

Tale of MagiKal

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Summary: Something happened to Clark when he was younger, something that's left him unable to completely control his powers — they emerge in bursts of varying intensity and at the most inopportune moments. In this AU, Clark has found a very creative way to deal with these sporadic and often dangerous bursts of powers. *MagiKal* is a collection of linked short stories written for and posted on Ficlet Fridays on the L&C MBs.

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There Is No Such Thing as Magic

“Oh, come on, Jimmy,” Lois groaned. “There’s no such thing as magic. You’re not honestly expecting me to chase a story that’s something for Cat or the tabloids, are you?”

His formerly giddy face fell. Jimmy ran a nervous hand through his hair and then held his hands as if he were praying. “Lois, please... I just know that this guy is more than just a great illusionist. He’s the real thing. I saw him **fly** for Heaven’s sake. There were no strings. And he froze a rose solid while he spun on his heels.”

Jimmy waved a picture that showed the blurred shape of some barely discernible flower in the hands of a masked man.

Lois tried not to laugh. “That photo proves nothing but that you’ve got much to learn as a photographer.”

“He was moving,” Jimmy grumbled. “I’d love to see you take a better picture.”

Lois shook her head. “I don’t get paid for my extraordinary photographs.”

Jimmy nodded. “Exactly. But you’ve won prizes for your investigative stories. That’s why you need to help me.

Lois let out a soft groan. Jimmy was the closest thing to a friend she had at the Daily Planet and his research skills were outstanding. So she couldn’t bring herself to be downright rude. But today he was wearing on her patience. If he were anyone else, Mad Dog Lane would have given him a harsh put down by now. Instead, she was trying to turn him down gently.

Lois heaved a sigh. “Look, there’s nothing to investigate about a masked guy who’s performing some good tricks and calls himself ‘Magi-Kal’. What am I supposed to find out? Why he can’t properly spell the word magical?”

Jimmy sank down on the edge of her desk and let out a frustrated huff. “They’re not just some good magic tricks, Lois. When I was a child I was living in Vegas for a few years. My Dad was absent for the most part. But whenever he was present, he took me to magic shows. To sort of make up for his lack of time, I guess.” He shrugged. “Anyway, I’ve seen them all. Copperfield, Siegfried and Roy... there was no one even remotely as good as this guy. I tell you, he’s truly magical. He can fly without anything holding him up.”

Lois rolled her eyes. “You mean there are no strings that you could see.”

She took a sip of coffee. It tasted stale. Wrinkling her nose in disgust, she spat it back into the cup and poured the liquid into the flowerpot on her desk. The plant’s already withered leaves seemed to look even more sorry than they had before. Lois felt a pang of guilt.

Jimmy hung his head in defeat. “I tell you there weren’t any strings. I can see a trick, I even practiced illusions in high school. I just know there’s something unbelievable going on.”

Lois couldn’t help but smile as she watched her giddy friend. “So, he’s good. Doesn’t mean that the laws of nature don’t apply to him. What did Perry tell you?”

Jimmy pursed his lips. “To forget about it,” he grumbled. He gave her his best puppy dog look. “That’s why I’m talking to you, Lois. Cause you’re the best. All I’m asking is that you come to his next performance.”

Lois frowned. “And how am I supposed to do that? Didn’t you say that he’s some kind of street artist, who just suddenly appears and does his tricks?”

Jimmy gritted his teeth. “I tell you, they’re not just tricks. But to answer your question, he usually shows up downtown. Sometimes, I run into him when I grab lunch. So, perhaps you could just... um... join me?” He gave her a sheepish smile.

Lois frowned. “This is not some elaborate scheme to get a date with me, is it?”

Jimmy blanched. “No, no, of course not,” he said hastily, maybe a bit too hasty.

Lois couldn’t stifle a laugh. “Okay, I have to admit, you’re making me curious. I’ll join you for lunch, if only to prove to you that there really is no such thing as magic.”

Jimmy smirked, the gleam in his eyes mischievous. “You’ll be singing a different song, once you’ve seen him. And then I get to say, ‘Told you so.’”

Lois shook her head. “In your dreams, Olsen. In your dreams.”

Magical Hiccups

“Did you see that? They’re writing about us,” Clark Kent said under his breath. He looked down at his

companion, who was wagging his tail and looking after a whole group of dogs going for a walk with their dog-sitter.

He smirked. "Ah, I see. You've got better things to do than reading headlines at a newspaper stand."

Houdini placed his nose against Clark's hand. In reply, Clark gently scratched the Irish Setter behind his ears.

"Did one of the ladies strike your fancy?" Houdini licked his hand. "I'd understand if you'd rather spend time with them instead of keeping an old mope company."

Houdini looked at Clark and deliberately sat down. His eyes seemed to say that he was going to stay, no matter what. The Setter was stubborn.

Clark smiled at him and turned his attention back on the headlines, perusing them with a frown. He'd rather see his name as a byline instead of plastered all across at least a dozen tabloids. MagiKal here, MagiKal there. He didn't like it.

Clark clenched his hands into tight fists as a surge of frustration washed over him. He let out a breath, reminding himself that he couldn't change his fate. Looking at the Irish Setter, he didn't really want to.

Being MagiKal was better than hiding from the world. At least this way he'd a chance to live an almost normal life.

"Hey, Mister, are you going to buy one of those papers?" The owner of the newspaper stand asked.

"Oh, right, sorry!" Clark flashed him an apologetic look and pointed at one of the few newspapers that hadn't written about him. "How much for the Daily Planet?"

He exchanged money for the latest edition of Metropolis' famous newspaper and with a nod of thanks, Clark reached for his bag and shouldered it. Houdini got up, giddily wagging his tail. The dog followed Clark, never leaving his side.

With a quick glance Clark speed-read through the paper, before he folded it and stuffed it into his bag.

"She got another front-page article, Houdini," he muttered. "Lois Lane is really one of the best reporters out there. I really wish I could work at the Daily Planet. But I doubt they'd be interested in any of my freelance articles."

He heaved a sigh and tried to shake the sense of despair that always took hold of him when he remembered that he couldn't work among people anyway.

Suddenly, he felt Houdini tugging at his sleeve. The Setter had stopped wagging his tail and tensed as if smelling prey. But despite being a gundog, Houdini wasn't much of a hunter. Once again, he dug his teeth into Clark's sleeve and tugged with more insistence.

Clark stopped and studied the dog's face. "Another hiccup? You sure?"

Houdini barked.

"Okay, then. Let's find a secluded spot." Clark fell into a light jog, Houdini right by his side.

They hurried down the street until Clark spotted a quiet alley with dumpsters and piles of empty cardboard boxes. As if on cue, he felt the prickling in the back of his neck that indicated his "hiccups", as his Mom liked to call them. It was a rather cute expression for his loss of control, but somehow it had stuck.

Hidden behind boxes and dumpsters, Clark dropped his bag. He managed to change into MagiKal just in the nick of time. His feet already left the ground and his vision blurred. Blinking a few times, he managed to clear it. Houdini was an odd mix of bones and hair.

"Just great," Clark muttered. "I hope I'm not going to be sick afterwards."

His x-ray vision going wild was a close second to his hearing being out of whack. He still hadn't found the magical aspect of a migraine.

Clark forced his way back down and took several balls and pins out of the bag. He stuffed them into large pockets on his costume while he lost hold on gravity. Once again his feet left the ground until he was hanging in the air upside down.

"Let's hope nobody sees this," he whispered. "You stay here. Be right back."

Houdini settled down and rested his head on his paws. His tail flopped up and down a few times. He barked as if to wish Clark good luck.

With a nod, Clark turned upright. Then he put on a broad smile and walked through the air, several feet above street level.

Within moments, he was back on the main street. Drifting higher, he pretended to climb invisible stairs. His eyes burned. He couldn't stifle a groan. This was going to be a full-fledged hiccup.

Already, the people gathered on the street. He pulled out metal balls containing oil. Clark started to juggle them, while he inflamed one after the other with involuntary bursts of heat vision. When he had eight balls in the air, his heat vision still hadn't settled. Clark gulped. This was a bad one. He changed to juggling the balls one handed and began adding the pins.

The people cheered, while Clark broke out in cold sweat. He fought hard to keep the different items up in the air, while gravity was pulling at him again.

He descended an imaginary staircase until his feet touched the ground. His heat vision died down, leaving him with sixteen items to juggle. He killed the flames with his icy breath before he dropped the flying objects.

The audience applauded and much to Clark's relief, the prickling in the back of his neck stopped. There would be no further power bursts.

He took a bow before the cheering crowd. Then he saw her. She had deep brown hair, rosy cheeks and eyes the color of chocolate. She was absolutely stunning.

He stared at her, helpless against her spell. Boy, he should really snap out of it, before he made a complete fool of himself.

“Bravo!” she shouted.

Hastily, Clark gathered his items. Then he did a somersault, shooting up so quickly that it would look like he’d vanished.

From deep down on the street he heard her voice again.

“Magical,” she whispered.

He couldn’t agree more.

Winter Magic

Lois stood among the crowd, mesmerized by the icy staircase that was appearing in the middle of Centennial Park, out of nowhere. The mysterious man who called himself MagiKal was climbing the stairs, holding out a large, colorful cloth that covered everything but his dark, wavy hair and his feet. The spiraling staircase grew under his feet, leading him higher and higher up.

It was baffling, astonishing, completely out of this world. Lois held her breath while her mind was going into overdrive trying to find a logical explanation for the things she saw. But she drew a complete blank, just like everyone else.

Ever since MagiKal’s gaze had met hers for the first time, Lois was under his spell. She still vividly remembered his soulful, deep brown eyes as he’d looked at her, seeming transfixed for that tiny moment that in Lois’ mind had lasted an eternity.

Something inexplicably drew her toward this man. She tried to rationalize it with the need to uncover his unbelievable abilities as an illusionist. But even now, as she watched him create a staircase of ice, Lois felt an attraction toward him that went beyond awe or curiosity.

She’d spent weeks tagging along with Jimmy for lunch or taking her sweet time to return from an assignment, always in the hope of running into another one of MagiKal’s performances.

Today, she’d finally gotten lucky. Too bad, Jimmy wasn’t here. He’d be disappointed to learn that he had missed out on something this spectacular.

Besides, he could have taken some photos of the glistening staircase. Lois pulled out her tiny camera and took a few pictures. They would be a poor replacement for professional photos, but still better than nothing.

Writing about MagiKal was no longer a topic just for the tabloids. He’d broken a few world records already. Professional illusionists were just as baffled by his tricks as anyone else. And the fact that, so far, he ignored the

press was slowly turning him into a more precious candidate for an interview than the elusive Lex Luthor.

The staircase was still growing under MagiKal’s feet, reaching so high up into the sky that her breath caught. Lois had never been particularly interested in magic or illusions. But something about this guy, MagiKal, was different. Though she hated to admit that Jimmy had been right, Lois was determined to find out what was so special about him. What was it that made her heart beat faster, whenever she thought about him? Was it just the mystery, the story to chase? Or was it something else? She wasn’t sure.

Lois didn’t know what drove her to climb up the stairs after MagiKal. She just did, ignoring the angry shouts from other spectators. Her feet were slipping on the ice. Lois took off her shoes and picked them up. Steadying herself with her other hand, she rushed up the stairs as quickly as her feet would let her.

Her breath came in panting gasps as she climbed up. Lois was so focused on making it upstairs that she hardly noticed her surroundings. Only for a moment, her gaze drifted down, and she gulped as she realized how high up she was. Automatically, she gripped the stairs in front of her harder. Her fingers and feet were turning increasingly cold and numb.

Finally, she caught sight of the colorful cloth MagiKal was holding. He was just wrapping it into a tight bundle and released an audible sigh.

“Finally,” he whispered. “I was beginning to wonder if this would ever stop.”

Lois’ heart was beating in her throat as she took the final steps up. So far, nobody had been able to get this close to the mysterious illusionist. This was her chance to get the scoop every single reporter in Metropolis would kill for.

“MagiKal?” she asked, tentatively.

He stared at her with wide brown eyes. His gaze was warm and intense, stirring something inside her that she couldn’t quite explain, just like the first time his gaze had met hers.

“What are you doing up here?” There was a slight squeak to his voice, betraying his shock. “You can’t be here. It’s dangerous.”

Lois pursed her lips. “You’re up here, too.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “You don’t understand. It’s—” He broke himself off and his eyes widened, then he squeezed them shut. “Oh, no!”

He pulled her toward him, pressing her tight against his body. Lois wanted to protest, but her words were muffled by his shirt. Pressing her hands against his chest, she tried to get away from him. He held her tight. Somehow, he’d

managed to wrap the cloth around them, so she couldn't see what was happening.

Suddenly a gust of moist, hot air hit her, and they were falling.

But with her hands, she felt the steady rise and fall of his chest. His heart beat under her fingertips. Lois inhaled his clean scent, the slight hint of soap and aftershave.

She should be terrified, but somehow she wasn't.

The warm air surrounding her was growing chilly, then her feet touched the ground and MagiKal let go of her,

Lois took a step back. As she looked up, snowflakes touched her face. The staircase was gone and a single cloud was snowing right in the middle of a sunny fall day.

The crowd was applauding, but all Lois noticed was the man standing in front of her.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly.

"How did you...?" The question died on her lips.

Once again, he had vanished into thin air.

This was magic, indeed.

Houdini Unleashed

"Did you see her, Houdini?"

Clark was sitting on a bench in Centennial Park, Houdini's head resting on his leg. Completely lost in his thoughts, Clark had stopped stroking him. The dog whimpered in protest.

"Sorry, buddy," he said. "Guess, I drifted off for a moment." Dutifully, he continued to scratch Houdini's favorite spot, right behind his left ear.

"She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. And she's bold and reckless and uncompromising. Can you imagine that she climbed up the whole staircase? I thought my heart was going to stop. Thank god I managed to save her just in time before my heat vision went crazy. That was a close one. She nearly saw me using my powers." His lips curled into a slight smile. "Do you think she'd have freaked out?"

The dog gave him a gentle nudge with his nose, running his tongue across his fingers.

Clark sighed. "You're right, I should just forget about that woman. It's too dangerous. Besides, I don't know the first thing about her. I bet she's a handful." Another long, wistful sigh escaped his throat and Houdini whimpered in tune. "No, I don't expect you to understand that. After all, she's not a dog. Why would you get all worked up about a woman like her?"

Houdini tilted his head as he looked at Clark. Then he got to his feet and darted off, heading for some bushes. When he returned, he carried a stick between his teeth. Clark couldn't stifle a laugh.

"Are you trying to cheer me up, buddy?" He took the stick and eyed it from every angle. Houdini barked and wagged his tail as he waited for Clark to throw the stick.

"You know, maybe it wouldn't be so hard if I didn't have to live my life in celibacy. If I could more than just dream of really meeting a woman like that."

Houdini barked again, this time sounding more impatient. He was taking a few steps back, his body tensing so he could rush after the stick as soon as Clark would throw it. His expression turned almost accusing.

"Hey, don't look at me like that," Clark protested, frustration tinting his voice. "Do I have to remind you that it's your hormones which got us into this mess in the first place?"

He threw the stick, but instead of darting after it, Houdini remained where he was. Ducking his head in a submissive gesture, he walked toward Clark, tail between his legs. Clark relaxed his stance and got down to his knees, embracing and stroking Houdini, who began licking his face.

"Hey, stop it," Clark pulled back and laid his hand on the dog's mouth. "No dog kisses, please. I'm not angry at you, buddy, just wishing things could be different."

He sat down in the damp grass and continued to scratch Houdini, who climbed onto his lap. The Setter was entirely too big for that spot. But there was no telling him that. Clark closed his eyes and ran his hands through the dog's warm, thick fur. His rampant emotions started to settle as he stroked the Irish Setter.

Houdini hadn't always been his dog. Four years ago, back in Smallville, Houdini was supposed to protect Wayne Irig's property. But he'd been a free spirit from his very first day. A puppy that never stayed put and managed to escape every leash. That kind of behavior had been cute as long as Houdini was still a baby dog. But it grew into a problem as he got older, an untamable teenager with wildly raging hormones.

"Houdini!" Wayne Irig shouted. "Houdini!"

He drove along the gravel way that led to the Kent's farm. At the side of the street Clark and his father Jonathan were working on the fences.

"Good grief, where is that darn dog again?" Clark heard Wayne mutter as he pulled the car to the side of the street and got out. "Hey, Jonathan, Clark. Did either one of you see Houdini?"

Jonathan shook his head. "Fraid not, Wayne. Did you try to put him on a leash again?"

Wayne nodded grimly. "The Lang's dog is in heat. Houdini's been going stir crazy for two days now. Laura will kill me if she's gotta deal with a whole set of Collie-Setter half-breeds a few months from now."

"I bet they'd look cute." Clark laughed.

"Yeah, they're even cuter if you don't have to take care of them," Wayne quipped. "Next thing I know, I have to

adopt half of them. And Laura'd make sure I get all the troublemakers."

Jonathan laid a hand on Wayne's shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll find him before he makes it to the Lang property, won't we, Clark?"

Jonathan shot his son a meaningful glance.

"Sure." Clark nodded. "Dad and I are almost finished with this fence. I'll help you look for Houdini as soon as we're -"

He broke himself off. His super hearing had picked up the pained whimper of a dog. He strained his hearing until he heard the same whimper again. It sounded hollow, like the dog was trapped in some kind of cave. He heard what sounded like falling rocks and the dog whined loudly.

Clark focused his attention back on his immediate surroundings and leaned toward his dad. "I believe I already found him. Seems like he got himself into serious trouble. Please keep Wayne occupied."

Jonathan gave Clark a tight nod. "Son, why don't you go ahead and look for Houdini. I'll manage the rest on my own. Uh, by the way, Wayne, there is something I've been meaning to ask you..."

Clark didn't hear the rest of the conversation. He dropped the hammer he'd been holding and ran off as fast as humanly possible. As soon as he was out of Wayne's immediate line of sight, he sped up.

The dog whined again and a moment later, Clark was standing at the edge of a deep hole. Had someone dug it or had some structure underground caved in? The edge was fragile and more rocks fell down while Clark stood there. They missed the dog by inches.

"Everything's all right, boy," Clark said. "I'm going to get you out of there." He looked around and spotted nobody else. "Good thing you're not able to tell the story."

He drifted up and floated down into the hole. The dog barked.

"Don't worry, I'll have you out of here in no time."

The dog was bleeding from several injuries that looked superficial. Clark tried to x-ray the dog to look for fractures, but the fur only got blurry before his eyes. His feet had just touched the ground when an intense wave of pain stole his breath. Dizziness let him sag against the cave's walls.

"What is this?" He gasped for air. "Houdini, I'm feeling strange, I..." Clark groaned as he steadied himself against the wall to keep from toppling over.

"Let's get you out of here," Clark whispered, then moaned.

He reached for the dog. Houdini was doing his best to help Clark. With a little assistance, he climbed on Clark's legs and shoulders. Clark groaned as his legs buckled under the additional weight of the young Irish Setter. When

Houdini jumped out of the cave, he lost his balance and found himself face down on the ground.

More rocks landed on his back, the resulting wave of pain almost knocking him out. Clark felt strangely lightheaded as he scrambled to his elbows and knees. How was he going to climb out? And did that even matter? Where was that thought coming from? He shook his head, trying to clear it.

"Houdini," he rasped. "Be a good boy, get help. I..." He cried out in pain as another rock hit him and he sagged back onto the ground. The last thing he saw was an iridescent glow of something red and green. Then he knew no more.

"You saved my life that day," Clark whispered into Houdini's ear. "I'll never forget that."

The dog barked, wagging his tail, and made another attempt at placing sloppy dog kisses on his master's face. Clark laughed while he fended him off.

But the way Houdini was practically vibrating with enthusiasm, he couldn't help but think the dog knew exactly he'd done the same for him.

Houdini must have run straight to his father. Jonathan still liked to tell how the Setter had torn his pants to shreds just to get him to follow. Clark had no idea how Wayne and his father had managed to drag him out of that hole. He'd lost consciousness as well as his powers in that cave.

He'd come to when he'd been at a safe distance from whatever had taken his strength. After two days his powers had gradually returned.

But there had been these strange power bursts ever since. He'd failed to control them, no matter how much he tried. They only were getting worse, the harder he fought. So much so that he'd isolated himself from everyone but Houdini, who'd stubbornly refused to leave his side.

After they'd saved each other's lives, the dog had stayed with Clark. Any attempt to remind him that he was Wayne's dog had failed. Houdini was fiercely loyal, though he still wouldn't stay on a leash. But that hadn't been necessary anyway.

Clark's life had never been the same after that fateful day and neither had Houdini's.

The dog got up and shook himself. He started to gently prod Clark's side with his snout, urging him to get up.

"Are you hungry, my friend?" The dog barked and wagged his tail. Clark scratched him behind both ears. "Then let's get you something to eat."

Magical Encounter

"Hmph, the guy is a ghost." Lois threw her hands up in frustration.

She gathered the various lists Jimmy had compiled and a map of Metropolis where she'd marked all appearances

of the mysterious MagiKal and stuffed them into the bottom drawer of her desk.

“Hitting more dead ends?” A voice startled her.

Lois straightened as if she’d been caught with her hands in the cookie jar. But she relaxed as she realized that it was just Jimmy who was standing in front of her.

“There are no patterns, no hidden trail of money that could lead to him.” She leaned back in her chair. “He doesn’t take money for his shows. Some people donate, but every buck he gets ends up in charity. He’s got an account with the bank of Metropolis, but that was set up by an agent named Murray Brown.”

Jimmy sat down on the edge of her desk. “Did you talk to him?”

Lois nodded. “But he’s another dead end. He has seen MagiKal only once or twice, always in his disguise. He doesn’t know more than we do. Short of securing an interview with MagiKal, there’s no way I’m going to solve this mystery.”

“Maybe magic is a mystery that is not supposed to be solved,” Jimmy suggested.

“Oh, come on, Jimmy, please,” Lois said with a hint of exasperation. “He’s not a wizard, he’s an illusionist. There has to be an explanation for these ‘miracles’.” She indicated quote marks. “And whatever it is, he doesn’t seem to have it completely under control.”

“What makes you say that?” Jimmy’s eyes widened. “Do you think he’s dangerous?”

“Something he said, while he was up on that staircase: ‘I was beginning to wonder if this would ever stop,’ she quoted. “And I don’t think he’s any kind of threat. I could see he was worried about me.”

Jimmy seemed intrigued. “What could he have been talking about?”

Lois shrugged. “Beats me. But I’m going to find out.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Jimmy grinned. He laid the most recent edition of the Daily Planet on Lois’ desk. “What do you think about the new guy?”

Lois furrowed her brows as she looked at the paper. “What new guy?”

“The new freelancer,” Jimmy clarified. “Clark Kent.”

“Oh, that new guy.” Lois mumbled. “His article on the demolition of the old theater was good. Did Perry publish another story he wrote?”

Lois remembered that Perry had been excited about his writing though he clearly lacked experience. He’d managed to turn in a puff piece Lois hadn’t wanted to write, right when Perry needed it. That sure had scored Kent some points.

“Yeah, about a dog show.” Jimmy leafed through the paper until he found the page. “You should read it.”

Lois snorted. “You’re suggesting I should read his article on a dog show?”

“I promise you’ve never seen anything like it,” Jimmy said. “He seems to know a lot about dogs. It’s truly a unique perspective.”

Before Lois had a chance to reply, there was a commotion in the newsroom. Several excited shouts came from the far side of the room. As Lois looked up, she saw hands pointing at the large window.

“He’s here. MagiKal is here,” someone yelled.

The illusionist was standing on the small ledge outside the window.

“How did he get up there?” she muttered.

She stood up to join the crowd that was already gathering in front of the staircase that led toward the huge window.

“Just illusions, huh?” Jimmy smirked.

Outside, MagiKal was balancing on a steel cable, or was he? Try as she might, Lois couldn’t make out what he was walking on. While it seemed like he went through thin air, he was creating magnificent ice sculptures only to let them vanish a moment later.

The guy had a thing for fire and ice. Lois stared at him mesmerized. But after a moment, her reporter’s instincts kicked back in. He’d never been this close to the Daily Planet. She needed to get outside before he disappeared again if she ever wanted to get that interview.

“Come on, get your camera,” she murmured into Jimmy’s ear.

He raised his brows, but then gave her a quick nod before he darted off. Lois didn’t wait for him. She headed straight for the stairs, figuring that would be quicker than waiting for the elevator. She rushed downstairs, making several of her coworkers jump out of her way lest they’d tumble down the stairs.

Within minutes, Lois was out on the street and looked up into the sky. MagiKal was carrying a large, icy star in his arms while he walked down the last couple of steps of an invisible staircase. He placed the sculpture on the sidewalk. Then he took a step to the side and bowed before the applauding audience.

Lois felt her heartbeat in her throat. This was her chance. She rushed toward him.

“MagiKal, wait!” she yelled.

But he jumped up, doing his trademark somersault and then he vanished in a gust of wind. Lois almost stumbled over her own feet as she came to a halt and stared at the now empty spot next to the ice star.

She muttered a curse before she turned and ran into Jimmy who had stopped by her side. “He’s gone again.”

“We’ll get him next time,” Jimmy tried to soothe her.

“I know,” Lois muttered unhappily.

She didn't really believe it. A part of her wished she'd just stayed put and watched more of his amazing tricks. But she just couldn't get him out of her mind. If only there was a way to talk to him. She had the weird notion that something was going on between them that she couldn't quite explain. The fleeting moment she'd met him on the staircase, the look in his eyes — he'd looked so incredibly lonely.

"Why don't you get back to work, Jimmy." She suggested. "I'll talk to a few people down here, get a few quotes."

Jimmy raised an eyebrow. "Something tells me you're not staying down here to get quotes. Is everything all right with you?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." She gave him a small smile before she admitted, "And I really don't want to get any quotes. Maybe you could..."

Jimmy beamed. "I'd love to. But what are **you** going to do?"

"Follow a hunch?" Lois sighed. "I don't really know. I should get back to work. But something tells me that I need to be out here a little while longer."

Jimmy smirked. "Just don't get lost in this, okay? Perry is going to have my head if his favorite reporter loses her edge because of an investigation I suggested."

Lois narrowed her eyes on the young photographer. "I'm certainly not losing my edge."

Jimmy took several steps back. "Well, then. Happy hunting."

Lois nodded and watched Jimmy as he mingled with the crowd that still hadn't completely dispersed. Then she turned around and went down the street, not really knowing what she was even looking for. MagiKal had vanished again and there was no telling where and when he'd show up again. She'd already tried that.

She turned a corner and went down a less crowded street. Her heart did a strange flutter, and she shook her head at her own irrational behavior. She wasn't going to find him here of all places, just because she so desperately wanted to.

A dog barked.

"Hey, there you are," a male voice said. "Good boy. Did you miss me?" The dog barked again, excitedly.

As Lois passed an alley to her left, she spotted a man who stroked a large dog with thick, wavy fur the color of cinnamon. The dog jumped up at him and licked his hands, wagging his tail as if he wanted to get rid of it. For no reason in particular she stilled and watched their encounter. Something about it was heartwarming. Their love for each other was quite obviously mutual.

Eventually, the dog calmed down. The man patted his head and bent down to pick up a duffel bag. He slung it

around his shoulders and turned, his gaze meeting Lois'. He stared at her, frozen for a moment and Lois had the time to take in his features. He was tall and lean, with broad shoulders and dark hair. Even his glasses couldn't quite hide that he was incredibly handsome.

Lois knew she should just leave. She had no business ogling a man, but she found it hard to move. The dog watched her with obvious apprehension. He tensed up, a low growl escaping his throat.

The man looked down. "Houdini, stop it."

The dog relaxed but didn't leave Lois out of his sight.

"Can I help you, Miss?" The man asked, his voice soft and gentle.

Lois didn't know what to say, how to explain her strange behavior. As she was fighting for words, the dog suddenly tensed up again. He started to tug at the man's sleeves, growing increasingly anxious with every passing second. For a moment, he let up, barked, whimpered, then tugged at the man's sleeves again.

He looked down at his dog. "It's not over yet?" He sounded panicked.

And then Lois could see him clutch his head as he went down, his legs buckling underneath him. A startled cry escaped his lips, followed by a pained moan. He curled in on himself, shaking slightly as whatever had just happened was causing him intense pain.

"What's going on?" Lois cried. She wanted to rush to his side and find out if she could somehow help him.

But the dog suddenly jumped in her way, baring his teeth and letting out a dangerous growl. Every single hair of his thick fur was standing on edge and then he barked, inching forward to keep Lois from getting anywhere near his master.

"I want to help him," Lois tried to explain.

But the dog wouldn't listen. Of course, he wouldn't, he was only a dog after all. But the man seemed to be in serious trouble. What was she going to do? She should call an ambulance!

The dog barked again, loud and menacing.

"Houdini, back off." The man's voice was weak. He let out another low moan. "Get back here. I need you."

Completely flabbergasted, Lois watched as the dog relaxed in front of her. He bared his teeth one last time and barked for good measure. Then he rushed over to his master. The man blindly reached for him and the dog laid down by his side, exposing his belly. With another low groan, the man rested his head against the dog's chest.

Lois slowly moved closer. Houdini lifted his head and bared his teeth again. He tensed, indicating that he was going to attack if she went even a step too far.

"Do you need help?" she whispered. "Should I call an ambulance?"

The man shook his head, one ear still firmly pressed to the dog's chest, the other one covered with his hand.

"I'll be fine," he said quietly. "This will soon be over. I don't need an ambulance."

The last words came out a bit harsher. And as if to emphasize his point the dog growled again.

"Leave the lady alone, Houdini," the man admonished him. "She just wants to help."

He lifted his head and rubbed his temples before he slowly sat up. "I'm feeling better now."

He ran his hand through the dog's fur and then scrambled back to his feet. Houdini, the dog, followed him, now completely relaxed.

"I'm sorry if I scared you, Miss," the man said with an awkward smile.

It was the most beautiful smile Lois had ever seen.

"What was wrong with you?" Lois still felt a little shaken.

"I suffer from a rare form of migraines," the man said, blushing a little at that. "Thanks for offering your help."

"Your dog didn't seem too fond of my offer," Lois remarked.

"He's very protective of me," the man said. "But he's got his heart in the right place."

He scratched Houdini behind his left ear. Then he held out his other hand. "I'm Clark Kent. Nice to meet you."

"Lois Lane," she said with a smile.

As she took his hand, she felt a spark of electricity rush through her, a magic of its own kind.

Circus Magic

Houdini whimpered and darted out of the subway train as soon as the doors opened. Clark could practically sense his relief. To be completely honest, he shared it. Crowds made them both uncomfortable, which was absurd considering that his "magic tricks" attracted an increasing number of people. But he never performed in a confined space like in the subway train, where a slip in his control might well have disastrous consequences.

Clark, too, breathed a sigh as he followed his dog out of the underground station and up the stairs onto the wide street outside. Houdini waited for him in a safe distance. Another whimper escaped the dog and he shook himself.

"I guess that means we're walking back home." Clark patted the dog's head and immediately Houdini began wagging his tail.

Sometimes he wondered just how much the Setter understood of what he said. Most days, he would swear that his furry friend was psychic. Like today, when he had somehow managed to keep Lois Lane from calling an ambulance while his out-of-control hearing had forced him to the ground with a splitting headache. The billion softer and louder sounds of the city had coalesced to a deafening

cacophony that had been almost impossible to discern. Houdini's heartbeat alone was something he could latch onto and pull himself back.

Clark swallowed hard as he thought about what might have happened if it hadn't been for his dog.

"You did a great job, today, buddy." His voice was trembling with the trepidation he still felt.

He'd lost control right before the eyes of Metropolis' best reporter and hadn't even worn his costume. It could have become a nightmare. He needed to be more careful, if he didn't want the world to know that there was someone with scary, superhuman powers who couldn't control them. Either that or vanish back into the shadows and lead his life in seclusion. Though his life would be safer that way, he didn't want to go back to this kind of existence, not at all. He didn't want to go back to that kind of loneliness.

"She's so beautiful," he said wistfully. "And when she touched me..."

Clark rubbed the hand she had shaken. It still seemed to tingle with the memory. But it couldn't be, he needed to forget about her. He really wished he could shake himself like Houdini and rid himself of such ideas.

The Setter whimpered beside him, as if he could sense his dark thoughts. Clark tried to smile for his sake, but he felt that his attempt was anything but convincing.

"We're almost there." He felt silly for saying that, because Houdini probably couldn't care less where they were going and why.

Clark turned a corner of a street and then he saw it — a huge tent stretching out before his eyes and reaching high up into the sky. Red and white stripes marked the fabric and at the top of each pole there was a flag with stars and stripes flapping in the wind. Clark slowed his steps as he watched the impressive circus, his most recent assignment for the Daily Planet.

Though he was still a freelancer, he had somehow managed to impress his editor with the few works he'd turned in so far. And now he found himself with smaller assignments for stories like this one — a new circus in town.

Clark sat down on a park bench, watching the circus from a distance. Though the tent looked ready, the workers still weren't completely done with the setup. As Clark lowered his glasses, he spotted some artists inside the tent, already practicing for their performance. A juggler, a clown and an aerialist. He smiled to himself as he remembered seeing another circus, much smaller than this one, in a rural small town in the middle of Nowhere, Wyoming.

Clark scratched Houdini, who had rested his head on Clark's upper leg.

His life had been quite different then, always on the move.

“Houdini, what are you doing?” he yelled. “We need to get away from here. There are too many people here with that circus in town.”

The dog barked and wagged his tail, rushing off in the opposite direction. Clark cursed softly. It wasn't at all like the Setter to just dart off, not even to chase some rabbit. No matter how hard he'd tried to get rid of his companion, the dog had refused to leave. And over time, he had found that Houdini could somehow sense his coming outbursts of power before he himself noticed what was going to happen. They were still practicing on that, though. But it was already helping a lot when they were walking through more densely settled areas.

Like they were doing now — well sort of.

Which was exactly why he needed his dog back.

“Houdini!” he shouted again. “Now's not the time to chase after some beautiful lady. Get back here, buddy.”

He whistled, but his dog ignored him. Clark became nervous. Gritting his teeth, he set for a brisker pace, one that was still slow enough to appear human. He could only hope that his powers wouldn't go all out of whack now. If he got hold of that dog, he'd fly them as far away into the wilderness as he dared, no matter how much Houdini hated flying.

He shouldn't have come here. But he'd wanted to earn a few bucks helping with the harvest, chopping wood, whatever opportunity presented itself. He wished he could go back to traveling. The United States was so big, but sometimes it felt too small for him.

Maybe he could head for Canada. Fewer people. More loneliness. It would be a long hike.

Clark sighed.

He missed his parents.

He missed people.

But it couldn't be. “Houdini, get back here.”

The Setter briefly stopped in front of the blue and white circus tent, then headed straight for a group of dogs that were quite obviously part of a performance. One after the other jumped on a pedestal and then through a ring their trainer was holding out. Houdini barged right in and stopped the training quite effectively.

The dogs greeted each other, started sniffing at their respective rear ends and quickly became a wad of fur.

The dog trainer raised his brows. “He's your dog?”

Clark blushed. “Yeah, sorry about Houdini.” He whistled once more and immediately, the Setter lifted his head and rushed back to his master. “It won't happen again.”

A smile spread across the dog trainer's face.

“Hey, Houdini, who'd have thought?” He winked at the dog. “You can obey after all. Want to join the group, do you?”

Houdini stood stiff at Clark's side, his lips already twitching as if he wanted to bare his teeth.

Clark looked down at him and laughed. “I don't think he's interested. Again, sorry for disturbing you.”

“Oh, don't worry about it,” the trainer replied. “These guys were in for a pause anyway. Are you coming to the premier this evening?”

Clark shook his head. “No, ‘fraid not. We need to get going. We've got a long ways ahead of us.”

“Well, your loss,” the trainer shrugged.

Clark waved goodbye and clicked his tongue. Houdini followed him with a last wistful look at the other dogs. Clark, too, felt a pang of sadness. He'd still been a child when he'd last visited a circus. But it was too dangerous to sit in a tent when his heat vision might go crazy any moment. That could only end in disaster.

This time, he took the shortest way out of the city.

When they were at a safe distance from the tent, Houdini stopped and looked back at the circus, barking at Clark.

“What do you want from me?” He said with a hint of exasperation. “We can't go back! You know why.”

Houdini barked again and stood his ground.

“You mean watch from here?” Clark mumbled.

He looked around. They had already reached the fields. There were no houses close to him, no people likely to pass him by during the show.

His heart fluttered with sudden excitement.

Clark swallowed. “I guess we could do that. But it wouldn't be right. We're no paying guests.”

Houdini barked a third time and laid down in the grass.

Clark's eyes drifted back to the circus and the ticket office. He reached into the pocket of his pants and fumbled out his last twenty dollar note.

Then he sat down beside Houdini. “You're right. Just because we don't buy a ticket doesn't have to mean we can't pay. But I'll need to find a job soon if we're going to do that.”

That evening had been magical. Clark had watched the show, hundreds of yards away from the tent. As soon as the sun had set, there had been two fire-breathers welcoming the audience under a sky full of stars. Another man had juggled burning torches, catching them fearlessly, almost as if his hands were invulnerable. Trapezeists had seemed to fly. And as he stared, amazed, awed and completely mesmerized, a crazy idea had formed in Clark's mind.

He blinked to shake the memory and looked down at Houdini, who had closed his eyes in delight. Though they

needed to get to work, Clark couldn't quite bring himself to stop stroking the dog. Sometimes, he truly wondered if the Setter was psychic. Had he led him to that circus on purpose? He supposed not. Houdini had probably only been interested in the other dogs.

Still, he couldn't help but wonder.

"What do you say, Houdini? Time to let our readers experience circus magic?"

The dog barked and jumped to his feet. This time Clark was happy to follow.

The Magic of Words

An icy wind sent chills through Lois. She wrapped her thick coat and scarf more firmly around herself. So did everyone else around her. The temperatures had dropped to single digits during the last few days, turning Metropolis into a freezing winter wonderland.

MagiKal was the only one who didn't seem to mind the cold. He darted back and forth among the crowd, motioning for people to switch places and half-dragging a huge man toward the other side.

"Okay, Sir, you move over here, and you—" He stopped in front of Lois. MagiKal's eyes widened a bit as he took her in and for a moment she felt that strange spark between them. "You're a bit of a problem, Miss."

He scratched his head. People around them started to chuckle as he looked back and forth between the groups. A strange tension had settled above the crowd. Although nothing spectacular had happened yet, everyone was brimming with anticipation. So far, MagiKal hadn't shown any of his usual tricks, but to this day he'd never failed to amaze his fans.

After appearing seemingly out of nowhere, he had spent the past two minutes sorting the gathering crowd into various groups. It was fun to watch, though Lois didn't have the slightest idea what kind of criterion he used.

"Okay, everyone in the group to my right, you move over here to the left side of this lovely lady," MagiKal ordered.

A murmur ran through the spectators, but the people did as he asked. Lois, too, wondered what he was up to. She'd never seen him this talkative or approachable. Maybe today was her chance to secure that interview.

MagiKal sorted another few people, then he seemed content with the result.

He smiled. "I bet you're wondering what that was all about, huh? Well, let's see if I got this right. Everyone who chose a white shirt or pullover this morning, lift your arm."

The group to Lois' left lifted their arms collectively, then stared at each other. Everyone was wearing thick jackets, their scarfs wrapped so firmly around their necks that it was impossible to see what was underneath.

MagiKal pointed at Lois, who hadn't raised her arm yet. "You too, Miss. That white blouse of yours does count. If you've forgotten what you chose this morning, you might want to check." He winked at her. "Or are you waiting for me to call up the people wearing blue, because you picked that blue vest?"

Lois gasped. How could he know that? She looked down at herself, checking if one of the buttons of her coat had popped or if there was a part of her sleeve peeking out. But there was no gap that would have allowed him to check on her clothing.

He looked over to Lois' right. "Now, who's wearing blue on this crisp winter morning?"

Now everyone next to Lois' right side raised their arm, but no one else. The crowd was cheering.

"Okay, let's see, who's wearing green?"

That evening, Lois leaned back in her chair and rubbed her eyes. She was about ready to call it a day. Wearily, she hit the button to send Perry her latest article. Again, she didn't have an interview with MagiKal, but neither did anyone else, so that was at least some consolation. After sorting the people by the color of their shirts, he had correctly guessed various items people had hidden behind their backs.

Lois cringed slightly as she remembered her pitiful attempt at getting his attention by hiding a sheet of paper that said: *<I want to interview you. Please contact me at the Daily Planet. Lois Lane.>*

He hadn't reacted. Either he was deliberately ignoring her, or he — Lois shook her head. How was he even supposed to see a piece of paper that she'd hidden behind her back and written on with tiny letters? It had been such a ridiculous idea that now Lois only felt silly for even trying. Silly and kind of desperate.

She wasn't even writing for the society section. Still, every reporter wanted to be the first one to interview MagiKal. And Lois couldn't help but feel there was more to the man than met the eye. For weeks there had been tales of miracles. People who swore that their life had been at stake but had been spared by some divine intervention. Usually, she'd dismiss the idea as something for the tabloids. But her reporter's instincts had kicked in and here she was, grasping at straws.

It might just be coincidence. There had always been weird stories floating around. But now there was also a man whose illusions baffled the world. She knew it was silly, but she wanted to see a connection. Either she was onto something big, or she was losing it completely. And all because she'd agreed to help Jimmy so many weeks ago.

Speaking of Jimmy — Lois chose to distract herself with perusing the articles of one Clark Kent which Jimmy had left on her desk. Articles about a circus in Park Ridge, a human-interest story concerning the closing of a community center and other puff pieces she wouldn't usually bother to write or read. But Clark Kent's words were drawing her in, making her a part of the spectators in that circus and letting her feel sad for a community she'd never been a part of.

Perry's voice startled her from her musings. "Do you want to work for the Daily Planet permanently, son?"

Lois turned her head, spotting Clark Kent just outside Perry's office. He seemed to squirm under the editor's gaze.

"I...uh." He looked down at the dog that was again standing firmly by his side. "Thanks so much for the offer, Mr. White, but..."

Perry followed Kent's gaze and took in the huge Irish Setter, hadn't his name been Houdini, who'd tensed next to his master. Automatically, Perry took a step back, quite obviously intimidated by the dog.

"Of course, you'd have to leave your dog at home," Perry added.

"I can't," Kent said quietly.

"Oh, come on, of course you can. Find a dog-sitter who will go for a walk with him and—"

"You got me wrong, Mr. White," Kent heaved a sigh. "I can't work for the Daily Planet permanently."

"Have you lost your mind?" Perry barked. His eyes narrowed on Kent. "Every damn reporter in Metropolis would kill for that offer."

Houdini made a step toward Perry, a low growl escaping his throat. Perry stared at him with wide eyes.

"Down boy," Kent said between clenched teeth. Immediately, Houdini backed off and Perry relaxed.

"Look, Mr. White, I'm not every reporter in Metropolis," Kent said with a tinge of sadness in his voice. "I'd really love to work here, but it's impossible. I really appreciate the offer, though. Thanks."

He turned and walked away, leaving Perry stunned. The editor wasn't the only one. Lois couldn't believe what she'd just heard, from either of them. As Perry went back into his office and closed the door behind him, she rushed over to Kent.

"Okay, spill it, what did you bring in that made Perry offer you a job? Did you get an interview with MagiKal or what?"

Kent stopped dead in his tracks. "Oh, Ms. Lane. Good evening. Why would I have an interview with MagiKal?" He seemed genuinely puzzled.

"Because every reporter in this city is dying to get one," she replied. "Perry White has never in his whole life

begged anyone to work for him. So how did you do it and why on earth did you refuse?"

His face clouded over. "That's none of your business, Ms. Lane," he said briskly. Then his ears turned a shade of pink. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so rude. You want it badly, that interview, don't you?"

His warm gaze rested on her and for some inexplicable reason Lois felt her heart beat faster. There was something about Clark Kent, about the way he looked at her. What was going on with her? Lucy would have a field day if she ever caught her mooning over not only one but two guys.

She heaved a sigh. "Yeah, me and everyone else. You don't happen to have an inside scoop, do you? I mean, I could really use help. And you're a good writer. We could use someone like you around here."

A smile flickered across his face, so bright and beautiful that Lois' breath caught. "Thanks, I guess."

"How's that head of yours?" Good grief, when had she changed to flirting with him?

"All right for now," he replied with another, even more dazzling smile. Then his expression sobered. "Come Houdini, we've got to get going. Bye, Ms. Lane."

His gaze lingered on her just for a moment longer, as if he was reluctant to go. Lois felt like she could drown in his eyes, and it took her a moment to realize that he'd just spoken to her.

Slightly dazed, she watched him walk off before she managed a 'Goodbye' of her own.

Houdini, however, was still standing in front of her and watching her intently.

Kent looked back at them. "Houdini?"

The dog's eyes never left Lois.

She gulped. "Why is he staring at me like that? He isn't going to attack, is he?"

Kent laughed. "Don't worry. He's probably just smelling the leftovers of your turkey sandwich." He clicked his tongue. "Come on now, boy. I'll get you some food. You don't have to steal the lady's sandwich."

Houdini followed Kent and Lois watched them as they left the newsroom through the staircase. Her heart was still pounding in her chest. She was confused. How could he refuse a job offer from Perry? How could he know that she'd had a turkey sandwich for lunch that she hadn't eaten completely?

Lois returned to her desk, deeply lost in thought. With a start, she saw a note lying on her desk that hadn't been there before. Had Jimmy brought it? She'd thought that he'd gone home already.

Lois unfolded the paper. It was her own note to MagiKal.

<I want to interview you. Please contact me at the Daily Planet. Lois Lane.>

Someone had written something underneath.

<Maybe one day, you will. MagiKal.>

Lois' heart skipped a beat. So he had seen her letter after all. But how?

The Once and Future Interviews

"I don't care how much money I could make."

Clark's chest was heaving with every breath he took. He clenched his hands into fists, willing his powers to behave themselves. Murray Brown was wearing on his patience.

"I'm not going to perform in Shuster Hall. And I'm not going to do that interview either."

"But you can't avoid the public forever," the agent argued. "You're a celebrity now. Lois Lane must have called me a dozen times to set a date for an interview. And I have a hundred different magazines begging for one as well."

Clark pinched the bridge of his nose. He shouldn't have promised Lois that interview. He could only attribute it to temporary insanity. Whenever she was near him he couldn't think straight.

"Well, tell her I changed my mind." He grumbled. "I'm not giving interviews."

"You hired me as your manager. And there is plenty of money--"

"You came after me and begged to be my manager," Clark cut him off. "I only accepted because I didn't want the donations to land in the hands of people who have enough already. I'm not looking for a quick buck and I'm not looking for fame, either."

This was taking far longer than he had anticipated. Clark shifted from one foot to the other. He started to feel a prickling in his neck, but he wasn't sure if that was another hiccup announcing itself or just his frayed nerves playing tricks on him. He really wished Houdini were at his side. The dog would be able to tell the difference. But he'd figured that his identity was safer if Houdini remained at home.

The longer he stayed with Murray Brown, the more he regretted his decision to come in the first place. But it had seemed like a good idea at the time. Better than having Murray place ads in every newspaper in Metropolis.

"You need to give someone an interview soon, MagiKal," Murray tried again. "If you don't throw the press a bone, they'll make up stories. Nothing you tell them could be worse than what they'll come up with."

Clark wasn't so sure about that. "I don't want publicity."

The prickling in the back of his neck intensified.

"Then you shouldn't perform so publicly," Murray scoffed.

Clark squeezed his eyes shut as they started to burn. He fought against his powers, but they surfaced relentlessly. His strange abilities had always been linked to his emotions, another reason why he'd been staying away from people for so long. He wouldn't be able to contain them much longer.

"This is important," Murray insisted. "You could be so much more than you even dare to imagine. That's why I came after you. I know you've got potential."

"Stop it right there." Clark broke himself off as he felt the sound of the city shattering his barrier. His own voice sounded muffled to his ears as a million other voices merged into deafening white noise. "We'll have to talk about this later."

He stormed out, unseeing, his eyes still squeezed shut. His hands felt for and turned the doorknob. He headed down the stairs, but his feet left the ground and he moved up instead of down. Clark cursed softly and changed directions, daring a quick peek through his lashes. He spotted a window and rushed toward it, hoping that he'd manage not to tear it out of its frame. Thankfully it stayed intact, but he was pretty sure that he'd left indentations.

He tumbled out of the window and shot up straight into the sky, desperate to leave the city behind. Within seconds he was above Earth's atmosphere and the deafening white noise was replaced by an equally oppressive silence. He knew that he couldn't contain his powers any longer and finally opened his eyes. Since the power spike had nowhere else to go, it erupted in a massive blast of heat vision, more intense than ever before. He was helpless to stop it, helpless to control it.

If he hadn't been floating in space, a cry would have been ripped from his lungs. Despair filled Clark as he felt all the energy burst from his eyes. He'd been such a fool to believe that there was a way he'd ever pass for normal. He didn't need all this frenzy, he just wanted a life. How was he going to get that if everyone wanted a piece of MagiKal? All he'd longed for was to walk down a street and not be stared at if he started to float accidentally.

An interview with Lois Lane? How was that even going to work and what would she think of him if he'd start hiccuping right in the middle of it? Best case: She'd think he was a showoff. Worst case: Well, he didn't want to imagine the worst-case scenario.

After what seemed like an eternity, the beam of heat vision died down and Clark felt utterly spent. His lungs were aching for another breath and he floated down, now in control of his descent. He headed straight back to the worn-out trailer that now passed for his home.

His feet touched ground close to the junkyard. It was the most secluded area in Metropolis he'd been able to find. Nobody stayed here longer than he absolutely had to.

Weary and with slumped shoulders, Clark trudged back to the old RV.

He could hear Houdini jump to his feet, barking with excitement. His wagging tail flopped against the wooden interior and as soon as Clark opened the door, the dog was all over him. Caught by surprise, Clark fell on his back as two large paws settled against his shoulders.

A sloppy tongue covered his face with dog kisses. He felt the tension ease.

“Did you miss me?”

The dog whimpered.

“Yeah, I missed you, too.” He let out a breath and pressed his face into the soft fur of his companion. The steady beat of the dog’s heart was soothing.

“You know, I think I might have made a mistake,” he told the dog softly.

Houdini took a step back and shook himself. To Clark, it seemed like he was shaking his head.

“You don’t think so?”

Houdini barked as if to confirm his point, then nudged Clark with his nose. In reply, Clark ran his hands through Houdini’s thick fur. Involuntarily, his thoughts wandered back to Lois Lane. Oh, how he hoped that Houdini was right.

Maybe, Murray Brown had a point, too. If he gave an interview, he could control what the public learned about him. One thing was for sure — the fiery Lois Lane wouldn’t give up.

A part of him hoped that she wouldn’t. He longed to talk to her.

He wanted to feel that magic again.

The Limits of Magic

In the faint light of dusk, Lois saw MagiKal stand on a small ledge that surrounded one of the older brick stone buildings on the fringes of the Southside. The sight of him was a welcome distraction after a busy news week, filled with a series of arsons. Lois felt a bit uneasy being so close to the targeted area, especially since the arsonist had not yet been caught or even identified.

But she wouldn’t miss the opportunity to see MagiKal again. Lois still couldn’t help but wonder how he managed to get up there. As always, his precarious stand caused her to hold her breath. She wasn’t the only one. Every single person in the crowd around her craned their necks in breathless anticipation.

Suddenly, a burst of flames erupted out of nowhere. Lois had seen fire breathers before, but usually they carried a torch. Another burst of flames erupted, this time from a spot on the building several feet higher up. How had he even got there so quickly? A third eruption followed, even more impressive than the last one and from yet another spot.

The crowd cheered as several balls of flames appeared in mid-air, juggled by the barely visible shape of MagiKal.

Mesmerized, Lois stared at him, hoping that tonight would finally be the night he approached her. Something special was going to happen, she felt it in every bone.

More and more flame balls appeared in the air, faintly illuminating the man who caught them. There seemed to be no limit to how many he could handle, because each time he performed, he set new records.

Bang!

A deafening explosion rocked the building on the other side of the street. Shards of glass rained down on the crowd below. Excited cheers turned to startled cries as flames burst through the broken windows.

MagiKal was forgotten.

Lois glanced up to the building that was on fire. Thick clouds of smoke billowed from the lower levels, while the upper floors were still intact. Her throat tightened as she took in the damage. She could only hope the building was abandoned, like so many in the Southside. There was no guarantee, though.

She turned her attention back to MagiKal, who was now standing on the uppermost ledge of the opposite building. He’d killed the flames of the balls he’d been juggling and was now barely a shadow.

“Someone call the firefighters,” a man to Lois’ right shouted.

A startled shriek made Lois jump. “Look, there’s someone up there.”

The woman who’d cried out stood a few feet away from Lois and pointed up. When Lois looked in the direction the woman was indicating, she saw a group of people standing at a window on the uppermost floor.

Lois clapped her hand to her mouth as she spotted the fire exit. There was a huge gap, which made it impossible to climb down the ladders.

When Lois looked back to MagiKal, he was gone. For some reason she couldn’t quite understand, Lois felt a prickling in the back of her neck. Her gaze drifted back to the people who were still standing at the window and shouting.

“Has someone called the firefighters?” A man asked the question before Lois could.

She strained her ears, praying that she would hear sirens. But other than the desperate shouts of the people trapped by the fire, all she could hear was a barking dog.

Lois gasped in surprise as she spotted MagiKal again. This time he was standing on the roof of the burning building. He held a platform similar to ones used to clean the skyscraper windows.

Lois blinked. *He carried it?*

Again, Lois heard a dog barking, a lot closer this time. Then she felt something wet against her hand. She looked down.

There was a dog standing next to her, tail between his legs. He whimpered. The dog looked strangely familiar.

“Houdini?” Lois whispered. “Is Clark here, too?”

She glanced around but didn’t see him anywhere. And she didn’t want to search for him for long, because there was something incredible going on on that roof.

MagiKal stepped closer to the window and climbed down, the platform still inexplicably floating beside him. Only one of his hands rested on the metal bars surrounding the platform. But that couldn’t be, could it?

“Climb onto the platform,” she heard MagiKal’s voice in the distance. “Quickly.”

Houdini whimpered again but remained beside Lois.

A man climbed out. Tentatively, he stepped onto the platform. It didn’t waver at all.

“Okay. Everyone please hurry,” MagiKal encouraged.

The next person climbed onto the platform and it kept floating in midair, completely stable. One after another, the people climbed to safety. They were holding each other, eyes wide, warily staring over the edge. But the platform remained steady, as if held up by some invisible pedestal.

When everyone was out of the building, MagiKal climbed down the wall.

Lois watched him, not sure if she was hallucinating. She held her breath, unable to remember when she’d drawn the last gasp and unable to take another one.

Slowly, MagiKal lowered the platform to the ground.

The crowd broke into frenetic cheers. MagiKal took a few steps back, looking decidedly uncomfortable. His head was hunched between his shoulders. Then he did his famous somersault and was gone.

Houdini whimpered and dashed away from Lois.

Feeling slightly dazed, Lois craned her neck, hoping that she’d see Clark somewhere. But there was no sign of him. She was desperate to talk to someone about what she’d just witnessed.

She could only describe it as a miracle.

“Did you see that?” Someone next to her grumbled, outraged. “He put people in danger for a magic trick.”

“But he saved them.” Lois protested.

“Oh, did he?”

All around Lois, people started to argue. Right at this moment, Lois wished that someone would be at her side to help her sort through all the frenzy. Clark Kent would be a good choice.

She’d seen his dog, so where the heck was he?

Smoke and Mirrors

As Clark climbed into his RV, his eyes fell on the copy of the Metropolis Star that lay on the passenger seat. Perry would have his head if he knew that he’d bought the paper.

“MagiKal — illusionist or arsonist?” The headline read.

He shoved the paper off the seat and into the back area, where Houdini was snoring soundly.

Why was he torturing himself like that?

Gritting his teeth, Clark turned the ignition and the motor roared to life. The radio resumed playing a country song as he left the gas station. Not long after that he passed the first sign that pointed him toward Smallville, Kansas.

Clark felt his stomach clench with dread. So many times he’d argued with his dad about becoming MagiKal. His father had warned him that it was just too risky to expose himself.

The music faded into the final chords. Clark heard the familiar jingle of the radio station.

“That was Johnny Cash singing ‘Ring of Fire’. And now we’re talking to our correspondent on the East Coast. Good evening, Carol. Can you tell me if there has been any statement from Metropolis’ famous illusionist, MagiKal?”

“Not yet,” Carol replied. “There’s only been ongoing speculation about the cause of the fire. Today’s headlines differ greatly. The Daily Planet is praising MagiKal as a hero, while some smaller papers like the Metropolis Star are speculating whether he might have staged the fire to —”

Clark turned off the radio and heaved a sigh. At least Lois still was on his side. But many others were not.

It was a nightmare.

Never had he imagined it would end like this. People were arguing about whether it was appropriate that an illusionist saved people from a burning building, accusing him of doing it for show. Some even suspected an elaborate, disgusting trick.

What was he supposed to do? Let people die?

The RV slowed to a crawl as Clark felt creeping doubts. He longed to talk to someone who could understand what he was going through. Someone who wasn’t a dog. But he was questioning the wisdom of running back to his parents, tail between his legs.

He wasn’t sure he could stand to hear his father say, “I told you so.”

Unfortunately, he’d be right about it, too.

If only Houdini were awake. He’d help him sort out his thoughts and make him feel better about himself. But the setter had drifted off to sleep a while ago. Occasionally he whimpered, probably dreaming. Clark hoped the dreams were more pleasant than his reality.

They'd been driving all day. The old RV groaned now and then, protesting against the unfamiliar exertion. For the past day and a half Clark had only stopped to refuel, get a large package of dog food, let Houdini relieve himself and ride out three major hiccups.

He only wanted to get away from it all.

As if his problems would suddenly vanish with the distance.

Murray Brown was probably busy placing ads in every paper he could get his hands on. How had things spiraled out of control so quickly? He'd meant to help these people, not wreak such havoc.

He'd become an illusionist to make people believe he was doing all these strange things on purpose. If anyone ever found out the truth about him... well, it was unthinkable.

Clark stifled a yawn as he passed the billboard welcoming him to the city of Smallville, Kansas. He slowed down, his heart hammering in his chest. His parent's farm was so close he could almost smell his mother's apple pie.

It had been quite a while since he'd last been there longer than a few minutes at a time. Between Houdini's fear of flying and his inability to control his powers he hadn't really dared to stay with them. He missed his parents so much.

His super hearing kicked in; it was his mother's voice. "Oh, Jonathan, have you tried to call the Daily Planet and ask them to pass on a message to Clark?"

"Of course I did," Jonathan grumbled. "But they haven't seen him in a while. He's working free-lance, remember?"

"This boy is going to be the death of me," Martha whispered.

Clark could hear the slight hitch to her voice that gave away she'd been crying. Because of him. His gut twisted into a tight knot. At the very least, he should talk to them.

"He should get himself one of those new mobile phones," she continued. "I can't stand to wait until he calls again. He must be so distraught! I can't believe they accused him of setting that fire."

Clark heard Jonathan clear his throat. "Well, you've gotta admit that it looks suspicious."

"Nonsense," Martha said emphatically.

Clark felt a rush of gratitude for his Mom. His own tears threatened to spill. Behind him, Houdini whimpered, then growled in his sleep.

Clark threw a glance over his shoulder. "Wake up, boy. We're almost there."

Clark turned the final corner and saw the old sign that announced he was now on the Kent farm. As the old, cozy farmhouse came into view, Clark pulled to a stop and

closed his eyes. The doubts were back. What was he doing here but putting his parents in danger? Though Houdini was here with him, there was never a guarantee that he wouldn't accidentally hurt people around him. He hadn't yet done what the press was accusing him of doing, but he just might do so eventually with his reckless behavior. It wasn't like he could dig himself a hole on this farm to live out the remainder of his days. So what was he even doing here?

Houdini got to his feet and placed his head on Clark's knee. He stroked the dog absentmindedly. Clark felt utterly torn. Part of him wanted nothing more than to feel his mother's arms around him and lean into his father's bear hug. But there was also this huge mass of jumbled emotions living inside his chest. He was so scared. Scared and incredibly lonely.

If only he'd maintained his life as a shadow, then he wouldn't be in this mess now.

But six people would have died in the fire.

It had been the first time in years that he'd felt truly good about himself. Like he had a purpose in life. Like he could do something more meaningful than wait for the next hiccup.

The screen door of the farmhouse flung open and a small, blonde tornado stormed out. "Jonathan, it's Clark! He's here."

Clark swallowed hard and glanced down at the dog whose head was still resting on his knee.

"Ready?" he asked.

Houdini barked emphatically. He jumped toward the door and got on his hind paws as if he wanted to open it himself. Clark shook his head with a pang of sadness. The dog was probably more ready than he'd ever be. He felt a huge lump in his throat as he followed Houdini and stepped out of the RV.

"Mom," he said quietly, his voice hoarse.

She was in his arms, before he could protest or even voice a word of warning. Clark melted into her embrace and the tension of the past days seeped out of him. Tears slipped down his cheeks.

"I didn't know where else to go," he whispered.

"You chose exactly the right place," she reassured him tenderly.

Clark heard the creaking of the screen door a second time and moments later his father was hugging him as well.

"They believe I started the fire," Clark mumbled unhappily.

"It's not important what they believe, son," Jonathan replied. "We know it's not true — you would never—"

"But that's just it, Dad," Clark ground out, sorrow-stricken. "It could have been me. They're not so wrong to

be scared of me. I was such a fool to believe I could live among people.” He took a step back and cast his eyes down. “You warned me that it would blow. I didn’t listen. It’s all right, you can say it. You told me so.”

Jonathan shook his head, a sad smile on his lips. “I did tell you so, but I was wrong. I’ve never been prouder of you, son. You saved these people and they’re not all scared of you. We’ll get through this.”

Clark’s throat felt so tight that he couldn’t reply. He tried to smile for the sake of the two people he loved so much. His mother placed a hand on his shoulder and gave him a soft squeeze. Then she smiled down at the dog that was jumping around their legs.

“Come on, Houdini. I believe I have a bit of meat pie left for you somewhere.”

As Houdini followed Martha excitedly, Jonathan pulled Clark into another bear-hug, so intense that he felt almost unable to breathe. But then, he could hold his breath for a long time. Nothing had ever felt this good.

Hidden Magic

“Lois?”

The voice was muffled and so hoarse that she didn’t recognize it. There was a rebuff already on her lips when Lois looked up, ready to put down whoever was addressing her so casually. But as she spotted Clark in front of her desk, she caught herself. His shoulders were slumped. It was baffling to her how such a tall man could look so small. He fidgeted with his hands, his gaze continually drifting down to Houdini, as if he wanted to check on the dog. The setter stood beside his master, his stance relaxed but guarded.

“Can I talk to you?” Clark shifted on his feet.

Lois raised her brows, curious what had him so on edge. “Of course, Clark. What’s the matter?”

“Would you...” he looked around nervously. “Would you mind if we went somewhere else?”

Now, her curiosity was definitely piqued. She felt a strange rush of excitement. Maybe he had some lead that he needed her help with? Lois had never felt like she needed a partner, but there was something about Clark Kent she didn’t know how to describe.

“I believe the conference room is free,” she offered.

He looked down at his dog. For some reason Clark seemed even more agitated than before. Then he shook his head. “I’d prefer if we talked outside. Centennial Park is close.”

Lois furrowed her brows. She wasn’t keen on leaving the Planet right now because she was still wrapping up her latest story on the series of arsons. The police had no leads, but she felt there was some connection to a criminal organization that controlled the Southside.

Clark seemed to sense her reluctance. “I can wait until you head for your lunch break,” he offered. “I’ll buy.”

Lois nodded. “Okay, I think I should be out of here by noon. Meet you at the main entrance.”

Clark relaxed. “I’ll see you there.”

He hurried out of the newsroom, heading straight for the staircase. Lois shook her head as she watched them. Most people preferred the elevator. But this was the second time already that she saw Clark use the stairs. Though it wasn’t a big deal, somehow it added to the mystery that was Clark Kent.

Lois was surprised to realize that she’d actually hurried to make the meeting with Clark. When she approached the main entrance of Centennial Park she was fifteen minutes early. Clark Kent wasn’t there, yet.

Her gaze drifted up into the air while she waited for him and she wished that MagiKal would choose this moment for one of his performances. But she had little hope it was going to happen. No one had seen him since his rescue at the fire. That only fueled the speculation about his involvement.

Lois didn’t believe he was responsible, but his absence gave her pause. It was odd that he still hadn’t given any statement. It wasn’t only the press who failed to contact him. Murray Brown’s ads in various papers hadn’t escaped her notice. That even his agent had no way of contacting him was probably the strangest thing of all.

Lois heard a dog whimpering in the distance. There was a male voice grunting and uttering a string of curses. Lois craned her neck to see where the noises were coming from. Could it be Clark? Was he having another bout of migraine?

Lois followed the sounds and spotted Clark hunched on the ground burying his face in his hands. His moans of pain sent shivers down her spine.

Houdini was sitting by his side but got up as soon as he spotted her. Once again, he bared his teeth as he approached her.

“Clark?” she asked, scared. “Are you all right?”

“Lois?” He sounded alarmed.

She heard him mutter something under his breath that sounded like an expletive. Then he shook his head as if to clear it and relaxed. Quickly, Clark scrambled to his feet. A deep blush tinted his cheeks. Lois realized with a start that he wasn’t wearing his coat though the wind was icy. As he wrapped it around himself, Lois thought she saw angry red blisters covering his forearms and hands.

Clark stared at her like a deer in headlights. “We wanted to meet at the entrance, why didn’t you wait for me there?”

"I..." Lois took a step back, eyeing Houdini who, with his teeth bared, was still blocking her way to Clark.

"Sorry about him," Clark muttered. "Down, Houdini. Come back to me."

The setter instantly relaxed and rushed back to Clark's side.

"What's with your hands?" Lois asked worriedly.

"My hands?" He looked at them. The skin was completely smooth. "What do you mean?"

Lois blinked. Had she imagined the scorch marks? This got more and more confusing.

"Strange, I could have sworn your hands looked burnt."

"Well, as you can see, they're not," Clark replied tightly.

He looked even more uncomfortable than he had earlier in the newsroom. Was he just nervous about talking to her or was there something else going on? Her reporter's instincts were screaming at her to dig deeper. But she suspected that he'd clam up, especially if there was really something he was trying to hide. That way, she wouldn't learn more about what he wanted to tell her. Lois took a deep breath, making a conscious decision to let the matter drop for the time being.

"What did you want to talk about?" she asked instead.

He cleared his throat and looked down at Houdini who was licking his hand. It seemed as if there was some sort of quiet exchange between the two of them. Lois watched it, feeling slightly irritated.

"I know MagiKal wasn't responsible for the fire," Clark said, eventually. "I could use your help to prove it."

Lois took in a sharp breath. "You know? Have... have you spoken to him?"

He couldn't really meet her gaze. "I... no...I," he stuttered.

Lois couldn't help but feel he was lying. Her excitement spiked. She was hard pressed not to call him out on it. Could the new guy at the paper, who refused to secure his position for reasons only known to him, actually have the inside track?

He clenched his hands into fists. "There is a group called 'The Toasters.' I believe they're involved with the Metro Gang. But I can't prove it."

Lois stared at him, taken aback. She'd been so caught up with MagiKal that it took her a moment to process what Clark had said.

"I've been hearing rumors about the Metros as well," she conceded.

She couldn't help but feel disappointed, because his lead wasn't an exclusive interview with MagiKal after all. But for the sake of the story, she'd have to suck it up.

"This is something we should follow up on," Lois suggested. "Why don't we go undercover at the Metro Club and see what we can find out?"

"We?" Clark asked, surprised.

"Of course, we. It's your lead." Lois replied.

Her heart fluttered with excitement at the prospect of working with Clark. What was happening here? She didn't need a partner, never had. It would allow her to keep an eye on the strange newbie, she tried to rationalize the feeling. Perhaps she'd find out what he was hiding. But a quiet voice in the back of her mind insisted it wasn't the only reason.

"Too bad you didn't talk to MagiKal," Lois added.

Clark raised his brows. "Why is that?"

Lois noticed that once again he exchanged glances with his dog. These two really were the strangest pair.

"We need to convince him to give me that interview," she replied. "He should tell the people his version of what happened at the fire."

Clark shifted his position and dragged his fingers deep into Houdini's fur. "Maybe he is shy and doesn't want the publicity?"

Lois laughed. "It's a bit late for that, don't you think?"

A faint blush appeared on Clark's cheeks. "You're probably right," he conceded. "We should try and talk to MagiKal the next time we see him."

Houdini started to nudge Clark's side, pushing him forward. Clark gave a small sigh and shook his head almost imperceptibly. But the dog didn't stop, wagged his tail and barked as if he was trying to tell his master something. It was an odd sight.

Finally, Clark shook his head and smiled. "I guess Houdini is trying to remind me that I promised you lunch. Do you like Chinese?" When she nodded, he smiled at her. "I know just the place. Houdini will keep you company for a moment, I'll be right back."

Houdini gave a small whimper as Clark darted off. Then he slowly approached Lois and pressed his nose into her hand, his eyes begging her to stroke him. He wagged his tail happily when she scratched him behind his ear. It was hard to believe the setter had threatened her just moments ago.

It really didn't take Clark long to return. And he brought the best Chinese food Lois had ever tasted. As they ate in companionable silence, Lois studied Clark thoughtfully. She was strangely excited at the prospect of working with him. The man was full of surprises.

What was going to be the next one?

Magical Assignment

Houdini whimpered. The setter turned his head, looking up at his master with as much of a murderous gaze as a dog was capable of.

“I know, pal.” Clark heaved a sigh. “I don’t like this any better than you do.”

The dog pulled at his harness and growled his disapproval. Clark’s heart went out to him. He knew how much Houdini hated leashes. The guide dog harness he was wearing now had to be so much worse. Houdini hadn’t uttered a sound of protest when they’d been living on the streets of the Southside for the past week, but this was testing the limits of his endurance.

“I’m sorry, buddy,” Clark whispered. “The other option was leaving you at home. And we both know that could end up in a disaster. Please bear with me, just this once.”

He bent down and scratched Houdini’s head, then offered him a treat. The setter eyed him as if he was loath to accept the bribe. But after a moment’s hesitation, he took the treat and gave in to his fate, temporarily.

Clark got up and checked his appearance in the reflection of a shop window.

“I’m not sure this is a good idea,” Clark muttered.

He set his sunglasses straight and pulled a face at the sight of his borrowed tux. He’d found a connection between ‘The Toasters’ and Tony Taylor, the sister of the Metro gang’s leader Johnny Taylor while he’d roamed the streets as a homeless guy. What on earth was he supposed to accomplish in this penguin dress-up?

<If Tony Taylor really is behind this series of arsons we need proof,> Lois had pointed out. <You’re a good-looking guy, try to hook up with her.>

A strange expression had flashed across her face, as if something about that idea upset her. But he could have imagined that.

Clark had frowned at her. <Hook up with her?>

<You’re a man, she’s a woman. Do I need to draw you a diagram?>

He hadn’t dignified that with an answer. It would have been rather hard to explain why he couldn’t possibly “hook up” with anyone. And that he’d insisted on taking Houdini with him had only made things worse. At least they had found a compromise on the dog issue. Though he was certain Houdini would beg to differ when it came to calling his current predicament a solution.

<If you show up with that dog of yours, they’ll throw you out before you can even order a drink,> Lois had muttered. <If they think you’re blind, they can’t argue the presence of Houdini. It’s perfect — assuming you manage to pass for a blind guy. They’ll never expect you to be sniffing around. Of course, you’d have a definite disadvantage trying to get the lady’s attention. But with the combined charms of Houdini and you, it might work. Or you could just leave the dog at home.>

Well, that had been a definite ‘No’. The look Lois had given him still sent shivers down Clark’s spine. He was

slightly surprised that she hadn’t already grilled him about his insistence to have Houdini by his side. But that was only a matter of time. What had he gotten himself into? Everything about this endeavor had disaster written all over it. He was a fool to take any part in it. But since they were trying to save his good name, he didn’t really have a choice.

Clark glanced down at Houdini. “Ready?”

The setter shook himself and let out a whimper that was as close to a resigned sigh as a dog could possibly get. Clark couldn’t help but chuckle softly before he entered the Metro Club. The bar was busy. All tables were occupied. Skimpily dressed waitresses moved through the rows, serving drinks. Lois wasn’t among them. A rush of disappointment went through Clark, accompanied by the slight twist of his heart that appeared whenever he thought about her these days.

**Get a grip, Kent,* he chastised himself.*

On the stage, a woman sang “Too darn hot.” Most of the men among the audience were staring at her, either mesmerized by her voice or just appreciating the view. She couldn’t hold a candle to Lois, Clark thought.

Remembering his assignment, he did his best to keep himself from looking around too much. He let Houdini set the pace. The dog proved to be a better actor than he’d expected. The setter dutifully stopped whenever someone came close.

Maybe the poor dog was just wary of so many people. They’d spent most of his life in isolation. Before Clark’s accident Houdini had lived in Smallville. Crowds only occurred during the Corn Festival and maybe during prom nights. If Clark were honest, he’d much rather be at either event than in this bar. His thoughts drifted back to Lois, trying to imagine her at the Corn Festival. Or as his date. It was a pleasant fantasy.

Just don’t go there, Kent. The time he’d spent with her, brainstorming, eating delicious meals and talking to her was getting to him.

Clark steered Houdini toward the bar as unobtrusively as he could. Then he felt for the chair and sat down, making it a point to look past the bartender, who was standing a bit to his left. Clark bit back the impulse to place an order, realizing that — if he wanted to pass for a blind person — he would have to wait until he was addressed.

“No dogs allowed in here,” the bartender said gruffly.

“He’s my guide dog,” Clark replied, unfazed.

The bartender crossed his arms in front of his chest, flexing his muscles provocatively. When Clark continued to look past him, it seemed to dawn on him that he wouldn’t be able to physically impress his customer unless

he touched him. That gave him some pause and he relaxed his stance in obvious irritation.

"I don't care what he is," the bartender growled. "I said no dogs in this bar."

Clark set his jaw. "Unless you want the Metropolis Star to write about your treatment of handicapped people, I suggest you give me whiskey. And make it a double."

The bartender blanched. He opened and closed his mouth a few times. But he refrained from opposing Clark again and poured him the drink.

"Thanks." Clark gave him a smug smile.

He reached for the glass and took a sip. Where was Lois? He wished he could go looking for her, but that would blow his cover. This wasn't the best part of town, and he hated having to leave her alone among the sharks. He'd been keeping an eye on her, but it wasn't the same as working by her side. If only he could secure himself a job as a bartender. But he didn't want to explain why he was mixing his drinks hanging upside down from the ceiling.

The audience applauded as the singer ended her song. Clark could hear a slight commotion as the crew switched the decorations on the stage. He stretched out his hearing and picked up Lois' heartbeat. She seemed okay as far as he could tell, albeit a little excited. His heart twisted. It was almost frightening how quickly he'd become attuned to hearing that sound. And it was getting closer. His own heartrate spiked.

When the orchestra played the first chords of "Down on the Farm", Clark quickly turned down his hearing range. It still hurt a little, but he managed not to flinch. He bent down, pretending to check on Houdini, while he threw a quick glance toward the stage. Lois was among the dancers, wearing a skimpy yellow chicken dress. The sight of her incredibly long legs made Clark's mouth run dry. She was absolutely stunning.

He was lost.

Dragging himself away from the sight, Clark placed his empty glass in front of himself. "Another one."

"At that rate you're gonna get drunk real quick," the bartender cautioned him.

Clark chewed on his bottom lip, not sure how to reply to that. He was supposed to attract the attention of Tony Taylor, not moon over a woman he could never even have. What was he doing, confusing his heart like that? It could never be; it was just too dangerous.

She was gorgeous and brilliant and everything he had ever dreamed of. And he was, well, him. It was impossible. But a tiny voice inside him insisted that if anyone could deal with the truth, it was her.

Clark downed the next whiskey and set down the glass. "Another one."

The bartender frowned but said nothing as he poured Clark a third glass.

Clark heaved a sigh before he downed that one as quickly as the first two. Hook up with a lady. That was easier said than done. Houdini had more experience in that department than he did. How was he even going to make her look at him, as a supposedly blind guy no less.

Perhaps he should try causing a scene? But how was that going to help? He was lost, indeed.

It's a Kind of Magic

Lois was furious with Clark. He was going to blow the entire investigation just because of his stupid infatuation with his dog. Why did he have to take Houdini with him into the bar? Lois didn't understand it. She was annoyed with herself that she'd even compromised by suggesting he pose as a blind guy. She was Lois Lane — she didn't make compromises and for good reason.

This was never going to work. There was a good chance he'd accidentally slip up and reveal that he could see well enough. And then they'd be busted.

Lois watched Clark's entrance from behind a curtain that separated the bar from the backstage area. She held her breath, waiting for either Houdini or Clark to make the first mistake. But the dog proved to be an exceptional actor, stopping at all the right places while he slowly led his master to the bar. Clark followed suit, keeping his head straight as if he didn't see any of the people around him.

Lois let out a breath. Maybe there was a slim chance this might work after all. As Clark turned to take a seat at the bar, there was a moment when Lois had an unrestricted view of him. She barely managed to stifle a gasp. Boy, did Clark look handsome in a tux. His white shirt stretched across a lean, muscular chest and his tightly fitted jacked did little to hide broad, muscular arms. Her mouth ran dry and it took a conscious effort to drag her eyes away from him.

She was here to investigate a crime, not her rookie colleague.

She spotted Johnny Taylor and a few of his goons sitting in front of the stage, all of them drooling over the singer. Lois curled her lips as she realized that Tony Taylor's assessment of Johnny's usefulness had been spot on. It was obvious that he cared more about his own pleasure than about the business. Here he was doing nothing but enjoying himself while his sister was still busy with the real work. Figures!

Lois' gaze drifted back to Clark, who had taken a seat at the bar. He was now staring past the bartender, whose face was creased in a deep frown. The latter didn't seem happy about his new customer and, more importantly, his dog. Houdini was standing by Clark's side like a statue, every muscle in his body tense. Lois felt her pulse quicken

as she wondered whether Houdini's protective streak would become a problem.

Clark was talking to the bartender, who shook his head and tensed up. Lois let out a growl of frustration. She had been afraid this was going to happen. It looked like the bartender was trying to throw Clark out. Oh, she should never have expected Clark to handle an assignment like this. Why did he have to insist on that stupid dog! Agonized by her own helplessness, Lois was dying to jump to Clark's rescue and find a few choice words for the bartender's treatment of handicapped people.

"Hey, sweetie pie, whatcha doin'?" A guy behind her asked. "You're next"

Lois whipped around, taking in the man's leer as he let his gaze drift over her body and the skimpy yellow chicken dress she wore. A surge of anger filled her and she was about to give the sleazy guy a piece of her mind, when she remembered that she was undercover herself.

Swallowing down her rising bile, she plastered a smile on her face.

"Coming," she purred.

Inwardly, she vowed to show the guy an example of her Taekwondo skills the next chance she got — him and every other sleazebag she came across. Lois clenched her hands into tight fists and had a last look at Clark.

She did a double take as he raised a glass of whiskey to his lips, a smug smile playing around them. He looked decidedly sexy, his measured movements hinted at a quiet strength that surrounded him. The bartender watched him with a sour expression that Clark seemed completely oblivious to. Lois blinked. He was much better than she gave him credit for.

Shaking her head, Lois turned and headed for the stage. As she passed a mirror on her way, she took one last look at the yellow wisp of nothing and the ludicrous feathers hemming her collar. She looked like a joke. Suddenly, she wished that Clark wouldn't turn to watch while she made a fool of herself on that stage.

"Come on, girls, you're on," the sleazebag said.

He waved Lois and the other dancers toward the stage, using the opportunity to do a little groping. Each of the women wore a different animal costume, though none of them even closely resembled any animal. But that wasn't the point anyway, she knew. The outfits were supposed to be revealing and Lois was sure that the male audience wasn't going to have any complaints in that respect.

The music started to play and Lois plastered a smile on her face, dancing with the other women and showing off her female assets. Would Clark appreciate the view? Lois felt torn. While part of her suddenly wanted his jaw to drop at the sight of her, another part of her was hoping that he wasn't one of the guys who enjoyed ogling women. What

was going on with her? What was it about Clark that turned her emotions into such a confusing jumble?

As her gaze fell on him, she nearly stopped dancing. Tony Taylor was sitting by his side and scratching Houdini's head. She was talking to Clark and he was smiling at her, a full blown thousand watt smile that was enough to make Lois' heart beat so hard it seemed to want to pound its way out of her chest. How had he managed to get her attention? Her heart raced with excitement, but also something else.

Lois caught herself in the last possible moment, resuming her dance and trying not to think about the way Clark was smiling at Tony Taylor.

Her heart clenched wistfully. She had the sudden urge to be the woman sitting by his side in a dark gown, sexy but in a less revealing way, and making him smile like that.

What the heck was going on with her?

Clark turned his head and looked in her direction, but somehow made it seem like he wasn't looking at anything in particular. But Lois could almost feel how their gazes met, how there was that moment the world stopped turning just for them.

Something was going on that she had no explanation for.

It was some kind of magic.

Magical Distractions

Clark contemplated the benefits of ordering a fourth drink. He desperately needed something to distract himself from the enticing sight of Lois. Her shapely legs and soft curves drew his eyes like a magnet. It took all his willpower to resist her siren call.

Until tonight he'd only ever seen her in long winter coats and business suits. While they couldn't quite hide her rare beauty, this chicken costume was designed to let his thoughts drift toward forbidden places.

Clark slipped his sunglasses more firmly in place and tightened his grip on the empty whisky glass as he fought to keep his head straight. A single crack appeared in the glass and immediately, Clark released his hold, mindful of his strength.

Houdini, who had stretched out on the floor, whimpered softly. Had his ears picked up Clark's slip?

"I'm sorry, mister." A female voice startled him. "There are no dogs allowed in this bar."

He turned his head in her direction, deliberately taking his time and letting his jaw work as if he was having a hard time remembering his manners. Then he plastered a fake smile on his lips, looking a few inches past Toni Taylor, who was standing at the bar seeming slightly flustered all of a sudden.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Clark said. His voice was cold but polite. "I didn't realize you did not accommodate handicapped customers."

He adjusted his sunglasses again to strengthen his point. Then he pulled a neatly folded hundred-dollar bill out of his wallet and placed it on the counter.

Clark clicked his tongue and Houdini jumped up to rush to his side, the perfect image of a guide dog. The handle of the harness was right before his hand, ready for Clark to take. He was thoroughly impressed by Houdini's performance.

Or was it just a fluke?

"My dog and I will leave." He took Houdini and turned, silently praying that he was making an impression on Toni Taylor.

"I... uh... I'm sorry, I didn't realize..." she trailed off. "Please accept my apologies. Your drinks are on the house, of course."

In the reflection of his glasses, Clark saw her throw up her hands, quietly urging the bartender to help her out and ensure that her guest wouldn't just leave. But the guy just gave a helpless shrug and poured a glass of white wine.

"Wait!" Clark felt Toni's hand on his shoulder. "May I invite you to another drink?"

He stood stiff, not sure how to react. He had her right where he wanted her, however he had accomplished that. But if he gave in too quickly now, it might look suspicious. For agonizing moments Clark was at a loss for what to do.

Then Houdini jumped to his aid. He dropped out of his role and pulled him back toward Toni Taylor.

"Oh my, aren't you a cutie!" She patted the dog's head. "I'll see if I can find some water for you."

"Houdini likes you." Clark allowed his lips to twitch into a broadening smile. "I can't argue with that. He's a good judge of character."

"My name is Charles King." He sat back down and held out his hand in Toni's general direction.

Toni shook it. Her gaze drifted across his features and then flitted down to his chest before she swallowed and dragged her gaze back up.

"Toni Taylor." She smiled at him, a deep flush tinting her cheeks. "Nice to meet you. I'm sorry about earlier. We had a few problems with customers who... oh, never mind."

The bartender set the wine glass right next to Clark's hand.

"It's okay." Clark shook his head and laughed softly. "This isn't the first time Houdini and I have been asked to leave. But I usually don't end up having a drink with a lovely sounding woman."

He felt for the glass and raised it in a toast. "To you — I have a feeling this is going to be an interesting evening."

While he took a sip of the white wine, he turned his head as if listening to the music. Lois was still dancing up there, still breathtakingly beautiful. His heart clenched wistfully as he allowed himself to look at Lois for a moment. When their gazes met, it seemed like the world stood still. The air seemed to sizzle with a kind of magic that had nothing to do with his powers.

"So, what brings you here tonight?" Toni interrupted his reverie.

Before Clark had a chance to reply, the doors of the bar flew open with a bang. A group of four people dressed in metallic warm-up suits with matching hoods and masks stepped inside and lined up several feet from Johnny Taylor's table. They pulled out their weapons, each attached to a backpack and looking as if it had been taken right out of a Ghostbusters movie.

A faint smell of gasoline reached Clark's nose. His heart skipped a beat as he realized they had flame throwers.

An intruder standing in the middle flipped a switch on his weapon. "Johnny, you're a dead man!"

The others imitated the motion and with a roar the weapons spit fire.

Clark grabbed Houdini's harness to keep him from rushing off in panic. Agonized, he watched the ball of flames exploding in the bar. Johnny and his goons had taken cover behind their table. People were screaming and running out of harm's way. The whole bar was in motion, a tangled mess of flames and panic. Clark's gaze automatically drifted toward the stage to check on Lois.

The dancers rushed to the back, leaving the stage as quickly as their feet would let them. None of them was in the immediate line of fire.

The attack didn't last long. After a few moments of frantic laughter and spraying fire all over the place, the four guys in their silver suits were gone. Smaller and larger fires were still burning.

The next moment, every customer was trying to get out of the bar, pushing others out of the way.

A panicked squeal to his right drew Clark's attention to Toni, who was trapped behind a wall of flames. But he also felt the tremors running through Houdini's body, the whole harness shaking with him. He couldn't leave the poor dog alone. If he lost Houdini, his whole life was essentially over.

Clark sucked in a sharp breath, knowing that he had no time to waste.

"Sorry, buddy." He bent down and picked up Houdini, rushing out of the bar faster than the eye could see. A low whimper seemed to follow him and Houdini was still trembling all over as Clark put him down outside on the street. "Stay put!"

With an uneasy prickling in the back of his neck, Clark rushed back inside to get Toni. He jumped through the fire, picked her up, and carried her to safety. He set her back on her feet close to the entrance and looked around, searching for Lois. His hands were shaking slightly, and he tightened them into fists. He was relieved that his powers had worked the way they should. But this wasn't over yet.

His heart beat in his throat as he turned back to Toni. "Get out."

She stared at him, open mouthed and with a frown on her forehead that left little doubt that at least his cover as a blind guy was blown. His gut clenched into a tight knot. Could she guess more than that?

He gave her a slight shove, urging her out of the bar before he focused his attention back on Lois. The prickling in the back of his neck intensified. Was this just his nerves or would his powers show now at the most inopportune moment of all?

His heart hammered in his chest as he lowered his glasses and x-rayed the walls. Lois was still behind the stage, running toward the entrance. There was another wall of flames that would block her way.

Clark inhaled deeply and killed all the minor and major fires in the room with his superbreath. It wasn't a moment too soon. As he turned back to the entrance, he saw Lois standing in front of the curtain, her eyes wide. Snowflakes whirled through the air — or were they ashes? A sense of dread was creeping up on Clark. Had she seen what he'd done?

Lois hurried toward him. "Clark, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he muttered.

His gaze drifted toward the wall on the far side of the room where the flames had painted the words "The Toasters." He should have been overjoyed, because those eleven letters exonerated MagiKal. But the truth was that Clark just felt numb.

He placed his hand on the small of Lois' back and guided her outside. Houdini came rushing toward him, jumping up and trying to lick his face. Absent-mindedly, he scratched the dog's fur.

Lois looked at the bar, then turned her attention back to Clark. "I guess this means we have proof that MagiKal is innocent."

"Yeah, I guess it does." Clark got down to his knees and undid Houdini's harness. Then he got up again, slipped out of his jacket and wrapped it around Lois's shoulders. "What are we going to do now?"

She grinned at him. "Secure an interview with MagiKal?"

His breath hitched in his chest and he wasn't sure if he felt capable of drawing another one. Had the other shoe

already dropped? The world was spinning about him, but he could hardly go and ask her if she knew his secret.

But the wonderful, slightly impish smile on her lips was designed to make him lose his mind, regardless of whether or not she knew.

Magical Interview

The newsroom was quiet. It was so late that only a few reporters were left. Lois was one of them. She sat staring at the piece of paper in her hands for what seemed the thousandth time. Then she put it back on her desk and smoothed out imaginary wrinkles as if the motion would somehow reveal whether the invitation were real or a fraud.

<Meet me on the roof of the Daily Planet at 9 p.m. MagiKal >

Her gaze drifted toward the clock. Another ten minutes. She knew it wasn't long now. Still it felt like an eternity. The whole day long her gaze had drifted up to that clock, but the hands seemed to be going slower, as if someone had glued them to the clock face.

Lois had been hoping for this interview for so many weeks now. Ever since she'd found his first letter on her desk, she'd been waiting to get another one.

Once again, she ran her hand over the sheet. She couldn't believe she actually held the invitation in her hands. Her pulse raced with excitement. She was going to meet him — MagiKal. It felt unreal.

A sudden pang of guilt rippled through Lois. Why had MagiKal chosen to give her his first interview? Clark had been the one who'd insisted they investigate the arsons, who'd refused to believe that the illusionist was involved and who'd spent a whole week living on the streets — just to prove that MagiKal was innocent. Compared to him, her efforts had been mediocre at best. It just wasn't fair. At the very least she should ask Clark to come with her to this interview. But she had no idea where he lived or how to contact him.

She hadn't seen him since the fire in the Metro bar. Her memories of that night were still a jumbled mess of images — fire, smoke, people running around and Clark right in the middle of it. She vividly remembered him standing in the bar. All fires had been extinguished and ashes danced like snowflakes above his head. There was something to that memory that bothered her, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was exactly. She'd just been relieved that he was safe, that they weren't going to die in that fire.

However, something had clearly happened with Clark that night.

Apparently, he'd blown his cover saving Toni. The woman had been quite impressed with him even though he'd lied to her about being blind. He'd been surprisingly quick coming up with an excuse, telling Toni that he was a

reporter writing an article about handicapped people and how they were treated in public places. She'd bought it, no questions asked. In fact, she'd practically been all over Clark thanking him for saving her life. Even so, he'd been pretty subdued, as if he weren't comfortable with the attention she heaped upon him.

His whole body had been tense. He'd shrunken in on himself, head ducked between his shoulders, unwilling to look at anyone but Houdini. It had been an odd sight and Lois was pretty sure that any other man she knew would have reveled in the limelight. But not Clark — what Lois had been able to see of his face had been drawn and pale. She'd wondered if those were the first signs of one of his migraines coming on.

Before she'd had a chance to ask him, he'd left the scene. Lois' attempt to follow him had been thwarted by Toni keeping a keen eye on her and by the police who'd wanted her statement. Lois hadn't wanted to be too obvious in her pursuit of Clark, lest Toni learned of their connection. By the time Lois had been free to leave, Clark had vanished.

Ever since that night, she'd seen neither hide nor hair of either Clark or Houdini. Though she was loath to admit it, she missed his warm voice, his smile and his insights. Working with him had been an unexpected pleasure. All he'd left her was a note saying that he would continue to look into the Toasters. And that was that. It had been a whole week without so much as a word from him.

Once again, Lois looked at MagiKal's invitation. Then her gaze drifted toward the clock. The large hand was slowly approaching the twelve. If she was going to do this interview, she should get up to the roof now. The whole day she'd compiled questions she was going to ask MagiKal. But right now, her head felt empty.

She felt a strange flutter in her belly, a million butterflies that were combining their efforts in an attempt to break out. It was uncomfortable as well as a bit sickening. Lois tried to steady her breath as she got up from her desk and headed for the staircase. Her knees felt wobbly and her hands were not only shaking ever so slightly, but also clammy with sweat. She curled them into fists, holding onto the invitation so tightly as if she feared the whole interview were going to burst like a soap-bubble if she let go of it.

The climb up the stairs took longer than she remembered, as if someone had built another few levels on top of the building just to spite her. But eventually, she reached the rooftop. With a trembling hand she opened the door and stepped out into the chilly night.

The wind whistled in her ears and the faint sounds of the traffic down on the streets filled the air. Lois looked around but found the roof empty. Then there was another

sound — a woosh — and as she turned her head in the general direction, he was there.

MagiKal.

With his dark suit and mask he was barely visible in the darkness. But she could see that he had his hands clasped behind his back and was staring down at his feet. He cleared his throat and looked up at her.

"Hello, Lois," he said softly.

"MagiKal," she whispered. She swallowed, trying to get rid of the lump that was suddenly in her throat and taking away her voice. "Thank you for agreeing to this interview."

His lips curled in a slight smile. "Thank you for interviewing me."

Lois took a deep breath, not knowing where to start. She'd never felt this nervous before an interview and a roof was a pretty odd place for one, too. Her gaze drifted around, searching for a place where they might be more comfortable. Finally she spotted a waist-high wall surrounding a roof light that seemed suitable for her purpose.

She pointed toward it. "Why don't we sit down?"

"Oh...okay, fine," he replied.

Was she imagining this or was MagiKal nervous, too? But he performed magic tricks before a huge audience and played with ice and fire. Surely, this had to be a piece of cake by comparison. After all, it was just her, wasn't it?

As MagiKal headed toward the little wall, his feet suddenly left the ground and he was walking through the air. Lois' breath caught and her heart hammered in her chest. He was doing this just for her, her very own private performance. Jimmy would be so envious if he knew!

MagiKal sat down in midair, crossing his legs under him. His expression, as far as it was visible underneath his mask, turned a little sheepish. He kneaded his hands and his gaze darted back and forth between her and some place next to her, as if he couldn't quite look her in the eyes.

"It's a bit dark up here," Lois noted wistfully.

He pulled two of the cones he used for juggling out of his large pocket and lit them up. A smirk played around his lips as Lois gasped at the sudden burst of flames.

"Better?" The flickering light of the flames illuminated his face.

Transfixed, Lois stared into his warm brown eyes. She'd never been this close to him. It took her a moment to drag her gaze away from him, to even remember they were supposed to be talking.

"Much." She licked her lips, which were awfully dry.

She saw him swallow when he fixed his gaze on her. "Thank you for proving that I wasn't the arsonist."

"You're welcome." Lois wished she'd taken the list of questions with her, but it was still lying on her desk.

Instead she was clutching his invitation for dear life. “Is that why you suddenly agreed to this interview?”

He nodded. “That and the fact that I promised you quite a while ago. I was never aiming for this level of attention when I became MagiKal. That’s why I refused to give interviews. But I’m beginning to understand that people want to know about me.”

He shifted his seat in mid-air, as if he were sitting on something solid. Lois felt the strange urge to go around him and check for strings or platform or whatever might be holding him up. Did he enjoy showing off?

Lois felt her reporter’s instincts return. “If it’s not the attention you want, and you’re not doing it for the money either, because everything goes to charity — tell me — why did you become MagiKal?”

His smile turned lopsided. “To have a life?”

Lois stared at him. Her first impulse was to laugh at his crazy answer. But the sincerity in his gaze gave her pause. She felt that he meant it.

Lois leaned forward. “Care to explain that?”

He looked at his hands. “Before I found magic, I was very lonely. Something... happened to me that changed my life forever. I didn’t know how to go on. But then, one day, I saw a circus with illusionists, fire-breathers and trapezists. And I knew that was what I had to do.”

She blinked. “Just like that?”

He chuckled. The sound made her heart swell, as if it were a precious gift he’d reserved just for her.

“It took some practice,” he conceded.

“I’d think so.” A rush of confidence filled Lois. She was back at the top of her game. “You’ve quickly become one of the world’s most famous illusionists. None of your colleagues can even fathom how you do it. What is your secret?”

He shook his head. “You don’t expect me to reveal how my magic works, do you?”

Lois flashed a smile at him. “Just one tiny illusion?”

He grinned. “What makes you think they’re illusions?”

Lois groaned. “Oh, come on, we both know that there is no such thing as magic.”

“If you say so, Ms. Lane, if you say so...”

He opened his mouth, as if he meant to go on. But then his eyes widened. His expression turned panicked, as far as she could tell through his mask. And it was only there for a moment.

In the next moment MagiKal was gone and a thick white cloud rose into the air. It started to whirl and changed its form. Lois turned her head and shielded her eyes from the small storm before her that blew the dust on the roof in her direction.

When Lois looked again, a small figurine of ice stood in front of her — a top hat with a bunny looking out of it. It seemed to be winking at her.

She laughed. Perhaps there was magic after all.

Shattered illusions

Houdini voiced his disapproval in a low howl. Then he sat down, stretched out and yawned for good measure, before finally resting his head on his paws. His tail flopped up and down a few times until the tired dog stopped moving altogether.

Clark shook his head with an amused smile and knelt down next to the setter. He scratched his head.

“I take it you’re done for the day.”

Houdini looked at him without so much as raising his head, somehow managing to give his face an accusing expression.

Clark heaved a sigh. “Sorry, buddy. I know it’s not your fault I’m so restless.”

He ran his hand through his hair, then buried his face in both hands, trying to breathe through the panic bubbling up inside of him. Without running around restlessly, he didn’t know how to cope.

So far, he’d managed to distract himself, spending the better part of the last few days learning new magic tricks.

It did him some good to come up with more creative ways to use his powers, helped him focus and used up a part of the excess energy he had in abundance.

Clark had spent what was left of his days walking around the Southside, trying to find the hideout of the Toasters.

It would have been much easier to use his x-ray vision. But wired as he felt he didn’t trust himself using his powers in an environment that wasn’t safe.

MagiKal had just been redeemed in the public’s eye. He was afraid that if he gave in to temptation and used one of his powers in his current state of pent-up tension the dam would break and he might end up causing a fire after all.

Perhaps it would be wiser just to stay out of this area that only served to further fray his nerves. Too much here reminded him of his near-exposure. It was a miracle Lois hadn’t already guessed the truth about him. Giving her the interview had been a test, one he’d thankfully passed. But he couldn’t go anywhere near her again. It was just too risky.

Which was why he found himself running in circles, literally.

For a blissful while he’d fallen for the illusion that he and Lois could be friends, that he could have even that small fragment of the social life his heart craved. It wasn’t fair that his dog was paying the price for his error.

Clark gave Houdini's favorite scratching spot a long moment of extra attention before he stood up. "Let's go home."

Houdini whimpered but refused to get up. His only action was another tired flop of his tail.

"Oh, come on, buddy. I know you hate flying with me and people will look if I carry a dog of your size through half the city."

He resumed scratching Houdini and tried to encourage him with a treat. The setter took it and looked at his master as if to say that he'd need much more than that to stand up again.

Before Clark had a chance to come up with a solution to his dilemma, his ears picked up a familiar heartbeat. It was racing, accompanied by muffled panicked gasps. Clark's own pulse increased as he looked around, trying to find the source.

Lois was somewhere close, and she seemed to be in trouble. What was she doing in the Southside so late at night?

He looked down at Houdini. "You stay here. I'll be right back."

Concentrating hard, Clark followed the sound of Lois' rapidly beating heart. Now that he paid closer attention, he could hear other voices, too.

The first was one of the Toasters. "Did you bring the money?"

A female voice replied. "One hundred thousand."

Clark recognized Toni Taylor. He closed his eyes, feeling a pang of disappointment. Though he'd suspected that she'd hired the Toasters, it gave him no satisfaction to hear it confirmed.

"You said two." The Toaster complained.

Toni snorted. "Considering how badly you botched the hit on my brother, you're lucky I'm even here. Do you realize I could've been killed?"

Clark could practically hear the man's leer. "Yeah, that would've been a real shame."

As quietly as Clark could without floating, he snuck into the building. Straining his ears to make out Lois' heartbeat among the other five, he tried to find her in the darkness.

Toni spoke again, her words tense with barely concealed anger and frustration. "Just don't forget who's running the show. The fires were supposed to stop as soon as I took over. What did you think you were doing?"

The Toaster laughed. "Having fun."

As Clark took the next step, he spotted the group — four men were circling Toni Taylor and mocking her. It was obvious they didn't respect her. The way Toni's hands were clenching into tight fists told Clark that she was thoroughly fed up with the men.

Lois' heartbeat picked up in speed as Toni stepped forward and held out her hands. "Well, the fun stops now. Give me those things."

She didn't wait for a reaction but grabbed the weapon from the Toaster's hand. Taken by surprise, the man loosened his grip on the weapon for a moment before he struggled to get it back under his control.

Right at that moment, Clark spotted Lois on the stairway up to the next level. She was crouching, trying to be invisible.

"Give me that damn thing," Toni shouted.

Her anger turned her words into a squeal as she was fighting a losing battle. The man was clearly a lot stronger than she was. Still she wouldn't give up. The hairs on the back of Clark's neck stood on edge and he felt a prickling sense of foreboding somewhere in his stomach.

Not even his super senses were quick enough to see exactly what happened next. A burst of flames erupted from the fire thrower, right into a group of barrels. Remnants of gasoline around the lid caught fire and ignited an entire barrel. Clark had no time to think. He drew in a deep breath and tried to stop the explosion, but all he managed was to blow the five people out of the immediate vicinity. He burst into speed as the barrel exploded in a ball of fire, causing a sort of chain reaction.

He slammed into Lois and took her with him, shielding her with his body as he carried them out through a window on the first floor.

Clark heard her gasp, hoping that it was not from pain. The bang of a massive explosion rang in his ears. He held Lois tight until the cool night air told him she was safe.

His mind started to race as he realized what he'd just done, coming up with half-baked excuses. But he found himself unable to float them back down, ruining the flimsy explanation that the explosion had miraculously carried them out to safety. Clark felt sick to his stomach as her eyes widened.

He tried to relax, fought with gravity which just refused to pull him back down. Time seemed to stand still as they continued to hover a good ten feet above the ground. Recognition dawned on Lois' face. Down below, Houdini barked a warning that came much too late.

Clark squeezed his eyes shut, not knowing what to say. And the prickling in the back of his neck intensified, taking over his whole body until there was no doubt in his mind that the looming hiccup was beyond his control. He had to get away before he hurt anyone.

With his super breath he built a slope and lowered Lois down, letting her slide to safety.

"I'm sorry," he managed.

Then he shot up into the night sky, heading straight north where he couldn't endanger anyone. He made it into

the wilderness when his powers erupted from him in an uncontrollable burst.

A cry was ripped from his lungs and when the burst finally subsided, he limply fell from the sky.

As Clark hit the ground, he knew no more.

The Magic of Dogs

A pale red hue flickered across the sky. Lois saw flames licking from empty windows and thick clouds of smoke.

Clark's muttered 'sorry' had been loaded with pain, guilt and fear, so much so that she couldn't help but wonder if those were her emotions or his.

Clark was gone as if he'd never been there in the first place. But the icy slope he'd created melted before her eyes. Her knees were still trembling with terror induced by the struggle between Toni Taylor and the Toasters. The explosion still rang in her ears.

She couldn't believe what had happened. Suddenly, she'd found herself in Clark's arms, hovering several feet above the ground. Time had seemed to stand still, suspending their fall, like a dream. His wide eyes and drawn face, the hasty heaves of his chest, however, had been real enough.

There was only one explanation.

Clark Kent was MagiKal.

It seemed absurd. How could a man who hated crowds, who never seemed to be going out without his dog, be MagiKal? He was timid and shy. There was no way he would voluntarily be standing in the limelight.

Or so she'd thought.

The long, heart-wrenching whimper of a dog caught Lois' attention. It was a desperate sound that slowly turned into a deep howl.

"Houdini?" Lois whispered, taken aback.

The dog once more voiced his despair. Lois instinctively followed the sound. She went around the ruin until she spotted the Irish setter in a small alley. Houdini barked and whimpered. The poor dog darted back and forth in obvious confusion. He seemed to be fighting both the impulse to rush into the ruin and to jump up into the sky even though he couldn't possibly reach it.

He threw his head back and let out another long howl, a picture of misery.

The presence of a dog who seemed worried out of his mind was about the most unsettling thing of all. Because Houdini represented Clark more than anything, he reinforced the strange events of the night and sort of proved that she hadn't just been hallucinating.

"Houdini!" Lois stepped forward.

The dog focused on her, his body tensing. Every hair on his body seemed to stand on end. He released a low

growl, baring his teeth as if Clark was behind him in need of his protection. Lois kept a respectful distance.

"Clark vanished," she told Houdini quietly. "He left you alone, too, didn't he?"

The dog watched her, no longer growling. But he was still tense, his expression unreadable. Lois' heart hammered in her throat. She was nervous, but also curious. This dog would probably know what was going on. If only he could talk. Right about now, she desperately wished she had someone, anyone to share her confusion with.

"He's MagiKal, isn't he?" She went a bit closer, careful not to threaten Houdini.

The setter remained where he was.

"He saved my life." Saying the words aloud made her breath go faster as if, just now, she realized how close to dying she'd come.

The dog relaxed a bit. His slowly-settling fur gave the strange impression of Houdini shrinking before her eyes. His whimpers softened.

She made a step toward him. "You miss him, don't you?"

The dog whimpered again.

Lois looked up into the sky, seeing nothing but smoke and darkness and the faint red glow of fire. Sirens filled the air, announcing the fire trucks.

Lois knew she should probably go and see what was happening at the scene, but she couldn't quite bring herself to leave the dog alone just yet.

Would Clark be back soon? Would he even talk to her? She remembered their interview, the moment of intense pain in MagiKal's gaze when he'd told her about how lonely he'd once been. Had he been so reluctant to talk to her because he'd been afraid she would guess his true identity?

It was odd that he would hide who he was. His magic was so wonderful, he could be a celebrity. Yet he chose to work as a freelance reporter covering dog shows.

"Will he be back?"

The dog whimpered again and lowered his head. He approached her carefully, pressing his nose against her leg and settling his head right under her hand as if begging her to stroke him, desperate for her comfort.

"You don't know either, do you?" She knelt and started to scratch his ear.

Houdini looked at her with pain in his gaze. She was certain that if dogs were able to cry his eyes would be filled with tears. Lois continued to stroke him, no longer sure who was offering comfort to whom. She felt a little silly for talking to Houdini, too. Clark's infatuation seemed to be rubbing off on her.

"What do I do with you?" she asked.

The sirens once more begged for her attention and her reporter's curiosity won over. Lois got up.

"Care to join me, while we wait for your master?"

Naturally, Houdini didn't reply. He just tilted his head and started wagging his tail.

"Okay, thank you." Lois waved at police officer Billings and turned to leave.

"Any time, Lane." The man smiled. "Er... what I've been meaning to ask you — what's with the dog? Are they implementing safety measures for overzealous reporters back at the Planet?"

"Haha, very funny," Lois deadpanned. "He belongs to... a friend. I'm just keeping an eye on him."

She felt a pang of regret, because she wished that were true. But would Clark think of her as a friend now that he'd revealed his identity in front of her, a reporter?

Billings raised a single brow. "Looks more like he's keeping an eye on you."

Lois turned her head and glanced back at Houdini, who was standing at a distance and watching their exchange intently.

"Houdini's got a protective streak," she muttered. "Anyway, thanks for the quotes. I've got to get going."

"Need to make the early edition?" Billings asked.

"Something like that." Lois waved at him once more and went toward Houdini who promptly fell into step beside her.

She'd given her statement on the events that had led to the explosion. In turn, the police officer had filled her in on the condition of the five victims. Surprisingly, all of them were alive, sporting only minor burns and a few cracked ribs as far as the EMTs had been able to tell from their initial assessment.

Lois vaguely remembered that she'd seen them hurling through the air as if the blast had propelled them out of the way. Only, the barrel had exploded after she'd been out of the building as well.

So, what had really happened? More magic?

As she walked off, Lois glanced around, strained her ears and tried to make out anything in the darkness. But if Clark were back, Houdini would have spotted him already. She doubted the setter would be patiently following her if his master were close.

"What's keeping him so long?" Lois asked quietly.

Was he purposely keeping his distance because he didn't want to give her any more information than she already had, afraid she was going to publish it? Or was something else going on? She was worried for him. It had been almost two hours since his hasty retreat.

"What am I going to do with you?" Lois wondered aloud and looked at the dog at her side.

Houdini had ducked his head and looked as miserable as any dog probably could.

Should she take him with her and hope that Clark wouldn't mind?

The deadline for the morning edition had already expired. There was no sense in going back to the Planet to write up her article. Should she take Houdini home with her? It wasn't like she was prepared to accommodate a dog. Water wouldn't be a problem. But would the convenience store have dog food for a dog of Houdini's size?

Before Lois had a chance to make up her mind, the Irish setter took off. They'd just reached a broader street and it seemed that — unlike Lois — Houdini knew exactly what to do.

Lois ran after him. "Houdini! Where are you going?"

The dog stopped. He looked over his shoulder and barked at her as if asking what took her so long. Then he waited until she'd closed the distance between them before he moved on.

"Do you know where Clark is?" Lois wondered. "Have you heard him?"

She laughed, feeling silly. It wasn't like he was going to reply. But it seemed the dog wanted her at his side. Now and again he darted off, but he always waited until she'd reached him before moving again. And as they went on, Lois started to wonder whether she followed Houdini because she was curious or because she seemed to have no other choice.

They wandered through the city for a while. Houdini headed for a subway station and entered a train. They left the main island and got off the train as they reached a suburb. Houdini trudged on until they'd reached an industrial area.

Lois felt her frustration grow. She no longer knew where they were, much less where they might be going.

They passed a junkyard. "What is this place?"

In a corner of the yard there was an old RV. Houdini barked and sprinted toward it. When he reached the door, he jumped up and scratched at it. He barked, trying to get the attention of someone who obviously wasn't here.

"That's your home?"

Lois stared at the shabby RV with a mixture of shock and fascination. MagiKal was so popular, he could have made a fortune with his tricks. And yet he decided to live in an old trailer that looked so worn that it seemed like pure luck it hadn't fallen apart.

Suddenly, Houdini let up and spun around. He started wagging his tail like crazy, barking and jumping around, his misery gone. There was a soft woosh behind Lois. As she turned her head, she spotted Clark, standing in a

distance, his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his pants.

He shifted from one foot to the other. His eyes couldn't quite meet hers.

"You know where I live?" He sounded surprised rather than angry.

Before either of them could say anything else, Houdini was all over Clark. He put his huge paws on Clark's chest and started licking his face. Clark laughed and tried to calm the excited dog. He ran his fingers through Houdini's soft fur and seemed just as happy to see him.

"Houdini came here, I merely tagged along," Lois explained.

Suddenly, she felt like an intruder. What if Clark didn't want her here? She was a reporter and he had carefully avoided the press — until recently. Would he throw her out?

"You mean, Houdini dragged you along."

Lois looked at the dog, wondering if that was what had happened. "Well, kind of, I guess."

A smile flashed across Clark's face. "That's a relief. He's a good judge of character, this one."

The Magic of Hugs

Clark wasn't sure whether inviting Lois into his RV had been the right call. She studied his home with a strange mixture of curiosity and barely concealed revulsion. He knew that the place was worn, though he kept it as clean and tidy as he could.

Her disapproval of his living quarters only added to his discomfort. Though, honestly, even if he were staying at the Ritz there wouldn't have been a way he could have felt at ease with the situation. He'd used his powers in front of a reporter. His secret was out.

Clark shifted from one foot to the other, and Lois mirrored his movement as if she, too, wasn't quite sure how to address the elephant in the room. Only Houdini seemed oblivious to the general tension. Or perhaps he'd just chosen to ignore it in favor of his belated dinner.

At least Clark's latest hiccup had been so intense that he still felt wiped out, particularly after his flight back. He'd be able to talk to Lois without losing control of his powers again. If only he knew where to start.

"So," he muttered.

He stuffed his hands even deeper into the pockets of his pants and stared at his feet.

"So," she echoed.

She twiddled a strand of hair around her fingers, suddenly became aware of it and brushed the lock behind her ear.

"Are you going to print it?" He managed, his voice hardly a whisper.

"That MagiKal's true name is Clark Kent?"

He closed his eyes, breathing through the rising nausea. Clark wasn't sure if some part of him had actually been hoping that she wouldn't have guessed the truth. It was a completely irrational wish. Still, having the whole disaster confirmed felt like a punch to the gut.

"Yeah," he ground out.

He felt silly as the strange tightness in his chest made him feel like he was about to suffocate. Surely a person who was able to hold his breath for a good twenty minutes had nothing to fear in an RV.

Her expression softened as she seemed to take in his mounting panic. She stepped closer, reaching out as if to offer comfort. But Clark just felt crowded. He pulled back, hitting the all-too-close wall behind him. Why, oh, why had he invited her in? There was nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. Which was a strange notion for someone who was the strongest being on this Planet.

For years he'd been longing for a connection with another person. All his life he'd dreamed that one day he'd meet that special someone to whom he could tell his secret, someone who wouldn't be scared or put off or—He couldn't even bring himself to think of what was going to happen now. He'd find out soon enough anyway.

She dropped her hand and shook her head. "I'm not going to publish that. Who you are underneath that costume is news for the gossip rags, not for me."

He sagged against the wall behind him. His voice was rough. "You're not going to write about me?"

Clark held his breath, not quite able to believe that she was going to confirm it. He was a reporter too, and he'd have to be galactically stupid to believe that MagiKal wasn't newsworthy. After his first, rather short interview with Lois, Murray Brown was drowning in even more requests than he'd been before.

As Lois opened her mouth Clark felt the urge to squeeze his eyes shut and clap his hands over his ears. He didn't want to hear her laughter, didn't want to see her mocking grin that told him that his life both as MagiKal and Clark Kent was essentially over. But he managed to resist the urge.

"That thought scares you, doesn't it?" Lois whispered. "Being exposed?"

Clark wiped his face. "Very much."

"Why?" Once more she approached him.

With his back pressed against the wall, he couldn't pull back anymore. His heart was racing as her hand touched his forearm. His breath caught and he watched her with trepidation. He didn't even know why he was so scared of her touch. When her fingers closed around his arm in a gentle squeeze, it felt good.

The tension slowly seeped out of him.

Her brown eyes were full of warmth. “Your magic is so wonderful. Why are you hiding?”

Clark tried to swallow past the lump in his dry throat. “Off the record?”

A smile crept across her lips, lighting up her face and flooding his chest with happiness.

“Off the record,” she confirmed. “You saved my life. Your secret is safe with me.”

He stared at her, mesmerized by her hand touching him and the warmth of her gaze on him. His fear seemed to melt away, but could he really trust her?

“Well, my magic, it’s not really illusions,” he said quietly.

Clark took deep breaths. Was he prepared to give her the full truth about his powers and that he couldn’t control them?

She rolled her eyes. “Seriously?”

He cleared his throat. “Seriously.”

Her eyes widened. “You’re pulling my leg!”

“I’m not,” he whispered. “People would be scared if they knew how I do these tricks.”

“You saved my life today and not just mine.” Lois gave his arm another squeeze.

Clark was acutely aware of every inch of skin she touched.

She met his gaze. “I don’t believe that there’s a reason to be scared of you.”

He let out a heavy sigh and looked down at his feet. “You don’t know that.”

Her other hand came to rest on his chin, tilting it up until he couldn’t help but look at her. “Is that the reason why you’re keeping your distance from everyone but Houdini? That you’re afraid of — what exactly?”

He couldn’t breathe. His chin burned hot where she was touching him. His heart pounded in his chest.

“Of hurting people,” he admitted quietly.

Clark couldn’t believe he was telling her any of this. Of the two of them, Lois seemed to be the one who was truly magical.

“Well, for the record, I’m not afraid of you, Clark Kent.”

Before he had a chance to stop her, she pulled him into a hug. The most powerful man on Earth was just helpless to resist her force. He felt himself melt into her embrace though he knew that there was no way this was ever going to be real. As soon as the sun came up, his strength would be back, just as unreliable and dangerous as ever.

But just for tonight, maybe he could allow himself to live the dream of having a friend like Lois. It couldn’t last more than a few precious hours, though.

Clark felt a cold nose against his hand. Houdini whimpered softly and leaned his body against Clark’s legs

as if he wanted to hug him, too. The setter’s tongue stroked his hands. It was the first time in years Clark truly felt at ease.

A tear slipped down his cheek. The thought of having to give all this up nearly killed him.

“Don’t do this to me, Lois,” he whispered roughly.

He tried to withdraw from the tenderness of her hug, but found that he couldn’t. If this short time was all he had left, how could he give up even a minute of it?

She released him and ran her hand across his cheek. “Don’t do what?”

“Let me believe that we can be friends,” he choked out.

“I am your friend, Clark, if you would let me be.” She pointed down at Houdini who was still sharing their hug. “And even your dog seems to agree.”

“Well, he’s my service dog, kind of,” Clark muttered. “So, he should probably know.”

“See?”

His knees grew weak at the smile Lois flashed him. Then she took a step back and studied Clark intensely.

“So you’re telling me you’re actually a wizard?”

He chuckled. “I’m not a wizard.”

Lois frowned. “Then what are you?”

He looked at her thoughtfully. Much as he suddenly wanted to share his story, he wasn’t sure if the bond that was forming between him and Lois could survive the full truth.

He sighed. “I’m not yet ready to tell you that. But maybe one day, I will.”

Magic Moves

Dusk was already settling as Lois left the Beckworth State School with a sense of disappointment. Interviewing Mrs. Powell, the director, hadn’t turned up any useful information about the “Smart Kids”, as they called themselves. Lois still wasn’t sure why she’d even volunteered for the story. Maybe because it was the only story on a super slow news day — or perhaps, a hushed voice in the back of her mind suggested, because it was the type of story Clark would enjoy writing about.

With a firm shake of her head, Lois pushed that thought aside. They’d worked well together on the story about Metro Gang and the Toasters. It didn’t mean she had to cover every dog show in the hopes of running into Clark Kent. That would be ridiculous, insane even.

As Lois looked around for a cab, she suddenly spotted a figure on the other side of the street. She wasn’t the only one. Pedestrians all around her looked in the same direction, changing their course as if they were moths, heading for the flame.

MagiKal was readying himself for another performance.

Lois' heart skipped a beat, then started to race like it always did when she saw him. He looked handsome in his black costume, even though she couldn't see much of his face under the mask.

Oddly enough, knowing that it really was Clark underneath the disguise only intensified the thrill of his presence.

Lois checked the street, preparing to cross it, when she felt something wet against her leg. As she looked down, dark brown eyes stared back at her.

"Houdini?" The dog barked a greeting and licked her hand. "Yeah, it's nice to see you, too." She took a moment to kneel and scratch his ear. "Where are you coming from all of a sudden?"

The setter tilted his head, looking at her as if he were chastising her for asking such a dumb question. If Clark was here then of course Houdini was, too. Her gaze drifted in the direction from which Houdini must have come. She spotted a small alley, the place she'd certainly find Clark later, once his performance was done.

"You're right, how stupid of me," she whispered. "I guess this still takes some getting used to. So, how does this work? Do you wait for him in that alley?"

Houdini barked and made a few steps toward the street, indicating that he intended to watch his master's show.

Lois smiled and stood up. "Come on, big guy. I'll take you along."

Happily wagging his tail, Houdini followed Lois as she crossed the street and joined the group of excited spectators.

MagiKal pulled out three boxes, each of them glowing in a different color. In the twilight of the setting sun they stood out. He started to juggle them, caught them again and aligned them horizontally until the two in his hands held a third in between. He swirled the boxes around, changing their order and always catching them again, before one of the boxes could fall. It was awesome to watch, but not really something an ordinary artist couldn't have done.

With bated breath Lois – and probably everyone else on the street around her — waited for the moment when his trick would truly turn magical.

MagiKal caught the boxes again and pulled out two more, glowing in yet other colors. Now he stacked them vertically in what seemed to be a fragile balance. Then he dropped his hands and the boxes were hovering before the dark background of his black costume, magically changing their places in quick succession.

Lois' mouth hung open as she watched, mesmerized how in one moment the red box was on top, wandering down, then skipping places. The different boxes seemed to blink before her like lights in a disco. They became a blur

of light, their different colors no longer visible. Then the boxes slowed and whirled around, as if MagiKal was juggling them. But his hands didn't move, hanging loosely at his side the whole time.

Lois wanted to rub her eyes, not quite believing what happened right in front of her. MagiKal seemed to enjoy the stunned silence of his audience. The smile on his lips twitched slightly as his gaze met hers. His dark eyes gleamed with mischief as if daring her to explain how he did this.

Magic was the only answer that came to mind.

Finally, one box after the other burst into a ball of flames, MagiKal did a somersault and then he was gone.

The crowd slowly dissipated.

Next to Lois, Houdini whimpered softly. He turned and already started back toward the alley.

"Wait." Lois bent down and placed a hand on his back to keep him from rushing right back to Clark. She understood Houdini too well. She felt the same impulse.

"I know you miss him, but..." She trailed off, wondering if it was really the dog who needed holding back.

The setter's huge brown eyes rested on her, silently asking her why she wouldn't let him return to Clark. Lois gave him a helpless shrug and stood up.

"I just don't want to blow this," she whispered. "Do you think he will mind if I come with you? I know he's not entirely comfortable with me knowing. What if he thinks I'm going to lead other people to him?"

Houdini barked at her, then gave her a gentle nudge with his head.

"I guess that mean it's okay, huh?" Lois laughed.

Houdini started for the street, but patiently waited until she'd joined him and checked for oncoming traffic before crossing the street with her.

When they reached the alley, Clark was crouching behind containers and stuffing various items into a duffle bag. Lois spotted his cones and — this time she rubbed her eyes for real — two arms. Though she knew they were fake, from a distance they looked frighteningly real. He peeled off black gloves and added them to the collection.

She gasped. "Wait a moment, you said you didn't use illusions!"

Clark whipped around, but before he could reply, Houdini became a ball of fur that rolled over him. Turning his head to avoid sloppy dog kisses, Clark tried in vain to calm his dog down.

The two fought an unequal battle that ended with Clark lying flat on his back and Houdini standing over him, licking his face.

"I never said that," Clark finally replied.

Slowly he managed to drag himself out from under his dog and scramble back to his feet.

Lois watched him in quiet amusement, then she folded her arms in front of her chest. "You're not going to tell me how you did that? It was absolutely amazing!"

Clark threw his duffle bag over his shoulder and winked at her. "I've got quick hands."

Lois followed him as he strolled back to the street. "No kidding."

For a while they walked in amiable silence, Houdini jumping back and forth between them. Lois watched Clark from the side, trying to gauge how he felt about her company. It felt so incredibly right to walk down the street beside him. Investigating this SmartKids story certainly would be more fun with him. He was the perfect person to bounce ideas off. She'd really liked to hear his opinion.

Lois bit her lip. "Have you heard about the Smart Kids?"

Clark looked at her. "Yeah. Quite impressive what they did with all the TV stations."

"Indeed." She nodded. "Would you like to help me with the investigation?"

A wry smile flashed across his face. "Can't do it on your own?" he teased.

"Of course I can," she bristled.

Immediately, she regretted the outburst. This was not how she was going to get a positive answer.

"We worked so well together," she said more gently. "You and me as a team, I believe that would result in something special."

He stopped and stared at her, dumbfounded. "You really think so?"

Lois blushed a little. "I don't do this touchy-feely stuff very well. You, on the other hand..."

He shuffled his feet and studied them intently. "I'm honored that you'd want to work with me, but it's not possible."

Lois shook her head and reached out to tilt his chin slightly up to make him look at her. "It was possible during the investigation of the arsons."

"That was different," he hedged.

"How was that different?" Lois protested.

But when she saw the look in his eyes, it dawned on her that saving MagiKal had been a question of life and death, so to speak.

For whatever reason that was.

She laid a hand on his shoulder, feeling a spark of electricity between them that went beyond any connection she'd ever known. She didn't know what it was that drew her toward Clark. But how was she going to find out if he didn't let her within arm's reach?

"Please, Clark, let's at least give this a try." Lois pleaded.

The expression on his face was one of pure agony. He looked down at Houdini, who watched both of them curiously. As Clark's eyes met Houdini's, the dog barked his approval.

Clark's lips twitched into a smile, before he gave a resigned sigh.

"Two against one is unfair," he complained.

Lois grinned as she felt that she'd won.

Clark ran a hand through his hair. "Okay. Let's give this a try. But we need to set a few rules. First of all, when Houdini gets agitated and I run off, you don't follow me. Second, you don't climb up any icy staircases. And third —"

"Oh no, buster," Lois raised her chin. "You don't get to set up three rules. That's my thing."

The Rules of Magic

Clark sat on a park bench, waiting for Lois. She was running late. The cup of coffee he'd gotten her was cold already. Not that it mattered much. Clark felt a strange thrill as he imagined himself reheating the cup right before her eyes.

Houdini had stretched out, head resting on his paws and catching up on some sleep. His occasional whimpers indicated that he was dreaming. Sometimes Clark wondered what the dog was dreaming about. Did he also wish to go back to a life that was less unsteady?

Warm rays of sunlight caressed Clark's face. He, too, closed his eyes. It had been a long night. Together with Houdini he'd roamed the streets, but so far they had had no luck finding the Smart Kids. The city was too loud to reach out and try to listen for them. He couldn't bring himself to x-ray all the buildings either, because that seemed like an awful invasion of people's privacy. He already saw enough things he shouldn't.

A voice pulled him out of his idle musings. "Rough night, partner?"

Clark opened his eyes. Lois stood in front of him and pointed at the Styrofoam cup in his hand.

"Brought one for me, too?"

Her smile was intoxicating, mesmerizing. It took Clark a moment to drag his gaze away from her lips that right in this moment looked so incredibly kissable that he felt slightly dazed.

"Yes, actually," he replied flustered. "But I'm afraid the coffee's cold already."

As he hastily straightened, his glasses slipped down his nose enough to allow him a glance over the rim. He smiled to himself.

With a grand gesture he removed the lid of the Styrofoam cup and waved his hand over it.

“Just a moment, Milady.” He beamed at her. “I’m going to change that.” Then he moved his hand in a slow circle above the cup. “Abracadabra.”

Clark directed a quick burst of heat vision at the beverage and immediately steam rose from the cup. Lois gasped and her eyebrows climbed toward her hairline. Clark replaced the lid before he handed it to her.

“Caution, it’s hot,” he said. “Artificial sweetener, low fat cream, just the way you prefer it.”

Lois sat down beside him and took a careful sip. She flinched a bit. “And you tell me you’re not a wizard? I swear this is hotter than they come from the machine. How did you do that?”

He winked at her. “This is not an interview, is it?”

“That depends.” She took another sip and let out a sigh of contentment. “Are you offering?”

Clark shook his head. “To be honest, I wouldn’t know what to tell you that could go on the record.”

The intensity of her gaze seemed to burn a hole into his skin. Clark shifted uncomfortably, regretting that he’d said anything.

“That bad?” She asked in a hushed whisper.

He shook his head again. “Not bad, but — ugh — it’s hard to explain.”

For a moment she kept looking at him as if there was more she wanted to ask. Clark felt the beads of sweat on his forehead and did his best not to jump up and run away as fast as he could. But then her expression relaxed, and she turned her attention back on her cup of coffee.

“This tastes really good,” she praised. “You couldn’t — by any chance — use your magic to find us these Smart Kids, could you?”

She smiled at him and Clark felt all the pent-up tension seep out. His life held enough excitement already without a nosy reporter in the know, it seemed. But sitting on a park bench and talking about his powers — at least sort of — was strangely exciting.

“That’s what Houdini and I tried for the better part of the night,” he amended. “But it doesn’t work that way.”

She gaped at him. “What — are there more rules to your magic?”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t allowed to set up more than two.”

She playfully slapped his arm. “Darn right, you’re not. But I’m going to make an exception for today because I’m curious. Why am I always meeting you in parks?”

“Off the record?” he asked.

She let out an annoyed huff and threw her arms up. “I think we already established that. Off the record until you tell me otherwise.”

Clark took a deep breath and looked down at Houdini. The urge to run his hand through the dog’s soft fur was

suddenly overwhelming. He felt silly for craving the reassurance that he had at least one friend in this world who didn’t mind his differences. How would Lois’ view of him change if he revealed the truth about his lack of control? But he’d dragged the setter through the streets too many nights now. The poor dog deserved his rest.

“Okay,” Clark said quietly. He took another calming breath. “Sometimes my magic comes in bursts. I can’t control the when and only to some degree the how. These illusions I’m performing — they’re only a cover-up. I’ve invented these tricks to safely channel the bursts. If any of that were to happen in a building, the results could be disastrous.”

Lois stared at him, dumbfounded. “You mean, you never stay inside?”

Clark chewed on his lower lip. “As little as possible. I live in a trailer, so I don’t endanger anyone. Houdini seems to sense the bursts. He warns me before they come. But not always quick enough that I would manage to get outside.”

“I see,” she muttered.

The silence that followed was oppressive. Clark heard both their hearts beating rapidly. He squeezed his eyes shut, expecting that the next thing she was going to say was that their agreement was null and void, that tomorrow he was going to read the shocking truth about MagiKal on the Daily Planet’s front page. He should never have told her any of this. Good grief, he hadn’t even yet warned his parents that his secret was out. At least, she didn’t know the full truth.

“When I climbed up the stairs, I heard your breath of relief,” she whispered. “You said something like ‘I was beginning to wonder if this would ever stop.’”

“Sometimes I do,” he replied roughly. “Look, I would never want to hurt anyone.”

He couldn’t meet her gaze. His throat felt so dry, constricted with fear and a sense of loss, though he’d never really had her friendship in the first place. It had only been a very nice dream. One that was never going to come true.

She laid her hand on his. “I know that, Clark. Don’t you think I know that? I’ve seen how much you care about people when you saved the men and women who were trapped by the fire, when you saved me though you must have feared exposure.”

He looked up surprised, seeing her smile so full of tenderness as she reached out to run her hand along his cheek.

“You must feel so lonely, always staying by yourself.”

He swallowed past the lump in his throat. Tears were pricking in his eyes and he felt overwhelmed that she didn’t seem to condemn him. But then, little did she know how dangerous he could really be.

“Houdini’s keeping me good company,” he said quietly.

The setter, it seemed, had heard his name. He raised his head, then got to his feet and stretched before he turned and greeted Lois, graciously allowing her to stroke him for a moment. Houdini quickly moved over to Clark though, resting his head on Clark’s knees and nudging him with his snout until Clark had started stroking his favorite spot. It was a welcome distraction.

Lois, too, seemed to enjoy the warmth of his fur, running her hand over the dog’s back. Houdini closed his eyes in contentment.

“What about your rules, Lois?” Clark asked eventually. “You mentioned three of them.”

She shifted a bit and cast her eyes down. An embarrassed chuckle escaped her lips.

“Oh, that. Well, it’s not…” She trailed off. “I’m not all that good at abiding by them.

Clark gave her arm a gentle squeeze. “Care to elaborate?”

“Off the record?” she winked at him.

Clark chuckled. “Off the record.”

“Well, the first rule is to never get involved with my stories.” She blushed. “You’re living proof of how well that works.”

His stomach dropped. “So, I’m a story to you after all?”

“Not anymore,” she assured him. “But it started that way. Jimmy dared me to find out how your magic works.”

“I see,” Clark felt himself relax. “What’s the second rule?”

She grinned. “Always get there first.”

He chuckled again. “I don’t think you’ve got any problems in that respect. And the last one?”

The blush on her cheek turned a shade of crimson. He couldn’t help but notice that Lois looked incredibly sexy when she was flustered. Once again he found himself longing to run a hand along her cheek and place a kiss on her lips.

“Never sleep with anyone you work with.”

Clark felt his own cheeks grow hot. Had she read his mind?

“I’ve broken all three of them,” Lois admitted quietly.

Suddenly, she looked vulnerable in a way that was so unlike the tough reporter he’d gotten to know. She touched something deep inside him. There was that hint of pain in her gaze that she tried to hide from him but failed.

“That sounds like someone broke your heart,” he noted.

Lois heaved a sigh. “Yeah, someone did. His name was Claude, a French guy who had such a cute accent. I was stupid enough to think that he was in love with me. I fell

for him pretty hard. We spent a night together and the next morning he was gone — and so was the story I had been working on. He even won a Kerth for it.”

She pursed her lips in self-reproach.

“That’s tough.” Clark’s jaw worked.

Suddenly, all he wanted to do was wrap his arms around her and protect her from everyone and everything that might hurt her. But he knew that he couldn’t allow himself that kind of contact, much as he longed for it. The kind of feelings he was harboring deep inside his chest weren’t for him to give into. Instead he reached out and placed his hand on hers that rested between them. Even the gentle squeeze of comfort that he allowed himself to offer her sent sparks of pleasure through his body.

“I promise you I have no intention of stealing your story or breaking your heart,” he vowed. “Your friendship means a lot to me. I’d never want to risk that.”

She smiled at him and though he knew that he could never even have her, he lost himself in the alluring sight of her lips. Boy, he was in trouble.

Truths and Illusions

“Let me get this straight.” Clark stopped in his tracks. “You think she’s going to talk to us because what — Houdini is so cute?”

The way Clark put it, Lois couldn’t help but admit her plan sounded lame. But she wasn’t going to tell him that. Instead she raised her chin and tried to exude a confidence she didn’t feel.

The investigation wasn’t going well. The call of Aymee’s little sister Inez had come as a surprise. She’d briefly met the girl after interviewing the school’s director, Mrs. Powell. Until last night Lois hadn’t thought that encounter would be of any significance. Inez, however, had obviously remembered Lois and had asked for her help. Now Lois was going to the police station to pick up Aymee.

“It’s worth a try,” Lois insisted. “Maybe your dog might help to weaken her defenses.” She went on and, looking over her shoulder, she asked. “Are you coming or not?”

Clark smirked and shook his head before he followed her. “You’re unbelievable. How did you even get her mother to grant you custody of her daughter? Does the woman know you at all?”

“We talked over the phone,” Lois replied with all the grace she could muster. “Come on now. I could really use your help here. I’m not good with children.”

He rolled his eyes. “But I am? You know I might not be around long enough to talk to the girl. Let alone — “

He stared at his feet, looking troubled. She knew he wanted to help the girl, no matter how reserved he acted. Clark had such a big heart. It pained her to see him close

off. Though she hadn't yet seen him interact with kids, Lois had a feeling that he'd be exactly the right guy for the job.

"We always have Houdini." Lois winked at Clark.

The Irish Setter who'd been dutifully following alongside her partner barked and wagged his tail as if he, at least, was all for it.

"Of course you would be on her side," Clark remarked wryly. He shot Houdini a meaningful glance, then stuffed his hands deep into the pockets of his pants before he addressed Lois again. "I tell you this is not gonna work. Aymee's far too smart to fall for you little trap."

Though she knew her attempt was desperate at best, she had to use this opportunity. Lois just knew that if anyone could get this girl to talk to them, it was Clark. If Lois felt this instant sense of connection with him, if she was this comfortable in his company, why shouldn't Aymee Valdez? With Houdini's assistance, the girl would be putty in their hands.

Lois pursed her lips. "Who said this was a trap?" She slowed her steps as they reached the police station. "Are you going to come inside?"

Clark shifted his weight. "You know I can't. I'll wait here on that bench, unless..." He trailed off, his gaze drifting down to Houdini who was panting but otherwise completely relaxed.

Lois hated having to leave Clark out on the street as if he, too, was a dog who wasn't allowed inside. How could he even stand to lead this kind of life? How did he manage to be the wonderful person that he was when he was excluded from nearly everything?

Lois wanted to comfort him, but then Clark shook his head almost imperceptibly. Don't dwell on it, his eyes seemed to say. Was she that obvious or was being a mind reader another one of his magic abilities?

With a quick nod in his direction, Lois turned and headed inside the police station. She ached for Clark. His magic was simply amazing, but it came with an awfully tight set of rules.

Not much later, Lois left the police station, a reluctant Aymee Valdez following her. Lois' gaze drifted toward the bench where Clark was supposed to be waiting for her.

It was empty.

Lois felt a pang of disappointment. She longed for Clark's presence.

Aymee's angry voice pulled her out of her musings. "Why are **you** taking care of me? I don't even know you!"

The girl had her arms crossed in front of her chest and was staring daggers at Lois.

Lois drew a slow breath, trying her best not to feel intimidated. "Your sister Inez contacted me. She said you needed help."

Aymee raised her chin in defiance. "I can take care of myself. Thank you very much."

Lois wriggled her brows and smirked. "Oh, can you? So your stay with the police was nothing but an elaborate scheme?"

"Oh, ha-ha, very funny," the girl quipped.

She opened her mouth, surely to give Lois a piece of her mind, but then her expression changed to one of complete awe.

"Oh my gosh," she said breathily. "He's here. MagiKal is here." Aymee wriggled first on her toes, then did a little dance, turning from the worldly-wise genius back into the child that she was. "We have to watch him."

Before Lois had a chance to say anything, Aymee headed straight for the crowd that surrounded MagiKal. He had appeared in a small park across from the police station.

Lois followed Aymee while looking out for Houdini. She spotted the dog in a distance, peeking around a corner and looking decidedly unhappy about his master's absence. But when he recognized Lois, he started wagging his tail. Before Lois could make up her mind about whether having Houdini at her side was wise, the dog rushed toward her.

Lois ran her hand over the dog's head, before she turned her attention back on MagiKal. Her heart was hammering in her chest. She could only hope Houdini knew he couldn't give Clark's identity away.

MagiKal was juggling burning cones through the air, throwing each one higher up than the other, until he didn't seem to catch them at all. The cones were flying in circles some twenty feet above the ground until MagiKal climbed up an imaginary ladder and picked them out of the air.

The crowd cheered. He put out the fire and the next moment the cones had vanished into thin air. Instead he held out a large red cloth that he whirled around while he turned on his heels, spinning faster until the cloth became a blur of red.

The blur drifted down, thick white clouds emanating from it. As the blur touched the ground, it disappeared. In its place stood Metropolis' very own icy version of the Statue of Liberty, albeit only the size of a regular person. MagiKal had once again vanished.

The crowd erupted in more cheers and when it became obvious that the show was over, slowly drifted apart.

"That was absolutely awesome," Aymee whispered. Her gaze drifted toward Houdini who was standing beside Lois and watching Aymee with keen interest. "Where's the dog coming from all of a sudden?"

“That’s Houdini,” Lois replied. “He belongs to my partner. Clark, uhm, brought him while you were watching MagiKal. He needed to run an errand.”

She desperately hoped the girl had been too distracted to take note of what happened around her.

Aymee frowned. “He doesn’t keep him on a leash in a city like Metropolis?”

Lois shrugged. “Houdini hates leashes. And he’s the most loyal dog I’ve ever seen. Never leaves his side.”

Aymee’s lips curled in contempt. “He must have trained him well, then. I wonder what kind of training would make a dog this obedient.”

Lois felt anger radiate off Aymee as if she had suffered under the strict rules of others. Was that the reason she and her friends had broken free?

“Whatever makes Houdini so fiercely loyal, I assure you, abusive behavior on Clark’s part is not it,” Lois said quietly.

Aymee frowned but didn’t reply. Instead she went toward the statue of ice that was glistening in the sunlight and ran her hand along the smooth surface.

“It looks like he carved it with some sort of laser,” she mused. “How does he do it?”

Lois followed Aymee. “He didn’t tell me.”

Aymee raised her brows, her formerly aloof attitude replaced by genuine curiosity. “You know him?”

Lois shrugged. “A bit. I was the first reporter to interview him.”

“Really?” Aymee’s face positively glowed. “There’s so much I’d like to ask him.”

“Oh, do you?” A familiar voice asked from behind them.

Lois spotted Clark, still dressed as MagiKal. Her heart skipped a beat. Excitement mixed with worry. Why was he here in his disguise? How would Houdini react? Her gaze drifted toward the dog, who was wagging his tail with more enthusiasm than before, but otherwise made no move toward his master.

Aymee seemed absolutely awestruck. Her hand wandered to her arm and she pinched herself.

MagiKal gave her one of his amazing smiles. “And what would you like to know, Aymee?”

The girl gasped. “You know my name?”

MagiKal nodded. “I’ve heard a lot about you and your friends. You did some pretty impressive stuff.”

“Yeah,” she whispered. “You do, too. I mean, you’re flying and this statue...” She vaguely gestured behind her, but her eyes remained firmly trained on MagiKal. “I mean, we’re super smart, but we don’t have a clue how you do all this magic.”

“Isn’t that the point of magic?” MagiKal asked gently. “That you don’t know how it works?”

“I guess,” Aymee said thoughtfully. “I wish I was like you. Even the laws of physics don’t seem to apply to you. You’re truly free!”

MagiKal rubbed the back of his neck. “You think defying gravity is what makes you free? I’m not so sure about that.”

Lois could see the sorrow in his eyes.

“All the things you can do, you could be a celebrity. You could be rich.” Aymee pointed out.

“And yet I chose not to,” MagiKal replied softly. “Why do you think that is?”

Aymee opened her lips, no doubt trying to come up with a smart remark. But after a few seconds of quiet struggle, she gave him a helpless shrug.

He let out a breath. “Because if I went down that path, I’d forever be an outcast. A famous one perhaps, but an outcast still. I’m hoping that one day I will no longer need to be MagiKal.” His eyes clouded over. “I’m not as free as you might think.”

Clark looked as if there was more he wanted to say. But next to Lois, Houdini became agitated, and Clark’s eyes widened.

“I should leave,” he muttered.

A moment later he was gone. Lois released a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. Houdini lowered his head and whimpered softly.

“Wow.” Aymee stared after MagiKal, though it was impossible to tell where he’d gone. “He’s not like I expected. I wonder what makes him so sad?”

“I can imagine,” Lois said quietly. “Do you remember when he was accused of the arsons? People are amazed at what he can do. He saved lives when a building burst into flames during his performance.”

She paused for a moment, her heart constricting in her chest. Lois wasn’t sure if — until now — she’d really understood how these accusations had impacted Clark. She knew he needed his tricks as a safe release for his magic, whatever it was exactly. If he lost that, would he stop being around people altogether?

He’d once told her that his life had been lonely until he’d found magic. She might have lost him.

Lois swallowed past the lump in her throat. “He saved lives, yet many people were ready to believe the worst of him. My partner insisted that we help MagiKal. He spent day and night roaming the streets of the Southside until he’d found who was behind the arsons.”

Aymee’s mouth hung open. “You were the ones saving MagiKal’s reputation?”

“Clark and I, yes.” Lois watched the girl, who no longer looked as confident and self-assured as she had. “MagiKal is right. He’s not as free as you may think. In

fact, he might just be the least free person I know. Believe it or not, Clark and I want to help you.”

Aymee gave Lois a lopsided smile. “You said Inez trusted you enough to ask for your help?”

“She did,” Lois confirmed.

Aymee shook her head. “Inez is a good judge of character, so I’m willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. So where is that partner of yours? His dog looks like he’s never going to see him again.”

Lois’ gaze drifted down to Houdini, who was lying on the ground, head resting on his paws. The poor dog was a picture of misery. Lois’ heart went out to him. She couldn’t help but feel a pang of worry that Clark hadn’t returned yet. Was it normal that his magic went out of his control in such a quick succession?

“I’m sure he’ll find us.” Lois smiled at Aymee, trying to hide her unease.

Aymee replied with a grin of her own. “I would hope so. I’m curious to meet the guy who has such a loyal dog and spends his night saving wizards in need.”

Lois couldn’t help but smile for real this time. “Oh, you will like him. Clark truly is one of a kind.”

Prestige and Distractions

MagiKal gulped as he looked at the crowd. His usual audience consisted of random passersby. Now every single student of the Beckworth State School for orphaned kids as well as every reporter in Metropolis had gathered in front of his makeshift stage.

Lois was one of them, but that helped only a bit in settling his nerves. He knew what he had in mind was going to come at a price. It was worth it, he had to remind himself. He could deal with it.

This performance was a gift for Aymee and her friends.

As far as he was concerned, this was a one-time event. But the way Murray had reacted, MagiKal would have a hard time convincing him he was being serious about it.

It was odd to perform without a hiccup forcing him to. But he had something different in mind anyway. Instead of illusions he wanted to create something lasting, something the kids at the school sorely needed.

His stage was set between four large trees that surrounded a badly damaged playground which was too dangerous for the kids to use. MagiKal had hung up two ropes holding large curtains, a black one in the back and two red ones, each lining one side of the stage.

He’d rescued them from an old theater about to be demolished. It had been his first story for the Daily Planet. This wasn’t quite the way he’d thought he would use them, but they sure gave his makeshift stage some elegance. In the background, he’d piled up some materials, carefully hidden under a large blue cloth that was covered in stars.

The audience cheered as MagiKal stepped out of the shadow of the trees and into the limelight. He took a deep breath, not quite sure what to say or what to do with his arms. Usually, he just went with the flow of what his powers demanded of him. But the tingling sensation his nerves sent through his belly was nothing like the tingle in his neck that announced a hiccup.

“Thank you all for coming.” He felt the racing beat of his heart hammering in his chest and throat. “Today’s performance will be a bit different. Just give me a moment to prepare.”

He smiled at his audience, then went toward the curtains and pulled at them until they hid the playground.

Once he was out of sight, MagiKal went to work. At superspeed he dug out the old monkey bars and the frame of the swing. Then he used his heat vision and strength to melt the old bars and form new ones, adding some steel he’d brought from the junkyard. He anchored the new framework with cement, speeding up the hardening with a bit of his super breath. Next, he formed a slate and carved wood into planks, using them to build a treehouse and a bridge.

Working with his hands felt so good. He loved building something meaningful. Within a few minutes, MagiKal did the work of days.

On the other side of the curtains the audience was getting agitated because nothing seemed to happen. Smiling to himself MagiKal finished his work and gave it a once-over. Looking upon the new playground filled his heart with pride.

Now that the true magic had been done, he needed a distraction. MagiKal grabbed a few cones and stepped through the curtain. The audience cheered again as he began his usual performance of juggling burning cones and walking on air.

It didn’t take long until he heard the hushed whispers of people wondering what was supposed to be different about this show. For a few more minutes he let them wonder. His gaze drifted to Lois who was scratching Houdini’s head.

A frown creased her forehead. “I wonder what he’s up to.”

MagiKal answered her whispered question by directing two beams of heat vision at the rope that held the front curtains. They fell, revealing the new playground complete with a long slate, a treehouse, new monkey bars and a tire swing.

A collective gasp went through the audience before they started to applaud. MagiKal took a bow, before he did his trademark somersault and shot up into the sky.

The crowd was still applauding when Clark approached Lois from behind. "Did I miss something?"

"Only the most amazing thing I've ever seen." She turned to him and gave his chest a playful slap.

Her smile was mesmerizing.

"Well done," she mouthed.

Clark grinned and for an agonizing moment he was sorely tempted to lean in and place a kiss on her cheek. Houdini kept him from making that mistake. He jumped up and placed his paws on Clark's chest to lick his face. Clark had little luck fending him off and received a few sloppy dog kisses on his neck, while he stroked Houdini behind his ears.

"Missed you too, buddy," he whispered into the dog's ear.

Aymee came running from the other side of the now slowly dissipating crowd, her sister Inez hot on her heels. Both girls waved at Lois and Clark.

"Oh my gosh," Aymee squealed happily. "Did you see this? He let a playground appear out of nothing."

"Not just some playground," Inez chimed in. "It's the best I've ever seen."

Aymee beamed, hugging her sister. "I still can't believe you two made him perform for us."

"We didn't make him perform," Clark corrected her gently. "We told him about you, and he offered."

Aymee's gaze drifted toward Houdini, who had calmed down enough to stand on his own four paws again. "No wonder this dog loves you so much. For a grown-up you're pretty cool, Mr. Kent. You too, Ms. Lane. Thank you both so much."

"Can I pet him?" Inez asked. "Oh please, Mr. Kent."

Clark winked at her. "You should ask him that. But I doubt Houdini will have any objections."

Inez jumped up and down a few times before she turned to the Irish Setter who was eager to be at the receiving end of Inez' affection.

"We need to thank **you**, Aymee," Clark said sincerely. "Without your help we wouldn't have found out about Mentamide 5 and the even more dangerous Mentamide 6. We wouldn't have been able to stop Prof. Carlton."

He gave Aymee's shoulder a gentle squeeze. Before he knew what was happening, the girl threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly.

His heart swelled as if wanting to burst from his chest. It felt so incredible to be a part of something again. For so long, his powers had nothing but scared him. It was a relief to see they could serve a purpose other than destruction. That was well worth the fallout he would have to face, wasn't it?

"Ms. Lane, Mr. Kent?" A female voice said. It was Mrs. Powell, the school's director.

She smiled at Lois and Clark, patiently waiting until Aymee let go of him. The girl turned her attention to Houdini, joining her sister in fondling the dog. The setter turned on his back and offered the girls his belly.

"Thank you so much for everything," Mrs. Powell blinked and wiped away a tear. "Thank you for bringing the kids back safely. And this..." She pointed at the new playground. "I can't express what MagiKal's presence meant for these children, let alone what he did for them."

Lois gave the director a warm smile. "We're glad we could help."

"MagiKal said the cement would need a few more days to harden completely," Clark added. "He's going to be back with sand after that to finish what he started. The children can use the playground once the authorities have checked it for safety."

Mrs Powell nodded. "Please let him know how grateful we're for his gift."

Clark had a huge lump in his throat. But Lois seemed to sense how overwhelmed he was and laid her arm around his shoulder.

"We'll make sure he knows," Lois promised. "We should be on our way now to make the deadline for tomorrow's edition."

Mrs. Powell beamed at them. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Mr. Kent, Ms. Lane." Aymee stopped stroking Houdini and got up. "Will you come to visit us when the playground is ready?"

"We will," Clark murmured thickly. "Goodbye, Aymee."

"Don't forget to bring Houdini," Aymee winked at him.

Clark grinned. "I wouldn't come without him." He let out a soft whistle and the setter raised his head. "Come on, boy. We've got to get going."

With one last wistful look at his petting team, Houdini followed Lois and Clark as they left. They waved their goodbyes and Clark felt a surge of emotion wash over him that left him slightly dazed. He'd missed this so much; he was grateful but also scared.

He felt Lois link arms with him, steering him away from the school.

"Come on, you big softie," she teased. "I'll never understand why you think anyone could consider you dangerous. Did you see the faces of those kids?"

"I did." Clark heaved a sigh. "It was incredible."

His heart constricted in his chest because he knew he would never have anything but fleeting moments of this. It probably wouldn't be long now until his powers turned against him. Clark had recognized the pattern. The more emotional he got, the worse it became.

"Why did you lie about the deadline?" he asked softly.

Lois patted his arm. "I saw how close you came to falling apart there. It's killing you inside to always stay away from it all. Why are you doing that to yourself?"

Before he had a chance to reply, he heard the low growl from deep within Houdini's throat. He felt him tug at his sleeve and the prickling sensation already ran up his spine, firmly settling in his neck.

He wanted to excuse himself and run, but his powers were quicker. This time it was his vision going crazy. His eyes lost their focus and rapidly switched between microscopic vision, x-ray vision and telescopic vision until Clark was lost in a strong wave of dizziness.

Nausea rose in his stomach. He tried to find a wall to steady himself but picked the wrong side and almost fell. He squeezed his eyes shut. That brought some relief, though it didn't change his current situation much.

He felt Lois' hand on his shoulder. "Clark, what's going on?"

"Dizzy," he muttered. "Can't see much of anything."

"Can't you open your eyes?" Lois asked softly.

He shook his head. "If I do that, I think I'll throw up. And I really rather not."

Houdini's tongue licked his hands. Clark ran his hand through his soft fur and wished he could use the dog's heartbeat to pull through this hiccup. But it didn't work like that.

"How can I help?" Lois asked, worried.

"Guide me home," Clark pleaded. He knelt down beside his dog and ran his hands through Houdini's fur. "I'm sorry, my friend. I know you hate this, but we won't be able to walk. It's too far. We can't use the subway, either."

The setter let out a soft whimper, but then licked Clark's hands as if to give his tacit agreement. Clark stroked him behind his ear, before he got up again. He wasn't sure this was a good idea, but he knew that right now, he wouldn't be able to get anywhere safely on his own. He couldn't stay here either. Too many people were likely to witness this hiccup.

Sighing softly, he felt for Lois' hand. "Let's just hope this won't get worse."

Lois gasped. "How could this get worse?"

Clark linked arms with her and let out a soft whistle, telling Houdini he was ready. "Plenty of ways, I'm afraid. Plenty of ways."

What Magic Truly Is

Guiding Clark home was probably the most bizarre experience of Lois's life. Much to her relief Houdini instinctively knew what to do. As soon as Clark had linked arms with Lois, the dog took point.

Lois wasn't sure what was expected of her and, for once in her life, was too flustered to ask. Would Houdini

take them to some quiet side streets where no one would see Clark stumble along with both eyes squeezed shut?

Once or twice his feet even left the ground, pulling her with him until Lois let out a startled yelp. Then he brought them back down, beads of sweat appearing on his forehead.

Unlike the first time Lois had followed Houdini, the setter stayed with them, close enough that his tail was occasionally brushing against their legs. Lois felt a slight tremor run through Clark's body as he fought against whatever was going on with him.

His face was contorted with sheer concentration. "Houdini, are we there yet? I can't contain this much longer."

As if to prove his point his feet again left the ground and Lois felt his body pull at hers. A soft groan escaped Clark's lips and he peeked through his eyelashes, swaying as he did so.

"Sorry." A sheepish expression flashed across his face. "I wouldn't do this to you if I knew where I was going."

Lois gave his arm a gentle squeeze. "Don't worry about me. What's going on with you?"

Before Clark could reply, Houdini rounded a corner and led them into a quiet alley. Full dumpsters and a large pile of trash bags were giving off a nasty smell. Clark recoiled as if he'd run into a wall. He looked a little green around the gills and gave a tortured grunt.

"Ready?" He asked with a nasal voice. "Houdini, come here." Clark held out both arms and the dog jumped.

It was odd to see the Irish setter in Clark's arms. Houdini rested his paws on one of Clark's shoulders and buried his head in the crook of Clark's neck. Lois watched them in quiet fascination, expecting Clark to stumble as he balanced Houdini's weight on one arm. But he seemed to be carrying the dog without effort. When they'd found what looked like a stable position, Clark held out his other arm.

"We're going to fly. You can back out if you want to," he offered quietly.

He drifted up and for a moment, he opened his eyes to look at her. With a start, Lois realized they were swimming, as if he were unable to focus on anything. He squeezed them shut again, but she'd already seen the raw fear bubbling underneath the surface.

He swallowed hard. "I'd understand if this is too much for you."

With slight trepidation, Lois eyed Clark, who was hovering a good two feet above the ground, obviously struggling to even stay that low. Though she felt her gut clench with nervousness, she was also aware that it must be a huge step for him to invite her along. She didn't want him to just disappear again.

"I'm not going to let you go through this alone." Lois took the hand he held out and climbed on his foot.

He pulled her up and when she held onto him, he wrapped his arm around her. His warmth spread through her, almost as if he'd covered her with a blanket. It was strangely comforting, and her frayed nerves calmed, even more so as he gave her a brief smile.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Hold on tight and don't move until I say it's okay. I'm going to fly up quickly."

His grip on her tightened. Before Lois had a chance to wonder what would happen next, she felt a strong rush of wind that had her bury her face into his chest. Houdini let out a panicked whimper and she could feel the shivers running through the dog. A soft drizzle dampened her skin and the temperature dropped several degrees.

"Okay, we should be above the clouds," Clark murmured. "Can you make out the old industrial area? That's where we need to go."

As Lois opened her eyes, she gasped. Clark hadn't been kidding when he'd told her that they were above the clouds. She watched him in awe, and it took a moment for her to realize why he wasn't moving. He didn't know where to go. But Lois couldn't help but stare at the world around and underneath her. Metropolis was so small. Clouds were close enough to touch them.

It was incredible.

"Are you okay?" Worry tinted his voice.

"Fine." She couldn't help but grin. It was the adventure of her life. "As long as you won't let go of me."

"Never," he vowed. "Though I should apologize. This is probably going to be a bumpy ride. I don't usually fly with my eyes closed. Now, could you point me in the right direction?"

The flight was surprisingly short. Lois had never experienced anything like it. With nothing but air around her, she felt absolutely free. Houdini, however, didn't much like his predicament. He whimpered and whined, his whole posture stiff like he was a huge stuffed animal. She reached out and ran her hand through his fur in what she hoped was a comforting manner.

"I'm so, so sorry, buddy," Clark muttered.

Lois felt him tense and speed on, following the directions she gave him. Only minutes after they'd taken off, they touched ground again in the old junkyard that seemed completely abandoned.

Clark immediately let go of Lois, set Houdini back down and stumbled away. He sank to his knees and clutched at his ears, letting out a low moan. Lois watched him with trepidation as he curled in on himself, shaking slightly.

Houdini stood at a distance, tremors still running through his body. He moved back and forth as if he

couldn't quite decide whether to approach Clark or remain where he was. The poor dog was obviously still suffering from their flight.

Lois felt helpless. Clark had told her not to get close to him as long as he wasn't in control. What was going on with him? She remembered the little incidents she'd witnessed. He'd been like this the first time she'd met him as Clark. Had she truly seen blisters on his hands when she'd spotted him hiding in a corner of Centennial Park? And what had he meant when he'd said that he couldn't see much of anything?

Time dragged on in a slow crawl while Lois couldn't do anything but watch her friend in agony. It was heart-wrenching, bringing tears to her eyes.

Eventually, Clark relaxed somewhat and let go of his ears. He crawled back to his feet and swayed for a bit, then straightened. He blinked a few times until his eyes had found their focus again. A faint smile played around his lips as their gazes met.

"Are you all right?" Lois asked softly.

He winced a bit but gave a tentative nod. "Yeah, I guess so."

Houdini shook off his stupor and ran over to Clark, who bent down to greet his canine friend. He buried his face in the dog's soft fur and let out a long sigh.

Houdini whimpered in tune.

Lois went toward the pair. "What was that?"

"Sensory overload," Clark muttered. "My senses fired on all cylinders to the point of blinding and deafening me." He sat back down and stroked Houdini, then suddenly pulled his hand back with a grimace. "It still feels like an army of ants is crawling on my skin. But I think that's the last of it. This hiccup was a nasty one."

Lois raised her brows. "Hiccup?"

His expression turned a little sheepish. "My Mom made up that name, because they happen involuntarily and I can't stop them." Any hint of a smile vanished from his face. "But they're not nearly as harmless."

Lois sat down next to him. "Are you ready to tell me what's really happening?"

Clark looked back at her and bit his lip. He took a slow breath, then let it out through his lips. Almost imperceptibly, he nodded.

"I have some strange abilities," he whispered. "You've seen the flying. I can see really far, hear really well and I can—" He swallowed, took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I can see through things, shoot heat from my eyes and freeze things with my breath."

Lois stared at him, half expecting that his lips would suddenly twitch into a smile, and he'd burst out laughing at her flabbergasted expression. This couldn't be but a joke, could it?

But she saw the raw pain in his gaze when he put his glasses back on. Lois realized he was telling the truth. She'd seen some of it. The pieces of the puzzle that was Clark Kent slipped into place.

She let out a breath. "How, if it's not magic?"

He gave her a shrug. "I'm not really sure. All I know is that the sun is involved. I'm not a wizard, Lois. I'm an alien."

Her breath caught. "You're not from this world?"

Clark kneaded his hands and nodded meekly.

Lois couldn't help but smile. "That is the first thing I have learned about you that does not come as a surprise."

A grin spread across his face, so warm and infectious that Lois wished he'd never stop smiling at her like that.

"You never cease to amaze me." His hand was shaking slightly as he reached out to take her hand.

She noticed he was giving her the time to pull back if she wanted to. But that was the last thing on her mind. As their hands touched, she felt a spark of electricity between them, more magical than anything he could possibly do.

His gaze was so full of tenderness and — oh, Lois hoped she wasn't imagining it — love. "Out of the two of us, you're the true wizard. You give me hope. I never thought that was possible."

"It's witch, Clark." She winked as his expression turned puzzled. "Females are called witches."

He burst out laughing. "Now, that can't be right."

Origins of Magic

Clark unfolded the chair and set it up for Lois. "Do you want some tea?"

Before he'd even given her the chance to answer his question, Clark was already on his way inside his trailer. His hands went through the motions of taking the kettle and filling it with water. Then he lowered his glasses, focused on the water, shook his head as he thought better of it and pushed his glasses back up.

"Clark, why don't you sit down?" Lois asked softly.

He flinched, startled. As he turned to look at her, the water spilled over the rim of the kettle. Smiling sheepishly, he put the kettle on the stove and ran his hand through his hair. He let out a long sigh and felt a gentle nudge of Houdini's snout against his leg. The setter positioned his head right under Clark's free hand and looked at him with what could only be described as a concerned expression.

Clark couldn't help but chuckle, but quickly he sobered. It was his own imagination running wild. He knew that dogs didn't have much of an expressive face, though sometimes it felt like Houdini was the exception to the rule. And right now, the way he looked at him seemed to mirror the concern that was radiating from Lois. Clark sighed again, switched the stove on with a trembling hand, and hung his head.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "I guess I'm pretty restless."

"You can say that again," Lois commented. "Relax, Clark. Whatever's got you so worked up, you don't need to worry. I told you that I'm not going to print anything I learn here and I'm not going to run away screaming either like you seem to believe I would."

He let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding.

"It's not that, exactly." He chewed on his bottom lip, wondering for a moment, if her assessment of his erratic behavior was correct after all. Maybe it was a part of it, but when it came right down to it -

"I just want to get this right the first time, because I'm not sure I'll get another chance," he blurted out. "This — you — I'd never imagined that anything like this was possible. I mean, even before my powers went completely out of whack, I never expected I could tell anyone who I really am and have them be okay with it. I never imagined I could tell anyone that I'm an alien and not have them look at me as if I grew a second head and a spare set of arms."

She grinned. "As far as I can tell, you grew no extra appendages. Though Houdini might appreciate it if you did because the poor dog is still waiting for you to pet him."

Houdini barked his agreement and licked Clark's hand. Some of the pent-up tension seeped out of Clark as he scratched Houdini's favorite spot. He looked at Lois, who was still smiling at him. There was a gleam in her eyes that made his heart leap with joy because he thought he saw the same kind of affection there that he felt for her. But he was getting ahead of himself. All things considered, he wasn't even sure if he really was in love with Lois, or if his heart was just so desperate for contact with another person that he wasn't thinking straight.

"I don't need tea," Lois said gently. "But if it helps to calm you down, then I'm all for it."

Clark cracked a smile and wiped his face. "I believe I might need something a lot stronger, but unfortunately alcohol has never had an effect on me."

He took a deep breath and let it out through his nose, slowly. Then he pulled out tea bags and two mugs. Houdini looked up expectantly and licked his lips as a quiet reminder that he still needed to be fed. For a short while, Clark could occupy himself with the mundane tasks of daily life and it helped him bring his emotions back under control.

By the time Clark had the tea ready and invited Lois to sit down on the chairs outside the trailer, he felt a lot more collected than he had before. He sat down and rolled the steaming mug between his hands before he took a slow sip, more out of habit than necessity.

Lois mirrored his motions and when she lowered the cup again, she leaned back in her chair and looked at him.

“So there was a time when your powers weren’t out of your control?”

He nodded and took another sip of tea.

“What happened?”

Clark gave her a brief shrug. “The whole story or just the gist of it?”

She shook her head and rolled her eyes. “You really have to ask?”

He laughed.

“Just checking — okay, the whole story…” For a moment, he wasn’t sure if he really wanted to tell her all of it. There was no going back from that. But it felt so good to finally tell another soul what he’d kept a secret all these years. “I was born on a dying planet called Krypton. The core had turned unstable, and my birth parents knew that the planet was doomed. They sent me to Earth so that I would live. The rest of my people died as the planet exploded. I was just a few months old when I arrived here. The Kents saw a meteor and found my ship in a field in Smallville, Kansas.”

Lois sat straight. “You grew up here? Did you even know where you came from? Did you have these powers right from the start?”

Clark shook his head in amusement. She really was a force to be reckoned with.

“Yes, no and no,” he replied. As he saw frustration flash across her face at his short answer, he couldn’t help but grin. “My parents were pretty open with me about the way they found me. But for a long time, we had no idea where I could have come from. They thought that I might have been a Russian experiment. I believe I was in elementary school when the first signs of my powers showed up. I couldn’t control them at first, but I learned quickly.”

He took another long sip of tea, losing himself in wistful memories of the times when his powers had been a new, frightening part of his life. But he also remembered the pride he’d felt whenever he’d mastered yet another one. Sometimes he wished life could be that easy again. What he wouldn’t give to just go back and relearn control. But he’d been trying that for years now.

“That must have been scary,” Lois said quietly.

“Yeah,” Clark admitted. “It was scary and sometimes lonely, too. But it was nothing compared to the way life feels now. Learning control had been a huge part of my teenage years and I had really thought that I had put that behind me.” He took off his glasses and put them down in his lap.

His hand brushed against Houdini’s head, who had just finished his meal and had returned for another round of ear scratching. Clark set his now empty cup down on the ground and ran his hand through the setter’s fur. Houdini’s

presence, soothing though it was, also served as a painful reminder of the day his life had changed forever. While he stroked the dog, Clark told Lois how he had saved Houdini from the hole he’d been trapped in and how he’d helped the dog to climb out, only to find himself writhing in pain.

“Houdini must have run to my Dad,” Clark finished his tale. “I was unconscious by the time he found me and I didn’t wake up until after he’d gotten me out and brought me back home somehow. My powers were gone for days and when they finally returned, I kept getting these hiccups. Some of them were so intense that I realized I couldn’t stay with my parents or anyone else for that matter. Only Houdini refused to leave my side.” He smiled at the dog who had closed his eyes and rested his head in Clark’s lap.

Houdini, who had inadvertently changed his life forever, had changed it again by helping him create the illusionist and thus find this amazing woman sitting beside him. The setter was the best friend anyone could hope for. There was no place for hard feelings and right now, he wasn’t even sure if he would go back and change what had happened, if he were given that chance. Who knew if he’d ever have met Lois if Houdini hadn’t fallen into that hole?

“Do you have any idea what causes these hiccups?” Lois’ voice was trembling slightly, as if she was fighting with her own emotions.

Clark shook his head. “No. But it’s been years since they started. I’ve learned to live with them, for the most part. Whatever was in that hole affected me temporarily. I’ve never again encountered anything like it. Perhaps, it also did some lasting damage.”

“Did you ever go back to find out what happened?” Lois asked softly.

“And risk that it’s getting even worse?” The words came out more forcefully than he intended. He flinched and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m sorry. You mean well, I know that.”

She laid her hand on his. “Think about it, Clark. If you don’t know what happened to you, you have no chance to fix it.”

He swallowed hard. “What if it can’t be fixed?”

She ran her thumb over the back of his hand in a slow circle. “You’ve come this far since I met you, Clark. Don’t write yourself off just yet.”

Her warmth spread through him, and his heart felt inexplicably light. Perhaps, just perhaps, there really was a slim chance that his life could be normal again, or less crazy than it was anyway. She’d taken a huge leap of faith with him, trusting him enough to be sitting here with him. So much had already changed in so little time. And while asking for more seemed foolhardy, hope stirred inside him.

“I’ll think about it,” he said quietly.

She nodded, saying no more. And for a while they sat in front of Clark's trailer, taking turns in stroking Houdini and just enjoyed a companionable silence. Clark wondered if he'd ever felt this at ease. Any remnants of the tension that had made him so restless was gone. He picked up her heartbeat that was a welcome addition to the sounds that surrounded him — the gentle breeze of the wind, the soft sounds of pleasure that now and again escaped Houdini's throat.

Maybe his life was about to take a turn for the better. Perhaps it really was too early to write himself off.

Clark felt peace settle upon him. Right in this moment, life was good.

Down the Yellow Brick Road

Lois pulled her suitcase off the luggage belt and took a deep breath. Her gaze drifted toward the exit. There was no sense stalling any longer. If Martha Kent was waiting for her at the airport, she'd know that Lois' flight had arrived on time. Four rounds on the luggage belt were far more than she could reasonably explain anyway. She couldn't put off meeting Clark's mother indefinitely.

Slowly she made her way to the arrival area. Lois wished Clark could be here with her. She missed him badly. Two weeks ago he'd given her the tickets and told her that his mother was going to pick her up at the airport. That was the last time she'd seen him.

It felt all wrong. Clark should be here with her, introducing her to his mom.

Given the enormous secret he carried, it would have been nice to have him stand beside her with a reassuring smile. Lois wished she had at least some sort of proof that he was okay with her knowing. She could only imagine how painstakingly Clark's parents had kept his powers and origins to themselves.

Now here she was, barging in on their lives, a reporter who knew details about their son that most journalists would be dying to print.

Her gut twisted into a tight knot as Lois pushed the doors open. The waiting area was mostly deserted. A few scattered travelers were still here and between them a petite blonde woman holding up a sign that read "Lois Lane."

The air rushed from Lois' lungs as if someone had kicked her hard. She stopped dead, her feet suddenly reluctant to move another step. Socializing had never been her strong suit. How did one greet a woman who had every right to be wary of her intentions? How was she supposed to get through a two-hour drive to Smallville, Kansas?

Suddenly, she couldn't quite understand why she'd suggested going to Smallville. Given Clark's unique problem, she should have known he wouldn't travel by plane.

Because of Houdini's fear of flying and his own increasingly severe hiccups, Clark had decided to walk the distance. Lois found it hard to believe that anyone would want to walk that far. But Clark had shrugged off her concern. According to him, it was safer that way. He'd been reluctant to come to Smallville in the first place and his frayed nerves surely caused his powers to act up more than they already did.

Right now, Lois wished Houdini would have been willing to board a plane. It would have been nice to have his support at least. If he wagged his tail and licked her hand, maybe Clark's mother would be more willing to trust her.

Filling her lungs with some much-needed air, Lois braced herself for meeting Martha Kent. She took a few steps toward the older woman. Her right hand twitched indecisively as Lois tried to decide whether offering a handshake would be appreciated.

"Mrs. Kent?" Her voice cracked a bit and she swallowed to get rid of the lump in her throat.

"You must be Lois." The lips of the older woman twitched into a broad smile. She held out her hand. "I'm Martha. Clark never mentioned how pretty you are. Thank you so much for bringing him back home."

Lois gaped at the other woman, unable to say a word.

"Do you need anything before we head to Smallville?" Martha asked. "I'm afraid that once we're out of Wichita, there won't be many places we can stop."

Lois tried to get her lips to work. She had expected a lot of things, but nothing had prepared her for the warm welcome Martha Kent was offering. Still unable to speak, she just shook her head, feeling slightly dazed.

"Clark arrived yesterday, a day earlier than anticipated," Martha chatted on. "Houdini was really eager to get back to Smallville, it seems. He has a thing for meat pie." She lowered her voice conspiratorially. "Though, knowing Clark, he might have carried him at least half of the way. I wouldn't be surprised if that boy smells my apple pie through eight states. We should make sure to reserve each of us a piece before the guys have a chance to dig in. You wouldn't believe how much Clark and his father can eat."

Her eyes twinkled with mischief before she laid her hand on Lois' arm and guided her out of the airport and toward the parking lot.

Lois felt still tongue-tied as she put her suitcase in the trunk of an old pickup truck and slipped into the passenger's seat next to Clark's mother. Only after she'd closed the door and no one was likely to overhear them, did she find her voice again.

"You're okay with me knowing?" she managed. "Just like that?"

Lois couldn't believe it should be this easy. Surely, the smiles had been for public display alone and the worst was yet to come. But Martha still looked at her with the same warmth in her gaze, genuinely seeming pleased that Lois was in her car.

"Clark trusts you, that's all I need to know." She turned the key and started the car. "He told me what a good friend you've been to him. And bringing him back here..." Her voice cracked and a tear slipped down her cheek. She wiped it away and her lips twitched back into that warm, now somewhat teary-eyed, smile. "That boy is stubborn as a mule. He's a lot like his father in that respect."

"He didn't have much of a choice but to trust me," Lois said quietly. "Me finding out about his other identity and his powers — it just sort of happened." She fumbled with her hands, feeling flustered. "I thought you were going to be angry and much more apprehensive. I mean, Clark isn't even around to introduce us and..." She trailed off because she didn't know what else to say.

Martha shook her head. "If you wanted to print the truth about him, you could have done so weeks ago."

She looked over her shoulder before she pulled the car out of the parking lot. When the pickup truck was facing the right way, she hit the brakes and once more turned her full attention on Lois.

There was a gleam in her eyes, a fire that revealed the heart of a lioness inside the petite woman's chest. Lois had no doubt that — should anyone threaten her family — Martha would fight tooth and nail to defend them. Whoever dared to mess with her would certainly regret it. But at the same time, Lois couldn't help the strange notion that even though they'd just met, Martha regarded her as an extension of her immediate family. There was a tenderness in the other woman's gaze that Lois found both disconcerting and heartrending at the same time.

Clark's mother swallowed. "I still can't believe my boy is here again and going to stay for more than a few minutes or a couple of days at best. Somehow you convinced him to try and find out what happened to him, which is more than I ever accomplished. You've known him for a few months, but already you did more for this family than you know. You're more than welcome here. Besides, I've never had another woman to whom I could really talk about Clark."

Another tear slipped down her cheeks which she surreptitiously wiped off. Then she switched gears and hit the accelerator. She steered the pickup toward the street.

"Thank you," Lois whispered.

The lump in her throat was back, but this time it didn't feel as choking as before. Lois couldn't explain it, but she just felt loved, which was an unsettling realization for someone whose family had always been a minefield.

"You've chosen the right weekend to come to Smallville." Martha chatted away happily. "We're holding the annual corn festival. It'll be fun."

Though Lois wasn't quite sure what was supposed to be exciting about a corn festival, Martha's enthusiasm was kind of contagious.

All the tension left her as she leaned back in the driver's seat and listened to Martha recounting stories about Clark's childhood. Lois had the strangest feeling that a whirlwind had picked her up and carried her toward the land of Oz. She couldn't help but grin at the thought.

Well, when in Kansas...

The ride to Smallville went by in a blur. Occasionally, Lois asked a question or told Martha how she'd met Clark. Before long Lois had already forgotten she'd ever been nervous at all.

Clark's mother, it seemed, possessed her own kind of magic.

No wonder, his heart was so big. He was truly loved.

Deep inside her, Lois's own feelings for him stirred. Everything she learned about Clark made her wish that they'd grow into more than just being friends.

Quietly she sent a prayer to whatever deity was up there, that they would find a solution to Clark's problem. She knew Clark would never admit to feeling more for her than friendship as long as he still considered himself a threat.

Finally, Martha pulled into a driveway that led to the Kent's farm. Lois' heart leaped with joy as she saw Clark standing in front of the house. His hands were stuffed deep into the pockets of his pants and he was looking slightly anxious. Houdini sat beside him, panting and flopping his tail up and down.

As Clark's eyes met Lois', his lips twitched into the brightest smile she'd ever seen. It made her insides melt.

Lois desperately hoped that once he was free, he would return her feelings. She no longer wanted to imagine her life without him in it.

Of Crystals and Spells

Houdini slowed his steps, his body tensing as they approached the area where four years ago the dog had tumbled into a hole.

Clark wasn't sure if the Irish Setter still remembered that fateful day or if he just sensed his master's increasing dread.

Lois' hand closed around Clark's, a gentle reminder of her presence, like the soft scent of her flowery fragrance. It mixed well with the more earthy notes of dry soil and the resin of trees.

Clark had never felt happier than when Lois had climbed out of his mother's pickup truck. Seeing the two women in his life so comfortable around each other had

warmed his heart. He knew how apprehensive Lois had been about meeting his parents. If their places were reversed, he would have felt the same way.

For a moment, Clark hadn't quite known how to greet Lois after putting her through a blind date with his Mom. Houdini, however, had had no such qualms. As soon as the setter had seen Lois, he'd stormed toward her, welcoming her with an enthusiasm only a dog was capable of.

They'd eaten dinner in the backyard of the farm. Clark still didn't dare to go inside though his powers had been a bit more stable over the course of the last two weeks and hadn't acted up all evening. But he wasn't going to take any risks with the people he loved.

He'd spent the night in a tent, the heartbeats of Lois, his parents and Houdini keeping him company. The soothing sounds had chased away any sense of loneliness, almost as if he'd been sleeping in the house with them.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Lois interrupted his musings.

He turned to her and couldn't help but smile. His heart swelled with all the tender feelings he had for her. It still amazed him that she was here with him, coming along as they tried to find a solution for his power fluctuations.

"I was just thinking how lucky I am to have you," he replied.

A faint blush tinted Lois' cheeks.

Clark's own cheeks grew hot as he wondered if maybe he'd said too much. Was he being too obvious in his affections for her? He didn't want to make any assumptions or scare her off. It was so easy to mistake the way she looked at him for more than friendship. But that could all be wishful thinking on his part.

Lois gave his hand another gentle squeeze. "Are you nervous?"

Her words brought him back to reality. The sense of dread that for a short moment had taken a backseat to other, more pleasant feelings returned full force. The weight of the rope that he'd slung around his shoulders was suddenly pressing down on him, when mere moments ago he hadn't noticed it at all.

"Yeah." He swallowed against his suddenly dry throat. "I've avoided this place for four years, thinking that whatever affected me here would wear off over time." He heaved a resigned sigh. "But you're right, it's about time for a different approach."

Clark attempted a smile, but that quickly crumbled as he spotted a group of trees he remembered very well. They'd been the last he'd seen before floating down into the hole where an intense wave of pain had washed over him.

Houdini whimpered and turned to Clark, tail between his legs.

"It's okay, buddy." Clark laid his hand on the dog's head. He wasn't quite sure if he was trying to reassure the setter or himself.

Taking a steadying breath, he lifted the rope off his shoulders and handed one end to Lois.

She gave him a worried look. "Are you okay?"

He nodded. "So far, I don't feel a thing. I'm not going any closer to the edge, though. Be careful. I might not be able to climb in and get you out. If you feel any discomfort, let me pull you up immediately. I don't want you to get hurt. My dad said he felt no ill effects, but..."

Clark's gut curled into a tight knot. He hoped his dad had been right.

Lois smiled tightly. "I promise not to take any unnecessary risks."

Clark raised his brows. "I'll hold you to that."

She grinned at him, before she headed for the hole. Trepidation filled Clark as he watched Lois. They exchanged a glance, before she lowered her end of the rope into the hole and climbed down. Clark held his breath, readying himself to pull her back up at the first sign of trouble.

Moments later, he felt the rope twitch in his hands as she let go of it.

"I've reached the bottom," Lois announced. "So far, I don't see anything out of the ordinary."

Clark let out a sigh of relief. "The last thing I remember is something green and red."

He heard rummaging from the hole. Next to him, Houdini moved on circles, took a few steps toward the hole only to return. The dog looked about as nervous as Clark felt. His own heart was beating fast as he remembered rocks falling and hitting both him and Houdini. He was hard pressed not to get closer and check on Lois.

Surreptitiously, he lowered his glasses. "Are you all right down there?"

"Yeah, fine," came the muffled reply. "I believe I found something. It looks like crystals. I'm coming back now."

Clark slipped his glasses back on and tightened his grip on the rope while Lois climbed up. He saw her hand first as she pushed two glowing objects over the rim of the hole, so she had her hands free to climb the rest of the way.

He stared at the crystals, his breath once again catching in his throat. Vaguely he remembered seeing their iridescent glow before passing out. One rock was green, the other one red, but both were mesmerizing and terrifying at the same time.

He wanted to utter a warning as Houdini moved closer to the rocks and sniffed at them. The setter went completely still, eying the crystals almost as if he expected them to launch an attack. But when they remained on the

ground, unmoving, he raised his head again, shook himself, and returned to Clark's side.

"You still okay?" Lois scrambled back to her feet and dusted off her clothes.

Clark pulled himself from the stupor that had befallen him and took stock of his current state. "Yeah, I still don't feel any different than I did a moment ago."

Lois' gaze drifted toward the two glowing rocks, and she bit her lip. "I guess we should test your reaction to them, what do you think?"

A shiver ran down Clark's spine. He looked at Houdini, who stood his ground beside him, albeit now trembling, head lowered and tail between his legs. Clark's heart went out to the poor dog. Truth be told, he felt much like Houdini, if his stance gave any indication of what the dog was thinking. Then he glanced back at Lois who studied him with concern.

He knew she wouldn't force him to go through with it.

But this was his chance, Clark reminded himself. Sure, he was also taking a risk. But in the end, life was about taking risks once in a while. He'd taken a huge risk by opening up to Lois. That had been the best decision of his life yet. He wanted a future with her and this was how he might get it. So how could he back out now?

"Okay," he said hoarsely. "But let me have a closer look first." Clark lowered his glasses, focusing on the crystals. As he studied the details, he let out a soft whistle. "Their structure is practically identical. The only difference I see is the color. It almost seems like these are two versions of the same substance."

Lois closed the distance between them and laid a hand on his arm. "Are you sure you want me to bring these crystals closer to you?"

Clark took a shuddering breath. "That's what we're here for. Let's try the red one first."

"What if something bad happens?" Her voice was quivering slightly, and she couldn't quite look at him.

Clark guessed that she was having second thoughts, too. He couldn't deny he was scared. But the prospect of staying lonely for the rest of his life without ever trying to do something about it seemed even more terrifying all of a sudden. Particularly with a friend like Lois just within his reach.

He straightened. "I need to find out what happened to me. Let's get this over with."

Before he knew what was happening, she stepped on her toes and placed a kiss on his cheek. Then she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pressed her face into the crook of his neck. Completely overwhelmed by her sudden nearness, he awkwardly returned the embrace and kissed her hair. Feeling her body flush against his was a sensation so incredible that he wasn't sure words even existed to

describe it. All the pent-up tension seeped from his body and right in this moment he knew that he had to try everything he could just to get one other moment with Lois. This was worth any risk.

"Thank you for trying this," she whispered into his ear. "Please, whatever happens, Clark, know this — I love you."

He stood frozen, struck by lightning, as she let go of him. Clark couldn't believe what she'd said and he couldn't reply either. His whole body was stunned, his tongue and mouth refusing to form any coherent word. A deep flush tinted Lois' cheeks and she ducked her head, hurrying back to the crystals as if her admission had surprised her just as much as it had surprised Clark.

She picked up the red one. "Ready?"

He could only nod. The shock and the tender feelings that had flooded his chest before were suddenly replaced by a deep sense of dread. Houdini whimpered and looked up at Clark who placed his hand on the dog's head, scratching him gently. His breath hitched as Lois stepped closer. He felt Houdini tense.

Then suddenly, all his emotions just seemed to leave him. He was strangely relaxed and calm, as if none of this mattered in any way whatsoever. His hand dropped from Houdini's head, no longer caring for the reassurance.

He saw Lois approaching him with some strange glowing object. But his eyes quickly drifted toward her ample cleavage and her luscious lips. These were lips that looked decidedly kissable. And that was exactly what he was going to do.

"Hey, babe, got any plans for tonight?" He winked at her and leaned in.

Kissing her was even better than he'd thought. She tasted sweet and sexy. Quickly his tongue darted forward, teasing her lips gently. She parted them to invite him in. Playfully he suckled at her lower lip before he went on to exploring the silky cave of her mouth that promised so much more. A low moan escaped his throat and he pulled her closer. He just couldn't get enough of her.

A loud bark resounded in his ears and he felt two large paws on his arms. Surprised, he let go of Lois, who took several steps back. Houdini pressed into him, pushing him back. A low growl escaped his throat.

"Clark." Lois stared first at him, then at the glowing crystal in her hand. "What just happened?"

As she brought more distance between them, the cobwebs that clouded Clark's mind slowly cleared. He shook his head to get rid of the woozy sensation. His lips still tingled from their kiss, but the memory of it turned hazier with every passing second as if it had merely been a dream.

Houdini got back down and eyed Clark carefully. His muscles were still tense as he stood with his back to Lois. Had the dog intervened because he was jealous, or had he sensed that Clark hadn't been in control of his actions? If only there were a way to ask him.

Confused, Clark's gaze drifted to Lois who still held the red crystal and studied it with a frown.

"I don't know," he muttered. "I believe I kissed you." His face burned hot with embarrassment. "Sorry about that, I never meant to impose on you. It was as if I was under a spell."

Her features relaxed and she smiled at him. "No harm done, you just took me by surprise. And the kiss was great, more than great, actually."

She had a dreamy expression on her face, her cheeks flushed. There was a gleam in her eyes that stirred a deep desire inside him. Though this time it felt more real than before. He exhaled slowly, fighting to get his emotions back under control.

"Um, thanks, I guess." Clark wasn't sure if it was possible to blush more furiously than he already had. He ran his hand through his hair and shifted his weight. "It was strange. When you approached me, I was so nervous. And then I was suddenly completely relaxed and nothing seemed to matter but what I wanted."

The words were out before he'd really had a chance to think about them. Clark bit his lip, an apology already sitting on the tip of his tongue.

But Lois didn't seem to take offense. "Do you believe it was the crystal?"

He shrugged. "I wouldn't know what else could have compelled me to kiss you without permission."

She grinned. "Boy scout."

For a while they watched each other without saying anything, but then both their gazes drifted toward the green crystal. Houdini seemed to notice the growing tension. He stiffened next to Clark.

Lois nibbled on her lower lip. "Ready to try the other one?"

Clark heaved a sigh and nodded. "As ready as I'll ever be."

Lois picked up the green crystal and slowly closed the distance between them.

This time the effect was rather abrupt. A moment of discomfort quickly mounted to an intense wave of pure agony that slammed into his chest and knocked the wind out of him.

"Lois, stop," he wanted to yell, but all that came out was a hoarse whisper.

His knees buckled underneath him and raging nausea rolled in his stomach, letting any experience with his out-of-control powers pale in comparison.

Weakness paralyzed him. Clark moaned. His vision grayed on the edges.

Vaguely, he registered how Houdini tensed beside him. The dog bared his teeth, letting out a low, warning growl. Every single hair of his thick fur stood on end.

Lois stopped, but Houdini still stood ready to attack.

"Down, boy," Clark ground out.

His voice still barely worked and was drowned out by another loud growl. Clark tilted sideways, no longer able to even remain on his knees.

"Clark!" Lois' eyes widened and she rushed in his direction.

More pain stole his breath. A panicked whimper escaped Houdini, then his body went rigid. As he leaped forward Clark's heart stopped. Terror infused his muscles with a strength he hadn't thought he still possessed.

Acting on instinct, Clark pushed himself off the ground, following his dog who headed straight for Lois. He had to get there first. Another strong wave of pain slammed into him as he pushed Lois down, shielding her just in time before Houdini's body could connect with hers.

The wave of agony subsided as the crystal flew far from her hand, replaced by a different pain as the dog's teeth settled into his arm.

Clark cried out as he landed hard on his back.

The dog's eyes met his, the dangerous gleam changing to something else.

Gritting his teeth against the searing pain, Clark took a deep breath, trying to exude a calm he didn't feel.

"Down, Houdini," he said firmly. "Everything is okay. Lois didn't mean to hurt me. I'm all right." He bore his eyes into the dog's. "Let go."

The death grip of Houdini's jaw on his arm lessened. The setter let out a startled whimper.

"Shhh, everything's fine," Clark reassured the dog.

He stroked him with his good arm and made soothing noises until Houdini's fur settled and the dog relaxed. Clark let out a slow breath and collapsed back to the ground. He craned his neck a bit to look at Lois, who'd scrambled back to her knees.

"Are you okay?" he whispered.

Then he closed his eyes against the pain that reclaimed his attention with a vengeance.

Her reply was something between a laugh and a sob. "I'm fine. What about you?"

"Been better," he admitted. "I think I need a moment."

Her hands touched his arm. "You're bleeding."

The way Houdini's teeth had felt, he wasn't surprised. "Then I lost all my powers again."

Her hand cupped his cheek. "I'm so, so sorry, Clark. I should have backed away as soon as I realized I was

hurting you. When Houdini attacked..." She trailed off. The ragged sound of her breaths was all he heard. "You saved me."

"I had to." A smile crept onto his lips. "The thing is, I love you, too."

Disillusioned

<The thing is — I love you, too.>

Clark's words echoed through her mind as Lois snuck up the stairs, feeling like a thief in the night. The memory made her heart beat faster, but at the same time her gut clenched with sorrow. Her gaze flitted down to her chest, once again drawn to the blood stains on her shirt — Clark's blood. Lois squeezed her eyes shut, then balled her hands into tight fists. She took a deep breath, relaxing her stance with a conscious effort before she climbed the rest of the stairs.

With a start she noticed Houdini, walking in circles in front of Clark's bedroom door. A whimper left his throat whenever he stopped and looked up as if contemplating whether to jump up and open the door.

Her heart went out to the poor dog. When she'd spotted his bowl of food untouched in the kitchen, Lois had expected to find Houdini keeping watch at his master's side.

The dog's ears twitched slightly in her direction before he turned to look at Lois. For a moment they just stared at each other. Lois couldn't help but find herself surreptitiously checking the dog's lips for blood. But it seemed like she was the only one still carrying incriminating evidence.

Lois averted her eyes and bit down on her lower lip until it hurt. Her gaze drifted toward the door to Clark's old bedroom where he'd been resting for the past two hours.

Much like Houdini she couldn't bring herself to go inside, though she needed a change of clothes. More than that she desperately wanted to talk to Clark. But she was also scared of his reaction now that he'd had time to think. His declaration of love had taken her by surprise. How could he really mean it after everything that had happened?

"Don't you want to go to him?" she asked Houdini.

The Irish setter lowered his head and whimpered softly. His usually wagging tail hung limply and the whole dog seemed to have shrunken to almost half his usual size.

"Yeah, me too," she whispered.

Lois sagged against the wall behind her and cradled her face in her hands. Slowly she sank into a sitting position and pulled her knees up. Images of Clark lying on the ground invaded her mind, pale, bleeding and clutching his arm to his chest. She'd just been about to slip out of her jacket to use it as a makeshift bandage when an approaching car had caught her attention.

Martha must have sensed the danger because she'd sent Jonathan after them. A startled cry had left his mouth as he'd spotted them on the ground. Then he'd climbed out of his pickup truck, immediately taking charge of the situation. Jonathan had pulled a first-aid kit from the bed of the truck and without much ado had tended to his son's arm to stop the bleeding while Clark had given him a brief account of what had happened.

Lois had wanted to help, but all she'd been able to do was watch, feeling completely helpless.

With his father's assistance, Clark had stood up and they'd headed for the bed of the truck. But as soon as he'd tried to climb it, his face had drained of any residual color. Jonathan had quickly switched gears, helping Clark onto the passenger's seat where he'd slumped, exhausted.

Numb and with a trembling Houdini by her side, Lois had climbed onto the bed of the truck instead. She hadn't known what to say or how to apologize. Words couldn't express how much she regretted talking Clark into coming here. How could she ever look into the Kents' eyes again after what she'd done to him?

The ride back to the farm had been quiet. Lois had spent her time trying to check on Clark through the rearview mirror. But she'd seen nothing but his closed eyes and her throat had been too tight to ask how he was doing.

Inside the house, Martha had cleaned the wound while Clark had occasionally hissed in pain. Lois had watched them until she hadn't been able to bear it any longer. It was pure torture, especially knowing that she was responsible.

Now he was resting in his room, and she still had no idea if he was feeling better.

The worst part was that neither Jonathan nor Martha seemed to be holding a grudge. They'd even smiled at her though they couldn't quite hide how worried they were about Clark.

The whole time Lois had been expecting the other shoe to drop.

Only it didn't, which made her feel even more guilty.

She wished someone would yell at her. She knew she deserved it.

They should have known better than to take Houdini with them. They'd known something in this hole was dangerous to Clark. The dog had shown his protective streak time and time again.

Yet Clark had insisted on bringing Houdini along, terrified that he might not notice in time if whatever was in that hole caused his powers to act up. Above everything else, he'd wanted to keep her safe.

And now he was hurt.

Tears filled Lois' eyes, but she blinked them back.

Clark was hurt, it wasn't her place to cry. This was her fault and she had no business falling apart in front of his

bedroom door. She needed to see how he was doing. She needed to thank him and apologize for putting him through this ordeal.

But she couldn't work up the courage to knock.

A light weight settled on her knees. Houdini's soft whimpers filled her ears. As Lois glanced up, she stared right into big brown eyes that looked so utterly forlorn.

"I'm sorry, Houdini." Tentatively, she reached out and scratched the setter behind his ear. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

A sob escaped her and Houdini whimpered in tune.

"You should go to him," Lois said quietly. "None of this is your fault. It's mine. I'm sure he's not angry at you."

The dog looked back at her sadly, not seeming convinced.

Lois' chest constricted and her heart beat in her throat. When she'd talked Clark into coming back to Smallville, she hadn't really considered the repercussions this might have for him. As always, she'd been far too optimistic, jumping in without checking the water level.

And he'd told her he loved her.

Lois buried her face in her hands. Another low whimper next to her confirmed that Houdini felt just as miserable as she did. Some strange pair they were, partners in crime and partners in grief. She ran her hand through the dog's fur, trying to offer comfort.

Suddenly, she felt a hand on her shoulder and heard the low rumble of Clark's voice. "Hey, what's wrong?"

Startled, Lois raised her head. She hadn't heard him coming. The tenderness and concern in his gaze let her throat tighten even more. He looked much better than he had, though he was still pale.

"Clark," she managed past the lump in her throat. The tears that she'd fought to keep at bay spilled down her cheeks. She sobbed. "I'm so sorry."

"Oh, Lois."

He sat down beside her and wrapped his good arm around her shoulder, pulling her closer until her head rested against his chest and her tears soaked his shirt.

"There's nothing you need to be sorry about," he whispered into her hair. "This was my fault. I was so focused on not hurting you with my powers that I didn't even consider Houdini might be more of a problem."

Another whimper startled them both. Houdini stood at a distance. His head was lowered in a submissive gesture, seemingly begging for forgiveness.

"Sorry, buddy, I didn't mean it that way," Clark said. "Of course, you're not a problem. Come here."

After a moment's hesitation, Houdini relaxed and, finally wagging his tail again, greeted Clark with a few sloppy dog kisses, before he settled down and rested his head in Clark's lap.

Clark ran his hand through his fur, apparently enjoying the contact just as much as Houdini did.

He turned his attention back on Lois. "I'm just glad nothing happened to you."

She stared at him and let her gaze drift across his bandaged arm. "But -"

"I will heal," he cut in. "Probably a lot quicker than I'd like." A faint blush crept across his cheeks. "Because once I'm back to normal, I'm not sure I will dare to do this..." He trailed off, a flicker of hesitation in his gaze. Then he swallowed and leaned in.

His kiss was gentle. She could feel his breath caress her skin. Velvet lips brushed against hers, a shy tongue darting forward, not quite following her invitation to deepen the kiss as she opened her mouth to him. So she made the first step, feeling bold as she let her tongue slip past his lips. And then — suddenly — it was as if they were both sucked into a passionate exchange. Their tongues took on a life of their own as if they'd been made for this dance. Lois lost herself, lost every track of time as she experienced a kind of magic that was so unlike anything she'd ever known. She could taste his love for her, felt the despair with which he was savoring this moment, because there was no telling how long it would last. Lois wished she wouldn't have to stop kissing him.

Ever.

But eventually, they had to part. He leaned his forehead against hers, a heavy sigh escaping his lips.

"Sorry about that," he whispered.

She cupped his cheek and stroked it with her thumb. "Why do you say that?"

"I shouldn't be kissing you like this, not as long as I..." He took a deep breath and shook his head. "The only thing I regret about today is that we didn't get any closer to the solution. That green rock hurt me and robbed me of my powers. And the red one turned me into a zombie of my desires. Unless my powers start acting up even worse when they come back again, we still don't know what's causing these power bursts."

Lois wrapped her arms around his shoulders and buried her head in the crook of his neck. She breathed in his soft scent and pressed her body against his, as close as he would let her.

"We will find the solution, Clark." She tried to put all her conviction into her words, willing him to believe that there was a future for them. Because if they both believed it desperately enough, then maybe they would find a way to make this work. "We just have to, because I wish you could always be this relaxed around me. I want you to act on your feelings because I feel the same way about you. Please don't stop kissing me. Let's make the most of this disaster."

He laughed softly. "You're incredible. Do you know that?" He kissed her hair and then she felt him pull back. A little awkwardly he scrambled back to his feet and held out his hand to help her up. "My powers won't be back for another few hours at least. And you're right, we should make the most of this disaster while it lasts. Would you like to come to the corn festival with me?"

As if Houdini understood every word Clark said, a sudden excitement took hold of the dog. He barked happily, jumped up at Clark's legs only to turn and head for the stairs.

Lois felt a strange thrill as she took in Clark's dashing smile. "As your date?"

He winked at her. "If you want to call it that."

She grinned. "Oh, absolutely."

He beamed at her. "Then it's a date."

Lois once more took in the bandage around his arm and as she studied him with a more thorough look, she could also see the tired lines around his eyes. Her stomach dropped a bit, reminding her that only hours ago he'd been lying on the ground, close to passing out.

She frowned. "Are you sure you're up to it?"

He reached out to brush a strand of hair behind her ear and ran his fingers along her cheek in a gentle caress. "With you, I'm up to anything."

Moments of Magic

Houdini happily wagged his tail, darting back and forth between Lois and Clark and whatever caught his interest. He sniffed in all corners and greeted what seemed like every single person attending the Corn Festival.

Clark followed him with quiet amusement, his good arm wrapped around Lois' shoulder. Now and again, he tore off a wispy strand of the cotton candy she held.

"This is nice," he said softly.

"Indeed, it is," Lois agreed. She placed a quick peck on his cheek and grinned. "I've never seen you this relaxed. Just Clark."

"That's who I am," he murmured. "Just Clark."

He petted Houdini's head, who'd just returned to him and enjoyed the feel of the dog's soft fur under his fingers. Closing his eyes just for a moment, he concentrated on the sensation of Lois' body snuggled against his as they walked.

Clark couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this alive. His chest was bursting with happiness, so much so that the grin on his face didn't suffice to express his emotions. He almost wished he had a tail like Houdini's, enabling him to announce to the whole world that this was by far the best day of his life.

Sure, his arm was still hurting and he felt sore from his exposure to the strange glowing rock. But those pains were a small price to pay given the reward. In fact, he welcomed

the lingering weakness in his bones because it meant he still had time to enjoy the simple pleasures of life.

Though, honestly, there was nothing simple about being able to kiss Lois whenever he felt like it without having to worry that an involuntary burst of heat vision might hurt her. Now that he had her so close, sensed her warmth, and felt every brush of her hip against his, he couldn't get enough of her. The clean scent of her hair and her silky skin were intoxicating and highly addictive. The urge to touch her was so overwhelming that he feared his behavior was already bordering on creepy.

But then she would give his hand on her shoulder a soft squeeze and look at him with an encouraging smile until he couldn't help himself anymore and just had to place another quick peck on her cheek.

Clark glanced sideways, catching another glimpse of the lovely red dress she had somehow snuck past him while he'd been talking to an old acquaintance. She looked simply stunning, but he didn't want to get caught staring at her all the time like the drooling fool he was.

When he'd asked her about the dress, she'd just winked at him, telling him that — like magic — some things didn't require explaining. His heart leaped at the memory and already he contemplated running his hand along her cheek or maybe kissing her again. It seemed like such an awfully long time since he'd last placed a kiss into her hair. Her lips looked enticing, too. And —

"Clark?" a familiar voice squealed. "Is that really you?"

He let go of Lois as he turned, startled, and stared into the deep brown eyes of Rachel Harris. Life had been good to her, it seemed. Outwardly, she hadn't changed much from the girl he'd taken to the prom. But Clark couldn't help the impression that she was more at ease in her sheriff uniform than she'd ever been wearing a fancy dress or trying to compete with the other girls.

"Rachel," he said softly. "Ehm, or should I say Sheriff Harris? It's good to see you."

Before he really knew what was happening, she pulled him into a bear hug. "I've heard the rumors, but I couldn't quite believe you're actually here!"

A little awkwardly, he returned the hug, wincing at the pain in his arm and laughing at her enthusiasm. "Me neither, Rachel, me neither."

She released him and took a step back. "How long has it been? Four years?" Her gaze drifted to Lois who was quietly watching the exchange. Rachel shook her head. "Where are my manners? I'm Rachel Harris."

Lois took the hand Rachel held out. "I'm Lois Lane."

Houdini chose that moment to barge in again, jumping up first at him and then at Rachel as if demanding to be introduced as well. Clark tried to calm the excited dog,

feeling flustered. Why hadn't he thought to introduce Lois and how was he going to explain any of this? Four years ago, he'd just up and disappeared. That was a long time, particularly in a town like Smallville. There were bound to be questions, most of which he wasn't prepared to answer.

He ran a nervous hand through his hair. "This is Houdini."

A look of surprise flashed across Rachel's features. "I think I remember that name. Didn't Wayne Irig have a dog called Houdini who used to run off all the time? My Dad was still Sheriff then and had to track him down several times. We thought his name was fitting for an escape artist like that dog."

Clark relaxed a bit and chuckled softly as he remembered Houdini's youth. "Oh, that is him all right. But he's changed a lot since then. Still not fond of leashes, but otherwise very loyal."

"Just like his master, I suppose," Rachel patted Clark's shoulder and winked at Lois. "Clark here was kind enough to take me to the senior prom when I needed him most. The other girls were making fun of me because I had no date. Next thing I know, the most handsome boy of the whole football team is asking me out. I have no idea how he even knew what was going on. You should have seen the looks of all the cheerleaders." A wicked grin appeared on her face. She chuckled. "Half the team had been falling all over themselves just to get his attention. But he asked **me**. I knew he was only doing it for a friend, but it was still the best night I ever had."

Clark raised his hands in protest. "You got that all wrong, Rach. I did it for purely selfish reasons. I needed a date, and I certainly wasn't going with one of Lana's many friends only to end up right in the middle of a war."

Rachel rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Keep telling yourself that." She lowered her voice conspiratorially as she addressed Lois. "A piece of advice — that guy's a keeper. Or aren't you two"-?"

"Oh, we most definitely are."

Lois wrapped her arm around Clark's shoulder and placed a kiss on his cheek, leaving him reeling with the implications. Had she just announced that she was his girlfriend? He couldn't help but stare at her, barely managing a proper goodbye as Rachel excused herself and got back to work.

"You can continue to breathe now," Lois whispered into his ear as they were alone again. "I told you I'm not going anywhere."

Clark turned to her, slowly releasing a breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. His heart sank as he looked at her, so beautiful and vibrant, so obviously happy that her face was positively glowing in the light of the setting sun.

He lowered his gaze, staring at his feet. "You know this can't last."

She reached out, tilting his chin back up until he looked at her again. "We agreed not to dwell on that. We wanted to make the most of this, however long it may last. And I promise you that this is not the end, because I will not give up until you're free. If anyone deserves happiness, it's you."

Clark swallowed, feeling tears prick in his eyes that he blinked back. Houdini's tongue tickled his fingers, and he felt the reassuring weight of the dog against his legs.

"How could I do this to you, Lois?" he said thickly. "How could I ask you to wait for me? It's not fair!"

She shook her head and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pulling him into an embrace. "I tell you what's not fair. It's not fair that the man with the biggest heart in the whole wide world should stay alone for the rest of his life. I know exactly how you knew that Rachel needed you. And I'm pretty sure you didn't just go out with her to get back at Lana, whoever that may be."

"Lana and I went out a few times," Clark mumbled. He heaved a small sigh. "Everyone thought we were an item, but it just didn't work out. I had intended to just skip the prom after we broke off. But Rachel had always been a good friend to me. I just couldn't stand the thought that she'd be miserable on prom night, not as long as I could do something about it. We both had a good time that night. It wasn't just about her."

Lois smiled at him. "See? You don't even need your powers to work your magic. Now come on. Let's dance while we still can."

She pulled him toward the music, where several lines of people were moving to the rhythm of a country song. Houdini followed behind them. To Clark's surprise, Lois effortlessly slipped into the routine of the line dance as if she'd never done anything else. Next to him, his mom had materialized seemingly out of nowhere, carrying the remainders of their cotton candy. She lured Houdini with an opulent dinner and gave Clark a gentle nudge in Lois' direction.

It was like a weird and wonderful dream come true.

Suddenly, his stomach felt as if a billion butterflies fluttered through his insides. With clammy fingers and a racing heart, Clark joined the line right at Lois' side.

Her smile lit up the whole dancing area. "What took you so long?"

She moved with a grace that simply stole his breath. And for a moment he wondered if it was possible to love this woman any more than he already did.

"I..." His throat was incredibly dry. "I had... no idea you could dance like that."

She laughed. "Last year I had a girlfriend convince me it was a great way to meet guys."

He swallowed. "And, is it?"

"Well, let's say, I'm dancing with exactly the right guy, so there is no need to further test that theory."

There was a gleam in her eyes as she looked at him that let the world around Clark fade to insignificance. His body still moved to the music, but what he heard and saw was only Lois. Her beautiful smile, her creamy skin and the dark curls of her hair that bobbed with every turn and step she made. He lost himself in the dark pools of her eyes, wishing that the song would never have to end.

He knew that right at this moment, he was getting a taste of what true magic was.

Two Hearts Sawed in Half

The air buzzed with the soft music of crickets. Houdini had stretched out across their legs, snoring lightly and letting out an occasional whimper. Lois pulled the blanket a little tighter and then laid her hand on Clark's that caressed her stomach. She felt so comfortable in his arms.

Mesmerized, Lois watched the millions of stars in the dark blue sky. She'd never seen anything quite like it. The Milky Way stretched across the sky like a huge, glistening ribbon. With bated breath, she waited for a shooting star. There was no question about what her greatest wish was right now.

Lois released a happy sigh. "Please tell me this is not a dream."

"It's not," he confirmed. She felt a slight shift in his position as he moved. "Are you warm enough? The air is getting chilly."

His arm around her shoulders pulled her a little closer and she snuggled against his chest.

"I'm fine." She lifted her head a bit and placed a kiss on his cheek. "I just wish we could stay like this forever."

"Yeah, me too," he said wistfully.

Lois rested her head back on his chest and closed her eyes, listening to the slow rhythm of his breathing, feeling his chest move up and down against her cheek. She concentrated on the warmth of his hand as he drew slow circles on her belly.

His tender caresses evoked memories of his kisses, so gentle and loving. Despite the cool night air, warmth spread through Lois' body and longing settled deep in her belly. She wanted more of this, more of him. Even though every inch of her body was tightly snuggled against his, she wasn't close enough. If they only had tonight, how could they waste a moment of it drowning in the sight of the stars?

The thought startled her and she opened her eyes again. Did she really want to make love to him? And what would

Clark think if she told him? Would he be thrilled at the idea or appalled?

And where was that thought even coming from? They'd just admitted their love for each other and now they shared the most amazing first date she'd ever had. It was wonderful to lie under the stars with Clark's strong arm wrapped around her shoulder while he gently caressed her stomach. No other man she knew would even think to spend a night like this, watching the stars with her until the wee hours of the morning.

But the time they had was so short. In a couple of hours, the sun would come up again and there was a good chance it would bring back Clark's powers. And what then?

"Is something wrong?" Clark whispered.

Lois let out a breath and tears sprang to her eyes. He was so attentive and considerate. Clark always seemed to know when something was on her mind and he genuinely cared about her. With every fiber of her being she could feel how much he loved her. Right now, she almost hated him for that because having to go back to the stage of friendship after such a night of magic was simply unbearable.

"I..." She wanted to brush off his concern, but her throat was suddenly so tight that she just couldn't say the words.

If she told him how much she wanted him, if they went through with it, how were they ever going to go back to being just friends? Back when they'd been at the Corn Festival, she'd said that she believed in finding a solution. But right now the thought terrified her that they wouldn't.

"How do we go on from here?" she said past the lump in her throat.

He exhaled sharply and she could feel him tense next to her. "I don't know. I wish I did. I really wish I did."

His voice cracked as if he, too, was fighting tears. A rush of guilt filled her because she'd told him this wasn't going to be a problem. She'd told him that she didn't mind waiting for him because he was totally worth it. And she stood by that vow, she just hadn't imagined it could be this difficult. She hadn't thought it was possible to love him even more than she already did. But here she was, her heart already mourning the impending loss.

She couldn't believe she longed for him so much that she was even considering breaking her rule number three during a first date. But even though she desperately wanted to, it was impossible to squeeze an entire relationship into a few precious hours.

Watching the stars with him was all she could expect for tonight and that should be enough. It was a wonderful start of a relationship. Only this wasn't a start, but just a

glimpse of what could be. And a part of her wanted so much more than a glimpse.

Lois gave his hand on her stomach a gentle squeeze. She wanted to say something encouraging, but again words failed her.

“The past few hours have been the best of my life,” Clark said quietly. “Even if this might be all we’re going to get, I wouldn’t miss them for the world. In my heart, I’m committed to this. But I can’t make such a promise. I know this is not fair to you, and if you want to back out...”

His hand drifted up and he rolled over a bit, cupping her cheek and sealing her lips with another sweet kiss. Lois opened her lips and allowed herself to get lost in the sensation once more. She savored every moment, trying to commit to memory how his lips tasted, how silky his mouth felt as she caressed him from within. She didn’t want to let go of him.

“I have no intention of backing out,” Lois whispered.

She snuggled even closer to him, breathing in the soft scent of his cologne. The soft music of crickets was accompanied by the steady beat of his heart.

Eventually, Lois drifted off to sleep.

Lois rolled around, slowly coming to. She was comfortably warm and snuggled deeper into the soft blanket covering her. It took her a moment to register that it wasn’t the blanket she’d wrapped around herself as they’d looked at the stars.

With a start she sat up.

She was no longer lying on a picnic blanket, Clark’s arm wrapped around her shoulder.

This was Clark’s old bedroom.

Her gaze drifted toward the clock on his bed stand. It was almost noon. She’d fallen asleep hours ago. Clark must have carried her inside, without his powers and with an injured arm.

Lois pushed the sheets aside and stood up. She gathered fresh clothes and got dressed in a hurry. As she passed the window, she looked out, hoping to catch a glimpse of Clark. Her heart raced. Was it too late already? Were his powers back? Why hadn’t she managed to stay awake a little longer? At least she should have kissed him one last time. Oh, why hadn’t he let her sleep on that picnic blanket?

She wished she could have woken up in Clark’s arms. Now, the sun was high up in the sky and –

Lois pulled the door open and rushed, almost tumbled, down the stairs. With a breathless “Good Morning” she hastened past Martha who was working in the kitchen and then, finally, she was outside.

“Clark!” she yelled at the top of her lungs.

Lois heard barking from the backside of the house and ran in that direction. As she rounded the corner and had a good look at the large field behind the farmhouse, her heart sank.

Clark was hovering several feet above the ground. He juggled a bunch of different items, ranging from baskets to gardening tools or other stuff that could be found on a farm. Now and then he directed a burst of freezing breath at the items, which had them glistening in the sun.

Awestruck, Lois watched her very private performance of MagiKal. She barely registered as Houdini joined her. Her fingers caressed his soft fur, while she watched several ice sculptures appear next to Clark. He moved slower than usual, giving her the time to see the sculptures grow. Using his heat vision, he carved lines and edges into the ice. While they looked impressive already, they were nowhere near as perfect as his usual work.

Lois frowned. Had something changed after the exposure to the crystals? Did they just have to expose him long enough? Her stomach clenched with dread. After seeing Clark’s reaction to the green rock, she couldn’t imagine getting that stuff near him just another minute.

But did that mean they could never be more than friends? Lois sucked in a breath. She knelt beside Houdini and buried her face in the dog’s warm fur, reminding herself that being Clark’s friend was already a wonderful experience. Still, her heart yearned for more.

As she looked up again, Clark’s feet were back on the ground and he approached her. Lois got up and, blinking back tears, plastered a broad smile on her face.

“That was fantastic.”

He smiled back, his expression a bit more subdued. “Thanks.”

A few feet from her he stopped in his tracks rather abruptly and bit his lower lip. Then he stuffed his hands into his pockets as if to keep himself from reaching out. Houdini darted toward his master and greeted him as if he hadn’t seen Clark in weeks. With half a smile, he withdrew his hands and petted the dog fondly.

When he looked back up at Lois, he seemed uncomfortable. “My powers came back with sunrise.”

Lois heaved a resigned sigh. “And you just had another hiccup, I suppose.”

“What?” Clark blinked, apparently confused. “Oh, no, this was training. I do that every morning to be able to use my powers creatively once the hiccup starts.”

Lois stared at him. “So you didn’t have a hiccup yet?”

She felt hope stir inside her chest. It was foolish, she knew. But she couldn’t help it.

Clark let out a breath. “It’s still too early to tell. Don’t get your hopes up to high. I’m sorry, Lois. I know I’m

asking a lot of you. I'd understand if this is too much for you. We had a wonderful time."

She closed the distance and pressed her face into the crook of his neck. Houdini brushed against her leg, pushing her a little closer to Clark.

"Yes, we did," she whispered.

He returned her hug lightly. As she looked up, she could see that his eyes were squeezed shut. He held his breath, probably afraid that the emotions coursing through him right now would cause his powers to act up again. Even so, Lois couldn't bring herself to let go of him yet, and he didn't ask her to.

She inhaled the soft scent of his aftershave, enjoyed the warmth that spread through her as she was so close to him. How were they supposed to get back to being mere friends? She didn't want to wait for him, though she knew that she would, however long it might take.

Her heart broke inside her chest. Tears filled her eyes. "Do you think Dorothy left her red shoes somewhere in Kansas, when she returned? I'd love to click these heels together right about now."

He stepped back and laughed. "You're not suggesting we stay here and go looking for them, are you?" He cupped her cheek and wiped off a tear. "But I admit it's a nice dream."

How to Escape a Straightjacket

MagiKal skated on the thin layer of ice he'd created right in the middle of Centennial Park. Though he pretended not to notice them, he was aware of the murmurs of awe around him. The burst of freezing breath finally died down, leaving him panting. The area he'd frozen was about half the size of an ice hockey field. But already the edges were melting in the unusually hot November sun.

The prickling in the back of MagiKal's neck still hadn't stopped. He felt his eyes burn, announcing what was coming next. Before his heat vision went out of control, MagiKal surreptitiously checked the audience. She wasn't here. His heart clenched with sorrow, but there was also a pang of relief accompanied by a heavy dose of guilt.

Though he absolutely didn't feel like it, he plastered a smile on his face, hoping to convince his audience that he was enjoying this. The burning in his eyes intensified to the point of becoming uncontainable and he quickly pulled the cones from his pockets, directing the rampant blasts of heat vision at them. Instantly, they burst into flames, and he started to juggle the cones, his feet continuing to draw circles on the icy ground. He picked up speed and spun in a pirouette while all cones were in the air. When he stopped, he caught them easily.

Just as he wondered what he would do next if the hiccup didn't subside soon, the prickling stopped and he felt in control again. MagiKal breathed a sigh of relief and

came to a halt in front of the now cheering audience. The crowd seemed to have even grown since he'd last had a look at it. He smiled for them until his face hurt, waving a hand while silently counting to twenty. All he really wanted to do was leave as quickly as he could. Clark counted another three seconds, then he did a somersault and shot up into the air.

He landed in a quiet alley a few blocks from his impromptu stage and spun back into his usual clothes. A ball of fur jumped into him and would have pushed him to the ground if it weren't for his powers. Clark greeted his canine friend by scratching his favorite spot.

"Hey, buddy." A heavy sigh escaped his lips and he kneeled down, burying his face in the dog's fur.

Houdini whimpered softly and took a step back, tilting his head as he looked at Clark. The flopping of his tail stopped and he lowered his head, approaching his master slowly. Though he attempted a smile for Houdini, Clark knew there was no use trying to fool his dog.

He felt a gentle nudge of Houdini's snout against his chest. The setter started wagging his tail again and barked at him.

Play with me, he seemed to say.

"I'm sorry," Clark stroked the dog's fur and heaved another sigh. "I know I've been moody ever since we left Smallville."

Actually, he'd been moody ever since the hiccups had returned. Lois and his Mom had been in town when he'd first felt the prickling in the back of his neck. The hiccup had been strong enough to force Clark away from Smallville to an even more deserted area, where his powers had erupted in an intense blast.

Lois had returned from her shopping tour with Martha shortly after he'd made it back to the farm. She'd joined him in the backyard with an adorable, yet slightly shy smile on her face. He'd seen the silent question in her eyes, the hint of hope that his powers were still under his control.

He hadn't been able to tell her the hiccups were back. He hadn't wanted to see her smile crumble. She'd probably noticed something was wrong because they'd tiptoed around each other from then on, neither of them really knowing how to continue, no matter what they'd told each other earlier.

The few days in Smallville had been such a pleasant dream. Returning to reality was much harder than he'd expected.

Their last day on the farm had been filled with awkward moments, so much so that he'd come up with all sorts of excuses to leave early. Lois hadn't even protested when he'd said goodbye, though he'd seen the longing in

her gaze. It was the same kind of longing that tore his own heart to shreds.

“She wasn’t there, Houdini.” Clark’s throat tightened as he said the words. “She must know by now that the hiccups are back. I don’t know how to face her again. How will she react after all these weeks?”

An unpleasant flutter stirred deep in his belly. He knew he’d been gone far longer than the way back from Smallville could reasonably explain. He’d tried to make up his mind about what the return of his powers and his hiccups would mean for their relationship. Also, after the first strong hiccup, he’d wanted to make sure that he could still deal with his loss of control in the same manner as he had before. He’d been so scared that things had turned worse after his second exposure to the crystals. Fortunately, they hadn’t. But now Clark feared that he’d driven Lois away, while at the same time, he couldn’t bring himself to tell her in person that he was back.

“Are you two going to sit there forever?” a familiar voice asked.

Startled, Clark looked up. Lois was standing a few feet from him, arms aimbo and tapping her foot. He stood up, dusting off his pants while Houdini rushed toward her to greet her enthusiastically.

“You’re here,” Clark managed hoarsely.

He took in her shy smile, the dark curls of her hair and the soft curves of her body. From his dance with Lois and a night spent under the stars, he remembered all too well how she felt snuggled against him. For a moment, he couldn’t breathe or think or do anything really but stand there and stare at her. She was so beautiful. He wanted to reach out and touch her.

“I missed you,” she said quietly.

“Missed you, too,” he murmured. He bit his lip, stared down at his feet and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his pants to keep from doing something risky. “The hiccups are back.”

“I know, Clark.” She let out a breath. “I saw you perform in Centennial Park when my cab drove past. I wanted to ask the driver to stop, but then I figured we’d have a better chance of talking if I’d go looking for the alley you’d return to.”

He stared at her incredulously. “That’s how you found me?”

She gave him a sly smile. “You’re not very creative when it comes to choosing your hiding spots.”

He chuckled uneasily and ran a hand through his hair. “I... uh... I guess not.”

Lois took a step toward him. “I was afraid you weren’t going to come back. You were gone for so long...”

Clark shrugged and heaved a long sigh. “I wanted to make sure that I could still safely be MagiKal. The first

few hiccups... well, I guess that all these emotions needed an out.”

Though he was telling her the truth, it felt like he was just making up excuses. Again a strong wave of guilt washed over him, leaving him unable to really meet her eyes. But it wasn’t the only reason he avoided looking at her. Now that he’d gotten a taste of what being able to love her was like, his powers seemed even more like an impenetrable wall that surrounded him, locked him in and kept everyone else out.

As he dared a quick peek in her direction, he realized that she seemed to be shy around him, too. His heart sank. He wanted to turn back time, just to be able to pull her into an embrace. He’d even face another exposure to the green crystal if it would help dispel the awkwardness between them. Clark knew it was his fault. Perhaps he shouldn’t have let things go as far as they had, fooling them both into believing they had a chance at a normal relationship. All he’d accomplished was to inflict mutual hurt.

His gaze drifted toward Houdini who was standing between them, panting in the heat of the day and wagging his tail. Soulful brown eyes looked back at him, quietly reminding him that he wasn’t completely alone. If only the dog had a piece of advice.

“Are you okay?” Pain and guilt reflected in Lois’ gaze as their eyes met.

She reached out to take his hand. Every brain cell screamed a warning not to let her touch him again. With all the emotions running through him, there was no telling what would happen. But he found himself unable to move, as if she’d cast a spell on him. His breath caught in his throat. The power she had over him was scary and exhilarating at the same time.

As her fingers closed around his hand, the contact sent sparks of electricity through him. An incredible warmth spread up his arm.

“Yes, I think so,” he said roughly.

Cautiously, he ran his thumb over the back of her hand, wishing he could do so much more.

Clark took a deep breath. “I don’t know how to go on from here.”

She cracked a weak smile. “Neither do I, to be honest. Smallville has been very special. It will be hard to take a step back.”

Clark hung his head. “Make that several steps,” he said dejectedly.

Her finger brushed against his chin and she tilted it up until he looked at her. “I told you I don’t mind waiting for you. Why don’t we start with what we know how to do?”

He frowned. “And what would that be?”

Her smile broadened. “Being an investigative team! This heat wave in November is really odd. Thanksgiving is in about two weeks and we still have triple digits.”

Clark couldn’t help but laugh. “Now you’re suggesting we investigate the weather? Who are you and what happened to Lois Lane?”

“She’s in love with a magician.” Playfully, she slapped his arm. “That means everything is possible!”

Houdini barked his approval and darted off toward the street. He seemed to know that they were on a new mission, though Clark couldn’t help but think that investigating the heat wave was just a ploy to lure him out of his snail shell. Well, perhaps some luring was just what he needed.

“God, I hope you are right.”

Pull a Rabbit From a Hat

As they walked down the street Lois stole frequent glances at Clark. His stance was more relaxed, though he had his hands stuffed into the pockets of his pants once again. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips as if he found something amusing. It was so good to see him smile again, even if it was only a ghost of the smiles he was capable of.

Lois loved it when he smiled. It warmed her heart. She wanted to reach out and take his hand in hers. But suddenly, she remembered there was something important she had yet to tell him about. Her guilty conscience made her pull back the hand that had already been inching toward him.

Instead Lois curled it into a fist. Her gaze drifted toward Houdini who was trudging along, happily wagging his tail. Thankfully the dog didn’t know that she’d gone behind Clark’s back. Lois bit her lip. She should tell Clark and come clean before she’d hurt him, not just physically but emotionally too.

Clark turned toward her. “Where are we going?”

“The mayor is holding a press conference,” Lois mumbled. “They’re announcing which measures they’re going to implement to deal with this heat wave and...”

She trailed off as she realized what she was saying. What was she doing dragging him to a press conference that she was only going to attend because annoying things like that belonged to her job? Hadn’t she spent half the morning complaining how pointless and boring this assignment was?

Moreover, a press conference meant lots of people, which was exactly the kind of story Clark couldn’t take on. She didn’t suppose dogs would be allowed into the city hall to attend a press conference and it was a little late to try and convince anyone that Houdini was a guard dog.

Way to go, Lois, she thought grumpily. As if Clark needed another reminder of all the things he couldn’t have

or do! This was just stupid and unnecessarily cruel! Certainly not the right way to make amends for what she’d done behind his back.

Lois stopped in her tracks and pinched the bridge of her nose. Clark made another two steps before he noticed that she was no longer coming along and returned to her. He looked at her with curiosity rather than anger, which made it even harder to face him.

Her gaze involuntarily drifted toward Houdini, who’d also stopped and looked back at them expectantly. Lois had the strangest feeling, that the expression of the dog carried a quiet warning not to hurt his master again. Or maybe that was just her guilty conscience talking.

Lois exhaled slowly. “I’m sorry. I guess, I didn’t really think this through.”

As she mustered the courage to look at Clark, she saw a smile flash across his face.

“Never mind.” He winked at her. “It’s the thought that counts.”

Lois tried to smile back, but she just couldn’t get her facial muscles to work accordingly. She felt strangely detached, lost in a way that was difficult to grasp and even harder to put into words. He was so kind, and she was... Her gut curled into a tight knot. Clark didn’t even know that she’d taken the crystals back to Metropolis. He believed that she’d gone shopping with Martha. But they’d done something else entirely in a very desperate attempt to solve the mystery surrounding Clark’s power bursts.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time. Though, as she saw his loving smile and the warm gleam of his eyes that carried no reproach, she started to question the wisdom of her decision. The memories of Clark writhing on the ground in agony were just too fresh and terrifying.

She and Martha had agreed not to tell Jonathan. But now she found that she couldn’t tell Clark either. She bit her lip that suddenly quivered and she felt like she’d burst into tears any moment.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” His hand cupped her cheek, his thumb gently wiping away the single tear that escaped her. “I don’t mind waiting for you outside the building. I can hear everything from the outside and then we’ll write the article together.”

She drew a shaky breath. “But...”

He smiled his dazzling smile and her breath caught in her throat. God, he was handsome. She couldn’t think straight when he looked at her like that. All she really wanted to do was lean her head against his chest and have him wrap his arms around her. Maybe, if she felt his warmth, she would find the strength to tell him about her transgression. But if she did, would he still smile at her the same way? Would he ever talk to her again?

“Come on, you wouldn’t want to miss a press conference, would you?” He held out his hand, taking hers in a light grasp.

She could tell that he was being extra careful, his fingers barely closing around hers for fear of hurting her. Still, his touch went through her like a bolt of electricity. Words failing her, she followed him, still attempting to smile at his sudden eagerness. She couldn’t really fathom why anyone would want to go to such a press conference. But with Clark at her side, even the dullest assignment seemed like something to look forward to. If only, he could actually be at her side.

Houdini stood at a crosswalk, waiting for them until the lights turned green. Together they walked across the street and a moment later, climbed the steps to city hall.

Lois gave Clark a pained smile as he leaned his back against one of the columns. “I’ll be just a moment.”

“Don’t worry about me.” Though his smile was reassuring, it cut through her like a knife.

Here they were again, Clark waiting outside, while life happened somewhere else. She couldn’t do that to him, not today, not when she’d just found him, not when her suggestion of investigating this heat wave had just been an excuse to have him work with her again. If she went inside now, they wouldn’t be working together.

“I won’t go. The conference has already started anyway, and I just can’t leave you here like a dog, who has to wait for his master.” She grimaced. “No offense, Houdini.”

Clark laughed softly. “None taken, I’m sure.” He laid a hand on her shoulder. “Lois, you can’t stop working, just because I can’t follow you everywhere.”

“But today…” Her throat tightened so much that she felt unable to continue

He brushed a strand of hair back behind her ear. “Don’t you think I know you just suggested investigating the weather to drag me out of the hole I’ve been ready to hide in? You were right, too. I can’t wallow in self-pity for the rest of my life. We may not find a solution to my power problems. But perhaps there is another way. You did so much for me already that I never believed I could have. We just start over and see where it leads us. Go on, I don’t mind waiting here for you.”

“But I mind.” Lois swallowed hard. “I haven’t seen you in weeks, Clark. I don’t want to waste a minute listening to that press conference, when I could be with you.”

He shook his head. “You can’t put your life on hold indefinitely.”

She pursed her lips and gave him a stern look. “But for today, I can. Don’t let us go inside. Let’s listen from here. I know you can tell me everything that’s spoken inside.”

His eyes widened. And then, slowly a grin spread across his features. “Okay. But just remember that you won’t be able to ask questions. Let’s move to a position where we won’t be sticking out like a sore thumb, though.”

Clark led her to a more hidden location, where Lois even had a good view of the stage, where the mayor was just talking. Houdini accompanied them, running around them in circles as if he wanted to make sure they wouldn’t part again. Mesmerized, Lois watched Clark as his eyes lost their focus and he craned his neck a bit.

“They’re just talking about the blackouts,” Clark murmured. “Lex Luthor is speaking now. He says that his nuclear power plant will be operational soon. Apparently, the approval from the utility commission is as good as granted.”

“But there were concerns over the environmental impact,” Lois whispered surprised. “The last thing I heard was that the commission wanted more tests and that it’d take well into the next year to run them all.”

“Seems like Luthor would consider this heat wave a lucky coincidence,” Clark mused.

“Maybe it’s not a coincidence,” Lois muttered.

Clark raised his brows. “You’re not suggesting that he causes it, do you? How on Earth would he accomplish that?”

She grinned at him. “How on Earth do you fly?”

He looked at her, mouth agape. Then a big grin spread across his lips. He laughed and shook his head. Then he placed a kiss on her forehead. Lois felt her heart burst with happiness.

Like a rabbit that a magician had pulled from his hat, a new sense of hope appeared out of nowhere. Suddenly, Lois couldn’t help but believe that everything might fall into place after all.

Magic and Miracles

The screeching of metal was deafening, drowning out the screams of terror. A low rumble seemed to shake the earth and MagiKal sped on.

He had to make it in time, he had to… His hands touched the front of the train, still hot from the relentless sun, and he pushed hard. So close to the machine, he felt awfully small. What made him think he could stop a derailed train? In the darkness, he’d tried to ignore how many coaches the train had. Every single one was full of people, so many lives were at stake.

He pushed even harder, giving it his full strength. The metal gave way under his hands, their shapes now imprinted on the train. But it slowed, gradually. Screams turned to murmurs of hope and surprise. The metal was still screeching its protest, perhaps even more insistent than before.

MagiKal gritted his teeth, the ringing in his ears became overwhelming. But eventually even this noise died down, leaving only cheers of joy that assaulted his ears and slammed into his head with the force of a sledgehammer.

He clutched at his ears, his legs buckling slightly underneath him. Blinking, he tried to clear his head enough to move away from the cacophony of sounds that assaulted him. Sirens, screams, laughter, clapping, it was all too much.

He darted up, speeding away from it all until the atmosphere thinned to the point where there was no longer air to carry sound.

Clark breathed a sigh of relief. Tremors ran through his body, fueled by the rush of adrenaline or whatever equivalent his body had. He had succeeded, had saved hundreds of lives. Tension left his body, transforming into a smile that spread across his face and seemed even harder to contain than his occasionally out-of-control powers.

It took some time before Clark felt composed and ready to return home. He sped back, taking a quick detour to check on the people he had saved, finding only minor injuries. He didn't slow until he reached the deserted area of the junkyard and landed a few feet from his trailer.

Within seconds, Houdini was all over him. As he stroked the dog, he picked up a second heartbeat, a now familiar and soothing sound that made his own heart flutter.

Lois stepped out of the shadows. "I was hoping you'd come back. What you did with stopping the train was amazing."

He gaped at her. "How do you know?"

"I heard the news on the radio."

His heart missed a beat as a surge of panic washed over him. Had anyone seen him? Would his actions start another debate like the one after he'd rescued people from the burning building? Before he could voice his fears, he felt Lois' hand on his arm.

"They're calling it a miracle," she said quietly. "Nobody has any explanation how this train stopped after derailling."

Clark cracked a small smile. "That's good."

Her forehead wrinkled in a slight frown. "It took you a long time to come back here. Did you have another hiccup?"

Clark pondered that for a moment, then he shook his head. "It wasn't that exactly. The sounds got overwhelming, so I flew somewhere quiet. But none of my other powers went out of control, which usually happens if I try to suppress the bursts. So, no, I don't think it was a hiccup. There was no tingling in the back of my neck, either."

Houdini started for the door of the trailer, jumping up to indicate that he wanted to go inside. Clark felt a pang of guilt. He had almost forgotten that the poor dog hadn't had dinner yet. Rummaging through the pockets of his pants to find the key, he followed Houdini.

As he turned the key, he looked back at Lois. "Do you want to come inside while I feed him?"

"That would be great." She beamed at him. "Jimmy turned up a ton of paperwork that I could use your help with. I must have called every scientist in Metropolis, but so far, nobody has an explanation for this heat wave."

Clark pulled the bag of dog food out of a shelf and prepared Houdini's dinner. The setter dug in eagerly, almost pulling the bowl from Clark's hands as he set it down in front of the hungry dog.

Clark straightened and gestured for Lois to sit down at the small table. "I don't know what to make of what I heard while listening in on Luthor. He said that maybe if it turned another degree warmer, the utility commission would become more reasonable. That really does sound like he's involved somehow." He sat down on the other side. "Or it might just have been a jest, and seriously, how would anyone influence the weather?"

Lois gave a shrug and pushed a few files in his direction. Her other hand reached for his, giving him a gentle squeeze. She smiled at him, a wonderful, heartwarming smile that made his heart flutter even more. But then he froze. What was he doing, sitting in the trailer with Lois only two feet from him, if that far. It wouldn't take much to lean in and kiss her and part of him desperately wanted to do just that.

But what if he had another hiccup? What if Houdini wouldn't warn him in time, because he was more concerned with devouring his food?

Clark pulled his hand back and stood, moving back to a safer position, where she wouldn't be in his direct line of sight, where he couldn't accidentally -

"Don't do this to yourself." He felt her hand closing around his again. Had she somehow moved with superspeed? His heart raced in his chest, and he couldn't bring himself to look at her. "Sit back down, Clark. I'm not afraid of you. It's going to be all right, I promise."

He winced and looked back up at her, finding her reassuring smile. Gently, she pulled at his hand, luring him to sit down again. He was helpless to resist, but his heart kept hammering in his chest. Surreptitiously, he cast glances at Houdini, who was still eating like he hadn't had anything in days.

Taking a deep breath, Clark tried to calm himself. With trembling hands, he pulled the folder closer and leafed through the pages. The motion helped him focus and bring his racing heart back under control.

Jimmy had compiled statistics about the weather in the past few decades, maps of the hottest spots in Metropolis and all sorts of maps. Subway trains, power supply lines, water pipes, gas pipes, sewers all across the city and all sorts of other stuff Clark wouldn't even have thought about. There was no doubt that Jimmy had done a thorough job. The only question was, would it help?

He looked up at Lois. "Did you find anything here?"

She shrugged. "Not so far, but it is too much to go through alone. Actually, even the two of us might need the whole night. You couldn't get us some take out, could you? That Chinese place you found the last time was fantastic and..." She trailed off and her eyes focused on his cheeks that had grown uncomfortably warm. "Wait a moment, don't tell me, that food probably was from China, wasn't it?"

Clark grinned. "Maybe. I guess I could—"

He was just about to get up, when he felt it, the tingle in the back of his neck. A wave of panic surged through him and he wanted to move away, but then the world blurred around him. Things lost their shape as they became transparent before his eyes. He saw Lois' bones, the insides of his cupboards and the papers on the table blurred into one big picture that swam before his eyes. Realization hit him, before he squeezed his eyes shut and stumbled back.

He heard Houdini's desperate barks and felt the dog tug at his sleeve. Houdini pulled Clark with him. Then Clark felt hands on his other arm, guiding him in the same direction.

"Lois, it's dangerous, you shouldn't..."

"I'm not leaving you alone with this," she whispered.

Her breathing sounded a bit labored; her voice was laced with pain and despair as she clung to his arm. She pressed her body against his, close enough that he could feel the beat of her heart against his arm. He focused on the sound and heard the slight flutter that filled him with a sense of peace and belonging.

The ground suddenly disappeared underneath him and he almost took a nose-dive out of his trailer. Clark caught himself on his hands and knees, but his focus never shifted from the soothing sounds that were uniquely Lois. And the prickling in the back of his neck faded.

Lois was sitting next to him, as the world slowly swam back into focus.

He gave her a tentative smile. "For a hiccup, this wasn't so bad."

Houdini rushed toward him and tried to lavish dog kisses on him. With a laugh, he fended the dog off. Lois stood beside him and reached out to help him up. As he took her hand, Clark wondered whether it had been her presence that had dampened the hiccup?

He pushed the thought aside. There was no use losing himself in false hopes. It might have been just a fluke. Besides, there were more pressing matters.

"I think I know what's causing this heat wave. There has to be a leak in the nuclear power plant."

Neither Wand nor Broomstick

"Congratulations, Lois and Clark!" Perry beamed as he held out the newest edition of the Daily Planet.

LEAK IN POWER PLANT CAUSES HEATWAVE, the headline said in bold letters.

The whole newsroom cheered and Perry patted Clark's shoulder, while grinning at Lois.

"That was one fine piece of journalism," he praised.

"Ladies and gentlemen, meet the hottest team in town."

Lois glanced over at her partner, who shifted his weight and frequently checked with Houdini. The dog was still at ease. Unlike Clark, the setter seemed to enjoy the commotion if his wagging tail was any indication. He had gotten at least six people to scratch his favorite spot and now was trying his luck with Cat whose preference for close encounters obviously didn't include dogs.

Clark tried his best to get Houdini to back off. Lois felt a sudden pang of guilt as she watched Clark squirm, desperately trying to get to Houdini without coming too close to anyone else. It was near impossible with so many people in the newsroom. Today wasn't just the celebration for their front-page story, but also an introduction of a new fragrance that marketing had set up.

If Lois had known about the event, she might not have dragged Clark into such a crowded newsroom.

She'd used all her creativity just to get him to attend, knowing that he wouldn't come for the applause. Though if anyone deserved it, it was Clark. Without him she wouldn't have drawn the connection between the nuclear power plant and the heat wave. Clark had also stumbled onto the biggest lead of her entire career.

Though they lacked evidence, they were almost certain that behind the facade of the wealthy philanthropist, Lex Luthor was really a crime lord. The things Clark had heard while listening in on him painted Luthor's actions in a completely different light. And they'd also found hints that he'd been involved in Toni Taylor's ploy with the Toasters.

If even half of their suspicions were true, Clark deserved much more than just applause for uncovering Luthor's schemes.

After another round of friendly pats on the back, Perry ended the impromptu party. As the crowd dissolved, he approached Clark who just straightened a bit, one hand still pressed against Houdini's side.

"I've said it before and I'm saying it again." Perry laid a hand on Clark's shoulder, seeming oblivious to the way Clark flinched under his touch.

Lois' heart went out to her partner and once again she cursed herself for putting him through this. She'd wanted him to see how much people appreciated what he did, she wanted to give him some normalcy. All she'd accomplished was making him uncomfortable.

"We could use someone like you here at the Planet," Perry continued. "Just say the word and I'll hire you from the spot. You and Lois are the best reporting team I've ever seen."

Clark blushed a little and adjusted his glasses. "Thank you, Mr. White, but..." He swallowed and glanced down at Houdini. Then his gaze drifted over the crowded newsroom. "It's not possible."

Perry let out a huff of exasperation. "Great shades of Elvis, I'm sure we could come to an agreement concerning this dog of yours."

Something flickered in Clark's gaze, hope maybe? He hesitated a moment as if considering the offer to work here with Houdini by his side. Lois felt her breath catch in her throat. She mentally crossed her fingers, hoping and praying that he'd say yes. But as Clark's eyes clouded over and he shook his head, she knew it wasn't going to happen.

Clark looked like something inside him was dying. Still, he put a rueful smile on his lips and did his best to appear casual. "I really appreciate the offer, but right now I can't commit to a full-time job. Bye, Chief. And thanks again. That really means a lot."

As he turned to leave, the slight slump to Clark's shoulders and the way his head hung just a bit lower gave away his true feelings. Lois knew that the job would have been his dream come true.

Once again she felt a strong surge of guilt ripple through her. She'd meant to make him happy, but instead Clark looked as miserable as she'd ever seen him.

Perry stared after him and threw up his arms in frustration. "Would anyone talk some sense into the man?"

Grumbling something incomprehensible, he turned and left as well.

Lois stood and looked after Clark, who had almost made it to the staircase. He must feel so lost, walking away from what he truly wanted and trying to appear as if he did it of his own free will. And for a moment, Lois had the strangest sensation that Perry's offer had pulled out the rug from under her as well.

Even Houdini seemed to sense his master's distress. The dog was tagging along with his head low and his tail hanging limply.

Lois ran after Clark. She'd almost caught up to him when she heard a voice.

"Have you tried my new fragrance?"

A woman sprayed something right in Clark's face, and only a moment later in Lois's. She sneezed before she managed to lay a hand on Clark's shoulder.

"Please wait."

He turned to her, the smile on his lips looking a bit forced. "Lois, you know I can't stay here much longer."

"Then I'll come with you." She linked arms with him and pulled him toward the stairs, though she would have preferred taking the elevator.

The thought of riding down with him, a moment of privacy in the hustle and bustle of the day, seemed quite enticing all of a sudden.

Her gaze drifted toward his muscular forearms. Why hadn't she noticed before that his sleeves were rolled up? Her mouth ran dry, and it took her a moment to remember why she had run after Clark.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

His expression softened. "Hey, it's fine. I know you lured me here to take part in the celebration. That means a lot to me and I'm glad you tricked me into coming."

He reached out to brush a strand of hair behind her ear. Lois' cheek tingled as he cupped it and ran his thumb along her skin. Though she could see the pain in his gaze, the disappointment of having to refuse the job offer of his life, she also realized that he meant what he said. He was actually glad he had come.

She wasn't sure she understood how he could accept his fate with such grace. But his genuine smile dispelled any remaining doubts, comforting her like a tender hug.

Her heart fluttered with excitement. She took in the loving gleam in his eyes that sent pleasant shivers down her spine. Clark's lips drew her gaze and she was unable to resist the temptation.

Lois leaned in and wrapped her arms around his shoulders before she pressed her lips to his. Kissing him was just like she remembered, better even. His mouth was soft and silky, he tasted like chocolate and coffee, leaving her breathless.

She didn't want to stop kissing him. A rush of desire settled deep in her belly and suddenly she wanted nothing more than to get out of the newsroom and take things to a more private place. Because at least one of them was seriously overdressed.

Love Potion

The moment she linked her arm with his, the clouds darkening his thoughts vanished. He was vaguely aware of Houdini leaning against him to offer his comfort and he was grateful for it.

The world started to spin around him as Lois pulled him a little closer. Every inch of skin she touched seemed to tingle with sensation.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

He turned to her and smiled. “Hey, it’s fine. I know you lured me here to take part in the celebration. That means a lot to me and I’m glad you tricked me into coming.”

His heart skipped a beat as he realized it was true. He’d meant to ease her mind, but as he looked around the newsroom he no longer felt out of place. Warmth flooded his chest as he remembered the cheers of his fellow reporters congratulating them on their front-page article.

Perry wanted him to work here permanently. And just a moment ago he’d been devastated that he’d had to decline. But did it really matter? Didn’t the offer show what he was able to accomplish despite his differences?

Clark was unable to hold himself back, he had to reach out and brush a strand of hair behind her ear. As he cupped Lois’ cheek and ran his thumb along the tender skin, he couldn’t help but imagine what it would be like to kiss her again.

Before he knew what was happening, hot and pliant lips were on his. The brush of her tongue sent him reeling as she demanded entrance to his mouth. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pressed her body flush against his.

His breath caught in his throat and warmth spread through his body. Clark felt like he was floating though he could still sense the slight pressure of the ground against his feet. The last time he’d kissed her like that, he’d been without his powers.

Now, however, his heightened senses multiplied the experience by what seemed like a thousand times.

He was lost, riding on the crest of a powerful wave that just swept him off his feet. It was dizzying, intoxicating in a way that he almost felt the pain of withdrawal as she pulled back.

Her dazzling smile made up for the loss. Clark swallowed against a dry throat, searching for something to say, when Houdini’s bark brought him back to reality.

They were still in a crowded newsroom. Clark looked down at his dog, who eyed him with what he could only describe as mild curiosity. At least, Houdini didn’t seem agitated. But the rush of guilt was no less intense. With Lois in his arms, Clark had simply forgotten about the dangers.

His arm trembled as he wrapped it around her shoulders and pulled Lois with him toward the stairs. Suddenly, he couldn’t leave the Daily Planet quickly enough.

As they walked downstairs, he took deep breaths, trying to sort his jumbled thoughts.

“I should probably spend some more time looking into Luthor, don’t you think? I believe I’ve heard people on the streets talking about a character they called ‘the Boss’. What if this mysterious ‘Boss’ really is Lex Luthor?”

“Clark...” Her voice was soft and just a tad sultry.

She licked her lips, sending his thoughts spiraling right out of control. The gleam in her eyes translated into a rush of heat shooting right through his body. He inhaled sharply, trying to think about something else, anything else than her velvet lips and how perfectly she fit in his arms.

“I...”

He didn’t know what to do. It was either dive into a new round of fruitless babbling or run away as fast as he could. He didn’t much like either of the two options, but as long as Lois was looking at him like that, he couldn’t think straight. Clark ran a nervous hand through his hair, and glanced down at Houdini, almost hoping that the dog would finally announce another hiccup so that he would be forced to leave without coming across as rude.

Lois laid a hand on his chest and smiled at him. “We could always play hooky. After breaking that last story, I believe we’d deserve it, too.”

Clark released another deep breath and fought to keep his wits about him. He had no idea what had gotten into Lois, or into him for that matter. Fond memories of their date in Smallville flooded his mind and he realized that he’d love nothing more than to say yes. But the rational part of him knew it would be too dangerous to give into his desires.

He smiled for Lois, though he felt it falter on his lips. “That would be nice. But I believe that we should find out as much about Luthor as we can before he suspects we’re onto him. See you tomorrow.”

He leaned forward and brushed a quick kiss against her cheek to somehow soften the blow that he was essentially running out on her. Clark stuffed his hands into the pockets of his pants and let out a low whistle, calling for Houdini. It wasn’t necessary, because the dog was already at his side, ready to warn him whenever the next hiccup would occur. Given his rampant emotions, he was pretty sure that it couldn’t be long now.

Hours later, Clark returned to his trailer. Houdini trudged along wearily after spending most of the day on the street. He’d heard more rumors, more hints that their hunch was right. But he still lacked evidence. Luthor was smart. It would probably take a while to prove his connection to Metropolis’ underworld.

To Clark’s surprise, his powers hadn’t acted up despite his emotions being a mess. He’d be lucky if Lois still talked to him after he’d abandoned her in front of the Daily Planet. She’d been so kind to him and how did he repay her? His gut clenched into a tight knot as he thought about apologizing for his behavior. How was he supposed to put into words what went through his head, when he had a hard time getting a grip on his feelings himself?

“Finally!” Lois’ husky voice made him stop dead in his tracks. “I was beginning to think that you’d let me wait here all night!”

Clark looked up, his heart hammering in his chest. She didn’t sound angry, so he hoped that was a good sign.

“Lois, what are you doing here?” He forced a smile on his lips, racking his mind how he was going to approach her now that she was standing right in front of him.

“I missed you,” she purred.

Her hands wandered to the front of her coat, and she untied it. The smile fell from Clark’s face as his jaw dropped around the same time as her coat did. It revealed a mind-blowing amount of creamy skin, most of it barely covered by translucent fabric. A deep plunging neckline drew his gaze right toward the soft curves of her bosom. Clark had a hard time forming a coherent thought.

“Lois…” he ground out.

She started swaying to inaudible music and pulled a veil out from somewhere, wrapped it around his shoulders and pulled him closer. Clark was lost as he watched her shake her body.

He felt her rummage through the pockets of his pants and pull out a key. Her dance sucked him in until he barely registered that she opened the door and dragged him into his trailer. Clark stumbled along, trapped in her spell. One tantalizing veil after another appeared, teasing him, bewitching him until she dropped it.

At some point Clark managed to feed Houdini, mainly because the dog was adamant about having dinner after their long day.

But her dance continued to entrance him. And then, suddenly, it was no longer just a dance. Fervent lips found his. Clark melted into her embrace, losing any sense of time. Lois’ hands were everywhere, playing with the hem of his shirt, lifting it up, and drawing slow circles on his back.

Her touch sent sparks of pleasure through him, fueled his desire and made his breath come in panting gasps. He wanted nothing more than to sweep her up into his arms and carry her to his bed. What he wouldn’t give to make gentle love to her tonight.

Her kiss turned hungrier. She nibbled on his lower lip and started to search for his belt buckle. A shiver of anticipation ran down his spine. But as he felt her hands on him, he also realized that this was going much too fast.

The more rational part of his brain gave a warning. He pulled back, trying to catch his breath.

“We should stop,” he rasped.

She gave him a sly smile, fumbling with a clasp in the back of her harem’s costume. Clark’s throat ran dry, and he wasn’t sure whether to follow his desire to watch her or

squeeze his eyes shut as tightly as he could. Was she really going to undress for him?

It was both a dream come true and a terrible nightmare.

“Come on, sweetie, you know you want it, too,” she cooed.

That he did. But it wasn’t right. Something wasn’t right with Lois. She’d never been so forward. And there was even more not right with himself. He couldn’t simply enjoy intimacy without considering the consequences. Besides, this wasn’t something they should do on a whim, if at all. Their relationship was too new, too uncertain to take such a huge step.

He clenched his hands into fists, fighting for some semblance of control.

“I’m not ready,” he whispered. “We should wait.”

The more primal part of his brain didn’t agree. It was done waiting.

Scared of himself, Clark stumbled back and hurried to find the door. He almost fell over Houdini who had followed him. The dog whimpered as they tumbled out of the trailer and Clark caught himself just in time before he would have hit the ground.

He closed the door behind him and sagged against it.

“Take your time, sweetie. I’ll be here, whenever you are ready.”

Clark closed his eyes. The husky tone to her voice was his undoing. He didn’t want to listen, but his hearing picked up the soft rustling of fabric. Something hit the floor. The sound was faint, inaudible to the human ear, he was sure of it.

But Clark was painfully aware that her clothes had just fallen, all of them. He buried his face in his hands and tried not to think about her.

Still, he couldn’t help but make out the small sounds she made as she lifted the covers and slipped underneath.

His mind added the pictures of her waiting in his bed, ready to make tender love

Clark released a heavy sigh, in tune with one of Houdini’s whimpers. As he looked up, the dog stared back at him. He’d tilted his head and let out another soft whimper.

“You probably think I’m crazy, huh?”

Clark reached out, scratching the dog behind his ear. Houdini licked his hand.

“Yeah, me too.” Clark leaned his forehead against the dog’s and took deep, steadying breaths. “I know she wants it and I want it, so why does this have to be so difficult?”

Houdini barked, not giving away what he thought about Clark’s dilemma.

“Clarkie, I’m waiting!” Lois purred.

Clark groaned, took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “I’m afraid this is going to be a long night.”

He leaned his head against the door and sighed.
 “Do you want me to tell you what I’m wearing?”
 Make that a very long night.

Emotions Unveiled

Lois woke to a dry throat, a sandpaper feeling in her mouth and a pounding headache. She groaned and rolled over, hitting her head on something hard. Startled, Lois blinked her eyes open and rubbed the aching spot on her head.

She was not in her own bed.

Her surroundings looked vaguely familiar, though she couldn’t immediately place them. A comforting scent of soap and aftershave clung to the sheets. It reminded her of Clark.

Clark! She sat up straight and looked around, recognizing his trailer. Why was she lying in his bed? And why was she... Lois did a double take as the sheets slid lower... why was she naked? Her heart raced as she lifted the sheets further, having a more thorough look.

The result was the same.

She swallowed hard and sank back into the pillows, racking her mind to find an explanation for her state of undress.

Her memories were foggy at best. The last thing she remembered clearly was running after Clark to apologize for dragging him into the Daily Planet. But as she saw the morning light filter through the curtains, she realized that must have happened many hours ago.

Lois wrapped Clark’s sheets around herself and stood up, rubbing her neck. Her gaze darted back and forth between the door and the ground, where she spotted several pieces of very flimsy clothing.

“What the...”

She bent down to pick up a veil. An image flashed through her mind.

She was wrapping the veil around Clark’s body, pulling him closer.

Lois swallowed. What had happened here?

Had she and Clark — her heart skipped a beat — had they made love? If so, she had no memory of it. Her stomach curled into a knot. Though she couldn’t believe Clark was ready to share himself in that way, her first time with him was something she would want to remember. If it had somehow happened without her knowing —

Lois squeezed her eyes shut, pushing the unwanted thought aside. Instead, she focused on the trail of clothing that led toward the door. None of it seemed like it was suitable for her to wear. What had possessed her to turn up here dressed in a harem’s costume?

Her cheeks grew hot with embarrassment.

And where was Clark? Was he outside dealing with a hiccup? Lois’ gaze drifted back to the door, hoping that he

wouldn’t choose this very moment to come back. She couldn’t face Clark in this flimsy attire.

Knowing him, he wouldn’t mind if she borrowed some of his clothes.

In the small space of the trailer, it didn’t take her long to find the cupboard where he stored shirts and pants. Lois felt a rush of guilt as she rummaged through Clark’s belongings, but she willed it down. After a few moments of fruitless search, Lois picked a t-shirt that was entirely too large for her and a pair of boxers that looked small enough to accommodate her.

Once she was dressed, Lois heaved a small sigh of relief.

She made her way back to the door, picked up the rest of the offending dress and wrapped everything into one of the veils. Then she took a deep breath and opened the door with a trembling hand.

As she stepped out, Lois spotted Clark lying on the ground in front of his trailer. He had one arm wrapped around Houdini and was fast asleep. Her stomach dropped. What had happened that had forced him to sleep outside? Another hiccup?

“Oh, Clark,” she muttered.

Before Lois could make up her mind about how to approach him, Clark stirred.

His eyes fluttered open and he sat up. “Lois?”

The wary look on his face painted a picture of what might have transpired between them. His eyes widened for a moment as his gaze drifted across her. He licked his lips, swallowed hard and looked down at Houdini as if he hoped for advice. But the dog was still sound asleep, occasionally whimpering and moving his paws.

Clark stared down into his lap. His cheeks had adopted a deep shade of red. He didn’t seem to know what to say, if the tightening of his jaw was any indication, or the clenching and unclenching of his fists.

Lois could relate, because how could she put into words what she didn’t even understand? What could have turned her into a person who showed up at her best friend’s place, dressed to seduce him?

Lois felt helpless as she watched Clark scramble to his feet. He ran a nervous hand through his hair, still not quite able to meet her gaze.

She squirmed and then blurted, “Did we... have we...?”

Her own cheeks burned up and she waved her hand between them, hoping that she wouldn’t have to spell it out for him.

“No, we didn’t.” Clark’s guarded expression dissolved into a smile, and he relaxed. “You...you’re back to...uh... normal, aren’t you?”

Lois’ breath caught. “I...uh... I guess so.”

Once again, she had a flash of dancing before Clark, swaying her hips, similar position, different veil. She squeezed her eyes shut and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Did I really do the Dance of the Seven Veils?”

Clark rubbed the back of his neck “Uh huh.”

Lois groaned. “I hardly remember any of it. What else happened between us?”

“Some kissing,” Clark conceded. “But that was it.”

He blushed furiously and averted his eyes for a moment. When he looked back at her, he’d plastered a smile on his face, so cheerful that it had to hurt his facial muscles.

“How about some breakfast? I believe you skipped dinner yesterday.”

As if on cue, her stomach growled. Breakfast sounded wonderful. But how could she just eat with him without talking about the elephant in the room? Somehow she’d attacked Clark and knowing him, he’d probably fled out of his trailer and had spent the night sleeping on concrete instead of in a soft bed. And that wasn’t okay, no matter how unperturbed Clark tried to act.

“Clark...”

With one last look at his sleeping dog, he opened the door to his trailer. “Let’s go inside. I believe I still have some eggs in the fridge, and I might have bacon, too. Though if you’d like something fancier, like perhaps a croissant right out of Paris, I could get that, too and —”

Lois couldn’t stand the mounting tension. “Clark, you’re babbling.”

“Guess I am.” He smiled at her sheepishly. “To be honest, I could really use a distraction because you...” His voice took on a husky tone. “You look pretty darn sexy in my clothes. Come to think of it, I’m also in desperate need of a very cold shower.”

He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his pants and shifted his weight.

Then he let out a small sigh. “I’m glad nothing happened between us, particularly since you weren’t in your right mind. I’d hate it if I had somehow taken advantage of your drugged state, or whatever it was that made you act like...”

He looked so flustered that her heart went out to him. A terrible thought crossed her mind. Could he think that she wouldn’t want to be with him because of his problems controlling his powers? Could he be afraid that she’d have been put off if he hadn’t seen through her strange behavior and escaped her advances? Her gut clenched. She couldn’t have him think like that.

She laid her hand on his arm and gave him a soft squeeze that made him flinch a bit. A rush of sympathy filled her, but she couldn’t bring herself to withdraw her hand.

“I’m also glad nothing happened.” She held his gaze, hoping that her love for him would shine through, conveying how much he meant to her. “But only because when we’re going to take that step, I want to remember it.”

He stared back at her, swallowing hard. For a moment, she hoped he’d say something, that he’d tell her again how he felt about her and that they were going to make love someday soon.

But Clark remained quiet.

She took a step toward him, reached for his hand and ran her thumb along the back of it. “If you’d made love to me last night, I’d have wanted it, too. Even if I wasn’t in my right mind. You know that, don’t you?”

He nodded meekly and looked down at their entwined hands. She could see his pain. “You’re not making this any easier.”

Lois hung her head. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “No, it’s okay. I get what you’re trying to tell me. And I appreciate it, really, I do. Just give me a few minutes to compose myself.”

A gust of wind hit Lois as he darted off. She felt somewhat lost without him and wrapped her arms around herself. Wondering what she was supposed to do now, Lois looked around. The soft tapping of paws announced that Houdini had woken up.

The dog sat and tilted his head, looking at her for a moment. Then he closed the distance between them and gave her a gentle nudge with his snout.

Lois smiled at the Irish Setter and ran her hand through his soft fur. It was soothing after her rather emotional encounter with Clark. But at the same time, Lois felt some of the tension ease, her gut clenched with renewed guilt. Houdini should be comforting his master, not her.

She gave the dog a teary smile. “He should be back in a few minutes.”

The dog barked, and wagging his tail he gave her another nudge with his snout.

“Are you hungry?”

Houdini barked again and trudged toward his food bowl, looking at her expectantly.

Lois couldn’t help but smile. “That probably means yes.”

She joined Houdini and started rummaging through the cupboard until she found what she needed. After filling the bowl, she sat down at Clark’s table and watched Houdini dig in. Then she buried her face in her hands. Part of her wished she could at least remember the kisses. Another part regretted that she’d put Clark into such an awkward position.

If only she could take Clark into her arms and kiss him senseless. So many of her nights were filled with dreams revolving around kissing him, exploring his body and

finding out what it was like to make love to him. And now she couldn't remember what might have been the most intimate moment of their relationship so far.

A sob escaped her throat and a tear slipped down her cheek. She wiped it away and forced down the lump in her throat. She wouldn't dissolve into tears. There were more pressing matters, like finding out what had happened to her to cause all this awkwardness between her and Clark.

Lois spotted a magazine on Clark's table and pulled it toward her, glad about the distraction it would provide. Like Clark, she needed to compose herself before she could even think about facing him again.

Blinking away another tear, Lois started leafing through the magazine. She found it hard to focus on anything but the headlines and they also blurred before her eyes. Her hand mechanically turned the pages. She'd almost made it to the end when something struck her as odd.

She turned the page back and stared at the advertisement for a perfume shop called Miranda's. The woman in the picture had sprayed her in the Daily Planet.

Lois inhaled sharply. Could she have something to do with her strange behavior?

She wanted to ask Clark, but he still wasn't there. Houdini had already emptied his bowl and sat down next to Lois. She scratched his head.

"What do you think, how long will he be gone?" she asked the dog.

The Irish Setter just looked at her and let out a whimper. Was she imagining this, or did Houdini sound worried? Her own gut clenched with unease.

Feeling restless, Lois got up and left the trailer. Houdini followed directly behind her.

Lois looked up and studied the sky, but Clark was nowhere to be seen. The sense of dread intensified, though she didn't know why. Clark had told her that he wanted to get breakfast and needed to compose himself. Surely that would take a while, considering how she'd shown up at his place yesterday.

A chill went down her spine and Lois wasn't sure whether that was due to the cool weather or the worry that had taken hold of her. She spotted her coat that she must have dropped outside the trailer the evening before.

She picked it up and wrapped the coat around herself and had another look at the sky. Houdini whimpered again.

Lois stuffed her hands into the pockets of her coat and froze as she realized that one key was missing.

The key to her car was still in the left pocket. But the keys to her apartment were gone.

A rush of dizziness hit Lois. What if chivalrous Clark had taken her keys to get her something more appropriate to wear?

With any other man, she wouldn't even consider the possibility. But Clark wasn't any other man. She'd never met anyone as thoughtful as him. Unfortunately, he was also the only person vulnerable to the crystals she kept in her apartment. A deep sense of foreboding filled her and suddenly she couldn't stay at his trailer another moment. She needed to find Clark, no matter how slim her chances. Most of all, she needed to see that he wasn't at her apartment. Her gut clenched with dread.

Biting her lip, Lois looked down at Houdini. She hoped the dog would have no problems riding in a car.

"Come on, boy, we might need to save your master."

God, never in her life had she wished more to be wrong about something. With Houdini by her side, she rushed toward her car.

Magician in Distress

Calming himself down in the icy waters of the Arctic Ocean had taken no more than a few minutes. Only seconds after that, he'd dried his clothes with a burst of heat vision, relieved that his powers weren't fluctuating right in that instant. A wry smile played around his lips as Clark imagined himself in the remnants of incinerated clothes.

That would guarantee him the curious gazes of the other customers waiting in line in front of his favorite 'boulangerie' in Paris. He took his place at the end of that line and ruffled his still damp hair a bit, because he didn't like it slicked back as it often was after flying at super speed.

He felt somewhat uneasy without Houdini by his side, but then he could never take Houdini to France. As the first customer in line left the bakery with a bag of warm croissants, Clark remembered to check his wallet. He breathed a small sigh of relief as he discovered that he still had a few French bills left.

A couple of minutes later the shop assistant smiled at him. "Bonjour, Monsieur. Qu'est-ce-que vous voulez?"

"Bonjour, Madame," Clark replied. "Je prends quatre croissants s'il vous plaît."

She packed the four croissants in a bag and told him how much he owed her. Clark paid and took his croissants that were still warm and smelling delicious.

"Merci beaucoup. Au revoir, Madame." Clark turned to leave when he felt the familiar prickling in the back of his neck.

He barely heard the woman's reply as he hurried out of the bakery, searching for a secluded place where he could take off. His lungs started to burn, and he realized that he might not have the time to leave France before the icy breath would freeze everything in his immediate surroundings. He was close to the Champ du Mars, though, the park that surrounded the Eiffel Tower.

Clark changed directions. As soon as he reached a line of trees, he became a blur. When he could no longer contain his powers, he let out the burst of freezing breath and recreated the statue of liberty, he'd built so many months ago. From the corners of his eyes, he saw people stop and stare as the statue grew seemingly out of nothing. The hiccup was stronger than the last few and so the statue became much larger than even Clark had anticipated.

He directed bursts of heat vision on the ice to carve out the form. Feeling a bit dizzy from flying around the statue at superspeed, he prayed the hiccup would stop before it turned into a real problem. He didn't want to consider the implications of having to reveal himself to the world. Why hadn't he thought to take the costume with him, if he'd taken the time to get Lois' keys before he'd rushed off?

Finally, the prickling in the back of his neck lessened after he'd created the statue's head. He continued a bit longer until he'd finished the Lady of Liberty. Then he darted off, hoping that nobody had seen him. He didn't take the time to listen to the people's reaction to Gustave Eiffel's other creation appearing a few hundred yards from the Eiffel Tower.

Clark felt antsy as he sped back to Metropolis. If he'd at least taken his MagiKal outfit with him, he might have explained his trick as the beginning of a world tour. The sudden appearance of an ice sculpture in another part of the world could raise suspicions he'd managed to avoid so far.

He'd probably have to talk to Murray about the issue, though he had no idea which kind of fabricated explanation people might swallow. And speaking to his so-called manager was the last thing he wanted to do. Perhaps Lois would have an idea that wouldn't result in a complete disaster.

Clark slowed as he reached a secluded alley close to her apartment. He dived down and stopped just in time before he would have destroyed the pavement. Startled by the rough landing, he checked the croissants, which thankfully were still intact. Now all he needed was to get Lois a change of clothing and then he'd be back at his trailer in no time at all.

Clark crossed the street and fumbled for the keys in his pockets. Though he'd never been in her apartment, he figured she wouldn't mind if he fetched her some clothes that were less revealing than his underwear. Knowing Lois, she'd want to find out what had caused her behavior as soon as possible. It would certainly help his peace of mind, if an incident like the one last night wasn't going to happen again.

Clark did his best to suppress the surge of unease that took hold of him as he let himself into her apartment building, climbed up the stairs and opened all five locks on

her door. He couldn't quite keep from grinning at her thoroughness. Considering that she tended to jump in without checking the water level, the number of locks on her door seemed a bit out-of-character.

Clark had made it about half-way into her living room when an intense wave of pain slammed into him. He grabbed his head that was assaulted by a splitting ache behind his eyes and a strong surge of dizziness. His stomach cramped and his knees buckled. Every muscle and tendon burned like fire.

Gasping for breath, Clark found himself on the floor. The world spun around him, and he squeezed his eyes shut against the onslaught of pain.

He knew this sensation of utter helplessness. But why were the crystals at Lois' apartment? He had to get away from here. Slowly, he propped himself up on his elbows and looked toward the door. It was closed. Clark grunted in frustration. The way he felt now, he wasn't sure he'd have the strength to open it and get out. Moreover, he wasn't keen on being seen in his current state.

Clark gritted his teeth and decided it would have to be the other direction, away from Lois' living room. He hoped that her bath or bedroom would shield him from the effects of the crystals.

His crawl toward Lois' kitchen was painfully slow. Now and again, he needed to rest in order to catch his breath. And the longer it took, the more helpless he felt in the face of the excruciating pain wracking his body. At first, it seemed to be getting worse instead of better. There was no way he was going to get out of here. If he wasn't damn lucky and Lois came looking for him...

But why would she be looking for him? An alien? An abomination? Someone who couldn't even kiss her without endangering her life. Surely, she was better off without him. He'd never manage to control his powers and how could he expect someone to love him like he was? Wouldn't it be more reasonable to just stay here and let the green crystal finish its job? Clark rested his head on the floor. He was completely exhausted and miserable. What purpose did he have in life? Tears streamed down his face and his heart clenched in despair. If he just stayed here, life would be over soon. Wasn't that for the better?

Clark stopped his struggle and rested his head on the floor. Just a while and unconsciousness would claim him. The pain would stop and then everything would be over. No more grief, no more doubts, no more hiccups.

But then he thought of Lois and remembered her beautiful face. His throat tightened as he imagined how she felt in his arms, how magical their date had been. He'd held her in his arms while watching a sky full of stars. She loved him. Clark knew that. Where were all those dark thoughts coming from?

He groaned. It must be the red crystal talking. Gritting his teeth once more, he fought against the darkness trying to pull him under. He wasn't going to let the dark thoughts win. It wasn't true what the red crystal whispered into his ear. He was loved and there was a reason to crawl on. For Lois he had to choose life over death, even if giving up seemed a whole lot easier.

Inch by painful inch he crawled across the floor until the pain subsided and moving became easier. The dark cloud above his head lifted and he took a breath of relief. The door to Lois' bedroom wasn't far now and as he finally passed it, the last of the pain receded and he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Behind the Trapdoor

Houdini's agitated barks made Lois pick up her pace on her way upstairs. She was breathless by the time she reached the right floor. The Irish Setter stood on his hind legs, one paw scratching at her door, while he tried to push it open. Of course it wouldn't budge.

Please be all right, please be all right, Lois prayed.

Until she'd seen Houdini's reaction, Lois had hoped she wouldn't find Clark at her apartment. But obviously he wasn't just having a giant hiccup somewhere on the other side of the world.

From her pocket she pulled the lock picking equipment she kept in her car. Her hands were shaking as she knelt before her door, hoping she'd manage to pry it open. She couldn't afford to drive back to the Daily Planet and get her spare keys.

Moments dragged on for what seemed like hours as she tried to get the lock to cooperate. Houdini nudged her with his snout, urging her to hurry. He didn't make her task any easier. Lois muttered curses and gently pushed him aside. Tears filled her eyes. Why, oh, why had she brought the crystals back to Metropolis? Why hadn't she told Clark about them?

Well, she'd never expected him to go into her apartment, least of all on his own. But it seemed like he always did the most unexpected and sometimes stupid things when he was being kind. Which was all the time.

Finally, the lock clicked and she was able to turn it. As she opened the door, Houdini rushed past her. He slipped on the ground as he rounded the corner and hastened toward her kitchen. Lois ran after him.

"Clark, Clark!" she shouted.

"Over here," came the muffled reply.

He scrambled to his feet and sat down on the edge of her bed. His steps seemed a bit wobbly, but that could also be Houdini's fault. The dog was giving his master a thorough examination, sniffing at every spot of his body.

"I'm fine, Houdini." Clark soothed him. "You're smelling the croissants. I'm afraid I crushed them when I fell."

He ruffled Houdini's fur and buried his face in it. A strong surge of relief washed over Lois as she realized that he was indeed okay — not writhing in pain like she'd initially believed. But that he'd managed to get into her bedroom meant that he must have fought his way through the living room before. She remembered very well what these crystals had done to him the last time.

It was her fault that he'd had to endure it again. She didn't know how to face him. Not only had she gone behind his back, but he'd also been hurt because he'd wanted to get her clothes after she'd been out of her mind. As if her performance last night hadn't been hard enough on him already.

"Clark." The lump in her throat was suffocating.

As his gaze met hers, her gut clenched with guilt. Not because he frowned at her, which he would have had every right to do. His sheepish smile was her undoing. The tears that she'd managed to keep at bay until now spilled freely.

"You could have warned me," he said softly.

"I didn't think you'd ever be coming here." She cringed at her words. Was a simple apology so hard?

He chuckled and ran his hand through his hair. "Me neither. Guess, I should have asked before entering your apartment."

Lois flopped down beside him and he laid his hand on her shoulder, giving her a gentle squeeze. It felt good, but it also made the situation more awkward.

"I don't know what to say," she whispered.

A sob escaped her and she buried her face in her hands.

He rubbed her back. "Why did you take the crystals with you?"

She leaned into his soothing touch, finding strength in his presence, enough to meet his eyes. There was no anger in his gaze.

Lois took a steadying breath. "I was hoping that I'd find someone who could examine them, who might be able to tell me what they're doing to you." She bit her lip. "I should have told you about it and asked your permission, but I was afraid that you'd say no after what happened in Smallville."

Clark's expression turned rueful. "You're right, I would have."

"I'm sorry." She swallowed hard. "I'm so incredibly sorry you were hurt again."

"Don't be." He leaned his forehead against hers. "I won't deny that I'd rather not have to face that green stuff again, but for what it's worth, I learned something from the experience."

"That it's dangerous to be around me?"

He laughed. "That too. No, what I meant is that the red crystal seems to affect me differently every time I encounter it. Looking back, I believe the first time I was apathetic to the point of not even realizing how painful the green crystal was. I wasn't trying to escape and just let myself drift to unconsciousness. The second time I..." He blushed furiously. "Well, you know what I was like the second time."

Lois sat straight. She'd expected a lot, but not his calm and collected reaction. The knot in her gut loosened and suddenly, she felt a strange rush of excitement.

She reached for Clark's hand. "And today?"

He looked down at his hands, studying them for a moment as if he was uncomfortable with what he was going to say next. Then he dropped them into his lap and looked at her.

"Today I fell into a deep hole of despair, deeper than anything I've ever experienced before." He chewed on his bottom lip. "And let me tell you, I was pretty down when I realized that the hiccups were going to stay and that I would have to live my life outside society. But today, I was ready to let the green crystal end my life."

His words seemed to reverberate through the room. The silence that followed was deafening. Clark looked at her, his mouth opening and closing as if he was searching for the right words to soften the blow. And as he stared at her, utterly forlorn and helpless, she understood beyond any shadow of a doubt that he'd meant what he'd said. He'd really been ready to die.

She drew a sharp breath and clapped her hand to her mouth. Her heart pounded in her chest that suddenly was so tight she didn't know how to take another breath.

"Oh, Clark, no, please, no!"

"Hey." He reached out and brushed a strand of hair back behind her ear. His touch was once again unrestrained and tender. "I'm still here. Because of you. Knowing that you love me helped me push those dark thoughts aside. Whatever this red crystal does to me, I can fight it."

He seemed giddy all of a sudden, an infectious smile spreading across his lips. It was the last thing she'd expected to see after finding him on the floor of her apartment after another exposure to the horrible crystals. Though she didn't quite know why, Lois couldn't help but smile too.

Clark pulled her into an embrace. "Don't you understand? Whatever happened to me in that hole, what if it's also a result of the red crystal? That means I can fight that too. And I believe I already started fighting it. Remember the hiccup at the trailer that sort of stopped before it really started? Perhaps accepting my hiccups as a part of my life is the key! They've been less intense recently whenever you were near because I actually tried

to give this a chance. Maybe I... maybe I can make this work."

Lois sank against him and relaxed into his hug. She felt Houdini lick her hands and stroked the dog. Something strange had happened here today, and perhaps it was even for the best. If Clark believed he could integrate the hiccups into his life, surely that was fine.

But a nagging voice in the back of her mind insisted that there had to be another solution, one that would truly set him free.

Hokiss Pokiss

Lois huffed in frustration as they left the small perfume shop. "Well, this was a perfect waste of our—" She stumbled a bit as Houdini darted past her, eager to get out of the assaulting mélange of different smells. "-time."

Clark reached out to steady Lois and laid an arm around her shoulders. "I wouldn't say that. We confirmed that she was there yesterday and sprayed every single person in the newsroom. Besides, I found a little something." With a smile, Clark produced an atomizer from his pocket. "I'm pretty sure this is what she used on us."

Lois's eyes widened. "How did you get that?"

"While I'm out of commission, Houdini helped me find the stuff that smells like the perfume that was on your clothes and Perry's and Jimmy's." Clark patted the setter's head fondly.

Houdini sneezed in reply and shook himself. The look on the dog's face seemed to say that he wasn't willing to pay the shop another visit. Clark could relate. He didn't want to know what would happen to him if his sense of smell went out of whack right in the middle of all those fragrances.

Even before he'd developed the hiccups, he'd stayed clear of intense smells like that whenever he could avoid them.

Much as he hated to ask things of Houdini that he'd rather not do himself, this was clearly an emergency. The whole newsroom probably still looked like it had been decorated for Valentine's Day. Perry was facing a sexual harassment suit and had nearly had a nervous breakdown over the morning edition's headline: **COUPLE REUNITED! LOVE WINS OUT!**

It was difficult to say which of these problems irked Perry more. And thanks to all the havoc in the newsroom, he didn't even know yet what he'd missed the other day. MagiKal's statue in the other side of the Atlantic must have hit the news. Clark still hadn't talked to Lois about his outing in Paris. He had no idea how he was going to address the issue and while he was without his powers, he couldn't meet Murray Brown either.

“Are you okay?” Lois eyed him concerned. “You look a little pale all of a sudden.”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Clark ran his hand through Houdini’s fur, wishing the dog could provide him with some advice.

“I should have let you rest,” Lois mumbled.

She bit her lower lip and Clark could see the guilt rippling across her beautiful features. He pulled her a little closer and placed a kiss on her temple. Seeing her so unhappy tore at his heart.

“Look, I got plenty of rest while you took care of the crystals.” Clark stopped and turned to her. A rush of warmth went through him as he ran his hand along her cheek and cupped it. Suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to kiss her pain away. “And I promise you I’m not going to get anywhere near that bank vault of yours. I can’t fly, is all. Considering how many perfumes we were just forced to smell, I’m actually glad that I’m not at a hundred percent right now. So no harm done.”

A single tear slipped down her cheek. “I just don’t understand how you’re able not to hate me.”

He felt his throat tighten and couldn’t hold himself back anymore. Clark leaned in and touched his lips to hers. She tasted so sweet, and her lips were so silky as she parted them under the gentle brush of his tongue. He felt Houdini press against his legs from behind, as if he wanted to make extra sure they really kissed and made up.

Clark was slightly breathless as they parted. “I’m completely in love with you, Lois. No matter what. That’s how.”

He pulled her into an embrace, and she leaned her head against his chest. As he felt her body so close to his, it was as if the final piece of the puzzle just slipped into place and completed the picture. She made him whole.

“Would you go out with me tonight?” he whispered into her hair. “I could find us a fancy restaurant and then I’ll wine and dine you until you forget what happened in your apartment. How does that sound?”

“Wonderful!” She looked up at him with a somewhat teary-eyed smile. “But what if your powers return before we make it to dinner?”

Clark wiped a tear off her cheek. “I’ll make sure they have tables outside as well as inside and allow dogs.”

Her eyes widened. “Really?”

“I’m not going to run away from this.” Clark vowed. “I might have to duck out to the little *magician’s* room if the need arises. But I’m not going to let this chance pass.”

She laughed, and the sound made his heart swell with happiness. There was no doubt in his mind that this was worth it, that she was worth a thousand exposures to the green crystal just to be near her. He loved her and he wanted to show her how much. Once again, he was drawn to her lips and he didn’t want to fight it any longer. He

leaned in, slowly, giving her the time to pull back if she wanted to. But Lois closed the distance. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pressed her lips to his.

Her kiss was everything he’d been dreaming of. If he’d had his powers, he would have floated from the experience. Clark closed his eyes and gave himself over to sensation. He was aware of every inch of her body that he touched, and it took all his willpower not to deepen the kiss. After all, they were outside and not in the privacy of his -

Clark pushed the thought away. Things were good the way they were, there was no use fantasizing about what might be. He was kissing her and that was great, better than great. It was absolutely amazing.

A silly smile played around her lips as she broke the kiss, and he knew that it only mirrored his. But he just couldn’t stop grinning.

“How about we take the stuff you found in Miranda’s shop to S.T.A.R. Labs. That’s just a short walk from here,” Lois suggested.

“Sounds good. I think Houdini would love to get some fresh air after that perfume shop.”

The dog barked his agreement. Lois entwined her hand with Clark’s and started down the street. Houdini followed them, brushing his head against Clark’s other hand. Gently, he scratched the dog behind his ear, reveling in the feel of having those he loved so close. This was what Heaven had to be like.

They walked for a while, making plans for the evening and considering the best location for their date, when Lois suddenly stopped in front of a newspaper stand. Clark turned his head, wondering what might have caught her interest, when he spotted it. A picture of the ice sculpture he’d created close to the Eiffel Tower was plastered across the front pages of almost any magazine or newspaper the stand sold.

Clark closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He’d completely forgotten about that problem, but it was pretty much obvious that he could no longer ignore it.

Lois turned to him and raised her brows. “Paris?”

He gave her a helpless shrug and pulled her away from the stand. “I wanted to get croissants for breakfast. Sort of as an apology for running out on you. While I was there, I had another hiccup. But since I didn’t have my costume, I couldn’t perform as MagiKal. So I did my best to avoid being seen.”

Lois pursed her lips. “And now the whole world is wondering how an ice sculpture of the Lady of Liberty appeared literally out of nowhere. Clark, this could turn into a real problem if MagiKal doesn’t give a statement.”

Clark heaved a sigh and ran a hand through his hair. “I wanted to talk to you about it, but then things kind of got out of hand.”

“I know.” She faced down. “Maybe we should use our date for another interview with MagiKal. Perry would be elated, and it might help him to forget about the last head line.”

Clark snorted. “I don’t know if anything can make him forget about that.”

Lois gave his shoulder a playful slap. “Don’t sell yourself short, flyboy. And never underestimate my abilities as a reporter. Remember, I’m the one who found out how your magic works.”

Clark laughed. “That’s because I told you. But you’re right, nobody stands a chance against Lois Lane. How could I ever forget that?”

She winked at him. “You better not, or I may remind you.”

As her lips curled into a wonderful smile, he knew that at least he was completely helpless to resist her.

MagiKal Dilemma

Lois leaned into Clark’s embrace as they swayed to soft music. His right hand rested on the small of her back while his left hand held hers. She gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze, then rested her head against it. His lips brushed her hair and he sighed contentedly.

“I didn’t know you could dance like this,” Lois murmured.

“I learned from a Nigerian princess,” he whispered.

“You’re full of surprises.” She looked up at him, studying his face for a moment to see if maybe he was teasing her. But the sincerity in his gaze told her that he meant it. “Wow, a Nigerian princess. Really?”

He nodded. “That was before...”

His expression turned wistful for a moment, but then his smile reappeared, and he dipped his head and kissed her. She melted into him, the world around them fading to insignificance. She forgot about the music or the restaurant. She didn’t hear the voices of the other guests. She had no idea if they were even still dancing.

All Lois cared about was the tender brush of his lips against hers, his tongue that shyly explored her mouth and the whiff of his breath she felt against her skin. She closed her eyes, savoring the moment and wishing it would never have to end.

So far, this date was filled with moments of blissful happiness. Even though they were in the outside area of a restaurant full of people, even though Clark’s powers were back, she had hardly ever seen him this relaxed. They’d shared their food, a lively conversation and now the most amazing dance Lois had ever experienced.

Not to mention the kiss that made her wish they weren’t at such a public place, because she desperately wanted to deepen it. All too soon Clark pulled back and slowly the world around her returned. The music was fading and as if someone had turned up the volume, she heard voices and the clattering of cutlery on dishes.

“I believe I still owe you dessert,” Clark murmured. “I’ve heard they serve an amazing chocolate mousse.”

He grinned and grasped her hand a little tighter, pulling her back toward the table where Houdini lay waiting for them. His head was resting on his paws, but when Clark approached, he jumped to his feet and greeted his master with a wagging tail.

Lois felt a brief rush of fear that the dog had noticed something about Clark that would announce another hiccup. She didn’t want him to leave now. Everything was so perfect. Lois dreaded the reminder that Clark’s issue still wasn’t solved, even if he seemed to have decided that he no longer wanted the hiccups to rule his entire life. She knew that they still had such a long way to go. Besides there were also other issues to address like MagiKal’s unplanned performance in Paris or her –

A sharp intake of breath pulled Lois from her musings. Startled, she looked up at Clark who grimaced and rubbed his back as he sat down.

“Is everything okay?” She took in his features that gradually relaxed into a smile. “Another hiccup coming?”

He shook his head. “Just a little residual ache from my last run in with the crystals. I’m fine.”

She frowned at him, but he just smiled and pulled a menu toward him. “So, what do you say? Do you want chocolate mousse or this Tarte au Chocolat?”

“Clark.” She reached for his hand and made him look at her. “If anything is going on you need to tell me.”

He still smiled at her and his thumb gently caressed the back of her hand. “It’s just not something I’m used to. Don’t worry about me, it’ll also pass in a few hours, I’m sure. Let’s order dessert and then, unfortunately, we need to talk about how to solve my MagiKal dilemma.”

Lois tried to return his smile, but she didn’t quite manage. Not only was she worried about him and nervous about what he would say to her suggestion concerning MagiKal. There was also another thing she needed to ask him.

She heaved a small sigh, because she already knew what his answer was going to be. As if Houdini sensed her dark thoughts, he chose that moment to rest his head on her legs. Absent-mindedly, she started to scratch his ear. She wished Clark would agree to come with her. The chances were slim, she knew. But it couldn’t hurt to try, could it?

Lois' stomach dropped. No matter what she tried to tell herself, she knew that it would hurt, very much, if he declined. She was barely able to listen as Clark chatted about the various choices of dessert. In the end she had no idea what she'd agreed to. It took her some time and several nudges of Houdini's snout to work up her courage.

Lois decided to tackle the smaller task first.

"About MagiKal..." She cleared her throat and took a deep breath for good measure. "I think you should let more statues appear all over the world. Just as mysteriously. Then it will look like a plan rather than an accident."

Clark raised his brows. "And what kind of plan is that supposed to be?"

She shrugged, feeling a little helpless. "Some huge, amazing trick that will sweep the whole world off their feet?"

He laughed and shook his head. "I have a feeling this plan is not all that well-thought-out."

"Come on, I bet you could think of something." She winked at him, feeling silly as she did so.

Part of her wanted to add that perhaps he could just reveal himself to the world. With all the amazing things he could do, with the difference he could make if he could use his powers freely... But she clamped her mouth shut, because she was only too aware that as long as Clark was suffering from these hiccups, he wouldn't want to take that chance. And he'd be right too. If the world knew that someone with his powers couldn't entirely control them, well, they wouldn't all get to know him as well as she did and she couldn't fault anyone if they were afraid of him.

"These things you do, knowing that you don't exactly plan them — they're awesome," she added lamely. "If you did any of this on purpose then maybe..."

He didn't look convinced. But at least, he was still smiling at her and stroking her hand. Lois's gaze drifted toward their entwined hands. It felt so good to touch him, to have him touch her. When she closed her eyes, she couldn't quite tell where his fingers began and hers ended. There was a bond forming between them that she couldn't explain. All she knew was that she wanted more of that, more of him.

She felt another nudge from Houdini's snout, as if he wanted to encourage her. She buried her fingers deeper into the dog's soft fur, searching for his support.

"There is something else," she said past a lump in her throat. "Apparently, I made a reservation for the Honeymoon Suite in the Lexor Hotel, while I was under the influence of the pheromone spray. It..." She swallowed hard, desperate to get her voice back under her control. "It's too late to cancel the room without having to pay a horrendous fee and..." Her heart hammered in her chest and blood rushed in her ears. Lois felt her cheeks burn as

she tried to meet Clark's gaze. "Would you... would you come with me? They allow dogs."

The world went quiet as she waited for his answer. His eyes had widened, and a slight blush tinted his cheeks. Lois froze as she realized how her invitation had come out and that the Honeymoon Suite implied certain expectations.

She closed her eyes and hastily added. "We don't have to do that. What I'm trying to say is that I didn't mean I wanted us to -" She couldn't help the feeling that her face had turned crimson with embarrassment. "Not that I would mind if we did, but I would really like to spend the night in your arms, both of us fully dressed if you're not ready for anything else."

Lois felt the sudden urge to dig herself a hole and vanish from the face of Earth. Why had she started this? Why hadn't she just kept this whole Honeymoon debacle to herself, leaving him guessing why she suddenly spent a night at the Lexor?

But here she was, with her foot deep in her mouth, waiting for his answer. Houdini licked her hand, as if he at least welcomed her uncommon bout of courage when it came to relationships.

Clark kneaded his hands and couldn't quite meet her eyes. "You know I'd love to," he whispered hoarsely. "But I'm just not sure I'm there yet. Coming here -" He took a deep breath and looked around, shifting a bit in his seat. Then he lowered his voice even more. "This is already a huge step for me, you and me and all these people. I'm willing to give this a try, Lois, really I am. But a whole night in a hotel full of people?"

He bit his lip and she couldn't help the notion that his eyes were filling with tears as he shook his head.

Her throat tightened and she nodded. She'd known he was going to say that, so why had she asked? It was only hurting them both. But part of her had needed to tell him that she wanted him there with her.

"I wish I could say yes, Lois." He gave her a rueful smile and lifted her hand to his mouth, kissing her gently. "We'll get there, someday soon."

"We'll get there." She nodded and blinked back the tears that had sprung to her eyes. "Someday soon."

He reached out and cupped her cheek, his thumb wiping away a tear that threatened to run down her cheek.

"You're making me so happy. I hate to make you cry. You don't deserve this."

Lois covered his hand with hers. "Neither do you. I can wait a little longer, if you promise me a raincheck."

Clark grinned. "A raincheck it is. But I would suggest that we take this somewhere a little more romantic than the Lexor. How does Hawaii sound?"

Lois' heart fluttered with excitement. "Heavenly. But what about Houdini?"

A mischievous glint appeared in Clark's eyes. "I'll swim him there."

That Honeymoon Magic

Clark couldn't help but notice the smile on Lois' face as he carried her over the threshold of the honeymoon suite. The blissful happiness he saw ran so much deeper than anything she could have put on for a fake photo of supposed newlyweds.

"Yeah, stay like this, just like this for another moment." The bellboy took his sweet time to take the picture.

If Clark were a human man, he'd probably be covered in sweat right about now. But while Lois' weight didn't affect him in the least, her closeness did. He breathed in the soft scent of her perfume, felt her warmth through the thin fabric of his shirt and was mesmerized by the feel of her slender frame in his arms.

Finally, the bellboy seemed content with their position and the flashlight blinded Clark. He blinked and put Lois back on her feet, a bit reluctant to let go of her. Houdini pressed his nose against Clark's leg, demanding his attention. A brief surge of panic went through Clark that his dog had sensed another hiccup coming, but the Irish setter just wanted his ear scratched.

While Lois gave the bellboy a generous tip, Clark bent down to take care of Houdini's favorite spot. The ache in his back returned, faint but persistent. He felt the bellboy's eyes on him as the young man left, winking at Clark as he passed him. Instantly, Clark's cheeks grew hot, even though he knew nothing was going to happen here tonight.

Jimmy entered the room, both hands full of bags and let out a soft whistle as he took in the luxurious interior of the suite.

"Too bad I missed how C.K. kissed the bride," he muttered. "I'm so happy for the two of you."

"Jimmy, we're only here for a job." Lois rolled her eyes. "Did you bring the surveillance equipment?"

"Sure did." Jimmy beamed. "But it would be a shame to waste such a perfect opportunity. I mean it's obvious what's going on between the two of you. If I was C.K. I'd be sure to make use of that bed."

Clark didn't know if he could be more embarrassed than he was. He pinched the bridge of his nose, not for the first time today wondering what had possessed him to agree to this charade. Hadn't he said that he couldn't stay in the Honeymoon Suite just a week ago? And now here he was, posing as Lois' newlywed husband. And apparently the whole newsroom was aware of his feelings for her.

"We're watching the office on the other side of the street, trying to find out what is going on with the people bribing Congressman Harrington." Lois narrowed her eyes

on Jimmy. "And that's all were going to do, so you can take your mind out of the gutter.

"Sorry, guys." Jimmy shrunk under her gaze and hurried to drop off the surveillance equipment.

But then he grinned, winking at Clark as he wished them a wonderful night before he left.

Clark heaved a sigh of relief as the door fell shut behind Jimmy and they were alone in the hotel room.

"I'm sorry, Clark. I know you didn't exactly sign up for this." Lois bit her lip and wrapped her arms around herself, her discomfort obvious. "You only need to stay for a bit, then I'll continue this investigation on my own. Thank you for coming here to help me set up the equipment and making them believe we're newlyweds."

"Lois, I..." Clark got up and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his pants.

As soon as his master had stopped to pet him, Houdini turned to Lois for another round of ear scratching. She bent down to pay attention to the dog. Clark watched them with a smirk. But soon it faltered, turning into a longing gaze. How he wished that he could enjoy her presence just as easily.

"I'm not leaving you to handle this investigation all on your own," he said hoarsely. "We... we'll do it together."

A glimmer of hope lit up her face, but then her gaze drifted toward the giant bed that seemed to occupy most of the room.

"But what about..." She swallowed. "... sleeping arrangements? I thought you weren't ready?"

"I'm not." Clark grimaced. "I thought I could find myself a place on the roof or the fire exit. I should be fine as long as I'm outside."

"Clark." Lois stood, closing the distance between them, and earning herself a whimper of protest as she left Houdini. "The fire exit? You cannot mean that."

He shrugged. "Then I'll think of something else. Somehow I will make this work, I promise. And -" His super hearing kicked in. "Someone is coming. The maid."

Like a deer in headlights, he stood frozen. Before he knew what was happening, Lois gathered the equipment and hid it under the blanket of the huge bed. Then she grabbed Clark's hand and dragged him with her as she lay down. He followed, not quite sure what she wanted. His legs made unexpected contact with the bedframe, and he tumbled on top of her.

Lois' hands framed his face and pulled him into a deep kiss. Clark was lost. A low moan escaped his throat as her soft body melted into his. Never before had he been this close to her. He felt every slight motion of her body under his as her hands roamed his back, slipping underneath the hem of his shirt and finding bare skin. He sucked in a breath as her fingers caressed his back, drawing small

circles, leaving every bit of skin she touched tingle with sensation.

Hungry for more, he plundered her mouth, feeling bold all of a sudden. She tasted so sweet and rich; her mouth was so soft and silky; he just couldn't get enough of her. Another low moan escaped his throat as her tongue slipped into his mouth, starting to tease him. His fingers ached to explore more of her skin, while he tried not to lean on her too much.

As if through thick fog, he heard the clacking of a door and the shuffling of feet on the floor. Houdini barked.

"Towels?" A female voice asked. "Yah? Oops. Sorry."

Clark wasn't sure how long the maid had been inside the room, and he didn't care. All he was aware of were Lois' hands that had abandoned his back to travel toward his chest. She started to fumble with the buttons on his shirt. The first popped and he felt her hands on his skin again. The sensation was dizzying. Lois nibbled on his lower lip, making his head spin. Another button gave way. He couldn't think about anything but how good she felt underneath him. He'd been dreaming of this, but reality was so much better, so much more intense.

Slowly Lois unbuttoned his shirt. He helped her slip it off his arms and soon it fell to the floor. Clark felt her gaze on him as she took in his now naked chest. A slight blush crept across his cheeks as he saw her lick his lips.

"You're perfect," she whispered.

"So are you." He leaned in to kiss her again and get another taste of the silky softness of her mouth.

It scared him a bit how much he wanted her right now, how much he longed to undress her too and feel her skin on his. Deep down he knew that they would need to stop soon. They weren't ready for the next step; he wasn't ready for that. But he couldn't bring himself to pull back just yet.

Houdini barked again, making Clark flinch. A sudden rush of panic filled him. He hoped this wasn't a warning that yet another hiccup was looming. After this moment of pure bliss, the last thing he wanted was to run out on her.

But Houdini barked again and the next thing Clark felt was a huge dog that jumped square on his back.

"Umph." He barely managed to keep from crushing Lois underneath him. "Houdini down."

The dog obeyed and jumped off his back onto the bed. But he continued to bark at him, becoming more agitated by the second. Clark pulled back, terrified to hurt Lois and brought some distance between them. Houdini followed, still barking at him and trying to jump him.

But unlike the other times Clark was experiencing hiccups, the Irish setter didn't attempt to drag him out of the room. It rather looked like the dog wanted to tell him something else.

He did his best to calm the excited setter. "Houdini, what is it?"

Suddenly, Lois gasped. "Clark, your back."

He was confused. How should anything be wrong with his back? It had itched a bit during the past week, but he'd blamed that on the green crystal. But whatever Lois was seeing, Houdini seemed to have spotted the same thing. He still moved around Clark and attempted to jump his back.

"What's the matter with my back?" Clark craned his neck, trying to see what had caught their attention.

"There's a faint red glow under your skin," Lois said.

As if he'd understood her, the dog calmed down. He once more barked for good measure, but then stood with his head tilted and watched while Lois climbed off the bed and approached Clark.

She stilled for a moment, watching him carefully. "You're not going to have another hiccup are you?"

Clark shook his head. "I don't think so. I believe Houdini saw the same thing you did. But..."

"Come into the bathroom." Lois took his hand and dragged him with her. "The mirror there should be big enough for you to see."

Moments later, Clark saw what Houdini and Lois had discovered. There was indeed a red blotch on or rather underneath his skin that seemed to glow.

"Is that..." Clark swallowed hard. "Is that a piece of the red crystal?"

"I think so," Lois muttered.

He felt strangely dizzy. If this really was what he thought it was... It might be the explanation for his hiccups. So long, he'd been wondering what had happened in that hole.

He felt for the blotch, wincing a bit as it caused the same stinging ache that had accompanied him for the past few days. It had started after he'd crawled over the floor of Lois' apartment.

But he'd never even seen the crystals at her place. Had the piece been stuck in his body since the day he'd climbed into the hole? Had one of the rocks that had fallen onto him pierced his skin or had it happened while his father had dragged him out?

Lois had put her hand to her mouth and was watching him with a mixture of hope and trepidation. Clark knew why because he felt the same way. His throat was awfully tight and his heart was racing.

Finally, there was a way to make the hiccups stop. But to accomplish that he'd have to face that green crystal again.

The thought sent shivers down his spine. Numbness took hold of him and he barely noticed that Lois had taken his hand in hers. This time, her gentle squeeze didn't send a rush of heat through him.

But maybe the chill was a little less freezing.

The Disappearing Tsunami

The docks were bathed in yellowish light as Lois, Clark, and Houdini sneaked past the warehouses lining the pier. They still didn't know what Roarke was planning to ensure Luthor's systems would fail or what was going on here in the first place.

Even Perry's contact in the Pentagon hadn't been able to tell them what 'Project Shockwave' really was.

Lois wrapped her arms a little tighter around herself as the cold, clammy air dampened her clothes and sent a chill through her.

Houdini froze and a low growl escaped his throat. Clark laid his hand on the dog's back to calm him. He put his index finger to his mouth and then pulled Lois and Houdini behind a bunch of barrels.

Clark slipped down his glasses and stared intently at whatever his x-ray vision revealed only to him. Lois felt a slight pang of frustration. She hated to wait without having any idea what was going on. Craning her neck, Lois tried to look around the barrels. But Clark seemed to sense her intention and held her back.

As she glared at him, he shook his head.

"Too dangerous," he whispered. "Roarke is tying Harrington up. Apparently, he wants to get rid of a witness. And he isn't alone. There is another guy patrolling the pier."

Clark took her hand. Crouching, they slowly made their way around the barrels. They took a strange zig zag route that Lois assumed was keeping them out of sight. Slowly they seemed to approach Roarke and Harrington. Lois heard voices, though they were still too far for her to make out what they said.

Suddenly, Houdini froze and started to nudge Clark with his snout. The setter became more agitated by the second, small whimpers escaping his throat. Lois felt her stomach drop. She knew very well what that meant.

As Clark turned to the dog, his wide eyes confirmed her fears. He was going to have another hiccup.

"Now?" he mouthed.

Lois could see the emotions ripple over his features, the panic and resignation. He looked around, but they were too close to badly stacked boxes. As Clark eyed them, Lois could almost see the wheels in his mind turn. They seemed unstable and there was a good chance they would tumble if he moved at superspeed.

A heavy smell of gasoline hung in the air, which didn't bode well for accidental bursts of heat vision.

Clark squeezed his eyes shut. His hands trembled as he tightened them into fists.

Lois wished they hadn't come. She reached for Clark's hand, wrapping hers around his tightly clenched fist. His powers were almost palpable under his skin.

Clark took a shuddering breath.

She felt a tremor run through his body. His muscles stiffened and a low moan escaped his throat. Lois watched him with trepidation as he fought the effects of the red crystal.

She wasn't afraid he would hurt her, but it scared her what this would do to him. Already she could see a fine sheen of perspiration pooling on his forehead and heard the quiet grunts that he was trying hard to keep as low as possible.

Lois cursed herself for dragging him into this while he was still having hiccups. After all nothing had changed, even if they now knew a possible solution to his problem.

But Clark had told her he needed time to think, which was only fair given the circumstances. She understood that he didn't jump at the opportunity to get healed when it meant she'd have to expose him to the green crystal and cut the red splinter out of his body.

She wasn't a doctor, they didn't have anesthetics and –

Next to her Clark curled in on himself and rested his head on the ground. Lois still held his hand while Houdini licked the other. Between them Clark was hovering two inches above the ground, making Lois pray that whoever was out there wouldn't find them.

She glanced around, keeping her ears trained on every sound. Clark's grunts appeared unnaturally loud while time dragged on, making seconds appear like minutes and minutes like hours. Lois held her breath, afraid that the additional sounds would alert Roarke's goon to their presence.

Even Houdini seemed to sense the danger and had gone still. Every hair of his thick fur stood on end.

Clark's eyes were squeezed shut; lines of pain evident around them. He was still floating, if only a bit. Lois was impressed as well as worried. As she watched him her gut clenched in sympathy. She could only guess how much he was struggling right now to keep the powers contained. And he managed, which was exciting to see. But it also cost him. His breathing was getting labored and sweat soaked his shirt.

Lois wanted to tell him that he should just let go. She wanted to ask him how he was doing and how long this torture was going to last. Tears filled her eyes as she watched him suffer in silence and she wasn't sure how long she could endure this before it would break her.

And there still was a man who might find them any moment. Lois closed her eyes, sending another prayer to Heaven that this ordeal would be over soon, for both of them.

“I envy you,” a louder voice disrupted the silence. “You’ll have a much better view from where you are. Sayonara.”

A motor started and waves hit the pier as what sounded like a boat headed to sea.

Next to her, Clark dropped with a heavy thud.

“Tsunami,” he ground out. “Go, free Harrington and run.”

He vanished in a blur and right in that moment, Lois heard explosions in the distance.

Houdini barked and ran off. She followed him around the barrels. Not far from them Congressman Harrington sat tied to a bollard.

She knelt next to him, struggling with tight ropes as she saw The giant wave rolling toward them.

Her breath caught and she tried harder to loosen the ropes that kept Harrington in place.

“Run while you still can,” he urged.

She shook her head and continued her struggle. Her gaze darted toward the approaching wave that became bigger with every passing second. Houdini whimpered, tail between his legs.

Lois froze at the sight of the tsunami. Her mind screamed at her to run, but her feet wouldn’t listen.

And then, suddenly, the wave slowed and shrunk before her eyes. The water rolled back and all that remained was a gust of water that left them drenched but otherwise unharmed.

“How?” Harrington sputtered.

“Magic.”

Warmth flooded Lois belly as she spotted Clark a little later. He was dripping wet but smiling. Houdini started toward him, wagging his tail and barking with excitement.

Lois returned Clark’s smile, not sure what made her happier — that he fought the hiccup or that he’d saved their lives.

He looked proud of himself and rightfully so. His love for her shone in his eyes, making her wish that she wouldn’t have to expose him to the crystal again.

What Spells the End

“I wonder why EPRAD calls a press conference about this solar eclipse,” Lois muttered. “Seems to me like there is more going on than that.”

“Yeah.”

Clark stuffed his hands into the pockets of his pants. He didn’t quite know what to say. Talking to Lois had never been an issue. Usually, the conversation flowed back and forth without effort. But today the words were stuck on the tip of his tongue.

Houdini looked up at him as if he was aware of Clark’s discomfort. Did the dog have any idea what was going through his master’s mind? What would he say if he could

voice his opinion on the matter? Clark’s unease grew as he remembered how Houdini had reacted the last time Lois had exposed him to the green crystal. His stomach clenched with dread.

He watched Lois from the side, trying to work up his courage. Her expression as she’d seen him collapse, the pain in her gaze as she’d found him in her apartment, the guilt she’d felt about it, all that danced before his mind’s eye.

How could he even think about asking her to do it again? It would be unnecessarily cruel. He couldn’t do it on his own, so he had to ask someone. But it didn’t have to be her. His parents were the obvious choice.

Only with Lois it would hurt less, and he wouldn’t have to wait until his powers were back before he could see her again. Though he knew it was selfish, he would prefer if she freed him of the splinter.

“How about dinner at my place tonight?” she suggested. “But don’t get your hopes up too high. It’s either takeout or you cook.”

Clark attempted a grin, but it felt forced and unnatural, so he gave up. Why did this have to be so hard? They’d barely just reached the point in their relationship where they were thinking about exploring intimacy. He almost wished he were still oblivious to the reason for his hiccups. Strangely, things had been easier before he’d known.

Lois laid a hand on his arm. “Is something on your mind?”

He heaved a sigh and nodded. But his throat was too tight to reply. And they had almost reached their destination. There just wasn’t enough time to say all the things he needed to say.

“I know this isn’t easy for you,” she whispered. “If dinner at my place is too much too soon, I’d understand. I guess I’m just longing to spend more time with you after the hassle of the last few days.”

Clark stared at his feet. He hated making her think he was afraid of spending time with her. After she’d discovered the splinter in his back, he’d told her that he needed time to think. The truth was that it had taken him about five seconds to decide that he’d rather face the green crystal than a life without her in it.

He couldn’t deny he was scared, which was why he wanted her there. But that was too much to ask.

The doors of the EPRAD press conference center were looming in front of him. He cleared his throat. Perhaps he could talk to her about it later.

Clark faked a smile. “Dinner would be great.”

He cringed. Though he’d tried hard to sound enthusiastic about it, he’d failed. This was going to be infinitely worse if he was sending mixed messages.

He wasn't sure how to explain what was troubling him. And from inside the building, he heard the buzzing voices of the gathered journalists dying down. The press conference was about to begin.

Clark felt the comforting warmth of Houdini's fur under his hand. The dog pressed his body against Clark's legs, lending him quiet support.

"I'm sorry." Clark sighed and made a new effort. "My mind is elsewhere."

Lois' eyes widened as it seemed to dawn on her what was really bothering him. "Do you want to talk about it?"

He shook his head and turned toward the doors. "We should go inside or we'll miss the conference. They've started."

Lois held him back. "We don't need to go inside. You... could just listen in and tell me what they're saying."

Clark wasn't sure whether his tension eased or grew. "You won't be able to ask all the right questions."

Lois shrugged. "Someone will. You're more important than some unscheduled solar eclipse."

This time his smile was genuine. "What did I ever do to deserve you?"

He closed his eyes and concentrated on what was being said inside. It wasn't easy to filter out the voice of EPRAD's spokesperson between murmurs of journalists and the many other sounds of his immediate surrounding.

"The solar eclipse was caused by an asteroid that will pass Earth..." More voices filled his ears, other voices that were also talking about the asteroid. His breath caught.

Houdini's bark cut through his head like a knife. He clutched at his ears, suddenly only hearing an intense ringing. Blinking, he tried to clear his head and get his senses back under control.

His vision blurred and he spotted a group of people taking to each other in a small room close to the main conference room. One of them was military, wearing the epaulets of a general. He was in a heated conversation with a scientist.

Clark's hearing kicked back in. "No, there's no doubt, General Zeitlin. Nightfall will be a direct hit."

He closed his eyes and concentrated on the sounds much closer to him. Houdini whimpered, his heartbeat slightly erratic. The fabric of Lois shirt rustled a bit as she moved. Clark's own breath came in panting gasps.

Lois voice made him flinch. "Clark, what's the matter with you?"

Though he was pretty sure she'd only whispered, his ears were still sensitive. He rubbed his temple and fought for words. How could he tell her what he'd just heard? An asteroid was headed toward Earth. Fear held his heart a vice-like grip. He wished he could go back to having to ask her assistance with the crystal.

"Clark? Do we need to get away from here?"

He shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. "No, I'm okay or will be in a few minutes. I overheard a conversation between a General and a scientist. This press conference is nothing but a diversion to avoid panic. They're telling the press that the asteroid will pass Earth, but that's not true."

She stared back at him, open-mouthed. Clark wasn't quite sure if he saw confusion in her expression or shock.

He felt the need to clarify. "The asteroid will hit. It's bigger than the one responsible for the extinction of dinosaurs. They're calling it Nightfall."

Lois' looked at him with wide eyes. Her face was pale, her lips trembling slightly. His own breath quickened, and his palms were clammy with sweat.

An asteroid would hit Earth, big enough to destroy anyone and anything he held dear. He'd escaped one catastrophe twenty-seven years ago only to face another one now. And this time there would be no spaceship to take him into a world where he was loved. He'd lose everything except maybe his life.

There was another option, he realized. He might be strong enough, stronger than even he suspected. He had to be because he refused to consider anything else.

His eyes focused on Lois again, took in the fear he saw in her gaze. Until now, he hadn't told her about the full extent of his powers. There had been that tiny sliver of doubt making him scared that if she knew just how strong he was, just how much destruction he could cause, she would no longer want to be his friend.

It no longer mattered. Nothing would matter if she was dead.

Clark cleared his throat and dug his hand into Houdini's soft fur, searching his support.

"Don't worry, Lois. I'll stop this asteroid."

The End of All Illusions

"Do you think it was him?" Lois ran her hand over Houdini's head.

Her heart raced, twisting with a strange mixture of dread and hope as once again she studied the dark sky. There was no sign of Clark, nothing since the shooting star she'd seen go down over Suicide Slum. She'd been watching the sky from the Daily Planet's roof then, hoping to see him return.

The ball of fire had fueled her hope enough that she'd taken the next cab with Houdini right by her side.

Now she wasn't so sure. Perhaps they were just on a wild goose chase. The sky was dark again, just a few stars here and there. Would she even notice his dark shadow? How was he supposed to find her here when he came back? On the fringes of Suicide Slum, her hope had expired. Lois was scared, both that she would find Clark

here and that she wouldn't. Falling from the sky in a ball of fire couldn't bode well for anyone, not even for someone like Clark.

She was terrified of losing him.

Her stomach clenched, making her feel sick. Breathing in and out seemed like an effort all of a sudden. But she had to know, even if she'd find his body broken. Not knowing what had happened to Clark was even worse. As Houdini barked, she was sure he'd agree.

Could she have seen a part of the asteroid that had miraculously preceded the rest?

It seemed unlikely.

She wanted the shooting star to be Clark and Clark to be all right. But if he were fine, surely he'd have come looking for her by now.

Lois stood at the fringes of Suicide Slum and couldn't bring herself to move. Houdini waited next to her, head lowered and tail between his legs. He missed his master and so did she.

The setter barked again. His whole body tensed before he flurried into motion. He darted off, but stopped at the next corner and looked over his shoulder to see if she was following.

Lois ran after him.

Was it a good sign that the setter picked up speed? Now and again, Houdini would check on her only to move faster afterwards. Soon Lois was jogging at a speed she couldn't keep up for long.

She was grateful for Houdini's presence, though. The streets of Suicide Slum were dangerous in the daylight. Now that darkness had descended upon the city, Lois felt a chill creep up despite the exertion. She could only hope that even the thugs were celebrating tonight.

MagiKal had saved Earth from Nightfall. She still couldn't believe it. When Clark had told her he was going to destroy the asteroid, she'd thought that maybe he'd turned a bit delusional. After all, nobody could be that strong.

The scientists at EPRAD had laughed at him, too, until he'd demonstrated what he could do. He'd lifted a rocket carrying a space shuttle that had been scheduled to take off a few days later and had flown it high up into the sky only to safely land it afterwards. That had convinced the scientists he wasn't just a fraud begging for attention.

Lois knew that revealing himself had been Clark's personal nightmare. But he'd seen no other way. True to his word MagiKal had managed to destroy the asteroid.

Clark had risked so much. He'd been aware there was no going back from letting an asteroid disappear.

Once he succeeded everyone would know that he wasn't just creating illusions, because EPRAD hadn't been

able to keep their secret for long. Other scientists had discovered Nightfall, so the whole world was watching.

This morning MagiKal had taken off to the jeers of the crowd. People had been convinced he was just trying to show off. They knew better now. But there was no telling how they were going to perceive him after learning about the extent of his powers. If Clark survived that was.

In the past couple of days, she'd seen Clark's fear — of the asteroid but maybe even more of how this would change their relationship. He'd been scared that people in general and Lois in particular would fear him.

He'd risked a lot up there. Until EPRAD had lost contact, Lois hadn't allowed herself to consider that above everything else he'd risked his life.

Now it was all she could think about.

Lois' breath now came in panting gasps, her sides were hurting with a stitch. Houdini barked and darted off at a pace that no human could hope to keep up with. Lois tapped into her own last reserves, knowing that it could only mean Houdini had smelled Clark.

She prayed he had and that by some divine intervention Clark was unharmed. Breathing heavily, she followed the dog around the next corner.

Houdini stood at the edge of a huge crater, barking and pacing back and forth. The flickering red glow of fire painted a wall on the other side of the hole in yellowish light.

Lois supposed it was the fire that kept the dog at a distance. Her throat was tight and her heart was hammering in her chest as she caught up to Houdini.

From the edge of the crater, she saw a figure on the ground. The man was lying on his stomach naked but for a few odd pieces of fabric that hadn't been burned. His skin was covered in soot, dust and pieces of broken concrete.

Blood was oozing from a few cuts. A faint red glow emanated from a crystal sticking out of his back. Paralyzed, Lois stared at Clark's unmoving form. Her racing heart beat in her throat and her guts turned into an ugly twisted mass.

Lois' gaze darted over his back and what she could see of his face. Agonizing seconds ticked by until she discovered that he was still breathing. A low moan escaped his throat as he moved groggily and then stilled again.

Lois managed to shake her stupor and rushed toward him.

"Clark!"

She dropped to her knees beside him and placed her hand on his back, shaking him lightly. His skin was cool to the touch. Clark grunted in reply but didn't move. His breathing was labored.

"Clark, say something, please."

Houdini had overcome his fear of fire and joined her, starting to lick his master's face. The setter whimpered and nudged Clark with his snout. Lois prayed for a reaction, any reaction that would tell her how Clark was doing. But he remained still, save for his chest rising and falling with rattling breaths.

Should she try to rouse him, or would she injure him further? Panic took hold of her as she realized that she had no idea how she could help him. Should she call an ambulance or hope that he'd recover on his own?

Would the doctors at a hospital even know what to do with Clark?

Lois' mind raced as she tried to decide which way to run in order to find a phone. Her gaze once more drifted across his back and lingered on the red crystal. There was at least something she could do for him, even if it was probably too late for that. She seized the crystal with two fingers and pulled it out.

Then she scrambled back to her feet, threw the crystal away and turned to climb out of the crater to get help.

"Lois?" Clark's breathy voice startled her.

He coughed, weakly at first but soon his whole chest seemed to spasm. With trembling arms he pushed himself up, gasping for breath between coughing fits. Startled by the unexpected sound Houdini whimpered and backed off, taking refuge behind Lois' legs

Lois watched Clark with trepidation. "I'll get an ambulance."

But he shook his head, his eyes wide with panic. "I'll be —"

He coughed again, so hard that it seemed like his lungs might come out. His whole body shook with the effort. But eventually the spasms subsided.

"Fine," he rasped.

Slowly, Clark managed to get to his feet. Once he stood, he looked down at himself and took in his naked form. He grimaced and scanned his surroundings, probably searching for something to cover himself with.

Lois watched him helplessly, then suddenly remembered that she was wearing a coat.

She shrugged out of it and handed it to him. "Take this."

"Thanks." With trembling hands, he took the coat and wrapped it around himself, his relief obvious as he managed to tie it enough that he was mostly decent.

She watched him, half expecting him to lose his balance as he swayed a bit. Worry, relief and love all filled her chest, mingling to a jumble of emotions that made her throat tight. Her eyes filled with tears and she wasn't even sure if they were tears of joy or sorrow because Clark looked anything but fine.

A sob escaped her. "How are you?"

He seemed to ponder that for a moment, while he studied his soot-covered hands. "Okay, I think. Tired, but otherwise I'm good."

He made a step toward her and opened his arms to wrap them around her. She hesitated, afraid that he might topple over and call his own bluff. But when his arms closed around her in a gentle embrace, his frame steady and soothing, she buried her face in his shoulders, the tears now spilling freely as she melted into him.

"I thought I'd lost you."

"Shh, it's fine," Clark whispered into her hair. "The asteroid is destroyed and I'm still here." His gurgling laughter filled the air, as if he couldn't quite believe it himself. "I'm really still here."

He let go of her and grinned the most dazzling smile she'd ever seen on his face. She felt a similar smile spread across her own face and now she knew that her tears were tears of joy, because he was still alive and still with her.

For a moment they just stood there, grinning at each other, mesmerized by the fact that neither had lost the other until Houdini found his courage and dashed toward Clark. The setter jumped up at him with such enthusiasm that Clark lost his balance and landed on his back.

"Hey, buddy, careful." Clark laughed. "This asteroid really took it out of me."

As Lois watched them, her heart swelled with more happiness. She wanted to pull Clark into another hug and never let go of him. She wanted to be as close to him as he would let her, for however long he would let her until they found-

Suddenly, she remembered that she had already found the solution to his hiccups. She couldn't wait to tell him that he was rid of the crystal.

They were going to have a future.

She couldn't help herself. If she'd thought that she'd been deliriously happy before, there were no words to describe how she was feeling now. Lois knelt beside him and flung her arms around Clark once more. She didn't care that Houdini was a part of their embrace, and the dog seemed happy to have both his people at his side.

But after a while, he slipped out to leave them their privacy and Clark gently tilted up Lois chin to seal her lips with a fierce kiss. Time and space lost their meaning as his tongue explored her mouth.

Part of her longed to tell him the good news, because he had a right to be just as happy as she was. But she just couldn't bring herself to pull back.

She couldn't get enough of him, not even now that she knew she wouldn't have to let go of him again.

Ever.

There's Magic After All

Clark landed on the balcony of his apartment and stepped inside. Though he'd barely moved in and could still smell the fresh paint, it already felt more like home than the trailer ever had. He sighed in contentment as he closed the door behind him and smiled to himself.

The rapid tapping of paws on the floor announced Houdini. The setter darted around a corner and stopped a few feet from him, his body all tense and ready to attack. The hairs of his fur stood on end and a low growl escaped his throat.

Clark took a step back and held up his hands. "Sorry, buddy, I forgot you don't like the suit."

Houdini growled again and bared his teeth.

"Hey, it's still me," Clark tried to soothe him. "See?"

He took another step back and quickly spun out of the glaring blue and red into his regular clothes. Then he tousled his hair back in Clark fashion, pulled his glasses from the pocket of his shirt, and put them back on.

Houdini relaxed a bit and whimpered softly, seeming confused for a moment. Then he started wagging his tail again and approached Clark to greet him in the usual manner. Clark knelt to stroke his dog and buried his face in the soft fur. Though, technically, he no longer needed Houdini's constant presence, he'd missed his friend while he'd been out.

He sighed softly and scratched the dog behind his ear. "I know, I liked the black better too, but this new costume allows me a freedom that MagiKal never did."

The setter barked and licked his face, clearly just as happy to see him as he was to be back home. His heart swelled and he was sure that even though their new situation would take some getting used to, they would be fine.

"It was a car accident," he whispered into the dog's fur. "Seven people would have died if I hadn't been there to save them. I really made a difference today; I didn't just show a few fancy tricks. This is who I want to be. I know it's all strange and new, but over time..."

He laid his arms around the dog, hoping to convey how much he still needed him, even if he no longer required his assistance.

Houdini barked again and then pulled at Clark's shirt.

It was a gesture so familiar that it sent a shiver down Clark's spine. His breath caught. It couldn't be. He squeezed his eyes shut. It couldn't be another hiccup! It had been three weeks since Lois had found him in Suicide Slum, three weeks since she'd removed the red splinter from his back. His powers had returned as soon as the sun had come up and he hadn't had another hiccup since. He'd been so sure he was free!

But Houdini kept tugging at his shirt and whimpered softly and Clark felt like his world was going to fall apart.

Then Clark heard someone clear their throat. As he looked up, he sagged with relief.

Lois smiled at him. She leaned against the wall, her arms crossed in front of her chest and was watching his exchange with Houdini.

"Oh, I understand," Clark said to his dog. "You're trying to tell me that we've got a visitor."

He once more ran his hands through Houdini's fur, feeling the urge to apologize for the misunderstanding. Had the setter picked up on his tension? Clark's limbs still felt a bit shaky as he got to his feet and smiled back at Lois.

"Hello, partner," she said.

Her silky voice sent another shiver down his spine, this time of the pleasant kind and he drowned in the dark pools of her eyes. While he stared at her, mesmerized, he vaguely registered that she pulled something from behind her back.

She held out a card. "Perry asked me to bring you this. It's your new press pass. You're now officially a member of the regular Daily Planet staff."

She pushed herself off the wall and closed the distance between them. Before Clark really knew what was happening, she'd flung her arms around him and was kissing him. Heat shot through his body at the contact. He moaned into her mouth as her tongue darted forward and teased him. He opened his lips to deepen the kiss and started suckling at her lower lip, tasting for himself how very sweet she was. He wanted to pull her even closer and show her exactly how much he loved her. He wanted to get on his knees right now and produce the ring that he'd been hiding in his pocket for the past two weeks. He wanted to do so much that he didn't know what to do first. It seemed like too much and at the same time could never be enough to show her how much she meant to him.

"Thank you," he rasped as they broke the kiss. "I owe you so much."

She shook her head. "You owe me nothing. I was just glad I could help you become the man you're supposed to be."

Clark pursed his lips. "Not that I want to complain or anything, but I'm really not sure I'm supposed to be 'Superman'. That sounds awfully presumptuous. Can't we change the name to something less... I don't know... less boastful?"

Lois laughed. "Nope. Afraid not. That name is stuck. One of the downsides of saving the whole world. And as far as I'm concerned, it's just right. You did great with that car accident today."

His cheeks grew hot. "Thanks." Clark swallowed against a dry throat. "I'm glad you came. After I spent most of the day running out on you, I wasn't sure whether

you'd want to risk a date that might end up disrupted. I bet Perry already regrets hiring me."

"He doesn't," Lois said firmly. "Actually, I wouldn't be surprised if he may suspect something about Superman. But before you work yourself into a frenzy, if he does it's unlikely he's ever going to tell a soul, not even us."

"That's...that's good," Clark managed.

His heart was suddenly beating in his throat and he had a hard time trying to suppress the sense of unease that had taken hold of him.

"And now I'd really like that pasta you promised."

Lois placed another kiss on his cheek and laid an arm around his shoulders to pull him toward the kitchen.

Clark followed her, the touch of her hand and the brilliant smile on her face sending a rush of excitement through him. He felt like he was walking on air. And as Houdini barked at him once again, he realized that it was true. His feet had left the ground.

With a sheepish smile, he lowered himself back down. Lois had spotted his slip and her grin had crumpled to an expression of concern. But he shook his head and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his pants, suddenly deeply embarrassed.

"Don't worry, it's not a hiccup." He stared at his feet, suppressing the urge to shuffle them. "It's just, your presence is kind of distracting." His gut clenched as he realized how creepy all of this must seem to her.

She cupped his cheek and made him look at her again. There was a gleam in her eyes as if she'd guessed what he'd been thinking about. His cheeks burned up and he swallowed hard, trying to come up with something to say that would explain his feelings without making a complete fool of himself.

"So, when you feel good about yourself, you're actually floating on cloud nine?"

He chuckled and gave her a small shrug. "I can't help it. With you around, I'm always on cloud nine."

His breath caught as he drowned in her eyes. Right at this moment, he could sense that connection that, for some reason, they'd always had. It was stronger now than ever, linking them in a way that he'd never thought possible. The world seemed to have stopped turning, and his right hand — still deep in the pocket of his pants — closed around the small chest with the ring. Was this the right moment? Could he ask her to become his wife?

His heart hammered in his chest, but he let out a small breath and let the moment pass. It was too soon. The hiccups were gone, there was no need to try and squeeze a whole relationship into the scarce moments when his powers wouldn't work up. He had time now to explore a romantic relationship with Lois, to date her and kiss her and learn how to love her with his powers intact. It didn't

have to happen tonight. Clark withdrew his hands from his pockets and gently placed them on her hips to pull her a little closer.

He'd take her to Smallville and ask her under the stars, he vowed to himself. When the time was right.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and leaned her head against his chest. "So, you float, when you're happy. Is there anything else you haven't told me about you?"

"Nothing I can think of. But ask away, I'm an open book"

She looked up at him and traced an S on his chest, imitating the symbol that he had on his Superman suit. "I don't think you ever told me what name your birth parents gave you."

"Kal El," he replied.

She gasped. "Kal as in MagiKal?"

For a moment she was silent, but then she started to chuckle, which quickly turned to a full-blown laughter.

Clark frowned. "Yeah, what's so funny about that?"

"Oh, something I once said, when Jimmy first asked me to write about you." She was still laughing and fighting to get herself back under control. "I said that there is no such thing as magic and that the only thing I might find out is why you can't spell the word magical properly."

He raised his brows. "And?"

She giggled. "I guess now I know." Then she sealed his lips with a long, hungry kiss. "But I learned something else, too. There's magic after all."

THE END