

Falling Slowly

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Summary: When rookie Lois Lane meets drifter Clark Kent in a small Arkansas town, the consequences are far-reaching.

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Thanks — as always — to my wonderful betas — Nancy/Anonpip, Beth and Alisha. Pam and Cat joined us a bit late but offered invaluable help as well.

Thanks also to my GE, Caroline K.

The title comes from the song of the same name. Lyrics: <http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/once/fallingslowly.htm>

Right. Disclaimer thing. Of course, I don't own Lois or Clark or any of the other recognizable characters or locations. If I did, I wouldn't be worried *at all* that I no longer have job... And since I don't have a job, suing me would be pointless... Thanks go to the writers though, because we all know how good I am with A-plots...

Notes on individual chapters at the end :).

Part 1

Clark yawned and stretched before curling back up under the covers.

He wanted to stay in that netherworld — halfway between awake and asleep where the dreams he'd had since childhood were reality.

Where he was married to a beautiful woman — a brunette, usually, whose face he could never quite see.

Where he had children he loved and doted on.

Where he could use his gifts openly and still have a life without threatening either of those things, but he was never quite sure how he did it.

And so he settled back in and tried to go back to sleep, to recapture that dream; to try to hold on to it for just a few more minutes.

But it wasn't to be.

The sunlight was streaming in through the window.

That was odd, he realized, still keeping his eyes closed. The window in his room at the farm wasn't big enough to let in that much light and, besides that, it faced west so it didn't get much morning sun.

Had he slept much later than he realized?

Was he late picking up his parents?

He opened his eyes and groaned as the light triggered something he hadn't felt in years.

Pain.

His head hurt.

Why did his head hurt?

He wasn't supposed to get hurt.

He covered his head with his pillow and somehow managed to will himself back to sleep.

When he awoke the room wasn't quite as bright and the pain in his head had settled down to a dull ache.

He covered his face with his hands then ran them through his hair.

He tried to think, to remember what happened, what could have brought on a *headache* of all things.

And then he realized something else.

He wasn't home.

He couldn't be at home.

The bed was too big; the sheets were too nice.

He finally decided to carefully open one eye.

He didn't recognize the room, but he was obviously in a hotel or, given what town he was in, more likely a bed and breakfast.

The bed was made of rich wood, a king-sized four-poster bed unless he was mistaken. Across from him, to his left, was a sitting area with a couple of chairs and a fireplace in a little nook. To the right was the bathroom and, through the open door, he could see a large Jacuzzi tub.

Where was he?

Or, more importantly perhaps, why was he there and what couldn't he remember?

He pushed himself into a sitting position and realized something else he probably should have realized sooner.

He wasn't wearing any clothes.

He looked around and saw the blue jeans he remembered wearing on the floor near the window. His shoes and socks were near the door, but they hadn't been taken off carefully given how they were strewn. His T-shirt was on the floor in front of the fireplace, his flannel over one of the chairs and his boxers... Where were his boxers?

He used his enhanced vision to find them tangled in the sheets, along with something else.

He dug through the sheets, pulling the other article of clothing out.

A camisole.

At least that's what he thought it was called.

Black with lace trim.

So he hadn't been here alone, but who had he been with?

And how could he have done such a thing with someone he couldn't have known well at all?

That was when he noticed it.

He stared at it.

Where had that come from?

Did it mean what he thought it meant?

And why couldn't he remember?

His right hand reached for his left to touch the item reverently.

He didn't understand why, but there it was.

A wedding band.

Twenty-four hours earlier

Clark hovered high over Eureka Springs, Arkansas.

"Hang on," he told his passengers, "I'm going in fast."

A minute later, he set both of them on the ground.

"Thank you, honey," Martha patted his arm. "Our own personal pilot."

Clark shrugged. "There's no sense in paying for gas and all that when I can get you here faster and easier. Happy anniversary."

"Why don't you have lunch with us?" Jonathan asked.

He shook his head. "No, it's your anniversary. You don't need me hanging around."

"It's *lunch*," Martha told him with a laugh. "After that, we'll go check into the hotel and you can do whatever you want."

Clark laughed with them. "If you're sure... The restaurant at the hotel isn't open yet, but I'm sure we can find something around here."

"Your Aunt Opal said we should try Myrtie Mae's Restaurant," Martha told them. "It's at Highway 62 and the Historic Loop," she said. "Can you find it, Clark?"

Clark lowered his glasses and looked around. "That way."

An hour and a half later, he flew back to Smallville to get their bags while they rode the trolley to the Crescent Hotel where they'd be staying the night.

He sat in one of the chairs in the spacious lobby as he waited for them. He tried to mind his own business as he waited, but he couldn't help noticing the pretty brunette sitting in one of the other chairs. She was obviously waiting for someone, he thought, as she flipped through a magazine off the side table.

She was keeping her eye on the main desk and stood as a young woman came around the counter.

"You ready?" the brunette asked.

The other young lady — a blonde — shook her head. "I can't go after all. Like four people called in sick and I have to stay. I'm so sorry."

The brunette sighed. "Believe me, if anyone understands working odd hours or having to cancel because of work, it's me. You know that."

"Still, you're only here for a couple of days."

"I'll be okay," the brunette told her friend with a smile. "I'll explore Eureka Springs on my own."

Clark missed the rest of the conversation as his parents arrived. He handed over their bags, gave his mom a hug and headed for the door.

He'd planned on heading directly back to Smallville, but the brunette was sitting on one of the benches outside the door.

She looked dejected and, before he could stop himself, he sat down next to her. "Hi," he said, a bit shyly. "I'm Clark. I didn't mean to eavesdrop but I overheard your conversation inside with your friend."

She looked at him, studying him intently for a long moment. "Hello, Clark," she finally said.

"Listen, I know I'm a strange guy and you have no reason to want to, but I can be a half-decent tour guide if you're interested." He pointed over his shoulder towards the hotel. "My parents are inside. They can vouch for me."

"Really?" she asked with a raised brow.

He winced. "Actually, it's their anniversary so they're probably, um, busy already, knowing my parents."

She winced on his behalf. "Nice."

"I'll admit that I hope that my wife and I are like that when we've been married as long as my folks."

"You're... married?" she asked with a raised brow.

He shook his head instantly. "No. I just mean, someday..."

"Right." She stared at him for another long moment. "Where are you from, Clark?"

"Born and raised in Smallville, Kansas," he told her.

"Really? Smallville? That's a place?"

"Just like the big city of Metropolis," he pointed out, smothering a grin.

"Born and raised?"

He hesitated. "Technically, I don't know where I was born. My parents found me on their doorstep when I was a couple of months old, but otherwise, yes. I lived in Smallville until I moved to Midwest for college."

"And now?" she pressed.

"Now, I'm between jobs. Thinking about working at the Smallville Gazette for a while. The editor's having surgery and is going to be off for a while, so they need a hand, but..."

"You're in journalism?"

"Sometimes. That's what my degree is in but my last job was on the docks in a small town in South America. I try to freelance when I can. I've worked for a couple of small papers here and there, but nothing long term and probably nothing you would have heard of. The last newspaper I worked for was in Borneo."

She looked him over again. "How long have you been out of college?"

"Two years."

"And how many jobs have you had in those years?"

He looked at her for a long minute. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you want to know how many jobs I've had?"

"Call me curious," she said with a shrug.

He gave her another long look. "Well, then, I guess I've had about a dozen jobs all around the world, plus the freelance work I mentioned."

"All around the world?"

"Yep. Several places in Asia, couple more in South America, Africa."

"So you're a... drifter?"

He hesitated before nodding. "I guess you could say that. Not sure 'sowing my wild oats' is the right phrase, but seeing the world trying to find where I fit in, what I want to do with the rest of my life, all of that. I mean, I know I want to be in journalism but where? That kind of thing."

"What if you decide not to stay in... Smallville? Or once the other guy is better and back to work?"

He shrugged. "Not sure. So whaddya say? Want a tour guide?"

"You really know that much about Eureka Springs?"

He had the good grace to look chagrined. "No, not really, but I can make lots of stuff up."

She laughed and stood. "Okay, Clark. Let's go."

He laughed with her. "Do I even get your name before we go on this fake tour?"

"Lois."

Clark studied her face closely as they walked towards the street. "It suits you."

"That's good to know."

He grabbed her hand as he saw the trolley come up the street. "Come on."

A minute later, they were on the trolley as it headed towards historic Eureka Springs.

"So where are we going?" Lois asked him.

He shrugged. "Wherever you want. We can ride the trolley for a bit and when you see something interesting, we get off." He pulled out the map. "Look at the stops and see? There's three other routes if there's somewhere not on this route that looks interesting."

"Molly, my friend, said there's some great places to get fudge," she said, studying the map.

"Probably. Have you had lunch?"

Lois shook her head. "No. Molly and I were supposed to go when she got off work but..."

"Well, let's get you something to eat then."

The trolley stopped and Clark grabbed her hand again. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" she asked, but following him willingly off the trolley.

"To get you something to eat."

He led her towards a little sandwich shop — somehow he didn't think Myrtie Mae's was quite her style — across the street.

She placed her order and he pulled his wallet out. "I got it," he told her as he ordered a drink and two of the hubcap sized chocolate chip cookies.

"That's okay," she said, opening her purse before sighing. "I left my wallet at the hotel."

He smiled at her. "Then I got it." He paid the cashier and took their drinks and cookies to one of the wrought iron tables in front of the little shop.

"We'll have to go back so I can get it," she told him.

"No problem. Eat up. Next stop. Back where we started."

"Whenever we make it back that way, I'll pick it up. And I'll pay you back," she promised.

"No need," he said. "I get to spend an afternoon with a

beautiful woman. Lunch is the least I can do.”

She blushed slightly, grateful when the lady brought her sandwich out. “Thank you,” she said, including both the employee and Clark in her statement.

“So what brings you to Arkansas?” Clark asked her. “Are you from around here?”

She shook her head. “I’m from Metropolis. Molly was one of my roommates in college and she’s doing an internship at that hotel. She invited me out for the weekend.”

“So what do you think so far?”

Lois shrugged. “I flew in, caught a shuttle here, checked in, waited in the lobby, met a guy and here I am.”

He laughed. “Well, I hope the Ozarks will leave a decent impression on you.”

“We’ll see. The verdict’s still out.” She smiled to take the sting out of the words.

Clark sat quietly while she ate her sandwich, both offering sporadic comments about assorted subjects.

She threw her wrapper in the trash. “Okay, Farmboy, make up some stuff about this place.”

He laughed. “What makes you so sure I’m from a farm?”

“Work boots, jeans well-worn from actual work rather than coming that way from Abercrombie and Fitch, John Deere T-shirt with a flannel shirt over the top, from Smallville, *Kansas* which isn’t likely a bustling shipping community... Add it all up, you get a farm.”

“Okay, you got me. I was raised on a farm.”

They started to wander down the sidewalk. “Next stop, Farmboy?” she asked.

“That fudge shop the lady mentioned?”

She nodded. “That works.”

He pointed. “And here comes the trolley. Red line. We can ride it back to the hotel, get your wallet, get back on and take it to the shop.”

“We can’t just get on going the other way?” she asked.

“The historic loop is one way,” he told her. “I do know that much.”

“Right.”

They climbed on and a few minutes later were back in the lobby of the hotel. “I’ll wait here,” he said with a smile.

“You’re not going to try to get into my room?” she asked with a raised brow.

“I can’t imagine you being comfortable with that, so I’ll wait here.”

She gave him an appraising look. “Okay then. I’ll be right back.”

He wandered around looking at the art work in the lobby and she was back before he knew it.

“Okay, fudge shop, here we come.”

They hurried back out to the street and just caught the trolley as it went by. The fudge shop was everything Molly had promised, and Lois made arrangements to have her order delivered to her room at the hotel so she wouldn’t have to carry it around.

“I need something sweet,” she said as they exited the shop.

Clark laughed at her.

“What?”

“You do know where we just left, right?”

She glared at him and held out her hand. “Gimme my cookie.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She glared again as she sat on one of the many benches along the sidewalk. “Gimme,” she ordered again.

Clark sat down next to her and opened the bag. “Here you go,” he said, handing her one of the large cookies and taking the other for himself.

They ate in companionable silence for a few minutes. Lois

nudged his shoulder with hers, nodding towards a young couple across the street. “Why are they here?”

“What?”

“Why are they here?” she repeated more insistently.

“How should I know?”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t you ever people watch and make up stories?”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “No, but apparently you do.”

“Sometimes.” She leaned closer to him. “So why are they here?”

He sighed, drawn into her game. “I bet she’s pregnant and they’re eloping.”

“Eloping?”

He shrugged. “There’s no waiting period in Arkansas.”

“Oh. Right.” A clip clop sound caught her attention. “They have carriage rides here?”

“Did you know anything about Eureka Springs before you showed up?”

“Nope. Not a thing except Molly works at a haunted hotel but the tours don’t start till like eight at night.”

“Well, it’s a romantic getaway, mostly. Day shopping, that kind of thing. Many of the rooms are in bed and breakfast type places. A lot of those offer wedding packages, including elopements, some with carriage rides included.”

“I’ve never been on a carriage ride,” she said wistfully, breaking of a big piece of her cookie and eating it slowly. “They have them in one of the big parks near where I live, but it’s such a touristy thing to do. And when you walk by where they all wait, it stinks.”

“Then let me take you on your first carriage ride,” he said.

“It’s okay, really.”

“Really. You have to go on at least one carriage ride in your life.” He stood. “Let’s go.”

They both wrapped the cellophane around the rest of their cookies and put them back in the bag. Clark wasn’t sure exactly how it happened, but he found Lois’ hand nestled in his, their fingers laced together. He didn’t remember the last time he’d held a girl’s hand like that — probably Lana sometime during the three weeks they’d dated his senior year in high school.

They found one of the carriage ride stands and waited for the next carriage to show up. Clark pulled his wallet out and paid the stand operator as they waited.

Five minutes later, they were in a princess carriage being drawn by a dappled grey horse. They settled into the seat and Clark did something a bit daring for him — he put his arm around her shoulders.

“What about them?” Lois whispered, nodding towards an older couple holding hands as they walked down the street.

“Fiftieth wedding anniversary,” Clark replied.

Lois shook her head. “No. I think they were high school sweethearts, broke up when he went off to war or something, both married someone else and then, once they were both widowed, met again and now are living out their twilight years together.”

“You’re a country music fan, aren’t you?”

“What makes you say that?” Lois asked him, a slightly shocked look on her face.

“That’s the whole premise of ‘What Might Have Been’ by Little Texas. Or Lonestar. One of the two. Or both. I think one did a remake, but you see my point.”

She shrugged, in the process moving closer to him. “I may have been known to listen to a country song or two from time to time.”

He leaned down to whisper in her ear. “I bet you even know how to line dance.”

She turned red. “Molly was convinced that learning to line dance was a great way to meet guys.”

“Was it?”

“Define guys,” she said with a half-smile.

He took a deep breath and plunged on. “So we established earlier that I’m not married. Is there some guy back home waiting for you?”

She hesitated slightly before shaking her head. “No, there’s not.”

“You don’t seem too sure.”

She shrugged. “There’s this guy at work that’s really cute and I keep thinking might ask me out, but he hasn’t and I don’t know that he’s going to. And, really, I’ve been too focused on my career to have time for a relationship.”

Was that a subtle — or not so subtle — hint, Clark wondered. “What career is that?”

“I’m trying to make it in a man’s world,” she told him. “I’m great at what I do, but I have to work twice as hard to make the same impression. Except on my boss. He loves me, but if I’m going to earn the respect of my colleagues and peers other places...”

“Right.”

She pointed towards another couple. “What about them?”

They were standing next to a car in front of one of the nearly ubiquitous bed and breakfast establishments, sharing a few kisses. It looked like she was crying and he didn’t look happy either.

“I bet she wants to live in the big city and he’s from a small town and neither can give it up so they’re saying good-bye,” Clark said.

“Either that or they’re having an affair and have realized that his wife is suspicious and so they have to call it off.”

“That’s pretty cynical, isn’t it?”

Lois shrugged, this time using the movement as cover to move away from him. “It’s what guys do.”

He brushed her shoulder lightly with his thumb. “Not all guys,” he said softly.

“I’m not sure I buy that.” She shifted farther away from him. “Daddy cheated on Mom all the time. It’s why she’s a drunk. Paul cheated on me with Linda. Even Ryan cheated on Molly. My sister’s boyfriends cheat all the time, except this latest one — but he knows I’d rip him limb from limb if he did. It’s what guys do,” she reiterated.

He reached over and took her hand in his free one. “I’m sorry that’s what your life experience has taught you, but not all guys are like that. Are there any men in your life who haven’t cheated on their wives or girlfriends?”

“Perry,” she said suddenly. “Perry’s never cheated on Alice, but he’s the only one I can think of that I would swear has never cheated. Though she might call his job his mistress.”

“Well, now you know two, then. I would *never* cheat on my girlfriend or, eventually, my wife.”

“You’ve never cheated on a girlfriend?” she asked skeptically.

“Well, the last girlfriend I had only lasted three weeks and that was several years ago,” he admitted. “But I was raised better than that. You don’t cheat. Period.”

“Even if you never meet that perfect person and you marry someone else who’s good enough and *then* meet that perfect person, the person you should have ended up with in the first place?”

“Even if.”

She sighed and pulled her hand away from his. “You’re the last Boy Scout, Clark.”

“That’s better than being a pig,” he told her with a smile as they pulled back into the carriage stand. He climbed down ahead of her and offered her a hand to help her down.

She hesitated before taking it. He rested his hands on her waist once she was on the ground.

“I wish you’d let me prove you wrong,” he said quietly.

“About what?”

He hesitated, deciding not to say anything.

Instead, with his heart in his throat, he kissed her.

Part 2

He took Lois by surprise.

He kissed her.

It was short, but tender. Sweet.

And he was a great kisser.

She could tell that even though the kiss was short enough that the carriage ride guys didn’t even get annoyed.

“That doesn’t prove anything,” she said quietly as she moved back.

Why’d he have to go ruin what was shaping up to be a great day? They’d flirted a bit, he’d held her hand, he’d even put his arm around her in the carriage. She’d interrogated him and he’d gone along with it proving, even before she agreed to go with him, to be witty and a good conversationalist.

And he was a journalist.

Sort of.

A drifter and a journalist.

Two things that didn’t go together and certainly didn’t belong in her life.

She’d told him there was a guy at home that she was hoping would ask her out — and that was the truth. He was a colleague, a journalist, but he certainly wasn’t a drifter. He was a well-respected reporter for the Daily Planet.

Clark was just a way for her to pass the time while Molly had to work. He wasn’t supposed to get into serious topics like did she have a boyfriend or get her to open up slightly about her cheating father and drunk mother, much less that Paul had cheated on her.

“Just don’t push it, okay?” she finally said as they stood awkwardly on the sidewalk. “Let’s just have fun this afternoon and not get into anything serious.”

He hesitated slightly before nodding. “Okay. So we got you lunch, got your wallet, got you fudge ordered to be sent to your room, ate half our cookies, went on a carriage ride. Now what?”

“Ice cream,” she told him, heading down the sidewalk. “I need ice cream.” She did her best to stay a half step in front of him. She didn’t need him to see the tears that had started to pool in her eyes.

Before he kissed her, before he started asking about whether there was anyone waiting for her at home, she was letting herself sort of imagine that she was here with him. That he was an attentive boyfriend whose only purpose for the day was to take her places that made her happy. No... NASCAR or woodworking shop or anything like that. Chocolate and ice cream stores. A bookstore. Bath and body shop of some kind.

Because he — the random, generic ‘he’ whose role Clark was playing — wanted to spend time together doing things that made her happy.

But then he had to go get all serious and ruin her little fantasy.

Even still... Her hand still tingled from where he’d held it. Her shoulder still burned where his arm had gone around her.

And her lips... She could still feel his lips on hers.

No guy had ever affected her like that before.

She stood at the counter in the ice cream shop and knew without looking that Clark was behind her — close but not too close. When it was her turn, she ordered a double scoop of Rocky Road and waited for Clark to order his before paying for both.

She still hadn’t looked at him or spoken to him directly since they left the carriage ride stand. She went back outside and sat at one of the tables.

He sat across from her. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I didn’t

mean to upset you and I shouldn't have kissed you."

She shrugged. "You're not the first guy to upset me or kiss me and I'm sure you won't be the last to do either."

"I'm still sorry."

"Thanks."

They ate their ice cream in silence. She didn't look at him or at anything but the cup of ice cream in front of her.

"What about them?" he suddenly whispered conspiratorially.

"What?" she asked, finally looking at him.

He nodded across the street. "Them."

It was a young couple with a little boy, probably about three or so. He was throwing a fit.

She studied them for a moment. "I think they're here for someone's wedding and he would rather go swimming instead of going to a wedding."

"Maybe."

"What do you think?"

She glanced at him to see him slowly pull the spoon out of his mouth. "I think maybe they met several years ago. They were in Vegas or something and maybe got a little tipsy or something but had an amazing day and an amazing night together and then one of them freaked out the next morning and left before sharing contact details. She found out she was pregnant. They've both spent the last couple years trying to find each other and finally did. Now they're getting married and making a real family for their son."

"Is that what you see happening today?" she asked before she could stop herself.

"What?"

She didn't respond, but stirred the little bit of ice cream soup left in the bowl.

"Spending an amazing day and night together?" he finally asked.

She shrugged, but didn't speak.

He leaned closer and spoke softly. "It has been a very nice day so far, but the only way we'd end up spending an amazing night together tonight is if you manage to convince me to marry you sometime in the next couple hours. Otherwise, at some point, I'll take you back to your hotel and we'll say our good-byes and go our separate ways and we'll each be a nice memory and nothing more. Maybe we'll run into each other someday in the future and have a good laugh about the tour guide who knew nothing about the town, but that's it."

She finally looked at him and saw nothing but sincerity on his face. "Okay then. Where are we going next?"

"There's a bookstore a couple doors down," he suggested. "I could use a new copy of 'To Kill a Mockingbird' and I still need to get my mom something for their anniversary so..."

"You get your parents something for their anniversary?" she asked a bit skeptically.

"Not every year — I mean, I get them a card and either take them out for dinner or make it or send a gift card if I can't make it home, but it's thirty years for them this year so they get special gifts — like a night at the hotel your friend works at, a feed store gift card for Dad and probably a book for Mom."

"A feed store gift card?"

He laughed. "It's not technically a gift card. I gave Chris Davis, the guy who runs the feed store, some money and told him to put it on Dad's account."

"And you trust him to do that?"

Clark shrugged. "I've known Chris my whole life. He and my mom dated in high school."

"Right. Small town living at its best."

"Something like that."

She suddenly realized that she felt a bit bereft at the loss of his hand in hers. He opened the door to the bookstore and held it for her, his hand leaving its imprint on her lower back as he

gently guided her inside.

He went one way and she went another. She looked around carefully to make sure no one was watching her as she headed for the sappy romance section. If Clark asked, she was looking for mystery/suspense books. She pulled one Harlequin off the shelf and put it back, repeating the process multiple times.

She sighed. They were all the same. Formulaic stories. Maybe she'd try her hand at one.

"Wanda Detroit is my name. I sing for drinks down at the docks. But it wasn't always like this..."

"I taunted him with my smoldering smile. I knew Clark wanted me, but I didn't care."

What?

Where did that come from?

She shoved another book back on the shelf.

"There you are." Clark's voice surprised her.

She turned around and grabbed a book from behind her. "Hi." She smiled at him. "Find what you were looking for?"

He held up a copy of 'To Kill a Mockingbird' and an art book. "Got it. You?"

She held up the book she had in her hand. 'How to Get a Guy to Propose in Ten Days'. "I was looking for my sister," she said, shoving it back on the shelf and grabbing one from the next stack. She did her best imitation of a tomato as she realized it was a copy of the Kama Sutra.

She slid it on top of the other books and turned, walking quickly away from him. She loved books and bookstores but this wasn't worth it.

She headed out the front door and stood on the sidewalk, waiting for Clark to come out. "I need some lotion," she told him abruptly, walking down towards a store she'd noticed earlier.

She heard him sigh behind her. "You don't have to run," he said.

She slowed her pace and he fell in beside her.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said quietly. "Or judge you for looking at corny romances. My mom reads them, too, sometimes."

She sighed. "Okay."

He held the door for her again and followed her as she wandered around. She picked up assorted lotions or perfumes, sniffing them. She found one she liked and squirted it into her hand.

Clark was standing close behind her, close enough that she was well aware of his presence but not close enough to make her uncomfortable. "That smells nice," he said softly.

"I like it." She selected a lotion bottle and headed towards the counter at the back of the store. He followed closely behind her. She set the item on the counter, wrinkling her nose as another smell assaulted her senses. They really needed to take the trash out.

She noticed Clark's hand resting lightly on her waist. She could smell his cologne and something that must be uniquely him. She looked around. "This is a nice place."

"It is." His hands moved to her shoulders, gently kneading them with his thumbs.

Her eyes came to rest on a sun catcher in one of the windows. A combination of sparkling red and clear crystals of some kind, it really was very pretty.

She shook her head slightly, trying not to moan as Clark continued to massage her shoulders. She smiled at the blonde associate as she took the bag from the lady.

Clark left an arm around her as they exited the store and she purposely moved slightly closer to him.

What was coming over her?

He leaned over and whispered in her ear. "I'd like to kiss you again, but I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

She turned to face him. "You won't."

If she'd thought the other kiss was good, this one was amazing.

Drifter or not, this man knew how to kiss.

And if he knew how to kiss this well, who knew how well he... did other things?

She moaned slightly as he pulled her closer to him.

"Get a room!"

The voice startled both of them into pulling away. His forehead rested on hers as they both tried to catch their breath.

"That was incredible," he whispered.

"Makes me wish we had a room," she whispered back before she could stop herself.

"I told you, the only way we're having an amazing night together is if you convince me to marry you."

He looked disappointed by the idea that they might not have that amazing night.

"So marry me," she said suddenly.

"What?"

"Marry me," she said again. "I know my luck. We'll get separated. We won't see each other again for years and by then I'll be even more turned off to the idea of marriage. By the time we get around to it, something will keep us apart — aliens or clones or amnesia or psycho... psychiatrists or something. So marry me now and skip all of that."

"You mean it?"

Instead of answering him, she kissed him again.

"I'll take that as a yes," he breathed as she moved back.

"Where's the courthouse?"

An hour and a half later, they stumbled into their hotel room. Somehow, they managed to stay upright and she pressed him up against the door as they both struggled to get their shoes and socks off.

She tugged his T-shirt out of his jeans, groaning at the first touch of her fingers on his skin. "You feel so good," she whispered, her hands gliding over his soft skin and around his back.

His lips trailed down her neck as he propelled her backwards into the room. His flannel shirt came off, followed by his T-shirt.

His hands grazed the small of her back as he tugged her shirt out of her jeans.

She felt her legs hit the bed and she fell backwards taking him with her.

She didn't know how much later it was because time seemed to stand still, but she found herself lying with her head on his chest as he held her to his side after the most amazing experience of her life.

"That was..." he started.

"I know," she sighed. "The only thing I'd like more would be..." She sighed happily.

"More?" he asked.

She nodded against his chest.

He rolled so he was on his side, looking at her, brushing her hair off her face. He leaned down and kissed her softly. "Did I mention that I'm an alien and can do all kinds of cool stuff?"

She pulled back. "What?"

He nodded as he started kissing her neck. "My parents didn't find me on their doorstep. They found me in a space ship in the middle of the field."

How was she supposed to think when he was doing that to her neck?

"You look human," she said as she managed to pull one coherent thought together.

"Kryptonians and humans are very compatible," he told her, moving to cover her body more completely with his own.

"I'd say so, but what's a Kryptonian?"

He'd moved to the other side of her neck. "Me. I'm from Krypton and I can do all kinds of cool stuff."

"Like what?"

She suddenly had the sensation of floating.

"I can float and I can fly," he whispered, turning them so he was between her and the bed.

"Wow," she whispered, kissing him again. "That's so cool."

"I'm so glad you think so."

Before she knew it, she was next to him again, but this time holding a sheet around her on the ceiling and looking down at the bed. "Wow," she whispered again.

He floated them down to the bed, taking the sheet with them.

"As nice as this has been, I think I want to try out that Jacuzzi tub." She rolled away from him, pulling his flannel shirt on. She slipped her arms in the sleeves and buttoned a couple of the buttons, pulling her underwear on before heading towards the bathroom.

"Do you have any idea how sexy you look?" he called from the bed.

She blushed. "Thanks, I think."

She was walking into the bathroom when she heard a whooshing sound and he was behind her wrapping his arms around her. "You look incredible in my shirt." He kissed the base of her neck. "I never thought seeing a woman wearing my clothes would be so sexy."

"You've never seen a woman wear your clothes?" she asked, practically holding her breath.

"Well, my mom's borrowed some a few times, but that's so not the same thing."

She giggled. "I'd hope not." Did she really want to follow up on that? "So none of your ex-girlfriends..." Her voice trailed off.

"Nope."

"Not even after..." Why was she doing this to herself when they were having such an amazing night?

"There's never been an 'after' before," he told her, reaching down to turn the water on. "Do you want bubbles?"

There'd never been an 'after' before? Did that mean he'd been a vir... vir... very patient man to this point?

She pushed it out of her mind and undressed again, climbing into the tub with him.

Some time later, for the first time in her life, she fell asleep in the arms of a man, feeling safe and loved.

Lois woke up when the sun streamed through the window.

She wanted to stay in that netherworld — halfway between awake and asleep where the dreams she'd had since childhood were reality.

Where she was married to a handsome man — usually a man with dark hair, whose face she could never quite see but seemed to recognize this time.

A man who never cheated on her, who loved her unconditionally.

A man who supported her career ambitions and anything else she wanted to accomplish.

Then it hit her.

Where was she?

She could feel a solid presence near her and she carefully opened one eye. She was at a hotel. That much was obvious.

What had happened?

She wanted to groan and hold her head and cry because it hurt, but she couldn't let herself — not with someone else in the room with her.

Who was it?

Given that she wasn't wearing any clothes, she was pretty sure *what* they had done.

Her shirt was on the nightstand and her bra was on the floor, but she didn't see her camisole. Her jeans were over by the bathroom. She held her shirt and bra to her and glanced at the man in the bed with her. All she could see was a shock of brown hair, but he hadn't moved.

She darted towards the bathroom trying to be as quiet as she could. She took her jeans with her and didn't quite shut the door in case the click would wake him up. She was glad her underwear was in the bathroom so she didn't have to search for them, too. There were a few suds still in the tub but the towels hadn't been used.

That was odd, but she didn't dwell on it, instead choosing to dress quickly and leaving the camisole behind. She left the bathroom, picking up her shoes and socks and leaving as quietly as she possibly could.

She sat in one of the chairs on the porch and looked around as she put her shoes and socks on.

Right.

Eureka Springs.

Molly.

But Molly had to work so they hadn't done anything together. So what had she done instead?

Met a guy, obviously, but what else? Surely they hadn't come *straight* to this... bed and breakfast. Had they?

Had he drugged her?

That made sense since she didn't remember anything.

Didn't it?

That didn't... feel right for some reason.

She looked down as she tied her second shoe.

That was when she noticed it.

She stared at it.

Where had that come from?

Did it mean what she thought it meant?

And why couldn't she remember?

Her right hand reached for her left to touch the item reverently.

She didn't understand why, but there it was.

A wedding band.

She closed her eyes and tried to remember.

It was right there, just beyond her reach.

She hadn't been drugged. Or if she had, they both had been or something because even though she couldn't remember who he was or anything else, she knew whatever she'd done, she'd done willingly. Or rather, he — whoever he was — hadn't forced her into anything.

Right then, though, all she needed was to get out. Get back to the hotel. Get home. Call a lawyer. Get a divorce.

She headed towards the road, hopped on the trolley and headed back towards the Crescent Hotel. She remembered riding the trolley the day before and... ice cream. A carriage maybe?

She got off the trolley and headed into the lobby hoping that Molly would be there with some kind of pain medicine.

"Lois!"

She winced. "Not so loud, Mols."

"Lo, what happened to you?" Molly put her arm around Lois and walked with her towards a chair.

"No, my room," she whispered.

They changed directions heading instead towards the elevator. "Do you have a hangover?"

She hesitated. "No, just a migraine," she insisted.

"So what happened?"

"I really don't want to talk about it right now." The dinging of the elevator as they reached her floor made her wince. "I just want to take some Advil and go back to sleep."

Molly helped her into her room. Molly dug a pair of pajamas out of Lois' suitcase and went into the bathroom to get some water while Lois changed.

Lois reached out to take the glass when Molly grabbed her hand. "What's this?" she asked. "A wedding ring?"

Lois winced. "Quieter please and yes."

"And your *husband* is where exactly?"

"Not now, please, Molly." Lois was near tears. "I need sleep."

Molly nodded. "Okay. We'll talk more later."

Lois nodded and crawled under the covers.

Before she knew it, she was asleep.

Part 3

Clark sighed and finally decided it was time to climb out of bed, check out of the hotel and try to figure out what the heck had happened.

He headed to the bathroom to take a quick shower — a glance at the clock had shown him he was going to have to hurry if he was going to get checked out in time and then go get his parents.

He closed his eyes and tried to remember.

He could see her in it, walking away from his spot on the bed towards the bathroom, with miles of long legs visible beneath the hemline. He'd told her she looked sexy.

He winced as he realized he hadn't been home; hadn't done any of the chores. The milk cow would *not* be happy with him.

He finished in the bathroom and dressed quickly, trying to place the scent in the room.

Cucumber maybe?

He headed to the front desk. "I need to check out," he told the lady behind the counter.

She frowned. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kent, but there's a two night minimum with the wedding package."

He sighed. Of course there was.

"You're welcome to check out, of course, but you'll still be charged for both nights."

He nodded, thinking for a minute. "Actually, my parents are in town. Can they use it tonight?"

"You and Mrs. Kent won't be staying?"

He shook his head. "No." He looked around, seeing the guest book. He zoomed in.

Clark and Lois Kent.

Lois.

Right.

Her name was Lois.

But Lois Kent didn't help him much.

Her... maiden name would help, but not his last name.

"So your parents?" the lady prompted.

"They're up at the Crescent Hotel. They're supposed to leave today, but I'll ask them if they want to stay here tonight. Either way, I'll be back to let you know."

She smiled at him. "I'll send the maid service over immediately so it's ready for your parents if they decide to stay."

"Thank you."

He left the office and headed towards the road, deciding not to wait for the trolley, choosing instead to walk to the other hotel. It wasn't *far*, but it would take him a good half hour to get there.

Time to get his thoughts together.

He kept his hand shoved deep in his pockets, stopping for a minute in front of a little lotion and perfume shop. He wasn't sure why. Maybe they'd been there the day before. Yeah. That sounded right.

He continued on, finally walking into the lobby a little bit before noon.

"Clark! There you are." Martha walked quickly to him.

"Where've you been?"

"Sorry, Mom," he said quietly, giving her a big hug. "I got held up."

He moved back, reaching for the suitcase his dad had set on the floor near them. She grabbed his hand.

"What's this?"

"Um..." He sighed. "We better sit down."

A minute later they were in a corner of the lobby as he explained what he knew.

"I woke up with a migraine," he told them. "I remember a

little bit, but not much. Her name is Lois, I think. Clark and Lois Kent signed the guestbook at the hotel but I have no idea what her last name is — I'm not sure she ever told me."

"You with a migraine?" his dad asked.

Clark nodded. "I know, but yeah. I slept most of it off, I think, but I don't know how to find her or anything. She's from Metropolis. I think she was visiting a friend who works here but..." He sighed again. "Apparently, the, uh, wedding package came with two nights at the hotel so I'm paying for tonight, too, if you guys wanted to go stay there tonight, you can."

"I'm more concerned about the migraine," Martha told him. "What brought it on? Did she do... *something*, find *something*, that could hurt you?"

He shook his head. "No, it wasn't like that. I don't know what happened, but for all we know I get random migraines from time to time now that I'm an adult or maybe I overdid it between..." He looked around carefully. "...helping at that fire and flying you two here or something. But I'm *fine* now."

His parents exchanged a look. "Well then... Another night at a nice hotel for free? How can we turn that down?" Jonathan asked Martha.

She laughed. "We can't."

Clark picked up their suitcase. "Let's go then."

They got on the trolley in front of the hotel riding it around the historic loop until they reached the stop near the Heartstone Inn.

"This is nice, Clark," Martha said looking around at the property.

"Thanks, I guess. I don't remember getting here or anything else." He headed towards the front office. "I'll let them know you're staying."

He headed in and chatted with the man at the desk for a few minutes. A minute later, the lady he'd spoken with earlier came in.

"Mr. Kent, here's your wedding album," she told him with a smile, holding a book out towards him. "We have them ready at checkout but since you're leaving today, we wanted to make sure you had it before you left. I'm sure Mrs. Kent will enjoy them. The pictures turned out well."

He took it from her and stared at the picture of him and a beautiful brunette on the front cover. They looked good together even if they weren't wearing traditional wedding garb.

They looked happy.

The smiles on their faces told the story.

"It's been a long time since we've seen a couple quite so eager to get to their room," the man said with a smirk.

Clark was sure he was eight shades of red. "Um, well, thank you. Is there anything else I need to do to take care of the bill?"

He shook his head. "Nope. You're all set. Just have your parents turn their keys in tomorrow morning."

"Thank you."

He headed out of the office to give the keys to his parents and show them where the room was.

"What's that?" his mom asked, nodding at the book he held in his hand.

"Um, the wedding album," he told them. "Apparently, it's part of the package."

She held out her hand. "Let me see."

He handed it over.

"She's lovely," Jonathan said. "You both look very happy."

"That's what I thought," Clark told them. "But I still don't know who she is or how to find her. I didn't find the marriage certificate — the guy inside said he'd given it to us last night — so she must have it. I guess I'll have to wait to hear from her lawyer."

"You never know," Martha said with a wink at Jonathan.

"Maybe you'll just hear from *her* and leave us for the big city. No

more farm life for our boy."

Clark groaned. "I didn't get home last night. I better get back before Dolly thinks I deserted her completely."

They both gave Clark a big hug. "Thanks, son," Jonathan said.

Clark took the album back from his mom and headed for the trees as his parents turned towards their room for the night.

He rocketed into the air and headed for Kansas.

Hours later, he sat on the porch of the farmhouse, watching the sun set.

He took a long drink of the iced tea he'd brought outside with him. He'd had a number of chores to take care of since he'd been gone so long. He could have sped through them but decided not to, mainly because as long as he had something else to focus on, he didn't focus on his... wife.

But he was done with everything unless he decided to repaint the barn or something.

He looked at the album sitting on the porch swing next to him.

He finally picked it up, staring at the couple on the front cover.

He was standing behind her, his arms around her. Her hands covered his and they were both beaming at the camera. He stared at it for a long minute before opening the cover.

It wasn't a large album — maybe twenty pictures all together — but every one showed a couple happy, in love.

Or at least appearing to be in love.

They couldn't have been.

They'd only known each other for a few hours.

He sighed as he flipped through the book.

Lois walking towards him down the... aisle.

Holding hands as they looked at each other.

Putting rings he didn't remember buying on each others' fingers.

Smiling at her as they prepared for their first kiss.

Their first kiss.

Slightly dazed looks on their faces after their first kiss.

Cutting the small cake.

Feeding it to each other.

A toast of some kind.

A couple more of the two of them.

He sighed.

How was he going to find her?

Should he find her? Should he wait for her lawyer to contact him? Should he talk to Pete, Smallville's one and only lawyer who was also one of his best friends, to find out what he needed to do if anything? Could Pete find out who she was somehow?

He sighed and set the book to the side.

He fiddled with the wedding band still on his left hand. What was he supposed to do with it?

Leave it on?

He *was* married, but if he stayed in Smallville and took the job at the paper, it would be noticed immediately and everyone would be asking about it and where his wife was and why she wasn't in Smallville with him or he somewhere else with her.

But taking it off felt wrong.

He'd always thought he'd marry one time and that was it. For life. Like his parents.

He slipped the ring halfway off before changing his mind and sliding it back on. He'd probably hear from her lawyer sometime in the next few days and once he did, then he'd take it off. He'd hang out at the farm for the next week or so and no one would ever be the wiser.

Right?

He sighed. It was a plan.

Not a good plan.

But a plan.

Two weeks later, he decided it was time to stop hiding and he headed to town, stopping first at Pete's office.

"Clark!" Pete's secretary was out but his old friend immediately stood, meeting him in the doorway with a big hug. "When did you get in town?"

Clark took the seat indicated as Pete went back around his desk. "I've been at the farm for a couple weeks."

"Avoiding town?" Pete asked with a raised brow.

"Something like that."

"Why?"

Clark sighed and held up his left hand, wedding band still firmly in place.

Pete's jaw dropped. "You got married? Who's the lucky lady?"

"That's just it. I don't know."

"What?"

He told his friend briefly what happened. "So I don't know how to find her. I know her name is Lois and I think she's from Metropolis, but she didn't tell me what she does for a living — just that it's a man's world — or her last name or anything."

"What about the bed and breakfast? Do they have any records?"

Clark shrugged. "I saw the check-in book the next morning, but it just said Clark and Lois Kent. I didn't feel like asking if they knew what my wife's maiden name was."

Pete winced. "I can't imagine why. So what do you want me to do?"

"I don't know. Is there a way to get a copy of the license without knowing her name? I keep expecting to hear from her lawyer about getting a divorce but I haven't yet. I'd guess I'm going to need you for that at some point."

His friend nodded. "I'll make a couple phone calls to Eureka Springs." He handed Clark a notepad and pen. "Write down as many details as you remember — date, time, all that stuff — and I'll see what I can do. I'd think the divorce would be pretty easy but you'll probably need a lawyer from New Troy if she files there. I've got a friend from law school who's in Metropolis. When she files, I'll help you get in touch with her. Something I'd be more concerned about is why you don't remember a lot of it. Could she have drugged you or something?"

Clark shook his head. He opened his briefcase and pulled out the wedding album. "I thought you might ask that so I brought this. Do either one of those people look like they're being coerced or drugged or anything?"

Pete flipped through the album. "She's pretty," he commented. "And you're right. These two people look completely in love, but Clark?"

"What?"

He turned the book around. "A John Deere T-shirt and a flannel? Really? You couldn't have found a place to buy a new shirt first?"

Clark rolled his eyes. "That's part of the day that I don't remember. I remember meeting her, hanging out, going on a trolley ride or three, the carriage, ice cream, the book store. She had a friend who worked at the hotel but I can't remember her name. Something with an N, I think, but I'm not sure. I don't remember anything from the bookstore until... later." He didn't look at Pete as he finished.

"Define... later," Pete asked.

"Later."

"I mean..." Pete sighed. "Man, this would have been easier in the locker room. Do you remember having sex with her? Are you sure the relationship was consummated?"

Clark nodded. "Yeah, it was consummated. I know that much."

Pete chuckled. "Well, I'm glad you remember that, I guess."

"You're right," Clark agreed. "This might have been easier in

the locker room except there would have been twenty other guys around."

"Are you taking the job at the paper?"

He shrugged. "Probably. That way no one has to track me down when the papers come in, but it also means I have to decide whether to mention this to anyone. If I still wear the wedding ring then I won't have a choice, but taking it off when she hasn't filed seems wrong."

"Well, I won't say anything, you know that, even if you're not officially a client. I'll see what I can find out from Eureka Springs and give you a call."

Clark stood and shook Pete's hand. "Thanks, man."

"Anytime."

Clark left the office and tried to decide what to do next.

The paper. They really did need help and Bill's surgery was coming up. He should have confirmed that he'd help a long time ago.

The office was only a couple blocks from Pete's and it didn't take Clark long to get there. He managed to avoid actually stopping to talk to anyone, instead waving and calling hello as necessary. He had dressed fairly nicely because he wasn't sure what his plans were when he left the house so he kept his briefcase in his left hand without it looking too out of place.

The bell rang as he opened the door.

"Clark!" Lauren practically ran towards him. "How are you? How long are you in town for? Are you going to take over for Bill while he's gone?"

Clark laughed, giving her a big hug. "I'm good. I'm not sure yet. If he'll have me then probably."

"Oh good!" Lauren smiled up at him. "Just remember that I changed your diapers so don't get too bossy on me."

"Don't worry."

"Lauren, did I hear... Clark! I thought that was you! How are you, son? Come on in." Bill motioned him towards the editor's office.

"I'm good, Bill. Thanks."

"Have a seat."

Clark sat in one of the chairs.

"So are you here to offer your services for a couple months?"

Clark hesitated again then nodded. "Yeah. If you need me, I'm here."

"Well, you know I do and you know this office as well as anyone else I could get to do it."

Clark smiled. "Well, then I'm your man."

"The paper will be in good hands. Do you want to come back another day and go over everything just to make sure you remember or does now work for you?"

"Now's fine."

Clark stood up and Bill showed him around the office. An hour later, they were seated in Bill's office again.

"Don't think I haven't noticed that ring," Bill said quietly.

"No one's heard anything about you getting married. Do we need to put an announcement in the paper?"

Clark didn't look at him.

"Don't be surprised. I didn't get to be the editor of the Smallville paper because I can yodel, you know. Heck, I even scooped Perry White once or twice back in the day. So do we need to make room for an announcement?"

Clark shook his head. "No and it's not something I really want to talk about."

"Trouble in paradise?"

"Not something I want to talk about, Bill. I was kind of hoping no one would notice, but I knew better."

"Do I even get her name?" Bill asked quietly.

"No," Clark answered in equally quiet tones. "I don't want to talk about it at all."

"Rumors are going to be flying if you keep wearing that ring

and not saying anything — everything from you met someone overseas, married quickly and either she died or couldn't get a visa or something to you got drunk in Vegas and aren't sure what her name is."

Clark almost started at how close Bill came to guessing the truth but managed to keep his surprise under control. "No, none of those."

"Well, you'll have to have thick skin for a while then but eventually folks will forget about it."

Clark nodded. "I know." He stood and shook hands with the man who had been his mentor in high school. "Thanks, Bill."

Bill walked him to the door. "You start Monday."

Clark nodded and waved to Lauren. "See you then."

Time passed quickly and before he knew it, it had been two and a half months since his trip to Arkansas.

Pete hadn't been able to find out who the mystery woman was. It was impossible to get a copy of the marriage certificate in Arkansas without knowing the maiden name of the bride — Clark Kent and Lois something just didn't cut it. He'd contacted the Heartstone Inn but they hadn't remembered anything other than the couple in question seemed to be very much in love and confirmed that her name was Lois. Her driver's license had been from New Troy, the lady thought, but Pete already knew that.

Working for the paper was rewarding if not much of a challenge. There wasn't *that* much intrigue in Smallville. One of the high school students had been arrested by Sheriff Rachel Harris — an old friend of Clark's — for selling pot, but it was a small stash, probably for his personal use, that he'd managed to get while visiting California. He'd sold one joint to a friend but it had been seen by the principal of Smallville High and so the arrest was made. He was a good kid who had no prior run-ins of any kind with either the police or school officials and would likely end up with community service for the rest of his life or so rather than anything more serious.

That had been the most scandalous happening in Smallville for quite some time.

Except for his marriage, of course.

He and his parents had refused to comment on his marriage, the circumstances surrounding it, or where his wife was, and after about three or four weeks, people stopped asking and fewer conversations ground to a halt when he walked in a room.

He took out the album regularly, wondering why he hadn't heard from her lawyer. Wondering why they couldn't have met under other circumstances and dated and fallen in love and gotten married in a more conventional manner.

He dreamed about their night together. Over the course of time, he'd remembered almost everything from the time they got to their room to the time he fell asleep holding her in his arms, but from the time they left the bookstore to that point was still something of a blur. He had vague recollections of picking out wedding bands and something about buying cucumber lotion or something and going to a number of different chapels before they found one that would marry them immediately and had a room with a Jacuzzi for the night. He knew that by the time they'd found the Heartstone Inn, they'd decided they didn't care about the Jacuzzi anymore. Heck, at that point, he thought they would have settled for anything with a lock — bed or not. He wasn't even sure why the Jacuzzi thing had been a big deal for his bride, but it had been.

He pulled an envelope out of his desk and took the picture out of it. He'd copied one of the pictures of the two of them and left it in his desk. Bill was going to be back in a couple days, and maybe he'd go to Metropolis for a while — just to see if he could find her.

He sighed as he looked at the couple. In this particular picture, he was behind her, his face buried in her hair, eyes closed as though memorizing the scent of her. It was his favorite because

she looked happy and completely at peace in his arms.

He slipped it back in the envelope and put it back in his desk, picking up the article about the basketball team tryouts. It didn't need much editing but he couldn't even concentrate on that.

The bell on the front door jangled as it opened and he heard Lauren ask someone if she could help them.

"I hope so," was the reply.

Clark's brow furrowed. The voice sounded familiar.

"I'm looking for someone. I know he's from Smallville and he mentioned the paper once but..."

"Well, I know just about everyone from around these parts," Lauren told her. "For the last thirty years or more. Who is it you're looking for?"

Clark stood to walk to the door.

"I'm looking for a man named Clark. About six foot, dark hair..."

Clark's jaw dropped as he walked out the door and saw her standing there.

"Lois," he whispered.

It was her.

She'd come to find him.

The only question was if it was a good thing or a bad thing.

The sinking filling in his stomach as she looked at him told him the answer.

It wasn't a good thing.

Part 4

Lois sighed and rested her head against the window of the plane. She'd hid in her room once she woke up. Her headache was mostly gone when she woke but she refused to answer any of Molly's questions about what had happened.

Her flight hadn't left until the next morning, but she hadn't even ventured to the basement for the ghost tour. Instead, she'd ordered pizza and room service and tried to remember what had happened.

She remembered fleeing the bookstore, and she had cucumber lotion that she didn't remember buying. She remembered sliding out of bed and putting his shirt on and him being in the bathroom awfully fast. She remembered him... drying her off with his eyes after they had... spent some time in the Jacuzzi together.

That couldn't be right, though, could it?

But that was what she remembered.

She didn't say much but the minimum to the stewardesses and nothing to anyone else until she reached Metropolis.

She got her bag and hailed a cab, heading towards her apartment.

She left her suitcase sitting by the door, heading straight for the freezer and pulling out the tub of Rocky Road. She grabbed a spoon out of the drawer and started for the couches in her living room before changing her mind and heading towards her room. Her couches just weren't comfortable enough for this kind of thing.

She set the ice cream on her dresser as she pulled her favorite pair of pajamas out of a drawer and changed clothes. She stuck an Ivory Tower video in but couldn't concentrate as she finished the rest of the ice cream in the tub.

Sleep didn't come easily but she finally managed to settle down for the night.

Perry called her into his office not long after she arrived the next morning.

"Lois, darlin', far be it from me to meddle or anything, but I noticed you got yourself a new piece of jewelry while you were gone. Did you run off and get married without telling me?"

Lois hesitated. "It was given to me," she started, "and I noticed that when I wore it, the slimy guys at the restaurant bar didn't hit on me so I decided it was a good idea to just wear it."

That was the complete truth. She had noticed several guys looking at her who backed off when she'd unobtrusively flashed the ring. And she'd avoided the whole 'married' thing without lying.

Perry nodded. "Well, then, okay. Now, get back to work. That police academy graduation story won't write itself."

She sighed. "Come on, Perry. Give me something juicier than that."

He shook his head. "You're still working your way up the ladder. Bring me some great stories and it's more likely you'll get juicier stories."

She stared at him and nodded. She had just the thing. It would mean working late nights while doing her 'day job' at the same time with no slack from Perry until she had results. She'd get Jimmy to help her with it and back her up if she needed it. No need for Perry to even know.

Lois spent the next three weeks working almost non-stop. During the day, she ran down the stories Perry assigned her — police academy graduations, mayoral press conferences, school board meetings, all kinds of boring projects — but at night... She went undercover as a scraggy teenage boy working as a runner for a chop shop. It took nearly a week to get in with the gang and another two to get the information she needed.

It was a relief when she didn't have to pretend to be a boy anymore, but she'd realized a couple things in the meantime.

First, Claude wasn't anything compared to Clark. She'd told Clark there was a guy at work she was hoping would ask her out but two days after she got back, a chance elevator encounter left her with the realization that Clark was eighty times the man Claude was — or more.

Second, throwing herself into her work, keeping herself so busy that she didn't have time to think about that amazing night, was the way to go. Clark was a drifter. He'd get a lawyer when he was in an American town long enough or when he realized he hadn't heard from hers.

But she couldn't bring herself to call a lawyer. Not yet. She'd wait for him and, having kept up the schedule she'd had since she got home, could always claim she'd been too busy to deal with it. And she had another excuse, too.

She'd found the marriage certificate in her purse. Clark K. something. His name was smudged. She could probably figure out who he was pretty quickly by finding the Smallville paper and calling there, but she kept telling herself she was too busy.

The reality was that she just didn't want to deal with it, but she wouldn't admit that, not even to herself.

Perry had been pleased with the story if a bit annoyed that she'd gone undercover without telling him about it first.

She spent the next two weeks not undercover but in the newsroom and elsewhere investigating the unexplained heat wave in late March.

Sure March was always a weird weather month in New Troy, but temperatures hovering at nearly a hundred for most of the month was beyond weird. She'd first noticed while working on the car story and by the time she was done with that, everyone else had noticed, too.

With the help of Dr. Katherine Goodman and Jimmy, she exposed the flaw in the new Lexcorp nuclear power plant, effectively shutting it down before it could even be turned on.

By then, of course, her one month anniversary had come and gone without much notice.

Perry was finally starting to realize that she was a decent investigative reporter and she got a little more free rein from her editor. With the help of her newest source, Bobby Bigmouth, she was able to expose the kidnapping scheme of world famous magician Darren Ronick's assistant, Constance Johnson. She'd even managed to save the life of Dr. Andre Novak in the process.

That took another week.

She convinced Perry to let her cover the trial of Eugene Laderman. She'd worked on the periphery of the case with Norcross and Judd when they first broke it, but they'd since moved on so she was the reporter most familiar with the case. She'd never really believed that Eugene had done what they said he did — murdered Henry Harrison — and neither had Norcross or Judd, but that's what the evidence said.

She was so convinced of his innocence that she helped him get a room at the Apollo Hotel. It took a week, but she was able to convince Detective Betty Reed to help her stop both Henry, and his wife, Lena, from spreading a virus that would have brought down most computers until they bought the antivirus program from Harrison's company. Since Henry wasn't dead, they were able to prove that the body was an unidentified man killed while setting up Eugene for Harrison's death as well as the computer virus.

She spent four days tracking down the 'Smart Kids' who'd run away from the Beckworth State School and had played pranks on the entire town. Once she found them, she'd exposed Dr. Alfred Carlton and his Metamide V and Metamide VI as harmful to the kids. He'd escaped prosecution when he OD'd on his own creation but the kids were safe.

Of course, then, just as her two month anniversary was approaching, her ex-boyfriend, Patrick Sullivan, showed up in town. They spent several evenings together catching up on old times. By the end of the week, she was in a bit better mood.

Until he tried to kill her.

It was only because Inspector Henderson showed up searching for the stolen emeralds and mask that he didn't.

All the more reason she should find a lawyer and find this Clark K.

Before she could, though, she was embroiled in a mystery in Chinatown. Chen Chow, a friend from college, called her with a tip about Chinese families essentially being slaves in that part of Metropolis. Unfortunately, six days later, half of Perry's retirement was gone as Chen's sister finally defeated the henchmen hired by Perry's old friend, Harlan Black.

And then Perry called her into his office.

She fiddled nervously with her wedding band as she waited for him to get off the phone. It was times like this she hated. Except for the week she'd spent hanging out with Patrick — before she realized he was insane — she'd worked until she literally dropped over exhausted many nights.

But times like this...

Times like this she had time to think, even for a few minutes, about her... husband.

Did he even realize they were married? Had they bought him a ring too? Or had he woken up thinking he'd... gotten laid and that was the end of it? If it wasn't for the marriage license hidden in her apartment and what she remembered about him saying there had never been an 'after' before, she'd have thought he was just looking for a notch on his bedpost.

She was staring at the floor in front of Perry's desk when she realized that he was off the phone and watching her.

"What?" she asked, somewhat defiantly.

"Two things. First, I want you to see the doctor this afternoon. Don't think I haven't noticed you working yourself into the ground. But even more than that, you're pale and peaked and those trips to the bathroom off and on the last couple weeks... I don't buy that it's just a stomach bug. I want you to get checked out and no arguin' with me, darlin'." He gave her a look she knew not to argue with.

"Fine," she muttered. "If I can get in..."

"You can get in. I've already got an appointment for you with the Planet's doc. If he says you're fine, great. If he says go to your own doc, you go. Got it?"

She nodded.

"Second, you're spending the weekend in Kansas."

Her eyebrows shot up to her hairline. "Excuse me?"

"Dr. Donny had to have his appendix taken out this morning. He's doing that series on hospital funding reforms and he was supposed to go to Kansas. The tickets have already been changed to your name. You'll fly into Springfield, Missouri Friday afternoon, drive to Independence, Kansas then fly out of Kansas City on Sunday."

She glared at him. "That's an odd flight schedule."

"Well, he had interviews scheduled in all three places. He's going to conduct the interviews over the phone — most of it is going to be hospital-y stuff that he understands and all that — but I still want someone on the ground at the fundraiser in Independence. Apparently, it's run by a friend of his from med school which is why he picked it. You'll have an interview with her about fundraiser specifics. Otherwise, just relax, enjoy yourself and get some quotes, eat some barbecue..."

"Barbecue?" she interrupted.

He nodded. "It's a barbecue competition. Why?"

"Barbecue has sounded really good lately. I don't know why. I like barbecue but it's almost like I've been craving it recently." Suddenly she was looking forward to this. After all, what were the odds that *he* would be there? He wasn't from Independence; he was from *Smallville*. They were probably in opposite corners of the state — if it even existed.

She talked with Perry for a few more minutes before heading upstairs to see the doctor. He wanted a urine sample and drew blood, asked questions and did a cursory exam. She went home to pack, thinking nothing of it. She was fine.

She was Lois Lane.

The next morning she climbed on a plane to St. Louis and then to Springfield, Missouri where she rented a car. It was almost a three hour drive to Independence, she noted looking at the map.

And then she noticed something else.

She blanched when she realized how close it was to a town she'd thought was completely made up. Or at least had convinced herself was in the opposite corner of the state.

Smallville.

Well, she'd just have to do her best to keep a low profile and keep her eyes open for... her husband.

And if she saw him, she'd run the other way.

Or hide.

Yes. That was the better plan.

Hiding.

Except Lois Lane didn't hide.

From anything.

Except...

Was she technically Lois Lane anymore?

She didn't even know his last name.

Or hers.

Had she officially changed her last name somehow?

She sighed as she avoided Oklahoma — by a mile or so — and headed into Kansas.

She'd promised herself for years that she wouldn't get married unless she was absolutely certain it was going to last. She'd seen too many failed marriages growing up and had seen how it had destroyed both of her parents and Lucy.

She'd decided that she wouldn't marry for love. *If* she ever married at all, she'd marry a man who was her friend, was passably attractive, and who she felt *something* physical for.

Clark was definitely attractive — unless her memory was completely faulty — and the physical... They'd had physical attraction in spades from the moment they met, even if she'd try to deny it to herself. And then later, they'd... made love more than once and it had been so much better than her few other experiences. No, her other experiences didn't even begin to

compare.

And if it really had been his first time... she turned bright red at the thought of what they might be like together once he had some experience.

She pulled into the parking lot of the Apple Tree Inn and sighed. Dr. Donny was supposed to stay with his friend but that wasn't an option for her. He'd said this was the best hotel in town, but 'best' was a relative term. It looked fairly nice, but the Lexor it wasn't. She grabbed her bag out of the trunk and headed inside.

She smiled slightly at the couple in front of her as they moved out of the way.

"Can I help you?" a pretty redhead asked her.

"Lois Lane, Daily Planet. I should have a reservation." She set her purse on the counter.

The young lady clicked on the computer and frowned. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but there's no reservation here."

Lois sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Can I get a room then, please?"

"All I have are the executive suites. Will that work for you?"

She nodded. "Sure." Perry wouldn't be happy about it but if the travel guys hadn't made her reservation, it wasn't her fault. No, Perry wouldn't care. The suits upstairs might, but she wasn't going to worry about it.

A few more clicks on the computer and she was all set. "You're ready to go."

A man who appeared to be the manager walked out from the office area. "Beth, we should have a guest named Lois Lane checking in," he said quietly. "She has a message waiting. Could you let her know?"

Beth smiled at Lois. "You have a message waiting, Ms. Lane."

I smiled back. "Thank you."

The manager looked chagrined. "You're supposed to call your doctor at work," he told Lois.

"Thank you."

That was puzzling. Would they call her if everything was fine? Did that mean something wasn't fine?

She took her key and paperwork and headed towards the elevator. When she got to her room, the first thing she did was kick off her shoes and wander around for a minute.

A Jacuzzi.

She turned her back on that and decided to call the doctor and ignore the memories that were coming to her.

Ten minutes later, she hung up.

She wanted to cry but refused to let herself. That settled it though — at some point this weekend, she was going to have to go to Smallville and try to straighten this out.

Without realizing what she was doing, she dozed off for a few hours — something she was sure her body badly needed after how hard she'd been on it the last couple months. After waking up, she changed and headed towards the first night of the fundraiser.

She wandered around for a while, sampling many of the different options. She found one she absolutely loved and somehow managed to sweet talk the guy running the MJK Farms booth into giving her a whole sandwich.

She sat at one of the tables and chatted with a lady named Maisie, taking a few notes as she did. Maisie was from Smallville, and Lois thought about asking about Clark but couldn't bring herself to do it.

After a couple hours, she made her way back to the hotel where she emailed Perry, telling him that she'd be flying back on Tuesday but not explaining why.

Sleep didn't come easily and, when she finally did sleep, she didn't sleep *well*.

Around ten the next morning, she headed back to the

fundraiser. She spent the day sampling, watching the judging and awards festivities and talking to hospital administrators, doctors, nurses and other members of the community.

And then she saw him.

It was past dinner time and there was a dance floor set up near the stage. A local band was playing and there were a number of people doing the Tush Push.

He was one of them.

Her heart ended up in her throat.

He was even more gorgeous than she remembered.

And he was dancing with a petite woman with long, light brown hair.

Smiling.

Laughing.

Flirting.

Tears filled her eyes.

Of course there was someone else.

So why hadn't he contacted her through his lawyer? Or had he been out of the country and had just gotten back? He was an international drifter after all.

She watched him as he moved in unison with the others on the floor. He had an easy grace about him that she admired, that she enjoyed watching.

Her eyes stayed on him until the song ended. He gave his partner a big hug and they walked off the dance floor with his arm still around her shoulders as they laughed together.

At least he hasn't kissed her.

She turned and walked straight to her car, ignoring everything else. She didn't know where she was going; she just drove.

Twenty minutes later, she saw a sign.

Smallville.

On impulse, she took the turn.

She drove slowly through the small town. Smallville was certainly an appropriate name for it. The newspaper office was easily spotted. That was where she'd start her search Monday, she decided.

She found the high school and sat in the parking lot staring at the football stadium for long minutes. He'd been a football player. Or she was pretty sure he'd said he was. He had the build for it. He'd probably been skinnier in high school, but he definitely had the build for it. Probably a running back or receiver, she thought.

She pulled out and headed back to Independence and her hotel.

She spent all of Sunday in her room contemplating how she was going to handle this. Maybe she should just go back to Metropolis and find a lawyer.

Maybe she didn't need to actually talk to him, to see him.

She didn't need the rejection.

That was it.

She should just go back to Metropolis and let the lawyers deal with it.

Even as she thought it, she knew it wasn't going to happen that way. No, she had to go see him. Even if it meant rejection because then it would be over for good and she'd never wonder.

Sunday night was another night filled with dreams of their night together but was otherwise restless.

It was afternoon on Monday before she convinced herself to leave the hotel, and she spent twenty minutes driving aimlessly around Smallville before she finally parked in front of the newspaper.

She took a deep breath and went inside before she could change her mind.

"Can I help you?" asked the lady at the desk.

"I hope so," she said, her stomach churning. "I'm looking for someone. I know he's from Smallville and he mentioned the paper once but..."

"Well, I know just about everyone from around these parts," the lady said with a smile. "For the last thirty years or more. Who is it you're looking for?"

She took a deep breath and blurted it out. "I'm looking for a man named Clark. About six foot, dark hair..."

She heard a noise and turned.

There he was, papers in hand. "Lois," he whispered.

He remembered her name.

"Um, hi," she said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Hi," he said back, quietly.

She was well aware of the woman at the desk watching them curiously.

"Um, come on in," he said, gesturing towards the office.

She hesitated before following him, grateful when he closed the door behind him. But that door wasn't sound proof and this wasn't a discussion she wanted to have where anyone could overhear.

"Listen," she said suddenly. "Is there somewhere else we can talk? Somewhere... private?"

He looked at her and nodded. "Okay." He stacked papers neatly in one of the boxes on his desk. He put his pens back in the pen holder and then pulled an envelope out of his desk.

Probably divorce papers, she thought.

He stood up and smiled. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"Wherever you want," he said softly. "We could go back to my folks' house if you want. They're not there," he added quickly. "They won't be back until later this evening, but I don't have a car here in town."

"I have one." She opened the door and smiled at the lady there as she walked out the front door.

"Lauren, I'm heading home for the night. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Kent, sir."

Clark laughed. "Have a good night."

She was already in the driver's seat when he slid in on the passenger side. "Just tell me where to go."

Fifteen minutes later, she turned onto a gravel drive and came to a stop in front of the farmhouse.

"Come on in," he said, climbing out of the car.

She was out by the time he made it to the driver's side. She'd noticed he was wearing a wedding ring. Was it the one she'd given him or was he already married to the mousy brunette from Saturday?

She followed him into the house. She took in the country hominess and the spinning piece of art that looked like it was made out of tractor parts or something.

"Have a seat," he said, motioning to the couch. "Can I get you something to drink?"

She didn't want to exchange pleasantries or discuss the merits of buttermilk versus skim or hog futures or corn futures or...

Their future.

She finally blurted it out.

"I'm pregnant."

The only sound was that of a glass shattering.

"What?" came his voice from the kitchen.

"I'm pregnant."

Part 5

The glass he was holding fell to the ground and shattered around him.

Had he heard her right?

Pregnant?

"What?" he asked, his voice sounding strangled even to his own ears.

"I'm pregnant."

He looked at the broken glass on the floor. It could wait. He

turned and walked to the living room, sitting in the chair across from her. “Wow,” he said. “I’m not sure what I thought you wanted to talk about, but that sure wasn’t it.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t guess we used protection, did we?”

She shook her head as she perched on the edge of the couch. “Not that I remember, and I’m not on the pill or anything like that.”

He wanted to ask her what she remembered, if she knew why he woke up with a headache, why he didn’t remember. He was in shock, staring unseeing at the coffee table.

She startled him when she stood. “I won’t ask you for anything. Work’s been crazy so I haven’t had a chance to call a lawyer. I would have figured you would by now, but that’s why I haven’t. I’m heading back to Metropolis in a minute. I just thought you should know before you read it in the paperwork and I was in the area on business so...”

He nodded. “Where do we go from here?” he asked quietly. Divorce was one thing, but now that there was a baby involved... He did the mental math. She had to be near the end of her first trimester.

She shrugged and laid a slip of paper on the table. “Here’s my address in case you get to a lawyer before I do. This week’s going to be crazy, too. I’ve been working like ninety hours a week so...”

“Is that good for you? For the baby?”

She started walking towards the door. “Don’t worry about me. I’m fine. I just thought you should know.”

“Wait.” Clark stood to look at her. She had one hand on the door and didn’t turn around. “What...”

The phone rang.

“Go ahead,” she said quietly. “Answer it.”

He sighed and headed for the kitchen. “Hello?” He listened for a minute. “I can’t right now, Mom. I’m kind of in the middle of something.” He listened again. “I’ll call Wayne and see if he can get out there. Where are you exactly?”

By the time Clark hung up the phone and turned around, she was gone. He immediately took to the air, hovering high enough up that he couldn’t be seen from the ground, but he couldn’t find her car. If she’d headed straight for the highway, which was only half a mile or so from the farm, she was long gone.

After ten minutes of futile searching, he landed back on the porch before climbing into his mom’s car and heading out to help them with their tire problem.

He pulled in behind them on US 75 near Independence.

“I thought you weren’t coming,” his mom said as he got out.

“I wasn’t. The... thing I was in the middle of ended rather more abruptly than I expected.”

“What was it?” Jonathan asked, pulling the jack out of the trunk of the car.

Clark took it from him heading towards the truck. He jacked up the truck and started to remove the flat tire.

“Lois,” he finally said as he pulled the tire off.

He could see his parents exchange a look.

“What?” Jonathan finally asked.

“She showed up at the office about an hour ago and asked if we could go somewhere more private to talk, so we went to the farm. She told me she’s pregnant, gave me her address to give to my lawyer, the phone rang and by the time I turned around she was gone. I couldn’t find her anywhere.”

The only sounds were of the cars zipping by.

Martha finally spoke. “Do you want to repeat that?”

“She’s pregnant,” Clark said, tightening the lug nuts on the spare tire. “Apparently...” He paused and sighed. “We didn’t use protection,” he finally went on. “And she wasn’t on the pill. She left before I had a chance to say anything else.”

“What’re you going to do?” Martha asked.

He sighed as he lowered the truck back to the ground. “Go to

Metropolis, I guess. She said she wouldn’t ask me for anything when she called her lawyer — I guess she’s been too busy lately — but wanted to tell me in person since she was in the area on business.”

“Did she say what she was planning on doing?”

Clark leaned against the car and cleaned his hands on an old towel. “I can’t imagine her seeking me out like that, even if she was in the area anyway, if she was planning on getting an abortion. And she said she wasn’t going to ask for anything which would seem to indicate she’s planning on keeping the baby, but beyond that... I don’t know.”

“Well, let’s get off the side of the road and we’ll talk more at home.” Jonathan climbed in the driver’s seat of the truck as Martha got in the other side.

Twenty minutes later they were seated around the kitchen table. Clark fingered the piece of paper she’d left behind.

“What now?” Martha asked quietly.

“I move to Metropolis,” Clark told them. “I hadn’t planned on it — I was thinking about heading back to China after Bill comes back next week — but I’m not going to run out on her or the baby. I’ll pay child support or whatever but I want to be part of my child’s life.”

Martha and Jonathan exchanged a look. “Um, listen, son,” Jonathan said, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. “We don’t know this girl, anything about her, but are you sure the baby’s yours?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Clark told them quietly. “Since I’m her husband, then legally this baby is mine regardless of who the biological father is. And if it’s not my baby... well, then we’re not even sure I can have kids with a human female. This baby is legally mine and may be my only chance to have a child, but I don’t want to make her uncomfortable or whatever so I guess I go to Metropolis and hope that I can be a part of my baby’s life without resorting to nasty custody battles.” He sighed. “I’ll call Bill tomorrow and see if there’s anyone who can take over for the rest of the week or leave after this week’s paper is out.”

“What’ll you do for work?” Martha asked him.

He shrugged. “Bill knows Perry White. I’ll see if he can help me get an interview at least. If not or if there isn’t anything available at the Planet, I can always get a job doing construction work or on the docks or something. Manual labor isn’t an issue either physically or for my ego. Well,” he conceded, “maybe for my ego but I’ll do what I have to do to help take care of Lois and the baby, if she’ll let me. If she won’t, then I’ll start a college fund or something.”

“What about the marriage?” That came from Jonathan.

Clark swirled the little bit of buttermilk left around in his glass. “She talked about lawyers so I’d guess we’re getting a divorce.”

“Is that what you want?” That was from Martha.

“No, not really,” he said. “Not now anyway. I’d like to at least get to know her a bit and see if this whatever it was that drove us to get married and...” He turned red. “...you know... is real. There’s a physical attraction there, at least on my part, and I enjoyed our afternoon together. I’d rather see if we could work something out first instead of just calling a lawyer and calling it quits, but if she wants a divorce, I don’t know that I have much of a choice.” He leaned back in his chair and idly traced the line of the wood grain on the table. “This just isn’t how I pictured this part of my life going. A wedding I don’t remember to a woman whose last name I still don’t know. Don’t see her for two and a half months and then she shows up to tell me I’m going to be a father and she’s calling her lawyer.”

“It’s going to be different this time,” Jonathan pointed out.

“You can’t pull your stunts in Metropolis. You can’t pull up and leave if you want to be a part of this baby’s life. And in a big city like Metropolis, someone is going to catch you on film or

something. And if they do, it's not just me and your mom you have to worry about anymore. If anyone found out about you and then found out that you have a child who's *not* invulnerable..."

Clark sighed. "I know. I'll be careful."

They talked for a while longer and then he went to call Bill.

Lois watched as he answered the phone, waiting until his back was turned to slip out the screen door, being careful that it didn't slam behind her.

"I'll call Wayne and see if he can get out there." Clark's voice drifted out the open windows. "Where are you exactly?"

She climbed into the car as quietly as she could, being careful not to make any more noise than necessary as she pulled out of the driveway.

She'd told him. She'd done what she'd come to do. She'd managed to get out without truly being rejected, but she hadn't seen any indication that he wanted anything other than a divorce.

Just like she did.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she turned onto US 169 and merged with other traffic.

She made it all the way to Thayer, Kansas before the tears started to fall. Ten minutes. That had to be some kind of record or something, right?

Lois spent the rest of the drive to Kansas City swiping at her cheeks. By the time she reached the Marriot near the airport, she was almost under control. Once settled into her room, she decided to hit the fitness center to work off some nervous energy.

By the time she made it back to her room, she was exhausted and she hadn't gone nearly as far on the treadmill as usual. Was she out of shape or was the baby taking that much out of her already?

She ordered room service before taking a shower. When it arrived, she curled up on the bed to eat, trying to block out the memories of Clark feeding her chocolate covered strawberries in bed and in front of the fireplace after they got out of the Jacuzzi.

There had been champagne and strawberries and chocolate waiting in the room for them when they arrived, but they'd been too busy doing... other things when they arrived and she'd forgotten about them when she'd headed for the bathroom to soak in the tub. When they got out, they'd gone back to bed together and, once sated again, he'd opened the champagne and they'd taken turns feeding each other strawberries. It had been a nice day for February, but the evening had been plenty chilly and they'd ordered pizza to eat in front of the fireplace once the strawberries were gone. They'd talked while they ate — him clad only in his boxers and her in his shirt again.

At least until he'd asked for it back, a mischievous grin on his face as he held his hand out.

She'd stood and done a bit of a striptease for him — something she wouldn't have believed herself capable of — and they'd made love in front of the fireplace before he'd floated — floated — them back to bed where they'd fallen asleep in each other's arms as he murmured sweet nothings into her hair.

Floated.

She frowned. That was something she'd refused to dwell on — those... abilities of his. He'd said he was an alien and he'd shown her a number of the things he could do.

That meant...

That meant that the baby...

That meant that the baby was... half alien?

He certainly didn't seem like an alien.

He very certainly didn't *look* like an alien.

But what about the baby?

The tears had started again as she put the rest of her dinner on the side table and crawled under the covers.

She wrapped herself around one of the extra pillows. What she needed was Clark.

His strong arms holding her, the solid presence of his body curled around hers, his warm breath on her neck as he would occasionally lightly kiss the skin of her shoulder or neck until his deep, even breathing told her he was asleep.

But what she needed was an ideal that he — or any man — could never hope to live up to.

His physical presence was one thing, but to trust him with her heart was something else.

First Joe, then Paul... No. First her father. Then Joe. Then Paul.

Her father had cheated on her mother so many times she doubted he knew how many women there had been.

Joe hadn't cheated on her. They were still friends — sort of. But when she'd told him she wasn't going to sleep with him after prom, she'd found herself dateless two days before the big event. All told, it was probably better because he and Debbie had gone together and had gotten married the year before. By all accounts, they were happy together, but he'd still dumped her because she wasn't going to have sex with him.

Paul... Paul she'd slept with. He hadn't been her first, but her break-up with Dan her sophomore year of college had been entirely mutual. With Paul, she'd thought she was in love with him and he with her. They'd dated for nearly three months before she'd actually slept with him. Two weeks later, she'd come home early to find him in bed with her roommate. He'd been sleeping with Linda the whole time. After she threw him out of the room in only his underwear, he'd proceeded to tell the entire newsroom at the college paper how she'd teased him mercilessly for weeks, always backing out at the last minute and then, once she'd finally gone all the way with him... Hot tears stung her eyes as she remembered what she'd overheard. The story was that he'd spent two weeks trying to teach her 'the basics', but that she'd failed miserably at that.

Part of her wished he could have seen her with Clark. Not in an exhibitionist sense, but because Clark had brought out a side of her — and her of him, it seemed — that Paul probably couldn't even dream of. He'd been wrong about her, probably because of what she now knew to be his own inadequacies.

She was pretty sure she'd dodged a bullet with Claude. He'd dated Jennifer, a girl on the city beat about a year older than Lois. Rumor had it that he'd stolen her story notes while she slept then written the story himself. There were also rumors that it was going to be nominated for a Kerth.

Why couldn't she have met Clark under other circumstances?

Like on the playground in elementary school. Grown-up together. High school sweethearts who couldn't wait to get married.

As it was, she had Clark had gotten married after only four hours or so. The first time she'd seen him since the next morning when she'd freaked out and run away, he was with another woman. Line dancing, but he'd had her arm around her when they walked off the floor. If she hadn't known he was an adopted only child, she might have thought the girl was his sister.

Maybe she wasn't his sister, maybe she was his cousin or something.

No. That wasn't the way Lois Lane's life worked.

She closed her eyes and sighed, a single tear streaking down her cheek onto her pillow. She imagined him behind her, his legs tucked in behind hers, his chest against her back, one hand resting protectively on her stomach.

With that image in her head, she finally went to sleep.

When she woke, she was as alone as she'd been when she went to sleep but with the light seeping in from around the drapes, the mirage of the night before dissipated and she felt more lonely than ever.

She took a shower before heading to the airport and back to Metropolis.

“Lois!”

She’d barely walked off the elevator Wednesday morning when the bellow made her wince.

“My office! Now!”

She sighed and headed towards Perry. He motioned towards one of the chairs as he sat behind his desk.

“Care to tell me why you’re two days late getting back?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “I’ve worked every day since I got back ten weeks ago. I had a bit of personal business to take care of. I have more than enough vacation days to cover it and I really don’t want to go into any more details.”

He stared at her for a long moment before nodding. “Okay. But if that ever happens again, I want more than an email telling me about it.”

“Fine.”

“Now, what did the doctor say?”

She hesitated. “I’m fine overall. He wants me to take it easier, not work as much. Take some vitamins and iron. Follow up with my own doctor later.” She wasn’t ready to tell him she was pregnant. She hadn’t been ready to tell Clark two days earlier, much less anyone else.

“Good. You’ve been workin’ way too hard.” He tapped his pencil against the edge of his desk as he stared at her for another minute before nodding slightly. “You’re getting a bit of a promotion.”

Her eyes widened but that was the only outward indication of the stunned feeling inside. “How much is the raise?” That was important if she was going to raise a baby on her own.

Perry chuckled. “Not as much as you’d like. Anyway, I’m hiring a new guy to take your spot. I want you to spend the next few days showing him around.”

Her face fell. “Perry,” she whined. “Please don’t make me.”

“Okay then.”

She breathed a sigh of relief.

“You can keep your old job and he can have the promotion.”

“Perry!”

“So you’ll do it?” he asked, trying to hide a grin.

“Doesn’t mean I’ll like it,” she muttered.

“You don’t have to like it. Just do it and don’t run him off. His name is Myerson and he’s waiting at the desk across from yours.”

She glared at him again before leaving the office.

Lois spent that day and the next one attempting to not run Myerson off but it wasn’t easy. He was probably a decent reporter, but he didn’t have what it took to keep up with her — pregnant or not.

She spent her evenings crashed on her bed watching sappy movies and trying to make a plan. She’d have to look into how much daycare cost and whether or not she’d be able to utilize the Planet’s daycare facility. She was going to need a new apartment at some point. Maybe not *right* away, but before too long she’d need more space.

Thursday night, after two days of training Myerson and the stress that went with that, she found herself at the bar in the kitchen staring at her Excel spreadsheet.

She had an appointment Friday morning with her OB/GYN. Then she’d find out what her portion of her prenatal care would be. She’d gotten online and done some searching about what she’d need when the baby was born, what she’d need the first few months, the first year.

Between the necessities like a roof over their heads and food and childcare and car insurance and everything else, she found herself staring at the file hoping that more money would just magically appear.

Even with the raise, it was going to be tight.

She pinched her nose with her thumb and forefinger. She’d

told Clark she wouldn’t ask him for anything, but it was looking like she might have to. Not alimony or anything like that — she couldn’t see a judge granting it anyway. Not when she was a gainfully employed reporter and he a drifter. But child support. She might have to ask for child support.

She hated the thought.

Would he even want to be a part of the baby’s life?

Probably on some level when he was in the area. If she asked for child support, he’d probably want to be around a bit more and she really didn’t want any more entanglements with Clark Kent than absolutely necessary.

Kent. That was his last name. She’d discovered that much in Smallville.

She sighed as there was a knock on the door. It was either a salesman or Mrs. Tracewski who’d locked herself out again.

Lois tied her frumpy robe more tightly around her as she looked through the peephole but didn’t see anything. She frowned slightly and undid all the locks, leaving the chain in place.

Her jaw dropped and her heart stopped when the door opened and she saw who it was.

She closed the door and undid the chain before opening it more fully.

“What’re you doing here?”

Part 6

Clark took a deep breath and knocked.

A minute later, the door opened and his breath caught in his throat. She was dressed in pajamas and a robe and her hair was up in a sloppy ponytail, but she was still beautiful.

“What’re you doing here?” she asked abruptly.

“I’m moving to Metropolis,” he said quietly. “Can I come in and talk to you?”

She sighed and backed away, leaving enough room for him to walk past her. He picked up his battered brown suitcase.

“I don’t know anyone else in town so I was hoping you could recommend a hotel until I can get a job and a place to live,” he told her, setting the suitcase down inside the door. “I have an interview in the morning, but it’ll probably be a couple weeks before I get a paycheck and get a place, so cheap would be good.”

The last of the locks turned and she was resting against the door when he turned back around.

“What are you doing here?” she repeated.

“You’re having my baby. I know you said you don’t want anything from me, but I can’t do that. If you won’t take child support, I’ll start a college fund. But I want to be part of this baby’s life. I’d rather not go through some big custody, visitation battle but this is important to me.”

She sighed as she walked over to the counter and closed her laptop as he sat on the couch. “You can stay here for a few days.”

“What?” he asked, surprised. “That’s not what this is about. That’s not why I came here first.”

“I know, but you can stay for a few days until you can get a job and find a place.”

“Thanks.”

She went to the other couch and sat down, arms crossed protectively in front of her. “I have an air mattress in the other room from when my sister lived with me for a while.”

He nodded and bounced lightly. “These couches aren’t real comfortable and a bit too short for me.”

There was a long, awkward silence.

“How do you see this working?” she finally asked.

He shrugged, trying not to stare at her. “I have no idea. I just know that I want to be part of my child’s life. I want to help you with whatever you need — finances or whatever.”

“You’re a drifter,” she reminded him.

“Not anymore,” he told her shaking his head. “I never had a

reason to stay in one place. I wanted to see the world and I've done that. I have a family now and that changes things."

"Right." She stood. "Listen, I know you just got here and all, but I'm exhausted. Do you want to get in the bathroom and I'll get out the air mattress?"

"Can we talk about something else first?" he asked.

She sighed and sat back down. "What?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "How much do you remember about that night?"

"How much do you remember?" she asked defiantly.

He wanted to retort back that he'd asked her first but decided that probably wasn't the best plan. "I don't remember much of anything from the time we left the bookstore to the time we made it to the bed in the room. I have snippets of buying rings and looking for a place that would marry us and had a room with a Jacuzzi, but it's incomplete. I don't remember the actual wedding much at all. But I remember everything from about the time we got to the room."

She sighed. "It's about the same here. I remember bits and pieces — the cake was good — but otherwise... I know we went in that body shop because I have some lotion from there, but I don't remember buying it. The next thing I *really* remember is pulling you onto the bed with me."

Clark nodded. "So you remember the rest of the night?" he asked cautiously, without looking at her.

"Yeah."

"So you remember that I'm... different?" He still didn't look at her.

She didn't look at him. "You didn't tell me much about it, but you did offer a few demonstrations that I remember."

"Right." He leaned forward, his forearms resting on his knees. "I guess you've never been pregnant before — I mean, I don't know but you didn't mention any kids so, I'm guessing — but has anything seemed... unusual to you?"

She shrugged. "I would have expected to be a lot more tired the last couple months given that I've been pregnant the whole time and given how much I've been working, but that's it."

"How long have you known?"

"Last Friday," she told him quietly.

Clark looked up, surprised. "That recently?"

She shrugged again. "I just kept thinking it was stress related. My boss finally told me I had to go see the doctor because he thought I was sick."

"I want to be involved," he said. "As much as you'll let me."

Lois hesitated. "I have a doctor's appointment in the morning at 8:30. I guess you can come."

He groaned. "I have an interview at 9:15 and I don't know my way around the city yet. Probably not a good plan to get lost on my way."

"Probably not."

They sat quietly for another minute. "I have no idea how this baby might be different," he finally said. "I mean for all I know, Kryptonian pregnancies are six months long or two years. I have no idea."

"Kryptonian?"

"I'm from Krypton," he said, leaning back against the couch again. "The baby is half-Kryptonian, but I have no idea what that might mean. My parents and I... we've talked about what a pregnancy might be like someday but..."

"Should I even go to my doctor?" she asked suddenly.

"Why wouldn't you?"

"What if something's... weird? I mean, it occurred to me that something might be... different but..." She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "Do you think it might be... bad different somehow?"

Clark hesitated before moving to the other couch, sitting next to her and reaching for her hand. "I hope not," he said softly. "I

hope it's just a normal pregnancy."

He was glad that she didn't immediately pull her hand out of his, but instead her fingers curled slightly around his.

"I'm sorry," he said finally.

"For what?"

"For getting us into this. I'm sure this isn't what you'd planned on doing this summer. Married to a guy you barely know and pregnant."

"No." She paused. "But getting married was my idea."

He looked back up at her. "It was?"

She nodded. "I don't know why or what prompted it or what, but suddenly I asked you to marry me."

He felt suddenly bereft as she pulled her hand out of his. "Then I'm sorry I didn't think about protection," he said without moving away from her.

"I didn't either. I seem to remember being anxious to get back to a room with you. I don't think either of us was thinking clearly."

"The couple at the hotel said it had been a long time since they had a couple so eager to get to their room."

She stood abruptly. "I'm tired. It's past bedtime and I've worked a lot lately. Do you need in the bathroom before I go to bed?"

Clark sighed and stood, picking his suitcase up from by the door. "Do you mind if I take a quick shower?"

She shook her head. "No. Go ahead."

He headed through her room to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. He leaned against it and closed his eyes for a moment.

It could have gone better but it could have gone so much worse.

At least she hadn't told him to go to hell.

Lois sank back to the couch as Clark closed the bathroom door.

Well, that would certainly help with the financial aspect of all this.

And now he was staying with her for a few days.

That *did not* mean he was going to end up in her bed. Even if he was her husband.

She heard the shower turn on and tried not to think about what might happen if she slipped in there with him. She didn't move until the shower turned off and then she stood again. She needed to get the air mattress out and find the pump to fill it for him.

She stopped mid-stride as she heard a noise at the front door. She turned to look, groaning as she realized the locks were turning.

Only one person had a key to all the locks on the door.

The door opened and Lucy appeared, laden with a suitcase and other bags.

"Lucy!" Lois hurried to her side and grabbed one of the grocery bags. "You could have knocked."

Lucy kicked the door closed behind her and set her suitcase on the floor before carrying the other grocery bags to the kitchen. "What fun is that? But I thought since I was crashing your place I'd bring some food with me. I know how well you eat."

Lois started digging through the bags and putting the groceries away. She hesitated before leaving the cottage cheese and applesauce out. It sounded good but she didn't know how Lucy would react to that.

"Lois, do you mind..." Clark came out of her room wearing a pair of sweat shorts and a muscle shirt — the lack of sleeves showing off his arms to perfection and the green looked great on him. His hair was still wet and curled slightly at the nape of his neck. He had a travel toiletries bag in his hand and was digging through it. He looked up and stopped speaking as he realized

someone else was in the room.

Lois closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Clark, this is my sister, Lucy. Lucy, Clark.” She didn’t offer any explanation as to who Clark was or how she knew him.

“Hi,” Lucy said quietly and Lois could feel her eyes watching her.

“Hi,” Clark said back. “Um, Lois, can I borrow your toothpaste? I seem to have left mine at home.”

“Sure.” Lois still didn’t look at either one of them. She heard the bathroom door shut behind him again. “Don’t start, Luce.”

“Who is he?” Lucy continued putting groceries away.

“I don’t want to talk about it. He’s a guy I know.”

“I got that much. I didn’t figure he was a hitchhiker or drifter you took in out of the kindness of your heart.” Lucy put the last of the juice in the fridge. “Are you the other woman?” she asked suddenly.

“What?!” Lois was shocked. “Lucy, I would *never*...”

“That’s what I thought but he’s wearing a wedding ring.”

“Did you stop to think that maybe he wears a ring for the same reason I told you I started wearing one? To keep women away?”

“You wear it to keep women away?” Lucy asked, trying to hide her smirk.

Lois glared at her. “Don’t start with me. I am *not* the other woman. I would *never* be the other woman. You should know me better than that.”

“But you’re sleeping with him,” Lucy said quietly.

“What makes you say that?”

“Come on. He just got out of the shower. He’s borrowing your toothpaste. You don’t let *me* use your toothpaste.”

“That’s because you squeeze it in the middle.” Lois sighed. “How long are you staying?”

Lucy shrugged. “I can go if you don’t want me to stay. I didn’t know you had a guy here. You’ve never had a guy here.”

“Where will you go?”

“Mom won’t care if I go to her place.” Lucy looked away as she spoke.

“You’re not going to Mom’s.”

“Are you sure you want me to stay here? Will Clark want me to stay here?”

“I don’t care what Clark thinks about you staying here. You’re my sister and you need a place to crash.” She put the cottage cheese and applesauce in a bowl and mixed it together. “And don’t look at me like that. I’m hungry.”

Lucy lowered her eyebrow. “I’ll get the air mattress and some ear plugs.”

“Don’t worry,” Lois muttered. She finished eating quickly as Lucy set up the air mattress. Lucy thought Clark was going to be sleeping with her. It wasn’t surprising, of course, given what Lucy thought she had walked in on.

“So how do you know him?” Lucy called over the sound of air compressor.

“We met, lost touch, saw each other recently. He’s moving to Metropolis and needed a place to stay until he finds a place of his own.”

Lucy smirked at her. “So you offered your bed?”

Lois sighed. “Something like that.”

“Well, he’s hot.” Lucy tested the air mattress’ firmness and turned off the air compressor.

Lois stood. “Good night, Lucy,” she said firmly, heading towards her room.

Clark was sitting nervously on the edge of the bed.

“I guess you’re staying in here,” Lois told him quietly, heading for the bathroom.

“I can go back to Kansas for the night,” he told her. “The last thing I want to do is make you uncomfortable.”

Lois shrugged. “I’m fine.” That wasn’t strictly accurate. The

thought of him in the shower had been one thing, but in her bed... Even if they were both fully clothed...

“Can I have a pillow then? I’ll sleep on the floor.”

She hesitated. “That’s not necessary.”

“I’m not going to invade your space anymore than necessary.”

“You’re not invading. I’m inviting.” She winced, glad he couldn’t see her as she spread moisturizer on her face. “I mean, I’m offering you a place to sleep.” She put a slight emphasis on the word sleep.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” She quickly brushed her teeth and headed back into her room. He hadn’t moved.

“I, um, didn’t know...”

She sighed. “Clark, we spent eight hours very naked together and then slept together completely without clothes. I think we’ll be okay.”

“Still...”

She flipped the covers back and climbed onto the bed. “I’m going to sleep. You can sit there all night or get some rest.”

Lois pulled the covers up over her. What she really wanted was for Clark to slip in behind her and hold her close as they fell asleep. She’d take more than that — maybe. Part of her wanted more — much more — but she was also pretty sure that wasn’t a good idea. She’d settle for him holding her while they slept, but she doubted that was going to happen. Maybe they’d roll together during the night or something.

She felt him stand up, heard him walk around to the other side of the bed and then felt him get in. He seemed to settle in facing away from her.

“Good night, Lois,” he said softly. “Thank you.”

“Good night.”

Clark lay there, staring at the wall for a long time — long after Lois’ quiet breathing told him she was asleep.

When he’d landed in Metropolis, he’d never imagined that he’d be spending the night in Lois’ *apartment*, much less her bed. What he really wanted to do was roll over and pull her close to him, hold her as he fell asleep.

Could he?

She was asleep. Could he roll over and wrap his arm around her and if she woke up and said something, murmur sleepy apologies?

No. He couldn’t do that.

He closed his eyes and willed himself to sleep.

When he woke, it was still the middle of the night. He was curled behind her just as he’d thought about earlier in the night. Her deep, even breathing told him she was still asleep. He realized he should probably move, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. It was purely accidental that he was here with her like this, but he loved the feeling of holding her in his arms.

He closed his eyes again and was back asleep almost immediately.

When he woke again, it was morning and she was gone.

The bathroom door was closed and he heard sounds coming from in there. He winced. It sounded like she was sick. He made the bed, hoping that would help her out a little bit at least, before lightly knocking on the bathroom door. “Is there anything I can get you?”

There was a pause. “Some crackers would be good. There’s some in the cabinet by the fridge.”

“I’ll be right back.”

He opened the bedroom door quietly, hoping not to wake Lucy if she wasn’t already up. He hadn’t put his glasses on so he searched the cabinets quickly with his vision and found the crackers.

“Is everything okay?”

He turned to see a sleepy Lucy behind him.
He looked towards the bedroom. "Um, Lois isn't feeling very well."

"Stomach?" she asked.

Clark nodded.

Lucy yawned and headed to the counter, opening one of the drawers and pulling out a handful of something. "These might help."

He took the peppermints from her. "Thanks." He wondered briefly if she might know Lois was pregnant.

"That's what Mom always said worked best when we were sick when we were little."

"Right." He turned back to the bedroom, shutting the door behind him — not because he wanted privacy or wanted to shut Lucy out, but if she didn't know and one of them mentioned it loudly enough for Lucy to hear... Lois would be livid he was sure.

He knocked on the door again and it opened. She was sitting on the floor leaning against the wall. He sat down and leaned against the door frame holding out the crackers and the mints.

She took both of them from him.

"Lucy said the mints might help," he told her.

Lois looked back up at him, her eyes wide. "You didn't tell her, did you?"

He shook his head. "No, I just said that you weren't feeling well."

"I haven't told anyone else yet."

"I told my parents," he said quietly. "But they're the only ones who know about... us."

She munched on a cracker. "I haven't told anyone. I really have worked all day every day, seven days a week, since I got back so no chance to..."

"Call a lawyer?" he finished.

She nodded as she munched on another cracker. "Yeah." She glanced at the clock. "I need to get moving if I'm going to make it to my appointment."

"Let me take you at least, even if I can't stay."

Lois hesitated then nodded. "Okay."

Clark stood and held out a hand. She grasped it and he pulled her up. She stumbled slightly, her hands coming to rest on her chest and his on her waist as he helped steady her.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"My pleasure."

"I, um, need to get dressed." She moved away from him.

He turned into a blur and stopped with his suit pants, shirt and tie firmly in place. His suit coat hung from one finger, slung over his shoulder. "I'll let you get ready."

Her mouth hung open. "Wow," she breathed. "Um, help yourself to breakfast."

"Thank you." He hesitated. "Has it been bad?"

"What?"

He nodded towards the bathroom. "Being sick like that."

"No, not too bad. Couple days a week for a few weeks."

"I'm glad." He turned back and headed out to the kitchen.

Lucy was sitting at the counter eating a big bowl of cereal. "How is she?"

"Better," he told her.

"Good. Jimmy said she's been sick some lately. That's why I showed up last night. To see if she's okay."

"Who's Jimmy?"

"My boyfriend. He works with Lois."

"Ah."

He looked around the kitchen, deciding to pour himself a bowl of cereal. By the time he finished, Lois was walking out of her room dressed in a maroon business suit with a black silky camisole underneath. It reminded him of the one he still had — tucked away in his suitcase, helping to remind him it hadn't all

been a dream.

"I probably won't be home until late tonight, Luce." She busied herself getting her things together. "Are you ready, Clark?"

He nodded and rinsed his bowl out. "Ready." He shrugged into his suit coat and followed her. "Bye, Lucy. It was nice to meet you."

"See you guys tonight," Lucy said with a smirk.

Lois rolled her eyes and headed out the door.

A few minutes later, they were seated in the cab, heading towards Metropolis General Hospital. Clark said his good-byes and asked her to let him know how it went before telling the cabbie to take him to the Daily Planet. Surely, getting there early would make a good impression right?

Between traffic and — he was sure — the cabbie taking the most circuitous route, it was after nine when he arrived.

He smiled and shook Perry White's hand at ten after. "Bill's told me a lot about you, sir. Even said he scooped you a time or two."

Perry motioned him to a seat as he chuckled. "Did he say *what* he scooped me on?"

Clark shook his head. "No."

"Well, I won't ruin it for him. Bill Carlton and I go way back. How's he doing after his surgery?"

"Fine. He's back to work on next week's paper."

"And you ran the paper since his surgery?"

Clark nodded. "I helped get yesterday's paper out and then headed here."

"Why Metropolis? Why now?" Perry leaned back in his chair and watched him carefully.

Clark hesitated. "Personal reasons. I've always thought I'd live in a big city like Metropolis someday, but the timing... those are personal reasons. Why the Daily Planet?" He shrugged. "I've worked and freelanced for papers all over the world, but to work for the Daily Planet? That's every reporter's dream."

Perry nodded and looked through the samples Clark had brought with him. "Knob-tailed geckos?" he asked with a raised brow.

"You write what you're assigned," Clark replied with a grin.

"I wish all my reporters knew that," Perry mumbled. He looked up. "Speaking of which..."

The door burst open. "Perry, you're never going to believe this."

Clark stood. "Lois?"

She turned towards him, her eyes wide. "Clark?"

It was his turn to ask what she had the night before. "What're you doing here?"

Part 7

Lois left the hospital with a bit lighter step. Because she was already more than three months along, her doctor decided to do an early ultrasound. She'd held her breath, letting out a big sigh of relief as the doctor said everything looked good, if a few days further along than she would have expected, but that was nothing unusual.

They'd gotten her right in, a few minutes early even, and she was done by nine. She decided against taking a cab, instead hopping the subway the two stops to the Daily Planet.

She stopped at her desk, turning her computer on and looking at the messages on her desk. One in particular caught her eye. She took the pink slip of paper with her and headed towards Perry's office. She barely noticed that the door was closed as she walked in.

"Perry, you're never going to believe this," she said excitedly.

Belatedly, she realized that there was someone in the office with Perry.

"Lois?"

She turned to look at the other person standing there.
“Clark?”

“What’re you doing here?” he asked.

“I’d introduce you to up and coming investigative reporter Lois Lane, Clark, but apparently you already know each other,” came the gruff voice of her editor.

“We’ve met,” Lois said quietly.

“Yeah,” Clark agreed. “We’ve met.”

Perry sighed. “What is it, darlin’?”

“It’s not official yet, but I just got a call from Chen Chow. He thinks you might be able to get some of your money back.”

Perry closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. “Maybe that’ll get me out of Alice’s doghouse. Thanks for letting me know.”

She took a deep breath and tried to make sure she was completely composed before she turned back to Clark. “I’d like to talk to you for a minute before you leave, if you have time.”

Clark nodded. “Of course.”

“Okay then...”

“Lois!” There was a knock on the window and she turned to see Jimmy motioning at her. She apparently had a call on line two.

“I’ve got to take this.” Her flight from the office was as controlled as she could make it. She made a beeline for her desk, taking a minute to compose herself before picking up the phone.

This time it was his personal secretary who gave her the brush off.

She’d been contemplating not going to the ball that night, especially since she’d found out she was pregnant, but if he was going to keep avoiding her, she didn’t see another way. She’d even canceled with Mitchell, who was originally supposed to be her date. They’d made plans several months ago when the guest list first started floating around. She’d gone out on one... she hesitated to call it a date, but had gone out once with him. She hadn’t spoken to him since he’d canceled their second ‘date’ because of the sniffles. He’d called the week before to confirm and she’d told him not to bother.

“Lois?”

Clark’s voice startled her. She looked up to see him standing nervously next to her desk.

“Right,” she said, standing. “Come on.” She led him to one of the conference rooms, shutting the door behind them. “Was your job interview with Perry?”

He nodded and leaned against the wall near the door. “He doesn’t have anything though. He said if I do any freelance stuff, he’d like first crack at it but that he just promoted you and hired someone else earlier this week.”

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you worked here?”

She sank into one of the chairs. “Originally, I didn’t tell you because I figured you’d hit me up for a job. I mean, you were a drifting reporter. I’d be your connection in. Later...” She shrugged. “I just didn’t.”

She didn’t want to tell him that she didn’t want him there. That wasn’t *entirely* accurate but the thought of him working there when the only future they had was as co-parents...

He interrupted her internal musings. “I’ve been reading your stories the last few weeks. We get the Daily Planet and I noticed your car ring story, but I never put two and two together — that Lois Lane was the Lois I’d married. I never knew your last name,” he told her quietly. “I figured there was more than one Lois in Metropolis.”

“I’m sure there is,” she agreed.

He sighed. “Well, I didn’t get a job here, but I’m going to go see if I can scare anything else up.” He looked down at his suit. “I might go home and change first. I can just imagine walking up to a construction foreman asking for a job in a business suit.”

“You’d do that?” Lois asked him quietly, staring at her hands in her lap.

“What?”

“Work construction.”

“There’s nothing *wrong* with working construction,” he said. “I’d rather be a reporter, obviously. I’d even take sports or lifestyles at this point, but if construction is what it takes to help you financially, then that’s what it takes. Perry said he’d keep me in mind when he has another opening but who knows when that’ll be. And it’s not like I’m not physically capable of doing construction. I’ve done it before — lots of work around the farm and a couple different places while I was traveling — so I’m qualified.”

“Still...”

“The other options are the Metropolis Star or the National Whisperer. I’d much rather work as a sewer technician, thank you.”

She smiled slightly. “I can understand that, but what’s a sewer technician?”

He shrugged. “Dunno, but I’d rather be one of those.”

“Listen,” she said suddenly. “Do you have plans tonight?”

He shook his head. “Nope.”

“I have this thing to go to and I need an escort and the guy who was originally supposed to take me — those plans were made about four months ago and he was barely a friend anyway much less anything more but he isn’t going to anymore and I just wasn’t going to go but I’m trying to get this interview but he’s avoiding me and he’s going to be there so...” She took a deep breath before plunging on. “Is there any chance you could go with me?”

“Sure,” he said with a smile. “I’d be happy to.”

“Can you get a tux?”

He hesitated slightly. “I can get one.”

“Thanks.”

There was an awkward silence.

“Is there anything I can do to make today easier for you?” he asked.

Jimmy poked his head in the door before she could answer. “Lois, Perry wants you down at the theater on 42nd before the demolition starts.”

“Seriously?” she asked, more resigned than annoyed.

“Hey, I’m just the messenger.” Jimmy left before she could say anything else.

“You could write that for me,” she said with a sigh.

“I would,” he said softly.

“Perry’d have my hide, but thanks for the offer.” She put her hands on the armrests and pushed herself up. “I’ve got to get back to work. Good luck.”

“Thanks.” He held the door open for her, walking with her to her desk. “I’ll see you later. What time do you need me to be ready?”

“The limo’s coming at 7:15. It’s a Daily Planet thing, sort of, so Perry had a couple limos ordered for us. I hadn’t told him I wasn’t going but Jimmy and Lucy are going so it was coming by anyway.”

“I’ll be ready.”

She sat down at her desk. “See you later.”

“Bye.”

She wanted to watch him leave but made herself focus on her monitor instead. Now that he was here and knew her last name, surely he’d find a lawyer. There was no point in torturing herself.

She’d woken up in the middle of the night to find Clark behind her, his arm around her stomach. For a minute, she’d thought she was dreaming but quickly realized that she wasn’t. She’d held very still, making sure not to wake him but just to enjoy the feeling.

She’d never actually *slept* with someone before — except

their wedding night. Dan and Paul... They'd both gotten up pretty quickly and there had been no 'sleepovers' with either one of them.

Given that she was pregnant, as soon as Clark found a place or her sister left, it seemed unlikely she would again for a very long time.

She sighed, closing her eyes and willing the tears to stay put. She opened them, typing away on her notes.

Ten minutes later, she left for the theater.

Clark flew to Smallville to change clothes and fill his parents in on what had happened since he left.

He left out the part where he slept in the same bed with Lois instead just saying she'd offered him the air mattress.

He changed into something more casual and headed back to Metropolis.

He talked to several foremen, leaving Lois' phone number with them in case anything opened up. They said to show up on weekday mornings and they might have some day labor.

As he walked around, he saw a sign for the Sarah Bernhardt Theater. He turned the corner to see a crowd gathered around and construction equipment. He glanced at the street sign. Forty-second Street. Wasn't that where Lois was supposed to be?

He headed that way to see if he could find her.

Two hours later, he thought he had enough for a good story. He was a bit worried though — Lois hadn't shown up.

She'd probably been caught up in another story and that was why she hadn't made it. Those things happened, especially if it was some big breaking news thing. He wandered around the Riverview district of the West River area. It seemed to be going through a period of renovation or revitalization or urban redevelopment or whatever they were calling it these days. There was a small grocery store and a law firm. There were a few restaurants and even a couple of clubs.

A sign in the window of one of the clubs said that they were looking for a bartender. He hesitated. He'd bartended before and, depending on what kind of club it was, he might make pretty good tips. He decided to go in and scope the place out.

The Metro Club wasn't open yet, but it looked nice. There were a number of men sitting around one of the tables having a meeting of some kind. Before he could take the rest in, someone spoke.

"Can I help you?"

He turned towards the voice and held out his hand. "Hi. I'm Clark Kent. I'd like to apply for the bartender's job."

She shook his hand lightly and he noticed that she unobtrusively wiped her hand on the side of her blue dress. "I'm sorry," she started. "We have a dress code and..." She looked him up and down. "...that's not it."

He glanced at his blue jeans, white T-shirt and leather jacket. He gave her his best smile. "Believe it or not, this isn't what I would normally wear. I had an interview this morning that didn't pan out and I wore a business suit to that. I didn't have any other leads so I changed because I didn't think a suit would impress a foreman on a job site and that was my next stop."

"So a businessman construction worker?" she asked with a raised brow.

Clark laughed. "Not exactly. Guy looking for a job and the only interview he could get in his field didn't pan out — there's no openings. It wasn't like they hired someone else; they just didn't have anything available. I only got the interview because my old boss was friends with the boss here." He shrugged. "I've done a lot of different jobs over the years and figured that without any other leads, construction or something along those lines would probably be easier to get into. I was walking by here, saw the sign in the window and thought I'd stop in."

"So you're not looking for something permanent?" She

leaned against the bar.

He hesitated. "Probably not, but the impression I've gotten from calling around is that there's not going to be any openings I'm interested in for a while. Even if there is, I would give a minimum of two weeks' notice and let you know ahead of time of any promising interviews so you can be as prepared as possible."

She hesitated. She wasn't even going to give him an interview.

"Let me make you a drink," he offered. "What's your favorite?"

She sized him up. "Long Island Iced Tea."

He started towards the bar when the door slammed open behind them.

"Johnny, you're a dead man!"

Clark turned long enough to see that there were four men, all wearing silver jump suits of some kind and holding what he assumed were weapons.

A number of the men who'd been sitting around some of the tables jumped up, guns drawn. What was he getting himself into? Flamethrowers.

That's what the weapons were.

Clark turned, covering the woman's body with his own as the club erupted in flames.

A minute later, the men were gone, but the fire was starting to take hold. "Everybody out," he yelled, picking up the woman up and getting her quickly past the flames.

Everyone else was rushing out the doors and he set her down on the stage. "Go!"

He glanced around, making sure that no one could see him. He blew on the flames, extinguishing them before heading out the door himself.

Someone had called the fire department and they arrived a few minutes later as the lady in blue and one of the men argued.

He blew a deep breath out slowly. He'd been in Metropolis less than a day and he'd already pulled a 'stunt'.

"You'll need a tux." The voice behind him startled him.

He turned. "Excuse me?"

She held out a wad of cash. "Toni Taylor. You'll need a tux if you're going to be a bartender at the Metro Club. Go to Streets Formal Wear and tell them I sent you. They'll give you a good deal."

He took the money from her. "Thank you."

"You start tonight." She turned to walk away.

"Ah, I can't."

She turned back. "What?"

"I'll be here first thing in the morning," he promised, "but I can't start tonight."

"Why not?"

He grinned at her, probably a bit too flirty but... "I promised a beautiful woman I'd be her escort to an event tonight."

She apprised him carefully. "Your wife?"

He hesitated.

"I noticed the ring."

"It's complicated," he said quietly. "It wouldn't surprise me to hear from her lawyer any day."

"Right."

By then the fire department had been through the building, declaring it safe, and police tape had been set up.

"Clark!"

He turned to see a brunette ducking under the thin yellow barrier. He looked back at Toni. "Excuse me?"

She nodded. "Of course. We'll be here first thing in the morning. Come ready to work and bring the tux for when we open."

"Of course." He walked towards Lois. "What're you doing here?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm a reporter. There was a fire. Do I

need to draw you a diagram? What are *you* doing here?"

He looked slightly chagrined. "Um, I'm the Metro Club's newest bartender."

Her jaw dropped. "Clark," she whispered, "you do know it's a front for the Metro Gang, one of the most notorious gangs in the West River area."

"How was I supposed to know that?" he whispered back. "I've been in town for like eighteen hours. I was in the middle of trying to convince Toni to give me a chance when the Toasters walked in."

"The Toasters?"

"Yeah. They had flamethrowers, wanted 'Johnny' dead, and wrote Toasters on the wall with fire."

"Oy." She bit her bottom lip. "I wonder if that's who's been starting *all* the fires in this area. There was another one earlier," she said almost to herself.

"Is that why you weren't at the theater?"

Her brown eyes flashed. "Were you checking up on me?" she hissed.

"No. I happened to be walking by and stopped to see if you were there. You weren't. I hung out then left and saw the sign here. I was about to convince her to let me make her a drink when they burst in."

"Lane." They both turned to see a slender man in a suit walking towards them.

"Henderson," she said.

"You're not supposed to be inside the tape, you know that."

"Sorry." Her tone indicated she was anything but. "Bill, this is Clark Kent. He was inside. Clark, this is Inspector Bill Henderson, MPD."

Clark held out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Inspector."

"Likewise. Make sure you give your statement to one of my men before you take off."

Clark nodded. "Gladly."

"How much damage is there?" Lois asked him.

He hesitated. "Off the record for now." She nodded. "Not as much as we would have expected. Given the other fires in the area, we would have expected it to burn to the ground. For some reason, it didn't take."

Clark glanced at Lois before asking his own question. "That should give you more evidence then, right?"

Henderson hesitated again. "Is he with you?" he asked Lois.

"Close enough," she retorted. "That should give you more evidence then, right?"

"Theoretically." He turned as someone called his name.

"Don't touch anything, Lane. Stay out of the building." He walked off.

Lois rolled her eyes. "Whatever you say," she called after him. She turned back to Clark. "I've got to get back and get this written up so I can get back to the apartment and get ready for tonight. Lucy should be there whenever you're ready to go back."

He nodded. "I've got to go get my tux and then will head that way."

"See you later then."

"See you." He watched her walk away then spoke to one of the officers in the area before getting directions to Street's Formal Wear.

About an hour later he was back at the apartment. Lucy let him in and they chatted a bit while he went to work on a story about the theater. Maybe he could sell it to Perry White unless someone else from the Daily Planet had been there since Lois wasn't.

A little after four, the front door opened then slammed shut. He looked up from his spot at the table to see an annoyed Lois.

"Don't take it out on the door, Lo," Lucy said sardonically.

"I can't believe it." She tossed her briefcase on the couch.

"I'm the *only* Daily Planet reporter to cover any of the fires today

because everyone else was tied up *and* I had the inside scoop on the one at the Metro Club. Does Perry appreciate it? No-o. He's mad because I didn't get the theater covered, too."

Clark hesitated before closing his laptop. He held out his notebook. "Here."

"What?"

"My notes from the theater. Take them."

She looked at him warily, reaching for the notebook. "What's the catch?"

He shook his head. "No catch. They're yours to write up."

She flipped through them. "Thanks." She started for the bedroom. "Listen, if either one of you want in the bathroom, you have twenty minutes before I take over."

Clark looked at Lucy who shook her head. "I just need to get dressed and do my hair. I don't need in the bathroom for either one of those."

He stood. "Then I'm going to hop in the shower, if that's okay. I probably should have after I got back but got to talking to Lucy so..."

He went to Lois' room, gathered his things and took a quick shower, changing into shorts and a T-shirt when he was done. His tux was hanging in a bag in Lois' closet. It wouldn't take him long to actually get dressed even without using his gifts.

He headed out into the living room. "All done."

He looked up to see Lois standing there with his laptop open and his notes in her hand. He couldn't read the look on her face.

"What were you thinking?"

Part 8

Lois scanned through Clark's notes as he headed for her room and the bathroom. She could do something with these. Maybe not exactly what Perry wanted, but something. She might even be able to get it sent to him before the limo showed up.

"Don't do it," Lucy said quietly.

"Don't do what?" Lois asked absently.

"I don't know what exactly your relationship is with Clark but he's spent two hours working on that story."

She looked up. "What?"

"He got back here about two and has been working on it ever since."

"It's taken him two hours to write *this*?" Lois asked skeptically, holding up the notebook.

"He did a bunch of research online and stuff, too."

"For this?"

Lucy shrugged. "Yeah, for that. I don't know why he gave it to you, but..."

Lois nodded, before glancing at the laptop and back at the bathroom. She moved to the table, popping the computer open. She pressed the power button and waited impatiently for it to 'wake up'.

"What are you doing?" Lucy hissed at her.

"Reading his article."

"Isn't that an invasion of his privacy?"

Lois glared at her. "We slept in the same bed last night, not for the first time, and reading his article is an invasion of his privacy?" That implied so much more to Lucy than was the truth, while also implying so much less.

Lucy wisely kept her mouth shut as Lois sat down and started scrolling through the story.

By the time Clark walked out of the bathroom a few minutes later, Lois was nearly done.

She stood up to face him, doing her best not to get distracted by the way the shirt stretched across his chest or how well the sleeves accented the muscles in his arms.

"All done," he announced.

"What were you thinking?" she asked him.

"What?" he asked, his eyes shifting between her and his open

computer. “What’re you doing?”

“Why’d you give these to me?” she practically demanded, holding out the notepad.

“So you can write the story for Perry,” he said moving towards the table and shutting the laptop.

“Why didn’t you tell me you’d already spent a couple of hours on it? That you were going to submit it to Perry yourself?”

“It’s your job. Your boss you’re in trouble with. There’s no guarantee he’d even buy it if I sent it to him.”

She had turned around to face him. “This is good, Clark. This is *really* good. It’s not my style at all — touchy feely and all that — but it’s good. If Perry doesn’t buy it, he’s stupid and Perry is *not* stupid.”

“You really think it’s that good?” he asked, sounding more than a bit skeptical.

“Yes, it’s *really* that good.” She tossed the notebook on the table. “I’m not writing it. Yours needs a bit of polish, but send it to him.”

With that she turned and walked to her room, shutting the door behind her. She leaned against it and sighed.

He was good. He was as good as she was as a writer. It didn’t have her edge or need any investigative skills but it was very good.

Whatever else Clark Kent was, he wasn’t a hack reporter.

But he was going to give her the story.

What did that mean? She pondered that as she headed for the bathroom to get ready.

By the time she exited, hair and makeup done, towel wrapped firmly around her, she knew that her sister and Clark were already dressed. She went to the closet and her hand hovered over the blue dress she’d planned on wearing for to the Ball. It had fit like a glove when she’d bought it a couple months earlier. Odds were it wouldn’t fit anymore. She’d noticed over the last week that her clothes were fitting a bit tighter. Not much, but enough that it would probably be very noticeable in the blue dress.

Instead she chose a dress in deep burgundy.

It had a scooped neckline, not too low, and pleated at the satin empire waist. The front draped loosely, forgiving enough that no one would notice the slight bump at her waist. The flowing skirt and sheer overskirt were sexy and flirty at the same time while still being modest. The back, however... The slim spaghetti straps went over her shoulders, making a crisscross pattern, meeting the opposite sides of the dress at the satin sash on either side of the small of her back. The skirt was long enough that even with her best heels, it pooled slightly on the floor.

She slipped it on over her head before eyeing herself critically in the mirror. She looked good. She didn’t look pregnant.

Her hair was down, brushing against her shoulders in waves. She’d put a small clip on one side to keep it out of her face. She glanced at the clock. Five after seven. She studied the three pairs of heels she’d gotten out of her closet earlier.

Undecided, she picked up all three and headed into the living room. “Lucy, which pair of shoes...” She looked up and stopped speaking, looking back and forth between her sister and Clark, who had stood. “What?”

She smiled to herself, knowing exactly what ‘what’ was. She looked great. Clark’s reaction was especially satisfying for some reason. His jaw was on the floor and she was sure he’d lost the ability to speak.

And then she got a good look at him and decided it was just as well they weren’t trying to carry on a conversation. Clark didn’t have his jacket on yet, but he looked incredible. He was wearing his tux, obviously, but something about it definitely agreed with him. The crisp white shirt. The patterned suspenders. The black cummerbund and matching bow tie.

The phrase ‘good enough to eat’ came to mind, but Lois

shoved that thought away.

“You look... incredible,” Clark managed to say.

“Thanks.” Instead of returning the compliment, she turned to Lucy. “Which shoes, Luce?”

“You’re going to be on your feet all night and no one’s going to see them,” her sister pointed out. “Which ones are the most comfortable?”

Lois sighed. “My tennis shoes.”

Lucy rolled her eyes. “Be serious.”

She looked at the shoes in her hand again. “Fine.” She turned and smiled slightly to herself when she heard Clark’s sharp intake of breath when he saw the back of her dress. She tossed two pairs of shoes in the closet and slipped the other ones on just as there was a knock on the door.

Two minutes later, she turned to lock the door after everyone had left ahead of her. She turned to see Clark standing there, now complete with his jacket.

“I meant it,” he said softly. “You look incredible.”

“Thanks.”

He allowed her to walk ahead of him, his hand finding its way to the — bare — small of her back. The warmth radiating from that spot was almost enough for her to turn around, drag him back to her apartment and have her way with him.

She managed to keep her libido under control and a minute later they were in the limo.

“Would you like to dance?” Clark asked Lois as she sipped on a glass of sparkling grape juice. He’d taken the same thing in deference to her pregnancy.

She hesitated before nodding. “Sure.” He was her da... escort for the night and she should dance with him. It had nothing to do with wanting to be close to him, to have him hold her in his arms... She sighed and started walking towards the dance floor.

He followed her, taking her hand and pulling her into his arms. “Is this okay?” he asked quietly, keeping what he hoped was an acceptable distance between them.

She nodded, aware of the scent of his aftershave and the tingle where his hand rested solidly on her lower back. Her hand rested on his arm and she could feel the play of muscles through his jacket. She shifted closer to him so he couldn’t see her close her eyes and remember the feeling of those arms around her in that room half a country away.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his breath warm against her ear.

She hesitated. “I’m a bit tired,” she finally said, using that as an excuse to lean slightly against him. “But I still have an interview to get tonight.”

“Do you ever stop working?”

There was a long silence between them. “No. Not very often.”

He let that go by. That was something they’d probably need to talk about at some point with regards to the baby, but this wasn’t the time or the place. “Who’s the interview with?”

The music stopped and she moved away from him. “I’ll catch up with you in a bit,” she called over her shoulder. She needed to get away from him, from the way she had a hard time thinking when she was that close to him.

What she needed to do was get that interview.

She picked up another glass of sparkling grape juice, sipping on it as she waited for their host to show up. A minute later, she saw him coming down the stairs. She set her glass down and moved to be in position.

She waited for her moment. “Bruce Wayne. Why haven’t you returned my calls?” she said loudly enough to be heard over the conversation din around the room.

He turned and walked towards her.

“Lois Lane. Daily Planet,” she said smiling at him.

“I can assure you I won’t make that mistake again.” He took

her hand and kissed it lightly as the music started again. “May I have this dance, Ms. Lane?”

She nodded slightly, making sure to keep an appropriate distance between them. He did have a bit of a reputation as a ladies’ man and she was, technically, a married woman. Whose husband was around here somewhere. “Pardon my boldness, Mr. Wayne...”

“Please, call me Bruce,” he said as he led her around the dance floor. “And boldness is a trait I find attractive in a woman.”

“So, Bruce, I know you’re hesitant to give interviews...” She tried not to notice that there was someone else on the dance floor. There were lots of someone else’s on the dance floor but one someone else in particular.

And he was dancing with a blonde.

She supposed if she could dance with someone else, so could he.

Bruce brought her attention back to him. “A man in my position can be easily misinterpreted. I’ve had bad experiences with the media.”

“Not with me,” she told him, looking him straight in the eye.

“Very true. But for the moment, let’s just enjoy the dance, shall we?”

She nodded, keeping her eyes firmly on anything but Clark and the blonde. When she did sneak a glance towards them, she found Clark looking directly at her.

Clark turned away, not wanting to get into a staring match while trying to dance.

“You dance very well,” said the blonde woman he was dancing with. She kept trying to move slightly closer than he was comfortable with.

“Thank you, Mayson. I learned a long time ago.”

“You never did say what brought you to Metropolis.”

“Personal reasons,” he told her.

“What kind of personal reasons?”

He sighed. “Family reasons and that’s really all I’m willing to say about it.”

“Your wife?” she asked suddenly.

His wife. The one currently dancing with the world’s biggest playboy.

He hesitated. “She lives in Metropolis.”

“And you don’t. Or didn’t until this week.”

He nodded.

“So trouble in paradise?” she asked quietly.

“None of your business, Ms. Drake,” he said, moving away from her. He turned, leaving her standing in the middle of the floor by herself.

He walked across the floor until he found the person he sought. He tapped the other man’s shoulder. “Mind if I cut in?”

Lois glared at him, subtly, under her lashes as Bruce stepped away from her.

“Thank you for the dance, Ms. Lane.” He bowed slightly before turning away.

Clark pulled Lois into his arms. Closer than Mayson had been; closer to her than Bruce had been.

She sighed. “I was *this close* to getting that interview, Clark. So who’s the blonde?”

“What blonde?”

“The one you were dancing with.”

“Oh. Jimmy introduced her to me. Mayson Drake. She’s an assistant DA.”

“Ah. I would have thought line dancing was more your style,” she said without looking at him. Without closing her eyes and seeing him dancing with the mousy brunette.

“I can line dance, too. I can two-step and Tush Push with the best of ‘em, but I learned this from a Nigerian princess. She’d studied in England...”

His voice trailed off as she pushed away from him, turning

away and heading for the doors to the balcony.

He sighed and followed her.

Lois could sense his presence as she stepped out of the subdued lighting of the ballroom to the velvet blackness of the night. She didn’t want to talk to him. She never should have invited him to stay with her. She never should have invited him to the ball. She never should have avoided calling a lawyer. She never should have told him she was pregnant.

Clark didn’t move too close to her. Close enough they could talk without any of the few other people on the balcony overhearing. “What’s wrong?”

She shrugged. “Nothing. I just didn’t feel like dancing anymore.”

He started to say something else, but she turned on her heel and headed back inside. He’d heard the announcement too, but had planned on ignoring the speech being given by their host.

But she was working, he reminded himself. He had no idea if she was covering this for the Planet or if someone else was.

Several short speeches were made by Bruce Wayne and others. They announced how much money had been raised for the children of both Metropolis and Gotham.

Clark chatted with several of the Daily Planet contingent until he saw Lois walking towards the front entrance with Lucy and Jimmy in tow. Was she leaving without mentioning it to him?

He made his excuses and followed them, catching up as they entered the elevator which would take them to street level where the limo was waiting.

The ride home was nearly silent.

He was only slightly surprised when Lucy didn’t get out when they reached Lois’ apartment building.

Lois didn’t say anything as Clark helped her out of the car. Or as they walked up the stairs. Or as she unlocked the door. Or as she decided she wanted to listen to some music and turned on the CD player.

Maybe Clark would take the hint and disappear if she kept ignoring him. She headed to the kitchen and pulled out leftovers from the barbecue place where she’d eaten lunch. She stuck the plate in the microwave and punched the button.

Did she want to go change before she ate? She did but that meant moving all the way to her room, finding clothes to change into and...

The microwave beeped. She took her plate to the table and sat down, kicked her shoes to the side as she did.

“How’re you feeling?” Clark asked from where he’d sat down on one of the couches.

“Hungry.” She took a big bite of the sandwich.

“That’s good, right?”

“Better than nauseous,” she retorted.

He was quiet for a moment. “I’d imagine so.”

She ate in silence for a moment. “You can help yourself if you want something to eat.”

“I’m fine. Thank you, though.”

She took the last bite. “Nigerian princess, huh?” Why was she doing this to herself? She really didn’t want to know about the women in the past.

“Yeah. I met her while I was traveling last year.”

She made a small sound that sounded something like a ‘hmmm’ but that was it. ‘Fly Me To The Moon’ came on the stereo and she closed her eyes, letting the music wash over her.

“You like this song?” Clark asked, seeing the small smile playing around her lips.

“It’s my favorite.”

She heard his footsteps walking towards her, opening her eyes when they stopped next to her. She looked up at him.

He held out a hand and bowed slightly. “May I have the pleasure of this dance, Ms. Lane?”

“My feet hurt,” she said, smiling slightly as she shook her

head.

He smiled back, the dazzling grin that made her insides do back flips. "Trust me."

She sighed and took his hand, allowing him to help her up. He pulled her into his arms and a second later she gasped.

"Clark!" She clung more tightly to him as her feet left the floor.

"*This* is dancing," he said softly in her ear as he twirled her in the air.

Her mouth dropped open as they moved around the room.

They were... floating!

It was... wonderful!

She threw back her head, laughing. "This is wonderful," she told him.

"And it doesn't matter if your feet hurt."

"You're right." She still held on to him a bit more tightly than was probably necessary, but in return, he tightened his hold on her.

Clark closed his eyes as she rested her head on his shoulder. "Tired?"

She nodded against him.

He leaned down and caught her off-guard when he swept her into his arms. She squealed and wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging tightly to him.

She could tell when his feet touched the ground. His skin was so close to hers. All she wanted to do was kiss it. Just one little feather light kiss where she could see his pulse moving. At some point, he'd taken his tie off and undone a couple of buttons on his shirt. His jacket was also long gone.

Just one.

One little kiss.

Before he set her down.

She shifted slightly in his arms as he walked into her room and 'accidentally' let her lips graze his skin.

He turned towards her and his lips were right there...

Lois could feel his breath on her face. She bit her bottom lip. All she wanted to do now was kiss him.

She moved towards him, her lips settling lightly on his as he lowered her feet to the floor. She left her arms around his neck, looking up at him.

"What was that for?" he asked softly.

She shrugged. "Wanted to." She rested her head against his chest, hoping he would just hold her for a minute.

Clark hesitated slightly before wrapping his arms around her and holding her to him. He tried to make sure he didn't hold her too tightly.

They stood there for a long moment before she moved back slightly. "Thank you," she whispered, leaning up to brush her lips against his cheek.

Clark turned his head to kiss her temple, but a shock ran through him as his lips touched hers.

One kiss turned into two.

Two kisses turned into three.

Three kisses turned into...

They both lost count.

Lois rested her hands against his chest as his ran up and down her nearly bare back. Her fingers played with one of his buttons before nimbly slipping it through the buttonhole. She slid her hands a little lower to the next button, her finger grazing against his skin as she did.

Clark moaned slightly at the feel of her fingers brushing against his chest and his lips left hers to trail a line of kisses along her jaw and down her neck as she continued to unbutton his shirt. She tugged the bottom out of his pants, where it was still held in place by both his cummerbund and his suspenders.

She groaned as the shirt didn't do what she wanted it to. She reached around him and undid the fastener, tossing the

cummerbund to the side before returning between them, unclipping the suspenders and sliding her hands up his chest to push them over his shoulders. The feeling of his lips on her skin as he kissed his way across her shoulder urged her on, and a second later she had his shirt completely unbuttoned and her arms slipped underneath it, her hands running over his back.

Clark undid one cuff link and then the other, not knowing or caring where they fell. Lois' hands were on his shoulders as he kissed her again. Together they worked his shirt off as the kiss reached a feverish pitch.

Lois felt his fingers slide under the straps holding her dress up.

"Is there some secret to this?" he murmured into her neck.

She shook her head.

He kissed her again, long and deep and passionate before stepping back slightly.

She kept her eyes closed as his fingers came up and over her shoulders, still hooked under the spaghetti straps.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded and, in unison, his fingers moved the straps down her arms until gravity took over, pulling the dress to the floor.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, lowering her to the bed before bending over enough to kiss her lower abdomen.

Where the baby was.

And then... He put one knee on the bed and lowered himself next to her, careful, she was sure, to keep his full weight from resting on her.

They lost themselves in each other, in the sounds and sensations of two halves once again becoming a whole.

Part 9

Lois slowly came to realize that it was morning.

And that she was alone.

Late morning, if the clock was right.

But she was still alone.

She stretched, realizing that she still wasn't wearing any clothes.

And that there was a key turning in the door.

She grabbed her robe and shut her bedroom door, quietly, hoping that Lucy wouldn't see her do it.

"Lois?"

"Just a minute," Lois called back. She glanced at her room.

Her dress and assorted undergarments were strewn about the room but Clark's tux was gone. She didn't have time to think about what that meant as she scurried around, picking it all up and shoving it in her closet, shutting the door to prevent it from spilling out. She grabbed a pair of pajamas out of the drawer, quickly pulling them on and wrapping her robe around her before going to the living room.

"Just get up?" Lucy asked with a smirk.

"Don't start," Lois warned. "You know how much I've been working lately. I finally got a day I could sleep in so I did."

"Where's Clark?"

"How should I know?" she snapped. She didn't. Did she? Maybe she should. All she really knew was that she'd woken up alone. She sighed. "Sorry. I'm still waking up. You know how I am before my first cup of coffee." That said, she headed to the kitchen to start a pot. On the counter was an envelope with her name on it.

She slid a finger under the flap and tore it open before pulling the sheet of paper out.

'Lois,

'I'm sorry to leave while you're still asleep and I hate that you'll wake up alone, but I'd guess you really need the rest. I had to get to work and probably won't be back until late. I would have cleaned up some more, too, but I didn't want to wake you. I did polish the article and email it to Mr. White. I haven't heard

back yet.

“We really need to talk — there’s a couple things I need to tell you, but I don’t know that I’ll be back early enough to do them justice. Hopefully, they won’t need me until later tomorrow and we can talk in the morning if we don’t tonight.”

It wasn’t signed.

“What’s that?” Lucy asked, walking into the kitchen.

Lois shrugged. “A note from Clark. He left before I woke up, obviously. Just says he went to work and doesn’t think he’ll be home until late.”

“Are you going to tell me what the deal with you two is?”

“No.” Lois turned away, moving back to the counter to put the coffee grounds away.

“How long have you known him?”

“Long enough.”

“Why haven’t you ever mentioned him?”

“Because I haven’t.”

“Lois, what’s going on?” Lucy asked quietly.

Tears filled Lois’ eyes, quickly spilling over and streaking down her cheeks. Instantly, Lucy was at her side, holding Lois in her arms. Together, they sunk to the floor.

How long they stayed like that, Lois didn’t know, but it was a long while before she pulled back.

“Thanks, Luce,” she whispered as Lucy reached for some napkins in one of the drawers. Lois gave a half laugh. “Napkins?”

Lois shrugged. “Kleenex are too far away.”

Lois leaned her head against the cabinet. “I guess I should tell you the whole story.”

“If you’re ready,” Lucy replied softly.

“Remember when I went to go see Molly a couple months ago?”

Lucy nodded.

“I met a guy. Molly had to work unexpectedly and he and I... We spent the afternoon together exploring the town.”

“Clark?”

Lois nodded. “Yeah. Then... something happened. I don’t know what, but I don’t remember much of the next couple hours — and before you ask, Clark didn’t do anything to me. I told him I wanted to get married. We did. We went to the courthouse and then found a bed and breakfast with a chapel and got married. My memory really picks up about the time we got to the room. I woke up the next morning and snuck out while he was asleep. I came home and...”

“Wait.”

“What?”

“You’re married?”

Lois nodded.

“To Clark?”

Lois nodded again.

Lucy’s head fell back against the cabinet. “Wow,” she whispered.

“We hadn’t been drinking or anything like that, but it’s like getting drunk and married in Vegas or something.”

“So the ring...”

Lois twisted the ring on her finger. “Yeah. I don’t remember it, but I guess we bought rings. It really does help keep unwanted guys away though,” she said, resting her head on Lucy’s shoulder.

“So why is he here? Did you not call a lawyer? Or him?”

“His name was smudged on the license, but I could have found him if I really wanted to. He’s from a small town in Kansas where everyone knows everyone else. He never knew my last name and didn’t know how to find me.”

“Kansas? You saw him last weekend?”

“Yeah.”

“So why’s he here now?”

Lois took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “Because I

told him he’s going to be a father.”

Lucy was silent for a long moment. “You’re pregnant?”

Lois nodded. “Yeah.”

“So Clark just showed up?”

“About half an hour before you did.”

“What’s the plan for you two then?”

“I don’t know. We’ve both mentioned calling lawyers but...”

“But what?” Lucy asked after a long moment.

Lois hesitated again. “Last night...”

“It’s a good thing I went home with Jimmy?”

Lois nodded. “Though if you’d been here... It wouldn’t have happened, I’m sure.”

Lucy nudged her with her shoulder, as she tried to suppress a grin. “Was it worth it?”

Lois laughed. “Lucy, it was super, but that doesn’t mean...”

Her voice trailed off. “Just because the sex is good doesn’t mean we should be married. I don’t know him well enough to know if we should even consider dating, much less anything else.”

“He gave you the story,” Lucy reminded her. “And he’s here.”

“He did give me the story, but...” She sighed. “He’s a drifter. He says he’s here to stay but... He’s lived twelve different places or so in the last two years. How can I put myself or my baby in the position of depending on him if he’s going to run off again?”

“Are you in love with him?”

“I’ve known him for like two days total. Of course, I’m madly in love with him,” Lois said sarcastically.

“Why’d you let him stay here then?”

“Because I let him stay here, I should be in love with him?”

“If you’re not in love with him, why did you?”

Lois sighed. “I don’t know. He showed up at the door with his suitcase and asked if I knew a cheap hotel. I don’t know why I offered to let him stay here. I offered to let him stay on the air mattress,” she finished quietly.

“Why didn’t you say something when I got here?”

“What was I supposed to say? Hey, Luce, my husband showed up and needs to sleep on the air mattress?”

Lucy winced. “I see your point. So did he sleep in the bed?”

“He offered to sleep on the floor but I told him he didn’t have to.”

It was Lucy’s turn to lean her head against Lois. “I think you are a smitten kitten.”

Lois sighed but didn’t respond to that. “I’ve got to get ready. I do need to get some work done today.”

Neither one of them moved until the phone rang. Lucy reached up and handed the handset to Lois.

Lois stood as she answered it. “Hello?” Silence. “Listen, whoever this is, I don’t have time for this.” She started to put the phone down when there was a reply.

“Lois?”

“Perry?” Lois leaned against on the counter.

“Um, don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m looking for Clark Kent. This is the number Jimmy gave me. I thought it looked familiar but...”

“He’s not here.”

“But you know how to reach him?”

Lois leaned her elbows on the counter and rested her forehead on the palms of her hands. “Yeah. He got another job yesterday and he’s there now.”

“Well, have him call me, would ya, darlin’? I got his article on the theater and it’s good.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I read it. Not my style, but good.”

“Well, when you see him, let him know I want to talk to him.”

“I will. I’m going to head down and follow-up on the Metro fire here in a bit.” It had nothing to do with the fact Clark would be there. Not at all. She needed to convince herself of that.

"Be careful, darlin'. The Metros should be taken seriously."

"I know, Perry. Don't worry about me."

They spoke for another minute before Lois hung up the phone. Lucy had long since moved to the living room and turned on the television.

She headed into her room and found a pair of formfitting shorts that made her legs look even longer than usual and a white shirt that she could tie up. Given what she'd overheard the day before, it was likely they were going to be looking for more showgirls. And this undercover gig couldn't be any worse than being a scruffy teenage boy. Even though her clothes weren't fitting quite as well, it certainly wasn't obvious that she was pregnant yet — even in this get up.

And even though she wasn't sure exactly what the deal was between her and Clark, he'd be there, too, and there was no way he'd let her get hurt, if for no other reason than she was having his baby.

She pulled on a pair of jogging pants and a T-shirt over her clothes, sticking a pair of heels in her big bag and putting tennis shoes on instead. No need for Lucy to know her plan.

"I'll be back later," she called to Lucy as she headed out the door. "Don't wait up."

"Wait," Lucy said.

Lois stopped and turned. "What?"

"Do you want me to find somewhere else to go? I mean, I could go to Jimmy's but you've been there — his place is a sty and the neighbors are so loud..." Lucy bit her bottom lip. "Once in a while, like last night, is one thing but..."

Lois sighed. "It's up to you. If you want to go somewhere else, I won't complain because of... everything, but at the same time, you're always welcome. You know that."

"I know," Lucy said softly. "I'll leave a note if I go somewhere. Love you, sis."

Lois smiled at her sister. "Love you, too, Luce."

With that she headed to the Metro Club.

Clark wiped his hands on towel and examined the wall in front of him. It looked good. The Metro Club was going to smell like fresh paint when it opened in a couple hours but the vestiges of the Toasters would be gone.

"Very nice, Mr. Kent," came the sultry voice behind him.

He turned to see Toni standing there. "Thank you."

"You've painted before."

She was flirting or something close to it.

"Almost always something to paint back home," he said.

"Hey, you," Johnny's voice cut across the club. "With the legs."

Clark glanced up at the stage to see who Johnny was talking to.

Lois.

Somehow he should have known.

Toni said something to him and he turned his attention back to his boss. It was an hour later before he had a chance to talk to Lois.

"What're you doing here?" he hissed as he pulled the curtains to her dressing area closed behind him.

"My job," she said calmly. "Something's going on here and I'm going to find out what it is."

"It's dangerous," he said in a harsh whisper.

"Your point?" she whispered back. "You're going to be here the whole time and you're not going to let anything happen to me. Besides, I'm careful."

He gave her a skeptical look. "I'm not sure I buy that."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm *not* going to do anything that's going to put me or the baby in danger — don't worry about that. I'm just getting the Metro story — that's *all*." Someone called from backstage. "I have to go."

He watched her head towards the door before heading for the bar.

The first part of the evening was pretty uneventful, though Clark did get a kick out of watching Lois dance in the chicken costume.

He kept an eye on her as she waited tables with ease, and he found himself wishing some of the men in the club would stop leering at her.

Eventually Johnny, Toni and a number of the other men Clark suspected of being gangsters went into one of the back rooms. He noticed Lois arguing quietly with another waitress before she headed towards him, a tray situated on her hip.

"I need drinks for all of them," she said nodding towards the conference room door.

Clark sighed and poured enough drinks for all of them, including the long overdue Long Island Iced Tea for Toni. "Be careful," he said quietly as she picked the tray up.

"Don't worry." She headed into the room and he heard her as the door swung shut. "Thirsty, boys?"

A minute later, shots rang out.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Clark hissed as the apartment door slammed shut.

Lois winced, and not just because she was sure eight of her neighbors would mention to her that they'd heard it in the middle of the night. "Lucy's asleep," she hissed back.

"You could have been *shot*," he said in a stage whisper as he followed her into her room.

"But I wasn't," she said quietly, but calmly. "And I got the inside scoop. Johnny's out and Toni's in. And that reminds me, I need to write it up before I go to bed."

"Your deadline is three in the morning?" he asked skeptically.

"No, it's noon. But I want to get it down while it's fresh in my mind, send the rough draft in to the night editor so he has an idea of what it is and how much space to hold and let him know that I'll send a final draft to the weekend editor tomorrow before noon. He may or may not call Perry first."

"Right."

She pulled her laptop off the side table and situated herself cross-legged on the bed. "You can do whatever you want, but I'm writing a story."

Clark sighed as he shrugged off his vest and tossed it and his tie onto the chair. She tried not to look as he untucked his shirt and toed off his shoes. "Can I help at all?"

"I think I got it, Farmboy." She was being more than a bit rude and she knew it. But she was trying to avoid thinking about what had happened the last time he'd worn a tux — and in this very room, on this very bed. She didn't need the distraction.

She tapped away on the keyboard, very aware that he was just sitting there. Finally, she turned and looked at him. "What?"

"What what?" he asked, looking at her.

"Why don't you go take a shower or something instead of just sitting there?"

"Because we need to talk."

"At three in the morning?" she asked skeptically.

"Soon," he said quietly. "Something happened yesterday — I did something — and I don't think anyone suspects but..."

"What happened?" she asked in tones equal to his.

"I'm the reason why the fire didn't spread yesterday." He didn't look at her but stared at his hands instead.

"What?" She stared at him.

"I put the fire out." He still didn't look at her.

"How?"

"Remember the champagne?"

She closed her eyes and thought back to the hotel suite.

And the strawberries.

The chocolate.

The champagne.
 It had been on ice but that had long since melted by the time they got around to eating strawberries and drinking champagne. But it had been cold when she'd sipped it.
 He was lying stretched out on the bed in his boxers. She'd been wearing his shirt again — or still, whichever.
 He'd held the champagne in front of him and...
 Blown on it.
 And then it was covered in... frost.
 She sighed and looked at her comforter. "I remember," she said quietly.
 "Like that."
 "But you don't think anyone noticed?" Lois was skeptical at that. How would Henderson not notice frost everywhere?
 "No." He leaned back in the chair. "This is part of the reason why I've bounced around so much the last few years. 'Stunts' Dad calls them. Using what I can do to help someone. Put a fire out or save a little girl from being run over by a car or help a mudslide decide to go towards the lake and not the village. Someone would see me do something I shouldn't be able to do and I'd have to leave."
 "Why?"
 "Because no one could — can — know about me." He finally looked at her. "You *can't* tell anyone. They can't hurt me, but you, the baby..." She could have sworn there were tears in his eyes. "They could get to you, my parents, the baby — you'd all be in danger if some crazy xenophobe decided that they wanted to hurt me."
 "I won't tell anyone," she promised. "But why can't they — whoever the random they is — hurt you?"
 "I'm invulnerable," he said with a shrug. "At least so far. Since I was ten or eleven, I guess. I don't know if the baby will inherit everything I can do, but I was pretty normal as a kid so..."
 "So you're going to have to leave here before too long then, won't you?" She couldn't look at him.
 "I don't want to. I want to be here — I want to be a dad, but at the same time I can't risk anyone finding out about me. What kind of dad would that make me? If I'd put my child in danger because someone saw me do something I shouldn't be able to." He ran his hands through his hair. "But what kind of *person* would I be if I didn't help when I could? But my... family has to come first, but I guess, I don't always think before I act. I just... do it. Like yesterday. I just put the fire out."
 She thought for a minute. "So it's not that you don't want to help, it's that you don't want to be recognized?"
 "I guess."
 "Wear a disguise," she said with a shrug.
 His head jerked up. "What?"
 "A disguise. When something happens and you need to help, change into a disguise. You're fast enough that you can change and get wherever you need to get quickly, right?"
 He nodded slowly. "I suppose. But what? Black jeans and shirt and a ski mask or something?"
 She chewed thoughtfully on the end of her pen. "No. A ski mask would tell the world you had something to hide. Take your glasses off," she commanded.
 He looked questioningly at her.
 She motioned at him with her hand to just do it.
 He sighed and took them off, tossing them on the bed.
 "Now, slick your hair back."
 He sighed again but did as he was told.
 She nodded. "Remember what I said in the Jacuzzi?" She was getting into her idea and was amazed that she didn't turn bright red.
 "You said lots of things in the Jacuzzi."
 "You look different without your glasses and with your hair slicked back like that — like when it was wet."

"Right. I remember that. But do you really think that's enough to keep someone from recognizing me?"
 "Well, no," she shrugged. "But get a disguise that's bold and splashy enough that no one will really look too closely at your face."
 "Like what?"
 "I don't know, but surely we can come up with something." She reminded herself suddenly that it wasn't *them* that would be doing this, but *him* — once one of them got around to getting a lawyer. "I came up with the idea. You take care of the details."
 "I'll call my mom tomorrow. I bet she can come up with something."
 She turned back to her computer. "I'm sure she can." She started typing again. "Was there something else?" she asked.
 He sighed. "I think that's enough for now." He stood. "I guess I'm going to hop in the shower if that's okay."
 "Sure." Lois looked at him. "Um, I told Lucy everything earlier. Just so you know. About us, I mean, not you."
 Clark nodded. "Okay." He gathered some things together and headed for the bathroom.
 Lois sighed and read over the story one more time before sending it to the night editor. She quickly changed into pajamas and slid into bed before Clark exited the bathroom.
 Before she knew it, she was sound asleep.

 Part 10
 Clark set a couple of drinks on the waitress' tray. "There you go, Mandy."
 "Thanks, Clark." The red-headed waitress turned and walked towards the table she was serving.
 "I need a soda, please."
 Clark turned to get the order. "How'd you sleep?" he asked quietly enough that no one else would hear.
 "Fine."
 "Saw that you got your story in." He nodded towards Toni who was gesturing furiously at Lou and the paper lying on the table.
 She nodded. "Yep. Yours is in there, too."
 "I saw that. Thanks again."
 "For what? Letting you keep your story?" She rolled her eyes while tapping her fingers impatiently.
 "Please be careful," he said suddenly, setting the glass on her tray.
 She smiled slightly. "Don't worry about me. I'll be careful."
 Clark wasn't sure he believed that, but he went back to work anyway, concentrating on his bartending.
 It was about two hours later when the announcement was made.
 "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Metro Club proudly presents Miss Lola Dane."
 Clark looked up to see Lois standing there in a white evening gown that literally made his jaw drop.
 "I've got a crush on you, Sweetie Pie." Her sultry voice resounded through the Club.
 Clark watched as she sang. Soft. Seductive. Sensuous. A side of Lois he'd never seen.
 Not like this.
 On their... wedding night, she'd been much more... playful than sexy or seductive. Of course, he'd found that very sexy and seductive at the time. He probably still would. He knew he still would.
 Was it his imagination or was she looking directly at him at least part of the time? If she was, what did that mean? Anything? Nothing? Just that he was a familiar, friendly face?
 "I'm not sure I like you looking at the help that way."
 He turned to see Toni standing there, leaning against the bar watching him.

Clark shrugged. “She’s good.” He turned back to cleaning a shot glass.

“Yes, she is. So, Lou said you’re having problems with the ice maker.”

“It’s on the fritz. I don’t know what’s wrong with it.” Clark was glad for the change in subject as Lois finished her song.

“I’ll have someone look at it.”

“Thanks.”

He smiled at her. “You seem upset about something.”

She shrugged. “Just wondering how that filth about the Metro Club got in today’s paper.”

Clark cleaned out a glass as he watched her. “I’ll keep my ear out.”

“Thanks, Clark.”

The rest of the night was uneventful, until he found Lois in the supply closet. She was trying to see and hear what was going on in the conference room through the bullet holes put there the night before.

“What are you doing?” he whispered.

“My job,” she whispered back. “If you’re a good boy maybe I’ll teach you some more of my tricks someday but right now I’ve got to get ready for my next number.”

She brushed past him, opening the door to find Toni standing there.

Clark grabbed her by the upper shoulders. “Here she is. Your leak. Lois Lane, reporter for the Daily Planet.”

He was going to pay for that later. She was *not* going to be happy.

Toni nodded at Clark. “Guess I’m going to have to find another singer. Good work, Clark.”

A minute later, Lois was tossed — carefully — over his shoulder as he carried her out the back door.

“You’re going to pay for this, Kent,” she hissed. “Why are you doing this?”

“She’ll stop looking for a leak and I’ll be your source for anything that happens,” he told her.

“Don’t you dare,” she said as he headed towards the dumpsters.

“I’ll be gentle.” He lowered his glasses and looked in one of the bins. Old food. That wouldn’t work. The other held mostly shredded paper. That was a better option.

“*No!*” she yelled as he set her as gently as he could in the bin.

Clark wiped his hands off. “And *stay* out,” he said loudly. He headed back into the club.

“That’s the last we’ll hear from her,” Lou said, shutting the door behind them.

“Speak for yourself,” Clark muttered.

It was nearly closing time and he finished his duties quickly before heading back to Lois’ apartment.

There was no one there when he arrived. He sighed and started to make some tea. He’d really hoped to talk to Lois. His mom had thought the idea of a disguise was sheer brilliance. He was supposed to go to Kansas in the morning to try some on and he was thinking about asking if she wanted to go with him.

There was a knock on the door as he set the tea kettle on the burner.

He was surprised to see Toni standing there. She was holding a bag of groceries from the Metro Mart as she pushed past him.

“Nice place,” she said, heading for the kitchen.

“A... friend of mine is letting me stay here for the moment,” he told her, closing the door behind them.

“Once again I’m in your debt,” Toni told him, setting the bag on the counter. “I thought I’d pay you back with a home cooked meal. How does lasagna sound?” She began emptying the bag.

“It sounds delicious,” Clark said honestly. “But I’m not sure this is a good idea.”

“Why not?” Toni stopped what she was doing to look at him.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Because I *am* married and even though things aren’t great between us, I’m not all that comfortable being alone with another woman in an apartment.”

She regarded him contemplatively before nodding. “I can’t say I’m happy to be turned down — married or not, there’s nothing ulterior in my motives — but it’s nice to see someone stand by his convictions.”

Clark moved back to the door and opened it. “Thanks for stopping by. I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon.”

Toni nodded, heading out the door. “Thanks again, Clark.”

Clark finished his tea and contemplated going out to look for Lois. He headed into the bedroom to change and that was when he saw the note.

‘I’m fine. I’ll be back later. Don’t worry about me. I’m not doing anything dangerous. L’

He sighed, changing into a pair of sleep shorts and a tank top. He’d just finished brushing his teeth when he heard the front door open.

“Lois?” he called, walking out into the living room.

“Nope.”

“Hi, Lucy,” he said. “Do you know where Lois is?”

Lucy shrugged. “No. Thought she was working with you at the Metro Club.”

Clark leaned against the island in the kitchen and ran a hand through his hair. “She was but she left about an hour before me.”

Lucy leaned against one of the couches. “What are your intentions towards my sister?”

He was slightly taken aback. “What?”

“What are your plans now that you know who my sister is? And what about my niece or nephew?”

Clark sighed and hopped up onto the counter. “I want to be a part of my child’s life, help Lois is whatever way I can.”

“And my sister?”

He was quiet for a long moment. “That’s between me and her,” he said quietly.

In all honesty, he didn’t know what was going to happen. They hadn’t talked at all about what was going to happen.

She’d been asleep when he came out of the bathroom very early that morning. He’d debated about where he was going to sleep and finally decided that he’d sleep in the bed with her.

He’d stayed on top of the covers though. He wasn’t sure he trusted himself to be any closer to her than that. He’d waited to find the right woman. But now that he knew what it was like to be with her — he found it hard to control his hormones.

Would it have been the same with anyone else? He didn’t know, but he knew that he *really* enjoyed being with Lois. Was that enough to base a relationship on? That and a baby?

No. Of course not, but the more he got to know her, the more he wanted to get to know her, to fall in love with her.

“Don’t hurt her,” Lucy said quietly.

He nodded. He wasn’t sure he *could* hurt her — that he had that kind of power over her emotions. Maybe if he took off again and wasn’t a part of the baby’s life, but otherwise... He didn’t think so.

He sighed. “Listen, we both worked late last night and I had to go in early this morning. I have to be up early again tomorrow so I’m going to crash.” He hopped off the counter. “If you see Lois would you let her know that I’m leaving early and I’ll see her later tomorrow?”

Lucy nodded. “Okay.”

Clark headed back to the bedroom and flopped onto the bed, staring at the ceiling for a while before rolling over and going to sleep.

Lois headed back towards her apartment after going for a walk to clear her head. She stopped when she saw the door open

and Toni Taylor walked out.

Her former... boss looked a bit annoyed. She wondered why that was, why Toni had been in her apartment building. Had she come to see Clark? How long had she been there? Lois glanced at her watch. She'd been gone for about an hour and a half. That was plenty of time for...

She stopped herself. She wasn't going there. Instead she decided to follow Toni and see what she could find out.

That was how she ended up in a warehouse, hiding behind a mannequin and hoping that the rats would leave her alone. It was how she heard that Toni was behind the Toasters and how she found out that they were planning on burning West River down. Unfortunately, she couldn't leave the warehouse to try to warn the police because of the goon stationed between her and the only working exit.

So she spent hours huddled down, praying she wouldn't be noticed. She was hungry. She was tired. She'd even dozed off a few times, but only for a few minutes here and there.

And she had to go to the bathroom.

Finally, the goon left — but not before setting a small fire near the back of the warehouse.

"There you go, *Toni*," he sneered as he headed for the door. "You'll have plenty of time to think about trying to double cross the Toasters." He gave an evil laugh as he ran out the door.

Lois made herself count to ten before running across the open space between her and where Toni was sitting — tied to both a chair and a post of some kind. She didn't let herself dwell on the fire behind her. She could hear it growing, crackling as she started to work frantically on the knots that held Toni in place.

"What are you doing here?"

"I followed you," Lois said, finally sneaking a peek over her shoulder. She had to hurry.

"From where?"

"My apartment?"

"Your apartment? The only place I went last night was to see my bartender."

"You mean my husband," Lois said grimly. She tried not to analyze what made her lay claim to Clark.

"Clark Kent is your husband?" Toni's eyes were wide and her voice incredulous.

"Yes." Lois finished the knot that held Toni's hands in place. "You get your right leg." She started working on the ropes that held Toni's left leg to the leg of the chair. "We've got to hurry."

Toni did as she was told and a minute later they were running out of the building. Lois kept her hand tightly wrapped around Toni's elbow as they rounded the corner.

"Let me go."

"No." Lois dragged Toni with her as they headed towards the sounds of sirens.

"They've started burning the West River area," Toni told her. "The Toasters are behind all this."

"And you're behind the Toasters. Yes, I know." They rounded another corner and Lois saw who she was hoping to see. "*Henderson!*"

The cop turned to look at her. "Lane. What're you doing here?"

Lois shoved her captive towards him. "Toni Taylor. Head of the Metro Gang and behind the Toasters. They're the ones doing this."

"Lois, right now I'm trying to coordinate with the fire chief. You two stay right here." He turned to talk to a uniformed police officer.

"What's that?!" someone yelled.

"What?" someone else yelled back.

"In the sky!"

"Where?"

"It's a bird!"

"No. Plane. But it's awfully low!"

Lois turned to try to see what they were pointing out.

"No. A guy in tights. And a cape."

She finally found what they were looking at. She gasped as the flying man hovered over the building.

Clark.

He'd said he was going to talk to his mom about a costume but...

The bright blue tights with red underwear on the outside. A flowing red cape with an 'S' looking symbol on it. Another, matching, emblem on his chest.

The crowd was awed as he blew on fire enveloping one of the warehouses.

"Lois!"

She turned to see Jimmy running towards her.

"Can you believe this?!" He took a few more pictures. "What is this guy?"

"Someone here to help, I suppose," Lois said quietly, grabbing Toni's elbow again as the other woman tried to slink away.

Knowing what he could do — seeing him chill a bottle of champagne, floating with him as they... made love — and watching him fly around the building putting the fire out was were two entirely different things.

Two hours later, Henderson had taken custody of Toni and Lois had been following the new hero around the Riverview part of the West River district. She'd been taking notes and talking to others in the area, gathering information for her article.

Superman had managed to detain the Toasters and they were in custody as well.

And then he landed in front of them.

"Excuse me," Clark said, his voice a bit deeper than normal.

"Hello, Superman." Lois smiled slightly as he started. She'd come up with the idea over the course of the last couple of hours and had started spreading it around — asking people what they thought of 'Superman'.

"I was told you might be able to tell me more about who was behind these fires."

Lois nodded before turning to her companion. "Jimmy, why don't you head back to the Planet and start getting that film developed? I'll be right behind you."

Jimmy nodded and took off, whistling loudly for a cab.

Lois turned back to Clark with a bit of a smirk on her face.

"Nice."

"What?"

"The costume. I think I'd like your mom."

He looked down and his face turned red. "She said no one would be looking at my face," he muttered.

"Well, she was right." She saw one of the news crews heading their way. "Um, I've got to get back to work and get this written up."

Clark sighed. "And I'm going to have to find a new job. The Metro Club's been closed down, I hear."

She watched the crew get closer and made a decision. "Fly me to the Planet? Fly me in and show off and then come back dressed as yourself and you can help me write up both stories — the Metro Club and the Toasters and Superman."

He scooped her into his arms and leapt into the air.

"Superman?" he asked.

She shrugged as best she could with her arms around his neck. "It worked."

"I heard you were in one of the warehouses," he said quietly.

She nodded. "I followed Toni when she left the apartment."

"She was only there for a few minutes," he rushed to tell her. "She offered to make me dinner and I told her I wasn't comfortable with that."

Lois wasn't sure what to make of that. "Anyway, I followed

her and got stuck in the warehouse. She was the one behind the Toasters. I think there's probably someone else behind her but I've not got a clue who it might be."

"Sounds likely."

They floated down in front of the large doors leading to the upper portion of the newsroom. Clark blew gently and they swung open.

He floated in and set her on the floor next to her desk.

"You owe me an interview," she said, sliding into what she'd determined would be her role — awed and star-struck. Maybe even a bit starry-eyed.

"I do?" Clark said, slipping back into what she thought was becoming his public persona.

She shrugged. "You flew with me first."

"Is that the rule?"

She could see a slight twinkle in his eye. "No, but I'd appreciate it."

He lifted into the air and headed slowly for the window.

"How will I find you?" she called after him, knowing he'd be back momentarily.

"I'll be around." He reached the window and disappeared in a blur.

She sank into her chair as the newsroom roared to life.

"Lois!" Perry's bellow cut through the din.

"Yeah, Perry?"

He appeared in front of her desk. "You want to tell me what this is all about, Darlin'?"

She knew what he meant but replied how she wanted to.

"Well, Toni's behind the Metros and the Toasters. She's under arrest. I'm writing it up now." She turned to her computer, trying desperately to hide the smile twitching at the corners of her mouth.

"Lois, Darlin', you better start talking about what seemed to be a flying man or I'll find some obits for you to write." His voice was calm but she could hear the underlying annoyance.

She turned towards Perry, leaning back in her chair. "His name is Superman. He's here to help. He helped put out the fires down by West River and..." She shrugged. "He *flies*."

Perry glared at her.

She grinned. "Jimmy's got pictures. I've got the story. We'll have it to you before you can say 'stop the presses'."

The elevator dinged and she glanced over. "There's my source inside the Metro Club now."

Perry followed her eyes. "Kent?"

She nodded. "When he didn't get the job here, he had to go somewhere. He got hired on as a bartender there. He's been working with me. Toni trusted him."

Clark smiled as he walked up. "Hello, Mr. White."

"Call me Perry, son." He eyed Clark for a long moment. "You been keeping an eye on this girl?"

Clark nodded. "As much as she'd let me. Once I realized she was undercover, I did my best."

"You ratted me out," Lois muttered.

"Okay, I ratted you out. But Toni caught us in the storage closet," he pointed out. "What was I supposed to do?"

"Pretend we were having a fleeting moment of passion." She glared at him.

"I'll remember that for next time," he bantered back.

"There won't be a next time."

"Well, get me the Superman story first," Perry told her.

Clark cleared his throat and Lois looked at him. He looked a bit nervous.

"You got somethin' to say, son?"

"Actually, I've got a meeting set up with him," Clark answered nervously.

"You do?" Lois and Perry said simultaneously.

Clark nodded. "Lois is supposed to come with me."

She grinned. "Of course I am."

"Well, get on it!" Perry practically bellowed, even though they were standing right there.

Clark looked between them. "Actually, the meeting isn't for a couple more hours, so I'm sure Lois has enough time to write up what she's got already."

"Well, then get on it, kids!"

He turned and bellowed at someone else.

"That was pretty impressive," Lois said softly.

Clark sat in the chair next to her desk. "Well, I wasn't doing it to try to get in good with Perry or anything. But if anyone has to interview me — and I know I have to do it eventually — then I'd rather it be you."

Lois nodded. She had nearly as much to lose as he did since she was, after all, having his baby. She'd be careful with what was put in the article. "True, but that's not what I meant. I meant the fires and everything."

"Ah." He rubbed the back of his neck. "It was nice to be able to help, but I wanted to do more. All I really did was get everything under control to the point that the fire departments could handle it."

She reached out and squeezed his hand lightly. "What you did was enough. The whole area would have burned to the ground without you."

"Thanks."

She felt like she should say more but wasn't sure what so she turned back to her computer. "Okay, let's get to work on this." He nodded and they spent the next two hours working on the stories.

"Ready for that interview?" she asked as she LANned the files to Perry.

He sighed. "No, but let's go do this anyway."

She gathered her things and followed him to the stairwell and then the roof, wondering what he was doing.

When they reached the roof, he looked around then started to spin, stopping when he was wearing his new costume.

"Ready?" he asked.

She found that she couldn't speak and just nodded instead.

He scooped her into his arms and took off into the air.

Part 11

Clark flew south with Lois in his arms. She clung tightly to him as they flew.

"Where are we going?"

"Just a minute."

True to his word, he set her down a minute later.

"It's a little island in the Caribbean," he said.

She leaned against him, one arm holding her up as she took her shoes and socks off. "And you couldn't have stopped at the apartment so I could get a swimsuit?"

He moved away from her as she let go. "I don't think that's a good idea," he muttered.

She unbuttoned her jacket and tossed it onto the sand.

"What?"

"Nothing," he sighed as he hovered far enough above the sand to spin into regular clothes.

"No, you said it wasn't a good idea. What does that mean?"

He sighed again as he walked down the beach. "It means that I'd have a hard time controlling myself around you if you were wearing a swimsuit, especially the kind I'm envisioning in my head."

"What's that mean? You'd have a hard time controlling yourself."

He stifled a scream. "It means that I was waiting to find the right woman to make love with and I didn't know you well enough to know if you were that right woman or not but, so help me, I think I could spend the rest of my life doing nothing but making love to you and be just fine."

“What?” she whispered.

“You heard me.” His voice was soft.

“I’m sorry,” she said suddenly.

He turned to look at her. “What?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I suggested we get married. I’m sorry...” her voice trailed off.

“Do you think I blame you?” he asked incredulously.

She shrugged as she sat on her jacket. “I have no idea. I barely *know* you.”

He looked over the water. “And I barely know you. But I do know that sleeping in the same bed as you and doing nothing but sleeping is a challenge.”

“Why?” she asked softly. “Why is it a challenge? I’m nothing special.”

Clark practically gaped at her before moving to sit at her side. “That’s *not* true! You’re brilliant and witty and beautiful and fun and sexy. And I know I have no real frame of reference, but it’s pretty amazing when we’re together. At least, it is for me and I hope it is for you.”

She nodded as a tear slipped down her cheek. He reached out and brushed it away.

“I’d like to get to know you,” he told her, taking her hand in his, gently brushing his thumb over the back. “I was having a great time with you that day and hoping that I could get to know you better but not really thinking it would happen — at least not at this point in my life; more of a maybe someday kind of thing. I know you’re still planning on calling a lawyer, and I won’t fight you on anything. I’ll do whatever I can to help you with expenses and all of that. I *want* to be a dad to this baby. But even with lawyers and everything, I’d like to get to know you, to at least be your friend because we’re tied together for life because of this baby and I really don’t want to have an antagonistic relationship with you.”

“I don’t want to have an antagonistic relationship with you either.”

There was a long silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

Clark sighed and moved away from her slightly. “So how do you want to do this?”

She looked up at him to see him staring out over the water. “Do what?”

“This interview.”

She sighed. “However you want. Tell me what you want published and we’ll go from there? Not how I’d normally conduct an interview but I’m not about print everything.”

“Thank you.”

Lois shrugged. “It’s not just because of you. I have a lot to lose, too.”

“I know, but thank you anyway.” He hesitated before continuing. “I’ve worried for a long time what would happen to my parents if someone ever found out about me.”

“You didn’t seem too worried that afternoon,” Lois muttered.

Clark chuckled slightly. “I guess I had other things on my mind.”

Lois looked at him, mouth open. “You heard that?”

He had the good grace to look chagrined. “Yeah. I’ve got great hearing.”

“I’ll have to remember that.” She sighed. “What else can you do?”

“Fly.”

“I got that one.”

“I’m strong enough that we’ve never found anything I couldn’t lift.”

“Right.”

“I can freeze things with my breath and heat things with my eyes — it can be anything from diffused to pinpoint accuracy and from slightly warm to literally burning a hole in something.”

Lois remembered him drying her off after they got out of the

Jacuzzi and starting the fire in the fireplace with just a shot of his... heat vision, she guessed it was. Now that she stopped to think about it, it amazed her that he could carefully dry her off without hurting her and still start a fire with the same... power.

“I can see through things,” he went on.

She remembered that, too, and turned bright red at the memory.

“Well, everything but lead,” he amended. “I can’t see through lead. I’m invulnerable to everything we’ve found since I was in my early teens. And I’m fast, really fast.”

She remembered him getting from the bed to the bathroom in a flash. She tried to direct her thoughts away from the room in Arkansas. “So how much of that do we put in the article? Any references to anything that might infer that you’ve been here more than a couple of days are out, obviously. And how’d you get the Suit thing so fast?”

“I called my mom last night and I guess she stayed up all night working on a bunch of them. This was the one we liked the best, by far.” He stretched out in mid-air, his hands propped behind his head, legs crossed at the ankle. “And I also have telescopic and microscopic vision.”

“Right.” She stared at him as he hovered a few inches above the sand. She shook her head slightly and pulled her notebook out of her bag. “So we just say that you’re a friend, you’re the last of your people and that you’re here to help. Fighting for truth and justice or some such nonsense.”

He rolled onto his side and propped his head on his hand. “Not ‘Damn the torpedoes’?” he asked with a smirk.

Lois glared his direction. “No.” She made a few notes. “Are you the last one from Krypton?”

“As far as I know.” He rolled onto his back again, staring into the sky for long minutes before speaking again. “My parents — the Kents, that is — found me when I was just a couple months old. I was in a space capsule of some kind. For a long time we didn’t know what I was. Alien, experiment, Soviet, what. When I was about fourteen, this... globe that was in the ship with me started to... talk to me, I guess. It showed me these hologram type messages. My... birth parents, Jor-El and Lara, said that the planet was going to explode and that only I would make it off the planet before it did.”

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

He shrugged half-heartedly. “I never knew them. I mean, I don’t *remember* them at all. And I couldn’t have asked for better parents than Mom and Dad.” He rolled again to look at her.

“Thank you.” He hesitated.

“For what?” she finally asked.

“I don’t know if the possibility crossed your mind or what, but thank you for not having an abortion. I know this isn’t what you planned and not what I would have planned either, but ever since I was old enough to really think about having kids, I wondered if I’d be able to have kids with an Earth woman. I mean, I’m not *from* here. And, granted, as far as I can tell, I’m pretty normal just... souped up, I guess, but thank you.”

She shifted uncomfortably on the sand. “I can’t say for sure what I would have done if I’d realized sooner that I was pregnant, but I was nearly done with my first trimester by the time I got a call from the doctor. I’ve always believed in a woman’s right to choose, but for me personally...” She shrugged. “I guess I’m glad I didn’t have to make that decision. I’m glad I was almost to the point that I wouldn’t have considered it anyway. And I was in such shock for a few days that I was done with my first trimester before the shock ended.”

“Would you have told me?” He wasn’t looking at her anymore.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “I didn’t want to tell you now, but I also know that lawyers want to know those kinds of things and I didn’t want you to find out that way. And Perry made me go

to the barbeque fundraiser thing in Independence anyway so...”

“That’s why you were in Kansas?” he asked incredulously. “I was there.”

“I know.” Lois hesitated. “I saw you.”

“You did? I didn’t see you.”

She nodded. “It was from a distance. You were dancing with someone.” She didn’t look at him as she said it.

His brow furrowed as he thought about it. “I danced with lots of people that night. Mom, Granny, Nana, my cousin Kara, Rachel, Lana, Aunt Dorrie, my cousin Danielle, two of my nieces but they’re four and six, Karen, Amber, Jenn, Lauren, Lisa, Cat, Pam... Probably a couple others. It could have been any of them, I guess.”

Lois did a slight double take at the mention of her co-worker’s name — but surely there was more than one ‘Cat’ in the world. There was probably even more than one ‘Cat’ in Smallville. She shoved the rarely fully-dressed cougar out of her mind. “Long light brown hair, you walked off the dance floor with your arm around her. That’s all I saw.”

“Probably Cat,” he said, still thinking. “We’ve been friends since Kindergarten. We were practically inseparable as kids. We played cops and robbers and cowboys and Indians and camped out in the farmyard and all kinds of stuff when we were kids.”

Of course it was Cat. Lois didn’t say anything, instead staring out over the water.

“I’m moving out,” he said suddenly.

What?

“What?”

“I mean, I have to find another place to stay. I can’t stay with you without knowing for sure this is going to work. I can’t put you and the baby at risk.”

“We’re already at risk,” she pointed out. “If someone realized you’re Superman, it wouldn’t take a half-decent researcher long to figure out we’re married.”

“Still, hopefully I’d have enough time to get you and my parents somewhere safe, and not being *immediately* connected to you by staying at your apartment should help.”

“By that logic, wouldn’t it be safer if you were there and you could...” She made a waving motion with her hand. “...zoom me out of there?” It had *nothing* to do with wanting him to sleep with her. She repeated that to herself. *Nothing* to do with enjoying waking up in his arms.

He shrugged. “That’s one way to look at it I guess. But regardless, I think it’s better if I find somewhere else to stay. I’ve got some money saved up from my tips and stuff the last few days.”

“What can you afford on a few tips?” She sighed.

“Regardless of whatever else, you shouldn’t have to stay at some dive of a hotel. I’ve been there, done that and believe me, the Apollo Hotel or someplace like it is no place to stay.”

“I’m sure I’ve stayed at worse places,” he told her, a hint of amusement in his voice. “Huts with dirt floors in China or South America can’t be better than the Apollo Hotel.”

“Probably not,” Lois conceded. “But it’s...” She stopped. She didn’t want him to get the... wrong idea. It probably was best for him to leave now rather than entangling herself further with him. The lawyers would be called as soon as things settled down and, though they’d be tied together for the rest of their lives through the baby, the sooner they cut off other ties, the better it would be for her heart. It was probably going to be broken enough as it was.

No. It almost definitely was going to be broken.

She sighed and conceded the point. “Maybe it would be best.”

“What else do you need for an article?”

She shrugged. “I think I can manage from here.” Her stomach growled loud enough for them both to hear it.

“Are you hungry?”

“Yeah.”

He stood on the sand. “Well, let’s head back to Metropolis and get something to eat then.” He reached towards her.

She grasped his hand and he pulled her to her feet. She held her shoes in one hand as he spun back into Superman.

A minute later, they were airborne and headed for Metropolis.

Lois stared at the menu and tried to decide what she wanted to eat. She knew what she wanted — everything — but not with Clark there. She’d have to order a... normal meal. She had felt better the last couple of days and suddenly wanted to eat everything in sight.

Finally, she decided she didn’t care. She’d order whatever she wanted. It wasn’t like she was asking Clark to pick up the tab or anything. She’d likely end up buying his given how broke he probably was, and Callard’s was a moderately nice place.

The waitress showed up, taking Clark’s order first. She smiled and flirted a bit as Clark told her what he wanted. Lois fumed inwardly. He was wearing a ring, for crying out loud. Not that she cared if he flirted back. He *didn’t*, but that wasn’t the point. She finally conceded to herself that it was unlikely that the waitress could see his wedding ring, but that wasn’t the point either.

Finally, she turned to Lois who proceeded to order an appetizer and two entrees. Then she noticed Clark’s slightly raised eyebrows. At her glare, he resumed careful study of the table cloth. She couldn’t help but notice the waitress’ smirk as she effectively cut her tip in half.

“Don’t say anything,” Lois muttered at him. “You got me in this situation and I’ve hardly eaten for a week and now I’m starving so leave me alone.”

“I didn’t say a word.”

“You thought it.”

“Thought what?” He still didn’t look at her.

She looked around to make sure no one was listening. “You got me pregnant. I know neither of us meant for it to happen, but I’ve been sick off and on for weeks now. And since this is a...” She looked around again and lowered her voice even further. “... *super* baby, it’s entirely possible that that’s why I’m so hungry right now. So don’t even *think* about commenting on my diet. You don’t know me and I don’t know you and just because we’re married and I’m pregnant doesn’t give you any right to judge what I eat.”

He finally looked up at her. “I’m not going to judge what you eat. I just thought it was... amusing that you were so hungry. I’m glad you’re feeling better. Really.”

“Well, stopping it amusing.” The waitress set an appetizer trio in front of her and a salad in front of Clark. Lois picked up a piece of calamari and popped it in her mouth.

He reached for a piece of his own, stopping when she glared at him again.

“You want some, order your own,” she told him, reaching for a stuffed mushroom and eating it in one bite. A minute later it was gone and she went for a mozzarella stick. It wasn’t long before she’d finished them all off.

A minute later, their meals arrived. They ate in near silence for several minutes.

“So, um, you never really told me how your doctor’s appointment went,” Clark finally said.

Lois shrugged. “It was fine. She did an ultrasound and said that the baby looks good. I got to hear the heartbeat, too.”

“You got to see the baby?” he asked quietly.

Her fork full of manicotti stopped halfway to her mouth. She never even thought about him missing that part of her appointment; that he would have wanted to be there. “Yeah.” She ate her bite. “I have a picture if you want to see it.”

He swallowed the food in his mouth. "Of course I want to see it." There was an incredulous tone to his voice.

She nodded. "Okay. I'll show you when you get your things then." Good. A reminder to both of them that he was moving out.

He nodded back and they ate the rest of their meal in virtual silence.

"Can I get anything else for you?" the waitress asked as she cleared their plates. The tone in her voice clearly indicated she thought Lois should be done.

"Chocolate cake, please," Lois replied frostily. She'd just cut her tip even further.

"Of course." The waitress turned to Clark. "And any dessert for you, sir?"

"No, thank you, Mary."

Lois tried not to glower at her as she walked away.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine." She was. She didn't care that someone else was flirting with him or that he was being nice back. First thing in the morning, she was going to call a lawyer. Surely Perry would know someone. But that would mean telling Perry. She was going to have to tell him soon enough.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"What?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. Just thinking about everything I need to do. The article is about half written in my head, maybe more. I've got some leeway since Perry knows it's coming but I really need to have it done in two hours or so."

He nodded. "Okay. How can I help?"

"Come with me and we'll work in the conference room and you can answer any other questions I have."

"Here you go, ma'am." Mary the waitress, whose tip was about a quarter at that point, set the plate in front of Lois.

"Thank you."

Lois ate her cake slowly, savoring every bite.

"Good?" Clark asked.

She looked at him to see the amusement back in his eyes.

"Very." She contemplated offering him one of the last two bites, but decided against it, finishing them both.

The black folder had mysteriously appeared on their table at some point. Lois dug her debit card out of her purse and stuck it in the pocket.

They waited in silence for the waitress to return. Lois signed the slip and set it back on the table.

Clark pulled his wallet out of his pocket. "How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing. I got it."

"Are you sure?"

She shrugged. "You paid for the hotel, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah."

"Then we're even."

Clark chuckled. "The hotel was way more than lunch."

She almost gave a smart aleck remark about how much he'd enjoyed the hotel so that dinner would cover her part of the hotel, but she managed to bite her tongue.

The voice over her shoulder caught her off-guard and sent a chill down her spine. "So, Lois, I see you decided eating was more important than chasing down the hot story of the day. Have you even *seen* Superman yet?"

Lois closed her eyes and took a deep breath before opening her eyes and looking at the intruder. "So good to see you." Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

The blonde turned to Clark and held out a carefully manicured hand. "Hi. I'm Linda King."

Lois sighed. What a great way to end a great meal.

Part 12

The blonde held her hand out towards Clark. "Hi. I'm Linda

King."

Clark reached out and shook her hand slightly. "Clark Kent."

"Very nice to meet you, Clark. You don't mind if I call you Clark, do you?" She smiled what had to be her best smile at him.

He glanced at Lois who was avoiding looking at either one of them, choosing instead to push the few remaining crumbs around on her dessert plate. "No, Clark is fine," he said after a slight delay.

Linda pulled one of the chairs out and sat down. "So are you a reporter, too?"

He nodded. "By trade."

"Where are you working? Surely not at that rag, the Daily Planet."

"The Daily Planet isn't a rag, but no. I'm between positions at the moment. My last job was filling in for the editor of my hometown paper in a small town in Kansas. I did have an article in Sunday's Daily Planet though. Freelance."

"Really?" She smiled again and leaned slightly towards him. "What article?"

"It was about the razing of the theater on Forty-Second Street. Buried way inside somewhere."

She nodded. "I did see it. It was a good article. Very well-written. Appealed to the reader's emotional side."

"Well, thank you."

"You know," she said, with one more smile. "I just started over at the Star. I think there's an opening there if you wanted to come join me."

Clark looked over at Lois again.

She was gone.

How could he have missed that? "Um, listen, I actually need to go catch up with Lois. We were in the middle of something..." If he was honest with himself, he was feeling more than a bit uncomfortable with the conversation. He was feeling a bit... trapped by this woman and now Lois had taken off. This wasn't good.

"You'd be better off working with someone from the Star, you know. The Planet's sales are down and they haven't had many breaking stories lately."

Clark pushed back from the table. "It was nice to meet you, Linda, really, but I do need to catch up with Lois."

She held out her hand again and he shook it quickly. "Well, if you need someone to show you around town..."

He smiled politely but knew he wouldn't be calling her anytime soon. "Thanks."

He followed her out the door and headed for the Planet. By the time he got there, Lois was typing furiously in the conference room.

"Why'd you leave?" he asked, shutting the door behind him.

She shrugged. "No interest in talking to Linda."

"She seems nice enough." He pulled a chair out and sat down, leaning back to watch her.

"I'm sure she does." She typed for a few more minutes.

"How much do you want to include about your eye stuff?"

He shrugged. "Whatever you think."

She bit her bottom lip for a minute, something he was finding increasingly endearing. "Okay, so among other vision doohickeys, you can see through things."

"They'll let you use the word doohickeys?" he asked with a raised brow.

She just glared at him.

Obviously, she didn't like Linda King and wasn't happy about running into her. And he was sure Linda's comments hadn't helped much.

He sat there for another half an hour while she worked and he marveled at the way things just seemed to flow for her.

She leaned back in her chair and turned the monitor towards him. "There. Done."

"By Lois Lane, Daily Planet Staff Reporter with Special Contribution by Clark Kent." He looked at her. "Special contribution?"

"You're not a staff reporter. Perry could decide to change it if he wanted to, and you didn't write *any* of it, but without you there wouldn't be a story." She finally looked at him, defiance written all over her face, just daring him to challenge her.

He chose not to, choosing instead to read the article. It was good. Very good. Better than he would have done. Special contribution was probably more than he deserved.

He leaned back. "Good job."

She clicked a few buttons. "Sent to Perry."

Just then the door between the conference room and the editor's office opened. "Kent, glad you're here. Can I see you for a minute?" said editor called.

Clark looked at Lois.

She shooed him away. "Go on. We're done here."

His heart was pounding in his chest as he headed to talk to one of the world's best reporters.

A dozen thoughts were running through his head. The main two had to do with secrets. Had the venerable editor of the Daily Planet realized he was Superman? Or that he was married to a pregnant Lois Lane?

He wasn't sure which he would prefer.

Maybe it was neither.

No.

That wasn't how his life worked.

He took a deep breath as he walked through the door, shutting it behind him.

Perry waved towards a chair. "Have a seat. Let's talk."

Lois sank to a chair in the conference room after she left Callard's. For someone with supersenses, Clark somehow managed to miss her leaving the table.

He'd been too enamored with *her*.

She gave herself thirty seconds to wallow then composed herself and started typing. Ten minutes later, Clark walked in.

"Why'd you leave?" He shut the door behind him and headed towards her.

"No interest in talking to Linda." No interest in seeing Linda flirt with her husband and really no interest in seeing him flirt back.

But she wasn't about to mention that to him.

"She seems nice enough."

"I'm sure she does." She pointedly ignored him as she continued typing.

Conversation for the next several minutes consisted only of her asking him a question about how much he wanted in the article about his vision thingies. The room was quiet for a long time after that, except for the clicking of her keyboard.

He read the story after it was done and said it was fine. She wasn't sure if he was annoyed that she only listed him as a special contributor or grateful. Sure, it was *his* story in the sense that he was Superman, but he hadn't really don't much except talk to her for a bit. And the vast majority of their talk had nothing to do with the article.

A minute later, he had left for Perry's office.

She stared through the window in the door as Clark sat across from Perry's desk. She'd love to know what they were talking about, but that wasn't going to happen. Instead, she gathered her things and headed to her desk.

She stopped Jimmy as he walked by. "Jimmy, I need you to get a name for me."

He skidded to a stop and plopped into the chair next to her desk. "Sure. What name?"

"An ethical lawyer who handles divorces."

He raised an eyebrow. "Do I want to know why?"

She glared at him.

"Right. A story."

"Do I ever ask you for names otherwise?"

"Nope."

Good. She hadn't lied.

"Tomorrow okay?"

She nodded. "Tomorrow's fine."

He grinned at her. "Good. I got a hot date tonight."

"With my sister, I hope."

"Is there anyone else?"

She smiled slightly at him. The two of them were so happy together and she was happy for them. "You know, I should ask you what your intentions towards my sister are."

His grinned widened as he stood. "You probably should, but you'd have to catch me first." He darted off and she shook her head in amusement.

She should probably take off, too. She gathered her things, casting one last glance at the still-closed door to the editor's office before heading home.

Lucy had apparently already left for her date with Jimmy as the apartment was empty when she got there. A long shower later, she was on her bed, her laptop with her as she pounded away on another chapter of her recently restarted romance novel.

She wasn't sure if giving Clark a key had been a good thing when she heard it scraping in the locks several hours after she left work. She was glad she'd put the ice cream away after eating only half the tub and that it wasn't still sitting out for him to see.

"Lois?" he called.

"In here."

He appeared in the doorway a minute later. "Hi."

She nodded, intent on finishing her sentence.

"What're you working on? Another story?"

She hesitated before nodding. "Yeah, a story." Not a news story, but she didn't want to tell him that. She reached a stopping point and saved. "You find a place to go?" She still hadn't looked at him.

"Yeah. I got a room at the Apollo."

"Have fun."

"I've stayed in worse. Anyway, I just stopped by to pick up my things."

"Go for it."

He turned into a blur for several seconds and came to a stop where he started, brown suitcase in his hand. "Thanks for letting me stay here."

"No problem."

He started to turn away, but stopped and turned to face her again. "I got a job."

"Good."

"Do you want to know where?"

She shrugged. "Is it at the Planet?"

"No."

"I figured you would have said so right away if Perry'd hired you."

"It's at the Star."

"Then it's probably just as well that you're leaving." Hadn't he said he'd rather be a sewer technician first? Obviously, he'd changed his mind after meeting Linda King. She shouldn't be surprised.

"I don't want to compete with you."

She raised a brow at him. "Are you on the city beat?"

He nodded.

"And you really think you'll be competition for me? Without cheating by using all your extra abilities?"

He smiled slightly. "I doubt anyone could really compete with you, but yeah, we'll be on a lot of the same stories I'd think."

"Well, good luck. You'll need it to tone your writing down to

a second grade level.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“Close enough.”

“I’ll get to work with your old roommate. Carpenter’s pairing me up with Linda for a couple weeks. She said you two were roommates in college.”

Lois wasn’t sure how she managed to keep the tears from her eyes. “Yeah, we were. For a year.” She closed her laptop and set it on the side table before pulling the covers further up over her legs. “I’m exhausted so I’m going to turn in. I’m glad you got a job. Hopefully, you won’t have to stay at the Apollo too long. Just, um, let me know where you move to so my lawyer can find you.”

It was like a knife in her heart to even say the words, but it wouldn’t do for her to forget about the temporary nature of their marriage. Sure, he was attracted to her, but attraction alone wasn’t anything to base a marriage on.

There was a brief silence on his part. “I will. Sleep well.”

“Thanks.”

He turned and left, locking the front door behind him.

She managed to wait until two minutes after that before tears started to slip silently down her cheeks. She slid under the covers, hugging the pillow that had been his to her as the tears continued to fall.

//I could spend the rest of my life doing nothing but making love to you and be just fine.//

His words from the beach came back to her. Had he really mean that? Was it more than just physical attraction? Was it really *making love* to him? Or was it something purely physical but he was smart enough not to use more crass terms in front of her?

It didn’t matter. It wasn’t going to happen again. Most likely, she was just the only woman he’d ever been with and it would have been the same — or even better for him — with any other woman. For all she knew, he and Linda... It certainly wouldn’t be for lack of trying on Linda’s part if it didn’t happen.

She squeezed her eyes closed and willed herself to sleep, but it was the wee hours of the morning before it finally claimed her.

Clark watched as Lois sat down a couple rows in front of him. He hadn’t seen her in several days.

The Superman article had gone over very well, just as he’d expected. There was already talk of a Kerth Award for the two of them.

While he’d told Lois the truth that the Apollo Hotel wasn’t the worst place he’d ever lived, it was by far the worst place he’d stayed in ‘civilized’ countries. He hadn’t enjoyed it and had dipped further into his savings than he would have preferred to put a deposit down on an apartment. He’d spent some time the evening before fixing it up because he hadn’t been willing to tell Lois where it was in its original condition.

The Superman thing seemed to be working. So far, no one had made the connection between him and Superman. That was a very good thing.

He’d been disappointed by his short time at the Star, not that he’d expected to be impressed. He’d even had a front page story with Linda, but it was a no-brainer. He could have done it in his sleep; he practically had.

He felt bad about running out on Linda a few times to go be Superman, but he was being careful to limit his activities to true emergencies and not things like every mugging or kitten stuck in a tree. He’d done a bit of that, too, but if he responded to everything, he’d do nothing but be Superman.

He’d flown patrols in the evenings, keeping an eye out for suspicious behavior. He’d stopped a couple of car thieves and found a couple of teenagers breaking and entering at an electronics store. He’d managed to convince one man that driving after he’d put his Firebird up on the sidewalk wasn’t a good plan.

He’d broken up a couple of gang fights and helped a homeless man who was being beaten get to a shelter.

It felt good to help openly, but the best had been when he *had* helped with real non-emergencies. Like the kitten he got out of the tree in Pittsdale and the little girl who scraped her knee falling off the jungle gym as he flew over a park. He’d felt responsible since she’d been waving at him when she fell so he flew her home. The look of pure joy on her face had made his day.

But now, he was sitting in a press conference about the Orani Jewels or something and Lois was sitting two rows in front of him and just a few seats down. She’d glanced at him and nodded slightly in his direction, but that was about it. He fiddled unobtrusively with his wedding band.

He’d managed to avoid answering questions from Linda about his wife, but she didn’t seem to take the hint that he just wasn’t interested. He thought she thought he was a widower or something, but really he just tried to avoid talking to her about anything personal.

He turned his attention towards the front of the room as a couple of men walked towards the lectern.

His stomach was churning as he stood to ask his question. “Mr. Secretary, Clark Kent, Metropolis Star. What do you think...”

He heard a clicking sound coming from the other room. Automatic rifles. He knew the sound.

In his silence, Lois jumped in.

“Mr. Secretary, Lois Lane, Daily Planet. Is it true...”

“Mr. Kent was asking a question, Lo-is,” Linda interjected.

“Mr. Kent stopped talking.” Lois turned back to the front of the room. “Mr. Secretary, is it true...”

“Wait your turn,” Linda snapped.

“Hypocrite,” Lois muttered. “Mr. Secretary...”

“You can sure dish it out, but you never could take it, could you, Lois?”

Clark wasn’t the only one whose mouth was agape at the exchange.

“Oh get off your high horse,” Lois tossed over her shoulder. “Mr...”

“And get down in the gutter with you?”

He heard the rifles again and glanced around, seeing three armed men in the next room.

Secretary Wallace finally spoke. “Ladies, please. No questions. That’s it.”

Clark used a bit of his super breath to knock over a planter, blocking the doors the armed gunmen were planning on using. A security guard walked over to see what happened and he gave the man a head’s up.

He looked around to make sure no one was paying any attention to him before slipping out and coming back as Superman to make sure no one got hurt.

After the gunmen had been turned over to Inspector Henderson, who also didn’t recognize him as Clark Kent, he took off, coming back as himself a few minutes later.

“There you are!” Linda grabbed his arm. “Where’d you go?”

“I was, um, in the bathroom,” he said, shifting uncomfortably as he noticed Lois watching them.

“Well, you missed it. Superman was here and helped thwart an attempted heist of the Orani Jewels.”

“I, uh, heard the commotion.” He looked back at Lois who was walking away. “Excuse me a minute.” He trotted after Lois, catching her as she reached her Jeep. “Hey. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said with a shrug, inserting her key in the lock.

He pulled his wallet out and held a piece of paper in her direction. “Um, here’s my address for my new apartment and my new phone number. Call me if you need *anything*.”

She opened the door and took it from him. “I will.”

"I mean it. If you're craving Thai at two in the morning, call me."

She nodded. "I will."

He was going to say something else, but found himself looking at the closed door.

He sighed and headed back to where Linda was fuming.

"I didn't get a chance to talk to Superman," she said before he even made it back onto the curb. "No one's talked to him since his interview the other day."

"I did," he said suddenly. He needed a good story that was his. Lois got the first Superman interview. He was going to get the second.

"You did?" Linda squealed and threw her arms around his neck, giving him no choice but to catch her.

"I did," he confirmed, trying to extricate himself but instead finding her arm linking through his.

"Then let's go write it up, partner."

Linda wasn't *bad* to work with, but he was sure Lois was better. They spent the next couple hours writing up the story and a couple of other small ones they'd been on earlier in the day.

By the time he made it home, he really didn't want to go out and do a patrol, but he did anyway, making it home about twenty minutes earlier than he needed to. He made a late dinner and set the table while waiting for his guest.

They talked about what was going on in the world, including the incident earlier that day, and generally getting to know each other better before turning to the main topic of the evening's meeting.

They were getting to the meat of the discussion when there was a pounding on the door.

"Clark, don't you dare try to pretend you're not home."

"Is that who I think it is?" his guest asked.

Clark groaned. "Probably."

She pounded again. "I know you're in there."

"It might be best if she doesn't see you," Clark suggested.

His guest nodded and headed for the closet.

Clark headed up the stairs, opening the door when he reached it. "Hello, Lois."

She brushed past him. "What the hell were you thinking?"

She stopped abruptly, noticing the two places set at the table. She turned to him, tears shining in her eyes. "Where is she?"

"Who?"

"Don't lie to me. Where is she?" She stomped around the apartment. "Nice place," she called sarcastically. "Is she under the bed?" she asked, jumping on it.

"What're you talking about?"

She hopped down off the bed and stormed back into the living room. "Don't lie to me, Clark. I know we're not conventional and that as soon as one of us gets around to calling a lawyer, we're getting a divorce, but you *promised* me before the whole 'let's get married' debacle that you'd *never* cheat on your wife. And, sure, we're not some long term love story, but I *cannot* believe that you'd cheat on me. Once the divorce goes through, I don't care what or who you do, but until then, you better not or it *will* come up with my lawyer. And it's not like I expect some big settlement or something like that since you haven't held a job down for more than ten minutes since you were in high school, but if you're cheating on me, so help me, I'll get every dime I can for me and the baby. And it's not like I *care* who you're doing at this point, but seeing you dancing with *Cat* or whoever it was was one thing because for all I knew you didn't even remember I existed, but after everything you said that day to cheat on me when you know I'm around and with someone I know and detest..." Her voice finally trailed off as the tears took over.

He stared at her, mouth ajar, as she ranted. "Lois, I'm not cheating on you," he finally managed to get out as her tirade

ended.

"You're not?"

He could see the trails of hot tears streaming down her cheeks. "No, I'm not," he told her quietly. "I wouldn't. Regardless of the circumstances, I meant what I said. I'd never cheat on my wife."

The closet slid open. "Wife? Married? Baby?" his guest asked.

Lois and Clark turned in unison and it was Lois' turn to have her jaw drop.

"Perry?" she whispered.

Part 13

She looked at Clark, tears streaming down her cheeks. It wasn't that she really cared who he slept with — she told herself that over and over, hoping eventually she'd believe it — but *Linda*? And after all the sweet things he'd said after they first met about how not all men would cheat and how he'd never cheat. And even though she hadn't told him the *whole* story about the men in her past, he knew enough to know that fidelity was important to her.

"Lois, I'm not cheating on you," he told her quietly.

She didn't bother to swipe at her cheeks. "You're not?"

"No, I'm not. I wouldn't I meant what I said. I'd never cheat on my wife."

She turned as the door to the closet opened slowly. The closet. Why hadn't she thought to look in the closet?

"Wife? Married? Baby?" She heard the familiar voice before she saw the beloved face.

Her jaw dropped and she was sure the color drained out of her face. "Perry?" she whispered.

"Hey, darlin'."

She glanced at Clark who had shoved his hands in his pockets and wasn't looking at either of them.

"What are you doing here?"

He stepped out of the closet, walking towards her as he spoke. "I still can't offer Clark a full-time job, but he is working for us right now. Undercover at the Star to see if we can figure out why they're getting all those stories lately."

"That's what you were talking about in your office."

Perry nodded before enveloping her in his arms. "Why didn't you tell me, Lois?"

She rested her head against the chest of the only real father figure she'd ever had. "Because it was some variation on drunk in Vegas and I figured I'd hear from his lawyer at any time and I just threw myself into my work trying to get you to notice my investigative skills and then when you sent me to Kansas I found out I was pregnant. I stopped in Smallville to tell Clark and he showed up on my doorstep a few days later." She pulled away, finally wiping at her cheeks. "Jimmy's finding me a lawyer so..."

She didn't look at Clark when she said that. She was sure he'd be relieved, but she didn't need to see that. "So, about this whole investigation thing... Is Linda in on it? I'd bet she is."

"I don't think so," Clark said. "Carpenter calls to check and see where she is and then *bam*. Something newsworthy happens. Like that elevator yesterday."

"The one Superman saved?" Perry asked.

Clark nodded. "That's the one. The Orani Jewels thing today. She said that he always checks up on her but also that he's hitting on her constantly. I don't think she's involved."

Lois sat in one of the big chairs. "So how do we prove it?"

"I haven't gotten that far yet," Clark admitted, sitting in the chair opposite her while Perry took a spot on the couch. "But he's had opinion pieces in the same edition as Linda's stories for a couple weeks. There was one in today's paper about stricter building regulations, the same edition that had the elevator story."

An idea was beginning to percolate in Lois' head, but she

decided to keep it to herself until it was more fully fleshed out. Perry and Clark tossed around a few ideas, but she couldn't bring herself to brainstorm with them.

"Listen," she finally said. "I'm going home. I'm tired and hungry..."

"I've got some food in the fridge if you want it," Clark told her, standing and heading towards the kitchen. "Lasagna?"

Her stomach rumbled. "That sounds good," she admitted.

He dished some up and put it in the microwave.

Perry stood. "I don't think there's much more we can do here tonight. Keep me posted, Clark." He looked pointedly at her.

"You and I are going to have a little talk later, Lois."

Fat chance. She'd avoid him. "Night, Perry."

He left as Clark took the dish out and handed it to her with a fork. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Do you have cream soda by any chance?"

"No. Sorry. I can go get you some..." His voice trailed off.

She shook her head. "No thanks. Water's fine."

She was pleasantly surprised by how good the lasagna was. "Did you make this?"

"Yeah." There was a long silence as she ate. "What were you talking about when you got here?"

"What?" she asked, scraping together one more bite.

"You barged in here asking what the hell was I thinking, but you weren't thinking about another woman at that point. What was it?"

"Right. Giving yourself an interview. What were you thinking?" She set her dish on the side table and pulled her legs into the chair with her, wrapping herself in the blanket that had been thrown over it.

He sighed. "I know. I was trying to cover with Linda about where I'd been and it just sort of came out that I'd talked to him. She was so excited that she gave me this huge hug and wouldn't let go of my arm."

So that was what she'd seen as she'd pulled away from the press conference. She leaned her head back against the chair and closed her eyes. His chair really was much more comfortable than her couches.

"My folks want me to bring you out to meet them," he said suddenly.

Her eyes flew open. "What?" She looked at him, surprised.

"I talked to my mom earlier. They want to meet their daughter-in-law, even if you won't be that officially for long, and the mother of their grandchild."

"Oh."

"Heck, you might have run into them at the fundraiser."

"I guess it's possible. I have no idea what they look like, though, and they wouldn't have known me."

"They've seen your picture."

"They have?"

He nodded. "The, um, the hotel gave us a wedding album."

"They did?"

"Yeah."

"Do you have it?"

He headed for the bedroom part of the apartment, returned a moment later and handing the small album to her.

She stared at the picture on the front for a long moment. "Not how I pictured my wedding attire."

Clark chuckled. "My friend, Pete, gave me a hard time about that. He's Smallville's only lawyer so I went to talk to him a couple weeks later. He tried to get a copy of our marriage license but it's impossible to get one from Arkansas without knowing the bride's last name. He said that surely I could have found some store in town to get a better shirt and not wear a John Deere shirt and a flannel to get married."

She shrugged. "I don't think we really cared."

"No," he said quietly, not looking at her. "At that point all we

cared about was a preacher, I think."

Something had been niggling at the back of her mind for a few days. "Um, I can see how I could have been drugged or something. I mean, I don't know who would have or why and I know you didn't and I don't know what purpose it would have served or anything like that, but aren't you supposed to be invulnerable or something?"

"I don't understand it. I've never found anything that's affected me. I mean, I even tried to get drunk once in college and nothing. I never tried drugs or anything like that, but there wouldn't have been a point. I *do* know that I don't remember much from the time we left the bookstore until we got to the room and that I had a huge headache the next morning... and I don't remember the last time I had a headache."

"I had a headache, too. I went back to my room and slept for about eight hours."

"I slept until about ten-thirty, I think. My head still hurt but not as badly, and then I saw the ring and started to remember."

She couldn't help but yawn again as she started to flip through the pictures. "We look happy," she finally said.

"We do."

She could feel her eyelids start to droop a bit as she flipped to the next page. She needed to get up, to go home, but that would take more energy that she suddenly realized she didn't have. She felt... drained.

She turned the page to see a picture of the two of them, Clark behind her holding her close to him. Both of them had their eyes closed and his face was buried in her hair. They both looked so... happy, content.

Lois closed her eyes again, willing another bout of tears to stay where they belonged. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, letting the photo album slip onto the chair next to her.

Before she knew what was happening, Clark had scooped her carefully into his arms.

"What're you doing?" she asked, even as she rested her head against him.

"Putting you to bed. Don't worry. I'll take the couch."

"I'm not going to kick you out of your own bed," she murmured half-heartedly. "I can go home."

"You're in no shape to drive home." He set her gently on the bed, pulling the covers up over her.

"Don't leave me," she practically sighed, burrowing under the covers, glad that she'd changed into a pair of leggings and a long T-shirt before she'd come over.

A minute later, she felt the other side of the bed depress as Clark slipped in behind her. Instinctually, she snuggled back into him and felt his arm wrap around her as she slipped into sleep.

Clark carried Lois towards his bedroom, wondering if it was a good idea to put her in his bed or if he should just fly her home. Finally, he decided that his bed was probably the best option and that he'd take the couch.

"Don't leave me," she breathed as he set her down.

Did she want him to sleep with her? Could he trust himself?

It was only a few seconds before he'd decided that not leaving her was part of the whole 'if you need anything' thing. A minute later, he slid into the bed, careful to keep a reasonable difference between them.

That effort was foiled when Lois moved back to settle in against him. Of its own volition, his arm went around her and pulled her closer.

It was a matter of moments before her even breathing told him that she was asleep. Secure in the knowledge that she'd never know, he pressed a kiss against the back of her head.

It wasn't long before he joined her in sleep.

It was several hours later when he jolted awake.

Clark found himself sitting straight up in his bed, alert to any

signs of danger or intruders or...

Lois.

She was gone.

He felt the other side of the bed to find that it was cold. "Lois?" There was no sound of her heartbeat anywhere in the vicinity.

He told himself that she was probably fine. She'd just woken up and decided to go home. That was it.

But just to be sure...

He quickly donned the Suit and took to the air off the balcony. In seconds, he was hovering over Lois' apartment to find that Lucy was there but that there was no sign of Lois.

The uneasy feeling wouldn't go away.

He headed towards the Daily Planet but she wasn't there either.

A thought suddenly occurred to him and he turned towards the Star.

There was activity in Preston Carpenter's office. Hovering high overhead, he felt no moral compunction about eavesdropping.

"Where is she?" Carpenter asked the thug.

"Somewhere no one will find her until after the incident."

Incident? What incident? And who was 'she'? Unless his instincts were very wrong, 'she' was Lois and she was in danger of some kind.

"Is everything set?" Carpenter sounded vaguely threatening.

"Everything's ready."

"And the sharpshooter?"

Clark's stomach dropped. Sharpshooter? Whatever it was, it was big.

He watched the two of them head for the door, but stop as it opened.

This time it was his jaw that dropped as Linda walked in the room.

"Is the bitch taken care of?" she asked.

Clark's eyes narrowed. There was only one person she could be talking about.

Carpenter's arms went around her. "She's a brilliant investigator, dear. I don't see why you two couldn't get along, and you could have pulled her in here where I could control her."

"Control her like you try to control me?" Linda asked, ice in her voice. "Believe me, Lois isn't nearly enough woman for you."

"And how would you know that?"

Linda smiled, a cold, hard smile, as she fiddled with Carpenter's tie. "Let's just say her college boyfriend needed a little more of a woman. Rumor around the newsroom at the campus paper was that he spent two weeks in her bed trying to teach her even the basics, but she couldn't even handle that. Of course, he was being kept perfectly satisfied elsewhere because she'd made him wait more than three months. The bitch had the nerve to be mad at *me* because she couldn't keep him satisfied."

Clark's fists were clenched and it was all he could do not to fly down there and tell Linda exactly what he thought of her — while flying with her dangling by her belt over the Arctic Ocean.

The thug looked uncomfortable as the other two started...

The first phrase that came to mind was 'making out' but that seemed too polite as Carpenter pushed her up against the wall.

Clark continued to watch until the thug left and the other two

stumbled towards Carpenter's desk.

He really wanted to throw up but decided that following the thug was a better use of his time. The thug headed to the World Club located on the top floor of the building and Clark watched him from his spot in the night sky as the thug entered, heading for the now-vacant kitchen. He used his vision to scan around.

His heart nearly stopped when he saw her.

She was unconscious in the walk-in refrigerator. The thug walked in and, grabbing the fire ax, took aim at a metal tube. The clanging sound caused Lois to stir, but not wake.

A couple of well-placed blows later, Freon poured into the enclosed space.

"Breathe deeply," the thug growled, locking the refrigerator behind him.

Clark had been scouting the roof at the same time and he yanked open the door to the stairwell without bothering to land. A bare second later, he was pulling the freezer door off its hinges. He twisted the pipe so it was no longer spewing the deadly substance before breathing in as much as he could and swallowing it.

He knelt at her side, lifting her off the ground and cradling her in his arms. "Lois?"

Nothing.

"Lois, come on. Wake up."

There was still no sign of her waking, so he scooped her into his arms and flew her to the hospital where she'd gone for her doctor's appointment.

Gasps went up around the emergency room as he strode confidently in, doing his best to keep his face stoic.

"Superman!" The nurse behind the desk was in awe. "Can we help you?"

"This woman has been unconscious for a period of time — I'm not certain how long. I do know that she probably received a blow to the head and inhaled some Freon. And she's pregnant — nearly four months, I believe. Her name is Lois Lane."

A gurney appeared from nowhere and he set her gently on it.

"We've got it from here," a doctor told him as they headed towards the rooms. "Do you know who her husband is?"

He nodded. "Clark Kent. I'll see if I can find him."

The doctor nodded his thanks as the doors swung closed behind them.

Clark was torn. Part of him wanted to return in about thirty seconds as Clark. The rest of him thought that getting Carpenter and Linda and anyone else responsible was the better plan. He'd listened to the baby's heartbeat on the way over and it seemed strong but...

He turned to the nurse and asked for a pen. He wrote down two numbers. "That's her boss — she was working when this happened, but away from the office — and her husband. Could you call her boss and let her husband know if anything changes? He's in the middle of helping me figure out who did this to her."

The nurse nodded and took the slip of paper. "I will. Thank you, Superman."

He strode purposefully out of the building and took to the air.

Lois slowly came to be aware of her surroundings.

She moved her tongue around her mouth to try to get rid of the dry cotton-y feeling.

"Here." The voice was quiet, but recognizable.

She opened her eyes slightly, glad that the lights in the room were dim. She could see the straw and parted her lips slightly, taking a slight sip when she could.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"How're you feeling?"

"I'm not sure." Her eyes closed again. "The baby?"

"Is fine."

"Thank God." A sense of relief washed over her and she

rested her head on the pillow.

“*Superman* found you and brought you here. What happened?”

“Secretary Wallace...” She tried to sit up, to reach the phone. She had to get word out.

“Is fine. Linda King, Preston Carpenter and several underlings are all in jail.”

She breathed another sigh of relief. “Linda was in on it?”

“From the beginning. Apparently, she and Carpenter have had a thing going off and on for years. When she wanted to move here, he used her in his plan. She figured it out pretty quick and wanted in. Taking you out was bonus.”

“Oh. So glad I could help her reach her goal.”

“You won, Lois. You’re fine. The baby’s fine. She’s in prison. Secretary Wallace is fine. The Orani Jewels are safe. Perry’s proud.”

She smiled slightly. “Is the story written up?”

“Going in the morning edition.”

“Good.”

“The byline is ‘Lois Lane and Clark Kent’.”

She nodded. He’d done more work on the story than she had. She’d found a crucial piece of information when she broke into Carpenter’s office, but she’d been taken out before she could do anything about it.

Her head still throbbed.

“Will they give me any medicine?”

“Maybe.”

Lois pushed the call button.

“Can I help you?”

“Um, I just woke up finally. And I could use some medicine.”

“Ms. Lane?” the disembodied voice asked.

“Yes.”

“Someone will be right in.”

“Thanks.”

She closed her eyes again. “The baby’s really okay?”

“The baby’s really okay.”

There was a slight knock on the door. “Come in,” Lois called. The door swung open and there he stood.

“Clark,” she said quietly. “Come on in.”

He held out a bouquet of wildflowers. “These are for you.”

“Thank you.”

He glanced between the two of them.

“Um, Lois, can we talk?”

Part 14

Clark finally made it back to the hospital. He’d hated leaving her there, not staying with her, but he really believed it was better for him to go catch the bad guys and save Secretary Wallace.

He’d gone back to the Star building to find that Carpenter’s office was empty. A few minutes, later the color drained from his face as he read the editorial that was going to run after the assassination of Secretary Wallace in the morning.

He’d printed a copy and went straight to the police station to find Henderson — mainly because he was the only police officer Clark knew.

Henderson’s eyes grew wide as Clark, as Superman, told him all that had happened in the last hour. When he handed over the editorial, Henderson had swung into action. Superman did what he could and Clark showed up a few minutes after Superman left.

It had been twelve hours since Clark had dropped Lois off. He’d even made a quick trip to Africa to pick some flowers for her.

He stood outside the door, hearing soft voices talking inside. That was a relief. She was awake.

He took a deep breath and knocked.

“Come in,” he heard her call.

He opened the door and stood right inside, his eyes moving

from one person to the other.

“Clark. Come on in.”

He held the flowers out her direction. “These are for you.”

“Thank you.” She didn’t really look straight at him.

He looked between the two of them again. “Um, Lois, can we talk?”

Lois looked over at her sister. “Can you excuse us for a few minutes, Luce?”

Lucy stood. “Of course.” She gave Lois a careful hug. “I’ll be back later.”

“Thanks, Luce.”

Clark moved further into the room as Lucy left, smiling slightly at her as she did. “How are you?”

“I’m okay,” she said quietly. “Someone should be in in a minute to check on me.”

As though on cue, there was a knock at the door. “Ms. Lane?” A nurse came in pushing a computer on wheels with a blood pressure cuff and assorted other medical paraphernalia on it. “The doctor will be here shortly, but let’s get started.”

It wasn’t long before the doctor walked in and talked to Lois for a few minutes, before examining her. Clark spent most of his time staring out the window while she talked to the doctor.

“And the baby?” she finally asked.

“The baby looks great.” Clark could hear the smile in the doctor’s voice. “Your OB came by and checked the ultrasound we did. She said she’d be back by later, but that everything looks good and that this baby must have some super genes or something.”

Clark smiled slightly and thought he heard Lois snort a bit at that.

“Call the nurses if you need anything, okay, Ms. Lane?”

“I need to get out of here.”

“Not until morning. Sorry.”

Lois sighed.

“And visiting hours are just about over. You can have one family member stay with you, if you’d like.”

Clark turned. “I’m her husband.” He was glad that, for the moment at least, he still had a legal right to be there — that the divorce hadn’t been started, much less finalized. But what if she wanted someone else to stay — like Lucy? He’d cross that bridge when he got there.

The doctor nodded. “Well then, if it’s okay with Ms. Lane, you’re welcome to stay.”

“Thank you for everything.” Clark meant that sincerely.

“My pleasure.”

He turned back to Lois. “Um, I didn’t think to grab a vase or anything,” he told her, holding out the flowers.

“Where’d you get them?”

“Africa.”

“Wow.” It was little more than a whisper. “So, what happened?”

Clark finally set the flowers on the side table. “You tell me. I woke up and you were gone.”

“I couldn’t sleep.” She didn’t look at him, instead, apparently finding the hospital blanket truly fascinating.

“Right.”

“I couldn’t,” she said defiantly. “I woke up and I wasn’t in my bed and I couldn’t sleep.”

“So you decided to get caught by a money grubbing, power hungry megalomaniac?”

“No. I didn’t *decide* to get caught. I just *got* caught.”

“So... care to tell me what happened?”

She sighed. “I decided to go to the Star, to see if I could find anything on Carpenter’s computer. While I was there, he came back and I got caught. His henchman hit me over the head and the next thing I remember, I woke up here a few minutes ago. I found the editorial, but he showed up before I could do anything

about it.”

She finally looked up at him, the look on her face practically daring him to challenge her on it. “So what happened?” she asked.

He leaned back in the chair. “I woke up and you were gone. I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong, so I headed out to... you know.” He made a flying motion with his hand. “I checked your apartment and the Planet and finally the Star.” He told her the rest of the story, including how he’d written it up for the Planet and Perry had given them the joint byline. Front page and everything.

They sat in uncomfortable silence for a long time before they both spoke at the same time.

“Thank you,” Lois said.

“I heard Linda say...” Clark started at the same time. “You go.”

“Thank you for saving me,” she said.

“Anytime.”

“So, um, Linda *was* implicated in all of this.”

He nodded. “I really didn’t think she was but then when I was looking for you...” He hesitated.

“What?”

“She said some things...”

“Like what?” Lois asked when he didn’t continue.

“About you. Your college boyfriend.”

“Oh.” She didn’t look at him. “The one she was sleeping with behind my back.”

“Yeah.”

“Did she mention that when I caught them, I threw him out of our room in nothing but his underwear? Underwear no man should wear, ever, for any reason?” There was a bit of a smirk on her face.

He chuckled slightly. “No. She didn’t mention that.”

She picked at the blanket. “I bet she had some pretty unflattering things to say about me.”

“Yes,” he answered slowly. “But I didn’t believe any of it. She’s a criminal who obviously hates you. Being taken at her word isn’t something she’s earned. And it wasn’t like she was talking to me — I was listening in to her talking to Carpenter, hoping to figure out where you were.”

“His name was Paul,” she said quietly. “We dated for about three and a half months. I thought we were in love and finally... He wasn’t my first, but I knew I wasn’t in love with Dan, who was. Attracted? Yes. In love? No. He was a good guy and he’s helped me on a couple stories here and there — he works for the FDA now. And we just got carried away one night. It wasn’t... *bad*, but... We broke up a few weeks later, mostly because of time constraints. In those three weeks, we’d seen each other twice. We weren’t avoiding each other or anything; just busy. But Paul... I was determined I wasn’t going to be with another guy unless I was in love, so we waited. Or I waited rather. He wanted to sleep with me on our first date. Given what I know about him now, I’m kind of surprised we kept dating, but I guess since he was sleeping with Linda the whole time, he wasn’t as upset that we weren’t... you know.”

The whole mentality didn’t make any sense to him. “That’s pathetic, you know. Justifying sleeping with someone because the person you’re dating isn’t sleeping with you.”

“No one else thought so,” she muttered.

She couldn’t look at him. Tears had been building behind her eyes as she spoke and finally spilled over onto her cheeks as she continued. “Everyone else thought he was perfectly within his rights. I’d even gone all out for... *that* night. Nice clothes, wine, candles.” She wasn’t sure why she was telling Clark all of this. She’d barely let herself think about it in years and she’d *never* talked to anyone about it. Except Lucy, a little bit. And telling the

man who was technically her husband how she’d set out to have sex with another man... “And when all was said and done, it wasn’t all that great. And it wasn’t for the next two weeks either. He blamed it on me, of course, when the story spread, but the reality is I think it was probably both of us or at least the combination of the two of us together. Part of me wants to say it was all his fault, but that’s probably not any more fair than him blaming it all on me.”

“That’s generous of you,” Clark told her quietly.

“It’s the truth. I don’t think I really realized that until...”

recently.” She still refused to look at him, wasn’t sure why she was telling him about a very painful time in her life. “It was different with you. Maybe it was because we were drugged or whatever, but I felt like I could just be myself and not worry about impressing you, and for whatever reason, we clicked together.”

“Yeah.”

And from what he’d said about having trouble keeping his hands to himself around her, she was sure that he wasn’t disappointed in her like Paul had been. She was glad of that, at least. In those quiet hours, in the still of the night, when she cried herself to sleep thinking that she’d never find the right man for her, she’d worried about what would happen if she did. Had Paul been right? Would she never know what it was like to really *make love*? Her time with Clark had proven that she would and the night after the White Orchid Ball had proven that it wasn’t a one time, one night thing — even if they weren’t actually *in love*.

An announcement came over the loud speaker system telling them the visiting hours were over. When Clark made no move to leave, she spoke again. “You don’t have to stay.”

“There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about.”

She swiped at her cheeks. “Okay.”

“Perry offered me a job.”

“That’s great.”

“As your partner.”

Her head snapped up. “What?”

“He offered me a job as your partner.”

“I work alone.” She always had and, even though she could admit that Clark was a good writer and they had worked well together, she didn’t want a partner. Especially not him. Not now. Maybe under other circumstances but...

He was silent for a long moment. “Okay then.” He stood. “I’ll let you get some rest.” He looked like he was going to say or do something else, but instead he just headed for the door. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

She laid there for a long time, simply staring at the ceiling, before sleep finally overcame her.

It was noon the next day before she was finally able to leave the hospital. Lucy had come by to pick her up and take her home.

She spent another two days resting at home before heading back to work.

She hadn’t heard from Clark at all in those two days. She didn’t know if he had accepted Perry’s job offer and he was going to be her partner against her wishes or what.

She walked carefully down the stairs, her eyes scanning the newsroom as she did.

“Lois! My office. Now!”

Some things never changed.

She sighed and set her bag down at her desk before heading to Perry’s office.

“Close the door.”

She did.

“Have a seat.”

She sat across from his desk, feeling for all the world like she was sitting in the principal’s office.

Perry leaned back in his chair, studying her until she was

nearly ready to squirm. “I can understand why you didn’t tell me you’d gotten married. Clark gave me a few — *few* — details and I get it. But that you’re pregnant? Lois, I need to know things like that. What if you blacked out or fell or something? We wouldn’t know to get you the help you needed. How long have you known?”

She sighed. “Since the first night I was in Kansas. I didn’t even suspect until the doctor called after you made me go see him.”

“And that’s why you were late getting back? Stopping in Smallville to see Clark?”

She nodded. “I thought he should know.”

“Then tell me... Why’d he turn down my job offer?”

Her head shot up. “He did?”

“He didn’t tell you?”

Lois shook her head. “I haven’t talked to him since he stopped by the hospital that first night. He told me about it but didn’t say what he was going to do.”

He looked at her for another minute. “I thought that, even though you two are whatever you are, he would have jumped at the chance to team up with you. You two work well together.”

So that was it. “So it really was a job as my partner?” she asked, needing to make sure.

Perry nodded. “He told you that?”

“I don’t want a partner. I don’t *need* a partner.” So, he had to have done that after she told him she worked alone. She wondered what he’d do for a job if he’d turned down Perry’s offer. Would he try construction again? Another bartender’s job? The Star? She should have caught on that something wasn’t completely what it seemed when he’d started there, knowing what he’d said just days earlier about working there. Would he get a job as a... sewer technician? The Superman thing seemed to be working so he could stay in Metropolis. Exactly how far was he willing to go to help take care of the baby? To take care of her? And what did that mean?

Perry interrupted her musings. “Did you tell him that?”

“Not in so many words, but yeah.”

He leaned forward, elbows resting on his desk. “Darlin’, far be it from me to tell you how to do your job — like I’m your boss or somethin’ — but at some point, you’re not going to be able to do what you do. I’m not sayin’ that gettin’ caught the other day was because you’re pregnant — I don’t think it was — but are you going to be able to do what you need to do, when you can’t move faster than a medium paced walk no matter how hard you try?”

She had to admit that he had a point. “Probably not.”

“And so I was thinkin’ that if you and Clark were working together, you still wouldn’t be completely out of the investigative loop even if you did have to do a lot of desk work for a while.” He sighed. “Anyway — while you were out a group of government thug wanna-bes showed up wanting to know what you knew about Superman being the front man for an invasion and to take your computer and all of that. Fortunately, one of the Planet’s lawyers was here showing his sixteen-year-old reporter wanna-be nephew around and took a look at the warrant. It was as phony as a lock of Elvis’ hair in a Memphis souvenir shop. They took off but not without some pretty interesting threats. Keep an eye out for anyone following you and all that. Let me know if you notice anything.”

“I will.”

They talked for a few minutes before Lois headed off to cover the negotiations between management and the dock workers union.

Clark spent most of those days either being Superman or helping out at the farm. He knew he needed to look for another job, but he couldn’t bring himself to just yet.

He’d finally been offered the job of his dreams at the Daily Planet and he’d turned it down. One thing he definitely didn’t want to do was make Lois uncomfortable; it was apparent that working with him would make her uncomfortable, so he had turned it down.

He flew patrols in the mornings and again at nights but spent the rest of the days brooding and pounding fence posts into the ground and stretching barbed wire to fit.

On the third day, he pushed his mom’s beef brisket and party potatoes around on his plate, not eating much at all, before heading back to Metropolis.

He’d promised himself that he wouldn’t allow Superman to take over his life — that, outside of when he was patrolling, he’d only respond to real emergencies. But this day...

He found some neighborhood kids arguing over balls and strikes. He landed and asked if they wanted an umpire. They were amazed that he knew how to play baseball well enough to be their umpire, but were thrilled — especially when he took a few pitches and literally knocked them out of the ballpark.

After that he took some of the kids for flights around the park — but only those whose parents were there to give permission. More kids showed up as word got around that he was there hanging out. They played a game of super-freeze-tag before taking a few more pictures. He told the disappointed group that it was time for him to go, and he took to the sky to patrol Metropolis.

He stopped a few muggings and assorted other minor crimes. He ran into Henderson at a crime scene and helped find a piece of evidence. They spoke for about half an hour, discussing what Superman could do to help the police the best.

He continued his patrol, helping at a four car pile-up and flying one patient to the hospital. He stayed out longer than he probably would have otherwise, but he really wasn’t ready to go home, to face the reality of losing his dream job and looking for something else. To an empty apartment. He was going to have to figure something out. The Superman thing was working. It looked like he could stay in Metropolis, be a part of his baby’s life, but he’d have to get a job. He thought about talking to the new folks running the Star but he couldn’t bring himself to do that.

What else could he do? He floated above Metropolis, staring at the night sky. Maybe he could work for a magazine or write copy for the American News Channel or work for an advertising company writing copy for press releases or something like that — something that was remotely related to reporting.

He’d start hunting in the morning.

Mind made up, he headed for home.

Something seemed a bit off when his boots landed on the balcony. There was a glow coming from around the curtains. It almost reminded him of the glow from his globe, but it was at home, in Smallville.

Instead of entering immediately, he decided to x-ray the apartment first.

What he saw made his heart nearly stop beating in his chest.

Curled up on his bed, blanket pulled tightly around her, was Lois.

He went in through the balcony door, spinning into his jeans and T-shirt once he was inside. There were candles lit all over the apartment, bathing it in the warm glow he’d noticed from outside. On the table was dinner for two from DiGiacinto’s Italian Eatery. He picked up one of the ravioli and popped it in his mouth. Cold. She’d been there for a while. He took a sip of the wine. Its lukewarm room temperature further confirmed that, as did the amount of wax pooling at the bottom of a number of the candlesticks.

He pattered around the kitchen for a few minutes, putting the food away and blowing out the candles, wondering what could

have possessed her to do this. Was it some kind of apology for not wanting him to take the job? Or something else?

He sighed. He just didn't understand women, Lois in particular.

"Hey."

The voice behind him startled him and he turned to see her standing there, leaning against the brickwork in the archway.

She was obviously still half asleep and she looked utterly adorable, her hair slightly messed up, her feet bare.

That wasn't what took his breath away.

It was his shirt.

His white dress shirt.

His only partially buttoned white dress shirt.

His incredibly sexy wife wearing his only partially buttoned white shirt.

"I waited for you." She walked towards him, hips swinging slightly. "I wanted to talk to you."

He swallowed hard. "You're not dressed to talk."

She looked down and then back up at him from under her long eyelashes. "I'm not?" she asked, her face the picture of pure innocence. She fingered one button. "Am I... overdressed?" She slipped the button through the buttonhole.

"No." He shook his head. "You're not overdressed."

Her hands fell to her sides as she got closer to him. "Too bad."

She came to stop directly in front of him, her hands coming to rest on his chest. "Is it too late, Clark?"

His hands came to rest on her waist. "For what?"

"For us. For happiness."

Part 15

"What?"

"I love you, Clark Kent. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

"What?"

She leaned into him, standing on her toes as her hands slipped up and around his neck and smiled. "Has anyone ever told you how much you look like Superman?"

"What?"

"Is that all you know how to say?" Her lips landed lightly on his, tugging slightly on his bottom lip with both of hers.

His arms wrapped around her and he could feel her body pressed tightly against his. Her lips were on his again and he allowed her to deepen the kiss.

Her hands tangled in his hair as she began to move backwards, tugging him with her towards the bedroom, stopping when she ran into the wall instead. After another moment of some of the most sensuous kisses he'd ever been a part of, he bent slightly, wrapping his arms more tightly around her and lifting her feet off the floor.

Her legs found their way around his waist as he managed to get them to the bed, floating so he didn't squash her when they landed on the mattress.

Together they worked to get his jeans and shirt off. He rested on one elbow as she faced him, one leg wrapped around his. His free hand ran gently up and down her bare thigh as he looked at her.

"Now am I overdressed?" she asked him huskily.

She leaned in to kiss him, but he moved away from her.

Something seemed off.

He'd written it off to being sleepy, but they'd been at this long enough that she should have been fully awake.

But her eyes were still slightly glassy.

"Are you feeling okay?" he asked quietly.

She pushed on him until he was flat on the mattress. "You are so handsome."

"What?"

She pouted and, in his experience, Lois Lane never pouted. "Are we back to that?" She leaned down to kiss him. "Forget about time. Forget about the world. All we need is us."

The more he studied her face, the more he was sure something was off. "Lois..." He rested his hands firmly on her waist and moved her to the side so he could sit up. "I think something's wrong. You're not acting like yourself."

"The only thing wrong is that you're not kissing me." She reached around, one hand grasping the back of his neck as she pulled him towards her.

He kissed her, but he could still tell that something wasn't right and he pulled away again. He rolled, standing up and running a hand through his hair. "Lois, I don't think..."

Lois sat up and slowly unbuttoned one of the few buttons actually done up on the shirt she'd... borrowed. "I think the problem is that you think too much."

What was he supposed to do? He didn't know what she might be under the influence of, but she was definitely under the influence of *something*. But she really didn't look like she was going to take 'no' for an answer.

So what was a guy to do when his admittedly sexy wife appeared to be high and wanted to make love with him?

Make sure she was safe and leave?

Keep an eye on her from forty thousand feet where it was cold enough to be a rough equivalent of a cold shower?

Would she be mad when she came out of it? Mad that he left? Mad that things had gone as far as they had? Mad at him? At her?

She undid another button, moving towards him as she did. "Cla-ark..."

He breathed a silent prayer and swiftly buttoned the whole shirt.

She pouted again. "What'd you do that for? If you're gonna use your speed gizmo shouldn't it be to *undress* us?"

He sighed. "Lois..."

Whatever else he was going to say was lost as she launched herself at him, kissing him for all she was worth.

Clark kissed her back, losing himself in it.

Until he found himself lying on top of her on the bed once more.

He pulled back again. "Lois..."

She frowned. "Don't tell me someone needs... Superman?" she whispered. "I need Superman right now."

He grasped at the lifeline she'd thrown him. "That's it. I have to, um, fly!" He didn't want to lie to her outright, but flying was a very good plan.

"Will you come back?"

He nodded. "Definitely."

She smiled sultrily at him. "I'll be waiting."

With that, he didn't even bother with the Suit but instead put his jeans and shirt back on as he fled out the door.

Lois pulled the covers up over her head and groaned. Her head *hurt*.

"Here."

The voice was barely over a whisper, but it made the pounding worse.

Where was she and who was that?

She pulled the blanket down just enough to see Clark holding a glass of water.

"What..." She wasn't even sure how to finish the thought.

"Take some medicine and go back to sleep. We'll talk when you wake up."

His voice was still soft, but she noticed that he averted his eyes when she pushed herself up and the blanket fell away.

She looked down, and, realizing she wasn't wearing a shirt, pulled the blanket back up. "What happened to my clothes?"

What she really wanted to ask was if they'd... had sex again,

but she couldn't bring herself to do so.

"I'd guess you took your shirt off when I left," he told her, still looking anywhere but at the bed. He held out his hands. "Here."

She took the glass and the pills. By the time she'd finished taking them, he was holding a T-shirt and a pair of sweats.

"I don't really have anything that'll fit you but..."

"Thanks."

"Get some more sleep and we'll talk in a bit," he repeated.

As much as she wanted to know what had happened, that sounded like a very good plan.

When she woke later, she felt much better just knowing that she was clothed. She carefully stood, stopping first in the bathroom. She took her time, borrowing Clark's toothbrush and splashing some water on her face.

There was a soft knock on the door. "Are you okay?"

She sighed and couldn't put it off any longer. She opened the door to see Clark standing a few feet back, hands shoved deep in his pockets. She didn't speak to him but headed to the living area, changing directions when she realized breakfast was on the table.

When they were both seated, she finally spoke. "What happened?"

"What do you remember?"

Lois furrowed her brow. "I remember working yesterday. There was some kind of perfume shoot or something." She thought for a long moment. "That's it until I woke up earlier."

"Something happened at work. I'm not sure what but..."

He handed her the Daily Planet. It was covered with hearts and stories of lost loves reunited. Her eyebrows crept up her forehead.

"What's this?"

He shrugged. "Whatever happened didn't affect just you."

She was suddenly filled with dread. "How did it affect me?"

She stared at him as he rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. "Um, you were here when I got home last night. I'd been out..." He made a flying motion with one hand. "You were asleep so I cleaned up the dinner you'd brought with you and, um..." He stopped, refusing to look at her.

"What?"

"You woke up and came out here..."

"What?" she demanded when he stopped again.

"You were wearing one of my dress shirts and you kissed me and we..." He waved a hand towards the bedroom.

"We..." She couldn't finish the thought. Not that the thought of... making love with Clark was repulsive but if she didn't even remember it...

"No, we didn't," he told her with a vehement shake of his head. "You seemed... off somehow. Your eyes were a bit glazed over. At first, I thought it was because you'd just woken up, but..." He sighed. "You weren't yourself and I left."

"You just left me here?"

He sighed again. "Well, I tried. You didn't want me to. You..." There was a pause. "You kissed me again and we ended up back on the bed and... You didn't want me to leave but finally asked if someone needed Superman so I said I had to fly and took off. I didn't go far — just about forty thousand feet up where it's freezing cold and kept an eye on you from there. I mean, I didn't watch you the *whole* time — I don't know when you took the shirt off, because you still had it on when I left — but I checked on you and you finally fell asleep."

Lois didn't say anything, choosing instead to concentrate on eating her omelet.

"So how're you feeling?"

"Embarrassed," she said after mulling it over for a minute. "I have no idea what happened, but that's the worst headache I remember having ever." A thought came to her. "Except for the day that we, um..."

"Right."

"So whatever it was didn't affect you," she said, thoughtfully munching on a piece of bacon.

"Not this time."

"Then it must have happened at the Planet. Whatever it was."

"Most likely."

"Why didn't you take the job?" she blurted out before she could stop herself.

"What?"

"At the Planet. Why didn't you take it?"

He reached for another egg and cracked it onto his plate, frying it with his eyes before cutting off a bite. He refused to look at her. "You said you don't work with a partner. The last thing I want to do is make you uncomfortable. I don't want to fight with you or anything else. I want all of this to be done as friendly as possible, and taking a job working with you when you really don't want me to doesn't seem to be a way to do that."

"So what're you going to do?"

He shrugged. "I don't know yet. I've got some ideas. Like I said before, I can always get a job doing construction or something if nothing else pans out."

They ate in silence until breakfast was gone.

"You should probably get home and get to work. Figure this out."

She stared at the plate for a long moment. "Will you help me?"

"Help you what?"

"Figure out what happened. If this is anything like what happened to both of us... Then we both have an interest in finding out what made me act so crazy and Perry decide *that* was fit to print." She gestured towards the paper.

"Hey." He reached out and covered her hand with his own.

"It's not your fault. Whatever it was... It wasn't your fault. You weren't yourself."

"Then I'm going to find out whose fault it is and nail them."

She stood. "Meet me at the Planet in an hour?"

He nodded. "I will."

With that, she practically fled out the door.

Clark quickly cleaned up after breakfast before taking to the air, in the Suit this time. He did a quick patrol over Metropolis before landing in the alley behind the Daily Planet. Lois was waiting for the elevator as he walked into the lobby.

"How're you feeling?" he asked quietly.

She shrugged. "My head doesn't hurt as badly."

"That's good."

The elevator ride passed in silence but both were stunned when they exited onto the newsroom floor.

Heart shaped balloons were all over the newsroom, accompanied by flowers of all kinds and hearts of many different materials.

"I think whatever it is isn't over," Lois told him with a sigh.

"I think you're right." Clark followed her to her desk, observing everything around them.

"Hey, CK!" Jimmy bounded up to the desk. "Isn't she *hot*?" He tossed a handful of pictures onto Lois' desk.

"What about Lucy?" Lois asked him with a glare.

"She's hotter, but she's not here and it's not like I'd ever *touch*, but a guy can look, can't he?" He picked up the picture of the supermodel. "What do you think, Clark?"

Clark glanced at Lois who was resolutely looking at her computer monitor. "She's pretty, but what would Lucy say if she knew you were even looking at other women like that? You love her, don't you?" He didn't know either one of them very well, but he'd seen them together at the White Orchid Ball and it certainly seemed like the real thing.

Jimmy sighed and leaned against another desk. "Yeah, I do."

And she really is prettier than April.”

Clark looked at one of the pictures more closely. “Who’s this?”

There was a blond lady in the background, holding an atomizer in her hand.

Jimmy shrugged. “Dunno. But that perfume she had...” He shuddered. “It stunk. Like old sweat socks or garbage that needed taking out.” He sighed. “I think I’m going to find Lucy.”

“I don’t think I want to know,” Lois muttered.

Clark handed her the picture. “Do you remember her being here?”

She studied the picture. “Maybe. Who is she?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know, but eau de sweat socks or trash cans? Rather than something that smells like... flowers or something? Seems odd, doesn’t it?”

Lois leaned back in her chair, biting her lip as she thought. “I do remember smelling something awful, but I’d been in the conference room and I don’t remember being anywhere near her.” She suddenly sat straight up and looked at him, eyes wide. “Clark, it’s the same thing I remember from that shop in Eureka Springs.”

“What?” he hissed.

“I remember the smell. From that bath and body shop where I got the lotion right before everything went insane.”

“Well, that’s a start then. Let’s see if we can find out who owns that shop and if there’s a connection to Metropolis and this lady.” He tossed the picture back on the pile.

Two hours later, they were looking at a name. “Miranda Johnson, chemist and perfumer,” Clark tapped the screen. “She owns Perfume and Body Works in Eureka Springs *and* Miranda’s Perfume Shop here in Metropolis. She looks like she’s done pretty well for herself.”

“Fourteen stores in ten states? I’d say so.” Lois looked at him. “We have our connection. Now what?”

“Let’s go talk to her.”

Lois nodded, shutting down her computer and gathering her things. Twenty minutes later, they were outside the shop in a quaint section of Metropolis.

“Here goes nothing,” Lois muttered as they headed inside.

They were greeted by a young brunette with pink streaks in her hair. “Hi. I’m Pink.”

“Is that what your parents named you?” Lois asked, walking around the shop and looking at the bottles lining the shelves.

“Well, no.” She recovered quickly. “What can I help you find?”

“I think the owner of your shop was at the Daily Planet yesterday, with a perfume.”

Clark left her to talk to the sales associate, moving around the store, lowering his glasses to look more closely at a bottle here or a jar there.

//Listen here, it’s working.>//

Clark looked through the wall to see the woman they were looking for speaking on the phone.

//Eureka Springs was a tiny spill of the .01 percent solution. Yesterday was the full one percent. The effects of that shouldn’t wear off for forty-eight hours. In Eureka Springs, the effects probably lasted an hour, maybe two tops and wouldn’t cause the out of control behavior you’re looking for. I wouldn’t have expected it to. But this is working right. Didn’t you see the Daily Planet this morning?//

Clark winced at the expletives that came out of her mouth before she slammed the phone down.

There it was. Confirmation of what had happened to them. Or to Lois at least. Was there a way to know if it had affected him as well? Without exposing him to it again?

And there it was.

His eyes lighted on the atomizer from the pictures. It was

practically hidden on a shelf behind the checkout counter. A split-second later, it was in his pocket.

“Honey,” he said, his tone cheerful. “I don’t think we’re going to find what we’re looking for here.

Lois gave him an odd look. “We’re not?”

“Nope. They don’t carry ‘Exclusive’ here.” He wrapped an arm around her waist and guided her as gently as he could towards the door. “We’ll find it somewhere else. Thanks, Pink,” he called over his shoulder.

They made it around the corner from the shop before she stopped to glare at him. “What was that all about, *honey*?”

He pulled the atomizer out of his pocket. “I found what we’re looking for and overheard Miranda on the phone.” He filled her in on what he’d heard.

“So that explains what happened to us,” she said as they walked towards her Jeep.

“She also said that repeated exposure would lead to the effects of anything less than the 100% solution wearing off more quickly.”

“So that explains why I’m okay but no one else is.”

“Exactly.”

They ended up back at the Daily Planet, reassuring Perry that the harassment charges against him wouldn’t stick and that his newsroom would be back to normal.

The three of them sat in the conference room, tossing around ideas, for nearly an hour.

“What I don’t get is something else she said,” Clark chewed thoughtfully on the end of a pen. “She said the entire city would feel her revenge, but how? She seemed to indicate that it would be the 100% solution this time, too.”

“I don’t know, but I have to visit the little reporters’ room.” Lois stood abruptly and left the room.

Perry watched her leave before turning to look at him. “I still wanna know how you got close enough to overhear all that without anyone noticing.”

He shrugged. “I’m just good, I guess.”

The editor sighed. “If all this pans out into as big a story as I think it will, I don’t care what the suits upstairs say, I’m offering you another job. Maybe sports or something until there’s an official opening on the city beat. They weren’t really crazy about the whole Lois’ partner thing, but...” He shook his head.

“Lois wasn’t either, sir. She works alone and I don’t want to make her uncomfortable.”

“Then what are you doing working with her today?”

Clark sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “You’d have to ask her about that, sir.”

Perry snorted. “Enough of the ‘sir’ nonsense. It’s Perry or Chief.”

Clark smiled. “Yes, sir. Chief.”

Lois barged back in. “I’ve got it!”

“What?” Perry and Clark asked simultaneously.

“The fruit fly spraying. *That’s* how Miranda’s going to spray the city.”

“What?” they asked simultaneously again.

Lois gave an exasperated sigh. “Miranda said she wanted to spray the entire city with the 100% solution, right?”

Clark nodded. “Right.”

“What better way to do that than with a crop duster that everyone *expects* to be spraying stuff all over the city?”

Perry thought about that for a minute. “That makes sense. What time is that supposed to start?”

Lois looked at the clock. “Ten minutes.”

Clark bolted upright. “I’ll, um, see if I can find Superman.”

Lois waved him off. “Go. I’m heading to the airport.”

By the time Lois arrived, Superman had Miranda in custody and the police were wrapping things up. Henderson thanked her for, once again, sticking her nose in and told her to have Perry

call if he needed anything with regards to the legal matters.

Before she knew it, Lois was flying in Superman's arms towards Arkansas.

"We need to find that other atomizer and make sure no one else gets affected by this stuff," Lois said as they flew. "How'd you get her to tell you that anyway?"

He shrugged. "When I doused her with the tenth of a percent solution, she suddenly realized she was in love with Superman and told him everything. It should wear off in a couple hours."

It wasn't long before they landed in a small alley near the Perfume and Body Works shop. Lois again distracted the sales clerk while Clark snatched the atomizer.

No sooner were they outside than he moved behind her, moving lockstep with her, his arms holding her close.

He kissed the base of her neck in a way he'd quickly learned drove her crazy. "Whaddya say we go find us a hotel with a room with a Jacuzzi?"

Lois stopped. "What?"

"I want to make love to my wife. No going to the courthouse nonsense this time and we already know a hotel that has a room we like..."

"Clark..."

He spun her in his arms, kissing her until they were both breathless.

She sunk against him, using his body to hold her upright as she recovered. "Okay," she whispered. "Let's go. Make love to me, Clark."

Part 16

Lois suddenly found herself in Clark's arms as they flew through the sky. She leaned slightly forward and kissed along his jaw line.

"I thought we were going to the hotel," she murmured between kisses.

"I figured why waste the time checking in and all that when there's a perfectly good bed not too far away." He stopped mid-flight and turned to kiss her. "But if you keep doing that, we'll end up at Mt. Rushmore instead."

"Where exactly are we going?"

"The farm." He took off again and she clung tightly to him.

"What about your parents?" she asked as he set her down on the porch and she noticed that he wasn't wearing the Suit anymore; he had changed back into his street clothes.

Her arms went around his neck as he kissed her. They stumbled towards the front door and landed on the floor in the entryway. "They're in town today," he muttered into her neck.

She took his word for it, pulling his shirt out of his jeans as he worked on the buttons of her suit jacket.

They both stopped when they heard a throat clear somewhere behind them.

"I thought you said they were in town," she whispered.

"They're supposed to be," he whispered back. "I can zoom us up to my room though. Or back to my place or your place or..." He was kissing his way down her neck as he talked.

"The truck wouldn't start," a voice behind her said — one that surely belonged to his dad.

"Can you just zoom us out anyway before I die of embarrassment?" she whispered.

"My parents won't care if we zoom off and not because of that. They know we're married."

"Clark Jerome Kent, this is the first time we've met your wife and we'd like to actually talk to her." That voice had to be his mom.

A split second later, they were standing and Clark was behind her, his arms holding her close to him. Lois turned to look at him and, for the first time, noticed that his eyes looked slightly glassed over.

Was this how she'd looked the night before?

And she'd had no doubt that he'd wanted her then, but they hadn't...

She took a deep breath and tried to still her rapidly beating heart. She had to find a way to calm things down. She looked up at him. "Clark," she started. "I'd like to talk to your parents. Is that okay with you?"

"I'd rather initiate my old room," he murmured into her hair.

She turned to look at him, her hands resting on her chest.

"Can you do something for me first?" She looked at him from under lowered eyelashes and used her best seductive voice — though she wasn't entirely certain it actually was very seductive.

He kissed her. "Anything for you."

She thought quickly. "You know what I'd really like?"

"What?"

She took a deep breath. "You should go somewhere, like Paris or Asia or something, and get some black silk pajamas for you to wear and when you get back, go upstairs and lay down and wait for me."

"You'll be there?" he asked eagerly.

She kissed him lightly. "I'll be there in a little bit," she promised. "After I talk to your parents."

He kissed her again, long and deep, until there were multiple throat clearings behind them and then he was gone.

Lois sank into a nearby chair, refusing to look at her hosts.

"So this is what it's like meeting the in-laws. Just my luck."

"Can you tell us what's wrong with Clark?" his mom asked. "He didn't seem like himself."

Lois shook her head. "He wasn't. I don't know what happened. He was fine and then..." She told them an appropriately edited version of the last twenty-four hours. "He kissed me in Eureka Springs and the next thing I knew we were on our way here. I didn't really get a good look him until we got here but if it's anything like I was last night..." She still hadn't taken a good look at her in-laws. "I just thought sending him on an errand and then if he went to go lay down, maybe he'd go to sleep and... Well, sleep it off."

"But why did it affect him?" his dad asked. "He told us about what happened, not *everything* but enough to know that you were both affected by *something* in Eureka Springs a few months ago, but this time you were affected in Metropolis and he wasn't..."

"And he was affected in Eureka Springs and you weren't," Martha finished.

Lois finally looked up and gasped. "You!" she exclaimed looking at his dad.

His parents exchanged a look. "What?" he asked.

"You gave me a whole sandwich at the hospital fundraiser in Independence."

He snapped his fingers. "That's right. I remember you. You really wanted a whole sandwich instead of just a sample. I knew you looked familiar but I couldn't place you. Clark showed us your pictures from your wedding album," he added by way of explanation. He held out his hand. "I'm Jonathan."

She shook it lightly. "Lois."

"It's nice to officially meet you. And this is Martha, Clark's mom."

She smiled slightly. "It's nice to officially meet you, too.

Both of you," she added, turning slightly to include Martha.

"That barbecue was delicious."

"Thanks."

"So, Clark..."

Lois sighed. "The Revenge stuff wore off me a lot faster this time than last time, but Clark was exposed to the 100% stuff, so maybe it did affect him some but took longer for it to start working. I just hope it's not permanent," she finished, musing almost to herself.

"What?!" his parents asked in unison.

"Um, he told me the 100% solution was supposed to be permanent. He inhaled all of it and released a bit back onto Miranda but said he'd diluted it. I guess it's possible that it took longer to affect him; I just hope it wears off."

"Are you sure you want it to?"

Lois looked up at Martha to see a smirk on her face before it was replaced with a wide-eyed look.

"I'm sorry, Lois. I don't know you well enough to say things like that to you."

She sighed and muttered, "I *cannot* believe I'm having this conversation with my in-laws who I *just* met." She looked at them. "It's not just... being amorous or whatever. It's a total, complete loss of inhibitions. I don't know Clark *real* well but I think he has enough... innate goodness that he wouldn't start using what he can do to start taking advantage of people or anything like that."

His parents' jaws had dropped. "What?" Martha whispered.

Lois nodded. "It's not just the kissing and... stuff, at least it's not supposed to be at full strength. But with Clark that potential goes to a whole new level." There was a 'whoosh' and a thump upstairs. "I guess he's back."

"So now what?"

"Hope he goes to sleep and sleeps it off," she told them. She went back to studying the wood grain on the table. "I woke up completely... unmolested, for lack of a better term, this morning and I know I came on pretty strong last night. I owe him nothing less," she finished softly. "Unfortunately, it's a bit harder for me to hide from him than it was for him to get away from me." Her eyes went wide. "Not that I think he'd... force me or anything but..." Her mouth snapped shut and tears filled her eyes. Not that she thought she was going to be their daughter-in-law for long but they would always be her child's grandparents.

"So, Lois, how're you feeling?" Martha asked her.

She was grateful for the change of subject. "Better, thank you."

"And the baby?" That was Jonathan.

"Fine as far as I know. I had an ultrasound the week after the fundraiser and they said the baby was a few days bigger than expected but otherwise fine."

"That's good."

There were footsteps on the stairs. "Lois?" Clark called.

She closed her eyes and prayed for strength. "Yes, Clark?" she called back. She could see his black clad legs descending the stairs. As he came into full view, she wanted to gasp and stare at the picture he made standing there in his new black silk pajama pants, his shirt hanging open so she could see his fabulous abs. His glasses were gone and his hair was mussed.

"I thought you were coming upstairs," he pouted.

"I will," she promised. "I just want to finish talking to your parents first."

He came to stand behind her chair, leaning over and wrapping his arms around her. "Can't you talk to them later?"

She nodded. "I could but I want to talk to them now."

"Please?" he murmured in her ear.

She closed her eyes again. "You know, Clark, you made me promise to call you if I wanted Thai at two in the morning, right?"

"You want Thai?" he asked, puzzled.

She nodded. "I do. And some Italian. And chocolate covered strawberries."

"Like we had on our wedding night?" he whispered.

"Exactly. But I want fresh strawberries and chocolate from this little place I read about in Belgium." She proceeded to tell him, in great detail, where to find the shop.

She breathed a sigh of relief as he flew off. "I don't know how long I can do this. I mean, I can't keep sending him on random errands all day."

"What if it doesn't wear off?" Jonathan asked quietly.

"You shouldn't have given him such good directions," Martha said standing and walking to the cupboard.

"I didn't," Lois said with a smirk as she watched Martha get the kettle out.

"What?" they both asked.

"I sent him on a wild goose chase of sorts. The store really does exist but not where I said it was."

Martha laughed. "I think I like you, Lois. If anyone can handle Clark while he's like this, I think it's you."

"I hope so," she muttered as there was another thump outside.

Clark walked in, still barefoot, still looking incredibly sexy in the pajamas he'd bought earlier. "The store wasn't where you said it was, but I found it."

"Good," she said with a small smile.

"There was a clothing boutique where you said the chocolate store was."

"Oh, I must have gotten mixed up."

He took her hand, not even looking at his parents. "Then come on."

"I want to eat," she said seriously. "I'm pregnant and hungry."

"Then I'll feed you."

She sighed. "Okay, but I want your mom to bring some tea up when it's ready."

He groaned. "Can't we pretend they're not here?"

"We *could*," she said slowly. "But we're not going to."

He sighed and pouted. "Fine."

She glanced back at Martha and Jonathan who smiled encouragingly, even if they did look a bit nervous, before allowing herself to be led upstairs.

Clark didn't open his eyes when he woke up. He wanted to spend a few more minutes in that dreamland between awake and asleep, where Lois was curled up next to him, his face buried in her chest as they were intertwined in slumber.

But it seemed more real than that.

"Lois?" he said softly.

"Are you feeling better?"

He could feel the words as much as hear them. He moved away from her, feeling the loss, but wondering what could have happened for them to end up together like that. "I guess so," he said, pushing himself up against the headboard and looking around.

His room?

At the farmhouse?

"What happened?" he asked her quietly.

"What's the last thing you remember?"

He thought about that for a minute. "The airport, I think. Handing Miranda over." He thought for another minute. "We went to Eureka Springs, right?"

"Right."

"And?"

She told him, briefly, what had happened — how they'd been caught by his parents and she'd sent him on errands and then they'd eaten and lain on his bed and talked for a while before falling asleep.

"So I didn't, um..." His voice trailed off. He couldn't let himself believe that he would have forced himself on her no matter what kind of state he was in.

"Do you really think I'd still be here if you had?" she asked, staring at her hands.

He breathed a sigh of relief. "No." Flashes were starting to come back to him — waking up with a headache, Lois being there with a cool wash cloth, whispering to him. Holding him until he went back to sleep. "So what's your theory?" he asked. "Was it the 100% pheromone compound or something in Eureka

Springs again?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. We were in Miranda's shop in Eureka Springs when it started but that wasn't very long after you were exposed to the pheromone either. It didn't hit me right away either this time but it did the first time."

"Right."

"I called Perry and told him that neither one of us would be in until later."

"You don't mind me taking the job?"

She didn't reply for a long moment. "No. I don't mind you taking the job."

"You don't sound too sure of yourself."

She was silent again for long moments and he found himself holding his breath. "I don't mind you taking the job. I just don't want to become fodder for the office grapevine. I've seen how it works and I don't want to be a part of it."

"No one will hear from me." He shifted slightly, aware that their shoulders brushed against each other when he did so. "But I do imagine that it'll get around the newsroom eventually — first that you're pregnant and, eventually, that I'm the father."

She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "Probably, but I'd still really rather not bear the brunt of it if I don't have to."

"So what did we talk about?" he asked after another interminable silence.

She shrugged. "Not much. I mean, lots of things but nothing of national import or anything."

He opened his mouth to say something when he heard a door open. "We've got company." He looked over and realized that the door was wide open and he groaned. "What did you tell my parents?"

"The truth, more or less."

"Define more or less," he said wryly.

"No details," she told him softly. "Just about the pheromone and how you were a perfect gentleman..."

"Not entirely," he interrupted.

"As soon as you realized what was happening, you left."

He sighed. That wasn't entirely accurate but close enough, he guessed.

"Anyway, I sent you on a few errands while I told them what was going on. They sort of hung around — not too close but close enough, just in case you *really* weren't yourself, though none of us really thought you'd force yourself on me; we weren't sure what the 100% solution would do to you — and then they went to bed once you fell asleep. Your mom and I took care of you this morning. I don't know where either of them are now."

He turned his hearing on and listened. "Dad's in one of the fields and Mom is in the barn working on her art."

"Ah. She said she left some biscuits in the kitchen. I'd offer to make you something but I'm pretty useless in the kitchen."

He smiled at her. "I'll make us something."

"Thanks, but I really need to go to the bathroom first." She swung her legs over the side of the bed and stretched before starting towards the door. She stopped and looked at him. "Unless you need to go first."

He shook his head, trying not to notice what she was wearing. "No, go ahead."

"What?"

He smiled slightly. "You look pretty good in the morning. Especially in one of my shirts."

She looked down at his Midwest sweatshirt. "Well, I was wearing a pair of your sweatpants, too," she informed him, grabbing them from where they were hanging over his desk chair. "But you were all sweaty and you didn't want me to leave and I was hot so..."

Clark grinned. "I told you my clothes have never looked so good and I meant it." The shirt was big enough that it hung nearly to her knees, but still...

Was flirting with her okay? Snippets of their conversation from the night before were starting to come back to him. What had he said to her? What had she said to him?

He thought he remembered telling her he loved her, but he wasn't sure. And he had no idea what she'd said back.

But she'd stayed with him the whole time. She'd trusted him enough to not take advantage of her. She'd held him while he was at least slightly feverish and she'd taken care of him.

What did that mean?

If anything.

He sighed. He wasn't going to come to any conclusions just sitting here.

Lois came out of the bathroom, calling to him that she was done as she headed downstairs.

Clark joined her in the kitchen a few minutes later. Glad she was still feeling better enough to eat almost as much as he did on a good morning, he made them both some eggs, bacon and gravy to go with the biscuits his mom had left.

His mom came in while they were eating and they chatted a bit before Lois excused herself to go take a shower and probably abscond with some more of his clothes.

"How are you?" his mom asked once Lois was gone.

"Really?"

He shrugged. "Glad I didn't do anything too bad. How bad was it, really? Lois didn't say much."

Martha chuckled. "Well, you two came in here and fell on the floor over by the door trying to take each other's clothes off."

Clark rested his head on the kitchen table. "She didn't tell me that part."

"You were more... puppy dog than pit bull, sweetheart. You'd never do anything she didn't want and as soon as she realized something was wrong she did her best to put some distance between you two and hope you'd fall asleep. Eventually you did. The door was open the whole time and we were close by. All you did was talk — and no I don't know what about. The last time I checked on you two you were just cuddling and nearly asleep — I think Lois already was, actually."

He breathed another sigh of relief. Invulnerable or not, his mom would have tanned his hide if he'd stepped too far out of line. He wasn't sure if Lois might have glossed over it a bit but it didn't seem she had.

His head popped up as he heard trucks coming down the gravel road.

"What is it?"

"Company."

She frowned slightly. "I wonder who."

He stood up. "Get out! Go to the storm cellar and stay there. Get in the secret compartment and shut it behind you. It's not sealed so you should be fine. I'll get you as soon as I can."

"Clark, what's going on?"

"*GO!*" He shoved her — hard enough to make her move, not hard enough to hurt her — and headed towards the stairs.

"*LOIS!*"

She was just coming out of the bathroom. "What's wrong?"

He grabbed her arm. There was no time to get her to the cellar, too. He looked around. "My parents' closet."

"What?"

He practically dragged her to their room. "In the back of the closet, there's a little door. You can't turn the light on but you'll feel it. There's an attic crawlspace there and you should be able to get in. Shut it behind you and wait for me."

"What? Why?"

"*Just do it!*" He pushed her into the closet and shut the door behind her.

He heard the pounding on the front door and sped through the house.

He prayed Lois had listened to him — if he listened he could

hear her moving in the closet.

He prayed his mom had made it to the shelter and into the secret space without anyone seeing her.

He prayed that his dad was safe; that they wouldn't find him.

He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath before opening the door.

"Can I help you?" he asked calmly.

Part 17

Lois thought about lingering in the shower but didn't. Part of her wanted to linger and relive the moments in Clark's old bed the night before. Part of her wanted to believe it was real, that he'd meant the things he'd whispered to her as they lay together, legs intertwined. One hand had often rested on her abdomen as he talked about the three of them being a family; how all he'd wanted from the time he was old enough to realize those things was a family.

He'd told her that he'd fallen for her the first moment he saw her and that he fell a little more in love with her every day. He said he wanted to be with her, to raise the baby together; to have more kids with her someday. She wanted desperately to respond in kind, but she held back — sure that he didn't really know what he was saying and even though she didn't think he'd remember anything she said, she still held back.

His boyhood bed was small — twin sized — and necessitated sleeping very close to him, something she'd thoroughly enjoyed. She'd even — almost — enjoyed taking care of him when he woke up feverish and still more than a bit out of it. The only thing that really calmed him down was when she lay with him.

And so she'd spent most of the morning just holding him, letting her mind wander to what life would be like if they really tried to make a go of things.

She had finished getting dressed when she was abruptly brought back to the present by the sound of a door slamming and Clark yelling for her.

She headed out of the bathroom. "What's wrong?" she asked as he headed towards her, his face grim.

She winced slightly as he grabbed her arm and looked around. "My parents' closet."

"What?" she asked as he pulled her towards their room

He told her about a door in the back of her, telling her to wait for him.

"What?" she asked. "Why?"

"*Just do it!*" He shoved her in and shut the door behind her and she was plunged into darkness.

She stared at the door for a long moment before turning and moving to the back of the closet. He wouldn't have told her to hide if there wasn't a very good reason for it.

Right?

She could hear someone pounding on the front door as her fingers found the outline of a panel against the back wall. She carefully slid it aside and crawled through the opening. It wasn't completely dark in the small space that seemed to run along the entire length of the house.

She replaced the panel and sat carefully on the small piece of plywood. It looked as though the entire crawl space was floored — which was good because she wouldn't have to worry about stepping from rafter to rafter or falling through the ceiling. She was glad she was wearing thick socks which would protect her feet and muffle the sound of her footsteps but she'd also be at a disadvantage if she needed to get outside — though for the life of her she had no idea how she was going to do that — or to run or fight for some reason.

The look on Clark's face and the stark fear in his eyes had shocked her. She'd let him tell her what to do and hadn't really fought him on it. The look on his face had compelled her to do what he said.

But now... If there was something going on, she wasn't going to sit idly by. She'd do her best to help if she could.

She reached the end of the house and carefully turned the corner. She was glad she wasn't any further along in her pregnancy or this would be nearly impossible. She inched her way along until she reached a vent of some kind.

She held her breath as she knelt down and peered through the narrow openings.

She barely managed to stifle a gasp when she realized that Clark was standing there, staring down the barrel of a gun.

"What do you want?" Clark asked.

"The alien."

"What?"

The barrel of a 9mm was much bigger in the sanctuary of the home he'd grown up in than it was in a back alley of Metropolis.

Not that it could hurt him either place but the rest of the men in uniform were tearing apart the house. He tried not to let the relief show on his face when he realized Lois had to have found the secret attic passageway. She'd made it around the corner so even if they did look through the little door, they wouldn't see her. Now, if only she'd stay quiet so they didn't realize she was there...

"Where is the alien?"

"What alien?" Clark asked, hoping to buy some time.

"Superman," the army colonel hissed. "I want *Superman!*" His voice had risen with each word until it echoed throughout the room.

"He's not here," Clark told him calmly.

"I think you can get him for me."

"What makes you think that?"

"There was a reported UFO sighting here in 1966. Your wife had the first interview with the alien and you had the second — there *has* to be a connection."

"No. There doesn't."

"Well, then, you and the little woman had the first two interviews and I know there was information he gave you that you didn't include in your articles and I want to know everything."

"I don't know what you want me to tell you." He could hear Lois creeping further along the passageway, but knew he was the only one who could. If she could find the ladder, she'd be able to get to a safer spot. That would be good.

"Where is your wife anyway? We know she's here. And how did you get here anyway? There's no record of either of you on any plane anywhere near Metropolis and there's no way you drove since yesterday."

"I know a private pilot."

"Name."

"Clark Jerome Kent. No rank or serial number."

"Not your name, Kent. The name of the pilot."

"So you can track him down and torture him for information? I don't think so."

The gun lowered — or that one did anyway, there were others trained on him — and Trask moved towards Clark, his eyes narrowing. "You will tell me what I want to know."

Clark didn't blink as he stared down the older man. He heard Lois slip much closer to safety when the other man nodded.

The next thing he knew he was overcome with blinding pain.

Lois listened to Clark talking to the man in Army green. It wasn't that she was really afraid for his safety, but there was still something disconcerting about seeing him standing there with a gun pointed at his forehead.

After a minute, she decided she better move on and see if there was anything else she could find — the nutcase down there wanted more information on Superman; she didn't really need to

know anymore than that.

She reached a point where there was a dark drop in front of her. To step across would be easy enough, but there was a ladder going down into the darkness. The rungs were mounted well above the floor so that it would be easy to get on and off without having to carefully either lower yourself down or hoist yourself up.

She thought she heard something and listened carefully. Yes. She definitely heard something.

She took a deep breath and started down into the darkness. She slipped slightly when one of the rungs gave way beneath her weight, but she pressed her back against the wall behind her to steady herself.

Another deep breath later she was on her way again, this time testing each rung more carefully and using the wall behind her to help. It wasn't long before she reached the bottom. There weren't walls for most of the trip down — the passageway was also along the first floor — but she chose not to get off the ladder when she could. The noise was coming from further down.

She was well under ground level but not quite deep enough to be at the bottom of a basement. She could tell when the wall had disappeared behind her and when she finally put her feet on the ground, she turned.

The blackness was almost overwhelming, but the noise was definitely coming from down the... underground passage. It headed away from the house and was only about three feet square — at least as best as she could tell.

She squinted into the dark and saw something flicker. She took a deep breath and started crawling along the dirt, slowly feeling her way. Every few feet, there were braces holding up the sides and roof. That made her feel a bit better.

The flicker was getting slightly brighter with every yard she progressed and before long she heard muttering. Curses, it sounded like.

She thought the sound must really carry in the tunnel because there was no way she was anywhere near the other end.

And then she realized why everything seemed a bit off.

The tunnel was caved in.

She sat down and sighed.

That was when she heard it again. Someone on the other side of the blockage.

But who?

She thought about saying something but what if it was one of the soldiers holding Clark at gunpoint?

But how likely was that?

Really?

More likely it was...

"Martha?" she whispered.

"Lois?" came the answering whisper.

"Yes. How'd you get over there?" The light grew brighter and Lois looked through the small opening to see Martha on the other side.

"The storm shelter. Clark send you through the closet in our room or the coat closet?"

"Your room." Lois quickly told her what she knew, which wasn't much.

"Okay — the first thing to do is make an opening big enough for one of us to get through."

They had just started working on the opening when they heard a scream.

Clark's scream.

"What was that?" Lois asked, her eyes meeting the fear-filled eyes of her mother-in-law.

"That was Clark. And it sounded like he was in pain."

"That's what I was afraid of, but I didn't think anything could hurt him."

"I didn't either." Martha's mouth was set in a tight line as she

began digging faster.

Lois resumed her efforts on her side of the cave in. "What're we going to do?"

"Get out of here and figure out what we can do to help."

As they worked, Martha told her how Jonathan had renovated the tunnel once government agents had snooped around Smallville not long after they found Clark. The passages in the house had once been used to hide runaway slaves — though not an official part of the Underground Railroad, they would take in slaves escaping from Missouri or Arkansas or the surrounding Kansas countryside. The passageway they were attempting to excavate led to the side of the storm shelter, where there was a very well-hidden secret compartment. The slaves, and later Clark's ship, were safe there.

It seemed like forever but really wasn't that long before the opening was big enough for Martha to wiggle through.

"Come on," she whispered, using her flashlight to lead the way back to the house. They could hear more shouting, but couldn't make out the words.

Suddenly, she stopped causing Lois to bump into her.

Martha turned to Lois. "Maybe you should stay here."

"What?" Lois hissed. "Why?"

"Because Clark sounded hurt. And if there's something there that can hurt Clark, what about the baby?"

Lois bit her bottom lip. The thought hadn't even occurred to her. "Tell you what," she whispered after a minute. "If I feel even the slightest twinge of pain or anything wrong, I'll turn around."

Martha nodded. "Promise me. Clark would never forgive any of us if anything happened to the baby and we could have prevented it."

"I promise."

They crawled the rest of the way to the house where Martha led the way up the ladder to the first floor walkway.

Clark groaned as they dragged him outside. His only consolation was that it appeared that all of the military men followed him outside which meant that Lois and his mother were safe.

He was certain if they'd found his mom, they would have told him and threatened her, using her to get to him.

As it was, they hadn't, which meant she was probably safe.

He hoped.

"Well, look what we have here."

Clark looked up and, out of eyes nearly swollen shut, saw his father being dragged across the yard. He could see the disbelief when his dad realized that Clark wasn't faking.

"Did you even know you were sheltering an alien?" Trask sneered, approaching Jonathan. "Did you know he'd taken over your son's body?"

"What?" Jonathan asked. "Are you insane? What alien?"

"The so-called Superman. You're such a stupid hick you didn't even know he took over your son's body when he was just an infant, lying dormant in the human form, biding his time until he could formulate his plan for taking over the world."

"What?" Jonathan asked again.

"You're insane," Clark groaned.

Trask nodded to one of the men standing near Clark. He opened the case with the strange, glowing green object inside.

Clark screamed again as the pain washed over him once more.

Trask squatted down next to him. "Does that hurt, alien?" He struck Clark across the face. "Does that weaken your hold on your human host? Can you feel yourself losing your power, alien? I'd just kill him, but then the alien would just move on to a new host. We'll have to wait for both of them to die together."

"You're full of it," Jonathan said, struggling against his captors. "If you're just going to stand around bloviating, I think

I'd rather you shoot me now."

Trask rose and walked over towards the simple farmer. "Are you calling me a cow, Farmer Brown?"

Jonathan chuckled. "Standing around all day bloviating is all you're capable of, and you don't even don't know what it means."

"Why don't you enlighten me?" Trask sneered at him. "Has the alien taken over you, too? Is that why you think you're any match for me and my men?"

"You're a bully and a blow-hard. That's all you'll ever be, Trask."

Trask's eyes narrowed. "How do you know my name?"

"Jason Trask?" Jonathan raised an eyebrow. "You lived here when you were young. Of course I remember you. You were a nut job even then. Your dad was, too. He was run out of town for being a conspiracy nut — did you really believe that the government irradiated your chickens so they wouldn't lay eggs? And put cyanide in the milk *before* it came out of the cows so they could kill you?"

Trask backhanded Jonathan, causing the older man to stumble back slightly.

"You were a bully even then. You picked on the smaller kids all the time. I think I was even the one to finally teach you a lesson when you sent my cousin home with a broken arm. What makes you think this time will be any different?"

"Because this time, I have superior firepower. And I've never forgotten what you did to me, Kent. It's only fitting that the alien would have spent its lifetime duping *you* into believing your loving son was *normal*."

"I bet you don't know what harangue or perorate means either, do you?" Jonathan sneered. "Because that's all you're good at. That and being an insolent hector, of course."

Clark couldn't help but laugh, despite the pain.

"What're you laughing at, *alien*?" Trask roared.

"You think he's a dumb hick," Clark told him, struggling up onto his elbow. "But he's smarter than anyone I know. You, you're a bloviating, haranguing, perorating insolent hector and you don't even know how badly you're being insulted."

Trask kicked Clark in the stomach, causing him to double over in pain again.

"He's your antipode," Clark groaned. "And I bet you don't know what that means either."

One of the other uniformed men cautiously approached Trask, whispering something in his ear.

"Load up!" Trask yelled. "Apparently, someone called the police and the hick sheriff is on her way. Take the traitor and alien infested human with us." He turned back to the man who had spoken to him. "Burn the house. Someone must have been hiding and called them."

"No!" Clark gasped.

"Can't save your pregnant wife or that whore, Martha Kent, can you, alien?"

Gas cans were being lugged out of the trucks and Clark could only hope Lois and his mother would get back into the tunnel and out to the storm shelter if they were, in fact, in the house. His mother would have headed for there as soon as she'd made it to the shelter. He knew that.

The gasoline was being spread on the ground around the house and one man started up to the porch.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't lay there and do nothing, no matter how bad the pain was.

He called on every last ounce of energy he could find and reached for the box containing the green substance. The lid snapped shut as he hit it with one hand. He struggled to his feet and launched himself at Trask's back, tackling him from behind.

The searing pain had stopped when the lid closed, but he was still so weak, and Trask easily threw him off.

Clark didn't remember the exact sequence of events after that, but he knew he was on the losing end of the ensuing fight.

And then somehow, they were in the pond. Clark struggled to make it back to the surface, taking a deep breath once he did. He looked around, but didn't see Trask anywhere. He slogged his way towards the dock, as he realized the rest of the men were taking to their trucks and leaving.

He allowed himself a second of relief as he realized that the house wasn't yet on fire. His father was lying beaten in the middle of the farm yard.

He looked up as the front door to the house opened and his mother ran out.

"Jonathan!" His mother ran to his father's side as he struggled to sit up.

He made it onto dry ground and then he heard it.

"Clark!" Lois ran across the yard, flinging herself into his arms.

He groaned as her body made contact with his but he managed to stay upright, wrapping his arms tight around her.

"You're alive," she whispered.

"A little worse for the wear," he answered softly. "But I'm alive."

She pulled back looking at him intently for a moment before closing her eyes and pressing her lips to his. He kissed her back, holding her as close to him as he could. After only a moment, they pulled back and he rested his forehead on hers.

There was a shuffling sound behind them and then a scream.

"Clark!"

"Gun!"

His parents spoke in unison and Clark turned to see Trask leaning against one of the rocks on the far side of the pond, handgun drawn.

He pushed Lois away from him onto the ground before heading towards the pond to deal with Trask one more time.

"I'll kill you!" Trask roared, aiming the gun.

Shots rang out and everything went black.

Part 18

Lois was sure she was going to have plenty of scrapes as she used her hands and forearms to break her fall. She'd heard Martha and Jonathan yelling about a gun and then found herself hurtling towards the ground.

She'd much rather still be kissing Clark.

She'd really rather Clark still be alive to kiss.

Shots rang out and she heard more screaming.

"Clark!" That was Martha.

A second later, Jonathan was at her side, helping her stand up.

Then she saw him. Lying on the ground in a pool of blood.

"Clark," she whispered. "*Clark!*" she screamed, holding tightly to Jonathan for support.

"He's alive," Martha called. "He's been shot in the thigh, but he's alive."

Cars skidded into the driveway, sirens blaring as they did.

The images swirled around her as the sheriff — Rachel, hadn't Martha said? — took the lone remaining soldier into custody. Trask's body was pulled out of the pond and loaded into the coroner's van. Paramedics were looking at Clark's leg as he sat on a gurney, an oxygen mask covering his face. The fire department was using kitty litter to soak up the gasoline on the porch and in the yard. She wasn't exactly sure what else they'd do to make it safe but she figured they would. Paramedics had looked at her and put bandages on a few of the worst cuts, but declared that she and the baby both appeared to be fine.

She wanted to go to Clark's side, to be with him when they took him to the hospital, but Martha was with him. His mother. He'd want her to go with him, not his temporary wife.

"No! I'm not going!" She looked up in time to see Clark

throw off the blanket covering him and yank the oxygen mask from his face.

"Clark..." Martha followed him as he... limped across the yard, putting very little weight on his bad leg — to the point that it was practically dragging behind him.

He made it to where Lois was seated on the bed of Jonathan's truck.

"I'm not going to the hospital, Dad," he said as he neared.

Jonathan let go of Lois to stand up and help Clark to the spot he'd vacated.

"You have to go," Martha told him, arms crossed in front of her. "You just got *shot*."

Clark shook his head. "I can't. I'm not... human." The last word was barely more than a whisper. "I can't risk it, not with Lois and the baby and you two. I can't. And it's a clean wound — no bones hit, no major blood vessels or arteries."

Lois looked back over to where Clark had been lying on the ground. The pool of blood she seemed to remember was much smaller than she originally thought.

"Remember what Jor-El said?" Clark continued.

"Who's Jor-El?" Lois asked quietly.

Clark sighed. The paramedics had followed him, stopped by a raised hand from Jonathan. He glanced to make sure they were far enough away that they wouldn't hear. "He's my birth father. He told me the Earth's yellow sun would give me my powers and a remarkable ability to heal, even as a child when I wasn't invulnerable."

"He's got a point," Jonathan said. "Remember when he broke his leg? He had that cast off in a week and a half and we had to hide him at home so no one would know."

Lois gasped. "Is that true?"

Martha nodded. "Okay, then a deal, Clark. We'll press them to let you stay home for now but if it's not already getting better in the morning, you're going to see that Doctor Klein Lois told me about earlier. Or we'll get him to come see you."

Lois had worked with Dr. Klein on a few stories before and knew he had an impeccable reputation for honesty and integrity. He had contacted her after her article introducing Superman had appeared offering his services as a physician if Superman needed them.

Clark nodded. "Fine. Now if we can just convince Josh... One of my best friends from high school," he added after he noticed Lois' puzzled look. "He's the angry looking paramedic over there."

Martha and Jonathan exchanged another look. "Okay then," Jonathan said. "Let's see if we can get everyone out of here."

A thought suddenly occurred to Clark. "Dad, what happened to that box?" he whispered urgently.

"It's in the barn. We'll get rid of it later."

Martha and Jonathan turned to get rid of Josh and his coworkers. Lois turned to Clark. "What box?"

Clark sighed. "It had this glowing green rock in it. When it was open..." He sighed again. "I've never felt anything like that before and I hope I never do again." His eyes grew wide as he turned to look at Lois. "The baby..."

"Is fine," she hurried to reassure him. "I don't even remember seeing the thing and the worst pain I've felt all day was helping your mom dig through that tunnel and then hitting the ground when you shoved me."

He reached out and took her hand, turning over so he could see the scratches. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "No. You did what you had to do to get me out of the way. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

They looked up to see the ambulance pulling out of the yard,

though Josh was still standing there looking annoyed. Rachel walked over with the now uncuffed, unarmed soldier.

"Clark, this is Sergeant Richards. He's the one who shot that other guy, but he's also one of the ones who detained Jonathan at gunpoint during this whole thing."

He shuffled his feet a bit before speaking. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kent, Mrs. Kent. We all knew Trask was a bit fanatical but none of us knew he was this far over the line. Honest."

"Thank you for killing him."

Lois and Clark both looked up to see Martha and Jonathan had worked their way back over.

"He would have killed my son for sure," Martha continued. "I can't thank you enough for saving his life."

"We thought we were supposed to detain you and question you. No one ever mentioned beatings and house fires." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm so sorry."

Jonathan held out a hand. "Thank you, son."

"Ezzie, please."

"Ezzie?" the asked in unison.

He turned a slight shade of red. "Well, it's really short for Ezekiel but my dad was Zeke so I ended up with Ezzie."

"Well, thank you, Ezekiel," Martha rested her hand on his shoulder. "We owe you a debt of gratitude. You were following orders, but when the time came, you did the right thing. Thank you."

It was over two hours later before everyone was finally gone.

Josh had agreed to come by and check on Clark the next morning and had helped him inside to the couch. Rachel and her officers had taken statements from everyone and eventually, everyone cleared out.

Martha had made sandwiches for the four of them for dinner, eating in the living room in near silence.

Clark wiped his mouth on a napkin before turning to Jonathan. "So the ice storm of '85 came in handy, huh, Dad?"

Jonathan laughed. "It did." His country accent grew more pronounced. "I ain't got much of that book larnin' stuff, but I got me a writer for a son and college edjicated wife who learned me how to spell big words one winter."

Lois looked around the room as the other two started laughing as well. "What?"

It was a couple of minutes before anyone could speak.

Clark finally managed to catch his breath. "Dad called Trask — the head guy — a bloviating, haranguing, perorating, insolent hector and Trask didn't have a clue what he was talking about. He thought bloviating was something to do with a cow."

Jonathan wiped the tears from his face. "I barely graduated from high school, Lois. It's these two that have taught me so much of what I know. I figured I was going to be a farmer, what did I need school for?"

"Oh, don't let him fool you, honey," Martha interjected, one hand resting on Jonathan's thigh. "He's smart as a whip even if he doesn't have a bunch of fancy degrees or whatever. He reads a lot and wins more Trivial Pursuit games than anyone. We played a lot during that ice storm. We didn't have power and couldn't get to town for almost two weeks. Lots of Trivial Pursuit and Scrabble."

Lois smiled. "Sounds like fun."

"And what else was I supposed to do? They had me by the arms, guns trained on me — fighting didn't seem like a real good option, so talking worked. I didn't mean to do all that but when 'bloviating' seemed to irritate him..." He shook his head slightly before standing and turning to Martha. He held out a hand to help her up. "Martha, whaddya say we go for a walk? I could use a bit of fresh air."

Martha took his hand. "That sounds like an excellent idea." She turned to Clark. "Do you need anything before we go?"

He shook his head. "I'm fine."

“Lois?”

Lois shook her head. “I’m good. Thank you. And Clark can tell me where anything is if either one of us do need something.”

“Okay then.” The two of them were holding hands as they walked out the door.

The silence was nearly pervasive after the screen door slammed shut behind his parents.

“So, secret passageway, huh?” Lois finally said.

Clark chuckled lightly. “Yep. Had the potential to come in handy when you were hiding an alien baby from who knew what government agencies.”

“The tunnel had a cave-in at some point.”

“I was going to fix it up this weekend. Just in case. I’d guess these were the same psychos that showed up in the newsroom that day and I wanted my parents to have a place to bolt if the need arose. If you didn’t know where the doors went in the closets, you’d think it was just attic space, and the opening in the storm shelter is very well hidden.”

“Well, it came in handy today. Whose idea was the phone in there?”

“Dad’s, I think. Seemed like a good idea to be able to call the sheriff from in there if necessary.”

“That’s exactly what your mom did.”

“I figured.” He yawned. “Man, getting shot really takes it out of you.”

“Ya think?” Lois asked with a smirk.

“Would you mind getting me a pillow and blanket? I think I need to get to sleep.”

Lois stared at him for a minute before responding. “No, I won’t.”

She averted her eyes after she spoke.

“What?” Clark asked surprised. “Why?”

“Because I’m going to help you up to your bed. You’re not sleeping on the couch.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Are you offering to share my bed with me? Because I’m not about to make a pregnant woman sleep on the couch.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” she said softly. “But no. That’s not what I meant. I’ll take the couch; it’s not a big deal. I’m not making a man who got shot protecting me sleep on the couch.” She stood. “Let’s go, Superman.” She held a hand out towards him.

Clark just sat there and watched her, arms crossed in front of him.

She rolled her eyes. “Let’s go.”

He raised his eyebrows but otherwise didn’t move.

She raised her eyebrows back but he didn’t budge. She sat back down. “Well, I can sleep in the chair then.” The look she gave him dared him to challenge her on it as she curled up where she sat.

Clark sighed. “Are you being serious?”

“Completely.”

“Fine.” He pushed himself into a seated position, taking her offered hand as he struggled to stand. “Are you going to be able to help me?”

“I may not be Superman, but I can help you up the stairs.” She was sure she could. He’d walked across the farmyard by himself, sort of; surely the two of them could get him up the stairs.

But it was harder than she thought.

Apparently, his muscles had tightened up in the last several hours or he’d still had quite a bit of adrenaline running through his system the first time because he was leaning very heavily on her and their progress was slow. It wasn’t quite like climbing Mt. Everest, but Lois was sure it was close.

By the time they made it into his room, they were both ready

to collapse.

“Oof,” Lois exhaled as they landed on his bed. “We made it.”

They both lay there, staring at the ceiling for a long minute before she started to stand.

“Let’s get you situated,” she said.

They worked together to get the covers pulled back and Clark seated against the headboard. He leaned his head back against the wall.

“Can you get your own shirt off?” Lois asked, not looking at him.

“Yeah.” He pulled it over his head and tossed it towards the closet. He scooted down, crying out as his shorts caught on the gauze wrapped around his leg.

Lois looked up, her eyes wide. “What? Are you okay?”

He bit his bottom lip and nodded. “Yeah. Shorts got caught. That’s it.”

“You want to take them off, too?” she asked quietly.

He nodded again. “Yeah. But I can’t do that myself.”

She sighed. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen before, and we’ll just take your shorts off, not... everything.”

“I know.” He stared at his hands. “I’m not used to this,” he told her softly. “Being half-helpless. Being... un-super. Needing help.”

She briefly contemplated tough love, but decided that probably wasn’t the right way to go. “I know, but that’s why I’m here.”

“I thought it was because I was out of my mind on the pheromone,” he deadpanned.

“Well, that, too.” She sat next to him on the bed, pulling the sheet to his waist before reaching underneath it to help ease his shorts over his hips. She twirled them on her finger for a minute before throwing them onto the floor by his shirt. “There. Modesty all intact and everything.”

“Thanks.” He moved down so that his head was resting on his pillow.

Lois pulled the blanket up over him after he got comfortable. “Good night, Clark.”

“Good night.”

She turned and headed to the hallway, stopping when she heard his voice behind her.

“Don’t go.”

Clark could hear his heart pounding in his ears as she stood, back to him, in the doorway. “Please stay,” he reiterated.

She turned and came to sit on the bed next to him. “Did you want to talk?”

He reached out and brushed her hair back off her face, tucking it behind one ear. “No. Yes. I don’t know. I just know I want you here with me.”

Lois ducked her head, the hair falling back around her face. “Why?”

“What happened last night?”

“We talked and we fell asleep. That’s it.”

“What did I say?”

“Lots of things I wouldn’t dream of holding you to in the light of day or whatever.”

“Like what?”

She swiped at her cheeks with a shaking hand. “That you were falling in love with me. That you had been since you first saw me in Eureka Springs. That you want to make this work with us.”

He reached out again, tipping her chin up so she was looking at him. “Is that what you want?”

She stared at him for long moments, tears glistening as they slid down her cheeks. “I don’t want to get hurt.”

“I can’t promise I’ll never hurt you, Lois, but I do want to make this work. I *have* been falling in love with you since the

first time I saw you. I don't want to call a lawyer and get a divorce. I want to be a family with you and the baby." He pushed himself up on one arm, his other hand wrapping around the back of her neck and pulling her towards him so he could kiss her softly. "I want to go to sleep every night in your arms and make your first cup of coffee for you every morning. I'm not perfect and I can't guarantee that there won't be nights that I'm not home because I'm off being Superman — if my powers come back, that is — but I know what I want out of life, and that's you."

"Do you really mean that?" she whispered.

"I do."

She smiled through her tears. "That's what I want too." She leaned forward to kiss him again. "I'm falling in love with you, too. I have been since you told me you didn't know anything about Eureka Springs."

He smiled back. "Sleep with me?" he asked quietly. "I'm exhausted and I've got a busted leg so it'll be just sleep, but I don't want to let you out of my sight again. Not today."

"I need some clothes."

"Feel free to help yourself." He lowered himself carefully back to the bed. "I'll wait right here."

Lois laughed and wiped her cheeks with her fingers. She went to the dresser and pulled out a shirt and some shorts before disappearing into the bathroom. She reappeared a few minutes later and padded across the room in her bare feet before sliding under the covers with him. It took them a minute to get situated in the small bed, but they managed.

He kissed her forehead. "Good night."

"Good night," she whispered back. "I love you, Clark."

"I love you, too."

He tightened his hold on her as they drifted to sleep.

Sunlight streaming in the window pierced Clark's consciousness the next morning, pulling a groan from him.

"Morning, sunshine."

Clark opened one eye to see his dad sitting in the desk chair. "What?" he muttered.

"I take it things went well after we left last night?" Jonathan asked with a smirk.

Clark shook his head slightly. "What?"

"Well, you and Lois were all curled up together in here when we got back."

That's what was missing. Lois. "Where is she?"

"With your mom. We decided to let you sleep a bit longer."

He pushed himself into a sitting position. "Thanks."

"How're you feeling?"

"Better." He managed to swing his legs over the side of the bed and stand up. He was a bit wobbly but overall felt pretty good. "I've gotta go to the bathroom, though."

"You're on your own there," Jonathan chuckled.

"Gee thanks."

Ten minutes later, Clark hobbled into the kitchen.

"Clark!" Martha was at his side instantly. "Let me help you."

"I'm fine, Mom. Much better."

"A little TLC goes a long way, doesn't it?" she asked with a wink.

"Mo-om," he whined giving her a quick hug before heading towards the table where Lois sat. "Hi," he said quietly, feeling almost a bit shy.

"Hi."

He suddenly didn't care that his parents were standing there watching them. He leaned over and kissed her gently before sitting in the chair next to her. A glance at his parents told him how happy they were for him and Lois.

"I, um, talked to Perry. He wants the story on his desk this afternoon. I told him Superman had flown us out here and we'd planned on being in yesterday but with everything..."

"Right."

He looked up as the screen door slammed shut and smiled slightly. "I guess they wanted to give us some time alone." He reached out and took her hand, before leaning over to kiss her again.

"Perry said to take a couple days off, but he expects us back in bright and early Monday."

"Us?" he asked, hoping it meant what he thought it did.

"Us." She smiled at him. "Turns out I work pretty well with the right partner."

"And who might that be, Ms. Lane?" he teased.

She grinned. "That's Mrs. Lane-Kent to you, mister."

"Did you change your name?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. And I'm going to stay Lois Lane professionally, but in my private life..."

"I think I like that plan."

They sat in companionable silence for some time before Lois spoke again.

"I talked to Lucy," she said suddenly.

"How's Jimmy?"

She smirked. "Married."

"What?! He got married?!" Clark gasped.

She nodded. "To Lucy."

"What?"

"I guess he went over and proposed to her after he left the Daily Planet the other day. There's no waiting period in New Troy either so..." Lois shrugged. "I guess she didn't notice that he seemed a bit off until later, but they've decided to give it a shot. He said he was planning to ask her before too long anyway so..."

"That's good. I'm happy for them."

She had taken her hand back and wrapped it around her coffee cup. "So I'm going to need a place to live," she said softly. "I don't suppose you know anyone with an empty half of the bed and a good balcony for coming and going."

"Why do you need a place?" he asked, puzzled.

"Well, there's no way that Lucy's going to live at Jimmy's, and so they need a place to live and my place makes sense for them, but that means I need somewhere to go where no one's going to notice when Superman comes to visit me every night."

Clark stood, being careful not to put too much weight on his bad leg. He tugged on her hand until she stood and he put his arms around her. "Well, I just happen to have a balcony that no one can see and a bed that seems way too empty without you in it."

"You do?"

He nodded. "I do."

"Well, I guess I'll have to move in with you then?" It was a question, asked from beneath lowered lashes.

"Oh, I hope so." Clark bent his head to meet hers, kissing her softly, but leaving no question as to what he wanted.

"And you don't mind that Superman's going to come see me often?" she whispered.

"I hope he does." He brushed her hair off of her face. "I've been falling slowly for you since we met. Do you think you can catch me?"

She shook her head. "No. I can't. I'm too busy falling slowly for you and I don't want it to ever stop."

He kissed her again, and when they finally broke apart, they realized they were floating slightly off the floor.

Lois gasped. "Are your powers back?"

They thumped onto the floor and he concentrated. "No, not really. I think that took all of my energy. I need to get in the sun for a while."

"Why?"

"The sun is what gives me my powers and should help me heal."

"Sun it is then." Lois moved slightly away from him, keeping

one arm wrapped around his waist as they walked slowly to the porch swing. She sat down on the swing and he lowered himself next to her, leaning back against her as she wrapped her arms around him, kissing his hair as she did.

He sighed happily. "I could stay here for the rest of my life."

"I thought you wanted to spend the rest of your life making love to me." She linked her fingers with his.

"Well, that too." He twisted so that he could kiss her lightly. "And I am feeling better, but I don't think I'm feeling quite that good yet. I will tell you this though... If I ever encounter that pheromone or whatever it was that affected me again..."

"Yes?"

He chuckled. "You have my permission to take full advantage of me."

"I don't think I'd feel right about that," she said uncomfortably.

He chuckled lightly. "I seem to remember that night in Eureka Springs being pretty amazing, and I never could bring myself to regret a minute of it. You can take advantage of me anytime you want. I mean it. Honest."

Lois laughed lightly. "How about we just stay away from the pheromones?"

"I'm just sayin'..."

He settled back in against her, and before either of them knew what was happening they had fallen asleep in the sun.

Together.

Epilogue

"Where to next?"

Lois looked around the small town from behind dark sunglasses. "Next was the book shop."

"Right — kama sutra wasn't it?" Clark wrapped his arms around her from behind, moving in unison with her as he whispered in her ear.

"I didn't know you already had three copies," she replied primly. "You never have told me *why* you had three copies."

"One was a very rare edition given to me by a family in India when I saved their daughter. One is in English because I couldn't read the Indian one at the time."

"And the third?"

"I, uh, came back and bought the one that you had picked up — just because."

She smacked his arm. "Why?"

"I was smitten."

"Was?"

He laughed. "I'm still smitten. You know that."

"Well it's nice to hear it every once in a while."

"You heard it this morning, Mrs. Kent," he growled before kissing the spot on her neck.

She laughed. "Do you think Zeke has any idea why we named him what we did?"

"He's nine, not psychic. He knows that Ezekiel was after Ezzie and that we just liked the name Ezekiel Steven but he doesn't know his initials come from Eureka Springs."

They spent a few minutes browsing around the bookstore before heading to get some more lotion.

It had been ten years since they'd first met in front of the hotel in Eureka Springs, and those years had been good to them. Just weeks before the birth of their first child, they'd won their first joint Kerth for their introduction of Superman, and not long after that they moved into the brownstone they still occupied. Two years later, Lara Lane Kent had joined their family. Not long after that, Lois had become the recipient of Clark's powers for a time, choosing to become Ultra Woman for a week until they were able to reverse the effects of the Red Kryptonite.

It wasn't the only Red Kryptonite they'd encountered. There had also been the piece that had made Clark apathetic and the

piece that made his powers go wonky. They'd cleaned up Shuster's Field and most of the Green Kryptonite once Clark's powers had come back two days after the incident at the farm, but they had encountered it from time to time, including the time Lex Luthor had imprisoned Clark, as Superman, in a cage coated with the toxic substance in an effort to stop their investigations.

They'd won their Pulitzer for the series of stories that brought down his empire.

Three years after Lara's birth, Jonathan Joel joined the family.

And, now, on their tenth anniversary, they were retracing their steps from that first day in Eureka Springs.

Lois wandered around the store, sniffing this lotion and that body wash before finally settling on the same cucumber she'd bought the first time they were there.

"Let's get out of here." Clark's arms wrapped tightly around her. "We've got that room, with the Jacuzzi, and it's just down the street..." He trailed wet kisses down the side of her neck.

Instantly on alert, Lois sniffed the air.

Nothing.

She looked around, her eyes coming to rest on the sun catcher she'd noticed the first time they were there.

Red.

Glistening in the sun.

Glowing really.

She turned in his arms. "Clark," she said sweetly. "I need you to do something for me."

He kissed her, passionately. "Anything. Anytime. Anywhere."

"Right here. Right now."

"What?"

"I need you to use your vision gizmos on that sun catcher. What's the red one made of?"

He looked over the top of his glasses. "It's Red Kryptonite. Why? Can't we go back to our room now?"

"In a minute, sweetheart. First, we need to break that."

"Why?"

"Because it's affecting you, sweetheart. Just like the first two times we were here."

"And I distinctly remember telling you to take full advantage of me if we ever encountered whatever it was again." He kissed her again, but not nearly like he wanted to before she pulled away.

"And if you go break that for me, I'll take you back to the hotel and take full advantage. How's that?"

"Promise."

She held up three fingers. "Scout's honor. I'll distract them; you break."

Lois headed for the counter, pulling both clerks into a conversation about the merits of one line of products over another. There was a gust of wind and a shattering sound as the sun catcher fell to the floor. The piece of Red Kryptonite was nowhere to be seen.

After a few minutes of confusion over how *that* had happened, Lois finished her purchase and headed towards the hotel. Unless she was very much mistaken, Clark was already there, waiting for her.

Sure enough, there he was. He was wearing the black pajamas she'd had him buy the last time — something he saved only for special occasions.

He held out a bag, dangling it from one finger. "I got something for you."

"What is it?" she asked, surprised she wasn't already completely unclothed and on the bed with him. "And what happened to the Red Kryptonite?"

He stood and walked towards her. "In a safe place. That way if I ever forget how much I want you, you can use it to remind me."

"I don't think that'll be a problem, Farmboy."

"I know, but just in case..." His voice trailed off as she stepped out of her pants and pulled her shirt over her head.

She took the bag from his hand and tossed it to the side. "I don't think we really need that, do we?"

Clark's lips were on hers instantly and it was mere seconds before they were on the bed, working in unison to take his pajamas off.

Overcome with need and desire, it wasn't long until they lay breathless in each other's arms.

"Where'd that come from?" Lois asked with a smirk.

"Where do you think? And where'd you get that underwear, anyway? And how'd you keep me from finding them?"

"They were at CostMart."

"Matching Superman bra and underwear? I don't remember authorizing that as part of the Superman clothing line."

Lois gave a one armed shrug. "Well, it worked, didn't it?" She leaned up and looked down at him. His eyes were still slightly glassed over. Had he really meant what he said about 'taking advantage' of him like this?

"I love you, Lois Lane-Kent." The intensity in his words, his eyes, caught her off-guard. Suddenly clear and bright, she knew he was in control. He'd never do anything he felt was wrong, even under the influence of Red Kryptonite — no matter which version of it.

"I love you, Clark." She kissed him lightly as he brought one hand up to cradle her face, his fingers tangling in her hair.

"I'm still falling slowly for you, you know," he whispered when he pulled back.

"I'm still falling slowly for you." She settled into the crook of his arm, one of her arms tossed over his abdomen.

They lay there until they both began to doze; cocooned in their own little world, where only the two of them existed.

THE END

Notes:

Ch. 1:

M/J's hotel: <http://www.crescent-hotel.com/>

Clark's room:

<http://www.heartstoneinn.com/rooms/regal.html>

Ch. 7:

[thanks to Labby for the IGACOY transcript :) — the script says Riverview for Metro Club area, ep says West River District — I like Riverview better... but I went with both...]

Ch. 8:

This dress with different straps:

<http://www.edressme.com/14584.html>

Lower cut like this one but maybe not quite that low:

<http://www.edressme.com/6351.html>

In this color:

[http://i.ebayimg.com/10/!BNq\(vKw!mk~\\$\(KGrHgoOKjsEjILmWUfiBJqwuVPJBg~~_35.JPG](http://i.ebayimg.com/10/!BNq(vKw!mk~$(KGrHgoOKjsEjILmWUfiBJqwuVPJBg~~_35.JPG)

http://i19.ebayimg.com/02/i/001/36/a5/f7e7_35.JPG

Ch. 17:

Bloviate: to speak or write verbosely and windily, to speak pompously and excessively or to expound ridiculously

Harangue: a ranting speech or writing

Perorate: to speak at length, esp in a formal manner, to conclude a speech or sum up, esp with a formal recapitulation

Insolent: Presumptuous and insulting in manner or speech; arrogant; Audaciously rude or disrespectful; impertinent.

Hector: A bully; a blustering, turbulent, insolent, fellow; one who vexes or provokes; To treat with insolence; to threaten; to bully; hence, to torment by words; to tease; to taunt; to worry or irritate by bullying; To play the bully; to bluster; to be turbulent or insolent [And yes, it's also a name ;)]