

Breaking Up Is Hard to Do

By Anonpip <anonpip@gmail.com>

Rated: PG

Submitted: August 2009

Summary: What happens when Lois' life takes a different turn long before she ever meets Clark?

Story Size: 113,189Kb (577Kb as text)

Author's Note: Just a brief introduction to this story. I see this as a spin-off to my story "A Triangle with Three Sides." That said, there are a lot of differences. The main similarity is that they are both alt-world stories. Aside from that, almost anything they share in common is also something they share with the television show. (For example, in both stories, Lois and Clark work for the Daily Planet.)

Unlike, Triangle, though, this story will not feature any characters from the universe of the show (or from any other universe). Also unlike Triangle, while this story will start with Clark's arrival in Metropolis, this will not be a re-write of the show. I don't expect there will be much A-plot here at all and this universe is so different than the one we are used to that the same things won't be happening anyway. For example, Lex Luthor's role in this story is minor, and even Superman's role is limited (in that we'll see little of him. Clark will still moonlight in tights).

So, here's how it is a spin-off. For Triangle, I created a history for Lois that involved a high school romance with a boy named Chad (I also wrote Chad into the original universe, although obviously he's not canon, but he doesn't contradict canon either). The Lois from our universe and the Lois from Triangle's universe had very different relationships with Chad. This story explores another universe where Lois also has a high school boyfriend named Chad. Chad is very similar to the Chad in the Triangle universe, but Lois' relationship with him is different than what's been seen in either the other universes.

That said, the history is pretty similar (to a certain part) with Triangle Lois. So, the prologue of this story is background information on Lois and Chad's relationship and is taken from the Lois flashbacks from that story. The only change is that this story is first person (from Lois' POV), so the flashbacks are updated to reflect that.

One other change in case you've read the flashbacks in Triangle and have decided to skip ahead here — this Chad does not mention going on a rock climbing trip. It's not that he never went, it's that the trip is unimportant. He didn't die during it (as with original Lois' Chad) nor was he saved by Clark (as in Triangle Lois' Chad). As such, the trip is not a particularly important part of Lois' memories of Chad.

One more thing — even if you skip the prologue, you may want to skip to the end of the prologue to see where the background leaves off. It is not at the last Lois memory from Triangle.

All characters are the property of Warner Bros, December 3rd Productions, ABC, and anyone else who may have a legal claim on them. The story, however, is mine.

I also owe "thank you"s to a lot of people:

To Kelly, Jill, and Nancy for all their help with making sure the stuff I wrote about the life of a medical resident was realistic.

To Sara (Lieta on the Boards) for providing the link on Kansas subsidies. And to James and Elizabeth for other facts about subsidies that are used in this story.

To all the people on the Boards who provided such thoughtful comments and encouraged me to write a story a little out of everyone's comfort zone.

To Erin for GEing this for me — not only reading through a fairly long story and making wonderful suggestions, but also teaching me about comma usage.

And lastly and most importantly, to Beth, Carol, and Kelly for all the help throughout — betaing, cheerleading, and occasionally calling me mean. :)

Prologue September 1983

I felt a little guilty. I knew I would be leaving Lucy home alone for the night, but... Chad was awfully cute. I was sixteen years old; I should be able to date, right? Even if it meant my thirteen-year-old sister had to stay home alone with our alcoholic mother?

With a sigh, I knocked on the door to Lucy's room. "Hi," I said softly as I opened the door.

Lucy looked up from the textbook she was studying. "Hi, Lo. What's up?"

I had to smile. Lucy was such an optimist; she was always smiling, as if she were unaware of what our family life was like.

I sighed again, sitting on the edge of Lucy's bed. "Luce, I wanted to talk to you. I'm going out tonight."

"On a date?" Lucy asked, her eyes lighting up. "With who? Is it with Peter? He's so cute, the way he follows you home and stuff."

My smile widened — trust Lucy to get focused on the date and not on being home alone. "No, not Peter. I don't really like him. I think the way he follows me home is a bit creepy..."

"No, it's not," Lucy cut in. "It's romantic."

I fought a grimace. "Well, anyway, it's not with Peter, but it is a date. I'm going out with Chad. You know him, right? His little brother, Ben, was in your class last year."

Lucy nodded, trying to remember. "Yeah, I remember Ben. He's cute, I guess. If you like the nerdy type. Is Chad nerdy, too?"

"Nerdy?" I asked, thinking I was a bit nerdy.

"Does he wear glasses?"

"Yes. Does that mean he's nerdy?"

Lucy nodded vehemently in response. "So, where are you going?" she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I'm not sure. He said something about a two-step lesson."

"A two-step? Isn't that some kind of dance?" Lucy asked.

"Beats me," I answered.

"I hope you don't think this is too dorky," Chad said as he held open the door for me. "My cousin lives in Tennessee and I went line dancing with him once. It was fun, so when I heard they were offering lessons here, I thought it would be fun, and more interesting than going to the movies."

"It sounds fun," I said, lying, but unable to concentrate on anything he said when he smiled as I followed the movement of his dimple up and down. He was so cute!

An hour later, I was breathing hard and grinning from ear to ear.

“Are you having a good time?” Chad asked me as we took a break.

“Yes,” I said enthusiastically. “It really is fun.”

“Wait until you try the Tush Push,” Chad said.

“The what?” I asked, laughing.

“The Tush Push,” Chad replied, grinning. “I know. Funny name, isn’t it? But it is really fun. Do you want anything to drink?”

“Just some water,” I said, thanking him a minute later when he handed me a bottle.

“So, I thought we could go for dinner or something after this,” Chad said, looking nervous. “Unless you just want to go home or something.”

“I’d love to go to dinner!” I exclaimed, and then felt myself blush as I realized how eager I sounded. I restated my words to sound less excited. “I mean... I’d like that.”

Chad’s smile could have lit up the room, and I was once again distracted by his dimple.

October 1983

“I really like you, Lois,” Chad said, staring at his shoes.

“I... I like you, too,” I replied, feeling myself blush even though Chad was still not looking at me. This was the end of our third date, and Chad had not looked this nervous ever before.

“Lois,” he said softly, taking my hand even as he stared resolutely at the ground. He took a breath so deep it was audible before he blurted out, “Can I kiss you?”

I didn’t answer at first. I had not expected that question. Chad was so different than I had expected, and this was just another way that was the case.

Truthfully, I had expected him to kiss me at the end of our first date, even though I wasn’t really ready for it. I didn’t think I had a choice, though. Wasn’t it my responsibility or something?

When he hadn’t kissed me, I wondered if he didn’t like me as much as I was beginning to like him, but then he had asked me out again. After he asked for the third date, I was pretty sure he liked me, but I guess I had just forgotten all about the kiss thing. Did boys normally ask?

Chad dropped my hands. “Forget I asked,” he mumbled and I realized I had taken too long to answer.

“No,” I said, my voice quiet. “I mean... I didn’t expect you to ask,” I finally blurted out.

Chad blushed even further. “I know. It’s not very romantic, is it?” he asked.

I frowned. “That’s not what I meant. I meant... shouldn’t we just kiss if you want? Isn’t that how it works?”

Chad looked at me, confused. “What do you mean ‘if I want’? We need to both want to.”

I could feel my eyes widen in surprise. “I need to want to, too?”

Chad shook his head, looking very confused. “Of course. That’s why I asked. I mean, I know, it isn’t romantic, but I’m no good at these things. I didn’t want to kiss you if you didn’t want to.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Really.”

“Wow. That’s neat,” I said, breaking into a smile.

“Well, good night,” Chad said, turning around.

“Good night?” I asked, disappointed. “Aren’t we going to kiss?”

Chad looked at me like I had two heads. “I told you, I don’t wanna if you don’t wanna and since you don’t...”

“I never said I didn’t,” I interrupted him, blushing furiously.

“You mean... Do you want to?” Chad asked.

“Yes,” I said softly.

Chad’s lips were only on mine for a few seconds, but I thought it just might be the best few seconds of my life.

February 1984

Chad held my hand tightly as we walked up the stairs to my apartment. “What’s with you today?” he asked me.

I said nothing for a moment, afraid to tell him the truth. I had been by his house several times now after school. Only for an hour or so each time to study before the middle school got out and I would go to pick up Lucy. Still, while it was only a short while each time and his parents had not been home from work yet, he had had no problem inviting me over.

I knew he expected me to do the same, but it was hard. How was I to know what day would be good for my mother? How could I know what day my mother would actually go to work and not be home when we got there rather than spending the day at home drinking?

Still, I felt like I needed to invite him over. We had been on several dates now, and while he had not yet asked me, I knew everyone at school considered me Chad’s girlfriend. I liked being his almost-girlfriend (although not as much as I would have liked to be his girlfriend). He had no idea why inviting him over would be hard for me and I had no intention of telling him. Instead, I had decided to invite him over and hope for the best.

I held my breath as I opened the door. I breathed a tiny sigh of relief when I walked inside. It was quiet in the house. Usually, if my mother had spent the day drinking, she would be shouting at the television by now. Unless, of course, it was the type of day where she kept herself in her bedroom crying. Maybe I should check the bedroom. If Mom was in there, I could keep her from coming out by making sure she still had lots to drink.

What was I thinking? The goal was to keep alcohol away from my mother, not give it to her! I bit my lip. ‘Let this be a good day,’ I prayed.

“So, this is it,” I told Chad nervously as I glanced around. The bedroom door was open. Mom was not home. I could feel my shoulders fall as the stress left my body.

“Is he still here?” Lucy called out an hour later as she entered the apartment.

Chad smiled. “Lucy?” he asked.

Chad had yet to meet Lucy. I had always gone alone to pick her up from school after leaving Chad’s house, even though he had always offered to walk me there. I was nervous about what Lucy may let slip. Unlike me, Lucy did not seem to think it was any big deal for her friends, at least her close friends, to know about Mom. She didn’t understand why I wanted to keep it a secret.

“Yes,” I said, hoping that this went well. I really wanted Lucy and Chad to get along, while hoping that Lucy would not say anything about Mom.

“He is here!” Lucy said, smiling as she walked in.

“Chad, this is my sister, Lucy.” I made introductions, my heart pounding. ‘Don’t say anything about Mom, Lucy,’ I tried to tell my sister telepathically.

Lucy was ignoring me, though. Chad stood to shake Lucy’s hand, but she moved to give him a hug instead.

“Hi, Chad,” she said.

Chad laughed as he hugged her back. “Hi, Lucy.”

Lucy smiled as she swung her backpack to the floor, taking her jacket off and laying it on top of her bag before she sat down. “So...” Lucy said, looking at Chad carefully. “You’re Lois’ boyfriend.”

“Lucy!” I said, feeling my cheeks flame up. What if Chad thought I was telling people I was his girlfriend when he hadn’t even asked me?

“Sorry, sorry,” Lucy said, not looking the least bit apologetic.

"You're Lois' friend. Who happens to be a boy."

"Yes," Chad said. "And you're her sister. Who happens to be a girl," he grinned.

"She speaks about you all the time."

"Oh, I bet not half as much as she speaks about you," Lucy smiled.

"*Lucy!*" I said again, feeling my cheeks flush even more.

"So, Lois said you like to play soccer?" Chad asked Lucy, reaching over to take my hand in his.

Before Lucy could answer though, the door to the apartment opened again. "Mom?" I asked, glancing worriedly at the clock. It was too early for my mother to be home from work.

"Yeah," Mom answered as she came in. "I just went out... Lucy, pick your jacket up! This place is a sty. My hard-earned money doesn't pay for this house just so you can trash it!"

I winced. Mom was drunk. I could see it in her eyes and the way she was standing, even if I ignored the vodka bottle in her hand. Plus, the things she was saying — I was the only one who ever cleaned around here, although sometimes Lucy helped. My mother barely did anything except for going to work often enough that I could find enough money to buy a few groceries each week.

Before I could say something, anything, to get my mother to go to her room and leave us alone, though, my mother's eyes traveled to where I sat next to Chad on the couch, my hand still in his.

"What's this?" she asked, and I almost inwardly groaned. In case her little outburst at Lucy had not made it clear, I knew what came next would do it. Mom was in one of her angry drunk moods. "Is this your little boyfriend, Lois?" Before I could respond, she continued. "When did I say you could have boys over? He needs to leave now! What did you think you were doing, you little slut?" I could feel my cheeks flame as my eyes filled with tears. Angry Drunk Mom had nothing on this woman.

"Don't think you're anything special," she said to Chad. "I find her in here with boys all the time."

"That's not true!" Lucy shouted, but then backed away when Mom glared at her.

"Don't defend her just 'cause you're hoping she'll send her rejects to you. It's not going to happen. We all know how selfish Lois can be."

"I should go," Chad said quietly.

I nodded, trying to hold in my tears. I got up and walked him to the door. "Good night, Chad," I said softly, staring at the tile in the entranceway, willing myself not to cry.

"Good night, Lois," he said just as softly.

As I closed the door after him, I knew that what we had really just said was goodbye.

"Hi," Chad said softly in my ear the next day. I stared resolutely ahead. If I turned toward him, I would start to cry, I knew I would. Was he going to break up with me here? Right here in the hallway? Right now, just before the bell for last period rang? I would have to switch lockers. Would they let me do that? I could not come back here day after day to the place where Chad had broken up with me. Of course, since he had never asked to be my boyfriend, it wasn't like he could actually break up with me, right?

"Lois," Chad said, just as softly as before, placing a hand on my shoulder. He was being so insistent. I didn't feel like I had a choice. I turned towards him, my eyes swimming with tears.

"Can you come over after school?" he asked me.

I nodded. So he was going to wait. At least I wouldn't have to change lockers.

Chad reached up to brush a tear from my cheek. I wished he wouldn't touch me. Then leaning close to me, he whispered, "Please don't cry. It makes me sad. I just want to talk. I swear."

I nodded again, afraid to talk.

"Forget it," Chad said softly. "Let's just go now."

"Now?" I finally managed to get a word past the lump in my throat.

"Yeah, I'm not going to be able to concentrate on physics anyway knowing you're upset, and I doubt you'll get much out of your English class either. So, let's go now."

"You want to cut school?" I asked, not sure why I was stuck on this.

Chad nodded. "Just for today. This is more important."

I nodded again, feeling a few more tears leak out. I supposed making sure he was no longer associated with the girl with the alcoholic mother, the girl who was Metropolis' own Lolita, would be more important than physics. I should be happy he was telling me he wanted nothing more to do with me rather than just ignoring me for the rest of the year.

I packed the books I needed into my book bag and closed my locker. Chad grabbed the bag before I could, swinging it over his left shoulder. "Come on," he said, taking my hand. I blindly followed him, staring at his hand in mine the whole way. This was likely the last time he would ever hold it.

The walk to Chad's house was quick and very quiet. Chad must have been worried about my reaction or something, as he got oddly shy once we got there. "Do you want something to drink? I got some cream soda for you if you want," he said.

"Maybe just water," I said quickly, not wanting to have any cream soda while we had this conversation. I would never be able to drink it again otherwise. Even now I may not be able to. How did Chad remember that cream soda was my favorite? I had only had it with him once — at dinner on our first date — since so few places had it.

Chad nodded, pouring us both glasses and bringing them out to the living room. He set the glasses on coasters on the coffee table and sat down. I stood awkwardly in the doorway. What was the proper protocol on how to act when your almost boyfriend was about to break up with you?

"Lois," Chad said softly. "Please come here."

I moved over to sit near him, but kept my arms crossed over my chest. I needed to keep my distance if I was going to manage to leave here with any dignity at all. If I had any left after last night.

"Why didn't you tell me about your mother?" he asked me, his voice gentle. "If I had known... I don't understand. Why did you invite me over?"

I couldn't seem to help the tears that started to fall down my cheeks. "I didn't want... I didn't want you to know. And sometimes... sometimes she goes to work and I just sort of hoped that yesterday... I just didn't want you to know."

Chad moved closer to put his arms around me, but I kept my arms resolutely around me and so he settled for placing a hand on my arm instead.

"It's not true," I said, hating that my voice sounded petulant. "I've never had a boy over before. Ever."

"I know," he said. "I didn't believe her for an instant. Look, Lois, if you or Lucy ever need to go somewhere, even just for a night or something, you can come here."

"Thanks," I said softly. That was unexpected. Did he really think I could come here to hang out after he broke up with me?

We sat in silence for another moment, before I blurted out, "Could you just do it already? I mean, it's nice of you to at least tell me, but could you just do it?"

"Do what?" Chad asked, looking at me in confusion.

"You're going to break up with me or whatever, aren't you?" I asked, tears still dripping down my cheeks, but I had stopped paying attention to them.

Chad looked at me in alarm. "Is that what you thought? No, Lois. I don't want to break up. You're my girl."

"I'm... What?" I asked, surprised. I was his girl? Really?

"You're my girl. You knew that, right?" Chad asked. "I mean, I didn't come right out and ask, but I told you how bad I am at these things... I thought you knew. Didn't you?"

I shook my head. I was his girl. I could feel my arms relax slightly as I thought of it, and Chad smiled, moving forward to brush the tears off my cheeks, before pulling me towards him to wrap me in his arms.

"Well, you are my girl. I mean, unless you don't want to be," he whispered in my ear.

"Even with my mother...?"

"You're my girl. Not her. Lois," he said, moving away slightly. "You're amazing, you know that? You're so smart. And so pretty. And well, the fact that you have to deal with your mother on top of that, well, if anyone could do it, it would be you, I guess. But still. I've never met anyone like you before."

I smiled shyly. "I've never met anyone like you before, either."

"Well, good," Chad said, smiling at me. Then he leaned forward to kiss me softly on the lips.

He backed away a moment later, though. "What did you mean, that it was nice of me to tell you? Tell you what?"

I could feel myself blush. "I thought you were going to break up with me."

"And it was nice of me to tell you what? That I was breaking up with you?" Chad asked, incredulously. At my nod, his eyes got even wider. "Why would I not tell you? I mean, what did you think I was going to do? Just ignore you?" My cheeks, betraying, flamed red, and Chad moved to hug me again. "Why... why would you think I would do that? I would never..."

I held onto him tightly, the tears falling again. I didn't understand Chad — how he didn't care about my mother, how he felt he would have to tell me if he was going to break up with me. This was not how boys were. It wasn't how my father was at all.

"Lois," he said, pulling away. "I mean it; I would never break up with you without letting you know. I promise. I mean, who would do that?" I stared at the couch cushions in silence, and Chad asked, "You didn't date someone else who did that to you, did you? I thought I was your first boyfriend."

"You are," I said softly, afraid to tell him the truth — that it was my father who had taught me this. I knew, though, that like my mother's drinking, I'd have to tell him.

"So who...?"

"No one, really," I admitted with a sigh, still staring at the couch. "It's just... when my dad left he didn't say goodbye to us. He just left. He told my mom that he could leave whenever he wanted; he didn't need to give her any warning. That she needed him, but he didn't need her. I heard him."

"Well," Chad said softly, "I don't know what your dad was like, but I promise I won't do that."

"You've never broken up with a girl without telling her?" I asked, just to be sure.

Chad blushed. "Well, no, but... I mean... you're my first girlfriend, so..."

I smiled. I was his first girlfriend. I'm not sure why that made me so happy, but it did. "But you won't do that. You promise?"

"Absolutely," he whispered, before he leaned in to kiss me again.

June 1984

Encased in Chad's arms, I swayed slowly to the music coming over the speakers. Some of the other juniors had complained that it was not fair that our prom was taking place in the school gym, but we didn't care. It was a chance to be together, so we knew we would have fun.

Chad buried his face in my neck. "I love this perfume," he whispered in my ear.

"I know," I smiled at him. "That's why I wore it." It was his favorite, along with the red I had chosen for my dress.

Chad kissed my neck lightly, causing me to tense up in anticipation, before backing away. "Lois," he said softly, so softly I couldn't hear him over the music, I could only read his lips.

"Hmmm?" I responded absently, still wondering why he was so far away.

"I love you," he said, again so softly I couldn't hear him. I stopped moving. I must have misread his lips. He did not just tell me that he loved me. He couldn't have.

"What?" I asked in an attempt to clarify things.

He leaned forward to place his lips right next to my ear. This time there was no mistake. "I love you."

Almost of its own accord, I felt a smile break over my face. "I love you, too," I said in reply, knowing it was true.

October 1984

"What are you two doing?" Lucy asked. Now that Lucy was a freshman, she was on the same schedule as I was, and we often went to Chad's house after school to study.

I wasn't sure what Chad had told his parents about my mother, but they never seemed to mind having us over, and often invited us to stay for dinner. Lucy and I usually accepted. It wasn't like Mom even noticed if we were home (although on her worst nights she would forget that it was not actually my responsibility to make us dinner and get angry that it was not done).

It was early now, though, and so while the Andrews had told us we could stay for dinner tonight, we were still in the living room studying before dinner. Or at least, Lucy was studying.

"We're talking," I explained in response to Lucy's question, and Lucy rolled her eyes.

"I know that," Lucy said. "I thought we were studying, but you two are making too much noise."

"Sorry, Luce," Chad said. "We are studying, sort of. Lois and I need to start working on college applications and we're trying to decide where to apply."

"Oh, right," Lucy said, sounding vaguely depressed.

"Met U is our first choice, Lucy," I said quietly, trying to reassure her. I knew how I would be feeling if I was her.

"It is?" Lucy asked, trying to contain her excitement.

"Well, it has both a great journalism department and pre-med program," Chad said. "Plus, of course, it's near you."

Lucy smiled, but the smile disappeared quickly. "But you're not going to still want to live at home, are you?" she said to me.

"No," I sighed, but before I could explain to her what I was thinking, she cut me off.

"What are you going to do?"

Chad smiled, "We're going to get an apartment off campus," he said, reaching over to give my hand a squeeze.

"Oh, right," Lucy said, eyeing us carefully.

"Not for that!" I said, giving Chad a look. We had discussed it before. Given the lack of parental supervision Lucy and I got, I wanted to set a good example for Lucy. Anyway, Chad had said he didn't want to have sex yet. We were too young, and if something were to happen, he couldn't really support us yet. So, we were waiting, and I wanted to make sure Lucy knew we were waiting so that she would think twice about sleeping with any boyfriends she had in the near future.

"I told you, Luce. We don't do that," I said quietly, so Chad's parents could not hear. "We'll be sleeping in separate bedrooms."

"Oh," Lucy said again.

Chad smiled at Lucy. "We think it shouldn't be too hard to find a two bedroom apartment someplace on the bus route to the high school so you could live with us and still get to school."

Lucy's face broke out in a smile as she asked, "You want me to live with you?"

I nodded, smiling as well. “Well, we’d need to share a bedroom, but yeah.”

“But how will you guys get to school?” Lucy asked. “And how are you going to afford an apartment?”

“Damien is graduating from college this year,” Chad started, referring to his eldest brother. “He bought a car last year, but he said now that he’ll have a real job, he wants a new car, so he’s going to give me his old one and Lois and I can share.”

“And Chad’s parents are going to give him the money they would have spent for him to live in the dorms for the apartment,” I explained.

“Is that enough for a two bedroom place?” Lucy asked.

“No,” I shook her head. “I’m going to ask dad for the rest.”

“You are?” Lucy was shocked. It wasn’t surprising she was shocked — we almost never talked to him.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I’m going to have to ask him for money anyway for college. The way I see it, he owes us. He’s the one that left us with Mom all these years.”

Lucy nodded, looking sad. “You think he’ll say yes?”

I shrugged again. “I don’t know, but we’ll think of something else if he doesn’t.”

“What if one of you doesn’t get in to Met U?” Lucy asked. “Like if you don’t get in,” she looked at Chad. “What will you do?” she asked me.

I looked at the couch cushion carefully, pulling at a piece of lint.

“We’re not going to college without each other,” I finally told Lucy quietly. “I’m sorry, Lucy. And really,” I said, looking up at Lucy, “it’s not going to be an issue. I mean, Chad is graduating salutatorian and I’m currently ranked fifth. Our SAT scores are good. We’re shoe-ins for Met U.”

Lucy nodded, agreeing, but still worried. “But if for some reason Chad doesn’t get in and you do, you won’t go?” she clarified.

“No,” I said quietly while Chad took my hand. “I mean, I promise, we’re only looking at schools nearby — somewhere where you could live with us, even if you have to take city buses to school, but we really want to go someplace together.”

“Are you guys engaged or something?” Lucy asked suspiciously.

“No,” Chad said. “Or at least not really.”

“Not really?” Lucy asked.

“Well, we are kind of thinking that we’ll get married some day,” I said.

“But not until after college,” Chad added.

“Okay,” Lucy said, and then went back to thinking about the college choices. “You really won’t go anywhere I can’t live with you?”

“No. I promise,” I said, hoping that she’d be excited at the idea of moving out.

Lucy frowned, “But you guys are gonna have things to do at night, aren’t you? Even if I stay with you, I’ll be home alone at night.”

“Nonsense,” came the voice of Mrs. Andrews behind us. “You’ll need to come over all the time, Lucy. With Chad being the last of our boys off to college, this place is going to feel empty. So, you’ll need to come for dinner and keep us company whenever Lois and Chad are busy.”

“Really?” Lucy asked.

“Yes. Now get washed up. All of you. Dinner’s ready,” she said.

As Lucy raced to the bathroom, I pulled gently on Chad’s hand to hold him back.

“They know about Mom, don’t they?” I asked, deciding to give him a chance to explain.

Chad flushed. “I didn’t tell them, Lois. I swear. Dad sort of ran into your mom a few months ago on his day off.”

“And they don’t care?” I asked, surprised.

“Don’t care about what?”

“That you’re dating me?” I asked quietly. Surely he saw the problem. I mean who would want their son to date someone whose mother was a drunk?

“Of course not, Lois. You are not your mother. I know that. My parents know that. Why would they care? What’s important to them is that you make me happy,” he said.

“I do?” I asked, although I kind of knew that I did.

“Yes, you do,” he said, leaning forward to kiss me on the nose.

“Didn’t I suggest you two clean up for dinner?” Mrs. Andrews asked.

“Sorry,” I blushed, embarrassed at having been caught, but Mrs. Andrews just laughed.

“It’s okay. It’s probably hard to believe, but Mr. Andrews and I were young once, too.”

January 1984

“Come on. I know you two are the shyest couple in school, but this is ridiculous,” Samantha, the yearbook photographer, said.

“Sorry,” Chad said, blushing, “but it’s hard to kiss in front of the camera.”

“You don’t need to make out or anything,” Samantha said. “Just press your lips together. I just need one picture of you kissing.”

I flushed, but leaned towards Chad and we gave each other a chaste kiss on the lips.

“Perfect,” Samantha said a second later. “Now. Do something goofy.”

“Goofy?” I asked, wondering what she meant.

“Yes, goofy. Something silly and cute,” Samantha instructed.

“Something silly and cute?” Chad repeated.

Samantha sighed. “The senior class voted you cutest couple. You need to pose doing something cute for the yearbook picture.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Samantha said. “Maybe stick your tongues out at each other. Give each other noogies. Something like that.”

“Or maybe...” Chad started, reaching his fingers out to tickle my stomach.

“Hey!” I said, between giggles. “Stop that!” I tried batting his hands away, but I was ineffective, I was laughing so hard. It wasn’t fair. He knew my ticklish spots. “Come on, Chad,” I said breathlessly. “We’re trying...”

“Got it!” Samantha cried. “That was perfect.”

I glared at Chad. “Our picture is going to have you tickling me!” I accused him.

“Yup,” he said, laughing at me.

“I can’t believe...” but my words faded off as Chad started tickling me again.

April 1985

“I’m sorry, Lois,” Chad said, his voice soft. “But it’s only for a semester. Really. I’ll be right behind you.”

“But it’s not what we planned,” I said, tears streaming down my face.

“I know, baby. I’m so sorry. You know that I want nothing more than to come with you.”

“I know,” I sniffled, embarrassed about crying. “I know you have to do this.”

“I’ll come home whenever I can,” he said, his voice soft, his hand grasping mine tightly. “And you can come visit. Grandma said it’s okay.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah, she said that as long as we don’t sleep in the same room, she’s okay with you coming for a visit. I mean, I know

you'll be busy with classes and all, but you can visit during one of the breaks."

I smiled, but even I could feel that my smile was weak. "So, we'll see each other at least a few times."

"Yes," he said softly as he pulled me closer to hold me tightly to him. "I'm going to miss you so much, Lois," he whispered into my hair.

"Me, too," I whispered back trying to memorize the feel of his arms around me.

August 1985

"Well," Chad said, leaning against the small table I had bought for the small dining area. "I think this is it."

I nodded, looking around. The place was Spartan, but it had all the essentials. Most importantly, though, it was someplace we could afford even without Chad's parents' contribution, so we would not need to move when he got back. And for now, Lucy and I had our own rooms.

Lucy came out from her bedroom, looking exceedingly pleased. "It's perfect," she said. "I can't believe Dad's paying for this."

I shrugged, "He *knows* he owes us," I said simply. Those were the words that I had used with dad on the phone. He had not replied, but had agreed to send us the money I requested.

Lucy sat down on the couch we had picked up at a garage sale and looked around the apartment with a smile on her face. On her second circuit, though, she caught sight of my face and realized what she was interrupting.

"Well, I'm going to go organize my books," she said as she moved to stand up. "Don't leave without saying goodbye, Chad."

"So..." I said, taking the seat Lucy had just abandoned, feeling nervous.

"So," Chad replied in kind, sitting down beside me.

"When's your flight?" I asked quietly, mostly just for something to say as I knew his flight schedule better than he did.

"In the morning at eight. I'll get to Grandma and Grandpa's about noon."

I reached out to take his hand in mine. "I'm proud of you," I told him, squeezing his hand. "I know you don't want to do this anymore than I want you to go, but you're doing it anyway. It makes me feel proud to be your girlfriend."

Chad pulled me towards him, wrapping his arms around me tightly. "I'm hoping it's a false alarm and Grandpa will be fine in a few days. The admission office said as long as I can start within the first two weeks, it's not a problem."

"That's not likely to happen, though, is it?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"No," Chad admitted. "It sounds like the doctors are pretty sure that Grandpa is not going to get better, and since Grandma can't take care of him on her own, and they can't afford to hire a nurse..."

I smiled, although I doubted it reached my eyes. "Chad to the rescue. A modern day superhero."

Chad smiled at me. "I'll spin you webs, if you'll be my Mary Jane." He leaned forward to kiss me softly. "I'll see you in a month," he whispered.

I nodded as I felt the tears start to leak out of my eyes. "And we'll talk tomorrow night?"

"Of course," he said, tears falling down his cheeks, too. "I'll want to hear all about your first day."

"I love you," I whispered against his lips, the taste of our tears mingled with the kiss.

"I love you, too, Lois. So much."

September 1985

"Has it really only been a month?" I asked between kisses, feeling and sounding breathless.

"No idea. I stopped looking at a calendar after day two. It just... the days were so long," he said in reply, sounding as breathless as I had.

"Just stay here," I said, pulling him to me more tightly. "Don't go back. Don't go anywhere. Just stay here forever."

I could feel Chad smile against my neck before he kissed me there again, moving to dart his tongue into the hollow of my throat. I suppressed a groan. "If you stay here with me, that won't be a problem."

Neither of us said anything for a few more minutes, until I softly said, "Let's not wait anymore, Chad."

"Hmmm?" he asked, his mouth now on my ear.

"Make love to me," I whispered.

"Really?" Chad breathed into my ear.

"Really."

Chad leaned up to pull his shirt over his head quickly before moving back to capture my lips again. "Lois," he whispered reverently as his hands made their way to buttons on my blouse.

A second later, two buttons undone, he backed away and stood up. "We can't do this," he said, his tone repentant and pained.

"What?" I asked, confused by the fact that he was suddenly standing by the side of the bed.

"We promised we wouldn't do this. We would never make this decision in the heat of the moment. If we want to revisit the decision that's fine, but only when we're both clear headed," he leaned over to hold the top of my blouse closed, "and fully clothed."

I buttoned my blouse back up, but looked at him with wide eyes. "That was before..."

"I know, baby," Chad, with his shirt back on, said as he sat back on the bed. "But nothing's really changed."

I started to argue, but then realized he was right. Nothing had changed. "I know," I finally said, leaning my head on his shoulder. "I know."

September 1993

"Hey, Perry," I said with a smile as I entered my editor's office.

"Lois, I'm in the middle of something."

"Oh, sorry. It's just... well, I have that mood piece you wanted on the Bernhardt Theater," I explained, glancing at the man sitting in Perry's guest chair.

"Thanks, sugar," Perry said as I handed him the piece. "I'm sure you'll be happy to get back to hard news." He smiled at me.

"Well, you know me, Perry. I'll do whatever you ask, but I much prefer a meaty story."

"Lois is one of our star reporters at the Planet," Perry told his guest.

"Nice to meet you," the man stood up, extending his hand towards me.

"You, too." I tried to smile at him warmly as I shook his hand. "What are you doing here?"

"I just moved to Metropolis from Kansas and was hoping to get a job here. My name is Clark. Clark Kent."

"Well, nice to meet you, Clark," I said as I turned away, ready to head back to my desk. Before I made it through the door, though, I heard Perry tell him, "As I was saying, Kent, I think it takes real guts to come here and ask for a job, but we just don't take reporters with the limited experience you have."

For some reason, I found myself turning around and smiling at Perry, "Oh, come on, Chief. You were inexperienced once. Give him a chance."

Perry sighed and gave me an exasperated look, but then his faced cleared. "Fine. You think I should give him a chance, I will. But you need to show him the ropes, Lois. Clark Kent, welcome to the Planet. Meet your new partner, Lois Andrews."

I looked over my new partner as he unpacked his belongings into a desk next to mine. I hoped that had not been a mistake. In the light of Perry's office, Clark had looked sort of... I'm not sure what, but not the way he looked here.

In my experience, good looking male reporters were just not nice guys. I remembered how Linda, my closest college friend, had been so terribly conned by Paul, the editor of our college paper. Similarly, Cat, one of the nicest women at the Planet, had been used and abused by Claude, a suave Frenchman who knew just how good looking he was.

On the other hand, there was Ralph, a slightly plump man who was prematurely balding. Ralph, though, was one of the nicest guys here and a really hard worker.

Unfortunately, as it turned out, my new partner looked more like Claude and Paul than Ralph. I sighed. I knew it was never a good thing to stereotype and I just had to remember, this one was from Kansas. Farm boys were nice, weren't they?

Besides, there was little he could really do to me. Linda and Cat had been hurt as they'd fallen for Paul and Claude. There was no way I was going to fall for Clark. I hadn't had eyes for anyone but Chad since I was sixteen years old.

"Hi, honey," Chad said as he snuggled up behind me. "Whatcha doing?"

"Making toast," I told him as I leaned my head to the right so he had better access to my neck.

"Is it your night?" he asked distractedly as he ran his lips up and down my neck, before latching onto my earlobe.

"Yes," I informed him, gripping the countertop to stop my knees from giving way. "I... um... ordered Chinese, but they said it won't be here for another forty minutes."

"Perfect," Chad whispered into my ear as he leaned down to lift me into his arms.

Forty minutes later, Chad threw a robe on to answer the door. "I'll be down in a minute," I told him feeling drowsy. My interest in dinner had abated.

A moment later, though, I could smell the Chinese food and my stomach growled. With a sigh, I got up, throwing on a t-shirt and shorts that were sitting next to my side of the bed.

"That smells great," I said to Chad as I moved the plates out of the cupboards.

"Yeah, we always get good food on your nights," he teased. Chad was a phenomenal cook whereas I burnt water. Thus, on Chad's nights, we ate gourmet meals. On my nights, we got take out. On the other hand, I learned quickly which were the best places to order from in the neighborhood, while Chad still had no idea.

"So, how was your day?" I asked him as I spooned some moo shu chicken onto a pancake.

Chad poured the sauce over his as he looked at me in confusion. "Didn't you get my email?"

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry. I didn't even remember to check my email before I left work today. It was busy."

"No problem," Chad said with a smile, "but I had a great day. Carla woke up."

I stood up to give him a hug while I finished chewing. "That's great, honey!" I said when I finished. Carla was one of Chad's patients — a thirty-year-old woman with three kids who had been hit by a drunk driver in a parking lot a few weeks ago. She had been in a coma since and they were starting to think she was never going to recover.

"What about you?" he asked as I sat back down.

I shrugged, "Well, nothing compared to your day, but Perry hired a new guy, and he saddled me with him for a partner."

"Is he bad?" Chad asked.

I shrugged again. "No idea, yet. Apparently, he has almost no experience. He seems nice enough, though. Besides, Perry only saddled me with him as I suggested he give the poor guy a break."

"Perry didn't want to hire him?" Chad asked as he reached for the rice.

"You know Perry. He likes experienced writers."

"And you asked him to hire this guy, why?" Chad asked.

"Are you jealous?" I asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Should I be?" Chad smiled.

I giggled as he leaned over for a kiss. "I don't know. I felt bad for the guy. He just moved to Metropolis from some small town in Kansas, Tintytown or something. Yes, really," I said off Chad's raised eyebrows. "I mean not Tintytown, but something like it. Smallville, maybe? Anyway, can't you imagine how cold Metropolis can seem when you haven't lived here all your life? Particularly when you spent your life on a farm or something? I just thought he deserved a break."

"Lois Andrews. The hard-hitting reporter with the heart of mush," Chad smiled at me.

"So, tell me about him?" Clark said three nights later. We were on a stake-out, our first together. The past few days working with Clark had been weird, but not bad. He was a good writer, much better than I had expected given Perry's near dismissal of him. His style was a little different than mine, but it was good.

Still, it was hard to get used to working with someone else and I found it annoying that Clark felt the need to edit my copy all the time, even though I did it to him as well.

Despite Perry's promise that once I finished the theater article, I would have some real news to sink my teeth into, the city hadn't cooperated. So, it had been a quiet few days filled with working on small stories. There had been lots of them, though, and so I hadn't really had a chance to talk to my new partner.

This question, though, came out of the blue and I had no idea what he was talking about. "What's who like? Mike McDougal?" I asked, wondering why he thought I'd have any more information than he did on the person we were watching for the night.

Clark smiled. "Only if McDougal is your husband." He pointed to my wedding ring. "What's your husband like? And if it's McDougal, please let me know as this stakeout is about to get a lot shorter."

I smiled in spite of myself. So far, Clark had acted exactly the way I'd expect a farm boy to act — kind and nearly chivalrous at times, none of the awful pretty boy scenes Claude had favored. Plus acknowledging that I was wearing a wedding ring was a real step up from Claude.

"No, I am not married to McDougal," I assured him, before setting back in my seat a little. "My husband's name is Chad. Chad Andrews."

"You took his name, I see," Clark said.

"Chad and I got married right out of college. I hadn't really started my career yet. Unless writing for the paper at Met U counts," I explained.

"College sweethearts?" Clark asked.

"High school, actually," I said.

"You met your husband in high school?" Clark asked, and used to this question, I replied quickly.

"I know it's weird nowadays, but when it's right, you know it."

Clark shrugged. "I wasn't arguing. I met my girlfriend in high school, too. Although, I guess officially, we're still trying to decide if it's right."

"What's her name?" I asked.

"No fair!" Clark said, his grin wide and disarming. "You

haven't told me nearly anything about Chad yet."

I sighed, prepared to give him the short version of our life story. "I met Chad when I was sixteen. He was my first boyfriend. We decided to go to college together, and while he had to start a year after me to go help take care of his sick grandfather, he took some extra courses and we graduated together. We got married right after college."

Clark looked at me with his eyes wide. "Did you breathe at all during that monologue?"

I laughed. "No. Chad thinks I'm part fish."

Clark's smile softened a bit. "So, what does Chad do?"

"He's a doctor at Metropolis General. He's low man on the totem pole, actually still doing his residency, but he loves his job."

"What kind of doctor?" Clark asked, his voice soft to match mine.

"He's a pediatrician," I said. "Although as a first year resident, he has to provide overflow support for the ER, and so lately he's been working a lot of shifts there, and I think he likes that, too."

"It must be hard to be there for him, given what he sees every day," Clark said compassionately.

"I guess," I shrugged. "Chad's a real optimist, though. He rarely seems down. Except when he loses a patient, he's always sure that things will work out fine."

Clark's eyes were intent on me and his voice soft as he said, "You love him very much. It's all over your face."

I smiled. "Well, he's pretty terrific." Then, eager to get the focus off of me, I said, "So, tell me about this high school girlfriend."

Clark looked out the window, and now I found myself watching him as closely as he had been watching me. "She's not really my high school girlfriend. I dated this girl named Lana in high school, but we were completely wrong for each other. Or at least she thought so." Clark looked at me, blushing slightly. "I do, too, now, but at the time, I was crushed. She dumped me just before our senior prom."

"Ouch," I said, remembering what a big deal that night had seemed like at the time, how much it would have stung to have Chad break up with me and leave me without a date.

"Lana broke up with me for my friend, Pete, and Pete had been dating Rachel at the time. I didn't really know Rachel all that well — except for a few double dates with her and Pete, I'd never really talked to her. But you know, getting dumped at the same time creates a bond." Clark shot a smile my way.

"Anyway, we decided to go to the prom together as friends. That was all it was. It was fun and Rachel was a lot more interesting than I'd known before, but at the end of the night, we kissed on the cheek and that was that.

"But, you know, school wasn't really over yet, and so we'd still see each other in the hallways and stuff. Then it turned out we were going to college near each other. Or sort of. Kansas State, where I went, was just south of Rachel's college and on her way home to Smallville. So, we started going back and forth together during breaks.

"We ended up stuck on the way to Kansas State one year on our way back after Thanksgiving and had to spend the night in a hotel. We were poor college kids so we split the room. Nothing really happened, but we ended up staying up all night talking. I kissed her just before we got out of there and we've been together ever since."

I smiled at his story. It was sweet and wholesome. Very farmboy-ish. "So, where is Miss Rachel?" I asked.

He turned to me, his eyes shining with laughter. "Miss Rachel? This isn't 'Driving Miss Daisy,' you know."

I laughed. "Okay, okay. So where is she?"

"In Smallville," Clark said, his voice more sober. "She's

sheriff now."

"Your girlfriend is the sheriff of the town you grew up in?" I asked.

"Yeah, so as I said, we're still trying to decide..."

"What's to decide? Do you love her?" I asked. The issue seemed simple to me.

"I do," he said. "But... I don't think I'm a small town guy."

I laughed. "You grew up in someplace called Smallville," I pointed out.

"I know," Clark smiled, "and at heart, I guess I do feel like a farm kid. But... I'm not sure I want to live my whole life there, you know? I guess I do love Rachel and I know she loves me, but I'm not sure we want the same things in life."

"Chad has always wanted to move to the country," I confessed. "But, you know, being a journalist in a small town just isn't the same. So, he agreed to stay here in Metropolis with me."

"He must love you as much as you love him," Clark observed, his face sad.

"Is Rachel not..." I faltered, not sure how to ask the question in a way that wasn't too personal.

"No," Clark said, looking at me. "I think she'd move to Metropolis in an instant if I asked, but she wouldn't be happy here. I don't know. For now, we've decided that I should try big city living for awhile and see how I like it and then we'd decide. Maybe I'll hate Metropolis."

I felt my nose scrunch up. "Hate Metropolis?" I asked. I could not imagine that.

Clark laughed. "Maybe hate is a strong word. I may like it as someplace to visit, but not to live," he clarified.

I relaxed slightly. I could see that. Sort of.

October 1993

I tried not to growl as I hung up the phone. I was an adult and she should not be able to make me so nervous. Still, despite how I wanted to feel, the truth was that my mother still brought up lots of emotions I preferred not to deal with. Things were different with us now than when I was kid, better, but it was hard to erase all of those years with a few okay memories. So, I was hardly looking forward to her visit.

"Lois?" Clark asked, his voice soft beside me.

"What?" I replied, more harshly than he deserved.

He took a small step back, but laughed slightly as he said, "No need to bite my head off. I was just checking to see if you had the lead-in on the James story. I've finished the end and the side bar."

I sighed, "Sorry, I just... well, I'm just sorry. I need a few minutes to finish up the lead-in, though."

"Of course," Clark said as he turned to go back to his desk. "Lois?"

"Hmm?"

"Can I take you to lunch or something? No pressure, it just seemed like maybe you could use a break from this place or something when you finish the lead-in," Clark asked me.

I smiled. A lunch out of the office would probably help me relax. "I'd like that," I admitted, smiling slightly as I went back to writing.

"So, you don't need to tell me about it, but..." Clark trailed off as he tried to find the right words.

"It's nothing," I said, sighing as I dug into my salad. A minute later, though, words starting coming out of my mouth without thought. "It's my mother. She's coming for a visit."

"You don't get along with your mother?" Clark asked.

"No," I said, resolved that this was all I would tell him, and to make sure I did that, I shoved a forkful of food into my mouth. Clark laughed as salad dressing dripped off my chin. He handed me a napkin and I could not help but laugh with him.

“So,” Clark said a moment later. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“What?” I asked, although I knew perfectly well what he meant.

“The reason you don’t get along with your mother.”

“No,” I said again and Clark nodded in understanding. For several moments we ate in silence, but strangely the silence was comfortable. Clark had only been with the Planet for a few weeks, but I was already completely at ease with him in a way I had never been with someone besides Chad. That’s the only explanation for what happened next — how despite my resolution to share no more, despite the fact that aside from Chad and his parents, no one outside my immediate family knew this, I started talking. “My mother was... is an alcoholic.”

Clark put his fork down, startling me, but when I looked at him, I could see that he was not shocked, but he was looking directly at me. I had his complete attention. Something about that look, with his brown eyes warm and compassionate, made me keep talking.

“She doesn’t drink anymore, but, you know, we had years of not getting along. My dad moved out when I was a kid and wasn’t really around after that. My mom started drinking years before that. By the time Dad moved out, though, I was taking care of myself. And my little sister.

“It was okay, I guess. I mean, Mom always worked enough for me to be able to buy groceries and stuff, but she wasn’t that much of a mother.” I paused for a moment, stunned that I had told him so much about my childhood.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that,” Clark said, his voice nearly a whisper.

I felt tears in my eyes, but ignored them. “Anyway, we got into this huge fight the first time I brought Chad home. I was sixteen and had never had a boy over before, and she came home drunk and sort of freaked out. She yelled a lot and called me a slut and... well, like I said, I was sixteen. I was pretty mortified.”

“I don’t think you need to be a teenager to be embarrassed about something like that,” Clark said, and I smiled slightly. He was clearly right about that, as I was still embarrassed about it.

“Chad was great about it, though, and shortly after that I guess his dad ran into my mom somewhere and by the time I was a senior in high school, the Andrews had virtually adopted me and Lucy.”

“That’s a long time, though,” Clark said. “By the time you were a senior in high school, your relationship with your mother was probably too established for that to help much.”

I nodded. “Exactly. Then when I went to college, Chad and I got a place together and Lucy moved in with us. Mom never said anything about it at all. Lucy is great about things like that, and it never seemed to bother her that much, but I mean, how could she not care that her fifteen-year-old daughter had moved out? What kind of mother does that?”

Clark put a hand on my arm. “It sounds like your mother is really troubled. Not that that excuses her behavior,” he hastened to add off my look. “But I doubt she meant to hurt you or your sister.”

I swiped angrily at my cheeks. I hated to cry in front of anyone, even Chad. “No, I don’t think she did, but...”

“But it still hurt,” Clark said softly. “Of course it did.”

I gave him a weak smile. “Anyway, so it’s hard to get excited when she comes for a visit.”

Clark nodded. “Any way I can help?” he asked.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. You could claim you have some errand you need to run with Chad and if your mom complains about being left alone, I’ll spend some time with her,” Clark suggested.

I looked at him with wide eyes. “Are you crazy? Why would you offer to spend time with my mother?”

Clark laughed, “Well, I’m not offering to have her stay with me or anything. Just if you need an afternoon off from her or something.”

I smiled. “That’s a really nice thing to offer, Clark.”

“Well,” he said, smiling broadly. “I’m a pretty nice guy.”

“Lois,” Chad called as I came in the door two weeks later. My mother had cancelled her visit, thankfully, and things had been pretty quiet until today.

“Hi,” I smiled at him, knowing precisely why he had run out to see me, even though I could smell garlic sizzling in the kitchen. “You saw the news, huh?” I asked.

He nodded. “So, were you there? Did you see him? What was he like?”

I laughed. “When did you become a girl?” I asked.

Chad pulled a face. “Come on, Lois. Tell me.”

“Okay,” I agreed as I walked with him back into the kitchen.

“I only saw him for a minute,” I warned Chad. “And it’s not like I talked to him at all.”

“But you and Clark were there?” he asked.

“I was there. Clark... I can’t recall why Clark didn’t come with me in the end, but he didn’t.”

“I bet he was disappointed,” Chad said.

I nodded. “He was, but he wasn’t quite as much of a girl about it as you’re being.”

Chad stuck his tongue out at me.

“He seemed nice,” I returned to Chad’s original question. “I mean, not full of himself or whatever just ‘cause he can fly and freeze things and catch bullets and whatever else he can do,” I said, thinking back to the strange encounter.

“So, you don’t think he’s some sort of evil alien?” Chad asked, making ‘Twilight Zone’ noises.

I giggled. “No, he seemed much more of the I-come-in-peace variety.”

“Perry must be going crazy,” Chad said.

“Not yet. I think he’s still in shock. I’m still in shock. I mean, rationally, I know I should be dying with curiosity, running out to get the first interview with him, but I can’t seem to wrap my mind around it. A man who flies is in Metropolis. Anyway, Jimmy got some good pictures at the robbery, and I called the story in on my way back to the newsroom, so the Planet was the only paper to get something in the evening edition on it. That will probably appease Perry for the night.”

“So,” Chad said, walking towards me until our bodies were touching. “His suit looked... rather... tight,” he finished, a question in his eyes.

I smiled, “Well, he was pretty cut. I mean, he had the nicest body of anybody I’ve ever met.” My smile widened when Chad backed away looking hurt.

“Really?” he asked, still trying to look hurt, but it was clear he was teasing.

“Honey, don’t be ridiculous. I barely even noticed.”

Chad raised his eyebrows at me.

“I said I *barely* noticed. Of course, I noticed, but it wasn’t an interesting or important fact.”

Chad looked at me suspiciously. “Honey!” I said. “Stop it!”

Chad leaned down to kiss me and we promptly forgot about the flying man.

“Clark!” I said in exasperation. He was acting strange today, subdued. He needed to be on his A-game. Perry had come out of his shock and was on the warpath this morning. Anyone and everyone needed to bring him stories with news about Superman. Including a name, since Superman was just the name one of the interns had come up with yesterday.

Clark sighed. “I’m sorry, Lois. I had a rough night.”

“I don’t care,” I said, my voice soft to show that I did feel

somewhat badly. “We need to get something to Perry. Help me think of a name, at least.”

“Superman works for me,” he said, sounding listless.

I sat down at the conference room table beside him. “What’s wrong, Clark?” I asked, hoping that maybe I could help him work through whatever was going on and we could move past it and get some actual work done.

“Nothing,” Clark said in a voice that made it perfectly clear that it was not nothing.

“Okay,” I said, placing a hand on his arm. “But I hope that you consider me a friend and would let me know if I could help you with something.”

Clark nodded his head. “I do. Thanks, Lois. And really, I think Superman is a good name. We’re not going to come up with something better.”

“Hi,” I said as I opened the door.

“Hi,” Clark said, sounding just as listless as this afternoon in the conference room. Honestly, he had not been that much fun to be around today. “Am I interrupting something? Is now a good time to talk?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said, moving aside to let him in. “Chad’s doing the overnight shift tonight, so this is perfect. Are you hungry?” I asked, holding up the piece of pizza in my hand.

“No, thanks,” Clark said. He looked around my apartment for a moment. “This is a nice place,” he said.

“Thanks.” I watched as he moved over to pick up a picture of Chad and me on our wedding day from the bookshelf.

“Chad looks nice,” he said to me.

“Well, this may surprise you, but he actually is a nice guy,” I teased him, but I only got a small smile in reply before he put the picture down.

I motioned to the couch, sitting down myself, and Clark sat at the other end, looking nervous and a bit sick to his stomach.

“Are you okay?” I asked, suddenly worried that whatever it was was serious. “Is it Rachel?”

“No,” Clark shook his head. “Rachel’s fine.”

“So, what is it?”

Clark’s hands gripped my couch cushions. “I can’t believe I’m even thinking of doing this,” he said softly. “I can’t... I shouldn’t...”

“Clark, what is it?” I cut in, feeling alarmed.

Clark got up. “Forget it. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Clark!” I called out as he reached my door. “What is it?”

Clark stared at the floor so fervently I was surprised there wasn’t a hole in it.

“It’s nothing. I shouldn’t have come here,” he said, but he made no move to leave.

I watched him from my place on the couch and was amazed. He looked so nervous, so agitated, and so frightened. I had never seen Clark looking like he was not in complete control of his emotions. Of course, until today, I had never seen him upset before. I guess we had really only known each other a few weeks, but for me, who got upset pretty easily, this was a surprising realization.

I thought back to the last time I had been upset over something serious (rather than just because it was raining out when I wanted to wear my favorite skirt to work). It was the afternoon I had told him about my mother. He had been so helpful — it had almost been like talking to Chad. I realized I wanted to be that kind of friend to him, too.

“Clark,” I said softly. “I hope you consider me a friend.” I realized as I said it that I had used the same words with him that afternoon with little result, but of course, I hadn’t realized how upset he was at the time. Maybe this time they would help.

He looked at me, but his eyes were full of panic.

“You can tell me anything that is bothering you,” I said, my

voice still soft.

“Not this,” he said, his voice even softer than mine. “I can’t tell anyone this. I don’t know why I’m here.”

I felt my heart rate speed up slightly at his words. Did he mean that he hadn’t told anyone this before? Whatever *this* was? What about Rachel?

“Clark, are you in trouble?” I asked.

He looked at me with wide eyes that belied the shake of his head. I felt myself start to panic. How well did I know Clark Kent really? He could be in trouble with the mob or something and I would have no idea. Still, I couldn’t just let him leave without doing something to help. Well, assuming he wasn’t really in trouble with the mob. He looked so lost and frightened, like a little boy, and it brought out my maternal instincts or something, I guess.

“Clark, you can tell me whatever it is,” I said, my voice soft and as soothing as I could make it. I could see from his eyes that he wanted to tell me, but was conflicted.

Finally, his eyes showed some calm, but he shook his head again. “Thank you, Lois,” he said, his voice softly hoarse. “But I really think I need to take care of this on my own.”

He turned to leave again and I called out, “Can’t you talk to Rachel?”

Without turning around, he shook his head. “No, not yet. I can’t. She wouldn’t... I don’t know that she would understand.”

My heart rate picked up again. What would his girlfriend not understand? That he was enjoying living here in Metropolis? But that wouldn’t make him so nervous, would it? I moved to stand next to him and placed a hand on his arm. “What about your parents?”

He shook his head. “They’re so proud of me. I don’t want to disappoint them.” His voice was so soft, I wasn’t sure those words were for me.

He brought his hand up to the doorknob, but now I felt committed to finding out what it was. If he really felt like he could not talk to anyone else, than I would be here for him like he had been there for me. I moved to take his hand and tugged on his arm. He looked at me questioningly.

“Come sit down, Clark. You don’t need to talk about it. Just sit with me for a few minutes.”

He followed me to the couch and sat down. I went into the kitchen and brought him a piece of pizza, which he took, but ate without seeming to really taste it. After a few moments of silence, I reached over and turned the TV on. I flipped past LNN, thinking Clark could use something more soothing and went to a mindless comedy.

After a few minutes I stole a glance in his direction and realized he wasn’t watching, though. I turned back, thinking that perhaps just sitting here was still helping.

It must have worked as after a few minutes of the television playing, Clark started talking again, although so quietly I had to turn the TV off to hear him.

“If Chad were to have a secret — I don’t know what it is, but — something that was newsworthy, but it could get him hurt if you printed it, would you?” he asked me.

“Like what?” I asked. I immediately knew I was getting bogged down in meaningless details, but that was a bad habit of mine.

Clark looked off in the distance for a moment before saying, “Pretend that some big crime boss came into the hospital for plastic surgery and Chad somehow knew about it, so he could tell people what the guy looked like later, but if you wrote the story, everyone would link it to Chad.”

“And then the mob would come after him,” I said, realizing where he was going, even if the scenario was pretty unlikely. “Of course I wouldn’t write it,” I said. “I love Chad. I wouldn’t do anything to hurt him.”

Clark nodded. “What if it wasn’t Chad? What if it was... Mr. Wilkins?”

“How would Mr. Wilkins know about the plastic surgery of a crime boss?” I asked, trying to imagine any scenario where the guy who owned the coffee cart in the Planet building would be privy to that kind of knowledge.

Clark smiled slightly. “He wouldn’t, but he accidentally saw some crime happen and was threatened not to tell, but you found out about it.”

I sighed. It was a hard call, but I don’t think I could live with myself if I purposely printed something that would get someone else killed. “I wouldn’t do it,” I said, although with decidedly less conviction than I had used when talking about the scenario with Chad.

“What...” Clark paused and gripped my couch cushions in the same fashion as when he had first shown up, “What if it was me? And I wasn’t the one who got hurt, but Rachel and my parents and maybe even you?”

“Clark,” I said, hearing the panic in my voice, but not caring. “What sort of trouble are you in?”

“I’m not in any trouble,” he said, sounding miserable.

I felt myself calm down. I hadn’t realized how overly dramatic Clark could be. I laughed a little. “Come on, Clark. You’re a farm boy from Kansas. You can’t have anything to tell me that would be interesting enough to print in the Daily Planet or get anyone you know in trouble.” Then I realized how harsh that sounded, so I added, “Nor do I. Our lives are too boring.”

“But if I did, would you print it?” Clark asked me, his eyes wide with an emotion I could not identify.

“No,” I said simply, knowing as I said it that it was true. In reality, I barely knew Clark, but I already felt like he was someone I trusted and I wanted him to trust me, too.

“I’m Him,” he said, and he said “him” with enough importance for me to know that it was someone important, even though I had no idea who he was talking about.

“Him who?”

“The guy... the guy who can fly. Superman,” he said.

For a moment, I said nothing and then I laughed. “Really, Clark, you are an incredible actor,” I said. “I thought you really had some big secret.”

“I do. I am him,” he said, his voice still serious.

“Come on, Clark!” I said. “I’ve seen you. You bump into walls and trip more than anyone I know. Superman didn’t seem like that at all.”

Clark did not say anything in response, but then stopped my laughter cold. He was floating two inches off my couch.

I could not find any words. None. They were all gone. I was a journalist, I made my living with words, but Clark had rendered me speechless.

Clark stopped floating and looked embarrassed. “I told you,” he said, but his tone was sad rather than accusatory.

I nodded. “I know. I just...”

“You didn’t believe me,” Clark supplied.

“Do you blame me?”

“Of course not,” Clark said, finally lifting his head to look at me. “I knew it would be hard to believe.”

I closed my eyes, trying to get my jumbled thoughts in order. “Clark,” I said softly, opening my eyes. “Why did you tell me?”

“I needed... someone to talk to,” he said, his voice stricken.

“But Rachel...”

“Rachel doesn’t know. She can’t know,” he said urgently.

“Wait,” I said, understanding dawning. “She didn’t know you could fly before you became Superman?” Clark shook his head. “So, she doesn’t know you’re Superman?” Another head shake.

“Clark! How could you not tell her?”

“Would you want to learn you were dating some sort of freak?” Clark asked, his tone bitter.

“Clark, you’re not a freak. What you can do, it’s amazing, a gift,” I told him.

“But what if Rachel doesn’t think so?” he asked. “I can’t... I can’t tell her.”

“Ever?”

Clark took a deep breath. “No, I mean if we get married or something someday I’ll tell her, but... we already have enough problems for one relationship.”

“Okay,” I said, realizing that I should be focusing on the issue at hand, which was clearly not Rachel. “So why not talk to your parents? I mean, I assume they know? Didn’t you say something about your mother making your costume?”

That comment earned me a smile, even though it was a slight one. “Yeah, they know. And Mom did make the costume. But Lois, they’re so proud of me for finding a way to help people and live a normal life. That’s always been my dream, and they are so happy that I seemed to have found a way to do that. I can’t disappoint them by telling them that I’m not sure I can.”

“You... Clark, are you thinking of quitting being Superman? Or Clark?”

Clark nodded. “You don’t know, Lois. It’s so hard. I had no idea it would be this hard.” He looked out my window, wringing his hands together.

Watching him like that, it was easy to see his anguish. It was easy to see that he meant what he said — he really needed someone to talk to. I was proud that he had chosen me, that he had been willing to trust me with such a big secret. Now, I just had to show him that by helping him.

“Tell me about it,” I said, my voice soft.

Clark turned to me, his eyes holding a haunted look. “It’s complicated.”

Unbidden, my mind flashed to a memory from high school. Those were the words I had used. Chad’s response had been, “Break it down into parts, Lois. It will be easy.” I told Clark that now (minus the easy part, as I didn’t think he’d appreciate that). Chad had been talking about a geometry problem at the time, but I hoped the advice would work for Clark anyway.

“I’m dealing with things...” Clark paused for a moment, staring out the window again. Finally, he spoke again, his voice so soft I had to strain to hear it. “I witnessed a ten year old getting raped today.”

I gasped. It was a completely inappropriate response, but it was instinctual. No matter how hard bitten I liked to think I was from years of reporting, the idea of watching someone get raped was too horrifying not to react to — and a child of all things!

Clark turned to me, his face grim. “Exactly,” he said, and I realized my gasp was not really the wrong response. It had echoed what Clark was probably feeling.

“She hadn’t even been crying for help,” Clark said. “I was in the neighborhood responding to a fire. On my way out, I heard some yelling and when I peered into the house I was passing...” He trailed off once again, but I knew now to be quiet and wait. He would start talking again.

“It was her father,” he whispered. “I’ve never had to deal with something like that before. I didn’t even know what to do. I pulled him off of her and he kept screaming only at me now rather than at her. She was crying. I wrapped her in a blanket and scooped her up and brought her to the police station, but I don’t know. Is that the right thing to do? She was so frightened.”

“You couldn’t leave her there, Clark,” I said, cringing when I thought of what might have happened if he had.

“I know,” he said softly. “But that’s the point. I’m not prepared to deal with those types of things.”

“Okay,” I said, feeling myself moving into reporter mode. Not that I was going to write any of this up, of course. It was clear Clark was too emotional to think through these things right now, though, and if I was going to help him, maybe listening

wasn't going to be enough. I picked up a pad of paper and a pen that was on the end table next to me and wrote, "Training on dealing with crime victims" on the paper. Below that I wrote, "Training dealing with criminals."

"We'll tackle that later. Let's not worry about solving any problems yet. Let's sort through your emotions first."

"Are you a counselor in your spare time?" Clark asked, and for the first time in days a real smile graced his lips.

"No," I said. "But you know..."

"You probably have to do this with Chad a lot," he guessed.

"Sort of, and Chad does it with patients. So he learned a few things about how to deal with them and told me what he found worked. He thought it would be useful during interviews. Plus he gives me lots of chances to practice when he's had bad days.

"So, anyway. You said it was complicated. Is there something else besides not feeling prepared for dealing with some of the crimes?"

"It's also... I mean, it was okay at first. No different than before, but now..."

"Before?" I cut him off to ask. "Before what?"

Clark took a deep breath. "This isn't the first time I've helped out. I've done it lots of times before. It just... well, it never interfered with being a normal person before. Well, sort of."

"What do you mean?"

"You know I traveled the world before I came to the Planet?" Clark asked.

I nodded my head. He had mentioned that before.

"I told you that Rachel had come with me for part of that time, but got sick of moving around so much and ended up going back to Smallville," Clark reminded me, and I nodded my head again. I was starting to see where this was going.

"We didn't intend to move around so much. That was part of why Rachel was so upset. It was just... something would always happen and someone would need help. I couldn't... How could I refuse to save someone's life when I knew I could do it with little detrimental effect to me? But afterwards people would get suspicious and I'd need to leave."

"Rachel didn't ask why? Didn't she start to suspect?" I asked him, wondering if Rachel knew more than she let on. Or was a bit thick.

Clark shook his head. "She did ask why, and I'd just tell her I was unhappy where ever we were. After the second time, I'd learned my lesson. I'd leave right after I did something, before she'd hear more rumors about me doing things I shouldn't have been doing."

He paused for a minute and then sighed before starting the story again. "It was hard on her, though. So she left. I kept traveling, leaving each place as soon as I needed to. It was easier without Rachel, to some degree, 'cause I could just fly on my own and leave that night, but on the other hand, I missed her. Not just because I love her, although of course I miss her when we're apart. It made it easier to move around so much when I had this one constant in my life."

He paused again, but I didn't say anything. I wasn't sure what to say.

"Anyway, eventually I decided that I couldn't live like that. So, I went to Smallville for a few months and that was fine. No one really needs my help much there. I mean, I help my dad on the farm, but it's very rare that I need to do anything that would expose who I am.

"But then I decided to come to Metropolis and find a way to stay here. I thought Superman was the answer, but now I'm not so sure."

He said nothing for several moments, and finally I whispered, "Why?" just to prod him on.

"It's different. When I helped out during my travels, I only helped out for big things — life and death things, and things I

was aware of because they were happening right in front of me. After I was here for a few days and people started to realize I was staying, though... They call for me. All the time. Even now, I can hear someone calling for me. I feel awful that I don't respond, but I just can't. It's too hard to be him all the time. I'm afraid... it's only been a few days and already I feel like he's taking over. Like in a few more days they'll be no Clark Kent left, just Superman."

"Oh, Clark," I said, feeling my eyes well up with sympathy for him. I moved closer to him on the couch, wrapping my arms around him. He hugged me back, but a few moments later pulled away.

"You don't need to answer every call," I said to him softly. "It's okay to want a life as Clark Kent."

"But how can I...?"

I cut him off, knowing what he was going to say. "It's better to only answer some of the calls, but be Superman for years, than to burn out in a few days. No one really expects you to show up for every call for help. Certainly sometimes there will be more than one call at a time, so even if you were Superman full time, you couldn't answer every call."

Clark nodded but I could tell he didn't really believe me. "It will be okay, Clark. When things get too rough, you can come talk to me about them. I bet after a little while, you'll get more used to it, too. You'll figure out the boundaries between Clark and Superman."

I made a mental note to put together an Op Ed piece for the paper tomorrow about how lucky Metropolis was to have Superman, even if the laws of physics meant he could not answer every call. Hopefully that would begin to set people's expectations, and if I was right, we'd get a ton of mail agreeing with me and that should help ease Clark's guilt.

"Thanks, Lois," he said softly. "I guess I should get going," he started to get up.

"Wait a second!" I ordered him. "We're not done yet. Sit down," I said as I proceeded to get up.

"What are you doing?"

"We still need to work on the first issue. I'm looking for something..." I said, perusing the phone book. "Here," I said, as I picked up the phone. I waited a few seconds, knowing that it was long after business hours and I would get a machine. Once I did, I left a message and hung up the phone.

"There's a program at Chad's hospital that trains people to help victims of crime. I did an article on it a year ago and it's exactly what you need. The volunteers help only during a moment of crisis: typically right after the crime happens. They do things like sit in the hospital with the victims."

Clark looked at me quizzically. "Lois, I don't... I don't know how to say this, but I don't..."

"You don't want to volunteer. Of course not, Clark. You have plenty to do already, but to volunteer for this program, you need to be certified by the state to be a counselor for people in distress. They train people. I'm sure they'd be happy to train Superman."

Clark smiled. "You're right. It's a great idea, Lois. Thank you."

"No problem," I said. "Now, I'm not as sure how to get training to deal with criminals, but jail social workers must get trained for that, so we can try to find something tomorrow."

"Thank you, Lois," Clark said, leaning over to squeeze my hand slightly. "I really appreciate you helping me with this."

"No problem. Just one thing, Clark." I hesitated, embarrassed that this had been the one question running through my mind since Clark had started floating above my couch.

"What?" Clark asked, and then took in the embarrassment on my face. "What is it, Lois?"

I took a deep breath. "Am I supposed to keep this from Chad? 'Cause I've never kept a secret from him before and..."

Clark's face fell and I had my answer.

"No," Clark said to my surprise. "Of course I can't expect you to keep a secret from your husband for me."

I took in his body language — clearly, despite what he was saying, he was not one hundred percent comfortable with the idea. "Can I ask a different question?" I asked. Clark nodded his head, so I asked, "Why is it such a big secret? Are you afraid of getting hurt?"

"No," Clark admitted. "Not much can hurt me."

"It can't?" I asked him, surprised.

"No," Clark shrugged. "I fell from my tree house a few times as a young teenager, and nothing. The same for cutting myself with a knife. And in the last few days I've established what I suspected — that I'm impervious to bullets and bombs as well."

"The only thing that seems to be able to hurt me is this green rock that my dad found on the farm. He thinks that maybe it came from the same place as me. I mean, he doesn't know. Maybe I'm not an alien and I'm sort of science experiment..."

"Clark!" I cut him off firmly. "Whatever else you may be, you are not a science experiment. You're barely even an alien, even if you come from outer space. More than anything else, you are a man."

Clark's face lit up at that, and I knew I had been right — I had heard more than a hint of self-recrimination in his words.

"Anyway," he continued as if none of that had just happened, "Dad thinks the rock must be a meteorite that landed with my ship."

"Your ship?" I asked. I couldn't help it. I was a reporter. Clark seemed to realize that at the same time as I did, so I was fast to add, "It's just a question, Clark. I promise none of this will make its way to a story unless you give me permission. Maybe," I said, thinking out loud, "we could write one together tomorrow. That would get all the other reporters off your back."

Clark nodded, realizing that that made sense. "So," I tried to bring him back to our conversation, "you came on a ship?"

Clark nodded. "My parents found me in a field. My mom is a bit like you, I think. They'd seen something fall from the sky and when they investigated, it was a space ship. I was about three months old."

"Wow!" I said, finally making the obvious connection. "Superman is a farm boy."

Clark laughed at that. "Yes, I am," he said.

"So, anyway," I said, trying to sort out all the thoughts in my head. "There is some sort of meteorite that can hurt you, and your father thinks it comes from the planet you are from."

"Well, it doesn't look like any Earth thing. It's green and glows."

"What does it do to you?" I asked.

"Makes me feel sick and saps my powers out of me. I'm not really sure. Once we realized it made me sick, Dad put in a box and buried it. As far as I can tell, nothing else hurts me."

"So, if you're not worried about getting hurt..."

Clark sighed. "I guess I am afraid of getting hurt, but not in the way you were thinking. I mean, if something happened to my mom or dad, or to Rachel..." His voice trailed off. He didn't need to say anything else. His words reminded me of his tone when he first walked in here. He did not need to convince me that he could be hurt; I had seen it first hand.

"Okay, so you don't want people to know who you are as then they could use your parents or Rachel to get to you," I summarized.

"Or you, or Perry, or Jimmy," Clark said, and I smiled. Clark had seemed to make friends in Metropolis very easily. It amazed me. I had never been all that good at making friends, and at this point Clark had nearly as many friends at the Planet as I did.

"But," Clark said, bringing me back from my thoughts, "that doesn't mean I expect you to keep this from Chad. That wouldn't be fair."

I could still hear the uneasiness in his voice, and while I felt a twinge of guilt at saying it, I did it anyway. "Look, Clark, if you want me to keep this a secret from Chad for awhile, I can. But just for awhile, maybe?" I said. "I really meant it when I said I'd never kept something from him before. Well, I guess not since we first started dating and I didn't tell him about Mom right away."

Clark nodded. "You don't need to do this."

"I know," I said, "but I'm not crazy about the idea of making Superman uncomfortable." I smiled at him. "I think Chad will understand. But I did mean just for awhile, Clark. Maybe you could meet Chad, come over for dinner or something, and then you'd feel more comfortable with him knowing?"

Clark nodded. "That seems more than fair," he smiled at me. "Thank you, Lois. I'm really lucky to have you as a friend. I know we don't really know each other long enough for you to do a favor this big for me."

I shook my head. "Nonsense, you were there for me when my mom called, and you even offered to entertain her if we needed you to. You've been a great friend to me already."

"Still, Lois. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, here's the thing. I'm an atrocious cook. I actually don't do it. We order in on my nights. Chad is great, though. Tomorrow is his night and it's a good one to come over. He's off all day tomorrow to recover from tonight's shift. So, he'll be well rested and probably eager for some company. Does tomorrow work for you?"

"It sounds perfect," Clark said.

"Good morning," Chad said as he crawled into bed the next morning.

"Morning," I replied sleepily. "What time is it?"

"About seven," Chad yawned in my ear.

I had another fifteen minutes before I had to get up and I scooted backwards until we were spooning.

"Did you have a good night?" Chad asked me, and I felt myself stiffen slightly at his words. I had promised Clark I would not tell Chad, but it was weird to have a secret from him.

"Clark stopped by," I said. "He's... having some trouble adjusting to life here."

"So he came to you? Somehow you aren't the first person I would think of for pointers on how to adjust to Metropolis. You think if someone can't live here, they should just move. You don't have any patience for that kind of thing."

I laughed and could feel Chad shaking with laughter behind me. "Well, Clark didn't know that."

Kissing me just behind my ear, he asked, "So, did you help?"

"I think so," I said. I did think so. Clark definitely seemed better when he left last night than when he arrived. "I invited him for dinner tonight."

"Am I supposed to be clearing out for you and your boytoy?" Chad teased.

I turned around so I was facing him. "Would you?" I asked. "Maybe after you make us dinner?"

Chad reached out to tickle me. "Is he really coming for dinner?" he asked a moment later.

"Yeah. You don't mind, do you?" I asked, catching my breath.

"Of course not. Anything special I should make?" he asked.

I shrugged right as my alarm started beeping. "Clark seems to eat anything," I told him as I got out of bed.

"I um... brought some wine?" Clark said, and I almost laughed. I had never seen Clark so nervous before.

Chad took it from him and smiled at the label. "A Chardonnay is perfect. I made salmon. It's good to meet you, Clark."

"You, too," Clark said to Chad as the two shook hands.

“Thanks for having me. I’m sure this isn’t the best time since you were up all last night.”

Chad laughed. “Are you joking? I slept all day. You’ll be begging me to let you leave.”

Clark laughed and I could see him begin to relax. “So, what can I do to help?” he asked.

Chad put up his hands as if to ward off the devil. “No thanks. I don’t let reporters into my kitchen. Not if I want to be able to use my pots again,” he said, bumping his hip against mine playfully.

Clark smiled. “Yeah, Lois did say something about burning water. I completely understand.”

“Do you cook?” I asked Clark.

Clark shrugged. “I’m pretty good. It comes from spending years freelancing all over the world. I was poor, so had to make my own food and I learned all sorts of useful tips from the locals.”

“Like what?” Chad asked as he motioned us to follow him into the kitchen.

Clark thought for a moment before saying, “Like in Italy, I was taught the easiest way to peel garlic. You smash the fat end with the edge of a chef’s knife. The whole thing sort of breaks apart and the peel comes right off. In Spain, this woman taught me when to buy fresh herbs and when to use dried. Actually, the most fun thing,” he said, “was learning how to chop in Korea. You know how those Japanese guys chop things super fast at those hibachi places?”

“Yeah,” Chad said, and I could see his eyes light up. This was a skill he’d like to know too, I was sure, but I wasn’t so keen on his learning it. Clark couldn’t be hurt if he missed with the knife, but Chad most certainly could.

“I know how to do that,” Clark said, his eyes gleaming.

“Can you show me?” Chad asked, and I groaned. “What?”

“I kind of like your fingers,” I said.

Chad laughed. “Me, too. I’m not planning to cut them off. Clark has all his fingers, doesn’t he?”

“Well, yes, but he’s super, dear,” I told Chad — in my head of course, since I wasn’t actually telling him Clark’s secret yet.

“It’s perfectly safe,” Clark assured me. The first trick is to bend your fingers so the joints are along the edge. No fingertips around to get lobbed off,” he said, and I relaxed somewhat as Clark moved closer to Chad.

Chad gave him a knife and a cutting board. “Can you chop up the carrots and celery for the salad?”

“Sure,” Clark said, taking both from him. He peeled the carrots and then lined them up. “Okay,” he said, so Chad stopped stirring the sauce and came over to watch.

Within a few seconds the carrots were all chopped, and almost right after that the celery was done, too. “Wow!” I said. I looked at him carefully. Had he used super powers?

“Ready for me to show you how?” he asked Chad. I guessed not.

Chad moved over eagerly while Clark showed him how to hold the knife and move his hand. In just a few minutes, Chad had chopped cucumber for the salad at a speed that was pretty close to what Clark had used for the carrots.

He put the knife down and smiled at me. “So, it turns out you don’t have to be a horrible cook to be a reporter. Who knew?”

“Hardy-har-har,” I said to him as I turned to the cabinets to pull out the plates.

I could hear Clark and Chad talking in the kitchen as I moved around the dining room table. It sounded like things were going well in there. I breathed a sigh of relief. If they got along, maybe I’d be able to stop keeping this secret from my husband. I knew I hadn’t been keeping it that long, less than a day in fact, but it still felt weird.

“So, Lois is being the hard-bitten city girl and acting all nonchalant, but what do you think of Superman, Clark?” Chad asked as we sat around after dinner sipping the wine Clark had brought.

Clark almost choked on the sip he had just taken, but covered quickly. “Well, it’s not like I know him or anything, but... he’s pretty amazing. All that stuff he can do.”

I could tell Clark felt uncomfortable saying anything too positive about his alter-ego and was fighting the urge to downplay Superman, knowing that would look weird to Chad. Still, it was probably good practice. Surely, other people would ask this question as well, but since he’d be telling Chad soon anyway, if Chad got too suspicious it wouldn’t be that big a deal.

“You’re going to have to do better than that, Clark. Chad, here, has a little bit of a crush on Superman.” I threw a teasing grin Chad’s way.

“I do not!” he replied.

“You don’t?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Okay, maybe a little bit. But I mean, come on. He’s Superman!” Chad said like he was a five-year old who had just seen the first Spiderman movie. “What is it he can do?” Chad asked. “Do you know? Or maybe what can’t he do is the better question.”

Clark shrugged. “I don’t know. So far we haven’t seen him having trouble doing much of anything.”

“He’s super fast,” I said, trying to take the pressure off of Clark. “He can freeze things with his breath and heat them with his eyes.”

“He can catch bullets with his bare hands,” Chad said, getting to the stuff that really impressed him. He was such a boy. “And can swallow bombs with no ill effect. How cool would that be?” he asked Clark.

Clark seemed to relax slightly and laughed back. “Pretty cool.”

“Can you imagine?” Chad asked. “Being able to do all of those things?”

“It would be pretty neat,” Clark admitted.

Chad reached out to squeeze my hand affectionately. “Of course, Lois is such a girl,” he said, and I smiled at the similarity of our thoughts. I guess being together for ten years would do that. “I’m sure you saw her article on Superman’s limitations — how he can’t be there all the time. I know she thinks it would be tough to see that side of humanity all the time.”

“Hey!” I replied hotly. “I got a lot of letters in agreement with that piece, and not all of them were from women!”

“I’m sure Superman really appreciated it,” Clark said quietly.

Chad got up to stand behind my chair and wrapped his arms around me. “I’m sure Clark’s right. And you know how I feel about it.” He picked his head up from my shoulder to look at Clark. “Lois probably told you that I’ve been helping in the ER. It’s not quite the same thing as being right there during a tragedy, but...”

“I’m sure it’s still a lot to deal with,” Clark said. “And given that you don’t have super powers...”

Chad chuckled. “Yeah. Anyway... I think she’s right. I know it’s hard on me some days. I feel sort of bad for Superman that way. I have someone to come home to, you know?” he asked, tightening his hold on me.

“Yeah,” Clark said, definitely looking a little uncomfortable.

Chad must have thought Clark’s discomfort was from the public display of affection as he let me go and started collecting plates from the table. Clark jumped up to join him and within minutes we were finished loading the dishwasher.

“Do you think...” Chad started, but then stopped.

“What?” I asked.

“I just wonder how Superman’s biology is different than ours,” Chad said. “I mean, he looks human, right? But he clearly

has abilities the rest of us don't have. I just wonder... Is there anything missing? Does he feel things like we do? It would be fascinating to study him."

I knew Chad was just talking and his interest was purely scientific, but Clark did not, and he paled at Chad's words. I wondered how often in the past he had worried about this — some scientist wanting to find out who he really was and what made him different.

"He's a person, Chad. Not a science experiment," I said, trying to keep my voice light and somewhat teasing.

"Of course not," Chad said, seeming to come out of his daydream. "I'm not talking about tying him up in a dark room and giving him an anal probe or something. More like random experiments to answer questions he has. I mean, don't you think Superman has all sorts of questions about this, too?"

Clark nodded, although he still looked a little pale. "I bet you're right," he said, and I wondered just how many questions Clark had about himself.

It must be so weird to sit through high school biology and wonder how much of what you learned applied to you. Of course, physics must have been fun, too. I had a mental image of Clark raising his hand in physics class to announce that not everything obeyed the law of gravity.

"What?" Chad asked at my giggle.

"Sorry," I flushed. "I was just thinking about Superman going through high school here and telling his physics teacher that he didn't care what he was told about the law of gravity. He could fly."

Chad's eyes got wide. "Do you think he was here back then? That would mean he has a secret identity, wouldn't it?" Clark paled again, but relaxed slightly at Chad's next words. "That would mean he probably has someone to talk to, right?"

Clark smiled. "Yeah, I think it would mean that."

"Thanks for having me," Clark said as we stood in the doorway.

"It was a pleasure," Chad said. "Really."

"Well, good night," Clark said, shaking Chad's hand again and smiling at me. He had walked a few feet away before he turned around again. "Hey, Chad?"

"Yeah?"

"You mentioned during dinner that you like to rock climb, right?" Clark asked.

"I do. I'm not very good, but I've gone a few times and it's fun," Chad said.

"There's a gym near my apartment if you ever want to go. I haven't been often, but I'm okay and I've heard the gym is one of the best in Metropolis," Clark offered and I smiled. It would be a little weird for Clark and Chad to be friends, particularly to be the type of friends that would go out without me. Without that, though, Clark would probably never be comfortable enough to tell Chad his secret. Besides, Chad didn't have a lot of male friends, so this would probably be good for him, too.

"That sounds great," Chad said, sounding enthused. "Maybe I'll give you a call tomorrow and we can set up a time?"

Clark smiled and it was one of the first completely relaxed smiles I had seen from him all night.

"That sounds great. See you tomorrow, Lois," he said before he took off down the walkway.

"He seems great," Chad said as we closed the door. "Really. He seems... genuine and kind. Exactly the way I picture people from farming towns."

I reached up to run my hands affectionately through his hair. "You romanticize small towns, honey. You're right, though. Clark is genuine, and he is kind."

November 1993

"So?" I asked as Chad walked in the door.

Chad laughed at me as he put his stuff down. "Did you eat those things for lunch?"

I glanced guiltily down at the chocolate covered pretzels I had taken out as a snack before Chad left — which must have been three or four hours ago. "No," I said noticing how most of the large bag was all ready gone.

"You ate something else?" Chad asked.

"I... um... I had a piece of cheese about two o'clock," I said, flushing.

Chad came to sit beside me, grabbing a pretzel out of the bag. "You're incorrigible," he said affectionately.

"Hey," I said, closing the bag. "You said these were for me."

Chad reached out to ruffle my hair. "I did, but I didn't realize you had become incapable of sharing."

With a glare, I held the bag out to him. "Don't go using these to refurbish the calories you burned today!" I said.

"Yes, ma'am," Chad said, sneaking another pretzel before handing the bag back to me.

"So, how was it?" I asked again.

"It was great. Clark was right — the gym was terrific. Well, I guess. Not that I've ever climbed in a gym before."

"Is it different than outside?" I asked.

"Yeah. It's easier for one — I mean, there's no searching for holds, they're just there and color coded."

I giggled. "Rock climbing for monkeys?" I asked.

"Something like that. It means you can do slightly harder climbs because you're not so focused on making sure you won't fall. With the ropes and all the mats, it's a lot safer."

"So, how was Clark?" I asked.

"He was okay. He said he's only been to a gym once or twice and never been outside and it showed — he was pretty good for a beginner, but he had to stick to the easier routes."

"I don't really care how good a rock climber he is, honey," I said, sneaking another pretzel before Chad gently took the bag away from me. "I meant did you have fun hanging out?"

"Yeah," Chad said, getting up and going into the kitchen.

"He's a really great guy," he said, coming back in with a glass of water. "He told me a little about his travels. Did you know he speaks over three hundred languages?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'd like to hate him for it, but he's so freakin' nice," I groused.

Chad ruffled my hair once again. "Just because he has a facility for languages you don't doesn't mean you don't have skill sets he doesn't."

"Have you read his stuff?" I asked.

"Aside from things you've written together?" Chad asked. "I don't think so, but maybe. I don't make special attempts to read his articles, if that's what you mean."

"Well, he's good," I said.

"Better than you?" Chad asked with raised eyebrows.

I giggled. "Maybe not, but he is good."

"Well, anyway, it was fun to listen to all the places he's been. Although, I forgot to ask. Why'd he move around so much anyway?"

"I think he said he just never felt like he fit in anywhere before," I said.

"That must be tough. To move from place to place and never feel like you're home," Chad said. "I wonder why he had trouble, though. He doesn't seem like someone who would have trouble making friends."

"He doesn't," I said. "He already has more friends at the Planet than I do. But... you know, you're better off asking Clark why he moved around so much," I said. I had been about to make something up, but I just couldn't do that. Not telling Chad Clark's secret was one thing. Lying to Chad directly was another, and it was a line I wasn't willing to cross.

“Good morning,” Clark called as he passed my desk two weeks later. It had been a good two weeks. The news had finally picked up again, and Clark and I had been working on some meaty stories. I liked working with Clark. He was talented, but to Chad’s point, our strengths were not the same, and we balanced each other out well.

Plus, he was fun to be with. I had learned early in my career that I don’t work well with others. Linda and I had partnered on more than one article during our college years, and as much as I liked Linda, working with her was not so great.

I realized after I got to the Planet that it was not Linda’s fault, it was mine. I am incredibly picky and not good at compromise. They say knowing the problem is half the battle, but that doesn’t appear to be the case with me. I know I need to be more flexible and not expect other people to just work around me, but doing it is another thing.

Clark, though, either fit perfectly or was much better than other people at letting me do my thing and making sure he didn’t get in my way. I’d never worked better with a partner, and it showed. Perry had been whistling a lot more lately, and Clark and I were actually acquiring a name for ourselves. I’d always been one of the top reporters at the Planet, but newspaper reporters were not exactly local celebrities. I was well known within the local newspaper business, but while the average person walking down the street was likely to read my work, they had no idea who Lois Andrews was.

The paper had started to realize that that was changing. People were switching from the Star to the Planet just to read Andrews and Kent stories. So, the marketing team had started advertising us. It was weird to see my face plastered over signs around town. I mean, this was still the newspaper business. The Planet hardly took out ads on prime time television, but there were several areas of town with print ads outside buildings and stuff showing Clark and me. It was odd.

Chad thought it was funny — there was an ad in front of the hospital that he had taken to showing to people whenever anyone was stupid enough to say yes to “Would you like to see a picture of my wife?” He informed me that his patients got a kick out of it, but of course, he had stopped pulling extra shifts in the ER, so his patients were mostly under the age of thirteen.

“What is with you this morning?” I asked Clark as I realized he was singing — off key, no less.

“Is it a crime to be in a good mood?” he asked me with a smile.

“No, but if you’re in a good mood, you should at least be polite enough to let me know why so I can share in it. Chad was on-call last night and got calls from a hysterical mother every hour from two to six. I’m grumpy!” I informed him.

Clark wandered away at that, but I was used to that sort of behavior from him. Working with Superman had its benefits — while Clark preferred to leave his superpowers out of investigations, he was willing to use them if we needed them. On the other hand, having a partner that moonlit in tights meant that sometimes I was left alone at the most inopportune of times.

“Here you go. One hot chocolate with extra whip cream,” Clark said as he placed the decadent breakfast drink in front of me.

“Okay, there really is something wrong with you,” I said. “You’re buying me presents now?”

“Last night when I came home, you know what I found?” Clark asked.

“You’d left the stove on and your apartment burned down?” I suggested. “The site of your apartment is right over the old Metropolis Land Fill?”

“Wow,” he said. “You really should think about sleeping somewhere else when Chad is on-call. You clearly need more

sleep than you’ve been getting,” Clark teased me.

“Stop it!” I said, laughing at him. “Tell me what you found.”

“Rachel,” he said simply.

“Rachel as in your girlfriend, Rachel?” I asked.

“Well, yes,” Clark said, looking at me quizzically. “Who did you think I meant? Rachel Green?”

“That would be weird,” I said. “So, did Rachel just pop in to Metropolis to surprise you?”

“Pretty much,” Clark said, still smiling.

“Slow crime week in Smallville?”

“Lois, every week is a slow crime week in Smallville,” Clark deadpanned.

“So, how long is she here for?” I asked.

“Just through the weekend,” Clark said. “So, I am sort of hoping we can wrap things up a little early here. I want to take her to the Metropolis Art Museum. As you can guess, Rachel thinks the big city is the root of all evil, but she’s a sucker for impressionist art, so I’m hoping I can show her that it’s not all bad here.”

“Why don’t you go tomorrow?” I asked. “Then you’d have all day.”

Clark grimaced. “I said Rachel is a fan of impressionist art. I, personally, can not stand spending time in art museums. The museum is open late tonight, so we can probably spend three or four hours there after work which will already be more than I need.”

“Good plan.” I laughed at him. “So, what did you two do last night?”

“Nothing much. It’s been three months since I’ve seen her. So we caught up a bit,” Clark said.

“Don’t you guys talk?” I asked.

“All the time,” Clark said. “It’s not the same.”

“I guess not.” I shrugged my shoulders. What did I know? The longest I had ever been away from Chad was the year he was away before he started college, and it wasn’t even really a year. It was a school year, but he came back early in the summer, so it was really like nine or ten months. Plus, Chad’s grandmother was so thankful for all the help he was providing that she paid for us to see each other once every month. There was a stretch of two months we were apart when his grandfather had gotten very sick, but for the most part we never went long stretches without seeing each other.

Of course, there was no reason Clark and Rachel had to go that long without seeing each other either, given that he could have flown to see her every weekend if he wanted. That involved telling Rachel his secret, though, and Clark was still stubbornly insisting that he could not do that.

“I don’t see any reason we can’t get out of here by four today,” I said, looking at my calendar. “We have that meeting with the DA’s office at two and nothing for the rest of the day unless you have something I don’t know about.”

“No,” Clark said, looking at his own calendar. “Let me give Rach a call to let her know, and then we can start on the lead-in to the Warvass story.”

“Hey,” I said, smiling. I could almost hear Clark’s smile when he answered the phone. Having Rachel around was good for him. I had never heard him so happy before, and since this was Clark, who was always in a good mood, that was really saying something.

“Hey, Lois,” Clark said. “What’s up?”

“Chad and I were just wondering what you and Rachel are doing for dinner tonight,” I said. “I know you’re not spending the day at the museum, and if you have something else planned, we completely understand — even if it’s just staying at home alone since you haven’t seen each other in so long. But, it would be kind of nice to finally meet Rachel, so we thought maybe you

could come over?"

Clark paused before answering, and I was ready for him to tell me that they'd rather hang out alone when he said, "Sure. I'm not sure what we're doing today. Rachel had fun at the museum last night, but I think she's museum'ed out now. She has a pretty low tolerance for being indoors too long.

"She's in the shower right now, so I can't ask her, but I'm sure she'd be okay with it. Why don't you guys come over here, though? Chad's cooked me dinner twice now, and I have yet to really prove to him that some journalists can cook."

I laughed. "I was going to say yes until you said that. I don't want him to know that you can cook. He may try to turn me in for a model that can."

I felt Chad come up behind me and move my hair away from my neck. He kissed me on the newly exposed skin softly. "I didn't know that was an option," he whispered, and I laughed.

"What?" Clark asked.

"Nothing," I said. "I've already got Chad daydreaming about a cooking Lois."

"She doesn't have to be a Lois," Chad called from across the room.

"Oh, really?" I asked him.

"Is she hot?" he asked me.

"I don't know. You're the one who said it didn't have to be a Lois. What are your requirements?"

"Um, Lois?" Clark said into the phone.

"Oh, sorry," I said. "Chad and I got distracted."

Clark laughed. "I could tell."

I watched Chad move into the bedroom to get dressed and whispered into the phone. "So, any need for... you know... last night?" I asked. I didn't want to say it out loud, but I knew Clark had been worried about needing to be out on Superman duty while Rachel was visiting. He had decided to skip his patrols, but wasn't comfortable not answering any calls for help.

On the other hand, that was a rather tricky proposition given that she was staying with him and he had given her his bed which was near the balcony. He was sleeping in the living room — some weird hang up about not being able to do *that* with her until he told her his secret. How Rachel had not wondered what was wrong with him before now, I had no idea. If Chad and I still hadn't moved forward in our relationship to that after several years together, I would have thought he was gay.

Clark assured me, though, that things were different in small towns where everyone knew everyone else's business. Premarital sex was much less common because you knew (or suspected) that everyone who knew you knew what you were doing. So, I guess Rachel hadn't wondered.

"Yeah," Clark said. "Right when we were in the museum, too. There was a fire in that new development in the suburbs. Three homes caught fire."

"Oh my goodness," I said. Those homes were brand new.

"Yeah, we can talk about it more later. I think there's a story there — I don't think the houses were far enough apart to pass code. Anyway, Rachel's somewhat used to my seeming a bit hare-brained so when I left to go to the bathroom and didn't come back for twenty minutes she just laughed at me. She's pretty laid-back about that kind of thing."

"So the fire was the only interruption?" I asked.

"Well, there were a few minor incidences last night, but Rachel sleeps like a rock so it was no problem to sneak past her to use the balcony," Clark said.

"Yeah, I guess it's pretty easy to move around noiselessly when you can float," I said.

"Something like that. Listen, I just heard the water shut off, so I should go. Does seven sound okay to you for tonight?"

"Sounds great," I said before I hung up the phone.

The most surprising thing about the night was that I liked Rachel. I don't know why, but I hadn't really expected to. I think from her easy acceptance of all of Clark's oddities, I had expected her to be a bit stupid. It was an unfair assessment, particularly since I didn't know her, and I was pretty accepting of Clark even before he told me his secret, but it was the truth.

Clark definitely seemed like the kind of guy that managed to go beyond looks, although that was clearly not one-hundred percent true. I did ask him a couple of questions about the girl he dated before Rachel, Lana, and he hadn't been able to say much more about her than that she was bubbly and pretty. Rachel was pretty, too, but more in a Midwest way and less like a cheerleader. Of course, she was also an adult, so who knew what she looked like in high school, but she seemed too down-to-earth to be described as bubbly.

Still, there was a reason he thought Rachel and he may be right for each other now, and I just couldn't see him with someone stupid. As it turned out, he was not. Rachel was much more intelligent than I expected and really kind of fun to have around.

She was pretty knowledgeable about world events, but even more than Clark, she really had a small-town view. We spent some time talking about the elections that had just passed, and Rachel explained to me the current issues with ethanol. I'd been doing some reading on it, but could not separate out the facts from the lobbyist's propaganda, but since corn was the basis for Smallville's economy, Rachel knew a lot about it.

Most impressive to me, though, was that the things she said weren't all pro-ethanol just because that would be best for Smallville. She pointed out that there are better sources in South America and said she wasn't completely convinced that corn-based ethanol was the way for the US to go. I never would have expected that from someone as devoted to Smallville as she clearly was.

The second surprise of the night was Clark. He had done some preparing of things the couple of times he had come over to cook, and he had told us he could do so, but he really hadn't done himself justice. He was a phenomenal cook — pretty much on par with Chad, and I thought Chad should have gone to culinary school. Chad joked that we'd be coming over more often now that he knew he didn't have to do all the cooking to get good homemade food.

Poor Rachel, though. We were sitting over dessert — strawberry shortcake and chocolate mousse. Rachel's favorite was strawberry shortcake, and Clark rightly assumed I'd prefer something with chocolate in it, so he made both. His mother would be proud of his hospitality, I'm sure.

Anyway, we were sitting over dessert when the questions started.

"So, how many people are in Smallville?" Chad asked. I gave a quiet groan beside him, and he reached out and grabbed my hand in a silent 'Be quiet!' gesture.

"Two thousand three hundred and thirty five," Clark answered. Of course he would know the exact number.

"Thirty six," Rachel corrected gently. "You're forgetting — Jenny and Brian Maddox had their baby last month."

"Right," Clark said. "I did forget. And soon to be two thousand three hundred and thirty seven as Anne Marie is due this month."

"You are so weird," I said around a spoonful of mousse.

"Who knows exactly how many people are in the town they live in?"

"People who live in small towns," Chad said.

"Really. You think everyone who lives in a small town keeps track of how the population size changes?" I asked.

"No," Rachel laughed. "I think even if you asked my parents... well, maybe not my parents, but Clark's, they'd tell

you it was just over two thousand. When you're sheriff, though..."

"Or dating the sheriff," Clark added.

"Then you kind of know this type of thing. The paperwork for new babies and deaths get passed through my office," Rachel explained.

"And the information gets passed to me," Clark said, grinning at Rachel.

"And your parents?" I asked.

"Well, my dad was sheriff before I was. He likes to keep on top of these things. He's one of those guys who had no business retiring," Rachel said.

"So, you took after your dad. Is that common in Smallville?" Chad asked.

"Honey, ease up. Let Rachel have some of her cake," I said, rolling my eyes at him. "Sorry," I said to Rachel. "Chad apparently grew up on Little House on the Prairie and he thinks all small towns are just like Walnut Grove."

Clark laughed. "Well, it's not as different as you might think, given that it's been about a hundred years since Walnut Grove was the home of Laura Ingalls."

Rachel swatted at Clark's shoulder playfully. "It's not the same."

"Well, there are telephones, for one," Clark said.

"There were telephones in Little House," Chad said. "Towards the end."

Clark shrugged. "Maybe they're the same then."

"You're horrible," Rachel said with a grin. "Three months here and you're turning into a city boy."

"Oh, trust me," I said. "Clark is no city boy. For one thing, no city boy would make more than one dessert to make each of his guests happy."

"That's right," Chad said. "With us city-folk, you get one dessert and you like it. And if you don't, we put a bullet in your head."

"So, how was the museum?" I asked after our laughter had calmed down.

"It was great," Rachel said. "I love art museums. One negative to Smallville is that there are no museums around. Although, if Martha gets her way that'll change soon."

"Who's Martha?" Chad asked before I had a chance to.

"My mom," Clark said. "She's a bit of a city-girl herself, and she's gotten into art recently."

"Is she any good?" I asked.

"Dad doesn't think so," Clark chuckled.

"It's hard to say. It's not my kind of art," Rachel said. "But she really enjoys it."

"And she can't be that bad," Clark added. "She won second place at last year's art show in Kansas City."

"Wow!" Chad said. "Sounds like she's really good."

"Yeah. Her stuff is just weird," Clark said. "I don't really understand it."

Chad turned to me. "Can I ask more Smallville questions now?" he asked with a teasing glint in his eyes.

"I think we should get going, honey. Clark and Rachel might not want us around all night."

"No, please stay," Rachel said. "Really. We do want time alone, but we were alone all day today and yesterday and we so rarely get to socialize with other couples."

"Although, tomorrow is definitely off limits for alone time," Clark said, and Rachel leaned over to kiss him on the cheek and whisper something in his ear.

"So what did you do today?" I asked. I was sort of hoping that Rachel was loving Metropolis. She and Clark looked very cute together and I was starting to worry that if she really hated it here, Clark would move back to Smallville. Now that Perry had me working with a partner, he was likely to want to keep it that

way, and I couldn't imagine working with someone besides Clark.

Rachel blushed, "Well, we went hiking actually."

"Where'd you go?" Chad asked. "I didn't know there was any place to hike in Metropolis."

"There's not," Clark smiled. "We caught a bus to New Troy National Forest."

After we cleared the table, we moved to the living room. For awhile, we sat around and talked — Chad and I on Clark's couch and Clark and Rachel huddled together on Clark's big comfy chair. Then Rachel admitted she had a weakness for board games.

"No, no board games," Clark said.

"Why not?" Rachel asked, turning to look at him with puppy dog eyes.

"Because I have neighbors and I don't see us being able to play any games where you and Lois don't start shouting at each other. You're both too competitive for your own good."

"I'm not competitive," I said.

"You're not?" Chad asked me with his eyebrows raised.

"I am," Rachel admitted. "But I can be quiet, Clark. Really."

Clark finally relented and we agreed to play Taboo. Clark and Chad decided we should play boys vs. girls so there would be less reason for Rachel and me to argue. No one won in the end, though. Chad and I left right after Clark's upstairs neighbors came down to ask us to keep it down. But it wasn't my fault that Rachel used one of the taboo words. Was I supposed to keep quiet about that?

December 1993

It was a slow news week, and Clark and I were each sitting at our desks working on pieces that might make the front page today, but on a normal day, would be lucky to show up on page ten. I finished mine and sat back. I had another piece, same type of unimportant drivel, waiting for me to start, but that one wasn't due until tomorrow, so I had no motivation to work on it.

"Want to grab a coffee?" Clark asked from behind me.

I turned around and flashed him a bright smile. "That sounds fantastic! Are you as bored as I am?" I asked as we walked to the elevator.

"Worse. The slow news week is related to a drop in crime, and that's great, don't get me wrong, but it means both my jobs are slow," Clark said with a wink.

"Yeah, I bet you do more patrols when things here are slow, don't you?" I realized.

Clark shrugged. "If I have the time..."

"You're a good person, Clark," I said, putting a hand on his arm. "I mean it," I said when I saw the look he gave me. "Even with what you can do, not everyone would use it the way you do."

"Thank you, Lois," Clark said quietly.

We each ordered our coffee, and then I grabbed us a table in the crowded shop while Clark waited for them to be ready. Clark had found this place during one of his rescues. It was a little further than the coffee cart downstairs, of course, but it was just around the block from the Planet and featured plush seats. I thought it was some lame attempt to look like the coffee house from Friends but then decided I didn't care. It was comfortable.

"Here you go," Clark said, sitting down.

"Thanks," I said, taking a sip of my mocha.

"So, how's Chad holding up?" Clark asked.

Chad's grandmother had passed away a couple of weeks ago. It was the same grandmother he had stayed with before college to help her look after his grandfather. They had always been close, but Chad living with them for a year certainly made them closer, so Chad had taken it pretty hard. To be honest, I was pretty upset by it, too. Mom and Dad didn't talk to their parents, so Lucy and I never really knew our grandparents. I had gotten to know

Chad's grandparents fairly well when Chad was living with them as I visited him there for breaks. They even let me stay for the three weeks during winter break.

Then, when they decided to move back to Metropolis to be closer to family, we had seen them often. So, both his grandfather's death while we were in college, and now his grandmother's death, were hard on both of us.

Clark had been great when it happened. He covered for me at work, but also showed up with a bunch of dinners pre-made for the week so we could deal with all the family coming in without having to worry about cooking (or in my case, ordering in).

"I think he's starting to get used to it," I said in response to Clark's question. "It's weird to know we'll never see her again, but she lived a good, full life. I think she was ready even if we weren't."

Clark nodded. "It was that way when my grandparents died, too," he said.

"Oh," I said as I remembered. "I didn't tell you the most annoying part."

"The most annoying part about Chad's grandmother dying?" Clark asked with his eyebrows raised.

"Okay, fine. The second most annoying part. No, it is *the* most annoying. Her dying was painful, not annoying," I said.

"Fair enough," Clark said with a smile, and I knew he thought I was being strange.

"Chad's always wanted to learn how to play piano," I told him. "His grandparents had one and his grandmother said she'd give it to him when he was a teenager."

"Okay," Clark said, clearly not seeing where this was going.

"So, at the last minute she changed her mind and told him he couldn't have it until she died," I explained.

"Did she use it?" Clark asked.

"No, it was sort of an engagement gift. They got engaged during the Depression, and his grandfather couldn't afford a ring. Then years later when he could afford it, she said she'd always wanted a piano and would prefer that to a ring.

"So, when Chad wanted it and she no longer used it, she was happy it was going to get some use, but his grandfather was a little upset as it was a gift for his wife."

"Makes sense," Clark said.

"Right. So, now we've inherited this piano. No one's used it since Chad's father was forced to take lessons as a kid, so it's been about forty years. The thing is in miserable shape. I mean, it looks okay, but most of the keys don't work. It needs a lot of work to be useable. And to make it worse, we have to get it into our small apartment.

"We estimated that between moving it and fixing it up, the piano he *inherited* is going to cost us \$3,000-5,000. You know you can buy a new piano for \$2,000!"

"But Chad wants this one," Clark guessed. When I nodded, he smiled. "It was like his grandmother's engagement ring. It sort of makes sense, doesn't it?"

"It completely makes sense," I groused. "That doesn't make it any less annoying."

Clark laughed at me. "You're such a sentimentalist."

"Thanks." I smirked. "I try."

"Maybe I could... no, forget I said anything," Clark said.

"What?"

"I was going to offer to move it using Superman, but I'm not sure. It's a piano. I could definitely lift it and carry it, but I think it probably needs to stay flat or something and I can't guarantee that."

I nodded. "Thanks for trying." I smiled at him.

"I could help Chad fix it up, though. I know some pointers, and the parts for that kind of thing are cheap. It's the labor that's expensive."

Trust Clark to know how to fix a piano. The man had more

irrelevant knowledge in his head than an encyclopedia. He was kind of useful to have around like that.

"Oh, hey. I almost forgot. Chad wanted me to invite you over to dinner tonight. Sort of as a thank you for all the meals you made for us the last couple of weeks," I said.

"It wasn't a problem. I enjoy cooking, and I figured you guys could use the help," Clark said. "But I don't turn down evenings with friends." He grinned at me.

"Great," I said. "I'll give Chad a call when we get back to the newsroom." I glanced at my watch. "I think he's probably still sleeping now."

"Is he back on ER duty?" Clark asked.

"Just for last night. Some nasty virus is making the rounds of the hospital, and four of the doctors called in sick," I explained. "I think it was good, though. It reminded Chad that while he likes it in the ER, the hours are not for him. Except for middle of the night phone calls, pediatrics has pretty good hours."

Clark shook his head. "But it must be so disheartening to deal with all those sick kids."

I nodded my head in agreement. "Chad really likes it, though. He says children make much better patients than adults, and they're more appreciative when he makes them feel better."

Clark smiled at that as he stood up. "Back to the drudgery?" With a grimace, I followed him out.

"Hi, Chad," Clark said as he came in. They were definitely feeling more comfortable with each other, and I was hoping that this night would solidify that. My plan was to talk to Clark tomorrow about telling Chad his secret. I had wanted to do that today and get Clark to come clean tonight, but for some reason I hadn't had the nerve to ask. Partly, I knew I was being selfish. On the other hand, I was sure Clark understood — it's not good to have secrets in a marriage.

"What can I help with?" Clark asked as we gathered in the kitchen.

"Nothing," Chad insisted. "Really. Tonight, please relax. You've done so much for us over the past couple of weeks..."

"It wasn't a problem," Clark said. "You needed help. It wasn't a big deal."

Chad turned to me. "You see, that's what people in small towns are like."

"You mean they let themselves be used?" I asked, grinning at Clark lest he think I meant it.

"So, when's the next time you're going to see Rachel?" I asked Clark. He had gone home for Thanksgiving, and it sounded like they had spent most of the long weekend together, but he hadn't talked about her coming for another visit and I wasn't sure what their plans were for Christmas.

"Well, I'm going home for Christmas so I'll see her then. I've talked to Perry about taking off between Christmas and New Year's, too, so I can spend it with her. He agreed as long as I agreed to write some stuff up while I'm gone. Has he talked about this with you yet?" Clark asked me.

"No." I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Well, Perry said you might enjoy that for a short time. Sort of job-share rather than a partnership. You'll do the investigating, send me your notes, and I'll write up the stories under the Andrews/Kent byline. Just for the week," Clark explained.

"No writing for a week. I would love that!" I said. I liked to write, but sometimes it felt like I was locked in the newsroom writing up news while it was happening.

Clark laughed. "That's what Perry said. So, I'll be home for like a week and a half, and then Rachel is planning to come back here at the end of January."

"Any idea what you're going to do when she's here?" Chad asked. "It's not the best time for someone who likes to be outside."

Clark smiled. “No, but neither is Kansas. So, I think it may actually be a good time for her to visit. There’s more indoor stuff to do here, so maybe she won’t feel quite so stir-crazy.”

Clark and I started setting the table while Chad put the finishing touches on dinner. As I came back into the living room area with the forks, I saw Clark’s head tilt in a familiar way. “Do you need to go?” I whispered. So far, surprisingly, Clark had yet to have to run out on plans with us. I knew that when he was out, he tended to only go to big calls for help and would skip things he might otherwise help with like traffic accidents.

Clark nodded. “Sorry, but I do.” He headed into the kitchen. “I’m so sorry, Chad, but I need to run out for a minute. I just remembered that I... left my oven on.”

Chad looked up in surprise, but Clark had headed for the door before he had a chance to respond.

“Does he do that often?” Chad asked me.

“All the time,” I said. It was the truth. Or sort of. Clark certainly ran off all the time, although he didn’t usually give me a lame excuse when he did.

“Isn’t it going to take him twenty minutes to get home and back? We could have driven him,” Chad said.

“I told you. Clark is a little weird.” I smiled as I picked a carrot out of the salad.

“I’m so sorry,” Clark said when he passed by my desk the next morning.

I nodded. I didn’t want to talk about it now. The truth was that I understood. I had seen the news report and could see how Clark had felt he had to help at the hostage situation and how he might have thought it would be easy to do. LNN, of course, reported on the fact that things were not as easy as Clark might have thought. I really did understand, and of course, no one could really expect him to break away to make a phone call and break his dinner plans.

Still, this was precisely why I wanted to tell Chad. He was visibly annoyed at Clark last night, and I didn’t know what to say. Whereas... well, I was annoyed at Clark, too, but I was annoyed as I felt like I wanted to explain Clark’s absence to my husband and couldn’t, rather than being annoyed because Clark seemed like a flake.

I wanted to cover for him — tell Chad that Clark had run across the hostage situation and stopped to get the story for the Planet, but how could I? Chad was home and knew that the phone had not rung.

“Lois?” Clark asked softly. “I really am sorry.”

“I know,” I told him. “I just... let’s not talk about it now, okay? Can we go out for lunch?”

“Yeah,” Clark said, and I softened slightly when I took in his body language as he walked to his desk. He was hunched over and it was clear that he felt badly. Still, I knew without a doubt now that I needed to talk to him about telling Chad. I couldn’t do this secret thing anymore.

I sat quietly at my desk typing, but I had to admit, being angry at Clark, or not angry so much as annoyed, was distracting. I’m not sure why, but it bothered me. I felt like we had developed a good working relationship very quickly, and at this point, he was also my closest friend aside from Chad, and so I didn’t like feeling like we were arguing, even if we weren’t really.

“May I please speak to Dr. Andrews?” I heard Clark behind me. I smiled. Chad was at the hospital today, so I guess Clark looked up the number and was calling to apologize. Okay, maybe I could forgive him.

“Chad?” I heard Clark say, and I shamelessly eavesdropped. “I just... I just wanted to apologize for last night. I’m sure I looked like the biggest flake... Yeah, I ran into the hostage situation on my way back and I know I should have called, but I got caught up in what I was doing.”

I was actually pretty impressed. For the most part, he was telling the truth, even if Chad had no idea what it was Clark was really doing at the hostage situation.

“Are you free tonight?” I heard Clark ask. “No, I’d like to take you and Lois to dinner to make it up to you... No, I haven’t asked Lois.” I heard Clark chuckle slightly. “Yeah, you could say that.” I shook my head. I was sure Chad had guessed that I was giving Clark the cold shoulder. Sometimes I wondered if we’d known each other too long — he knew way too much about me. On the other hand, sometimes that was nice. Like when all I wanted to do was curl up on the couch with the latest episode of The Ivory Tower and a tub of ice cream. It was nice to have someone around who was happy to supply the ice cream and a spoon.

“Tomorrow sounds great,” Clark said. “Yeah, I’ll ask her at lunch. I think she’s decided she’ll talk to me again then.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it.

“Okay, see you tomorrow,” Clark said before he hung up the phone.

“Maybe sooner than lunch?” Clark called to me.

I turned around. “Dinner tomorrow sounds good, and treating us is a really nice touch, Clark.”

“I really am sorry, Lois,” he said.

“I know,” I told him, and I did. It was all over his face.

“So,” I said as we sat down. “Maybe it’s time to tell Chad?”

Clark looked up at me in surprise.

“What?” I asked him. “You don’t agree.”

“I just... didn’t expect you to bring it up, I guess,” Clark said.

“Okay, so what do you think?”

Clark sighed. “He’s your husband. You shouldn’t be keeping secrets from him for me.”

“That’s not quite the response I was hoping for,” I told him. “You know Chad. You two are friends now. What are you waiting for?”

“This isn’t something I tell all my friends,” Clark pointed out.

“You told me.”

Clark sighed again. “I know, but honestly, I’m not sure why. I don’t mean that in a bad way. Just that I don’t know why I felt comfortable telling you when I’ve never felt that way about anyone else.”

I smiled cheekily. “Well, I am a very understanding person.”

Clark laughed, so I continued. “Chad’s understanding, too.”

“I’m sure he is, and I mean it, Lois. If you want me to tell him, I will, but...”

“But you’re not ready yet?” I asked, feeling a sigh coming on. How much longer did I need to keep this from Chad? No matter what Clark said, I didn’t feel right telling Chad this secret if Clark wasn’t comfortable with it, but I also didn’t feel right keeping it from Chad. I wished he would just be comfortable already so I wouldn’t have to deal with it.

“I’m not,” Clark said softly. “I’m sorry.”

I nodded my head. “Can we make a time to re-evaluate?” I asked, afraid that if I let this go, I would eternally be keeping a secret from Chad.

“That seems more than fair,” Clark said. “How about next week?”

“Sounds good,” I said, although I didn’t really mean it. It sounded okay — better than no date or six months from now would have been. But I was ready to end this now.

“You have a minute?” Clark asked me shortly after I came in the next day. He had been here at daybreak and had written up a Superman story, so I guess he had had a long night.

“Sure,” I said. I was feeling a little better about things today. I still hated the idea of keeping secrets from Chad, but I also knew that Chad would understand. This wasn’t a secret like someone

having an affair — this was a secret that could put people in danger, and at this point, Chad and I were probably close enough to Clark to be on that list.

Certainly, I was the person most associated with Clark in the public eye. That was a bit weird actually. I knew it was just because of our jobs, but it did seem like I might be in more danger if Clark's secret got out than Rachel. Not that it would take much digging for someone to find Rachel — most people around the newsroom knew Clark had a girlfriend who still lived in Kansas, and those that were closer to Clark like Perry and Jimmy actually remembered both her name and the name of the town Clark grew up in. Given that they also knew she was sheriff, I doubted it would be hard for someone to find her.

Still, that took some leg work and some trickery to get the information. All you needed to do to know that Clark and I spent a fair amount of time together was to read the paper or see the ads. Not that either of those would indicate that we were friends aside from colleagues, but the way Superman acted that probably wouldn't seem that important. He would clearly rescue me regardless of how close we were. Well, actually, I knew he would, but from a criminal's perspective or whatever.

I followed Clark into the conference room, and as soon as I shut the door behind me, I said, "I'm sorry for yesterday. I shouldn't be pushing you for things you're not ready for."

"No," Clark shook his head. "I'm sorry. I... I never meant to burden you with this, and I certainly don't want to come between you and Chad. I... I talked to my parents last night."

"About telling Chad?" I asked.

"Sort of," Clark looked out the window. "I never really told them that I had told you."

"Oh."

"Yeah, to be honest, they weren't all that happy about it. Not that it's anything against you."

"They don't know me," I said.

"Exactly. I mean... they trust my judgment, but this is still hard for them. They've been worried my whole life about this secret getting out, and now I've gone and told someone who is not part of the family and has no reason to keep it. I mean, I actually think that's not true. You're my closest friend in Metropolis. I don't think that's exactly a secret. And since the average criminal can't fly with the ease I can, you are a lot more accessible than Rachel. But they just..."

"It's okay, Clark," I said, putting a hand on his arm. "I understand."

Clark nodded. "Mom also thought that given how long you've known, I should tell Chad," he said quietly.

"What?" I was surprised. They didn't want me to know, but they thought Chad should?

"She said as important as the secret is, it shouldn't be as important as your wedding vows, and if I didn't want Chad to know, I never should have told you."

His words made me feel badly. I agreed with Martha, but it wasn't exactly fair, was it? Clark saw me for hours every day. We had had time to develop trust in each other. I knew Chad was trustworthy, too, but it was fair that Clark was still not sure. Even with all the time they spent together, it still dwarfed the time he spent with me.

"Clark, I meant what I said yesterday. I don't want to make you uncomfortable..."

"No," Clark interrupted. "That's not fair. It never has been. Keeping this secret is making you uncomfortable. Mom's right. I knew you were married when I told you. I should have considered that, and it's not like I don't like Chad or something. I just... I don't really know that I'll ever feel ready to tell him."

I nodded my head unsure what to say.

"Can I ask you one more favor?" Clark asked. I nodded, and Clark quietly asked, "Would you tell Chad? I know that's not fair,

but... I don't know. I thought it might be better."

I nodded again. I could understand that. "Okay," I said. I still felt awkward about this. It was clear that Clark was still uncomfortable with the idea of Chad knowing, but if he was always going to feel that way, what was I supposed to do? I couldn't keep this from Chad forever. It was just too hard.

Chad was working that night; the virus was still taking its toll on the hospital, so he was in the ER again. This meant I couldn't tell him about Clark until the morning. The thought ruined my night. First of all, I was nervous about telling Chad I had kept a secret from him at all, but to do it when he had been up all night did not seem like the best possible time.

Still, I didn't want to wait any longer. I wanted to get it over with. So, armed with more thoughts on what I was going to say to him than I wanted, I settled into bed for the night. I lay there for several hours, just staring at the ceiling. He would understand, wouldn't he? What if he didn't? Had this been a mistake? Should I have taken Clark up on his offer to tell Chad when he first told me?

I finally fell asleep amid these thoughts and was startled awake when I felt Chad get into bed. "Morning," he said.

"Morning," I replied, wishing he would be a little quieter so that I could fall back to sleep. Then I remembered why I was so tired and got up more fully.

"Can we talk for a few minutes?" I asked Chad. "Or are you too tired?"

"I'm okay," Chad said, sitting up. "Is everything okay?"

I played with the edge of the sheet. "I have something to tell you," I said nervously.

I felt Chad put a warm hand on my back. "What's wrong, honey?" he asked. "Just tell me. I'm sure whatever it is, it's not as bad as you think."

"I sort of..." I clearly had not done a good enough job practicing what to say to him last night as I could not find the words to do so right now. "There's something I haven't told you."

"Are you sick?" Chad asked, the concern in his voice evident. It made me feel even guiltier.

"No, I'm fine. I just... it's not really my secret."

"Wait," Chad said and there was an edge to his voice that worried me. "This is a secret? How long have you been keeping it from me?"

"A couple of months?" I guessed.

Chad got out of bed, a sure sign that he was not happy. "You have something you've been keeping from me for a couple of months?" he asked, the edge more pronounced now. "I thought..." He stopped and took a deep breath. "Lois, I thought we promised to always be honest with each other."

"I know," I told him, and I did know, but surely finding out your partner was an alien was an exception, right? "But..."

"But what?" Chad asked, and there was no mistaking he was angry now. "There is no explanation that could make it okay for you to keep anything from me this long."

"This wasn't..." I had no idea how to finish that sentence. What had I been thinking? I should have just told Chad this when Clark first told me.

"Wasn't what, Lois? What could possess you to keep a secret from me this long?" Chad asked, nearly yelling now.

I closed my eyes, hoping the words were imprinted on my eyelids. "It's just... Clark..."

"Clark?" Chad asked. "You told Clark whatever it was and you didn't tell me?"

"It's not like that..." I said, but Chad cut me off before I could explain that it was Clark's secret not mine.

"How... what could you have been thinking? Keeping a secret from me, but sharing it with Clark. It's like... it almost feels like you're having an affair," Chad said, his voice soft. He

sounded so hurt I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to get him to understand.

"It's not... it's not anything like what you're thinking," I said.

"So tell me what it is like, Lois," Chad said, but before I could, he continued. "You know what? I don't think I want to hear it right now. I'm going to sleep on the couch!"

I lay back down, not sure what to do. Tears were streaming into my ears, but I didn't even bother to push them out of the way. I lay there for about ten minutes before I couldn't stand it anymore. I had to talk to him; I had to make him understand.

I padded downstairs in my bare feet. Chad was lying with his legs falling over the arm of the couch, but his eyes were wide open.

"I'm so sorry," I said quietly.

"It doesn't matter," Chad said quietly, and with such lack of emotion that it worried me.

"What doesn't matter?" I asked.

"The secret. Whatever it is. It's not the secret that's important, Lois." He sat up on the couch, but stared at his hands rather than me. "It's the fact that you thought there was something you could share with Clark and not with me. What does that say about our marriage? Or your partnership with Clark?"

"Clark and I are just..."

"Don't patronize me, Lois," Chad said. "Don't tell me that you're just partners or just friends. You kept a secret from me that you shared with him. Something you trusted him with that you kept from me."

I couldn't seem to stop crying long enough to explain anything.

"I just..." Chad stopped speaking, but when he did speak again, he picked his head up to look at me. "I don't even know what to do with this information, Lois. It's so... surprising. I knew you were close to Clark, and I thought he was a great guy, so it didn't really bother me. But now I think it should have."

"No!" I insisted through my tears. "It's not... Clark and I are not... I love you!"

"I know you do," Chad said softly. "But there's more to our marriage than that. I would have said that trust was one of the cornerstones, but you've taken that away."

"Chad..." I pleaded.

"I need to get away for a few minutes. I'm going for a walk," Chad said without responding to me. I watched him walk upstairs and come down a minute later wearing sweatpants and a sweatshirt.

"Your alarm is going off," he said without looking at me. "You need to get ready for work."

If it was me, I would have slammed the front door behind me, but Chad wasn't like that. He closed the door softly.

I went upstairs to shut my alarm off, but made no move to get ready for work. I couldn't go to work like this. I had to fix things with Chad. Somehow, I had to make things better even if I didn't know how.

I sat downstairs waiting for him. This time I knew what I had to do. I had to just blurt out Clark's secret before Chad had a chance to get upset again. That and keep my fingers, toes, and any other appendages available crossed that once he learned the secret, Chad would understand.

I tried to keep taking deep breaths, sure that if I started crying I'd never get the words out.

He was gone for about forty-five minutes which meant he was trying to avoid me. Clark and I had a meeting at the DA's office this morning, and I would have been long gone if I was going. As it was, I had not had the energy to call Clark, so I called into my voicemail and left him a message from there, letting him know he should meet with the DA without me.

When Chad came back, he barely glanced at me. "I thought you'd be gone by now," he said.

I took a deep breath. This was it. Rather than being drawn into a conversation about why I was home and how sorry I was, I just had to tell him. I could suddenly understand how hard this must have been for Clark. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest and it wasn't my secret. Then again, Clark didn't have his marriage hanging in the balance when he told me.

"Clark's Superman," I finally said. Chad was on his way upstairs, but stopped at that.

Without turning around, he asked, "What?"

"It wasn't my secret. It was Clark's. He's Superman," I said again. "And he didn't ask me not to tell you, but he clearly wasn't comfortable with it, and it made sense. He didn't even know you at the time. I'm the only person besides his parents who know. I've wanted to tell you, and I only agreed to keep it from you if Clark would agree to get to know you so that I could tell you someday. Chad, I'm so sorry. I realize now I should have told you right away even if he was uncomfortable. At the time, though... I'm just so sorry."

Chad had turned around and came down the stairs to sit beside me on the couch. "Clark is Superman?" he asked quietly.

I nodded my head. "I don't think... I think it was supposed to be a secret. Well, I mean, it is a secret, but I don't think he had intended to let anyone but his parents know."

"Rachel doesn't know?" he asked, clearly trying to get his head around this.

I shook my head. "He's sort of... I was going to say he's weird about it, but that's not really true. It's more like he's scared of it. He seems so worried that she'd be repulsed if she knew the truth."

"But doesn't she know that he can fly and whatever else he can do?" Chad asked.

"No, he hasn't told her. He said he'll do so before he proposes, but just can't right now. He's afraid of what her reaction would be."

Chad turned to look at me for the first time. "So, what made him tell you?"

I shrugged. "I don't think it was any one thing. He didn't have anyone else to talk to — he had had a bad day and was thinking about quitting. He was worried his parents would be disappointed in him and... I think he just needed someone to talk to, and I was the only one he knew here in Metropolis. Well, that and I sort of bullied it out of him."

I saw a ghost of a smile on Chad's lips and knew we were going to be okay. "Of course, you did," he said.

"You should have seen him, Chad. He just looked so upset."

"So, he was going to quit being Superman?" Chad asked.

"Or Clark. We never discussed exactly which he was thinking of," I said.

"What happened?"

"To make him want to quit or to make him change his mind?" I asked.

"Both, I guess," Chad said.

"Well, like I said, he'd had a bad day. It was only the second or third day since he had invented Superman. He saw a little girl getting raped by her father."

Chad groaned.

"Yeah," I said. "I think he just didn't know how to deal with that. As for why he didn't quit? I'm not sure if he really meant it. It sounds like it's always been a problem for him not to help people when they're in trouble."

Chad shook his head. "I can see that, and still... it must be so hard sometimes."

"Yeah. So, I set him up with the coordinator at the Rose Program at the hospital," I told Chad.

"The one that helps victims of violent crimes?" Chad asked.

“Clark is volunteering for that? Does he not need any sleep?”

“I think he needs less than we do,” I said. “But he’s not volunteering. Superman went through the training to learn how to deal with victims. I also got him hooked up with a program that social workers at prisons go through to learn how to deal with criminals.”

Chad placed his hand on mine. “Clark is lucky to have you.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered. “I wasn’t trying to... keep you out of the loop or forge a relationship with Clark. I just... he needed me and... if you’d seen his face you’d understand, I think, why I just couldn’t tell you until he was ready for you to know.”

Chad nodded his head, moving closer to me on the couch. “I know. I can understand how this is different than any of the types of secrets I was thinking of. I can see how you wouldn’t want to tell me until he was ready. I’m sorry I wouldn’t listen to you.”

I shook my head. “You shouldn’t apologize ‘cause I was finally ready to talk and you weren’t ready to listen. You’re right. We promised to always be honest with each other and I didn’t do that.”

Chad gave a slight chuckle. “Well, when we made that agreement, neither of us thought we’d ever meet an alien or... what is he exactly?”

“He doesn’t know,” I said. “His guesses are alien or ‘science experiment.’” Chad shot me a look of surprise, so I explained. “Those are his words, not mine. Like I said, he has a lot of issues with this.”

Chad tilted my head up to place a kiss on my lips.

“I’m glad he felt he could talk to you,” he said. “I’m sure he needed that. And I’m honored that he was willing to share that secret with me. I really am sorry for getting so upset at you this morning. I guess I was more tired than I thought.”

“No more secrets,” I promised him.

Chad smiled. “Until the next time you meet a man who can fly?”

“No, I mean it. Next time, I’ll tell you anyway.” I laughed, knowing the chances of there being a next time were pretty slim.

Clark was deep in thought when I entered the newsroom. He didn’t even notice me come in and put my purse in my bottom drawer. “Hey,” I said as I came up behind him. “How’d the interview go?”

“Good,” Clark said. “I’m writing it up now, but we should talk about it. I think there’s more to it than what the DA’s admitting to.”

I smiled. “Oh, good. I could do with a nice, meaty investigation,” I told him.

Clark turned around to smile at me, but his eyes lingered on my face a bit longer than normal. “Is everything okay?” he asked.

“What?” I asked, although I suspected I knew what he was asking.

“You look... your eyes are a little puffy,” he said gently.

“I told Chad this morning,” I whispered.

“It didn’t go well?” Clark asked, looking instantly remorseful. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have made you do that. I shouldn’t have ever put you in this position.”

“Clark!” I said to stop his torrent of words. “It’s okay. Chad understands. Really. It just... well, it took a little while to get past the fact that I was keeping a secret from him to what the secret was. Once he knew, he was okay.”

“So, you guys are...”

“We’re fine. Really,” I said, blushing a little as I remembered just how Chad had shown me how fine we were. It made me a little later to work, but I was already late, so who cared?

“And dinner tonight is still okay?” Clark asked.

“Oh, right. About that,” I started, remembering Chad’s request. “Chad wondered if we couldn’t bring something in. He

just... I think he feels weird knowing this without talking to you about it, and he can’t really do that in a restaurant.”

Clark nodded. “That’s more than fair. Anything in particular you guys want me to bring in?”

“No,” I shook my head. “You know we’re not picky. Although, I could go for Chinese food,” I told him. “But it’s fine if you’d rather have something else. Chad almost always prefers Thai to Chinese so he will be happy if you just ignore my request.”

“Wow, there’s only three of us here, Clark,” Chad said with a smile as Clark came in laden down with food.

“Well, I know, but... Lois said she wanted Chinese, but that you prefer Thai, and then I thought since I was already in the area I’d stop off and get some Japanese.”

“What area were you in?” I asked as I took in the bags in his arms. “Little Asia?” Was there even a Little Asia in Metropolis. There was a Chinatown, but I wasn’t aware of that being bordered by a Thaitown or whatever.

“Well, um... I was sort of in... Asia,” Clark admitted, blushing furiously.

“What do you mean you were in Asia?” Chad asked.

“I went to China to get the food for Lois, and Thailand and Japan are only short flights away,” Clark said.

“Short flights away?” Chad grinned. “How long does it take to get from China to Thailand using commercial air travel?”

Clark shrugged. “I’m not sure. Never traveled that way.”

“Wow. Puts a whole new spin on being Superman. I never considered the fact that there’s no need for Superman to have Chinese take-out from Ming’s Szechwan when he can just pop on over to Beijing,” Chad said.

“Well, the Chinese food is actually from Shanghai,” Clark said.

“And the Thai food?” I asked.

“Chiang Chai,” Clark said. “It’s in northern Thailand, so a little closer to China. The Japanese food is from Nagasaki which is in the southern part of Japan.”

“Wasn’t Nagasaki one of the towns hit during World War II?” Chad asked.

“Yeah,” Clark said, “but it’s been completely rebuilt. It’s completely different than most war torn cities look, I think.”

“Well, I know it’s not quite like flying for us would be, but I appreciate your traveling to get the food,” Chad said, helping me dig into the bags.

“What’s that?” Chad asked pointing to brightly colored... meat of some kind? It wasn’t clear. Strips of something on rice.

“Sushi,” Clark said.

“Oh wait,” Chad said. “I’ve heard of that before. It’s the raw fish thing from Japan, right?”

“Raw fish?” I said, and I could feel my nose wrinkle.

“Yeah,” Clark said. “It’s actually quite good, but I know it sounds a little weird.”

“Japanese people eat raw fish?” I asked. Chad and I had gone out for Japanese food once before, but we both had chicken teriyaki — it was good, but very like Chinese food. Nothing like raw fish.

Clark smiled. “You know, there’s a sushi place opening in Metropolis.”

“Where?”

“Near the Flowers building. It’s supposed to be the new craze,” Clark said.

“Raw fish is the new craze?” I asked in disbelief.

Clark nodded. “Anyway, in case you didn’t want to try that, I brought you some other traditional Japanese food.” He opened a plastic container with some sort of soup. “These are udon noodles,” he said, using a chopstick to pick up a thick white noodle. “And this is essentially soup with vegetables in it and the

noodles.”

He covered the soup back up and moved over to a different bag. “The Thai food is pretty simple. I got spring rolls and pad thai,” he said, “but my favorite thing to get in Thailand is dessert.” He opened a container filled with rice and... what was that fruit again? It was bright orange and a little slimy looking. “These are mangoes on sticky rice. Do you like coconut?” he asked Chad.

Chad nodded his head and Clark smiled, “Then you’ll love this.” Moving to the last of the bags, he said to me, “I didn’t get you any chicken as Chinese tend to cut their meat with the bones and I didn’t think you’d like that, but I got you dumplings which are kind of a Chinese staple and shrimp.”

“It has the shell still on,” I said.

“Just try it,” Clark smiled. “They really know how to cook it. It’s delicious.”

“Do you eat it with the shells?” Chad asked.

“Well, the Chinese do,” Clark said. “It’s not as weird as it sounds. It takes kind of like potato chips — salty and tasty.”

“The shrimp tastes like potato chips?” I asked, picking one up. Clark and Chad watched as I put it in my mouth. “It does sort of. I mean, not really, but I can see what you mean. It is good.” I smiled. Who knew? “Maybe I’ll even try the... whatever it was called. The raw fish thing.”

“Sushi,” Clark smiled at me and I could tell that he was already more relaxed than when he had arrived.

We got plates out and each took a little bit of each of the foods Clark had brought.

“So what are your favorites?” I asked Clark.

“I know it’s silly as it’s the cheapest thing here, but I’m a huge fan of the Chinese dumplings. But I pretty much like all of it.”

Chad gingerly took a piece of the sushi. “So I just eat this?” he asked, looking at it as if it might bite him.

Clark laughed and pulled a small plastic container towards him. “Put some soy sauce in here and mix it with the green pasty thing. It’s called wasabi and it’s spicy — it’s a type of horseradish, so if you don’t like spicy food, don’t add too much.” We all watched Chad mixing the green paste into his soy sauce. “Now, dip the sushi into the soy sauce and eat it, fish side down.”

Chad dipped the sushi into the little bowl of soy sauce and then his chopsticks got the better of him and he dropped the whole thing in. He got it out, but most of the rice seemed to be still be with the soy sauce.

“Yeah, the rice is a little sticky, but it still falls apart pretty easily,” Clark said as Chad put the fish in his mouth.

For a moment, neither Clark nor I moved as we watched Chad chew. Finally, he smiled. “That was really good. I mean, I’ll be honest. I didn’t expect to like it, but it’s so tender.”

“Of course it’s tender. It isn’t cooked!” I insisted.

“You should try it, Lois,” Chad said.

I glared at him before I took a piece of sushi. “How is this different from the piece Chad had?” I asked. Chad’s piece had been a dark reddish color, but this one was pinker.

“Chad had a piece of tuna. That one is salmon,” Clark said. I wished I hadn’t asked. Somehow I thought it might be easier to eat this if I forgot what it was.

I borrowed Chad’s rice laden soy sauce mixture and gingerly dipped the salmon in. I managed to get it out without dropping it and almost rushed it towards my mouth as I felt my chopsticks slipping. I got it in at the last minute, although I forgot to put it upside down.

It wasn’t bad and Chad was right — it was tender. Still not my favorite food, though. “It’s okay,” I said, “but I like the udon noodles better.”

We had finally finished all the food Clark had brought — or

at least all the food we could eat, and had gathered in the living room with mugs of hot chocolate. Mine had marshmallows, but neither Chad nor Clark would admit to wanting them, too. Men — I’m sure it was just because they were around each other.

“So,” Chad said as he settled back into the couch beside me. “I... I haven’t been sure how to say this, but I wanted to thank you for being comfortable sharing your secret with me.”

Clark nodded. “I’m sorry I asked Lois to keep it from you for so long. It’s not something a lot of people know. Except for my parents, it’s really just you and Lois,” Clark said.

“Well,” Chad said, “now that we know, hopefully we can be some help. I mean besides not getting annoyed when you run off in the middle of dinner.” He grinned and Clark blushed.

“Yeah, I am really sorry about that, too,” Clark said.

Chad nodded. “I know, and really it’s not a big deal. We certainly didn’t expect you to leave those hostages to die or whatever just so my chicken didn’t dry out.”

Clark smiled. “I didn’t think you would, but I appreciate your forgiving me even though you didn’t know why I was running off.”

“Well, really, I meant being more helpful than that. Like giving you more than one person to talk to on a bad day,” Chad said, and I reached over to take his hand in mine. I wasn’t surprised by his actions, but that didn’t change the fact that sometimes I remembered how proud I was that this wonderful, understanding man had picked me to be his wife.

“Thank you,” Clark said softly.

“So, can I ask you a question?” Chad asked.

“Sure,” Clark said, and I could see he was trying to be open to this conversation, but as with most conversations about his abilities, he was uncomfortable.

“Do you need to eat or sleep?” Chad asked.

“Um... I don’t seem to need to eat, but I enjoy it,” Clark said, and I opened my eyes in wonder. He had never mentioned that to me. Imagine not having to eat! I’d never exercise again as I could just stop eating when I had gained a couple of pounds.

“But I do need sleep,” Clark continued. “Just less than most people. I can get by on a couple of hours every two days or so.”

“Wow! You could get so much done that way!” I said, and then blushed as I realized what I had said. Clark held down the same full time job I did and still had time to be Superman. Clearly he made use of the time he was not asleep.

“So, if you don’t need food or sleep, where does your energy come from?” Chad asked. I smiled slightly. Sometimes I thought Chad should have gotten a job in a lab somewhere rather than practicing medicine. He had such a love of experiments and pushing the knowledge of science and he had limited use for that passion in practice.

Clark shrugged. “I don’t really know, but I think maybe the sun,” Clark said. “I notice sometimes that I feel better when it’s sunny out.”

Chad nodded. “But you don’t know? Don’t you wonder?” he asked.

Clark blushed. “Sometimes, but... I guess I prefer not to think too much about the fact that I’m different.”

“But you’re not different so much as... better,” Chad said with a little bit of awe. “I mean, think of all that you can do. What is it that you can do, anyway?”

Clark shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and I wondered how to let Chad know to ease up on the curiosity. “I can fly, of course,” Clark said slowly. “And I can set fire to things with my eyes and freeze them with my breath. I’m super-fast and strong. I can see through things as long as they are not lined in lead...”

“You can’t see through lead?” Chad asked.

“No.” Clark shrugged, making it clear that it was just another thing he had accepted about himself years ago.

“I wonder why,” Chad said quietly as he thought. “So how

fast and strong are you?”

Clark shrugged again. “I don’t really know. I’ve never not been able to run fast enough or lift something or whatever.”

“Don’t you wonder what your limits are?” Chad asked, but even he finally saw that he was making Clark uncomfortable. “I mean... given your second job, don’t you worry that one day you’ll have to deal with something you can’t handle?”

“Not really,” Clark said. “I guess in a day to day thing it seems unlikely. Most of the stuff I deal with is pretty simple.”

“But what if... I don’t know,” Chad thought. “A plane was about to crash land. Wouldn’t you want to know if you could save it?”

“I’d just do it,” Clark said, “and find out.”

“But what if you couldn’t and it crash landed on you and killed you?” Chad asked.

“I... I never considered that, but... I don’t know,” Clark said. “I couldn’t not help. What if it was easy for me?”

“Okay,” Chad said. “What if... I don’t know... a giant asteroid was hurtling through space towards Earth. Would you be able to stop it? I mean, assuming it’s the size of Metropolis or New York or something.”

“I’d go, I guess,” Clark said. “I mean, again, I couldn’t just wait for it to hit, could I? An asteroid that size would kill all life on the planet, so it would kill me if it hit, right?”

“But wouldn’t you like to know?” Chad asked, and I squeezed his hand slightly. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to... I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

Clark stood up. “I understand, but... I really don’t wonder. Like I said, I try to think about it as little as possible.”

“I’m sorry,” Chad said again.

“I know,” Clark said quietly. “Um... I think it’s time for me to head home. I told Rachel I’d call her tonight,” he said as he shifted nervously from foot to foot.

“I made a mess of things, didn’t I?” Chad asked after we shut the door.

“I told you,” I said gently. “Clark’s really sensitive about this. He really... it’s sad, but he’s sort of ashamed of himself.”

“I can’t imagine being him and not having a thousand questions about myself,” Chad said.

“I don’t think we really know what it’s like. I think it might have been really scary for him as the powers developed,” I said.

Chad nodded. “I guess. You’re right,” he said, leaning forward to place a kiss on my nose. “If I try to imagine learning I could do all those things as a teenager, it might not have seemed so cool.”

“Can you imagine trying to fit in when you can fly?” I asked.

Chad gave me a sly grin. “No, but the x-ray vision would have been fun. Starting with the girl’s locker room.”

I swatted at his arm. “Good to know.”

“I would have used it on you, too, you know,” he said.

“Well, that makes me feel so much better!”

“Hey!” Chad said, snaking an arm out to grab me around the waist and bring me closer to him. “I bet you were cute in your gym shorts.”

“We had gym together in the ninth grade,” I pointed out. “I don’t think you even knew I was in that class.”

Chad blushed. “So, I was stupid in the ninth grade.” He smiled at me. “But if I had had x-ray vision maybe I would have wized up to how attractive you were sooner.”

“Good to know,” I said.

“You know...” Chad nibbled on my ear. “I think I’m developing some x-ray vision right now. Care to join me upstairs and confirm or deny?”

I giggled as he leaned down to pick me up.

I dragged Chad behind me up the walk. He had turned into a

sullen little boy this morning. For all his strengths, Chad was a terrible apologist. “Come on,” I said as he seemed to stop moving.

“I’m coming,” he mumbled behind me, and I had to stop and laugh at him.

Leaning up, I placed a quick kiss on his lips. “Clark isn’t going to bite your head off, you know.”

“I know,” Chad said, “but I really was insensitive yesterday.”

“And that’s precisely why we’re here,” I pointed out as I rang Clark’s doorbell.

We stood on the stoop for a few minutes just waiting before Clark came to the door. “Oh, hi,” he said looking at us questioningly.

“Clark,” Chad said, his voice a little higher pitched than normal. “I’m really sorry about last night. It was really insensitive of me.”

Clark moved away from the door to motion us inside. “It’s okay,” Clark said. “I’m sure it was a huge shock and...”

“But I wasn’t trying to make you feel like some sort of science project or something and I know that’s what it sounded like,” Chad said. “I just... I don’t know. I see you as so amazing partly ‘cause you’re not some weird green guy with antennas or something. You’re just so human.”

Clark smiled and I could see him start to relax. “I know. I guess it’s different. I grew up with these differences and I learned how to hide them so I’m not used to people asking about them.”

“What about your parents?” I asked.

Clark shrugged. “You’d have to meet my parents to understand, but they take most everything in stride. Plus they found me in a spaceship, so I guess while it was surprising when I started being able to bench-press the tractor, it was a bit less surprising than it might have been otherwise.”

“So you really were here as a kid, then?” Chad asked.

Clark nodded. “When my parents found me, I was about three months old. Kansas born and bred.” He smiled.

“Wow!” Chad said, but no more questions.

“When I was a teenager,” Clark said quietly, “I had a lot of questions about myself and why I was different. But then I realized, I’d probably never know and... I don’t know. I spent most of my time in this tree house I’d built. I called it my ‘Fortress of Solitude’ and wondered what made me different and what my limits were. I also worried that this meant I was too different to be friends with my classmates.”

“My parents have the best marriage,” Clark said softly. “I really want that some day. They are true partners,” he said, “and I want to have someone I can share a life with. Like you have. And I realized if I spent so much time focusing on what made me different and trying to hide away like that, I’d never have that. So, I just stopped wondering.”

“What if you could have that and still know?” Chad asked quietly. “I mean, you sort of have the building blocks for now, right? I could help you learn more about yourself in a way that was safe and no one else would know about by using some of the stuff in the lab at the hospital. And Clark Kent and Superman are different people, so you can have a real life. And Rachel...”

“Until she knows the truth, I can’t really know what will happen with Rachel,” Clark interjected.

“So tell her,” I suggested.

Clark shook his head again. “No. I... the fewer people who know the better. I can’t tell Rachel until I’m sure, and I’m not there yet. We still need to decide about the living arrangements.”

“But you’re liking it here, right?” I asked, suddenly worried that Clark was thinking of moving back to Smallville. Perry would insist I work with another partner and I just couldn’t do it.

“I am,” Clark said, “but that doesn’t change the fact the Rachel is the sheriff of Lowell County. Even if she decides she likes Metropolis, too, she doesn’t exactly have a career that is

easily transported to the big city.”

“She could be a police officer here, couldn’t she?” I asked.

Clark nodded. “She could, but I don’t think she’d like it. Being an officer in Metropolis is not exactly the same job as being sheriff of a county made up mostly of small farming towns.”

“So, what are you going to do?” Chad asked quietly.

Clark shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m not ready to end things — I love her too much, but I know that at some point something has to give. We can’t keep living this far apart.”

“If she knew, you could see her more often,” I suggested again gently.

“No,” Clark said again, but more firmly. “Not until I’m sure this is going to work. I trust her, but... the less she knows, the less trouble she could be in, and... what if she’s not interested in being with me once she knows? I don’t know. I guess I don’t want to know that if I don’t have to.”

“She loves you, Clark,” I started, but he cut me off.

“I know. I don’t... I really don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

I blushed. I had dragged Chad here to apologize for asking Clark all these personal questions I knew he didn’t want to think about and then I went ahead and did the same thing.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly.

Clark nodded and turned around to pour us all cups of coffee.

Chad chuckled. “Sorry. I guess it’s clear that Lois and I both have a tendency to butt into other people’s business.”

Clark smiled. “But you mean well, and I know that. I do appreciate it. Really, I feel lucky to have people who care about me so much in Metropolis. It was definitely one of my biggest concerns with moving here. I have such a strong emotional base in Smallville, I was sort of worried about that here.”

“But you make friends so easily,” I said, surprised by this concern.

Clark nodded. “I know, but... friends are not always the best support structure, depending on how close you are to them.”

I nodded. I did know what he meant. I had lots of friends from college I still traded Christmas cards with, but I couldn’t count on them if I really needed help. Not in the way I already realized I could count on Clark.

“So, we should head to work soon,” Clark mentioned to me and I groaned. It was comfortable here and I didn’t want to leave.

“You’re going to head home early, right?” Chad asked me as we all walked out the front door.

I groaned again. “Right. I forgot. The piano is coming today.”

“Right,” Chad confirmed. “My mom is at Grandma’s making sure all the stuff that anyone wants is taken out. I think the dumping company is coming tomorrow. So, she’ll make sure the movers pack up the piano okay. They’re supposed to move it into our place around three and I’ll be at the hospital.”

“The dumping company?” Clark asked.

“Oh, you’ve got to hear this,” I said.

“This company comes and basically empties out the house,” Chad explained. “Grandma had lots of stuff in there — she was a bit of a pack rat. No one really wants to go through it all, so we took anything we wanted and now this company will come in and empty out the rest for a thousand dollars. Sure beats spending several days of us doing it.”

“Clark wouldn’t have that problem, honey,” I reminded him.

Clark laughed. “Well, I appreciate that you didn’t offer my services, Lois.”

“So, you’ll be home?” Chad checked with me again.

“Yes,” I grumbled.

“Okay. Thank you, hon,” he said, before bending down. I saw Clark turn away to give us some privacy.

“Chad?” Clark called as Chad got into the car. When Chad turned around, he continued, “I’m not sure if Lois mentioned it,

but I can help you fix up the piano. I can’t tune it, but I can do everything else. I even can show you how to play a little.”

Even from here, I could see Chad’s eyes light up. “Really? That would be awesome, Clark. Thanks!”

January 1994

“So?” I asked as Clark entered the pit smiling and whistling again. “Was it worth the wait?”

“Was what worth it?” he asked as he nearly danced in place.

“Seeing Rachel. I thought you were going to go crazy ever since you came back after New Year’s.” I smiled at him.

Clark grinned. “Yeah. It’s been awhile since Rach and I have been able to see each other every day for so many days in a row. So, I missed her more when I got back. And yes, it was completely worth it.”

“Are you still sleeping on the couch?” I asked him with raised brows.

Clark coughed in surprise. “Sometimes you really don’t understand boundaries, do you?” he asked.

“No. So are you?”

“Yes. I told you. We won’t do the pre-marital thing. I know it seems silly and old-fashioned here in Metropolis, but in Smallville...”

“There’s no premarital sex in Smallville?” I asked. That was hard to believe.

“Of course there is. The problem is that everyone talks about it. When Lana and Pete started dating,” he started, “I guess they didn’t wait all that long. I think I mentioned they broke up with us just before the prom?” he asked.

I nodded. “Did they do it the night of the prom?” That was a popular night for girls to lose their virginities at Lincoln High, too.

Clark nodded. “All summer long all anyone could talk about — kids, adults, anyone, was how foolish and irresponsible they were being.”

“Did Lana get pregnant?”

“No,” Clark laughed. “And she and Pete got married a few months after they started college, so they clearly thought they were right for each other. Didn’t stop the talk, though. It took ten months before people could accept that they got married as they wanted to and not because they had to.”

“It must have hurt you and Rachel, though. Them getting married so soon after they broke up with you.”

“No, not really,” Clark shrugged. “It actually made it better. It sort of seemed like if they were so perfect for each other, it was okay for them to break up with us.”

“And it ended well, didn’t it?” I asked.

“Very well,” Clark said, and all the doubts I’d seen in his eyes when he talked to Chad last month were gone. I was starting to think Rachel was going to learn the truth about Clark very soon. I only hoped that didn’t mean he’d be going somewhere.

“So, what did you do last night?” I asked.

“Um...” Clark blushed. “We just hung out at home.”

I laughed. “Okay. Maybe I don’t want to know. Are you guys coming over again tonight?”

Clark nodded. “Yeah. Did I tell you that she’s staying until next weekend?” Clark asked.

“She is?”

“It was sort of a Christmas gift,” Clark smiled.

“Nice gift.” I winked at him.

“The best.”

“Thanks,” Rachel said as I passed her a glass of wine. She was wearing a red sweater tonight that seemed to set off the highlights in her hair. Clark seemed a bit mesmerized.

“So, how are you enjoying Metropolis in the winter?” Chad asked.

"It's... different," Rachel said, and I could tell she was trying not to bash Metropolis. "Parts of it are very pretty," she said. "We went for a walk in Centennial Park today and it was beautiful."

"I love it there in the winter," I smiled.

"Yeah, we saw them taking the trimmings off the giant tree," Rachel said, grinning as she reached over to grab Clark's hand. "And Clark bought me a giant hot chocolate from the restaurant near the ice skating rink."

"Did you go skating?" Chad asked.

Rachel looked aghast at the suggestion. "At \$7 an hour plus \$3 for the skates? You've got to be kidding. We can skate for free in the Kent's backyard."

"You have a place to skate in your backyard?" I asked Clark in wonder.

Clark grinned. "We have a small pond in the yard. It's not quite an ice skating rink..."

"But it's private," Rachel said. "No little kids to watch out for."

Clark laughed. "You're just still sore at Lizzie Bells," he teased her. "A few years ago, we decided to skip my parents' pond and skate at the rink in Smallville — which is only \$2 by the way and we have our own skates there," he explained to us. "But Kathy Bells daughter, Lizzie, thinks she could be the next Kristi Yamaguchi. She was zipping around the rink practicing and knocked Rachel right off her feet."

Rachel laughed. "Luckily, knight in shining armor that he is, Clark caught me before I fell."

I was still amazed at the fact that Clark's parents had a pond in their backyard. "Just how big is your backyard?" I asked.

Clark laughed. "Well, you may have noticed — I've chosen to live in Metropolis and thus do not have a backyard. I am lucky enough to have a balcony that I can stand on if I stand sideways and no one else tries to join me," he pointed out.

I grimaced. Was mocking Metropolis in front of Rachel really going to help?

"But," Clark continued, "my parents have 120 acres."

"One hundred and twenty?" I asked. How much was an acre again? I wasn't sure, but the house we lived in before my dad moved out was only a quarter of an acre. So, Clark's parents' place was... 480 times that?

Rachel laughed. "Not all places in Smallville are that big. The Kents are farmers, so they need a lot of land. I live in town and my place is only a couple of acres."

"Your house is on a plot a couple of acres big?" I asked.

"Yeah," Rachel smiled. "Just big enough for a reasonable sized garden."

I turned to Chad. "Rachel's house is on a couple of acres of land," I said to him. He smiled at me.

"How many feet are in an acre?" I asked Clark, knowing that was the type of thing he would know.

"Forty-three thousand, five hundred and sixty square feet," Clark said.

"So our place is..." I looked at Chad. The math was too hard for me.

Chad shrugged as he got up to get a calculator. "Three hundredths of an acre."

Clark smiled. "It's probably best not to think of our apartments in acres."

"This must seem so cramped to you," I said to Rachel.

Rachel laughed. "Well, it does seem sort of small," she admitted. "But not for an apartment. It's much nicer than my house, I assure you. I'm never there so it's sort of a sty."

"Except for her garden," Clark said, smiling at her.

Rachel smiled. "Well, yeah. That's sort of my passion. I spend all my free time in the garden when it's warmer out."

I felt my heart sink slightly. How would she ever be comfortable in Metropolis if she was so in love with her garden?

Suddenly, Rachel looked around the room with a frown.

"Sorry, I just realized this, but you rearranged things from last time, didn't you? Wait," she said as she stood up. "Is the piano new?"

Chad smiled and explained the story behind the piano.

"Does it work now?" she asked.

"No, it's in sad shape," Chad said. Turning to Clark, he said, "Although I finally got all those parts you told me to order." He turned back to Rachel. "Clark's going to help me fix it up. I looked into doing it professionally, but it was too much."

Rachel smiled at Clark. "He does know a bunch of useless stuff, doesn't he?" she teased.

"Hey!" Clark acted offended. "That useless info came in handy when you were trying to determine the smell from Mrs. Gerdun's furnace. And when..."

"Okay, okay," she walked over to him, grinning. "Sometimes you can be useful to have around."

Clark tried to look offended, but failed. Seeing how happy they looked made me feel a little sad. Clark was going to move back to Smallville. I just knew it.

"What's your favorite thing to do in Metropolis?" I asked Chad as I got dressed the next morning.

"What?" he asked, laughing at me.

"Well, while you and Clark are in here fixing up the piano all day, I'm supposed to spend the day with Rachel," I tried to explain.

"And that's a bad thing?" Chad asked. "I thought you liked Rachel."

"I do like Rachel," I explained. "The problem is that Rachel doesn't like Metropolis. Of course she doesn't. My hayseed of a partner is the one showing it to her. What does he know about Metropolis? He's only been here for a few months."

"On the other hand, I've lived here all my life. So I know all the best places in Metropolis," I explained.

"Which explains why you're asking me for advice?" Chad asked.

I pouted. Why did he have to be so difficult? "It's just that... well, the stuff Clark's done sounds kind of nice," I admitted. "And it hasn't won her over. I *have* to make her like Metropolis!" I insisted.

Chad came over to place his arms around me. "Or Clark may choose to move to Smallville and you'll never see him again."

"Yeah," I mumbled against his chest. "And Perry will order me to work with a new partner and..."

Chad laughed and tipped my head up towards his. "Clark loves it here, and maybe that will be enough for Rachel, right? Don't worry so much," he suggested as he gave me a soft kiss on the lips.

"I still want to make sure that's the case by wowing Rachel with Metropolis," I said.

"Well," Chad said. "We know Rachel likes to be outside. Maybe a walk over the Midvale Bridge?"

"It's cold out," I pouted, but I knew he was right. The Midvale Bridge was really kind of fun to walk over. It offered great views of Metropolis and it was a typical suspension bridge so once you got onto the real part of the pedestrian walkway, you were surrounded by a mass of cables.

"Okay," I said. "I guess we can take the subway down there. There's another subway entrance right on the Midvale side, right?" I asked Chad.

"I think so," Chad shrugged, so I rummaged around my purse until I found a subway map.

"Yeah, it's on the L line, but there is one," I said.

"Well, if you're going to end up on the L line, you could go to St. Joseph's Church," Chad suggested. "My guess is it dwarfs any of the churches in Smallville."

I nodded. That would be inside which would be nice after the walk over the bridge and it was beautiful. Plus, exploring a church seemed like something that someone from Smallville would enjoy. “Do you think you can get up to the top today?” I asked.

Chad nodded, “I think you can climb to the viewing tower any day but Sunday.”

“Okay, but if we’re going to cross the Midvale Bridge and then climb to the viewing tower in St. Joseph’s, we’re going to need to do something more laid back afterwards,” I thought out loud.

“Well, if you are really trying to wow her, you could take her for afternoon tea. Although, that may be a bit high class for Rachel,” Chad thought.

“Yeah, I think so, too. Maybe if she was in England or something, but I don’t imagine Rachel eating all those sandwiches with the crusts cut off. What about that crepe place in Hobbs Bay?” I asked.

“The one with the French fries in the flower pot?” Chad asked. “That sounds great and very laid back. I guess you could do that right after the church and it wouldn’t be too far out of your way.”

“Right,” I said. “I also think that’s better than afternoon tea as it’s cheaper. I don’t want her thinking Metropolis is expensive.”

Chad laughed at me again. “Honey, I don’t think there’s any doubt that Metropolis is going to seem expensive to someone from Smallville.”

“I know,” I mumbled just as the doorbell rang.

I ran over to answer it, happy with my new plan for showing Rachel how great Metropolis was.

“Hey,” Clark said as I opened the door.

“Hey Clark, hey Rachel,” Chad called from across the room.

Clark and Rachel walked in looking absolutely adorable in their nearly matching outfits. Both were wearing jeans that peeked out under puffy winter coats. Rachel’s was black with a pink scarf around her neck. Clark’s was grey with a red scarf. I was guessing that was Rachel’s idea since Clark rarely wore more than a thin jacket around town even the last few weeks. On snowy days, he’d pull out a wool coat to stop the funny looks, but he clearly didn’t see a need for a jacket very often.

“So, what are you two doing today?” Clark asked as he took his coat off.

“Well,” I said, looking at Rachel, “I thought you might like walking over the Midvale Bridge. It’s a bit cold, but they almost always keep the pedestrian walkway clear of snow and ice. It’s kind of neat to be under all the cables. Then I thought we’d go to St. Joseph’s.”

“Oh, you’ll like St. Joseph’s,” Clark told Rachel. “The stained glass is amazing, and you can climb up to this viewing tower from which you can see most of Metropolis.”

“Right,” I said, “and then on the way back, I thought we’d stop for something to eat. Do you like crepes?” I asked Rachel.

Rachel’s eye’s lit up, and I knew I had hit pay dirt. “If they’re good. Maisie’s Diner in Smallville makes some, but they’re kind of pancake like. Not at all like the ones in France.”

“Well, I’ve never been to France,” I admitted, “but these are really thin. And they also make the best French fries ever.”

“They come with a whole range of dipping sauces,” Chad said, and I could tell he was a little jealous that he was missing out.

“Well, it sounds great,” Rachel said, and her soft twang seemed even more pronounced when she smiled.

I felt myself start to relax as we walked along the Midvale Bridge. I don’t think she was a big fan of the subway, and that was made worse by the fact that there was some sort of parade downtown so we couldn’t get a place to sit. Rachel held onto the

bar for dear life, clearly afraid she was going to tip over.

She got better, though. I showed her how you have better balance if you stand with your feet shoulder length apart and by the time we got to our stop, she was only holding on with one hand.

The bridge was definitely more her style, though. Rachel was a weird combination of things and I could see why she and Clark got along so well as it was the same weird small town/cosmopolitan combination he had. She was definitely a little heavier on the small town than he was, but she had an appreciation for big cities that surprised me. I still tended to think of Rachel as a small town girl, but she was the one who had had crepes in Paris before. I’d never been to France.

So, the bridge represented big city to her in a way that I never really thought of. Of course, I hadn’t walked across the Midvale Bridge since I was about seventeen when Chad thought it would be a fun way to spend the day. It was much easier to get to Midvale by subway or drive and really, there were few reasons to leave Metropolis and go to Midvale anyway.

Rachel, though, was appreciating the journey. “You were right, Lois,” she said as she walked with her neck craned all the way back to look up at the cables. “It’s amazing here.”

I smiled. “Look over there,” I pointed to where the lower Metropolis skyline was. It was a clear day making the view that much better.

Rachel looked back and forth. “There are so many bridges here,” she said. It was true. There were six or seven bridges leading from Metropolis to the suburbs and four of them were within sight right now.

“It’s amazing,” she said, “that enough people are here for there to be traffic with all these bridges.”

“Watch your step,” I said as I grabbed her jacket. A bicyclist had just come by going way too fast since he was in the pedestrian lane. The bicycle lanes were supposed to be in the middle, with all the cars crossing on the level below us, but to be fair, neither bicyclists nor pedestrians paid much attention.

Stepping back, Rachel smiled at me. “Thanks for doing this, Lois. I appreciate your trying to show me Metropolis’ high points.”

“Yeah, well,” I blushed. “It’s hardly a bad day for me.” I felt embarrassed a little that I was trying so hard. I knew I was mostly doing it so Clark could stay, and I felt a bit badly for that. I’m sure Rachel would prefer I spend my time showing Clark how dirty Metropolis was. Maybe not, though. While they clearly wished they could spend more time together, neither seemed to really want the other to be unhappy.

“It’s cold out here, though,” Rachel said, bringing me out of my thoughts. “How much further to the subway station?”

“Not too far if we walk a little faster,” I told her.

“So, how does it compare to France?” I asked Rachel as she tried to spear a part of her crepe. I had ordered mine with chocolate and bananas, but Rachel had gotten one with something called Nutella in it, and now I was a little jealous. She said Nutella was a common crepe filling in France, but she hadn’t explained until after it came what it was. In her crepe, where it was warm, it looked like chocolate sauce, but Rachel said it was normally more paste-like and looked a bit like chocolate peanut butter and tasted like nutty chocolate. Apparently the nut was hazelnut, and when I tasted her crepe, it was delicious.

“Very similar,” she said as she reached for a fry. “And these are great.” Her French fry hung over the different dips before she decided on a spicy mayonnaise-like one.

She smiled as she saw me eying the Nutella dripping from her crepe. It was ridiculous — there was a chocolate sauce in mine, too, but I’ve always had a problem wanting what I can’t have.

“You can have another bite,” she teased me. “And you know, you can buy Nutella in the supermarket.”

“Really?” I asked just before I jammed another bite of her crepe in my mouth.

“Sure. At least you can in Smallville, so I would think you could do so here. We could look when we’re finished if you’d like,” Rachel offered.

“You just became my very best friend,” I beamed, and we both laughed.

Rachel took another bite of her crepe, stealing a slice of banana from mine and looked out the window. “Clark likes it here, doesn’t he?” she asked quietly when she finished chewing.

“I... um... I think so,” I said uncertainly.

Rachel smiled slightly at me. “He’s good, isn’t he? Too good to write for the Smallville Press.”

While I agreed with her, I wasn’t sure what to say, so I didn’t say anything at all.

“I mean, I’ve read his stuff before, obviously. I read all of his stuff. I never know if I’m just biased or not,” she said.

“You’re not,” I replied softly. “Clark’s a terrific writer. Really. Perry loves him, and he’s a pretty picky editor.”

Rachel smiled. “I guess that’s what it takes to be editor of the Daily Planet.” She ate another fry, this time in ketchup, before saying, “I’m not sure what to do.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, and I could feel my heartbeat pick up.

“He’s happy here. I think... I don’t know. I think he belongs here, but I’m not sure I do, and if I quit being sheriff of Lowell County... Well, it’s not exactly the type of job you can quit and come back to if things don’t work out,” Rachel said.

I nodded. I had never considered that before. The situation was even more complicated than I had imagined.

“Can I tell you something?” Rachel asked, and afraid to break whatever spell had her sharing secrets with me, I nodded. It didn’t work, though as she seemed to come out of it anyway. “Never mind. I just think... I think Clark is special... and he has something to give to the world. I’m afraid I’m holding him back.”

“No,” I responded almost immediately. “Clark loves you,” I told her.

“I know,” Rachel said softly. “I know he does. I just... I worry that that’s a mistake. I think he’s meant for bigger things, and he may give those up to be with me.”

Rachel’s mood picked up by the time we got home which was good as I was so out of my depth there. I had no idea what to tell her. I worried a little that Rachel and Clark were definitely thinking similar thoughts, but neither of them seemed to have come to terms with the need to say them to each other yet.

We came in to the sound of Clark’s voice. “No, right here,” he was saying while Chad sat on the piano bench.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Chad turned to me as the worst sound ever came out of the piano. “We got it fixed so Clark is teaching me how to play.”

“Is he any good?” I asked Clark.

“You may want to invest in some earplugs for the next few weeks,” Clark smiled at me.

“What’s that?” Chad asked, taking in the bag in my hand.

I pulled the jar of Nutella out of my bag and Clark groaned. “You introduced Lois to Nutella?” he asked Rachel. “I’m sorry,” he said to Chad. “This is the end of life as you know it.”

“What is it?” Chad asked.

“It’s a chocolate hazelnut spread,” I said. “Wait till you taste it, honey.” I moved into the kitchen to get a spoon only to come back to find them all laughing. “What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Chad said between laughs. “Nothing at all.”

“What?” I demanded, leveling a glare at Chad and then

Clark, but they both knew me too well and ignored me. “What?” I asked Rachel. Finally, someone who didn’t know me that well. She saved.

“It’s just... it’s just chocolate, Lois.” She laughed.

“It’s not exactly like you just found the cure for cancer,”

Clark added.

“Fine, then,” I said, grabbing the jar of Nutella. “No need for you to taste it,” I said, unscrewing the lid and pulling off the protective covering. “It’s all for me.”

I dug my spoon inside. Rachel was right, it did have a peanut butter like consistency and it tasted even better now than in the crepe. With a glower at my husband, I moved into the kitchen to put it away.

“Wait, Lois,” Chad said, moving to stand in my way. “I’m sorry. Give me a taste.”

“Nope,” I said. “If you aren’t interested, that’s fine with me.”

“Please?” he asked, pouting and looking absolutely adorable.

I smiled; I couldn’t help it. “Here,” I said, digging the spoon in again and giving him a spoonful.

“Oh wow, this is good,” he was saying when I finished putting the Nutella away and came into the living room.

“Where’d you get this?”

“At the supermarket,” Rachel said. “It’s a European thing, but it’s not too hard to get here.”

“Rachel said you can even get it in Smallville,” I told Chad.

“I bet she didn’t say it quite like that,” Clark laughed. “Last I checked, Smallville was a small town. Not a third world country.”

“Fine!” I said.

“You should come visit sometime,” Rachel said. She turned to Clark. “Are you coming home for the Wind Festival?”

“That would be perfect.” He smiled at her. “I was planning to visit then. You two should definitely come,” he told us.

“What’s the Wind Festival?” I asked, although I wasn’t sure why I bothered. I knew Chad would want to go if he could.

“Smallville has two major events a year,” Rachel explained. “The Corn Festival in the fall and the Wind Festival in the spring.”

“It’s usually the first weekend in April,” Clark said. “Once it gets warm enough. It’s sort of just a general festival with carnival games and such, but the centerpiece is a kite flying contest on the last day.”

“A kite flying contest?” Chad asked.

“Yeah,” Rachel said. “It’s for the most interesting kite. The only requirement is that it has to fly.”

“Which usually leads to some attempts at cutting down competing kites,” Clark added.

“Who decides which kite is the most interesting?” I asked.

Rachel stood up a little straighter. “Well, it’s a highly qualified position. It takes years of study and...”

“It’s the sheriff, isn’t it?” Chad asked.

“Yeah, it is,” Rachel admitted. “So maybe you’ll come?”

“We’ll definitely think about it,” I told her. “See how much flights are. That kind of thing.”

“Well, you could also ask Superman to take you,” Rachel said, and the rest of us all seemed to hold our breath. “Just a joke, guys. Geez!”

Clark came in the next Monday morning late and looking a bit pale.

“Is everything okay?” I asked as he walked over.

He nodded, and I moved over to the television, but there was no Superman coverage. I walked back over to his desk. “Clark, what’s wrong?”

“Everything’s okay,” he said softly. “Let’s talk during lunch.”

“Is everything okay with Rachel?” I asked, remembering that she had left that morning. Clark nodded though, without saying anything else, so I went back to my desk.

I kept stealing glances at Clark all morning, but he never really regained the color in his face. It was weird. What was wrong with him? Finally at noon, I walked back over to his desk. “Okay. Lunch. Now,” I said, not prepared to take no for an answer.

“Could we go to your place for lunch?” he asked. I nodded. I guessed that meant he wanted to talk. That was a good thing.

I kept up inane chatter the entire way back to the apartment, although I was fully aware that Clark wasn’t listening. Finally we reached my front door. We worked in companionable silence, pulling together the makings for sandwiches, and I waited until we sat down to begin interrogating him. “So, what’s up?” I asked.

“She knows,” Clark said softly.

“What?”

“Rachel. She knows I’m Superman,” he explained.

“Oh, Clark! That’s wonderful!” I said, jumping up and giving him a hug. As I pulled away, though, I took in his face. “Isn’t it?”

Clark nodded. “It is, I guess. I mean she’s okay with it. It’s just... I didn’t tell her, Lois. I mean, I confirmed it, but she brought it up.”

“What do you mean she brought it up?” I asked.

“Last night, we were eating dinner, and she just asked if I was Superman,” Clark said.

“She knew?”

Clark sighed. “She said it took her awhile to piece it all together, but I disappeared all the time and... I guess she noticed more than I thought during our travels after college. She said she didn’t really know then, but she knew there was something I wasn’t telling her, and then when Superman appeared on the scene so shortly after I moved here, it just made sense. She had already decided it must be something really big if I wasn’t telling her about it.

“She didn’t want to say anything, hoping that I’d come to her, but eventually, she was sure. I guess she was watching and matching my taking off with lame excuses to Superman rescues.”

“It’s still a good thing, though, right, Clark? I mean, now you know that she isn’t repulsed or whatever by it,” I tried to point out.

“I know,” Clark said. “But what if... what if someone else puts the pieces together?”

“They won’t,” I insisted. “Really. Come one. Who’s closer to you than Rachel? No one. Honestly, Clark, not to be mean, but do you think anyone pays as close attention when they are around you as Rachel does?”

Clark relaxed a bit. “Thanks, Lois. I think I needed to hear that.”

I smiled. “Not a problem. So... now what?”

“Now what? What?” Clark asked, clearly confused.

“So now that she knows, what changes? I mean, you can see each other more often, right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Clark smiled slightly. “That is a definite benefit.”

“And... maybe, I don’t know. You could think about what that means long term. I mean, now that she knows maybe you could agree to get married but still live long distance. Now you could see her all the time.”

Clark grimaced. “I can’t do that, Lois. Between the Planet and Superman, I don’t have time to be making daily trips to Smallville. We can definitely see each other more, but not enough for a marriage to work. This is still just a short term solution,” Clark said, and I felt my spirits dive. I had hoped that somehow Rachel knowing Clark’s secret would make things simpler, but it was looking like it wasn’t quite that easy.

“Have you guys given any more thought to coming to the Wind Festival?” Clark asked that night as we cleaned up the dishes. He had been so upset all day, worried that someone was going to recognize him, that I hadn’t felt right leaving him alone.

When I mentioned getting together for dinner, though, he said we should go over to his place. He had leftovers from last night — he had made some fancy dinner for Rachel.

I was glad I had agreed. For one thing, somehow once Chad arrived and repeated my words from this afternoon about it being unlikely someone else would recognize Clark and pointing out, as I had, that Rachel had an advantage in doing so, Clark seemed almost back to his normal self.

For more selfish reasons, though, I was happy for me. The fancy dinner he had made for Rachel was absolutely delicious, even as leftovers. It was some sort of French duck dish — between this and Nutella, France was quickly becoming my first choice for our next vacation, with homemade mashed potatoes and brussel sprouts. I don’t even like brussel sprouts, but these were fantastic. Turns out if you cook anything in enough butter, it tastes good. Dinner tonight was definitely going to cost me a couple of extra hours at the gym tomorrow, but it was completely worth it.

“We haven’t talked about it,” Chad replied. “I checked the hospital schedule, though, and I could definitely take that weekend off.”

“You really want to go, don’t you?” I asked Chad.

“Come on, honey. A festival in small town America. See it as a learning experience,” Chad said, smiling at me.

“But where will we stay?” I asked.

“Oh, Rachel has an extra room,” Clark said.

“Will you be saying with Rachel?” I asked.

Clark laughed. “Are you kidding? No, thank you — that would make the Smallville Press. I’ll stay with my folks, but it won’t be a problem for you to stay with her. And while she was joking, Rachel’s right. You could get there by Superman Express...”

Chad gave me his best puppy dog eyes. “Come on, Lois,” he pleaded. “It will be fun.”

“It really is fun,” Clark backed Chad up.

“Okay, fine!” I said, turning to more fully face Chad. “But only ‘cause I love you.” I couldn’t imagine a more boring weekend than one spent in Smallville, Kansas — even if I managed to get along fine with the only two people I knew who lived there.

“I’m lucky to have you,” Chad said as he bent to give me a quick peck on the lips.

“Tea?” Clark asked when we broke apart.

“Sure,” Chad replied as he moved over to the cabinets to take the tea bags out.

Within a few minutes we were gathered around Clark’s living room with mugs of tea — I had peppermint, Clark had some sort of Asian one I’d never heard of before, and Chad had Earl Grey.

“So,” Clark said, taking a deep breath. “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“If you’re going to drag us to more Smallville events, you can just stop right there,” I teased him, and he gave a slight laugh.

“Actually, I mostly wanted to talk to your husband, if that’s okay with you,” Clark teased me back.

“I’ll have to think about it. Can I get back to you tomorrow?” I asked.

“Enough, you two,” Chad said, squeezing me a little closer to his side.

“I’ve been thinking about your offer,” Clark started. “To learn more about myself.”

I could almost feel Chad’s excitement at the thought that Clark might be okay with this. “You have?” he asked, and I had to laugh as he clearly was trying to restrain his excitement so Clark would not get nervous.

“I’m not sure,” Clark said. “But I do... have all these questions about myself and I thought maybe...”

“I’d be glad to help,” Chad said. What an understatement!

“So,” Clark said. “What were you thinking?”
 “Well, what are you wondering about?” Chad shot back.
 Clark sighed. “I guess my biggest question is whether or not I’m human.”

Chad frowned. “We could probably figure that out if we could get a blood sample, but I’m not sure how to do that. I assume you’re as impervious to needles as you are to everything else?”

Clark nodded. “And there’s no other way you could tell?”

Chad thought. “What about a strand of hair?”

Clark shrugged. “I can’t cut it.”

“How do you normally cut it?” I asked. “How do you shave? Or don’t you need to?”

“I do need to shave and cut my hair. I do it with heat vision. The hair all sort of burns up, so there’s nothing left,” Clark explained.

“Can you show us?” I asked, amazed.

Clark flushed, but got out a mirror and moving in front of us, shaved. It was amazing. He had just the slightest bit of five o’clock shadow one minute and the next he was completely clean shaven.

“Wow,” I said softly, and Clark smiled at me.

“Yeah,” Chad said. “That’s a lot more interesting than watching me shave.”

“And it doesn’t leave any of those annoying hairs in the bathroom sink,” I added.

Chad laughed.

“Wait!” I said, remembering. “What about that experiment we did in high school biology. The one where you brush a q-tip over the inside of your mouth. Isn’t that to get cells that you could test?” I asked Chad.

“Well, yeah, but,” he looked at Clark. “Does that work for you?”

“I doubt it,” Clark said. “It did when I took bio, but I wasn’t invulnerable yet.”

Chad frowned. “Anything else you’re wondering about that we can test?”

Clark shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess... I’ve been thinking since you mentioned it... it would be useful to know my limits.”

Chad beamed. “Well, that we can definitely test. We don’t even need the lab for all of it. When do you want to start?”

He sounded so eager, I was a little concerned about Clark’s response.

“I’m not really completely ready yet,” Clark said and his unease was apparent. “Maybe in a couple of weeks?”

“Just let me know,” Chad said. “Whenever you’re ready. And if you’re never ready, that’s okay, too.” I smiled up at him. He was definitely making an effort to keep his curiosity to himself so as to not spook Clark.

March 1994

“Ready?” I asked as I came downstairs.

“Wow,” Chad said softly as he took in my dress. “You look fantastic.”

“Well, you don’t look too bad yourself,” I said as I approached him. “It’s not every day a girl gets to celebrate her fifth wedding anniversary to the most wonderful guy in the world.”

Chad pulled me closer to him, running his hands along my bare back. “Maybe we should just stay home,” he whispered in my ear.

I laughed. “Sorry, but this dress was made to be seen.”

“Okay,” he said as he moved to kiss my neck. “Send the dress out. Just you stay home with me.”

“Chad!” I laughed at him.

“Okay, okay. I do have a special night planned,” he said.

“You do?” I asked.

“Yes,” Chad assured me. “Starting with dinner at La Colombe d’Or.”

“Really?” I asked. “That’s French, right?”

Chad smiled. “I checked and they do make duck, although no Nutella on their menu.”

“Well, what’s the point then?” I asked him with a smile.

“Well, they do have crème brûlée, which I realize isn’t chocolate, but is a bit more French. They also have chocolate mousse and something called profiteroles. They’re tiny cream puffs served with homemade chocolate sauce,” Chad said.

“Maybe we should skip the duck,” I suggested.

“I’m still for skipping dinner,” Chad said as he ran a finger down my spine again. He was clearly enjoying the backless feature of my dress.

“Come on,” I said, grabbing his hand. “Take me for French food.”

“So?” Chad asked as I swallowed another bite of duck. This one was served in a grape reduction, whatever that was.

“This may be worth putting off chocolate for,” I said, leaning over to give him another bite.

“Mmmm...” he said before he swallowed. “I can’t decide whose dinner I like more,” he said. I reached over to take another bite of his quiche. It was a pie like thing made of eggs with vegetables and cheese on the inside. It did not sound at all like something that I would like, but it was delicious.

“Nah, I’ll stick with my duck,” I said after I swallowed. “Your quiche is good, but my duck is better.”

“So, what would Madame like for dessert?” the waiter asked a few minutes later after clearing our plates away.

“We were hoping for suggestions,” Chad said. “The woman who took our reservation suggested the crème brûlée, the chocolate mousse, and the profiteroles.”

“Well, all are excellent,” the waiter said. “But my favorite is the crème brûlée. The best in all of Metropolis.”

“And of the remaining two?” I asked. I was more than okay with trying the best crème brûlée in Metropolis, but we were ordering two desserts and one of them had to have chocolate.

“The profiteroles,” the waiter said. “The chocolate sauce is made fresh every evening and is out of this world.”

“We’ll have one of each,” Chad said after checking to make sure I was okay with that.

“I know I didn’t plan a fancy night out for you or anything,” I said as we waited for our dessert. “But I did get you a little something to celebrate.”

Chad smiled at me. “Your present is back at the apartment.”

I handed him the small package I had hidden in my coat pocket. He unwrapped the present quickly, taking in the picture frame with a picture of me that he had told me he liked from this summer and the pencil.

“Five years is wood,” I said, explaining why both the picture frame and the pencil were wood. “And I know you wanted a picture for your desk at the hospital and you are always complaining that there are pens, but no pencils there,” I explained.

“They’re both perfect,” Chad said softly. He moved the pencil around to place it in his pocket and saw the gold lettering of the inscription.

“Oh, Lois, it’s perfect,” he said as he leaned over the table for a kiss. I had engraved in small letters “You’re all I’ll ever need,” on the pencil. It was one of the lines from our wedding song and seemed to fit how I felt about Chad better than any other.

Chad let go of my hand to lead me inside. “Dinner was wonderful,” I told him. “And I loved the concert.”

He smiled. “Somehow I thought you’d enjoy that more than some stuffy old opera or something.” He had found a jazz concert

in a small coffeehouse, and we had sat there for hours just listening to the music and holding hands. It had been a perfect anniversary.

“So,” I grinned at him. “I believe I was told my present was here.”

“Yeah,” Chad said, suddenly seeming nervous. “I didn’t actually get you anything, but I’ve been working on something. Clark’s been helping me.”

“What is it?” I asked, confused by how nervous he was.

Chad moved over to the piano. “Try to bear in mind that I’ve only been learning for a month now,” he said.

He pulled a piece of sheet music out of the piano bench and sat down. I smiled as I walked over to him. It was “When I See You Smile,” our wedding song. It made me smile even more at the realization that we had both thought of that as part of our gift.

Playing slowly and using only his right hand, Chad played the melody to the song, singing along quietly. He doesn’t have the best voice, and he knew that, but right then, I couldn’t think of a more beautiful sound.

“Sometimes I wonder, how I’d make it through, through this world without having you. I just wouldn’t have a clue,” Chad sang.

I joined him for the next verse, my voice a bit stronger than his. “Cause sometimes it seems like this world is closing in on me, and there’s no way of breaking free, and then I see you reach for me.”

I leaned over to kiss him, effectively cutting off the rest of the song.

“This is the best gift ever,” I whispered.

“No,” Chad said, moving to put his arms around my waist. “You are the best gift ever.”

The phone rang right then, but neither of us paid any attention to it.

April 1994

“You look very small town,” Chad grinned at me as I came downstairs. I had decided on a pair of jeans and the only plaid shirt I could find in my closet. It must be from some sort of surveillance operation. It seemed like something that would blend in well with farmers.

That didn’t mean Chad’s teasing was appropriate, though. I stuck my tongue out at him. He laughed before reaching for me to kiss me on my forehead.

We broke apart at the knock on the door. “Morning, Clark,” Chad said as he opened the door.

“Good morning. You guys ready?” Clark asked. They were both way too cheerful about spending a long weekend in rural America.

“We’re all packed, if that’s what you mean,” I said with just a hint of grumpiness.

“Good to see you’ve decided to keep an open mind, Lois.”

Clark grinned at me.

I stuck my tongue out at him, too.

“So,” Clark said, “I thought I’d take your bags over first. Then we can decide if we want to all go over together or not.”

“What do you mean?” Chad asked.

“Well, the most comfortable way to fly with me is to have me hold you under the neck and knees, kind of like a baby. To take you both at once, though, I’ll have to wrap an arm around each of your waists. That will be faster, but it is a little bit of a long flight and you may prefer to feel more comfortable.”

“How long will it take you?” I asked, torn between wanting to share this experience with Chad and the fact that Clark having an arm around my waist didn’t sound very secure to me.

Clark shrugged. “Oh, not that long. Maybe five minutes.”

“So we can talk about it while you bring the luggage over?” I asked.

“Sure, but that will take a little less time. I can fly a little faster with the luggage than with you,” Clark said. “Or maybe not, but I don’t feel comfortable flying that fast with other people.”

He grabbed all the bags before the thought occurred to Chad. “Does Rachel know that we know?” he asked.

Clark paused on his way out the door. “About Superman?” he asked. When Chad nodded, he added quietly, “I told her last night.”

“And?” I prodded.

“And,” Clark grinned sheepishly, “I’ll be spending most of today making it up to her.”

“Is she really angry?” Chad asked.

“No,” Clark admitted. “I think she’s a little hurt, but overall, she seemed to understand that it was actually easier to tell you than her. I know I have issues with people accepting me for who I am. Part of the problem, I think, is that I’ve always hidden it well so it surprised her.”

“But she loves you,” I said.

“Right,” Clark smiled. “We’ll get past this.”

“Okay, what did you decide?” Clark asked as he came back in.

Chad and I exchanged another glance. “We want to go together,” Chad said.

“You’re going to hold hands the entire trip, aren’t you?”

Clark asked us, smiling.

“We were planning to,” I admitted.

“Okay, let’s go,” Clark said, leading us out the door and into an alley. “I don’t worry too much about hiding before I take off anymore. The suit takes care of most of that, but since I’m taking off with you, and both of you seemed perfectly healthy, I think it would be best to not be too open. The less it’s clear that Superman is friends with you the better,” he explained.

He wrapped an arm around each of our waists and waited until Chad took my hand before taking off. “Just let me know if you start to feel uncomfortable and we can stop for a minute,” Clark told us. “And don’t worry. I won’t drop you. Even if I did, which is extremely unlikely, I’m fast enough to catch you.”

Even just through his hand, I could feel Chad relax at these words, but I shook with laughter. “Is that supposed to be reassuring? ‘If I’m lying about not dropping you, trust me. I’ll catch you.’” We all laughed, but in another second we were high enough that Chad and I stopped to admire the view.

“This is amazing,” I whispered a few seconds later. “How do you not spend all your time up here?”

“I did,” Clark admitted. “When I first realized I could fly, I spent almost every spare minute in the sky. Eventually... I guess I realized I wanted a life with everyone else and that wasn’t going to happen if I was flying all the time.”

I didn’t say anything. I got the impression from his tone that Clark spent less time up here as a teenager because it’s so beautiful and more to get away from everyone else. It made me think again about what his adolescence must have been like.

It must have been so different than mine. Mine had been awful, but I had had Lucy going through it with me and later I had had Chad. It sounded like Clark’s parents were incredibly supportive and he was still really close to them, but they couldn’t really understand what he was going through.

He never talked too much about Lana, but I just assumed she wasn’t much help with this, either. First off, she seemed a little self-absorbed to me — that was the only explanation I could understand for breaking up with someone just before the prom. Plus, Clark had probably never told her.

It was amusing in a sad way that our teenage years had both been difficult, but in such different ways. I squeezed Chad’s hand a little tighter. Unlike Clark and me, Chad had had a storybook

childhood. His parents were supportive and loved him, and he had gotten along well with his two older brothers. Even as a teenager, when everyone around us was complaining, Chad had recognized that he was lucky.

I realized that while I had been lost in thought, the scenery below had changed substantially. As opposed to the skyscrapers we had seen earlier, now there were fields below us, although I could see a city up ahead.

“What’s that?” I asked Clark. “The city,” I clarified.

“Indianapolis,” Clark said.

“We’re that far already?” Chad asked, but then added, “Although I guess you did say the whole trip would only take about five minutes. Still, that’s so fast.”

Clark laughed. “You can perhaps understand why I’m not a big fan of commercial travel. Why fly in a small enclosed space when I can do it on my own much faster and cheaper?”

Chad laughed and I looked up at Clark to smile. I loved that he could flip so quickly from his earlier comment about spending time up here to joking. I wished I was always so good at keeping up a positive attitude.

Clark landed in Rachel’s garden. It was a joke. When I pictured a garden, I pictured the small area in my grandmother’s yard where she had grown tomatoes and carrots. Rachel’s garden was the size of my grandmother’s house.

However, in this case, the size was a benefit as Rachel’s neighbors were not that visible if we landed on the right part of her yard and, of course, Clark knew exactly where that was.

He led us towards Rachel’s small house — it had the charming look of a cottage — and opened the door without knocking. “Rachel’s not here,” he told us. “She’s busy getting stuff ready for the festival, but she’ll meet us at my parent’s place for dinner.”

He walked up the narrow flight of stairs into a small bedroom. It was simply decorated in blue with a small bed, a double, I thought, a night stand with an alarm clock, a small chest of drawers, and a small window. Clark set our bags down and I walked over to the window. It had a nice view of Rachel’s garden, but it was hard not to think about how different this was than Metropolis. I hadn’t done as much traveling as I would have liked and had never really been anyplace besides big cities and the suburbs of Metropolis. None of those places looked like this when you looked out your window.

As much as I still thought Kansas sounded dull, I had to admit it was beautiful. I was in trouble — Chad was going to be completely seduced. I just had to hope that this weekend was as boring as I was expecting.

“Does Rachel get a lot of visitors?” I asked Clark, turning away from the window.

Clark chuckled slightly. “No, but this is small town America. People have guest rooms. It’s just... what they do. Honestly, not to fit into your image of everyone here being a hick,” I grimaced a bit at that, “but Rachel’s situation is a bit unusual. Most of the people around here got married young and so few single people own their own homes.”

I smiled to show how open-minded I was being. “Well, Rachel isn’t quite as much small town as I had expected before I met her,” I admitted.

“Come on,” Clark said. “I’ll show you the rest of the place before we head over to my parents.”

“Are we flying there, too?” Chad asked, and I smiled at him. It was clear that like me, he had found the experience more awe-inspiring than scary.

“No,” Clark shook his head. “Rachel got someone to bring her to the fairgrounds this morning so we could borrow her car. I try not to fly too much around here. There’s too much chance of someone recognizing me.”

He left the bedroom and we followed. “This is the bathroom,” he said, pointing to a door just left of our room. “There’s a master bath in Rachel’s room,” he pointed to a door across from us, “so she probably won’t use this one at all. So, feel free to leave toiletries or whatever in there.”

He led us downstairs into a very comfortable living room done in greens and a small, but sunny kitchen. “Rachel is a pretty decent cook,” Clark said, “although we probably won’t be eating here that much.”

“How come?” I asked.

“Well, during the day tomorrow and Sunday we’ll probably be at the fair, and we’ll be spending this afternoon and evening at my folks’,” Clark said. “Are you guys ready to go?” he asked.

I shrugged and Chad nodded eagerly so we all went out Rachel’s front door to where her car was parked on the driveway. It was just what I expected from Rachel, now that I knew her. It was a small hatch-back — economical and practical, it was in good condition, but didn’t look like she was the type of person to wax it every weekend or something.

“Do you mind if we stop by the fair grounds?” Clark said. “I’d just like to say hello to Rachel.”

“Of course,” I said, turning around to see that Chad was somewhat oblivious to Clark’s question as he took in our surroundings.

Rachel only lived a little ways out of town, I guess, as Clark pulled into a parking spot in front of a gazebo just a few minutes later.

I got out of the car and looked around. There was no doubt about it — it was pretty. The gazebo was lined with flowers that were just starting to bloom and the area around it was green. If I didn’t know any better, I would have thought Clark had flown us to the set of Mayberry. It was exactly how Hollywood portrayed small town America.

As if to prove my thought, a slightly overweight, redheaded woman came rushing over. “Clark! I didn’t realize you were going to be able to come home for the Wind Festival!” she exclaimed, wrapping her arms around him.

Clark smiled. “You know I can never pass up an opportunity for your buck-eye balls, Mrs. Dayton.”

Mrs. Dayton pulled away to smack Clark lightly on the arm. “Such a tease you are. As if I didn’t know that your mother makes the best buck-eye balls in Smallville.”

Clark smiled good-naturedly. “Mrs. Drake, these are my friends from Metropolis, Lois and Chad Andrews. Lois, Chad, Mrs. Drake lives here in town. Her husband owns the hardware store over there.” He pointed behind us.

Mrs. Drake shook both our hands with more enthusiasm than I would have expected. “I’ve known Clark since he was running around chasing little Lana around the town square, and he’s always been the best judge of character, so I’m sure you’re the finest of Metropolis. Welcome to Smallville,” she said.

She turned back to Clark. “I saw Rachel over by the soda fountain,” she told him. “I’m sure she’ll be pleased to see you.” With a wink at Clark, she moved off to the hardware store.

“The soda fountain?” I asked. This really was Mayberry.

“Laugh all you want, Lois, but it’s charming here. When was the last time you got such a friendly hello from someone in Metropolis?” Chad asked, and I groaned.

I grabbed Chad’s hand to give it a squeeze before following Clark who was laughing at me — I could tell.

“Sheriff Harris,” he called a few seconds later. Rachel turned around and her face lit up.

“Why, it’s the city boy,” she said, and I thought her soft twang sounded a little stronger here than I had noticed in Metropolis.

“I’m going to get my wife some sugar,” Chad said as he tugged on my arm. “I think it might improve her mood.”

"I wanted to say hello to Rachel," I whined as he opened the door to the soda fountain.

"I'm pretty sure Clark did, too," Chad smiled at me and, glancing outside, I could see he was right. They were holding each other close.

"You folks in town for the Wind Festival?" an older gentleman asked us.

"Yup," Chad said, taking a seat at the counter. "I'm Chad, and this is my wife, Lois. We're friends of Clark Kent's."

I looked at him like he was crazy. Why would this guy care that we were friends of Clark's, but I'd forgotten. I wasn't in Metropolis anymore — he did care. "You're friends of Clark's?" he said. "Well, then, I'll give you each free sodas for stories of what he's been up to in Metropolis. That girlfriend of his always brags about how he's turning the city on its ear, but you can't trust a word she says. She's too biased."

I smiled. I couldn't help it. I knew Chad would tease me mercilessly later, but so far, everyone in Smallville had been overly warm and friendly. Even though I knew I'd never want to live somewhere like this, I could see why Rachel liked it. I could also see how Metropolis could never stack up to someone who truly loved it here.

"So, sodas for gossip about our city slicker?" the old man asked us.

"I'll have a Coke, and Lois will have a Diet Coke. She works with Clark at the Planet, so she can share lots of information about you," Chad said, and I smiled at him. Already, he was fitting right in here.

Placing two sodas in front of us, the man looked at me with interest. "Well," I said, "I don't know what Rachel said, but it's hard to imagine she exaggerated. Clark is doing really well in Metropolis."

"Is it true that Daily Planet is advertising him and that pretty partner of his?" he asked me.

I blushed slightly, trying not to laugh. "Who told you his partner was pretty?"

"Rachel. She says his partner is sophisticated and pretty. And almost as talented as Clark," he told me.

"Almost!" I said, but Chad put a hand on my arm to quiet me. Right. It was probably okay that Clark's girlfriend thought he was better than me. Slightly better than me. "Yeah, the Planet has an ad campaign for Clark and me."

"You? You're Clark's partner?" he asked.

"Uh oh," came Clark's voice from the door. "What sorts of stories are you sharing with Mel?"

"Clark, it's good to see you, son," Mel came out from behind the counter to give Clark a hug. "A root beer?" he asked.

"Sounds great. Rachel is going to join us in a second. So, a ginger ale, too," Clark said, taking the seat next to me.

"How is she?" I asked.

"I think she's a little stressed right now, but once the Festival starts, her job will be finished, at least until clean up on Monday, so she'll be able to relax some," he said.

"Is your dad going to run the grill station again this year?" Mel asked him.

"You bet," Clark said, taking a swallow of his root beer. "And Mom is making pies. I can't wait to get home and steal a piece."

Mel laughed. "If you snag me a peach pie, I'll keep you and Rachel in drinks for a year. Maybe two for you since you're not in town that often."

"Your mom must be quite the baker," I said. Mel was the second person to comment on his mother's cooking.

Clark smiled. "She's a great cook in general. Wait till you meet her. You'll love her, I promise. She's... well, no one in town has ever understood my desire to move to Metropolis as much as my mom."

"Well, now, Clark," Mel came back over with Rachel's ginger

ale, "that may be true, but no one knows better than your mother that Smallville is a better place to raise a family."

"Oh, stop pressuring him," Rachel said as she came in, but she was smiling at Mel and I had the feeling this was a common conversation. I wondered how many people here were waiting for Clark to 'come to his senses' and move back to Smallville, marry Rachel, and settle down.

"Thanks," she said to Clark as she sat down and took a sip of her ginger ale. He reached for her free hand as she turned to us. "Sorry I didn't say a proper hello earlier," she said.

"It's okay," Chad smiled at her and I smiled to show my agreement.

"How are things coming together?" I asked.

Rachel grimaced. "It always seems like a mess the day before, but I think it's coming together nicely. We're actually mostly done except for setting up the fireworks for tomorrow night. That's my biggest job anyway — coordinating with the fire department and the company that hosts the show to make sure everything is within regulations."

"Doesn't sound like much fun," Chad said.

"No," Rachel admitted, "but it's worth it. The Smallville Wind Festival has the best annual fireworks in Kansas."

"Is that true?" I asked Clark.

"I saw an international fireworks competition in Quebec one year where many of the entrants weren't as good, so I'd guess so."

"You'll be happy to know that this young lady here says you haven't been bragging so much as telling the truth about Clark," Mel said to Rachel, motioning to me. "She says he's doing just as well in Metropolis as you said."

Clark flushed slightly, "Oh, I'm doing okay."

Mel laughed. "Good to see Metropolis hasn't knocked the humbleness right out of ya'."

Was he trying to say that city people weren't humble? I remembered my reaction to the fact that Rachel said I was almost as good as Clark and flushed a little.

"Okay," Rachel sighed. "I've got to get back. I'll see you guys later?"

Clark gave her a quick kiss on the lips. "Are you ready to meet my folks?" he asked us as Rachel walked out the door.

"And see a real farm," Chad smiled at me.

"Come on, Toto," I teased him. "We're finally in Kansas."

Clark's parents were clearly further out of town than Rachel was since we drove for about fifteen minutes before Clark turned onto a drive. "Where's the property line?" I asked.

Clark looked at me and grinned. "It's 120 acres, Lois. You can't see the property lines from here."

I blushed. I still did not have a good feel for how much that was. "So, I don't think you've ever said — what do your parents grow on their farm?"

"Corn mostly, but dad believes in sustainable agriculture," Clark said.

"What's that?"

"It's the practice of farming so that you don't effectively rape the land of its nutrients such that you can't use it anymore. Any particular crop uses specific nutrients from the soil and if you keep taking that, but never giving, eventually you won't be able to do it anymore," Clark explained. "So, the way around that is to rotate crops. My parents almost always have a corn crop, but they rotate the plot of land they use for that each year and usually grow some alfalfa, too. Alfalfa's good for replenishing the soil. I think this year there's also soybean and wheat."

"It seems complicated," I said.

"It's the life of a farmer. My dad is good at it, and it makes him happy," Clark said.

"Any animals?" Chad asked as we got out of the car.

“Not at the moment. We had a couple of horses when I was a kid, but my parents haven’t had any in years,” Clark said as the door to the house opened.

“Clark!” a blonde woman exclaimed as she ran towards him.

“Hi, Mom!” he said as he gave his mother a tight hug.

“You must be Lois and Chad,” she said as she pulled away.

To my surprise, she came over and gave us both hugs. “It’s so good to finally meet you. Clark only has good things to say about both of you.”

She turned around to lead us into the house. I turned to Chad and he grinned at me. Clark was right — I was going to like his mother. It was clear that like me, she was a bundle of energy. In fact, I thought she might even make me look sedentary.

“Jonathan, Clark’s here,” she was calling out the back door as we came in.

“Come, sit down,” she said, gesturing to the table.

“Does this mean I can have some pie now?” a roundish man with a kind face said as he came in.

“No, you heard what the doctor said,” Martha scolded him.

Clark and his father embraced and then Clark introduced us.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Kent,” Chad said as he shook hands.

“Nonsense,” Mr. Kent said. “You’re family. You know our secret. You have to call me Jonathan.”

“Now,” Martha came over. “Would you like a slice of apple pie or peach pie?”

“Go for the peach,” Jonathan said. “It’s her specialty.”

“Peach,” I smiled.

“Sounds good to me,” Chad agreed.

Clark took out some buttermilk and poured it into glasses.

“Willing to try buttermilk, Lois?” he asked.

“What is it?” I asked, vaguely annoyed that he already knew Chad would try it. I wasn’t a picky eater just because I was pickier than either of them.

Clark grinned, and I could tell I wasn’t going to like it. “It’s the milk leftover after you churn butter,” he said. “It’s a little sour tasting compared to the milk you get in the store.”

“I’ll try some,” I said, although honestly, I didn’t want to. I just was sick of Clark making fun of my attitude towards his home town. He placed glasses in front of all us, plus two extra — one for him and one for Martha.

Martha placed small plates with pie in front of us, and even placed one in front of Jonathan. “I made this one especially for you, without butter or shortening,” she told him as she kissed the top of his head.

He grabbed her around the waist before she could get away and leaned up to kiss her softly. “You spoil me,” he smiled at her.

“I know,” she smiled back at him before she escaped.

I looked over at Clark and realized he wasn’t as embarrassed as I expected. I guess he got used to that. It was true that he never seemed too bothered when Chad and I teased each other in front of him. Now I guessed that was from watching his parents.

I took one bite of the pie and put my fork down. “That... is the best... pie I’ve ever tasted,” I tried to say around the food in my mouth. I knew it was impolite to talk with my mouth full, but the pie was too good to wait.

“Thanks,” Martha said.

“I told you,” Clark said.

I nodded, but decided not to say anything else. I was too busy chewing. I wasn’t sure what I thought of the buttermilk, but I didn’t dislike it enough to say anything about it to Clark.

After a few moments more, we all sat back, pleasantly full from the pie.

“Well, now,” Martha said as she collected plates. “Maybe we could show you some of the farm before it gets dark.”

“It would be good to burn off some of those calories, too,” I said, already hoping to have another piece after dinner.

We all got up and put our jackets on and followed Jonathan

out the door. “So, how long have you lived here?” Chad asked.

“I grew up here,” Jonathan said. “My dad owned the farm before me and my grandfather before him.”

“Wow,” I said. “How many generations does it go back?”

“Four, I think,” Jonathan said. “But it was smaller when it started. My dad grew it a lot when I was a kid, and I just bought some more land from the Irgs a few years back.”

“Why’d they sell?” Chad asked.

“Wayne Irig is getting older and has some back problems. It’s not as easy for him to plough as it used to be. I offered to help, but he didn’t want charity, so we ended up agreeing that he would sell me twenty acres in exchange for my help ploughing his land as long as I can.”

We walked over to a building that I was guessing was the barn. Martha laughed as we entered. “This was Clark’s favorite place when he was a boy. He used to burrow under the hay in the hay loft and stay hidden there for hours.”

“I bet you were a cute little boy,” I said to Clark.

“Oh, I could show you pictures,” Martha said.

“But you won’t, will you, Mom?” Clark asked. “Didn’t you get that all out of your system when you showed Rachel?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I guess that depends. Will I get some super help tonight rolling the buck-eye balls?” she asked him, her eyes twinkling with laughter.

“If it will prevent you from showing Lois pictures, I’ll make all the buck-eye balls,” he said, and we all laughed.

Jonathan showed us some of the farming equipment before we moved back outside. “Over this way,” Clark guided us. “We need to show Lois and Chad the pond.”

“Oh, we definitely need to see the pond,” Chad said.

By the time we got back to the farmhouse, it felt like Chad and I had known Martha and Jonathan forever. They were so different from my family — much more like Chad’s. They were both so open with us and so friendly.

I was particularly impressed with the ease with which they accepted that we knew the truth about Clark. I know Clark said they had been concerned about that, and I could understand why, but they seemed completely comfortable with it now. It reminded me of what that woman said. What was her name? Mrs. Dayton? She said that Clark was a good judge of character. It seemed like his parents thought so, too — if Clark trusted us enough to tell us his secret, than they should, too.

“Need help with dinner, Mom?” Clark asked as we came inside.

“I always like help from you, honey. You know that,” she said.

Watching them, I wondered about the comment from Mel earlier. Were his parents, too, hoping that Clark would settle down in Smallville with Rachel? I know he said his mother understood his desire to move to Metropolis, but understanding and wanting him to settle there were different things.

“Can we help?” Chad asked, and I coughed. Would Martha really want my help?

“No, dear. You’re our guest. But you can sit in the kitchen and chat with us if you’d like.”

I took a seat at the kitchen table and Chad sat beside me, taking my hand.

“I’ve read a lot of your writing, Lois,” Martha said as she and Clark moved around each other. It was clear that they had spent lots of time cooking together before.

“You have?” I asked.

“Of course. We get a Daily Planet subscription because of Clark, so it’s the paper we read now.”

“I’m sure the Daily Planet offices are confused by the paper’s popularity here,” Jonathan said.

“Who gets it besides you and Rachel?” Chad asked.

"Lots of people. Clark's a bit of a local celebrity." Jonathan smiled at him from the doorway. "Not too many people from Smallville go off to the big city and make a success of it."

I smiled. Okay, so they probably weren't waiting for him to come home. They were proud of him for what he had accomplished. I was happy watching him here. For some reason, more and more recently Clark had opened up, often unwittingly, about how hard it was to be different as a teenager. It was good to see his relationship with his parents and know that it couldn't have been all bad.

"Chad," Jonathan said as he came into the room, stopping just long enough to place a chaste kiss on Martha's forehead. "Clark says you work for the hospital?"

Chad nodded. "I'm a pediatrician."

"But the hospital is a mess, and they are constantly asking for help in the ER," I added.

Martha stopped what she was doing to look at us. "They do that? Are you really able to handle that type of thing?" she asked Chad.

"Not everything, but a lot of what comes in I can diagnose even if I can't treat it, so it's still useful when they're short staffed. It's the problem with being a resident," Chad explained. "It hasn't been that long since I did my rotations in med school, so I'm the first to get picked when they need someone to cover somewhere else."

"Wow!" Martha said. "I don't imagine that ever happens at the hospital in town."

"Does it ever get busy?" I asked.

Martha laughed. "No, not really. The biggest things that ever pop up in the ER here are farming related injuries or children swallowing toys."

"It must be so different," Chad mused. "It must be so calm."

Jonathan nodded. "I would think so, too."

"Do you have a lot of doctors here?" I asked.

Martha shrugged. "There are a few at the hospital but most major things get referred to doctors in Wichita. We have two family doctors in town, but no specialists. Dr. Blum, the pediatrician in town when Clark was a child, retired a few years ago and I don't think anyone took his place. I think Dr. Skeptel takes all the kids now. We're too small a town to get any other specialists."

I smiled. Chad was right. It was awfully different here.

"You're here," Clark said with a smile as the door opened.

"The fireworks are as set up as they can be until tomorrow night," Rachel announced, coming over to sit on Clark's lap, "which means I'm off duty until tomorrow night."

"That's wonderful, honey," Martha said. "You've worked so hard on this. I hope you'll really get to enjoy yourself this year."

"She will," Clark insisted tightening his grip on her slightly. "I'm holding her to her word that she's off duty."

The Wind Festival was different than I had expected. It had a small town feel in that everyone seemed to know everyone else, but other than that it was your typical carnival type thing.

Clark and Martha had apparently stayed up late making the buck-eye balls and the candies were amazing. I kept making Chad go by their booth to get more.

We had lost track of Rachel and Clark shortly after we arrived, but I spotted them a few times and it looked like they were enjoying their time alone together. Chad, too, seemed to be in his element. I was having fun, too, but not like Chad. He was chatting with every person we came across almost, telling them we were friends with Clark and Rachel, and assuring every person we saw, multiple times, that this was the best festival he had ever been to.

"Hey," Clark said as he and Rachel caught up with us as we made another stop for a buck-eye ball. "Stop eating my mom's

profits," he teased me. It was true, Martha refused to let me buy them and while they were only ten cents apiece, I had had probably half a dozen already and the first day wasn't even over.

"Sorry," I blushed and turned to Martha.

"Ignore him, Lois. He can help me make more tonight in no time. You eat as many as you want." Martha smiled at me.

"Have you two ever been line-dancing?" Rachel smiled at us.

I looked up at Chad and smiled as he answered for us. "I've been a couple of times. Lois and I took lessons on our first date."

"Really?" Clark asked surprised. "And here I was thinking you were a couple of city-folks."

"Well, then," I said, "why don't we show you how well a couple of city folks can line-dance?"

The four of us made our way to the bandstand, but were stopped a second later. "Rachel, Clark!" came an excited voice. A blonde woman approached us, holding a small baby in one arm and a toddler by the other hand. Trailing along behind them was her husband, I assumed. Even before they reached us, I knew who they were. As I had gathered from Clark's description of her, Lana was more stereotypically pretty than Rachel. I could easily picture her in some calendar for a Midwestern school. She made the perfect model for small-town living. Blonde, pretty, bubbly — she had a glow to her that spoke of happiness and health.

Her husband — what was his name again? Anyway, he was also attractive, although no more so than Clark which raised my estimation of Lana up a notch. He had a friendly smile that lit up his whole face, and I thought I might actually like him even if he had left Rachel and Clark broken-hearted.

"Good to see you, Lana," Clark said, giving her a hug.

"Pete." He shook hands with Pete while Lana hugged Rachel and then Pete moved to give Rachel a hug as well.

Clark knelt down to be on eye-level with the toddler. "Hi, Emma," he said, and the little girl gave him a bright smile. Standing up, he asked Lana, "And this is Dave?" gesturing to the baby in her arms.

"David Michael," Pete answered proudly. "He's eight months today."

"He's adorable," Rachel said as she put her finger out for David to grab.

"Lana, Pete, these are our friends from Metropolis, Lois and Chad. Lois and I are partners at the Planet," Clark introduced us.

We shook hands all around and then the happy family moved off. "Are you guys still friends with them?" I asked.

Rachel shrugged. "Not friends, really, but I think we're all over what happened when we were in high school."

I laughed. "Were they ever upset?" What could they be upset about?

Clark smiled. "Probably not, although I never got the impression they were too happy to hear we had gotten together in college. But it's all water under the bridge now."

"Well," I said, "they seemed nice enough, but you're much prettier," I said to Rachel conspiringly. It was what I would want to hear if confronted with Chad's ex, if he had one, and it was true. Lana was stereotypically attractive, but Rachel had a depth to her that made her look more interesting and more friendly. If I met them both on the street, I would definitely gravitate to Rachel faster than Lana.

"Well," Clark said, putting an arm around Rachel, "that goes without saying." Rachel smiled warmly and thanked us both, flushing slightly.

We moved back towards the dance floor, and Chad and I tried to keep up with the moving feet around us. The truth was neither of us had line-danced since our first date, and that was eleven years ago. After a few minutes of tripping over our own feet, though, Clark and Rachel showed us some steps and we did pick it up quickly, if I did say so myself.

By the time Rachel had to go to help with the fireworks,

Chad and I were old pros at it, and we were all beaming from a combination of sweat and happiness.

Clark helped us set up to watch the fireworks in what he claimed was the best place to see them, and then he went to go find Rachel. She needed to be near the fire department and other emergency services, but being sheriff had some advantages. He said generally no one said anything if he went to watch them with her.

Martha and Jonathan found us a few minutes later and sat down on the grass next to us. “How’d you do?” Chad asked.

“Oh, I think we made a couple hundred dollars,” Jonathan said, “but tomorrow is usually a bigger day since lots of people come in late today to watch the fireworks and stay through the kite flying tomorrow. Plus, you know, we just do it for fun. Our main goal is just to recoup our expenses.”

“Have you done that?” I asked.

“Probably not for the buck-eye balls,” Chad mumbled, and I smacked him.

Martha laughed. “I don’t know for each individual thing, but I think we spent about \$400 on groceries for everything — the meat Jonathan grilled, the chocolate, peanut butter, and butter for the buck-eye balls, and the fruit and flour for the pies. So, we’re about half way there. Not too bad.”

“Does everyone do that?” I asked. “Just look to break-even?” I had noticed that things were cheaper here than normal, but I had thought that was just because we were in Kansas rather than New Troy.

“Pretty much,” Jonathan answered. “I think most people see this as sort of like a block party would be in the city. It’s more a chance to get to hang out with your neighbors than a way to make money.”

I nodded. There was no doubt that this was different than the way this type of event would be in Metropolis, but it was kind of nice.

Right then the music from the bandstand got louder as the first firework lit across the sky. Although I didn’t see them, I assumed Lana and Pete were nearby as I had seen Emma toddle by once or twice, but soon she must have gotten caught up in the explosions of color above us as well and aside from the music and the explosions from the fireworks themselves, things got fairly quiet.

I woke up to Chad nuzzling his head against my neck. “Morning,” I yawned.

“Good morning, sleepyhead!” he said.

The fireworks had surprised me last night. Despite the talk earlier, I hadn’t really expected to be impressed by them, but I was. Clark was right — they were far more creative and better choreographed than any I had seen before. A quiet sense pervaded after they were over though, and people started packing up to go home.

We had come back here and talked with Rachel for a few minutes, but Clark had come over after he had dropped his parents off at home so he could borrow the car. Shortly after he got here, Chad and I had gone upstairs to leave Clark and Rachel some more time alone and I had fallen asleep, still hearing their soft voices speaking from the floor below us.

On Friday night I had had some trouble falling asleep because it was so quiet here compared to the noise I was used to in Metropolis, but that hadn’t been a problem last night. Now I was realizing that while I had wanted to think this weekend was boring, it couldn’t have been as I was disappointed to realize that it was Sunday all ready and we were going to be leaving this evening.

“We should get up and clean up after ourselves before it’s time to head to the kite thing,” I mumbled. I felt Chad nod next to

me and realized that despite his teasing earlier, he wasn’t any more awake than I was.

“Are you having fun?” I asked him.

“Yeah. It’s great here, isn’t it?” he asked sleepily. “Aren’t you having fun?”

I nodded. “I am, actually. I don’t think I could stand how quiet it is here all the time, but I can see why Clark still enjoys coming back here. It’s a nice change from Metropolis.”

Chad chuckled into my hair. “I don’t think that’s the only reason Clark likes to come back here.”

“Probably not,” I admitted.

I lay still another minute, before I swung my legs out of bed. “I’m going to brush my teeth,” I told Chad as I left him in bed.

Exiting the bathroom a few minutes later, I passed Rachel. I had already pegged her for a morning person and yesterday she had certainly lived up to that expectation, but this morning she seemed a bit more subdued. I wondered if the firework thing really took a lot out of her. “Hi,” I said softly.

“Hi, Lois,” she said, smiling at me. “I’m about to head out to start to organize things. The kites start to go up in an hour and I need to make sure no one is crowding anyone else.” She rolled her eyes and I could already tell that this is why she seemed less cheerful this morning — what a boring job! “Clark and his folks will be by in about 45 minutes to pick you up and bring you over.”

“Okay. We’ll see you there?” I asked.

Rachel gave a small laugh. “Well, you’ll probably see me, but whether I’ll see you is another thing. Trying to view all the kites takes longer than you would think.”

Chad was out of bed when I got back into the guest room, and I told him that we had forty-five minutes to get ready. We jumped right into the shower so we could try to do a load of laundry with our sheets and towels and put things into the dryer before we left. This way Rachel wouldn’t suffer too much with having to clean up after us.

The washing machine stopped right as Clark came in the front door. “Hey,” he said, and it was clear that he, too, was not as cheerful as normal this morning. Then again, if Rachel was going to be busy all day, he probably wouldn’t get to see her much more before we left.

“You okay?” Chad asked him.

Clark nodded. “There were some Superman emergencies last night, so I didn’t get much sleep,” he explained.

“Can we run the dryer while Rach is out?” I asked.

Clark shrugged. “I think so. I don’t think she worries too much about that kind of thing.”

I ran into her small laundry room to throw our towels and sheets into the dryer before we moved out to the car. It was a tight fit with the Kents in the car as well, and I had to sit in the middle seat, but it wasn’t that far a drive either.

We passed by the place we’d parked before this time. “The kites are done a little bit further from town than the events yesterday,” Martha explained. “Just the other side of the food stands, but it’s up on a plateau that tends to get more wind.”

Jonathan parked a minute later and we climbed out of the car.

“I’m going to man the stand for a few minutes,” Clark told us. “Mom and Dad will show you around the kites.”

He walked off towards the stand and Chad turned to Martha. “Was he up all night?” he asked, referring to the fact that Clark still seemed rather subdued.

Martha shook her head. “I don’t know. That’s what he told us, too.”

“There were several rescues on the news this morning,” I said. “Although not all of them seemed like the type of thing I thought he would go to when he was taking the weekend off.”

Jonathan nodded. “Sometimes Clark forgets how not to help. I can see him getting up for something big and then coming

across smaller things and not being able to pass right by.”

I nodded in agreement. I could definitely see that.

By that point we had walked to the bottom of a hill, but I could already see several kites in the sky from here. As we walked up the hill towards the plateau, I could see that the kite flyers ranged from a couple of small children, no more than six or seven, to several adults. The kites seemed to come in as many varieties as the people. There were several plain kites that Martha said were out there for the fun of it, since everyone knew they didn’t stand a chance of winning, but some of the serious contenders were really interesting.

“Wow,” I said looking around. “Who knew they even made this many types of kites?”

Jonathan put a hand on my back to turn me to face the other way. “These are just the traditional ones. The trick kites are over there.”

“Trick kites?” Chad asked.

“Oh, wow, look at them!” I exclaimed. It was immediately clear why they were called trick kites. None of them had the standard kite shape and as I moved closer I could tell most of them had two strings, while some even had four. The fliers were keeping a bigger distance from one another and moving both their hands around, but the impact on the kites was amazing. These kites were flying across the sky, some were doing loop-de-loops, I saw one take a sharp dive towards the ground. The flier yanked both his arms backwards hard, the kite flipped skyward again, and the speed seemed to flip on a dime from the fast dive down to what was now a slow progress upwards.

“Do you know how to fly those?” I asked Jonathan. “Is it hard?”

Jonathan shrugged. “I’ve never tried, but they are fun to watch, aren’t they?”

I nodded my head and turned to look at Chad who was looking at them in the same wonder I was.

“Hi, honey,” Martha said as Rachel came by. “How’s it going?”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Oh, it’s fine. I’ve already confiscated a dozen pairs of scissors.”

“Scissors?” Chad asked.

“Remember Clark said that people sometimes cut down other kites?” she asked him. “Officially that’s allowed, but you need to use your kite to do it — honestly, I think the only reason it’s allowed is that it makes it more interesting to watch the kite fighting. But sometimes some of the teenagers think it will be faster to just walk along and cut the strings of competitors.”

“And that’s not allowed.” I smiled.

“No, it’s not,” Rachel said. “Which doesn’t seem to stop it happening every year.”

“What happens if someone does it?” Chad asked.

Rachel lowered her voice slightly, “Honestly, most of the time, nothing. There are two other local officials here doing this with me, but aside from us, no one cares, so unless you’re stupid and do it right in front of us, you’re unlikely to get caught. Officially, you get disqualified for this year and next.”

“Is there a prize for winning?” Chad asked. “Would they care?”

Martha laughed. “I doubt it. Third prize is a \$10 gift certificate for the soda shop, second is a \$25 dollar gift certificate, and first is a \$50 gift certificate plus your picture in the Smallville Press.”

Chad laughed. “Yeah, I don’t see too many teenagers thinking those are worth giving up the fun of doing something wrong.”

“Anyway, I should get back,” Rachel said, and Martha reached out to give her a hug.

“Hey,” Chad said in confusion as Rachel walked away. “You know, I never asked, but where are her parents?”

“Oh, they’re on vacation,” Jonathan answered. “They wanted

to go next week so they wouldn’t miss this, but got some sort of incredible deal by going now.”

“Are you friends?” I asked.

Martha nodded. “Well, we didn’t really meet until the kids got older. Since Rachel’s father was sheriff, they lived in town, but now that Clark and Rachel have been together so long, we’ve become friends. You know, you see someone multiple times, it just sort of happens. It doesn’t hurt that, like Rachel, her parents are lovely people.”

“Particularly with them living so far apart,” Jonathan said.

“We hate the idea of Clark coming home for Thanksgiving or something and not seeing Rachel as he’s tied up with family stuff. So we’ll invite the Harrises over.”

“What about the rest of their family?” I asked.

“Rachel has a brother, but he moved to California a few years ago, and they don’t really have too many other family members in town, so it’s not usually a problem. We don’t have a lot of family members either, so when Evan is in town and the Harrises are having a big family meal, they’ll invite us,” Martha said.

“Not that we’re together for every holiday or something,” Jonathan said. “But we try to often so it’s not too hard on the kids.”

Martha and Jonathan went to relieve Clark from his duties, and he came and joined us later in the afternoon. He pointed out some of the kite fliers to us. Unfortunately, knowing how to fly a trick kite was not one of the pieces of useless information Clark knew.

Around three o’clock, several kites had been cut down (although we didn’t have a good idea of how many were by legal methods) and Rachel and two other people I didn’t recognize got up on the small stage.

The trick kite flying award went to the kite I had been watching all afternoon. Even just watching, it was hard to keep up with it. For the traditional kites, third place went to a little girl flying a butterfly kite. Second place went to an adult who was flying a dolphin shaped kite and first to another adult flying a kite I couldn’t describe — sort of like a psychedelic tube.

Shortly after the awards were given, Rachel came over and joined us. “I’m done,” she said, but with less enthusiasm than I was expecting.

“We should probably start heading back to Metropolis. Can you come home?” Clark asked her.

“Yeah,” Rachel said. “I just need to grab my stuff. Can I meet you by the car?”

“Sure,” Clark said. “I want to say goodbye to Mom and Dad first anyway.”

We followed Clark back over to his parents who were doing a good business now that the kite flying was over.

“Heading home?” Martha asked when she saw us.

“Yeah,” Clark said, giving her a big hug.

“Make sure Clark brings you back sometime soon,” she said as she gave a hug to Chad.

I hugged Jonathan and then Martha. As I pulled away, she said, “Don’t go anywhere. Just one second.”

She finished taking care of the customer that had approached and then reached into the box next to her. “I made these for you last night,” she said. She handed Chad a peach pie and me a bag of buck-eye balls.

“Oh, you didn’t have to do that,” I gushed.

“This is really nice of you!” Chad said over me.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Like Jonathan said, you’re family now. I knew you’d enjoy it, and it was no trouble at all.”

The car ride back to Rachel’s was quiet and the sadness Clark and Rachel were feeling at their weekend being over was palpable. I checked the dryer when we got back and everything

was dry, so I folded things quickly while Chad did the last minute packing up. By the time I made it back to the living room, Clark had left to take our stuff home.

"You didn't have to do that, Lois," Rachel said.

"I wanted to," I smiled. "You didn't have to have us."

"It was my pleasure," she said, and I could tell that she meant it.

Clark came back in, and so Chad and I said our goodbyes to Rachel.

"When are you coming for your next visit?" I asked her as I pulled away.

"I'm not sure," she said, her voice quiet and I noticed her eyes fill with tears as Clark came over to give her a hug. I turned to give them some privacy. I couldn't imagine doing the long distance thing.

"I'll come back after I drop them off and we can talk some more," I heard Clark say softly before he came back over to us.

The four of us walked outside and Clark turned to give Rachel another tight hug and tell her again that he'd be right back. I was surprised to realize that his eyes, too, were covered with tears when he came back over and wrapped an arm around each of our waists. Dating long distance must be even harder than I thought — I wouldn't have expected Clark to get emotional over the weekend being over.

We lifted off a moment later and waved at Rachel before Clark shot us up over the clouds.

I was starting to get worried about Clark. We had been back from Smallville for about a week and he seemed to be getting more and more tired. The news showed more nighttime Superman rescues than normal, but they continued to seem to be mostly things he wouldn't need to help with, particularly if he was not getting enough sleep.

More infuriating, though, he wouldn't talk about why he was not sleeping. Actually, he barely talked at all. We had had lunch together everyday this week, but he spent most of the time either staring off into space or nodding absently to anything I said.

Finally, on Friday, I had enough. "You're coming over for dinner," I told him as I saw him packing up for the day.

"Not tonight, Lois," he said. "I..."

"Yes, tonight," I insisted. "You don't have a choice. If you need to run out to run an errand or whatever," I said, mindful of the people around us, "that's fine, but you're going to come over. Seven."

I turned around and went directly to the bathroom. I knew he could call later to cancel, or just not show up at all and blame it on Superman, but I was hoping that by leaving before he had a chance to say no now, he would show.

"It's probably just what Jonathan said about him not being able to not help if he passes something," Chad said to me that night as he started setting the table. It was my night and I had ordered Chinese. While it wouldn't even compare to the stuff Clark had brought us from China, it was pretty decent. I wasn't stupid enough to ask Clark to go half-way around the world for food. No doubt he'd go, but then he'd probably find six or seven rescues that had to get done on his way back and never make it here.

"That can't be all of it," I told Chad. "If that was it, this would be normal and it's not. Besides, it's not just the rescues or even how tired he is since that's probably related to him being up all night. It's also his complete unwillingness to talk."

Chad came over to put his arms around me. "I'm not sure anyone's bothered to let you know this, but you're not married to Clark. He doesn't have to talk to you."

"Very funny," I said as I reached up to place a kiss on his lips. "I know he doesn't have to talk to me, but that's never been a

problem before."

"Maybe this is something personal," Chad suggested.

"More personal than the fact that he was found in a spaceship?"

"Okay," Chad finally agreed. "Point taken."

I went back into the kitchen to get the silverware. Chad blocked my way back to the table, though. "Lois," he said, his voice gentle. "I'm glad you and Clark are so close that it bothers you when he won't talk to you. You've always been so hesitant to make friends with potential rivals at the paper. You and Linda were always competing and you've never really had a friend at the Planet before now except for Jimmy and Perry — no one who was really an equal, so I say this with love."

"What?" I asked, suddenly suspicious.

"You need to realize that even if it seems like he's told you his most personal secret, he doesn't have to tell you what's going on now. I know you want him to, but..."

"I know," I said, resting my head on Chad's chest. "Wait till you see him, though, Chad. You'll see what I mean."

The doorbell rang and Chad went to answer it. One look at Clark and I could tell that Chad got it. He turned to me with wide eyes. It was hard to understand until you saw it, but it was hard to take seeing Clark tired. Not that he looked any different than anyone else when they were tired. It just wasn't... normal for Clark.

"Hi," Clark said listlessly. "I brought you guys a bottle of wine." He handed the bottle to Chad. "I wasn't sure, but I thought it was Lois' night so I brought red thinking we were likely having pizza." He smiled, but it was a weak version of the smile that normally lit up his face.

"Chinese," I told him. Clark nodded as he took his coat off and hung it up. "It should be here any minute," I filled in.

Chad moved towards the couch and Clark followed. I took the seat next to Chad and felt him reach for my hand. His concern for Clark was palpable and it made me feel better. Having an ally in this felt like a good thing. It was a weird feeling — almost like whatever was going on with Clark was an enemy, but it sort of was. The man in my living room now was so... not Clark, that it was hard not to feel like it had to be somehow defeated.

"So, there's been a lot of Superman rescues recently," Chad said. I looked at him and smiled. He wasn't going to let Clark not talk.

"Yeah," Clark said. Okay, maybe that was not enough to defeat the beast.

"Clark, what's going on?" I asked. After a week of this behavior, I was more than a little frustrated. Chad squeezed my hand and placed another hand on my arm. I knew he was trying to tell me that a gentle touch would be better, but I wasn't good at that. I had already been way more patient with Clark than I normally was.

"Nothing," Clark said. "I really don't want to talk about it."

Chad got up to get the food when the doorbell rang. I didn't want to move. I felt like we had finally made some headway. At least he was admitting something was going on. "So, there is something," I confirmed.

Chad moved the food to the table, but then came back to the couch to sit down. Like me, he didn't want to spoil whatever had made Clark spill even as little as he had so far.

Clark shook his head. "Rach and I... we decided that things weren't working," Clark said. "But I really don't want to talk about it right now," he repeated.

Well, that explained several things really, including the tears when we left last week. How could they have broken up, though? They'd been together for years and seemed so happy together. Some part of me knew I should be happy. This meant there was no reason for Clark to leave Metropolis. Still, looking at him now, it was hard to feel happy.

“Oh, Clark,” was all I managed to get out, but Clark did not say anything more.

Chad got up, and we followed him to the table. A look at Chad showed that he, too, was feeling sort of sad now. I’m not sure why, but somehow knowing that Clark and Rachel had broken up was depressing. Maybe it was because they were our only friends who were a couple. Or maybe it was just because we both cared for Clark and it was clear that he was hurting. I don’t know. All I knew was that I had been waiting for this. I had been dreading the possibility of it not happening and Clark moving to Smallville instead, but now I wished I could take it all back. Maybe Clark in Smallville wouldn’t be so bad after all.

After a dinner where Clark continued to imitate a clam, Chad invited him rock climbing. I wasn’t sure if rock climbing was really a speaking activity, but maybe that was Chad’s point — to make Clark feel like he could be social without talking — and then he would open up.

Clark started to disagree, but then saw the look on my face and changed his mind. I think he must have realized I would be all too happy to give him what-for later if he said no.

“So?” I asked Chad when he came home from rock climbing the following evening.

“It was... okay. I don’t know, Lois. It sounds like he’s working through it,” Chad told me.

“Working through what? The fact that he broke up with his girlfriend who he’s in love with?” I asked, incredulous.

Chad nodded. “I know. I can’t imagine. I keep thinking about making the decision to not live with you, and it’s hard to imagine... I don’t know. I get the impression Clark’s been sort of waiting for this.”

“That’s because he’s a lunkhead,” I muttered. “He’s been waiting for this for years, sure she was going to reject him for being an alien. But she didn’t. If they could work past that, how could they not work through the silly long distance thing?”

Chad smiled at me and came to put his arms around me. “I know, honey, but this is Clark’s choice. Not ours.”

“I’m going over there,” I said, moving to put my coat on.

“Lois, leave it alone,” Chad warned me.

“Is he not hurting anymore?” I asked.

Chad sighed. “No, he is. He said he wanted to start doing the tests soon. Maybe next weekend.”

“What tests?” I asked.

“The ones on his limits,” Chad said. “I don’t get the feeling he’s really ready yet, you know? He still seems so uncomfortable. But I think he’s trying to move past that. I feel like... like he’s doing this as it’s something to keep his mind off Rachel.”

“It’s ridiculous anyway. How can he test his limits when he’s so tired?” I pointed out.

Chad nodded. “I know. I thought of that. He was having some trouble at the gym today staying on the rock. He kept popping off. I’m sure it’s the exhaustion. Maybe you can try to convince him to sleep?” Chad suggested.

“Maybe you should come with me. Give him a lecture on the need for sleep?” I suggested.

“No, I don’t think that’ll work. He so clearly doesn’t want to talk about this, he clams up when we’re both around. How about you go over now and try to get him to talk? I’ll make something for dinner and bring it over later.”

“Oh, hi,” Clark said when he opened the door.

“Good to see you, too,” I smiled at him.

“Sorry,” Clark said, moving aside for me to enter. “I’m just tired.”

“I know,” I replied. “I’m hoping to help with that.”

“You have some Andrews... what is your maiden name anyway?” he asked me.

“Lane,” I answered, confused by the non-sequitor.

“So, you have some ancient Lane cure for superheroes?” he asked and I was glad to see him joking, even weakly.

I laughed slightly. “I guess my grandmother might have had something, but neither of my parents were parental enough for that. There is an Andrews thing, though, and from what I saw of your parents, I would expect it to be the same cure the Kents have.”

“What’s that?” Clark asked, looking at me with suspicion.

“Talking,” I said, making myself comfortable on his couch and looking at him in a way that I hoped made it clear I was expecting him to join me. “I know you don’t want to talk about it, Clark, and I’d like to respect your need to work through this on your own, but you’re not. You’re just suffering. Please let me help.”

Clark sighed as he sat down. “I don’t really know what to say.”

“Want to tell me about what you and Rachel talked about? I mean, it’s pretty clear that you didn’t just stop caring about her.”

“No,” Clark sighed again. “I didn’t. I love her. But... I don’t know. I guess that’s not enough. I want it to be, but there’s no way around it. I’m happiest living here. Both because I want to write for a major paper and because I can help so many more people here than in Smallville. Not just because Metropolis is bigger, but also because it’s closer to other large cities like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.

“I just... I think I need to live here. And Rachel needs to live in Smallville. She offered to move here, but she didn’t really mean it. She loves her life there — not just her job, but the entire way of life. She likes Metropolis enough to visit, but not to live here. I love her too much to let her move here for me and be unhappy.”

“I’m so sorry, Clark,” I said. “Is there really no middle ground?”

“I think this *is* the middle ground,” Clark said. “We’re friends still. I can’t imagine not being friends with her. I guess this isn’t your traditional break up in that we didn’t fight or have any big scenes. We both just agreed that being apart was making us unhappy and yet neither of us wanted the other person to move to where we wanted to live as then they’d be unhappy.

“None of that changes the fact that Rachel is still one of the best people I’ve ever known and I want to have her in my life. But I don’t think she fits in the role she’s been in. I think friends is better for us. Eventually, we’ll move on and it won’t hurt anymore. That has to be better than what we’ve been doing before now — where we’ve both been hurting except for the small amount of time we’ve been together.”

What he was saying made sense, but it didn’t change the fact that I felt awful for him.

His head picked up slightly. “Sorry, Lois. I have to go,” he said.

“Can I wait here?” I asked him. “Chad was going to come by with dinner.”

Clark smiled. “You guys are amazing, you know that? Of course you can stay. I don’t know how long I’ll be, though. It sounds bad.”

With that, he spun into the Superman suit and took off.

I turned LNN on after Clark left, figuring I’d get a good idea of how long he’d be gone, and I could call Chad. Unfortunately, they were covering international news. I sat back down and flipped through the channels until I finally found a local affiliate that was running Metropolis news.

“A multiple shooting at the Park Ridge Mall has officials in a panic,” the newscaster said. “So far, six people have been found dead. According to police, a caller who preferred not to be identified called in a half hour ago, reporting a hostage situation

in a women's clothing store. We also have reports of victims in neighboring stores.

"Superman arrived on the scene shortly after the police," she said as the channel showed footage of Superman flying into the mall, "and has been shuttling victims to Metropolis Hospital. No one is sure if more patrons were killed or how many more are injured."

The screen flashed off the on-site reporter to one in the studio. "Please stay tuned to Channel 5 for more updates on this breaking news. We now return to our regularly scheduled program."

I flipped back to LNN, but before I was able to determine if they had picked up the news yet, Clark's phone rang. I considered not answering it, but then changed my mind. Clark wouldn't mind, would he?

"Hello?" I asked as I picked up.

"Hi, honey," came Chad's voice on the other end of the line.

"Oh, I was just about to call you. I wanted to tell you that Clark is out..."

"I know," Chad cut me off. "I was calling to tell you that I'm not going to be able to come by for dinner. So far, Superman's brought in twelve people from the mall, he's not done yet, and he still has to bring in the ones who didn't make it so that someone can put together death certificates." He sighed. "As you can imagine, the ER is overloaded."

"So, you're going into the hospital," I said.

"Yeah," Chad sighed. "I'm sorry, Lois, but maybe you and Clark can come over here when he's done. Dinner was almost ready. It'll just need to be heated."

"Okay," I replied, feeling somewhat dispirited. I couldn't wait for Chad to finish his first year of residency in June. While I knew it may not change anything, the fact that there was another group of students joining the staff would mean Chad shouldn't be low man on the totem pole anymore.

Turning to LNN, it sounded like Clark might have a lot more to do yet, so I left him a note asking him to meet me at my place and went home.

I woke up to the sound of the door opening and sat up startled. "Hello?" I called into the darkness.

"Lois?" Chad asked, turning a light on. "What are you doing down here?"

"Waiting for you," I said with a yawn. "Clark left hours ago. I think he may even be tired enough to sleep now. Anyway, I thought I'd wait up for you." I glanced at the clock on the VCR and groaned. "Although I hadn't known you would be gone so long."

"I'm sorry," Chad said, sitting beside me and leaning his head against the back of the couch.

"Are you okay?" I asked, realizing how pale he looked.

"It was awful," he said quietly. "There were so many victims — thirty injuries and a dozen deaths."

"Wow! Did they catch the guy?" I asked. There was still no news on that when I fell asleep.

Chad nodded. "I heard on my way home that the police found him a little ways out of town."

I placed a hand on his cheek. He still looked pale.

"It was so awful, Lois," he whispered, and I could tell that the breakdown was coming. "There was a little boy there, no older than three. Shot right in the head."

I moved closer to wrap my arms around him, bringing his head to my breast to stroke his hair.

"I don't understand. How can someone do that?" he asked. I could feel him trembling beneath my hands and I said nothing, letting him get it all out.

"I bet nothing like this ever happens in Smallville," he whispered before he stilled and fell asleep.

May 1994

I yawned for the third time in the last hour. It was the slowest news day in the history of the news. Okay, so maybe not, but it was slow.

"Let's do something," Clark suggested.

"What?"

"Let's go somewhere, do something. You are going to fall asleep if we sit here with nothing to do much longer, and I'm slowly wearing the floor down by moving my chair back and forth. Anything would be more exciting than this," Clark said.

I got up and grabbed my purse. "I would think you'd be well practiced at slow news days. It couldn't have been busy all the time while you traveled."

Clark shrugged. "I was freelancing, so I didn't notice it so much. If it was slow, I just had more time to for site seeing."

"Oh, site seeing. Great idea! Let's go to the top of LexTower!" I said, suddenly excited. Visiting LexTower was one of those things you did often on field trips as a kid, but I hadn't been to the top since sometime in elementary school.

"You want to go to the LexTower observation deck?" Clark asked.

I shrugged. "I haven't been since I was a kid. I haven't even seen what they did to the inside since Luthor donated all his things to Metropolis and moved to that deserted island."

"What?" Clark asked and I was reminded that not having lived here all his life, Clark probably had no idea who Lex Luthor was.

"Haven't you ever wondered who Lex Luthor is?" I asked him. "LexTower, LNN, Luthor Centennial Park?"

"I thought it was just Centennial Park?" Clark said.

I shrugged. "The Luthor got added on when I was in college. Most people don't use it, but it's on all the signs."

"So," Clark asked, grinning at me as we exited the elevator, "who was Lex Luthor?"

"When we were kids, he was the wealthiest man in Metropolis," I told him. "Luthor owned most of the city — he was the third richest man in the world, I think. But there was some sort of tragedy in his family — I can't recall what, but his wife and daughter died and he kind of retreated. I guess he had been proud of all his success before that, but when he lost his family he realized money couldn't buy him everything."

"So, he donated most of the buildings and stuff to the city, gave them a huge endowment for the park, and just kept enough to be able to spend the rest of his life on this deserted island he owned. I kind of thought it was a joke at the time, and it was only so long before he'd come back, but that was about ten years ago, and he's still there."

"Wow," Clark said. "That must be lonely."

I nodded. "Yeah, so they've redone LexTower. In Luthor's day it was just an office building with only the lobby and the observation deck open to the public. Now, the elevator stops at some floors in the middle that chronicle all the things Luthor did for the city."

"And that's what you want to do today?" Clark asked me.

"Yes. Is that okay with you?" I asked.

"It's fine with me." He smiled.

"So," I asked as we got on the subway. "How are you doing? With the thing with Rachel?" I hadn't asked him about it since the night of the shooting and Clark hadn't volunteered any information either. It had been three weeks now, though. Hopefully it wouldn't be too painful to talk about. He certainly seemed more cheerful.

"I'm okay," Clark nodded. "I still miss her, but I also still think it was the right thing to do."

I nodded to show I understood.

"I actually talked to her last night," Clark said.

"You did?" I was surprised. I know Clark said he still wanted to have her in his life, but I guess I didn't really believe that they'd be able to just be friends.

He nodded. "I'm going home in a couple of weeks for Memorial Day. I thought it made sense to talk by phone first so things wouldn't be awkward if we ran into each other."

"And?" I prodded him when he didn't offer more information.

"And it was nice. Weird, I guess. This is the longest we haven't spoken in years. It made the conversation feel a bit forced at the beginning. We got past it, though, and it was good to talk to her."

"How's she doing?" I asked.

Clark smiled. "She's good. She just got re-elected."

"I didn't realize her term was almost up," I said.

"Well, she doesn't like to talk about it. The whole thing makes her nervous. This is what she's wanted to do her whole life. I'm not sure what she would do if she lost. Personally, I don't think it's likely to ever happen. Lowell County doesn't have term limits for sheriff and Dan was sheriff all the time I was growing up until Rachel took over."

"And she's good at it," I said.

"Yes, she is," Clark said, sounding a little sad now.

"So, aside from work. Is she doing well?" I asked.

"She sounded... like she was doing okay. Some of the early vegetables are blooming in her garden and she said she planted some flowers this year," he said.

"I can't imagine having a garden that big to take care," I admitted.

Clark laughed, "Yeah, I can't imagine you having a garden that big either. But Rachel loves it."

We grew silent as the subway reached our stop and we made our way back to street-level. "She's going on vacation this summer," Clark said, seeming to be deep in thought. "She hasn't taken a real vacation in awhile as she's used all her vacation days to visit me where ever I've been."

"Where's she going?" I asked.

"She said she wasn't sure. She was thinking of going to Alaska. Her dad has an old friend who lives up there she could stay with."

"Wow!" I said, impressed. "That would be quite a trip. Is she at all nervous about it?"

"I don't know," Clark said. "I don't think she'd say. We're both a little skittish around each other now, you know? We need to negotiate carefully so we can still be friends when it's over."

I nodded. "If anyone can make it work, it's you and Rachel."

"You're in a good mood," Chad mentioned as I closed the door. "I thought it was a slow news day."

"It was," I told him. "So, Clark and I played hooky for most of the afternoon."

"What did you do?" He smiled at me.

"We went to the top of LexTowers. Explored those new floors. Well, old floors I guess, but the ones about Luthor."

"Were they interesting?" he asked as I sat down on the couch next to him.

I shrugged. "The stuff about all Luthor did for Metropolis? No. I knew all of that and even if I didn't, I'm not sure I'd care. It was a beautiful day to be outside, though, and clear enough that the view from the top was great."

Chad moved closer to place a kiss on the top of my head. "I have to go," he said, getting up.

"I thought you were done with the ER shifts," I whined.

Chad gave me a strange look. "I'm not going to the ER. I told you. I'm going out with Clark. We're going to start the first of the tests."

"Oh," I said, remembering now. Chad and Clark were

supposed to go out tonight to test Clark's abilities and then come by a little later for dinner.

"Clark said he'd pick something up for dinner if you have any special requests," Chad told me. I thought carefully. It was definitely different trying to choose what I wanted for dinner when Clark was picking it up.

"I don't care," I finally said. "Anything you two want."

I heard Chad's key in the lock two hours later and he came in, smiling. "Clark said he'd be back in a minute. He's just going to pick up the food."

"What's he getting?" I asked.

"I don't know. I told him that anything we hadn't tried before would be good as long as it wasn't too out there," Chad said.

"How did it go?"

Chad shrugged. "I don't know. I'm a little worried about pushing him too much."

"Isn't that the point?"

"Not physically. Or... let me rephrase," Chad said. "I'm not afraid to push him too much physically. I'm afraid to push him too much emotionally. I don't want to scare him off."

"I mean, I am curious about his biology, but I want his questions to guide what we do, you know? I don't want him to feel like... I don't know how to say what I'm thinking," Chad sat down looking frustrated.

"It's okay," I said, placing a hand on his arm. "I understand."

Clark knocked right then, and Chad got up to let him in.

"So, what'd you get?" I asked.

"Well, I'm not sure what you'll think, but I decided on fish and chips from England. In case you didn't like that, I got a Ploughman's Platter, too. It's sort of a weird dinner, but makes a nice appetizer if you're okay with fish and chips," Clark explained.

"What is it?" Chad asked as Clark started unpacking the bag.

"It's finger food, mostly," Clark explained. "It's Irish, I think. It comes with different things, but mostly fruit and cheese. This one has a hunk of Stilton Cheddar and a bleu cheese. There are some grapes and apple slices and some mango chutney. Also, some pickles — these look like sours to me. And some bread."

"Wow," I said. "That's a dinner?"

"No," Clark smiled. "Like I said it is a sort of weird dinner. Although it's not uncommon to have at a pub, particularly at lunch time."

We each put some of the food on our plate and sat down. "So, want to talk about it?" I asked Clark.

"What?" he asked and I had to wonder if he was being purposely obtuse.

"The tests?" I prodded him.

"Oh. They were... well, I think they went well. Right, Chad?" Clark asked.

Chad swallowed the French fry he was eating, although I guess these were called chips, and smiled. "Yeah, I think we're already learning a lot."

"Like what?" I asked.

"The fastest I can go around the world is 3.67 seconds," Clark told me.

"You can go around the world in less than five seconds?" I asked amazed.

"Well, not with stopping," Clark said.

"And he slows down to a full three minutes if he carries me," Chad said.

"You flew around the world with Clark?" I asked. Now I was getting jealous.

"It wasn't... that much fun," Chad blushed, and I knew he was lying.

"Yeah, right," I said, smiling at him. "So why so much slower with Chad?" I asked Clark.

“Well, it’s actually sort of hard to determine my fastest speed with someone else. The three minute estimate is really more indicative of what I’m comfortable with. I know I can’t carry people and go as fast I normally go without it being detrimental to them, but I’m not really sure how fast is too fast. I went faster with Chad than I’ve ever gone before, and obviously much faster than when I flew with you to Kansas, but... I just can’t go any faster. It makes me nervous that by the time Chad told me something was wrong, it would be too late.”

I nodded. I had never really thought before about how much Clark must hold himself back given his abilities. I know I’m competitive, but I have to imagine that almost anyone would feel this way — it’s just weird not to do things the best you are able.

Clark, though, couldn’t really do that, could he? I mean, imagine him in the newsroom typing as fast as he could. Not only would that draw a lot of attention, but I’m not even sure keyboards are made to withstand that kind of speed.

It must be really hard for him though, when he has someone who’s injured — when he needs to get them to the hospital as fast as possible, but can’t hurt them in the process.

“How do you do it?” I asked him.

“Do what?” both Chad and Clark responded.

“Manage to act normal all the time. Don’t you just want to type faster, run faster... I don’t know. It just seems like it must be so hard to hold yourself back.”

Clark laughed. “I can’t imagine how *you* would ever do it.”

“Very funny.” I gave him a look to let him know I did not appreciate the sentiment.

“I don’t know that I can explain it,” he said. “I don’t have to try to do something super, so much as I can sort of feel when I’m doing it. Sort of like an appliance with a low and a high setting. I can feel when I’m on my ‘super’ setting. If I just don’t... turn it on, I guess, I don’t have trouble not going faster than normal.”

“Wow,” I thought. Not that this was a new thought, but how cool would it be to have a super setting?

“Although,” Clark admitted, “I do sort of ‘cheat’ a lot.”

“Like how?” I asked, and I could hear the slight challenge in my voice.

“Well, if I’m late for a deadline, I’ll use super-speed typing when no one’s watching. When I’m alone I tend to do things that way. Or there are some things that don’t have an... off switch or whatever. Rachel could never understand why I refused to buy pot holders, but the truth was that I’d forget since I never need them.”

“That would be cool to test,” Chad said.

“What?” I asked, and I could see Clark looking at Chad quizzically.

“Well, I wonder why you can withstand hotter things. It’s not the same as speed really. Do you have less heat receptors?” Chad wondered.

“That can’t be it,” I said. “Isn’t there some sort of disease like that? And those people burn even though they don’t feel the heat.”

Chad nodded. “You’re right. So, maybe Clark’s skin is...”

“Flame retardant,” Clark suggested, smiling. I realized it was the first time I had ever seen him smiling when talking about his special abilities.

“Something like that.” Chad smiled back at him.

“Where’s Clark?” I asked Perry. It was the Tuesday after Memorial Day weekend, and while Clark took off early on Friday, I was pretty sure he was supposed to be back today. I had been running sort of late myself, but was pretty sure I hadn’t seen Clark at his desk when I passed by.

“He called in sick,” Perry told me. Clark was sick? How was that possible?

“Perry... I just remembered, I’m supposed to check with a

source this morning. Can I be a little late to the meeting?”

Perry gave me a dirty look, but didn’t say anything, so I took my stuff and ran back to my desk. I had to make the call quickly or he would have managed to assign me to some lame dog show or something by the time I got to the meeting.

“Hello?” came the voice on the other end of the line.

“Martha?” I asked. “This is Lois.”

“Lois, hi!” she replied, sounding genuinely pleased to hear from me.

“Hi. Um... Perry said Clark called in sick. I didn’t think he could get sick,” I said quietly, deciding not to beat around the bush.

Martha laughed slightly. “I think he’s fine, but I’m sure he’ll be happy to talk to you. I’ll go get him.”

“Thanks, Martha,” I said before I heard her place the phone on the counter.

“Didn’t you get my message?” Clark asked a second later.

I glanced at my phone and realized the message light was blinking, but I hadn’t really paid attention before now. “No,” I admitted. “I was running late today so went directly to the staff meeting. What’s going on?”

Clark sighed. “I was helping my dad with some stuff on the farm. Remember I told you there’s some weird green rock that saps my powers?”

“Yes,” I answered, seeing where this was going.

“Well, we turned up more of it,” Clark said.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, I felt pretty awful yesterday, but I seem to be okay today. No super-powers, though, so I don’t have a way back to Metropolis.”

I laughed. “I guess that makes sense. Do you think you’ll be back tomorrow?”

“I hope so,” he said. “You know, when I was a teenager I wanted nothing more than to be normal. But now... I feel like something’s missing when I am.”

“Trust me, Clark,” I told him. “Powers or not, you are not normal.”

July 1994

Chad literally slammed the door on his way in. “What’s up?” I asked. Slamming the door was my thing — Chad was normally much more controlled.

“I have to work the ER shift again tomorrow,” he complained.

“I thought now that there was a whole new crop of residents...”

“So did I,” Chad interrupted. “But apparently, I’m *good* at it.”

“That’s a bad thing?” I asked with a slight smile.

Chad sighed. “No, obviously not. But I don’t want to keep getting stuck filling in for them. It’s just... I feel like they’re taking advantage of me.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, walking over to put my arms around him. “It does sound like that.”

“And you know, it’s not like someone covers my peds shifts for me when I’ve spent the night in the ER. They just let the nurses handle anything that comes up,” he continued to complain. “So, my patients suffer because they can’t manage the ER shifts.”

I continued to hold him, not sure what to say.

Finally, he sighed again. “I’m sorry,” he said as he sat down. “I didn’t mean to blow up at you.”

“You didn’t blow up at me. You blew up in front of me.

That’s more than a little okay. I do it to you all the time.”

Chad reached an arm out to pull me onto his lap. “But you’re cute when you do it.”

“Tell me that next time I’m blowing up and that may take care of all your worries.” When Chad looked at me curiously, I explained, “I’ll hit you in the face so hard you’ll start scaring the

patients, and no one will want your help anymore.”

Chad laughed and I could tell he had let his anger go. “I love you,” he whispered before he kissed me.

“So,” Chad said as we sat down to dinner. “I had a good day today. Well,” he continued at my look, “before I went a little crazy about the ER shift.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“Apparently Mike’s office screwed up and made an appointment for one of his patients to come see him at the hospital today instead of his office,” Chad said, and I nodded. It wasn’t uncommon for some of the older doctors who had private practices to see patients during their hospital shifts if someone needed an appointment urgently.

“Well, Mike was supposed to be in his office today, and no one told him he had an appointment at the hospital. I was free when they came in, so I agreed to see them. You should have seen this little girl, Lois. She was so cute. Her name was Debbie and she had brown hair with the brightest green eyes you’ve ever seen. She felt awful, but was smiling and just so even tempered despite not feeling well.”

“What was wrong with her?” I asked.

“She had the flu, so her mother wanted to give her an antibiotic. Can you believe this little kid was complaining about missing school?”

I smiled. I might have been like that at seven, too. Back then, school was a chance to play with your friends, but mostly I smiled as I loved this aspect of Chad’s job — he loved interacting with the kids and I loved watching his face as he described these parts of his day.

Clark and Chad came in two days later looking worn out. They had been continuing their Superman experiments and had stepped things up. Chad had asked Clark to bring some kryptonite back from Smallville, and after buying a lead toolbox in town, he had done so.

Until this morning, though, they had been too worried about using it. Chad wanted to see if the quantity mattered, but both were worried about incapacitating Clark when his help could be needed.

“So?” I asked, although I already feared the answer from the look of him.

“Size matters,” Chad said, “but only in how fast the stuff works.”

“I feel awful with even the smallest piece,” Clark said, collapsing into a chair.

“And no powers?” I asked.

Clark shook his head. “It took longer to lose them as Chad used a small piece, but I’m completely un-super now.”

Chad sat down next to me and placed a head on my shoulder.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked. “I thought kryptonite only affects Clark?”

Chad nodded, and I could tell he didn’t want to talk about it in front of Clark for some reason. “We’re going to start making dinner. You stay here and rest,” I told Clark. I didn’t think we were in any danger of his ignoring me as he sat slumped on the chair.

“Okay, what’s up?” I asked Chad as we went into the kitchen.

He moved to wrap his arms around me and rested his head on top of mine. “It was just harder than I thought.”

“Doing these tests?” I asked.

“Yeah. Watching the strongest man in the world get weaker and weaker. I wanted to stop, but Clark thought that once we started, we should continue,” Chad said. “It was just... well, hard I guess, watching him get sick. You should see what that stuff does to him. And it’s scary looking.”

“What’s it look like?” I asked. I vaguely remembered Clark

saying it glowed.

“I’ll go get it,” Chad said. He appeared again a moment later with the toolbox and opened it up. “Look quickly. I don’t know if it can still impact Clark from here when he’s weak.”

I glanced inside quickly, before slamming the toolbox shut. Chad was right — it was sort of scary looking, the way it glowed brightly. Although, I guess it might have been pretty if I didn’t know it was poisonous to my best friend. “It’s...”

“Unearthly?” Chad offered, and I smiled.

“Something like that,” I admitted. “So, are you planning to do more tests with it?”

“No,” Chad said. “I don’t know that he wants to know any more, and I can’t stand the thought of doing this again.”

“So what else are you two going to do?” I asked.

Chad shrugged. “I don’t know. We hadn’t really talked about it. I think I may try to sneak some of this into the hospital lab and look at it under a microscope. See if I can learn more about it that way. Other than that...”

“Hey, could you take a sample of Clark’s blood now?” I asked.

Chad looked at me with a smile. “I can. Great idea, Lois,” he said as he leaned over to kiss me on the cheek.

“Clark,” he called as he moved to the living room. “Are you still interested in learning how different you may be from humans?”

Clark nodded, looking like was still pretty sleepy.

“Well, Lois mentioned that now might be a good time to take a blood sample,” Chad said.

“Good idea, Lois,” Clark smiled at me, but his smile was sort of weak, and I wondered if this was a bad idea.

“Maybe you should wait awhile? Feel a little better?” I suggested.

Clark shook his head. “No, we need to do it now or Chad won’t be able to get the needle in.”

“You’re sure?” Chad asked.

“Yeah, let’s do it now,” Clark said. “I’ve heard these things hurt, and I’d like to get it over with.”

I laughed slightly. “Do you know how much money I could get for a video of Superman saying he’s afraid of a needle?”

Clark rolled his eyes at me as Chad went upstairs to look to see if he had supplies at home for a blood test.

“I invited Clark over for dinner after his evening patrol,” I told Chad as I put my purse down. It had been a week since Clark and Chad’s experiment with kryptonite. Chad had been running some tests of Clark’s blood, but the going was slow. Chad had worked in a lab during med school, but he was sort of out of practice in running the tests now. Still, he didn’t want the lab guys to run the tests in case they suspected the blood wasn’t human.

He mentioned yesterday that he had gotten some results he wanted to talk to Clark about, so inviting him for dinner made sense.

“Do you think he would mind if we moved it to tomorrow?” he asked me.

I cast my mind about. Was it some sort of anniversary I had forgotten? I couldn’t think of anything.

“Um... I guess not. What’s up?”

“I just wanted to talk,” Chad said.

“Okay, I’ll go call Clark,” I told him.

After I’d talked to Clark, who was fine with rescheduling, although I know he was interested in what Chad had to say, I set the table. Chad announced that dinner was ready right as I finished.

“Mmm.” I smiled as I took in the Chicken Cordon Bleu and asparagus with hollandaise sauce. “Very fancy. What’s the occasion?”

"Does there have to be an occasion?" Chad asked.
 "No," I admitted. "But I know this takes a lot of work."
 "It's your favorite," Chad explained.

"Well, I know that," I said, bestowing a kiss on his nose before I sat down.

We ate in companionable silence for a minute or two before Chad cleared his throat. "I actually... I wanted to talk to you about something."

"What?" I asked, looking at him and noticing for the first time that he looked a little nervous.

"I got... reprimanded at work today," Chad said.

"Did they try to stick you with another ER shift?" I asked. Given his reaction last time, I could see him saying no.

"No," he sighed. "Remember Debbie?"

I nodded. "The little girl with the flu from last week, right?"

"Right," Chad said. "I got the results of her blood work back this morning."

"Why did you take blood work for someone with the flu?" I asked.

Chad shrugged. "I'm not sure why, but something didn't feel right to me. I just wanted to be sure."

"Did you do some sort of complicated test that it took so long?"

"No. The sample just kind of got lost in the lab and I forgot about it," Chad admitted.

"So, did anything show?" I asked.

Chad nodded. "The blood test showed that she probably has leukemia."

"Oh," I said, feeling sad. Sometimes it was hard to hear about Chad's day.

"I know. Mike was out today, and when I called to tell him, he said to go ahead and call her parents. We didn't want to waste more time before we let her know and do more tests to confirm the diagnosis and get her treatment if we're right," Chad said.

"So," I asked, "did you get a chance to talk to her parents today?"

Chad nodded. "Yeah, they came in around one. Debbie was in school, but I guess they could tell from the phone call that something was seriously wrong. It was so hard to tell them what we found. I spent over two hours explaining the tests we have to do now and what the different treatment options are if we're right. I wanted them to understand that while this was awful news, in all likelihood, we'll get Debbie through this."

"That's great, Chad," I said, leaning over to place a hand on his. "I'm sure they appreciated it."

Chad nodded. "They did, but Ken didn't."

Ken was the residency program director and so effectively Chad's boss. "I don't understand," I said. "What was Ken's problem?"

"Apparently, I was spending too much time with her parents," Chad said bitterly. "According to Ken, Met General is a public hospital and we strive to see as many patients as possible."

I didn't say anything. This was not the first time Chad had gotten in trouble for spending too much time with a patient and it was unlikely to be the last. I found it was best to just sit quietly and let him get his frustrations out.

"So, I guess we don't care how good we are, if we have good bedside manner or just tell it like it is and move on, no matter how that may make the patient feel. What I was supposed to do was to tell Debbie's parents that she has a life-threatening illness and then send them on their way so I could see other patients!"

We sat in silence for a few minutes before Chad looked up from his food. "I've been thinking," he said his voice very soft. "I think this is a horrible idea, but I can't seem to make it go away."

"What is?" I asked.

"I think... Lois, I'm so sorry," Chad said.

"What?" I asked. He was starting to scare me.

"I just feel like I've been getting more and more frustrated here," Chad said. "I'm starting to hate my job."

"Oh, honey," I said, getting up and moving over to sit in his lap. He moved his chair back to make room for me.

"I don't ever want to be somewhere where I can't see you everyday," Chad said.

I could feel myself stiffen. "Are you... are you talking about leaving me?"

Chad buried his head in my shoulder. "No, but I am talking about... going away for a little while. Just for a trial."

"What do you mean?" I asked, and I could hear that my voice was hard, but it was either that or tears.

"I think... maybe Clark and Rachel were right to try to each pursue their own dreams," Chad said quietly.

I stood up. I didn't want to touch him. I didn't want to feel him next to me as he spoke those words. "Clark and Rachel aren't together anymore," I said coldly.

"We're not Clark and Rachel," Chad said as he stood up and took a step toward me. "I love you more than anything, Lois. I know that I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Nothing is going to change that."

"But you want to go away," I pointed out, horrified to find that my voice didn't sound quite so cold and tears were now falling down my cheeks.

"No," Chad said as put his arms around me and held me close. I tried to stay stiff in his arms. I didn't want him to comfort me, but I couldn't help it. He was my husband, the man who had soothed all my hurts for years. It was a habit to let him hold me while I cried. "I don't want to go away from you, Lois. But I think I need to."

"I feel like since we got back from Smallville, I keep comparing it to Metropolis, and Metropolis keeps coming up short," he whispered into my hair. "I feel like maybe if I spend some time in a small town, I'll see that things aren't perfect there either and I'll stop idolizing the idea."

I nodded my head to show I understood. I did understand. I didn't like it, but I understood. I'd known for years that Chad's dream was to practice medicine in a small town, and he'd given that up for me.

I remembered when Clark talked about Rachel when I first met him, it all seemed so easy to me. If you love someone, you go where they need to be. Of course I had thought it was easy. It had been easy for me — because Chad had gone where I wanted. I had never given up anything for him. Wasn't it only fair that I let him try this and see if he liked it? But what if he did like it? What then?

"What if you decide it is idyllic?" I asked him quietly.

"I won't," he said. "I'll miss you too much."

"That won't have anything to do with the town you're in," I pointed out.

Chad pulled away from me slightly and rested his forehead against mine. "I know," he said quietly. "And I have no idea what we'll do if I like it. I mean, I do think in the end it won't matter. Even if it's great, I'll remember that I'd rather be with you every day, but... I'm so scared, Lois. I feel so angry all the time at work now. I'm worried that that's going to carry over and I'm going to start resenting you."

"I don't ever want to get to a place where I feel that way," he said, his eyes brimming with tears. "Lois, I'd rather not see you every day than get to a point where I feel unreasonably angry at you all the time."

I nodded to show I understood.

"We're not Clark and Rachel," he said again softly, bringing his lips to mine. I could taste his tears on his lips. "We'll make our way through this together," he whispered before he picked me up and brought me upstairs.

I was surprised Clark didn't cancel dinner plans with us for the following night. I had been short with him all day. I couldn't help it. I knew it wasn't really his fault, but I felt like he had put the idea into Chad's head. He was the one to show Chad that some people could have a long distance relationship and make it work — although he had also shown that it couldn't work forever. He was the one who had shown Chad what a small town was like.

I knew he hadn't done either of those things maliciously. He probably didn't even remember my telling him that Chad had always dreamed of practicing medicine in a small town, but I still felt like it was his fault. Maybe. Or maybe I just wanted somebody to blame. I was not interested in having a long distance relationship. We had done that in college and I knew what it was like. It was lonely.

I had seen Clark going through it, and he always seemed so much happier when Rachel was around. I didn't want to be that way.

But what were my choices? I could agree to move with him. That didn't make any sense, though. Why would I give up my place at the Planet on the chance that Chad was happy when he didn't really know if this was what he wanted? Maybe he would be bored at a small town hospital.

I had suggested maybe moving to the suburbs and finding a small town nearby, but Chad said that it wouldn't work. First off, Metropolis wasn't like some of the smaller cities in the US, where small towns were right outside of large metropolitan areas and because everything nearby was suburbs, there just weren't many opportunities in the suburbs. There were a few hospitals here and there for emergencies, but they tended to be pretty small and focus on the ER. People came into the city for specialists.

Plus Chad didn't want to practice in the suburbs. He wanted to try a small town, and the truth was that people in the suburbs of Metropolis were not that different than people in Metropolis. Many of them were one and the same — they worked in the city and lived in the suburbs — so of course they had the same city-attitude that Chad wanted to try to get away from.

I could forbid him to go. Well, not really forbid him, but give him an ultimatum. I couldn't do that, though. I wanted to. I wanted to so much, but how could I? Chad had been here in Metropolis for years for me. How could I deny him this?

I couldn't. I loved him too much. I was going to have to do it. I was going to have to watch my husband of five years leave me and start a life someplace else.

The only consolation was that it probably wouldn't happen right away. Residencies in small towns were not easy to come by, and Chad had missed out on the obvious chance to move in June when new terms started. He had said he thought he may have to wait until the end of this year and move in June and then things could get complicated. If he really settled in a small town, it probably wouldn't matter. Once he passed his Boards, he'd be able to practice. If he wanted to practice in Metropolis, though, it would be easier to get a position with a subspecialty and then he'd need to do a Fellowship. A small town hospital wouldn't have a program big enough to be employing fellows.

So, in the end, it may not work out at all. Was that what I wanted? Did I want Chad to stay in Metropolis for me because he had to? No, what I really wanted was for Chad to want to be in Metropolis. Not just because I'm here, but because this was truly where he wanted to be.

So, clearly, I was not going to get what I wanted. I could only hope that Chad found a way to get what he wanted.

"Hi," Clark said as he came in. He seemed subdued. Clearly he had picked up on my mood earlier even if he hadn't said anything.

"Did you bring dinner?" Chad asked, taking in the bag in his

hand. "I made something."

"I brought dessert," Clark said. He looked right at me. "I got some chocolate mousse from a small restaurant in Nice. It's sort of a peace offering for whatever I did."

"What did you do?" Chad asked him, but when he realized that Clark was just as clueless, he turned to me.

"You didn't do anything," I said grumpily. "I'm just in a bad mood." I could feel the tears pressing on the back of my eyes. I wasn't ready for company tonight. Not even Clark. I got up and moved to the bathroom before I started to cry.

When I came back out a couple of minutes later, Clark was saying good night to Chad. "I'll see you tomorrow, Lois," he said to me softly.

"No," I said a little too loudly. "Please stay." I didn't want company, but I didn't want him to leave either. I wasn't ready to have another conversation with Chad. I was too worried about what would be said.

"I can come back tomorrow," Clark started, but I cut him off.

"No, please. We invited you for tonight. I'm... I'm sorry, Clark. I know I've been awful to you all day, but please stay."

Looking supremely uncomfortable, Clark sat down. We sat in silence for a few minutes before the beeper on the oven went off and we moved to the table.

"So, test results?" Clark asked, and I could tell he had lost interest in them somewhat, but wanted to ease the tension in the room.

"Yeah, so I was only able to do some basic tests," Chad explained, "but most of them came back without an error. I was able to measure most typical blood components just as I would for me or Lois."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means, that from what I can tell, Clark not only looks mostly human, but he may *be* mostly human," Chad explained. "Or at least close enough."

"But what about..." Clark started to ask, but Chad cut him off.

"No idea why you would have powers if you're mostly human. It doesn't explain your differences very well. The only thing I noticed was that you had low levels of cholesterol and high levels of Vitamin D. The low cholesterol fits with your other resistance to human illness and the vitamin D is probably related to your reaction to the yellow sun," Chad said. "I can't explain it fully, obviously, but it's all I know."

Clark smiled. "It's still much more than I knew earlier today."

"That's what I thought," Chad said.

"So..." Clark said, clearly realizing this conversation was over and wondering what to say next. It was like Chad's decision was the pink elephant in the room. We had lots in common, all of us, but there was nothing to talk about with this hanging over us.

"I know what I said when you came in," Chad said to Clark, deciding not to ignore it, I guess, "but as Lois and I have already talked about, it's probably not going to happen. The logistics are difficult. I missed the best chance to change residency programs in June, and few small towns have residence programs anyway."

Clark suddenly looked supremely uncomfortable. At first I thought it was because he didn't want to be involved in this discussion, but then I started to get the impression that he had something to say but was afraid to say it.

"What?" I asked him, somewhat accusingly.

Both Chad and Clark looked at me in surprise. "What do you have to say, Clark?" I asked. "It's clear there's something."

"It's nothing," he mumbled, clearly lying. I leveled him with a glare until he spoke again. "It's just that Mom said there was no pediatrician in Smallville. I don't know if they have a residency program there, but I would imagine they'd welcome the help."

I didn't ease my glare. Did Clark have to have a solution?

"I hadn't thought of that," Chad said. I guess he caught my

look as he sounded a lot less excited about it than I would have expected.

"Look, I don't want to get involved in the middle of things," Clark said, "but I know how hard a long distance relationship can be. Not just the constantly missing each other, but the fighting and stuff."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Clark shrugged. "When Rach and I started trying the long distance thing, we fought all the time. When we were apart we fought because we missed each other, and when we were together we fought 'cause it was hard to deal with suddenly having another person around. Silly things, but like not being able to eat dinner whenever you want."

I hadn't thought about that. If Chad made this work, I would be single again, or sort of. I could enjoy all those things Lucy was always going on about. I could see how I might miss some of it when Chad came back. But... "But wasn't it better to be together than apart even if you had to wait to eat until Rachel was hungry, too?" I voiced my thought.

Clark nodded. "Definitely. Doesn't mean we didn't fight about it anyway. I mean, ideally, I'd get to eat when I wanted and have Rachel around, right?" Clark smiled. "Anyway, my point is, I know this is hard, but I think I could help to make it easier for you."

"How?" I asked.

"Well, for starters, if you can get a position in Smallville, I think I could find someplace for you to live without having a lease," Clark said.

"Where?" Chad asked.

"There's a cottage like thing on my parents' farm. It used to belong to my grandparents, and my parents have been asking me to fix it up for years, but I keep forgetting. It doesn't really need much work, and I could probably finish it up in an afternoon. Anyway, my parents would be thrilled to have it fixed up even if it meant having someone else live in it for a while. It's not like they really need it. Mom just wants it fixed up as it's a bit of an eye sore."

"That would be perfect," I admitted. I bet the Kents wouldn't charge much rent either.

"And," Clark said, "there's another benefit to Smallville."

"What's that?" Chad asked.

"Well, the farm is pretty secluded. I can land in the fields without fear of bumping into most anyone but my folks. This means that maybe you two could see each other more often. Courtesy of Superman Express, of course," Clark suggested.

I couldn't help it. It was possibly the best idea I'd heard since Chad had dropped this bombshell on me yesterday. I got up and gave Clark a huge hug. Okay, so maybe he was trying to find a place for Chad to go, but seriously, I did sort of want him to go. Like he said, he could go and see how much like Metropolis it really was and then he'd move back here happily.

"You are the best friend ever," I said to Clark, and Chad laughed.

"I have to agree with Lois, Clark. This is really very generous of you," Chad said.

Clark shrugged. "It's not a big deal. Nothing I'm offering is that difficult for me. I do need to call my parents and check with them first, but I don't think it will be a problem."

"How close to the farmhouse is the cottage?" I asked, wondering if they wouldn't really like the idea of having a boarder.

"A couple of acres," Clark said. "You can't see one from the other."

Now that he said it that made sense. I hadn't noticed the cottage when we visited.

"Any idea who I could call about the residency?" Chad asked.

"I can ask Mom for the name of that doctor she said was seeing all the kids now. That would be the right place to start, right?" Clark asked.

Chad shrugged. "I guess if anyone would know, it would be him."

"Could you call her right now?" I asked. I knew I was being impatient, but part of what bothered me about this whole thing was feeling like my whole life was up in the air. If we could start to get this Smallville thing settled... I would definitely feel a lot better.

"Maybe he should do it from home," Chad suggested. "If Martha and Jonathan want to say no, they may not feel comfortable knowing we're here."

Clark laughed. "Trust me, if Mom wants to say no, you'll know it."

He moved over to our phone and dialed. "Hi, Dad," he said a moment later.

"No, nothing's really happened since we talked earlier, but I had a question for you and Mom. Sure."

He moved the phone away from his mouth to tell us, "He's getting Mom." A moment later, he turned back to the phone conversation.

"So, I was wondering how you guys would feel about me finally fixing up Nana and Papa's place?" he asked them.

Chad came over to put his arms around me. "Does this sound okay to you?" he asked, and I nodded my head.

"Well, there would be a price to pay," I heard Clark tell his parents. "A boarder for a little while." Clark flushed slightly. "Um... no. Actually, Chad."

I could tell Clark was feeling flustered for some reason, but I couldn't tell what his parents were saying about Chad staying in the cottage.

"Just for a few months, I think. She's okay," Clark said cautiously. "But Chad's always wanted to practice in a small town and just wants to see what it's like."

A few minutes later, he got off the phone.

"So?" Chad asked, holding me tightly from behind.

Clark smiled. "They'd be happy to have you stay there. Mom said no rent, but you'd be responsible for anything the cottage needed after I fix it up and maybe a few other random chores around the farm."

"No rent?" I asked.

"Nope. They don't need the money, and Chad isn't going to stay there long, probably. Right?" he asked.

"Right," Chad said, giving me a squeeze.

"So, it's not like the place is going to need a ton of work after he leaves, so they don't really care," Clark said.

"So, they're really okay with that?" Chad asked.

Clark smiled. "Well, when I first said something about a boarder, my Mom thought I was moving home, so I think they may have been a little disappointed, but..."

"I'm sorry, Clark," I said, and I was. I worried that he thought he was letting them down.

"Don't be," Clark smiled. "Mom was about to give me a lecture on being strong and sticking it out here. They want me to be happy. I think Dad would love it if what made me happy was running the farm, but he's not upset that it doesn't."

I smiled. "You're lucky."

"I know," Clark smiled back. "Oh, and Mom gave me the name and number of that doctor," Clark said, pulling the top piece of paper off the pad we kept near the phone. "Dr. Skeptel," he said as he passed the paper to Chad.

"Great," Chad said. "I'll call him tomorrow."

September 1994

"How are you?" Martha asked me as we took a walk around the property. Clark had finished fixing up the cottage a few

weekends ago, and we had taken Labor Day weekend as a good opportunity to move Chad. It was an easy move as he wasn't bringing any furniture — Martha had taken us to the K-Mart in town to pick up some things he could use while he was here since we didn't want to sink a lot of money into things we already owned in Metropolis.

Chad took the car since I didn't really need it in Metropolis, and by filling it up with his stuff and a few extra trips from Clark, we had gotten all his stuff here pretty quickly. While I had taken extra days off to account for the drive to Smallville, Clark was working, so he had left the unpacking to us. Which was only fair, I guess, since he wasn't moving. He was coming back tomorrow night to fly me back to Metropolis.

"I think I'm okay," I told Martha. This was my first chance to talk to her. Chad had called her several times — to thank her for giving Clark Dr. Skeptel's name, and to coordinate logistics about the move. I had wanted to call her — I felt I owed her a thank you or something, but I had spent most of the time before this weekend in denial. It felt like it all came together so suddenly.

"You can't really be okay," Martha said. "I've seen the way you two are together. There's no question that you'd rather be together than apart."

I gave her a wan smile. Unlike my mother, Martha was incredibly perceptive. I wasn't sure I wanted someone like that around right now. While I knew they both knew better, both Clark and Chad were playing along with my pretending that everything was fine. It didn't really surprise me that Martha was much blunter than her son.

"I still think it will all work out," I said as unbidden tears came to my eyes.

"Of course it will," Martha said, drawing me into her embrace. "What ever happens, Chad loves you. He wouldn't make any decisions without having you in mind," she reminded me. "But that doesn't mean it's not painful right now."

"But Clark and Rachel..." I started, but Martha pulled me closer, stroking my hair.

"I'll tell you a secret," Martha said. "I love Rachel. I think she was wonderful for Clark, and I was not one bit surprised that she was not bothered by his origins. Rachel is a good soul and I would have been lucky to have her as a daughter-in-law. I never thought I would, though. No matter how much they loved each other, I never once thought that they would go the distance."

I sniffled as I pulled back to look at her. "Why not?"

"They were too different. And because I know they love each other so much, I knew they wouldn't ask the other person to settle for them," Martha said. "I don't see that with you and Chad. I see you both *wanting* to settle for each other — because being together is better than being apart. You see each other as worth making compromises for."

"So you think we'll be together at the end of this?" I asked. "In Metropolis?"

"I don't know," Martha said. "But I think you will make the decision that is right for you as a couple and not two individuals. Remember that as long as they were together, Clark and Rachel never stopped being individuals — individuals that cared about each other, but still individuals. You and Chad are more than the sum of your parts — you're a family."

I nodded, wanting to thank her for her words, but not knowing how. Maybe I had needed someone to do that rather than ignore what I was really thinking.

"Thank you for doing this for us," I said softly as we turned back to the cottage. "For letting Chad stay here."

"It will be fun to have a young man around again," Martha smiled. "Trust me. Jonathan and I have a list a mile long with ways for Chad to earn his keep."

For the first time since we left Metropolis two days before, I laughed.

"You wouldn't last a day here," Chad teased me as he put the last of dinner on the table. "Martha said no one delivers to the farm. Not even pizza."

"Very funny," I said as I started putting things on my plate. "There's always take-out, you know."

Chad laughed, leaning over to kiss me softly. "I guess you are pretty resourceful."

"I can't believe we're doing this," I said softly.

"Hey," Chad chided me. "I thought we said none of that tonight."

"I know," I said as a tear fell down my cheek. "But still..."

Chad came over and picked me up to sit down on my chair with me in his lap. "I know," he said, burying his head in my hair. "This is the hardest thing I've ever done, but I do really think it will be good for us in the long run," he said.

I nodded to show I understood. "I love you," I said softly.

"I love *you*," Chad said, pulling away to look me in the eyes. "So much, Lois. So much. And you'll see. This won't be anything like when I was with Grandma and Grandpa. We'll see each other all the time. As often as Clark is willing to take us."

"What happens if things don't work out here?" I asked him.

"I mean, Ken made it sound like..."

"I know what Ken said," Chad interrupted. "But I'm not sure I believe him. They need more people working in peds there. I think he said that just so I wouldn't leave, but he'll take me back. If not, there are lots of other hospitals in Metropolis. Worst case, I stay here for a little longer than we planned and finish my residency and then apply for fellowships in Metropolis. It will work out, Lois. We'll make it work."

I nodded. We would make it work. We had to.

I heard a whoosh outside the cottage door and realized Clark had arrived. He didn't knock, though, and when I went to the window, I saw him walking towards the farmhouse. I guess he thought we'd come to him when we were ready to say goodbye.

"Clark's here?" Chad asked me softly.

I nodded. "I'm not ready yet," I whispered. I wasn't sure Chad would even be able to hear me, but he had moved behind me at the window to wrap his arms around me.

"There is nothing in this world that is as important to me as you are," Chad said softly.

"Then why are we here?" I asked. I hated myself for asking the question, for being that selfish, but I couldn't help it. As much as I understood Chad's need to be here, some small part of me was still sort of angry about it. I didn't want to be apart from my husband. Why did he want to be away from me?

Chad's hands turned me towards him. "I just need to do this, Lois. Just to see. You see that, don't you? If there was any way to try this without being away from you, I'd do it in an instant."

I nodded. "I do understand," I told him. "I just... I just don't want to be away from you."

"I don't want to be away from you either," he said. "You can't know how much this decision has torn me up. I didn't want to mention it to you for so long, but..."

"Chad, I don't think..." I stopped to take a breath through my tears. "I don't think I ever thanked you for living in Metropolis all of these years. For choosing to be with me when you could have gone directly to a small town."

Chad pulled me close to him. "It wasn't a sacrifice. Being near you is a blessing. I..." Chad pulled away to look at me. "I love you, Lois. Nothing is going to change that. I've loved you since we were sixteen years old. It's as much a part of me as this annoying cowlick," he said, pointing to his hair.

I smiled slightly.

"I got you something," he said as he let me go. He walked over to one of the drawers in the small bookcase we had gotten at

K-Mart yesterday. Perched on top of it was a small television set, the only luxury Chad had decided to give in and buy.

He handed me a small box and I opened it slowly. Inside was a small pendant on a box chain. The pendant was an oval shape — an opal surrounded by gold in the shape of a daisy. My eyes teared up as I looked at it.

“I got the opal as it’s your favorite,” Chad said softly as he removed the necklace from the box. “And the lady at the store said this chain was really strong so I thought it would be good for you. I know you try not to take chances, but...” Chad grinned at me and I smiled back. It was true. I did have a tendency to be a bit reckless sometimes.

“Thank you,” I said to him as he clasped the necklace around my neck.

“It’s for you to remember me by. Whenever you feel lonely, just look at it and remember I’m thinking of you. It will always be true, Lois. You’re never far from my thoughts.”

I nodded my head, tears falling down my cheeks for the third time that day.

“One more thing,” Chad said, and I giggled through my tears.

“Here,” he said, handing me a small, oddly shaped package. I looked at him quizzically. Inside was a stuffed Winnie-the-Pooh.

“It’s for at night,” Chad blushed. “When you’re sleeping without me, Pooh can be a replacement.”

“You think a stuffed animal could replace you?” I asked him.

“No,” he said. “I hope not, but maybe he can help?”

I nodded. “Thank you,” I said again.

“I’m going to miss you so much,” he said as he held me close.

“Me, too,” I said. I thought about Clark waiting in his parents’ house for us. How was I supposed to do this? How was I supposed to decide I was ready to say goodbye to my husband? I just wanted to hold him forever.

I pulled away a moment later knowing my face was a mess. “I should go wash my face before we go over to the Kent’s,” I said softly.

“Me, too,” Chad smiled at me, and I realized he had been crying too. For a second, I wanted to point that out to him. What were we doing? If being apart was making us both so miserable, why were we bothering?

I knew why he needed to do this, though, and I needed to stop asking him about it, and making him feel even guiltier than he obviously already did.

“Hi,” Martha said quietly as we entered the farmhouse. I knew my eyes were still red and a fast glance at Chad showed that his were, too, although I suspected Martha would have used that tone regardless.

“Hi,” Chad replied, and I nodded in response.

“I didn’t want to disturb you,” Clark said and he was looking at me with... pity? Empathy maybe? He did sort of know what this was like. Although, maybe it was selfish of me, but I thought it could never have been this hard for him and Rachel. As close as they were, they had never made the commitment to each other Chad and I had. As Martha had said, they never really made a family together.

“Thanks,” I said, smiling to show my appreciation. I could tell it didn’t reach my eyes, though.

“I think we’re ready,” Chad said. “Or at least as much as we can be.”

I moved to give Martha a hug. “I don’t expect to see you every time you visit,” she said as she hugged me back, “but stop by next weekend to let me know how you’re doing?”

I nodded. It was nice to have Martha as a surrogate mother, and I was happy once again that if we had to do this, Chad was able to stay with the Kents.

“Thank you again for letting Chad stay here,” I said as I

moved away from Martha, including Jonathan in my comment.

“It’s our pleasure,” Jonathan said, giving me a hug as well. “We’ll take care of your young man for you.” He grinned at me, and I found myself smiling back.

Clark gave his parents fast hugs as well and then did that weird guy thing where he and Chad shook hands that ended in a hug.

“Do you guys want another minute?” he asked us.

I shook my head. No more goodbyes. We needed to just do it.

“Okay then,” he said softly. “Ready?” he asked me.

I moved over to Chad and wrapped my arms tightly around him. “I’ll see you this weekend?”

He nodded against me. “And you’ll call me tonight right after Clark drops you off.”

I nodded as well and then we shared a fast... well maybe not so fast kiss.

I clutched Pooh to me tightly while Clark held me in his arms. I looked down as we took off, took in the form of my husband getting smaller and smaller as we gained altitude until I couldn’t see him anymore.

“Hi,” I said softly when the phone rang just moments after Clark dropped me off.

“I miss you,” Chad said into the receiver sounding sad.

“Maybe Clark could bring you back and you could go back in the morning?”

I laughed a little. It felt good to know he was already missing me as much as I missed him. “How is this going to work if we can’t spend a night apart?” I asked.

“It’s not going to work,” Chad said. “This was a stupid idea. I don’t work without you.”

I smiled even more. I felt badly for feeling sort of happy when Chad was so sad, but maybe I needed this — a reminder that Martha was right. Chad and I would come through this together in the end.

“Honey,” I said soothingly. “You need to try this. Just try it. You’re not doing it without me. I’m right here, supporting you, the way I always do. You just need to listen a little harder to hear me.”

Chad chuckled softly. “Thanks, baby. I needed that.”

He sighed and we settled into silence on the phone.

“Maybe we can fall asleep like this?” he suggested.

I yawned. “I’m not ready for bed yet.”

“Well, get ready. Go get into your comfy pajamas and get under the covers,” he suggested.

“And then call you back?”

“Call me back?” Chad asked. “No, stay on the phone with me while you get ready.”

“Are you ready for bed?” I asked. “It’s only ten o’clock there.”

“I’m still on Metropolis time,” Chad reminded me.

I made sure the door was locked and headed upstairs.

“Where are you?” Chad asked.

“I’m making my way upstairs.” I giggled.

A few moments later, I was in bed, Pooh snuggled up to my side. “He’s a poor replacement,” I said to Chad.

“Sh... Don’t let him hear that!” he admonished me, and I laughed. We settled into silence once more.

I awoke a half hour later to hear Chad’s even breathing on the other end of the line.

“Honey?” I asked quietly.

“Hmmm...” he asked sleepily.

“We should probably get off,” I said.

“Off?” he mumbled. “Lois, move closer,” he said, and I giggled.

“Chad, I’m not there.”

There was silence for a second and then sounding more

awake, Chad said, “Oh, I forgot.”

“We should go,” I repeated.

“Yeah,” he said. “I love you, Lois.”

“I love you, too.”

I hung up the phone, turned out the light, and held Pooh as tightly as I could until I fell back asleep.

October 1994

It had been six weeks since Chad had moved to Smallville, and I was settling into the new norm. I didn’t like it as much as the old one, but I was getting used to it.

We saw each other often — Clark was true to his word and flew us to see each other almost every weekend. The only problem was that Chad was busy at the hospital and had pretty much no days off so I had done all the travel. This meant that when we didn’t see each other for a weekend, this was more often because Clark and I had work to do at the Planet than because Clark couldn’t take me for some reason.

I was lucky to have Clark for a friend. In addition to the travel, he came over often to make sure I was okay, and he made me dinner at least once or twice a week. In fact, if he hadn’t, I probably would have been fat already. My eating habits had really declined with Chad gone, and not wanting to order in every night, I had regressed to my old college diet of mac-n-cheese (only I bought the good kind in the blue box now, rather than the store brand) and Ramen noodles. Between that and copious amounts of chocolate, I was not eating quite as healthily as I had been when Chad was here.

Clark had taken to being my personal nutritionist, though, and seeing my eating habits, had taken to making me healthy dinners. It was depressing. I missed the times he brought fish and chips by, but now he insisted I had enough fat in my diet. I found this a little rich coming from someone who could easily eat a box of yodels for lunch, but it was true that I had to worry about these things and he didn’t. Duck, too, was out as apparently it was a very fatty meat — no wonder it tasted so good!

Still, I couldn’t complain. Clark’s meals of chicken and vegetables were good, and he made a mean pasta sauce. He had tried to pass fruit off as dessert one too many times, but I had cured him of that.

Besides, with the evenings to myself, I had more time to exercise. I have to admit, I didn’t use it that way at first. The first couple of weeks, I moved around living the same type of life I had when Chad was around, just without him. Eventually, though, I had settled into my own routine and realized that without Chad there, who always wanted dinner at six o’clock, I could get a good work-out in before dinner. I was perfectly happy to eat at seven or eight.

I had settled into the life Clark had talked about, and he was right — Chad and I had fought once or twice when I visited and I wasn’t ready to eat at six. That was the weird part. It was actually easier to settle into a routine on my own than it had been to settle into one with Chad when I visited. I missed him so much, but it was true, we fought more than we had before. I often felt superfluous at the cottage and in the way. Chad insisted that wasn’t true, and I believed him, but the truth was that I didn’t fit in there.

The knock at the door startled me. With a sigh, I got up to answer it. “Hi,” I said, smiling brighter when I realized it was Clark. “Did you come to make me dinner?”

Clark laughed as he came inside. “Is that all I’m good for?”

“Well, no,” I assured him. “I also need you for the fast, free flights to Smallville.”

“Very cute, Lois. Very cute.”

“So no dinner then?”

“You are persistent, aren’t you?” Clark grinned at me. “No, I was actually in the mood for some macaroni and cheese tonight,

so I thought I’d let you make it.”

“Are you sure about that?” I asked him.

“I’ve seen your mac and cheese,” he assured me. “It seems that you can measure butter and milk okay.”

I pulled two boxes out of the pantry, certain that, like Chad, Clark could eat one on his own. “So, you came over here so I’d make you dinner?” I asked.

“Well, no. I came over here as I thought you might like the company,” he said.

“I could. I was wallowing,” I admitted. “Not sure why, though.”

“It’s hard to be apart,” Clark said quietly.

“Yeah.”

“I talked to Rachel today,” Clark mentioned.

I nodded while I measured out the milk.

“She said she had lunch with Chad today. I guess we’re all going to go to dinner this weekend,” Clark told me.

“You’re staying?” I asked. Clark often visited his parents when he dropped me off at the farmhouse, but rarely hung around for the weekend.

“Well, I wasn’t planning to, but I guess I am now.”

“Will it be weird?” I asked. “To have lunch with Rachel?”

Clark shrugged. “I don’t know. I hope not. I want to be friends with her, and if I only talk to her on the phone, then I’m not really doing that.”

“You’re a good guy, Clark Kent,” I said as I placed a bowl of macaroni and cheese in front of him.

“Why, thanks, Lois,” he smiled at me. “It’s good of you to notice.”

“Is there someplace else that can go?” Chad asked me.

“What?” I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Your laptop. Does it have to go there?”

“On the desk?” I asked. It seemed like a reasonable place to put it to me.

“On *my* desk,” Chad corrected.

“Well, I don’t have a desk here,” I pointed out, starting to get annoyed.

“Of course you don’t have a desk here. You don’t live here!” Chad pointed out.

“So, this is your place?” I asked.

Chad looked at me like I had two heads. “Well, yes.”

“And the place in Metropolis?”

“Well,” Chad appeared to consider the question for a moment. “It’s ours.”

“So this place is yours and the place there is ours?” I asked.

“Yes,” Chad answered, clearly not understanding what was bothering me.

“So you have two homes and I have one? And when you visit me in Metropolis, if you ever do, this won’t be a problem as you’ll fit in there, but here I need to make sure I don’t overstep my bounds since I’m just a guest?” I asked, nearly yelling.

“Don’t be unreasonable, Lois! This place is smaller than the one in Metropolis!” Chad insisted, yelling as well now.

“Aside from the extra bedroom, this is still bigger than the apartment that we shared in college. And Lucy lived with us,” I pointed out.

“That was different.”

“It was different because you wanted me there,” I said, feeling the tears building. I often cried when I was annoyed, and I hated it. It somehow always seemed to diminish the impact of my anger.

“I want you here, too,” Chad said, his tone softer, but I was not appeased.

“As long as I don’t take up any room!” I said, swiping angrily at my cheeks. “I’m not even sure why I bother visiting!”

I walked into the farmhouse to find it all quiet. I took a seat in the living room anyway, and a minute later, Martha came in from upstairs.

“Oh, Lois. I thought you were... Are you okay?” she asked, putting down the basket of laundry she was holding.

I nodded. “We just got into a fight,” I said, swiping at my cheeks again.

“It’ll get easier,” she said, sitting beside me and putting a hand on my arm. “Over time, you’ll figure out the new boundaries.”

“Did this happen with you and Jonathan?” I asked.

Martha sighed. “We’ve never tried to live apart,” she admitted. “But this was what it was like the first time you moved in together, right?”

“It was different then,” I said, and Martha pulled me towards her.

We sat there in silence for a few minutes before the door opened. I didn’t move from my position leaning against Martha, but I saw Chad come in and walk towards me.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

Martha pulled away from me gently and quietly picked up her laundry and left the room. Chad stayed where he was, crouching down in front of me.

“You’re right,” he said. “I’m not being fair. I do see this place as mine and the place in Metropolis as ours, but not because I want to have two places while you have one. I just want to have something that is ours. I think I need that, Lois. Some real connection that I can point to and say, we are as together as we’ve always been.”

I nodded to show I understood, although I thought he was still avoiding the real problem — which was my place here, not his in Metropolis.

Chad bowed his head but took my hands in his. “I know I need to make more room for you here. It just seems hard to do when you aren’t here that often. I’m not saying that’s your fault,” he rushed to add when he saw me start to protest. “But it’s true. I’m mostly here alone, and so it’s easy to use all the space here for me. But that’s going to change now, Lois. I promise. Come home with me, please?”

“We’ll find a space for me?” I asked, lifting his chin so I could see his face. His apology was all over it.

He nodded. “I want you to fit in here. I don’t want to ever be anywhere where there’s not room for you, too.”

I leaned forward to kiss him softly.

This time I knocked on the farmhouse door. Martha answered it and smiled broadly at the sight of Chad and me holding hands on her porch. “Clark’ll be down in a second. Come on in,” she said.

Chad and I came in and took seats at the kitchen table. The kitchen was full of good smells as Martha prepared dinner. “What are you eating tonight?” Chad asked, and I could tell that like me, he was wondering if we should ditch Clark and Rachel for dinner.

“Oh, Jonathan just got some blood work done that shows he’s done a good job of lowering his cholesterol, so I’m making him a treat. Fried chicken with mashed potatoes and gravy,” Martha said as she checked on something in the oven.

“Maybe we should just eat here,” Clark said as he came downstairs.

Martha shook her head at him, smiling. “I made this for Rachel. You’ll bring it over?” she asked as she handed him a casserole dish.

“Mom, you have to stop feeding all of Smallville,” Clark said as he reached for the dish and kissed his mother on the cheek.

“I’m not feeding all of Smallville. Rachel is part of this family. Regardless of how things worked out for the two of you, she was too good to us all for too many years for me to forget

that. Besides, aside from those of us in this house, she’s the only one who knows your secret and that’s a bond nothing else can break,” Martha gently scolded him.

“You’re right, Mom,” Clark smiled. “And I’m glad you’re still looking out for her.”

“Besides,” Martha said as she turned to stir the gravy, “I saw her in town the other day and she looked like she’d lost a little weight.”

“I thought so, too,” Chad said.

“Do you think she’s okay?” Clark asked, and the concern was clear on his face.

“It wasn’t that much,” Chad said.

“I know your body is impervious to food, Clark, but Rachel’s is not. And as you well know, Rachel tends not to eat when she’s upset. I’m sure this has been a tough adjustment for her,” Martha said.

“I should have called her more or visited,” Clark said, the self-recrimination coming through loud and clear.

“That’s not true, Clark. You need some time apart to adjust to the new status quo,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t hard for Rachel.”

Clark nodded his head, but still looked unconvinced. “Let’s go,” he said softly as we went back out to the yard. Chad had suggested we drive so Clark didn’t need to borrow his parents’ car.

“Clark, I’m sure she’s just a little depressed. That’s normal,” I said as we piled into the car.

“I know,” he said quietly, but he didn’t say anything else the rest of the way over to Rachel’s.

“Hey,” Rachel said, smiling brightly as she came to meet us in her driveway. She did look a little thinner than last time I had seen her, but not alarmingly so.

She gave us each hugs, Clark’s a little longer than strictly necessary. “Mom sent this for you,” he said as he pulled the casserole dish from the hood of the car.

She opened the lid and sniffed. “Your mom makes the best bread pudding. Tell her I said thank you, and I’ll drop the dish off next time I’m out there.”

“Is there anything your mom doesn’t make the best of?” I asked Clark.

“Nope,” he and Rachel said in unison.

“So, are we ready?” I asked after Rachel had moved the dish inside and joined us on the porch.

“Maisie’s?” she asked.

Clark shrugged and I just waited, because what did I know about places to go in Smallville?

“What about the new Asian place?” Chad asked.

“Did Barb and Evan finally open it up?” Clark asked.

“Two weeks ago,” Rachel said. “I heard it’s pretty good.”

“What kind of Asian?” I asked.

“I don’t think they know,” Chad laughed as we all got into the car.

“Barb and Evan saved up for their dream trip to Asia about six years ago now,” Clark said.

“They were gone for a month and explored China, India, Thailand, I can’t remember all the places they went,” Rachel added.

“And since they got back, they’ve been wanting to open a restaurant with all the different foods they had. Smallville didn’t have any Asian food at all here before that,” Chad said. “They took classes over in Kansas City for a couple of years, making sure they knew how to cook all the food and just opened up.”

“How do you know this?” I asked Chad.

He shrugged. “Their neighbor, Bill, brought his little girl in the other day and he mentioned it. I decided to give the restaurant a try and ended up chatting with Barb.”

"Was something wrong with Daisy?" Clark asked.
 "What's not wrong with Daisy?" Rachel laughed. "That child can get herself into more trouble than anyone I know."
 Chad laughed. "Yeah. She had... brace yourself, swallowed one of Barbie's shoes."

We all laughed, and Clark asked, "But she was okay?"
 "She was fine," Chad said. "Just scared. Her dad had found her swallowing the second one — she didn't like the idea of the pair being separated."

"How old is she?" I asked between giggles.
 "Four or five," Rachel said, giggling as well.

"How are you, really?" I heard Clark ask. I had gone to the bathroom while we waited for dessert. I guess Clark and Rachel forgot as they had chosen to talk in the hallway outside the bathroom. I didn't really want to listen in... well, I did sort of, but I knew I shouldn't, but I also didn't want to disturb them.

"I'm fine," Rachel responded, but not convincingly. "I miss you," she said a minute later.

"I miss you, too," Clark said, his voice soft. "So much sometimes."

"But this is the right decision," Rachel said, her voice sad. "I know it is, even if it hurts now."

I didn't hear anything else for a moment, but when I opened the bathroom door a minute later, they were standing there, holding each other tightly.

"So," I asked Clark over lunch on Monday. "What's with you and Rachel?"

"What?" Clark choked on the bite of sandwich he had just taken.

"I saw you two at the restaurant last night," I told him. "You looked all cozy after your talk."

Clark laughed lightly. "Lois, you are too nosy for your own good."

"What does that mean?" I asked, looking at him suspiciously. He was trying to squirm out of answering my question.

"Aside from the fact that it's none of your business?" Clark asked, his eyes gleaming with laughter.

"Yes, aside from that," I said.

Clark sighed. "It was nothing. There's nothing going on with us. I miss her. She misses me. We still love each other. But nothing's changed. We both know that we're better off living where we are, and if that's the case, we can't be together. But we can't turn our emotions off like a faucet."

"So the hug in the restaurant was a mistake?" I asked.

"A mistake?" Clark asked, looking at me like I had two heads. "I can't imagine any situation where giving Rachel a hug is a mistake. She's someone I care about very much, and I can't imagine that ever not being the case. It wasn't like we kissed in the restaurant, Lois!"

I sighed. I had clearly hit a sore spot. "It was just a very... intimate sort of hug," I tried to explain, keeping my voice low in the hopes of calming Clark down.

"We're getting there," Clark said. "This is an adjustment for us. But Lois, Rachel is always going to be one of my closest friends. Like Mom said, she knows my secret. That makes her family."

"It's still different," I insisted. "I know you're secret, and I'm one of your closest friends. You wouldn't give me a hug like that."

"I would if you needed it," Clark said definitively, and I could tell that he felt the conversation was over.

November 1994

"I'm sorry, sweetie," I said into the phone while trying to keep both hands free for typing. "It really feels like this

investigation is going to blow wide open any day now."

"You said that last weekend," Chad said sadly.

"I know," I told him.

"And the one before that," he pointed out.

I sighed. "I'm sorry that things got so busy. You know, Clark would be happy to come get you and you could spend the weekend here," I said. I could hear that my voice was a bit snippy, but didn't care.

"What's the point if you're going to be busy?" he asked me.

"We could still have dinner together or something," I pointed out.

"I can't anyway. I have to..."

"Why is it that you think I should come there when you have to work but you can't come here when I have to work?" I cut him off.

"Lois, that's not what..."

"It's not?" I demanded.

He sighed. "Lois..."

"What?" I snapped at him, and flushed slightly when I noticed Ralph give me a look.

"Maybe we shouldn't talk right now," Chad said.

"Fine!" I slammed down the phone.

I stared at the computer screen for a minute, but could not recall at all what the article I was writing was about. My vision blurred as tears filled my eyes, but I promised myself I would not cry in the newsroom.

I felt hands on my shoulders giving me a gentle massage, but kept my head faced at my computer screen.

"Maybe I could take you to Smallville after work?" Clark whispered in my ear. "You could have dinner with Chad and then come back?"

I didn't say anything, still afraid I might cry. Clark's hands disappeared from my shoulders and he spun my chair around. He took my hand and pulled me from my chair.

I followed him out of the newsroom. Once we were in the hallway, he pulled me to him and I allowed myself to cry. Okay, so maybe he wasn't lying that day when he said he would give me a hug like the one he had given Rachel if I needed it.

"It's just because you haven't seen each other in awhile," Clark said. "A few hours tonight will probably help."

I nodded against his chest. "I just miss him so much."

"I know," Clark said quietly.

I pulled away slightly. "I'm going to go wash my face," I told Clark without looking at him. I'm sure I was a mess.

When I got back to the newsroom a few minutes later, Clark was on the phone at my desk. I gave him a quizzical look. "I answered it for you," he said as I came over. "I thought it might be Chad." He handed me the receiver.

"Hello?" I asked quietly.

"When I said we shouldn't talk right now, that didn't mean I didn't want to talk," Chad said quietly. "Just that maybe we weren't in the right place to talk. We were just arguing in circles."

I nodded my head as I noticed Clark going back to his desk. Then I realized Chad couldn't hear me. "I know," I said quietly. "I'm sorry I got so upset."

I could hear the smile in Chad's voice when he replied. "I didn't notice over my own annoyance. Lois, it's just been so long since I've been able to hold you."

"I know," I told him, glancing at the opal hanging around my neck. "Clark said he'd bring me by for dinner tonight. Are you off?"

"I'm on call, but I can call Damien and ask him to cover for me for a couple of hours. It's not like we get any calls anyway," Chad told me.

"Okay," I sniffled. "I think we can probably leave around six since we're working all weekend and early mornings tomorrow and Friday. So, as long as Clark doesn't have something else to

take care of...”

“I’ll turn the news on, so no need to call me if you’ll be late,” Chad said. This had been a problem in the past. We tried to keep mentions of Clark taking me to Smallville to a minimum in case someone in the newsroom heard us, but the truth was most of the planning discussions seemed to happen when I was here rather than home.

So once or twice, I had not called Chad to tell him I was going to be late, not wanting to draw attention to the times Clark was missing and Superman was doing a rescue. Until recently, Chad had not considered listening to the news to see if Clark would be busy.

“Okay, I’ll see you in a couple of hours,” I told Chad.

“Okay. I love you, Lois,” Chad said softly.

“I love you, too.”

Clark placed me on the ground softly. “I’m going to have dinner with Mom and Dad,” he told me. “Just come get me when you’re ready.”

I nodded as I made my way to the door of the cottage. I had been thinking about this all day and was nervous. I’m not sure why, but I couldn’t help it.

“Hey,” Chad said with a smile as he opened the door. “You’re earlier than I expected.”

“I am?” I asked as I came inside and Chad moved behind me to take my coat off.

“Yeah. I saw the Superman thing on the news,” Chad said, my coat now on the ground and his arms around me.

“It didn’t take as long as Clark thought it might, and I was ready to go as soon as he got back,” I said, turning in Chad’s arms.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Chad whispered against my neck.

“Me, too,” I said.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” Chad said as he moved to pull my shirt up over my head.

“Me, too,” I mumbled against his chest.

“Less talking?” Chad laughed.

“Definitely.”

“This is so good,” I said as I wiped my mouth.

Chad smiled. “I admit. I spent all afternoon cooking once I knew you were coming. I barely cook anymore. It seems so worthless for just me.”

“So you never cook?” I asked. “What do you eat?” He hadn’t mentioned this before, not even when I mentioned that my eating habits had gone downhill.

“I do cook, but only maybe twice when you aren’t here. Both times were to bring things over to Martha and Jonathan. Martha brings things by for me all the time, so I like to occasionally bring her something,” Chad said. “Otherwise, I eat cereal. Sometimes pancakes for dinner,” he mused.

“You eat pancakes for dinner?” I asked, smiling.

“Hey. It’s better than chocolate covered pretzels,” Chad teased me.

“I haven’t had chocolate covered pretzels for dinner since you left,” I insisted.

“Double Fudge Crunch bars?” he asked.

“Nope.”

“Ice cream?”

“No,” I laughed.

“Popcorn?” Chad suggested.

“Hey. Popcorn is healthy. Sort of.”

“So you have had popcorn for dinner?” he repeated.

“Maybe once or twice,” I mumbled.

Chad smiled, leaning over to push a strand of hair out of my eyes. “I love having you here,” he whispered.

“I know,” I said. I knew what I should say was that I loved

being there, but it wasn’t strictly true. I loved being with Chad, but I was sure I’d prefer it if he’d come see me in Metropolis. It was becoming increasingly clear, though, that Chad was happy here.

“So, tell me more about your job,” I said. In the months since Chad had moved here he had spoken a lot about small-town life, but little about his job. I think the day-to-day stuff was a bigger adjustment so he spoke about it more but the impetus for being here was supposed to be for his job.

“It’s great,” Chad said, and to my chagrin, his face lit up when he said it. “It’s so much more relaxing than Metropolis. I think... in some ways it may not be the best experience,” Chad admitted. “But I just don’t care. I think between my rotations in med school and the year I spent doing my residency in Metropolis, if I ever wanted to move back to the big city, I could make the case for having the experience, but I’m just learning so much more here.”

I caught his words — ‘if I *ever* want to move back to the big city’ — but decided not to mention them. This conversation wasn’t about that. Still, I filed it away mentally. I could see that this was heading exactly where I feared it might.

“You’re learning more here than in Metropolis?” I asked.

Chad nodded. “It’s just different. I mean, the complicated stuff does go to Wichita, but I’ve been going up there a couple of days a week to make sure I don’t miss anything. Damien has some contacts up there and explained my situation. While not anything like Metropolis General, the hospital there is much bigger and busier, and they appreciate my help.”

“I didn’t know you were going up there,” I said, feeling sad that I was missing so much of his life.

Chad shrugged. “I guess it didn’t seem like that big a deal. Damien was pretty clear when I got here that I wouldn’t really get the best education just staying at the Smallville hospital. The Wichita thing was supposed to be sort of informal at first, but it’s sort of grown.”

“So, now you have set days of the week you go up there?” I asked.

“Well, sort of. I often go up on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but the doctor I’m working with there, Gil, will call me if something especially interesting is happening another day so I can come up. I’ve gone up every day for a few days when one of our patients was sent there. Damien loves it. He hates having to travel and this way, I can cover for him.”

“How far away is it?” I asked.

“A little over an hour,” Chad said.

“How often do you have a patient there?” I asked him.

Chad shrugged. “Not often. There just aren’t that many kids in Smallville. So far, just the one I told you about last month.”

“Kate?” I asked, trying to remember her name.

“Carol,” Chad corrected.

“And she’s recovered from the bug she had?” I asked.

“Yup. She probably didn’t really need to go to Wichita, but they have so many more resources there than we have here, we wanted to make sure we weren’t missing anything.”

“It must be scary to be told you need to send your kid somewhere else. Makes them seem sicker,” I said.

Chad nodded. “I think it did for Abby and Mike, but in the end they were glad. It didn’t take long for them to figure out what was wrong with Carol and that’s what was most important to them.”

I nodded my head. “And emergency room shifts here?” I asked, although I knew he had far fewer of them.

“They’re easier here,” Chad said. “I mean, first off, since there’s no formal residency program here, there’s less a feeling of my being slave labor. So, sure I need to cover the ER, but that’s mostly as things are so slow here there are no ER docs so we all do. It just feels different. More like I’m part of a team, you

know?”

I nodded. I did know. I couldn't honestly say I was happy to hear him talk about his job in such glowing terms, but I did understand why he was happy.

“The best part of being here, though,” Chad said, “is Damien. I mean all the doctors are great, but Damien... He's so different from Ken!”

I smiled. “Small town hospitality?”

“Maybe,” Chad smiled back. “And more of the feeling about residents not being slave labor, but he just seems so much more concerned with making sure I'm learning all I should and all I want to rather than using me for whatever he can.”

“That really is great, Chad,” I said softly.

“Yeah,” he said. “It is nice to be able to truly feel like I'm learning while taking care of patients.” He leaned over to pick me up and put me on his lap. “And what about you? Aside from the investigation this week, you've been pretty quiet about work,” he mentioned.

I shrugged. “I'm not starting a new career,” I told him as I leaned my head on his shoulder. “Work's the same as always.”

Chad sighed as he rested his head on mine. “I know, but... I feel like we're losing something, you know? All the stuff we just talked about — isn't it weird that we never did before? And I know so little about what you're currently working on. I miss telling you the minutiae of my day. I feel like we often only hit the high points now,” he said sadly.

“Me, too,” I agreed.

“It's weird,” Chad said softly. “When I'm going about my day, I often think of things in terms of how I'll tell them to you later, but then... I just often don't.”

“I know,” I nodded. It was true. I spent more time talking to Chad in my head now than I did in real life. That was why... I took a deep breath.

“Chad, I know this isn't the best time for this conversation, but since I'm not coming this weekend, I guess... I just wanted to say this. Give us time to think about it before we have a chance to talk about it.”

“What?” Chad asked, and I could tell he was alarmed.

“I don't...” I picked my head up off his shoulder. I couldn't decide if it was better to look at him when I said this or to touch him. I put my head back down as I realized I couldn't look in his eyes while I said this. “Chad, I don't think this is working.”

“Are you okay?” Clark asked as he set me down in an alley near the apartment.

I nodded. I knew I had been quiet during the ride home and ignoring the sights. I normally loved flying with Clark, so it wasn't surprising that he hadn't missed my behavior. Despite that, I wasn't ready to talk about it yet. There were so many thoughts going through my head, I wasn't sure I'd be able to sort them out to explain anyway.

“Thanks, Clark,” I told him as we reached my door and I opened the lock.

“I'm sorry, Lois,” he whispered.

I smiled at him slightly, shaking my head. “For what? You've been great. This is just hard.”

Clark nodded to show he understood before I closed the door. I peeled my shoes and socks off as soon as I got in the door. I wanted to shower desperately. It was completely ridiculous — showering wasn't going to change anything. I wanted some distance from the conversation we had just had anyway, though.

I realized now that I shouldn't have said anything yet. I just scared him. Chad had been so sure that I was saying I couldn't be with him anymore and I wasn't. When I said it wasn't working, I hadn't meant our marriage. I meant living half a continent apart from each other. I did tell him that, but it was like once I had said the scary words, Chad had a hard time getting past my first

sentence.

I couldn't stop picturing his face in my mind. He looked so hurt. Showering was not providing the distance I had sought. I felt like I had brought Chad in here with me — and not in a good way.

Still, I did really think it was a good idea to think about this before we talked. We had options. None of them were ideal, but we did have them. I wanted time to think them through rationally and I wasn't sure we could do that together. I sighed as I dried off. How were we going to do this?

“Lois,” Clark called, and I realized this was not the first time he had called my name.

“Sorry,” I said, but I think it was patently obvious that I wasn't sorry.

Clark laughed lightly. “Are you here today? Maybe I should have taken you to Smallville anyway.”

“Very funny,” I said with a weak smile. “I'm sorry. I'm just... What were you saying?”

Clark sighed. “I'm just trying to determine what to make of this mess of paper. I'm not sure what is useful here and what isn't.”

I nodded my understanding, but my mind was elsewhere. Had I ruined Chad's day, too? Was he trying to think through how we were going to get through this, or was he still convinced that I was saying I didn't want to be with him anymore?

That wasn't what I was saying, was it? No, I'm sure it wasn't. I wanted to be with Chad — whatever it took.

Whatever it took? What if it meant giving up my job here and moving to Smallville?

“Lois!” Clark called, and I could tell he was starting to get annoyed.

“I'm sorry,” I said, putting my head down on my desk. “I can't do this today. I know this is lousy timing, but Clark, I can't. My marriage is falling apart.”

“What?” Clark put his papers down and came over to sit in my guest chair. He put his hand on my arm and looked like the research he had been doing was now the last thing on his mind. “What's going on?”

“I don't know,” I told him, hearing the tears in my voice. “I just... I can't keep doing this. I feel so disconnected from Chad. Did you know he was going to Wichita twice a week?” Clark shook his head. “Neither did I. My husband is going to another hospital twice a week and I had no idea. How does that happen?”

“I'm sorry,” Clark said softly. “We have been busy.”

“It's not just that,” I insisted. “I've been busy before. I've still found time to talk to Chad. It's just... when we're in the same house it's easy to talk over dinner or while getting ready for bed at night. We haven't been very good at this new thing where we carve time out to talk each night.”

“That can be difficult, but you get used to it,” Clark said.

“I don't want to get used to it!” I practically yelled, and then took a deep breath. Clark was only a few feet away and the newsroom was empty on this Saturday afternoon. There was no need to shout. “I don't want to get used to it,” I repeated more quietly.

“What is it you want to do?” Clark asked me.

I shrugged. “I have no idea. Any suggestions?”

December 1994

One look at him and I could tell Chad had not been sleeping any better than I had.

“Hi,” he said quietly, and with none of the surprise I might have expected given that I hadn't told him I was coming by tonight. After spending the weekend going around in circles, I realized I needed to see Chad. My original idea of thinking this over independently didn't make sense. We had to discuss this and

make this decision as a couple as we always had in the past.

“Hi,” I replied, my greeting not any more energetic than Chad’s had been.

“I wasn’t expecting you tonight,” he said.

“I know. I felt like we had to talk. Is this a bad time?”

Chad sank onto the couch and placed his head in his hands. “You need to ask? You need to ask if this is a bad time for us to talk?” he asked me. Even from the door I could see that his eyes were covered with tears. “Lois, you are my wife. You are the most important person in my life. I...” He paused and took a deep breath. “There’s never a bad time for you to talk to me. I can’t believe we’ve really gotten to a point where you feel the need to ask.”

I nodded, the tears in my eyes falling to my cheeks as I did. “I know. I... It just felt like an appropriate question,” I said as I came over to sit beside him.

Chad moved over to wrap me in his arms. “I know,” he said quietly into my hair.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I thought it would be helpful to think things through separately, but I realize now that I was wrong. I never meant to upset you. I never meant that I don’t want to be with you anymore,” I said, tears now streaming down my cheeks.

“I know,” Chad said, pulling away to brush my tears away. “I know that’s not what you meant. You just... took me by surprise.” He pulled me close to him again. “I knew that this was hard on you — as hard as it was on me. For some reason I still didn’t expect you to decide things had to change so fast.”

“I feel like we’re drifting further and further apart,” I admitted. “I’m afraid of what will happen if we wait.”

“Me, too,” Chad said, sighing as he held me tighter.

I pulled away. “I’m going to wash my face and then maybe we can try to talk through this? Together?”

Chad nodded. “I’ll come with you,” he smiled, pointing to his own tear-stained face.

Five minutes later we were on the couch. Chad had put chocolate ice cream into two bowls, topped with chocolate sauce and whipped cream. For fortitude, he said.

“Okay,” Chad said. “This arrangement isn’t working.” I could tell he was trying not to get emotional, and I appreciated it. There was no way I would be able to refrain from crying if he started again.

“But we have lots of options,” I said.

“Such as?” Chad asked, grinning at me. I knew he always found it funny that I tried to solve things by making lists. It was a tactic he employed, too, but due to my habit of getting bogged down in details, I often got waylaid doing this and Chad found it funny. This time I was committed to not doing that. I was going to stay on track, and we were going to work through things.

“Well, one option — we keep doing what we’re doing and assume we’ll come out okay in the end,” I said.

Chad nodded.

“Or you move back to Metropolis,” I said slowly. This was clearly the best option for me, but I already was very clear on the fact that it was not the best option for Chad.

Chad nodded again, but did not tell me that this was out of the question which surprised me.

“I could move here,” I said hesitantly, watching his face closely. I was ready for it to light up like a Christmas tree, but he remained impassive.

“Or we could try to find someplace else. Some mid-sized town where the hospital system would be more like here, but the town would be... more interesting than Smallville,” I finished lamely.

Chad laughed. “Smallville is not that boring.” He smiled at me. “But I know what you mean. I read the Smallville Press at the hospital, and it’s not exactly chock full of the types of stories

you really like to write.” His smile slowly disappeared as he started to concentrate on the task at hand. “So,” he said after a pause. “Pros and cons of each option?”

I nodded. “Should we be writing this down?” I asked.

Chad shook his head. “I don’t think so. I think we can do this without it turning into some sort of homework assignment. So, pros of doing what we’re doing,” he started us off.

“You love your job,” I said.

“And you love yours,” Chad pointed out.

“The Kents,” I said, smiling. It was weird that they counted as a positive, but they did. “All of them,” I added. “Clark and his parents.”

Chad smiled. “Yeah, they are great, aren’t they? It is one negative about the option you didn’t mention — where I move to a different small city closer to Metropolis, but we continue to live apart.”

I shook my head. “Given how fast Clark can transport us and how great it is for you to be able to stay here rent free, that doesn’t make much sense.”

Chad nodded to show his agreement.

“Similarly, I think the idea of my moving to Wichita or Kansas City doesn’t make sense either,” I said. “While I’m sure the papers are closer to the Daily Planet than the Smallville Press, we can’t really ask Clark to come get me there and take me here.”

Chad looked up. “It is an option, though. I go to Wichita twice a week.”

“I don’t want to only see you twice a week,” I said. “Con number one for both that idea and keeping things as they are.”

“I think the option of keeping things as they are is out anyway,” Chad said. “It puts our marriage at risk too much. I don’t want to come out of this loving my job but having lost you.”

“Me neither,” I said, hearing the tears I’d done such a good job of staving off coming on.

“More ice cream?” Chad asked me with a slight grin.

“No,” I said, putting a big spoonful into my mouth. I got whip cream on my lip, Chad started laughing, and my tears dried up.

“Okay,” Chad said. “So we’ve eliminated that option.”

I nodded. “And I think we should eliminate all options of us moving closer together, but not living together as they’re too similar to what we currently have. With Clark at our disposal, the distance just isn’t an issue.”

Chad smiled. “At least as long as he’s willing to do that.”

“But all the options we have left don’t include free trips on the Superman Express,” I pointed out.

“Okay,” Chad said, taking a breath. “I move back to Metropolis. Obvious pro, we’re together.”

“And we’ve decided that’s the most important thing,” I said.

“Definitely,” Chad agreed.

“The biggest con is that you go back to a job you hate,” I said.

“I could move to a different hospital maybe,” Chad said.

“Would it really be that different?” I asked.

“Probably not, but you’d get to keep a job that you love.” Chad smiled.

“And my moving here is the same thing, except that you get the job that you love, and I move to one that I’m not sure I’d like,” I said.

“And you’d need to learn to cook,” Chad teased me.

“Very funny,” I said. “So, mid-sized town?”

Chad sighed. “Would that really work, or would that just be both of us unhappy in the hopes of being happy?”

I shrugged.

“It’s not like you don’t know the answer, Lois,” Chad chided me. “Do you not remember what you say about the Union-Trib whenever we visit Lucy?”

"It's okay," I said softly. In reality, I've moaned whenever I was out there. The San Diego Union-Tribune was an okay paper, but in some ways it was worse than the Smallville Press. At least the Smallville Press doesn't try to pass itself off as a global paper. You know if you live in Smallville and you want world news you need to buy the Planet. Or if you're stupid, the New York Times. But the Trib actually tries to pass itself off as being a competitor with the Planet. As if.

Chad raised an eyebrow at me knowingly.

"Okay," I smiled. "Maybe the paper wouldn't be as good."

"And we've been to the hospital there," Chad reminded me. "When Ethan broke his arm."

"I know, but that was just..." I trailed off. I was about to point out it was just the ER and the pediatrics unit, since Lucy's son, Ethan, was less than two at the time, but then I realized how stupid that was. Was there another area of the hospital Chad would care about? "You're right. The hospital was only slightly less crazy than Met General."

Chad sighed. "So, what do we do?"

I put my bowl down and moved over to him, snuggling against his side. "I think it's time for me to move here."

"What?" Chad asked, clearly surprised.

"I think I should move to Smallville."

"Lois, that's crazy!" Chad said. "You wouldn't be happy."

"Maybe I would be," I insisted. "You were happy for a few years in Metropolis, right? Maybe I'm not giving Smallville a fair chance."

"Lois," Chad said, but I could tell he was weakening.

"No," I said, sitting up and taking his hands in mine. "Chad you lived in Metropolis for years just for me. Now it's my turn to move some place for you."

"Lois," Chad said, squeezing my hands. "You don't need to do this."

"I know," I said. "I want to."

"Wow. I'm... well, darlin', I'm flabbergasted," Perry told me the following morning when I turned in my notice. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "I know, Perry. I don't want to do this, but I can't keep living apart from Chad."

Perry nodded his head. I wondered if he really understood. Perry clearly loved Alice very much, but sometimes he seemed more devoted to the Planet than to her. A week ago I would have described myself the same way, but that was before I had to make a choice.

"I understand, sugar," Perry said as he got up to give me a hug. "It doesn't mean I'm not disappointed to lose my star reporter."

"You'll still have Clark," I smiled up at him.

Perry nodded. "He won't be the same without you. You two play off each other's strengths. You're better than the sum of your parts."

"Sort of like Chad and I are as a family," I said softly.

"And that's what's most important," Perry said, kissing the top of my head and finally letting me go.

"Thanks, Perry," I said, glad that he was being so understanding.

"Lois," he called before I left his office. "As long as I'm editor-in-chief, you'll always have a home at the Planet."

I smiled weakly. "You can't know how much it means to me to hear that," I told him.

I walked back to my desk with tears in my eyes. I couldn't believe I was doing this. I was leaving the Planet. This place had been my home for what felt like forever.

I looked over at Clark's desk only to notice he was gone. In reality, now that I thought about it, I'd loved it here, I'd seen it as part of my identity, but until Clark started, it hadn't been quite so

family-like here. He brought a warmth to this place that had been missing before. If the newsroom could change that much in a year and a half, then who knew how settled I'd feel in Smallville next year?

"Is it true?" Jimmy asked me as he came and sat in my guest chair. "Are you really leaving?"

I nodded.

"Man, Lois, I thought you were a lifer here. Like Perry or me. Or CK," Jimmy said.

"I did, too," I admitted. "But then my life moved to Smallville."

Jimmy smiled. "Chad's lucky to have you," he said quietly.

"Thanks, Jimmy," I smiled at him.

"So," he said as he got up. "A chocolate fountain? Chocolate sculptures?"

"What?" I laughed at him.

"For your going away party." He smiled.

"Can we keep it simple?" I asked him. "Maybe just dinner with Perry and Clark?"

"So no chocolate fountain?" Jimmy asked, looking disappointed.

"Not this time."

"Ah, darn!" He smiled at me as he went back to his desk.

"Well, Mrs. Andrews, I'm sorry you came all the way down here," Rob Collins said as I sat down.

I could feel my smile start to fail and I forced it into place. This couldn't be happening. What would I do?

"I mean, your record speaks for itself. I don't see the point in interviewing Lois Andrews for a job here. If you can write for the Daily Planet, you can certainly write for the Smallville Press."

I felt myself relax. He wasn't telling me he didn't have an opening or something. "Well, thank you, Rob. You sure you don't have any questions?"

"Just one," Rob smiled at me. "Any chance you could convince your Planet partner to come back here and write with you?"

I could tell from his face that he knew the answer to that question, so I didn't feel badly telling him no. "I'm sorry. I think Clark is pretty happy in Metropolis."

"Well, I just hope we can help make Smallville as comfortable an adopted home for you as you have made Metropolis feel for Clark," Rob said as he led me out.

"So, I'll be moving right after Christmas," I explained. "So maybe..."

"Start on January 9th?" Rob suggested. "Time to settle in before you start the new job?"

"That sounds perfect," I told him as I left and made my way to the hospital.

"So?" Chad asked as he saw me coming down the hallway.

"It wasn't really an interview," I told him.

"Of course it wasn't. You're Lois Andrews." He smiled at me.

"I start on January 9th," I told him as he gave me a fast hug.

"Are you sure about this, Lois?" he asked me. "You don't need to do this for me."

"I'm not doing it for you," I told him. "I'm doing it for us."

Chad kissed me in gratitude before his name was called over the loudspeaker. "I'll see you at the cottage for dinner?"

"At the farmhouse," I corrected him. "Martha and Jonathan invited us over for dinner."

"Right." He smiled at me.

"I thought I said no chocolate fountain," I said, smiling at Jimmy the following weekend.

"You said to keep it simple. Just dinner. This is just dinner," Jimmy said.

"And officially, this is not a fountain," Clark pointed out. "It's just a pot of melted chocolate."

"I guess I can forgive you then." I smiled at all of them. "I really appreciate your doing this."

"Taking you to dinner?" Perry asked. "Or trying to find someplace that still served fondue so we could get you something akin to a chocolate fountain?"

"Both," I told him. "This was the perfect going away party."

"It would be more perfect if you weren't actually going away," Jimmy said quietly.

I closed my eyes. "I sort of wish that, too."

"Well," Clark interrupted, "maybe we could try to convince Superman to come bring you back here occasionally for visits?"

"You think he would do that?" Jimmy asked amazed while I smiled my appreciation at Clark.

Clark shrugged. "Well, they are sort of friends."

"Imagine," Jimmy said, "having Superman at your disposal."

"I don't think that's quite what Clark was suggesting," I said.

"I know," Jimmy said. "But it's still fun to think about."

"Shall we go?" I asked as I looked around the table. I was the only one still eating and all the strawberries were gone anyway.

Perry nodded, and we all got up. I sneaked another taste of the liquid chocolate while Clark tried to help me with my coat, laughing quietly in my ear.

I gave Perry a huge hug outside. "I'm going to miss you," I told him.

He shook his head. "Me, too." He hugged me tighter. "You call if you need anything, you hear?"

"I will, Chief," I told him before turning to hug Jimmy.

"Thanks for planning this, Jimmy. It was perfect," I told him.

"You deserve it," he told me with a smile. "You'll come back to the Planet to say goodbye before you actually leave town, right?" he asked.

"I will," I told him. I turned to Clark. "Are you walking me home?"

"What do you think?" He smiled at me. "Your husband would have my head otherwise."

"I can't believe you're moving," Lucy said as she helped me put the dishes away from dinner.

"What do you care?" I asked her. "It's not like you live anywhere near here."

"I know, but do you know how hard it is to get a flight from San Diego to Smallville?" she asked me.

"Impossible," I said. "Smallville doesn't have an airport. You have to fly into Wichita or Kansas City and drive."

"Is that what you've been doing?" Lucy asked.

I paused. I didn't like the idea of lying to my sister, but what was I going to say? I could hardly tell her that I had been getting rides from the Man of Steel.

Luckily, I was saved from having to think of an excuse when Chad came in. "Are you ladies coming back? Ethan is going berserk out there. He is more than ready for presents. He's started spreading cranberry sauce on the walls and I'd like to get our security deposit back on this place."

"Bobby!" Lucy called to her husband as she ran into the living room.

"How are things going in here?" Chad asked.

"Okay," I told him as I dried the last dish and placed it in the box. We had used the good china for our Christmas dinner, but it seemed silly to put it away now. We were using the rest of the weekend to pack up anyway.

"Are you okay?" Chad asked as he moved closer.

I nodded. "It's silly really."

"What?" he prodded me when I didn't explain.

"I just feel like... this is our first home together. I mean the place on Devers Street wasn't really the same," I said as he

moved closer to give me a hug.

"Hey! I heard that!" Lucy said with a smile as she carried her son in front of her. Ethan had apparently moved from spreading cranberry sauce on the walls to spreading it all over himself.

I leaned backwards to grab a paper towel and handed it to Lucy. "The place on Devers was great, Lucy," I said.

"But it wasn't just you and Chad," she said. "I understand. I was just teasing."

"Yeah," I said simply in reply.

"We'll build a new home," Chad told me. "You'll see. I know it's not what you dreamed of, but you're going to love Smallville," Chad told me.

I nodded. I wasn't sure I agreed with him, but I thought it would be okay. It had to be better than being here without him.

"Is that the last of them?" Clark asked as he taped a box closed.

"I hope so," Lucy said, taking a seat on the floor. Chad and Bobby had gone this morning to give most of our furniture to the Salvation Army. The last thing we had to do was to pack the U-Haul. It would have been easy to let Clark do it, but when Lucy and Bobby had offered to stay for a few extra days after Christmas to help us pack, we didn't want to say no.

"We still need to clean the place," Chad groaned as we looked around. With all the stuff packed up, you could see the places where we had done a good job of "living" in this place.

"I can start on that," Lucy offered. "Someone needs to watch Ethan anyway."

I nodded as I picked up a small box. "Okay. We'll join you once we empty this place out."

It took us half an hour to get all the boxes into the U-Haul, and then Clark suggested taking it for a drive around the block to make sure it was handling properly now that it was full. Chad said it felt unwieldy, so we unpacked the whole thing and repacked it, with Clark directing us to make sure the weight was more evenly distributed.

By the time we finished, Lucy had managed to clean the kitchen and the bathroom — the two places that had certainly seen the most wear.

Clark offered to go get lunch while we finished cleaning. I could tell Bobby thought he was trying to get out of cleaning, but Chad and I heartedly agreed. We figured Clark would likely come back with some great treat from far away and didn't want to miss out given that he wouldn't be doing that so much anymore now that we were living in Smallville.

Lucy was more generous about Clark's disappearance. "I can't believe he offered to come back early from Smallville to help you two pack," she said. I didn't bother to tell her that Clark would be back in Smallville before we were, planning to spend New Year's with his folks. I thought he might even have plans to have dinner with Rachel.

"Yeah," Chad said. "He's been a great friend."

"Are you guys going to keep staying at his parent's place?" Bobby asked as we all worked on cleaning the bedroom.

Chad sighed. "At least for now. It would be good to get a house, but there aren't that many in Smallville and... I don't know. I think it will be easier for Lois to acclimate with Martha and Jonathan there. They're great people."

"Eventually, though," I told them, "we'll want to move to town. Martha and Jonathan are great, but the farm is a little ways out of town and since Chad and I both work in the town itself..."

"Plus it will be nice to have something of your own again," Lucy said.

"Yes," I said as I heard the whoosh outside indicating that Clark was back.

Sure enough, he poked his head into the bedroom a moment later. "How's it going in here?"

“Almost done,” Chad said. “What’d you get?”
 “Fish and chips,” he said. “Lois has been saying for weeks she wants some, and I figured fried food would keep Ethan happy while not hyping him up on sugar before your flight home.”

Bobby smiled. “Sounds perfect. He is getting a bit cranky, so food that he’ll eat is much appreciated.”

We moved to the living room and took places on the floor while Clark separated the food onto paper plates.

“Wow!” Bobby said as he swallowed his first bite. “There’s someplace that makes such good fish and chips near by?”

“Sort of near by,” Chad said, keeping a completely straight face.

“Just a few minutes away,” Clark said with a smile.

“Clark always knows the best places to get food,” I told them, eyeing the bag Clark had set aside. I hoped I knew what was inside.

“Well, next time you’re in San Diego, you’re welcome to stay with us and help us find the best restaurants there,” Lucy told him.

“Well,” Clark said thoughtfully. “San Diego does have some good restaurants. Lots of good places for Mexican.”

“In Old Town,” Bobby agreed.

“When were you in San Diego?” Lucy asked.

“I’ve visited friends there a couple of times, but haven’t been in years,” Clark said and I wasn’t sure if he was being honest or not. I decided he probably was. Clark hated to lie and was awful at it, so he probably would not have let on that he knew anything about San Diego restaurants if he had not had a legitimate reason for having been there aside from his alter ego.

“So,” I interrupted their small talk. I eyed the bag again and Clark smiled.

“Like you thought I forgot?” he asked me.

“Like you thought I didn’t notice it?” I teased him back.

“What is it?”

“You know what it is,” Chad smiled at me.

“What is it?” Lucy asked.

“Chocolate mousse,” Chad answered her. “Clark found a little bakery that makes what Lois declares is the best chocolate mousse ever.”

Clark pulled a container of the velvety concoction out of the bag. “But it’s not just Lois’ last night in Metropolis,” he smiled.

I laughed as Chad’s eyes lit up. “Crème brulee?” he asked.

Clark took two small containers out of the bag. “I wasn’t sure who would want what,” he said as he placed them between us.

Ethan immediately began reaching for the crème brulee, and Lucy grabbed him before he crushed the sugary top.

Pulling more paper plates out of the bag, Clark handed us each one, and a minute later, we were all on the way to sugar rushes.

January 1995

“Wow! This place looks...” Martha’s voice trailed off as she tried to find a polite way to describe the mess that was the cottage.

“Crowded?” I supplied. “Over-furnished?”

She laughed. “Like perhaps you’ve outgrown it.”

I nodded. “I think so, too, but Chad thinks it will be easier for me to settle in here with you and Jonathan nearby and there’s nothing in town available yet anyway, so...”

“Well, I’m sure you two will make do,” Martha smiled. “It’s not like being too close is a problem, right?”

“Right now? Definitely not,” I agreed.

“Well, it looks like you’ve gotten everything in,” Jonathan said as he stepped inside.

“Crammed it in, is more like it,” I said.

Jonathan smiled. “Your words, not mine. So, when do you start work?”

“Next week,” I said. “We have a few days to adjust to the move first.”

“Well, I’m sure the Smallville Press won’t be anywhere near as exciting as the Planet, but Rob is a fine man, and I bet he’ll be great to work with.”

“And he’s already a little in awe of you,” Martha confided. “Ever since you met with him he’s been asking everyone for ideas on what will make you happy at the Press after covering front page stories at the Planet.”

I smiled. It was nice that Rob wanted me to feel so much at home. A little weird, but nice. “That’s nice of him,” I told the Kents.

“Oh, well, Rob grew up in town. He’s a small town boy at heart. He’ll want you to feel as at home here as possible.”

I smiled at them. Chad’s romantic fantasies aside, it did seem to be true that hospitality was taken to a new level in Smallville. The Kents could just as well been talking about themselves as Rob.

“You’re here,” Rob smiled broadly when I entered the small office that housed the Smallville Press.

“Yup,” I smiled back. “Ready to meet everybody and get down to work.”

“Oh, uh...” Rob faltered for a minute. “You’ve already basically met everybody. It’s really just me. Well, there are a few others, but you won’t meet them until the end of the week. Chris Roberts is the printer, and Bob Mann takes care of distribution. Chris comes by every Friday to pick up what we have and Bob stops by on Monday to collect his check.”

“Chris only comes by once a week?” I asked. How did the rest of the papers get printed?

“Um... Lois, this is the Smallville Press. There isn’t a lot of news here. We only publish once a week. On Sundays,” Rob explained.

“Right,” I smiled. That made sense and was also a little embarrassing. I probably should have known that already, but I hadn’t spent any real time researching my new job. “So, what are we working on this week?” I asked him.

“We have a few things. Crop forecast for one — I’m sure that seems like small potatoes to you, but for a farming community, this is what they look to see. It’s a bit early in the season, but we start early. Probably the biggest thing, though, is looking into the subsidies from Washington. Helps the farmers plan.”

“Subsidies?” I asked.

“Yeah. The United States isn’t really the agricultural country it used to be. It’s expensive to be a farmer and the money isn’t great. The people here in Smallville, like the Kents, they do it because they love it. But it’s guess work.

“Think about it like a paper. We guess what people want to see in the news and our sales figures tell us if we’re doing a good job. For the farmers, they guess what people want at the beginning of the season, and if they’re wrong, there’s no way for them to fix it. Makes for volatile finances.”

I smiled to show I understood. I had never really thought about that before, but I wondered how Martha and Jonathan did this. Was one of them independently wealthy so that they could make sure to survive a bad year?

“So, that’s where Washington comes in. The government provides subsidies to farmers for certain crops. They do some predictions of their own for what’s going to sell well and basically promise to give farmers some money to cover their losses if they’re wrong. Helps the farmers stay in business in a bad year and helps the US by keeping our imports low.”

“Makes sense,” I said. “So, our job is to report what the subsidies will be? Does it change?”

“Well, there aren’t huge shifts,” Rob explained. “The requirement is that two dozen products be subsidized, and corn

and wheat are the almost always at the top of the list. There are other products that get subsidized as well that affect the farmers of Smallville, like soybeans.”

“Soybeans?” I asked. “Like the stuff that makes tofu?” Was there some sort of vegetarian lobby?

“Yup, except that’s not its primary use in the US. Most of it is used for oil production with the remaining bean sold to livestock farmers for feed, and lots of it is used for filler in other foods.

Only a very small amount goes for the making of tofu.”

“I guess these subsidies are probably big news around here,” I said.

Rob smiled. “The biggest. We can write for weeks about them — what they are, what they mean for Smallville, and speculations on how that changes the output of farmers here.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, some farmers sort of cater to the subsidies. Others don’t. For example, tomatoes are almost never subsidized, but we still grow them, right? How many farmers produce things for subsidies changes partly on what they are.”

“How much money the government is giving?” I asked.

“Well, that, but more what specifically is being subsidized. How much the government is giving is not that important to the farmers here as the money doesn’t go to them directly. It’s given to the Kansas Department of Agriculture to dole out.

“What is being subsidized is very important, though. Some of the farmers here, like Wayne Irig, always produce the same thing, regardless of what the subsidies are. Others like the Kents, rotate their crops, but also don’t tend to follow the subsidies that much. It’s farmers like that that sometimes benefit from subsidies and sometimes don’t. So, we can make guesses as to how Smallville will fare partly by guessing what our farms will grow.”

“Okay,” I nodded, although I was starting to feel sort of depressed. I wanted to do investigative reporting, and it sounded like my new job was going to involve more crystal ball gazing. “So, what do I start with?”

“Well, the subsidies won’t be announced for a few days yet, so for now the best thing might be to study the community so you can get a feel for how it will impact us when they are announced,” Rob told me.

“How do I do that? Is there some record of that?” I asked.

“Well, yes,” Rob said, looking at me quizzically, “but I would have thought you’d prefer to talk to the farmers directly.”

“Oh.” I blushed. He was right. That was how I would normally have done it, but I felt off my game here.

“So, why don’t you just grow what’s subsidized?” I asked Jonathan and Martha over coffee.

Jonathan sighed. “The subsidies are complicated and very political. There’s lots of reasons we choose to ignore them. First off, I assume Rob told you that the federal government doesn’t pay us, the money goes to the Kansas Department of Agriculture?”

I nodded.

“Well, we’re sort of a small farm, so even though we grow corn, we often won’t get much, if any, of the money from Kansas. So, the subsidies don’t impact our profits as much as say the Wyeth farm. Can’t remember the exact rank, but Scott’s farm is among the top ten in the state, so he tends to get a fair amount from the subsidies,” Jonathan explained.

“Like Jonathan said,” Martha cut in, “there are also political issues we prefer not to get involved in.”

“Like what?” I asked. What was political about getting paid for doing their job?

“Not everyone agrees that there should be subsidies,” Jonathan explained. “There’s lots of reasons — for example, there’s a belief that the only reason corn is so big is because of the corn lobby, but it’s not that healthy and we shouldn’t be

eating so much of it — either directly or indirectly since a lot of corn is fed to cattle and passed on to us in our beef.”

“The main reason we try not to get involved, though, is that some farmers have tried to game the system and that’s caused a lot of ill will,” Martha said. At my quizzical look, she explained. “You can ask for the subsidies whenever and they give you the difference between the price they expected the crop to go for and what it’s going for that day. So, in the past, some farmers will ask for the subsidy when prices are low, so they get a fair amount of money.”

“Isn’t that the point of the subsidies, though?” I asked.

Jonathan nodded. “Yes, but then some of them hold on to the crop a little longer. Causes low supply and thus the price goes up and then they sell.”

“So they’ve gotten extra money,” I said, understanding.

Martha nodded. “Particularly around here, it’s not that much of an issue, but given the low impact it has on us, it makes sense for us to skip the subsidy and then we can say that when we sell. A few buyers will buy from us as they know that and so it helps us develop a little bit of a niche.”

“I thought we were meeting at home,” Chad said as he opened the back door.

I looked up at the clock. “I’m sorry,” I told him. “I was interviewing the Kents and I lost track of time.”

Chad smiled. “Juicy story? Are you guys hiding a dead body in your yard or something?”

“Nah,” Jonathan smiled. “We thought the space ship was probably enough.”

“I’m learning about agricultural subsidies,” I smiled at Chad. I wanted him to see how happy I was. To be fair, I wasn’t sure how interesting this would be for as long as it sounded like we’d be writing about it, but I didn’t want Chad to feel guilty about my moving here. For now, at least, it was sort of interesting.

“Lois?” a voice called from across the aisle. I turned around, still holding the jar of pickles I was examining. Where was the Staggers? This looked similar, but it was called Mynback. Shopping shouldn’t be this hard. I just wanted Staggers pickles — was that too much to ask? I sighed. Now that I thought about it, Staggers was a brand local to Metropolis, so it wasn’t surprising they didn’t have it here. That didn’t improve my mood, though.

“Hi,” I said, trying to place the woman in front of me.

She smiled at me warmly. “It’s Elysa Dayton, dear. We met the weekend of the Wind Festival.” I nodded. I remembered now. She was the one who said Clark was a good judge of character.

“Yes, sorry. I remember now.”

She laughed, “Well, I’m sure you met too many people that weekend to remember us all. I heard you’ve joined Chad in the Kent place. How are you settling in?”

“I’m doing okay,” I told her. “It’s a little crowded. I’m not sure how Clark’s grandparents ever lived there.”

Mrs. Dayton laughed. “Well, I think they spent most of their time at the farmhouse. Didn’t keep too much in the cabin. I imagine it must be hard to make it your home. Are you planning to stay there?”

“Just until we can find some place in town,” I told her.

She nodded. “I’m sure it will be good to have a place of your own.” She smiled. “A place with extra room for some little ones perhaps?”

I didn’t say anything for a moment. Did this woman — this virtual stranger — just ask me if my husband and I were planning on having kids? Who did that?

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, flushing hotly. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

I nodded, not sure what to say. I felt a little badly that she was so embarrassed, but really, shouldn’t she be?

“Well, really, it was lovely to see you, dear,” she mumbled before turning away.

“It was good to see you, too,” I called after her, trying to sound friendly. Maybe I could have responded a little better to her, but she just caught me so off guard.

“And then she said ‘A place with extra room for some little ones perhaps?’” I recounted to Chad and Rachel that night. Rachel had stopped by the hospital to invite us over for dinner. It was my night to cook and I felt badly going over to the farmhouse again in an effort to get out of it, so this worked out quite well for me.

Rachel smiled. “Welcome to Smallville, Lois.”

“Do people really do that?” I asked her. “I mean, I don’t even know her.”

Rachel nodded. “Doesn’t matter. She isn’t trying to be nosy, it’s just... It’s different here.”

“Do people do that to you?” I asked.

“Well, not quite. I used to get a lot of questions about when I was going to get my boyfriend to come back and settle down, though. I think kids weren’t mentioned as they were afraid to sound like they were encouraging me to get pregnant before married.” She smiled.

“I guess that could be equally annoying,” I admitted.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Rachel sighed. “It’s better than the pitying looks I get now. I’m suddenly the resident Old Maid.”

I looked at her with wide eyes. “But you’re only twenty six!”

She laughed. “Well, yes, but most people get married at eighteen or nineteen around here.”

“People get married before they go to college?” Chad asked.

Rachel shook her head. “I can count on one hand the number of people in this town who have gone to college. And given that three of them are in this room...”

“That’s not really true, is it?” I asked, aghast.

“Not quite,” Rachel admitted. “Maybe before you two moved here, though. My dad did, as did the other doctors at the hospital, obviously. Diana Starks did as well. I think that’s it. So many people are farmers and there’s no need to go to college for that.”

“Rob didn’t go to college?” I asked. The farmers thing made sense, but Rob?

She shook her head. “He talked about it for a little while. I remember, I was a kid at the time and everyone in town was talking about Rob going off to college. It was sort of big deal since he was the only one in his class to be planning on it. But then his dad got sick and so he deferred enrollment and started working for the Press.

“His dad got better that year, but by that time, Rob had sort of revolutionized the Press and so he ended up just staying.”

“What was the paper like before he started?” Chad asked, and I was glad he was the one asking the question.

Rachel shrugged. “I only vaguely remember, but it didn’t come out as often — maybe once a month or something and it wasn’t regular. It was just the editor on staff then, who wasn’t as good as Rob, so the articles were often Associated Press things. People bought it as they wanted to support the Smallville economy, but joked that we’d be better off buying the Wichita paper for all the local news we got.”

“Guess I’m glad we moved here now then,” I smiled.

“Yeah, I don’t think there would have been any hope of you being happy at the Press before Rob started,” Rachel smiled.

“So, have you talked to Clark?” Chad asked.

“Last night, in fact,” she said, and she looked happy. “He said he won’t be back for awhile now — something about being busy now that his partner deserted him.” She flashed a smile my way. “But he’ll be coming back for the Wind Festival.”

“So, you guys have done it,” I said, taking in her smiling face.

“What?” she asked.

“You’re friends. You transitioned into friendship,” I pointed out.

For a moment Rachel looked startled, but then she smiled.

“Yeah, I guess we did. I miss him still, but it’s different now.”

“Even if you are an Old Maid,” Chad said, stifling a laugh at his own joke.

Rachel laughed as well, reaching over to swat at his arm.

“Don’t go saying that around the hospital. I don’t need to hear it from anyone else.”

February 1995

“So, what do you think?” Rachel asked me hesitantly. What did I think? It was huge! I mean, okay, for Smallville it wasn’t really, but compared to what we were used to?

“I don’t know...” I floundered for words. “Do you know how much furniture we’ll have to buy to fill this place up? It’s like three times the size of our apartment in Metropolis,” I told her.

I was sure, though, that despite my words, my face was showing what I really thought. I mean, I was a bit flabbergasted that something had opened up this quickly, but this place was perfect. It was even small by Smallville standards, which is what I wanted. Not a ton of land to take care of — or in our case, not take care of. A reasonable sized living area and three bedrooms, in case we ever... well, what Mrs. Dayton had said.

“It’s perfect, isn’t it?” Rachel asked, and I was reminded that Rachel wasn’t Clark. She couldn’t read me nearly as well, so clearly she had picked up on the signs that I was happy, but wasn’t sure.

“It is,” I smiled. “I think Chad will love it, too. Thanks for telling me about it.”

“No problem,” Rachel smiled. “When Bob mentioned they were moving, I just knew the place would be perfect for you. He’ll be pleased, too. It’s not like the real estate market is booming here.”

“No,” I smiled. “I guess it wouldn’t be.”

I was getting used to my new hometown, and there were lots of things I liked about it. It was charming — sometimes it seemed to me like this would be the perfect place to take postcard pictures. People were friendly, and Rob was great. Most importantly, Chad was happy. I could see it everyday on his face when he came home from work — he was happy with his job in a way I had never even realized he wasn’t in Metropolis, and he was happy to come home and find me there — happier than he had been when we were living apart.

What I wasn’t sure of was whether or not I was happier than when we were living apart. I mean, on the one hand, I was sure I was. I didn’t spend nearly so much time locked in my apartment crying; that was certainly an improvement, wasn’t it?

Still, for all that Smallville had to offer, there were things I missed about Metropolis. For one thing, it was true that everyone was friendly here, but wasn’t there such a thing as too friendly? I mean, did I really have to have a conversation with everyone I bumped into on the street? And to be fair, I had always avoided going to the supermarket in Metropolis (aside from that one trip with Rachel for Nutella), but did it really have to take so long? Surely it wouldn’t in Metropolis as everyone else would want to finish and get out of there as well.

Here, it sometimes seemed as if grocery shopping was a social activity. Some days, I’m ashamed to say, I would peek down aisles and only shop in the empty ones. It was just so tiring having to talk all the time.

The other thing was that while Rob was great, and I couldn’t think of anything he could do so that I’d like my job better... I was going to put a bullet through my head if I had to spend one more day writing about the stupid subsidies. Really, who cared? I’d talked to the Kents and their neighbor, Wayne Irig, and they

both said they ignored them completely.

To be fair, I'd talked to Scott Wyeth and he was very interested — said in bad years 30% or more of his revenue could come from those subsidies. Still, did he really need this many articles to understand how this year's subsidies were going to affect him? I mean, if they could be 30% of his revenues, wouldn't he spend the time to figure it out himself regardless of what Rob and I said?

Still, despite all the issues, being with Chad again was nice. I was sure after I'd settled in more, I'd love it here. The first step in that was moving out of the crowded cottage. No doubt, Chad was right, and I would miss having the Kents right there, but we really needed more space than that small cottage provided.

Plus, this house was only a five minute walk away from Rachel, so we already had neighbors we liked. The neighbors between us, Florence and David Samson, seemed nice, too, although given that they were in their sixties, I doubted we had much in common with them.

March 1995

"You look beautiful," Chad smiled at me as I came into the living room.

"Thanks," I said quietly. I was still feeling distracted by what a hassle it had been trying to get dressed. We had moved into the house the week before and had not finished unpacking yet. The dress had been easy to find as all the nice clothes had been hung in the closet the day we moved in. I hadn't found my make-up before tonight, though, as I had so little use for it here. And my shoes... well, don't get me started on how long it took me to locate this pair. All I had in the closet right now was a pair of black pumps and while those would match this dress I didn't want to wear them when I had others that matched this dress perfectly.

"So, are you ready?" Chad asked me.

I shook my head to clear thoughts of getting dressed and smiled at him again. "Yeah. You look great, too, by the way."

"Thanks." Chad smiled as he moved over to kiss me. "So, I did some searching, and clearly there's nothing in Smallville to match the types of places we'd go to in Metropolis, but I did find a Japanese place in Wichita."

"Are we having sushi for our anniversary?" I asked.

Chad shook his head. "No, they don't have sushi. It's more like that Japanese grill place we went to once. Hibachi or something, I think it's called. Remember?" he asked me. "Where you pick the food you want from a buffet and the chef cooks it for you?"

I nodded. "It was a mix of meat and vegetables?"

Chad nodded.

"Okay," I smiled. "That sounds good."

I followed Chad out to the car, realizing only now that this would be different than going out in Metropolis. Chad had a very strict no drinking and driving policy — he would not drink at all if he was driving later. His argument was that while he knew if he didn't drink much he could drive, if he was ever in an accident after he had had a drink he would always wonder if it was related and feel guilty.

This hadn't been a big deal when we lived in Metropolis — we just took the subway if we wanted to drink, but of course that wasn't an option here. I could drink alone, I guess, but on our anniversary?

Truthfully, while I understood Chad's reasoning, I still was willing to drive if I only had a drink, but I didn't do it often and I knew Chad wouldn't let me drive. He felt that this was his hang-up, so if I wanted to drink, then he should drive. He did occasionally ask me to drive so he could drink, but only rarely — like on his birthday or something.

Still, it wasn't like I needed alcohol to have a good time — I

was a pretty light drinker for fear of turning into my mother, so it wasn't a big deal. It was just nice to share a bottle of wine on our anniversary. If we couldn't anymore, though, we couldn't. Certainly being together on our anniversary, and every day, was the most important thing.

We were quiet on the drive to Wichita, holding hands and listening to the radio, but not saying much. Chad pulled up to a nice looking restaurant about an hour later and we got out. It was a bit noisier inside than I was expecting, and even Chad looked disappointed when he realized that we were going to be seated at a large table with other people.

"It's our anniversary," he said to the hostess. "Any chance of our sitting alone?"

"I'm sorry," the girl said, looking sincerely apologetic. "This is our smallest table and we always cook for large parties at once." Chad nodded his understanding as we took seats next to each other and introduced ourselves to the other people at the table.

The food was good and the chef did some amazing things with the utensils — throwing them around and stuff. So dinner was interesting, and the people we sat with were really friendly. Still, it wasn't quite the romantic evening I had been envisioning for our sixth anniversary.

"I'm sorry," Chad sighed as we got back into the car. "I know that wasn't quite what you were hoping for."

"It's okay," I said reaching over to take his hand in mine.

"I wanted to take you to some music or something after dinner, but I couldn't find anything," Chad admitted.

"Me neither," I smiled. "I looked, too."

"So, home?" he asked.

I nodded. We sat in the car in silence for a few minutes before I reached over and took his hand. "You know it doesn't matter what we do, right?" I asked him. "The most important thing is that we do it together."

Chad leaned over to kiss me softly as he stopped briefly before pulling onto the freeway. "My thoughts exactly," he whispered.

April 1995

"I can't believe you're a Smallville resident," Clark said as he looked around our new home.

"Be nice," Rachel reminded him with a smile.

"What?" Clark replied, the picture of innocence. "I think it's nice that Lois has embraced her small town persona."

"I don't have a small town persona," I mumbled too quietly for anyone to hear. I was trying to put on a good front, but something about having Clark here was reminding me even more poignantly of all the things I missed about Metropolis. "Well, get used to it. I'm a small-town wife now," I said more loudly.

Rachel smiled at me, but the smile was completely gone from Clark's face, and I could see concern there. I was confused for a moment, and then flushed as I realized he had probably heard my first comment. It was hard to remember to watch what I said, even quietly, around Clark, and I was out of practice.

"Well, the place looks great," Clark said, compassion in his eyes.

"Thanks," I said, knowing I had destroyed the illusion of cheerfulness.

The door opened a second later, Chad whistling as he entered. "You're here!" he said when he saw Clark, and there was no question that his cheeriness was sincere.

"Good to see you," Clark said as he went to shake Chad's hand. "Ready for your first dinner party?"

"The groceries are out in the car," Chad said, and Clark immediately followed him back out there to help him bring things in. Since Clark was in town for the Wind Festival, we had invited Rachel and Clark's parents over for dinner. We owed the Kents

and Rachel for all the meals they had made for us and now that we were finally settled, it seemed like the right time to re-pay them.

Not that I would be contributing much to tonight's dinner. My cooking skills had improved since I got to Smallville, or at least the repertoire of what I could make had increased, but since this mainly meant I had added other "just add water" foods to what I was willing to cook, I still wasn't fit to serve food to others. Miley, the supermarket clerk, had suggested some sauces you could pour directly over chicken breasts and put in the oven, and I had tried that once, but I cooked it too long or something as the chicken was dried out and the sauce all congealed.

Martha had offered to teach me to cook, but I found the idea of it too daunting and turned her down.

"Is everything okay?" Rachel asked me when the boys had left.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I smiled.

"I'm sure it's a big adjustment, being here after years in Metropolis," Rachel said.

I paused for a moment, trying to word what I was thinking. "It's just different," I finally said.

Rachel nodded. "Still, I wouldn't blame you for being unhappy here while you adjust. I mean, there's a reason Clark and I didn't work out, right? I think Metropolis is great and not worse than Smallville, just different, like you said. While Metropolis is just different, though, it's not a different I could live with."

Clark and Chad came back in, Clark carrying the bulk of the food, just then, preventing me from responding to Rachel. I appreciated how understanding she was being, but then, she wouldn't be the person who would be disappointed if I decided I couldn't hack it here.

That was the crux of the problem for me. I was Lois Andrews! I could do anything! So, why couldn't I decide to be happy here? There was nothing wrong with Smallville. Chad had managed to be happy for years in Metropolis, and it was abundantly clear that he was really more of a small town guy at heart. So, why couldn't I be happy in Smallville, even if I was really a city girl?

Obviously, the answer was that I could. I just needed to try harder. Looking at Chad's face, all lit up as he spoke to Clark about what he was going to make now that he had a real kitchen, rather than the small closet that passed for a kitchen in Metropolis, it didn't seem like it should be that hard.

"Dinner looks great, Chad," Martha said as she took in the spread around the table. She was right — it did. The sheer amount of food Chad and Clark had managed to produce was impressive, but in addition, everything looked wonderful.

"Well, it wasn't just me," Chad said. "Clark did a lot of the work."

Clark held his hands up as if to ward off thanks. "It was all Chad. I just assisted where I could."

"Well, who ever did the work, it looks delicious," Jonathan said as he spooned some mashed potatoes onto his plate.

As Rachel took some of the potatoes and passed them to Clark, she smiled at him. "So, how are you? You look okay, but you must be exhausted."

I nodded to show I agreed, and I could see Martha doing the same. "We saw the coverage of the rescue last night on LNN," I added.

Clark looked down at his plate a minute before answering. "It was okay."

"Were there a lot of casualties?" Chad asked softly.

"There were a lot of injuries," Clark said softly, "but no, luckily not too many deaths."

Martha leaned over to pat him on the hand. "Well, I'm sure

that's largely thanks to you."

"There were other rescue workers there, Mom." Clark smiled at her.

"I know, and I'm sure they did all they could. As did you," Martha said, pride on her face.

Clark sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm feeling sort of grumpy today."

"What's wrong, son?" Jonathan asked.

"I can't explain it," Clark said, putting his fork down. "I feel like... I mean, I want people to be appreciative of what I do. But on the other hand, what did I do last night? I showed up and helped a bunch of people at no detriment to myself other than lack of sleep. And that made international news."

"But how many other men and women were out there helping last night, too? None of them are impervious to fire and lava and whatever else. They were risking their lives for others. Why isn't that news? Aren't they the real heroes? Even if I saved more people than all of them, it's not like that's because they are lazy or something. I just can do more. I'm lucky."

Rachel reached over to place a hand on his. "It's not just that, Clark. It's not international news that you did this because you're you and not that anyone else was there because they aren't. It's because of what you could do. Those people are doing wonderful things and you're right — they should be heralded as heroes."

"But you could use your abilities to really hurt others on a much more massive scale than they could. It's news that you were there because we are lucky to have you — and I don't mean to have some super-powered Kryptonian, but you. A super-powered Kryptonian who chooses to make this a better planet for the rest of us."

Martha smiled at Rachel lovingly, and I thought of her words from months ago about how she would have been lucky to have Rachel for a daughter-in-law. "Rachel is right, honey. You are lucky. But so are we. You are a blessing. And not just for the people in this room."

Clark gave a watery smile to his mother. "I'm only who you taught me to be."

Chad reached over to grab my hand, and I knew he was as touched by the scene playing out in front of us as I was.

"Right," Jonathan said with a smile. "You had no choice in the matter — we made you grow up to be generous and kind. Could you explain how we *made* you do anything given that you could have thrown your mother and me across the farm by the time you were ten?"

We all laughed, and Clark's sober mood seem to lift slightly.

"So, I was thinking," Clark said, "about that thing I mentioned the other day."

"What thing?" I asked as I dug into my salad. I had to hand it to Maisie. Perhaps she didn't make great crepes, but her salads were excellent.

"The rescue workers in Colombia," Clark said.

I nodded as I chewed.

"I'm wondering if Perry and maybe Rob would be interested in a series of articles highlighting rescue workers around the world," Clark said. "You know, profile them — what it is they face when they go on these rescues, the training they've had to undertake and then the flip side — what their family situation is, their day job, etc. What they have to lose."

"That sounds like a great idea, Clark. But Perry and Rob?" I asked.

"Well," Clark blushed, "I thought maybe you could work on it with me."

"What would I do?" I asked. "Come on, Clark. You can travel to interview these people, and the stories are the type of soft, mushy stuff you write better than me. Besides, is there a readership for things like that in Smallville?"

"Doesn't the Press pick up the AP Superman stories?" Clark

asked.

I shrugged. He was right — Rob did run those for the big international rescues. Plus it would be fun to write with Clark again. “I wonder if we could get some of them to talk about some of the rescue workers that didn’t make it. Really highlight what someone gave up.”

Clark’s face lit up. “So you’ll do it with me?”

“Well, we’ll need to get Perry and Rob to agree,” I reminded him. “But Perry will love this idea.”

“And you must be dying to write about something besides crop subsidies,” Clark teased me.

“Oh, I’m passed the subsidies,” I told him. “I’m on to crop predictions,” I said with a grimace as I stabbed a slice of cucumber a little harder than I needed to.

“Oh, Lois, I’m sorry,” Clark said, and I could tell from his voice that he meant it.

“So, what are you working on?” I asked, not wanting to give in and admit how bored I was at the Press.

Clark flushed slightly as he mumbled, “Nothing that exciting.”

I leveled him with a glare. “What are you working on, Clark?”

He looked at a point right over my left shoulder. “You know John Praught?”

“He’s the senator from Ohio that’s running for president, right?” At Clark’s nod, I continued, “He’s expected to win the Democratic nomination, right?”

Clark nodded again. “Obviously, it’s a little early to tell with the nomination over a year away, but yeah, that is the expectation.”

“So what about him?” I asked.

“Well, there’s some evidence of his working in collusion with Art Hadley,” Clark said.

“Art Hadley? Isn’t he one of the candidates running for the Republican nomination? Why would they be working together?”

Clark shrugged. “I’m not sure yet, but if it’s true...”

“It will be huge news. International,” I said, my voice quiet.

“Yeah,” Clark agreed, still looking over my head. Of course he was. He was working on a story of international importance while I was covering crop predictions for a small town in Kansas. How the mighty had fallen.

“I see you lost your privileged place,” I teased Clark as he sat down on the grass between us and his parents.

“Very funny,” Clark said, grinning at me. “You know I did consider trying to get things to work with Rachel so I could continue to have a better view of the fireworks. It really is the worst part of breaking up.”

I laughed lightly, glad Clark could joke about this.

“Do you want anything?” Chad asked us as he got up. “I want to grab a drink before they start.”

“I’m fine.” I smiled up at him, squinting as the sun hit me in the eyes. The fireworks started right after dark, but Chad had been insistent on wanting a good spot, so we had set up a half hour ago. The sun was just dipping below the horizon now, so we probably had another fifteen minutes to a half hour to go.

“I’ll come with you.” Jonathan got up. “Martha?”

“Sure. I could do with a walk,” she said as she got up as well.

“I meant did you want anything, honey?” Jonathan smiled at her.

Martha smiled brightly. “Well, yes, I do. I want to take a walk with you.”

Clark’s smile was still bright on his face as he turned away from his parents to turn to me. “So...” he said, before trailing off.

“So,” I replied with a smile.

“I probably should have said something at lunch yesterday,” Clark said softly.

“Something about what?” I asked sharply.

“Are you okay?” he asked me, lifting his head to look me directly in the eyes as he did.

“Of course I am,” I said, turning to look at two small girls from out of town running around the grass in front of us.

“Lois...” Clark said, his voice still soft, but his tone leaving no doubt that he didn’t believe me.

“It’ll be fine, Clark,” I said, still not willing to meet his eyes. “I’m just still getting used to things here.”

He reached over and placed a hand on top of mine. “If there’s anything I can do to help...”

I turned to him with a small smile. “Working with you again will help. I hope Rob says yes.”

“Are you kidding?” Rob asked me. “Did you really think there was any chance I’d say no? A series of articles from Andrews and Kent? Will Perry White really be okay with them being printed here as well?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Clark is going to ask him today.”

“Well, if he says yes, I’m all for it,” Rob said. “And if he says no, I’m okay with you working on them as long as they don’t distract you from your job here.”

“Really?” I asked. I had been sure that if Perry and Rob did not both agree, I would have to give up on the idea of working with Clark again.

“Of course. I’m not stupid, Lois. I hired an award-winning journalist to write for the once-weekly paper of a small town in Kansas. I can’t imagine I keep you challenged here,” Rob said without any trace of embarrassment.

I fought the impulse to hug him — Rob didn’t strike me as a hugger. “Thank you,” I said instead, trying to infuse as much of my gratitude as possible into the words.

Rob’s phone rang then and, with a smile, he turned away from me. I sat back down at my desk and opened the article I had been working on this morning before Rob came in — about crop predictions, of course.

A few minutes later I was pleased to have Rob call out and distract me from my writing. “Call for you,” he said, and I leaned over to pick up the phone.

“Hello?” I asked, confused. The only person who called me here was Chad, and he was on his way to Wichita this morning.

“So, already missing writing for the big city paper, are you, darlin’?” Perry’s distinctive laugh came over the phone.

“So, you’re okay with it?” I asked, assuming his good temper meant he didn’t lash out at Clark.

“Okay with it?” Perry asked. “I think it’s a brilliant idea, and getting the Andrews/Kent team on the paper again is just an added bonus.”

“Well, it was Clark’s idea,” I admitted quietly.

“Maybe,” Perry said, and the quiet tone he took let me know that my tone had come through clearly, “but he always has his best ideas when he’s working with you, so that doesn’t surprise me.”

“How’s he doing?” I asked Perry cautiously. I wondered sometimes if Perry wasn’t as sorry to see me leave as he had pretended. Had Clark just sort of stepped in and taken my place?

“He’s doing well,” Perry said, “but like I said — you both work better together than either of you do apart. Having Clark is good for the paper, but it doesn’t replace you, darlin’, and it certainly doesn’t replace the Andrews/Kent team.”

Clark came to pick me up at ten the following morning. “So, where to?” I asked him.

“I thought we’d start with Colombia while the rescue there is still fresh in the news,” Clark said.

“And how are you going to explain us being there?” I asked.

“I’m not. I’m going to fly us into an alley in Bogotá and turn

back into Clark. Let the people there think we flew in by commercial means,” Clark said.

I smiled. It was the simplest solution, but I wondered how long it would take before our actions were considered suspicious. Then again, it was unlikely the Planet was read in Bogotá and given that the Smallville Press wasn’t even read in Hanley (the next town over), we probably didn’t need to worry about it too much. The readers here didn’t need to know we were interviewing people in person, and neither did Rob or Perry for that matter.

Clark lifted me into his arms and we lifted off. It had been awhile since I had been flying with Clark and I smiled as I looked down and took in the landscape below us. I had forgotten how exhilarating this was.

“Tuck your head in,” Clark instructed. “The cloud cover is thin here and I don’t want too many questions about what Superman is doing flying over South America, so I’m going to pick up speed a bit.”

I leaned my head into the crevice between Clark’s shoulder and his neck and felt him hold me closer to him. He was warm, and from this close I could smell his aftershave. I idly wondered why he wore aftershave since I couldn’t imagine he needed it, but regardless, I liked the smell. It was different than Chad’s — more... I wasn’t sure, but it suited Clark better. A moment later, I realized what I was doing — or at least what it must have appeared to Clark as if I was doing.

Why was I sniffing at him anyway? Could he feel that? It seemed like he might feel the displacement of air, but maybe he wouldn’t notice it while we were flying? I had no idea how this might relate to his super powers.

I snuck a glance at him and he seemed oblivious to my discomfort, so maybe he hadn’t noticed. I breathed a slight sigh of relief. What could I possibly have said to explain my behavior? I felt myself flush slightly.

Really, that was not the biggest issue. I was a married woman. Moreover, I was a happily married woman. Why was I sniffing at Clark, whether or not he knew I was doing it?

I sighed. It was an accident, that’s all it was. Clark asked me to tuck my head in, and there was nothing untoward about that — it was for my safety. Then, with my head tucked in, I happened to smell his aftershave. It was an accident, an incidental consequence of our flying. It meant nothing.

“So?” Clark asked me as we sat in a small restaurant after the interview. We were eating something called ajiaco, a chicken soup that Clark said was common here.

“I think it went fairly well,” I said, shrugging. In reality, the interview was in Spanish. While Clark had translated for me, it wasn’t the same thing and so I didn’t feel like I had as good a handle on what information we had as I would have liked.

“How should we split up the writing?” Clark asked.

“I was thinking we’d each go with our strengths,” I said. “I’d write about what Señor Padilla told us about what he did during the rescue, and you would write about his life and family — what he was risking giving up by helping out.”

“Then we’ll send each other what we have and try to weave it together?” Clark asked.

“I can probably do that — working on a weekly paper means I have more free time than you. Then you can edit it to make sure it sounds okay.”

“Okay,” Clark sighed. Then he gave me one of those penetrating looks again. “Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

I smiled. “I’m more than okay with it, Clark. Really. I’m happy to be working with you again.”

He gave me a warm smile, leaning over to place a hand on top of mine. “Me, too. I miss you. Metropolis is lonely without you and Chad.”

“Are you not happy there anymore?” I asked. I had never really considered that before, but Clark had lost his closest friends when Chad and I moved to Smallville.

“No, I am,” Clark said, looking at his soup, “but it’s not the same as before. I feel like my entire support system is in Smallville.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, feeling badly for him.

“Don’t be.” He gave me a small smile. “Moving to Smallville was the best move for you and Chad. That’s what’s most important.”

“Clark...” I said quietly, hesitant to put what I was thinking into words. “What if... what if it wasn’t what was best for me?”

Clark looked down at the remains of his soup. “Do you think it wasn’t? You seem happier now than when you and Chad were apart.”

“I am,” I confirmed. “But...”

“But it was best when you and Chad were together in Metropolis,” Clark said, giving me a smile.

“Well, yeah,” I admitted. “I know that’s selfish, but...”

“Do you want to ask Chad to move back to Metropolis?” Clark asked. Then he shook his head. “You know, maybe we shouldn’t talk about this. You should talk about it with Chad.”

“How can I talk about it with Chad when I don’t even know what makes the most sense for us?” I asked him.

Clark smiled slightly. “I think I remember you telling me that you and Chad make decisions best when you decide together.”

“We do,” I admitted. “I’m just worried...”

“Lois,” Clark said, finally looking up at me. “You and Chad will make the decision that’s best for both of you. You will. I’m sure of it. You love each other.”

I smiled. “Thanks. Maybe I needed to hear that. I’m not sure why, it wasn’t anything I didn’t know, but...”

“Sometimes it’s good to get outside confirmation,” Clark said warmly.

May 1995

I was a coward. That’s the only explanation for it. I mean, clearly, I was having the thoughts before that. I mentioned them to Clark when we were in Colombia. Instead of telling Chad what I was thinking, though, I thought about it constantly, but said nothing.

I wondered if this is what it was like for Chad when he was thinking of trying to leave Met General. Why were we so afraid to tell each other that we were unhappy? Clark was right. We loved each other. I know Chad didn’t want me to be unhappy any more than I was okay finding out that he was unhappy.

Still, I waited. Working on the articles with Clark didn’t help. I had thought it would, but it just reminded me how good working with Clark was — how much easier the ideas sparked, how much crisper my writing was, and that was despite the fact that these articles contained none of the things I was consciously missing. No hard hitting stories, no deep undercover investigations. Just these human interest pieces. They were good, I knew that, but before I came to Smallville, I would have scoffed at them.

Sadly, I tried to bring the conversation up with Martha long before Chad. I’m not sure why. I couldn’t do it, though. I started to and then remembered what Clark said — that I should be talking about it with Chad.

So, I did nothing. I kept living my life in Smallville. The problem was my life in Smallville was... well, for lack of a better term, small. Work Monday through Friday — the Smallville Press never required late nights or weekend hours. Grocery shopping on Monday night (it was quieter than if I waited and went on Saturday and saved me some of the hassle of having to socialize). We had started going to church, not that Chad and I were religious, but it was something to do. So, church on Sunday.

We often had dinner with the Kents on Saturday night and with Rachel sometime during the week. Not uncommonly, we would invite them all over for dinner and that would be another evening. Chad couldn't handle much more than that since — as opposed to me — he did work some evenings.

His hours were still substantially better than they were in Metropolis — his days were shorter and many of his overnights were from home. He was just on call in case someone came into the hospital, but the nurse would just call him if that was the case. The longest hours were the days he spent in Wichita — he lost some time in travel, and he often stayed late there checking on patients he didn't get to see that often.

He was happy — really happy. That was clear. It made my unhappiness all the harder to take. More than that, it made it harder for me to tell him I was unhappy, so I kept not doing it.

Until about a week before Memorial Day. It was a quiet night — we were both home early and had no evening plans. I had made pasta for dinner — using jarred sauce, it was even an edible dinner. We were sitting at the table not talking, which was rare for us, when Chad looked up at me. In a completely calm voice he asked, "So how long are you going to wait to tell me that you're miserable here?"

I glanced up from my pasta. "What?" It was a stupid response — I knew that, but I was caught off guard.

"Come on, Lois," Chad said gently. "I'm not blind. I've known you for fourteen years. I can tell when you're not happy."

I still didn't say anything, not sure of what to say. Was I surprised that he noticed? Well, sort of, but only because I thought I had been hiding it well. On the other hand, it wasn't a complete shock. I mean, no one knew me better than Chad.

"Lois," Chad's voice dropped to be even softer. "Please say something. It's okay that you're not happy. It's not even surprising. I know the Press doesn't even compare to the Planet."

"But I love you," I said softly, feeling the tears start to fall down my cheeks. Were they just waiting for the conversation to start or something? Besides, I knew he wanted me to say something, but what could I say? He was right. I was unhappy. I had no idea what to do about it, though.

"Oh, honey," Chad said, reaching out to pull me towards him. He put me on his lap and held me close. "I know you do. I never questioned that."

I leaned against him, feeling sort of glad that he knew I loved him, but sort of unaffected. It wasn't like I thought he didn't know, and it still did nothing to help me determine the best way to move on from here. "But what are we going to do?" I asked him. "I don't want to be apart from you."

"I don't want to be apart from you either," Chad whispered into my hair.

"Tell me we won't," I pleaded, leaning away to look him in the eye. "Promise me that we'll find a solution that ends up with us being together." I couldn't bear the idea of us deciding to live apart, but I also couldn't see a good way around our current predicament.

"Of course we will," Chad said. "We'll move back to Metropolis."

I shook my head. What was he talking about? That wasn't an option. Did he think I didn't know how much happier he was here? "We can't do that," I said. "You're so much happier here."

"When you're here, yes," Chad said. "But not if you're unhappy."

I nodded. It was exactly how I felt about Metropolis. "So, honestly," I said, looking into his eyes to make sure he would have to be completely honest with me, "where are you happier — here alone or in Metropolis with me?"

"In Metropolis with you," Chad said without hesitation.

"But for long term? Forever?" I asked, a little afraid of the answer.

Chad paused before answering which made my tears come faster. That was a sign, wasn't it? After a sigh, Chad quietly said, "I think so... I hope so. Lois, I love you so much."

"I know you do," I smiled at him. "I never questioned that." He smirked at me. "But I don't know. I can't decide if I'm happier long term in Metropolis alone or here with you."

Chad leaned forward to rest his head against my shoulder. "So what do we do?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "It's part of why I didn't say anything. I don't know how we move on from here." I hated every part of this conversation. Did I really want to keep living here being miserable? Well, no, but I was more than a little worried about what the outcome of this conversation was going to be.

In an effort to postpone the conversation, I got up and moved to put the dishes from dinner away. It was clear we weren't going to eat anymore tonight anyway. Chad joined me and we cleaned up in silence.

Finally, after all the dishes were put away and cleaned by hand — even though we usually put as much as possible in the dishwasher — we couldn't postpone any longer and moved to the couch.

"So," Chad said as we sat down. He moved a bit closer to me to take my hand. "What do we do now?"

"I don't know," I said, even though I knew I had said this before. What else was there to say, though?

"Lois..." Chad said before taking a deep breath, "I meant it. I'll move back to Metropolis."

"I know you will," I said quietly, taking in the sincerity of his words, but also his choice of words. He did not say that he would be happy to move back to Metropolis — not that I would have believed him if he said that. "And I'd stay here," I told him. "But neither of those solutions makes us both happy."

"Is there a solution that does?" Chad asked.

I shook my head. I couldn't put to words the conclusion we were coming to.

"I don't want to be apart from you," Chad whispered, drawing me closer to kiss me.

"Me neither," I said, tasting the tears, although I wasn't sure whose tears they were.

"But that's what we're agreeing to, isn't it?" Chad whispered.

I nodded my head. "How can we decide to do this?" I asked, hearing the anguish in my voice, but not sure that there was any way to hide it. It was what I was feeling.

"I have no idea," Chad said, trying to swipe the tears away from his face, but they were coming too fast for that to have any effect. "Maybe we could just do it as a trial?"

I shook my head. "Isn't that what we were doing when you first moved here?" I thought for a moment. "Do you remember what Linda said when she and Ted were going through all that stuff in college?"

Chad thought for a moment before he said, "She said she wanted it to just be over so that she could work through it and move on."

I nodded. "I don't really feel that way now, but I understand the point. Living in limbo is harder to deal with than living with a failed relationship."

"So this is it then," Chad said, swiping at his face again. "You're going to move to Metropolis and we're going to..."

Neither of us said anything for a moment. "Then we're going to..." I trailed off. I took a deep breath. "Split up," I added quietly, no longer able to see Chad through my own tears.

"Are we sure?" Chad asked. "I love you. You love me. How can divorce be the best option?"

"I don't know," I sniffled.

"This is what Clark meant," Chad said softly. "When he said he loved Rachel too much to stay with her."

I nodded before leaning forward to kiss him. “Is this the last time I’m going to get to do this?” I whispered against his lips. “No,” he whispered back. “It can’t be.”

We slowly made our way upstairs, but our love making was different that night — full of sniffing and tears. We were slow, as if we needed to memorize every part of our actions. While I knew realistically that I wasn’t going to leave tomorrow, so this probably wouldn’t be the last time, I felt like time was running out, and I know Chad did, too.

“Can you come pick me up sometime today?” I asked Clark over the phone.

“Sure,” Clark said, and I could hear his smile over the phone. “Any reason?”

“I can tell you when you get here,” I said.

“Do you have a cold?” he asked me.

“No.”

“Are you okay?” he asked, and now I could hear nothing but concern in his voice.

“No.”

The line got quiet, and I waited for Clark to say something. Anything. “Clark?” No answer. Staring at the phone curiously, I moved toward the door to answer the doorbell.

“What’s wrong?” he asked as soon as I opened the door.

I gave a giggle and then sniffled again. “It’s weird being friends with Superman,” I said.

Clark shrugged. “What’s wrong?” he asked again.

“We’re finished,” I whispered, backing into the room to sit on the couch after hanging up the phone.

“Who’s finished? With what?” Clark asked, taking the seat beside me and placing a hand on mine.

“Chad and I. This isn’t working. I hate it here. He hates it in Metropolis. We... what was it you said — we love each other too much to make the other person live where we want to. So, we’re finished.” I was impressed by my ability to get all the words out without bursting into tears again.

“Oh, Lois,” Clark said as he moved closer to wrap his arms around me, and the tears I had been expecting a moment earlier came.

“I love him,” I said into Clark’s chest. “How can this be the best solution?”

“I don’t know,” Clark whispered. “I’m so sorry, Lois. I wish I could do something.”

I pulled back to swipe at my cheeks. “When Chad first moved here, your mom told me that she knew Chad and I would make it. That whatever we decided to do, she was sure we would decide to do it together. Do you think she knew a solution we don’t?”

Clark shrugged. “I don’t know. Have you asked her?”

I shook my head. “I haven’t told anyone else yet.”

“Come on,” Clark said, getting up and tugging on my hand. “I’ll take you to the farm.”

“What’s this?” Martha asked as she straightened up from cleaning a corner of the barn. “Are you two off to some exotic locale for another interview?” she asked. The smile fell off her face as she stepped closer to us. “Lois? What’s wrong?”

“I’m going to go help Dad for awhile,” Clark said quietly, leaving the barn.

“Lois?” Martha prodded again.

This time I didn’t do as good a job as I did with Clark and burst into tears before I could speak. “When Chad first moved into the cottage,” I said between sniffles, “you told me that whatever happened, you knew Chad and I would come through together in the end.”

Martha nodded as she took my hand and led me to a bench outside. “I did.”

“What did you think we would do?” I asked her. “How would we manage to stay together when he’s so happy here and I hate it?”

“I...” Martha looked at me in alarm. “I’m not sure, honey. I just knew that being together would be important to both of you.”

“It is,” I admitted, sniffing again. “But we can’t make it work. We agreed to... I’m moving back to Metropolis.”

Martha closed her eyes tightly and I could see that our decision pained her, but then she moved closer to wrap her arms around me. “Are you sure that’s what will make you happiest?”

“No,” I said. “But being here is making me miserable, and Chad can’t come back to Metropolis. He’s so much happier here. He belongs here. I don’t.”

“I’m sorry,” Martha said softly.

“But I thought... I always thought that where we belonged first and foremost was together,” I said, hating the whiny sound in my voice. “How could I have been so wrong?”

Martha said nothing, just rocked me back and forth until the tears slowed.

June 1995

“I’m going to wash my face before I go in,” I told Clark as we exited the elevator at the Planet.

“Okay. I’m going back to my desk, but let me know when you’re ready to go back to Smallville,” he said with a small smile.

A moment later, I entered the newsroom. This place had felt like home to me the first time I had entered it. I remembered that I had thought no place could ever be more comfortable than here — except for the inside of Chad’s embrace. Still, when forced to choose, this place had won over Chad. I looked around, trying to find the source of that comfort so I could do some sort of logical analysis of how I had come to this. It was just a large room filled with the sound of lots of people typing. It had nothing to recommend it over my husband’s side. Still, I was choosing this place.

“Lois!” Jimmy came up the ramp smiling at me and distracting me from my thoughts. “You didn’t mention you were planning to visit today. I’m heading these over to Star Labs. Will you be here when I get back?”

“I think so,” I nodded.

“Great!” He smiled at me before heading for the elevators.

I took one last breath before moving over to Perry’s door and knocking.

“Is there never a break...” Perry ranted as he opened the door, but broke off when he saw me. “Lois!” he said, his face breaking into a smile. “What are you doing here?”

“Did you mean it?” I asked him. “When you said I’d always have a job here?”

“Of course,” Perry said, but he didn’t look as pleased as I would have expected. “Do you want one?”

I nodded. “I think I need one,” I admitted.

“So you and Chad are moving back?” Perry asked.

I shook my head. “Just me.”

“Are you...”

I cut him off. “We’re... getting a divorce.” I said the word quietly like if I didn’t say the word at full volume it wouldn’t have the same meaning.

Perry sat down heavily in his chair, not saying anything for a moment. “I’m sorry, darlin’,” he finally added, his voice soft.

“Me too,” I admitted. “But,” I tried to plaster a smile to my face, but could feel that it didn’t reach my eyes, “I’m so tired of writing about farm subsidies and crop predictions. I’m ready for some real news.”

Perry smiled. “That’s my girl. When are you ready to start?”

I sighed. “I’m not sure. I haven’t told Rob yet. I’ll need to move my stuff back, but I guess I’ll have to wait to have a place

to move it to.” I sighed again. I hadn’t thought about any of the logistics: having to find a place to live, having to move my stuff — worse — having to sort through our stuff and determine what was mine and what was Chad’s. I closed my eyes. I couldn’t possibly be ready for this. I could never be ready for this.

“Just let me know, Lois,” Perry said, and I was surprised to hear his voice so close. When I opened my eyes, though, he was standing right in front of me, and he placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Thanks,” I whispered.

“Hi.” Chad was using the same subdued voice I’d been using all day.

“How was the hospital?” I asked him.

“Same as always,” he said as he sat down on the couch.

“How was the trip to Metropolis?”

I shrugged. “Perry confirmed that I could have my job back,” I told him. “And I saw Rob this afternoon and told him I was leaving.”

“How’d he take it?” Chad asked, and I noticed that he was looking out the window — avoiding my gaze as much as possible.

“He was okay. Said he never really thought he’d be able to keep me happy and was happy to have me while I lasted.”

We lapsed into silence.

“I’ll make dinner,” Chad said, getting up.

Dinner showcased Chad’s mood as much as anything — he made tuna salad — not exactly his usual near gourmet fare. We ate in silence. Finally as we were putting the dishes away, I asked the question that I know was on both of our minds. “Are you sure this is the right decision?”

Chad looked at the dish in his hand before looking up at me. “No. I’m not sure of anything anymore.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t do this,” I whispered as he closed the dishwasher.

“What do we do instead?” Chad asked.

“Decide which one of us gets to be happy?” I asked with an attempt — a failed attempt — at a smile.

“I still feel like I’d be happy as long as I get to be with you. Let me move back to Metropolis with you,” Chad offered again, this time nearly pleading.

“Only if you’re really sure that will make you happy in the long term,” I said quietly. “Remember what you said before you came here? How you didn’t want to resent me? Are you sure you won’t feel that way if you move back to Metropolis?”

“No,” Chad admitted quietly, his eyes filling with tears again. “I don’t know that. I just know that this is killing me.”

For a moment, I hesitated. My natural inclination to seeing his tears was to want to hold him. Was that still okay? “Me too,” I admitted to put off the decision. “But it’s for the best, isn’t it?”

Chad nodded. “I can’t believe it, but I think you’re right. But Lois... I’m going to miss you so much,” he said, the tears spilling over onto his cheeks. “Oh, screw it,” I thought. He was my husband. I loved him. Was I supposed to dispassionately watch him cry just because he wouldn’t be my husband forever? Nothing we’d decided changed how I felt about him. I couldn’t just stand there and watch him cry.

“I know,” I told him as I wrapped my arms around him, the tears falling down my own cheeks. “I know because I’m going to miss you just as much.”

“Stop pitying me!” I insisted before I took a deep breath. Even I could hear the screech creeping into my voice.

“I’m not pitying you, Lois,” Clark said, his voice soft. “I’ll be perfectly comfortable on the couch.”

“You’re too long for the couch,” I pointed out.

“I float.” He grinned at me. “Really, Lois. It’s okay.”

“I’m the one who’s crashing at your place,” I reminded him. “I should take the couch.”

Clark sighed. “Fine. If you want to insist on being uncomfortable, go right ahead.” He turned around. “I need a cup of tea. Want anything?”

“No, I’m fine,” I said, slumping onto his bed. The last thing I was was fine. My husband was 1400 miles away and was planning to stay there. In fact, the only thing we were planning to change at all was that he was my husband. How could I possibly be fine?

“Lois?” Clark asked, leaning his head back into the room.

“I’m fine,” I repeated.

He gave me a long look before deciding to let me get away with my lie and retreating back into the kitchen. I found myself stretching out on his bed and promptly falling asleep.

I woke up confused. I smelled coffee. Wasn’t Clark making tea? I stretched, and as I did so I realized it was lighter in here than when I fell asleep. Glancing at the clock, I realized it was seven in the morning. I had stolen Clark’s bed after all.

“Sorry,” I said with a yawn as I came into the kitchen.

“Sleep well?” Clark asked as he poured some coffee into a mug and handed it to me.

“Yeah,” I admitted as I fixed my coffee. “I guess. I didn’t mean to take your bed.”

“I know. I told you I didn’t mind,” Clark said.

“So, what’s on the agenda today?” I asked.

“I have a meeting with Bobby Bigmouth for lunch. He said he has some information for me on that story I told you about — about Art Hadley and John Praught working together. So I’m off to India this morning to pick up some food. Bobby said he likes spicy food, so I’m going to get him some vindaloo. He probably won’t even be able to eat it, but it will get him to stop complaining about the food not being spicy enough around here.”

“What’s vindaloo?” I asked, trying not to focus on the story. It was Clark’s story, not mine. I wasn’t even working again yet since Perry had suggested I take a few days to find an apartment first.

“It’s like a stew, but very spicy. You can get it a few places here at Indian restaurants, but they always temper the spice. The real stuff is hard for even me to eat.”

“Does it hurt?” I asked amazed. I didn’t realize there was anything Clark couldn’t handle.

“Me? Not really, but it does make me really thirsty.” Clark grinned. “In Goa, where vindaloo is from, they eat really spicy food all the time, so they don’t even notice it, but I think Bobby will have trouble swallowing it.”

I smiled as I pictured the snitch trying to hide his discomfort.

“So, want to join me?” Clark asked. “Or do you have a bunch of apartments lined up to look at?”

“I can’t do that, Clark,” I said, wishing I could. “It’s your story. You’ve been working on it for months.”

“And so far I have nothing more than speculation,” Clark pointed out. “Come on, partner. I could really use you on this one. I know you aren’t officially working again yet, but I promise I’ll help you look at apartments all afternoon if you come with me to see Bobby.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Of course,” Clark said. “Why don’t you check out the classifieds and set up some appointments while I head to India? I’m meeting Bobby at noon, so as long as you don’t set up anything before 12:30 or so, we should be fine.”

July 1995

“Just give me a call when you’re ready,” Clark said softly before walking out the door.

I took a look around after he left. I couldn’t believe I was

doing this. With Clark's help, I had found an apartment in Metropolis in just a couple of days. Another week and it was ready for me to move in. So, I was spending today packing things up from our place in Smallville. Clark had offered to help with moving costs by flying things there for me. I felt a little badly for using him like that, but he insisted it was okay, and I didn't have the energy to argue. Plus, details like arranging movers or whatever seemed beyond my capabilities right now.

I wasn't delusional. I knew I was operating at half mast or something. Clark was basically covering for me at the Planet and pretending that I was adding more to our investigations than I was. It was sweet of him, but I wondered sometimes how long he would do that for. When would he stop feeling badly for me and start to get annoyed at having to carry the extra weight around?

Since Clark was doing the moving, things were a little simpler. Clearly I wasn't going to take any furniture, just clothes, really. My books and music, too. I couldn't think of anything else. It would be expensive to replace all the stuff I had had with Chad, but I wasn't going to have Clark move dishes. Besides, I couldn't take the dishes. Chad needed them.

Briefly, I wondered if this would be easier if this was a typical divorce — if I hated Chad. Then I wouldn't worry about what he needed; I'd only care what I needed. I couldn't imagine that, though. Regardless of where the road we were on was leading, and while I couldn't bring myself to think the word, I knew what it was, and I couldn't imagine ever not caring about Chad. Heck, I couldn't imagine ever not loving Chad, so how could I completely not care about him?

Then again, maybe it wasn't lack of caring in your typical divorce — it was just anger masking all other feelings. Besides, I knew I didn't really prefer that to what we were doing. It was hard to imagine anger that only went one way, and while it was hard to imagine not caring about Chad, it was positively painful to imagine a world where Chad didn't care about me.

I sat down on the couch heavily. Just the thought of it left me breathless. Would we get there some day? Suddenly I realized that what I wanted was what Clark and Rachel had. When had that happened? For months now I had been trying to avoid thinking too much about their relationship, about their inability to live together. I didn't want to end up anything like them; I wanted to end up together with Chad.

Now that that hadn't worked though, everything had changed. Ending up like Clark and Rachel was suddenly the best possible outcome. Being good friends with Chad — the thought was unbelievable to me, or at least the thought of being *only* good friends with Chad — platonic friends. Still, it was preferable, *so* preferable to not being friends with him at all.

I thought briefly of our first visit to Smallville for the Wind Festival over a year ago. I remembered Clark and Rachel bumping into Pete and Lana. They were friendly to each other — knew the basics of their lives, but there was no warmth there, just a bland friendliness. I couldn't imagine Clark ever acting that way if he bumped into Rachel. Then again, I couldn't imagine Clark ever randomly bumping into Rachel like that here in Smallville. They would always be close enough for him to let her know he was visiting so they could get together. At least, I thought they would be.

So, who would Chad and I end up like? Would we be like Clark and Rachel or Clark and Lana? Or worse, would we end up avoiding each other completely? I mean, it wasn't like it was impossible we'd see each other again. Chad's family was still in Metropolis. Metropolis wasn't Smallville, of course, so we would be unlikely to bump into each other randomly there. Still, it was certainly possible.

Plus, I'd grown so fond of the Kents during our time here. It seemed unlikely I'd never come back to Smallville unless Clark and I had some sort of falling out.

So I'd see Chad here. Would I let him know I was coming? Assume he'd hear it through the grapevine since Clark was bound to let Rachel and his folks know? Who would we be? I closed my eyes, blocking out the tears. Why were we doing this?

"Hi." The soft voice from the doorway startled me, and I looked up in alarm.

"Oh," I said taking in his form. He was standing stiffly in the doorway. I had told him I was coming, but it was clear he hadn't really been expecting me. Or maybe he just hadn't been expecting me to be here when he got home.

After a moment of silence, he moved more fully into the house and closed the door. "Where's Clark?" he asked quietly.

"At his parents'. He said to call him when I'm finished," I said, my voice just above a whisper.

"Are you?" he asked, and I could hear the strain in his voice, the hint of tears just beneath his words.

I shook my head. "I haven't even started yet. I haven't been able to."

He nodded his head before he took a seat beside me on the couch. "So, where's the apartment you're moving into?"

"It's in midtown. Not too far from the Planet," I said. "On Sixth and Bleeker."

Chad nodded. "Near the crepe place."

I nodded. "Yeah, pretty close." We sat in silence for several minutes.

"Do you want help packing?" Chad asked, his voice soft.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't decide if I wanted his help or not. I couldn't bear the idea of going through things with him, but I also couldn't bear the idea of going through things alone and not spending time together while we could. "I don't know," I finally whispered.

He reached over towards me, but changed his mind at the last minute, his hand dropping on the couch cushion between us. I stared at it in fascination. When was the last time Chad hadn't known if it was okay to hold my hand? Maybe when we first started dating? So, ten years ago.

This was not okay. It was so not okay. I reached over and placed my hand on top of his. He flipped his hand over to grasp mine tightly, but we didn't look at each other. "This is the right decision, isn't it?" I asked him in a whisper.

Chad didn't answer me at first. Finally, he whispered back, "I don't know, but I don't see a different solution." After a few more moments of silence, he got up, his hand in mine, pulling me up with him.

"Come on," he said gently. "This isn't going to get easier. Let's start with your clothes."

I nodded. "I got some boxes." I pointed them out to him in the corner, and hand in hand we went over to grab one each and then head upstairs to the bedroom.

The clothes were easy. At least there was nothing in there to think about. I tried not to imagine if someday someone else's clothes would fill these drawers as I moved my things into boxes. It only took us ten minutes to empty out the drawers and my side of the closet.

"What's next?" Chad asked quietly, and I could tell he was trying to temper his emotions.

"Books?" I suggested. We headed downstairs to the bookcase. For a few minutes, we worked in silence, pulling books off the bookcase. That, too, took little time. Chad and I had very different tastes in books — he preferred nonfiction, and I had a weakness for chick lit, so it was easy to determine whose books were whose.

The CDs were more complicated. There were some CDs that were clearly Chad's. He had gone through a stage of liking heavy metal (or what I teasingly referred to as heavy metal, but was probably more like hard rock) in college. On the other hand, I had gone through a period of liking classical music. Chad now liked

classical, too, but all the classical CDs were mine. I left behind the Brandenburg concertos, though. Chad loved those. I liked them, too, but wasn't sure I'd ever be able to hear them without crying. Chad always whistled along while we listened to the CD. Since I was going through that side of the CD case, Chad didn't notice. I wondered what he would think when he did.

"Is this yours or mine?" Chad asked, holding up 'Negotiations and Love Songs,' I shrugged. We had both been Paul Simon fans before we met and that was one of the albums we had both owned. Since we had bought them early in high school, the versions we owned were on cassette. It had been a no-brainer to buy the album on CD when we got rid of our tape player. But whose album was it now? We'd only bought one CD obviously.

"You keep it," I said softly. My default seemed to be to leave things with Chad if there was any question. He seemed about to argue with me, but changed his mind.

"Well, that's it," I said as we packed up the last of the CDs. He looked at me quizzically for a minute. "That's it? What about the other stuff? We have boxes of stuff we moved here from Metropolis we never went through. I'm sure some of your journalism textbooks are in there. Keepsakes, that type of thing."

He was right. I wasn't sure I wanted to go through those boxes. They were going to be filled with mementos from our time together. Still, it made sense to go through them now. It would only be more painful for Chad if I left them for him to go through alone.

Grabbing another box, I headed upstairs to the spare bedroom where we had stored all the boxes. We worked in silence for awhile — the first box was college textbooks which were pretty easy to separate.

The next box had our high school yearbooks on top. A quick flip through revealed which ones were mine, and I put them into a box with my textbooks. Below that was a box that made my breath catch. I knew what was in there. I paused with my hand over it and Chad reached over me, but once he got the top of the box off, he dropped it like it had burned him. "Do you want it?" he asked me, the tears audible in his voice.

I didn't say anything and of its own accord, my hands reached out for the box, pulling the thick book out and opening it to the first page. Chad looked over from where he sat. "You looked so beautiful," he said softly.

"So happy," I whispered back, running a hand over the smile on my face in the image.

"We were happy, Lois," Chad said. "No matter what happens from here, we were happy that day and every day that followed."

"If you had known we would end up sitting here like this..." I started, but had to stop to swipe my tears away. "Would you have still done it?" I motioned to the picture in front of me. "Would you still have wanted to..."

"In an instant," Chad said, an urgency to his voice I had rarely heard in our time together as he moved closer to me. "That was the happiest day of my life, Lois. Seeing you walk down that aisle filled me with a feeling I can't even describe. Knowing that you were agreeing to share your life with me was a high like I'd never felt before." He reached out to brush the tears from my cheeks, ignoring the ones on his. "I wouldn't trade a day of my life with you for anything. No matter how things turned out."

I nodded. I felt the same way, although it brought me back to the same question again. Why were we doing this? "Let's stop," I whispered.

"Stop what?" Chad asked me.

"Stop packing. I'll stay here."

"You can't," Chad said, his voice thick with tears. "You're miserable here. I can't let you stay. I just... I can't let you be so unhappy, Lois."

I moved forward and wrapped my arms around him. I

couldn't bear to watch him cry. We sat on the floor for a long time, both crying before we pulled away.

"I want the wedding picture of us downstairs," Chad said softly, referring to the one we had framed that was now sitting on his desk. "I love the way you look in that. You can keep the album."

I nodded, placing it back in the box and then into the larger one containing my things.

"What's this?" Chad asked, holding up a small bag.

I shrugged, reaching out to grab it. Opening it, I gave a slight smile. I thought I had lost these. I hadn't seen them in years. "They're the letters you sent me when you were staying with your grandparents."

"You kept them?" Chad asked in surprise.

"Of course I did," I said quietly.

The phone rang, breaking us out of our thoughts. Chad got up to get it and I sat on the floor opening the first of the letters in the bag. My tears flowed as I read it. We were so different then, so sure of our future together. Where had that confidence gone?

"That was Clark," Chad said as he came back into the room. "There's an emergency, and it's late. I hadn't realized how late. It's already ten. I told him you'd stay the night and he could come get you tomorrow."

I nodded my head wondering where I would sleep. In our bed? On the couch? I glanced at the letter in my hand again. I wished I could go back to the girl who was the recipient of that letter and tell her to stop feeling sorry for herself. Living apart from Chad for a little while was really not that bad. Not while he sent letters like this one. Not while she could feel loved and secure in her relationship.

"Why don't I go make us some dinner?" Chad offered. "Or a late night snack or something."

I nodded in agreement. Feeling the paper in my hands start to crinkle, I relaxed my grip. I looked around the room for a second before getting up. "I'll help you," I said, not wanting to go through the rest of this alone. Besides, it looked like we were almost done.

We walked downstairs together, not talking. "Mashed potatoes?" Chad asked me, and I smiled. Mashed potatoes were one of my favorite comfort foods. "Or grilled cheese with tomato soup?"

"Grilled cheese," I said. Chad made the best grilled cheese. I did not have the patience required to cook it on medium so the cheese would melt, but even aside from that, Chad added this mustard-mayonnaise mixture that gave it a nice tang. It was a far cry from the burnt pieces of toast with cheese in the middle I used to serve to Lucy.

Chad started on the sandwiches while I got the soup out of the pantry and dumped it into a pot. Measuring out a can full of water, I added it to the pot and stirred as I turned the heat up. Chad worked quietly beside me. When the bread and cheese were on the skillet, he placed an arm around my waist. "I'm going to miss moments like this the most," he said quietly.

"Me, too," I admitted, brushing impatiently at the tears that appeared on my cheeks.

"So, shall we be healthy and have milk or skip it and go for soda?" Chad asked as he transferred the toasty sandwiches to plates.

"Soda," I said, thinking that the extra sugar could not hurt tonight.

"My thought, too," Chad said, and he poured us each a cup of cola as I finished putting the soup into bowls.

We moved to the small kitchen table in silence and then seemed to just stop. We both sat down, but neither of us seemed ready to start the mundane task of eating. With a sigh, I reached down and grabbed a half of sandwich. "This is great," I told Chad as I took a bite.

"The soup's perfect," he said, swallowing a mouthful.
 "Yeah, I'm still very talented at adding water." I smiled at him.

"So," Chad said, but then he trailed off in silence. "Which furniture are you taking?" he finally said.

"I'm not taking any furniture. I can't really ask Clark to move it anyway," I said.

"None of it?" Chad asked in confusion. "You're just going to buy it all new?"

"Or used," I said. "I don't know. I haven't thought that far ahead."

"To tomorrow?" Chad asked with a small smile. "What are you planning to do with all the things in the boxes?"

I shook my head. "I don't know."

We ate in silence for several more minutes and neither of us spoke again until we had moved the plates to the dishwasher.

"What about the plates?" Chad asked. "Or the china?"

"You can have them," I told him.

"That's... Lois, that isn't fair," Chad said. "You shouldn't have to buy all new stuff."

I shrugged. "You need this stuff, too," I reminded him.

"I know, but... Let me give you some money for new stuff," he offered.

I shook my head. "It's my choice to leave," I reminded him.

"I left first," Chad replied. "And this decision... we both made it. You shouldn't bear the brunt of the financial responsibility."

"You're the one who still has a mortgage," I reminded him.

"And you'll have rent, and considering it's for an apartment in Metropolis, my guess is that your rent is more than my mortgage payment," Chad said.

"It is," I admitted quietly.

"Then let me give you some money to contribute to getting new things," Chad offered again.

"I don't want your money!" I yelled. I started to add the rest of my thought, but stopped. What I wanted to say was 'What I want is you,' but that wasn't really true, was it? I mean, it was true in that I did want Chad, but I only wanted him on my terms. I didn't want him in Smallville; I wanted him in Metropolis. So, it wouldn't really be fair to say, would it?

"I know," he whispered, moving closer to wrap me in his arms. "I know you don't want my money, but don't think of it that way. Just buy stuff out of our account. It's our money for now."

"And then what? We'll just split what's left?" I asked.

"Something like that," Chad said. "At some point we'll have to get a lawyer. There are bound to be things to take care of we didn't anticipate. Retirement accounts or something. I don't know."

"I don't want to do this," I told him, my voice muffled from its place next to his chest.

"Me neither," Chad said, and even without looking up, I could hear that he was crying. "Let's not," he said. "Let's just stop all of this. I'll move back to Metropolis and we'll go back to the way things were before."

I shook my head, leaning back to look at him. "Earlier when I suggested I stay here you said you couldn't let me do that. Why would you think I could let you move back to Metropolis? You belong here. I know that. You know that."

"I belong with you," Chad whispered, his tears falling on my cheeks and mingling with my own.

"I used to think so," I said quietly.

"Please let me go back with you," Chad whispered, his head falling to my shoulder. "Please?" he pleaded, his lips finding my neck.

"We can't do that," I whispered as he lifted his head and my lips found his.

"We can't do this," he whispered back as he trailed kisses over my face. "I don't want to be without you."

"I don't want to be without you," I said, no longer having any clue why we would be doing this.

I woke to the feeling of sunlight falling on my face, and I snuggled closer to Chad. Without even being fully awake, I decided it was much more comfortable here and there was no reason to wake up.

"Morning," he grumbled into someplace near my shoulder as his fingers traveled over my side and then across my stomach to teasingly squeeze my hip.

"Morning," I giggled as he tickled my side lightly.

"This is my favorite type of morning," Chad said, and I could feel him smiling from where his head rested on my chest.

"What? Us waking up naked?" I asked with a smirk.

"That would be it," Chad said, turning his head slightly to kiss me.

The phone rang before things could get more interesting, and Chad snaked one arm out from under the covers to grab it.

"What?" he asked, and the annoyance was clear in his voice.

After a moment, he moved away from me slightly. We were still touching, but there was a different feel to it now. "It's Clark," he said quietly, handing me the phone.

"Tell him we're..." I trailed off as I realized why Chad had moved away. I had forgotten. Apparently he had, too. Somehow waking up in Chad's arms had felt so familiar, so comfortable. I had forgotten what I was doing here. "Hi," I said into the mouthpiece. I could tell I sounded annoyed, but I didn't really care.

"Sorry," Clark asked. "I didn't mean to wake you. I just wanted to see what time you'd be ready."

"What time is it now?" I asked him, trying not to sigh.

"About ten," Clark said, and I felt myself blush. It had been late last night when we went to bed, but I had no idea it was so late now.

"I need a few more hours," I said quietly. "Maybe sometime after lunch?"

"Okay," Clark said quietly. "Why don't you call me when you're ready? I'm at my folks now, but I'm having lunch with Rachel so call her place."

"Okay," I said, handing Chad back the phone.

For a moment after he hung it up, we lay side by side in bed, neither of us saying anything. Then Chad sat up, pulling the sheets up to cover himself. "So," he said quietly.

"So," I replied, trying to keep the smile out of my voice. I suddenly wanted to laugh, although I was unsure why.

"That was... We're going to go through with this anyway, aren't we?" he asked me, turning to look at me with a sheen of tears over his eyes.

I sat up, bringing the blanket with me. I nodded my head. "I don't want to," I said quietly.

"I know," Chad said. "But this is what's best for us."

I nodded slowly, and Chad leaned forward to kiss me. The kiss was soft, sweet. Nothing like the fevered kisses of last night.

"We should get up and finish packing up your stuff," Chad suggested. "Do you want the shower first?"

I nodded, getting up. Chad looked away, and I wasn't sure if I was relieved or not. When had it become awkward to be naked in front of my husband?

When I got out of the shower, I realized all my clothes were in boxes in the other room. Wrapping a towel around me, I walked through the empty hallway. The smell of pancakes was wafting upstairs, and once I was dressed I made my way downstairs.

"I know I'm just postponing the inevitable..." Chad said as I came in.

"It smells delicious," I said, cutting him off. He sent me a grateful smile and I could tell he was more grateful for my pretending things were normal than for any compliment on the pancakes.

We each took a couple and made our way to the table with butter and syrup. We ate in silence, but as opposed to earlier this morning, things felt comfortable now. It took us just a few minutes to finish breakfast and we cleaned up, also in silence.

Then, by mutual agreement we moved back upstairs and packed up the rest of my things.

Slowly, we brought the boxes downstairs. All in all, there were a dozen boxes and they made a sad sight on our... on *Chad's* living room floor.

Without a word I moved over to the phone, glancing at the clock while I did so. It was two now, so I shouldn't be disturbing Clark's lunch with Rachel. "I'm ready," I said quietly when he answered.

"Okay, I'll be right over," he answered, his voice also soft.

Chad and I sat on the couch as we waited, holding hands, but still not talking. It felt like we had run out of words, like there was nothing left to say.

It took Clark several trips to take all the boxes, and he seemed to take his time with the last one. Chad and I got up slowly, trying to postpone the time until Clark would fly away with me and we would be separated permanently.

"I love you," I whispered, tightening my hold on his hand.

"I love you," Chad said. "So much, Lois. If there was another way..."

"I know," I told him, leaning forward to kiss him. The kiss ended, but we didn't pull apart. We stood there, lips touching, hands tight around each other, in denial about what was about to happen.

It wasn't until after we broke apart that Clark appeared, making me wonder if he had been watching periodically, making sure not to interrupt our goodbye. "Do you want more time?" he asked us quietly.

Chad nodded, tears falling down his cheeks. "I want forever. But I don't have that," he said softly. "So, I think I'm ready now."

I leaned back into him, resting my head against his chest, listening to the sound of his heart beating. The sound was soothing, reminding me of so many memories from the last ten years. After a few minutes, Chad gently pushed my head up to meet my lips. "Goodbye, Lois," he whispered, our lips still touching.

"Goodbye," I whispered back before leaning forward to kiss him again. Then pulling away, I turned toward Clark.

"I'm ready now," I told him.

Clark nodded, then took a step forward. "I'm sorry," he said to both of us.

I took another step forward, but couldn't let go of Chad's hand. "I love you," Chad whispered to me. I nodded and finally let go.

September 1995

I held the small opal pendant in my hands, staring at it. Was he thinking of me, or had he already gotten out of the habit? I didn't know. For the first few weeks after I permanently moved to Metropolis, things had gone back to the way they were when Chad first moved to Smallville. We talked every night, sometimes for hours.

Eventually, though, we had stopped. We ended every phone call in tears and decided that this wasn't working. We had to both move on, and we couldn't do that if we continued to lean so heavily on each other. So we put a moratorium on talking for a little while. We even agreed to delay contacting a lawyer to try to settle the divorce as we thought that would just give us an excuse to talk.

So now I was still married, but had willingly agreed not to talk to my husband for over a month. Some days I wondered why we bothered. I even considered asking Clark to take me to Smallville. I'd move back — I'd offer to go back to the long distance thing. Anything to be with Chad again.

Other days I was more confident that we had made the right decision. When I wasn't lost in my misery at missing Chad, I was happy — happier than I had been in Smallville, and I knew it.

Still, sometimes it was just so hard. This was one of them.

In fact, I always knew when the bad times would be. It was the same every day. I got up in the morning and looked over at the left side of the bed. It wasn't even our bed, but I'd lived with Chad for too long for that to matter, and I had yet to start using the entire bed just because I could. So each morning I'd look over there and wonder where Chad was. Then, just as I was swinging my legs to the floor to get up, I would remember. He was in Smallville — half a continent away. And he was going to stay there.

It would hit me like a punch in the gut and I would sit on the edge of the bed for a moment remembering what it was we had agreed to do. That wasn't the bad part, though. At some point, I'd be looking around the room and catch the clock. I'd realize I needed to get up and I'd stop focusing on Chad as I ran around trying to get ready for work in time.

Work was fine. I was distracted sometimes, and I knew I was not really on my game, but at least I was busy. I could distract myself with work for most of the day. Clark would cover for me when it was really bad, and he and Perry would congratulate me if I made any intelligent contribution to a story. Sometimes this bothered me — I wasn't used to being handled with kid-gloves, but most of the time I didn't care. My heart wasn't in it anymore. It was in Smallville with Chad.

After work, Clark would make every effort to keep me distracted. Dinner from far-off places, movies, late night at a museum. Once he even flew me to Australia for a snowball fight.

No, the day too was okay. At some point, though, Clark would need to go. Superman would be needed or it would simply be time for bed. It didn't matter the reason — the important thing was that at some point my source of entertainment would disappear.

I'd watch television for a little while, and it would help. Eventually, though, I'd unconsciously move to the center of the couch to snuggle with Chad. The punch in the gut I got in the mornings was nothing to the feeling of intense loneliness I would feel when I realized he wasn't there. That he was never going to be there again.

And it wasn't loneliness as in not wanting to be alone. It's not as if having Clark around all day was all I needed, so if he could have stayed later I wouldn't be lonely. It was more that the echoing silence wasn't as noticeable when Clark was here. I was focused on something else and it was more like Chad was just in the kitchen making dinner or something. It wasn't until I was alone that the cold, hard truth would hit me. Chad wasn't in the next room. He wasn't even on some sort of trip to a conference or something. He didn't live here. This wasn't his home — it was mine. Mine alone.

When I was a little girl, after Dad moved out, I would dream of my own place. Sometimes I'd imagine the place I'd share with Lucy, but mostly I'd imagine my place as an adult — one of my very own without an alcoholic mother or a sister who needed someone to take care of her. Then the idea of a place of my own seemed idyllic.

Chad had changed all that. I had never regretted not living alone before now, and I hardly relished the opportunity to do it now. I wanted my husband. Particularly at night, when I had no distractions — I wanted nothing more than to share this apartment with Chad, the same way we had shared every place

else I had lived since I moved out of my mother's house.

"So, what's on the docket for today, partner?" Clark asked me as I took my coat off. I glared at him. He was way too cheerful in the mornings.

"No idea," I mumbled as I took a sip of the coffee Clark had placed on my desk.

"Bad night?" he asked me with compassion.

"They're all bad," I told him.

Clark nodded, but offered no words to console me. Maybe he knew that nothing he said would do it. Instead he glanced at his desk. "There's nothing this morning," he offered. "Maybe we should knock off work for the morning and go do something?"

"Like what?" I asked, listless.

"A walk in the park?" he suggested. "A visit to the Children's Museum?"

"A flight to Smallville," I threw out. For a second Clark said nothing. Then he reached over to grab my coat and took my arm, leading me out of the newsroom. As we exited the elevators, he handed me my coat, but continued not to say anything.

With a hand on the small of my back to guide me, he led me to the Fudge Castle. "Clark, it's nine in the morning!" I reminded him.

"They're open," he said quietly. "We'll get some hot chocolate."

He was right — how I never realized that, I don't know. It was useful information. We sat across from each other at a booth in the back and Clark ordered two hot chocolates with extra whipped cream.

"I can take you if you want," he said quietly while we waited for our decadent drinks. When I didn't respond, he added, "To Smallville. I can take you."

"I don't know if that's what I want," I admitted. "I don't know what I want anymore." We lapsed into silence as the waitress placed the hot chocolates in front of us. I took a spoonful of whipped cream off the top while Clark stirred his into his drink. I watched his spoon move around in brisk circles for a second before I spoke again. "I want my old life back. The one where Chad and I lived here and we were happy that way."

"He'd move back for you," Clark said quietly.

"And Rachel would have moved here for you," I said, a challenge in my eyes, I was sure. "Would you have let her?"

Clark shook his head. "No. I couldn't ask her to do that for me."

"Right. Well, the life I want back is the one where Chad liked living here. Or at least I thought he did."

"Ignorance is bliss," Clark said quietly.

For a moment I said nothing as I stirred the remaining whipped cream into my hot chocolate. Then I played Clark's words over in my head and had a horrifying thought. "Do you think... do you think he was never really happy here?"

Clark looked up from the table top in surprise. "No. I don't. Really. I think he was happy here. He was happy being with you. But sometimes..."

"Sometimes that isn't enough," I finished his thought. "I know. I wish it was. If it was, I'd still be in Smallville. Maybe you would be, too."

Clark nodded. "Lois..." He hesitated.

"What?" I asked.

"Maybe... maybe Chad isn't the right person for you. I think he's great," he rushed to add. "And I know he loves you terribly."

"And I do him," I added.

Clark nodded. "I know, but maybe... I don't know how to say this." He paused to sigh. "I guess I thought for years that Rachel and I were perfect together. Now, though, I wonder. I loved her so much, and I know she loved me. But if we were really perfect for each other... wouldn't we want compatible things out of life?"

And if we don't, doesn't that mean we're not perfect for each other, even if we love each other?"

"Maybe," I admitted. "But... it's different. Chad and I have been together a lot longer than you and Rachel. I thought..."

"I know," Clark said, his voice soft. "But sometimes that just makes it harder to see."

I nodded. "Maybe." I said nothing else, but took a long sip of my hot chocolate. The whipped cream had cooled it slightly and it was just the right temperature. "I guess... I just feel like maybe Chad isn't perfect for me, but now I don't know what is. I lived my entire adult life until now knowing what I wanted, but I feel like it's all different now."

Clark smiled. "You're only 27," he pointed out. "You're hardly an old lady. Maybe you just need to reinvent yourself."

"But into whom?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Whoever you want. That's the beauty of reinventing yourself."

"I could give up my job at the Planet. Stop being a reporter," I mused.

"Do you want to?" he asked, and for the first time I could see something besides concern in his eyes.

"Why? Would it matter?" I asked.

"No." He sighed. "You need to do whatever makes you happy, but I missed you when you were in Smallville, and not just as a friend. I missed you that way, too. Metropolis was a lonelier place without you in it. Chad, too. But also as a colleague."

I smiled. "That's sweet, Clark."

"I'm not trying to be sweet, but it's true. Writing for the Daily Planet has been a dream of mine since I was old enough to understand that the Smallville Press was not the kind of paper I'd want to write for."

"And I never even thought of quitting when you were in Smallville — I love it here more than any of the other papers I've written for. I like it even more, though, when you're here. More than that, I write better when you're here."

"That's a very nice thing to say, Clark Kent," I smiled at him.

"It's true," he said quietly. "I think you need to make the decision that makes sense for you. If that's to quit the Planet, though, I'll miss you. Even if you stay in Metropolis."

"I don't even know what I'd do if I didn't write," I said.

"You could still write," Clark reminded me with a smile.

"For someplace besides the Planet?"

"Well, no," Clark said. "I mean, you could, but why?"

I laughed. "My thought exactly."

"But maybe you wouldn't be a reporter," Clark said.

"I've always wanted to write a novel," I admitted.

Clark smiled. "I bet you'd be great at it."

I sighed. "Maybe, but... I think I'd miss the newsroom. The thrill of working on a good story. Not that I've done much of that recently."

"What are you talking about? We've had a dozen front page stories since you got back," he reminded me.

"Of which you did most of the investigating and more than your fair share of the writing for all of them," I pointed out. "I'm just riding on your coattails."

"You're going through something right now. I know that. Perry knows that. And we both know that Lois Andrews is way better than any other reporter, even distracted."

I sighed. "I won't be Lois Andrews much longer."

"I'm sorry, Lois," Clark said, his eyes sad. "Really, I am."

"Me, too," I said, swirling the dregs of my hot cocoa.

"If you decided to be a novelist, would you move back to Smallville?" Clark asked me.

I shook my head, feeling the tears start to gather in my eyes. "No. I wasn't happy there. I mean, it's a great place. I can see why Chad loves it. But I'm not a small-town girl. It was just

so...”

Clark laughed. “Small?”

I gave a small chuckle in response. “Yeah.” I paused while I stared at the tabletop. “Is that why you left? Or was it because of...” I made a motion with my hand to represent flying.

Clark looked out the window. “Both, I guess. I mean, I think I felt surer that this is where I needed to be after I traveled. Ever since I realized all I could do I knew I wanted to help, and after traveling around the world I realized how much easier that is in large cities — how much more need there is for that. How much easier it is to hide in plain sight.

“But...” He paused while he took a sip of his drink. “Even before that. I don’t know. I never pictured myself staying in Smallville. When we’d go visit Mom’s folks in Boston, I loved it. I think ever since I was a little boy I felt like I belonged someplace like that more than Smallville.”

“You were a city boy,” I laughed.

Clark sighed. “Not really. I love Smallville. I think it was the perfect place to grow up, and I can’t imagine my life without the farm in it. I still never felt like I belonged there, though. When I was in high school I thought it was because I was different. But now... I don’t know. I don’t feel that way here. I know I’m different, but it doesn’t make me feel like an outsider.”

“You’re not,” I told him. “You’re more human than almost anyone else I know.”

“Thanks, Lois,” he said quietly. “You have no idea how good that is to hear.”

“Should we go?” I asked.

Clark nodded. “Are you ready?”

“For what?” I asked him.

“For our next front page story.” Clark grinned at me.

“You know what?” I asked as we got up. “I think I am.”

October 1995

I took a deep breath as I picked up the phone. I could do this, I knew I could. I suspected, although without talking to him I had no proof, that Chad was waiting for me to make the first move. So, I was going to do it. We couldn’t keep living this way — it was time to make this permanent and stop avoiding each other.

I dialed the number quickly as if I could get this over faster if I did. It rang twice before he answered. “Hello,” he said into the phone, sounding subdued.

For a second, I said nothing. I’m not sure what I expected — had I thought I had forgotten what his voice sounded like? If I had, I was sadly mistaken. Instead, I felt like a schoolgirl now, talking to her crush. My heart was beating wildly and I had the strangest urge to hang up the phone.

“Hi,” I finally managed to choke out, hoping that he would recognize my voice from that one small syllable as I was suddenly not sure I could say anymore.

There was a pause while Chad seemed to try to go through his database of voices to place me before I heard the sigh. “I didn’t... I don’t know. I wasn’t expecting you to call,” he finally said, and I realized that he had recognized my voice, but like me, was finding it hard to speak.

“Maybe we should have set a date for talking again,” I said softly.

“Does this mean... Are you ready?” Chad asked quietly.

“Ready?”

“You’re calling to make it official, aren’t you? You want a divorce,” he said. His words were simple and straightforward, but there was a strangled quality to his voice that let me know he wasn’t any more ready for this than I was.

I took a deep breath. “I don’t know that I’m ready,” I admitted. “But I feel like we’re living in limbo. I’m ready to move forward. I’m ready to have you in my life again, even if that’s just as a voice on the phone. If that means I’m ready for a

divorce, then maybe I am,” I said, breathing hard as I finished. I meant every word I said, but that didn’t mean that I didn’t find them difficult to say.

“I miss you,” Chad said softly.

“I miss you, too,” I replied.

For a moment after that we sat in silence before I asked the question I wanted to know most: “Are you happy?” I thought I knew what the answer would be — it was why we were in this situation to begin with. Part of me, a large part of me, who had always wanted nothing more than to see Chad smile, hoped he’d say yes. But another part, the small, selfish part that wanted my old life back was hoping for a no. I could feel her — my devil-me, sitting on my shoulder with her fingers crossed.

“I miss you,” Chad said again in reply. “But... yeah, I think aside from that I’m happier here than I was in Metropolis.”

The little devil-me uncrossed her fingers and slunk off my shoulder. Strangely, the little angel-me didn’t feel satisfied either. She was weeping on the other shoulder. I felt that anguish so strongly, I actually looked over to see if there was a little me on my shoulder. There wasn’t of course, but that didn’t change the fact that I could feel her.

“I’m glad,” I finally managed to get out. It was true. I was glad — even if my heart was breaking at the same time.

“You’re doing well,” he said, his voice just above a whisper. “I see your name on the front page of the Planet almost as much as before.”

I gave a small laugh. “Honestly,” I admitted, “that’s all Clark. Until about a week ago, I was barely doing any work. I did some writing — all of which Clark edited heavily before it was fit to print.”

“What happened a week ago?” Chad asked.

I took a deep breath. “I realized... I realized I missed myself almost as much as I missed you. I felt like I was going through the motions of life here, but I wasn’t invested in it. I felt lost. So I decided to do something about it. I’m still not really... me again, I guess, but I’m getting there.”

“What part of you is not you?” Chad asked, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

I paused while I tried to find the right words to say. “The part that’s... Lois Andrews, I guess. I feel like so much of me is with you that it can’t be here.”

“But you’re ready to move forward anyway?” Chad asked, his tone curious rather than challenging.

“I think we have to, don’t we?”

“Maybe,” Chad said, his voice so quiet I could barely hear him now.

“I think I need to become Lois Lane again,” I said, my voice just slightly louder than his.

“I like Lois Lane,” Chad said quietly. “I fell in love with her when I was sixteen.”

“And she fell in love with you,” I whispered back.

“But now...” Chad’s words trailed off.

I took a deep breath before saying the words. “I think now it’s time for her to be on her own.”

“I think so, too,” Chad said, tears audible in his voice.

“So...” I said, eager to get this conversation over with, but not sure what to say. I wanted to keep talking to him, but this was too painful.

“So,” Chad said giving a little laugh. “I don’t know what to do now. Do we call a lawyer?”

“I guess,” I said quietly. “Should I do that? I presume it will be hard to find someone in Smallville.”

“Should we look for recommendations?” Chad asked.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It would be good to deal with someone who has experience — particularly with amicable divorces.”

“But who do we know that could help us?”

I shrugged before I realized that Chad couldn’t see me.

“Maybe Clark?” I said. “He knows all sorts of people as Superman.”

“Good divorce lawyers?” Chad asked, laughing.

I laughed, too. “I don’t know, but even if not, maybe he knows someone who could help us locate one.”

“I guess,” Chad said. “It’s not like we know anyone else.”

We lapsed into silence for a second. “I love you,” Chad whispered.

“Me, too,” I said back, feeling the tears gathering in my eyes.

“Should we talk tomorrow after you’ve had a chance to talk to Clark?” he asked.

“Okay,” I said softly, finding the words hard to get out again.

“Good night, Lois.”

“Good night, Chad,” I said before I placed the phone on the cradle. Then I sat back against the couch cushions, holding Pooh tightly and crying silent tears.

November 1995

It had been a busy month. Clark had not known any good divorce lawyers, but he had used his connections as Superman to find us a good recommendation. I wasn’t completely clear on how his connections as Superman helped, and frankly I thought it was just as likely that it was his connections as the affable Clark Kent that did it, but I didn’t ask. I tried to spend as little time as possible thinking about the divorce, the lawyer, and everything else related to separating myself from Chad.

It wasn’t an easy task. It turned out that even in an amicable divorce there were lots of things to consider. For example — how to split up the bank account. I thought we should just split it 50/50, but Chad insisted that wasn’t fair since I had left him almost all our joint possessions. I felt like we had more than compensated for that by using the joint account to pay for my new furnishings and stuff in Metropolis, but Chad didn’t agree. Our lawyer, a man by the unfortunate name of Bob Barker, said he had never seen a couple fight for the other side so vehemently before.

So, we were still settling things. Plus, Chad insisted on buying me out of the house in Smallville. I mean, I knew Chad’s salary would be better than mine once he finished residency, but he was hardly raking in the dough now. Plus who knew if that was really even true if he stayed in Smallville? I imagined doctors there weren’t as well paid as those in Metropolis. Even if the cost of living was less there, I wasn’t sure that he would be doing as well as if he had stayed in Metropolis.

Basically, I just wished he’d stop insisting on taking care of me. It worried me that he was not taking enough time to make sure he had what he needed.

The other thing that was busy was work. For some reason that I didn’t understand — or more accurately, I didn’t care enough about to understand — the Kerth Awards had been postponed this year until just before Thanksgiving.

Personally, I felt like this had little to do with me. I had done hardly any noticeably good journalism in the past year. Still, I had been included on several pieces of Clark’s that were possibilities. In fact, in the end, three pieces of his were nominated — which I had to begrudgingly admit was a record. I had once had two pieces nominated in one year, but never three. Actually, since I was on two of Clark’s pieces for this year, I had two nominations as well.

I had agreed to go as Clark’s date to the awards — both because, well, why wouldn’t I, and because I actually thought one of our joint pieces stood a good chance of winning. The original article in the series of rescue workers with the person from Colombia was nominated as well as the article we had just recently finished where Clark and I (okay, mostly Clark) had found the link between John Praught and Art Hadley, the Democratic and Republican front-runners for next year’s

election. The article had destroyed the careers of both men and sent both parties into a tailspin as none of the remaining candidates seemed that strong.

Perry and Alice were going as well — Perry was invited anytime one of his reporters were nominated, and surprisingly, Cat was attending. While I was gone she had written a small article on the Metropolis Police Department. While small, it was a strongly written piece — even I could see that, and it had been nominated under local news.

So, there was a small contingent of Daily Planet people going and Perry was sure we would come home with at least one Kerth. Clark, who had never been nominated for a Kerth before, was incredibly nervous. I couldn’t seem to make him see that he stood a better chance than anyone of winning with three nominations — he had turned into the self-conscious boy I imagined him being as a teenager when his powers first developed.

So, it was no surprise when he showed up at my door a couple of hours before we were supposed to meet in the lobby of the hotel where the awards were being given.

“I know, I’m being silly,” he said when I opened the door.

“Yes,” I laughed at him. “You are.”

“Which tie?” he asked as he came in, holding up two bowties — one plain black and one that was more Clark — some crazy pattern of blue, green, yellow, and orange that was hard to describe. Where ever did he find some place that would even offer that tie to go with his tux? What dress would it even match with?

“That one,” I pointed to the crazy tie hoping it would give him confidence to have me pick a style of tie that I normally teased him about.

“You sure?” he asked.

“Yes,” I laughed at him. “You know, Clark, the award is for your writing, not your clothes.”

“I haven’t won an award,” he said as he slipped the tie around his neck and moved to put the cummerbund on.

“Not yet,” I said, patting his arm as I passed him on my way to the bathroom to finish applying my make-up.

“Do you want to go to dinner?” Clark appeared behind me in the mirror.

“Sure,” I said as I applied eyeliner.

“You look nice, Lois,” Clark said, smiling at me warmly.

I smiled at him in the mirror. “I guess you’ve probably never seen me all dressed up before, have you?”

Clark shrugged. “I don’t know. You always look nice, but you look different tonight. More relaxed.”

“It’s the make-up,” I told him.

“No,” he shook his head. “I noticed it when I first came in. The make-up is nice, I guess, but you don’t need it.”

“That’s sweet, Clark,” I told him as I made my way past him. “You look good, too.”

“I’d look better with the black tie, wouldn’t I?” he asked with a smile.

“Um... you’d stand out less,” I offered.

“In a good way.” He grinned.

“I don’t know. You’d be less Clark, I think, so no, not in a good way,” I told him as he led me out the door.

We went for dinner at a restaurant on the way to the hotel. It was relaxed, but different than other meals we’d shared before. While we spent many dinners together, we rarely went out except for when we went with Chad and Rachel. Sometimes we’d go to lunch together, but that was to much more casual places than the restaurant we went to that night.

Something about the nice restaurant and being all dressed up made this feel different. It felt... well... like a date.

Still, despite that, it was comfortable. The fancier surroundings and nicer clothes didn’t change the comfort level between us. I was still having dinner with my best friend. We

laughed and talked over dinner. It was fun. We somehow managed to avoid topics that brought us back to Chad or Smallville at all and so for a few hours, I was just me. Not Lois Andrews — about to be divorced, but just Lois Andrews. Or maybe Lois Lane since Lois Andrews would be unlikely to be here without her husband. I didn't know. I still hadn't figured out the difference between Lois Lane and Lois Andrews yet.

"So, are you ready?" Perry asked as we joined him at the Planet table.

"Ready for what?" Clark asked as he helped me with my coat and handed it to one of the passing attendants.

"For your first Kerth," Perry smiled.

"We haven't won yet, Chief," Clark continued to be clueless about how likely he was to win at least one Kerth.

"You will. Maybe even more than one," Perry said.

"Did you see the other articles that were nominated?" Clark asked. "I don't stand a chance."

"Did you struggle through English classes or something as a kid?" I asked him, wondering where all his self-doubt came from. Clark didn't answer, but he did look a little ruddier than normal. "You did, didn't you?"

"Well, I wasn't the best writer," Clark mumbled, and I laughed.

"Well, you've certainly improved, son," Perry said, clapping him on the shoulder. "You're a shoo-in tonight."

"Hello, hello, hello," Cat called out as she joined us.

"Hey, Cat," Clark smiled.

"Everyone, this is Matthew Wilde," Cat introduced us.

"Matthew, this is Clark Kent, Perry White, my editor, and his wife Alice, and Lois Andrews. We don't like her." She smiled.

"Good to meet you all," Matthew said. "Well, except you, Lois."

I laughed. "Yes, well, it's a displeasure to meet you, too."

My good mood lasted through to the time of the awards, and I was still laughing when we took our seats. All in all, it was a good night for the Planet. Cat won the local news Kerth, and an article Clark wrote on the Coates Orphanage beat out our joint article on the rescue workers for human interest. His surprise at winning would have been a little sad if it wasn't so funny.

There was a break in the ceremony before the main award — the one for international level news — was awarded. Cat and Clark had identical looks of awe on their faces looking at their first Kerths. "Congratulations, you two," I said as the noise level in the room increased slightly.

"I know this is old hat for you," Cat said, but I cut her off before she could finish.

"No, it's not. It's an amazing honor," I told her.

"Thanks, Lois." She smiled at me.

"Come on." I grabbed Clark's arm. "Let's get you a drink to celebrate."

Clark nodded, still seeming awed by his win, but he followed me and we both grabbed a glass of wine from a passing tray. "Are you having fun?" he asked.

"I am," I told him and was surprised to realize it was true.

"I'm sorry we didn't win for our joint article," he said.

"I'm not," I told him. "The orphanage article was a better story."

"You're being very gracious tonight," Clark smiled at me, and I smiled back. It was true — my time in Smallville had softened my killer instincts or something. Or maybe it was just that all the time with Clark since I had come back made me want to see him happy.

There was a slight tapping noise over the din, and when I looked up at the dais I realized they were about to start again. "We should take our seats," Clark nodded as he placed a hand lightly on the small of my back, and we made our way back to

the table.

After a few minutes of people shuffling back to their seats, the emcee resumed his place behind the podium and announced the nominees for international news. I thought Clark's story, or our story, on the election was a good one, but I also had read the other nominees and wasn't as confident as I'd like that we'd win. It was the biggest of the stories nominated, but Reggie Hiller's story on a governmental aide using the British Prime Minister's diplomatic visits to smuggle opium into England was well written and not exactly small news.

Perry, though, was smiling at us encouragingly and clearly thought we had a good chance of winning. Clark, looking a little nervous, reached over to grab my hand. You'd think winning a Kerth earlier would have boosted his confidence, but I think he actually may have jumped off his chair when they called our names. I squeezed his hand when he looked over at me, and then we got up together.

It was my fourth Kerth. The first one where Chad was not by my side. I thought that later that might feel weird, but at that moment, I was too caught up in Clark's excitement to really process it.

Things went back to purely social shortly after Clark and I got back to our seats. Some tables cleared out immediately, but Perry insisted we all stay and share a bottle of champagne to celebrate our success. Clark kept looking at the two awards in front of him in awe (they were made of plastic as the real ones weren't engraved with our names until after the ceremony and mailed to us later, but I remember thinking the plastic version of my first Kerth was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen).

It was an hour later that we all piled out of the hotel, happy and a little tipsy. "Want to walk home?" Clark asked me.

"Sure," I agreed. It was a nice night out and the walk wasn't that long. Besides, the cooler air would help clear my head. I wasn't drunk, but three glasses of wine and two glasses of champagne over the last several hours was more than I was used to.

We walked in silence for a few minutes, and it felt relaxed and comfortable.

"Thanks for coming with me tonight," Clark said quietly.

I smiled. "I had to come anyway. I'm not sure if you're aware, but I was nominated, too." I held up my plastic Kerth to demonstrate my point.

"I know," Clark said. "Still, you were great tonight. I know I was sort of ridiculously nervous. I can't imagine going through that without you."

"Well, you don't have to," I told him. "I'm your best friend. You can count on me to help with things like this."

Clark placed a hand on my arm. "I know. And I appreciate it. Really."

"I know you do," I said, my voice dropping slightly. "You know, I owe you. You've been there for me for the past several months, and I know that was a lot more work than helping you pick out a tie."

"It wasn't work," Clark said as we both stopped at a corner to wait for the light to change before crossing. "I enjoy being with you, and I'm glad that my being around has made this time easier to get through."

"I enjoy being with you, too," I said, turning to face him more fully, and moving closer to give him a tight hug. "You're a good friend, Clark Kent," I said as I turned my head to give him a soft kiss on the cheek.

I started to back away, and I could see Clark start to respond to me when something happened. I don't know what. I have no idea. One minute Clark was about to speak and I was moving out of his arms, and the next we were moving closer together. For a moment it seemed like we both stood still and then...

I nearly ran home, tears streaming down my cheeks. When I first crossed the street I had heard Clark calling after me. I heard him apologize. But I couldn't stop running. I didn't want to see him. Talk to him. What had I done? Or had he done? How could we have done that?

Eventually the sound of his voice stopped. I was sure he was flying above me making sure I got home okay, but at least he had stopped calling after me. I couldn't talk to him right now. How could I?

How could I have done that? Or let him do that? I still wasn't sure who had instigated it. It didn't matter, though. My divorce wasn't even finalized yet. I was still married — to a man I was still in love with, even if it turned out we wanted different things out of life.

How could I have kissed Clark? What was I thinking?

My litany of thoughts were brought to an abrupt halt when I reached the top of the stairs and my doorway was in view, though.

Standing there, with a suitcase in hand, was Chad.

"Lois," he was using a louder voice than I had expected, but I still didn't say anything. I hadn't even finished getting up the stairs — one foot was on the landing, but the other was still on the staircase and I couldn't seem to make myself move.

"Lois, I'm sorry," he said, but I still said nothing.

"Hey." Now his voice was soft. In fact, now he was using his voice rather than... I turned around. Clark was behind me. He was the person who had been calling to me before. Of course he was — Clark — the man I had just kissed. Not Chad, my husband. What did he have to be sorry for?

Clark looked past me and saw Chad. I saw the color drain from his face and then suddenly he was all flushed. Interesting. So Kryptonians reacted to embarrassing situations much like humans did. Or was that just a learned trait?

I shook my head. Why was I thinking about this now?

"Hi," Clark said to Chad, his voice now soft, too.

There was silence for a moment more before I finally managed to make both my feet join me on the landing. "Hi," I said to Chad, avoiding his eyes as I did so.

"Um... I should go," Clark nearly whispered behind me.

"I'll... um... Lois, call me to talk, okay?" I said nothing, not at all sure what to say, so he added, "Please?" to his words.

Still having trouble speaking, I nodded my head, then turned away to open my door. I motioned for Chad to go inside after all the locks were undone, and then followed him inside myself. Clark was still standing on the landing, and I caught sight of his face when I turned around to close the door. He looked awful — apologetic and sad and... something else I couldn't identify.

I wanted to say something, let him know I wasn't angry at him. Heck, I wasn't even sure he had done anything wrong, so how could I be angry at him? But I couldn't deal with that now. Not with Chad standing behind me. So I said nothing as I closed the door.

"Is everything okay?" Chad asked softly when I turned around. I looked at him quizzically, but still said nothing. "Something seemed wrong. With you and Clark. Is everything okay?" he clarified.

I nodded and then took a deep breath. "Yeah. It was just an emotional night," I said. I held up my plastic Kerth. "We won a Kerth."

"Congratulations," Chad said warmly, but his eyes didn't quite meet mine. I know he was having the same thought I had had earlier — this was the first one I had won without him beside me.

"Thanks," I said quietly. "Clark won a second one as well. I think he was a bit overwhelmed." I wasn't sure that at all

explained his behavior — it certainly didn't explain the apology, but hopefully it would suffice.

I was suddenly glad that the wind against my face when I ran home had dried up my tears. I wasn't about to tell Chad about the kiss. It was a mistake anyway. There was no reason to mention it.

"That's great," Chad said with a smile that didn't quite meet his eyes.

"Why are you here?" Hearing the words coming out of my mouth made me flinch. I hadn't meant to be so cold when I asked that. "I'm sorry. I'm just... I wasn't expecting you."

"I wasn't expecting to be here," Chad said. "I don't know what happened. I was in Wichita today, and I couldn't stop thinking about how easy it would be to get on a plane and see you."

"But you're all packed," I mentioned, nodding to the suitcase still in his hand.

He blushed. "I know. I had the idea before now. I just didn't act on it."

"I don't understand," I said, although I think that was to delay having to say anything as much as it was true.

"I'm miserable," Chad said, dropping his suitcase and moving to the couch. "I keep waiting to feel better. To stop missing you so much. But it's not happening. I guess about a week ago, I got the idea of just coming back. So I packed my bag, but then I decided I was being too rash. So the suitcase stayed in the car."

"This morning, though... I don't know. It seemed more real to me that I could just get on a plane and see you. So I did."

"I've missed you, too," I said, my voice barely above a whisper as I sat beside him on the couch.

"I think I should move back," Chad said to me, his eyes earnest.

I started to tell him how much I wanted him to, but for some reason, before the words were past my lips, I imagined Clark's face as I closed the door just a moment ago. I shook my head to clear it. Clearly, I had made a mess of things with Clark — or they had become a mess even if I was not to blame. But that had nothing to do with Chad. Did it?

"Will you really be happy?" I asked Chad to stall some more.

"I don't know," Chad said. "Do I think this is the best possible solution? No," he said honestly. "The best possible solution would involve you being as happy in Smallville as I am. But given that that isn't happening... I don't want to miss you anymore."

"So you're willing to go back to working for Ken?" I asked.

His head fell forward, and Chad rested it in his hands. "I don't know," he mumbled. "I haven't thought this through. I just... I miss you so much, Lois."

"I know. I know how you feel. I miss you, too. So much. But... I just don't want you to be unhappy," I told him.

"I don't know what to do to be happy," he said softly. "I'm unhappy here with my job, I'm unhappy in Smallville without you. This seems like the lesser of two evils."

"For now," I said softly, thinking that this was the same decision I had made. It was better to be in Smallville with Chad than Metropolis alone. In the short term, anyway. It was harder to tell if that was the right long term solution, though.

Chad nodded. "I know. And you're right. Maybe this is the right decision long term, too."

"Maybe," I whispered, wondering just when this question had become a real question. It seemed like for the past several months, Chad and I were constantly re-evaluating. I missed the days when I had been sure that he was all I wanted. Well, as long as I had my job at the Daily Planet.

I still didn't get it. It was just a job. Why was it so important to me? Why was Chad's need to work in a small town hospital so important to him?

I recalled Clark's words from the Fudge Castle so many months ago. 'If we were really perfect for each other... wouldn't we want compatible things out of life?' Were we not perfect for each other? I had never thought so before now. Even when I decided it was time to move forward with the divorce, I still thought Chad was perfect for me.

It was a belief I had held constantly since I was sixteen. Oh, sure, there were moments here and there when we were arguing when I would wonder if I was wrong, but mostly, I was sure.

Suddenly, for just a moment, I was back on that street corner, my lips pressed to Clark's. I hadn't been thinking that Chad was perfect for me then. I hadn't been thinking about Chad at all.

I shook my head. I hadn't been thinking at all. It was a mistake. I had had too much to drink, Clark had slipped or something. Whatever it was, it had nothing to do with Chad. He was still perfect for me. He was, wasn't he? He had to be. Even if we couldn't be together, I couldn't stand the thought that I had been wrong on this one life-altering thought my entire life.

"We should sleep on it," I said, realizing only now that we had been sitting in silence for a long time.

"Okay," Chad said quietly. "I can stay down here."

I nodded. That was probably the best idea. "I'll get you a pillow and some sheets," I told him.

I looked over at the clock. It was finally seven — a reasonable time to get up. I had tossed and turned all night, never really being able to fall into anything resembling sleep. Instead, I kept going over things in my mind. What was the right decision for us? We needed to decide now before our divorce was final.

I couldn't move back to Smallville. I knew that. But could Chad move back here? Really? Was it a decision that he would be okay with in five years? Or was it a decision that felt good now — felt comfortable, but he would live to regret?

I had no idea. I hated the feeling of confusion that seemed so pervasive in my life right now. I wanted a clear idea of where I was and where I was headed. Was that really too much to ask?

With a sigh, I swung my legs out of bed. Some part of me wished I had invited Chad to spend the night with me, another still knew that was a bad idea. That never helped us come to any decisions. Still, it was comfortable, even if our activities there stayed PG, and I missed him more when I was alone in our bed at night than at any other time.

I was surprised to find my living room empty. The blanket Chad had used was folded up and neatly placed on top of his pillow. Had he changed his mind and left already? That didn't seem like Chad.

I stepped closer, turning my head to take in the kitchen, but that too was empty. I finally noticed a note sitting on top of his blanket, though, and I picked it up with trepidation. Before I had it open, I noticed his suitcase still sitting on the floor and breathed a sigh of relief. While it would have been easier to have him make this decision for us, I was glad to see that he was still here... somewhere.

I turned to his note, but it was terse. Not cold per se, but short. He had gone out for a walk, needed time to think. He was sorry to come here without having thought this through better and hoped he wasn't making things difficult for me. He would be back by dinner time.

And he loved me.

I set the note back on the blanket and sank onto the couch. Was he making things difficult for me? Maybe, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Maybe we had rushed into this divorce. Maybe we weren't ready for it yet. Or maybe we would never be ready for it and we had to just do it and move on. I had no idea.

So, what to do with myself while I waited for Chad to come back? I tried to remember what I had had planned for the day before he showed up, but I couldn't remember. I probably would

have ended up spending the day with Clark.

Clark. In my questions about my marriage this morning, I had somehow managed to forget about the situation with Clark.

My head fell back to lean against the couch. Did I have the energy to deal with him today before Chad came back? Should I wait? I wasn't sure, but I suspected I'd feel better once the situation with Clark was behind me.

With a sigh, I got up and walked over to the phone. He wasn't there, so I left him a message telling him I was coming over later to talk, before I headed to the shower to prepare for what promised to be a difficult day.

He had the door open before I had even come up the walk. "You got my message," I called out to him. I knew it was obvious he had, but I wanted something to say — something normal.

Apparently he did not, as he looked at me, ashen-faced, and started apologizing immediately. "I'm so sorry, Lois. I don't know what came over me. I don't... I'm just so sorry."

I said nothing as I walked past him into his apartment. What was there to say? I knew we had to talk this out, but that was Clark's territory. My natural instinct was flight. So, it should have been no surprise that the first words I uttered after I sat down were completely wrong. "So, was it your fault then? Did you kiss me?"

Clark sat down across from me, his face in his hands. "I don't know. I can't remember clearly what happened. One minute we were standing there in the street, the next we were..." he trailed off. "But you were drunk, and alcohol doesn't affect me, so yeah, clearly it was my fault."

"I wasn't drunk," I said quietly. "I mean, yeah, I had a bit too much to drink, but I knew what I was doing."

"You did?" Clark asked, looking at me in shock. "Did you..."

"I don't know. I mean, I don't know what happened, but aside from that moment, the rest of the night is crystal clear in my memory. I'd like to blame the alcohol, and maybe I can to some extent, but it's not like I can say I was drunk so whatever happened was your fault. I just wasn't that drunk." I took a deep breath. It would have been so much easier to let Clark take the fall for this. He was clearly willing to do it, and then I could stop the churning in my stomach when I thought of what I had done. I could stop feeling guilty about kissing Clark when I was married to Chad. Most importantly, I could stop trying to examine *why* I kissed Clark when I was married to Chad.

It would have been a lie, though. While I still wasn't clear on what had happened, I knew I wasn't completely blameless. I had been there and coherent. Intentional or not, I had kissed Clark.

"I never meant for that to happen," Clark said quietly.

I looked up sharply. What had he said? That sounded like...

"What?" I asked him, my voice strangled.

"I never meant for that to happen," Clark said again, not looking at me as he spoke.

"Had you..." I almost couldn't force the words out past my dry throat. "Had you thought about it before?"

Clark didn't answer at first, but his face flushed hotly, so I pressed him. "Had you?"

Clark sighed and stared resolutely at the floor while his cheeks remained a bright crimson. "I don't know," he mumbled. "I mean, of course, the thought has occurred to me before."

"Of course?" I cut him off. What was obvious about that? I had never thought of kissing Clark before. I hadn't, had I?

"I mean, Lois, you can't be..." Clark trailed off, but then looked up, meeting my eyes. "Look, I'm not trying to make things complicated for you. I know your life is a mess. Honestly, it's not like I've spent months thinking about kissing you. Or really much time at all. But, yeah, the thought has occurred to me. I mean, Rachel and I didn't work out as we wanted different things out of life. It looked like you and Chad were heading down

a similar path.

“So, yeah, once or twice it occurred to me that I’ve never known anyone else who wants so many of the same things in life as I do. And maybe that’s led to... Lois, you are a beautiful woman. Surely it would be strange if I never...” He trailed off again, looking even redder in the face now than when he started.

“Are you...” I couldn’t get the words out. “Do you...” I shook my head and finally gave up. “Clark?”

“I don’t know,” he said quietly, his voice so anguished that I had to fight the urge to reach forward and wrap my arms around him. “It’s not like I’ve been interested in you for years and was keeping it hidden or something. Or at least if I was, it wasn’t conscious, but maybe... I don’t know, but I care about you, Lois, and I have to admit, last night after I came back here, I did a lot of thinking, and it would be dishonest for me to say that I only mean that in a platonic sense.”

“I don’t know what to say,” I said quietly.

“You don’t need to say anything,” Clark said, getting up and pacing back and forth in his living room while running his fingers through his hair. “You’re married. I never meant... Really, Lois, I promise, I never consciously thought about kissing you in any more than a fleeting sense. I know how completely inappropriate it is and how ridiculous it is to think that you could feel anything besides friendship for me.”

“Right,” I agreed. “Because I’m married.” But when I looked up and met his eyes, I couldn’t help but wonder. Was it true? Did I really have nothing but platonic feelings for Clark? I was nearly certain that it was true — I had never thought about kissing him before. But what about that flight to Colombia — the one where I had sniffed his aftershave. Was that 100% platonic?

I sighed. “This is so...” I trailed off. I’d been about to say complicated or hard, but both would make Clark feel badly and I didn’t want to do that. He hadn’t really done anything wrong. Well, maybe he had kissed me, but then, I still wasn’t sure about that.

Suddenly that thought brought me up short. How could I insist that I felt nothing romantic for Clark if I still thought it was possible that I had initiated the kiss from last night? “Maybe I...” I trailed off again.

“Lois, it’s okay. Really,” Clark said, and his voice was soothing, the voice I knew so well. But when I looked up, I could see the fear behind his eyes. Fear of what, though?

“What are you afraid of?” I asked him.

“What?” he asked, taking a step back, startled.

I shook my head. When had I gotten in the habit of speaking to Clark like this? I had never done this with anyone else. Even with Chad, while I sometimes slipped up, I usually remembered to think before I spoke. I sighed. I was acting completely insane.

With a deep breath, I tried to back track. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked that. It was just...”

“Just what?” Clark asked.

“You look scared,” I blurted out. “But what do you have to be scared of?”

“Don’t you know?” Clark asked, utterly bewildered.

“No,” I said, flashing back to the first time he looked like this. That day, so long ago, on my couch. He had looked terrified before he told me about his strange abilities, and while he didn’t look quite like that now, it wasn’t that far off.

Clark sat down again, his head falling forward into his hands. “Lois, you’re my best friend. I don’t want to have ruined everything between us because of...”

“You haven’t!” I cut him off emphatically. It was like a film had played in front of my eyes while he spoke. What would it be like if he had? If I decided Clark’s attraction to me, however slight it may be, was too much and we couldn’t be friends anymore? “You can’t have,” I continued, my voice softer this time, still feeling the loss I had felt when I saw that image a

second ago. “I can’t imagine my life without you in it.”

My eyes widened as I said it, and I leaned back against the couch. What the heck did that mean? I couldn’t imagine my life without Clark in it? Clark? How could that be?

Not that it mattered. One quick glance up into his face and I knew it was true. I couldn’t picture my life without Clark in it. Or I could, but didn’t want to — couldn’t bear the thought.

I had walked away from the man I had been in love with since I was sixteen, but somehow, imagining a life without Clark was too hard to contemplate.

I can’t say what I did next was the best thing, but, as I said, my natural instinct is always flight, so faced with the realization that I couldn’t bear the thought of Clark not being in my life, I did the only thing that came naturally to me — I ran away from him.

“I’m sorry,” I said as I stood up abruptly. “I can’t do this right now.”

For a second, Clark didn’t move. He just stood there, startled. As a result, I was opening his door before he spoke. “Don’t,” he said, and while I wanted to ignore him and keep going, the plaintive tone to his voice prevented me from doing so. I turned around, but kept my hand on the doorknob, ready to bolt at any second.

“Lois, please,” he said, his voice still pleading. “Please don’t go.”

“I can’t...” I said again, my voice barely louder than a whisper. I could feel the tears building behind my eyes. I just felt so overwhelmed, so... lost at sea, I guess.

“Please,” Clark said again, taking a tentative step closer to me. “I’m sorry. I know that this is my problem and I’ll get past it. I promise, Lois. Just promise me that I haven’t screwed everything up.”

“You haven’t,” I whispered as the first tear fell down my cheek. “You haven’t at all. But...” I brushed impatiently at the tear. “I need to get home. I need to talk to Chad. Decide what we’re doing. I just can’t deal with this right now.”

Clark nodded his head in understanding, but looked so lost, so hurt, that I knew I needed to leave before I felt compelled to stay.

“Will you call me tomorrow?” he asked softly. “Just let me know how you’re doing? I just... I really do want to continue to be your friend, Lois.”

I nodded. “And you are. But I have to go,” I said, surprised at how firm my voice was even while the tears continued to fall.

Chad was still out when I got home — a fact for which I was grateful. I washed my face to erase any sign of my tears and turned the television on. I had to empty my brain, I couldn’t think about this thing with Clark. Whatever it was, it meant nothing. It had no impact on where things stood with Chad.

Getting up to make myself a cup of coffee, I realized how true that was and felt better. Chad and I had to make the decision that was best for Chad and me. Clark was my closest friend, and if I let myself think about it, maybe I would decide that he was more than that. He wasn’t my husband, though, and I knew without a doubt that I didn’t have the same kind of feelings for him that I had for Chad.

I was feeling a bit calmer and more in control when Chad came in a half hour later. Chad, on the other hand, looked awful. “I have something to tell you,” he said quietly almost the instant he walked inside.

“What is it?” I asked, confused. What could have happened while he was out for the day?

“Yesterday morning, when I was in Wichita...” He paused, sitting on the couch. “I went for coffee with one of the other residents.”

“Okay,” I said, not sure where this was going. Did he feel guilty about that? It was just coffee. He’d done that with lots of other colleagues over the years, and like my going out for coffee with Clark, it wasn’t a big deal. Even when we weren’t going through a divorce.

“She kissed me,” Chad said, his voice anguished.

I nodded, not sure what to say, or even how to feel. “Did you want her to?” I finally asked, although I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

Chad shrugged. “Maybe, sort of. Not really. I mean... I’m not really interested in her. She’s nice and all, but I’m not interested in dating her. I have to admit, though, I’ve been feeling lonely and...”

“Chad, whatever we decide tonight, we are in the middle of divorce proceedings. The fact that someone else kissed you is not really something I can get upset about.”

“You don’t mind?” he asked, and I could tell that even he wasn’t sure how he wanted me to feel.

I sighed. “Of course I mind, but that doesn’t mean I have any right to be angry at you. We previously agreed to split up. Besides...” I took a deep breath. He had been honest with me, I had to return the favor. Given my recent revelation about Clark, though, I realized my admission was not quite the same as his meaningless kiss with a woman he wasn’t even attracted to. “Last night... on the way home... I mean, it meant nothing, we’re not even sure how it happened, but... Clark and I kissed.”

Chad looked up startled. “You kissed Clark?”

“Or he kissed me,” I said quietly. “We’re not sure.”

Chad looked away from me, but not before I could see the hurt in his eyes. “Do you... Are you interested in Clark?”

I knew he was going to ask that as soon as I decided to tell him, but that didn’t make me any more prepared to answer the question. I sighed and decided to half answer him since I wasn’t really sure of the answer anyway. “I love *you*.”

Chad nodded. “Have you and Clark...”

“No!” I cut him off. “Never. It was a one time thing. Really.”

“What do you think this means?” Chad asked. “The fact that we both kissed other people. I mean... when we were in high school, this always seemed like proof that you were over your ex or something, but I’m not over you, Lois. I love you so much.”

“I know. I don’t know what it means,” I said, my tears from earlier back in full force.

“Maybe we’ve both been lonely?” Chad asked. “And lost or something.”

I nodded. “Whatever the reason, it doesn’t change how I feel about you.” I told Chad my thought from earlier.

He smiled. “No, it doesn’t, does it?”

“Not that that makes it any easier to make a decision.” I gave a small half-smile.

Chad nodded. “I saw Ken today,” he offered up.

“Is that where you were?” I asked in surprise.

He shrugged. “No, mostly I went to see my mom, but I also wanted to feel out Ken on coming back.”

“And?”

“He seemed open to the idea, although I think my life would be hell for a little while.”

“Is that what you want?” I asked him.

Chad didn’t answer, but instead looked out the window. After a few moments of silence, he got up and walked over there, staring at the ground. “Chad?” I prodded him.

When he turned around, his eyes were full of tears. “No,” he whispered. “I want it to be. I want it to be so much. But seeing him again reminded me of why I left. Even just waiting for him — seeing the hospital, I don’t think a different hospital in Metropolis would make things better. Ken is just a part of what I don’t like.”

I nodded. “So, you’re not moving back?” I asked, just to

clarify.

Chad sighed. “I don’t think so. I wish I was. I wish I could be sure that this would make me happy for the rest of my life, and I know *you* could. But I’m not sure about staying in Metropolis. I don’t think I could do that again long term.”

I sighed and brushed impatiently at the tear on my cheek. I hadn’t really expected that he would stay, and yet some part of me had really hoped, really wanted him to make that choice. It was unfair and I knew that. I had no intention of making the choice to stay in Smallville for him. Still, I wanted to be with Chad and if he could have been happy in Metropolis...

But he wasn’t. It was that simple. I knew he wasn’t before he showed up and he still wasn’t. That didn’t seem to mean I wasn’t disappointed, though.

“Are you angry?” Chad asked me quietly.

“About what?” I looked up at him, surprised.

“Because I came here and made everything a mess and then decided to leave again,” he said, his voice soft.

I shook my head, but then realized he couldn’t see me since he was looking outside again. “No. I’m glad you came. I’m glad...” I couldn’t finish my thought. I wasn’t even sure what it was.

“What?” Chad asked, turning to look at me.

I sighed as I tried to put the complicated thoughts into words. “I guess... maybe it was good for me to see that this is hard for you, too. Is that selfish?”

Chad smiled at me. “A little, but I know what you mean. It makes me feel better to know I’m not struggling through this alone, too.”

I moved closer to him to wrap my arms around him. “We’ll get through this, right?” I asked. “We’ll be friends when this is over?”

I felt Chad’s head nod above me. “We have to be, don’t we?”

“I can’t imagine my life without you in it,” I said, looking up. For a moment, I realized those were the same words I had said to Clark, but I brushed the thought away, not wanting Clark to be part of this moment.

“You don’t need to,” Chad reassured me. “I can’t imagine ever not caring about you, Lois. I hope one day that this is easier than it is now, but I don’t see how we would ever get to a point where I wouldn’t want to know what you were doing and that you were happy.”

I nodded. “Me, too.” Then squeezing him just a little harder, I let go.

“Hi,” I said shyly as I stood in his doorway.

“Hi,” he replied, looking even more flustered than me. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “Chad is going back to Smallville.”

“I’m sorry,” he said softly, and looking into his eyes I could tell that he meant it.

“Me, too,” I replied. “But I think I’m okay with it now.”

“Do you want to come in?” he asked, and I suddenly hated how formal we were being.

“I do. I want things to go back to the way they were, Clark,” I said, and then sighed when I heard the whine in my voice.

Clark moved away, smiling slightly. “Me, too. I’m sorry for the other night.”

I shook my head. “Don’t be. We were both there.” I sat on his couch taking a deep breath. I had practiced what to say the whole way over here. That was a lie — or at least a minimization of the truth. I had practiced what to say all of last night, too.

Chad had left not long after I pulled away from our hug, but before he left he told me that he loved me and wanted me to be happy. With a slightly strangled quality to his voice, he had told me to follow my heart. “I have trouble imagining you with someone else,” he had said, flushing hotly. “But I want you to be

happy, and if Clark makes you happy, then you should be with Clark. I couldn't pick someone who deserves you more."

I had nodded at him, not sure what to say. Would Clark make me happy? Well, clearly, yes. He had been doing so for months. But the kind of happy Chad was talking about? I didn't know.

After another long night of tossing and turning, I had realized that I wasn't really ready to know. Clark was an amazing man — there was no doubt about that. While I was ready now to move past Chad, I wasn't over him yet. I still loved him. I wasn't ready to fall in love again with anyone, even Clark.

Still, I had to admit that I was attracted to him. Some small part of me had probably always been, but it had been easy to miss before — hidden as it was beneath my feelings and my history with Chad.

Could that grow to be something wonderful? Something like I had had with Chad? Maybe, but not now. I had to admit that the thought of having that type of relationship with anyone — those types of feelings, made me a little sick to my stomach. I clearly wasn't ready.

"Lois, I really am sorry," Clark said again.

I nodded. "I've been thinking about what you said pretty much since Chad left."

"You have?" Clark asked, sounding surprised.

I nodded. "I really do want things to go back to normal," I told him. "But before that can happen, we probably need to talk about what happened the other night."

"It was a mistake, Lois. I'll put it behind me," Clark started, but I cut him off.

"I think some part of me wanted it to happen."

My statement was greeted with silence, and I looked up surprised. It took a lot to render Clark speechless. Not as much as me perhaps, but a lot.

He was staring at me in complete surprise and confusion. "What?" he finally asked quietly.

I took a deep breath. Somehow this was harder to say a second time. "I think... No. I know. Some part of me wanted it to happen. Your feelings... they aren't... unreciprocated."

Clark continued to stare at me in shock, but I couldn't bear to say anything else. Finally Clark stopped pacing to sit on the couch. There was an entire couch cushion between us, but it was still closer than we had been to each other since the other night on the street.

"Lois, are you... I'm confused," he said softly.

I gave a small laugh. "Me, too," I admitted.

Clark nodded. "I know that it doesn't mean anything. I mean, whatever... I don't know. But I know that doesn't mean..."

I shook my head. "No. It doesn't. It can't."

"Because you're still married," Clark agreed quietly.

"And still in love with my husband," I added quietly. I looked up. As difficult as it was, I needed to look at him as I said this.

"Regardless of the fact that Chad and I have firmly agreed that he's not moving back, and I have to say any fantasies I had of his changing his mind are dead now, I'm still in love with him. I'm just not ready..."

"Of course you're not," Clark said quietly, compassionately.

"I think you're great, Clark," I said quietly. "You're my best friend and anyone would be lucky to be with you. But it can't be me. Not now."

"I know," Clark said quietly. "Really, Lois. I never expected..." He trailed off for a second before taking a deep breath and continuing. "I never even thought about it before now. I mean, I think maybe I've been attracted to you on some level since I met you, but I never thought anything would come of it. Never expected... No matter how things were going with you and Chad."

I nodded. "I feel the same way," I said softly. "I've always been more comfortable with you than anyone I've ever known

other than Chad. Maybe that means I've always been somewhat attracted to you too, but... I'm just not ready."

"I know," Clark said again.

"And I don't know when I will be," I added quietly. "I don't think... I just want to be honest, Clark. I don't want you to feel guilty about the kiss the other night because I do think it was both of us. But at the same time, I don't want to give you the impression that this means..."

"I know," he said again. "I have no expectations. And, Lois? Thank you for telling me how you feel. I know that wasn't easy for you, and I really appreciate it."

I nodded. "Just don't... wait for me, I guess," I said quietly. "I am so far from ready to be in a relationship."

Clark nodded. "I wouldn't expect anything different. But Lois... I need to be honest with you, too. I'm not really interested in anyone else, so..."

"Just as long as you won't stop yourself from looking because of me," I said. "I can't promise that I'll ever be ready."

"You will be," Clark smiled at me. "Maybe by the time you are, you won't feel the same way towards me, but you have too much to give to not fall in love again someday."

"And if that happens?" I asked him. "With someone else?"

"I'll still be your best friend if you'll let me," Clark said.

I smiled back. "Good. Because I'd like to think I'll still be your best friend when you find someone else." Clark nodded, and I knew he caught my choice of words. *When* he found someone else. I really did not see any way that wouldn't happen before I was ready. Even if my feelings for him didn't go away, I knew it would be a long time before I was ready to act on them. It would be foolish to think Clark would still be single.

But right now, what I needed was my best friend. Looking into his eyes, I realized I had him.

April 1997

"Are you ready to go?" I called as I closed the door behind me. I had been watching the news as I got ready, and it looked like Superman had left the oil spill at least a half hour ago. I figured as Superman it wouldn't take Clark long to get cleaned up.

"Pretty much," Clark said as he exited his bedroom. He smiled upon catching sight of me. "You know, it's okay to go to Smallville and not wear flannel."

"I know," I said. "I lived there, too, you know. This always feels right, though." I gestured down at my flannel shirt — the one I had worn the first time I went to Smallville three years ago. As I recalled, Chad had made a similar comment about my shirt that day.

"Well, I'll admit," Clark said, as he washed the coffee cup that had been sitting on the counter when I arrived, "you look cute."

"Are we going?" I asked in lieu of saying thank you.

"Yup, just give me a second," Clark said.

"You know, if you forget something you can be back here in a minute," I reminded him.

"I know," Clark said with a look. "That doesn't mean I should just assume I'll remember. Besides, I like to just be Clark as much as possible when we're at the Wind Festival. It's much more relaxing that way."

He put a hand on the small of my back as he led me out the door. "Ready?" he asked.

"You brought my suitcase out already?" I checked for the third time since he had come by to pick it up the previous night.

"Yes, Lois," he said, a trace of impatience in his voice. "I told you I had when you called me at midnight to ask."

I could feel myself blush slightly, but ignored it. "It's just... well, it's different this time."

"I know," he said, and the annoyance was gone from his

voice, replaced with compassion.

He lifted me into his arms before taking off. We flew in silence for just a moment before he asked, “Are you ready for this?”

I nodded. I had felt nervous last night... well, this morning too, if I were to be honest with myself. But there was nothing to be nervous about. I had been to Smallville twice before since we finalized the divorce, and Chad had come to Metropolis three times. It had been awkward at first, but we had slowly settled into a new norm.

In retrospect, it was weird to think about how different we were together now. We had done it — we had transitioned into being friends. Good friends, in fact. We spoke on the phone at least once a week and usually more often than that. I smiled a little as I recalled my worries from a year and a half ago — that we would turn into Clark and Lana — knowing about each other only through gossip and randomly bumping into each other somewhere.

That wasn’t a danger at all. It had never occurred to me to not tell Chad I was coming to Smallville. Of course, to be fair, I hadn’t been sure it was a wise decision to go the first time. I remember feeling so nervous I wanted to smack myself. I couldn’t sleep the night before I was so nauseated.

I had gone anyway — not wanting to miss last year’s Wind Festival due to nerves. Once I got there, I had been glad I had gone. While it was awkward to see Chad again, it was also good to see him. I missed him still, but in less of the heart breaking way I had before.

I felt much the same way now. I still missed him. I wasn’t sure that would ever stop — he was always going to be one of my closest friends, and I hadn’t broken the habit of sometimes thinking of things in terms of how I would retell the story to him. So I would probably always wish he lived closer.

Still, I no longer ached for him the way I had before. I no longer missed him as my husband and my lover. I missed him as my friend.

“I think so,” I finally answered Clark’s question about whether or not I was ready. The last two times I had come for a visit, I had stayed at the farm with Clark, Martha, and Jonathan. It was just easier that way, and it was nice to have the buffer from Chad if I should need it.

Slowly, I had realized, though, that I didn’t need it. So, this time I had taken Rachel up on her offer and was staying there. Two doors away from the house Chad and I had bought.

I hadn’t actually been in the house since the divorce — both afraid to see that things were different and afraid to see that they were not. It seemed unavoidable this time, though. It would be hard to stay with Rachel and not visit Chad’s home.

“I’ll be with you the whole time,” Clark said softly, and I smiled at him. He was also staying at Rachel’s. I suspected he was doing so for me, but he had claimed that it had been long enough since he and Rachel were together that there were less likely to be rumors about his staying there. Especially with me there. To be honest, he hadn’t seemed 100% sure of that, but Rachel had insisted that it was okay.

“If you want to stay with your parents...” I offered again, secretly hoping that he would say no. I felt in some ways like I leaned on Clark even more now than I had before. He had really been there for me when things were rough. True to his promise, he had seemed to put behind him whatever feelings had caused that one long ago kiss.

I still thought about it from time to time — wondered what might have been. But that was a long time ago now. While Clark was single now, I was pretty sure those feelings were long gone. About six months ago, he had gone on a few dates with a pretty redhead he had met at a coffee shop. Her name was Lydia, and I had met her on more than one occasion. She had seemed

completely enamored with Clark when I met her. Something had gone wrong, though. Clark never said what, but I imagined it wasn’t pretty since when I saw her again about two weeks after she and Clark ended things, she was engaged. She had blushed when I asked her about it, and I got the impression that the relationship wasn’t as new as I would have thought given how recently she had broken up with Clark. So maybe she wasn’t as enamored of him as I had thought. Still, Clark didn’t seem too despondent over it, so he clearly wasn’t ready to marry her himself.

“No,” Clark insisted. “I haven’t had a chance to really talk to Rachel in ages, so it will be good to spend the night at her place. Besides, we’ll spend tomorrow night with my folks,” he reminded me.

I nodded. Rachel had offered to have us stay with her the whole weekend, but understandably, Clark wanted more time than that with his parents. I had said yes to Rachel’s offer at first, wanting to give Clark time alone at the farm if he wanted it. The truth was, though, that I wanted to see more of Martha and Jonathan, too. Clark either guessed that, or maybe his parents did, because he told me in no uncertain terms before we left that he fully expected me to accompany him to the farm after the fireworks the next night.

“Tuck your head in,” Clark suggested as we approached Smallville. A second later, we were standing in Rachel’s garden.

“You’re here!” Rachel called excitedly from the doorway. “We weren’t expecting you for another hour.”

Clark glanced at his watch as we walked over to her. “Didn’t we say we’d be by around seven?”

“Yes,” Chad said from behind her. “But we saw the news of the oil spill on LNN.”

“Oh, that didn’t take long at all,” Clark said as we reached them both. I gave Rachel a hug and then Chad. It always felt a little weird to hug Chad — like it took my brain a minute to adjust to the new norm and I half expected us to kiss hello. But I had to admit it was getting easier and easier, and this time I only hesitated briefly.

Chad and Clark shook hands and Clark gave Rachel a hug before the four of us moved inside.

“I wasn’t sure if we’d see you tonight,” I said to Chad as we moved into the living room. When we had talked a couple of nights ago, Chad had mentioned having a patient in the hospital in Wichita, so he had been spending most of his days there.

“Annie is finally feeling better, so she was sent home yesterday,” he told me, and I couldn’t help but smile. His face lit up as he spoke about his patient. Sometimes coming to visit him in Smallville was good. It was so good to see him so happy and well adjusted. As opposed to back when we were trying to make decisions and it had hurt a little to think about how much happier he was here, now it just made me feel happy. I really wanted nothing more for Chad than for him to be where he was the happiest, and it was clear that this was it.

“That’s great,” I said as Clark and Rachel came back from the kitchen with drinks.

“Oh, you didn’t have to do that,” Chad said.

“It wasn’t a problem,” Rachel smiled. “I knew what you wanted.” She handed him a cola, and Clark handed me a cream soda.

“Thank you,” I said to Clark and then turned to Rachel. “You didn’t need to buy cream soda for me, Rachel. Thank you.”

“Not a problem,” she said as she sat on the couch next to Chad. Clark took the chair that matched mine, both of us facing the couch.

“So,” Chad said, suddenly seeming nervous. “We... um... well, we wanted to talk to you before the festival started.”

“We?” Clark asked.

“Chad and I,” Rachel said, and I noticed her cheeks color

slightly. “And if you don’t feel comfortable staying here after this, we’ll understand.”

I nodded, already starting to suspect where this was going. It was the only explanation for why Chad would be part of a ‘we’ that would understand us not wanting to stay with Rachel.

“We... um...” Rachel said, but then trailed off, looking to Chad for help.

“We hope this isn’t too weird,” Chad said softly, and I chanced a glance at Clark. I could tell that he, too, was starting to suspect where this was going.

I looked back at Chad and Rachel. They both looked so uncomfortable, I felt compelled to put them out of their misery. I couldn’t process this fast enough to decide how I felt, but I knew there was no reason why they needed to look like their best friend had just died.

“So, how long have you two been together?” I asked with a smile. It was forced, and I knew if Chad looked at me closely, he’d be able to see that, but my guess was he was too occupied with his own thoughts for that.

“Not long at all,” Rachel said, her cheeks getting even darker.

“Just since last weekend,” Chad said quietly.

I nodded, not sure what to say, and was happy when Clark picked up the conversation.

“That’s great!” he said, and I could tell he meant it. Of course, he did. He wanted Rachel to be happy, he liked Chad, and he and Rachel were so in the past. While Rachel hadn’t dated anyone since Clark that I knew of, I’m sure Clark made his peace with whatever remaining feelings he had for Rachel when he started dating Lydia.

“I know it’s weird,” Rachel said, glancing at me. It was her glance that did it. I felt so awful — Rachel was a wonderful person. There was no reason why she had to worry that I would be upset with her for dating Chad. We’d been divorced for over a year now. It was weird to be sure, but I had no reason to be angry or jealous.

“It’s not weird at all,” I said. “You are two of the best people I know, and given that you both live in the same small town...” I trailed off. Even I could hear that my voice was a tad higher pitched than normal.

“So, you’re not angry?” Rachel asked. “I really... Lois, I really want you to stay here.”

I nodded, feeling tears come to my eyes. I wasn’t sure if that was due to how awkward this all was or because I was honestly touched at how concerned for me Rachel was. Looking at Chad, I could tell he felt the same way, but couldn’t find the nerve to speak.

“We really...” he finally said before I could answer Rachel. “If it makes either of you uncomfortable, we’ll stop,” he said.

I laughed, although I could hear tears in my laughter. “Do you need to run all future girlfriend choices by me?” I asked.

Chad gave a smile. “I want to,” he said. “I don’t want to do anything that would jeopardize having you in my life.”

“And that’s more important to you than Rachel?” I asked.

Chad blushed. “I’m sort of hoping I don’t have to make that choice.”

I looked at him — really looked at him after he said that. I could see so much on his face: his concern that he had somehow hurt me, his nervousness, and his hope that I would be okay with this. It was the last one that came through the most clearly, and I suddenly realized something I hadn’t before. Chad would stop seeing Rachel if I asked him to, but not for the right reasons.

It wasn’t because this was just something he was doing for fun and if it bothered me it wasn’t worth it. That wasn’t it at all. They may have just started dating a couple of weeks ago, but the relationship was already pretty serious — or at least Chad’s feelings for Rachel were pretty serious.

He was willing to stop dating her simply as after years of

prioritizing my feelings over his own, he had forgotten not to do that. If I did ask him to stop dating Rachel, not that the thought had occurred to me even for a second, he would do so.

Eventually, though, he would resent me for it. In all likelihood, he’d end up dating her later if she forgave him. Rachel may not have been more important to Chad now than I ever was, but she was more important to him than I was at this moment. Chad just hadn’t realized it yet, or at least not enough to realize that this was as it should be and he could act on those feelings.

Instead, he was hoping I wouldn’t make him choose because he knew that it would hurt him if I asked him to do so. He knew he wanted to be with Rachel enough that it would hurt, but didn’t seem to know that this meant it wasn’t my choice. He could date whomever he wanted, regardless of how I felt. While it was nice that he wanted me to be comfortable with his choice, it really wasn’t necessary. This was about Chad and Rachel. I had no part in it at all.

Of course I didn’t. I wasn’t really part of Chad’s life in that way anymore. I was a friend of his — a good friend, I hoped, but that was it. In the same way he never would have broken up with me in high school if one of his friends had suggested it, he shouldn’t have been even considering breaking up with Rachel for me.

I felt the tear fall down my cheek and brushed at it, but apparently not before everyone noticed.

“Lois, we mean it,” Rachel said. “It’s okay. We’ll stop. It’s not important to us.”

I shook my head, trying to get the words out. “No. I’m not crying because of that,” I said, knowing that her words were untrue. Their relationship was important to them, even if they hadn’t realized it yet.

“Then why are you crying?” Chad asked, and I could tell that he was trying to decide what to do. His eyes were tight on me, and he seemed to be considering getting up and consoling me, but one of his hands was moving closer and closer to Rachel. I was sure he was tempted to grab her hand, sure I was about to make him end their relationship.

“We’re not married anymore,” I said, swiping at my tears. “I mean, I knew that, but I didn’t get that before now. And neither did you.”

“What didn’t I get?” Chad asked.

“I am no longer the most important person in your life. I don’t get a say in who you date, Chad. Or at least I shouldn’t. I mean, it’s nice that you asked me, but you need to make the decisions that are best for you. Not the ones that are best for me.”

“Lois...” Rachel started, but I shook my head.

“No,” I cut her off. “I appreciate it. Really. I appreciate that both of you are so concerned for me. But my happiness shouldn’t be coming first for either of you. Not that it matters. What I want most for you,” I said, looking Chad in the eye, “is for you to be happy. And even if you haven’t figured it out fully yet, it’s clear to me that Rachel makes you very happy. I’m glad you found each other.”

With that, I got up and walked outside. I knew my tears were only going to come faster and I didn’t want Chad or Rachel to think that was because I was upset about their relationship. I wasn’t. It was more like this was closure on my relationship with Chad. I knew it was over before now, but this was really the end of it — the changing point where I was replaced by someone else as the most important person in Chad’s life.

I couldn’t have picked a better person for Chad, and I was happy that he was moving on, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t a little sad to see the last small part of this relationship pass.

I was only outside for a second before I heard the door open and close softly behind me. I didn’t bother turning around, and within seconds, Clark moved in front of me and wrapped me in his arms.

“Are you okay?” he asked me softly.
 “Yeah,” I sniffed against his chest. “I am. I really am. It’s just...”
 “What?” Clark asked, tilting my head up to look at him with a finger under my chin.
 “It’s really over,” I whispered.
 Clark nodded, pulling me close to him again. “I know. I’m sorry.”
 “I’m not,” I said. “We had to get here. I want him to be happy again. I do. And I think Rachel is going to do that. Or is already doing that. It’s just... I guess I hadn’t even realized it wasn’t over yet.”
 “Are you ready for it to be over?” Clark asked me softly.
 “I am,” I said, moving away from him to brush my tears away. “I really am.”

I zipped up my small suitcase for moving to the Kent farm for the night, looking around the guest room with a smile. Chad and Rachel had seemed concerned when I came back in, but I had assured them that I was fine. I had told them what I had told Clark, and while it took awhile, eventually, we moved past it and the evening got more comfortable.

So comfortable, in fact, that when we went for a walk after dinner so Rachel could check on preparations for the fireworks, at some point Chad and Rachel forgot I was there, or remembered and decided it didn’t matter. Regardless, they held hands. It was weird to see Chad holding someone else’s hand, but then again, it wasn’t really. I had to admit that the sight made me smile. I wondered how long they’d be together, and I realized that I hoped it would be a long time. I liked Chad with Rachel. He was my Chad and yet he wasn’t. He was himself with her in a way I hadn’t seen him with anyone else and yet there were parts of him that I didn’t quite recognize. They laughed over shared memories that I didn’t share. They made references to people in Smallville that I hadn’t met or didn’t remember.

They were quite simply being a couple in love. Surprisingly, it made me happy to see that.

We had had lunch at Chad’s the following day, and his house was everything I had sort of hoped it would be. It wasn’t changed so much that I walked inside and didn’t recognize it, and yet, it wasn’t my home anymore. There were small changes, like new books on the bookshelf, or a new tape player in the entertainment center. But larger changes, too. Chad had redecorated since I had lived there. Nothing major, so it wasn’t surprising to me that he hadn’t mentioned it, but he had moved the piano to the other side of the living room and repainted the walls a different shade of green with a darker green accent.

Looking around, I guessed that Chad may have made the changes himself, but Rachel had helped, even if it was just to give her opinion. Something about the changes made me think of her, although the green color was one I knew Chad loved. I suspected that the next time I visited, I’d see much more of Rachel’s influence, though.

Other than lunch, we had spent the day at the fair grounds. Martha and Jonathan were there as always, serving pies, candies, and barbequed meat.

“Want to take a spin?” Clark asked me as we passed the dance floor. Rachel had left to go check on the fireworks and Chad had gone with her, so for the moment, it was just Clark and me.

“Sure,” I said, grabbing his hand and moving towards the dance floor.

“You’re feeling okay about Chad and Rachel?” Clark asked as he twirled me around.

I nodded. “I am. I’m happy for them. They seem perfect for each other. Don’t you think?”

“I do,” Clark said. “I really do. I think Chad can give Rachel

everything I couldn’t, and I think she sees that even if she hasn’t thought of it in that way yet.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I think they’re really happy.”

“And you?” Clark asked me. “Are you really happy?”

I smiled at him. “Yes, I am happy. Although, you know what I’d like right now?”

“What?” Clark asked, his eyes twinkling in laughter as he anticipated my answer. I’m sure he was thinking I was going to say I’d like one of his mother’s buck-eye balls, but that wasn’t it at all.

“I’d like to stop thinking about Chad and Rachel for a moment and just enjoy dancing with you.”

Clark’s smile got just a tad wider, and something indefinable crossed his face as he spun me into his arms. “Well,” he said, his voice right in my ear, “that can easily be arranged.”

“The fireworks just seem to get better every year,” Martha commented as we piled into their car that night.

“I think you’re right,” I said, thinking that they continued to be better than any fireworks I’d seen in Metropolis.

“You two must be tired,” Jonathan said as he navigated through all the cars making their way away from the fireworks.

“I’m okay,” Clark said.

“Of course you are,” I laughed. “You barely need sleep.”

“Does that mean you’re tired?” he asked me.

“A little,” I said. It was late. We’d waited for Chad and Rachel to come back from where they had watched the fireworks, and then the six of us had walked around the booths some more, or the few that were still open. Martha and Jonathan had closed up beforehand, but lots of other people had stayed open.

“Well, we have Clark’s old bed all made up for you,” Martha said.

“One day I’m going to come visit and get to sleep in my own bed,” Clark grumbled good-naturedly.

“And where did you sleep when you were here last month, young man?” Martha asked him.

“That was different,” Clark said, turning to look at me. “Lois wasn’t here.”

“And you want me to come and sleep on the couch?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yes,” Clark surprised me by saying. He laughed at the look on my face. “Okay. Maybe not.”

I leaned over and smacked him lightly as Jonathan pulled up to the farm house. We piled out of the car and inside where, true to form, the house had all the smells from Martha’s baking.

“You know,” Jonathan said with a smile in his wife’s direction. “I think I could go for one more piece of pie before bed.”

“Oh, do you have a peach pie here, Martha?” I asked.

She placed a hand on my arm. “Of course I do. And a stash of buck-eye balls.”

Clark got glasses and poured us all milk — buttermilk for his parents and himself, but he’d long ago figured out that I preferred regular milk. Meanwhile, Martha dished out pie and I snagged a buck-eye ball from the bag she pointed out.

We sat around the table, quietly eating the pie for a few moments.

“Your last story was wonderful,” Martha said as she finished her pie. “I know it’s not the harder stuff you prefer,” she smiled at me, “but it was great.”

“As you can guess,” I said, “Clark did most of the work on the theater article. I barely deserved the byline.”

“Not true,” Clark said. “You were the one who dragged me there.”

I laughed. “Only ‘cause Perry ordered me to cover it, and I knew I could get you to do most of the work if I made you come with me.”

We all laughed as we got up to put the plates in the dishwasher. “We’ll wake you up about a half hour before we leave for the Festival?” Martha asked me as we got to the top of the stairs.

“Please,” I said before heading into Clark’s room.

I was snuggled in his bed less than five minutes later, feeling myself drift off to sleep.

I woke up with a yawn two weeks later. It had been a busy two weeks.

The morning of the kite contest Jonathan had put his back out doing morning chores. We had spent the day at the hospital, and overall he was okay, but needed to go easy on his back for a few weeks.

Clark had offered to spend the time in Smallville to help out and was supposed to fly me back to Metropolis the following morning. When I had woken up though, it was chaos around the farm, and I realized that with Jonathan injured, Martha was trying to care for him and do her own chores.

I suggested I wait to go back until things were calmer, but spending the morning there I had realized quickly that I needed to stay. Martha was quickly running herself ragged, and with all the favors she had done for me, I owed her. I wasn’t much use at cooking, but I could clean the barn out pretty well. I had lots of unused vacation days anyway. I hadn’t taken a proper vacation since I had returned from my brief stint at the Smallville Press.

It was a good idea and I was glad to do it, but it was amazing to me how much Martha worked. Even without taking on the cooking, I was wiped out at the end of every day from doing her chores. Rachel and Chad both came by to help as often as they could, and Clark used his abilities whenever possible to move through his stuff faster and help me, but we still put in a full day’s work every day.

“Morning,” Clark called as he passed me on the stairs.

“How do they do this every day?” I asked him as I started towards the bathroom. I asked him this question every day and always got the same answer, but couldn’t stop being surprised by how much his parents did a day.

“They love the farm,” Clark said, as he always did. “Mom has pancakes ready downstairs whenever you’re ready.”

I groaned as I closed the bathroom door. I was looking forward to Jonathan making a recovery so we could go home. Investigative reporting was a vacation compared to this. Still, I thought the only person who wished things would go back to normal more than me was Jonathan. Clark was right — he loved the farm, and it was clear that he missed working on it every day he was stuck inside.

My thought was confirmed when I came downstairs. Jonathan was sitting at the table, not enjoying his pancakes as much as normal.

“I bet you’ll be glad to get back to Metropolis,” he said as I sat down.

“Not as much as you’ll be glad to be outside working again,” I replied.

“Maybe not,” Jonathan said with a sigh. “We really appreciate your staying and helping, Lois.”

“It’s not a problem,” I told him. “Really. I’m glad I can help.”

“Thank you for staying,” Clark echoed his father’s thanks from that morning while we took a walk around the farm that evening.

“You know I’m happy to,” I said in reply. “Your parents have done so much for me.”

“Well, the thank you was from me. Not my parents,” Clark said. “I love the farm, but I like it better when you’re here.”

“Even though you don’t get your bed?” I asked him.

“Even though I don’t get my bed,” Clark replied, chuckling.

“If I’d gone back to Metropolis, I would have missed you, too,” I told him.

We stopped beside the pond and looked out across the still water. “Lois,” Clark said quietly. “I’ve been thinking.”

“About what?” I asked, surprised by the serious tone to his voice.

“Chad and Rachel,” he said.

“Are you not okay with them being together anymore?” I asked, surprised. Not that I imagined Clark would say anything to them even if it did bother him, but I couldn’t believe that it did. I had gotten used to seeing them holding hands, and I’d even come across them kissing, a gentle peck only, once when they were here in the evening. So it was hard to imagine Clark was bothered.

“That wasn’t what I was thinking about,” Clark said, his voice nearly a whisper as he moved to stand in front of me and took my hands.

“Then what?” I asked, looking up into his eyes. Daylight was fading, but standing this close, I could still see him clearly.

“You,” he said quietly. “I’m wondering where you are.”

“Where I am?” I asked, half distracted by the look on his face. I couldn’t interpret what I was seeing there.

“Have you...” Clark stopped and looked at some point above my head. “... have you thought about dating again?”

“No,” I said quickly, knowing as I said it that it wasn’t true. More than once since we’d arrived, I’d fallen asleep in Clark’s childhood bed and wondered what it would be like to share it with him. I didn’t want to admit that, though. Clark had moved on from the small crush he’d had on me, and it wasn’t fair of me to make him feel guilty about that. Better for him to think I just wasn’t ready yet than to ask why I wasn’t dating again.

Clark let go of my hands and took a step back. “Oh.”

“Clark?” I asked, still not understanding the look on his face.

He turned away from me for a second, not answering my question, and when he turned back there was an intensity in his eyes that surprised me.

“I waited for you,” Clark whispered.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“Remember at the Kerth awards a few years ago? The kiss?” Clark asked.

I nodded, feeling unaccountably afraid of where this was going.

“I promised you I wouldn’t wait for you,” he clarified, and I took a deep breath.

“But you did?” I asked, not daring to let myself believe what I thought I was hearing.

“I didn’t mean to,” he said. “I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t help it,” he said. Then, moving forward, he leaned toward me. He stopped just short of my lips and I knew he was thinking of my words from earlier about not being ready. Without thought, though, I closed the distance between us.

Minutes, hours, or maybe years later, he drew away to look at me again. “I love you, Lois. I think I always have.”

I looked into his eyes and was surprised by what I saw there. I had fallen in love at sixteen and once upon a time had thought my life lay with that boy. To some degree, it had. I had shared a wonderful life with the boy I fallen in love with at sixteen. When it ended, I had been sure that was it for me. I had had my chance at love and failed.

Looking into Clark’s eyes now, though, I knew I had been wrong. What I saw there wasn’t just Clark’s love for me shining through his eyes, but my love for him reflected back at me. “I love you, too,” I whispered, and couldn’t stop the smile from spreading across my face.

At least not until Clark wiped it away by kissing me again.

“You didn’t need to,” I told Martha as she held the buck-eye

balls towards me a week later.

"I owe you more than that," she said to me.

"You owe me nothing," I told her. I could see Clark and Jonathan through the window as they came back towards the barn from their walk to the fields. "You've done so much for me over the years. This barely makes a dent in what I owe you."

Martha shook her head. "Not true. You helped Metropolis feel like a home for Clark from the beginning. You've been a great friend to Jonathan and me since we met you. And now," she trailed off as she glanced out the window.

"Now?" I asked, confused. I saw her looking outside towards Clark and wondered what she was going to say. As I had expected, she and Jonathan had taken finding Clark and me holding hands two nights ago in stride. Still, while I knew them well enough to know they'd never complain, I worried a little about what they thought about it. I mean, they had known me as Chad's wife for years. It must have been weird to see me with their son.

"Now you are giving Clark something he's needed for a long time," she said, as she looked at me with tears in her eyes. "Someone to love. Someone who is strong enough for him to lean on and soft enough to appreciate him. Someone who deserves him and wants the same things in life he does."

I felt my own tears in my eyes at her words. "You don't think it's weird?" I asked her.

"Weird?" Martha gave a small laugh. "What's weird about it? Honestly, I knew it would take time, but I had been hoping this would happen since shortly after you moved back to Metropolis."

"Really?" I asked, surprised.

She nodded. "You are a special woman, Lois. I've loved you for a long time. And I know I'm biased, but I'd like to think that my son deserves you. I'd like to think that he can make you happy in a way you haven't really been before. I know what you had with Chad was amazing. I saw it when I first met the two of you."

"But maybe Clark and I could be something even better," I said softly.

Martha smiled. "Exactly."

"Are you about ready to go?" Clark asked me as we took one last walk around the farm. We were heading out in a little while, but surprisingly I wasn't that happy about it. We'd been here for three weeks, and it had taken on a feeling of normalcy. I missed Metropolis, but there was something soothing about the farm. Despite how hard we'd been working, it was different enough from our regular jobs that it felt a little like a vacation.

"I guess so," I said.

"What? You're not eager to leave the small town behind?"

Clark asked me, squeezing my hand slightly.

"Well, don't get me wrong. I still don't want to live here," I said, laughing lightly. "But it makes a nice vacation."

Clark laughed out loud, a full laugh. "Only you would consider working twelve hours a day a vacation."

"You know what I mean," I said to him. "I feel... sheltered here."

"Are you worried about going back to Metropolis?" Clark asked me. "Is it... it because of me?"

"No," I said, stopping to look at him. "Really. It'll be weird, I guess, for people in the newsroom to realize that we're together, but I'm not worried about it."

"Are you sure?" Clark asked me, and I could see the insecurity in his eyes. "Cause if you want, we could... I don't know, keep it to ourselves or... we could..."

"What, Clark?" I asked, tightening my grip on his hand.

"Stop dating when we get back to Metropolis?"

"If that's what you want," Clark said quietly.

"It's not what I want," I told him, my voice firm. "And I

don't feel any need to hide it from anyone either."

"Are you sure?" he asked, but I could see already that he was feeling more relaxed. I wondered — had he been waiting for me to change my mind for the past week?

"I am very sure," I told him, stepping closer to him. "I love you, Clark Kent. I want nothing more than to be with you." I leaned up on my toes to kiss him.

When I broke away a moment later, I pulled back just slightly to ask, "You believe that, don't you? You don't think I'm going to change my mind?"

"Not when you kiss me like that." Clark grinned at me.

"Like what?" I asked, giggling.

"Like this," Clark whispered huskily as he closed the distance between us and kissed me again.

A few hours later Clark was back from bringing our stuff to Metropolis, and we were saying goodbye to his parents.

"I know you've probably seen more of the farm than you wanted," Jonathan said as I hugged him goodbye, "but I hope that you'll come back with Clark when he visits next month."

"I will," I said, hugging him even tighter than normal. "Just take care of your back so next time I don't have to work so hard." I smiled at him.

I hugged Martha as well, before I stepped back while Clark said goodbye to his parents. When he came to join me, I gasped. Something in his eyes... I wasn't sure what it was, but I could feel it when he lifted me into his arms. We hadn't had any reason to go anywhere, so this was the first flight we'd gone on since we had kissed. Even without the look in Clark's eyes, it would have felt different. With it, it was clear that Clark knew it, too.

"Ready?" he asked, his voice husky.

I nodded and smiled at Martha and Jonathan as he floated us off the ground.

I looked down and saw Smallville stretched below us. My chest still tightened slightly when I looked down at it. I had almost made a life here. Almost. And it might have been a good life. Maybe. But it would have been the wrong life. I looked up and smiled at Clark. The life we were going back to — in Metropolis and together — was the right life.

THE END