a grin. *Few people in the world have as much money as I do. And none of them in this country have as much power as I do.*

He quickly marked a paper with a note. He needed to circle back to this one. The language within made it far too obvious what he was trying to pull. It would never pass muster with the smarter voters. The less intelligent ones *might* overlook things, but he was never one to take unnecessary risks.

The knocking resumed after a slight pause.

“Come in,” he said, perhaps a little gruffer than he meant to.

He rubbed his eyes quickly, trying to help them adjust to looking at things further away than the top of his desk. How long *had* he been reading for? He sighed and turned the paper over out of habit more than a desire to hide what he was working on.

“Sir?” came a gravelly, English-accented voice. “May I interrupt for a moment?”

“Ah, Nigel, do come in,” Lex said as his old friend appeared in the doorway. He gestured once, and then steepled his fingers in anticipation.

Nigel did as he was told, deliberately closing the door and checking it to ensure that it wouldn’t swing open at an inopportune moment. Then, with long, sure strides, he crossed the room to stand before the President’s desk. He clasped his hands behind his back.

“We have a problem,” Nigel started dourly.

Lex scratched a bothersome itch on his chin. “Problem? Aren’t you supposed to handle any ‘problems’ that arise? Isn’t that what I pay you for?” he asked, his voice suggesting that he was asking a rhetorical question, though he knew Nigel would understand the very real threat hidden beneath.

Nigel gave him a single nod, the movement so slight it was barely there at all. “This one is a bit more...delicate than some of the others,” he simply stated. “Are we, uh...” He let his voice trail as he looked around with purpose.

“No one is listening in,” Lex calmly assured him. “Come now, tell me what threat I need to be aware of.”

He leaned back in his chair, presenting an aura of relaxation, though, inwardly, he was always just a little nervous when his friend and informant came to him with an issue. He opened a hand-carved, bone chest to his left, took a cigar out, and sniffed it. The Gurkha Black Dragon cigars were a recent, pricey favorite indulgence of his. But who was more deserving of the world’s most expensive cigars than him? He trimmed the end and lit it

with practiced fingers.

“Another assassination plot? Another fledging attempt to have me impeached? More ridiculous conspiracy theories linking me to all kinds of unsavory acts of criminality?” Lex snorted his disgust as he took a puff of his cigar.

For a moment, he held the smoke deep in his lungs before exhaling it again, though he didn’t try to do something as plebeian as to create a smoke ring. Then he took a second one out and offered it to Nigel. The older man refused with a shake of his hand and a simple “stop” gesture of his hand. Lex shrugged and returned the expensive treat to its chest, making a mental note to order more as soon as he dealt with whatever this most recent crisis was. Already he was down to half a box, and he was fairly certain he had only one more full box on hand when this one was finished. He smiled to himself. Most people thought the cigars were rare. And they were right, if you happened to be of the common folk. But not for him. He’d struck up a personal friendship with one of the cigar’s makers, and the man was paid handsomely to always have a stock of them ready to be shipped on a moment’s notice to Lex.

Nigel shook his head again, all business. “If only it were that simple,” he said. “Have you seen the news today?”

“Only the briefings for the things that are the most important,” Lex admitted, realizing for the first time how late it had gotten. “I usually take in a few of the papers with dinner.”

“You won’t like the front page of the Daily Planet,” Nigel warned.

Lex snickered a little. “Why? Did Lois Lane finally get herself into a scrape she couldn’t weasel her way out of?”

He didn’t bother hiding his resentment of the filthy trollop who’d left him at the altar and who’d continuously rebuffed his attempts to win her back. It had taken years, but the love he’d once had for her had blackened, turned to ash, and poisoned him with a hatred he hadn’t known was possible to have for someone who’d once meant so much to him.

Nigel didn’t even crack a smile. “It seems that the raid on Gotham Asylum the other day dug up an old skeleton.”

“I already saw how many of Gotham’s criminally insane were uncovered there. All of which we knew about, from our informants, need I remind you. The raid means nothing in the long run,” Lex said dismissively, taking another deep drag of his cigar.

“I wasn’t talking about those worthless worms,” Nigel spat. He’d always made his contempt for the Gotham street rats known. “Clark Kent was found, *alive*.”

Lex reflexively swallowed and the smoke he’d been meaning to exhale got caught in his lungs. He coughed violently, putting a fist to his chest and repeatedly beating the center in an attempt to clear out the bad air. He sat up straighter in his chair and the smirk on his face was gone.

“What?” he demanded. He let all of his ice-cold venom seep into that one word.

He scrambled to get his phone out of his pocket and clicked on the LNN app. The top story was the raid on the Arkham Asylum. He clicked it and put the volume up. The reporter – some rusty-haired young man that Lex didn’t recognize – was talking into a microphone and gesturing to the townhouse behind him.

“...At this time, there has been no word on Clark Kent’s condition or why he was at the asylum to begin with. But we expect that a statement will be made in the near future. In the meantime, if he *is* indeed in the house behind me, no one has caught a glimpse of him since the raid two days ago...”

Lex closed the app with a scowl.

“Why wasn’t I made aware of this sooner?” he growled.

Nigel regained his composure and seemed utterly unbothered by the rage that was seething just below Lex’s tightly controlled features. He shrugged indifferently.

“I just got word not long ago. Our informants couldn’t get

close to the asylum during the raid. The police cordoned off quite an extensive area as their base of operations,” Nigel said coolly.

“And the ones *inside* the building?” Lex demanded.

Nigel picked up a small glass sphere from Lex’s desk and examined the exquisite swirl of colors within, like a microscopic galaxy flecked with a trillion frozen stars trapped for Lex’s viewing pleasure.

“Detained,” he said simply.

“Detained?” Lex echoed with far more gravity in his voice.

“According to that blithering idiot reporting on it, the raid was two days ago. How is it that I’m just hearing from anyone now?”

Nigel placed the sphere back on its golden pedestal. “The police were thorough. No one left until the police questioned them in depth. And they were all afraid they may be being watched. As it was, the message I received was *heavily* coded,” he explained patiently.

Lex stubbed out his cigar, suddenly aware of how much of it was burning to ash without the benefit of him enjoying it. He let the half-used stogie lay in the ashtray to his left. Trying to maintain a neutral expression, he sat in silence for a moment, assessing the situation and his options.

“We’re *certain* Kent was liberated?” he finally asked.

“There’s no doubt about it,” Nigel confirmed.

“And we’re also certain he’s at that location?” He jabbed a finger at his phone, as though the motion would recall the image seen in the news segment.

“At Lois Lane’s residence?” Nigel clarified. “Almost certain.”

“Almost?” Lex asked dangerously.

Nigel studied his fingernails, unconcerned. “He’s not checked into any hospital. Not in Gotham. Not in Metropolis. Not anywhere that our little birds can find. One of them overheard something about Miss Lane having the ambulance transport Clark to Metropolis.”

“That means very little,” Lex reminded him.

“He was in no condition to travel much farther than that. He wasn’t shipped off to Kansas,” Nigel said haughtily. “Where else would he go? You know how doggedly Miss Lane has pursued every fake lead we’ve been able to throw at her for the last twenty years. Do you honestly think she’d let him out of her sight now?”

“Confirm it,” Lex ordered decisively.

“Already working on it. But I think Miss Lane may confirm it herself if she chooses to make a statement to the media,” Nigel said.

“I don’t care if the heavens open and God himself steps down from the clouds and tells you that Kent is there. As soon as you can confirm it, find a way to ensure that he never leaves the house again,” Lex hissed. “He *will* be erased, one way or another.”

“He should have been in a shallow grave years ago,” Nigel snidely remarked, taking Lex aback for just a moment. His friend had always been bluntly honest with him, but Lex had never seen Nigel take such a bold ‘I told you so’ approach in the way in which he spoke to Lex.

“You’d do well to check your attitude,” Lex coldly reminded him. “The asylum was never meant to keep him alive. They were supposed to break him and discard him. Dr. Fulton must be going soft.” Lex stroked his cheek in thought for a moment. “Give this story a chance to blow over. A week or two. Then do me a favor, would you?”

Nigel smiled in a way that didn’t touch his eyes. “I’ll prepare to terminate his ‘contract’ just as soon as it’s safe to.”

“Good. And make sure to make it look like a suicide. We can’t afford anyone looking into this mess further than they have to.”

“Are you ready for this?” Lois asked as she took Martha’s hand and gave it a slight, reassuring squeeze.

Martha shook her head, her whitish-blond locks swaying with the uncertain movement. “Not really,” she admitted quietly. Then

she sighed tiredly. “But we *have* to, to protect Clark.”

“To protect Clark,” Lois echoed in agreement.

“He’ll be all right on his own,” Martha mused, more to convince herself that it was safe to leave his side for more than a couple of minutes at a time. “We won’t be that long.”

“No, we won’t,” Lois confirmed. “And we’ll just be outside on the steps. “He’s got the Bills game on and those amazing nachos you whipped up. He’ll be okay.”

Lois cast a glance at Clark, who was staring uncomprehendingly at the television in the living room. It was clear from his slow blink and slack-jawed expression that he didn’t really know what it was that he was watching. But a part of Lois hoped that the game would trigger something inside of him. After all, it was his favorite team playing his favorite sport. Perhaps he would get a flash of memory of watching a game with some friends or, better yet, of playing ball in college. Maybe it would restore a microscopic piece of himself.

Martha noticed the look Lois was giving him and she nodded in Clark’s direction. “He’s tough, Lois. If anyone can come back from this, it’s him.” She patted Lois’ shoulder.

Lois nodded and placed her hand on Martha’s for a moment. “I know. And I know it’s only been four days since he got out of Arkham. But I keep searching for some hint that he’s getting better and I know I have to stop. It’s just so hard to because I miss him so much.”

A single tear slid down Martha’s cheek. “So do I.” Resolutely, she wiped the tear away and crossed to Clark. Kissing the top of his head, she spoke softly. “We’ll be right back, Clark. Just stay here and watch the game, okay? Hopefully, this will chase away those reporters out there so you can finally heal in peace and quiet and plenty of sunlight.”

Clark might as well have been deaf for all the reaction that he gave her. He went on looking at, but not truly watching – as his eyes tracked neither player nor ball – the television screen. Martha watched him for another couple of seconds, then squared her shoulders and looked with clear, bright eyes at Lois.

“Let’s get this over with,” she said determinedly.

Lois nodded again. “Fine by me. I can’t *wait* to be able to open up my blinds again.” She flashed Martha a smile that she only partially felt.

She allowed Martha to lead the way to the front door and watched as Clark’s mother ambled her way across the room. Age and decades of hard, physical labor on the farm had taken its toll on the woman. Her shoulders were more hunched than when Lois had first met her. And the laugh lines around her eyes had been nearly eradicated by twenty years of grief and worry over Clark’s disappearance. She was still as sweet as Lois remembered her being when Clark had first introduced his parents to her at the CornFest, but everything about her demeanor had changed. Her laugh was less frequent. Her voice was touched by a sadness that persisted even now that Clark had been found. Her smile was faded, especially in the two and a half years since Jonathan had died.

Lois found herself saying a silent prayer that Martha would find her way back to her old self if and when Clark did. She missed the way Clark’s mother had been before Clark had been ripped out of their lives. It was as though an integral part of her had died when she’d realized that her son was gone. But then again, Lois supposed that had been true for all of them. Martha, Jonathan, and she herself had been irrevocably changed by Clark’s disappearance. Perry and Jimmy too, but perhaps less so. Or maybe they’d just been a whole lot better about hiding it. Or had Lois just been too busy following bogus leads for so long that she’d forgotten to take note of the changes in her friends?

She shook her head. No time to dwell on that now. The crowd of journalists outside the house were getting rowdier and louder by the moment. She glanced at the clock as she passed by. She and

Martha were now five minutes late to their own press conference. She mentally shrugged. So what? She’d been to plenty of other press conferences that had started way later than theirs.

At the door, she paused and took a deep breath, collecting herself for what she knew was about to come. Then she opened the door, trying to shield Martha as much as she could with her own body, though she knew she was buying Clark’s mother only a few seconds in the long run. Instantly, what felt like a thousand cameras began to flash and a million questions were yelled in her direction. But none of the reporters could get too close. The makeshift podium had been erected at the top of the stairs into the house. And the police had maintained their boundary tapes, keeping the press on the sidewalk. Officers stood by, watching with eagle-eyed sharpness to ensure that not a single toe of any reporter touched Lois’ property. Silently, she sent a word of thanks to Bill for being so on top of things.

She approached the podium with its plethora of microphones all bundled together to capture every last word, sigh, and exhalation she uttered. For a moment, Lois was brought right back to the very first public statement she’d made regarding the search for Clark and the reward being offered for information leading to his return. The weight she’d felt on her shoulders and the creeping fear that had knotted her stomach and made the short hairs on her neck stand on end had made the press conference more than a little intimidating for her then. But now she held herself confidently upright and, while her heart still bled for the truth about Clark’s condition, she walked with a self-assurance that she’d lacked when begging the public to help her find her best friend.

For a full fifteen seconds, she stood in the center of the podium, Martha flanking her on the left, just looking out over the crowd of journalists. Even in that sea of bodies, she recognized a few familiar faces. Eddy Stump, one of the photographers from the Daily Planet. Janet Hadley, from the Ocean City Tribune. Adam Winter, from the Gotham Gazette. Tim Logan, from the Morning Star. Anna Lee, from the Inquirer. Leo Nunk – still a thorn in her side after all these years – from the Dirt Digger. And numerous others Lois had worked with, against, or alongside of for years.

There were a lot of faces she didn’t know as well. Men and women who looked at her with predatory gazes, ready to pounce on her and whatever information she was about to give them. Others who looked at her with pity, as though it pained them to see the great Lois Lane, winner of a dozen Kerths and other various journalism awards, reduced to holding a press conference about a fellow reporter who, like a shooting star, had had a brilliant start to his career at the Daily Planet, but which had fizzled out and gone dark in mere seconds, to be forgotten again just as quickly.

Mentally, Lois shook her head. Ninety percent of the faces she saw before her now looked too young, too fresh, to have lived through the era of Clark Kent and Superman; at least not with any real memory of either man. *Of course* they would look bored to tears by the prospect of reporting on someone they considered to be irrelevant. It tore her heart to know that almost none of the men and women before her knew or cared about the man she was there to protect. They were simply hungry for the story, which they would regurgitate in their own way, then quickly forget it and move on to more exciting investigations.

She cleared her throat, making sure the microphones picked up the sound. Instantly, a shushing sound rippled through the crowd and the journalists started to fall silent, one by one. Lois waited patiently for the crowd to get as mute as she figured it would get, then she took a breath and began her statement from memory.

“Thank you all for coming today. As most of you already know, my name is Lois Lane. I was the one who reported my friend and fellow journalist at the Daily Planet missing a little over twenty years ago. I spear-headed numerous searches for him over

the years, all which came to dead ends, despite the reward money promised for any leads that brought Clark Kent home.”

She paused, letting the words sink in.

“You’ve all heard, by now, the rumors going around that Clark was found during a raid on the Arkham Asylum in Gotham City. I’m happy to announce that the rumors are true. Clark was found alive during the raid and has been brought home. The circumstances of how and why he came to be in that place are still unclear at this time, and may not be for some time to come. At the request of his immediate family, those details will *not* be made a matter of public information. I *can* confirm that he was found injured and is recovering at this time, however.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd, and Lois pressed on, not allowing anyone to be bold enough to throw out any questions.

“We are extremely grateful to all those who have offered their help and support over all these years – be it those who offered to chip in on the reward, those who helped hang missing flyers, those who participated in the physical search parties, those who kept a sharp eye and ear out for information about his whereabouts, even those who simply prayed for his safe return,” Lois said, her eyes scanning the gathered media. “*All* of it is appreciated more than you can possibly know. We’d also like to thank the Gotham PD for their assistance in helping bring Clark home. And, of course, to the tipster who alerted the GPD that Clark might be inside the asylum...his family, friends, and I owe you more than simple words can ever express. And the fact that you’ve declined the reward money is proof of what an amazing person you are. Thank you, from the bottom of our hearts.”

Lois paused and swallowed down the emotional tears that had crafted a lump in her throat. But the email she’d received from Bruce Wayne – Batman – declining the offered reward made her smile internally, even if just for a split second.

“At this time, his family and I would like to ask for privacy as Clark continues to recover from his ordeal. He’s been through a lot and we wish for him to be left alone to recover. Again, thank you all for coming out and for all the support you’ve given us over the years.”

Lois stepped back, allowing Henderson to move in from where’d he’d been standing to the rear right of the podium. As Lois and Martha went to return to the safety of inside the house, she could hear Henderson over the speakers as the reporters all sprang into action, hurling a billion questions and comments her way.

“No questions!” Bill was yelling into the microphones to be heard. “No questions!”

In the next moment, the door was open and Lois ushered Martha inside. Then she slipped through the small gap she’d made and shut the door again, leaving it unlocked so Bill could enter if he needed to.

“Do you think that’ll satisfy them?” Martha asked worriedly, looking frail and shaken by the sheer number of reporters that had all been clamoring for a personal statement or answered question.

Lois shrugged helplessly. “I can only hope so. Clark needs the sunlight, so they need to go away.”

Martha nodded. “It’s killing me to keep him cooped up in the house like this. *I’m* going stir-crazy with the closed drapes. I can only imagine what must be going through his mind.” She sighed sadly.

Lois put a supportive hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry, Martha. The media will go away or I’ll *make* them go away. One way or another.”

In the end, Lois didn’t have to threaten harm to any members of the press. Most of them stalked off angrily after the press conference. Lois didn’t blame them much. She would be fuming too if she’d wasted her time on such a vague, virtually helpless statement that would barely allow them to flesh out two

paragraphs for their articles and give them half a minute at best for their filmed news segments. But that was all she and Martha dared to say on the subject of Clark. It was bad enough that the world’s superheroes had been let in on Clark’s secret in order to help find him. But then to be forced into sharing that information with Dr. Klein – necessary but still not something Lois had relished doing – and then again with Henderson...she wanted to take no chances. She wasn’t going to give anyone else any reason to speculate on Clark’s health or anything else about him. If word got out that he’d undergone electroshock therapy, and on the incredibly slim chance that he eventually recovered from it, everyone would know there was more to Clark than met the eye. She wasn’t going to risk that happening. So much had already been taken from him. His secret wasn’t going to be one of them, not if she could help it.

The stubborn few who appeared to be in no rush to leave were chased off by Henderson’s officers. Lois wasn’t entirely sure what to make of their lack of motivation. Perhaps they were afraid their editors wouldn’t be happy with what they’d gotten. Perhaps they hoped that, if they hung around long enough, Lois would come out and give them more information. Perhaps they were betting on the thinning crowd as a catalyst for Lois to open the blinds so that they might just be able to catch a glimpse of Clark. Lois didn’t know and she didn’t care. She was just glad to see the officers forcing her journalistic brethren to leave the area as she cautiously peeked through the blinds.

“That’s the last of them,” she said to Martha as she breathed a sigh of relief. She watched as Jessica Porter of Channel 12 hurried across the street to her news van, climbed in, and sped off, keeping to just under the speed limit as one of the officers watched, his handcuffs at the ready if she didn’t leave right away.

“Good riddance,” Martha huffed.

Lois checked the time. “We still have about an hour before the sun starts to set. Let’s get Clark outside.”

Martha was already rising from her seat. “You read my mind.” She gently put her hand on Clark’s inner elbow. Whatever else he might know and understand, he’d come to associate the gesture with an unspoken request for him to stand and follow. He did so now, a small ripple of worry showing on his brow. “It’s okay, Clark. No one’s going to hurt you. We’re doing everything in our power to help you,” she promised him in the hushed tone of a mother speaking to her newborn.

The crease in his brow left, but Lois could tell that Clark was still ill-at-ease, even if he couldn’t communicate it. She shook her head sadly and wondered yet again what kinds of evil things Clark had endured to turn her fearless best friend into a man who would jump at his own shadow if only his broken mind and body would allow it.

Don’t go there, Lois, she warned herself. Focus on the present. Clark needs you.

Shoving aside her grim thoughts, Lois hastened her step to get ahead of Martha and Clark. After carefully checking to make certain there were no unexpected spies huddled in her backyard, she worked with freezing fingers to set up three chairs in her tiny backyard. Then she rushed back inside to brew a fresh pot of coffee and retrieve her coat, hat, and gloves. Martha had already helped Clark into the coat Lois had saved from his apartment. Once, Clark had fit into the thick material like it had been molded specifically for his body. Now it hung huge and limp on his emaciated frame, reminding Lois sharply of her young nieces playing dress up in Lucy’s old bathrobes.

Silently, Lois fixed the three cups of coffee and brought them out to the yard. Martha had already settled Clark into one of the chairs and he sat with closed eyes facing the weak, westering sun. He opened his eyes briefly as Lois touched his shoulder to alert him to his coffee. He looked at it with the same blank look as always, but he did sip it after a few minutes.

“So, where do we go from here?” Martha said after a while.

Lois shook her head. “Dr. Klein will reevaluate Clark’s condition in a couple of weeks. Hopefully Clark will put on some weight before then and get healthier overall. I’m hoping that he’ll say that Clark is ready to have some of those malfused bones of his reset. I can’t imagine what it must be like for him to have to alter his way of walking, of using his hands, the way that he has to.”

“I hope so too,” Martha agreed. “I know my son. Mark my words, he’s in pain. I see it every time he gets up to move from one chair to another or to climb the steps or hold a spoon. Maybe he’s not in excruciating pain, but he’s in discomfort.”

“I think so too,” Lois said. “I was hoping I was wrong...for Clark’s sake.” She sighed. “I wish he could tell us what he needs. If he’s hurting. If he’s remembering anything.” She looked at Clark in silent contemplation. “I’m so used to fixing things,” she finally said. “Getting apartment renters the services they need from lazy landlords. Getting answers for the public on what’s happening with our tax dollars. Getting criminals put in jail. But I can’t fix what matters most.” She reached over to Clark and took his free hand in hers. He winced at the contact at first, but when it became apparent that she wasn’t going to hurt him, his body relaxed again.

“You’ve already done more than anyone has a right to expect from you. Even if he...doesn’t,” Martha began, and it was clear the word was hard for her to get out, “recover from this, you brought him *home*. He’s *safe* because of you.”

“He’s safe because of *Batman*,” Lois corrected, though not unkindly. “In twenty years of searching, I had *nothing* to show for my efforts,” she added bitterly. She took a sip of her coffee, annoyed with herself.

“Without *you* and your efforts, Batman *never* would have been on the lookout for Clark,” Martha reminded her.

Lois sighed again. “Maybe,” she allowed, “but unless he’s got a gadget to bring back Clark’s memory...” She let her voice trail off.

After a short while, Clark began to doze off, as he often did. Martha took the opportunity to slip inside and begin to prepare the pot roast, potatoes, carrots, and homemade macaroni and cheese – another one of Clark’s favorite meals. Lois sat out in the cold, crisp air and drank in the sight of her best friend. He was so distant now; more of a stranger to her than when she’d first met him and had barely taken notice of what his name was, let alone that she was stuck with him on an assignment. In the waning afternoon light, he looked so deathly pale that it was a wonder to her that he’d survived all those years shut away in a desolate basement cell in the asylum. She was beyond glad to have him free and safe again, but how much good had they really done him? He was still locked away from them, from the world, and he might never return from the darkness of his damaged brain.

Better than dying alone and confused in that hellhole, Lois told herself resolutely. Out here, with me, he at least has a chance to reconnect to his past.

Two weeks.

Two weeks passed without any sign of improvement from Clark. He still wandered about the townhome in a mute, glassy-eyed state of confusion. He still ate whatever was placed before him, usually not stopping unless either Lois or Martha refused to give him another helping – they both worried Clark would make himself sick if he ate too much at one time. He still spent most of his time sleeping – either in the guest room bed or cat napping wherever he happened to be sitting at the time. And, though Lois and Martha made certain he spent as many hours a day in the sunlight as possible, there was no indication that his powers were returning, nor did he regain any of his usual, healthy, tanned glow to his skin. And yet, although Clark’s weight didn’t seem to change much, his cheeks appeared to be less sunken in. Lois

assumed he must have put on a couple of pounds, thanks to the seemingly endless supply of nutritious meals and junk food snacks he’d been provided with.

Then again, she knew she couldn’t assume anything when it came to what should be considered normal. *Nothing* about what was happening was normal. Not the circumstances in which Clark had been kept, before he’d been found. Not the way in which his whereabouts had been discovered. Not even his anatomy was normal. And, although Dr. Klein had given the Man of Steel a physical examination when Clark had asked him to be Superman’s doctor, much of Clark’s unique differences were still a mystery. The poor doctor was flying almost blind when it came to treating Clark. Lois had to remind herself of that every time she called Dr. Klein with a question that he couldn’t answer or had to guess at the answer to.

Two weeks.

Two weeks of constant worrying over his condition.

Two weeks of wondering if he’d ever become the man he’d once been again.

Two weeks of waking in the middle of the night just to check on him and reassure herself that it hadn’t been just a dream, that he really *was* home and safe with her.

Two nightmarish weeks that stretched on without end as Lois lost much of her appetite, didn’t sleep well, stumbled through her day to day tasks, and lived with a constant dull headache that neither aspirin, nor food, nor sleep could vanquish. Her energy was perpetually low and she felt increasingly nauseous as she fretted over Clark. She didn’t need to be a doctor to know it was from the stress she was shouldering. But she refused to let that stop her. She would let the stress kill her before she gave up on Clark. She wasn’t worried about herself. It was Clark and Martha that she was concerned with. Although Clark’s mother was careful not to let on that she was dealing with similar symptoms, Lois knew Martha was having difficulties in dealing with the unexpected stress of caring for her unresponsive son. Dark circles were around Martha’s eyes and she often dozed off in the evenings when the three sat in the living room together, often waking with a start and a strangled cry. Her movements were stiffer than before too. Lois could see how the tension in Martha’s muscles plagued her.

Two weeks of hell, when they should have been euphoric from Clark’s return.

One night, toward the end of those two weeks, Lois awoke a little after two in the morning. Shivering a little, she tugged on her bathrobe and shoved her bare feet into her slippers. She checked on Clark and found him sound asleep in his bed. His foot was hanging off the side, so she gingerly manipulated his leg to get it back onto the mattress and under the warm covers. But, before she did, she took a moment to study his poor mangled toes and the unnatural way his ankle looked. Everything was gnarled and twisted beyond belief and she had to wonder what kind of miracle had allowed him to continue to walk at all. She kissed her fingertips, then pressed them to the top of his foot, as though she had imbued the kiss with some mystical power that would restore his broken bones to the picture of health again.

Clark rolled over in his sleep, his face twitching in some dream, but he did not cry out or whimper, so Lois left him to rest after placing a light kiss on his brow. For one, searing moment, she was struck with the thought that she’d been looking at him for two weeks without him wearing his once ever-present glasses. Did she miss the glasses? She wasn’t sure. On the one hand, they’d been an unneeded ruse that had been a barrier against her seeing him as he truly was. On the other hand, the glasses had been an integral part of Clark. The fact that he wasn’t wearing them was a constant reminder of how much of his life had been stolen away.

She shook her head sadly and left the room. Going back to bed would be pointless, she knew. Her stomach rumbled and she

instinctively headed downstairs, toward the kitchen. A cup of tea and a cookie or two, she decided on as she descended the steps. That usually was enough to satisfy her middle-of-the-night snack needs. She found Martha already in the kitchen, a pot of tea on the stove heating. Clark's mother was softly crying.

"Hey, are you okay?" Lois asked in a quiet tone, so as not to frighten Martha with her sudden appearance.

Martha looked up, wiping at her watery, reddened eyes with the heel of her palm. "I will be, dear."

"What's going on?" Lois asked, sliding into the seat opposite from Martha in the breakfast nook. She reached across the table and took the older woman's hand. "Tell me."

Martha sighed heavily just as the tea kettle started to whistle. Lois got up wordlessly and turned the stove off. Then she poured them each their tea as she silently waited for Martha to respond. She didn't push for a response. One thing she'd learned during all the long years of looking for Clark was that Martha would answer at her own pace after gathering her thoughts. Or, maybe in this case, after wrestling back the tears she'd been shedding when Lois had walked in.

After fixing both mugs of tea, Lois brought them to the table along with a box of chocolate chip cookies. She pushed the box toward Martha in an open invitation as she sat down. For a moment, both women sat in a fragile, expectant silence, until Lois could bear it no longer.

"I don't want to pry but...Martha, what's wrong?" she repeated carefully, not wanting to upset Clark's mother.

"Nothing. Everything," Martha replied, and it was plain that she was struggling to find the right words. Her shoulders slumped in defeat. "I couldn't sleep," she tried explaining. "So, I peeked into Clark's room. I..." Her voice hitched and wobbled. "I'm still having trouble...I can't..." she stammered uncertainly.

"I know," Lois reassured her. "I do the same thing most nights. I'm still having trouble accepting his...condition too."

Martha looked relieved that Lois understood. "I know we're helping him in the only way...the best way...we can. But I worry that it's not enough."

Lois nodded. "Me too."

Martha took her mug in both hands and stared into its light-colored depths as though peering into the heart of eternity. "For so long, I prayed for his return. Every morning when I awoke. Every night before I closed my eyes to sleep. Every Sunday at church. Every time I lit a candle. Every time I saw something – *anything* – that reminded me of him. Every time the phone rang. For twenty years I hoped he was still alive. But sometimes, in the middle of the night, I would lay awake and wonder...what if he'd been hurt or killed? What if I never saw him again?"

"That's nothing to be ashamed of," Lois told her, reaching over to take Martha's hand in comfort, noting the way the other woman hung her head as though to hide from her confession. "I think we *all* had thoughts like that. It's natural to consider *all* of the possibilities. We had no way of knowing for sure that he was alive," she gently reminded her.

"I know. But, looking at him now...there's a part of me that wonders..." Martha looked away, looking horrified by her own thoughts. She cleared her throat before speaking again. "Wonders if it's for the best that he's still alive. God forgive me. I love my son, Lois. The bigger part of me is so, *so* happy he's home. But...at what cost? Is it such a blessing for him to be living life the way he is? Not knowing who we are?" A tear slipped down her cheek and she pulled her hand from Lois' to wipe it away. "Not knowing who he *himself* is? Not...being able to appreciate or remember all the things that used to bring him such joy?"

She shook her head as more tears welled up in her eyes, then broke from their dam to spill down her cheeks. "Of course, I'm thrilled to have him alive and not gone forever but...it hurts to know how much has been taken from him." She looked at Lois. "I

sound horrible and ungrateful," she added apologetically.

"No," Lois said, shaking her head slightly. She cupped her mug in her hands, in a perfect mirror of Martha. "No, you don't. You sound like a grieving mother. It's *okay* to be afraid for Clark. Of what his future may or may not hold. For what he's lost and whether or not he'll ever get it back. It's okay to wonder what's going on in his mind and if he's aware of his situation."

She took a drink from her mug, then set it back down and looked Martha straight in the eyes. "True be told, I guess a part of me has wondered the same thing. For all intents and purposes, the Clark we know and love is gone. He's not who he once was. It's not easy to accept. I don't *want* to accept it. And I'm so glad he's alive in one moment, then I see him struggling to move around or staring into space when confronted with something he once loved and it's like...like I'm looking at nothing but the shell of a man whose spirit died a long time ago. And I'm not entirely convinced that it's a good thing because I don't know if we can resurrect that spirit."

"All we can do it press on," Martha said, the weight of the cosmos in her words.

"Press on and love him," Lois echoed.

"He's lucky to have you, Lois. He always was."

"No, *I* was the lucky one," Lois argued softly. "I just wish I'd realized it sooner. I would have embraced...the potential we had. Maybe if I had...maybe if I'd chosen to give him a chance instead of Lex...maybe he never would have disappeared in the first place. Maybe he never would have...become what he is now."

This is my fault, she admonished herself.

But was it, really? There had been no way to know what was going to happen. No way of preventing the hurts Clark had suffered. No way to avoid whatever indignities he'd endured. No way to stop him from vanishing without a trace only to turn up twenty years later as a virtual stranger.

I was starting to fall for him and he never even knew, she bemoaned internally.

Love. She hadn't been willing or able to acknowledge that fact twenty years ago. But she had been falling in love with her best friend and partner since...when had that started? she wondered.

Probably since Smallville, she admitted to herself. *When I got to see Clark for who he really is*.

She thought back with fondness to their time in Smallville and the way in which they'd started that assignment as work partners and ended it as friends. That was when Clark had broken through her defenses and slipped into her heart. She thought back to the red gingham dress she'd purchased during the Cornfest, just because she'd known it would earn her that blindingly brilliant smile of his. Everything else that came after, especially when she'd thought the world was as good as dead during Nightfall, had only cemented his place in her heart.

And then I lost him for real, for twenty years and it was like I'd lost a piece of my soul, she lamented.

No. She refused to despair in front of Martha. She, more than Clark, needed Lois to keep a brave face. Lois would not fail either of them.

All I can do is help him now. And if he ever gets better, I swear I won't ever let a day go by when I don't tell him how I feel about him.

Early the next morning, Lois was awakened by the sound of her phone ringing. Groaning in sleepiness and irritation at having been ripped from the dreamless void she'd been floating in, she yawned and picked up the phone. She squinted at the bedside clock as she did so. It wasn't even 6:30 yet.

"Hello?" she half asked, half growled.

"Lois, it's Jimmy," came a chipper voice on the other end of the line.

"Jimmy, it's my day off," she reminded him unhappily.

“Is that any way to speak to your editor?” he teased.

“How about ‘call me this early again on my day off and I’ll go work for the New York Times’ instead?” she shot back jokingly.

“That’s a step too far,” Jimmy mockingly warned. “Anyway, I *know* you’re supposed to be off but you’re gonna wanna know this,” he said in a sobering tone.

Lois instantly sat up straight in her bed and clutched the phone a little tighter. “What do you have for me? And why isn’t Tanya the one calling me?” she asked, thinking of the research assistant she’d been working closely with for the last couple of years, who was good, but would never be as good as Jimmy had once been.

“It’s...sensitive. It’s about Clark. Well, the doctor that held him at the Arkham Asylum, at any rate,” Jimmy replied gravely.

“Dr. Fulton?” Lois asked, her curiosity piqued now. “I’ve been trying to get ahold of him since Clark got rescued. Between the police and him just holing up at home and not returning any calls...” She left the implication to hang in the air unvoiced.

“What about him, Jimmy? Is he finally willing to speak with us?”

“Not exactly,” Jimmy hedged. “He’s dead, Lois.”

Lois blinked. “Dead?” she repeated. “How? When?”

“At least a week. His neighbors reported not seeing him around for a while and sent the police to do a wellness check,” Jimmy explained. “The guy was in his bathtub and already pretty ripe, from all accounts.”

“How?” Lois asked again, grabbing for the pen and pad of paper she kept on her nightstand.

“Phenobarbital OD.”

“In English, please.”

“Sleeping pills. Enough to take down a horse,” Jimmy clarified. “Factor in the bottle of Jim Beam...” There was a shrug in his voice.

“Yikes,” Lois replied. “Someone *really* wanted to make sure they didn’t wake up.”

“Yep,” Jimmy agreed.

Lois thought for a moment. “The police were really grilling him over the patients held on that basement level of the asylum. Maybe the pressure got to him?”

“Could be,” Jimmy agreed. “Look, Lois, I know you have your hands full with everything at home...and I know you’re a bit close to the case, with Clark being, well, as important to you as he is. But, if you’re willing, I’ll let you handle the...”

“Consider me on it,” Lois interrupted. “I want answers. And I want them *now*.”

“Commissioner Gordon, please,” Lois said into the phone from the comfort of her desk at the Daily Planet. She twirled her pencil in her fingers as she waited for the receptionist to either argue with her or connect her to the Commissioner.

“I’m sorry, Miss Lane, but the Commissioner isn’t taking any calls right now.”

So, it was to be an argument then.

“Look, I need to speak with him and it needs to be *now*,” Lois commanded. “It’s in regards to a high-profile case and...”

“I’m sure it is,” the bored-sounding woman replied dryly. “But the Commissioner isn’t fielding requests from the press for statements at the moment.”

Lois rolled her eyes so hard she could swear she could see her own brain. “It’s in regards to the raid on the asylum. And I’m not looking for a soundbite here. I need to discuss...”

“Miss Lane!” the woman admonished irritably. “I’ve already told you...”

From somewhere in the close distance, Lois heard another voice. “Transfer her to my office, Linda.”

“But!” came the protest.

“Miss Lane is working closely with me on the case,” the Commissioner replied sternly. “*Always* put her through. We both have a vested interest in working together.”

“Please hold while I transfer you,” Linda said to Lois with fake sweetness.

“Thank you,” Lois said cheerfully, not bothering to hide her smugness.

There was a brief silence, then she heard the sound of the phone being picked up.

“Lois,” Commissioner Gordon greeted her gruffly.

“Commissioner,” she replied in turn.

“Jim, please,” he corrected her. “After what we saw in Gotham, I think we’re on a first name basis,” he said, his voice troubled.

“Ah...okay, Jim,” Lois allowed. “I need to talk to you about Dr. Fulton.”

“So, I take it you’ve heard about his suicide then,” the man said unsurprised. “Shocker from the great Lois Lane,” he teased.

“Yeah, what can you tell me about it?” she asked.

“Not much. The guy took a lethal dose of sleeping pills and washed it down with half a bottle of Jim Beam,” the Commissioner replied. “Forensics think he did it about a week ago. The scene...it was a mess. The guy was practically a hoarder. There was garbage and roaches everywhere. You couldn’t even tell there was a smell of a rotting body in the house. That’s how bad it was. I had guys puking inside of their hazmat suits.”

“Lovely,” quipped Lois.

“The heat was turned pretty low in the house. The tub was practically frozen when my guys found the body,” Jim elaborated.

“Any suicide note? Motivation? Anything at all to give us more context?”

“Nothing,” Jim said. “At least, not yet. But, as I said, the house was an absolute pigsty. Who knows if he wrote a note and it just got buried under a pile of stuff?”

“So...no motive,” Lois said as she scribbled notes on her legal pad. “Nothing...unusual at all?”

There was a loaded pause, then Jim cleared his throat. “Off the record?”

“Of course,” was her immediate answer.

“I think his suicide might have been because of our investigation into him,” the Commissioner confided. “He was facing a *long* list of charges once we finished up our work. We had undercover shadowing him to make sure he didn’t disappear on us.”

Lois jotted the information down for her own, personal use, in case she needed to check back with the Commissioner about something in the future.

“I see,” she said as she wrote. “So, the undercover saw nothing out of the ordinary? Did they see him buy the sleeping pills?”

There was another awkward pause. “No,” Jim admitted. “But that doesn’t mean they weren’t already in the house.”

“True,” Lois allowed.

“There’s one thing that’s bothering me though, just between you and me,” Jim said in a low tone as if to hammer home how important it was to keep the information confidential. “According to everyone we spoke with, the doctor didn’t drink.”

Lois’ eyes went wide. “You’re sure?”

“He regularly underwent random drug and alcohol testing at the asylum. All the staff does. He’s always been clean. People we’ve been talking to don’t recall him ever imbibing, not even a virgin Pina Colada.”

“So why would he have a bottle of Jim Beam?” Lois wondered aloud, tapping the eraser end of her pencil against her notepad.

“That’s what I’m wondering too,” Jim agreed. “And none of my guys saw him enter any liquor stores. His house is around the corner from one and he never even went that way when my officers had eyes on him.”

“And none of them thought him not leaving his house for a

week was weird?” Lois inquired.

“We suspected that he was catching on to the fact that he was being watched. He loaded up on groceries and some DVDs from a local discount place just before he died. We figured he was getting ready to stay under the radar as much as possible. He probably knew we were closing in. We’d already heavily questioned him,” Jim explained.

“About that,” Lois said, switching gears for a moment, “can I ask about what you found out?”

“I’ll email you a copy of the transcript,” Jim told her.

“Any chance I can see the tape?” Lois asked sweetly.

Jim exhaled noisily as he mulled it over. “Can you come into the station?”

Lois checked her watch. “It’s a two-hour drive. Can’t you send me a video file?” she asked nicely.

“I’m afraid not. It’s too high profile a case. I can’t risk it leaking.” The Commissioner’s voice clearly brooked no argument.

Lois pinched the bridge of her nose in thought. “Okay, okay. You win.”

“I’ll make sure Linda doesn’t give you a hard time this time,” Jim promised.

“She’d better not. Dead or not, this so-called ‘doctor’ is responsible for hurting my best friend, and I’m gonna find out why,” Lois vowed in turn.

Lois was silent and contemplative as she drove home that evening. She’d watched, and rewatched, the taped questioning of Dr. Fulton three times, trying to glean any insight into the man who’d tortured Clark and stolen his memories. But there wasn’t much to learn after the first viewing. Mentally, Lois ran down the list of truths she’d come to discover from the tape.

Clark had been brought to the asylum late one night approximately ten years before Batman had discovered him wasting away in that tiny cell, which, if she was being honest with herself, wasn’t news.

He’d been brought in, ranting and raving that he was Superman, which had made Lois shudder with dread that Clark had been spreading that information around, even if no one had believed it.

His name had been unknown at the time, though it was clear that something had happened *before* his arrival in Gotham to make him fear the word “Clark” so much.

His scars and brutalized fingers, wrists, ankles, toes, and other areas had been apparent even then; he hadn’t gained them from the asylum. *If* the doctor’s word could be trusted.

Dr. Fulton had given Clark countless sessions of the electrotherapy shocks in order to purge the ridiculous notion of being Superman from his brain, and to calm his “violent outbursts,” though Lois sincerely doubted that the Clark she knew and had begun to love so long ago could *ever* be violent.

His last “therapy” had been roughly seven years ago after Clark had slipped into his current, nearly vegetative state.

For the last seven years, Clark had been mute and lost into his own world of blank hopelessness.

For the last seven years, Dr. Fulton had almost ignored Clark’s continued existence, choosing, instead, to focus on new and more dangerous patients.

That was it. Never once did Clark’s torturer mention being paid off to hurt Clark, though Lois suspected that he *had*, based on the way he fidgeted and tried to skirt around those questions. Never once did he suggest that someone wanted Clark’s memory erased. Never once did he allude to having an affiliation with anyone who might want to see the prisoners of Arkham Asylum dead. It had appeared to be his own, sick, twisted, perverted sense of “medicine” that dictated whether or not he sent electricity into the minds of his captives, as Lois saw it.

She sighed as she honked her horn at an SUV that cut in front

of her without signaling. She felt no closer to finding justice for Clark than she had when she’d gotten up that morning and now she was in a foul mood.

At least the weasel hadn’t tried to proclaim his innocence in the whole thing. He’d been only too willing to share the details of what he’d done. That had made Lois shiver. He’d sounded so *proud* of himself as he’d admitted to the horrific things he’d done to Clark. Not only proud, but he’d sounded so convinced that what he’d done was a *good* thing: that he’d *helped* Clark, rather than destroyed him.

Which made it all the more perplexing that the doctor had committed suicide. If he’d been so proud of his work, why would he kill himself, even with the police building a case against him? It was clear he believed strongly that what he’d done to his patients was good and necessary. He seemed like the type of man who would argue that point passionately in court, not to win over the jury, but because he wholeheartedly *believed* in his actions. Lois knew the type. They would rather rot in jail than run from their fate, simply because they were so certain of their own innocence.

The alcohol was nagging at her brain too. Why would a man so dedicated to sobriety throw it all away in his final moments? Had Dr. Fulton truly flipped and wanted to ensure that the sleeping pills took his life? Had he, like her own mother, just been *that* skilled about drinking in private and only when he was *sure* not to be tested for sobriety? It was possible, she knew. Her mother had found ways to avoid flunking her own drug and alcohol tests for *years*, even in the worst depths of her addiction.

She’d shared her thoughts on the matter with Commissioner Gordon, who’d agreed with her suspicions. He’d vowed to look into it all, giving Lois some peace of mind. She would continue to investigate on her own, of course, but it was nice to have the Gotham Police Department on her side as well.

But for now, all she wanted was to get home, get into sweat clothing, and be with Clark. She’d spent the better part of the day worrying about him, even though Martha had been there with him. She felt, somehow, that taking care of Clark was *her* job. Maybe it was just from the residual guilt she felt for pushing him away during her ill-fated engagement to Lex. Maybe some part of her felt like she needed to make amends for not finding him for twenty years. Or maybe it was because, even with him in his current state, she found the embers of her emerging feelings for him being stirred up once more.

It’s not fair to start down that path, she warned herself. *It’s not fair to him. It’s not fair to me. I can’t allow myself to love him in that way right now. Maybe not ever. Not if he doesn’t recover.*

But even as she told herself these things, she knew it was fruitless. She’d been in love with Clark since before he’d disappeared. And seeing him now, stranger though he was from his brain injuries, those feelings were growing with each day.

Lois distractedly picked up the phone the following morning, half expecting it to be Jimmy, or Henderson, or even the Commissioner. She muted the football game on the television. Clark didn’t seem to even notice. She grabbed the phone without looking and brought it to her ear after hitting the button to allow the call to go through.

“Hello?” she asked.

“Lois!” came an overly bubbly female voice.

Lois blinked as she was brought out of her thoughts and into the present. “Lucy! Hi. What’s up?”

“Just checking in with you, sis. And I’m finalizing my preparations for Christmas. Can I still count on you being there?” Lucy asked.

Lois would have laughed if she’d been in a better mood. *Trust Lucy to get right to the point without beating around the bush.*

“I...uh...” Lois stammered.

“Lo-is,” Lucy whined, and for a moment, the way she said it

reminded Lois too much of the way Clark used to draw out her name when he was teasing her or exasperated by her. Lois swallowed around the sudden, unexpected lump in her throat. “You promised me months ago that you’d come up for the holiday. You *can’t* back out now. Christmas is in a week.”

“I know, Luce,” Lois placated. “But that was before.”

“*Before*,” Lucy prompted with such flat disdain that Lois flinched.

“He needs me, Lucy,” Lois said softly, her eyes flickering briefly to Clark.

“So bring him with you,” Lucy replied in a tone that suggested she was talking to a complete idiot. “The more, the merrier.”

“I can’t, Luce,” Lois protested mildly. “It’s...complicated.”

Lois could practically hear her sister rolling her eyes as she huffed. “What’s so complicated, Lois? Just bring him along.”

“Lucy, I can’t. He’s still in bad shape after his ordeal,” Lois explained hesitantly, mildly annoyed that her sister was even *attempting* to argue this with her.

“Lois, the girls haven’t seen you in like four months,” Lucy argued gently. “They miss their aunt. I miss my sister. And if Mom finds out you aren’t coming...” The casual threat was left hanging unvoiced.

“Like Mom is the picture of family togetherness,” Lois hurled back bitterly. “Look, Lucy,” she said after a sigh and pinching the bridge of her nose, “I wish it was a simple matter of you putting up an extra guest but...” She paused. How could she make Lucy see what an issue it was without divulging everything that had happened to Clark?

“You should go. I’ll be with Clark,” Martha whispered from the seat next to Lois.

“Lois? Who was that?” Lucy asked.

Lois sighed again. This was getting messy fast. “Martha. Clark’s mother.”

“Bring her too if you want, there’s plenty of room at the table.”

“Lucy...” Lois said in a tired voice.

“You’re coming and that’s final,” Lucy said firmly. “I don’t care if I have to send my husband to pick you up and drag you here.”

“Lucy...” Lois warned again.

“No. I won’t hear any objections. You’ve put off the last *three* holidays with us,” Lucy admonished. “You owe us.”

“But Clark...”

“Clark has been occupying your every thought for the last *twenty years*, Lois,” Lucy pressed. “You found him. Now celebrate for once.”

Lois shook her head, knowing that her obstinate sister would never let her get away with staying home. “Fine but...I think Clark should stay here.”

“No way,” Lucy argued. “After all this time, hearing you pine over his absence, he’s coming with you.”

“Lucy...he’s in...” She lowered her voice, stood up, and quickly left the room. “Really bad shape,” she admitted once she thought she was out of Clark’s earshot. She knew she didn’t have to worry about offending Martha.

“You keep saying that,” Lucy said with another imagined eye roll. “Spit it out! Is he missing his arms or something?”

“Or something,” Lois muttered. “Listen, you *cannot* breathe a word of this, to anyone. *None* of you can. Because, if it got out, it would be a media circus. Got it?”

“Fine, fine, I swear. I won’t say a word,” Lucy replied, clearly annoyed.

“Clark...whatever he endured...part of it included torture.” It was best to keep it simple and truthful, without spilling the whole story. “His fingers, wrists, feet, and ankles have all healed improperly. I don’t know if it will scare the kids,” she warned. “And mentally? He’s not really *here* at the moment. It’s like...he’s

locked away, Lucy. He doesn’t speak, doesn’t seem to know what’s going on around him.” A tear slipped from her eye. Even after half a month since his rescue, it still hurt Lois to admit the extent of Clark’s injuries. “I don’t know if dragging him out of the house is the best idea right now. He’s only just seeming to get comfortable in his surroundings.”

Lucy was silent on the other end for a long moment. Then she cleared her throat. “I...see,” she stammered, embarrassed.

“Look, I know you like to host at your house. But maybe we can do Christmas Eve here and then you and mom can enjoy Christmas Day at your place,” she offered, hoping to appease her sister.

“All right,” Lucy finally acquiesced. “But I’m helping you cook. You still can’t make the candied yams correctly to save your life.” There was a grin in her voice now.

Lois chuckled a little. “Deal.”

Christmas Eve morning dawned bleak and overcast, the clouds above swollen and heavy with a great weight of snow that threatened to break at any moment, though the forecast predicted the flakes wouldn’t start to fall until after midnight. Lois was up with the sun, or would have been had there *been* any sun to get up with. With all that had been going on, she’d been neglecting to clean her home, so she took advantage of the quiet while Martha and Clark slept to pick up the odds and ends that had been left around, dusting as she went, and running the vacuum as swiftly as she could to minimize the noise. By the time Clark lumbered his slow way down the steps, the house was spotless and Lois, though a little tired, felt accomplished and happy.

“Merry Christmas,” she told Clark as he shuffled his way to the breakfast nook, followed by Martha. “Well...Merry Christmas *Eve*,” she corrected, knowing he would have corrected her if he’d been in his right mind.

“Merry Christmas Eve,” Martha replied on Clark’s behalf.

“I have to take Clark over to S.T.A.R. Labs this morning before Lucy and everyone else arrives. Did you want to come?” Lois offered, already knowing Martha would accept. “Aside from the obvious of Clark being your son, I’d like for you to meet Dr. Klein.”

Martha nodded. “I’d like that.”

“Great,” Lois said, mustering up some enthusiasm, though her stomach was tied in tight knots of worry over what Dr. Klein would have to say when they got there. “I’ll whip us up a couple of bagels, then we’ll get going.”

Within forty-five minutes, the three were in the car and on their way. Everyone was silent on the drive – Clark because he’d yet to find his voice, Martha because she sat entertaining her own thoughts and fears in her mind – as evidenced by the way she sat ramrod straight, looking dead ahead, and picking absently at her fingernails – and Lois because she was too nervous to put words to her feelings. And even if she *had* been able to vocalize her thoughts, it wouldn’t have helped anyone. It wouldn’t have made her any less nervous, nor would it have been of any benefit to Martha or Clark.

Clark.

Did he even comprehend what was going on around him? Did he know how much of himself had been lost?

She took a deep breath and sighed to herself.

I’d give up half of my own memories just to bring back some of his, she thought miserably. I just want to see a spark of the old Clark back. If I can find that spark, I know I can bring him back.

“There’s the building,” Lois said aloud, pointing to Martha’s passenger side window. “The parking lot is around the side.”

With practiced ease, she pulled into the lot and into the first available space. Dr. Klein had been kind enough to furnish her with a temporary handicapped parking placard for the car, so Clark wouldn’t have to make his potentially painful limping walk

across too great a distance. Once she was parked, she hopped out of the driver's seat and helped Clark get out of the back. It broke her heart anew to have to help him the way she was; not because she didn't like helping him – she'd fly to the moon and back again if it would do him some good – but because she was struck – again – with how mostly helpless he was.

"Come on, lean on me if you need to," she coaxed, but he simply started to shamble alongside her.

Maybe there's a piece of him that's still there after all, Lois thought as she watched him from the corner of her eye. That refusal to be beaten down. But even as she thought it, another, more sobering theory occurred to her. Or maybe he's just still too used to fending for himself and not being able to rely on the help of others.

They made it inside the building without incident, and the security guard merely nodded to her as she walked into the lobby. Daryl knew her by sight from the numerous trips she'd made to S.T.A.R. Labs over the years as she consulted with one scientist or another – usually Dr. Klein though – on research she was doing within the bounds of an investigation.

"Here to see Bernie?" the man asked knowingly.

"Guilty as charged," Lois said, mustering up a smile that she knew didn't touch her eyes.

"You know where to find him, Miss Lane," Daryl said, and at least *his* smile was real. His eyes slid over to Martha and Clark. "They with you?" he asked.

Lois nodded. "They're the reason we're here to see Dr. Klein," she confirmed.

Daryl printed off three "Visitor" badges for them and logged them in his system. Lois helped Clark affix the sticker to the front of his blue flannel shirt and was thankful that he wasn't fiddling with the now unfamiliar feel of his fool's glasses to keep up appearances. She thanked the guard, then herded everyone to the elevators and to Dr. Klein's office.

Dr. Klein was staring intently at some reddish-pink liquid in a beaker when she knocked on his open door. For a moment, she thought he was going to spill it as he spooked, but, to his credit, he regained his composure and kept the beaker firmly in hand.

"Lois!" he exclaimed in his surprise.

"Hi, Dr. Klein," she greeted him, walking into his office uninvited.

He stared for a moment as though confused as to their presence, then it seemed to click. "Oh, right, today's check-up day, isn't it?"

Lois nodded. "We changed it after that ice storm last week."

Dr. Klein nodded in turn. "Right, right. And you must be...?" He turned his attention to Martha.

"Clark's mother. Martha," Martha introduced herself.

Dr. Klein extended a hand to her and they shook. "It's nice to meet you. Well, not *nice*, given the circumstances. But...you know what I mean," he fumbled before clearing his throat and withdrawing his hand. "Let me start again," he apologized, putting his hand over his heart for a moment before extending it to Martha once more. His nervousness died away and his expression softened as he met Martha's gaze with his own. "I'm Dr. Klein. Your son...it's a privilege to know him. I promise, I will do all in my power to help him."

Martha gave him a tiny smile. "I know you will. Lois has done nothing but praise you."

"I appreciate that," he replied, dipping his head in embarrassed acknowledgment. "Come on down the hall to the exam room."

Lois let Martha escort Clark as they followed Dr. Klein back to the same room where Clark had been examined after being freed from Arkham Asylum. As before, it was torture to leave Clark alone in the room while she was directed to wait in the adjacent room, but at least this time she wasn't alone. She had Martha.

"Any changes I should know about?" Dr. Klein asked them before heading into Clark's room.

Lois shook her head. "Nothing. He's still...as distant as he was when we found him," she admitted.

"No powers? No indication of accelerated healing? Has he spoken?" Dr. Klein carefully inquired.

"Nothing at all." It hurt to say it out loud. "But he's had a healthy appetite. And I think maybe his face looks a little fuller. Or maybe it's my imagination," she quickly added.

Dr. Klein nodded. "And how much sun per day?" For the time being, he was all business and clinical.

Lois thought for a moment. "The first couple of days were rough with the media surrounding my house," she confessed, feeling ashamed, though she knew it wasn't her fault. "But once the media dispersed...it's been...I don't know. Most of the day every day that the weather cooperates."

"Good," he commented. "I'll be back soon. I promise."

True to his word, in fifteen or twenty minutes – Lois lost track of the time – Dr. Klein returned. Lois had been slouching in the chair as she ran every worst-case scenario over in her mind. But Dr. Klein didn't appear to be *too* grim when he returned, so she considered that to be a good sign. Although, she realized as her stomach dropped a little, he didn't exactly look *happy* either. She held her breath and squeezed Martha's hand in anticipation.

Dr. Klein pulled over the rolling stool in the room and sat facing them. "There's some good news and some bad news," he began. "The bad news first. I'm sure it's no surprise to you that he's still in a precarious situation. And it goes without saying that I have no idea how far or how quickly he might recover. I drew some blood, as I did last time, and I'll run it myself to compare it to how he was doing when he was first brought in. I, uh, didn't need any 'help' in drawing the sample, if you catch my meaning."

Martha nodded. "We understand."

He nodded in turn. "He still appears to be suffering from the damage the electroshock therapy caused to his brain. Again, no surprise, I'm sure. I tried running a very simple memory game with him. I showed him three cards with symbols on them and asked him to point and repeat the pattern. He didn't even seem to notice that I asked him a question."

"The blank stare. Yeah, we've never gotten more than that, aside from the rare look of confusion," Lois agreed. "And he's still a little fearful of his name and sometimes if we touch him unexpectedly." She paused and sighed softly.

"You said there was good news?" Martha prompted.

"There is," Dr. Klein confirmed and his voice had a spark of hope in it now. "He's put on about five pounds since I last saw him. His vital signs are *much* improved. I was worried when I made the decision not to set up an IV in your home, Lois," he admitted. "I wasn't sure I was doing the right thing and if an IV would have even made a difference. But, whatever you two are doing, keep it up. Physically speaking, he's heading in the right direction. That's not to say that things aren't touch and go still, but I'm feeling pretty confident about his ability to get back to a place where he's completely healthy again, regardless of if and when his abilities return."

Dr. Klein looked down at Clark's file in his hands. "Honestly, it's like you two are pulling off a miracle here. When I saw him after you brought him in, fresh from the asylum, I wondered how it was possible for a man, even one as unique as Clark, to endure what he did and still be alive after all those years." He swallowed hard and it was apparent how hard it was to him to be saying the things he was saying. "But now, after seeing him today, I have hope again. Hope for him. That he'll live a long and healthy life after this...at least in body. His mind..." Dr. Klein's voice trailed off a moment. "I wish I had a crystal ball to see what the future holds for his mind."

"And what about his bones? When can we start the surgeries

he'll need to correct all the malunions?" Lois asked, perhaps a bit too eagerly, but she wanted Clark to be pain free and able to function as a normal man again.

"Not yet, I'm afraid. I want him to get a little stronger first," Dr. Klein said apologetically. "There's no rush."

"No rush?" Lois was incredulous. "No rush?" she repeated. "Have you *seen* the way he needs to navigate his world?"

"I have," Dr. Klein affirmed. "And, believe me, if I could start it now, I would. But the risk isn't worth it right now. I want to give it a few more weeks. Maybe a month, then we'll reevaluate things. Hopefully by then I'll feel more comfortable in sedating him to do what I need to do," he kindly, but firmly, explained.

"A month?" Lois was completely crestfallen. "But he's..."

"Making do just fine for the time being," Dr. Klein gently interrupted. "Look, I hate leaving him in his current condition, but I *have* to consider what's safest for him. And right now, I'm not convinced that putting him under is in his best interest. I know you're eager to have him as close to normal as possible. So am I," he added even more sympathetically. "And, I promise, we'll get there. We just have to do it at Clark's pace, not ours."

Lois found herself without an argument. "Fine," she hesitantly agreed.

"In the meantime, if you notice any of his abilities returning, let me know and I'll clear my schedule to see him," Dr. Klein offered.

"I will," Lois vowed.

"Why did I agree to this?" Lois grumbled to herself a few short hours later as she sliced cheese and arranged it on a platter next to some crackers.

"You owe it to yourself to see your family," Martha reminded her, though she kept her eyes on her own task of neatly arranging the cocktail shrimp on a different platter.

"I owed it to myself to keep it just the *three* of us," Lois said distastefully. "I shouldn't be subjecting Clark to this."

Martha sadly shook her head. "No, dear. You aren't subjecting him to anything. He doesn't seem to be aware of what's going on."

"I feel like he's on display like an animal in the zoo," Lois argued.

"It's probably good for him to get used to being around people who aren't just us," Martha countered. "We can't hide him away from the world forever. Eventually, whether he heals fully or not, he'll need to be around others."

Lois sighed as she sliced the last of the block of cheddar. "True," she acquiesced. "As it is, at some point, I'm going to have to beat Jimmy and Perry away from Clark with a stick. It's killing them to not see him." She laughed bitterly.

Martha nodded thoughtfully as she finished placing the shrimp and poured the cocktail sauce from the jar into a wide bowl. "I can imagine. Clark always spoke so highly of them. I just wish that, when they *do* see him eventually, he'll be able to recognize how much they care about him."

"Me too," Lois replied. She picked up the platter and looked toward Martha. "Ready to go back into the lion's den?" she asked ruefully.

Martha chuckled. "It's not really *that* bad in there."

"That's because Mom hasn't shown up yet," Lois said. She tried to make it light-hearted, but she only managed to make it sound flat and mocking. She glanced at the clock. "Speaking of, she should be here soon."

She let Martha pass through the doorway first, following in her footsteps as they carried in the last few appetizers. Everyone was where she'd left them – Lucy and Luke chatting on the couch, Kelly and Amanda playing on the floor with a small assortment of Barbie dolls and unicorns. Clark was still in his chair, blindly staring into the fireplace, looking without noticing the dancing, writhing flames in the hearth.

"Aunt Lois!" Amanda, the younger of her nieces called, as Lois set down her cheese platter. "What's wrong with that man?" She pointed, in the wholesome, yet oblivious, manner that children under the age of ten tend to have.

Lois squatted down on the floor, leaving Martha to take the other seat. She smoothed down a patch of Amanda's dark blonde hair in a loving way.

"That's not polite," snapped Kelly, a serious girl of ten, compared to her more carefree seven-year-old sister.

"It's okay," Lois murmured softly, letting Amanda know by her tone that she wasn't angry at the question. "That's my friend, Clark. He's...my best friend actually. Or...was."

"What do you mean, 'was'?" Either he's your friend or not," Kelly piped up matter-of-factly as she sat her Barbie on a woefully undersized white and silver unicorn.

Was? For a moment, Lois was taken aback by her own words. Or rather, that one, singular, depressing word. Was. Did that mean she'd given up hope, on some level, that Clark would be restored to her?

Not a chance, she admonished herself. *Clark is strong. He'll find a way back to us. And...even if he doesn't...that changes nothing. He's still my best friend. He always will be. I love him too much to ever let anything change that.*

"Why doesn't he talk? Why does he look so sad?" Amanda wanted to know, and Lois was grateful for the interruption of her private reflection.

"Well, it's like this," Lois began, trying to buy herself a few precious moments while she figured out what she was going to say. "He...went missing, for a long time." Sometimes, a carefully tailored truth was better than a constructed lie. "And while he was away, he got hurt. Here," she said softly, pointing to her head.

"His skull?" Amanda's eyes were wide.

"His brain, sweetie," Lois corrected simply. "He's got a long way to go to get better from it. That's why he's here with me. I'm helping him to get better," she explained, wishing with all her might that her words would one day become the God's Honest Truth. She wanted nothing more than to help him get better.

"He moves funny too," Amanda observed as she pulled the boots off her Ken doll.

"His brain wasn't the only thing that got hurt. His hands and feet got hurt too," Lois amended.

"Oh."

With that dismissively uttered word, the girl's curiosity was sated and the subject matter was dropped as Amanda turned to the more serious business of figuring out if her dolls should go skiing or to the beach. Lois sent up a silent thank you for the innocence of children. But even as she did, she cast a look at Clark.

He should be here with me, playing on the floor with these two little munchkins, she thought remorsefully, using the pet name she'd dotingly given the girls long ago. *He would love them.*

A tender, barely-there smile curled the corners of her mouth. How often had she seen the glint of happiness in his eyes when he was dealing with a child? Either a witness' kid that he kept entertained while she'd spoken to the parent, or a kid who rushed up to Superman for a handshake and an autograph? Clark had loved them all and been so patient with them. He would have done anything to make a kid smile.

He...he would have made such a wonderful father, she thought with a pang in her heart. *And now...I don't know if he'll ever even notice a kid again in his life, let alone reclaim who he used to be and go on to have a normal life and family.*

Another thought crept, unbidden, into her mind. *Maybe even...with me?*

Mentally, she shook her head to dispel the notion. She was only thinking that because of the emotional rollercoaster she'd been on since finding Clark and learning how badly he'd been treated. Twenty years ago, she'd had her chance with him and

blown it in favor of pursuing the “safer” option of a man she could never love. If she could never love Lex, he could never hurt her. Clark had been much more dangerous in her eyes. Because if she’d allowed herself to love him and things had gone badly, she never would have recovered from that hurt.

She sighed, disappointed in herself. *I was different then. Young and stupid. So very, very stupid. I let my fears get the better of me and I ruined everything.*

“Aunt Lois! Can we have our presents now?” Amanda interrupted, and Lois thought she’d never been so glad to have her train of thought derailed before.

Lois chuckled. “Let’s wait until your grandmother gets here, hmm?”

But even as she said the words, the distinctive roar of her mother’s car – *still* in desperate need of a muffler, Lois noted sardonically – came to a thunderous halt in front of the house. Lois got up and peeked out the window at the overcast world beyond to double check, then stuffed her feet into an old pair of running shoes to help her mother with the gifts she was starting to take out of the trunk. Ellen dropped the package she was struggling with and cursed loudly. But at the sight of Lois, she composed herself and hugged her daughter tightly.

“Merry Christmas, Mom,” Lois greeted her.

“Merry Christmas,” Ellen replied. “Sorry I’m late. The traffic in this dreadful city...”

“Will be a lot less when you head up to Lucy’s tonight,” Lois cut in, before her mother could begin to rant. Ellen’s hatred of Metropolis ever since the divorce had been finalized in Lois’ youth knew no bounds.

“I never did understand your affection for the rat race of the city,” Ellen huffed.

Lois rolled her eyes. “Everyone’s already here,” she said instead of answering her mother. “The kids can’t wait for you to get inside.”

Ellen smiled. “Can’t wait for me, or can’t wait for their gifts?” she joked knowingly.

Lois laughed a little. “Well...” she hedged, drawing the word out.

Ellen laughed too. “Thought so. Take those couple of bags over there,” she instructed with a flick of her hand in the direction of four bags covered in tiny Santa Claus faces. “That’s all the girls are getting until tomorrow morning.”

Quickly, the two gathered up as many of the packages and bags as they needed to, with Lois running out a second time to grab the pies Ellen had brought with her for dessert. She watched with great amusement as Amanda and Kelly attacked their grandmother with hugs, kisses, and excited shrieks, though her heart was heavy. During her youth, Lois had never really had a “good” Christmas. Usually, her father snuck out to his work or to his mistresses – as Lois later discovered – and Ellen typically drank until she passed out or was barely coherent. Somewhere in there, one or the other would press some cash or a gift card into Lois and Lucy’s hands as their gift. If it was one of the “better” years, there may have been a few wrapped trinkets to open.

But now Ellen was sober and attentive to her two young granddaughters, showering them with hand-picked, thoughtful gifts. But jealousy wasn’t what had Lois feeling so down. She *loved* seeing the positive changes in both her mother *and* her father over the years, especially since there were now grandchildren in the family. No, what had Lois feeling so depressed wasn’t thinking about the smoking ruins of Christmases long gone. It was *Clark*. As she watched him staring with his unchanging, dead expression, she realized that she was grieving for *him*. He’d lost everything. His past, his present, and his future, as far as she knew. Even something as simple as this – celebrating Christmas – was prohibited to him. It had always been his favorite holiday, and yet he was completely unaware of the festivities

around him.

“Lois?” Ellen asked some time later as Lois sat silently watching everyone interact.

Lois looked up sharply as she realized someone was calling her name – more than once, if her mother’s concerned tone was any indication.

“Huh?” she asked, blinking rapidly and tearing her eyes away from the lights of the Christmas tree. Spots lingered before her gaze from having looked too long at the strands of lights that she’d struggled for two days to hang just right on the tree.

“Let’s go into the kitchen and get dinner started. Just you and me,” Ellen offered meaningfully.

Lois nodded. “Sure, Mom.”

The two rose from their seats and went into the kitchen. Lois immediately started on getting the ham prepped while Ellen began to prepare the side dishes. For a few, precious moments, they worked in companionable silence. Then Ellen turned to Lois as Lois was turning on the stove to boil the ham before sticking it in the oven. Her hands were on her hips and she had a dishtowel grasped in her right hand. She looked Lois up and down with her discerning mother’s stare that, even now, Lois was powerless against. There would be no hiding from her mother’s questions.

“Lois, we need to talk,” Ellen said simply, but it was abundantly clear that this was not a request. “I know what you’re doing.”

“Making the ham?” Lois offered with faux innocence.

Ellen snorted a little in dismissal. “You’re blaming yourself for your friend’s condition. Now, I’m not prying – Lord only knows I’ve done enough of that in my time and it’s only pushed you away – but it looks like he’s suffered a number of broken bones while you tried to find him.”

Lois nodded. “His doctor thinks he might be able to help correct all the malunions when Clark is strong enough, but he’s just not ready yet.”

“Of course he’s not. Anyone can tell just by looking at him that he’s as unhealthy as a...a...” She fumbled for a moment as she tried to come up with a good analogy. “A purely junk food diet,” she finished, throwing her hands up in the air in exasperation with herself.

“He’s getting better,” Lois said, a bit more defensively than she’d anticipated.

“I didn’t say he wasn’t,” Ellen smoothly countered. Her hands went back to her hips. “But, Lois, let’s be honest here. He’s never going to totally recover,” she said in a voice so gentle, she sounded like she was talking to one of the kids. “Those marks? On his temples? I know what they are,” she continued, tapping her own temple as though to illustrate her point. “I’ve been a nurse long enough to see just about anything and everything. Those are burns from electroshock treatments.”

“They were *never* treatments!” Lois snapped. “He was *tortured!* There’s no other explanation for why he was given so many high doses.”

“Semantics,” Ellen allowed in a manner that brushed it off. “Either way, people don’t come back from that. Sometimes, the electroshock works and works well. I’ve seen patients with major depression turn corners after treatment. But, for others, ones that wind up like your friend...” She shook her head sadly. “Just... don’t expect miracles,” she gently warned. “I would hate to see you get hurt.”

Lois let out a deep breath, releasing the argument that had been brewing on her tongue. “I’m not sure *what* I expect, to be honest. But I *do* know this, if *anyone* can come back from the abyss, it’s Clark.”

“Lois...” There it was, that same warning tone, though this time it was sharper and missing any hint of gentleness.

“No, Mom. You just watch and see,” she replied before leaving the kitchen – and her mother’s cautionary warning –

behind her.

“3...2...1...Happy New Year!” the announcers cried out as the Times Square Ball reached its final destination and confetti started snowing down on the freezing souls packed together in the heart of New York City.

Auld Lang Syne played over Lois’ television as the camera cut away to happy couples kissing in the street, even one or two who were slipping their diamond rings onto the fingers of their brand-new fiancées. Happy revelers jumped up and down in excitement, many of them wearing plastic 2014 glasses – some of them plain and others outfitted with glow sticks – not that the glow would be obvious in the eternal daylight-like brightness of the city’s theater district. Lois leaned over and kissed Clark on the cheek. He was staring at the television, but no expression showed on his face.

“Happy New Year, Clark,” she told him, whispering it softly near his ear.

He didn’t so much as flinch, but Lois took it as a good sign. When Martha had returned to Kansas that morning to deal with a few problems that had cropped up around the farm that required her presence in Smallville, Lois had been apprehensive that the sudden change of not having Clark’s mother around might throw Clark off or worry him, the same way he’d been fearful when Martha had first arrived. But he was taking the change in stride.

And, Lois noted to herself with cautious satisfaction, it had been a full three days since Clark had stopped reacting fearfully to his name. Perhaps there was some part of him that was still able to process the world around him and make the connection that, outside of the asylum, his name wasn’t connected to physical torture, the way Lois assumed it had been inside those dank, dark, creepy walls. Now, whenever anyone used his name within earshot of him, Clark didn’t react at all. Perhaps she shouldn’t have considered it a victory, but given how terrified he’d been of his name at first, Lois was chalking it up as a definite win. And what was more, she could also touch him now without him recoiling in fear. It made things easier when she had to guide him places – even just to other rooms – and when she – often – forgot herself and reached out to take his hand or pat his knee or even just to give him an innocent peck on the cheek to celebrate the start of a brand-new year.

She picked up the remote as she sat back and switched the television off with a yawn.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m beat,” she offered, expecting no response from him. “Let’s get some sleep, shall we?”

She stood and took his hand loosely in hers. He stood without a sound and obediently followed her upstairs. She left him at the door to his room, where he lurched and shambled his way inside, and she silently prayed that Dr. Klein would deem him ready for surgery when he saw Clark again. Watching Clark barely navigating the world around him was truly awful. She wanted him to be well again, even if “well” meant in body only. Then she padded down the hallway to her own room, shut the door, and disrobed for a quick, hot shower. By the time she finally fell asleep, the new year was nearly two hours old.

Dark, heavy, dreamless sleep descended upon her as soon as her eyes closed. She stayed in that void for close to three hours before a sudden loud crash woke her with a jolt. Heart racing, she thrust her bare feet into her pink fuzzy slippers and grabbed the closest heavy object – to her dismay, it was nothing more than hefty flashlight she’d used a few nights before when the power had briefly gone out after the circuit breaker had tripped. Still, it would put a sizeable dent in the skull of whoever she hit with it, so it gave her a small measure of comfort. Cautiously, she made her way to the door and opened it, just barely sticking her head out into the hallway to listen. She checked both ways – left and then right as though she was about to cross the street – but saw nothing out of the ordinary on that floor of the house.

Clark had, apparently, been awakened by the sound too. He shuffled out of his room but no expression showed on his face. Not fear, not curiosity, not determination to fight. Just a blank nothingness. Not even a shred of confusion was written in his still too thin features. Lois gripped the flashlight tighter as sounds of a struggle rose up the stairs to meet them. Someone – or more than one someones – was in the house, she was certain of it. She waved Clark back, frantically trying to get him to return to the relative safety of his room.

“Clark!” she hissed in a scared whisper. “Go back to your room!” She gestured once more for emphasis.

But Clark wasn’t paying attention to her. His attention was on the stairs. Lois wasn’t entirely sure if the sounds coming from the first floor were drawing him in or if he was simply unaware of the danger and just looking for a middle of the night snack, as she’d caught him doing twice in the past week. He started down the steps. Lois ran down the hallway, easily catching up to his limping stride as he wobbled his way on his destroyed ankles. She placed a hand on his shoulder and gently pulled him back.

“It’s not safe, Clark,” she murmured in his ear. “Stay here.”

Hefting her flashlight, she crept down the steps as quietly as possible. With each step, the sound of fighting grew louder and more serious. She heard grunts and sharp curses now, as well as what she knew only too well to be punches hitting their targets. Gulping hard and trying to swallow down some of her fear, Lois pressed on, her grip on her makeshift weapon so tight that her knuckles were white.

A blur of motion and activity greeted her when she reached the bottom step. It was hard to see in the darkness – the only light being that which snuck in around the blinds from the streetlight on the corner of the block. Instinct took over and she brought her flashlight down with two hands, bringing as much muscle and force as she could muster down on the head of the first intruder she could reach. To her dismay, whoever it was didn’t crumple into a heap as anticipated. He kept on fighting the other intruder, though a colorful string of words erupted from his mouth as a direct result of Lois’ attempt to subdue him. He delivered a spectacularly placed punch to the other’s jaw and the other went down like a wet noodle. The one Lois had hit turned to her.

“What are you doing?” he demanded as he switched on the overhead lights, flooding the once dimly lit room with a brightness that made Lois’ sleepy eyes squint and ache against the sudden harsh intrusion.

“Batman?” she gasped in horror, careful to use the correct name, since it was the hero, not the billionaire who stood in her home. Even with the other intruder down for the immediate future, she wasn’t going to risk things. She immediately dropped the offending flashlight like a scolded schoolgirl trying to get rid of evidence she’d been caught red-handed with. “I, uh...sorry about that. I heard fighting. I thought you were an intruder,” she explained simply and quickly, toeing the flashlight away from her foot a bit. “Which, you kind of *are*, in a way,” she pointed out in self-defense. “Not that I mind seeing you but...what are you doing in my house...in the middle of the night...*unannounced?*” she prodded, though she kept any accusations out of her voice.

Bruce rubbed his sore head. “Aside from getting my head nearly caved in?” he quipped.

“I *said* I was sorry,” Lois shot back teasingly.

Bruce shrugged and gestured to the man laid out on the floor. In the light, Lois could see the intruder’s features better. Or, she tried to. The man’s face was a network of scars and tattoos, some clearly old and badly faded, some torn apart by scar tissue – many of which hadn’t healed properly so that the image was distorted. Lois saw one naked lady on his neck that had a breast up by her smiling face. A bunch of them were newer, the ink dark and colorful, standing out against the older ones. All in all, even with the man right before her eyes, Lois couldn’t accurately describe

him at all, other than his scars, tattoos, and the fact that he was almost as gaunt looking as Clark. But, even with him knocked out for the moment, Lois could see the hate and readiness to kill in the man's face.

"Him," Bruce explained. "He's the reason I'm here."

"Who is he? And, dare I ask, *why* is he in my living room?"

Lois asked, her sleepiness giving way to irritation – not at Bruce, but at the man sprawled on the floor at Bruce's feet.

"The Reaver," Bruce spat, making the introduction.

"Never heard of him. Must be one of your Gotham variety bad guys," Lois said, looking down with disgust at the man.

Bruce nodded. "One of worst right now," he confirmed. "He's been around for years but has always slipped away before I could catch him. I got word that he was on his way here to kill you, Clark, and anyone else who might be in the house."

"Word?" Lois asked as her mind worked to process what he was saying.

"A former...associate...of his squealed to Diana. She told me just before she returned to Themyscira to deal with a political dispute," Bruce replied with another casual shrug. "Is anyone else here with you?"

Lois shook her head slowly. "No. Clark's mother is in Kansas. Is she...do you think she's safe?" she asked, alarmed now.

Bruce nodded. "Probably. The hit was specifically for you two. Anyone else would have been a bonus."

"Who hired him?" Lois asked, knowing the Reaver wouldn't have been acting on his own accord. Neither she nor Clark had ever, to the best of her knowledge, done any wrong to the assassin.

"That's what I intend to find out," Bruce told her. He knelt down next to the Reaver's head.

The assassin was just starting to come to. His eyes widened a little when he saw that he'd lost the advantage and that he wasn't, in fact, going to be able to carry out his plans. He ground his teeth and a second later went limp as a white foam frothed out of his mouth.

"Damn it!" Bruce swore, and even Lois recognized that the man had chosen suicide rather than be caught. Still, Bruce checked the assassin's vital signs. Finding none, he shook his head. "I'm not surprised...but I was hoping we might be able to get some information out of him."

"I'll call the police," Lois said with a nod to herself.

"In a bit," Bruce said. "I was hoping to talk to you for a few minutes." He pulled off his cowl and rubbed the place where Lois had nearly brained him. He checked his fingertips for blood. "Thank God Alfred insisted I armor the entire uniform," he mumbled to himself. "Otherwise I'd have a crater in my skull." He looked at Lois, but amusement, rather than anger, was in his eyes. "Nice aim, by the way."

Lois smirked and crossed her arms over her chest. "Thanks."

By then, Clark had apparently forgotten Lois' command to stay in his room and he jostled his awkward way down the steps. Bruce's face grew grim when he saw the vacant expression on Clark's face and the absolute lack of any kind of spark in his eyes. Lois took Clark's hand and helped him to the couch. He seemed not to even notice the dead body on the floor as he walked within inches of the assassin's boots. Bruce followed and they all sat.

"I was going to ask how he was," Bruce said in a contemplative tone. "But I see he hasn't really..." He paused, as if unsure of how to finish that statement.

"There's been no change. Yet," Lois said, some insane spark of hope still lit within her heart that she could cure her best friend.

Bruce sighed and shook his head. "I'm truly sorry, Lois. All those years of looking and he was practically under my nose."

Lois put a hand on his shoulder. "It's not your fault. Of all the places he could have been...none of us ever imagined he'd be in an asylum."

"I should have checked earlier," Bruce protested. Then he

shook his head again. "I heard about the doctor who...did this to him."

"I think he was murdered," Lois said quietly. Then, as the thought came to her, her voice took on even more conviction. "And I'd bet my last dollar his death and the hit on us are connected."

Bruce frowned as he thought it over. "I don't know. If Dr. Fulton *was* murdered, it *wasn't* the Reaver."

Lois looked at him askance. "How can you be so sure?"

Bruce spread his palms on his thighs. "Dr. Fulton's death was too clean. The Reaver is a bit more...well...messy. If he'd succeeded tonight, pieces of you and Clark would have been spread all over the house and halfway to Miami."

Lois grimaced. "Gross," she muttered.

Bruce nodded. "Torture and dismemberment have always been his MO. There's no chance he would have forced a bunch of pills and booze down an old man's throat and left him to a peaceful repose in a bathtub."

"Which begs the questions; who killed Dr. Fulton and hired the Reaver? And why the difference in how the killings were carried out? Who wants to cover up what happened to Clark?"

"I don't know," Bruce admitted with a shake of his head. "But I'll do whatever I can to help you find out."

Lex Luthor was enjoying a comfortable, quiet evening for once. All of the recent negotiations, late-night reading of stacks upon stacks of executive orders, red-eye flights, jet lag, and other presidential duties were, for once, not in the picture and he could relax in the well-earned comfort of the White House library. Out beyond the darkened windows, an angry wind gusted and howled, whipping what would have been a light snow into nearly whiteout conditions. Lex smiled to himself, grateful to be indoors on such a cold, blustery night. He wandered closer to the windows, peering out at the storm. The sky had that familiar, ominous tinge of orange to it as the clouds trapped and reflected back the sheen of streetlights, giving him just enough light by which to see the swirls of snowflakes as they danced past the glass. Of course, some of it struck the windows, pelting it with a continuous stream of tiny *pings!* that told Lex the flakes were just as much ice as they were snow.

He sipped the hot toddy he'd ordered made for himself. With all the traveling and mostly sleepless nights, he was concerned that the slight scratchiness to his throat might develop into a full-blown cold. He couldn't afford for that to happen. He was due to give a State of the Union address in just two days' time. He *needed* his voice. He wasn't about to let his worthless Vice President do the talking for him. That knuckle-dragging, primordial swamp-dwelling Neanderthal would get things all wrong, despite the clearly written out script Lex had painstakingly constructed. Truth be told, there were times when Lex was tempted to have the old man smothered in his sleep.

But Tom Perch was loyal to Lex and just stupid enough to be occasionally useful. He certainly didn't ask any uncomfortable questions and merely agreed to what Lex asked of him. It also hadn't hurt that the former judge had political experience that had netted them both a huge portion of votes from some of the more important demographics. So Lex kept him around and made it appear as though Perch actually had some power. It was the perfect set up.

Lex turned away from the wintery mess outside of the window and strode across the room to sit in the armchair by the fireplace. It was toasty warm here and Lex felt the heat seep deep into his bones, relaxing him further. He thought back on the events of the day, all of them done, thankfully, from the comfort of the Oval Office. He felt not one ounce of guilt over the cuts he'd approved to the Department of Education, nor did he think about the troops he was sending into the Middle East, despite the former

President's efforts to decrease American troops in the slowly stabilizing, former warzone. He was at peace with his decisions, because each and every one of them had been carefully selected and crafted to benefit him in some way.

A sharp chirp broke the contemplative silence of the room. Instinctively, Lex shot a glance at the two Secret Service agents flanking the door into the room. One of them, Rick, if Lex remembered correctly, answered his radio as it chirped again. *Too long*, Lex thought as he frowned into the depths of his drink. Maybe hiring such imbeciles for his security detail *hadn't* been the best move. At the time, it had felt like the strategically smart thing to do – to hire dimwits who were more muscle than brains. Sure, his agents could be trusted to keep him safe, Lex had no reservations about that. And it was also true that the morons never asked questions, even when Lex broke protocol. But sometimes he wondered if hiring agents with an IQ higher than that of a piece of granite wouldn't have been the wiser choice.

Water under the bridge now, Lex thought with a mental sigh. *If they continue to displease me, I can always fire them.*

Rick fumbled for a moment with the radio as it chirped again. A deep, rumbling voice – even over the radio's slight distortion – informed the agents that the Director of the Secret Service was on his way.

"Copy that, Motherbird," Rick replied.

The other man, Antwan, rolled his eyes. "Wrong name," he hissed, irritated. He tapped the button on his earpiece. "Apologies, Rogue. We copy." He let go of the button and inclined his head respectfully toward Lex. "My sincere apologies, Mr. President."

Lex nodded absently, barely even hearing the exchange, too absorbed in his own thoughts to be bothered with the blithering idiots tasked with keeping his esteemed self safe. Normally, he wouldn't tolerate such stupid mistakes and would have fired Rick on the spot. But he was tired and distracted as he went over his State of the Union speech in his mind.

The agents said nothing, only straightening their already stiff, attentive bodies all the more as they awaited their Director. Lex continued to stare moodily into his drink as the minutes ticked by. But less than five minutes after the alert, a knock sounded at the door, pulling Lex from his inner speech rehearsal.

"Who is it?" Lex barked harshly, reflexively. He cleared his throat and mentally winced. After so many years of running LexCorp on his own terms, he sometimes forgot that he needed to restrain himself as President. There were rules and procedures that he – grudgingly – had to abide by. "I mean, can one of you see to the door?" he asked, mustering up as much politeness as he could. He gestured with one hand to Antwan. At least *he* was more seasoned and a bit quicker on the uptake. "Perhaps that might be the Director, hmm?" he muttered in a soft tone that was just barely loud enough to be heard, but as disapproving as a disappointed father chastising a wayward son.

"Jack Frost has arrived," came a different voice over the radio – one that Lex couldn't put a name to. Not that it mattered much. All he had to do was point to an agent and command them. Names were of little importance.

"Forgive me, Director St. John," Antwan murmured with abject humility as he opened the door and began the procedure of verifying the identity of the man out in the hallway. Lex could see nothing as Antwan's body blocked the slight opening. But only for a moment. Then the burly man stepped back and pulled the door open wide.

Nigel stepped inside, dressed in the crisp, pitch-black suit of the Secret Service – a "promotion" given to him on Lex's first day as President, which, of course, had the added benefit of giving Nigel unrestricted access to Lex, no matter where he might be. Nigel inclined his head respectfully at Lex before speaking and Lex raised his glass mug in a silent answer. Then he turned his cold, unflinching, stern gaze at the agents in the room, staring

them down as though they were nothing but misbehaving children. The well-trained agents squirmed under his withering look and Lex held back a grin. Nigel was truly remarkable, Lex reflected, as he watched his old friend turn two well-trained agents who had somehow managed to pass every mental and physical test to claim their positions, into nearly whimpering whelps.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Nigel asked in a deadly tone when several long seconds had passed without so much as a peep from either agent.

"Oh...right," fumbled Rick, his face scarlet in a flush. "Nigel St. John to see you, Mr. President," he announced with such boot-licking formality that Lex cracked a small smile. "Head of the Secret Service," he added pointlessly, as if Lex was stupid enough to forget such an important piece of information.

"Ah, Nigel, do come in," Lex called, feeling his voice strain a little as he spoke loudly enough to be heard.

Nigel gave his underlings a fleeting glance over his shoulder and a dismissive sweep of his hand. "Leave us," he ordered them.

The two men hesitated for only a fraction of a second before Lex repeated the order with a dangerous, impatient growl, adding in "You're dismissed," for good measure. Then they both stiffly nodded and filed out of the room. They knew better than to question their President. Lex had made it abundantly clear to all of them that Nigel was one member of their ranks that he preferred to speak with alone. Those who'd questioned it early on had found themselves promptly fired.

"Sir," Nigel greeted, inclining his head slightly in deference.

"What is it?" Lex asked, not wanting to beat around the bush. His throat was hurting more, not less, even with the hot toddy.

"The attempt on Clark Kent failed," Nigel replied evenly, remaining ever stoic, after turning off and removing his earpiece.

Lex found his anger bubbling inside. "How?" he demanded in a deadly cold voice.

"The Reaver got caught," Nigel said with a shrug. "Even the best assassins eventually fail, I suppose."

Lex shook his head. "No," he answered defiantly. "Not ones as seasoned as the Reaver."

"Well, seasoned or not, from what I've been told, the Batman knew of the plot against Clark Kent. He stopped the assassination from being carried out, and the Reaver chose cyanide over exposing his employer." Nigel was calm, cool, collected, and Lex found himself irritated over his friend's seemingly cavalier attitude.

"So, the Bat is protecting the Kryptonian nuisance, is he?" Lex growled.

"Apparently."

Lex could have reached out and slapped the dispassionate look off Nigel's face. "Why?"

Nigel shrugged again. "I don't know," he said, brushing off the question. "My focus since you were sworn into office has been in keeping you safe. It's not like the old days, when I had my eyes and ears on...shall we say, more frivolous matters than keeping the President alive."

Sometimes, it annoyed Lex how casually Nigel spoke to him. But, mostly, Lex encouraged his old friend to speak plainly to him. Sometimes, the bluntness and honesty was like a breath of fresh air that helped Lex remain focused and clear-headed.

Lex turned this new information over in his mind. "He must know that Kent is more than what he appears to be. Or, should I say, he *used to be*." He chuckled a little to himself as a small, malevolent smile touched his lips but not his eyes. "From what I've gathered about his condition, his mind is nothing more than a blank slate, more fried and burned up than a charcoal briquette. He'll never be Clark and he'll never be Superman ever again. He's a ghost with no past and certainly no future."

He rubbed his chin in thought. "We'll have to find someone better suited to the task of wiping that alien intruder off the face of

this planet,” he decided. “But not yet. We’ll have to let things die down a little. Lois Lane may be a stupid woman when it comes to her personal life,” he said bitterly, still rankled by being jilted at the altar, “but she, unfortunately, has strong reporter’s instincts. She’ll try to connect the attempt on Kent to Dr. Fulton’s demise.”

“Her guard will be up,” Nigel agreed.

Lex nodded. “She’ll be expecting another attack, and soon. We have to wait until she thinks it’s safe again, that the attempt was just a random, isolated incident.”

“It may be a long time in coming,” Nigel informed him. “The Batman isn’t the only one watching out for Kent, from what my spies have gathered.”

Lex scowled. “How many others?”

“Too many,” Nigel said simply.

Lex growled like a wounded beast. Then he took a deep breath and forced himself to relax. He could be patient if he had to be.

“Tell your spies to keep their eyes and ears open. The moment we get an opportunity to do so, we’ll strike and finish what I should have done a long time ago...erasing that miserable alien freak from the world and the world’s memory.”

“Your word is my command. But I have to wonder...is that really wise?” Nigel’s eyebrow arched before the question was even complete.

Lex took another sip of his drink before answering. “Nigel, my old friend, I have no choice.” He spread his hands out as though helpless in his situation. “I’m a politician now. I *must* make good on my promises. And I *did* promise Kent that he would be wiped out of memory.”

By the time Valentine’s Day rolled around, Clark had made no further progress in regaining his lost self. But he looked nearly the same as the day he’d gone missing, thanks to the diligent efforts of Lois and Martha to keep him well-fed. They gave him whatever they could think of that had been old favorites of his, and in great supply. Lois constantly joked that the tristate area was in serious danger of facing The Great Twinkie Drought by the way she and Martha snapped up boxes of the sugary treats each time they went food shopping.

Lois talked to Clark constantly when she was home – and Jimmy was good enough to allow her to work from home as much as possible so she could be with Clark. She recounted story after story to him, and Martha did the same when Lois couldn’t. The one thing neither woman spoke about was Superman. They wanted Clark to remember who he was, not the hero he’d created. If and when Clark’s powers and memory returned, they would gently ease him into the idea that Superman had once been his creation. But, as it stood, Clark was no closer to being “super” than he had on the day he’d been rescued from the bowels of the Arkham Asylum.

She found herself doubting, from time to time, that Clark would *ever* recover from his ordeal.

Still, Dr. Klein was enthusiastic and encouraged by how well Clark was doing in terms of putting on weight and overall getting healthier, so Lois had to be grateful for that much at least. But as much as she appreciated how much better Clark was looking, it was somehow an even more painful reminder of all that had been lost to them both. During the weeks and months of Clark resembling a walking skeleton, his body condition had been a visual reminder of his mistreatment and of the fact that he wasn’t really himself. Now he looked like his old self in his physical appearance, and it made Lois long all the harder for his mind to return. Now, it was easy to look at him and forget, for an instant, that, while his body was nearly whole, his mind was still missing.

“I wonder if Dr. Klein will think you’re ready for surgery yet,” Lois chattered away to Clark as they sat at the dinner table together. She took his hand in hers and rubbed her thumb over his inflamed and gnarled knuckles. “I wonder if he can even fix how

much damage was done to you,” she mused sadly.

Clark stared ahead mutely.

Lois sighed. “I wish you could tell me what happened to you. I’d make sure that whoever hurt you would never see life outside of prison walls ever again.” She fell silent a moment as she studied his misshapen fingers. “But maybe it’s a blessing that you don’t remember,” she said finally. “After all, who *wants* to remember such trauma?”

Clark looked up at the clock as it struck seven pm, drawn by the sound rather than any curiosity or understanding of the time. It drew Lois’ attention too and she blinked in surprise over how long she and Clark had been sitting there.

“Let’s get cleaned up here,” she said, nodding at their mostly empty plates. “Your mother will be home from that play any time now.” She smiled a little. “I’m glad I could convince her to go. I know she’s been wanting to see it, and she needs a little break to get out and enjoy herself.”

She would never admit it out loud, but caring for Clark had been a full-time job ever since he’d been found alive and been released into her care. It wasn’t a burden – Lois would gladly see to his needs until her dying day – but it could sometimes be overwhelming. It was good for both Martha and herself to get out to do things they enjoyed once in a while, so they could relax and recharge a little bit.

Clark obediently stood and started to help her to clear the table. They were nearly done packing the leftovers when Clark reached out to the lit candle in the center of the table. Lois was preoccupied with putting the mashed potatoes in a Tupperware container and didn’t notice what he was doing at first, until his fingertips were in the flame in a slow attempt to pinch the wick to extinguish the blaze.

“Clark! No!” Lois commanded fearfully as she launched herself at him.

The Tupperware teetered near the edge of the table and fell with a heavy splat on the floor, fluffy white lumps of goo splattering everywhere. She didn’t care as she yanked his hand away from the candle and inspected it, expecting to find a mild to moderate burn on his fingers. But as she carefully manipulated his hand this way and that, she could find no damage.

“Clark?” she asked, barely containing her excitement. “You’re not hurt! Do you know what this means?”

She let his hands go and, instead, cupped his cheeks so that he was forced to look into her eyes. She searched those familiar brown orbs but found no trace of understanding. Some of her excitement died then, crumbling away into dust. But not all of it. The majority of her excitement stayed and made a bubble of laughter come bouncing out of her mouth. She kissed Clark’s freshly shaved cheek. Once, a long time ago, she would have seen a goofy, elated grin spread slowly over her best friend’s face from such a gesture. But not now. Now Clark simply stared ahead without reacting.

“Dr. Klein can’t *possibly* refuse the surgery now,” Lois explained, letting Clark’s face go and taking him by the hand. “Come on. He’s usually still in his office now. I’ll call him from the car and make sure he’ll be there to see you.”

“Well?” Lois asked, impatiently tapping her foot as Dr. Klein hummed to himself as he checked and rechecked what seemed like every square inch of Clark’s exposed flesh. When he didn’t immediately answer, she tried again. “What do you think?”

Dr. Klein didn’t even so much as throw a fleeting glance over his shoulder at where she and Martha sat, just across the room. “I think you’re distracting me,” he said, his voice backing up his claim of disturbance.

Lois rolled her eyes so hard her mother would have told her that she was in danger of having her eyes freeze that way. “Is he ready for the surgery?” she practically demanded.

At last, Dr. Klein looked up and patted Clark's shoulder gently, to which Clark made no indication he'd noticed. He turned and faced Lois. "He's in excellent physical health, thanks to the both of you. His healing aura seems to be returning. I think we can move ahead. I'll schedule it for next week. His hands first. We'll tackle his feet another time. I don't want to do too much at one time. As it is, doing both hands in one surgery might be pushing it. But I believe he can tolerate it."

"Next week?" Lois could hear the disappointment in Martha's voice.

Dr. Klein shrugged helplessly. "I have a conference coming up that I can't get out of. Next week is literally the earliest I can do the surgery. Plus, I need time to pull together a discreet team that won't question things like his quick discharge from the hospital once everything is over and done with."

"How quickly are we talking?" Lois ventured to ask.

"Probably a day or two. If his aura truly comes back in full, I won't be able to keep IV lines in his body and questions will start to circulate."

"And the surgery itself?" Lois asked. "If his aura..."

Dr. Klein gently interrupted her. "S.T.A.R. Labs has a small collection of Kryptonite samples. I'll find an excuse to go into the vault, take a tiny piece that won't be missed, believe me, and let it weaken Clark's body long enough for me to make the incisions I need, break and reset any bones that need it, and to make sure that the anesthesia keeps him completely knocked out. Once I'm done, I'll return the sample to the vault, and no one will be the wiser. I'll repeat the process once we're ready to correct the malunions in his toes and ankles." As he spoke, his hands flew in all directions, as though he were illustrating his points with objects only he could see.

Lois cast a worried glance at Martha, who returned the look. Martha subtly cleared her throat.

"Is he strong enough to survive exposure to that?" Martha asked, voicing Lois' exact question.

Dr. Klein's serious expression softened as he nodded and gave them a small, but reassuring, smile. "Thanks to the both of you, and plenty of exposure to sunlight, yes. Aside from his malunions and ongoing mental state, he's as healthy as he can get."

Lois shrugged as Martha looked to her once more. "If Dr. Klein says Clark can handle it, then...there's no one else's word I would trust. I think we should do it."

Martha nodded, then she turned her gaze to Dr. Klein, her eyes pleading with him. "Please fix my son so that he can live pain-free."

"I promise," he quietly swore.

Lois and Martha paced the waiting room at Metropolis General, waiting for word of Clark's condition. He'd already been in surgery for eight – no, nine hours, Lois corrected herself as she pulled out her phone and checked the time for the millionth time that day. Nine hours and still no word had filtered down to them. She *had* to assume that was a *good* thing. Surely, if something had gone amiss, Dr. Klein would have told them. Still, nine hours of being knocked out, his bones broken and realigned, his tendons and ligaments repaired, and, scariest of all, Kryptonite exposure had Lois' nerves teetering on the edge. She could only imagine what kinds of thoughts were running through Clark's mother's head. The poor woman looked absolutely distraught, and Lois couldn't blame her one bit.

She turned to Martha and touched her shoulder. Martha jumped slightly at the sudden contact, but then she gave Lois the barest ghost of a smile. Lois nodded her head in the direction of the door.

"Our pacing isn't helping anything," Lois acknowledged. "In fact, I think we may be freaking out the family over there, waiting to hear about their son's transplant. Let's get out of here for a little

while...get some coffee and something to eat."

"But what if..." Martha began.

"Dr. Klein has my cell number," Lois reminded her. "If he needs us, he'll call."

Reluctantly, Martha surrendered with a sigh as she let her head hang down so that her chin rested against her chest. "Okay," she agreed.

Lois linked her arm with Martha's, offering her support as they left the waiting area. Together, they made their way back down to the cafeteria. They'd been there seven hours ago to grab a quick brunch and some coffee, as Clark's surgery had only just barely gotten underway. Lois yawned as they stepped into the noisy cafeteria. It hadn't been that way earlier. Then, they had avoided the breakfast and lunch crowds, and only a few people had sat alone or in small groups, silently eating or talking in hushed voices. Now, with dinner time approaching, the room was nearly full and the noise level was at a dull roar as people competed with their neighbors in order to be heard.

They wasted no time in debating their meal choices, choosing a couple of tasteless burgers, bland and somewhat mushy fries, hard-as-rocks chocolate chip cookies, and soft drinks that, surprisingly, weren't flat. The two ate mostly in silence, venturing to speak only when it was absolutely necessary. Lois tried to get Martha to talk a little, but even *her* gift of gab couldn't shake Martha's worry and inner reflection as she waited for news of her son. Eventually, Lois gave up trying and slipped into her own internal monologue of doubts and fears.

After they swallowed down as much food as they could stomach, they mutely cleaned their table, disposed of their trash, and refilled their drinks to take with them to the waiting room. Lois pointed out the restroom on the way back, and both women stopped to use the facilities and wash up. All in all, they were gone for less than forty-five minutes. And still, when they checked with the nurse in the waiting room – who was giving the family of the transplant recipient good news when they walked in – there was still no word on Clark's surgery being over. Lois reclaimed the chair she'd been sitting in all day while Martha rifled through the stash of magazines on the table in the corner of the room. She yawned again as her eyelids grew heavy. She'd barely slept the night before – and she suspected that Martha hadn't gotten so much as a single wink. The lack of sleep, followed by a four AM trek to Met Gen for a five-thirty check-in time on Clark's surgery had left Lois feeling like every last nerve had been rubbed raw, as well as utterly exhausted. Her eyes fluttered shut of their own accord and she dozed for a while.

She awoke to Dr. Klein gently shaking her shoulder. Martha appeared to be just rousing from a cat nap as well. Lois blinked rapidly to dispel the lingering sleepiness in her eyes and stifled a yawn. For a split second, she was disoriented, but then it all came crashing back to her. Clark's surgery.

"He's fine," Dr. Klein said, answering their unvoiced question. "He tolerated the surgery better than I'd anticipated. He's heading to recovery now."

"Can we see him?" Martha immediately asked.

"Soon. Give us a little more time to get him all set. He still hasn't woken up from his sedation, but it shouldn't be too much longer now. We'll keep him as comfortable as we can with painkillers, but," Dr. Klein shrugged, "it's only a matter of time before his natural metabolic rate starts burning it off faster than we can give it to him."

Lois glanced around as Dr. Klein said the words, but they were alone in the waiting area now. The world beyond the windows in the room was dark and overcast. Lois had a hunch that it would snow again before the night was through.

"How bad was the damage?" Lois ventured, emboldened by the fact that no one else was there to eavesdrop.

Dr. Klein sighed and shook his head as an apologetic look

wrinkled his features. “Bad. The muscles and tendons were... well...they weren’t the *worst* I’ve seen but...close enough. His bones though.” Once again, he shook his head sadly. “I don’t know how many times his bones were broken, but I do know this: it was done a lot. I’m not talking five or six times. I’m talking about probably dozens of times. Whatever happened to him, this isn’t a case of someone being clumsy and falling and hurting himself. This...this *had* to have been deliberate.” He pulled the surgical cap off his head, mopped his brow with a handkerchief, and fiddled with the cap in his hands. “I know we talked a little bit about how bad things looked from the x-rays we took, but...I wasn’t prepared for the amount of damage I saw.”

Lois bit back a cry of horror, but Martha allowed hers to escape. A wail of sorrow and pain ripped from Clark’s mother’s throat and Lois instinctively wrapped the older woman in a hug.

“It’s okay,” Lois whispered to her. “Clark’s okay. He was hurt, yes, but he’s going to get better now.”

But in her heart, Lois was ready to go to war with whoever had done this to Clark.

Two and a half days passed before Dr. Klein informed Lois and Martha that it was time to “check Clark out of the hospital against medical advice.” His newly reclaimed aura had returned in full and it was growing next to impossible to keep that information under wraps. He could no longer keep an IV line in, nor could Dr. Klein continue to hide how much healing had been taking place. After all, he’d deliberately chosen a corner room for Clark, with two whole walls of windows to let in as much of the still-weak winter sunlight in as possible.

Lois was only too happy to oblige Dr. Klein, though she could tell Martha was torn between wanting Clark and his secret safe at home and wanting him under the watchful eyes of medical professionals. For his part, Clark appeared to have no opinion on the matter. He was distant and mute, as always, though from time to time he would moan in discomfort as his body burned off the painkillers and his natural healing process knit his bones, muscles, and tendons back together. That broke Lois’ heart as she sat vigil by his bedside each day. Clark had already endured so much, and now they were asking him – no, *requiring* him – to undergo more pain, even as necessary as it was. But as it grew closer to the time to check him out of the hospital, his moaning grew more infrequent. Dr. Klein did one final, “unofficial” x-ray before they left, and to no one’s surprise, the breaks and fractures Dr. Klein had been forced to make before realigning Clark’s bones in the correct manner had all but fully mended themselves. He gave Martha the x-rays to take with her and deleted all evidence of the scans just to be safe.

“Come see me in another six weeks,” he told them before they left. “I’ll do an ‘official’ check then and we’ll get a fresh set of x-rays to prove that he’s healed. It’ll give us a paper trail, just in case of anything. We can discuss his feet and ankles then too, and repeat the process we just went through.” He slipped a business card out of his lab coat pocket. “In the meantime, here’s the number for a physical therapist I know. She’ll work with Clark to make sure he relearns how to properly use his hands again.” He looked over to Clark, who was staring blankly out the window, perhaps at the blimp that was flying over the harbor. “Call her tonight and she’ll set everything up. She can probably do at-home visits if you explain how difficult it is for Clark to get out and about.”

Martha took the card and then hugged Dr. Klein. “Thank you for all you’ve done for him so far,” she said, and Lois heard the hitch in her voice as she struggled to keep her tears at bay.

Dr. Klein smiled. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do to help your son. I just wish I could do *more*.”

The weeks passed quickly and life moved on. A string of high-

profile investigations kept Lois busy and Martha spent her days tending to Clark. But Clark grew stronger every day. With the help of Rashida, the physical therapist Dr. Klein had recommended, Clark was soon able to use his hands, wrists, and fingers in the way they’d been designed to work. Lois noted with satisfaction that he no longer needed quite as much help as he’d once relied on to do simple tasks like brushing his hair in the mornings, brushing his teeth, and manipulating utensils to eat with. In fact, being able to feed himself with far less effort than he’d needed to exert before only served to boost his appetite again, and for a few weeks, it was all Lois could do to keep the house stocked with enough snacks to sate Clark’s voracious Kryptonian metabolism.

Still, Lois and Martha had to be careful during Clark’s “recovery” period. If there was a chance of Clark being seen by anyone, they had to carefully wrap his hands the way Dr. Klein had taught them. And Clark did, indeed, need to have his hands bandaged on a few occasions – all of which he slightly protested with squirms of discomfort and the odd sound of displeasure. But it couldn’t be helped. Lois had run out of excuses to keep Perry and Jimmy away. Three weeks after Clark’s surgery, Perry happened to be in town and Lois couldn’t refuse his request to come visit Clark.

Their former editor was overjoyed to see Clark at first, but as the day wore on, it became more and more obvious that their sometimes gruff, but ever loving, old boss was at a loss as to what to say and how to act around Clark. Still, Lois had to commend Perry for the effort he put in to trying to talk to Clark, reminiscing about the approximate year that Clark had been a part of the Daily Planet’s staff. He told Clark stories about things that had happened in the intervening years too – how Mr. Stern had stepped in to buy the paper after the bombing, how much effort had been put into trying to find Clark, how Lois had been responsible – along with no small amount of help from Jimmy – in crumbling the empire that the Church family had built through the use of Intergang, even if Intergang still popped up once in a while to cause headaches for Metropolis. Through it all, Clark was silent and unmoving, and it was impossible to tell whether or not he’d actually heard and processed any of what was said.

After a while, Lois found that Perry was speaking more and more to both Martha and herself, and it hurt to think of Clark as being excluded from the conversation, even though she knew Perry didn’t mean for it to look like that. Still, in the end, she felt like Perry cut his trip short, citing a need to bring Alice to the opera. Lois glanced at her watch discreetly as the Chief said it – most operas in the city didn’t start for another two to three hours. Still, before he left, Lois noticed that Perry pulled Martha aside to speak briefly in whispered tones that Lois couldn’t hear. She did, however, notice the knowing way he nodded his head and the tender smile that crossed Martha’s lips.

He knows, her gut instinct told her.

After she’d first discovered Clark’s secret, she’d tried to remember everything Clark had said and done, and that often included the conversations he’d had with herself, Jimmy, and Perry. Clark might have been oblivious – deliberately or feigned – but Perry had seemed to drop the occasional hint that he’d known about Clark’s dual life. A part of her was tempted to ask Martha what Perry had said, but she bit back her curiosity. Clearly, he hadn’t wanted her to know, and besides, did it really even matter?

Jimmy visited the day after Perry, and that went, thankfully, a little smoother, though Lois could see how deeply Clark’s condition hurt their friend’s gentle heart. She could see the way the younger man kept swallowing around the lump in his throat and the way his eyes glistened with tears that he refused to shed. Still, for all of that, Jimmy retained the façade of a jovial attitude. Perhaps some of it was even real – no one could joke around the way Jimmy did and feign *all* of his positive tone of voice. Lois found that she was glad of Jimmy’s company and wished she’d

allowed him to see Clark sooner than she had. Sure, she'd wanted to protect Clark and Jimmy both from being hurt, but maybe it was good for Clark to be around the people who'd once been closest to him, even if he couldn't remember it.

She found herself laughing along with Jimmy that day; real, deep, hearty laughs like she hadn't enjoyed in a while. Not even her sister, brother-in-law, and nieces had brought tears of laughter to her eyes and she found herself repeatedly thanking Jimmy for lightening her world within the confines of her heart all day long. She only wished Clark could partake in the joyful atmosphere, but as usual, whatever might or might not have been going on in his mind stayed locked away behind his vacant gaze.

By the time summer broke, Clark's hands and feet were completely back to normal. He no longer needed Rashida to guide him in relearning how to walk properly or how to hold a spoon. He could deftly handle even the most complicated tasks; things that had been almost impossible for him before, like tying his shoes and buttoning his shirts. Life became a little more relaxed, in subtle ways. Martha stopped following up on Rashida's instructions, which had forced Clark to work for hours a day at strengthening his muscles and retraining his brain to do things the correct way. Lois worried less when she was away from Clark. Instead, she could focus easier on her investigations at work and Clark's imprisonment at the asylum.

So far, she didn't have much to go on. It became clear that Dr. Fulton had been receiving somewhat regular cash bribes – but who was paying him was impossible to uncover. Nor could she prove that he was being paid off to keep or harm Clark, rather than one of the other patients. And nothing could be found about who'd ordered the Reaver to try and assassinate them. Anyone even remotely connected to the Reaver began to pop up dead – most from “suicide.”

Things were almost back to normal.

They *would* have been, if not for the continued absence of Clark's memory and inability to speak or show that he could comprehend the world around him. And, of course, the occasional visit from Bruce or Diana – Lois' main contacts in the superhero world – letting her know if they'd deflected another attack or if all had been quiet. It was mostly quiet, but two other attempts had been diverted – one man had been certifiably insane and claimed that the devil was in Clark and that's why he needed to kill him, and the other had chosen suicide before Bruce had been able to catch him.

Yes, things were *almost* normal.

“Lois,” Martha said one evening as they sat out in Lois' diminutive back yard, sipping the freshly squeezed lemonade she'd made that afternoon.

“Hmm?” Lois responded, watching Clark, his neck craned upwards to catch the last few rays of the setting sun on his face.

“I think it's time I went home to Kansas.”

“What?” Lois asked, taken off guard. She'd become too used to having Martha around.

“At least for a little while,” Martha amended. “The planting season has already come and gone. Pretty soon the crops will begin to grow. I trust my hired hands to run the farm for me, but...” Her voice trailed off as she sighed. “Even if I'm only there long enough to put the farm on the market, I need to go back,” she said, her voice gone soft and sad.

“Sell?” Lois gasped. She could no more picture Martha selling the farm than she could picture herself leaving Metropolis for good.

“I'm getting too old to run the place on my own,” Martha said, shrugging. “And...I need to be with Clark. Until he...finds his way back to us, if that ever happens...I should be around. And I can't...as much as I might want to bring him home to Kansas...I can't do that to him. Kansas hasn't been his home since he first set

his sights on Metropolis and the Daily Planet.” She turned her head slightly to better see Lois. “And, truth be told, once he met you, I knew nowhere else would *ever* be his home. As much as I want to believe that, since I'm his mother, I'm Clark's best chance at recovering fully...I'm not. *You* are. *You're* the key, Lois.”

Lois blushed in embarrassment. “I'm not sure that's true,” she admitted sheepishly. “I haven't done a very good job so far. He's still...locked away from us.” She gestured feebly toward Clark. She fell silent for half a minute, then sighed deeply. “Six months. He came home almost six months ago. And we're still no closer to getting him back.”

“At least he's more comfortable now,” Martha commented quietly. “His feet...his hands...you were right to trust Dr. Klein.” She paused for a moment as her cheeks colored slightly in a blush. “I'll admit, it scared me at first, knowing that some stranger...to me at least...was going to be let in on Clark's...uniqueness,” she said, lowering her voice out of mindfulness that they were outside and that there was the potential to be overheard.

“I don't blame you,” Lois replied, reaching over and taking Martha's hand. “I was a little scared too. But I knew Clark trusted Dr. Klein.” She looked to Clark, but his eyes were closed and his breathing was deep and even, his whole body relaxed as he slept. She thought for a minute as she watched the peaceful way his chest rose and fell with each breath.

“I think we should come with you,” she said at last, earning a surprised look from Martha. “I can talk to Jimmy about taking some time off. I know I've taken a lot since Clark was found, especially in the very beginning. But he's been understanding of our situation and wants to see Clark get as well as possible. I think Clark needs to go home for a visit. Maybe being back on the farm will...I don't know. Jog his memory a little? Bring back that spark into his eyes? Maybe...maybe it's a long shot,” she admitted after a moment's hesitation. “But now that he's strong and healthy and won't attract as much attention with the way he was walking and everything...I think he needs some time in his childhood home.”

Martha looked only too eager to have her boy back home again and she covered Lois' hand with her free one, trapping Lois' hand gently between hers. She nodded as a grin began to creep across her face. “I'd like that.”

Lois returned the smile and she nodded in Clark's direction. “I think he will too. I'll go call Jimmy now, then we can check out flights.”

“Clark?” Lois asked, peering cautiously into his face as she guided him into the weather-beaten old farmhouse where he'd spent the whole of his childhood. She bit her tongue against asking if the place was familiar to him. After all, he'd only *just* stepped foot inside the living room. “I know it's been a long time,” she offered instead, “but this is the house you grew up in.”

Clark didn't so much as flinch or flick his eyes around the room.

“This is your parents' house. You lived your whole life here, from the time you entered their lives as a founding infant, until the time you left to go to college, then to travel the world before settling down in Metropolis,” she explained, gesturing at the pictures on the walls as she spoke, which featured Clark at various ages.

The first one showed Jonathan and Martha, beaming with pride, on the day Clark had officially become their son. Another showed him as a giggling five or six-month-old. Another showed him as an eighteen-month-old, mid-shriek of laughter as he ran through the living room with his pants on his head. Another showed him at age five, posing proudly with the first fish he'd ever caught. In yet another, he was practically glowing as he held a third-place ribbon from the science fair. Then there was his eighth-grade graduation, his high school prom photo, his high school, and college graduations, and the headshot the Daily Planet

had used for his byline.

A lump caught in Lois' throat seeing that last one as it hit her, once again, how much she missed working alongside him at the paper. She wished she could hear him editing her copy just once more, or be subjected to some of his gentle, good-natured teasing, or be treated to his hearty laughter, or even just be on the receiving end of one of those devastating smiles she'd once tried so hard not to be affected by. She swallowed hard, trying to remove the lump before she spoke again.

"You used to talk about this place all the time," she told Clark, taking both of his hands in hers as she led him deeper into the house. "You made it sound like it was Heaven itself. I used to think you were absolutely crazy. I mean, it was so...country." She chuckled. "But then we came out here to investigate Bureau 39 and I got to see, first-hand, how amazing it really is here. Oh, that's not to say I was ready to pack up and leave Metropolis for good, but...I could see why it appealed to you so much. The slower pace. The friendly, small-town feel. The freedom of the wide-open farmlands. It just...matched your nature so well," she continued as she guided him to the stairs.

One by one, they ascended each step to the second floor, where Lois took Clark to his old bedroom. She took him to the window and let him look out, though she doubted how much he was really seeing.

"See that?" she asked, standing pressed against his side. She pointed down to a lone tree in the yard. "Your old tree house is right there. It had been your father's when he was a boy and then it became yours when you were old enough. Your mother said that you used to spend a lot of time in it."

She failed to mention how it had been his "Fortress of Solitude" – a refuge from the world when his abilities had begun to manifest and continuously terrify him with all the new and progressively more powerful things he could do. Clark didn't need that reminder right now, nor had his powers shown up again, outside of his invulnerability and accelerated healing. She often wondered why that was, but neither she, nor Martha, nor Dr. Klein could explain it, other than that he might be so far gone with the trauma he'd sustained to his brain that he was incapable of touching his abilities. For now, Lois was thankful. There was no telling what kind of damage Clark might cause if he could suddenly shoot fire from his eyes and ice from his breath without understanding what he was doing or how to shut the ability off. And she shuddered to think of what state her house would be in if Clark was able to grasp things tightly enough to crush them with his immense strength. For the time being, perhaps because of his injuries and altered state of mind, his touch was as delicate as a butterfly's, which continuously surprised Lois. She'd expected him to be a lot clumsier and more prone to accidental destruction.

"This was your bed," she said, turning his body enough so that he could see it.

She gave him a gentle touch of encouragement and he shuffled across the room to sit down. Lois sat next to him and a flood of memories washed over her. She'd slept in his bed during that first investigation in Smallville, when they'd uncovered Trask's *real* reason for digging around in Wayne Irig's fields. She'd slept there when she'd flown, terrified and heartsick, to visit Martha and Jonathan when Clark had gone missing and she'd discovered his Superman suits in his old apartment. She'd slept there on other, even more somber visits, as she tried to give his parents comfort as the years slipped by with no further sign of where Clark was.

Her chest heaved with a concealed, but heavy, sigh as she remembered those trips. She'd been so happy on that first visit to Smallville. Hungry for the story and annoyed with Clark for dismissing what Bureau 39 was up to at first, but happy. She'd lost herself and her heart to the small town, the charmingly country CornFest, and the irresistible good nature of her coworker. For the first time, Lois had really *seen* Clark while they were there. She'd

admired how relaxed and easy-going he was. She'd seen how friendly and open he was. In short, she'd been forced to see him as a *person*, rather than just competition at work. They'd started that trip as partners mandated to work together – happily on Clark's part and grudgingly on hers – and ended it friends. She still could scarcely believe how much had changed between them over the span of just a few days during that investigation, and she was still silently thankful for the way Kansas had made her see Clark in a new light.

"It's too late to go into town today," she commented, more to herself than to Clark at first. "Maybe in a day or two we can go into Smallville. Maybe seeing your old neighborhood will shake something up there loose," she said, tenderly brushing a lock of his striking black hair away from his forehead.

Clark closed his eyes against the now familiar feel of her hands on his body. It almost felt natural, the way he responded to her touch now. Lois remembered well how Clark had always seemed to crave her touch – the way he'd always been quick to offer his hand or his arm, the way he'd always appeared to melt a little when she initiated contact with him. She let her hand linger longer than she otherwise would have, enjoying the contact with him as much as he was enjoying it. She truly wished she had the power to heal him through her touch alone. Feeling brazen, she leaned over and gave him a chaste kiss on his forehead, before pulling away and smiling at him.

"I wish I knew what to do for you," she quietly told him for what felt like the billionth time since he'd been found. "I'd give up my own memories if it meant I could restore yours. I've even talked to my father to see if he has any crackpot theories about how to help you, or even one of his insane gizmos that never seem to work the way he intends. But..." She shrugged helplessly, then put her arm around Clark's shoulders. "I'm sorry, Clark. But, I promise, no matter what happens, I'll be here for you."

They sat in silence for a short while, then Lois took him out into the fields until the sun had set and the sky above began to turn the purple-black of twilight. Martha stayed with them for a time, pointing out to the still-oblivious Clark the different crops that were growing and letting him taste some of the strawberries and blackberries that had already ripened in the heat, before returning to the house to prepare a meal of porkchops, mashed potatoes, corn on the cob, and buttermilk biscuits. After dinner, Lois took Clark back outside. So far away from the city lights she was used to, the sky above seemed profoundly dark and full of more stars than were imaginable. She'd found an old astronomy book in his bedroom, so she quickly downloaded an application on her phone that would allow her to pinpoint which star was which. Armed with her phone and a thick picnic blanket Martha had found in the barn, she brought Clark out to the front yard where she laid out the blanket and stretched out on it alongside Clark. With the help of phone app, she did her best to point out the various celestial objects – constellations and planets, the band of the Milky Way, even the space station as it orbited by.

Martha had once told Lois how Clark had often sought solace in that space between the Earth and the rest of the universe when he wanted to be alone and think, and Lois wondered if some part of him would remember that and feel connected to the stars. She wondered if any part of him recognized that he'd been born out there, somewhere out beyond the reaches of their own solar system, on a distant, doomed world. She wondered if he would remember how lonely that refuge beyond the Earth's nourishing atmosphere was and how it had made him search for answers about his origins and his place in the world.

You never belonged out there amongst the stars, she thought to herself as she gazed at Clark. *You were always meant for this world. You were always meant to find your way into my life. I just wish I'd realized it sooner. I could have cured your loneliness. I could have protected you from whatever tragedy brought you to*

your imprisonment in Arkham Asylum. But I'm here now. And I'll never make the mistake of dismissing you again.

Nine days.

That was all Lois could spare away from Metropolis. That was all Jimmy could give her, what with the big Carson trial beginning. Lois had been the one to connect all the brutally murdered prostitutes to the unassuming high school shop teacher and it was only fitting that she should be the one to be there covering the trial and sentencing of the serial killer.

Nine days.

Nine days to give Clark the chance to take in as much of his childhood home as possible.

She talked to Martha about the possibility of Clark staying behind for a while – at least until the trial was over. But Clark seemed to become more and more agitated as the days wore on, and both wondered if it might not be better for him to return to Metropolis, back to Lois' house where he knew he was safe, and was, therefore, calm and not displaying stress signals.

Martha was the one to broach the subject, on the morning of their seventh day on the farm. She'd whipped up her usual extravagant – by Lois' standards – breakfast of fluffy scrambled eggs, thick-sliced ham, sausage, pancakes with maple syrup, toast, fruit, cereal, coffee, and orange juice. Lois was thankful and ate with a hearty appetite, outmatched only by Clark.

"I think Clark should go home with you," Martha said without any preamble.

"Are you sure?" Lois asked, stopping her egg-laden fork in midair and looking at Clark's mother in surprise. "You don't think it's better for him to be here, with you?"

Martha shook her head and discreetly shot a glance at Clark. Lois followed her gaze. "He's not himself here. Or...his 'new' self," she reflexively corrected herself. She nodded at the way Clark was fidgeting with his fork, despite the fact that he'd made serious headway on his second helping of the eggs. "He never acted like this in Metropolis. As much as I hate to admit it, I think he's uncomfortable here."

"This is his home," Lois pointed out, stabbing the air vaguely with her fork.

But Martha shook her head. "It isn't. Not anymore. He doesn't remember it. Ever since your friend, Batman, found him in the asylum, he's been in your house. Maybe he can't express it, but he's comfortable there. He associates it with safety and healing."

"He's safe here too," Lois argued. "And so far, there haven't been any assassins sent to *this* address," she added with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

Martha cracked a smile and chuckled a little at Lois' joke. "Maybe," she allowed. "But Clark needs to be where he knows he's safe. Besides, if anything were to happen, I'd feel better having Dr. Klein close at hand."

Lois hadn't thought of that. After all, aside from Clark's mind, he had fully recovered from his surgeries and his near-starvation while he was locked in his tiny, depressing cell. His body still bore scars, but overall, he was healthy. But Martha's point was a good one. If anything new developed, it would be better for Clark to be a mere car ride away from S.T.A.R. Labs and Dr. Klein.

"I guess you're right," Lois finally admitted. "Are you *sure* you can't come back with us?"

Martha frowned and shook her head. "There's too much to be done around here. If this truly is my last growing season on the farm, I need to make the most of it."

"If money is your worry..." Lois began.

"A bit, yeah. Oh, Jonathan and I saved, it's true. But with refinancing the house not long before he passed, coupled with some of the loans we were forced to take during some of the bad years...I'm a bit nervous about having enough to live on once I sell. Metropolis is a far cry from Kansas, expense-wise," Martha

confessed.

"You don't have to worry," Lois assured her. "I'd do whatever I can to help you."

Clark's mother shook her head again. "That's kind of you, honey, but you shouldn't have to."

"I *want* to," Lois insisted.

"Even so, I'm committed to the growing season now," Martha argued gently.

Unsure of what else she could say to Martha, Lois focused on Clark. He was nibbling absently on a piece of toast heavily smeared with a generous amount of homemade blackberry jam. A warm shaft of sunlight bathed him from behind in a kind of almost ethereal manner, making him look angelic in a way. Lois couldn't help but smile at him, though she knew he would never return it. He looked so peaceful that it was hard to picture ripping him away from his country roots to return him to the rat race of the city once more. But Martha was right. Metropolis had some advantages that Kansas didn't have and he was far from settled here in his childhood home. He was listless and fidgety and it was worrying, to say the least.

What must be going on in his head? Lois thought with a mental sigh. Is anything going on in there? Has anything we've said or done made any difference in bringing him back?

A steady pressure was building in Clark's brain. Ever since his surroundings had changed, a thrumming buzzing had started to build in his mind. Ever since the weather had changed and the sunlight had gotten stronger, something had shifted in his head. It had started out so small, so insignificant, it was barely even noticeable. But now it felt like molten lava was erupting in his brain. The buzzing had reached deafening levels to the point where no other sound could cut through the cacophony of abject pain. Black spots floated before Clark's unseeing eyes. A scream wanted to rip from his throat but it found the way blocked. Every nerve in his body was ablaze, freezing him in place like one of Medusa's once-human stone statues. Even his dull, slow blinking was denied to him. A roiling sensation grew in his stomach as the pain in his mind shot through his uncooperative, unresponsive body like liquid lightning.

The volcano in his head erupted. There was a phantom tearing sensation in his dead brain tissue. If Clark had been capable of forming coherent thoughts, he would have wondered if he was dying. He would have questioned if he was having a stroke or an aneurysm. But not now. His ability to think, to wonder, to question, to worry, to do anything other than exist in a zombie-like state had been torn from him ages ago and he was left to the mercy of the agony that was shredding his very soul.

A crack.

That's what it felt like.

Like a city street torn asunder by an earthquake, a slight crack seemed to break in his head. Like a seedling forcing its way through asphalt, a hole appeared in the darkness. Like a single pinprick of starlight on a winter's night, the blankness was marred. Like the mighty Hercules, Clark found the strength somehow to snap the chains that bound him.

With a bestial effort, Clark made his useless body respond.

As Lois looked on, the toast slipped from Clark's fingers and landed, jam side down, with a wet *splat!* on the table. His hands flew up to the sides of his head as a nearly inhuman sounding, strangled cry of pain ripped out of his throat, though it was muted by years of having his vocal cords languish away. It made Lois' blood freeze in her veins and every hair stand at attention. Her appetite vanished in an instant, like a puff of smoke blown away by a sudden breeze. She dropped her fork and stood up, scared and confused by Clark's actions.

"Clark?" she asked, not bothering to hide the terror in her

voice. “Clark? What’s wrong?”

The only response she received was Clark’s continued sounds of agony. It was as though some demon had possessed him or inflicted some unseen, internal torture. Clark wretched his body from side to side, perhaps trying to shake off or escape whatever was causing him such distress, but he couldn’t get away from it. He slammed his elbows down onto the table with such force that his breakfast plate flew off the edge to crash and shatter on the floor, sending bits of egg, toast, and bacon everywhere. His coffee jumped in his mug and splashed all over the table as he repeated the action. He grabbed fistfuls of hair and pulled, as though trying to rip out his own hair to get to the source of his anguish.

Lois jumped into action then, standing behind him in the blink of an eye. She wrapped her arms around him from behind, as tightly as she could, hoping the feel of her touch would still his movements. She whispered soft shushing sounds in his ear.

“Hey, it’s okay. I’m here. Your mother is here. It’s okay. We’ve got you,” she assured him, though her platitudes would do nothing to quell actual, physical pain. “Just breathe through it,” she tried again, feeling powerless to help him. “I’ve got you. Calm down. It’ll pass. I’ve got you.”

Clark continued to struggle and cry out. Lois could feel his entire body shuddering with tremors that seemed involuntary and she grew more scared and anxious by the moment. She kissed the back of his head, wishing once more that she had some mystical power to take away his hurts, even if it meant taking them on herself. Wetness splashed onto her hands and she realized with a sudden drop to the pit of her stomach, that Clark was in so much agony that he was crying.

Crying.

She’d never seen Clark cry before. Not when he was whole and in the prime of his life, before he’d gone missing. Not since he’d returned home, a broken, blank slate of a man. Not even in his wildest nightmares that she’d witnessed in the beginning had tears ever dared to sting his eyes.

But he was shedding plenty now as he fought whatever torment had gripped him. She tightened her hug around him even more.

For how long Clark’s anguish lasted, Lois wasn’t sure. It felt like a lifetime as she clung to him, hoping to impart some measure of comfort to him. What Martha did during that time, Lois was unaware. She became blind to anything and anyone that wasn’t Clark. But, eventually, the spasms of his body slowed and became less violent. His whispered screams lessened until they were no more than almost dog-like whimpers. He tentatively loosened his grip on his hair and lowered his arms. He still remained slumped forward in his seat, but Lois felt slightly more confident in letting go of him. He didn’t move or respond as she slipped away to kneel in front of him. His hands had left his hair only to cover his face as he recovered from the brutal pain he’d been in, and Lois gave him a minute to simply just be before she tried to inspect him for any sign of lingering pain or the unlikely evidence that he’d caused himself bodily harm.

“I’ll call Dr. Klein,” Martha murmured to herself as she took a step away from the table.

“No, wait,” Lois replied, gently prying Clark’s hands away from his face. “We need to make sure he’s not hurt first.”

As Clark’s hands left his face, Lois noticed that he didn’t quite look the same. It took her a long moment to realize why that was.

As his features softened out of the grimace they’d been crunched up into, she saw that they didn’t relax back into the expressionless flatness she was used to seeing. She looked closer and it was almost as though she could see actual clouds of confusion and dullness swirling away in his eyes as they cleared and his focus sharpened right before her very gaze. Clark took a deep breath as he closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them again, it seemed as though a fire had been lit inside.

“Lois?” he tentatively croaked out in a badly rusted voice.

“Clark?” Lois asked, barely trusting her own voice. She reached out and cupped his cheek with her left hand, as though needing the confirmation that it was really him and not some hallucination or dream that had spoken her name. She tried to smile, but it wobbled too much and a few tears slipped down her cheeks. “Clark? Yeah, it’s me. I’m here,” she told him. She looked up to the ceiling as she tried to master her emotions, but it was a losing battle. “Oh, God,” she said in a mixture of disbelief and absolute relief.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lois could see Martha. Her hands were clasped in an almost prayerlike way and her eyes were glistening with elated tears. A part of Lois told her that she should make way for Clark’s mother as she moved toward her son, but selfishly, Lois didn’t want to leave his side. She threw her arms around him in a hug.

“You’re back,” she murmured into his neck. “Oh, God. I thought we’d lost you forever.”

Conscious of Martha, Lois pulled away then, and let the other woman hug her son for a long time. She tried hard not to listen in on what Martha said as she held Clark close. But she couldn’t help but notice how Clark, although he’d spoken, still seemed to hold his body stiffly and how he still didn’t seem to be “all there,” as her mother would have put it.

“Clark? Do you know us?” Lois asked when Martha had had her fill of hugging him.

“Lois,” he said, pointing. “Mar...Mom?” he asked, sounding unsure of himself.

Lois nodded. “That’s right. What else do you remember?”

Clark blinked at her and appeared to be thinking. “Not... sure...” he eventually responded, his words thick and slow. Lois wasn’t sure if he was having a difficult time just forming words after so long a time being mute or if it was his mind that was slow to figure out how to express himself.

It doesn’t matter; she instantly decided as her mind kicked into hyperdrive. He’s talking. He’s actually talking! He’s going to be okay.

But was he, really? She couldn’t be sure. It was true that he could now speak, but what did that really mean, in the long run? Did he remember anything?

She searched his face, desperately looking for the spark of recognition to flare up in his eyes. All around her, the room seemed to lurch forward and spin crazily, reminding her of the Tilt-a-Whirl she used to love so much at carnivals. Only, this time, the blur of colors and sounds didn’t bring her a thrill. It made her feel nauseous with anticipation as her heart raced faster than it ever had in her life.

Please, show me a sign that you remember; she silently pleaded.

But Clark’s eyes remained troubled and uncertain. She saw no trace of recognition there. The long-awaited smile she’d been yearning for did not appear.

Her heart shattered anew.

“It’s okay,” Martha encouraged him. “We understand.”

Lois nodded, quickly jumping in as well. “That’s right. You’ve been through a lot. We understand that it might...take a while,” she hedged, hope blazing in her heart that he might just recover his memories after all.

“I want...to remember,” Clark started to say, frowning at his own inability to access the memories he wanted. “I just... everything’s a blur.”

“It’s okay,” Martha repeated.

Clark slumped his shoulders and looked around a little as if seeing the farmhouse kitchen for the first time. He spied the mess on the floor and shook his head, as though trying to figure out where it had come from.

“Did I...?” he asked, tentatively pointing at the scrambled

eggs by Lois' foot.

"It's nothing," Lois replied, grabbing a napkin from the table and squatting down to clean up the egg in question. "Don't worry about it. Are you still hungry? I can fix you another plate from what's leftover on the stove."

Clark shook his head uncertainly. "No? I think?"

"Martha, why don't you take Clark into the living room," Lois offered. "I'll clean up here. You should talk to him a little."

Martha nodded her thanks. Her hand went to her chest as if saying she was too choked up to verbalize anything at the moment. But Lois didn't need spoken words – not from Martha. She wanted to soak up every last word Clark uttered from now until the end of time. She set to work cleaning up with a speed that would have rivaled Superman's, if he still existed. Then she sped off to the living room, aching to be near Clark, frantically hoping he'd remembered something – anything – in the few minutes she'd been apart from him.

Clark was sitting on the couch when she entered, with Martha on the far end. His mother seemed to be afraid to be separated from him, but also unwilling to crowd him. Lois took the high-backed seat that Jonathan had been so fond of.

"Hey," Lois said softly as she entered the room. She touched Clark's shoulder briefly on her way to her seat. "How are you feeling?" she asked, concerned about any lingering pain in his head.

"Okay, I guess. Just...confused. Out of sorts," Clark replied with a slight shrug.

"Well, you know us," Lois said, pointing to Martha and herself. "That's a pretty good start."

"You've been taking care of me," Clark answered blandly, and the hair on the nape of Lois' neck stood at attention.

"Wait...is that *all* you remember?" Lois pressed.

"I think so."

"Clark, what *exactly* do you remember?" Martha asked. "How far back? Anything at all. About us. About yourself. Anything."

Clark closed his eyes as he thought. Lois could see his eyes moving beneath the lids as if he were reviewing a filmstrip of his life.

"Darkness," he finally said, and Lois let out a breath she'd unintentionally been holding. "A small, cramped, dark room. Being afraid. Hating the small space. Fearing the man in the white coat."

"Dr. Fulton?" Lois immediately asked, her hackles up.

Clark nodded shallowly. "I guess so. He had people with him sometimes."

"What did they do to you?" Martha pressed.

Clark appeared to be trying to remember. "Hurt me. A lot."

"Where?" The word appeared to stick in Martha's throat.

Clark gingerly touched his fingertips to his head. "Here. I think the doctor enjoyed hurting me. He said it was good for me."

"Why? Why did he hurt you?" Lois asked, recognizing the spot Clark had touched as the place where the electroshock paddles would have been placed.

"I don't know."

"How often did he hurt you?" Lois tried.

"I don't know. A lot at first. Less often as time went by," Clark replied, his voice hollow. Lois wasn't sure if he was having difficulty remembering, if remembering was too emotionally painful for him, or if the injuries to his brain had altered him and made him incapable of feeling emotion.

"I'm so sorry, Clark," she told him.

I looked for you for twenty years. I had every hero out there – super-powered or not – out looking for you. I went on national television and begged for information that would lead to you being found.

She cleared her throat. "What else do you remember?"

"Hunger."

Her stomach bottomed out as she recalled how skeletal and barely alive he'd been when Bruce's exploits as Batman had led him to Clark's cell.

If Fulton wasn't dead, I'd kill him myself for what he did.

"Then...some other people."

"The police and EMTs," Lois supplied.

Clark nodded. "Probably?" He looked straight at Lois.

"Then...you."

"I came as soon as I heard where you were," Lois said, carefully choosing her words. She didn't want to upset him by mentioning how long he'd been locked away and how badly off he'd been.

"Why?" Clark asked quizzically. "I mean, you came and took me out of that place and I think I've been living at your house but...why?"

Lois swallowed the nervousness that had leapt up into her heart. "Clark? How much do you actually remember? Anything from *before* Dr. Fulton?" she carefully inquired.

Clark fell quiet and looked as if he was thinking it over.

"Nothing," he replied in a detached tone.

"You...don't remember anything about...us? About me? About your family?" Lois pressed.

Clark shook his head. "There's nothing. Only darkness. Why? Were we involved? Did we...have a family?"

We could have if I hadn't been so pig-headed and stubborn.

"Oh...no," Lois gently corrected. "I didn't mean that to sound like *our* family. I meant *your* family. Your mom and dad. Your childhood. Anything."

"Nothing," Clark confirmed.

"And us? The Daily Planet?" Lois tried desperately.

He shrugged with casual indifference.

What hope had flared into Lois' heart sputtered out and died as the gravity of Clark's injuries came crashing down around her once more.

Something was wrong.

Clark could feel it in his heart.

Something had been shaken loose in his mind. Some mental block had been cracked. His vocal cords had been liberated from their imprisonment in a body which constantly defied his wishes. And yet...

He was still trapped. His mind was almost a blank slate.

Oh, he had snatches of more recent memories. He had the vague impression of being imprisoned in a crypt-like room. He had the strong impression of always being hungry. He had snatches of memories of police and EMTs and this woman before him. He knew, somehow, that she'd been responsible for getting him out of the darkness.

The woman...

Lois.

That was her name...wasn't it?

He was fairly sure it was.

But, then again...he wasn't really *sure* of anything.

No, that *had* to be right. She'd looked...excited and expectant when he'd said the word "Lois."

Why had she been so excited to hear her own name? Was he supposed to know her from somewhere? Is that why she'd taken him into her home?

Clark strained to place where he might know Lois from. Somehow, he doubted she was his sister or even a close cousin. Had she been a neighbor? Had they dated? Or maybe he'd always been unable to function on his own and she'd been his caretaker. Or...she'd mentioned something about a daily planet. If only he knew what she was talking about...

"I'm sorry," he said helplessly. "I'm trying but...am I supposed to...know you?" he cautiously asked, aware on an abstract level that she might not take the question well.

“Yes,” she replied, her voice sounding choked. Even in his barely-functional state, he knew she was trying hard not to tear up. “You truly can’t remember me?”

“You’ve been helping me,” he offered. “But...I don’t know why. I guess you must know me pretty well. It’s just...I just don’t know *you*.”

Weeks passed and the summer grew hotter. Clark came no closer to remembering his old life and the soul-crushing disappointment Lois had felt when he’d first admitted to not knowing who she was did not fade. She felt guilty for that. Of course, her disappointment wasn’t directed at Clark himself, but was, rather, directed at *herself* for believing that his mind would instantly be restored. But, mostly, she felt disappointed in the universe for teasing both Martha and herself. Clark could talk to them now, that was true, but he was still a stranger to them, as much as they were to him. It felt entirely unfair that he should be so tantalizingly close to his old self without crossing that invisible threshold. She wanted to scream and shout and rage against God and the universe and fate and whatever else she could. But there was still nothing she could do to help Clark.

As soon as she returned to Metropolis, she brought Clark to Dr. Klein. The man was ecstatic to see the progress Clark had made, but offered no assurances that the healing would continue, nor did he make any guesses as to whether or not Clark’s missing memories would ever be restored. Lois couldn’t blame Dr. Klein for that, but logic didn’t stop her from feeling like the visit had been an exercise in frustration and pointlessness.

As before, she told Clark stories whenever she could. The only difference was that now Clark was an active participant who could ask questions and express his disbelief over some of the absurd things they had lived through. Lois was always careful to leave Superman as a third party, and never let on that he’d once been Clark’s alter ego. The poor man was still living without a past, and she didn’t want to upset or confuse him.

“Clark?” she asked one night as they sat together in the living room after dinner.

“Yeah?” Clark replied distractedly as he watched the contestants on *Jeopardy!* get the answer to the final question wildly wrong.

Once, Clark would have jumped in and gotten most, if not all, of the questions correct. Lois had seen him do it on more than one occasion while they’d been holed up on stakeouts or having dinner together at one of their apartments. But he was strangely quiet and impassive as he watched the show now, and it only hammered home just how far they still had to go before he was back to normal.

“What do you remember about Superman?” Lois asked cautiously, testing the waters with a single pinkie toe.

Clark scratched his right ear in thought. “Nothing outside of what you’ve told me,” he finally replied. “I don’t recall ever meeting him. And, honestly? If you hadn’t shown me those old news clippings and internet videos, I would have said you were lying to me about a man who could fly and bend steel with his bare hands,” he scoffed. “I mean, it sounds absolutely ludicrous, don’t you think?”

Lois chuckled nervously. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Why?” Clark asked after a moment. “Why does it matter what I remember about some freak in a cape?” His tone grew hostile and his eyes narrowed.

Lois’ defenses went on alert. “Just curious,” she only half lied. “You seem angry about it. Why is that?”

“Angry. Bitter. It’s all the same,” Clark spat. “You say this ‘Superman’ was good friends with me, right? So how come that clown in the flashy costume never came and found me? What kind of ‘friend’ leaves someone to rot in a cell no bigger than a closet and be subjected to horrors so bad that I can’t even remember

them outside of a vague sense of pain and terror?” His eyes were flashing in hatred and Lois found herself a little scared. She’d seen him shoot heat vision from his eyes with less provocation than this.

But nothing burst into flames and she wasn’t reduced to a pile of ash. It seemed that the mental block Clark had still firmly held his powers in some inaccessible part of his mind. Never before had Lois been so glad of that as she was in that instant.

“It’s not that simple,” Lois tried to explain. “Superman... isn’t around. He hasn’t been for a long time now. Ever since you... disappeared.” She swallowed hard around the partial truths she was spinning for Clark’s own good.

“Good. The world doesn’t need him. If he has to run and hide and leave his ‘friends’ to such fates... then the world is better off without him and his fake ‘help,’” Clark snarled. “Now, if you don’t mind, I don’t want to talk about someone who can so easily abandon the people he called his ‘friends.’”

Lois tied several responses in the privacy of her own mind, but none of them seemed right. In the end, she said nothing, and let the conversation drop. Either Clark would remember that he was Superman in good time and make his peace with being unable to save himself, or he would continue to think of Superman as a traitor who’d allowed him to be tortured. And there was nothing Lois could do to hasten or prevent either one of those eventualities.

A week or so after Clark’s verbal denunciation of Superman, he began to experience excruciating headaches, like the one he’d suffered through in Kansas. But, unlike in Smallville, he didn’t seem to gain any more insight into his lost life after they were over. Some attacks were short – just a minute or two long – but violent enough to send Clark crashing to his knees in pain. Some were long – lasting hours in some cases – but appeared to be more manageable, and Clark maintained his ability to get through the motions of the day. A few lasted all day long. Lois hated all of the headaches, but those were perhaps the worst. On those days, Clark would barricade himself in his room with the lights off and would refuse all food and drink. If he slept or stayed awake nursing his pain, Lois wasn’t sure. On those days, he did not allow her to speak with him at all. He was like a ghost when the pain gripped him like that.

For a few weeks, the headaches came on and off, with no rhythm or pattern as to when they would strike. Lois worried about Clark constantly, but she’d long since become an expert in hiding her concern beneath a blank, neutral expression, not unlike the mask Clark would slip on as Superman when dealing with the worst-case scenarios. He’d felt the need, Martha had once explained, to make Superman as aloof as possible. For one thing, it made him seem less human than he really was, and that had helped maintain the illusion that Clark and Superman were two different people. For another thing, people looked to Superman as an authority figure. If they saw how affected he was by the lives he couldn’t save, people might fall into despair. Clark had wanted only to inspire hope, and so, had needed to try and turn off his own emotions, sacrificing his humanity before the scrutinizing eyes of the masses.

Lois tried to keep herself busy during those weeks of Clark’s headaches. As much as she wanted to be there for him, work was piling up and she had cases that needed closure. Plus, there was nothing she could do for Clark, aside from drawing the curtains tight against the light that he tried to hide from and offer cold compresses for his head that he mostly refused. Aspirin did nothing for him, as she quickly found out. It helped for her to have an outlet for her pent-up frustrations and worries, and work gave her what she sought. So, as she’d done for all those years while Clark had been missing, she threw herself into her work – tried to forget herself in it, if she was being honest with herself.

One evening, just about a month after the initial headache that had taken Clark in Smallville, Lois came home to find Clark sitting in the darkening living room. That was a good sign, Lois noted. When she'd left for work that morning, Clark had been in pain – manageable pain, but pain nonetheless. He hadn't left his room for more than a few minutes to grab a cup of coffee before disappearing back into his bedroom, which had been just as dark and cocoon-like as the living room was now. Lois approached cautiously and saw that Clark had a few photo albums out on the coffee table. While he wasn't looking at them now, it was evident that he had been.

"Clark?" Lois called softly, so as not to startle him. "I brought home some calzones. I was going to bring back a couple of pizzas, but Antonio's was *out of pizza*. Can you imagine? What's a pizza place without any *pizza*? All they had were calzones and a few Strombolis. The calzones looked fresher so I went with those. Besides, I remembered that you used to like the calzones better," she rambled on as she came up to the couch.

Clark looked up slowly at her and blinked, as though he were a man waking from a dream. A ghost of a smile touched his lips as he stood up, took the box from her hands, and set it aside on the table. Tentatively, as if he were doing something forbidden, he reached out and touched her hair, which was loose and tumbled down in beachy waves to the middle of her back.

"You grew your hair long," he whispered. "It used to be short. A chin-length bob."

"You've seen the pictures," she said. It wasn't quite a question, but it wasn't a statement of fact either.

"You always used to tuck in loose strands behind your ear when you were nervous," Clark continued.

Unconsciously, Lois did the exact thing Clark had spoken of. "Force of habit," she reflexively said.

"I always loved your hair. You used to threaten that you were going to cut it short when you were having a bad day and it got in your way. I'm glad you didn't," Clark said, looking her in the eyes. "I love the way it looks long on you."

"Well, thanks, I needed a cha..." Lois cut her word off midway. "Did you just say...?" She once again aborted her train of thought. "Clark! You...you *remembered!*"

Shamelessly, she flung herself into his arms for a hug, which he returned. She nearly cried at how good it felt to *finally* feel his arms around her again. So far, any affection shown had been very much one-sided. To see Clark finally acting a little like his old self was like a breath of fresh air, even if the whirl of emotions Lois was feeling left her feeling like all the air had been suddenly squeezed out of her lungs.

"I am. At least, I *think* I am," Clark replied, and she could hear the smile in his voice.

Lois pulled back. "What else do you remember?" she inquired curiously.

Clark grinned. "That I'm hungry. That I *do* like calzones," he teased.

Lois could have cried at the sparkle she saw in Clark's eyes. The sparkle she'd been denied seeing for twenty-one years now. She chose laughter instead. "You'll like these, I promise," she told him.

"Perfect," Clark replied, still grinning.

He helped her to set the table in the breakfast nook once they reached the kitchen, then he opened the box holding the calzones. "Were they always this huge?" he asked as he caught sight of the cheese-filled breads within. He looked up at her with a quizzical expression.

"No. That started about five or six years ago when Antonio retired and his sons took over," Lois answered with an amused chuckle. "They cost a bit more now, but I typically get two meals out of one of them." She flashed him a huge smile.

Clark took a bite and closed his eyes against the taste of it.

"Heavenly," he proclaimed it, his mouth half-full.

"Glad you like it," Lois said as she poured them both Cokes. She hesitated, then went on as she sat down. "Clark? Can I ask you something?"

"Of course. I'll try to answer it as best I can. There's still a lot that seems...missing up here," he replied, pointing to his forehead.

"What *can* you remember? I don't mean to keep prying and pressing the subject but..." She shrugged. "I wasn't sure you were ever going to recover *any* of your memories. Dr. Klein wasn't sure either, despite how many times he's checked you over since you came home."

Clark chewed thoughtfully. "I'm not sure. I remember being in the Gotham Asylum. I remember now that Dr. Fulton would inject me with something and I wouldn't wake up for hours sometimes...at least, I *think* it was hours. It could have been minutes or days for all I could tell. He used to have his goons strap me down in a chair so he could..." He gulped and a fearful look crossed his face. "He electrocuted my brain. He said it was 'good' for me. Said it would erase the untruths that I was clinging to. Whatever those 'untruths' were."

Lois saw that Clark's hands were shaking. She dropped her calzone and took his hands in hers. "Hey, it's okay. You're safe now. Dr. Fulton is dead, Clark."

His eyes turned cold. "Maybe this is wrong, but...I'm glad to hear it. It...it wasn't just *me* that he tortured, Lois. There was this other guy, just down the hall from me. Maybe...I don't know. Four...five...rooms away. They called him the Scarecrow. I don't know why. I never met him but I overheard stories before Dr. Fulton started zapping away my memories." Clark paused and shuddered. "The guy deserved to be locked up. He used to torment this one nurse, Nancy. She was the only one who was ever nice to me. I think maybe she pitied me. She used to slip me pieces of chocolate when she'd bring me my 'meals.'" Here he made sarcastic air quotes with his fingers. "Dr. Fulton found out and that was the last time I ever saw Nancy. He fired her...or had her transferred elsewhere or something. If he had her killed...it wouldn't surprise me at all."

He sighed and his shoulders slumped. "I hate that I can remember this stuff, Lois. But...at the same time, I wish I knew what it was Dr. Fulton wanted from me. I don't...I can't...when I try to figure out what it was that he was trying to purge from my mind...there's nothing. Only blankness, like an unpainted canvas."

"Give it time, Clark," Lois said softly. "You've only *just* started remembering anything at all."

Clark nodded, but she could see he wasn't convinced. "I don't even know how or why I wound up in the asylum to begin with. I know the scars on my body aren't from the abuse I received under Fulton's orders. His sick perversion was twisting and tormenting minds, not bodies."

He gave her a helpless look as he spread his hands wide, like a Vegas dealer showing his cards. "I'm sorry. I wish I had more to give you."

"It's okay," Lois repeated. She let go of his hand and lightly stroked the side of his head, just beyond the burns on his temples. "We'll figure it out. And then, we'll get whatever justice we can for you."

"It's funny," Clark said after a few seconds. "The only thing I remember clearly is *you*. In fact, you were the first thing I remembered today after my headache finally subsided." He gave her a lopsided grin. "I guess we used to mean a lot to each other." *The world*, Lois mentally corrected him.

"We were best friends," she allowed herself to say aloud. "Partners at work too." She smiled mischievously and waggled her eyebrows as best she could. "Actually, 'partners' is too mild a word. We were an unstoppable team." She lowered her gaze for a moment. "I didn't always appreciate that fact in the beginning, but once I did, there was nothing the team of Lane and Kent couldn't

do.”

“Lane and Kent? Not Kent and Lane?” Clark asked teasingly. “No way. I was the senior reporter,” Lois tossed back lightly.

“The straight man always goes first,” Clark murmured, then looked as surprised as Lois felt. “Wait...where did I hear that?” he wondered aloud.

“From Jimmy,” Lois said as gently as the late summer breeze that had been blowing outside. “It was during one of our very first assignments together and you made the same exact joke about Kent and Lane. And Jimmy said that it would never work because the straight man always goes first.” She bit her lip against another surge of her heart as it swelled with happiness that Clark was finally starting to find pieces of his past.

Clark smiled a little. “Jimmy,” he said, the word almost a sigh. “I can’t wait to see him again. I mean, really see him. I know he was here not too long ago, but that...doesn’t really count. I mean...I don’t really remember him all that well...just a sort of generalized sense of him. But from the stories you’ve told me, I guess he was one of my best friends.”

“You two were practically attached at the hip. But...he understood why you couldn’t talk to him,” Lois offered.

“I...” Clark began, sounding uncertain as his voice wobbled a bit. “I knew what was happening around me. I could hear and see everyone but couldn’t focus on it. It was like trying to hold a pot of water with a pasta strainer. And I couldn’t respond. It was like I was locked away. You know the feeling when you’re not quite asleep but not fully awake? And everything around you feels surreal? Like you can hear what’s going on but you can’t react to it because it feels like it’s a million miles away and like you’re stuck inside your own body that can’t really move?”

Lois nodded her head. “I guess so.”

“That’s kind of what it was like for me,” Clark continued. “I was frozen inside a body and mind that refused to work properly. I don’t even know how long I was like that.”

He looked to Lois for an answer. She swallowed hard and studied the few bites of calzone she had left on her plate. “You were admitted to the Arkham Asylum just about eleven years ago,” she finally confessed.

“I missed eleven years of my life?” Clark gaped. “Really? Has it really been that long since I last...got to interact with the world?”

“Well...as far as we know,” Lois admitted, her heart sinking as she delivered more bad news. “You disappeared...you were missing...for ten years before that. It’s been twenty-one years, Clark, since the moment you vanished without a trace.”

“Twenty...one...” Clark’s hands flew up to his hair to rake through his ebony locks. His mouth moved but no sound came forth. His entire expression was one of disbelief, horror, and profound sadness as he realized just how much of his life had been stolen away from him. “Can that really be?” he uttered in shock.

Lois forced herself to nod. “I’m sorry, Clark. The last time I...or anyone else...saw you was just before I was supposed to...” She gulped, hating to say the words.

“Supposed to what?” Clark prodded.

“Marry Lex Luthor,” she said, letting the words fall from her mouth with disdain. “A wedding which didn’t go through, by the way. I couldn’t...a life with him...a life without you in it...it wasn’t something I could bear. I kept hearing your warnings about Lex in my head, and, even though nothing was ever proven, the fact that you hated him so much...” She broke her words off and tried again. “We were very much at odds over Lex. I thought I was in love with him and you hated him and...it was tearing us apart. At the time, I thought it was just jealousy on your part, but the closer it came to the time I needed to walk down the aisle, I realized that you were my best friend. If you’d thought Lex was good for me, you would have been happy for me, no matter what personal feelings you might have had. But...you couldn’t hide

your loathing for him. You *knew* he wasn’t right for me.”

She felt her cheeks redden and heat up in a blush. “I said some pretty vile things to you and we parted ways. But all I kept thinking of as I got ready for the wedding was you. Not Lex. Not about what married life would be like. Not any future family I might have had with Lex. *You*. I missed you more than I could have ever loved Lex, and I realized that I didn’t want any life that didn’t include you in it as my friend.”

Clark looked utterly perplexed. “I’m sorry. But...Lex *who*?”

“Lex Luthor,” Lois said, blinking in surprise. “You don’t...remember him?”

Clark shook his head, a look of bewilderment on his face. “Sorry, no. You say this man and I didn’t get along but...I can’t even picture what he looks like, let alone remember anything else about him.”

“Clark...he’s the President of the United States,” Lois gaped. She knew Clark’s memory was only just returning, but his complete blankness when it came to Lex took her off guard.

“He could be God himself, Lois. I still have no recollection of him,” Clark shrugged as he frowned.

Lois frowned too. “Believe me, he *thinks* he’s God himself. Some of the things that he’s allowed to happen while he’s been in office...” She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Maybe,” Clark tentatively agreed. He fisted his hand and banged it on the table nonetheless. “It’s so *frustrating*, Lois. I *know* there’s whole parts of my life that I’m missing and I feel like they’re in there, somewhere,” he said, once again motioning to his head, “but they’re just out of reach.”

“Hey, we’ll figure this out,” Lois reassured him. “You’re recovering from...a *lot* of electroshock treatment,” she admitted. “Dr. Klein has the file but...Oh, God, I should call him with the news! But...” she stopped herself from going down that particular train of thought, “it can wait. He has the file that Fulton kept on you. It’s pretty spartan, but...Clark, no one should have ever been exposed to as much of the electroshock as you’ve been. Regaining your memory...it’s going to take time. As it is, it’s taken you more than seven...almost eight...months to get where you are. And I know, it sucks to not have all your memories right now. But I’m here, and I’ll help you in whatever way I can,” she vowed.

The disappointment didn’t entirely leave Clark’s face, but he nodded and mustered up a half-smile. “Thank you, Lois. For some reason, I’m not surprised by your promise. Somehow...I feel like you’ve always been there to support me...even if you didn’t know it. I just wish I knew how that was.” He paused in thought. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Anything,” Lois promised.

“I remember being in Smallville, with you and my mom. It’s hazy...like I’m trying to see the memories through a fog. Which...I guess I am. My mind was too messed up to really absorb it all. But...I don’t remember my dad being there...or really even being mentioned.”

Lois’ heart broke, and she avoided his gaze.

“Lois, what is it?” he asked when he saw the look on her face.

“I’m sorry, Clark,” she apologized, swallowing down the tears that pricked her eyes. Telling him this was going to be harder than watching him go through the headaches that had plagued him recently, but which had, apparently, been born out of his brain healing itself somewhat.

Clark’s face fell. “He...he’s gone, isn’t he?” he asked with soul-shattering understanding.

Lois could only mutely nod to confirm what Clark already knew.

“When?”

That one word sounded so weak and broken that it was hard to believe it had come from Clark, the strongest person she knew, his ability to bench press rocket ships aside.

“A little more than three and a half years ago,” Lois said,

staring down at her plate.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw Clark go pale. He stood up without a word and left the room. Worried about him, Lois tracked him from a distance. He went straight to the bathroom and before she could even see him, she could hear the violent sounds of his retching. She closed her eyes, heart hurting for him, and leaned her back against the wall. Long moments passed. The sound changed from an active retch to a dry heave, then, finally, she heard the toilet flush and the sink turn on as Clark rinsed his mouth.

“Sorry,” he mumbled in apology, and Lois opened her eyes to look at him.

His eyes were red and puffy with the distinctive look of tears welling up. She reached for him and he sank into her embrace. Within seconds his chest was heaving as he let himself cry. She could feel each shuttering breath that he took. His tears soaked through her shirt at the shoulder. She said nothing, just held him and stroked the back of his head with her hand, trying to infuse some comfort into him. But Clark was not so easily calmed. Lois understood his distress, even if she couldn’t imagine a world in which she had a relationship with her father as strong as Clark had had with his.

When Clark finally pulled away from her, he looked older somehow, as though his grief had aged him. Lois cupped his cheek in her hand, the way he’d always done to her, as both Clark and as Superman. His hand came up to cover hers and he seemed to luxuriate in the warmth of her palm. Tenderly, he turned his head just enough to brush his lips against her palm.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “For...telling me. For...letting me...for being there for me,” he stammered, appearing to be a little embarrassed. Aside from the tears that had stung his eyes during his headaches, he’d never once shed a tear in her presence before.

Lois wiped away an errant tear with her thumb. “You’ve always been there for me, Clark. You’re my best friend. I’ll *always* be there for you.”

He pulled away, just a little, still clearly shaken by the news. “I think...I think I want to be alone now, just for a little while,” he said with a voice that trembled.

Lois nodded. “Okay,” she told him. “I’ll be here if you need me.”

Clark nodded his thanks with just one inclination of his head, then he was heading back up the stairs to his bedroom – his newest Fortress of Solitude.

Summer was nearly at an end when Clark’s memory first began to return. Before long, it was officially autumn, though it seemed that the summer didn’t get the memo that it was supposed to leave. It stayed hot and relatively humid until mid-October, then, without warning, the temperature dropped and the days grew brisk and dry. All through that time, Clark continued to suffer from his headaches, though they were at least a little spread out now and no longer a guaranteed daily occurrence. But they didn’t hold the same power to scare Lois the way they once had. Although she still hated seeing Clark in pain, she knew now that he was regaining pieces of himself. Each attack allowed him to access select memories that he hadn’t been able to before. In a weird way, she knew Clark almost looked forward to the mind-blasting pain, because it meant he would remember something when it was all over, like new, healthy growth after a devastating wildfire. Lois was very much on the fence and didn’t have the same outlook as Clark.

What she *did* worry about was the rapidly approaching time change, which meant less hours of sunlight for Clark. She’d never been a big fan of the early nightfall to begin with. Now, even more than when Clark had needed the sun to recover from his physical injuries, she loathed the too-short days to come. Still, it was

inevitable, and there was nothing she could do to prevent it from happening.

But right now, she couldn’t worry about that. She watched from the doorway of the bedroom as Clark slept peacefully, at least for the time being. She nodded to herself as she noted the position of his body. When he’d first arrived in her home, he’d always laid in as tight a fetal curl as possible. Now, his body was more relaxed – not quite stretched to his full length, but definitely looser than it had been in those early months. She smiled to herself. It had taken her a long time, back then, but she’d finally convinced him that it was okay to be comfortable – he now regularly slipped beneath the warm blankets and sheets of the bed without her needing to tuck him in under one of Martha’s old blankets.

Clark was laying on his right side now, with his right arm tucked beneath his head, trapped between the mattress and his pillow. His left arm was up, the tops of his fingers pressed against his forehead. Lois recognized the position as a defensive one. Clark wasn’t exhausted from trying to recover his memory. He didn’t have one of his blinding headaches. He was, even in his sleep - even this far removed from the horrors and abuses he’d suffered - trying to protect his fragile brain and the precious shreds of returned identity he was reclaiming.

She smiled softly to herself. His posture aside, he looked for all the world like the Clark she’d once known and had, despite her best efforts, slowly started to fall for. She wondered now, especially with Clark regaining his lost memories, his stolen past, and his forgotten identity, if the chance that had once stood between them to be together was still out there, somewhere amid the shadows of their uncertain future. If it was, she vowed that she wouldn’t be so blind as to miss it, or too stubborn to accept it.

Clark twitched in his sleep, his entire body shivering and shuddering beneath his blankets. Lois went to his side and brushed a wayward lock of hair off his brow. Usually, he calmed under her touch, but not tonight. Tonight, his body jerked and bucked, and a sheen of sweat glistened on his skin. Lois shook him slightly, trying to rouse him, but he was gripped too firmly in his nightmare. She climbed up on the bed behind him and did the only thing she could: she hugged him as tightly as she could and planted a kiss on his head.

Clark woke with a roar of fear and agony so loud and fierce that it scared Lois. She let go of him and scooted back, away from him as he sat up straight, panting as he tried to regain his breath and slow his racing heart. He put his head into his hands and rubbed the heels of his palms into his eyes as he groaned softly. After a few moments, he brought his hands down again and addressed Lois.

“Hey,” he said hollowly.

“Hey,” she said back, her voice feather-light. “Are you okay?”

“Just...dreaming. Reliving things. I can’t make sense of it all.

There was this green cage all around me. I felt like I was dying. Then a shadowy figure came and told me he was going to erase me from the memories of people. He said I wasn’t Clark. And then...then I was in the asylum getting my brains fried. None of it made sense,” he repeated.

“Were they all memories?” Lois asked cautiously. Clark still didn’t remember his days as Superman and still bore ill-will toward the no-show hero who hadn’t come to rescue him. But the green of the cage and his memory of pain alluded to possible Kryptonite. “I know it’s unpleasant, but think back for a minute, okay?”

Clark closed his eyes as if it would afford him a clearer picture in his mind. “I’ll try.” He grew quiet and contemplative. “I *think* it was a memory. The asylum certainly was. I don’t think I’ll *ever* be free of those memories. But the cage? The shadow person? It’s too hazy to make out. It seems so far away and veiled so heavily that I have no idea. But the pain felt so real that I think it *had* to be a

memory.”

“I’m sorry, Clark,” Lois apologized, getting closer to him again and putting her arms around his broad chest. She snuggled up into his side. “I wish I could do more for you. I wish I knew who could be so cruel as to want to hurt you, of all people.”

He looked down and gave her a smile. “You already are doing something for me, just by being here,” he told her. She felt his body sag as some of the lingering tension within dissipated. “The more I remember about you, the more I know that the same has always been true. You’ve always been there for me. Always helped me. Always made me feel like...I wasn’t alone.”

“What *do* you remember about me?” she asked carefully, wondering if he remembered, even in some abstract way, all the times they’d flown together.

“Honestly?”

“Honestly,” she encouraged.

“I remember being in love with you,” Clark said quietly as his entire body seemed to go red with a blush. “Which, maybe I shouldn’t even be saying,” he immediately amended. “But, Lois, I already lost you for twenty years. And yeah, my memory has holes in it big enough to fly a 747 through. But, when I think about you, I *know* my feelings are real. I don’t need to remember every last detail about my past to know that.”

“Clark...” she interrupted gently, pressing one finger lightly against his lips to silence him. “Don’t apologize. Don’t explain yourself. The truth is, I’m glad you told me. Because it took almost losing you forever, but I know that I was starting to feel things for you too before you disappeared. I *still* feel them. And maybe, once your memory returns in full, maybe we can explore our relationship further. I mean, I know I’d be willing to.” She looked at him and smiled. “I just think it’s in our best interest to take it slowly. Make sure we’re doing it for the right reasons.”

Clark’s smile broadened into a grin. “That’s the best news I’ve heard in my entire life,” he said. Then he chuckled. “Not that I can *remember* much of my life.”

“I’m always happy to tell you stories,” Lois assured him.

“I know. And I appreciate it. But...don’t take this the wrong way. I *like* hearing your stories. It’s just that...I *don’t want* to have to rely on someone else telling me things I should know on my own. I want to *remember* on my own. And I can’t, and it’s so frustrating that I can barely put it into words,” he said, his voice intense like he might scream out his frustration at any moment.

Lois put her hand on his shoulder. “You’ll get there. Do you remember anything new? Aside from the cage and shadowy figure of your dream?”

Clark shook his head a little. “Not yet. I feel like there are vague images all around me in my mind, but when I try to look at them directly, they vanish and only reappear when I’m looking away.” He sighed. “I hate this, Lois. This...not knowing. This...wondering who I really was. What my life was really like. This...inability to remember basic things about myself, about my friends and family.”

“Clark, you’ve made remarkable progress in gaining back the memories you *do* have already,” Lois gently reminded him, her voice full of encouragement and the ever-lingering awe she had that he’d recovered as well as he had. “The fact that you’ve gotten back even *some* of your memories...your ability to talk even...it’s nothing short of a miracle. Dr. Klein painted such a bleak outlook when you were first found. The odds of your mind healing...they were astronomically low, Clark.” She shook her head, remembering how hopeless those early days had felt. “I’m not saying this to scare you or make you feel like you have no right to be frustrated. Because you have *every* right to be upset and angry and frustrated and anything else you might feel.”

“I just need to be patient,” he supplied defeatedly.

Lois nodded ever so slightly. “It stinks, I know. I have wished I could do something, anything, to help you since the moment I

first laid eyes on you in that little cell in Gotham. But all we can do is wait and try to make the best of things.”

His arms circled her as he held her close. “I’m trying. And I’m glad you’re here with me as I go through this.”

“Always,” Lois promised.

“Would you...stay for a while?” he asked after a few minutes of companionable silence. “After a nightmare like that, I’m not sure I want to be alone.” He blushed sheepishly.

Lois nodded and gave him a tiny smile. “Sure. You want a midnight snack or something?”

He thought it over but ultimately shook his head. “Nothing for me, but if you want something, go for it. I’m a sweaty mess. I’m going to throw myself in a cool shower and get cleaned up.”

“Okay,” Lois replied.

“I’ll be done in a few minutes,” Clark promised.

Lois nodded and rose from the bed. “Go on. I’ll give you some privacy.”

She crossed the room and left, closing the door behind her. But she didn’t go raid the kitchen the way she ordinarily did when waking in the middle of the night. Instead, she retreated to her room and checked her email from her phone. There was nothing but spam and a quick response from her sister about gifts Lois was thinking about getting the girls for their birthday. She tapped out a swift thank you and put the phone down again. Since she hadn’t actually been to bed yet, she took care of her nightly bedtime routine – a speedy shower, brushing and flossing, moisturizing, using the toilet, cleaning the sink, selecting her favorite pair of soft pajamas, laying out the few items she would need in the morning for running a handful of errands. Then she padded back down to Clark’s room.

The door was open in invitation when she arrived, but she knocked on the doorframe anyway before entering. Clark’s face lit up when he saw her and he stopped his current task of stripping the sweat-soaked bedsheets from his mattress. Lois gave him a mute smile, then she stepped into his room and went to the beside. He was on the far side from the door and she lifted the corner of the fitted sheet.

“Let me help,” she offered as she tugged the corner free, then went to the other corner and repeated the motion.

“We always did work better as a team,” Clark quipped. “As far as I can recall at any rate.”

Lois laughed. “We were absolutely unstoppable. We *still* are.” Clark’s eyes twinkled. “Lane and Kent.”

“The Hottest Team in Town,” Lois finished the old Daily Planet marketing slogan for him, grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

“I think I miss those days,” Clark admitted as he pulled the flat sheet off the bed, then worked at a pillowcase.

“We’re still a team,” Lois reminded him.

“Oh...I meant being a reporter. I feel like I enjoyed investigating and finding things out and everything that went into getting a case closed,” he corrected her.

“You were amazing at it,” Lois commented softly. “And, when you’re ready, Jimmy would take you back on staff in a heartbeat.”

“Jimmy...I miss him,” Clark said in a contemplative voice as he finally worked his pillow free and tossed the case into the rumpled pile of soiled bed linens.

“He misses you too,” Lois assured him. “Everything about your disappearance and rescue has really affected him. He’ll be glad to hang out with you again, as soon as you’re up for it.”

How in the world would I explain your recovery to him? She wondered with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. He knows what you went through. He’s a smart guy. He’ll know that no regular man could recover from brain damage as severe as yours was.

“I’d like that. I remember we were close friends,” Clark replied.

“He might as well have been your brother,” Lois said with a

chuckle as she stuffed the used sheets into a laundry basket and deposited it into the hallway for the next morning. She paused. “Do you think you’d want to go back to the Planet, eventually?” she asked curiously.

“Yes,” Clark replied without hesitation. “At least, I think so. I just want everything to go back to the way it was, Lois. I miss my old life. This...half aware state of being...this constant fog...” He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Hopefully, I didn’t lose whatever reporting instincts I used to have,” he only half-joked.

Lois waved her hand dismissively, hoping to put him at ease. “It’s like riding a bicycle. Once you have the skill, you never forget it. You know, you lost your memory once before, not too long after you started at the Planet. A car hit you and you bumped your head,” she said as she went to the closet and pulled out a fresh set of light grey sheets, giving him the ‘official’ story, though she knew from Jonathan and Martha what had really transpired. “You only lost your memory for a few days that time, but you still had your reporter’s instincts. I took you along on a story and you still managed to ask really good questions.” She plopped the stack of sheets on the mattress, then turned to Clark and gently poked his chest over his heart. “That’s because your instincts are here, not up here.” She moved from his heart to gently tap the side of his head with her finger.

Clark nodded slowly, perhaps unconvinced. “If you say so.”

“I *know* so,” Lois replied as she began to put on the new fitted sheet.

They worked in silence for a few moments, getting the fitted sheet secured over the corners of the bed and straightened out. While Lois tended to the flat sheet, Clark got the pillows into their fresh new cases. He replaced them on the bed, then they both got the comforter centered on the bed and tucked down at the foot of the bed, trapping it beneath the mattress.

“Lois?” Clark said as he tugged on the edge of the comforter to work out a crease.

“Hmm?” she replied as she checked the length of the overhang on her side.

“I know I’ve said it before, but...thank you...for everything you’ve been doing for me,” Clark said. “I don’t know what I did in my past to earn your friendship, but I’m glad to have it.”

Lois finished her job and leaned on the mattress with both hands. She smiled. “You just...you were *you*. Once I stopped being too pig-headed to see that you were a genuinely nice guy, it was easy to allow you into my life.”

Clark chuckled. “Sounds too easy.”

Lois would have laughed too if she didn’t completely regret how those first weeks of being partnered with Clark had been wasted on hating him. “It should have been, but it took me a lot of effort to stop resenting the fact that Perry had given me a permanent partner.”

“Well...at any rate, I’m glad we’re friends,” Clark said, shrugging easily. “And hopefully more than that soon enough.” He looked down at the freshly made bed. “I’m still a little worked up from that nightmare,” he confessed. “You don’t have to stay if you don’t want to, but I wouldn’t turn away a little company if you’re not too sleepy. I mean, I know I asked you to hang out for a bit but you don’t have to if you’d rather not.”

“I’ll stay,” Lois immediately decided, putting an end to what might have been a babble.

Clark pulled the sheets up just enough to crawl beneath them and Lois did the same. For a while, they both lay back on the pillows, simply talking. Clark had a hundred questions about his past, Lois’ past, their past together at the Planet and as friends outside of work. Lois told him everything she could remember, leaving Superman well out of things so as not to upset him. But after an hour or two she felt herself drifting as Clark lay silently absorbing the things she’d told him, and before long, sleep

claimed her.

Clark lay nestled in the strong arms of Superman as the hero sped across the land. Where they were going, Clark wasn’t sure, but he realized that he was enjoying the sensation of flying. He hadn’t thought that he would. Incoherent as he’d been while flying to and from Kansas a few months prior, he felt like he’d disliked being on the airplane. But this was different, somehow. Without the tight, narrow confines of the plane around him, Clark felt free. He *liked* the sensation of having nothing between himself and the clouds.

“Hold on,” Superman said to him, but Clark didn’t so much hear the Man of Steel’s voice as he got a mental image of the words being spoken. He had no idea if the hero had spoken with a deep, authoritative voice or a meek, quiet one.

“Where are we going?” he asked, shouting to be heard over the rush of wind that surrounded them.

Superman’s hold tightened almost imperceptibly. “To remember.”

He headed straight for the center of a storm cloud. Darkness enveloped Clark, nearly blinding him. The only thing he *could* see were flashes of lightning all around him, dancing and writhing about him like frenzied dervishes. Clark cried out in alarm, but Superman didn’t react. He simply kept moving forward, bringing Clark into the center of the tempest. Another searing flash of light. Another deafening boom of thunder. Another coil of dread deep in Clark’s stomach.

“Go back!” Clark screamed. “This is insanity! You’ll kill me!”

The so-called hero didn’t answer and Clark was electrocuted in the next breath. Pure power ripped through Clark’s mortal body, tearing him apart and building him into something new at the same time. He felt every atom of his body tingling with the raw electricity of the white-hot lightning. He yelled again, this time in pain rather than fear. Still Superman kept moving him forward through the squall.

Clark had to fight for every inch of progress he made. The storm wanted to destroy him, almost as if it were a living, hateful thing. He screamed and gnashed his teeth and he grasped at shreds of cloud that melted away at his touch. But as each cry died away, he was struck anew, and the cycle began again. It felt like he’d circled the Earth a dozen times by the time he finally broke free of the thick black cloud and out into the blue sky again.

He sighed and his body sagged with relief as he sped away from the massive storm. He felt his face burning with rage and he twisted his neck to look up at Superman. He would let loose his fury on the so-called friend of his...the man who’d allowed Clark to rot in a prison cell and be tortured for two decades. But when he looked, the torrent of anger died in his throat and turned to confusion.

Superman was gone!

Clark panicked and scrambled for purchase in the air, but found nothing. He closed his eyes, bracing himself for the fall he knew was coming. But it *didn’t* come and Clark realized after a tense few moments that he *himself* was flying. Confusion washed over him, then pure fear, then tentative acceptance, and finally exhilaration. He stretched out his body on his stomach to his full length, putting his arms before him as though they would steer him through the now cloudless blue sky. Instinct took over as he went faster, then slower, made loops, zoomed left and right, ascended and descended as he came to learn what he could and could not do.

Suddenly, he was aware that the scenery had changed again. He saw Lois and himself being flung from an airplane while a man in seemingly military attire looked on with hard-set features and a look of triumph. The next thing he knew, he was in the arctic, screaming out some frustration or another. He blinked and he was in space, staring down an asteroid. He tried to brace for impact as

he sped toward it, but it hit him like a steam train and sent him reeling. When he at last recovered his wits, he was high above flat farmlands as far as the eye could see, all of it bathed in the warm golden light of a fading summer day. Fields of corn waved in the light breeze as if greeting him. He smiled to himself, feeling like he was home. But in the next second the cornfields ended and he was floating outside an apartment building where hushed voices were talking inside, but they sounded like the adults in the old Charlie Brown cartoons – nothing more than an unintelligible “wah-wah” noise. As he tried to make sense of it, he found himself racing an old steam locomotive on a stretch of track through a sleepy town. He entered a tunnel and came out the other side a moment later, right into the middle of a rocket launch...

Clark awoke panting heavily and in a cold sweat. He sat up immediately and rubbed at his eyes, wondering what the heck his dream had been about. Or had it meant anything at all? Had it all been conjured up by his imagination as he still struggled with gaping holes in his memory? He fisted his hands in frustration. Halloween had come and gone and November was almost halfway over. He’d now been free of his Arkham prison for eleven months. And still his memories were spotty at best, though he had to admit that he’d made a lot of progress since he’d started to heal. There were now childhood memories mixed into the bits of his past that had eluded him for so long. But Clark knew there was something missing still. Something that would tie the loose ends together, bridge some of the gaps, and complete him so that he didn’t feel like he was missing a part of his soul.

Shaking off the remnants of his nightmare, he checked the clock on his nightstand. It was just after eight in the morning. While his sleep hadn’t been as restful as it could have been, Clark decided to start the day. He showered quickly and then dressed. The long, hot summer had long since abated and now the city air was crisp and cool, with the threat of colder temperatures still to come. He chose an ash gray thermal style long sleeve shirt and a thick pair of black sweatpants, then he went and put on the faux pair of glasses Lois insisted he wear for some reason. He still didn’t understand why that was when he could see perfectly fine without them. But Lois was adamant that he wear them, though she was vague on why, only stating that the public was used to seeing him with glasses and that he should get used to them. At first, he’d only conceded to do so when they were going outside of the house – to see Dr. Klein usually. But as they’d spent more and more time out in the backyard or taking quiet afternoon strolls in the nearby park, he’d gotten used to the pretend frames and had gotten into the habit of wearing them inside the house as well.

“Maybe she just likes a man in glasses,” he quipped to himself as he turned the mystery over in his mind once more. He shrugged as he checked his appearance in the mirror.

He crept out of his room and gingerly made his way down the stairs to the kitchen. Along with some of his memories returning, he’d rediscovered that he’d once been a decent cook. He decided to make a few breakfast burritos for Lois and himself to share before the day got started in earnest. Not two minutes after he was done prepping the ingredients, Lois joined him in the kitchen.

“Morning,” she greeted him as she stepped into the room.

“Morning, Lois,” he said back with a grin as he scrambled the eggs and got the pan hot and ready.

“Sleep well?” she asked. She *always* did and Clark found it endearing.

“Well...” he waffled.

“More memories?” she asked with eager interest as he added the cheese, peppers, and bacon bits into the egg.

“I...I’m not really sure,” he admitted as he poured the egg mixture into the pan and immediately set to work ensuring that it cooked properly.

Lois nodded in understanding. It wasn’t uncommon for Clark to dream of something or think of something and then look to her

to confirm if it might be shreds of memories trying to find their place in the unfinished puzzle that was his mind.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she offered. She never pressed him to spill all of the details of his dreams if he didn’t want to.

Clark shook his head, trying to gather his thoughts. “It was strange,” he finally said as the random bits of dream coalesced into something more tangible that he could speak about. But something stopped him from diving right in and talking about the storm he’d flown through. “Lois?” he asked instead.

“Yeah?”

“Can I ask you something?” he hedged.

“Anything, you know that,” she softly encouraged as he slid the egg out of the pan and set the next batch to cooking. He placed the egg on the flat wrap and brought it to Lois. “Thanks,” she acknowledged.

“I guess it’s kind of an awkward question,” he said as he retreated to the stove to watch the new egg mixture cook. “But... it’s about Superman.”

“Superman?” Lois’ eyebrows shot up into her hairline. “I... was under the impression that you hated him.”

Hated was an understatement. Clark had flat out refused to listen to tales of the Man of Steel, nor had he read any articles about the hero, nor had he allowed Lois to even speak that name aloud in his presence. The very idea of Superman sent Clark into a near-rage. He still blamed the hero for his imprisonment – or at least for his imprisonment lasting as long as it had. After he’d learned that Superman was supposedly his friend, he’d denounced the Kryptonian any time his name was brought up in conversation. In Clark’s still very fractured mind, it didn’t make any sense why Superman would allow a friend of his to be locked up and tortured for two decades.

“I do,” Clark said through gritted teeth as he manipulated the cooking eggs. “But...I need to know...you said we used to be friends, before he abandoned me to...whatever it was that brought me to Arkham.”

Lois nodded warily. “You were as close as two people can get,” she said softly.

“So...I must have gone flying with him on at least a few occasions then?” Clark asked, clearly looking for confirmation.

Again she nodded, trying to puzzle out where he was coming from. “Yes...” she offered, dragging the word out.

“A lot?” Clark asked, transferring the cooked egg to his own plate and wrap. He brought it to the table and doused the inside with hot sauce before rolling it up to eat.

Lois winced at the amount of hot sauce. Just the smell of it had her eyes watering. Of course, it wouldn’t affect Clark, his invulnerable taste-buds, or his iron stomach. Even if he *hadn’t* had the benefit of his Kryptonian genes, Lois had tasted Jonathan Kent’s Five Alarm Chili. Clark would have developed a cast iron stomach with or without his unique origins.

“A fair amount,” she answered carefully. “We both got into...a lot of scrapes during our time as partners for the Daily Planet. He helped us out of quite a few jams.”

“But disappeared when I needed him most,” Clark grumbled as he took a bite of his breakfast. He chewed, swallowed, and sighed.

“Why so interested all of a sudden?” Lois asked, trying her best to make it sound casual.

“I...last night...I dreamt of flying with him,” Clark admitted slowly, as if it pained him to say the words. “It’s not the first time. I’ve had other flying dreams. Last night was just...the most intense one yet. But the thing is...I always start off flying *with* Superman. And I know it’s him...I’ve seen the photos. But, after I recognize that I’m flying with him, he always disappears. I never see him leave. One moment he’s there and the next...gone.” He snapped his fingers like a magician making a rabbit disappear.

“And I’m left alone...flying on my own.” He shook his head. “Weird...I know.”

“Are you...afraid...? When you find out you’re flying under your own power?” Lois asked, tamping down the spark of hope in her heart that maybe, just maybe, Clark was finally remembering.

“At first...yes,” Clark confided, after another generous bite of his breakfast. “But once the shock wears off...it feels...kind of good.” A gossamer smile just barely touched his lips.

“And do you find it...weird that you’re flying by yourself in these dreams?” she pressed.

He shook his head again. “No. It feels...like I was always meant to do it. But...last night was different,” he quickly amended. “Superman took me through an electrical storm. I was struck over and over with lightning so intense it was like Dr. Fulton’s electroshock treatment all over again.” Absently, he rubbed his temples with his hands as he spoke, as if feeling the electricity being shot through his body at that very moment. “Then he abandoned me. I flew for a while until I saw all of these random images.”

“Random images?” Lois asked, half holding her breath in hopes they were shards of memory and not conjured up by his imagination.

Quickly, Clark listed the things he’d seen. “In all of them, I got the sense that Superman *should* have been there. But he *wasn’t*,” he said disdainfully.

“Clark? Was there...anything else that you can recall about those...memories?” she asked carefully.

He shook his head. “Not much. The feeling of flying was pretty strong, but, other than that...” He shrugged as his voice trailed off. “So...did I? You know. Fly with him a lot.”

Lois scratched the back of her neck as she thought how best to answer his question. “It’s...complicated,” she finally settled on.

“What’s complicated about it? Either I flew a lot while we were still friends, or I didn’t,” Clark said, a quizzical expression on his face.

Lois sighed. “Do you trust me?” she asked, instead of answering him.

“You *know* I do,” Clark replied, but he looked worried at her change of topic.

“And you know I wouldn’t lie to you,” she continued.

He nodded warily. “Yes...” he said, dragging the word out in hesitation.

“The thing is...there’s something I haven’t told you yet. I was hoping you’d remember on your own but...” She sighed again. “I think these dreams are trying to give you what you’re missing.”

“Maybe I don’t *want* to remember Superman,” Clark said flatly.

“You *need* to!” Lois said, a bit louder and more animated than she’d meant to. She cleared her throat and tried again. “It’s important that you do.”

“Why? So I can remember how he let me down?” Clark scoffed. “No thanks.”

“He didn’t let you down,” she replied carefully.

“Well he sure as heck didn’t *help*,” Clark volleyed back, annoyed and troubled. “Look, Lois, I know you mentioned that you and he were friends, but that doesn’t mean *I* have to keep living in a fantasy land where I’m supposed to pretend that he wasn’t there when I needed him the most.”

“Clark! He *couldn’t* be there!” Lois pressed. She shut her eyes for a moment, gathering her courage, then opened them and made the plunge. “*You* are Superman.”

The words came out firm, but low. She let them be neutral — neither an accusation nor a press for him to accept the truth. It had been a simple statement of fact.

Clark recoiled like she’d slapped him. “That’s not true,” he said.

Lois shook her head at his denial. He wasn’t pretending he

didn’t know what she was talking about. He truly didn’t know.

“Yes, you are,” she softly countered. “I found out about it after you went missing,” she explained. “Your parents confirmed it. That’s when I knew something really, *really* bad must have happened to you. Superman does *not* just go missing and stay that way. I can only guess that something happened to you to rob you of your powers. You mentioned a green cage a while back in one of your nightmares. I’m guessing there was some exposure to Kryptonite and it stole your ability to save yourself.”

“No...” Clark said, standing up from his chair and denying the truth. “There’s *no way* I’m Superman. I’m just a boring, average guy. I mean, if I were Superman, wouldn’t I have...powers? I’ve got *nothing*, Lois.”

“You *do* have them, even if you can’t remember them,” Lois told him, trying to placate the wild, scared, angry look in his eyes. “But, if you let me, I can help you remember them.”

“*I’m not Superman!*” Clark fairly roared, stepped backward, toppling the chair over as he did so. “You...you’re *lying* to me! After I *trusted* you!” With that, he fled from the room.

Lois sat stunned for a moment before rising from her chair and chasing after him. But Clark had moved fast, even without his super speed. Before she’d even left the kitchen, she heard the front door slam shut. She started to run, squashing down the useless instinct to call out after him. She hurled herself out the front door as soon as she reached it, scanning up and down the sidewalk, looking for him, but he must have been running. She saw no sign of him.

“Oh no,” she muttered miserably, her stomach sinking and the breakfast burrito inside it threatening to make a reappearance. She ducked back into the house to throw on her shoes and grab her purse and car keys. She only hoped she picked the right direction when she climbed behind the wheel of her Jeep.

“This is a disaster,” she moaned to herself.

Clark was somewhere in Metropolis, alone, angry, and missing half his memories.

Clark didn’t stop running for a long while. He took no notice of what direction he’d fled in, his need to be away from such blatant lies too strong to allow him to even plot where he was going. Now, as he paused at an intersection to catch his breath, he wasn’t sure where he was.

You’re lost, idiot, he berated himself.

I’m not lost, I can backtrack the way I came from, he tried to reassure himself, but he wasn’t entirely convinced of the truth of that. He really *hadn’t* been paying any mind to his surroundings as he’d run, making random turns down random blocks in an effort to throw Lois off his track if that liar was in pursuit. And he knew she had to be.

You can’t even hail a cab back to Lois, his mind moodily hissed at him. *You have no money, no credit card, nothing.*

He shook his head, feeling sheepish. He really should have planned this better. But the past was in the past and there was nothing he could do to change that.

I don’t want to go back, he stubbornly insisted to himself. *She was lying to me to protect her so-called friend. After all we’ve been through since I was rescued and she’s lying to me. No...I can’t go back.*

But, if that was true, where *could* he go? The question ate away at him while he leaned against the corner of the brick building. It was a coffee shop and the most delicious smells were wafting out of it. He would have loved to have gone in, gotten one of the croissants he was smelling and a strong cup of coffee. But, as he stuck his hands into his pockets, he was once again made painfully aware of the fact that he had no money on him. He hadn’t even stopped to grab his jacket and he chalked up the fact that he wasn’t cold to all the running he’d done.

His mother would have scolded him for not having a jacket.

Suddenly, Clark snapped his fingers. That was it! His mother! She would know what to do! All he needed was a phone...

Clark looked this way and that, dismayed. In the twenty years he'd been shackled away from society, things had really changed. Everyone carried a phone in their pocket now. Not a single payphone was to be seen, where once they had seemed to be on every corner and outside every restaurant. His plan to make a collect call died before it was even hatched. Did collect calls even *exist* in this new and unfamiliar world he'd been thrust into?

He sighed. So much for his bright idea, he mused with a shake of his head. Not that it mattered much, he supposed. His mother was in Kansas...

"No, she's not," he remembered suddenly. "She said she was coming into the city when I talked to her the other night." He frowned. His mother was planning on staying at Lois' house. Which meant if he wanted to talk to her, he'd have to go back.

Sulking, he turned around and walked back the way he'd come, or at least he *hoped* it was the path he'd taken...

It wasn't the way he'd come.

He got lost half a dozen times, winding up on streets he didn't recognize or, once, down a dead end. He nearly got clipped by a bike messenger to boot as the young man had gone flying down the sidewalk, rather than in the street like he was supposed to. Hours passed and Clark was starting to worry. He didn't want to face Lois and her lies, but he hated the terrifying feeling of being lost in a city that he *should* have known like the back of his hand. It only drove home how much he was still missing and the thought both scared and depressed him.

"I shouldn't have stormed out," he grumbled to himself, his head hanging low, but still taking in the alien world around him.

A thought struck him then, as he looked at a shoe store on the corner of Tannenbaum Avenue. He had this nagging thought that the corner store and its unique windows looked vaguely familiar. Had it once been a diner? Or had it been a toy store? Either way, he was *certain*, somehow, that it hadn't been a shoe store the last time he'd been this way, some twenty years prior. How many other stores had changed since then? How much would he recognize in Metropolis even if he *hadn't* had his past stolen away by a barbaric doctor with a couple of electrodes?

Feeling even more hopeless than before, he kept walking.

Three blocks and two more wrong turns later, he happened upon a young police officer. Quickly, Clark crossed the street to where the officer was leaning against a telephone pole, sipping from a steaming Dunkin Donuts cup. The officer looked up just as Clark drew near.

"Can I help you?" he offered pleasantly.

"I...uh...hope so. I'm...not familiar with the city and I got a bit lost," Clark sheepishly admitted, toeing the ground in his embarrassment.

"Where are you trying to get to?" the policeman asked kindly.

"Hyperion Avenue," Clark replied without hesitation, glad he could remember at least that much.

The officer smiled. "You're not far."

"Glad to hear it," Clark remarked, meaning every word. He was more than ready to get back to his nice, familiar surroundings.

"You know what? I'm headed that way myself," the man said, looking Clark up and down as if sizing him up. He pushed himself away from the pole. "I can take you there."

Clark sighed with relief. "Thank you. I'd really appreciate that."

"Come on. It's just two blocks down," the officer said, waving to Clark as he started down the sidewalk.

Clark nodded and found himself making small talk with the policeman as they walked. He was curious about what changes had been made since he was last allowed to wander freely in the city, and he asked the officer about various buildings and stores. But the man couldn't have been much above the age of twenty-

eight or thirty, and he confessed to Clark that he was too young to remember most of the places Clark asked about. After the first block, Clark shut his mouth in contemplative silence.

It took all of fifteen minutes before Clark finally caught sight of Lois' street. He tried to thank the officer and be on his own way, but the polite young man insisted on walking Clark all the way to the front of Lois' house. Then, before Clark could say another word, Lois pulled up in her car – a silver Jeep that reminded Clark a lot of the one she'd driven way back when they'd first met, though of course, this one was much newer. She threw the car into park in the first available space and then flung herself outside, rushing to Clark.

"Oh, God! Clark! Where have you been? I've been looking *everywhere* for you! And the police...?" she rambled. She tried to hug him but he brushed off her advances.

"I'm fine," Clark said, shrugging off her concern, still feeling betrayed by her lies about Superman. "This kind officer helped me find my way back, that's all. It's not like I got caught graffitizing or shoplifting or something," he added angrily.

Lois looked like she was about to give him a huge piece of her mind, but she swallowed down whatever she was going to say and, instead, thanked the policeman. Then she guided Clark into the house, where Martha was pacing the living room. At the sound of the door opening, she turned and Clark could see the relief flooding her face. She crossed the room in a flash; Clark was constantly amazed at how quickly she could move for someone of her age. She threw her arms around him.

"I was so worried when I arrived and Lois was heading out to look for you," she told him. "Why on Earth did you run off?"

"Ask Lois," he grumbled, raising a hand to gesture at his friend.

Martha turned with a questioning look to Lois. Clearly, she hadn't had enough time to gather the whole story. But she didn't need to utter a word.

"Clark's been having dreams about Superman," Lois explained quietly. "About *flying*." Something was funny about the way she said 'flying,' though Clark couldn't pinpoint what it was. "He asked me about Superman and...I told him the truth."

"That *he's* Superman," Martha said, closing her eyes with the weight of that knowledge.

"No, she *lied* to me and said I was Superman," Clark snapped. "She *knows* how much I hate him for abandoning me and then she tries to make me believe *I'm* that pathetic loser?"

"Clark, she's *not* lying," Martha told him, leveling him with a steely gaze.

"Pfft," Clark blew her off. "There's *no way* I can be Superman. I have no powers. I was locked up in Arkham Asylum! I think if I were Superman, I could have, oh I don't know, knocked a hole in the wall big enough to walk through."

"Clark Jerome Kent!" Martha snapped in the disciplinary tone that Clark hadn't heard since he was a child. "Sit down, knock off the attitude, and *listen* to us!"

"Why would I listen Lois spin a bunch of mean-spirited lies?" he wondered acidly.

"Call Lois a liar one more time and you won't be too old for me to tan your hide like a piece of cheap leather," his mother threatened.

Clark flinched, suddenly feeling like a little kid again. He grudgingly sat but he crossed his arms petulantly. There was no chance he was going to entertain a pack of lies. "Do these look like the types of injuries the Man of Steel can suffer from?" he asked coldly, lifting his shirt enough to expose the long, wormy white lines of scar tissue on his chest and back.

"If he were exposed to Kryptonite and made vulnerable, yes," Martha immediately replied in a hard tone. Then, softer, "Look, Clark, I know it's not easy to reconcile. But you *are* Superman." She sat down next to him on the couch and put a hand on his

shoulder. “You just don’t remember it.”

“Because there’s nothing *to* remember!” Clark insisted, gesturing vaguely.

“Then why are you dreaming about flying?” Lois asked smugly.

Clark shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s not *that* uncommon a dream, is it?” The rhetorical question had been meant as a challenge, not as a true question.

“You always said flying was your favorite ability,” Martha calmly explained.

“That’s convenient,” Clark muttered, not quite under his breath.

“Martha, nothing is going to make him believe us unless we prove it to him,” Lois said, ignoring his brooding mood.

Martha nodded. “You’re right.”

Clark rolled his eyes. “There’s nothing *to* prove!”

“Shut up,” Lois commanded in a tone he’d never heard come from her before.

To his own amazement, he found himself closing his mouth on the retort that was boiling on his tongue.

“Good,” Lois commented in the same tone. “Now...Martha, how did you and Jonathan help him when his abilities first started making themselves known?”

Martha sighed. “It was a long process, but he had to learn control, back then. He always said that once he learned control, keeping it got to be second nature.”

“So, it’s possible he’s just subconsciously got a tight rein on them right now, simply because he doesn’t remember he’s even got these powers,” Lois said thoughtfully turning over the information in her mind. “Okay, so...we should be fine in just... coaxing them back out. I think.”

“I hope so,” Martha said, chewing her lower lip in worry.

“Okay,” Lois repeated, “the question is...how?”

Martha thought for a moment before answering. “I think flight is the safest way to go.”

Lois nodded. “I was thinking the same thing.”

Clark rolled his eyes again. “I can’t fly any more than you can,” he insisted.

“Close your eyes,” Martha instructed, giving him a look that dared him to argue. He bit his tongue against replying and did as he was told. “Good. Now, I want you to clear your mind. Forget about us. Forget about Superman. I want you to think about those dreams...the ones in which you’re flying.”

“With the traitor or on my own?” Clark asked, unable to resist the barb.

“On your own,” Lois answered, not taking the bait. Her voice was calm, soothing, much like Martha’s.

“The sky is blue, endless, stretched out before you,” Martha said, directing the mental image she wanted him to picture. “You’re weightless. You stretch your hand out to one side to touch a wispy puff of white cloud as you float by. It’s cold and wet to the touch but it means next to nothing to you. You’re just completely relaxed as you lazily float on. You have no cares, nothing to tie you to the ground. Can you feel it?”

Clark did the best he could and let his mother’s voice carry him away. He had to. If he continued to mouth off, he knew there would be hell to pay later. Martha Kent was the world’s sweetest mother, but she could also be roused to warrior-mode, as he’d seen on a few occasions that he could actually remember.

“Clark...open your eyes,” Lois instructed, her voice soft.

“Slowly,” she added before he could so much as crack one eyelid open.

Again, humoring her, he did, but when the waking world was before his eyes again, things didn’t look quite right. He was suspended in the air a good two feet above their heads. He panicked for a moment, lost his concentration on the images Martha had called up in his mind, and crashed down on the floor

behind the couch with such a force he probably would have cracked the couch in two if he’d landed on it.

He scrambled backward for a foot or so as he tried to make sense of what had just happened, his mouth hanging open and his brain whirring. He tried for a long moment to speak, but nothing came out of his flapping lips. He shook his head and tried again.

“What...just happened?” he finally managed to get out.

Lois arched an eyebrow. “*Now* do you believe you’re Superman?”

Superman.

How could Clark deny it any longer?

The evidence was there. He’d seen himself flying.

But it terrified him, rather than comforted him.

“No...no...no,” he moaned, his hands on the sides of his head.

“This can’t be right.”

“I’m sorry, but...it’s the truth,” Lois said, going around behind the couch to where he was kneeling on the floor. “It’s okay.”

But Clark hadn’t been speaking to her. He found himself in a memory. He wasn’t seeing the walls of Lois’ living room any longer. He didn’t see or even hear her as she knelt before him to offer her support.

He was in Arkham Asylum, strapped to a chair with bonds so tight he felt sure they would cut off his circulation. Dr. Fulton hovered before him, checking the restraints.

“Tell me, who are you?” he asked, peering into Clark’s scowling face.

“Superman,” Clark growled defiantly. Because that’s who he was. There was no one else he could possibly be.

Dr. Fulton clucked his tongue in a disappointed fashion. “Well, well, I see we haven’t made any progress yet. Curious,” the doctor said, partly to Clark but mostly to himself. “I may have to increase the voltage after all.” He grinned maliciously at Clark. “Don’t worry though. *Eventually* we’ll get the voltage correct. And then Superman will vanish and plague you no more.” His voice was syrupy sweet, almost a sing-song, like he was talking to a toddler.

He shoved a gag into Clark’s mouth with such force it was a wonder Clark’s jaw didn’t break. Then he turned, and with a swish of his lab coat, fiddled with the knobs of some computer panel and threw the lever that sent sizzling pain into Clark’s brain. Dr. Fulton laughed; Clark screamed as every molecule of his body felt like it was torn apart and set on fire.

“No...no...no...no!” he kept repeating aloud as the scene played out in his head with such clarity that he could *feel* the pain, not *just* remember it. “Stop!” he pleaded to the ghost before his eyes. “Leave me alone!” His eyes squeezed shut, as if that would banish the memory.

“Clark? Clark?” Lois and Martha were practically screaming, but Clark did not notice. They gently shook him by the shoulders, desperately trying to get him to snap out of it.

But Clark only felt Dr. Fulton’s hands on him as the memory continued to torment him. In Clark’s mind, it was the doctor who rattled his body to and fro, screaming for answers Clark didn’t have.

“Who are you?” Dr. Fulton demanded to know once more, the crazed sneer in his voice as clear as if Clark was hearing it in real time.

“I’m Superman. Can’t you understand that?” Clark flung back venomously at the phantasm leering at him behind his closed eyelids.

Clark watched the memory play out as Dr. Fulton shook his head and hit the switch again. Clark went blind with agony. He screamed louder than before and wretched his body from side to side trying to escape the torture.

Subconsciously, he was aware that he could move, and wasn’t shackled down to the chair like in his memory. He cradled his aching head in his hands and pushed himself up as he tried to

escape the memory he was trapped in. Lois touched his shoulder to try and comfort him, but he was beyond the point of knowing anything but the past. He wobbled as he stood up, then blindly fled the room.

Lois heard a few things in the hall fall over in the wake of his passing, then the thump of his racing footsteps as he mounted the stairs. With a slam, the door to his room shut and Lois was left behind in bewilderment.

For the better part of three hours, Clark sat huddled on the floor of his bedroom, his back against the bed, on the far side from the door. He'd locked it in his panic, as though it would keep out the images in his head. It didn't. For a long while, he sat trapped in his memories, blind to the world around him, deaf to the pleading cries of Martha and Lois as they called to him and banged their ineffectual fists on the door. He sat with his knees up to his chest, his arms wrapped about them. He rocked back and forth, trying to self-soothe, even if he wasn't really aware of it.

Bit by bit, the past came back to him.

He remembered his time in the asylum. He remembered every cruel thing Dr. Fulton had said or done to him. He remembered every jolt of electricity as Dr. Fulton tried to "cure" him by purging Superman from his identity. He remembered knowing *only* that he was Superman. He remembered the void where Clark Kent had once been. Slowly, pieces of the puzzle locked into place. But much of it was still cloaked in shadow.

He knew he had come from somewhere. He could remember being dressed in a cheap, knock-off Superman costume and dropped off at the asylum. He remembered the presence of some guy handing him over to the asylum staff, though he couldn't picture the man's face. Beyond that...darkness. But not the darkness of missing memories. *Actual* darkness, so deep and black he couldn't see the hand in front of his face. There was the occasional pain, so vastly different from the pain brought about by Dr. Fulton's electrical torture device. That anguish had come from outside to invade his body. This other agony was more ethereal, less concrete in a way, originating in every cell of Clark's body all at once and leaving him to roast alive from some inner fire.

Where it came from, he wasn't sure. He did remember being locked in a cage. He could feel the cold, heartless steel beneath his hands as he gripped the bars in the times when the crippling torment wasn't present. There was a heavy feeling in the air, something oppressive though it wasn't really tangible. It was in his mind, sapping his sanity. He could almost hear some sort of mantra running through his mind, but he could not make out the words. Something about Superman...

Frustrated, Clark finally pulled himself from his dark pathway into the past with a bestial roar. No matter how hard he tried, whatever lay behind his captivity and the depression he knew he'd experienced lay just out of reach. In fact, the harder he tried to focus on it, to bring it into clearer view, the more it slipped away into the swirling mists of his mind. He shook his head, trying to dispel the darkness that he'd been wandering in.

Slowly, his bedroom coalesced before his eyes. He realized he was shaking like a leaf, with balled fists and tears on his cheeks. His breathing was ragged panting, like he'd run a marathon under the broiling sun, without the benefit of his Kryptonian genetics. His heart was hammering in his chest so violently he was concerned he might be having a heart attack. He was light-headed and felt woozy, his stomach was balled up in knots, and he felt like the world around him was spinning in dizzying circles.

"No..." he said in a half-choked sob. "No..."

But it was the truth. He had to face the facts. Even if they made him uncomfortable or dredged up memories that would have been better off forgotten in his still-damaged brain. He was Superman. And, at one point, that was *all* he'd been.

"I forgot who I was," he whispered to himself tremulously, as

if speaking it aloud might somehow trigger a return to his catatonic-like state of having no identity at all. "How could I have forgotten?"

Torture, his mind hissed in a sleepy, disgusted way.

He had to admit it made sense. If torture had forced out his memories of his super side, it stood to reason that torture had burned away his Clark side too.

But the question remained – how?

He *knew* he hadn't lost that part of himself in the asylum. He remembered clearly now how he'd been brought there, against his will, raging at everyone who dared to say he wasn't Superman. Clark had been stolen from him sometime prior to that. And, what was more, he had an indistinct feeling that Clark had been ripped away from him a long time before he'd ever been dumped at the asylum, like an unwanted dog at the local animal shelter.

But he couldn't remember anything more than that. He *knew* it would drive him absolutely crazy if he continued to focus on it while it skittered away further into the locked recesses of his mind.

Instead, he forced himself up off the floor and washed his face in the bathroom sink, ridding himself of any trace of his fear, tears, and uneasy admittance that he still was missing an important part of his past. When he thought he looked presentable, he squared his shoulders and left the room. He could hear Lois and his mother talking quietly amongst themselves in the living room, thanks to a quick check of his super hearing, which brought him up short. Now that he remembered, it seemed like a door in his mind had opened, giving him access to his abilities. Using his super-hearing had been so reflexive that he hadn't even been aware that he'd triggered its use.

Better go someplace safe, and soon, to test out my control over my abilities, he told himself as he severed the connection. *Before I use any of them again*.

He didn't need his enhanced hearing now as he got closer. Lois sounded worried. Martha sounded numb.

"What if he never remembers?" Lois was fretting.

"We'll *make* him remember, one way or another," Martha said tiredly, sounding not entirely convinced of her own words.

"We tried that and look what happened," Lois said despondently. "He *saw* himself floating. And still denied it."

"What about one of the other supers out there?" Martha wondered. "Didn't you say that Martian guy can read minds or something?"

"Martian Manhunter," Lois confirmed, and Clark could see her nodding as he peeked around the door frame. "And he can only read minds; he can't make anyone believe anything. And he can't unlock missing memories. Otherwise, I would have asked Batman or Wonder Woman to send him over as soon as Clark was found in that damn asylum." She spoke bitterly about the asylum.

"You don't have to convince me of anything," Clark said softly as he padded into the room, his voice soft, tired, and apologetic. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to believe you earlier."

"We were worried about you," Lois said, rather than reply to his words. Instead of rushing to his side, like she usually did, she warily eyed him from her seat and kept her distance, making no effort to approach him. "When you ran off screaming. We thought about jimmying the lock to your bedroom open. What happened?"

"I'm glad you didn't," Clark admitted, flopping tiredly down on the couch beside Lois. He absently rubbed at his temples. "I was sort of stuck in a memory. I guess that's the best way to describe it. It was like I was actually back there, in Dr. Fulton's lab."

Lois shivered slightly and Martha scowled at the name. But neither of them spoke.

"I remember now. I was brought to the asylum as a man who believed he was Superman. An average, not at all infused with powers, boring, delusional man who swore up and down he was

Superman. Because that's all I was. Something happened before that to make me forget I was Clark. I only knew I was Superman. Dr. Fulton would electrocute my brain in an effort to 'cure' me," and here he made air quotes with his fingers, "of my delusion. Only I guess, even without my powers, I was a little more... resilient. Against the electroshock treatment. He did it over and over again, sometimes back to back, sometimes with a day or a week in between, until it finally fried my brain. I remember losing more and more of the world as each treatment happened, until I was stuck inside a body I could no longer control, aside from basic functions, with a mind as hollow and brittle as an empty eggshell."

Martha's face was the picture of heartbreak. Lois' was nothing more than naked rage.

"He's lucky he's already dead," she swore. "I'd kill him."

"It wasn't his fault. Not entirely," Clark quickly added, not defending the doctor but wanting to explain. "How would you react to a normal man – who could bleed just as easily as you – dressing in a cheap Halloween costume, insisting he was Superman? Would *you* believe him? Or would you think he was insane? You *saw* how many nuts came out of the woodwork all claiming to be 'the real deal' after Superman made his debut!"

When had he remembered *that*? he wondered.

"Well..." Lois hedged.

"You *wouldn't* believe him," Clark asserted. "I had *no* idea I was Clark at the time. Something happened to me before I ever got to the asylum. Something that made me believe I was *only* Superman. Something that took Clark away from me."

"When I was first brought to you, you were emotionless," Lois said slowly, as if reliving that first encounter. "I called you by name and you reacted as if I'd knifed you. The terror on your face...the way you recoiled from me..." She shook her head and sighed sadly. "It took you a long time before I could call you Clark without sending you into a mute panic."

"I think I was tortured before I got to Gotham," he said flatly.

"Well...yeah, that makes sense. The terror associated with your name...the countless wounds and broken bones..." She ticked off the points on her fingers.

"No, I mean *mentally* tortured," Clark clarified, running a hand through his hair uneasily. "Yeah, okay, the physical stuff makes sense too. But I remember being left in the dark for a long, long time. I remember something being said to me about Superman. I remember pain if I denied it. I think. But, beyond that...nothing."

"Who would do such a thing?" Martha gasped in horror.

"And why?" Lois asked sharply, looking for all the world like she was ready to strangle whoever was responsible.

"Search me," Clark replied helplessly with a pitiful shrug. "I can't pinpoint anything yet. I know there was a voice but I can't really *hear* it, per se. I know it tormented me about Superman, but I have no idea what it actually said. I can't figure out who said it, if they were a man or woman or if it was robotic. There's just... nothing. Not even a reason for why it was happening."

"I'm sorry, Clark," Lois offered sincerely.

He shook his head. "No, *I'm* the one who's sorry. I shouldn't have called you a liar. I should have known better that you wouldn't lie to me. I *did* know better. I acted like an absolute jerk," he apologized. "Forgive me?" He sighed and pulled off his glasses to rub at his eyes. He felt exhausted by the emotional toll of the day.

Lois scooted a little closer to him and patted his knee affectionately. "There's nothing to forgive."

"There's *everything* to forgive," he gently argued.

"No, there's not. I think I get it now. It was a knee-jerk reaction. If someone tortured *me* for saying I was a reporter, for example, I think I'd learn to deny it after a while too. Consciously or not," she added.

"It was easier to think Superman let me down than that I

couldn't save myself," Clark neatly tacked on with another sigh. He fell silent a moment, then ventured to take the conversation in another direction. "You said something about the other supers? Are there many others? Do they know...about me?"

Lois shot Martha a nervous glance. Martha returned the look, but it looked ambiguously reassuring at the same time.

"Well...yes, there are others now. I've lost count of how many, mostly because none are Metropolis-based, so I don't cover them the way I used to cover Superman," Lois hastily explained. "If I'm being honest, I've mostly been in contact with Wonder Woman and Batman over the years."

"Bat...man?" Clark asked, envisioning a bat with vaguely humanoid features and powerful wings to fly with.

"Oh, he's just a regular guy who dresses in black, uses a bat symbol as his sort of 'brand,' and who sticks to crimefighting at night. He's the one who found you, by the way. Gotham is his city," Lois replied somewhat dismissively. She waved her hand, as if banishing smoke from her presence. "I'll fill you in on all the details later."

"Fair enough. So...there's a lot, then," Clark tried to confirm.

Lois nodded slowly as she thought. "More than I ever dreamed possible, and still fewer than this world really needs. They've kind of split themselves into different organizations. The Avengers, the Justice League...you know, lofty titles that proclaim how important and powerful they are. Anyway, the Justice League is more modeled on, well, the legacy Superman left behind when he vanished. You'd like them, I think. I know they've been waiting to meet you. All in good time, of course," she rambled on a bit.

"Meet me? Do they know...?" he asked again.

Lois blushed guiltily.

"They *had* to be told," Martha interrupted. "Lois ran herself ragged looking for you. Chased false leads all over the globe. Exhausted every human avenue open to her. And even *with* the cooperation of that network of heroes – and despite their choice to work as separate organizations, they *do* help one another – it still took twenty years for you to be brought home." There was a hitch in her voice but she swallowed it down. "When Lois first asked if she should tell Wonder Woman that Clark Kent – and that's who Lois was searching for, not Superman – was Superman, your father and I thought it was for the best. We hated it, don't get me wrong. But by withholding your real alias from them only hurt the search, in our eyes. For all we knew, Superman was lying wounded or captive or," she gulped hard, "dead somewhere. Or it could have been Clark out there. We didn't want either of your identities to be overlooked because they were looking for a normal man, not a superhero...or vice versa."

Clark thought over the logic of this. Slowly, only half convinced, he nodded. "I guess..."

"It was the *only* way," Martha insisted.

"I'm not *mad*," Clark defensively replied. "It's just a lot to take in, you know? Apparently, everyone *except* me knew that I was Superman, until a couple of hours ago at any rate." He cracked his knuckles in thought. "Um, awkward question?" he finally said after clearing his throat.

"Hmm?" Lois asked.

"So...I don't really remember too much yet. Did I tell you I was Superman or...?" He shrugged, knowing he didn't really *need* to fill in the rest of that question. He scratched an itch on his wrist idly, not knowing what to expect. He could well imagine Lois being angry with him, regardless of how the information had come out.

"I figured it out myself," Lois admitted calmly, stunning Clark. He'd anticipated all the fire and brimstone of Hell falling upon him for not telling Lois such crucial information. But perhaps twenty years to stew in her anger had tempered it somewhat. "Not long after you vanished, in case you were wondering."

“Actually, I *was*,” Clark confessed. He scrunched up his brow. “Um...can I ask? How? And...why are you so calm about this? Uh...not that I’m complaining, mind you,” he rushed to amend.

Lois laughed, but bitterly. “I’m not mad. I never was, not really. I was too busy being scared. Even before I figured it out, I knew it was totally unlike you to disappear without a word. I used your spare key to check your apartment and accidentally found your suits in the hidden rear compartment in your closet.”

“I guess I should have picked a better spot,” Clark remarked blandly as shreds of memory swirled around him. He thought he could almost recall putting that false back into the closet to conceal how deep it went.

Lois shrugged. “I was confused at first, but it didn’t take a Mensa scholar to make the connection. You were missing and so was Superman. As far as I could figure, both of you dropped off the map at roughly the same time. I went to my roof and called for Superman every day and night, thinking he could help me find you, and for the first time in since he’d appeared, he didn’t answer my call. Not even the media had seen him around. It was a no-brainer that the suits were *yours*, rather than *his* and just being stored at your apartment.”

“Smart,” Clark admitted with a nod. He loved to watch Lois’ mind work. It gave him a thrill to see the vast intelligence mingled with her fiery spirit beneath the exceedingly attractive façade.

“Lois brought the suits to us,” Martha supplied from her own seat. “Your father and I didn’t see much use in denying the truth, especially to Lois. We knew it could only help her try to locate where on Earth you’d gone.”

Clark nodded again. “Like with giving the other supers my identity. It was a bold move and a smart one.” Then he sighed. “I’m glad I had you all on my side.”

“You still do,” Lois promised.

“Thanks,” he acknowledged as something tugged at the back of his mind. “Wait...didn’t you have a crush on Superman back then?” he asked Lois, carefully keeping any accusation out of his voice.

Martha subtly cleared her throat and slipped out of the room. “I did,” Lois replied.

“Is that why you’ve...?” He couldn’t finish the question. It was too painful to think that Lois had admitted feelings for him and agreed to give him a chance in the dating world once his memory came back fully, only because he’d once been Superman.

“No.” She seemed to know exactly what his worries were. “The truth is, I realized how much I care about you...how much I *like* you...before you went missing. I might have been too stubborn to acknowledge it, but it was there. And when I couldn’t find you, even before I found your suits, suddenly this...this yawning abyss appeared before me where I had to come to terms with the fact that I might never see you again. It scared me, Clark. It scared me to know that I might never see you or hear your voice or explore the feelings I’d been having for you. Superman wasn’t even a *blip* on my radar, except for one thing.”

“What?” He could hardly force the word out of his throat, fearing what the exception might be.

“As soon as I realized you were Superman, it made me go from scared to full-on panic. Because I knew that something had to have gone very, *very* wrong. If you were in trouble, you should have been able to get yourself out of it. Superman doesn’t get into trouble unless he wants to. But the fact that he *didn’t* reappear meant you had to have been at the very least hurt, if you were even still alive.”

She shuddered as though a chill had run down her spine. “That’s why I tracked down the other supers, including Wonder Woman, and asked for help in finding you. I knew you could be literally anywhere – tied up in a flea-ridden motel in Hobb’s Bay, in trouble at the summit of Mount Everest, lying dead or dying on some deserted island...” Her voice trembled and trailed off, as

though she was experiencing the terrifying race to find him all over again.

He hung his head, realizing for the first real time, just how much Lois had suffered emotionally as she’d searched for him. He felt ashamed, though he knew there was nothing he could have done to get home quicker.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized.

“Don’t apologize,” she told him with a shake of her head. Her gaze went to steel and ice was in her words. “Let whoever locked you in Arkham Asylum be sorry. Let whoever brought you to that hellhole be sorry. Because, one way or another, we’re going to figure out what happened in the ten years before Gotham, and we’re going to make whoever is responsible for it pay.”

It took Clark weeks to reconcile with himself the fact that, while he’d been Superman all along, he had been absolutely powerless to save himself. He still instinctively blamed the absent hero for his imprisonment, and it was difficult to admit to himself that *he* was the missing hero. Try as he might, he could not remember how or why he’d come to be without his powers. Kryptonite seemed the likely culprit, of course, as Lois had pointed out. And it would explain the unshaped feeling of having been hurt during his pre-asylum days. But, for the life of him, he had no recollection of where he’d been, who had hurt him, or for what purpose he’d been forcibly stripped of his true identity of Clark Kent.

During that time, he often slipped out of the house after Lois went to work. He found a nice, secluded clearing in the woods of upstate New Troy, far from any roads, buildings, or other watchful eyes. He was always careful to fly fast enough to avoid being seen, but slow enough not to break the sound barrier. He didn’t want people to think Superman had returned, mostly because Superman *hadn’t*. Clark found himself wondering sometimes if Superman ever *would*. He could remember bits and pieces of his work while wearing the bright blue and red suit. He could remember how good, how fulfilling it had been to make a rescue. He remembered the sense of purpose it had given him whenever he’d been able to use his powers to save a life or put a criminal behind bars.

But that had been a long, long time ago. Clark hadn’t been sure, at first, if he could remember how to use half of his abilities. So, he would sneak off to the woods and practice in as safe an environment as he could, where his identity could remain protected and where he stood no chance of accidentally incinerating a random passerby with out of control heat vision. Day after day, he would spend hours alone, testing his limits bit by incremental bit, until he was *certain* he could remember how to unleash the subconscious restraint he kept on each potentially devastating ability, *and* that he could keep control even in the most extreme upper limit of each power.

He needn’t have worried. As each passing day slipped by, he found that reaching for his powers came naturally to him, as easy to remember and execute as riding a bike. In the evenings, with both his mother’s and Lois’ blessings, he would fly out to his childhood home in Kansas and transport boxes and bags and various pieces of furniture to his mother’s new, modest little house in Metropolis.

“I’m getting too old to work the farm like I used to,” she’d told him the day after he’d rediscovered his super side.

“I can do it for you,” he’d pressed, eager to give her a reason to keep the farm. “You know I could do all the planting and harvesting and tilling and the rest in minutes. You’d never have to worry about things,” he’d told her, even though his powers had been as of yet untested.

But she’d shaken her head. “I love that farm, you know that. But it’s just not the same without your father. And I feel better being close to you anyway.”

"I'm *always* close by," Clark had argued. "So long as I have my speed and my flight."

"Your father and I always planned to move to Metropolis," she'd confided. "Once you'd decided this was your home, we always knew we'd wind up here in our retirement. Of course, we never thought the circumstances would turn out like this," she'd admitted, her palms upturned with an unmoving shrug.

It hadn't taken a clairvoyant to see that she'd meant she'd always thought Clark might find someone, settle down, get married, and raise a family.

"Besides," she'd continued before he could comment, "Dustin and Randy Irig are more than a perfect choice to take over the land. They've done amazing things with Wayne's old farm. They'll take care of ours too," she'd said, her voice full of conviction and devoid of remorse.

That had been the end of the discussion. She would hear no more on the subject and would entertain no attempts to get her to change her mind. What was done, was done. Clark reluctantly let it go, and focused instead on providing a fast, reliable, and cautious moving service to bring all of Martha's possessions to her humble new abode. And, the more he carried through the air under the dark cover of night, the more he had to admit that it *was* a comfort to have her close by while he still tried to fill in the ever-shrinking number of gaps in his memory.

He had a lot of time to himself during those flights and he used them to think. Well, except for the first one. He was still figuring out his route then and had been so focused on the landscape below that he'd flown smack-dab into the center of an electrical storm on his way over Cleveland. He'd still picked up the dresser his mother had asked for, but he'd returned to Metropolis looking like a marshmallow that had been put too close to a bonfire and went aflame. After that, he'd been more careful and a lot more familiar with the route he needed to take. And that's when he would let his mind wander.

Mostly, his thoughts strayed to Superman.

How could they not, when he was flying up above the world?

A world he only partially recognized. A world he was still relearning. A world that had moved on, changed, and evolved while he'd been stuck firmly in the past. A world which, he hoped, held a potential future with Lois, if only he could finally reclaim the last missing pieces of his memory.

Superman.

He thought of it now as he made his way over the ribbon-thin roads far beneath him on his way to the old farmhouse. It was his fifteenth trip of the night as he'd toted boxes of art supplies and books and various knickknacks to Metropolis. He was on his way now to transport his father's old high-backed armchair, and the thought made him incredibly sad. It was haunting enough to watch the house he'd grown up in grow steadily emptier. The echoes within the rooms that sent his footsteps back to his own ears were eerie. But this was different. This was heart-wrenching, to know that Jonathan Kent would never sit in his chair again, in its new spot by the tidy faux fireplace in the tight little living room in Metropolis. It slowed his pace considerably as he tried to stave off the inevitable.

Funny, how this one trip is taking me longer than all the others combined, he thought sourly.

He detoured then, as Smallville came into view and aimed for the cemetery instead of the house. He landed with whisper-quietness on the stubbornly green grass, despite the definite chill in the air as autumn moved inexorably closer to winter. So far, he hadn't visited his father's grave, despite asking his mother where, exactly, in the cemetery his father's remains had been laid to rest. Visiting the site would have made it all too real. But now Clark felt compelled to cement that reality into existence and try to make peace with the fact that he'd been robbed of the last years of his father's life. All those missed opportunities to hear his father's

sometimes gruff, but always supportive, advice. All those unsaid goodbyes. All those little memories of his father's gentle chuckle, his booming belly laugh, the way Jonathan's eyes would twinkle in amusement, the way he'd absently wipe at his glasses when he was in deep thought.

Worst of all, Jonathan Kent had died never knowing that his son was still alive.

Clark sighed heavily as he looked around at the area that spread out around his father's tombstone. A massive maple tree still held a few stubborn, brown leaves. Clark judged that in the summer, the tree's branches would just barely shade the edges of his dad's grave, which suited Clark just fine. His dad had been a lover of working and playing in the bright sunshine. Behind the grave, maybe a hundred and fifty feet away, was a little pond. Clark's sharp night vision picked out the flash of silver scales beneath the water as he zoomed in on the surface. That made Clark smile bittersweetly. He might not have had all his memories back just yet, but he could remember how much his dad had loved fishing, and, by extension, how much he himself had enjoyed it, simply because it was something that his father had loved.

"It's a beautiful spot, Dad," he murmured so lightly even the slight breeze couldn't carry the sound away. "I'm sorry it's taken me so long to visit. I...I wasn't sure I was ready for it before now. I wish I *had* come. I wanted you to know that...I'm okay. I *will* be okay. I may not be completely back to my old self, but Mom and Lois have been amazing at helping me to get back to who I used to be."

He ran his fingertips over the engraved lettering on the front of the tombstone, which stated simply in a beautifully flowing script: *Jonathan Kent, Devoted Husband and Loving Father*. And, of course, the dates that marked the beginning and end of his life. Clark ignored the dates and stared in contemplation at the dash between them.

"I remember hearing or reading something once," he told his father's final resting place as he dragged his fingers away from the words and ran them, instead, over the top of the highly polished, extremely smooth gray granite. "I don't remember the exact wording – surprise, surprise," he added bitterly, "but it talked about the dash between the dates on a gravestone. How it represents an entire lifetime. How it's the most meaningful mark on the entire piece of stone. I wish I hadn't missed out on the last years of your life. I wish I could see you one last time. I'd tell you how much I miss you. How much I love you, Dad. How much I still need you." He closed his eyes against the pinpricks of tears in his eyes until he was certain he'd banished them from existence. "I'll take care of Mom, you know that. I just...I hope you know that we're okay, all of us. Sometimes, I wonder if you didn't somehow have a cosmic hand in my rescue. Maybe you sent Bruce to where I was. I don't know," he continued, shaking his head.

He looked up at the star-filled expanse of sky above him. "I just wanted to say thank you for that. I promise I'll make you proud of me...of this second chance I've been given...even if I don't necessarily deserve it. I've made a lot of mistakes in my life. I guess everyone does. But...sometimes I wonder why I've been given this miraculous recovery from what should have rendered me almost catatonic and a blank slate for the rest of my life. It doesn't make any sense to me. Anyone else would have suffered permanent brain damage by going through the things I did. And, while I'm grateful to get my life back, it doesn't seem fair that after all of that electroshock torture I went through, that I still got some kind of cosmic reset so I could go about my life again."

He rifled his hand through his hair as he fought to master both his emotions and his train of thought. Just thinking about how insanely blessed he'd been to possess the ability to heal his barbecued brain made him feel queasy when he knew no one else on Earth would ever have it so lucky. They would be lost forever,

not just a decade or two.

“I should probably get going. I don’t want to worry Mom,” he told his father. “I promise I’ll be back when I can.”

Then, silently, he rose ever upwards until he was nothing more than a black speck against an even blacker sky. In a few heartbeats he was at the farm, unlocking the door and grabbing his father’s chair. On an impulse, he stacked the coffee table longways across the arms of the chair, figuring he could save himself a trip and knowing that the added weight would be negligible, on par with that of a fly landing on the chair thanks to the inhuman strength he possessed.

His mind slid back to Superman as he flew back home to Metropolis, even though he would have done just about anything to be devoid of any and all thoughts at that moment in time. He wondered if he would ever take up the mantle of the superhero again. A part of him was convinced Superman should stay dead in the public’s eye. A greater part of him was revolted by the idea of wearing the blue and red again; not after wearing it day in and day out and being electrocuted for the simple knowledge that he *was* Superman, and not some delusional, possibly self-destructive, sorry excuse for a man.

“The public won’t accept me if I go back to being Superman,” he reasoned to the moon, which seemed to beckon him ever eastward as he made his way home. “And even *if* they did, there’s *no* way I could ever explain Superman’s long absence in a satisfactory way. There would be too many questions. People might realize that Superman was gone just long enough for Clark Kent to recover from his tragic ordeal.”

He frowned, not completely happy with the possibility of giving up his super side for good. But the option of becoming a new superhero didn’t sit at all well with him. For one thing, it would mean re-establishing trust with the public, hoping against hope they would accept, rather than reject the powerful being in their midst. For another, he’d have to figure out which powers to use and which to pretend that he didn’t have; a major point to separate himself from Superman, and easily forgettable in the heat of the moment when a life was at stake. And then, of course, there was the matter of his looks. Lois had shown him pictures they’d taken together when he’d first moved to Metropolis, secured a job with the Daily Planet, and then befriended the woman he’d fallen in love with at first sight. Twenty years hadn’t done much to age him – nor had it to Lois, to be honest. He couldn’t be a new hero if he looked exactly like Superman. And wearing a mask was simply out of the question.

“I wish I could talk this out with you, Dad,” he muttered under his breath. “You always had a way of cutting straight to the heart of a problem and helping me see what I should do. You never *told* me what to do. It was always my decision. But I always knew it was the right one after I’d talked to you about it.” He thought for a moment. “I remember how you urged me to tell Lois about my feelings *before* she got mixed up with Lex Luthor. I didn’t listen and the next thing I knew, he was asking her to marry him. I was so desperate to stop the wedding and...”

In a flash, it all came rushing back to him. Meeting Luthor in his wine cellar. The cage. The Kryptonite that Luthor could control with the push of a button. Promises to kill his parents if Clark denied that he was Superman. His manservant – Nigel, if Clark was remembering clearly – hurting him...breaking fingers, snapping toes, taking a mallet to his wrists and ankles...

Clark Kent never existed. You are Superman. You are not and have never been Clark Kent.

Clark froze as he clearly heard the reptilian voice of Lex Luthor croon.

I’m enjoying chipping away at you, eroding what you used to be, erasing you from memory, just as you tried to do to me.

Clark screamed, wobbled in the air, nearly went crashing to the Earth, and lost his grip on the chair as he went completely

hollow inside. Every bone seemed to go to jelly, every nerve was seared away to leave him unable to move for a small eternity. A cold wave of nausea roiled in his stomach and leached out to drench his entire body in a freezing sweat. It was only when he heard the blare of a horn far below him and to his right that he snapped out of his trance-like state. Swiftly, he dove down to grab the armchair, rescuing it neatly as he scooped it up in his arms. The coffee table had no such luck. In his distracted state, Clark didn’t realize he hadn’t grabbed it along with the chair. The table went whistling downward like an angry boulder and smashed to pieces about twelve feet away from the highway and right in front of the “Welcome to Chicago!” sign.

“Great,” he groaned to himself. “Mom’s going to kill me.”

But luck was, perhaps, on his side once again. No one had been around to witness the crash. No one, not even an errant furry creature, had been harmed by the flying debris that had resulted from the crash, and, in the morning, the baffled local authorities, in an effort to focus on more important things, figured the whole thing had to have been staged by some bored teenagers or young adults in some kind of bizarre prank that no one understood.

He hardly took note of the lack of flattened people and creatures as his world spun, went upside down, and turned inside out. He landed next to the carnage that had once been the table and woefully walked a dozen or so feet away. Carefully setting down the chair, he doubled over and retched in a thick, tangled patch of half-dead weeds. He knew he was right about it all. About his imprisonment, about Luthor, about the asinine attempt to “erase” both Clark and Superman from history.

“You should have killed me outright, Luthor,” he growled to himself as he picked up the chair and rose into the sky once more. “I’m a dangerous enemy to leave alive.”

“Clark! There you are!” Martha said with an obvious sigh of relief as he carried the chair through the doorway and into her new house. “We were getting worried.”

He nodded as wrangled the chair into the spot Martha had pointed out to him earlier. With a pang in his heart, he realized that it was on the same side of the living room that his father had always sat in. “I know, I’m sorry,” he apologized. “It’s just... moving Dad’s stuff, knowing that I never got to say goodbye... I couldn’t find it in me to move as fast as I did on the other trips,” he confided.

He suddenly felt very old and very tired. He wanted nothing more than to collapse and not think for a while. But he couldn’t bring himself to sit in his dad’s chair, not yet, at any rate. It felt as wrong as a pauper sitting on the king’s throne and trying to pass himself off as lord and master. He opted to remain standing.

“You look beat,” Lois said, looking up from where she’d been helping Martha organize all her crafting supplies. “Are you okay?” “No,” he breathed uncertainly. “I’m not.”

The two women’s brows creased in concern in roughly the same second and in roughly the same look.

“Tea?” Martha asked out of habit.

Clark nodded. “Oolong, if you have it.”

“Of course I do,” she smiled at him.

“Thanks, Mom. Uh...I have a confession to make,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck while his flesh went scarlet in a blush. “I tried to bring back more than just the chair. I had the coffee table with me.”

Martha peered at him curiously. “Had?” she asked softly.

“I, uh, kind of owe you a new table,” he continued with downcast eyes like a child caught red-handed doing something he wasn’t supposed to be doing. “I kind of...dropped it. At the border of Chicago. And, well, it’s fair to say that it doesn’t really even look like a table anymore. More like an unfortunate pile of really big toothpicks.”

Martha’s eyes widened, but she didn’t appear to be upset by

the news. Surprised, more like it.

“I know, I’m usually a bit more careful,” Clark went on.

She held up a hand to stop him. “Accidents happen. It’s not a big deal. Besides, that table came to us as a hand-me-down after we got married, from my cousin’s neighbor’s sister.” She waved her hand dismissively as she explained her apathy over the destroyed coffee table. “She lived in town and we knew each other a little. She and her husband were getting rid of some of their old furniture. Your father and I were newlyweds with very little money, so we didn’t turn down the offer,” Martha explained as she led the way into the kitchen. She chuckled a little to herself as she reminisced.

“I always did hate that table but somehow we never got around to replacing it. There were always more pressing issues – the leaky roof, the burst water main, droughts so bad we had to borrow money from the bank just to keep food on the table, good harvests when we took whatever excess money we’d made and funneled it back to paying off those loans,” she said, ticking the points off on her fingers and throwing a warm smile at him, “a son with super abilities. We just kind of forgot about the stupid table after a while.” She ended with a casual shrug as she reached the stove in the kitchen.

“Well...I guess I’m glad to hear that,” Clark said with a half-hearted chuckle as he reached the kitchen table and sat down heavily. “There was...a bit more to my delay in getting back with the chair though,” he admitted after a moment. “I...made a stop. To see Dad.”

“Oh, honey,” Martha said sadly, knowing or guessing how much it had hurt him to see his father’s grave. She took him in her arms in a hug.

“I’m sorry, Clark,” Lois said, coming up alongside him and rubbing his arm affectionately. “You shouldn’t have gone alone. Martha or I should have been there for you.”

Clark shook his head as his mother released him and then filled the tea kettle. “It wasn’t something I’d planned. It just sort of happened. You know...spur of the moment. I’ve been avoiding it since I got my powers back and...seeing it...” He closed his eyes and sighed deeply. “It made it feel so...real.” It wasn’t exactly the word he was looking for, but it was close enough.

Lois gave him a hug. He let himself sink into her embrace, drawing strength from her love. She kissed the side of his head, then pulled back as if shocked that she’d been so bold. Her cheeks bloomed pink in a blush, and he thought maybe it stemmed from having Martha in the room with them. After all, they’d cuddled together often enough in the privacy of Lois’ house.

“I’m still sorry you had to do that alone,” she told him.

“I don’t know...” he wavered. “I think I *needed* to do it on my own. It’s not that I wouldn’t have appreciated you being there, because I would have. But I’m kind of glad I didn’t...well...have an audience,” he said as compassionately as he could. But inside, he was at a near panic from his resurfaced memories.

He shook his head again and watched as his mother prepared mugs with tea bags, then brought them over to the table. She returned with a small glass pitcher of milk, the sugar bowl, spoons, and dessert plates. Clark took them all from her and set the table for the three of them while his mother busied herself with putting out some fresh sugar cookies on a fourth plate. Clark inhaled deeply; they smelled heavenly.

“I...” He paused and swallowed hard. “I hate to say it but...I think I needed to see Dad’s grave for...more than just my own peace of mind. Being there...then going to get his chair...it made me think a lot about him. Things I haven’t thought about or remembered in a while.”

The tea kettle started to whistle and Martha turned to turn off the stove. Using a dishtowel, she wrapped the handle of the kettle, then poured the steaming water into everyone’s mugs. Clark added three spoonfuls of sugar into the massive mug before him and

played with the tea bag’s string for a long moment before deciding it had steeped enough and fishing it out of the water. He curled both hands around the hot mug, enjoying the calming warmth that seeped out into his fingers and palms.

“I hope they were good memories,” Martha said as she selected a cookie and put it on her plate.

“Well...” Clark hedged, uncomfortable. “To be honest, and to keep it short, one thought led to another and pretty soon I was thinking about the conversation I had with him...the last one I had with him...just before Lois was supposed to marry Lex Luthor.” He shot her an apologetic look, hating to bring up her aborted wedding, wondering if she still harbored any pain from it.

She shook her head. “It’s okay. I barely even think about it,” she assured him softly. “It was a long time ago. Ancient history.”

He nodded, then ducked his head down in shame. “Thinking about that conversation...I remembered how much I didn’t want you to marry Luthor. It...remembering all of that...it jarred something loose in my head. Some mental block came crashing down and I...” He shuddered, feeling terribly cold all of a sudden and small and vulnerable. He swallowed again and brought his gaze to the strong, dark liquid in his mug. “I know what happened to me. I remember it all. Why I disappeared. Where I was. What happened before I was sent to have my brains fried in Gotham City.”

“Clark? You’re shaking,” Lois said, concerned. She reached out and placed a hand over his wrist, though he never let go of his tea.

“It was *him*, Lois. *He’s* the reason...he’s the one behind it all,” Clark said, his voice thin and haunted.

“Him?” she asked, as if needing confirmation.

“Luthor. He’s the one who stole twenty years of my life.”

“Are you *sure*?” Lois asked slowly, and Clark wasn’t entirely sure if she believed him.

“Positive,” he said without hesitation. “I remember it *all* now. He contacted me and asked me to send Superman his way if I saw him. He said he was worried about you. So...I went. I was worried that you were in some kind of trouble. Given how...distant...we’d become at the time, I didn’t trust that you’d call me if something was wrong. It was all a lie. He had a cage made of Kryptonite and before I knew it, I was his prisoner, and there was literally nothing I could do about it. I was weak, powerless, heartsick, and terrified.”

He gulped and absently took a sip of his tea, oblivious to how hot the water still was. He no longer saw the kitchen. He was firmly back in Luthor’s wine cellar.

“He kept me in the wine cellar,” he went on, smelling the odor of wines and wooden casks, seeing the reflected light on the bottles stored there. “He knew I was Clark. I don’t know how he figured it out. But he *knew* and he promised me that he’d kill every last person I cared about unless I admitted it. I refused at first but I knew he’d do what he said he’d do. So...I admitted that he was right. That’s when the torture started. He had Nigel do his dirty work...most of the time. Once in a while he’d get...inspired...and join in. But he liked crippling me with the Kryptonite best. He used it enough to permanently disable my powers, not that I *could* recharge...I need sunlight to do that and he kept me in a room without so much as a single shaft of natural light.”

He toyed with his mug, then took another, albeit shaky, sip. “He broke me,” he whispered ashamedly. “After a while...he kept me in the pitch black for long periods of time. He had a recording that played on a loop, never stopping. I wasn’t Clark Kent. I’d *never* been Clark. I was Superman. I...held out, as long as I could. But I guess it wasn’t enough. Somewhere along the line, I started to believe it.”

“Oh, God, Clark,” Lois gasped while Martha made a strangled cry.

He nodded distractedly. “I tried. I really did. But Luthor made Guantanamo look like a day camp. I barely slept. I was starving. There was constant pain from my bones being broken and rebroken before they could even have a chance to heal. Beatings. Kryptonite sickness. That constant verbal reminder that I was Superman, would only ever *be* Superman.”

He was shaking like a leaf now and on the verge of a full-blown panic attack. “He said, when it all started, that he was going to utterly erase me from history. Maybe he felt like Clark was the bigger threat to him. I don’t know. But, whatever his reasons, he targeted Clark first until I’d forgotten who I was and grew to be afraid of the name even if I didn’t really remember why. Because, at some point, I started to give him exactly what he wanted. He’d ask who I was and I would say Superman instead of Clark. But the torture didn’t stop. It only got worse.”

He let go of his mug to pinch the bridge of his nose and rub the corners of his exhausted eyes. “For ten years, that was all I knew, until one day he shipped me off to the asylum so that Superman could be purged from me as well, leaving behind an empty shell.” He shrugged helplessly. “You know all the rest.”

“I’ll kill him,” Lois vowed.

Clark shook his head. “No. We have to be smart about this. He’s tried to erase me. And I guarantee he’s behind the failed assassination attempts. We need to be subtle and take him down in a way he won’t see coming.”

“Just tell me how you want to handle it,” Lois said grimly.

“I will, just as soon as I can process this all and think clearly about the course ahead,” Clark replied, staring moodily into his tea.

“What I can do to help?” Martha asked, reaching over and patting his wrist.

He frowned. “I’m afraid there’s not much you *can* do, Mom. Laying low is probably the best thing you can do. Because, if Luthor figures out that I remember what he did, I don’t want you getting caught in the line of fire.”

The next morning, bright and early, Clark rummaged through the closet in his bedroom, searching and sorting through the assorted shirts, pants, and suits Lois had saved for him until he found what he was looking for. He dressed swiftly, a sense of determination and a fire of purpose burning in his heart. He’d tossed and turned all night coming to this decision and now he was ready to execute it.

And yet, his two decades of imprisonment had left its mark, he realized with a frown. He couldn’t do this on his own. He needed Lois. But, then again, he thought to himself, when *didn’t* he need her? She was his world, his hope, his sense of direction. She was his guardian angel who’d nursed his broken body back to the picture of health. She was the guiding light who’d brought him back from the abyss of nothingness.

“Hey, Lois?” Clark called from his bedroom as he manipulated a crimson tie dotted with tiny white elephants around his neck. But his fingers had lost their skill in getting the knot exactly right, even if he could remember how to do it in his mind.

“Yeah?” she called from the hall, a laden basket of her laundry in her arms.

“I wanted to ask you something,” he called back, popping his head out the door just enough to see her pass by. “You want some help with that?”

“No, I’ve got it. Just give me a second, okay?” she replied, kicking the partially open door to her room fully open with her foot.

Clark shrugged and went back into his room to fiddle with his tie some more. While he was less than happy about his fingers’ inability to get the darn thing on right, he *was* pleased to find that he remembered when and where he’d bought it; at a little outdoor kiosk in New Delhi during a brief, two day stopover in between

his job in London and his new assignment in South Africa. He’d loved the pattern and had felt bad for the old man selling them, so he’d bought it and three others of differing patterns. But the elephant design had been his favorite.

“Hey, sorry, what’s up?” Lois asked all in one breath as she stuck her head into the doorway. “Wow, you look great. That old suit looks incredible on you,” she said approvingly as she eyed the charcoal material. “Hot date this morning?” she joked.

Clark chuckled. “Only if you want tonight to be our first one,” he said without any trace of a joke in his voice. Then he sighed. “It would look better if this stupid thing would tie the right way.”

“Here, let me,” Lois offered, stepping up before him and lightly touching his frantic fingers. He let go, his skin aflame where she’d touched him. “Luckily for you, my father couldn’t tie a tie for the life of him when I was younger, so I’ve had lots of practice.” With quick, deft fingers, she got the silken garment in place. “There,” she proclaimed, checking her efforts, “perfect.”

“Thanks,” Clark said with a grin. “I really look okay? This isn’t...outdated, this suit?”

Lois shook her head. “A classy suit is never out of style,” she informed him, patting his chest gently. “And it really does look great. It’s...actually kind of...odd. You fit into that suit just as perfectly as you did twenty-one years ago. It’s almost like you never changed.” She stepped a half-step backward to admire the suit again.

“Thanks to you, bringing me back from the walking skeleton I was,” he told her, cupping her cheek with his hand.

He’d asked Dr. Klein on his last checkup if he could see the photographs he’d taken when Clark had first been liberated from the asylum. They’d been taken strictly for evidence and documentation, but Clark had been speechless nonetheless as he’d beheld his nearly nude and emaciated, half-dead form in the pictures.

Lois shrugged. “It was nothing, really. Now...um...you said you wanted to ask me something?” she prompted, blushing.

Clark nodded, relieved to be on a different topic. “I was wondering if you could...take me to see Jimmy.”

Lois hesitated before answering. “Judging from the suit, I’m guessing this isn’t for a social call.”

“No. I want to ask him for my job back,” Clark said resolutely, but he knew there was a twinkle in his eyes. He could feel the old fire within him, calling him to right the wrongs of the world through the power of his words and investigations. It felt *amazing*.

“Are you *sure* you’re up for that so soon?” she asked, studying his face with a look of concern on hers.

Again, he nodded. “I’m ready. I *want* to get back out there, Lois. I need to take Luthor down. But I can’t do that on my own from the house. I *need* my press pass and access to whatever resources are out there for people like you and me now.”

“A *lot* has changed in the last twenty years,” she gently reminded him. “It might take a little while for you...”

Clark gave her a soft smile as he cut her off. “I know. There are a lot of things I’m going to need to relearn,” he allowed with a shrug. “But I know I can learn them, with your help, of course.” He put his hand on her shoulder and looked her right in the eyes. “I *have* to do this, Lois. Remembering what Luthor did to me...” He shuddered. “I *have* to expose him for what he’s done. And the *only* way I can do that is by getting back to work and using the Planet’s resources to help me.” His voice was low, rushed, and intense but his heart was beating like the drums of war in his chest.

A slow, uncertain smile curled the corners of Lois’ lips, but didn’t explode into the wide grin Clark had been expecting. She nodded, almost reluctantly. “I...if you’re sure that this is what you want,” she began, letting it trail off into nothingness.

“It is,” he told her without so much as blinking.

Her smile broadened in the smallest of degrees. “Then I say...”

let's go get you reinstated, partner." Then, and only then, did Clark see the grin he'd been hoping for.

He smiled in turn. "Thank you, Lois. I can't do this on my own."

"You don't have to," she assured him. "I want to see you happy, Clark. And I want to see Lex made to answer for what he did to you."

"We will," he said with conviction.

"All the forces of Heaven and Hell won't be able to stop us," Lois said, her voice and smile going grim as Death itself.

"Um, Lois?" Clark asked, watching the Metropolis streets slide past the passenger window of Lois' car. "I may not be *completely* familiar with all the new stores and coffee shops and businesses in the city but... isn't the Daily Planet in the *other* direction?" he ventured cautiously, not wanting to seem like he was calling her knowledge of the city into question.

"It is," she confirmed, never taking her eyes off the road. She honked at a pedestrian who nearly walked into traffic while he was too busy looking at his phone. "Smart phones, dumb people," she complained under her breath.

"So, is this a, uh... new route or something then?" he asked innocently.

"No. We're not going to the office," she told him, gunning the engine just enough to make it through a yellow light before it could change to red.

"We aren't?" he asked, looking askance at her.

She shook her head ever so slightly as she maneuvered around a FedEx truck that was double-parked. "Jimmy's a little different than Perry. He actually takes days off," she half-joked, though Clark remembered well enough how rare it had been for Perry to *not* come into the office on any given day. "We're going to his house."

"House, not apartment," Clark mused lightly. "Good for him."

Lois nodded. "Yeah. He's really grown up," she joked. "We all have," she added after a moment, more somberly than before. "I called ahead and said I needed to talk to him, alone."

"Alone?" Clark asked, surprised.

Lois shrugged. "It wouldn't do to have his wife and kids around while we talk," she explained. "Especially given that he saw how badly off you were after you finally came home. I just think... it'll be easier to talk if we don't have an audience. Or the threat of one hanging around," she amended with a smile.

"Makes sense," Clark admitted. Then, mostly to himself, "I'm not sure how I'll field any questions about my... recovery." He tried to keep his voice steady, but his worry bled out into his words and muddled them a bit.

Lois bit her lower lip in worry. "We'll figure something out."

Clark gave her a reserved smile that she missed as she braked at a stop sign and checked both ways. "Lane and Kent," he breathed reverently.

She smiled too. "Lane and Kent," she echoed. "The hottest team in this or any other town."

"I couldn't believe my luck when Perry paired us up," Clark said after a moment of contemplative silence. "Getting to learn from the great Lois Lane? And find out you were such an incredible person beneath all the journalism awards? It was like... I knew my life had changed as soon as I met you."

Lois laughed in a self-deprecative way. "I wish I'd seen it that way."

Clark shrugged. "I didn't blame you. You'd worked too hard and made too much of a name for yourself to put it all on the line." He shook his head. "Anyway, it's all water under the bridge."

Lois nodded. "Absolutely." She slowed the car as they entered a one-way street. "This is Jimmy's block," she informed him.

Clark let out a low whistle at the picturesque, expensive-looking homes. "I had no idea being an editor paid so well," he

quipped dryly.

That made Lois laugh. "It doesn't. But his wife's making a killing as a lawyer."

"Ahh," Clark remarked, nodding sagely.

"There, at the end of the block," Lois said, pointing, and ignoring his attempt at humor. "The one with the green trim."

"Nice place," Clark replied, looking at the house in question. "I'm proud of him."

Lois grinned as she pulled the car into the first available spot, just two houses away from Jimmy's. "Me too." She gave Clark a discerning look as she shut off the engine. "Are you ready for this?"

"I was *born* ready," Clark answered, though there was a twinge of nervousness inside of him. He grabbed the door handle as he unclipped his seatbelt. "Let's do this."

In mere minutes, they were standing at Jimmy's door. Lois went to ring the doorbell, but he must have been looking out the window, waiting for them. He opened the door before Lois could touch her fingertip to the small, lighted button. He blinked when he saw Clark standing there, his hands in his pockets, his stance casual and reserved, like a shy schoolboy.

"CK?" he asked cautiously, as if disbelieving his own eyes.

"My mother taught me never to show up at someone's house empty-handed," Lois said before Clark could reply. "So... I brought Clark with me."

"Hey, Jimmy," Clark said with a smile and a self-conscious wave.

Jimmy blinked even harder as he went completely pale. He looked, for all the world, like he was seeing a ghost. In a way, he was, Clark realized with a pang of guilt. His recent full recovery had been kept well under wraps as he and Lois had focused more on filling in the gaps in his memory that had still been there, as well as a healthy dose of worry about how they would explain his recovery to the people who'd seen how far gone he'd once been.

"CK?" Jimmy asked again, a tremor in his voice. "Is it really you, man?"

Clark nodded. "Yeah, it's me."

"But... how? I saw..." Jimmy stammered almost incoherently.

"Can we come in?" Lois asked, throwing a furtive glance over her shoulder to ensure no one was watching or listening. It gladdened Clark's heart to see how protective Lois was toward him.

"Yeah, sure," Jimmy said, bobbing his head up and down in a daze. He stepped aside and let them in. Clark let Lois take the lead.

"It's good to see you, Jimmy," Clark said once they were all inside Jimmy's tastefully decorated living room. "I've really missed you." He wrapped Jimmy in a quick, back-slapping hug that Jimmy only barely returned in his stunned state.

"I've missed you too, CK. But... I still... I can't believe it's really you," Jimmy said, still gaping like a fish out of water. "This can't be. Lois told me about the damage to your brain. Recovering from something like that... it just doesn't happen," he continued, shaking his head. Then, slowly, a smile unfurled as it appeared that he thought of something new. "Unless... damn it, the Chief was right about you!" To the amazement of Clark, he laughed as he let himself fall into his chair.

"Right about me?" Clark asked, bewildered, as Jimmy wiped tears of laughter from his eyes. He hesitantly sat on the couch with Lois.

It took Jimmy another minute before his fit of mirth subsided enough for him to explain. Then he became more somber and businesslike once more. "Well," he said, scratching self-consciously behind his ear, "it's like this. After you disappeared... I forget how long it was, but you'd been missing for a while and the official police investigations had gone cold and almost forgotten... the Chief and I were working late, even later than Lois,

if you can imagine that.” He shot Lois a grin, then looked back to Clark. “We got to talking. Perry was starting to think about retiring by then and he was thinking of making me the new editor, mostly because he knew Lois would never go for it, not with the way she kept leaping after every fake lead and false rumor she heard about you.”

A far-off look appeared in Jimmy’s eyes as he wandered into the past through his memories and Clark marveled at how simple a thing it could be to do that, when it had been denied to him for so long.

“Somehow or another, the conversation angled its way to you. Perry confessed to me that he’d been a hundred percent sure you were Superman. And when you and Superman disappeared around the same time, it just...kind of confirmed it, I guess you could say. I wasn’t really sure. I mean, it seemed to make sense but also...” Jimmy shrugged helplessly, looking for the right words. “I guess I had a hard time believing it. If you were Superman, you could have rescued yourself, right? No, it had to be that Superman was still looking for you, even though no one had heard tell of the hero in years.”

Jimmy sighed, then looked questioningly at Clark. “He was right, wasn’t he? Because no mere human could ever recover from having his brains zapped as much as you did. I *saw* you, CK, not too long after you were rescued. You were...gone. Mentally gone.” He winced a little at his own description. “Uh, so to speak. Sorry,” he apologized.

Clark shot Lois a look, and she ever so slightly shrugged. This was his call and she wasn’t going to influence his decision.

“I...” Clark started slowly, picking his words carefully. “I sometimes used to wonder, if Perry suspected,” he admitted sheepishly, looking down at the light gray carpeting of the floors and feeling the heat of a blush in his face and neck. Even his ears felt hot. “It’s true,” he confirmed with a sigh. He looked up sharply at his friend. “I’m sorry I lied to you, all those years ago. I was trying to protect myself and all the people I cared about.”

Jimmy shook his head. “it doesn’t matter. I’m just so happy you’ve recovered. When I saw you the way you were...that shell of a man...it broke my heart, CK. Seeing you now...” He shook his head again, looking overwhelmed by emotion. “It’s a miracle. I don’t care how or why you got better. It doesn’t matter if you’re Superman or Batman or Godzilla. I’m just thrilled to get my friend back.” By the end, Jimmy was beaming a smile so wide it was a wonder that his face didn’t crack right in two.

Clark chuckled a little, releasing some of the nervous tension he’d been holding inside. “You’ll have more than your friend back, if you’ll allow it.”

“Oh?” Jimmy asked, intrigued.

“You’ll have me back as a reporter,” Clark offered humbly. “If you’re willing to take a chance on me.”

“Take a chance?” Jimmy parroted.

“Well, I haven’t exactly practiced my craft in twenty-one years,” Clark only half-joked. “But I *think* I still have it in me.”

Jimmy nodded thoughtfully. “I never, in a million years, imagined this,” he said with a grin. “You didn’t even have to ask, CK. The job has always been yours. Come by the Planet tomorrow morning and we’ll get the ball rolling to get you back on staff. You know you don’t need an interview or anything, right? And that you have my secrecy on the Superman thing?”

Clark nodded, although he *had* expected a bit more hesitation on Jimmy’s behalf, if only because he had the paper’s reputation at stake. “Thanks, Jimmy, this means a lot to me.”

Jimmy made an off-hand gesture, as if to dismiss Clark’s humbleness. “We can start you off nice and slow, if you want, just so you can get your feet wet again, you understand.”

He sounds just like Perry, Clark mentally laughed to himself. *If he starts spouting off Elvis yarns...*

“That won’t be necessary, I hope,” Clark replied with a smile.

“Just...one request, if possible?”

Jimmy motioned for him to ask. “If it’s something within reason, absolutely.”

“Can I have my old partner back?” Clark asked, his eyes twinkling with a renewed sense of purpose blazing in his chest. No longer would he be sitting idly by, watching the world slip from day to day while he contributed nothing, and, in fact, only leeches off Lois’ hospitality.

Jimmy roared a laugh. “You mean Lois? CK, there is literally *no one else* I would *dare* to partner you with.”

Clark grinned. “Good.” Then he blushed a little as he rubbed the back of his neck. “Ah, assuming Lois even *wants* me as her partner.”

He meant it only jokingly, but a kernel of worry was still there in the back of his mind. Now, more than ever, Lois was an established and highly esteemed reporter. And he, unpracticed and rusty as he was, was a greater liability to her than ever before. He looked over to her, to gauge her reaction.

She looked stunned. “Why would you even ask that?” she wondered. “*Of course* I want Lane and Kent back. Besides, you are *never* leaving my sight again.” By the hard set of her lips, Clark knew she wasn’t kidding.

“It’s settled then,” Jimmy happily announced. “The reporting team of Lane and Kent is back in action.” He paused for a second or two before a huge grin overtook him. “Aw, man! CK, I gotta say...this is great. Seeing you back to your old self. You getting back to work at the Planet. It...wasn’t the same without you around, you know? I missed you. A lot. Everyone did.” He looked away and composed his features again, trying to look like the boss he was. “So, uh, any ideas for the kinds of stories you want to start off on? Op eds? Obits? Human interest?”

“Oh, I have a pretty good idea of where I want to begin,” Clark said with a grim frown.

“And that is?” Jimmy asked, his own frown matching Clark’s as he tried to figure out where his friend was going with this.

“Taking down the man responsible for my two-decade-long imprisonment. The President of the United States of America.”

Lois and Clark spent the majority of the day at Jimmy’s house, talking, joking, reminiscing. It felt so completely normal and good for Clark that it seemed impossible to reconcile that so much time had passed since he’d last spoken with his old friend. Several times over the course of the discussion, as he watched Jimmy and Lois laugh together over something, Clark withdrew into his own mind and wondered about how natural it felt to be there with the people he cared about. It felt like no time at all had passed, rather than twenty-one years. But, at the same time, as he listened to them talk about people and events he didn’t know, it felt like an eternity had passed since he’d been captured and held prisoner.

Eventually though, it was time to leave. Clark left feeling so warm and good inside, it was as if he was drunk on life. He felt buzzed to the point where it felt unnatural to be walking to Lois’ car, rather than flying through the clouds. He wanted to laugh and tell all the world that he was back – *truly* back. Instead, he turned to Lois once they reached the car. He put both hands on her shoulders and looked her in the eyes.

“Thank you, for everything back there,” he told her. “For bringing me here in the first place.”

She smiled and gently cupped his cheek with a gloved hand. “You’re welcome.”

“I’d like to make good on a promise I made you,” Clark continued, emboldened by the events of the afternoon.

“Oh?”

He nodded sincerely. “Now that *all* of my memories are back, I’d like to take you out to dinner - on a date, if you’ll let me.”

“Clark, I...” Lois stammered for a second, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear as the breeze picked up.

"I'd offer up a suggestion or two of where to go, but...I'm not sure what's still around and what isn't. At least, not the way I used to. Is The Garden Terrace on 5th Avenue still around?" he asked, although Lois hadn't technically agreed to the date yet.

She shook her head. "No, they closed about...um...four years ago."

"Oh," Clark said disappointedly. The place had been one of his favorites, with food so fresh it seemed like they had to have grown the fruits and vegetables right in house.

"But I think we could find someplace else," Lois said, a bit shyly.

Clark brightened. "So...you *do* want to go out? On a date? With me?" he elaborated, hardly daring to trust his luck.

"Yes, you lunkhead," Lois affectionately teased him, reaching out to ruffle his hair a bit.

He grinned, his heart so happy it felt ready to burst. First, he'd gotten his old job back. Now he was *finally* getting a chance to date the woman he'd been in love with since the moment he'd first laid eyes on her, over twenty-two years prior. Still, he felt compelled to lightly tease her.

"Lunkhead?" he asked, his eyebrows raising up into his hairline.

She laughed, the sound so bright and pure that it smote his heart. A puff of white mist accompanied it, giving Clark an idea.

"Yes. Lunkhead. A cute, but occasionally clueless, guy," she explained, baiting him into their old banter.

"It's not my fault," Clark said with faux offense. "My brain's only newly restored from being no better than scrambled eggs." He put on a fake sense of snootiness, which only made Lois laugh all the harder.

"Yeah, yeah, a likely story," she easily tossed back, grinning from ear to ear.

Clark chuckled. "Okay, so The Garden Terrace is out. Um... how about The Reef? Or did they go out too?" he offered, naming the best seafood restaurant in the city before his capture.

Lois nodded. "It's still there. But, Clark, it's a bit...pricier than you remember," she cautioned.

He shrugged. "That's not a problem. Now that I have access to my savings again, thanks to my memory coming back and all, I can afford it. Which...brings me to another point." He gestured to the Jeep. "Let's get inside and turn the heat on first. You look cold."

Lois nodded and unlocked the car. A minute later, they were inside the car, waiting for the warmth to start seeping out of the air vents. "So...what's your other point?" she finally asked, twisting in her seat a little to look at him.

Clark avoided her gaze. "Well, I was thinking...once I'm back on the Planet's payroll, I should probably look for my own place. I've really enjoyed being at your house, Lois, and I'm so thankful you took me in. I really am. But, let's face it, I can't keep imposing on you. Especially now that I'm myself again. *All* of myself, super abilities included. It wouldn't be right."

Lois reached out and took his chin gently in her hand, forcing him to look at her. "Do you think you're...a burden or something?" she asked carefully.

"Well...kind of," Clark confessed, embarrassed. "I mean, you're the one working, paying the bills, putting food on the table. And for most of the year, I couldn't even so much as help with washing the dishes or running a load of laundry for you."

"Clark Jerome Kent," she said sternly, and he reflexively winced at the usage of his full name, "you are not, nor will you ever be, a burden. And I don't want you to leave."

"Don't you want your personal space back?" he asked, a bit surprised at her reaction.

She shook her head. "Not since the moment you came home. I've enjoyed having you around, even when you first came back and were so painfully frail and thin and so catatonic that I wasn't

sure you could even understand what I was saying. I don't *want* you to leave." She looked down at the Jeep's floor for a moment. "Of course, that's your decision. But I'm not kicking you out. There will always be a place for you in the house."

Clark dipped his head in acknowledgment, touched beyond words. "Thank you," he finally managed to get out. "I...um...I'll think about it?" It came out as a question, even though he hadn't really intended on it being so. "I mean...it could get a little weird as we start dating," he offered as a too-quick explanation.

"Maybe," Lois said, settling back into her seat and putting on her seatbelt as the car blessedly began to warm up. "Or it could be just right. Time will tell."

There was nothing to do but agree. "Time will tell," he echoed. He glanced at the clock. "It's still a little early for dinner. We can go to The Reef, make a reservation, and walk around the shops for a bit, assuming the City Center is still much the same as it used to be. Didn't they used to have an outdoor holiday market or something?"

Lois nodded. "It is and they do. Even bigger and better now." She was practically beaming with excitement.

Clark chuckled. "Perfect."

She pulled out of the spot as an old woman in a beat-up Oldsmobile honked angrily at her. Lois scowled and appeared to be put out, even though she and Clark had been about to leave anyway. Clark smiled inwardly. Twenty-one years and Lois was still Lois in every way. It was amazing how much growth he saw in her, but how much had remained unchanged. Now more than ever, she was the rock in the midst of the confusing storm of his life. He counted himself unbelievably lucky to have her in his life.

He tried to relax as she navigated the city streets to the heart of Metropolis. But even her slightly improved driving skills couldn't quell his nerves. As excited as he was to go on his first date with Lois, he had a host of butterflies in his stomach. He'd waited a long, *long* time for this evening and he didn't want to mess it up in any way. Almost too soon, Lois was pulling into one of the pay-by-the-hour parking garages across the street from the City Center. Clark extracted enough money from his wallet to pay for their parking until after midnight, though he doubted they would need that long. After all, it would be an early morning for the both of them, now that Jimmy was set to reinstate Clark at the paper.

The Reef was unusually quiet, even for that early hour when they arrived, and Clark was easily able to secure a reservation for six-thirty that night. Being in the restaurant, taking in all the intoxicating seafood smells brought back a wonderful plethora of memories – of late dinners with Lois after a hard night of research, of meetings with Bobby Bigmouth, in which they paid for his meals and he supplied them as many leads as he could, of the first and only Daily Planet Christmas party he'd ever attended. Lois noticed how he stood, just taking in the atmosphere.

"Hey, are you okay?" she asked, lightly touching his upper arm.

He smiled wistfully. "Yeah. This place...it hasn't changed all that much, has it?"

Lois looked around as if seeing it with fresh eyes. "The décor has changed a little over the years, but yeah, I guess you're right. Although they *did* take the molten chocolate cake off the menu about a dozen years ago," she added with a slightly sarcastic grumble in her voice.

Clark chuckled. "I'm sure there's something even better now." He shook his head. "Come on. Let's walk around for a bit. We have a while before our reservation."

Lois checked her watch and nodded. "A couple of hours, yeah," she agreed.

Clark offered her his arm and she slipped into his embrace so naturally, it was like it had always been meant to be. Clark's heart was pounding wildly in his chest and his throat was dry in his nervousness. But he swallowed down his fears of messing things

up and guided Lois back out into the cold November air. The outdoor flea market had already sprung up in the City Center, so they meandered for a long time, going from tent to tent, checking out the various trinkets and treasures and outright oddities that the merchants were selling. Lois had forgotten her scarf at home, so Clark found a nice, warm handmade one made from alpaca fur that perfectly matched her hat and coat. Lois' smile of appreciation and the sparkle in her eyes made Clark feel bolder as some of his worries slipped away.

"Hey, would you mind if I check out the quilts over there?" Lois asked at one point, gesturing to the stall in question. "One of them might make a good Christmas present for my mother," she explained.

Clark nodded. "Of course. I actually wanted to take a peek at one of the other tents," he hastily added, glad for the opening. He wanted to check things out without Lois being with him and her wanting to see another seller's wares was the perfect opportunity. "I'll only be a couple of minutes, then I'll come out to you," he promised.

"Deal," she said, flashing a grateful grin before turning away and making her quick way to the tent.

Clark watched her go, then waded his own way through the loose throngs of people to one of the nearby tents. Inside was a long row of glass display cases housing a variety of rings, bracelets, charms, earrings, and necklaces. At the far end, a few glass animals were displayed, each one shining like a star pulled down from the heavens to glisten on Earth. Clark scanned the jewelry idly, wondering if it was appropriate to buy something expensive for Lois on their first date. But, even if it *had* been, he saw nothing special enough for her. He was mildly upset at not finding anything for her when a small glass elephant, about the size of a quarter, caught his eye.

On an impulse, he purchased the relatively inexpensive trinket and pocketed it so Lois wouldn't see it. Then he went to find her. She was just coming out of the quilt-maker's tent, empty-handed. She shook her head slightly when she saw him.

"Way too expensive," she informed him before he could ask. "And kind of ugly."

Clark laughed. "Well, that's as good a reason as any to scare off anyone," he teased her.

She laughed too. "Yeah," she agreed.

For the next two hours, they made a leisurely circuit around the City Center, eventually winding up right back where they'd started. Each had a few small paper or plastic bags with them, as well as one or two big ones, filled with various treasures they'd found. Some were meant for themselves, but with Thanksgiving and the Christmas season fast approaching, many were to be given as gifts. Lois was especially pleased with the items she and Clark had found for her nieces – including the softest, squishiest unicorn pillow-plushies she'd ever seen; a brilliant find – as she called it – on Clark's part.

"Here, let me take everything to the Jeep," Clark told her, reaching for her bags. "I promise I won't peek inside any of the mystery bags," he joked as she clutched one or two plain brown bags closer to her chest to get them away from his sight.

For a split second, she looked indecisive, then she nodded, handed him the bags, and dropped her keys in the palm of his hand. "Okay, but no peeking," she insisted, wagging a warning finger before her face. "Not even *through* the bags," she teased in a whisper.

Clark chuckled. "Scout's honor," he said, crossing his heart.

Then, before she could protest, he was walking away, a spring in his step from the successful start to their date. Inside the parking garage, he found himself alone, so he let out a little of his still mildly nervous energy by using his super-speed to get to the Jeep in seconds, rather than minutes. He secured everything in the trunk, tossed an old blanket over the bags to hide them from

prying eyes, then zipped his way back to the entrance of the garage. Lois was waiting for him right where he'd left her, just outside of the doors to The Reef.

"That was fast," she commented with a wink.

Clark shrugged. "If you think that's impressive, you should have seen how quickly I got Mom's living room painted while you were at work the other day," he only half-joked back with a goofy grin.

But Lois laughed anyway and even more of the worried knots in his stomach unraveled. Lois had done a *lot* of laughing so far. He *had* to be doing *something* right. And yet, he still couldn't relax – *wouldn't* relax – until the date was over and he knew for sure if Lois had had a good time.

He nodded toward the doors. "We're a few minutes early for our reservation, but would you like to head inside?" he offered.

She nodded and rubbed at her arms a little. "Absolutely."

"After you," Clark said with a sweeping gesture as he opened the first of the double doors for her. Once she was inside, he hurried to open the second set for her. She nodded her thanks and took his arm again as he offered it.

Inside the restaurant, it was warm and comfortable. Clark helped Lois out of her coat just as soon as he'd alerted the hostess that they were there. Then he shed his own coat and sat next to Lois on the black leather bench farthest from the doors. He didn't want her to be cold, and he subtly angled his body to block any stray draft that might follow another diner as they came inside the restaurant. But he needn't have bothered. Within five minutes, they were being led away to the far side of the dining area to a small, intimate booth tucked away in a comfortable corner.

Normally, Clark would have asked for a table for two where he could position his chair to be next to Lois, but the booth offered them far more privacy. And right now, he craved privacy more than sitting directly next to Lois. After all, he could do that for the rest of the night, if he so chose, once they got back to the house.

They eagerly took the menus that the hostess offered as she told them that Brenda would be with them in just a few moments to take their drink orders. Clark spent a minute or two as he silently pored over the menu. Some of the items hadn't changed in all the intervening years since he'd last stepped foot in the building. Some were new and were of varying degrees of interest to him. Others that he'd anticipated seeing had long since been dropped from the menu.

"So...what do you recommend?" he asked Lois playfully.

She laughed and her eyes sparkled. "Aside from everything?" she joked.

"How's the steak and lobster?" he asked. "Still as good as I remember?"

"Even better," she affirmed.

Clark shut his menu with a flourish. "Well, that settles that then." He took a moment just to soak up the restaurant and the wonderful woman he was with. "I'm so glad we're doing this, Lois," he finally said.

"Me too."

"I've been wanting this since the moment I met you," he told her.

"You mean when I barged in on your interview with Perry like a maddened bull elephant?" she teased.

Clark chuckled and shook his head. "I think you mean like the spirited, passionate reporter and person that you are," he gently corrected her. "I fell for you right then and there."

"And I told you that I didn't have time for it," she said regretfully.

"Lois, you were trying to protect yourself. Once you told me about Claude, I understood. I didn't – *couldn't* – listen to your warning, but I got where you were coming from," he said quietly.

"And now, here we are," she offered with a shy smile.

Clark's lips mirrored her own. "And now, here we are," he

echoed. He shook his head again. “It’s so stupid, but...I’m *so* nervous right now.”

“And here I thought it was only *me* that was nervous,” Lois replied, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear; a gesture Clark had seen her do many times before when she was out of her comfort zone.

“Are you kidding? I feel like my heart’s about to pop right out of my chest!” he told her, grinning impishly. A rush of adrenaline washed over him, stealing away a lot of his anxiety. “I mean, this has been my dream since I met you. And now it’s finally coming true and I’m *well* out of practice when it comes to dating,” he said in a joking tone, even if it was the truth.

“Yeah, well, you’re doing just fine so far,” Lois replied with a chuckle, reaching over to pat the top of his hand affectionately.

“Thanks,” he said, biting back a laugh himself and relaxing more than he’d thought possible.

He was spared from further embarrassing himself by the impeccable timing of Brenda, their waitress for the evening. Clark mentally tacked on an extra bit to her tip for her ability to save him from himself. They both ordered medium-rare steaks, grilled lobster tails, fries, and a side salad, and an appetizer of the shrimp cocktail. Lois chose a nice bottle of wine for them to split, only because Clark was unfamiliar with some of the newer brands listed in the menu. Then, as Brenda whisked herself away to get their wine and ice waters, they made small talk. It didn’t matter what the subject was about; Clark enjoyed every moment of it.

Dinner was amazing. Clark had remembered The Reef as being exceptionally good, but it was clear that they’d managed to improve upon perfection in the years since he’d last eaten there. The steak was melt-in-your-mouth tender, the lobster tail was exquisitely cooked, the prawns served in a chilled glass with a zesty remoulade were huge and delicious, and the wine was fruity and pleasant; one of the best he’d ever tasted. But it was *Lois* that made the evening perfect for Clark.

Being with her gave the evening a heightened feel. It enhanced the flavors of his meal. It turned the ordinary low lighting of the restaurant into something ethereal and otherworldly. It made the tea light in the table’s simple, nautical centerpiece romantic. It brought Clark a sense of peace and belonging that he’d never quite known, not even in his short year of working with her at the paper before his world had been torn apart.

Dessert didn’t disappoint either. In place of the molten chocolate cake, they each chose the Crème Brûlée. Clark moaned in ecstasy as the first bite hit his tongue. He’d nearly forgotten how much he used to enjoy the custardy treat. He used his spoon to point down at the ceramic ramakin it had been served in.

“That is fantastic,” he told Lois. “I can’t *believe* I’d almost forgotten how good Crème Brûlée is.”

Lois laughed. “In case you’ve forgotten, you were also never one to turn down a churro.”

“Mmm,” Clark agreed, recalling the cinnamon sugar covered dough sticks. “Those are the *best*.”

“I promise, I’ll buy you one next time we see a place selling them,” Lois vowed.

“I’ll hold you to it,” Clark replied with a wink.

I’d rather just hold you, his heart thumped with a twinge of desire.

Lois took another bite of her dessert, perhaps so she didn’t need to reply. Before long, the meal was truly over. The last bit of Crème Brûlée had been dutifully scraped from the dishes. The last bit of coffee had been drained from their mugs. Clark took the opportunity to pay the bill while Lois used the restroom, before heading to the facilities himself. Once inside, he used the toilet, washed up, then checked his appearance in the mirror. His tie had gone slightly askew, so he fixed it as best he could with fingers that still refused to comply with the silken garment. Then he ducked back out and into the lobby, where Lois was waiting for

him.

She was just putting on her coat when he approached. He shrugged into his own coat after helping Lois with hers. She smiled at him in thanks and his heart melted. It seemed like all she’d done that night so far was smile and laugh, and he was feeling quite good about his ability to make her happy. He reached for the door and held it open, then repeated the process at the second door. Outside, clouds had gathered and a soft snowfall had begun – not much more than a flurry, but enough to enhance the magic of the night. And it had somehow warmed up a bit. Not enough to make much of a difference, but Clark could feel it nonetheless as the clouds trapped what precious little heat was in the air.

An idea struck Clark and he subtly guided Lois to the ice-skating rink in the middle of the City Center, around which the flea market had been set up. Soon, Clark knew, the city would bring in a huge Christmas tree. Since it was still before Thanksgiving, the area was practically devoid of the hordes of shoppers and tourists that would descend upon the area like ants on a lump of sugar. Clark spied a wooden bench in the far corner, close to where the tree would soon stand sentinel over the Center. He brought her to it and gestured for her to sit. Once she was settled, Clark reached into the breast pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out the small box he’d placed there earlier, grateful for the fact that no one else was around just then.

“Lois, I have something I’d like to give you. I wanted to wait until the end of the night, once the date was over. But I just can’t help myself. I want you to have it now,” he told her before handing her the small white box.

“Clark? What is it?” she asked, accepting the box.

“Open it,” he encouraged.

Lois peered at him for a heartbeat more, then curiosity got the better of her. She opened the box and gasped. “It’s beautiful!” she exclaimed as she lifted the little glass elephant out to inspect it. “But...why?” she asked, looking up at him with gratitude and wonderment.

“I wanted to get you something to commemorate our first date,” he said simply. “When I saw it, it made me think. Elephants never forget, right? That’s the old saying. Lois, you *never* forgot me. You never gave up on me. I’m sure pretty much everyone else told you to, am I right? Give up, move on, Clark’s gone for good.”

“Not...*everyone*,” she hesitantly answered.

“Take away my parents and a few close friends like Perry and Jimmy, and it probably *was* everyone else saying it,” Clark argued, though kindly. “And no, the other supers don’t count,” he said in an amused whisper. “But...you didn’t.”

“I don’t deserve this,” Lois said, casting her eyes downward. “No, I didn’t give up on you. But there were times, Clark, when I really *did* wonder if I was wrong. If you were truly gone and I was chasing a fairy tale.” She shook her head, perhaps trying to rid herself of horrors only she could see.

“You would have been crazy *not* to question yourself,” Clark assured her, reaching over and cupping her chin lovingly.

“I hated those moments. They felt like a betrayal.”

“They weren’t. They were normal, human doubts,” Clark reminded her. “It doesn’t matter. Lois, because of you, I’m *alive*.”

“Because of *Batman*, you’re alive,” she corrected in a hushed tone.

But Clark shook his head resolutely. “No. *You* are the reason I’m alive. When I was found, I was all but dead – in mind, spirit, and body. *You* brought me back. *You* gave me a *reason* to continue on. I might not have known who I was or why you were helping me, but I think I was aware, even on just a primal level, that you were fighting for me.”

He smiled at her and stroked her cheek for a brief moment. “Think about it, Lois. What was the first thing I remembered when my busted-up mind started to heal? It wasn’t the Daily Planet or

my parents, or even,” he lowered his voice to all but mouth the next word. “Superman. It was *you*.” He pointed to the little elephant. “I wanted to give you a reminder of that. You’re the only reason why I’m myself again. I owe you *everything*.”

He closed his eyes for two heartbeats, then looked her straight in the eyes again. “Lois, I *literally* lost my mind. You brought it back to me. If I hadn’t already been hopelessly in love with you, I would have fallen for you for all you’ve done for me.”

Lois gave him a mischievous grin. “Love, huh?”

But Clark wasn’t smiling. He was dead serious. “When I told you that I loved you, that day in the park when you were considering Luthor’s proposal...I wasn’t lying. I wasn’t *just* saying it to dissuade you from getting close to him.”

The smile melted from Lois’ face. “I know. I kept running that conversation over and over in my head. It was a big part of why I didn’t go through with the wedding.” She sighed a bit wistfully. “I’d known for a while that I was developing feelings for you, but that conversation really forced me to look at what those feelings were.”

“So, does that mean you love me too?” Clark teased, falling easily back into the banter that had defined their relationship practically from the start. He leaned in a little to hear her answer.

Lois gently pushed his chest while she bit back a laugh. “Call me crazy, but yes, Clark. I love you. I have for a long time. Which is what kept me going all those years, looking for you.”

“For a long time, I couldn’t remember you,” Clark admitted softly. “And then, suddenly, my memories began to return. I knew I loved you, but, in a way, ever since that first moment of recognition when I knew for sure that I knew you, I’ve been falling in love with you all over again. It’s been...incredible, Lois.”

“I think I know what you mean. For twenty years, I loved a memory. And then you were back but still gone and I had to love you in a different way. Now that you’re completely well and whole again, I can finally fall in love with you the way I was always supposed to,” Lois said, taking hold of his hands. She gently squeezed them in support and love.

“I’m here now,” he told her, his voice low and husky. “And I am *never* going anywhere ever again,” he vowed.

“You’d better not,” she said, her voice taking on a serious, yet loving, tone. “Because I couldn’t stand it if I ever lost you again, for any reason.”

“Never,” he swore. “I love you, Lois. Always have. Always will.”

“And I love you,” she replied, her eyes sliding halfway shut in an invitation to kiss her.

Clark leaned in, his eyes closing in anticipation. All his life, he’d waited for this moment, when his heart would connect, permanently, with his soul mate. And he’d known for a long time now, that Lois was his soul mate. He’d known it ever since he’d first gotten to know her all those years ago as her willing, though detested, partner at work.

His lips touched hers and all thought was obliterated. The world ceased to exist as an explosion without sound shattered him into a billion happy little pieces while he was simultaneously recreated into a completely new man. He felt as if some threshold had been crossed, though not with Lois; it was obvious that they would never go back to being just friends. No, he felt like he crossed some invisible line within *himself*. He was no longer merely *just* Clark Kent. He was Clark Kent, the man who had been specially designed to love Lois Lane for all his life and into the eternal realm that existed beyond the veil of death.

He deepened that first, tentative meeting of their lips, kissing her hard and passionately. A lifetime of looking for her was in that kiss. Decades of waiting to be reunited with her were in it too. Longing, desire, worshipfulness: all of it seeped into that kiss as it spoke of all the ways he wanted to make her happy forever.

When he reluctantly pulled away, he was breathless and his head was swimming with the intoxication that only being in love with Lois could bring. He was almost panting for breath and his heart had reached speeds that he could only dream about achieving in the physical world. He cupped her cold cheek with his gloved hand and rested his forehead against hers.

“I love you, Lois,” he told her in a murmur meant only for her ears.

He sensed, rather than saw, her smile. “I love you too, Clark.” *Love.*

His heart exploded and he was, at last, fully reborn from the ashes of his former life like the mythical Phoenix.

“I don’t want this night to end,” he told her.

“It doesn’t have to,” she replied, her voice heavy with desire, though Clark was too much of a gentleman to think of that desire as anything more than a need to be with him wherever they went, rather than in a way that suggested they return home and to the privacy of a bedroom.

He sat back a little and looked over at the ice-skating rink. Then he looked back to Lois. “Would you care to go skating?” he asked, grinning.

Lois peered at the rink, though eagerness shone in her features. “I haven’t been skating since I was in high school,” she admitted hesitantly.

Clark laughed. “Same. But it’s like riding a bike, right? Once you know how to do it, you never forget. Or, at least, *I hope* that’s the case. I’d hate to embarrass myself in front of you on our first date.”

“First date, huh?” Lois ribbed gently as she put the glass elephant he’d given her back in its box and tucked the whole thing into her purse.

He nodded. “Of course. I’m planning on taking you out a *lot* more if you’ll let me. I’d rather save embarrassing myself until we’ve had a dozen or so dates,” he joked back with a grin.

Lois leaned in and gave him another, though quick, kiss on his lips. “You’re on,” she told him in a baiting manner. She stood and extended a hand to him, which he took. “Come on. It’s the *perfect* night for skating. The rink is nearly empty, there’s a snow flurry, and I’ve just had an amazing time with a really incredible guy.”

“I think you mean *super* guy,” Clark tossed out lightly, though he really wasn’t insinuating that she was dating Superman. After all, the Man of Steel didn’t currently exist.

Lois nodded thoughtfully. “Well, sure,” she agreed after a moment. “He *is* pretty super, but not for the reasons you might think.” She winked at him and reached out to fiddle with his tie, as if she was about to lead him to the ice by it, like a leash. After a second or two, she let it go again and smoothed it down while she adjusted the buttons of Clark’s coat. “Come on, Farm Boy. Let’s see how much we *both* remember about skating.”

“Sir?” Nigel only half asked as he approached the President’s desk in the Oval Office as he ended the call he’d taken on his private cell phone.

Lex held up one finger as he finished off the email he was working on. When he was done typing, he read it over with a careful, discriminating eye before hitting the Send button. Finished for the moment, he leaned back in his chair and folded his hands together, resting them over his stomach – still more than full from the evening’s delicacies at dinner.

“What is it this time?” Lex asked, knowing from the way Nigel’s frown was creased in concern that whatever he was going to say, it wasn’t good news for Lex.

“It’s Kent again,” Nigel said, clasping his hands behind his back.

Lex scowled and his eyes narrowed dangerously. “Yes, yes, what is that thorn in my side up to now?”

“It seems he’s been a bit more...active, than in the past. My

sources confirm that he's been out and about Metropolis all day."

Lex's scowl deepened and he gave Nigel a dark glare. "That's all you've come to tell me? That some soft-brained lunatic took a field trip?" It was a struggle for Lex to keep himself from yelling. "Shouldn't his mind be the consistency of pea-soup?"

"My sources saw he's looking rather *healthy*," Nigel said pointedly.

Lex growled and slammed his palm down on his desk, demanding an answer. "How?"

The older man shrugged. "As you made it abundantly clear to him so long ago, he's Superman. Apparently, his self-healing is more powerful than we imagined."

"Apparently," Lex echoed sourly. He steepled his fingers in thought as he tried to calm his racing, raging thoughts enough to think rationally. "If he's regained the use of his brain, he might well remember how it was that he got to that point."

Nigel nodded dourly. "Perhaps. One thing *is* clear though. I fear he may be getting ready to make some kind of move...*toward Lois Lane*."

"Lois?" That name had cut through the other, more important thoughts that were crowding Lex's mind at the moment. "What does *she* have to do with anything?" Even now, after twenty-one years, her decision to leave him jilted at the altar brought back fresh rage and disbelief.

"Kent was spotted kissing her not long ago," Nigel said neutrally.

Lex's scowl deepened into such a look of contempt that it could have curdled milk. "Is that so?" he asked, his voice cracking with the unbridled hatred he carried for both Lois and the alien nuisance he'd failed to eliminate.

Nigel shrugged. "Priorities," he gently reminded Lex. "The Lane woman is the least of your worries. As you said before, we can't be certain he remembers your role in his...prior condition."

Lex forced himself to mentally take a step back from the idea of Lois cozying up to his hated rival. He took a deep breath in through his nose and let it slowly out of his mouth. "Of course," he allowed, the calmness in his voice a thin veneer covering the roiling rage beneath the surface. "Of course," he repeated, this time with a nod. "You were right, Nigel. I was, perhaps, a bit too eager to gloat in my victory when he was my prisoner. I should have eliminated him right then and there, when I had him in that cage."

A fleeting look of smugness crossed Nigel's features for half a heartbeat before it was gone again. "Perhaps," he agreed. "But we've tried to eliminate him since his unexpected rescue," he reminded Lex.

"Which failed," Lex pointed out, angrily jabbing his finger down onto the surface of his desk.

"Rome wasn't built in a day," Nigel calmly countered with a shallow shrug.

Lex nodded. "It wasn't built on failures either. Get one of your contacts out there *now*. Direct them to one of our contingency shelters for what they'll need. I want him erased, for good, by the end of the night," he snarled.

Clark glided across the ice in a graceful manner, pleased that he hadn't lost any of his ability to ice-skate. In fact, he felt like he was doing a better job of it now than he ever had before. But perhaps that was because he was well-versed in flying now, albeit through the air, rather than on the razor-sharp, thin blades beneath his booted feet. Beside him, Lois was matching him, movement for movement, and looking as graceful as any angel come to Earth for a little bit of wintertime fun. It was hard for him to pull his eyes away from her.

It was snowing a little more heavily now than it had when they'd first stepped onto the ice. It was, by no means, a storm, but

it *was* just thick and heavy enough to stick and give everything a thin patina of whiteness. With the flakes flying in the air and the bright lights around the rink, Lois seemed to actually glow. With every laugh, every breath, puffs of white mist appeared before her lips – lips that Clark still couldn't believe he'd actually been allowed to kiss.

"Wait, wait," Lois puffed, breaking the magical winter spell that had enchanted Clark's eyes. She glided over to the railing around the edge of the rink. "I need to catch my breath for a moment," she apologized.

"Take your time," Clark told her as he skidded to a stop and then leaned his back on the high wooden rail. He looked around at the sparsely populated rink for a moment, watching other couples skating together and kids falling and stumbling their way around the ice. "I can't believe how much I missed doing simple things like this," he said after a moment, well aware of the wonderment in his voice. He looked at Lois. "Thanks for indulging me on this."

Lois shook her head. "Don't thank *me*. This was all your idea and I've really been having a great time." She flashed him a smile that seemed somehow private - like it was meant for him and him alone.

"Yeah, but you could have said no," he good-naturedly needed her.

"I could have," she agreed, "but I would have missed out on an amazing night."

He reached out and cupped her cheek. "This has been the best night of my life," he told her.

"Mine too," she replied, just before he leaned over and claimed her lips with his own.

Fireworks shot off behind his closed eyelids and fire was kindled in his blood. Every time he kissed her, it was like a volcano was erupting inside of him, as all his love made his heart literally ache as it beat wildly within his ribs. But this time, he kept the kiss short out of respect for the people around him. He had forever to show Lois just how much he loved her. There was no need to put it out on display for the public's view. Lois shivered a little as they parted.

"Cold?" he asked.

"A little, despite the workout we've been getting for the last hour," she replied with a grin.

Clark nodded. "I think I can remedy that," he said.

She gently swatted his chest, then spoke in a near-whisper. "Don't you *dare* heat-vision me in public."

He chuckled. "I wasn't thinking of that, but now that you mention it..." He let his voice trail off deliberately, teasing her.

"Not a chance, Farm Boy," she mock-warned.

He laughed again and threw his hands up in surrender. "Okay, you win. I was thinking about hot chocolate anyway."

"Mmm." Lois closed her eyes as the thought of a nice, steaming hot cup of melted chocolate clearly came into her mind at the suggestion. "Sounds wonderful," she said.

"Okay, let's return the skates and head across the street. I saw a café over there when we passed by earlier."

"Perfect," Lois said.

Clark hesitated. "Unless you want me to get the drinks to go and keep skating once we're done," he offered.

But Lois shook her head. "I think I'm good for the night. Any more and I might be too sore to move in the morning. Those first few falls I took were pretty hard." She took his hand and led him back toward the open space in the railing that passed for an entrance and exit.

"Sorry. I should have been quicker to catch you," Clark apologized. "I guess I was a little distracted." He ran his free hand through his hair.

"Don't worry about it," Lois said, brushing off his concern. "It's nothing. But I *am* ready to sit inside and warm up a little."

"Your wish is my command," Clark said as they reached the

exit. He helped Lois through first, then climbed over the miniature step.

Lois hummed a sound of acknowledgement as Clark helped her while they both awkwardly shuffled to the closest bench. Clark knelt down and untied Lois' skates and gently eased them off her feet. Lois sighed in relief as the boots left her feet and Clark wondered if they'd perhaps been too tight or if they'd gotten too warm as they'd made lap after lap around the rink. He said nothing though and pulled Lois' shoes out of the shoe cubby. She took them from him with a grateful smile, but wouldn't allow him to help her with them.

"Thanks, Clark, but you don't have to do that," she told him as she lovingly touched the back of his hand.

"I *like* doing things for you. I always have," he told her.

"I know," she allowed with a single nod of her head. "And I appreciate it. But you're not my personal servant or anything."

"Would it be such a bad thing if I was?" he joked. Then, more seriously, "Lois, you've gone above and beyond for me. I can never repay you for that."

"I don't *need* repayment," she stressed, interrupting him.

"I know that. And I'm not doing this out of...obligation or anything," he amended, truthfully. "But it makes me happy to do little things for you. I like making you happy."

"You *already* make me happy, Clark. You know that, right?" she said, taking his hand and making him sit down next to her.

"Just by being you and by being with me. Clark, I spent a long, long time thinking I might never see you again. All I want now is to just be with you, like we used to be, before any of this happened. Only, it's better now, because I'm *finally* letting myself love you."

Clark nodded thoughtfully and started to untie his own laces. "Things are better for me too," he replied after a moment. "Because I can finally be honest with you about who I am. And about how much I love you. Back then...keeping those secrets...it almost tore me in half sometimes. I'd fluctuate between wanting to tell you everything one moment and being terrified of you rejecting me and becoming more committed to keeping my secrets than ever before in the next moment."

He sighed and watched as a man and a woman – both clearly expert skaters – spun each other around the middle of the ice, flipping and twirling and reversing direction with ease. "I never want to go back to that kind of life, Lois. Not with you. I prefer this. This not hiding. This not pretending. This not worrying about how and when to tell you things. This not wondering if you'll be revolted by my...unique origins." He shifted his gaze to her and smiled. "For a long time, even before Luthor, I was an outsider, always looking in. I could blend in and act like everyone else, but I was always, *always* set apart from them. Until you. The day I met you, I felt like I'd finally found where I belonged – in Metropolis, at your side. I *finally* felt like I fit in."

He left his untied skates on his feet, and took Lois' hand, entwining his fingers with hers. "I met you and I found my heart, Lois."

She gave him a wobbly, emotional smile in return. "And I'd spent my life wondering if there was even one decent man out there. Someone who wouldn't look at me and see an opportunity to use and humiliate me. I was so scared that you'd be the same when Perry teamed us up. How could you not? You were – still are – handsome and competent and smart. And that scared me even more. Even if you didn't outright steal from me, surely you'd use my reputation to boost your own and get ahead."

She shook her head at the absurdity of her statements. "Then I got to know you. The real you. Not the...projection of yourself that you would occasionally disappear into thin air to become, for the benefit of society," she said cautiously, keeping her words deliberately soft and vague. "And I learned I was wrong. What was more? I learned how to trust again. For the first time in my

life, I knew I'd found a best friend who I could always count on. And then you slipped even deeper into my heart and I found that I could love again."

"I will *always* be that guy, Lois. I swear it. I'll *always* be there for you...barring any other unforeseen...uh...incidents," he weakly joked. "I will never hurt you. I'll never give you a reason to cry ever again."

"You better not. Twenty years of tears is enough to last a lifetime," Lois said, reaching out to gently stroke his cheek.

"Once we get justice and see Luthor behind bars, we'll never need to worry about that again," Clark said with conviction. Then he shook his head ever so softly. "I'm just not entirely sure how we're going to go about that. Yet."

"We'll find a way, partner," she said with a chuckle, bumping her shoulder into his in a comfortable, friendly way.

"You're right, as always," he said, shooting back a smile. Then he reached down to pull his skates off and change back into his regular shoes. "But first thing's first. I owe you a hot chocolate."

"That *may* have been the best hot chocolate I've ever had," Lois said, two hours later as she and Clark left the quaint little café and went back out into the cold night.

"Agreed. And that scone was incredible," Clark added. "I've had authentic scones before and that was *definitely* authentic."

Lois hummed her agreement. "Maybe we should have gotten some for the morning," she mused as they crossed the street just before the light could change.

"Or maybe we can just make it another date night and come back here," Clark offered with a wolfish grin.

Lois laughed and nodded. "Maybe," she allowed.

"I mean, there *will* be other dates, right?" Clark said after a moment. "Because I can only speak for myself, but this was the best night of my life, Lois. I had such a great time with you."

"I had a really great time with you too," she said, flashing him her brightest smile. "I'd love to go out again. And, if I'm not being too forward, soon."

"As soon as possible," Clark vowed, pulling her a little closer to him as they walked. He hoped his close proximity to her was helping to keep her warm as the snow continued to fall.

They turned down the street where the parking garage was. Everything was still and quiet and Clark felt at peace. He and Lois had had an amazing conversation in the café, and he was still counting his lucky stars that he was dating her. That was why he wasn't aware that they were being followed. They reached the corner of the garage to where the elevators and stairs were without incident. But as Clark reached for the call button of the elevator for the ride up to the fourth level, he was suddenly aware that someone was standing right behind him. He turned to see who was there, but he never got out so much as a single word. The man standing there pulled the trigger of his gun and Clark's left side exploded into a mist of red blood before he slumped, unmoving, to the concrete at her feet.

Two seconds.

That's all it took from the time the man pulled the gun to the time it took for Clark to hit the ground.

Two seconds.

Two seconds that seemed to move in slow motion.

Two seconds in which Lois' perfect, amazing, Hallmark-movie evening turned into a horror show.

Two seconds in which she felt frozen in place, helpless to do anything but look on as abject fear washed over her and left her colder than the rapidly dropping temperature.

"*Clark!*" Lois screamed as she watched him crumple to the ground, blood quickly soaking the front of his shirt and his suit jacket.

Her mind lurched into overdrive. Clark was bleeding out. He'd

been shot. Only, he was invulnerable. He shouldn't be able to be hurt. The bullet should have bounced off his skin like a rock being skipped on the surface of a calm lake.

Kryptonite.

That *had* to be it.

But that meant the man before her had to know, or guess, about Clark.

She sprang into action and leapt at the gunman before he could finish aiming at her. He shot, but it went wild and blasted a chunk out of the concrete wall that housed the elevators. Lois made a tight fist and slugged the gunman as hard as she could in the face. There was the sickening *crunch!* as his nose broke. Blood poured down his face, though not as seriously as Clark's wound. The gunman was stunned and lost his grip on his weapon as his hands immediately flew up to protect his face against another one of Lois' attacks. But his shocked state didn't last and he was grabbing to regain his handgun in the next second. Lois snatched at his wrist, twisted viciously, and broke the delicate bones there. The gunman shrieked involuntarily. He cradled the broken wrist with his good hand and Lois saw her next opportunity. She grabbed the gun, turned it around, and used the heavy handgrip to wallop the man in the forehead, knocking his head against the concrete hard enough to make him black out.

Taking the weapon with her, she scrambled to Clark's side, praying that he wasn't dead.

"Clark?" she asked, her heart in her throat.

Clark moaned and made a feeble move to clutch at his gunshot wound. He coughed slightly and wheezed as he tried to regain his breath. Lois' breath came out in a rush.

"Oh, thank God!" she said, the words tumbling out of her mouth in a rush. "Don't move," she instructed him as she knelt by his side and put the gun between the two of them. "Let me see."

Clark immediately stilled what poor movements he was making and let Lois take a look at his wound. "Kryptonite," he gasped out, though Lois already guessed as much. "Gotta...get it...out," he said through gritted teeth as a fresh wave of pain washed over him. She could tell by the way his face scrunched up in a wince.

The wound looked bad, but not nearly as bad as she'd first thought it would be. The bullet had struck him closer to the shoulder than his heart, as she could see from the hole that had been ripped in his shirt. He was still badly bleeding though, and unless Lois could get the bullet out, Clark would lose too much blood. She knew, already, from being Clark's medical proxy, that his blood was too different from a regular person's. He would not be eligible for a transfusion if he lost too much. If she wasn't able to stem the flow of Clark's blood, he would die right there in the parking garage.

Lois nodded mostly to herself as a thought entered her mind. "Hold still," she said as she began to rummage through her purse. A moment later, she found what she was looking for – a pair of long, thin hairpins she'd thrown in her bag after the end of a long day at work and had nearly forgotten about. Quickly, she set about using them like chopsticks to fish for the green bullet that would be Clark's death if she failed. "Come on, come on," she muttered to herself as she tried, unsuccessfully, to grab hold of the bullet.

Clark yelped in pain as she lost her grip again and the makeshift forceps she'd devised slipped and hit into his torn muscles.

"Sorry," she apologized.

"Keep going," Clark encouraged her, by way of forgiving her misstep.

Lois bit down on her lower lip as she concentrated. She altered her angle a little bit, prodded blindly for the bullet, then felt the hairpins catch it between them. Slowly, gently, unwilling to risk making the slightest wrong move, she eased the accursed metal and rock slug from Clark's body. Tense seconds past as she

worked at her task, until, at last, she felt it come free. She let the bullet drop into her empty palm, then held it aloft to examine it, making sure it looked intact.

"Get it away," Clark pleaded, almost looking paler than when it had been inside his body. "Please."

Lois nodded again and dropped the bloody green thing into a small change purse she had in her bag. Frowning, she looked down at the gun. "Hold on for just another minute," she told Clark as she took off the blood-soaked gloves she wore and reached for the weapon. With deft hands and a knowledge of what she was doing, she swiftly emptied the chambers of the weapon, depositing the rest of the spent bullet's brethren into the change purse too. She snapped it shut. "There," she told him.

Clark's body sagged in relief as the radioactive stone was sealed away. "Thank you."

"Are you okay?" she asked, knowing that it was probably too soon to ask.

Clark didn't try to move or to open his eyes, which had closed as the piece of his home world was barricaded away from him. "I'm not sure yet. I'm weak and the pain is still there, but it's better than it was." He took what appeared to be an experimental deeper breath. "Call the police. Have them arrest the gunman. I should be feeling more like myself by the time they arrive. I hope."

"Are you sure?" Lois asked nervously.

"We can't allow him to escape. I don't have the ability to chase him down if he comes to," Clark replied, finally cracking his eyes open.

"Okay," Lois assented.

She took out her phone, but didn't call 911. Instead, she called Henderson. He picked up on the second ring and listened quietly as she told him what had happened. Then she hung up and looked at Clark.

"Henderson's on his way."

"Let me guess, he knows about me too?" Clark mused, pushing himself up a little straighter.

Lois unbuttoned the top of Clark's dress shirt and checked the wound. "It's stopped bleeding," she said in both relief and wonderment. "And yes. But blame your mother on that one, not me," she added with a grin.

Clark chuckled. "I'm sure she had her reasons." He tested his arm out by moving it slowly in a wide circle. When it appeared not to bother him, he smiled. "See? I'm healing already."

"Good. I'd hate to lose you on our first date," Lois joked.

"No kidding. Of all the ways I feared this night could go wrong by the end...you having a miserable time, finding that we just don't click as a couple, you slamming a door in my face before I could kiss you goodnight...getting shot was *not* on the list." Clark quipped. He made a move to stand and Lois sprang to her feet to help him up. "Thanks," he said sincerely. He looked at the still unconscious gunman. "You saved my life tonight."

"Don't mention it. You've saved mine more than I care to admit," she replied, patting his unhurt shoulder.

Clark cocked his head to one side. "Seems like I'm still able to recover pretty quickly from being exposed to that rock," he said in a low tone, lest anyone be in earshot. "I hear sirens coming this way already."

"Quick," Lois said, turning to him and fumbling with his buttons once again, "we need to hide the evidence you were shot. Henderson might know the truth, but we don't need any other nosy cops seeing the blood and wondering why you're not bleeding out on the floor and needing a ride in the ambulance."

Clark nodded and took over, his fingers brushing against hers as he hastened to button his shirt and get his winter coat closed tightly over the evidence splashed all across his chest. "How do I look?" he asked as he craned his head this way and that, trying to determine if everything was hidden.

“Like someone who managed to *avoid* getting shot,” Lois said, shoving her bloody gloves in her pockets. “Who do you suppose this guy is?” she asked, nodding in the direction of the gunman.

“One of Luthor’s assassins,” Clark said with conviction, looking over the man’s unconscious form with disdain.

“Obviously. I mean, who *is* he?” Lois clarified.

The first police cruiser pulled into the parking garage. Clark barely glanced in its direction. “We’ll find out soon enough,” he said.

“And this time, at least we were able to stop an attempt on your life *before* the would-be assassin could kill themselves,” Lois added acridly.

Clark nodded but said nothing as the cruiser pulled to a stop and Henderson jumped out with a speed that surprised Clark, given the man’s age. Henderson slammed the door of the vehicle as he approached Lois and Clark. As soon as he was within an arm’s reach, he stuck out his hand to Clark.

“Kent, you have *no* idea how glad I am to see you alive and well,” the older man said, his face cracking into a rare, though modest, smile. “Last time I saw you...”

“I know,” Clark said, dipping his head in acknowledgment as his old friend’s voice trailed off. “I hear congratulations are in order. Chief of Police is pretty impressive, Bill.”

Henderson made a dismissive motion with his hand. “Ah, it’s okay. I don’t miss the grunt work, but sometimes I do miss being out in the middle of things.”

“I’ll bet,” Clark replied. “I always knew you’d go places though. I’m not surprised you made Chief.”

“Lois’ doing, mostly. With her investigations, she made me look good,” Henderson said, and it sounded to Lois like he wasn’t really joking. She blushed. But Henderson didn’t appear to notice and slipped right into his usual business-like demeanor. “Nice work knocking him out,” he sarcastically told Lois.

She shrugged. “I had no choice.”

“Let’s hope you didn’t knock out the memories of who hired him to make the hit,” Henderson replied in a similar tone. Then, looking at Clark, he apologized. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound insensitive.”

It was Clark’s turn to brush off a comment. “Don’t worry about it. What happened, happened, and I’m better now. But we’ll need an ID on this guy as soon as possible. We think he may be linked to some...other close calls we’ve had,” he said, his voice going low.

Henderson grunted a sound of agreement. For a moment, he watched his officers, who’d arrived only moments after he had, as they worked the scene and collected what evidence they could. An ambulance had arrived as well, and the EMTs were working on reviving the gunman.

“Let’s talk over here, out of the way,” he said finally, gesturing to two empty parking spaces to the right of the crime scene. “I need to take your statement.”

Lois and Clark allowed the Chief of Police to lead them to the empty spaces, then, in hushed tones, they told Henderson what had happened. He jotted everything down on his notepad. Everything, that is, except for the fact that Clark had been struck.

“I appreciate you keeping my secret,” Clark said at the end of it all. “It’s nice to know I can count on people to respect my privacy.”

Henderson nodded. “It’s an honor to be part of the inner circle,” he responded thoughtfully. “What you did for us...I mean all of us, not just those of us in a uniform...it was probably the most selfless thing I’ve ever seen in all my years on the force. I can’t tell you how much I respect what you were doing while in your...other business suit.”

“Still, it’s not every day I come across someone trustworthy enough to be comfortable with them knowing,” Clark replied. “In fact, I was hoping I could entrust another secret to you. Lois? Give

him that change purse.”

Lois mutely did as Clark asked, handing the bag over to a bewildered Henderson.

“Bullets made of Kryptonite,” Clark said in a tone so low it was almost lost amongst the ambient noises of the garage. “The only thing on Earth that can kill me. Bring them to Dr. Klein at S.T.A.R. Labs. He’ll know what to do with them. These are all the gunman had, that we know of. Except for the one embedded in the concrete by the elevator.”

Lois held her breath, wondering if Clark would divulge Lex’s part in his twenty-year disappearance. But he remained silent on the issue. Perhaps he was waiting until they could somehow find proof of Lex’s hellish deeds. So she said nothing on the subject.

“I want that change purse back,” she said instead, her voice hard and serious. “I had that specially made.”

It was true. As the years had gone by without word of where Clark could be, she’d asked Martha to make her something out of one of Clark’s old sweatshirts that he’d once lent to her. She’d worn it so often that the fabric was nearly threadbare in places and she hated to get rid of it. So, in desperation to save some of it at least, she’d asked Clark’s mother to make her something out of it that she could always keep with her. A week after sending the well-worn shirt to Kansas, Martha had mailed back the change purse, as well as a few scraps of the fabric that she’d been able to salvage. Lois still kept one of the scraps under her pillow, even though Clark was living in her house now. She hated to part with it, as though if she tossed it out, it would mean Clark would vanish again.

“Yeah, yeah,” Henderson said dismissively. “I’ll tell him to mail it back to you, okay?”

Lois nodded. If Henderson said he would do something, he would do it. “Thanks.”

“Okay, you two have been through enough tonight,” Henderson said after pocketing the change purse. “Go home. I’ll let you know once I find out anything about the perp.”

“Thanks, Bill,” Clark said sincerely. He turned to Lois. “Sorry about how tonight wound up. But Bill’s right. There’s nothing more we can do here...at least not until I get my press pass back.”

Reluctantly, Lois agreed. Then, together, they made their way to the car and headed for home.

It was late that night and Clark found himself tossing and turning in his bed. He couldn’t sleep. His mind was too full of dark thoughts to allow him any rest. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Luthor’s mocking face behind his closed lids. He heard the madman’s voice deriding him, telling him he was no one, that Clark Kent never existed, that Superman was all there had ever been. He once more heard the hissed threats against the lives of those he cared about. He could practically feel all of the torture and abuse Nigel had dealt to him at Luthor’s every whim. He could feel the walls closing in about him like the claustrophobic little cell he’d been stuffed into in the Arkham Asylum. He could hear the ghostly, echoing screams and rants of the other insane inmates as they howled in the sterile, bland, cheerless, windowless basement. He could feel every jolt of electricity as it slaughtered his brain cells and left him helpless, thoughtless, and zombie-like.

Finally, he could stand it no longer. He crept out of his bedroom and listened intently. From Lois’ room, he could hear only the soft sounds of her sleep breathing. Down the stairs he went, floating rather than walking, so as not to wake her. Her hall closet was his target – she’d shown him the secret space behind the false back wall, not unlike the one he’d had once upon a time. He went to it and opened the secret compartment with shaking hands. He wasn’t sure he wanted to do this. But he still felt drawn to it.

With trembling fingers, he plucked one of the blue unitards from its hanger and withdrew it from its hiding place. The thin,

silky material felt almost alien in his grasp, and yet, there was so much familiarity and memory wrapped into that lifeless swath of fabric. He reached in again and found the rest of its brethren – a heavy, vibrant red cape, a matching pair of briefs, and a pair of sturdy red boots.

He handled the items as gingerly and with as much caution as he would handle a live grenade. He closed the closet and brought everything into the living room. Feeling physically weighed down by the memories encased in the costume he held and by the decision he had to make, he plopped onto the couch.

Every atom of his body, every brain cell was screaming at him to burn the outfit into a pile of cinders. This was what had gotten him into such trouble with Luthor all those years ago. If he'd never taken up the cape, he never would have become such a target. Clark Kent would have been a threat to Luthor, of course, but not in the same way Superman had been. Maybe Lois would have even seen Clark for who he was earlier. At the least, she never would have pined over a superhero who didn't exist.

And yet...

Clark set aside the boots, briefs, and cape and stared only at the blue unitard. He traced the bold S on its front with one finger, caressing the crest that proclaimed the heritage of his birth, though not of his upbringing. Maybe it shouldn't have, but the design called to him, cajoled him, seduced him. As much as it might benefit him to distance himself from the hero he'd created, it was a part of him. The suit and the symbol had once meant so much to him. It symbolized the freedom he'd gained to use his powers in public without causing a mass panic or putting his identity in jeopardy.

"I don't really *need* to put it on," he told himself in a whisper. "I've gone out flying before without it. And it's not like I'm planning on doing any super work tonight."

He almost put it down. He almost returned it to the closet. But he found himself remaining in his seat, unwilling or unable to put the costume back.

"No. Maybe it's better to wear it, just this once," he reasoned, wishing there was an easy answer or that his mother or Lois was there to help him make up his mind. But there was no one and he had to do it alone, as he had all those years ago when he'd decided to make an alter ego for himself.

He sighed. "Just this once," he finally decided. "If only to give off the illusion of authority. No. I don't really *need* to pretend I have any authority because I *don't* have any. But...it's respectful to wear the suit."

Without another word, he shed his civilian clothing and pulled on the tight Spandex that had once given him so much comfort. Now it only put him ill at ease, like he was strapping a neon target to his back.

"It's dark. I'll be flying too high and fast to be seen," he told himself in a kind of pep talk. "No one will see me unless I want them to."

Then, stealthy as any ninja, he slipped out of the house and rocketed into the sky. He knew where to go. With his memory restored to what it had once been, he knew the landscape beneath him as well as the back of his hand. So he flew on through the night, sticking to the tattered clouds as much as he could and flying as fast as possible without breaking the sound barrier. He dared not risk the rumors that would spread if a sonic boom was to be heard.

It took him just minutes to get to his destination, then to locate the precise spot he needed to be in. Still, being back in Gotham turned his stomach to the point where he almost felt like he might become physically sick. Bravely, he swallowed hard, tamping down the bile in the back of his throat, then he descended lightly to the rooftop of the Gotham Museum of Natural History.

"Bruce Wayne," he greeted the man hunched in the shadows, surveying the city below like a silent sentinel.

The man in question looked up, peering at Clark from behind his bat-themed cowl. "Clark Kent," he said in turn, a bit gruffly but not unkind. He raked his eyes over Clark in an appraising way. "You look well. A lot better than the way I last saw you, at any rate."

"That's partly why I'm here," Clark offered, approaching with measured steps. "I owe you a debt of thanks that I don't think I'll ever be able to repay. You saved my life when you found me in the Arkham Asylum," he said, keeping his voice even and steady, though the thought of being in the same city as that asylum made his skin crawl. "And then again when that man broke into Lois' home, apparently with the intention of murdering us both."

"Don't mention it," Bruce said, standing up and abandoning his post. He stuck out a hand to Clark, and Clark accepted it. The two shook hands and Clark made the immediate conclusion that he and Bruce would likely be friends if ever the opportunity arose for them to work together as a team.

"Glad to see you back in uniform," Bruce added approvingly after a moment, gesturing to the primary colors of Superman's distinctive disguise.

"It's not permanent," Clark hedged. "I just thought it might be more appropriate to meet the Batman if I were also in uniform."

Bruce nodded thoughtfully. "But surely you'll be returning to the superhero business," he said, and it was not a question.

"I don't know," Clark admitted quietly.

"You...don't know?" Bruce repeated with surprise. "You're Superman. People need you."

"Maybe, but even if I was gung-ho about returning, there's no way I could explain my absence for such a long time," Clark countered, feeling a little relieved to be able to voice his concerns aloud to someone who could understand the pressures of living a dual life. "Not without revealing more than I'm comfortable with, at any rate. Besides, even if I *could* concoct a plausible explanation, I've been gone a long, *long* time. There's no guarantee most people would even accept my return."

"Does it matter what the public thinks?" Bruce asked, the question heavily loaded.

"Yes," Clark immediately answered. "I'm not like you. I'm not a normal guy with a million gadgets that stops criminals. I'm not like Tony Stark, with machine-given powers. I'm not even like that kid Peter, who got bit by a spider."

"No, you aren't," Bruce neutrally agreed.

Clark frowned at his own inner musings. "And that's a problem. I'm not from this planet. I'm worried that might affect people's ability to forgive my absence. I've never been a fallible human being to them."

"Wasn't that the point of your disguise? To shake them off the trail of your true identity?" Bruce asked pointedly, crossing his arms and leaning back a bit, as if appraising Clark.

"Yes. But now I'm afraid that might work against me," Clark explained, his heart heavy. "Superman was *never* given the ability to be wrong. He was always expected to be perfect. Now he's just this loser who disappeared without a trace. People aren't going to accept him just showing back up again."

"You think they won't trust you," Bruce accurately surmised.

"Exactly," Clark said with a singular nod. "If Superman isn't trusted, I can't do my job. No one will ever allow me to help them the way I used to. This worry over the public's opinion...it's not an ego thing, Bruce." He folded his arms across his chest and suppressed a sigh. "I don't care, on a personal level, if people like me or not. But I can't function as Superman if people are actively fearful or otherwise against me."

"People were distraught when they realized you'd disappeared," Bruce said, and Clark wasn't entirely sure if that was an argument *for* Clark's point or *against* it.

"All the more reason to believe that they might turn their back on me if I suddenly reappear...with or without a reason why,"

Clark softly argued.

Bruce didn't respond right away. But when he did, it wasn't what Clark expected. He thought Bruce would either dismiss him if he wasn't going to take on the role of Superman again or that Bruce would try to persuade him to return to his super duties.

"If you *do* decide to come back, there will always be a place for you in the Justice League," Bruce said sincerely.

Clark was touched by the invitation, even if he couldn't accept it right away. "Thanks, Bruce," he said, dipping his head once in acknowledgment. "From what I've heard, the League is more my style than the Avengers," he said jokingly, though the sentiment was true enough.

Bruce nodded in turn. "But an invitation into the League *isn't* why you're here," he correctly deduced. "Nor, do I assume, did you come for my opinion on what to do in regards to returning as Superman."

"No, it's not," Clark agreed. "I came to ask for your help. And I know I haven't earned it yet. But..."

"With what?" Bruce interrupted, sounding intrigued, rather than annoyed, as Clark had half-feared the billionaire would be.

"Gathering evidence," Clark said grimly. "I know who held me hostage and it's time I exposed him for the criminal he is."

Even with the cowl obscuring his features, it was clear that Bruce's interest was piqued. "Oh?" he asked and Clark imagined a raised eyebrow beneath the mask.

"Lex Luthor. I need to find proof that he's the one who imprisoned me in a cage for ten years, torturing me to the point where he effectively erased the memory of being Clark from me, before he shipped me off to the asylum." Clark's voice was solemn and grave.

"That's a tall order," Bruce said after considering it.

Clark nodded in agreement. "I know. But I also know you have the computer skills to hack into Luthor's databases. Even once I get my press pass back, I have neither the skill nor the tools to do that," Clark explained. "Lois and I will be working to expose the rest of Luthor's criminal misdeeds but I need help in ensuring that he's held accountable for stealing twenty years of my life."

Bruce sat on the low wall around the edge of the roof. He steeped his fingers in thought. "I may be able to help, but I can't guarantee I'll find what you're looking for."

"Of course," Clark allowed, leaning his back up against the small doorway that housed the stairwell that gave security and maintenance access to the roof. He crossed his arms over his chest once more. "That goes without saying." He sighed. "That's also assuming I can use it without exposing my super identity," he added thoughtfully.

"Oh?" Bruce asked, curious.

"Long story," Clark swiftly countered. "To make it short, Luthor knows who I am and brainwashed me into forgetting about Clark. Even if there's something... a video, a voice recording, whatever, he's probably going to be calling me Superman on it. Still, I have to hope there's *something* I can use to put him in jail."

"And if there isn't?" Bruce asked, genuinely curious sounding.

Clark dropped his hands to his sides and shrugged. "Then I'll have to be content to putting him in jail for everything else he's done."

"You seem oddly okay with that," Bruce observed in a neutral tone.

Again, Clark shrugged. "What choice do I have? If it comes down to my word against his with no evidence to back up my claim, I'm just the guy that spent a decade in a mental ward. No one would ever believe me."

Bruce nodded approvingly. "Okay. It might take me some time."

For the first time that night, relief spread over Clark. "Take as long as you need. Lois and I are going to take a while to gather our own evidence to build a case against him."

"It may be harder than you anticipate," Bruce warned.

"Especially now that he's the President."

"Tell me about it," Clark sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "But I'm determined to see it happen."

"Good," Bruce said, the barest hint of a smile cracking his otherwise business-like demeanor. "Go on. Find what you need. And if I or the rest of the League can help, let me know."

"Trust me. I will," Clark said, his voice serious and cold with contempt for Lex Luthor.

Lois was awake when Clark slipped back into the house. He found her sitting in the darkened living room, her laptop on her lap, the pale light from the screen casting a sickly hue of pallor on her face as she scrolled through her email. She looked up as he entered the room, a fleeting look of relief on her face that she quickly tried to mask.

"Hey," she said softly.

"Hey," he returned in kind. "What are you doing awake?"

Lois shrugged and shut the computer's lid. "I had a bad dream about the incident in the parking garage," she explained quickly, waving her hand as if to dismiss any such dark thoughts. "And I couldn't go back to sleep right away. What are *you* doing up?"

She reached for the side table, groping in the near-darkness for the lamp there. At length, her questing fingers found it and switched it on. They both blinked in the sudden intrusion of light, weak as it was. Lois gasped when she saw what he was wearing.

"Wow," she breathed in awe. "You look... amazing. Like you stepped right out of the past. Does this mean...?" She didn't finish her question. Perhaps she dared not to.

Clark shook his head. "I'm not sure yet. It's... difficult, wearing this. Not because I don't want to but... Luthor made me believe this outfit was all I was. And Dr. Fulton made me believe I was insane for thinking I could *ever* be Superman," he said hesitantly, trying to explain the torrent of emotions he felt inside. "But I know that it *is* – or *was*, I guess – a part of me."

"I understand how you could be conflicted about wearing it," she told him, standing and reaching out to him.

He needed no invitation. He allowed himself to sink into her embrace as she hugged him tightly.

"I hate this," he confessed. "I thought I was better, you know? I got my memory back... I got my *life* back. I even got *you* back. But Luthor's still winning. He's still getting his way. Superman, at least, is erased... he doesn't exist because I can't even put on the uniform without flashing back and feeling sick to my stomach."

"If that's true, why did you put on the suit tonight?" Lois asked.

Clark pulled away and led her to the couch again. "I needed to talk to Bruce Wayne. And, while I've already been out and about flying in my street clothes, it felt more... respectful, I guess, to meet him dressed as equals. After all, he doesn't exactly spend his evenings in pajamas sitting in front of the fireplace in his mansion. At least, that's not where I met up with him anyway," he said wryly. Then he sighed. "He wants me to join the League."

"What did you tell him?" Lois asked, peering closely at him, as if she could read the answer in his features.

"That I'm not entirely sure I *can be* Superman anymore. I've been gone for a long time. Even *if* the public allows me to help them, they'll want answers that I *cannot* provide. Not without exposing my real identity." He stood up and paced. "Luthor's won, Lois. You and I can bring him down, show the world what a criminal he is, but he's won. I can't *be* Clark *and* Superman anymore. Not without destroying my private life."

"We'll figure something out," Lois assured him, her tone resolute. She stood up and touched his shoulder to get him to stop moving. He immediately ceased his pacing under the gentle pressure of her hand. "He hasn't won anything. We're going to tear down Lex Luthor and show the world what he did to you, and

figure out how to bring Superman back...if you want to.”

“That’s the thing. I’m *not* sure anymore. There’s this huge part of me that misses it. I *loved* saving lives, Lois. I *loved* knowing that I could make a difference in the world. But there’s also a lot of trauma connected to the suit now. I don’t mean the kind that came from being five seconds too late to save a life, or making split-second decisions, knowing that whoever I chose to leave behind while I rescued someone else probably wouldn’t make it.” He could feel himself shaking as he spoke, the torment of his emotions being split the way they were almost too painful to bear. “I was *tortured* over this costume...over having a second identity.”

Lois wrapped her arms about his quaking form, as though she was the glue preventing him from falling apart.

In many ways, she *was*, Clark knew.

“It’s okay. It’s *normal* to be conflicted,” she soothingly told him. “I’d be more worried if you knew exactly what you want to do regarding Superman right now. You’ve only *just* gotten your memories back. And yes, what Lex and Dr. Fulton did to you...I can’t even imagine how hard it must have been to put that suit on tonight.” Gently, she let go of him, tugged his arm, and got him to sit down again.

“It...wasn’t easy,” he admitted sheepishly.

“And now that you’ve been wearing it for a while?” Lois carefully prodded.

“I’m still torn. All those unpleasant memories. But...I kind of miss wearing it too.”

“You know you don’t have to decide anything tonight,” Lois offered.

Clark sighed tiredly, then yawned. “I know.”

“It’s been a long day,” Lois said, switching topics as he tried to suppress a second yawn. “Why don’t we try to get some more sleep?”

Clark tamped down the instinct to crack a joke about how he couldn’t get “more” sleep if he hadn’t gotten any yet that night, but decided against it. His troubled heart wasn’t fully in it. In the end, he simply nodded.

“Yeah. It’s going to be an early morning too,” he agreed, and that thought lifted his spirits. “I can’t believe I’m going back to the Planet.” He grinned.

“I can’t wait to have my partner back,” Lois said, matching his grin. She patted his leg. “Come on. I...um...was kind of hoping I could...or, rather, you could...stay with me for a while? I think I’m still a little worked up over the shooter,” she added after a moment in which she stepped away, then looked shyly back at him.

“I’ll be up in a minute,” Clark said brightly. “I just want to change out of this and hang it back up,” he said, sweeping a hand before the stylized S on his chest.

Lois chuckled. “Fair enough. Come to my room when you’re ready.”

Not a minute later, Clark was gently knocking on the wall beside her open bedroom door, now clad in his soft sleeping clothes once more. Lois beckoned him in with one hand and pulled back the bedsheets. Clark looked inquisitively at her, but she only nodded her invitation. He slipped into the bed and pulled up the sheets. Lois immediately laid her head on his chest. For a long time, no one spoke, nor did either of them dare to move. Clark simply luxuriated in cuddling her so closely. Then, as Lois’ breathing changed to the deep, even breaths of sleep, Clark closed his eyes and drifted off.

Clark stood still for a moment at the railing overlooking the bullpen of the Daily Planet. For several heartbeats, all he could do was close his eyes and drink up all the familiar, though distant, smells and sounds of the paper. Frenetic tapping at keyboards. Phones ringing. Insistent voices speaking pleasantly, but without yielding, to unknown people on the other end of the phone. Small

talk being made in the break area. Footsteps rushing to and fro across the newsroom. The coffeemaker brewing a strong, rich pot of coffee. Someone dropping coins into the vending machine.

Lois put her hand on the middle of his back and he opened his eyes again. Nervous butterflies were in his stomach, but he was elated and excited to be back. And having Lois by his side soothed him.

“How are you feeling?” she asked him in a gentle tone meant only for his ears.

“Excited,” he answered honestly. “A little nervous too. It’s been a long time.”

“You’ll do great,” she said, cheering him on.

He gave her a smile. “Thanks.” He looked back over the bullpen. “It looks so different than I last remember it. I mean, the layout is basically the same but...everything is so...different,” he ended lamely, failing to express what he meant.

It was true. While the basic layout of the room hadn’t changed much – the conference rooms were still conference rooms, the editor’s office was still in the same place, the break area hadn’t moved an inch – things were far more modern. Gone were the worn wooden desks that had stood in place before the Planet had been bombed. Newer cherry-colored desks were everywhere. Not a fax machine was in sight – email had long since replaced the old dinosaur-sized machine at the far end of the office. Every desk had a small printer and a docking station for the reporters to plug in the laptops they took with them.

While Clark saw some people on regular phones at their desks, many more had cellphones pressed to their ear. Some scribbled notes on old-fashioned note pads, while others made notations on smart phones or tablet devices. Even the dress code was a little laxer. The younger members of the paper’s staff wore business casual clothing. Clark felt overdressed in his black suit and navy tie spotted with a handful of hibiscus flowers. Thankfully, a few “old-timers” still dressed in formal business attire, so Clark wasn’t *entirely* out of place.

Like Lois. He’d noted each day the no-nonsense business suits – some with skirts, others with pants – that she donned to go to work. Today, she was in a maroon pants suit with a white shirt and low black pumps. He was glad Lois hadn’t succumbed to the appeal of the business casual approach. While he liked her in whatever she wore, she made a powerful presence in her work attire – as stunning as any sunset and dangerous as a hurricane if you were caught in her crosshairs.

“It’s pretty amazing, huh?” she said, leaning on the railing and looking out, perhaps trying to see it with fresh eyes, as he was. “After the bombing, it was amazing that Mr. Stern bought the paper and brought us back. I thought we were high-tech then – and we were – but we’ve only gotten better as the years have passed.”

“They never did find the real bomber, huh?” Clark asked sadly.

“No. But at least we were able to prove that it wasn’t Jack,” Lois replied in kind.

Clark nodded mutely. Then, squaring his shoulders and once again smiling at her, he gave the bullpen one last look. “Let’s get to work, partner,” he said with determination and eagerness.

“You read my mind,” she said, grinning back widely, with a look that Clark knew well.

Let’s nail Lex Luthor to the wall, it said. And Clark couldn’t have been happier to make that happen.

Fall died and winter came on strong. Spring broke timid and weak, but relentlessly fought back the bitter cold and melted the ice while ushering in milder, warmer weather. The first brave shoots of flowers and tender blades of grass peeked cautiously out of the ground. Lois and Clark hardly noticed unless they were out on a date. And even then, it was usually at night, for even on their days off from work, they were constantly building their case

against Lex Luthor. It turned out to be a bigger, more extensive investigation than even Clark had imagined it would be, even in his wildest dreams.

Luthor had procured most of his wealth through illegal means, was lord and master of the organized crime in half the Northeast – let alone Metropolis, as Clark had often suspected - and had, it seemed, retained that control even now as he sat in the Oval Office in the seat of the President. Lois and Clark both suspected foul play in the election that had given Luthor the Presidency, but, as of yet, they could prove nothing beyond a shadow of a doubt. If Luthor had somehow used illegal means to sway the vote, he'd been very, very careful not to leave a trace.

And that was only a portion of what they dedicated their time to. They still had plenty of other stories to investigate, and Clark was only too happy to take on whatever it was that Jimmy wanted him to cover. The annual dog show, a police graduation ceremony, a corrupt landlord, the arson at City Hall, it didn't matter. Clark showed the same enthusiasm for them all. It wasn't just for show either. He was genuinely happy to cover any story and still marveled over the fact that he was back to work, even though he very quickly learned that none of his old training had abandoned him during the long years of disuse. He was still as competent a reporter as the day he'd gone missing. Still, he often leaned on Lois for help. He liked having her edit his copy and give him suggestions.

"You're never too old or too smart or too practiced to learn something," his father had once told him, after Clark had questioned why Jonathan had listened to Wayne Irig when the man had been explaining a different way to rotate the crops. He'd thought the way they were doing things at the time was fine enough and couldn't understand why his father, a great farmer in his own right, would consider changing a tried-and-true method. Jonathan had smiled and ruffled his hair affectionately as he'd explained his reasons to Clark. "There's no such thing as perfect. There's always room for improvement."

Clark hadn't really understood it at the time. What super-fast, super-strong twelve-year-old would have? But as he'd gotten old and wiser, he'd learned what valuable advice that had been. He took it to heart, especially now, and constantly looked for opportunities to learn more and be better.

He threw himself into his work and into learning all the new things he needed to know as a reporter. But not when he was out on a date with Lois. As a rule, he refrained from discussing work with her if it could be avoided while they were on a date. He knew they both needed to step back from their jobs if they ever hoped to come back to things in the morning with fresh eyes. And while their work was important, it made for weary conversation over dinner.

They went out almost every night, trying new restaurants and revisiting old favorites that were still thriving in the city. Or they might wind up at a late movie or shopping together or at the zoo. Clark tried his best to think of different ideas to keep things new and exciting, instead of a routine of dinner and home again to watch TV together. He wanted to make Lois the happiest she'd ever been. She was already making *him* the happiest he'd ever been in *his* life.

Every moment with her was magical. Every dinner was a feast fit for royalty, so long as she was with him. Every movie had at least one redeeming quality in that he'd sat next to her to view it. Every outing to the zoo or museum or mall was an exciting adventure. Every time they returned home for the night, he was *home*. It wasn't the four walls or the furnishings or even that it was the only place he'd lived in since he'd been rescued from the asylum. It was *Lois*. He could have been living with her in a cardboard box under the Metropolis Bridge and *still* been home. He was immensely glad he hadn't moved out and had, instead, obliged Lois in remaining at her house.

Everything in his life felt like it was finally going in the right direction. He'd recovered everything he'd ever lost. And he'd gained more than he'd ever dared to dream he'd have. But one thing was still not the same.

Superman remained missing.

Clark still found that he had extreme anxiety every time he thought about resurrecting the presumed-dead hero – or, as some people seemed to believe, the "hero" who'd been a jerk for just up and leaving Earth without so much as a word of goodbye. Nor could he convince himself that there was any way that he could explain away more than twenty years of ghosting the world.

Lois made him insanely happy.

The situation with Superman made him profoundly sad.

At least *one* course of action was clear. And one early April day, while he and Lois strolled along the docks at sunset after a wonderful seafood dinner at the newly-opened Lobster Hut, he acted on his decision.

"Lois?" he asked as they stopped to watch the sky flare into a brilliant painting of golds, oranges, and reds, tinged with just a hint of blue. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course," she immediately replied, tearing her eyes from the sunset to study him. "What's up?"

"Are you happy?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we've been dating for just about six months now," he hedged cautiously.

"*Of course* I'm happy," she replied, giving him a funny look. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Clark shrugged. "I had to make sure. Because being with you has been the most amazing thing that's ever happened to me. And I'm just so happy. *You* make me happy, Lois."

She leaned into his side a bit and looked up at him with a contented sigh. "You make me happy too," she said. "For a long time, I wasn't. And I don't mean just during the years you were missing. I was miserable then, but not for the first time. Before I met you, I was lonely and sad, even if I didn't show it. I tried to cover it up and harden myself to the world to avoid getting hurt again." She stretched up on her toes and gave his cheek a kiss. "Then you came along and, once I stopped trying to push you away, you made me happy. Having you *back* in my life again... dating you... I never could have guessed I'd ever be this happy and peaceful in my life."

"Good," Clark said with a crooked smile. "Then maybe I'm not crazy for doing this." With that, he extracted himself from her hug and went down on one knee. In the same fluid motion, he removed the small jewelry box he'd had tucked away in the breast pocket of his coat. He popped the lid open and looked at her with such seriousness, hope, and love that he hoped she'd understand just how much he wanted to spend his life with her.

"Lois Lane, you are my heart and soul. You're my hero - and not just because of everything you've done for me in the last year and a half." He gave her a crooked, but shy, grin. "You've *always* been my hero. You've *always* held my heart. Your fire and passion inspire me to be a better man. Your heart is so gentle and kind and loving that I'm humbled to be given the chance to love you." He paused for a moment and took her hand. With his thumb, he stroked the back of her hand tenderly. "I lost you once already and now that we're together again, I don't ever want to be apart from you for *any* reason. I love you so much that I don't even have words for it...because any description I can come up with falls utterly short. So, Lois? Will you do me the honor of letting me be your husband?"

A single silver tear rolled down her cheek as she reached out to him. "Yes," she said breathlessly. "I love you, Clark. I want to spend my life with you."

His heart almost bursting with joy, he reverently plucked the ring from the black velvet box, then solemnly placed the solitaire

diamond on her finger. He stood then and drew her close. His lips crushed down on hers and she responded in kind, matching the unbridled intensity of his passion. Liquid fire raced through his veins and he nearly floated up off the ground in his excitement. It was only at the last second that he realized what danger he was in, and he willed himself to remain earthbound. Some long moments later, he finally broke their kiss. Breathless, he rested his forehead against hers.

"I love you," was all he could manage to say.

"I love you too."

After a moment of blissful, comfortable silence, he pulled back. "So, when should we plan the wedding for?" he teased, eager for the planning to begin.

"Tomorrow, noon, at the courthouse?" Lois offered with a smirk.

"Lo-is! I'm being serious," he gently admonished.

"I'm not joking," Lois said. "Okay, yeah, maybe we can't do it tomorrow for real, but..." She shrugged.

"Don't you want a traditional wedding?" Clark asked in surprise. "The white gown and the chapel and rose petals thrown down the aisle by your nieces?"

Lois shook her head. "Maybe once upon a time," she admitted. "But I'm not sure I want to wait. I waited long enough to be reunited with you. The *real* you. The one with *all* his memories," she said, reaching out and tenderly stroking his cheek. "I'm not sure I want to risk waiting."

"Risk?" he asked.

"Well...yeah," she replied, withdrawing her hand and gesturing for them to keep walking. "Someone – presumably Lex – has tried to kill us several times now. I mean, last week? With my Jeep's brake lines being cut? If word got back to him that we were planning a wedding..."

Clark paled. He hadn't thought of that. "Good point," he conceded. "But we can always wait until after Luthor's in jail. We're not far from making our case against him."

"No. I'm done waiting. I'm done having Lex figure into our lives – even if I didn't know it was him keeping you hostage," she said, her voice going hard as she spoke of Lex Luthor. "I just want to marry you. All the trappings of dresses and flowers and limos and the like...they're all just decoration, that's all. Like wrapping paper on a Christmas present. It's what's inside – the *marriage* – that counts. The rest just gets thrown away after being glanced at."

"Well...if you're *sure*," Clark said, dragging the word out slightly.

"Unless..." She paused, looking suddenly uncertain. "Did you want all the trappings? I mean, I know you're the kind of guy who loves traditions and the like. If you rather wait and do the whole big wedding thing, I can do that."

"Lois," he said, stopping her mid-babble, his hands resting gently on her shoulders. "None of that matters to me. Like you said, it's the *marriage* I want. I can take or leave all the rest. I've waited my whole life to be your husband. All I want is to say my vows and really, truly start our life together."

"It's settled then. We'll talk to our families and get them here just as soon as we can. Because we'll never hear the end of it from my side if we just run off and elope," Lois said with a laugh.

"Judging from what I've seen with your family, I'm guessing we'll never hear the end of it anyway," Clark laughed in turn. "I'm not sure who will give you a harder time. Lucy, for not doing the over-the-top wedding, or your mother, for doing it so soon." He turned to her as they walked and wiggled his eyebrows at her playfully.

Lois rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "Right. We'll be married after not dating long enough but she'll also be on our backs about when we'll give her grandchildren."

"I'm willing if you are," Clark said in a quiet, contemplative tone.

Children.

He was absolutely ready to have a family with Lois. He only hoped she was willing to have children with him. After all, they weren't in their twenties anymore. Conceiving might be more challenging because of that, if their unique blend of Earthling and Kryptonian genes even *could* usher in new life.

"One thing at a time, Farm Boy," she grinned teasingly. "First the marriage and *then* we'll work on bringing a baby or two into the world."

"So...that's a 'yes' then?" Clark only half-asked with a grin.

"It's a *definite* 'yes,'" she confirmed with a nod. "And you can thank our nieces for that. I've watched them often enough to have lost most of my fears about having kids of my own. Oh, I know it's not *really* the same thing, but...they've been a big confidence booster. And besides," she said, gently knocking into his side with her shoulder, "with you by my side, we can accomplish anything. Even the terrible twos," she jested.

Two weeks later, on a warm early May morning, Clark Kent – a man who'd once been no one at all – married Lois Lane at City Hall, before the tear-filled eyes of their family and a select few friends – namely Jimmy and Perry, though well-wishes filtered in to them from various superheroes who knew exactly how hard-won that marriage had been. He dressed in the charcoal suit that she loved him in the best. And she wore a simple white gown that she'd picked off the rack in one of the local shops near the City Center where they'd had their first date. Amanda and Kelly, Lois' nieces, stood next to their aunt as Lois and Clark exchanged their vows. Lucy was the matron of honor. Jimmy was Clark's best man. Sam Lane beamed. Ellen and Martha cried.

Clark felt like he was flying, though his feet remained firmly planted on the ground. His heart was full to the point of bursting. And the way Lois looked in her wedding dress broke his heart in the best way possible. She'd always been beautiful in his eyes. But not even radiant could accurately describe how she looked as they stood before the judge. She looked as ethereal as an angel, as gorgeous as any depiction of Aphrodite he'd ever seen, as regal as a queen. He felt insignificant compared to her and incredibly humbled to be her husband.

Love.

Luthor had tried to take that from him.

First, the billionaire had pursued and wooed Lois right before his eyes. Then he'd tried to marry Lois, while at the same time trying to drive a wedge between Lois and everyone she'd cared about, but most especially with Clark. He'd kidnapped Clark, held him in a cell for a decade, slowly beating the life, memories, and identity out of him. He'd destroyed every trace of Lois in his mind, leaving Clark a loveless, empty husk of a man. Not satisfied with even that, Luthor had shipped Clark off to an asylum to be held for another ten years while everything that Clark had ever known had been seared away by electrical charges shot into his brain.

And yet, despite all the time and effort Luthor had dedicated to his twisted cause, Clark had the one thing he'd always yearned for. Love.

All his life, Clark had hoped to find the other half of his soul. Someone he could be himself with, without having to hide anything. He'd wandered the world, trying to find his home, trying to find out where he belonged. He'd found it with Lois. And now, he was *finally* getting to pledge his love and his life to her, for now, and for always.

He'd never, *ever* in his life been this happy.

"Clark? You have your own vows?" the judge prompted, breaking him from his thoughts.

He nodded. "Lois, from the moment I met you, during my interview with Perry, I have loved you. I don't know how or why, but the second I laid eyes on you, I just *knew* you were the person

I'd spent my whole life looking for. Over the years, as I've gotten to know you better and better, that love has only grown. Our relationship hasn't always been easy...life has torn us apart from one another...but we've managed to find our way back together. And I love you all the more. In you, I see a future so happy and bright that it's nearly unbelievable. You are my heart, my soul, my very reason for being."

He took her hands in his and easily slipped the wedding band they'd purchased just the day before over her finger. "You make me happier than I ever dared to dream I'd be. I promise to always love you, to always be faithful to you, to be your rock, and to spend the rest of my life making you as happy as you make me. I love you, Lois."

Lois gave him a watery smile as she fought back tears. She squeezed his hands before speaking.

"Clark, you're my best friend. I never really understood what it was like to have one until I met you...until you made me see you and get to know you. You have brought so much light and joy into my life. Every day you make me happy. My life is so much richer for having you in it. I know that we're supposed to pledge our love and fidelity to each other going forward from this point on. But the truth is, you've *always* had my love and faithfulness. You've always held my heart. I will always be there for you, loving you, supporting you, protecting you from anything or anyone that ever tries to hurt you again. I love you, Clark."

She slid the ring onto his finger then, the plain gold band the perfect twin to the one she now wore. Clark smiled. The thick band weighed practically nothing, and yet it carried significant weight. It bound him – in the best of ways – to Lois. It shouted to the world that he was Lois Lane's husband. It was the most incredible title he'd ever had.

The judge asked them if they swore to take each other as husband and wife, to love one another for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. They both eagerly responded with an "I do!" that was solemnly, but excitedly, spoken.

"By the power vested in me by the state of New Troy, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride," the judge said with a soft smile.

Clark gathered his new wife in his arms and kissed her deeply and passionately. In all the times he'd kissed Lois before, this one made him weak in the knees. He wasn't *just* kissing Lois. He was pledging himself a thousand times over to his soul mate. Still, he kept the kiss short, ever mindful of their audience.

Light, but enthusiastic, applause followed them as they made their way out of the courtroom. Congratulations and pats on the shoulder came after as everyone made their way into the hallway after them.

He and Lois treated everyone to lunch at The Reef, the restaurant they'd had their first date in. They lingered until the midafternoon, and the staff, seeing that it was clearly a bride and groom celebrating their wedding, allowed them to stay as long as they liked, even bringing out complimentary slices of red velvet cake for everyone. Then, as the afternoon wore on, it became apparent that their little party would need to go their separate ways. Lucy was the first to speak up after little Kelly started complaining that she was starting to not feel well. Everyone else quickly seemed to follow suit. Jimmy's kids were getting restless and Sam had to finish packing for a conference he needed to fly out to early the next morning.

Clark didn't mind. He was more than ready to start his honeymoon with Lois. He'd lost more than twenty years with her; he wasn't willing to waste another second. And in all the time he'd had his full memory back and had begun to date Lois, and despite all the evenings she'd crawled into his bed or invited him into hers, they'd always refrained from crossing the threshold of physical intimacy. Each had wanted to make sure the moment was perfect when they first stepped over that boundary.

"Ready to go home?" Clark asked after bidding goodbye to his mother once they dropped her off at her house.

"More than ready," she replied, giving him a dreamy look from the passenger seat of the Jeep.

"And just think - tomorrow we'll be on a tropical island, far, far from Metropolis," Clark put in with a contented, eager smile.

"Mmm," Lois hummed in agreement. "Two weeks of being completely unreachable. Two weeks of sun, sand, and *you*."

"You say sun and sand like we're ever leaving the hotel," Clark quipped as he gave her a wolfish look.

She laughed hard. "Someone's a bit...enthusiastic," she shot back with a gentle slap to his bicep.

"I was locked away for twenty years without so much as a *glimpse* of you," Clark responded lightly. "And we've both been... pretty patient as we've dated."

"As I recall, that was *your* decision," Lois playfully teased.

"I seem to remember it being mutual. And I'm not saying it was a bad thing. I'm just...completely done waiting," Clark replied with a smirk.

"On that, we agree," Lois said, choking back a chuckle. "But Clark?"

"Yes, dear?"

"We could be home much faster if you'd drive a little swifter," she teased.

Clark only laughed...but he *did* begin to push the speed limit.

Months passed in a busy, but blissful, whirlwind for Lois and Clark. Building the case against Lex Luthor took up much of their time. Their regular, assigned stories at work took up the rest. And, when they actually took a day off together, they busied themselves with building their life together. Clark insisted that those days be spent doing normal, newlywed couple things – lunches and dinners out at fine restaurants, trips to parks and zoos and amusement parks, nights spent stargazing on sandy, deserted beaches. Whatever they could think of, Clark was willing and eager to do it all. He'd missed so many years of enjoying simple pleasures and now he wanted to make up for lost time. Having Lois by his side as his wife only made his second chance at life all the more perfect.

But, as much as he immersed himself in experiencing all the things that had once been denied to him, he never lost sight of the important goal of bringing his former jailor to justice.

"Tomorrow's the day," Clark announced one August morning as he came into the kitchen, tucking his white button-down shirt into his tan suit pants.

"What's the day?" Lois asked.

"To make our case against Luthor," he said grimly.

Lois nodded. They had about as much evidence as they were going to get, connecting the billionaire President to a host of crimes, both before his administration and *during* it. Everything they had was iron-clad. There was no way that he would be able to weasel his way out of any of it. It was just a matter of bringing the evidence to the right people, to get the ball rolling on formally charging him and getting impeachment proceedings started. But, try as Bruce Wayne had, no concrete evidence had turned up to pin Clark's imprisonment on Metropolis' Golden Boy, as Lex Luthor had come to be known during his campaign.

"I just got off the phone with Jimmy," Clark continued.

"We've got the go-ahead to take the next couple of weeks, starting today, to head down to D.C. I did a bit of research while you were sleeping last night and, as it turns out, my best friend from high school, Pete Ross, works for the FBI. I sent him an email asking if we could meet up and I guess the FBI never sleeps. He got back to me a couple of hours ago. We're meeting him for lunch tomorrow." He flashed a triumphant grin as he fiddled with the cuff of his shirt. "We've got him, Lois. He's already trapped and he has *no idea*."

The thought of Luthor being so close to being brought to justice made Clark feel almost weak in the knees. It was such an incredible relief, like he'd spent all those months running a marathon and the finish line was in sight; like a runner at the end of a brutal course, his body felt ready to give out and crash, but he knew he had to give it one final push and then it would be all over and he could finally rest, and that alone kept his spirits up. And yet, somehow, it felt like bringing the evidence to the feds would be just the beginning of an Iron Man competition, though Clark couldn't put his finger on why.

But, more than anything, he was nervous.

He wasn't scared of Luthor himself. No. The billionaire had tried to take everything from Clark already. And he'd failed in the long run. But Clark *was* wary about the things Luthor might do in retribution. Though it would be the FBI bringing the charges against Luthor, unfortunately, the psychopathic President was smart. He would *know* Lois and Clark were behind things. They would have to tread carefully, lest more would-be assassins might spring up in the future.

"Great!" Lois piped up with a sparkle in her eye as she downed the last sip of her coffee. "When do we leave?"

"This afternoon, at four," Clark said, coming around the counter to hug her from behind.

She sank into his embrace. "SuperClark Express or....?" she asked, leaving the rest unsaid.

"Commercial flight," Clark said apologetically. "While I'd love to fly us down in the middle of the night and cut out the plane entirely, we *need* to have a paper trail on this."

"Do we though? Maybe it's smarter if Lex can't prove we were ever in the area," Lois said thoughtfully.

Clark smiled at the way she thought. "As much as I agree with you, he's going to figure out it's us anyway. It will probably cause less problems in the long run if we don't have to lie about how we got to D.C.," Clark said with a heavy heart. "I kind of hate it, but we can't risk *anything* not adding up. This isn't like taking down just any random billionaire crime lord. This is taking down the sitting President of the United States. Besides, we'll have to cover things when they blow up. And you know they will. Luthor isn't going to handle things quietly. There'll be a press conference at the very least."

Lois sighed. "You're right, of course. Okay, let's get packed."

"Already done, except for your clothing," Clark said with a shrug. "I got everything else together while I was talking to Jimmy."

Lois twisted in his arms to look at him. "Show off," she teasingly accused.

He grinned. "What's the point of superpowers if you don't use them?"

The words stopped him dead in his tracks as soon as he uttered them. What good *were* his powers if he wasn't actively using them for the betterment of society? Superman still hadn't been resurrected. He was still worried about how to do so without making the world suspicious about what had *really* kept the hero away for so long.

Lois seemed to sense his mood and kissed his cheek lightly. "Thanks for doing that for me. Come on, let's finish up. We've still got a few hours before we need to leave for the airport. And I can think of a few ways to spend our time...*husband*." She fairly purred the last few words out and Clark instantly melted.

"Mmm," he wordlessly agreed as he scooped her up in his arms and carried her out of the kitchen.

Everything had gone smoothly. Lois and Clark had met with Pete Ross and given him the flash drive with all of their months of research and investigations. They did make it clear to him that they had a backup of the flash drive locked away in a safe location, just in case. They wanted to leave *nothing* to chance. He

listened intently to them and took everything they said seriously. After lunch, he'd invited them back to his office where he popped the drive into his computer and skimmed through the mountain of information stored on it while his eyes grew wider and wider with shock.

"All of this is legitimate," he said under his breath, half a question and half a statement of fact. It was clear he was absolutely blown away.

"Yes," Clark had replied, chafing a bit to know that he couldn't prove that Luthor had stolen two decades of his life. "And that's probably the tip of the iceberg," he said.

"Impressive," Pete had said, letting out a low whistle. Then he gave them a funny look. "What prompted all of this?"

Clark had fidgeted badly under his friend's gaze. He'd never been able to lie to Pete for as long as he'd known him. "I can't get into details," he said quickly. "And I can't prove anything. So this stays between you and me. But...Luthor is responsible for some... personal grievances. I've suspected his criminal dealings for a long time now."

"Personal grievances?" Pete had asked, arching an eyebrow. "Clark, I know you better than that. What'd he do to you? I mean, you disappeared for twenty years and..." He'd stopped short. "Wait." He'd given Clark a hard look. "Clark?" he'd half demanded.

Clark had sighed and shaken his head. "Remember how I was found in the Arkham Asylum? He's the reason I was there... against my will. Please, Pete, don't ask me for more details. I don't really want to think about what happened."

It had taken a long time for his friend to respond. When he did, he did so slowly. "For the sake of our friendship, I won't press the issue. But, Clark, if he's responsible for *other* criminal misdeeds..."

Clark had shaken his head again. "It doesn't matter. It would be my word against his and I can't prove anything. Let's focus on what we *can* prove. What we gave you should be enough to convict him and sentence him to several lifetimes in jail."

Reluctantly, Pete had nodded. "For now, I'll drop the subject. You're right about one thing. We certainly have enough to get the ball rolling bringing justice."

"Thanks, Pete. You're a good man."

The announcement was made a week later that the FBI was formally investigating the sitting President of the United States, Alexander J. Luthor, for crimes too numerous to count. Lois and Clark were right there, front and center, at the press conference held to make the announcement. It was hard not to beam with pride for a job well done, but they both had practice in keeping a neutral face; for Lois, it was years of professionalism, and for Clark, it was his brief, but impressive, stint as Superman. And although it had been more than two decades since Clark had donned the uniform and gone out into the world as his alter ego to help fight crime and protect the helpless, he found it second nature to adopt the neutral mask the hero had always worn, even in the face of the worst tragedies.

Luthor's response was swift and predictable. He called for his own press conference not two days later, to formally renounce the accusations against him as "false, unsubstantiated, and a personal attack" on him. Victory should have felt so close that Clark should have been able to taste it. Instead, a nagging feeling plagued Clark since the announcement was made that the President would be addressing the nation at 8pm sharp the following evening. It was a sick feeling at the pit of his stomach that just would not fade and Clark had found himself slipping out of the hotel room he and Lois had been living in for the past week just before midnight.

Finding a dark alley, he took off into the sky like a rocket, straight back home to pick up one of his Superman uniforms. Then he made a beeline for Gotham, once more seeking out Bruce

Wayne, with whom he'd grown to have the beginnings of a friendship with. He knew Bruce would not be patrolling the city that night – Bruce had mentioned that the Justice League would be meeting. Instead of scanning the rooftops, he zoomed toward the billionaire's former home – the original Wayne Manor, only half standing after a fire some thirty years before, and well shielded from prying eyes by a dense strand of woods on all sides. Now, the part that hadn't been destroyed by the fire had been refurbished while the demolished half was being rebuilt. Officially, the billionaire wanted to reconstruct the home his parents had built for nostalgia's sake. In reality, the old mansion had been repurposed and renamed. Now it was the Hall of Justice, a safe place for the Justice League to hold meetings in or to lay low in if the need ever arose.

Clark landed just as the meeting was coming to a close, so he hurriedly made for what had once been the manor's expansive living room. Everyone looked up in surprise as he gently rapped his knuckles against the doorframe to announce himself, rather than just barging on in. Bruce stood, a slight smirk on his face.

"Nice to see you. Does this mean you've changed your mind about my invitation into the League?" Bruce asked smoothly, indicating with one sweeping gesture of his palm that Clark should enter the room.

Clark shook his head. "Not yet. And maybe that makes it wrong of me to be here. But I need your help." He took a few steps into the room and looked at everyone, making eye contact and giving them all a barely-there smile. "All of you. Please."

For a few seconds – each of which felt like a millennium to Clark – no one spoke. Everyone just looked at one another, appearing to be waiting for someone else to answer Clark. Then, finally, Wonder Woman spoke up.

"What's wrong?" she asked gently.

The air rushed out of Clark's lungs. He hadn't even realized he'd been holding his breath. "Lex Luthor is the problem."

That got everyone's attention. Those lounging – Flash and Cyborg – sat up a little straighter. Green Lantern put down his soda. Wonder Woman's posture changed ever so slightly – sitting forward in her seat to listen more closely. Bruce folded his arms. Aquaman raised his eyebrows over the rim of his can of beer. Martian Manhunter set aside the computer he'd been taking notes on and looked expectantly at Clark.

Quickly, Clark told them of his misgivings and the fears he had of Luthor seeking retribution, even though he could not put his finger on exactly how he expected Luthor to get his revenge. Unsurprisingly, those gathered knew of Clark's story – he'd met them all over the last few months and had informed them about how Luthor had been behind the kidnapping and imprisonment he'd suffered through. So, none of them seemed particularly shocked at his insistence that something just didn't feel right. Instead, they listened intently and didn't judge him, the way he'd been slightly worried they would.

"What can we do to help?" Cyborg asked when Clark finished.

Clark sat down in an empty armchair and shook his head. "I'm not sure yet. I can't even pay you all back for the work you put into trying to find me, and then again with keeping your eyes and ears open for threats against me after I was found and unable to defend myself."

"It was our pleasure to help," Flash said with a casual shrug. "Helping an actual legend? How could we say no?"

Aquaman rolled his eyes at the much younger man. "Dude, you weren't even *born* when Clark was doing the hero thing."

Flash shrugged again. "So? It doesn't mean I can't appreciate what he's done for the world, in *both* of his identities."

"Kids, play nice," Wonder Woman chided gently.

"But, Diana, he..." Flash began to protest before she cut him off.

"Well, as you know, I'm often in the capitol area," Wonder

Woman offered. "I can easily hang around and keep an eye on things from above."

"I'd appreciate that, yeah," Clark replied gratefully, nodding in thought.

"I can blend right in with the media," Manhunter added, shapeshifting to look like a tall, slim, square-jawed, but forgettable looking, man. "It might not hurt to have someone on the ground."

"Good idea, J'onn," Clark agreed.

"I'll hang back with Diana," Green Lantern offered after a moment. "We can flank the area that way."

Clark nodded. "Thank you."

When he left, the League had the beginnings of a plan, and Clark felt a pang of longing in his heart to join them as a member of their group. For the first time, he desperately wanted to figure out a way to bring back Superman, and he made it a priority in his mind to talk to the others and Lois once the business with Luthor was through, in order to figure out how they could explain why Superman had disappeared without a word only to return after more than twenty-two years.

His meeting with the League brought him peace of mind. There was nothing Luthor could do to weasel his way out of justice. Not if he and the League had any say about it. His fears mostly assuaged, Clark flew back to the hotel room without bothering to drop off his uniform at home first. For some reason, something was telling him to keep it close by, just in case Superman needed to make an unexpected and unexplained return. A part of him felt compelled to wear it beneath his civilian clothing at the press conference the following evening, though the larger part of him was screaming that it was unnecessary.

The next day took forever to crawl by, until, at last, the members of the media were allowed beyond the gates of the White House and into the area of the lawn where a podium and a stage had been set up for the press conference. As with the FBI's announcement, Lois and Clark were there to witness and report, but this time, by both design and luck, they found themselves on the leftmost fringe of the area, rather than at the center of things, though they were still up front.

After talking things through with Lois, Clark decided to wear his uniform beneath the sandy brown suit he'd chosen for the conference. It was a risk, he knew that. If Luthor saw him there, any number of things could happen. Clark didn't *want* to be exposed for the alien hero he'd once been. But he also knew that, if push came to shove, he would do whatever it would take to ensure that Luthor faced justice.

Now, as he stood waiting for the President to make his entrance, he regretted his decision to wear the suit. He felt like a fraud. He wasn't Superman anymore – at least, not publicly. But, more importantly, he felt nauseated by the memories that swirled up out of the deepest places of his mind – memories of *only* being Superman in Luthor's presence, the way Clark had been beaten out of him, the way the Superman suit had become the only article of clothing Clark had worn for a decade, until it was ripped and frayed and stretched out and hung in tattered strips that barely covered any of his body. He remembered huddling under the half-shredded cape, dripping wet and shivering in the dark, trying to will some heat into his body. He remembered how the vibrant blue material had blackened over the years from grime, the long stretches where Clark went unwashed, and, of course, from the blood that seeped into it and crusted there so deeply that not even the forceful hosing downs Nigel gave him could loosen it from the fibers.

"Clark? Are you okay?" Lois asked, peering concernedly at him. "You're white as a ghost."

"I just...this is harder than I thought," he admitted in a whisper as he bent to speak directly into her ear. "Knowing I'll be looking at that smug, sneering face again. It's...stirred up a lot of unpleasant memories. I shouldn't have worn the suit. It's...too

strongly associated with *him*.”

Lois hugged him close. “You’re brave for being here,” she told him, a whispered sentence into his own ear.

A pleasant shudder ran down his body. “No, I’m not. I’m only here because I need to see this through. And because I need to make sure he doesn’t try to pull some stunt or another to get out of facing justice.”

“That’s still brave,” she pointed out, stubbornly refusing to admit that Clark might be right. “You’re making a huge, emotional sacrifice to make sure that nothing bad happens. You’re *amazing*.”

“Why does it feel like I’m a coward?” he wondered. He pulled at the jacket of his suit, as though it was itching him. “I don’t deserve to wear...*this*,” he said, meaning the suit hidden beneath his professional attire.

“Yes, you do. You *are* still him, even if you’ve kept that part of you out of view,” Lois assured him.

“I worry that Luthor succeeded in what he set out to do,” he confided in a low tone. “He wanted to erase me and everything I stood for.”

“He *failed*,” Lois staunchly replied. “You’re back and making a difference in the world again. Clark Kent is someone who writes articles, informs the public, and gets justice for those who have been wronged. You’re one of the most read reporters in the *world*, Clark.”

“Maybe. But that doesn’t change how much he took from me.” He sighed and motioned vaguely to the empty podium where Luthor was about to make his statement. “I’m not sure I can ever go back to the way things were. A part of me *wants* to. But he really *did* erase that other side of me. No one cares anymore that *he’s* gone. The world has moved on. Probably for the better.”

He paused, sighing once more as he dragged his hand through his hair. After a moment, he shrugged. “Or, at least, not for the worse, what with the scores of new heroes that have cropped up.” He looked around subtly, but the others were not in view. “And, believe me, I’m *thrilled* to see how many others have stepped up to help. But it feels like...like there’s no room left...for me.”

“Clark, that’s not...” Lois began, but he couldn’t stop himself from interrupting. He needed to get this off his chest.

“I’m not wanted or needed anymore, Lois. Superman’s relevance has been erased.” He stared down at his shoes in embarrassment as his words tumbled swiftly, but barely audibly, from his lips.

“Is that *really* what you think?” Lois asked, looking for all the world like his words had slapped her across the face. “That’s not true *at all*, Clark. There will *always* be a need for Superman. *Always*. Okay, fine, people are stupid and have short memories,” she allowed, her voice a gossamer whisper but intense. She gestured vaguely with one hand. “But I guarantee that, if you brought him back right now, there would be plenty of people who would be thrilled. People you once saved that remember you. Kids who have heard the story about how you appeared on the scene and the deeds you did. People who wish they could have seen just a *glimpse* of you in person.”

“Maybe for an hour or a day or a week. But, eventually, they would want answers that I can’t give them,” Clark firmly reminded her.

Clark could see her gearing up for a response, but a hush rippled through the crowd, making it impossible for them to talk without being overheard. The press secretary came out, made a quick announcement which Clark barely heard over the rushing of blood in his ears from his racing heart, and then introduced - as if he needed it! - Lex Luthor to the crowd.

Clark’s heart lurched into his throat and his stomach dropped out as Luthor strode confidently to the podium. Seeing the man who’d abducted him, imprisoned him, tortured him, and brainwashed him in person was a vastly different experience than seeing still photos or video images of him. Clark wished he could

throw up or fly away and never look back. A cold sweat broke out over his entire body and what was left of his stomach churned. The coppery taste of bile rose up from the knot in his abdomen, and he found himself trembling as his mind brought back all the vile things Luthor had said and done for ten years.

What is your name?

Say it!

I have but to say one word and I’ll be flying to a certain pathetic little Kansas farm. Do you understand what I’m saying?

I’ll kill your parents right in front of your eyes. And if that doesn’t break you...Lois Lane’s death just might.

Say it!

We’re going to be together for a long, long time.

Don’t play coy with me. I’ve seen past your flimsy disguise for a while now.

Say it!

Ah, here we are! Our pretty little bird in his gilded cage.

You’ll soon be forgotten.

I’m enjoying chipping away at you, eroding what you used to be, erasing you from memory, just as you tried to do to me.

Already, the people have turned on their supposed ‘hero.’

Say it!

You’re rather stupid. All you have to do is give up on the Clark hoax and the pain will stop.

Say it!

Clark Kent never existed. You are Superman. You are not and have never been Clark Kent.

He fought hard not to clamp his hands over his ears in a futile attempt to block out the voice. He didn’t want to draw attention to himself. He couldn’t afford to. Luthor was crazy. If he realized Clark was there, on the fringe of the crowd, there was no telling what might happen.

This was a mistake. I shouldn’t be here, he thought to himself in a sickly voice. *I should have asked J’onn to stand in for me.*

Every klaxon alarm was ringing in his brain. And yet, he knew he would be a target if he brought attention to himself by trying to leave. There was no way he could escape Luthor’s eye if he did anything at all that might set him apart from the crowd.

“I know you’ve all heard the allegations made against me,”

Luthor was saying, and Clark realized with a start that he’d missed the billionaire’s opening remarks. “I want to address them right here and right now.”

Clark took a deep, measured breath through his nose, trying to calm his nerves. He could do this. He *had* to.

“These allegations are nothing more than the fevered delusions of those who would seek to do me harm, and I emphatically deny them all,” Luthor said, just the barest uptick to his voice, which Clark knew signified his annoyance. “It is *insane* to even *entertain* the notion that I was, am, or ever will be a criminal. I have done countless good things for this country. Because of my companies, many, many people have been able to get jobs. I have given *considerable* amounts of money to charities. I have done my best to do what is in this country’s best interest as your President.”

Clark scowled slightly. *Of course* Luthor was going to pat himself on the back.

“Because of this, I have, unfortunately, made enemies. But I promise you. I will find out who - and I have my suspicions - has planted such false evidence against me, and they will be punished,” Luthor went on.

He knows, the panicked voice in Clark’s head screamed.

“In fact, I suspect they are here now, among you,” Luthor hissed, and his gaze slithered over to rest on Clark.

The various reporters all exchanged confused looks. There was a general muttering and a lot of shoulder shrugging. Clark refused to lower his head and hide from that reptilian gaze of Luthor’s. He stared back, hard.

Checkmate, Clark thought as he saw a flash of hatred and maybe a little uncertainty flash across Luthor's features.

"They will regret the day they tried to frame me," Luthor continued.

"Is that a threat?" Wonder Woman asked, descending from the sky, and, save for Lois, Clark had never been so glad to see any woman before.

"Sounded like one," Green Lantern agreed, gently alighting on the grass on the opposite side.

"I seem to remember only extending an invitation to the press," Luthor coolly complained. "Which reminds me. The enemy. He's right over there. Clark Kent. Otherwise known as your absentee 'hero,' Superman."

All eyes went to Clark. TV cameras swung in his direction. He set his jaw so hard the muscle ticked and his teeth ached with the effort.

"Don't believe me?" Luthor asked, and the eyes went back to him. "This might convince you." He plunged his hand into his ash-gray suit pocket and pulled out a small box. He popped the lid before anyone could react and held aloft a jagged, broken piece of Kryptonite about the size of a silver dollar.

Clark couldn't fight the effect the stone had on him. Before the lidless eyes of dozens of cameras and the millions of viewers watching live at home, his knees buckled and he collapsed, panting and struggling to keep himself from pitching face first in the grass. Lois was instantly at his side, kneeling in the grass, helping support him so that he stayed somewhat upright. But his strength failed quickly as the Kryptonite worked its savage devastation. He sagged in her arms.

Luthor grinned and his eyes flashed with the thrill of victory. He gestured to the fallen man.

"Security?" he said by way of invitation. "You know what to do to this...threat to national security."

"No!" Clark yelled, his voice hollow but loud enough for everyone to hear.

His protest fell on deaf ears. Two security guards whipped out their sidearms and trained them on Clark. Just a glance told Clark that if they discharged the weapons, they would tear his skull in half. Even if the Kryptonite hadn't robbed him of his ability to move, he now could no longer risk *any* kind of wrong move. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Diana and John frozen in place, also not daring to make a false move, lest it prove fatal to Clark. Where J'onn was in the crowd, Clark wasn't sure.

"Stand down," Clark told them anyway, more for Luthor's benefit than anyone else's. He knew his friends weren't foolish enough to attack the guards, but he wanted Luthor to think that he was cooperating in order to buy time for the others to make a plan.

"See?" Luthor gloated. "*There* is your enemy. An alien who abandoned you. A *creature* so utterly inhuman that he seeks to undermine the authority of the President."

"That's...not...true..." Clark wheezed.

Luthor stepped away from the podium, still holding the piece of radioactive rock aloft like a trophy. He came at Clark with easy, long, confident strides. Lois threw her body half over Clark's in a desperate attempt to shield him from the poison. Luthor grabbed her by the hair and backhanded her across the face, sending her sprawling on the ground. Instantly, Lenny Rosenthal, from the Central City Chronicles, was kneeling down to help her. Or so it appeared.

"Do you want me to...?" Clark barely heard the man ask Lois.

"If you do, he'll kill Clark," Lois replied, shaking her head and holding a hand to her reddened cheek.

"You'll pay for hurting her," Clark growled between gritted teeth.

"You see? The alien *threatens* me!" Luthor cried, and Clark wondered through the pain if the rest of the world realized how unhinged he sounded. "Let's see, hmm? Are you wearing the blue

today, *alien*?"

Luthor squatted down on the grass before Clark and set the Kryptonite down just out of reach. Then he reached out and grabbed Clark's dress shirt. With a burst of strength, Luthor tore the shirt open, making buttons pop off in all directions. His smile went from merely evil to criminally insane as the stylized S was exposed. He picked the Kryptonite back up and held it before Clark, watching as it beat Clark down without him having to raise a single finger.

"There! You see? Clark Kent is nothing more than a pathetic cover for your so-called 'hero,' Superman!"

"You son of a..."

Luthor cut him off. "He's nothing more than a non-human creature out on a perverse mission to destroy me. And this woman," he said, spitting out the words venomously and pointing accusingly at Lois, "is a co-conspirator. She is working with him," he said, jabbing his finger at Clark, "to defraud all of you into branding me a criminal. They have no proof. They seek only to sabotage my chances at reelection. They want to prey on your impressionable minds, filling your heads with falsehoods."

"Okay, I've seen enough," came a young man's voice from the crowd. "It's time for you to shut up."

Clark blinked, and the security guards were staring, dumbfounded, at their empty hands. A heartbeat later, the Flash stood leaning against the podium, the pilfered handguns in hand. He crossed his legs as he leaned, looking very much at ease. Clark wondered when the younger man had arrived. He hadn't noticed him in the crowd earlier.

"He's all yours," the Flash said to Green Lantern and Wonder Woman.

Wonder Woman was already on the move. She shoved aside Luthor's slack-jawed security detail and ripped the stone out of his fingers, exerting more effort than was absolutely necessary as she placed pressure on his wrist to loosen his grip. She tossed the stone to Green Lantern, who neatly encased the stone in a green energy bubble. It wasn't enough to help Clark. Lantern quickly made the energy bubble float, then conjured up a huge green baseball bat. He swung the bat, hit the bubble, and sent the Kryptonite hurtling into space.

The vice around Clark's chest vanished as the stone soared beyond reach. The taut muscles in his neck relaxed and he could breathe again. Shakily, though he could feel his strength returning, he stood. Everyone, even the security guards, looked at him in mute shock. For a few precious moments, it was as though he alone could move in a wax museum of unmoving figures.

He squared his shoulders and faced Luthor, his face hard but emotionless. Clark was nearly boiling with rage for having his identity irrefutably exposed before the world. But he would not let Luthor see that. He wanted the billionaire to fear the calm collectedness he forced onto his face. Because, as Clark was so intimately familiar with, fear of the unknown was worse than knowing exactly what to be afraid of. Besides, the world was watching, and Superman or not, he held himself to a higher standard than the soon-to-be-disgraced President.

Luthor squirmed, trying to back away, but Wonder Woman had a tight grasp on the collar of his imported shirt. He sputtered and growled threats. Clark let each one roll off his back. Instead, he nodded at Diana.

"Thanks for keeping ahold of him," he said. Then he looked at the others. "I owe you all."

"Don't mention it," John said grimly.

Diana looked at the billionaire with disgust that she did not bother to conceal. "My pleasure." She hesitated for a few seconds before adding, "I'm just sorry I wasn't a little quicker to prevent that stunt he just pulled."

"Yeah, same. I kinda got here about two seconds before I took Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum's weapons," Flash said with a

casual shrug of apology.

"It's not your fault," Clark reassured them both kindly.

"We can't make it up to you. However, I think I can save the taxpayers a little money," Wonder Woman said with a twinkle in her eye. With her free hand, she liberated the golden lasso at her hip. Then she looped it around Luthor's midsection and chest. She tugged at the rope around him and led him back to the podium.

The Flash moved out of the way, barely concealing his delight. "Oh, she's got the lasso out. Things just got *really* interesting." He leaned in toward the microphones set there. "Listen up, world. This is going to be pretty eye-opening."

In the audience, the reporter who'd helped Lois was missing, and Clark caught movement out of the corner of his eye. It had to be J'onn, and it looked like he was going for more help.

Clark followed behind Diana. Now that the Kryptonite was gone, he felt back to normal. He grabbed Luthor's expensive Italian jacket tightly in both fists to free up Diana's hands, twisting the fabric around his hands, letting Luthor know without speaking that he had no chance of escape.

"Go ahead," he encouraged Diana. "Use it."

She hesitated only for a moment, gauging his expression, looking for something only she knew she was looking for. "Are you sure? There's no telling what he might say..."

Clark gently interrupted, gesturing to his torn attire and blown identity. "There's nothing else he can say to hurt me."

She nodded. "All right then, if you insist. Alexander Luthor," she commanded as the lasso awoke at her voice and began to softly glow. "You will stop struggling."

Luthor's body went limp against his will. "You will regret this," he promised through gritted teeth.

"Enough of that," Diana said sternly, and his mouth shut with a snap. "Tell the people the *truth* about the allegations made against you."

Luthor scowled and gnashed his teeth as he tried to resist the lasso's power. He failed, though Clark had to admit that Luthor had fought for longer than he would have thought was possible. That idea scared Clark more than he wanted to admit. It only drove home how completely psychotic the billionaire was.

"I...did it. All of it. It's...true," Luthor got out from around his clenched teeth. "I did everything I'm accused of. And more."

"How much more?" Clark demanded, tightening his grip, ignoring how his fingers were tangled in the thin, strong lasso.

"You know very well what I did," Luthor spat at him. Then he grinned evilly. "*Superman*."

"*Besides* that," Clark asked evenly, though his heart was hammering in his chest.

"Don't you want to tell them?" Luthor asked, tossing his head in the direction of the gaping reporters, still dutifully recording the exchange. "About how I nearly erased your presence from the world? About how I destroyed you? Or did until *Lois Lane*, that traitorous, wretched, *vile* woman played nursemaid to you and brought you back from oblivion." Every word was snarled, and Clark felt what little privacy he'd retained collapsing around him. "About my sporadic, strategic, though ultimately useless, assassination attempts on you both. Go on. Tell them, *Superman*."

Too late, Clark realized that his fingers were trapped in the lasso's golden threads. A strange sensation came over him and he felt compelled to speak. Diana saw and tried to warn him, but the words were already forming in his throat.

"Clark, no!" she cried.

But she was half a second too slow. The first words of his confession came spilling out from between his unwilling lips.

"It's true," he said, his shoulders slumping. A short burst of feedback from the microphone almost blotted out the words, but by the way the media spoke amongst themselves, he'd still been heard clearly enough. "This man captured me, held me prisoner, and tortured me for ten years before having me shipped off to the

Arkham Asylum, where I was held in a tiny cell in the basement and subjected to another ten years of torture," Clark confirmed.

"Clark..." Diana said softly, in dismay.

Clark took a moment to unwind the lasso from between his fingers. Then he squared his shoulders and faced the bank of microphones before him. Free from the lasso's influence, he knew he didn't have to say anything else he didn't want to. But he also knew this opportunity would not present itself again.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly and regretfully. "I know I've probably let you all down. Making you believe I was two different people when I first adopted the character of Superman. And I know what it must have looked like, to see Superman everywhere one day and utterly gone the next. It was *never* my intention to make it seem like I'd abandoned the people of Earth. This is my home, and I would do *anything* to protect it. I also know what some of you are probably thinking right now. I was rescued almost two years ago. So why hasn't Superman returned?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lois making her way up to where he stood, a bruise already darkening her cheek where Luthor had struck her. She stayed to one side, silently giving him support, but also giving him the space he needed to command the attention of the media and, by extension, the viewers around the world. He nodded at her – just a shallow dip of his head – and gave her a reserved, minuscule smile.

"The truth is...I wasn't sure how to explain my absence. I never wanted this," he said, pulling his torn shirt open more to expose the S adorning his chest, "to be made public. Because Superman isn't who I am. It's just something I can do to help people. And, since I have nothing else to hide now - thanks to the President - I want to be completely honest with all of you. There have been other factors in my hesitation to resurrect Superman. I wasn't sure I would be *welcomed* back after being gone for more than two decades." He paused and moved his gaze to Lois, and an entire conversation passed between them in that look.

"But now that the cat's out of the bag, so to speak, I'm looking forward to bringing Superman back...and joining forces with the rest of the Justice League," he said, giving both Wonder Woman and Green Lantern a nod and a smile. He was struck by how much approval and excitement he saw in the smiles and nods they returned. "If the world will have me."

"And as for you," he said, turning to Lex Luthor, making sure his voice was lost to the microphone's reach, "you lost, Luthor. Badly." He nodded at the police officers who'd just arrived on the scene, thanks to J'onn. "He's all yours, Officers," he told them as one of the men reached the podium and swiftly handcuffed Luthor while Diana uncoiled the lasso from around him.

"I'm sorry, Clark," Lois said as she came to stand next to him. "I know this isn't how you wanted today to go."

Clark sighed, suddenly tired. The media – for the moment – had let him out of their sight while they covered the President's arrest, each of them clamoring for a statement from either Luthor himself or one of the arresting officers. He knew it wouldn't last. As soon as Luthor was out of sight, he knew the onslaught of questions would be aimed at him.

"Maybe it's for the best," he said, trying to convince her as much as he was trying to convince himself. "No more hiding. No more wondering how I can bring Superman back."

"It's *dangerous*," Lois pointed out.

He nodded thoughtfully. "We'll have to be more careful than we otherwise would have needed to be. But we've been targeted before, simply because the public saw that we had a connection to Superman. We can handle this."

"Kent and Kent," Lois said with a bright grin.

Clark chuckled. "Even stronger than Lane and Kent ever were," he agreed.

One Year Later...

For once, all was peaceful and quiet in Metropolis – especially in the townhouse on Hyperion Avenue. A place that had once been an alien world to Clark after what had felt like a lifetime of imprisonment in the dark. A building that had been nothing more than four walls and a roof over his head. A place that had become a sacred refuge when he'd been no more than a shattered, mindless, skeletal shell of a man, having been freshly rescued from a fate worse than death in the Arkham Asylum. The sanctuary where Clark had slowly recovered from two decades of torture. The house where he'd finally found his way back to his memories and life. The home where he and Lois had solidified their life as husband and wife.

House?

No. It wasn't *just* a house.

It was *home*.

"Are you upset you're not covering Lex's sentencing?" Lois asked from the bed as Clark emerged from the shower, already dressed and with his hair neatly combed.

"Not a chance," Clark replied, giving her his biggest smile and sitting down on the bed next to her. He leaned over and gave her a kiss on the top of her head. "I've had more than enough of Luthor to last a lifetime. Besides, Martinez will do a great job covering it for us. He's been invaluable to us since the trial first began."

"Still, we worked hard for this moment," Lois pointed out, reaching for the remote and flipping through the channels until she found one of the news stations. "I thought the trial would *never* end. We gave the feds everything they needed on a silver platter," she gently complained, though her voice remained soft and low.

"Honey, you know they had to make sure everything was iron-clad. And Pete found more than we could've *dreamed* of getting on our own. My superpowers notwithstanding," he added, giving her a tender look.

"I know. I guess I just never really thought about how long the process would take when we flew down to D.C. to give Pete our evidence," she said. "You know, I have mixed emotions about this whole thing," she said a few minutes later as Clark watched the muted news anchor talk endlessly, filling the air before the sentencing could begin.

"Really?" he asked, surprised.

Lois shrugged. "We did something amazing, Clark. We took down the *President of the United States*. That's a feat that has only been achieved once before. It's...a whole other level of accomplishment. It makes our Kerth award seem like a participation trophy in a kid's foot race. I mean, this is Pulitzer stuff here. But even that seems...I don't know. Insignificant compared to the history in the making that's been happening ever since we gave Pete our evidence." She sighed and shrugged, her excitement softening to something that bordered on contemplativeness. "On the other hand, we *took down the President*. There's a certain...notoriety associated with that. There will be those...*are* those...who hate us for what we exposed. They rather live in ignorant bliss than see the corruption right under their noses." She looked at him questioningly, as though trying to gauge if he understood her conflicted emotions.

He did. "I know. I've had the same thought. But, it's a *good* notoriety. Okay, sure, select groups of people hate us. Whatever. We've dealt with that before. This is no different."

Lois smiled. "And he's facing justice for what he did to you too, not just the things he did to erode society."

Clark frowned slightly. "I'm glad. But a part of me would have preferred if he got off scot-free on that and I'd been able to keep my secret intact." He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Anyway, no point in wishing for the past to change. In a way, he wound up digging a bigger hole for himself by outing me."

Lois chuckled quietly. "He instantly lost whatever support he might have still had, even with the criminal investigation looming," she said brightly.

"And he gave me the opportunity to bring Superman back," Clark mused, a mischievous smile curving his lips ever so slightly. "He thought he was hurting me, but he wound up *helping* me instead. Weird how that turned out," he said with the barest hint of sarcasm in his words. "I still can't believe how incredibly supportive the public has – mostly – been of me."

"Karma's a witch, and Luthor got exactly what he deserves," Lois agreed with a grin. "Still, are you really, *really* sure you wouldn't rather be at the sentencing?"

"I'm sure," Clark assured her. "There's nowhere I'd rather be than right here."

At that, a tiny cry rang out, breaking the fragile quiet of the room. It was followed by another, and Clark got up off the bed.

"Sounds like these little ladies are hungry," he said with a smile, peering over the side of the pack 'n play on the opposite side of the bedroom. He reached in and tickled the bellies of his one-month-old daughters, Lara and Samantha. "Hi there. Are you hungry? I'll bet you are!" he cooed to them. "Let Daddy just give you a quick diaper change, hmm?"

"I'll get the bottles ready," Lois offered.

"No need, I got it," he said, changing the two babies with lightning speed. He picked up first one, then the other and brought them both to Lois. "Here we are. Safe and sound with Mommy. Now, let me just get your brother, and we'll be all set to have some breakfast."

He returned to the pack 'n play and lifted out the last of the triplets - his son, Jonathan. As he'd done with the girls, he changed the baby's diaper in the blink of an eye, then brought the boy to Lois. "Be right back," he said with a wink, before zipping out of the room at super speed. He returned less than half a minute later with three bottles in hand. "I'll take the girls this time," he told Lois, handing her a single bottle.

Lois hummed her assent, then let Clark take each of the girls. She settled back into her pillow, cradling Jonathan in her arms. Clark got Lara settled on his lap before gently getting Samantha into position.

"Breakfast is served," he announced in a sing-song voice as he brought the nipples of the bottles to their hungry and waiting mouths.

For a long time, the only thing that could be heard was the sucking and slurping noises of the triplets as they devoured their bottles. Clark sat entranced as he watched them eat. How had he gotten this lucky? Although he and Lois had both expressed a desire to have a child, they hadn't *really* known if it was possible for them. The combination of Earthling and Kryptonian DNA was something that had never happened before. It was possible that the chromosomes were incompatible for recombining into a new life. Their age had been another factor. Both had been in their upper-forties when Lois had gotten pregnant – surely their biological clocks had been working against them.

What neither of them had realized was that, while it had certainly been a possibility that they had missed their peak fertility window, the older a woman was, the higher the chance for hyper-ovulation and the chance for multiples. To say they were shocked when they'd gone for their first ultrasound was an understatement. For almost three months, they'd envisioned their future with their son or daughter and started planning appropriately. To be told that there was not one but *three* babies on the way blindsided them in the best way possible. In an instant, their entire world and future had been turned upside down and pulled inside out. And, while initially worried about the logistics of going from zero children to three, they'd embraced the chaos to come with open hearts and excitement.

The day those three had arrived – remarkably full term – had been the happiest day of Clark's life. It had been nothing short of a miracle watching as the doctor had gently pulled each one from Lois' womb, all within seconds of one another while a skilled

team of nurses had silently divided the tasks and babies amongst themselves to tend to each squalling newborn's needs. Just like that, in the blink of an eye, they were a family of five and Clark was a father.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Lois asked in a near-whisper as Jonathan drained the last few drops of milk from his bottle.

"I'm a lucky man," Clark said, wiping his daughters' faces with a burp cloth and hoisting Samantha onto his shoulder first. He gently patted her back, helping her to burp. "Look at my life," he said with a grin, setting Samantha down to pick up her sister. He repeated the burping process.

"A never-ending sequence of dirty diapers and hungry mouths and barely enough sleep to function?" Lois lovingly joked, burping Jonathan, who spit up a small portion of his breakfast. She quickly wiped it off his chin. "Which I'm grateful for. I never knew I could love being a mom so much."

Clark chuckled and, after putting Lara down, he crooked his finger and placed it beneath Lois' chin. "I've always thought you were the most beautiful woman on the planet," he told her sincerely. "But seeing you as a mom? You are absolutely *radiant*."

"Smooth-talker," Lois murmured, leaning in for a kiss that he happily supplied.

When they broke apart, Clark carefully rearranged their yawning daughters so they could lay on his chest as he reclined in the bed.

"What I meant was...I've been through a *lot*, Lois. Lex Luthor tried to destroy me. He *swore* to erase all traces and memory of me from the world. Locked up in his wine cellar for so long...beaten, starved, tortured...I believed him." He paused, his breaths coming shakily. "But look what happened. He *failed*. I have my life back – both Clark's life *and* Superman's. I have *you* back. And now I have these three perfect children. I have *more* than I ever thought was possible, even *before* I got caught in his trap."

He grinned broadly as his son and daughters yawned one final time before falling asleep one by one. "I've gone from being erased to being on top of the world. And all because of the four of you," he said with a contented sigh. "I haven't been erased at all. I've been cemented as a permanent fixture in this world."

He closed his eyes, breathing deeply and contentedly, and listened to the four heartbeats that gave his second chance at life meaning.

THE END