

The Man Under the Suit

By HappyGirl <michelloyd@aol.com>

Rated: PG

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Summary: Clark Kent is a master of disguise, with more aliases than you can shake a stick at, so you can imagine his surprise when one insightful reporter sees right through his most flashy disguise of all.

Lois Lane raised both hands in gracious acknowledgement of her co-workers' praise. "Come on, you guys, it was nothing, really." She had to say it, of course, but in her heart of hearts she couldn't be prouder of the front page late edition headline, "Million Dollar Car Theft Ring Exposed."

"I still can't believe they thought you were a boy," Jimmy marveled.

"Well, I'm no Clark Kent, but the mustache helped. And thanks for teaching me how to boost a car." Lois grinned at her young co-conspirator.

"No problemo." Jimmy raised his coffee cup in salute. "To Lois Lane, still going where no reporter has gone before."

"Don't encourage her, Jimmy. Her head's as big as the Metrodome as it is." Perry was his usual gruff self, but Lois could see the twinkle in his eye. He was proud of her, as he should be.

Before she could bask in the spotlight for more than a moment, however, the editor addressed the room at large. "Okay, what's everybody standing around for? This is a newspaper, not happy hour at Buckingham Palace."

The small crowd that had gathered around Lois's desk quickly dispersed. Even Jimmy hurried off in the general direction of the file room. When Perry was the last one within earshot of Lois, he leaned toward her and drawled in a conspiratorial tone, "He's in town, you know. Cat just heard from her source at the Jade Inn."

Lois gave her editor a confused frown. "Who?"

"Clark Kent. Arrives this evening. He's got the Presidential Suite booked for the next three weeks. His new book came out last month and he's doing the round of publicity interviews — "Good Morning America", "Today", all the local morning shows, you know the drill. I bet he'll be at Luthor's White Orchid Ball. You can't hold the social event of the season and not invite Clark Kent if he's in town. I know you've been chasing an interview with Lex Luthor for months, but if you managed to land a one-on-one with Clark Kent — not a PR puff piece, but a real, in-depth interview — well, *that* would be something to see." With a last parting wink, Perry strode off toward his office, bellowing for Jimmy as he went.

Clark Kent was not a fan of big cities. They were loud, for one thing. He had learned by now how to tune the background noise out, but it did take a little effort to do so. They were smelly. Like the sounds, he would get used to the constant assault of car exhaust, cooking smells, and human body odors masked by dozens of brands of deodorants and shampoos, but it took a while. He'd rather be surrounded by the clean dirt and animal smells of the farm. But mostly, he hated the way he had to get there. Unless he was fairly familiar with a city, he couldn't just swoop in for a landing. It was too likely that someone would see him. So, having just finished up two weeks of publicity spots in Los Angeles, he'd been forced to make his L.A. to Metropolis flight the old-fashioned way: commercially. Metropolis — the

largest city in North America. He didn't know how he'd gotten out of stopping there on the last three tours, but this time the publisher had insisted, and Clark had acquiesced.

At least in first class people mostly left him alone. He'd learned long ago how to handle mechanical air travel when he had to: tune out. Metropolis was the last stop on his contractually obligated publicity tour. Clark closed his window shade, reclined his chair, shut his eyes, and allowed himself to start thinking about the next book.

He hadn't decided yet on his next hero's name. He wasn't even sure whether it would be a man or a woman. He only had the vaguest outline of a plot, but he knew it would involve the rescue of at least one girl from the sex trade. There would definitely be drugs in the mix. Guns, of course. Maybe a pair of sisters? He wasn't sure about that yet. He wasn't even sure which country he'd set it in. Maybe Cambodia, maybe Nepal. It would all come together once he got his feet on the ground and let the atmosphere — the sense of place and the culture — sink into his pores. He'd come up with a cover, bone up on the local language, then start making contacts. After a few weeks, a couple months tops, he'd have enough raw material to hole up in Smallville and start the actual writing.

It was a slow, roundabout process. He often wished that he could just swoop in, pull every girl out of every brothel in some grand rescue, and solve the world's problems with brute strength alone. Unfortunately, even with all his extraordinary gifts, he knew that was an unrealistic fantasy. Problems like this had to be addressed systemically, from the roots up. He hoped his story would open enough people's eyes to the issue that it would make some dent in the public consciousness. If, like his last three novels, it was optioned as a movie as well, it would have an even wider audience. But even if the movie deal never panned out, just the Clark Kent name on the cover almost guaranteed a spot on the Daily Planet best seller list. Not that he'd ever say that out loud; Clark had been raised better than that, and besides, his mother would box his ears if she ever heard even a hint of boasting from him. But he was experienced enough to know that it was true, nonetheless.

At eight-fifteen that evening, Clark's liveried Lincoln Town Car with tinted windows pulled up in front of the Jade Inn, Metropolis. Two doormen in the distinctive green jackets and black top hats of the world's premier hotel approached the car. As one man unloaded the leather suitcases from the car's trunk and placed them on a waiting cart, his companion opened the back door of the vehicle and stood at attention. As the car's occupant unfolded himself from the back seat, a third man in a crisp dark business suit emerged from the hotel's front door and addressed the new arrival.

"Welcome to the Jade Inn, Mr. Kent. My name is Basil Mosby. I am the general manager here at the Jade, Metropolis. We are delighted to have you staying with us. Mr. and Mrs. Ross arrived earlier this afternoon, and I believe that you will find everything in order in your suite. If there is anything my staff and I can do to make your stay more enjoyable, please do not hesitate to call for me."

Clark gave his host a cursory nod and a brief smile. "Thank you, Mr. Mosby. If you've passed Mrs. Ross's inspection, then I'm sure you have nothing to worry about from me. I'm certain you'll hear from her if there's anything we require."

"Of course, Mr. Kent, as you say. If you'll follow me, it will be my pleasure to show you to your suite. Right this way, please."

Clark buried his hands in the pockets of his wool herringbone pants and trailed after the manager. One long elevator ride later, the pair stepped onto the fifty-third floor of the Vernon tower and entered the Jade Inn's Presidential Suite. The striking red-head who emerged from the second bedroom gave Clark a welcoming

smile and bade Mr. Mosby goodnight with the assurance that everything was in order and nothing further would be required that evening. A glance through the door of the bedroom revealed that the luggage was already arranged on the bench at the foot of the king bed and was in the process of being unpacked.

As soon as the door of the suite closed behind the departing manager, Clark plopped down into one of the overstuffed chairs that adorned the suite's living room. He quickly toed off his fine leather shoes and draped one leg over the chair's arm. Giving the red-head a long-suffering sigh and a rakish grin, he implored her, "Lana, please tell me there are some good old-fashioned Levi's somewhere in that pile of luggage."

"What's the matter, Clark? Too many hours in a 'tin can' today?"

"Try too many hours in lambswool," her friend and employer replied. He stripped the offending sweater over his head and tossed it on the floor next to the shoes. "And hair mousse," he added, scrubbing both hands over his formerly smooth coif with a disgusted grunt. The result of this last gesture was to leave every strand of Clark's hair standing on end.

Ruthlessly suppressing the urge to laugh out loud at her friend's now-outlandish appearance, Lana frowned pointedly at the growing pile of clutter. But her tone was sympathetic as she admonished, "Pick up your things and go look on the chair in your bathroom. And wash your hair while you're in there. You look ridiculous."

"My bathroom has a chair?" Clark threw over his shoulder as he gathered his discarded clothing and headed for the bedroom.

"A chair *and* an ottoman. After all, you never know when you'll want to recline at your leisure while waiting for your bath to fill," Lana teased back. The only reply was the sound of running water.

Three minutes later, no one except his closest friends would have recognized the young man who emerged from the bedroom clad in blue jeans and a Midwest University tee-shirt. His damp hair, released from the prison of the hated mousse, rested in soft waves over his forehead and curled around his ears and neck. The sleek silver glasses that graced the jackets of every Clark Kent best seller had been traded in for an old-fashioned pair of horn rims. Even his posture was different. Martha Kent might be tempted to tell him that he was slouching, but Lana knew that he was simply relaxing. The public face of Clark Kent was a far cry from the small-town boy that he still remained at heart. This was Clark at home...or as close to home as Lana could make this suite for the next three weeks.

"My mother would have a cow if she saw this place, you know. So would your dad." Clark's remark was partially muffled by the oversized sweatshirt he was pulling over his head as he spoke. "You could house a good-sized family in this suite. It's almost obscene."

"You know what Pete says. Clark Kent has a reputation to maintain, and this," her expansive gesture encompassed the entire 1700 square feet of the suite, "is part of the image." Hearing her own words, Lana wondered anew whether it was really necessary to shoehorn Clark into this persona that made him so obviously uncomfortable. Once again she consoled herself with the thought that it was only a temporary state. A few weeks a year to run the publicity gauntlet, then Clark could go back to choosing whatever image he liked for the next undercover stint. Meanwhile, the Rich and Successful Writer façade sold books, and that was the whole point.

"What's wrong with the Holiday Inn?" Clark grumbled half-heartedly.

"You know perfectly well what's wrong with it, and I know you wouldn't stay at the Lexor if it were the last place in town, so this is what you get. Suck it up, farm boy."

"Yes, ma'am." Thus sufficiently chastened, at least for the

time being, Clark stuck both thumbs in the pockets of his long-anticipated blue jeans and gazed out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the lights which shone from the far side of the West River. "St. Martin's Island, right?" he called to Lana.

"Yep. Fort Hob's Park is right below us, but you can't see much in the dark. At least, most of us can't."

"Not much to see," Clark answered her, "just a couple of teenagers making out on one of the benches. Nothing you couldn't see behind the Smallville Dairy Freeze."

"Who's behind the Smallville Dairy Freeze?" came a new voice from the suite's front door.

"No one, Pete. Clark was just giving me the reconnaissance report on Metropolis's adolescent night crawlers. Sounds like they're not much different from Smallville's."

Pete crossed the living room to greet his wife with a kiss. "No, I don't guess they would be," he chuckled. "Hi, Clark. I see you got in okay."

"I didn't leave any fingerprints in the plane's armrest if that's what you mean. Everything okay downstairs?"

"Yep. I had a nice chat with the chief of security. He knows his stuff. You're not the first high-profile guest they've had here. I don't think we'll have any trouble." Clark acknowledged his friend with a silent nod and turned his attention back to the window. "Oh, I almost forgot." Pete reached into the pocket of his sport coat. "This arrived by messenger while I was down there."

Clark reached for the proffered envelope. A frown crossed his face as he read the enclosed invitation. "Luthor?" he scowled and tossed the card onto the nearest table.

"I know." Pete's tone was sympathetic. "But I don't think you can avoid it. The White Orchid Ball is *the* social event of the Metropolis season. To decline without a compelling and publicly explainable reason would raise a red flag that I think you'd best avoid. You're not ready to go public on him yet. You need to stay under his radar until you are."

Clark let out a defeated grunt. "You're right, as usual. Who can I ask? I don't know a soul in Metropolis, and Clark Kent can't show up at a social event without a date. Should I fly Zoe or Keiko in?"

"No need," Lana answered him. "Pete has business to attend to that night. Why don't you take me?"

Clark gave Pete a questioning glance. "What business do you have at 9:00 on a Friday night?"

Pete answered with a sheepish grin, "The Royals are in the playoffs."

"Ah. I see. In that case, would you mind, Pete?"

"No problem, Clark. You'll have the best-looking date in the room."

"No doubt." Clark smiled at Lana. "Okay, it's a date."

"I'll phone in the RSVP tomorrow. For now, I'm taking myself and my husband off to bed. See you in the morning, Clark." Lana grabbed her husband by the hand and pulled him behind her into the suite's master bedroom.

Clark returned to the window. From the fifty-third floor, he could see the lights of the city spread out beneath him like a meadow of fireflies. He'd been in cities all over the world, but this was his first visit to Metropolis. He'd seen scores of cityscapes before. He didn't understand why this particular view wouldn't let him go.

Friday came, and Lois Lane was a woman on a mission. Months of calls hadn't gotten her as much as one telephone conversation with the elusive Mr. Luthor, but tonight she'd be an invited guest at his own ball. There was no way he could avoid her. The trick was to make that first impression count. She had to grab his attention from the start and not let it go until she had what she came for.

Perry wanted her to change targets, from Lex Luthor to Clark Kent. But why? Kent was a brilliant disguise artist — every one with a pulse knew that — but so what? What had he done with his talents? Written a few page-turners for popular consumption? Made a mint on story rights for movies aimed at your average fourteen-year-old male? What was so special about that? Okay, so he made the rounds of the morning talk shows and threw in a few comments about education for poor kids in India — in between flashing that famous smile and fielding questions about his latest rumored celebrity hook-up. What was that compared to all the good that Lex Luthor did right here in Metropolis? No, even without having read his books, Lois was pretty sure that Clark Kent was about as deep as the average morning television viewer. Lex Luthor was the real prize, and she was going to land him tonight.

The air was thick with ozone as Clark stepped from the hansom cab in front of the LexTower that Friday night. He scanned the sky briefly before turning to help Lana from the cab. The storm would break any minute now, but not before they made it inside. The light flashing around them at the moment came not from the sky, but from the dozen or so photographers who crowded the velvet rope at the edge of the red carpet leading to the LexTower's front door. Clark noticed that Lana had tucked her left hand into the crook of his arm. She never missed a beat, did she? Between Clark Kent's patented smile and the mysterious red head in the Vera Wang gown on his arm, their picture was sure to grace at least one society page. And no one would be able to see Lana's wedding ring when it did.

"Mr. Kent! Who's your lady friend?" "Miss, over here! Look this way!" "Clark! What happened to the blonde you were with in Gotham?" "What's your name, Red?" "Never the same girl twice, eh Kent?" The paparazzi bombarded the couple with questions, clamoring for their attention with such a cacophony that no one would have been able to hear any answer they might have chosen to give. Not that it mattered in the least; everyone there knew that no answers would be forthcoming anyway. What they really wanted was for Clark and his date to turn their faces in their directions. Fighting off the urge to duck as if they were dashing through a downpour of rain rather than questions, Clark simply smiled down at Lana and guided her gently through the door. The sudden quiet as the doorman closed the door behind them was a welcome relief.

A second doorman quickly showed the couple to the express elevator, which deposited them directly in the foyer of Lex Luthor's penthouse. A servant stepped forward to take Clark's overcoat and Lana's cashmere shawl. As was his habit in any new environs, Clark quickly memorized the layout of the entire floor. In addition to the elevator they had arrived in, there were three more, including a hidden one in Luthor's private office, and one fireproofed staircase in the building's central core. Dozens of windows would have offered easy egress, except that only the ones overlooking balconies — of which there were four on this level — actually opened. The penthouse included a gourmet kitchen, dining room, four bedrooms, several sitting areas, an office with a prominent display of ancient weapons, a library, and, of course, the ballroom, where Lana was leading Clark gently by the elbow.

Leaning in with a mischievous half-smile, his date whispered, "So tell me, Clark, did you happen to note the location of the powder room? Or is that on a need-to-know basis?"

Clark smiled back and answered, "Since you might need to know, I suppose I can tell you; take the hallway just past the buffet table. First door on the left."

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind for future reference. Now let's find the bar. I wonder what Zinfandel Luthor's serving tonight?"

"Really? I've never known you to drink on the job."

"Who's on the job? Pete's got his feet up, spilling popcorn all over the Jade's designer sofa as we speak. I'm just out on the town with my high school crush." And with that, she poked Clark in the ribs and headed for the bar. Clark quickly caught up with her and joined her in the short line there.

"So you're telling me that I'm just a fill-in to while away the time while your true love has abandoned you for the boys of summer," he teased.

"You got it, farm boy."

Ten minutes later, having procured two glasses of wine and a plate of hors d'oeuvres, the couple was slowly making their way to a table near the dance floor. Slowly, because they were constantly detained by "gentle readers," as Clark called them in the privacy of his own mind, who were eager to make small talk with their favorite adventure writer. Clark had a polite smile plastered on his face and was running on conversational autopilot while a matronly lady in pale pink rhapsodized about the beauty of the Taj Mahal. He was trying to formulate something suitably amusing to say in response when his attention was suddenly and inexplicably hijacked.

A woman had entered the room. She was medium height, slender build, with dark hair swept up into some kind of twist, except for spiraling tendrils that framed her face. She was dressed in dark blue, and her head had a confident tilt. She was beautiful. Clark had a strange sense of déjà-vu. It was just like the window that first night in Metropolis. Clark had seen many beautiful women in his life, and, objectively speaking, this one was by no means the most glamorous or refined woman he'd ever seen, but something about her drew his gaze, and he couldn't turn away. And then she spoke.

"Lex Luthor! Why haven't you returned my calls?" Her strong, confident voice carried over the buzz of conversation and music that filled the room. From his place at the bottom of a spiral staircase, their host turned at the sound of his name. Luthor's look of surprise quickly turned to one of admiration.

"Lois Lane," the woman said by way of introduction, "Daily Planet."

"I can assure you," Luthor replied smoothly, "I'll never make that mistake again."

Wow. She had moxie, Clark had to give her that. It had been a risk, calling Luthor out like that in front of all his guests, but it looked like it was paying off. He'd read her work, of course, but now Clark was getting a first-hand glimpse of what made Lois Lane a top-notch reporter. He was fascinated.

Clark never returned to that conversation about the Taj Mahal. He just kept watching Lois Lane and Lex Luthor dance, and, without consciously realizing it, even listened in on their conversation. Which was why Clark was acutely aware of Lois Lane's discomfort when Luthor made a move that surprised her. Luthor drew Ms. Lane close with a motion that was more of a grab than a caress, and spoke into her ear in a predatory growl. "Why don't we make it dinner?" Luthor was saying, and Clark couldn't help muttering, "That's close enough."

Without thinking through the consequences of what he was about to do, Clark found himself tapping Luthor on the shoulder. At least he managed to suppress the scowl that wanted to form on his face and give a charming smile instead. "Do you mind if I cut in?" he asked in his most ingratiating high society manner.

If Luthor was angry about the interruption, he hid it well. But then, hiding things was what Lex Luthor did best. He stepped gracefully away from Lois Lane and motioned for Clark to take his place, meanwhile cordially introducing, "Lois Lane, Clark Kent. Clark Kent, Lois Lane." Giving Lois's hand a kiss in parting, Luthor remarked, "It's been a pleasure, Ms. Lane. One I hope to have again soon."

As Clark gathered Lois into his arms and turned her smoothly into the dance, he favored her with his most winning smile. At

least, it usually won. At the moment, however, it was being met with a recalcitrant glare.

“Mr. Kent, do you have any idea what you’ve just done? I was *that* close to landing an interview. Do you realize how long I’ve been trying to gain access to Lex Luthor?”

Clark was taken aback. This wasn’t the reaction he normally got when he danced with a beautiful woman. “I’m sorry. It looked to me like he was getting a little too close for comfort. I didn’t mean to interfere with your scheme.”

Lois made a visible effort to calm herself. “It wasn’t a scheme. It was a . . . plan.” The calming didn’t seem to be working very well, though, because her next words were laced with frustration. “And now it’s shot to hell.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Clark soothed. “I’m sure he’ll be delighted to have the next dance. You can pick up right where you left off.”

“No, I can’t.” She spoke with the exaggerated patience of a person explaining the obvious to an imbecile. “I’ve lost the element of surprise. He might dance with me all night, but he’ll never agree to an interview now. He’ll have his guard up.”

Oops. She had a point. He didn’t know what had made him want to come riding in to her rescue, but she obviously hadn’t needed it, and now she was short one high-profile interview. On impulse, he offered, “Let me make it up to you.”

She raised a skeptical brow. “How?”

“By offering a substitute. I know I’m no Lex Luthor, but I can at least give you an interview myself.”

Lois’s mouth twisted into a wry half-smile. “You know, that’s almost funny. My editor’s been after me to try to get an interview with you. I chose to go after Mr. Luthor instead, and I had a good reason to.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. You see, no offense, Mr. Kent, but your interviews are a dime a dozen. You’ve given at least eight of them this week alone.”

“Not to you,” Clark persisted, giving the charming smile another try.

She looked at him thoughtfully. “You’re serious? You’re offering me a real, in-depth, Lois Lane interview? You should know I don’t do puff pieces.”

“I’ve read your work, Ms. Lane. I know its caliber.”

“You’ve never given a serious interview before.” The look she gave him was in transition from skeptical to appraising.

“I’ve never met Lois Lane before.”

The music ended and Clark released her from his embrace. Just as their arms lost contact with each other, Lois gave a decisive nod. “Mr. Kent,” she said, holding out her hand for him to shake, “you’ve got yourself a deal.”

As she strode away across the room, Clark wondered what he had just gotten himself into.

On the opposite side of the dance floor, Lois wondered the same thing.

By the next night, Clark was happy to be back in his blue jeans, unburdening himself to his folks over a simple supper in Smallville.

“I don’t understand,” Martha Kent said, lifting a third slice of meatloaf onto her son’s plate. “What’s so awful about an interview with Lois Lane? You must have done at least a hundred interviews in the last four years. What’s so special about this one?”

“It’s with Lois Lane.”

“So you’ve said.”

“She’s brilliant. Have you read her articles? She’s already stipulated that this is not going to be a typical PR puff piece. This woman asks questions that no one else would think of. She gets people to admit things that they don’t even realize they’re

admitting until it’s too late. And when I’m in the same room with her, my tongue disconnects from my brain, which is how I ended up agreeing to this interview in the first place.”

“So cancel it. You can’t afford for an ace reporter like Lois Lane to dig too deep,” Jonathan Kent warned.

“No. I’ll be okay, Dad. I’ll just have to stay on my toes. I promised her an interview, and I’m not going to back out of it now.”

“Well, if it really worries you, why don’t you bring Lana or Pete along?” Martha suggested. “That way if things get out of hand they can come up with some excuse to cut the interview short.”

“Actually, I was already planning on having both of them there anyway. I often do T.V. or radio promos in the studios, but the print media usually like to come to me. I think they’re looking for some insight into Clark Kent’s character by seeing him on his home turf.”

“And they have no clue that his real home turf is this house and not the Presidential Suite at the Jade,” Lana put in.

“Clark,” Martha said in a half-teasing tone, “you do realize you’re talking about yourself in the third person, don’t you?”

“Maybe, Mom. Sometimes I’m not so sure.” Clark stirred his peas around with his fork as he spoke, not meeting his mother’s eyes. “I’ve spent so long creating this public persona, I’m not sure that Clark Kent is really me any more. Sometimes I wish I’d taken a pen name right at the beginning. Then I would still have my own name for the real me instead of loaning it to some cardboard cut-out.”

“Clark Jerome Kent! There is nothing cardboard or one-dimensional about who you are or what you do. You’ve brought important issues into the public eye. AIDS, immigration, child labor — these are issues that affect the poorest and most vulnerable people who have no one else to give them a voice. I am proud of what you do, and you should be, too.”

“I know, Mom. I am proud of it. I love going undercover and researching the background for my books. And the writing itself is a blast. And you’re right, the issues I highlight in my stories are important and I’m glad I can get the public thinking about them. But if I’m going to reach enough people to really influence public policy, it’s not enough to have great stories about important issues. I’ve also got to have a certain public image myself. That’s what gets the movie deals and the publicity spots. Lana and Pete are terrific at knowing what sells. I just wish sometimes that I wasn’t selling off *me* in the process.”

“Oh, honey, I’ve never heard you so cynical. It’s just not like you.”

“He’s been Clark too long, that’s what it is.” Pete put his two cents in around a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

“What do you mean?” asked Martha.

Pete swallowed before answering. “I mean that when he’s in his Clark Kent persona, he’s actually the least able to be himself, and it makes him cranky.”

Martha and Jonathan were both giving him puzzled frowns now, so Pete explained, “Think about it. If Clark pulls one of his stunts when he’s undercover in India or Bangkok, he just disappears and no one is the wiser. Who cares what happens to some drifter dock-hand or migrant factory worker anyway? But if he pulls something as Clark Kent and gets caught, he has no way out. Everyone knows that face; he just can’t risk it. And that makes him cranky.”

“Hmmm. I see your point. Clark?” Martha turned to her son for his reaction.

“I’ve never really thought it through that clearly, but yeah. That’s pretty much it. It’s pretty ironic, but the times when I’m being the ‘real me’ are actually the times I feel the least like the real me, if that makes any sense.”

“Actually, it does,” Martha answered. Her lips pursed and her

eyes narrowed in contemplation. “Now I’ll just have to see what I can do about that.”

“Mom? What are you cooking up in that crafty old head of yours?” Clark gave his mother a suspicious half-frown.

“That’s for me to know. Once I figure it out. And I’m not that old.”

“No, you’re not,” Clark agreed with a laugh. He gathered his dishes and stood to carry them to the sink. Then he returned and planted a kiss on the top of his mom’s head. “And you still make the best meatloaf in Lowell County.”

Lois stood in front of her bedroom mirror in the fourth dress of the evening. The three discards lay strewn across her bed. This one should work, at last. If she’d been conducting an interview during normal business hours, she wouldn’t be having this problem. But, since Clark Kent’s daytime hours were booked up for the next several days, she was joining him for dinner. In his suite. Which made the wardrobe decision tricky. The first three dresses were appropriate for dinner at the Jade, but they were a little too...suggestive...for a business meeting. She knew Kent’s reputation as a ladies’ man, and she had no intention of giving him the wrong impression about her agenda for the evening. Lois Lane was all business, and he’d better believe it. The simple black cocktail dress she now wore was dressy enough for evening wear yet conservative enough to maintain her professional distance. Yes, it would do nicely.

Lois still wasn’t quite sure why she was the one about to interview the charming Mr. Kent. Despite Perry’s enthusiasm for the idea, this was really more Cat’s department. But she’d been in the right place at the right time, which, as Perry never tired of pointing out, was 50% of what a good reporter did. So, armed with a weekend of skimming Kent’s last four books and a notepad full of questions, Lois was determined to do her best to drum up a story worthy of the Lane byline. As she’d told the man on Friday, Lois Lane didn’t do puff pieces.

Thirty minutes later, Lois emerged onto the fifty-third floor of the Vernon Tower and knocked on the door of the Presidential Suite. She couldn’t quite hide her surprised recognition upon seeing who opened it. The woman was dressed in a simple knee-length sheath in deep blue, and her straight, red hair was pulled back in a sleek ponytail, but there could be no mistake; this was definitely Clark Kent’s mystery date from the White Orchid Ball. Lois caught the suppressed amusement in the woman’s green eyes as she waved Lois into the suite.

“Ms. Lane, please come in. Mr. Kent is in the study, but he’ll be right out. I’m Lana Ross, Mr. Kent’s personal assistant.” Lois shook the woman’s hand and allowed herself to be led to the loveseat of the suite’s living room. “What can I get you to drink?”

“Just seltzer if you’ve got it,” Lois replied. She didn’t know why, but she didn’t like the idea of the striking redhead being such a close associate of Mr. Kent’s.

“Lime with that?” Ms. Ross called from the kitchen. What was she talking about? Oh, yes, the drink.

“Sure. Thanks.” Lois needed to stop wondering just how personal this woman’s assistance was and focus on the job at hand.

She was saved from her unfruitful pondering by the emergence of Clark Kent from the suite’s mahogany-paneled study. Through the study’s door, Lois glimpsed an open laptop computer and a small stack of notepads arranged in a much more orderly fashion than the larger pile which currently graced her own desk back at the Planet. Remember that he’s a writer, too, she thought. She should be able to use that common ground in this interview.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Mr. Kent said by way of greeting. He was dressed in gray wool slacks and a black

cashmere sweater. He looked good. But then, Clark Kent always looked good. It was part of his job.

“I see Lana has made you welcome,” he added, smiling at his assistant as she handed Lois her seltzer with lime. Lois nodded her thanks. Mr. Kent lowered himself smoothly into the armchair catty-corner to Lois, his body angled to face her.

“No problem, Mr. Kent. I just got here a minute ago. Thank you for making time for me.”

“Please, call me Clark.” He smiled warmly.

“Only if you’ll call me Lois.”

“Gladly.” Their eyes met, and there was a brief suspension of time before Clark suddenly said, “Anyway, it’s the least I can do after blowing your best-laid plan at the ball. Besides, we all have to eat anyway. We might as well have an interesting conversation while we dine.”

After a brief glance around the room, Clark turned an inquiring eye on Lana Ross, who was quietly puttering in the suite’s open kitchen. “Where’s Pete?” he called.

“He was at the radio studio getting set up for tomorrow’s interview, but he should be back any minute now,” she replied. At that moment the front door of the suite opened and Ms. Ross greeted the man who came through it with a cheerful, “Speak of the devil!”

“Should my ears be burning?” the trim blond man asked, crossing the room in easy strides. Not waiting for an answer, he held his hand out to Lois and introduced himself. “Sorry I’m late, Ms. Lane. I’m Pete Ross, Clark’s one-man security detail. You’d think by now that I’d remember to leave extra time for rush hour in the big city, but somehow I always underestimate it.” Lois doubted that Clark Kent’s security chief was as laid-back as he was trying to appear. More likely something had come up that he didn’t want to discuss in front of a stranger.

Lana Ross, Pete Ross — Lois liked where that thought was leading. Her assumption was confirmed when Lana appeared at Mr. Ross’s side and said, “Pete, why don’t you help me with drinks for the two of us and Clark?”

“Sure, hon.” The blond man followed the redhead into the kitchen, one hand coming to rest gently at the small of her back. Lois didn’t understand why the sight gave her such a sense of relief.

While his employees were busy in the kitchen, Clark leaned toward Lois and said in a soft voice, “I hope you don’t mind the Rosses joining us for dinner. It’s partly for your own protection.”

“I beg your pardon?” What did he mean by that?

Clark appeared to realize how awkward his phrasing had been and hastened to clarify. “Half the staff of this hotel already knows that you are in my rooms after normal business hours. Once dinner arrives and the waiter sees the Rosses dining with us, it will be clear that the meeting is strictly professional, especially if you can manage to have a notebook and pen in hand at the time.”

Lois was puzzled by his reasoning. “I hope you won’t take this the wrong way, Clark, but you already have quite a reputation as a ladies’ man. Surely one more assignation won’t ruin you in the eyes of your adoring public.”

“You mistake my meaning,” he smiled. “If I wanted another notch in that belt, I would have invited Catherine Grant rather than Lois Lane. As you say, one more rumor can’t hurt me any. But I imagine that being whispered to be Clark Kent’s latest conquest wouldn’t do much for your professional reputation.”

“And it would for Cat’s?” Clark merely raised one eyebrow in response. Lois gave a wry smile in acknowledgement of her own flawed reasoning. “Never mind. Forget I said that.”

Lois was spared further embarrassment by the arrival of the promised dinner. As the waiter arranged the items on the dining table, Lois made sure to remove her notepad and pen from her purse and ask in a clear voice which the waiter was sure to hear,

“Mr. Kent, do you mind if we conduct our interview while we eat? I have an early start in the morning and I can’t stay late.”

“Not at all, Ms. Lane,” Clark replied just as clearly. “Please bring your notes to the table and we’ll get started as soon as everything’s ready.”

The waiter finished his preparations and rolled the cart out of the suite. As the door closed behind him and Lana ladled lobster bisque into bone china bowls, Lois addressed her subject.

“Let’s start with some ground rules. As we discussed earlier, I don’t conduct the sort of softball interviews you are accustomed to. I am well aware that you have never given an in-depth interview before, so I’m not going to assume that you know how this works. Stop me if I’m wrong.” Barely pausing for Clark’s nod of acquiescence, Lois continued, “First off, you need to understand that the fact of our interview does not guarantee that an article will actually be printed. I won’t know until we’re finished whether I have enough newsworthy material to make a publishable piece. If not, no harm, no foul. Agreed?”

“Agreed. What else?”

Lois swallowed the one bite of soup she’d been able to get in and went on. It was a shame to be distracted from food this good, but she had a job to do.

“Second, I get to ask whatever I want. If you don’t want to answer, you don’t have to. The more you tell me, the better article I can write, but it’s your choice. If you do choose to answer, I’ll assume that it’s for the record unless you tell me otherwise. If you tell me something off the record, that’s how it will stay. I don’t betray my sources, but I do ask that you tell me the truth. Are we clear? Does that sound fair to you?”

“Yes. That sounds very fair.”

“You sound surprised. Were you expecting anything less?”

Lois got another bite of soup in while she waited for Kent to answer.

“No, not at all. I know you’re a fair-minded reporter. I wouldn’t have invited you if you weren’t. I guess I just didn’t expect you to be so...up front. I picture you as more of the dig-out-what-they-don’t-want-to-tell-you type.”

“You’ve heard about Mad Dog Lane, then. Believe me, Clark, if you were a criminal under my investigation I would not be nearly this open with you. You wouldn’t even know I was looking into you until your name was plastered across the Planet’s front page. But this is an entirely different situation.”

“Fair enough.” He smiled that charming smile again.

Glancing at Mr. and Ms. Ross in turn, Clark asked, “All set, then?”

“Almost,” Lana interjected. She turned a smile of her own on Lois and calmly said, “We want to preview the article.”

Lois nearly choked on her last bite of soup. “I beg your pardon?” she managed without dribbling anything down her chin.

“We want to see a copy before you go to print. If we don’t approve, you can either make the changes we ask for or drop the story.”

“I know what a preview means, Ms. Ross. That’s a highly unusual request. It’s not Planet policy.”

“You have the first in-depth interview with the top fiction writer in the country. I’m sure you can bend the rules this one time.” Lana’s smile never wavered, but neither did her gaze. If Lois said “No,” she’d be going home with a full stomach and an empty notebook.

“Deal.” With every ounce of self-control she possessed, Lois swallowed her pride and turned her most disarming smile on her subject. “Let’s get started, shall we?”

It wasn’t working. For the umpteenth time that night, Lois leaned back from her keyboard, stretched her tense shoulder muscles, let out a frustrated sigh, and asked the ceiling, “What am I missing?” For the third time, she got up from her sofa,

stepped over the cord of her laptop computer, marched into her kitchen, opened her freezer, bemoaned the lack of chocolate ice cream, and shut it again with a bang.

Why wouldn’t this article come together? It had been a lovely dinner. She could still taste the chocolate torte. The four of them, but mostly Lois and Clark, had talked for almost two hours. She had pages full of notes. But, no matter how she tried to rearrange her thoughts and impressions, they just wouldn’t gel into a Lane-worthy article.

Closing the laptop so that she wouldn’t have to stare at the blinking cursor, Lois plopped into the corner of her sofa, tucked her feet under her, and set about reviewing her notes. Again.

There was her summary of Kent’s last four novels. She’d been forced to admit to herself that they were better than she’d given him credit for. She’d been up half one night finishing the one with the young girl who was a domestic slave in a diplomat’s home in suburban Maryland. She wasn’t the main character, and there was a lot of international intrigue and spies double-crossing other spies in the plot, but the plight of the child was what stayed in the reader’s mind after all the shooting was over.

There was her underlined scrawl of “Smallville off limits.” Clark had been adamant about protecting his parents and childhood neighbors from being besieged by an endless stream of curiosity seekers. “I realize that the entertainment beat is not your area of expertise, so I don’t expect you to know this, but you’ll forgive me for being blunt: If anyone even remotely connected with the Daily Planet turns up anywhere in Lowell County asking questions of anyone I know, and it gets back to me — which it would, believe me — this will be the last communication of any kind between myself, my staff, or my agents and the Daily Planet. That means no interviews, no press conferences, no questions, no releases, no advance copies of my books for review, nothing. Are we clear?” Oh, yes. Clear as glass.

There were the box office dollar figures for the movie versions of his books. A list of women he’d been seen with in the last year. Nothing there that Cat Grant couldn’t have dug up.

The more interesting stuff began when she’d asked him about his undercover work. “Clark, you are famous for the undercover investigations that provide the background material for your novels — so much so that your name is synonymous with a brilliant disguise. Aren’t you worried that your very fame will begin to undermine your ability to travel incognito?”

He’d shrugged and answered easily, “You’ve done undercover work yourself. You don’t seem worried about the same problem.”

“That’s because I won’t allow my picture to be published with my byline,” she’d persisted. “People may know my name, but not my face. Your face is one of the most photographed in the world, recognizable to millions — how then are you able to go unnoticed in your undercover work?”

He’d smiled in reply and taken a slightly didactic tone, as if explaining to a young child that her teacher had a home and didn’t live at school. “Lois, take a good look at me. I have olive skin, brown eyes, and dark hair. That makes me the same general description as most of the people in the world. I also have a natural talent for languages. Those two facts mean that, with the right choice of clothing, I can pass for a native just about anywhere outside of sub-Saharan Africa or northern Europe. And even there I can pass for an immigrant. When you look at me tonight, you see Clark Kent, famous American writer; but put me in a tattered pair of shorts and a faded t-shirt, add a couple of day’s grime and some good, honest sweat, plus the ability to curse a blue streak in over a dozen languages, and I could be anyone — a Latino farm hand, a Pacific fisherman, a Middle-Eastern guest laborer. I’ve been mistaken for Japanese, Italian, Filipino, Native American, Spanish, Arab, Latino, and high-caste Indian. My dad says I missed my calling; the CIA would have

loved me.”

“But if everyone knows that you could be anyone at any time, won’t they expect it? What’s to stop the bad guys from just assuming that every dock hand is actually you in disguise so you won’t get the true story on them?”

“I wish they would. If every boss in the world treated their employees as if they might be Clark Kent in disguise, I would never need to write another book. I’m like the cop with the radar gun. He doesn’t really want to give out speeding tickets; he just wants everyone to slow down. I do my undercover work and write my novels because I want the American public to be aware of the way most of the world lives, of the problems they face on a daily basis. My hope is that at least some of my readers will be moved enough that they will be supportive the next time a policy change is put forward in Congress or a non-profit development agency is raising funds. Maybe some of them will even become leaders in those fields themselves. That’s not my gift. My gift is writing. I’m just trying to do a little good with it in the process. I’m sure you can relate.” He seemed to realize that his passion had run away with him, and he set down the fork he had been waving as he spoke and carefully rearranged the napkin on his lap. “In any case,” he said in a calmer voice, “the bottom line in undercover work is the same for everyone: People see what they expect to see.”

It was at that point that Lana Ross had jumped in and turned the conversation to the delights and pitfalls of international travel. Why? Why had Kent’s personal assistant been so eager to change the subject? What had Clark Kent said that impelled his assistant to interrupt him so abruptly?

“That’s it!” Lois threw her notebook down next to her laptop and clapped her hands. “That’s what she didn’t want me to see!” She addressed her empty living room with her revelation. “That’s why it won’t gel. ‘People see what they expect to see,’ and Clark Kent the Writer is just another role. He’s not real!”

The sense of triumph was short-lived. Lois’s initial instinct had been to write up the article using this new epiphany as the core of the piece. Clark Kent was not really in the writing game for the entertainment value. He was a crusader who masqueraded as an entertainer. And, now that she thought about it, she doubted that his “best selling pop culture adventure writer” role was among his favorites. He didn’t seem very comfortable in it, and over the course of the dinner the mask had been in constant danger of slipping, as it had when he’d given his passionate little speech with the waving fork.

But, for some reason she wasn’t quite sure of, Clark Kent valued that mask. He seemed to believe — and perhaps he would know more about this than she would, she reluctantly admitted to herself — that playing that role somehow made his books and movies more attractive to the general public than they would be if he were more open and straightforward about his motives. Maybe it was as simple as the idea that people didn’t like to be lectured. Clark Kent might be on a mission to expose the injustices in the world, but Joe Regular was just looking for a good movie on a Friday night.

Of course, her natural impulse was to write the “gotcha!” article. Oh, how she wished she hadn’t agreed to that preview! She could break her promise and write the article anyway. What did she care if Lana Ross was mad at her? But Clark Kent had connections everywhere, and Lois couldn’t afford to get a reputation for going back on her word. No source would ever trust her again. Argh! This was exactly why the puff pieces should be left to the Cat Grants of the world. Lois was never cornered into a preview agreement with the bad guys. Everything was much simpler with them.

Well, that just plain stank. Now she was going to have to either break her promise and blow Clark Kent’s cover, massage what she had into something printable but not really true, or

quash the story. It was late. She’d sleep on it and make a decision in the morning.

But sleeping on it didn’t make the decision any easier. By morning Lois was really starting to wonder about this double life that Clark Kent was apparently leading. He had the makings of a terrific investigator. That subplot about the servant girl could have sparked an entire investigative series in a paper like the Planet. It still would if Lois had anything to say about it. And he obviously cared. That little speech that Lana Ross had cut him off from proved that.

Ah, the lovely Ms. Ross. Lois wondered if she was the source of the trouble. She was the PR part of the Kent publicity machine. Maybe she was also the force behind Clark’s apparent compulsion to hide his investigative lamp under a bushel of “Entertainment Tonight” fluff. She might not even be doing it for nefarious reasons. Maybe she honestly believed that Kent’s novels wouldn’t sell as well without all the window-dressing, that being too serious would lose him readers. Maybe it even would — what did Lois know about literary marketing? Still, Clark Kent was too good a talent to waste on MoviePlex blockbusters. If he really wanted to change the world he should go about it more directly.

There had to be a way to get through to him. Unfortunately, it wasn’t going to happen with this article. Lois had already agreed to a preview — a mistake she never intended to repeat — and she was up to her ears in the Messenger investigation. She’d asked Perry for a task force, but there hadn’t been anyone else available to help.

No, there wasn’t much she could do this week, but she’d get back to Mr. Kent. Let Lana Ross think that Lois had written Kent off for now. After a while, things at work would calm down and Lois would have time to worry about how to get Clark Kent to herself for a couple of hours without Lana there to change the subject.

Clark and the Rosses were in Smallville when the call came. It had been several days since the interview, and Clark was busy modeling skin-tight costumes for Martha. The farmhouse phone rang, and even though she hated to miss the chance to rib Clark about the leopard-skin print he was currently sporting, Lana ducked into the kitchen to pick it up; she’d had all of Clark’s phone calls forwarded to the Kents’ line, and she didn’t want anyone who thought they were calling Metropolis to wind up talking to the Kent Farms answering machine.

Martha was holding a blue and red outfit out to Clark when Lana reappeared.

“Well, you can stop worrying that you said too much to Lois Lane,” Lana told Clark. “She’s not going to print the article.” At Clark’s surprised look, Lana just shrugged her shoulders. “She said something about not having anything usable that Cat Grant couldn’t have printed and not being a mud-slinging rumor-monger. I guess the playboy act worked well enough after all.”

Clark wondered why he felt disappointed rather than relieved. He had really worried that he’d given himself away. Lois Lane had a talent for making him say things he never meant to. It was a *good* thing that she still thought he was as shallow as he pretended to be, right? Now he could tackle this crazy idea of his mother’s with one less worry on his mind.

Actually, that blue and red outfit didn’t look too bad. Maybe this would work after all.

This was *not* how Clark had planned to debut his new identity.

His mom had convinced him that, with a flashy costume and an otherworldly aloofness, his I’m-Here-To-Help persona would allow him to respond to the emergencies that he couldn’t ignore without endangering his so-called real life. After all, Clark was a

pro at creating characters that looked and acted nothing like Clark Kent. The only difference would be that his new character would be designed to stand out, not to blend in. He thought it had a good chance of succeeding. As he'd told Lois Lane the other night, people saw what they expected to see, and the last thing anyone would expect would be for the flashy Flying Hero to be a world-famous writer in disguise. For this persona, he'd ditched his glasses altogether and slicked his hair back with gel in a way that was more severe than the softer moussed style Clark usually wore in public. Besides, as his mom had pointed out, people weren't likely to be focusing on his face.

Still, he had hoped for something small to start out with — a trial balloon, as it were — not a nationally televised shuttle launch. But he couldn't let all those colonists perish when he might be able to help them, so here he was, flying in to the rescue.

Oh, no. The universe hated him. That had to be it, because of all the people who might be stowed away on the Prometheus shuttle pointing to a ticking bomb, the one he encountered was Lois Lane, the world's best investigative reporter and the one person outside of his inner circle who had spent the most time one-on-one with Clark Kent in the last year. Talk about baptism by fire! But that bomb was ticking away, so it was too late to back out now. His 'hide in plain sight' theory was about to get the acid test whether he liked it or not.

Apparently, it worked, because as Hero Guy sheepishly excused himself from his bomb-induced burp, Lois did not say, "I know you! You're Clark Kent, that smarmy Tom Clancy wannabe I couldn't get a decent interview out of last week!"

Instead, she gaped at him and blurted, "What the hell are you?"

Clark just smiled.

The cursor blinked. Clark stared at the screen. The cursor continued to blink.

He was supposed to be writing. It wasn't often these days that Clark got a free afternoon. Between book tour interviews, social events, and Superman rescues, the past two weeks had been even more hectic than usual. But this Monday afternoon was miraculously free of commitments, and he had planned to write up a list of questions, or character sketches, or plot points, or *something* for his next book. With a sigh of frustration, Clark closed the laptop. He needed to stretch his legs. He wandered out of the hotel suite's study and began idly pacing back and forth in the living room, letting his gaze travel out over the Metropolis skyline.

This was all Lois Lane's fault. Ever since he had flown with her through the open sky, her slim body cradled in his arms and her silky hair brushing against his neck, ever since she had stared into his eyes with that look of enraptured adoration, he couldn't concentrate on anything else. And that was a problem with no solution, because there wasn't much chance of him holding her in his arms again any time soon.

There was no way a superficial character like Clark Kent stood a snowball's chance in Hell with Lois Lane. Superman, on the other hand, had obviously captured her interest, but he wasn't likely to see her again, either. After all, there were billions of people in the world, millions in Metropolis alone. How likely was it that the same person would need rescuing more than once in a blue moon?

There was the obvious option of having Superman give Lois an interview. Every reporter on the Eastern Seaboard was trying to track down Superman for the exclusive of a lifetime. But, given how disastrously his last interview with Lois Lane had gone, he didn't relish the prospect of another one. Besides, an interview wouldn't give him an excuse to touch her, to hold her. It might be worse than not seeing her at all. Barely.

Clark's melancholy musing was interrupted by Lana's concerned voice. "Still debating whether to stay in Metropolis after the tour? You've only got a week left. Should I be looking into long-term rentals?" Clark gave his assistant a startled blink. He must really be distracted if he hadn't even noticed her curled up in the corner of the sofa with the latest copy of *People*. Lana held the magazine up for Clark to see. "Nice shot of you and the Star's entertainment editor at the 'Riverdance' opening. What was her name again?"

As if Lana didn't know. She never forgot a name, or the face that went with it. She was obviously trying to nudge Clark out of his funk. "Melissa something," was his distracted reply.

Lana put her magazine down and gave her friend her undivided attention. "Her name is Melanie Morgan, not Melissa. Seriously, Clark, what's bothering you? Are you still worried about Luthor and his tests?"

"Huh?" After a confused moment, Clark's brain caught up with Lana's question. He stopped pacing and, leaning against the back of an armchair, regarded her over it. "No, not really," he replied. "I've dealt with his type before. If Superman gives in to that kind of blackmail it just lets the bad guys win. And Mom was right: it's the idea of Superman that's important, even if he can't be everywhere at once."

"So what's the trouble, then? You're obsessing over something. Are you still thinking about making Metropolis a more permanent base for Superman and Clark Kent? You hate big cities. Is it really that important to stay in one place just to prove Luthor wrong?"

"No, it's not about Luthor. At least not only about him. I admit that part of me wants to stay here just to make Superman a fly in Luthor's ointment, but it's bigger than that."

"Superman could find things to do anywhere on Earth, you know. Metropolis doesn't hold the monopoly on crime or disaster."

Clark waved a dismissive hand and shook his head. "I know that, and we hashed this all out last night. Superman doesn't need to stay in one city. And it's unlikely that anyone would connect him with Clark Kent's travel itinerary." His eyes went back to the city spread out below him. "No, it's something else. Something I can't put my finger on. I don't know what it is. I just have a gut feeling that I need to be here, at least for a while."

"Superman! Help!"

He knew that voice. "Lois Lane's in trouble," he told Lana as he strode toward the master bedroom's balcony. In seconds Clark was in the Suit and in the air.

Why was Lois's voice coming from the sky above him rather than the city streets below? Clark scanned the sky with his telescopic vision. He could hear her repeating his new name, "Superman, Superman, Superman!" over and over, but where was she? Finally, he saw her. She sounded truly panicked now, and Clark quickly realized why. Lois was 15,000 feet up, and in free fall.

Quickly Clark zoomed to her side and scooped her into his arms.

"You really can read minds!" she exclaimed in breathless relief.

"No," Clark couldn't help smiling as he cradled her again, "but I do have pretty good hearing."

Lois grinned back at him. "Thank goodness for that!" she said. "For a minute there I was afraid I was about to prove Trask wrong the hard way."

"Trask?" Clark didn't know who or what Lois was talking about.

"A rogue military nutcase who thinks you're trying to take over the planet."

"Your newspaper?" Why would Superman want to take over a newspaper? She wasn't making any sense.

“No, not the Daily Planet. Planet Earth. The whole world. If you’ll take me back to my office I can explain the whole story to you.”

“Actually, we’re already there,” Clark replied, depositing Lois gently on the roof of the famous newspaper building. “The window’s locked today.” He winked at her.

What did he think he was doing? Flirting with Lois Lane?! He must be crazy! But, as Clark looked for Lois’s reaction to his teasing remark, he saw that she was gaping and pointing in terror at something behind him. Turning to look in the direction of Lois’s gaze, Clark saw a fast approaching missile. In an instant he was in the air again.

Lois saw Superman fly to the missile and wrestle it from its intended course. Before he could release it on its new trajectory toward outer space, the missile exploded with a tremendous roar and Superman was thrown backward, out of Lois’s line of sight, toward the streets below.

No! No, no, no, no, no! It couldn’t end this way. Not after he’d saved her life twice — no, that missile made it three times — and carried her through the air in his arms.

Hoping against hope, Lois ran to the edge of the Planet’s roof and peered over. There was no sign of the hero in the street below. She scanned the horizon in front of her, what little of it she could see through the skyscrapers of the business district. “Superman!” she called in desperation. “Oh God, no,” she muttered.

Lois turned back around, intending to run down the stairs to the newsroom below. Surely other people had witnessed the explosion. Someone must have seen what had become of her hero. Her progress was impeded by the sudden arrival of said hero directly in her path.

Overcome with relief, Lois launched herself toward him, throwing her arms around his neck. He wrapped his arms around her in return as she poured out her joy at seeing him safe and sound.

“Superman! You’re all right! You’re alive!” She pulled back to get a look at him. She even started to reach up as if to cradle his face in her hands. She had a brief glimpse of her own delight mirrored in Superman’s face before they both froze.

In an instant, the twin grins collapsed into matching pictures of embarrassed awkwardness. Lois quickly stepped out of Superman’s embrace as the hero cleared his throat, bringing one loose fist up to cover his mouth.

“Yes, well, thank you for your concern, Ms. Lane, but, as you can see, I’m not hurt. Are you okay as well?” The tone was sincere, concerned, but definitely professional.

“Yes, I’m fine, Superman.” Lois smoothed imaginary wrinkles from her skirt. “Thank you for rescuing me. Again.”

That earned a small smile from the hero. “You’re welcome. I believe you’re my first repeat customer. I hope this isn’t getting to be a habit, putting yourself in mortal danger.”

“Well, this time it wasn’t really my fault,” she replied, “which reminds me, I really would like to tell you the whole story behind this.”

“I thought you reporters were supposed to tell the rest of us to read all about it in our morning paper.” That time Superman earned the smile from Lois.

“Normally, yes. But I think there are some parts of this story that might not make it into my article — parts that concern you and that you should know about. Also, I think I have something that belongs to you.” Superman raised his eyebrows in mute surprise at that last remark. “Could we talk privately?” Lois continued, “Maybe at my apartment this evening?”

Superman seemed to hesitate for a moment. Then he gave a brief nod. “I think that can be arranged. I’ll need your address. And, if you don’t mind, it might be better if I came through a

window rather than your front door. I’m assuming that there are other tenants in your building, and I wouldn’t want my visit there to become grist for the rumor mill.”

“It’s a date, then,” Lois stated, pulling a business card out of her jacket pocket. Reaching into an inside pocket for a pen, she scrawled her home address and phone number on the back. “Is 8:00 too late for you?” she asked as she handed Superman the card.

“No. 8:00 is fine.” He seemed a little nonplussed, as if he still couldn’t quite believe that he had agreed to this.

Lois decided to make her exit before he had a chance to change his mind. “Great,” she said, and reached to shake his hand. “I’ll see you then. I’ll leave the living room window open. Just come straight in when you get there and no one should see you.” She backed her way to the stairwell door as she spoke. “I’m really glad you’re okay. And thanks again for the rescue. See you tonight.”

Before he could reply, she was through the door and on her way back to the newsroom. This story was getting bigger by the second. Wait till Perry saw that warehouse!

He’d done it again. Clark couldn’t believe that he’d let himself be talked into another meeting with Lois Lane. Not that he wasn’t eager to see her, but it was dangerous. There was something about that woman that caused his brain lose all higher function. Well, he consoled himself as he flew toward Carter Avenue, at least this time it wasn’t technically an interview. He hadn’t actually agreed to answer any questions. No, this time it was Lois who had something she wanted to tell him. And she thought she had something that belonged to Superman. What could possibly make her believe that? It was curiosity, he told himself, and courtesy, not his unhealthy fascination with Lois Lane, which brought him sailing through her open window against his better judgment.

The scene that welcomed him in the moments before Lois noticed his approach caused his newly minted hero façade to slip into a stifled smile. Lois was wearing the same business suit she’d had on that afternoon, and her hair was bobbing up and down in an adorable little rhythm in time to her pounding feet as she stomped back and forth in front of her kitchen island, her heavy steps punctuating a rhythmic chant of “Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn, damn!”

He nearly had to bite his lip to keep from grinning as she noticed his entrance and turned an endearing shade of pink. Boy, was he in deep trouble.

In deep trouble, and now caught staring wide-eyed at Lois Lane. This was not the impression he was going for when he invented Superman. He needed to say something. Something professional and...heroish. “I’m sorry. You said eight. I didn’t know I’d be interrupting you mid-rant.”

Oh, yeah, real smooth.

Lois turned an even deeper shade of red and busied herself by closing the laptop that stood open on her kitchen island. Was the computer the target of her frustration?

“No, Superman, I’m the one who should be sorry. I did say eight, and I lost track of the time.” She smoothed her skirt, and then her hair, and looked around her apartment, obviously searching for a change of subject. Finally, her restless gaze landed on her living room furniture. She gestured in that direction. “Please, won’t you sit down?”

Clark strode toward a white loveseat. He was momentarily thrown off-balance by the sudden realization that his hero suit was not designed for dignified sitting. After a brief pause, he settled for draping the cape under him and spreading the corners over his lap like a stadium blanket. He desperately hoped that he didn’t look nearly as stupid as he felt.

“Can I get you some coffee?” she offered, “I’ve just made a

fresh pot.” At Clark’s startled look, Lois hurried to add, “If you drink coffee, that is. Do they even have coffee... wherever you come from? Probably not. I mean, why would they? And they say it’s an acquired taste. Maybe you wouldn’t even like it. It’s really good once you get used to it, though. Some of us can’t really function without it. And there’s milk and sugar to make it less bitter, if you like that...” My goodness, she was a force of nature! Clark felt he should say something before she passed out from lack of oxygen.

“Coffee would be fine. Thank you.”

“Oh.” Lois blinked. “Of course.” She reached two mugs down from a cupboard and opened her refrigerator. “Milk? Sugar?”

“Yes, please, if it isn’t too much trouble.”

A brief minute later Lois brought the two mugs through to the living room and seated herself, after another awkward pause, in the opposite corner of the same love seat. She took a moment to steady her nerves and faced her guest with her best professional manner.

“Thank you for coming, Superman. I know that you’re a busy man, and I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me.” Ah, yes, this was finally familiar territory for Clark. Meet the Press he could do in his sleep — as Clark Kent, that is. As Superman, though, it was another story. This required caution and a clear head.

“I must admit that I don’t usually visit members of the press in their homes, Ms. Lane. But you indicated that this conversation might best be kept confidential, so I was willing to make an exception. I must warn you, however, that I am not prepared to give an interview at this time.”

“No, no, Superman,” Lois hastened to reassure him, “I wasn’t requesting an interview. Not that I wouldn’t be thrilled to have one. Me and every other reporter in the world.” She rolled her eyes and flashed him a self-deprecating smile. “No, I asked you here tonight because of what happened to me today.”

A confused half-frown creased Clark’s brow. “You want some quotes for your article about today’s rescue?” Which reminded him, “By the way, why *were* you falling from 15,000 feet up? I assume you don’t do that every day?”

“No.” Lois couldn’t help but smile. “Not if I can help it.”

Clark was trying very hard to keep a straight face, but she wasn’t making it easy. He loved her wry sense of humor, and her smile just begged to be answered with one of his own. With Herculean effort, he controlled himself.

“And I didn’t ask you here for quotes, either,” she continued. “Although if you have a minute or two before you leave, I’m sure I could use some. It’s the reason for that fall that I want to talk to you about. Actually, ‘fall’ is the wrong word. I was pushed.”

“What?!” Clark was sure his voice had just climbed up an octave, but he didn’t care. “Why? By whom? The same people who fired that missile?” What kind of people would do such a thing?

“Yeah, a nutcase named Jason Trask. Unfortunately for us, he’s a dangerous nutcase with access to military jets and who knows what else. The government doesn’t want to claim him, but he seems to consider himself a one-man task force.”

Clark frowned. “For what task?” he asked.

Lois was turning red again. She ran a nervous hand through her hair, causing it to fall slowly back into place in a quite bewitching manner. “This is very embarrassing, Superman. I’d hate for you to think that this lunatic in any way represents the way the rest of us feel about you. I hope you know how much everyone appreciates everything you’ve done for us.”

Not everyone, Clark thought to himself. Lex Luthor certainly didn’t appreciate Superman’s efforts, but he refrained from saying so.

“Ms. Lane,” Clark gently prodded, “you haven’t really

answered my question. What task is Mr. Trask engaged in that involves throwing reporters out of jet planes and firing missiles inside the city limits?”

“Well, it seems that Trask — he’s a Colonel, by the way — used to be part of Project Blue Book...”

“The government program to track down UFOs in the fifties?” If Lois wondered how Superman knew about Project Blue Book, she didn’t let it show.

“Yes. It disbanded in 1969, but it seems Trask never got the memo. He’s decided that you’re some kind of front runner for an alien invasion.”

Clark jumped to his feet, his hands in tight fists at his sides. “So he threw you out of a jet plane in order to draw me out? He used you as bait?!”

So much for controlling his expressions. Clark knew his impassive hero persona was in tatters by now, but he couldn’t keep the shock and anger out of his face, or his voice. How *dare* he? When Clark got his hands on that lunatic, he’d...

Lois stood and approached him cautiously. “He tried to kill you, Superman. Just like the madman who set that bomb off in the Carlin Building last week.” Her voice was gentle, full of sympathy and concern. She reached out and laid a tentative hand on his arm. “I can only imagine how you must feel.” At his questioning glance she explained, “You come here to help, and people try to kill you. It’s awful.”

Clark shook his head, dismissing the need for her concern. “That’s kind of you, Ms. Lane, but I’m pretty hard to kill. I’m more worried about you. You came within inches of losing an eye in that bombing, and within seconds of losing your life today. If I hadn’t been within hearing range...” It didn’t bear thinking about. Instead, he shot her a determined look. “I’m going to find that man and stop him. That’s a promise, Lois.”

Lois meant to say, “That’s funny. I was about to tell you the same thing.” Instead, what came out was, “You noticed me at the bombing?”

By sheer act of will, Clark refrained from blurting out, “I always notice you.” In the nick of time he changed it to, “I was concerned about civilians getting hurt. Someone was testing me, but he put a lot of other people in danger in the process.”

“Testing you?”

“Yes. The double suicide attempts to test my speed, the bomb to test my vulnerability...”

“Do you know who it was?”

“I have my suspicions. Nothing I can prove yet.”

“Yet? So you’re investigating someone?”

This was getting dangerously close to Clark Kent territory.

“In a way,” he hedged. “I really can’t say anything more.”

“Will you tell me when you’re getting close? Or will you let me help? I am a trained investigator. It’s what I do. If someone’s trying to harm you, I’d gladly help bring them down.”

“That’s very kind of you, Ms. Lane. As I said, though, I really don’t have anything I can give you.”

“You’ll think about it, won’t you? Let me know if you change your mind? My window’s always open for you,” she declared with hopeful earnestness.

Whoa. Lois was sounding a little too determined for Clark’s comfort. She was starting to sound dangerously like the kind of fan who swarmed over Clark Kent at every public function and wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer. This was the last thing he needed — an ace reporter with a crush on Superman. It didn’t help that she was also the one person who could make him lose all composure by her mere presence. As much as he’d like to spend more time with Lois, he couldn’t afford to encourage her fascination with his alter ego. It was time to make a graceful exit while he still could.

“Ms. Lane, thank you for the information on Colonel Trask. I appreciate the warning. If you’ll excuse me, I really should be

going.” Clark turned and strode as majestically as he could to the afore-mentioned window.

“Wait!” He stopped just short of the sill and turned to face her reluctantly. She was blushing again. She reached one hand toward him in silent entreaty, and her words came out in a rush, as if she were afraid that he would fly away before she could finish. “First, I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. I promise not to drool over you like some moony-eyed cheerleader. I just meant that... Well, it seems to me like a man in your position... you know, with so many rescues and people trying to test you and kill you and all... Well, I just thought that maybe you could use a friend. So if you ever need one, I’m here. That’s all.” Clark wasn’t sure that was all, but it was a good cover for her earlier comment, so he let it go.

“Thank you. That’s very kind of you.” Not that he’d be flying back here any time soon. Superman was supposed to be the distant, mysterious hero. He didn’t have friends. He turned again toward the window.

“Oh!” At her sudden exclamation, he turned back toward her once more. “I can’t believe I almost forgot. I have something of yours.”

“Something of mine? What makes you think so?” Clark couldn’t imagine what Lois could have mistaken for Superman’s property. Aside from the suit he was currently wearing, Superman owned nothing.

Lois gestured toward her sofa. “Please, have a seat. Your coffee’s getting cold.” She made a vague wave in the general direction of her bedroom. “I’ve got it hidden in my closet, but I’ll be right back with it.” With that, Lois disappeared through the bedroom door, leaving Clark little choice but to sit back down and wait.

Lois soon reemerged from the bedroom. “I found this earlier today. It was in a secret government warehouse, along with one of your ships. I thought you might want it back, so I took it for you.”

The object that she held out to him was a globe, about the size of a softball. Clark took it from her outstretched hand. He was opening his mouth to explain that it didn’t belong to him when he was stopped by a voice that spoke not to his ears, but directly to his mind.

“Krypton,” he softly repeated after the voice. As he spoke, the globe in his hands morphed from the familiar blue and green of Earth to a strange pattern of red and white that he somehow knew portrayed his long-forgotten home planet.

“I beg your pardon?” Lois’s question reached him through the fog of overwhelming revelation. He came back to his senses and looked up at her as she dropped gracefully back into her seat, a mere arm’s length away from Clark.

“Krypton,” he repeated. “This is a map of my home planet.” She didn’t need to know that he’d just now realized that himself.

“And it showed the Earth before you touched it. So it’s some kind of navigational device for your supply ship?”

“My supply ship? Is that what you think you saw in the warehouse? How did you know it was mine?”

“It had your...” she pointed vaguely at his chest.

“Crest,” he supplied.

“Yes, your crest, on the front of the ship. And it was too small to fit a person, so I’m assuming it was bringing you provisions from... Krypton?”

Clark didn’t answer right away. He was too busy trying to assimilate the implications of what he’d just learned. He had a ship. One with his symbol on it. The one his mother copied from his baby blanket. That — along with the globe that somehow *told* him its name — meant that he wasn’t a Russian experiment after all. He had always known it was possible, but to have it confirmed... He was an alien. He wasn’t even human! And his ship was out there somewhere in the hands of a rogue

government agency.

There was only one thing to be done about that. Instead of answering Lois’s question, he asked one of his own. “This warehouse, could you tell me where it is? I’d really like to get my ship back, especially if this Colonel Trask is the one keeping it.”

“That’s the trouble, Superman. The reason I was... ranting, I believe you called it...” He gave her an apologetic smile. “... when you came in was because it’s gone. I went back to the warehouse earlier this evening with Perry and the police, but it was empty. I know what I saw, but it’s gone. I’m sorry.”

“So am I.”

The two of them sat in stillness for at least a minute. Clark was stunned by the sheer weight of his new knowledge. He’d been right; he really didn’t fit in, and now he knew why. He’d never belonged here in the first place. He wasn’t even from this planet. And somewhere out there was a government agent who was determined to ensure that the alien threat was eliminated. Every childhood fear of some faceless “Them” who would come and take him away to a laboratory was rearing its ugly head.

For her part, Lois was accosted by the overwhelming realization that, as powerful as he was, this man needed her help in a way that no one ever had before. He didn’t just need any friend. He needed her. She didn’t understand how other people could fail to appreciate how extraordinary and wonderful Superman was. What she did understand was that, no matter what it might cost her, she would stand by him. He needed an ally, and she was going to be it.

As Clark emerged from his fugue, he focused once more on Lois. She was staring at him, but not in the way he had feared. She wasn’t disgusted by his alienness. Nor was she infatuated in the way that she had first seemed to be that day he flew her back to the Planet from EPRAD. No, the look she was giving him now reminded him of Lana, or of his mom. She was looking through the costume to the man beneath it. Suddenly he wasn’t in such a rush to leave after all.

“Thank you,” he told her sincerely. At her questioning look, he raised the globe toward her with a little nod. “You didn’t have to give this back to me. I’m sure there are a lot of people who would love to get their hands on this.”

“I’m sure there are, but they wouldn’t get it from me.” Was there a hint of offense in her tone?

“I know that, Lois. I didn’t mean to imply that you would ever do such a thing. But not everyone shares your sense of ethics. I’m very lucky that this fell into your hands and not someone else’s. I guess what I’m trying to say is, you’ve been a true friend to me tonight. And true friends are hard to find. So thank you.”

She smiled warmly in response and gave his knee a little nudge with hers. “See? I told you that already — if you need a friend, I’m always around. You didn’t think I really meant it.”

He returned her smile with one of his own. “It wasn’t that I didn’t believe you wanted to be my friend,” he explained. “I just didn’t think someone like me could have friends.” He paused for a moment, then added in a thoughtful tone, “You’ve changed my mind tonight.”

Before the moment could grow uncomfortably intense, Clark stood to take his leave. “I should be going. Thank you again — for everything.”

“You’re welcome.” Her smile was warm and genuine. She stood to walk him to the window. “Do you think you could give me a quote or two before you go? For the ‘falling from a jet plane’ story?”

“Sure.” Clark hesitated only a moment before adding, “In fact, though it’s getting a bit late for it tonight, I think I’d like to see you again soon. Maybe Thursday morning at your office? How’d you like to have the first official interview with Superman?”

He'd done it again. It seemed that every time he saw Lois Lane, Clark came away with an appointment for yet another interview. And yet, he didn't regret this one. He no longer held any illusions that he was capable of controlling the course of a conversation with the ace reporter, but that thought no longer inspired the terror that it had only a few days earlier.

Why was that? Because Lois had shown herself to be a friend to Superman. He still needed to watch his step, but if he did let something slip inadvertently, he trusted her not to use it against him. Lois knew that Superman had enough enemies as it was, and she seemed determined to show him that he had at least one ally as well.

So it wasn't very difficult for Clark to project an air of easy confidence as he strode into the lobby of the Daily Planet and quickly scanned the directory for the newsroom. The handful of people who had been waiting in front of the elevators parted like the Red Sea to let him pass. A chime sounded, and the elevator doors opened. Clark stepped through them, and when they closed again a moment later, he found himself alone. He was used to being recognized in public, of course. But, whereas people who recognized Clark Kent normally either pretended not to out of courtesy, or attempted to make small talk with their favorite writer, these people, who didn't have the option of pretending not to recognize Superman, had clearly decided to give him a wide berth. Clark chose to assume that it was a matter of respect rather than fear.

Seconds later Clark emerged from the elevator into a small reception area overlooking an array of desks humming with activity. It only took a moment for the hum to fade from dull roar to absolute silence. Every eye in the room was on him. Out of sheer force of habit, he almost broke into his Clark Kent 'charm the adoring public' smile, but stopped himself just in time. Allowing only a slight softening of Superman's usual stern expression, he favored the crowd with a small nod of acknowledgement. Lois rose to her feet and strode toward him, her right hand extended in welcome.

"Good afternoon, Superman. Thank you for coming." Her voice was pitched for the entire room to hear. "I've got the conference room all set up for our interview." By this time he'd met her halfway down the newsroom ramp, and they shook hands in the manner of professional acquaintances.

"It's my pleasure, Ms. Lane. I can think of no finer reporter to tell my story."

Lois nodded and smiled in gracious acknowledgement of the compliment. "If you'll follow me..." She led the way to the smaller of the Planet's conference rooms and closed the door behind him. Clark noticed that the blinds on the conference room windows were closed. He took a seat on the far side of the table, catty-corner from the head of the table where a pad of paper, pencil, and small tape recorder were neatly arranged.

Lois walked to a credenza next to the door and poured two cups of coffee. "Cream and sugar for you, right?" she asked over her shoulder. To anyone but Clark, she would have seemed perfectly at ease. Her racing heartbeat told him otherwise.

"Yes, thank you," Clark replied. Lois carried the two coffees to the table, then sat down and faced him across the corner of the table.

Without preamble she glanced at the closed door, then leaned forward and told him in hushed tones, "I think we have a problem."

"I beg your pardon?" What problem could there be with Superman giving Lois Lane an exclusive interview? It was at the top of every reporter's wish list.

"There are some things we need to discuss before I can interview Superman. But not here." Cold fingers walked up and down Clark's spine. Why was Lois referring to Superman in the

third person?

"What do you suggest?" He was proud of how calm and assured his voice sounded.

"I think we need to talk somewhere private. Somewhere with no chance of our being overheard."

Clark frowned at that suggestion. He didn't think a change of venue boded well for this conversation. "You want to talk in your apartment again? That seems a little...irregular for an interview."

Lois shook her head. "No, not my apartment. We shouldn't be seen arriving there together, and, besides, as you pointed out last time, I have neighbors. I was thinking more of you flying us somewhere. Somewhere isolated with no other people around."

Clark's frown only deepened. "Would you be comfortable with that? I know a few islands that no one else ever visits, but that would make you completely dependent on me for transportation there and back again. Are you certain that's what you want?"

Lois was already gathering her things and stuffing them into her shoulder bag. "Yes. That would be fine." She stood up and walked to the conference room's exterior window, which, Clark now noticed, not only had the blinds open, but the sash as well. He stood and followed her.

She pulled the strap of her bag over her head so that it rested securely across her body. Then she turned to face him and said, "I'm about to ask you to trust me with something big, so I think it's only fair that I demonstrate a little trust in you first." She gestured out the window. "Shall we?"

Lois could hardly believe what she was about to do. If her hunch was right, she was about to give away what could be the biggest story of her career. But what was her alternative? If she went about this in her typical Mad Dog mode she might get a Kerth-worthy story out of it, but at what price? She'd be ruining a good man's life and probably costing the world a hero that it sorely needed. Not to mention blowing whatever small chance she might have of actually getting to know this amazing man — the man who, at the moment, held her in his arms as they swooped over turquoise water under an azure sky.

No. Superman was literally one of a kind; she'd never get another opportunity to meet a man like him. She'd told him only days earlier that she was his friend, and she wouldn't give that up for anything. Her reporter's instincts might be telling her she was crazy, but her heart was telling her that this man was worth going a little crazy over. Maybe the way she felt right now, cradled in his arms, had something to do with it. For the first time in a long time, she was determined to listen to her heart and put the man before the story.

Besides, if her hunch played out, she was still going to get one whopper of an interview out of this.

As they came in for a landing, Lois realized too late that a short skirt and three-inch heels were not the most practical attire for a tropical beach. Superman noticed her trouble, and he tried to compensate for her wobbly footing by offering her his arm for support, but it wasn't helping much. In the end Lois solved the problem by removing her shoes and nylons, leaning one hand on Superman's shoulder for support as she did so. So much for her professional image. At least he'd been gentlemanly and turned his head. Still, she consoled herself, bare feet were more dignified than a twisted ankle.

Her troubles were magnified by the lack of convenient seating afforded by an uninhabited island. Lois did not relish the thought of conducting this conversation with her 5'6" self face-to-chest with Superman in boots. Sitting down would put them on more even ground.

Clark noticed that Lois was glancing around the island as if looking for something, but it took him a moment to realize what it was she was searching for. Once he figured it out, the solution

was pretty simple.

“Lois? Are you looking for a place to sit?”

Lois cast a startled glance at Superman. “I thought you said you didn’t read minds.”

Clark gave her a reassuring smile. “I don’t. It just seemed the logical inference. And, if you don’t mind, I think I can solve your dilemma.” So saying, he peered briefly into the island’s wooded interior, gave a small nod of satisfaction, then disappeared between the trees. When he emerged, he was carrying two good-sized logs, which he arranged across from each other on a level stretch of sand.

To Lois’s consternation, he calmly removed his cape and draped it over one of the logs, motioning for her to sit before taking his own seat on the opposite log. It was lucky for her that he sat down when he did. Otherwise she would have been far too distracted by the sight of that magnificent backside to focus on the job at hand. With ruthless determination, she forced her gaze onto his face.

Clark felt positively naked without his cape, but what else could he have done? He couldn’t expect Lois to sit bare-legged on the rough log in that short skirt, and neither one of them had anything else to use as a blanket. He very carefully kept his knees together as he sat, placing his hands as casually as he could in his lap.

“So...” they both began at once. At Lois’s nod, Clark began again. “You said there was something we needed to discuss before our interview.”

“Yes.” Lois removed her shoulder bag and placed it on the sand at her feet. Then she turned to Superman with a determined expression. “I want you to know that what I’m about to say, and anything you tell me in response, is completely off the record. I’m not taking notes, and I have no recorder going. This is strictly between you and me, not for publication unless and until you say so, which I expect you never will. And I could be completely off the mark to begin with, although I doubt it. So I’m asking you to trust me as a friend here, okay?”

“Okaaaay,” he dragged the word out, clearly not entirely comfortable with this arrangement. “But you haven’t said what it is I’m to trust you about. It sounds like you believe you’ve discovered something about me which I might want kept secret. Would you mind telling me what it is?”

“Yes. No. I mean no, I don’t mind. Yes, I will tell you.” Superman merely raised his eyebrows in response. Lois tried again. “Yes, well, the thing is, I’ve been thinking about you a lot over the last few days.” His eyebrows climbed even higher. “Not that way,” Lois hastened to add. At least, not *only* that way, she edited silently to herself. “What I mean is, I’ve been thinking about your ship, and your globe, and the things you’ve said and done since I first saw you on the Prometheus, and I think we might have a problem.”

Clark gave her a wary look. “So you said at the Planet. But I still don’t understand. What exactly is the problem?”

Lois gave herself a mental shake and went for the direct approach. “I don’t think Superman is really you.”

“Come again?” Clark didn’t know what to make of that remark. “Lois, I just flew us both here from Metropolis in less than ten minutes. The operative word in that sentence being ‘flew.’ How could I not be Superman?”

“I didn’t say you weren’t Superman. I said Superman wasn’t you.”

“And that means?”

“That means that you have another name. One that I didn’t give you.”

Oh, oh. This was getting into very dangerous territory. Clark could see only one possible escape route, and he gave it his best shot.

“Of course I do. But, since I’m not sure you could even

pronounce my Kryptonian name,” and since even I don’t know what it is, Clark added to himself, “I chose to accept the name that you gave me in that first article. I still don’t see what the problem is.”

It was a classic piece of Clark Kent misdirection, and it might have worked — on anyone other than Lois Lane.

“Let me spell it out for you, then,” she said. “I told you about the warehouse where I found your ship.”

“Yes.”

“Well, what I didn’t tell you about, but what I remembered yesterday, was the collection of files there.”

“Files?”

“Yes. That warehouse was filled with all sorts of big metal objects under tarps — UFO’s I suppose — including your ship. But there was also this big, dusty, steel filing cabinet with photographs and reports detailing where the various items were found. I didn’t have time to find the one that matched your ship, but I remember that they were all labeled with places and years. You know, like ‘Roswell, New Mexico, 1947.’ But here’s the thing: none of the dates I saw was after 1969. I’m positive about that.”

“The year that Project Bluebook was disbanded,” Clark provided.

“Exactly!” she exclaimed in triumph.

“I’m still waiting for the problem.” He could see precisely where she was headed, but he wasn’t going to give her any help in getting there.

“The problem, ‘Superman,’” Clark could hear the quotes around his name in her tone of voice, “is that your supposed supply ship was in that warehouse of very *old* UFOs, under a very dusty tarp. I don’t think it was a supply ship after all, or at least not a recent one. I think that ship has been sitting in that warehouse for over twenty years. Which means that either you or someone else from Krypton has been on Earth at least since then.”

“I see,” he said calmly. Internally, he was repeating, ‘Don’t panic, don’t panic, don’t panic!’ in an endless loop. It wasn’t helping. “And this is the part that you *don’t* intend to publish? Why not? Besides the fact that your evidence has gone missing? Or is that the only reason?” He regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth. Lois deserved better, but he had learned the hard way to be wary of reporters, and old habits die hard.

Lois’s eyes flashed fire at his last remark. “Now don’t you start that again, Mister. I thought we already established that I don’t work that way, that I’m *trying* to be your friend here. It would help if you’d trust my motives just a little bit. Because, believe me, if I intended to expose your secret we wouldn’t be having this conversation. You would have read about it on the front page of the Daily Planet.”

Clark blinked. He wasn’t used to having anyone talk to him like that, either as Superman or as Clark Kent. Then again, this was the same woman who had called out Lex Luthor in his own home in front of Metropolis’s social elite. Why should he expect her to be intimidated by Superman? Besides, she was only giving voice to what he had just been telling himself, anyway.

“I’m sorry, Lois. That wasn’t fair. And I do appreciate your talking to me first. I’m just not sure how to answer you.”

Lois crossed her arms and pinned him with a steady gaze. “For starters, you can tell me whether I’m right or not.”

The half-truth was on the tip of his tongue. It would be so easy to say, “I swear to you, Lois, I never stepped foot in Metropolis before last month.” It would even be true, as far as it went. It just wouldn’t be truthful. Still, he needed a little more from Lois before he could do what he couldn’t believe he was thinking of doing.

“And then?” he hedged.

“And then, once I understand what’s really going on, we

decide together what Superman is going to say in his interview.”
 “His interview?”

Lois shrugged. “Like I said, we need to talk before I can interview Superman. If I’m right, if Superman isn’t really you, then, after you’ve told me whatever you’re willing to about who you are, you step back into character and I interview Superman — you know, that guy who appeared out of nowhere and saved my life a couple of weeks ago. The one who, as far as I’m concerned, has no past.”

Clark couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He felt like a condemned man who’d been given a last-minute reprieve. It couldn’t be that easy.

“Why?” He tried to keep the suspicious tone out of his voice, but her offer just didn’t make sense. “You’re one of the most ambitious reporters around. And one of the best. Why would you pass up a story that big?”

Lois relaxed her arms and spoke in a softer tone. “For a couple of reasons. One is that I think Superman is amazing and I don’t want him to disappear. If I’m right and you’ve been here for years, that means you have another identity — one you’ve been protecting by hiding your abilities all this time. I don’t know what made you decide to show yourself now, but I’m really glad that you did. For me and for all of us. The world needs Superman.”

“Okay, I guess that’s fair enough. What’s the other reason?”

Lois leaned just a little closer and put a gentle hand on his knee. “Can we be really honest here? You stop being Superman and I stop being Ace Reporter and we just talk? Person to person?”

What could he say in response to that? Just accepting her offer would be tantamount to admitting that Superman was not the real him. But she already knew that, didn’t she? She’d seen past that façade the other night in her apartment when she looked below the cape to the man who needed a friend. Meanwhile, he was almost certain that her hand was burning a hole right through his tights.

“Okay.” He covered her hand with his own. “Strictly off the record,” he smiled.

Lois sat up again, releasing their mutual grasp, but she didn’t release his eyes from hers. “I think you’re an incredible person,” she began, “and I don’t mean because of the things you can do. I mean because of the things you *choose* to do. You have more power than any other person on this planet, yet you choose to use it to help the rest of us. That’s a rare and wonderful thing. I told you before that I want to be your friend. I meant it then and I mean it now. And I don’t betray my friends. Believe me,” she added with a little smile, “I don’t have enough of them to spare any.”

Clark was flabbergasted. It seemed so out of character for Lois Lane to bury a scoop of this magnitude, yet she made it sound perfectly logical. “You’re serious, aren’t you?” he said in wonder. “You’d pick a friendship with me over a front page story?”

“Any day of the week.” A small twinkle crept into her eye as she added, “but don’t let it go to your head, flyboy. I fully intend to get a front-page story out of this.” At his worried look, she added, “The first exclusive interview with the caped wonder? You better believe that’s worth the front page.”

Clark gave a decisive nod. “That sounds great, Lois.” She smiled, but her smile froze when he added, “I still have one more question, though.”

“Okay, shoot,” she said. Inside she was hoping that this question wasn’t going to be the one that blew the whole deal, but she tried not to let her fear show.

“Why bring this up at all?” At her questioning look, he continued, “If you never planned to publish your theory, if your plan was always just to interview Superman as if he’d just arrived

on Earth, why tell me about your suspicions in the first place? Why not just interview Superman without ever letting on that you didn’t buy the whole story?”

Was that all? Lois relaxed and answered, “You’re kidding, right?”

Superman merely shook his head in response.

She was going to have to spell it out for him. “This is Lois Lane you’re talking to. An insatiable sense of curiosity is what made me who I am. Once I got the idea in my head, how could I not try to find out if it was true? Just because I’m not going to publish it doesn’t mean that I’m not dying to know! Wouldn’t you be?”

Clark let out a laugh, amazed and delighted at the sheer honesty of her answer. “Okay, Lois. You’ve got yourself a deal,” he announced. “I can’t promise to tell you everything you want to know, and you’re right that I won’t ever want this to be published, but, yeah, you’ve got the basic idea. Superman is a cover. He lets me use my abilities openly and still have a normal life. At least in theory.”

“In theory? It’s not working out so well in practice?”

“Who’s asking? Friend Lois or Reporter Lois?”

“We’re still off the record. I’ll let you know before that changes.”

“Well, off the record, just me talking, my real life isn’t that normal to begin with.”

“Are you going to tell me who you really are?”

“I don’t know. Not today, anyway.”

Could he imagine ever telling Lois the whole truth about who he was? She wouldn’t be the first person he’d trusted with his secret. Lana and Pete had both accepted the strange things he could do with good grace. He didn’t know where he’d be today if he hadn’t had them and his folks to confide in. But this was different. Lois already knew what he could do. What she didn’t know was who he really was. And after that disastrous evening at the Jade Inn, he intended to keep it that way, at least until she got to know him better.

Meanwhile, Lois was looking disappointed, and he felt she at least deserved an explanation. “It’s not that I don’t trust you, Lois,” he offered. “It’s partly that this isn’t only my secret to keep. There are other people I need to talk to before I could even consider telling you everything.”

“And...?” Lois prodded.

“And...this might sound silly, but since we’re being brutally honest here, sometimes I’m not sure that even I know who I really am anymore. Or that I like who I really am. And I’m almost certain you wouldn’t. Like me, that is.”

Lois gave him a look of utter disbelief. “What’s not to like? You’re a pretty great guy.”

“You might not think so if you knew the real me.”

“Really? So this is the fake you talking to me now?”

He frowned, contemplating her question. “No,” he began, “this is...” His voice trailed off. “This is just me,” he said quietly. A slow, satisfied smile spread over his features. “Thanks, Lois.”

Lois returned his smile with one of her own. “You’re welcome...I think. What specifically are you thanking me for?”

Clark tried to pour all the gratitude he felt into his next words. “For letting me be myself with you. For helping me realize that I don’t have to be the person I’ve been playing at for years, that the man with my name is not the real me any more than Superman is. For giving me hope that I can become someone I like again.”

“Wow, that’s a lot. I don’t know what to say.” Lois was a little overwhelmed by his reaction. She’d done all that? Just by stating the obvious — that Superman, or whoever he was under that flashy costume, was a pretty great guy? It looked like her initial instinct had been right — this man really did need a friend.

“You don’t have to say anything, Lois.”

No, she didn't have to, but the entire conversation was getting far more intense than she had planned, and Lois had no idea how to get out of it and back to firmer ground. Finally, in sheer desperation, she seized on the thing that always saved her when her emotions got too much for her — work.

"So," she began in a too-bright voice, "are we all set here? Shall we head back to the Planet? Is Superman ready for his interview?"

Superman, who now seemed a little embarrassed by all his soul-baring, was clearly happy to follow Lois's lead. Shaking off his earlier solemnity, he stood and replied with an attempt at an easy grin, "He will be, as soon as the Ace Reporter stands up and lets him shake the sand out of his cape."

Lois's laugh rang over the island. "As you wish, Superman." She stood and began to gather her things for the trip back to Metropolis. "You know," she said thoughtfully, "if you won't tell me your real name, I'm just going to have to come up with another one. I can't keep calling you Superman with a straight face."

"Lois," he grinned while shaking the sand from his cape, "you can call me anything you like. Except Norbert. I don't think I could answer to Norbert, even for you."

On the way back to Metropolis and the Interview of the Century, as she had gleefully dubbed it, Lois had some pointers for her new friend.

"So, when we arrive, we'll go back in through the conference room window. If we're really lucky, no one will have even realized that we've been gone."

Clark raised a skeptical brow. "You don't think at least one of the millions of people in Metropolis will notice a man in a garish suit carrying a beautiful reporter through an open window several stories up?"

Inwardly, Lois's mind was reeling with one thought: He thinks I'm beautiful! So she was rather proud of the casual shrug she managed while replying, "Most people never look up. And even if they do, so what? Once the story hits the front page tomorrow morning, they'll just assume that you were taking me for a joy ride as part of the interview."

Clark rolled his eyes. "Superman gives joy rides now?"

Lois grinned cheekily back. "Only to brilliant ace reporters."

"Okay," Clark agreed. "How do you want to play the actual interview? Aren't there ethical issues about you printing answers that you know aren't true?"

"Ah, but I'm not going to do that. I'm going to ask Superman the same questions I would if I really thought he'd just arrived on Earth, and he's going to answer them truthfully."

Clark was catching on quickly. "Just not necessarily completely?" he clarified.

"By George, I think he's got it," Lois agreed. "Do you think you can handle that? I suppose I could help with suggestions for answers, but that would be skirting pretty close to the line."

"No, I think I can manage," Clark reassured her. It certainly wouldn't be the first time, he added to himself. "There are some questions I'm not prepared to answer, though."

"That's up to you. You don't have to answer if you don't want to. But I'm not going to throw you softballs. This is going to be a real interview; I don't do puff pieces."

The words, "So I've heard," popped into Clark's mind, but he refrained from saying them aloud.

The conference room was empty when they returned, the door still locked and the shades still drawn. Lois settled herself at one end of the table with her notepad and tape recorder, caught Superman's eye to make sure he saw her turn the recorder on, then rose to greet him as if he'd just arrived.

"Superman, thank you for coming. I hope you don't mind if I record our conversation?"

"I'm very pleased to be here, Ms. Lane. And, no, I don't mind at all."

"Great. Please, have a seat. Can I offer you something to drink?"

Clark seated himself back at the table where this entire episode had begun an hour before. "No, thank you. I'm fine."

"Okay then, let's get started." Lois looked him straight in the eye and began. "You first appeared in Metropolis about two weeks ago at the Prometheus shuttle launch. So let's start with the obvious question: Why are you here?"

"To help."

"That's all? You don't have any ulterior motives?"

"What other motives would I have?"

"The same motives many people have: money, power, influence."

"I'm not looking for money. And, due to the nature of my abilities, I already have all the power I can handle. I will admit that I wouldn't be averse to using whatever influence I might acquire to try to impact the community for the better."

"Like what? Fighting for truth and justice?"

The corners of his mouth twitched. Lois was pretty good at this inventing a hero business. "You could put it that way if you like."

"Okay, Superman, next question: Where did you come from? There has been speculation that you are from another planet. Is that true?"

"Yes, Ms. Lane, it's true. I come from a planet called Krypton."

"And yet you look like a human man."

"I am a man, Ms. Lane." Was Lois imagining things, or was she meant to take that comment on more than one level?

"Just a man from another world?"

"Yes."

"That's an astonishing claim, Superman! You're telling me that you are living proof of the existence of intelligent life on other planets. Every biologist and anthropologist in the world will want to talk with you. I imagine you could tell us marvelous things about your home world — its history, culture, science, how it differs from our own and how it is similar. Are your people in contact with other planets as well? Or are Krypton and Earth it?"

"I'm not sure how much help I can be, Ms. Lane. I'm not an expert on Krypton's history, nor on its technology. As for culture, I suspect ours has the same elements as any Earth culture — language, music, art, religion, work life, family life, community life. As I'm sure you've learned from the wide diversity of Earth cultures, there are many ways of approaching life together, but the basic issues are the same for people everywhere." That was a pretty vague answer, Clark knew. He could only hope that Lois wouldn't press him for details that he didn't have. "As for other planets, Krypton and Earth are the only inhabited planets that I am aware of. That doesn't mean there aren't others. I'm no expert, but, given the existence of two, it seems likely that they aren't the only ones."

"Are there more of you, or are you the only Krypton man on Earth?"

"Kryptonian," Superman corrected, "and, as far as I know, I am the only one on Earth."

"As far as you know? Why wouldn't you know?"

"I have not been in contact with my people for some time. If they have plans to send other Kryptonians here, I am not aware of them."

"Why not? Why would they keep you out of the loop? Don't you keep in contact with whoever sent you?"

"No."

"So you're operating independently? Like a deep cover agent?"

“No, Ms. Lane. I am not any kind of agent of Krypton or anywhere else.”

“I’m not sure I understand. Why are you here if you weren’t sent by the Kryptonian government? Are you some kind of explorer? A scientist?”

“No. I am more of a...refugee. My people didn’t want me.” He said it calmly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, but Lois caught the pain that hovered beneath the surface of his steady gaze.

“I’m sorry,” she answered honestly. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“I’d rather not discuss that here, Ms. Lane. It’s rather personal.” Was Lois reading too much into this, or was he suggesting that he might discuss it with Friend Lois some other time?

“All right. You’ll forgive me for asking the follow-up question, though: You aren’t a fugitive from justice, are you? Or are you in exile for political reasons?”

“No, Ms. Lane. I have never been a criminal. And I try to stay out of politics. Next question, please?”

“How did you get here?”

“In a spacecraft.”

“Alone? Or were you dropped off here by someone else?”

“I was alone.”

“So you piloted a personal spacecraft from Krypton to Earth?”

“It was piloted automatically; I was merely the passenger.” Clark had to assume that was the case; he certainly hadn’t piloted anything as an infant.

“How far away is Krypton from Earth? How long did it take you to get here? You don’t sound like you plan on going back.”

“Krypton is many light years from Earth.” Clark thought that was a fair statement, given that the nearest star was four light years away. “The trip took less than a year.” Also true, since his parents said he was only a few months old when they found him. “And, no, I have no plans to return to Krypton. Earth is my home now.”

“So your ship has faster than light travel capabilities? That’s amazing! Will you share your technology with our scientists?”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Lane, but that won’t be possible. As I said, I am not a scientist. I couldn’t tell you how my ship’s engines worked, and even if I could, it’s unlikely that Kryptonian technology would be compatible with Earth materials. In any case, I don’t think it would be wise to let the ship itself out of my possession.” Or it wouldn’t be, if the ship were *in* his possession to begin with.

“Where is the ship now?”

“In an undisclosed location,” Superman smiled.

“Touche, Superman. You realize I had to ask.”

“Yes, Ms. Lane, but I don’t have to answer,” the smile never wavered. He was enjoying this, wasn’t he?

“Fair enough. Let’s move on, shall we? Given everything that you’ve just explained to me, what do you say to the allegation that you are here as part of an advance party?”

Now the smile was gone. “An advance party? In advance of what?”

“An invasion of Earth.”

His face was now as stern as Lois had ever seen it. His voice was clear and firm as he replied, “I categorically deny it. As I said, I am, as far as I know, the only one of my kind on this planet. I have severed all ties with my home world. There is no invasion, Ms. Lane, and, unless you know something I don’t, no evidence for one, either.”

“Some would argue that your very presence is evidence.”

“I don’t know what else I can tell you, Ms. Lane. As you yourself pointed out, I look exactly like an Earth man. Were I truly a spy for a Kryptonian invasion fleet, why would I make my

presence known? The truth is, I am alone here, one man who happens to have some unique gifts by sheer accident of birth. I choose to use those gifts to help as best I can. I have been operating publicly for almost three weeks. In that time I have saved dozens of human lives and harmed no one. I will let my record speak for itself.”

“Okay, Superman, let’s move on.” Lois paused for a moment to give him a little time to calm down. She gave him an encouraging smile as she asked, “Speaking of your ‘gifts,’ as you call them, what can you tell me about your extraordinary powers?”

He seemed relaxed again as he asked, “What would you like to know?”

“Let’s start with what, exactly, they are. I’ve seen you swallow a bomb with no apparent ill effects. Are you physically invulnerable?”

“I haven’t encountered anything yet that could harm me.”

“Of course we all know that you can fly. Can all Kryptonians do that?”

“I have never met a Kryptonian adult who couldn’t.”

“An adult? What about the children?”

“I first flew at the age of eighteen. I’ve never heard of a child flying.”

“Interesting. How about strength? Are Kryptonian children super strong, or does that develop in adulthood as well?”

“Like human children, our strength increases with adolescence.” Clark was generalizing from a sample size of one, but it seemed like a fair assumption.

“An entire society of superpowered beings — that would lead to all kinds of differences; everything from roads to machinery to travel and communication. Earth must seem primitive by comparison.”

“As I said before, there are cultural differences all over the world as well as between our worlds. Technological differences are merely on the surface. The fundamental issues — work, education, spiritual life, relationships between people — are the same. I don’t consider Earth primitive at all. The people here have made me welcome, and I am grateful.” Thinking of Martha and Jonathan, and of all the places he’d lived over his years of researching his novels, Clark realized that this answer, for once, was the simple truth.

Lois brought his thoughts back to the present with her next question. “Exactly how strong are you?”

“I haven’t found anything yet that I couldn’t lift. The Prometheus shuttle is the largest object I’ve lifted so far.”

“So you didn’t know ahead of time that you’d be able to do it?”

“I had no reason to assume that I couldn’t, but, no, there was no way to know for certain.”

“What if you had failed? The colonist’s lives might have all been endangered.”

“If I had felt incapable of continuing at any point in the launch, I would have landed the shuttle immediately. The colonists were not in danger at any point. Had I not attempted the launch, the entire mission would have been a loss. There would not have been an opportunity to try again.”

“Okay, Superman, we’ve established that you are physically invulnerable, very strong, and able to fly. Anything else? I myself have seen you move extremely fast.”

“Yes, if I choose to I can move faster than the human eye can follow.”

“What else?”

“My senses are more acute than a human’s. I can see, hear, and smell things which would be undetectable to anyone else. Also, I can heat objects with my eyes and cool them with my breath.”

“Wow, that’s a lot. Can you understand why all of those

abilities would make some humans nervous?”

“Yes, Ms. Lane, I can. I am familiar with the human aphorism that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. I can only repeat that I have nothing but good will toward the people of this planet, and, as I said earlier, let my record speak for itself.”

“If our leaders asked you to leave, would you?”

He hadn’t seen that one coming. The thought had never occurred to him. A frown creased his brow as he formulated his answer. Finally, he leaned forward and looked Lois directly in the eye as he responded, “If the elected representatives of Earth requested that I leave this planet, I would do my best to accommodate them.” Superman could disappear as easily as he had appeared. Clark would still be around, of course. “But I sincerely hope that I can convince all of you that I wish only to be of service here. I hope that my actions will earn me your welcome. The truth is, Ms. Lane, I have nowhere else to go.”

During the entire interview, Lois had been experiencing a strange sort of double vision. She saw and heard the stoic hero answering her questions for public consumption. But she also saw hints of emotion that peeked through his eyes. Some she was sure were meant for her, a sort of private joke between the two of them. Others she thought he’d revealed involuntarily, too overcome with his feelings to hide them completely. Her last question had obviously thrown him for a loop, and the sincerity of his response touched something deep within her.

She turned the tape recorder off with a click. Giving her guest her warmest, most sympathetic smile, she announced, “We’re done here.” The hero façade lifted like a veil and she was back with her friend from the island. “Are you okay?” she asked.

Clark returned her smile with a reassuring one of his own. “Yeah, I’m fine. You sure pack a mean punch, Ms. Ace Reporter. I can see why the bad guys quiver in fear of you.”

“I know I was a little tough on Superman, but it had to be done. If I hadn’t asked those questions, others would have. At least this way you got a chance to respond directly instead of having people whisper behind your back. You did great, by the way. Are you sure this is your first interview?”

“This is Superman’s first interview.”

“But not yours? Interesting...”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t deny it, either,” she grinned. “Stop worrying. I’m not going to torture it out of you. How would I even go about it? Nothing I did to you would have any effect, anyway,” Lois teased.

‘Oh, I don’t know about that,’ Clark thought to himself, ‘I can’t think of another person who has ever had as much effect on me.’ But it was way too early in their relationship — friendship, he amended — to tell her any such thing.

“Come on, Superman,” Lois prodded, “the interview’s over and it’s time for you to make a very public exit from this conference room before my colleagues start to wonder what I’ve done with you.”

“Oh?” Clark teased, “Do you have a reputation for devouring your interviewees?”

“Does the phrase ‘Mad Dog Lane’ mean anything to you?” she shot back.

“You’d better cut it out, Lois; I’m supposed to be walking out of here with my stern Hero Face on. How am going to do that if you keep making me smile?”

“I’m sure you’ll manage, flyboy.”

Lois had her hand on the conference room’s doorknob when Clark thought of one more thing. “Hold on a minute, Lois.” She turned to face him, and he asked, “Can I see a copy of the interview before it goes to print?”

“You want a preview?” her frown told him she wasn’t inclined to grant that request.

“Not to edit it or anything. It’s your story.” He gave her a sheepish half-smile. “Truth be told, I don’t think I’ll sleep a wink tonight if I don’t get to see what you’ve come up with before it hits the newsstands tomorrow.”

Lois smiled. He was absolutely adorable — so strong, so confident in the interview, yet with these little glimpses of insecurity. She loved it. “I’ll tell you what, why don’t you come over to my apartment tonight at seven and I’ll show you the final write-up. I’ll get Chinese take-out.”

Clark broke into a wide grin. “It’s a date. But let me bring the take-out.”

Five minutes later, Superman walked sedately out of the front door of the Daily Planet building and lifted off into the bright October sky. He flew slowly southeast for a few miles for the benefit of any Superman-watchers who might have spotted him. He tried to vary the direction to keep the press and the rumormongers guessing. Pete thought he should stick to due North and start dropping hints about an Arctic refuge, but Clark thought that was going a bit far. Once he was over open water he doubled back at a faster speed and landed as quietly as he could in the back alley of a large downtown bookstore. One quick dash into the men’s room window, and no one would question seeing Clark Kent emerge and stroll leisurely back to the Jade Inn. He knew that the customers recognized him, but they were usually too polite to bother him. And since he’d already done one three-hour book signing there and was scheduled for another before his tour ended, the staff left him in peace as well.

Pete and Lana were seated at one end of the suite’s dining table when Clark arrived. They both looked up as he entered.

“You’re just in time for lunch,” Lana greeted him. “You want orange chicken or Szechwan beef?”

“Thanks, but I’m having Chinese for dinner tonight,” Clark answered. “Is there any lasagna left in the fridge?”

“I think so. Take a look. I’m pretty sure the salad’s gone, though.”

“That’s okay,” Clark’s muffled voice came from the depths of the refrigerator, “There’s still some broccoli salad from Monday.” It sounded like an odd combination to Lana, but Clark ate like a teenage boy to begin with, so she wasn’t really surprised.

Clark finally joined them, bringing his plate and a tall glass of lemonade. As he sat down, Pete said, “Lana and I were just discussing the tail that I had to shake the night of your Lois Lane interview. I guess I should say your *first* Lois Lane interview,” he amended. “Anyway, I haven’t seen him since, so I’m thinking it was just Luthor or some other local crime boss checking out the new guy in town. I don’t think we need to worry about it for now.”

“No, I suppose not,” Clark agreed around a mouthful of lasagna. “Luthor might initially have been worried that the publicity bookings were a cover for a new Clark Kent investigation, but I think he’s convinced by now that they’re legit. Besides, he’s too busy harassing Superman to pay much attention to Clark Kent these days.”

“We’re agreed, then. Speaking of Lois Lane, how’d the interview go?”

“Which one?” Clark stole a dumpling off Lana’s plate and got his wrist slapped for his trouble. “The official Superman exclusive, or the one before that where she told me that she knows I’ve been on Earth for years?”

“What?!” The exclamation came in stereo.

“It’s okay. She’s not going to print it,” Clark hastened to assure his friends.

“Really?” Pete sounded skeptical. “The most ambitious reporter on the East Coast is just going to sit on a huge story about the world’s biggest celebrity?”

“You really think Superman is the world’s biggest celebrity?” Clark asked.

Pete rolled his eyes in frustration. His voice dripped with sarcasm. “Yes, Clark, I’m sorry to tell you that you are now bigger than you. Can we please focus here?”

Clark speared a bite of broccoli with his fork and said, “I’m really not worried, Pete. We had a whole conversation about it, and she’s not going to publish her theory. Besides, even if she wanted to — which she doesn’t — she has no proof. I’d just deny it if she tried.”

“Superman would lie outright?” Lana interjected.

Clark her in the eye and said calmly, “To protect you two and my folks, absolutely.”

But Pete focused on another part of Clark’s remark. “You said her theory. So you didn’t confirm it?”

Clark hesitated. “Not in so many words.”

“Which means...” Pete pressed.

“I didn’t tell her my name or give her any details. But I did admit that Superman is a cover that lets me use my abilities and still have a normal life.”

“And how is that not confirming it in so many words?” Pete almost shouted.

Clark’s sheepish look said that he wasn’t going to argue the point. With a visible act of will, Pete switched from panic mode to damage control. “Okay, so Lois Lane knows that you have another identity, but she claims she’s not going to publish that fact.”

“She won’t, Pete. I don’t expect you to understand, but there’s something special about her. I trust her,” Clark insisted.

“I hear you, Clark, but just because you trust her doesn’t mean I have to. Just let me think, will you?”

Clark complied by polishing off his lasagna in silence. By the time he drained his lemonade, Pete had a plan.

“Here’s what we’ll do: let me run a background check on her. There’s got to be something we can use for blackmail material if we really need to. Nobody gets as far as she has without making enemies along the way. And if I can’t find anything on her, there’s bound to be some scandal in her family.” Pete stopped when he noticed Lana’s shocked stare and Clark’s deepening scowl.

“Pete, do you hear what you’re saying?” his wife put in. “That’s not like you. What would possess you to even think of such a thing?”

“Your safety, Lana, that’s what. Do you realize what would happen to us if it became known that we are close associates of Superman?”

“We’re already known associates of Clark, and he’s got his own enemies,” Lana countered.

“Superman is bigger than Clark Kent, Lana. And he’s bound to make even bigger enemies. I don’t know if I’ll be able to keep you safe, and that scares me to death!”

Clark’s scowl disappeared as quickly as it had come. His friend’s fear was real, and not entirely unfounded. Nonetheless, Clark wouldn’t allow him to hurt Lois by digging up whatever skeletons might be hiding in her family closet.

“Pete,” he tried to make his voice sympathetic as well as firm, “I won’t let you or Lana get hurt. That’s a promise. But I’m telling you right now, Lois is off limits.”

There was a brief staring match between the two men, but Pete knew his friend well enough to know when to back down. The very fact that Clark felt this strongly about Lois Lane told Pete more than maybe Clark himself yet realized. “Okay,” was his only reply.

Clark could tell that his friends were still worried. And why shouldn’t they be? They hadn’t been there during either of his recent conversations with Lois. They didn’t know her the same way he did. Nor were they likely to any time soon. Clark was looking forward to seeing Lois that night, but he still had no intention of telling her who he really was. That would be the

fastest way possible to kill whatever chance he might have with her.

No, Lana and Pete were just going to have to trust Clark since they couldn’t be expected to trust Lois.

“Don’t worry, guys. I know I can’t expect you to trust her, but you can trust me. I’ll keep an eye on her.” His face brightened at that thought. “Actually, I’m having dinner with her tonight. I’m picking up carry-out from Tsung Yeh’s.”

“I thought she didn’t like you,” Lana began, then, “Wait a minute. Did you say Tsung Yeh’s? As in Shanghai? You’re going to see her as Superman?!”

Pete had now lost the power of speech entirely and simply waited for Clark to respond.

“Well, yeah. She likes Superman. It’s Clark she can’t stand.”

“But Superman isn’t real,” Lana protested.

“No, he’s not,” Clark agreed. “But then again, neither is Clark. And the man that Lois really likes is neither of them.” Clark flashed his friends a satisfied smile. “He’s just me.”

Lois checked her watch for the third time in the last ten minutes. She still shuddered whenever she recalled how she must have looked when Superman arrived at her apartment on Monday evening to find her having a temper tantrum over the disappearance of the evidence in the Bureau 39 warehouse. This time would be different.

Everything was ready. The table was neatly set for two. A bottle of white wine was chilled and waiting. “Ella Fitzgerald’s Greatest Hits” was playing softly in the background. Lois had two copies of the interview article printed out and sitting neatly on the corner of her desk. She had changed out of her work clothes into a well-fitted pair of slacks and a sleeveless knit top. Her make-up and hair were freshened. She was reclining in what she hoped was a casual-looking manner, curled up in one corner of her sofa with the latest Clark Kent novel. When Superman flew through her window, he would find her calm, cool, and collected.

Just as Lois was about to check her watch for the fourth time, her doorbell rang. Oh, great! Superman would be here any minute, but first she had to get rid of whoever had the audacity to be ringing her doorbell right when she was expecting a guest that no one else was supposed to know about. It was probably Jimmy. Who else would show up at her apartment unannounced at the most inconvenient time possible?

Lois was so sure that her uninvited caller must be her young office mate that she didn’t even bother to check through her peephole. She just worked her way down her array of locks as quickly as she could. As she opened the door, she was already beginning her ‘Get lost, Jimmy’ speech.

“Look, Jimmy, this isn’t a good...” she began. Then she stopped. The man gaping at her in surprise wasn’t Jimmy after all. It was a stranger dressed in black casual slacks, a grey t-shirt that hugged his quite impressive chest, and a black leather jacket. His dark hair curled loosely around his ears and the back of his neck, one curl falling over his forehead in a way that begged to be brushed back.

“I’m sorry,” Tall, Dark, and Handsome said. “Didn’t we say seven?”

It was then that Lois noticed the stack of bamboo steamers he held in one hand and the white paper bag in the other.

“Oh my God! It’s you! I can’t believe it!”

“Were you expecting someone else?” he asked, still looking slightly confused.

“What? No! No, I just wasn’t expecting you to come through the door.”

Superman gave a quick glance up and down the hallway.

“Uh, maybe I’d better come in.”

“Oh! Yes! Yes, of course! Please!” Lois stepped back and

opened her front door wide in a welcoming gesture.

Superman came in and gave a quick look around the apartment. “Where would you like these?” he asked, holding up the still-steaming containers.

Lois finally put her brain back into gear and directed him to the table. As she walked into her small kitchen she asked, “What can I get you to drink? I’ve got some wine chilled, or there’s soda if you prefer. I don’t know whether you even drink wine.”

Superman smiled — a relaxed, friendly smile that set something alight in his rich brown eyes. “Wine sounds great.”

Lois reached to open the bottle, but quickly realized that she had forgotten to get out the corkscrew. She opened her utensil drawer and started digging around as inconspicuously as she could.

She was finding it very difficult to focus at the moment. She just couldn’t get over how different he looked without the tight suit and the hair gel. Then, in one of those intuitive leaps that she prided herself on, it came to her. ‘People see what they expect to see.’ At the same moment, her hand landed on the corkscrew. She stood up straight, looked Superman in the eye, brandished the corkscrew with a grin, and proclaimed triumphantly, “Clark Kent!”

“Excuse me?” It was the world’s lamest defense against the sudden collapse of what he had thought was a brilliant disguise, but it was all his brain could come up with over the clamor of mental alarm bells. By dint of sheer terror-induced paralysis, he did not, in fact, fly straight out the window, but stood rooted to the floor long enough to hear what Lois said next.

“Clark Kent,” she repeated casually, for all the world as if she had not just discovered his biggest secret. “You know, the writer?” she clarified, twisting the corkscrew into the cork, “‘Northern Passage,’ ‘Many Hands,’ ‘Little David?’” She waved toward her coffee table, where Clark belatedly noticed a copy of his latest book. “All best-sellers with movie deals,” she went on, “He’s on ‘Entertainment Tonight’ every other day lately. Different girl every time.” She rolled her eyes at her last description and looked to Clark for any sign of recognition. When Superman continued to stare blankly at her, she apparently assumed that he was the only person in North America who hadn’t seen a Clark Kent movie. “Anyway,” she continued undeterred, “I interviewed him a couple of weeks ago. Nothing ever came of it, but I just remembered something he said that night: People see what they expect to see. So that explains how we could have spent a couple of hours together this morning, and me still not recognize you when you turned up dressed completely differently tonight.” She smiled at her own epiphany.

“Well,” he replied as soon as he felt he could trust his voice again, “this is pretty much how I look when I’m at home.” Except for the glasses he usually wore out of habit, but he didn’t tell her that. “It’s the flashy hero suit and the hair gel that’s the disguise. But you knew that.”

By this time Lois had managed to get the cork halfway out of the bottle, but she was having some trouble. “Well, I didn’t think that you normally walked about with your hair plastered to your skull, if that’s what you mean,” she replied. She gave the corkscrew one final tug, and a good-sized chunk of cork came loose, leaving the rest of the cork still firmly entrenched in the bottle and no clean surface with which to make another try. She looked up at Superman with a shrug and, rather sheepishly, added, “I’m sorry. I’ve made quite a mess of this. I’m afraid it’s going to be soda after all.”

“No trouble,” Superman replied easily. “Allow me.” With that, he gently took the bottle from her and popped the remains of the cork out with his thumb. Of course, Lois thought. Why not? He’s *Superman*, for goodness’ sake!

While he poured the wine into the glasses, Superman said, “I hope you don’t mind me dressing this way. I didn’t think it was a

good idea for Superman to keep coming through your window. There’s a good chance that someone will notice, and you’ve had enough trouble on my account as it is.”

“Of course not,” she assured him, gesturing for him to take a seat at the table.

As Lois took her own seat, Superman said in a rueful tone, “I want you to know how terrible I feel about putting you in danger, Lois. First you nearly lose an eye in the Carlin Building bombing, then that madman Trask throws you out of a plane; your connection with me has brought you nothing but trouble. It was never my intention, but I should have anticipated it. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she admonished him. “You saved my life at the shuttle launch, and that danger had nothing to do with you. I’ve been getting myself into trouble as long as I can remember. I always seem to jump in without testing the water level. My editor swears I’ll be the death of him, but it’s the only way I know to get the job done.”

“Besides, the only reason I was in any danger at the Carlin Building, or even when Trask decided to use me to test his crazy theory, was because I was doing my job. Superman is the biggest story since...ever, and I’m going to be the envy of every reporter in the world when that interview appears on tomorrow’s front page. If that story doesn’t get me a Pulitzer nomination, I don’t what could. That’s worth a little risk.”

He was looking at her with open admiration. Needing a distraction, Lois lifted the top off of the nearest container. A delicious aroma wafted up along with the steam. “This smells wonderful! And it’s still hot. Where did you get it?”

“Shanghai,” Superman answered, a smile still playing at the corners of his mouth. He handed Lois a pair of chopsticks, then helped himself to a dumpling with his own pair.

“Shanghai,” Lois repeated in amused wonder. “Of course. Where else would Superman go for Chinese food?” She popped a dumpling in her mouth. When she’d swallowed enough to be able to speak again, she exclaimed, “This is terrific! I wish I had your phone number. I’d be calling you every time I needed a tip from Bobby Bigmouth.”

“Who’s Bobby Bigmouth?” Superman asked, amusement evident in his voice.

“My best snitch,” Lois replied with her mouth half full. “Skinny as a rail, but eats like a horse. He gets paid in food, and he’s very particular about the quality. The better the food, the better the information.”

“Does he like Italian?”

“Are you kidding? His mother’s Italian. He’s a sucker for anything pasta. But it has to be fresh. He has too much taste for my own good.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Superman said, reaching for another dumpling, “the next time you need a tip from Bobby, you let me know. I’ll get you the best Fusilli Puttanesca known to man.”

“Mmm...” Lois swallowed and reached for another container. “I don’t even know what that is, but if it’s as good as this food, I’m sure Bobby will love it.” She paused long enough to take the top off the basket of noodles before asking, “But how would I get in touch with you? I don’t usually know in advance when I’m going to be fishing for information.”

“Hmm...I’ll have to think about that one. For now, why don’t you just open your window, or go up to the roof if you’re at work, and call for me? If I’m anywhere in Metropolis, I’ll hear you.”

“Are you serious?” Lois asked in surprise. “There are over ten million people just inside the city limits. How could you possibly make out my voice over all those other people?”

His face turned utterly serious for just a moment as he replied, “All those other people aren’t you.”

Lois could feel the blush rising up her cheeks. She covered by reaching for some kind of shrimp dish and asking, “Doesn’t it drive you crazy, being surrounded by so many people when you

can hear every word they say?”

“It did at first, but I’ve learned to tune it out, just like you do.”

“I don’t have superhearing.”

“That doesn’t matter. It’s still the same principle. Both of our brains filter what we hear. Mine just has to work a little harder than yours.”

“You mean like how I can tune out other people’s conversations in the newsroom if I’m concentrating on an article.”

“Exactly.” He used his chopsticks to scoop a generous pile of steamed rice onto his plate and piled slices of beef in a tangy orange sauce on top. “The funny thing is, it works in reverse too.”

“What do you mean?” Lois couldn’t believe how much this man could eat. On the other hand, he must use up a lot of energy. He’d certainly brought enough food for four ordinary people.

“Let’s say that you live out in the country, not too far from a set of railroad tracks. Every night at 2:30 a.m. a train comes past your house. At first the noise might wake you up, but after a while you don’t even hear it any more. But actually, you do. There’s this little part of your brain whose job is to filter everything you hear. It decides which things your conscious mind needs to know about and which can be ignored. That’s why you can tune out all the conversations at a cocktail party, but if someone on the other side of the room says your name, you’ll hear it. Now, back to the train. You’ve gotten used to it now, and you don’t wake up when it comes rumbling by every night. But one night there’s some kind of problem farther up the line, and the train doesn’t come. You wake up at 2:30 with no idea of what woke you up. It was that little part of your brain. It was expecting the train and it didn’t come, so it woke you up to find out why.”

Superman took a sip of wine, then seemed to notice Lois’s slack-jawed stare.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m boring you. I’m afraid I’m a bit of a trivia nut.”

Lois came to and hurried to reassure him. “No, not at all. I was just thinking about how much your brain must have to filter.” The truth was, she was flabbergasted. She couldn’t believe she was sitting at her own table eating Chinese carryout *from China* and listening to Superman explain the inner workings of the human brain. Her life was just so weird! It worked for her, though.

Meanwhile, Superman gave a little shrug and said, “I’m used to it. It’s really no big deal.”

Lois didn’t think the phrase ‘no big deal’ belonged anywhere in the vicinity of Superman, but she refrained from saying so.

“I was surprised how well you handled yourself in the interview this afternoon,” she said.

He raised one eyebrow in response, giving her a quizzical half-smile. “Is that a back-handed compliment? I don’t know whether to be happy that I did a good job or insulted that your expectations were low.”

Lois could feel herself blushing. Again. “I’m sorry, that didn’t come out quite right. It’s just that you’ve only been Superman for less than three weeks, and this was your first interview. I didn’t expect you to handle it with such...aplomb. I didn’t exactly pull my punches.”

“No, you didn’t,” he agreed with a grin.

“Yet you didn’t let it get to you. That’s unusual for a novice.”

“I never said I was a novice.”

“No, you didn’t. But you’re not going to tell me where you learned to handle the press so well, are you?”

“Not tonight,” he smiled. Then his face turned serious and he paused for a moment, as if searching for the right words. “I don’t want to pretend with you, Lois. I want to be myself, which is a luxury I haven’t had in a long time outside of a very small circle

of people. I won’t ever lie to you. And I fully intend to tell you my whole story...someday. But I’m afraid that if you know who I am too soon...or what my name is, anyway, which I’m not sure is the same thing...I’ll lose something precious. I feel like I’ve been given a clean slate.”

When she didn’t respond right away, he tried another tack.

“Do you know what convinced me that Superman could have friends after all?”

“What?”

“The way you looked at me that night. You were looking past the disguise, like you could see me underneath. I didn’t realize until that moment how tired I was of people seeing the façade and never being able to show the man beneath it. So the last thing I want to do now is trade one disguise for another. And that’s what I’m afraid I’d be doing if I told you my name now.” He gave a frustrated sigh. “I’m not sure I’m explaining this very well. Can you understand what I’m trying to say? Can you accept that by not telling you everything yet I’m trying to be *more* honest with you, not less?”

Lois chewed thoughtfully for a moment before replying, “I’m not sure I understand completely. But I can tell that you’re trying to make some kind of break with your past, with whatever it is that your real name means to you. So, yeah, I guess I can wait. But I’m not sure how well we can really get to know each other if you feel you have to hide part of yourself from me, even if it’s a part you don’t like much.”

“You have a point,” Clark was forced to admit. “Maybe I just need a little time to get comfortable with the idea. It’s not just a matter of what *you*’ll see if I tell you my name. It’s also a matter of my own expectations, of who I feel like I have to be when I’m him. Without that burden, I feel like I can be anybody — like I’m discovering who I am all over again.”

“It must be confusing,” she put in, “you’ve got Superman, Whatever Your Name Is, and, somewhere underneath it all, this New Man that you’re trying to create, or find, or I don’t know what.”

“I don’t know what either, Lois. I’m kind of making this up as I go along. All I know now is that the guy with my name is no more me than Superman is. For one thing, he can’t fly, and I can.”

“Good point.” Lois took a bite of green beans with red peppers while she thought it over. “I guess there’s no reason I can’t start off getting to know the superpowered side of you just as easily as the other side. As long as we’re agreed that it’s just for now. And you can’t expect me not to be curious. I can’t just turn that off.”

He grinned in relief. “I wouldn’t dream of it, Lois. Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Speaking of which, you said in the interview that you were a refugee. Now that we’re off the record, do you want to tell me how that happened? It seems like it still bothers you.”

“Only from time to time, when I think about how I got here. It’s not something I dwell on most of the time.” He paused to gather his thoughts. “To be honest, I don’t know exactly what happened, why my parents sent me away, or even whether they had any choice in the matter. Maybe someone took me from them.”

“Your parents sent you to Earth from Krypton? And you don’t remember anything about it?” A new thought dawned on her. “Exactly how long ago was that? How old were you?”

He couldn’t help smiling at her insightfulness. “A very long time ago; I was only a few months old when my ship landed on Earth.”

“A few *months* old? You were a baby?” The logic gears were turning at full speed now. “So that ship I saw wasn’t a supply ship at all. I said it was too small to carry a person, but that would only be true for an adult. It was big enough to fit a baby.”

“You’ve got it exactly right,” he nodded. “My folks — my adoptive parents — found me in that ship over twenty years ago.”
 “How old are you?”

“Twenty-seven. How old are you?”

Lois laughed at his what’s-good-for-the-goose-is-good-for-the-gander riposte. “Touche. I’m twenty-six.”

He’d distracted her momentarily, but he could practically see her rearranging her assumptions about Superman in her head. “So you grew up here on Earth. And you haven’t heard from anyone on Krypton since you were a baby?”

“No. Not a word.” That issue still touched a nerve, and he was certain that it showed.

“Why would anyone send a little baby all alone to another solar system?”

“I have no idea. Until you showed me that globe I wasn’t even sure I was from another solar system. My parents thought I might have been some sort of Russian experiment.”

The implications of that statement registered quickly. “So you just recently found out for sure that you are the first visitor from another planet? That’s huge!”

“To find out that I’m an alien? Yeah. It’s pretty big. That’s one reason I was so relieved to see how you were looking at me that night. You didn’t look at me like I was some kind of freak.”

“Now, hold on there, bud.” Lois reached one hand across the table to cover one of his. “I don’t care where you come from or what you can do. You are the most amazing man I’ve ever met. You’re not an alien or a freak.”

He shook his head sadly. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Lois, but I am an alien. There’s no denying that. The globe you found talked to me, directly into my mind. It told me the name of its planet. That’s about as freaky as you can get.”

“You’ve never been to Mardi Gras, have you?” Lois asked in an obvious attempt to break the tension and lighten the mood.

“As a matter of fact, I have,” he laughed. “Point taken.”

The various bamboo containers were just about empty. Lois took one final sip of wine and then reached for a fortune cookie and cracked it open.

“It’s in Chinese,” she blurted out in surprise. Well, why wouldn’t it be?

“Let me see.” Superman was reaching for the fortune.

“Don’t tell me you read...never mind.”

Lois handed the slip of paper to him and he translated, “A good horse is like a member of the family.”

“See, I hate that! That is not a fortune!” Lois began. She stopped when she saw the look he was giving her. Smitten. That was the only word she could come up with to describe that look. She had a feeling that it was closely mirrored by her own. Neither of them moved.

A million thoughts were churning in her head, so it probably wasn’t surprising that one of them spilled out of her mouth.

“If you were any other man, I’d tell you not to fall for me.”

The corners of his mouth twitched, and a warm twinkle danced in his eyes. “It wouldn’t do you any good. As it is, you’re too late,” he returned, his voice deep and smooth.

“I’m nothing but trouble in that department,” she parried half-heartedly.

“Forewarned is forearmed; I’ll take my chances,” he insisted, his mouth stretching into a wide smile.

“Why?” she blurted.

He’d been leaning back in his chair, but at her question he sat forward and reached across the small table to grasp her hand in his. Every trace of teasing was gone. In all earnestness, he told her, “Because you’re brilliant.” Without letting go of her hand, he slid gracefully out of his seat and moved around the table to kneel next to her. “Because you were Superman’s first friend.” He reached up with his free hand and gently tucked her hair behind her left ear. “Because you saw right away that he wasn’t me.” He

released her hand and cradled her face in his palms. “Because you are the most beautiful person I know.” His face leaned in towards hers, “There’s something special going on here, Lois. I felt it the first time I laid eyes on you. Please tell me I’m not the only one.”

“You’re not,” came out in a whisper. It was all she could manage, but it was all he needed to hear.

She’d seen it coming. He’d made his intentions clear with every move. But nothing could have prepared Lois for the impact of that first kiss. His lips were soft and yielding, but his hands were firm and sure. The first touch was brief, a testing of the waters, but at her willing response his hesitancy evaporated and he was back, kissing her in earnest. His kiss spoke of admiration, of affection, of desire, and a promise of even better things to come. It was a kiss that said, “This is wonderful, and you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

Lois brought her own hands to his head, idly playing with the soft curls at the back of his neck. When the kiss finally broke, Superman let out a breathless, “Lois...”

“Super...” she began, but the name was interrupted by the return of his lips to hers. He kissed her quickly and briefly, just to stop her from talking.

“Please, Lois, don’t call me that, not when it’s just us.” His forehead leaned against hers, and she could feel the breath of every word blowing gently across her own lips.

She kissed him again, tried to pour all the faith she had in him into that kiss. “I want you to be whoever you want to be. I don’t care what your name is. It’s you I care about.”

This time when she kissed him he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her out of her chair in the process. But they didn’t collapse in a heap on the floor. Instead, they rose smoothly up until they were both standing, arms around each other, six inches in the air. When the kiss broke, Lois rested her head on his chest. She’d loved flying in his arms, but floating like this, face to face, was even better.

When he spoke, his voice emanated from this chest in a low rumble that she felt as much as heard. “Lois, you are amazing. I’ve never met another woman quite like you.”

“Well, I’m not your typical female,” she teased. “Anyone could tell you that.”

“I’ll just bet they could.” Lois could hear the grin in his voice. She pulled her head back so that she could see it as well. Just then, a thought that had been bothering her all evening pushed its way to the foreground.

“What?” he asked when a small frown of consternation creased her brow.

“I wasn’t kidding; I really don’t need you to tell me your real name yet. But I do need something to call you besides Superman or Hey Handsome.”

He landed them gently back on the floor and, taking her by the hand, led her to sit with him on her loveseat.

“Well, Hey Handsome works for me,” he said, pulling her feet up sideways to rest her legs across his lap, “but I suppose I could answer to something else if you insist. As long as it isn’t...”

“Norbert,” they said in unison, chuckling at the shared joke.

Lois leaned back against the arm of the sofa. Her left arm draped across the sofa back, her fingers once more toying with those adorable curls at the back of his head. His hands rubbed idly up and down the sides of her lower legs.

“Hmmm....,” she contemplated. “I think we should name you after Clark Kent. He is the master of the secret identity, you know.”

“You’re going to call me Clark?” he squeaked.

“No, that could get confusing. What if we wanted to go somewhere public? I couldn’t go around introducing you to my friends as Clark Kent. You’d never hear the end of it.”

"Good point," he agreed. He removed her hand from his neck and placed a kiss on her knuckles before lacing their fingers together.

"No, I was thinking more along the lines of using the same initials," she mused.

"I guess I could live with that. But please don't call me Calvin Klein."

Lois gave a little chuckle and then went back to her pondering. "How about Charlie King?" she asked.

"Definitely not," was his emphatic reply. "I know a Charlie King, and he's nobody you'd like to meet." In point of fact, Charlie King was one of Clark's least favorite aliases. Charlie had fallen in with some gunrunners in the Congo and gotten to know some very nasty people. In the process, he'd learned a few things about Metropolis's favorite son, but he'd been forced out before he had anything tangible. One of these days, though...

"Too much baggage with Charlie. Got it." Lois's voice brought him back to the present. There was a long pause as she continued to meditate on the various permutations of CK.

"How do you feel about Caleb?" she asked at length.

He tried it out. "Caleb...Caleb...I knew a Caleb in college. He was a pretty good guy. I guess I could be a Caleb."

"Ah, so you've been to college. You're dropping a lot of clues, you know."

"I'm not going to censor everything I say around you, Lois. I want us to get to know each other. Besides, you're the great Lois Lane. If you really want to know my name, I have no doubt you'll find it out."

"Well, I doubt your name would make any difference to me anyway. It's not as if I'm likely to even meet you in your other guise. You could tell me your name was Joe Regular and it wouldn't mean a thing to me. But, since it seems to mean something to you, I'm going to give you a new one anyway. A new name for the new you. So, are we settled on Caleb?"

"Sure," Clark agreed, glad that he wouldn't actually have to reply to her assumption that she'd never met him.

"Okay, then. And, since you don't want to be the King, you can be my Knight in shining armor. Or spandex, as the case may be."

"Caleb Knight..." Clark rolled the name around in his mind and then gave a satisfied little nod. "Why not? Caleb Knight it is. It might take me a while to get used to it, but I think I'll like it."

"I could help you learn to like it," Lois offered, a mischievous smile playing at the corner of her mouth.

"Oh? And how do you propose to do that?" Clark asked, his smile mirroring hers.

"Like this." She scooted her body forward so that she was almost sitting on his lap, her legs draped across his. Her arms wrapped themselves around his neck. He could feel her hair brush like silk against his cheek as she brought her mouth close to his ear and murmured, "Caleb..." She planted a soft, warm kiss on the tender skin beneath his ear. "Caleb..." She laid a trail of slow, deliberate kisses down the strong, firm line of his jaw. "Caleb..." she whispered against his lips, punctuating his new name with the melding of her supple mouth to his. After that, there was no need for names, or other words for that matter, for a very long time.

Clark was the first one awake the next morning. This wasn't unusual since he didn't need as much sleep as Pete and Lana. He had long since trained himself to turn his superhearing off whenever his parents were in their bedroom together, and the habit transferred to his friends for the few weeks of every year when the three of them were on tour.

This particular morning he had his nose buried in the front page of the Daily Planet. Somehow, he never had gotten around to previewing the interview on Thursday evening. His eyes were

on the words, but, since he had read the entire article in thirty seconds, his mind was free to wander back to the night before. He hadn't been kissed like that in...well, ever. He'd liked it. A lot. He planned to do it as often as he could for the foreseeable future.

He was absentmindedly downing his second bowl of apple-spice oatmeal when Lana appeared, dressed in blue jeans and a mock turtleneck sweater, and headed for the coffee machine.

"Well?" she said as she dropped into the seat next to his.

"Well what?" Clark answered automatically, not lifting his eyes from the article.

"Well, I take it from your remarkable concentration that the captivating Ms. Lane actually printed your interview this time. How'd she do?"

"You tell me," Clark said, handing the paper to Lana. The headline screamed "Superman Confirms Intelligent Life on Alien Planet," with the subhead, "'I'm Here to Help' says Flying Hero." Lana scanned the article, searching for any hint that Superman might be hiding a secret identity. She found none. What she did find was a sympathetic portrayal of the hero as a refugee from a distant world who had used his unique talents to earn a warm welcome from the inhabitants of his adopted homeland. In addition to Lois's conversation with Superman, there were several quotes from people he had rescued and official statements of welcome from the Mayor of Metropolis and the Governor of New Troy. A sidebar by Eduardo Friez provided an analysis of the probabilities of life existing on other planets besides Earth and Krypton and a brief discussion of the implications of Einstein's theory of relativity for faster-than-light travel.

She handed the paper back to Clark with a noncommittal, "Not bad. If you like that sort of thing." Clark figured that was as good as he was going to get until at least a few weeks had passed without the appearance of a "Superman's Secret Identity" expose.

"Well, Clark," Lana said in the tone of one changing the subject, "time's up. You've got two interviews this afternoon, your last book signing tonight, and then the tour is officially over. We've got the suite booked through the weekend, but Arthur Chow has it starting Monday, so I need a decision. Are you going back undercover, or do I need to find us something more long term in Metropolis?"

Clark put the paper down with a soft swish. He took a sip of coffee, noticed it had gone cold, zapped it with his heat vision, took a second, more satisfactory sip, then finally replied, "Undercover, but not in Nepal."

"Where, then?" was the obvious next question.

"Right here."

"Come again?"

Clark set his coffee mug down and leaned back in his chair, feet crossed at the ankles and arms crossed over his chest. Lana recognized this as his 'talking business' pose. "You and Pete head back to Smallville. Put the word out that Clark Kent has left Metropolis for a short sabbatical before beginning the research for his next book. But before you go, I'll need a house. Nothing fancy or too big. Something an average Joe could afford. Maybe one of those brownstones in the Hyperion Avenue neighborhood."

"Let me get this straight: you want to *pretend* to leave Metropolis? Won't people get suspicious when Clark Kent's name shows up on the property rolls?" She couldn't help but wonder what had transpired last night that made Clark want to stay in Metropolis, but she knew better than to ask. Clark was a gentleman, and she knew he'd never kiss an tell.

"No, they won't, because Clark Kent is not buying this house. Caleb Knight is. Or rather, Clark's new Limited Liability Corporation is buying it on Caleb's behalf. Give Lloyd a call and have him set it up. Call it...Norbert Enterprises."

"Norbert?" Her voice and her eyebrows rose in tandem.

"You had to be there," he grinned.

"So, just to clarify, you want your lawyer to set up a shell company to buy a house for a fictional man."

"Caleb Knight," Clark supplied.

"Yes, Caleb. Who's going to live in Metropolis," Lana confirmed.

"You got it," Clark replied cheerfully. "Oh, and I'm going to need a cell phone."

"Sure. A cell phone for Caleb Knight. Whatever you say." Lana just shook her head.

Lois felt like the queen of the world as she strode into the newsroom late Friday morning. She'd already fielded four phone calls at home from reporters at other papers wanting to know how she'd contacted Superman — as if she'd ever tell. Ha! — and one from Lucy wanting to know if he was really as "yummy" in person as he seemed on T.V. She could still hear her sister's voice complaining, "I can't believe I let Amanda talk me into moving a month early. I'm missing all the excitement."

Jimmy greeted her cheerfully as she set her shoulder bag down on one corner of her desk. He picked up a small stack of phone messages from the other corner and leaned casually against the half-wall which separated her desk from Eduardo's.

"You're Miss Popularity this morning, Lois. You've got three messages from Lex Luthor's personal assistant. I guess if you're good enough for Superman, then you're good enough for Luthor." Jimmy rifled through the messages one by one before placing them dramatically in front of her. "Oh, yeah," he said when he was down to the last message, "some guy named Caleb called. He was real insistent that I write his number down. Said you didn't have it yet. He made me read it back to him twice."

"Give me that!" Lois grabbed for the last message. "Caleb Knight," she read silently, "555-8057 Dinner tomorrow?" She was reaching for the phone when she noticed Jimmy still standing there, watching her every move with ill-disguised curiosity. She gave him a pointed stare until he shrugged his shoulders and scampered off in the general direction of the records room. When she was sure he was out of earshot, she picked up her phone and dialed.

"This is Caleb," came a cheerful and heartwarming familiar voice on the other end of the line.

Something strange about the background noise made her ask, "Where are you?"

"10,000 feet over Hobb's Bay. Where are you?" She could hear his amusement even over the phone.

"I'm at work, of course. Are you telling me that you're answering this phone while you're..." she paused briefly to come up with the right wording for a public setting..."in uniform?"

"Why not? There's no one around to hear me. And the whole point of even having this number is so you can reach me whenever you need to. I'm glad it works up here, though; I was a little worried about the coverage."

Lois shook her head in bemusement. "It works fine. I got your message. Obviously."

"So? What do you say? Can I buy you dinner tomorrow? I'm sorry I can't do it tonight. I've got another engagement I can't get out of easily."

"Tomorrow's fine." She only paused a beat before daring to ask, "What kind of engagement does...our mutual acquaintance have?"

"That's not who has the engagement. It's the Other Guy. And it's a work thing. But after that my schedule's pretty clear. I loved the article by the way."

"You read it?" That was a silly question, she realized as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

He didn't tease her about it, though. His voice was utterly sincere as he replied, "I always read your work." Then, seemingly apropos of nothing, he asked, "Do you have a passport?"

"Of course. Every reporter does. Why do you ask?"

"Bring it with you tomorrow. I'm taking you out for pasta. Of course I plan to bring you back again, but it would be a good idea to have it along just in case. If there were some huge disaster in China or something and I had to leave suddenly, I wouldn't want you stranded in Florence."

"Florence. Gotcha." She rolled her eyes, but a smile played at her lips.

"Hey, we have to check out the goods for Bobby, don't we? Just to make sure it's up to his exacting standards."

"Sure we do. What time should I expect you?"

"Is three too early? The restaurants in Europe are open pretty late, but there is a six hour time difference."

"No problem. I'll eat a light lunch. What should I wear?"

"It's a family restaurant. And I don't think I can completely avoid the wind on the way, so slacks are probably best. Something along the lines of what you had on last night would be perfect."

"Okay. It's a date."

"Great. I'll see you then. And call this number any time. I'll always answer if I possibly can. If it's a real emergency, just scream loud," he teased.

"Sure. I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you." There was a small pause. "Bye."

"Bye." As she hung up the phone, Lois was struck by a sudden and overwhelming realization.

Oh my God, she thought, I'm Superman's girlfriend!

She didn't have long to ponder this new state of affairs before she was accosted by a familiar bellow. "Lois! My office! Now!" Grabbing a fresh notepad and pencil, she headed off to answer the summons.

"What's up, Chief?" she asked in a fair imitation of her normal voice.

Perry put down the paper he'd been perusing and motioned for Lois to take a seat in his guest chair. "Darlin', you've outdone yourself," he beamed. "This is first rate journalism. You should be proud."

"Thanks." Lois couldn't suppress a smile at her editor's praise.

"What's more, the suits upstairs are pleased as punch — circulation is up twelve percent at newsstands this morning."

"That's great." Why did she get the feeling there was a 'but' coming?

"But," — yep, there it was — "we've got a problem."

"How so?"

Perry picked up a stack of phone messages at least as big as the one Jimmy had been waving around earlier that morning. "These all came in since 8:00 this morning, and poor Gloria at the switchboard is fielding more every hour." He picked the messages off the stack one by one and laid each one down on his desk with a flourish. "This one is from the Luthor Center for the Blind; they want Superman to appear at their celebrity bachelor auction. This one is from the Muscular Dystrophy Foundation. They want him for their telethon next month." The list went on, degenerating into an unintelligible mumble until Perry waved the last message in the air and proclaimed, "And this one is from the Mayor's office. He wants to give Superman the Key to the City. Lois, it's got to stop. This is a newspaper, not a public relations firm. I don't know how you contacted Superman for your interview, and I don't want to know. Just get him on the line — or whatever it is you do — and tell him he's got to handle his own phone calls from now on. Capiche?"

"Sure, Chief. I'll do my best." What else could she have said? She turned to head back to the bullpen, but Perry called her back.

"Here." He held the pile of messages out to her. "Take these with you. You might as well pass them on." Reluctantly, Lois took the stack and headed back to her desk. Somehow, she didn't

think Caleb had anticipated this when he'd invented Superman.

When she got back to her desk her phone was ringing. It was Benny Bonebreak, her second best snitch, who insisted he had to talk to her *right now* in the alley behind the Fudge Castle. So, by the time she got around to calling Caleb about the problem with the phone messages, it was almost lunchtime. Perry had met her at the elevator door with half a dozen more messages and a scowl that said, "Get on this pronto, young lady."

With a touch of fear and trembling, she dialed Caleb's number. At first she thought she'd misdialed, the voice that answered was so different from his earlier breezy tone. "Hello," came the very businesslike answer to her ring.

"Uh, hello, this is Lois Lane from the Daily Planet. I was trying to reach Caleb Knight." Who else could possibly be picking up Caleb's phone?

"Yes, Ms. Johnson, thank you for returning my call," the voice said, causing Lois even more confusion. "Can you hold for just a moment?" Without waiting for a reply, the voice lost several decibels and said faintly, "Excuse me, Liz. Are we just about finished here? I really should take this call."

A second voice, even fainter, could barely be made out replying, "No problem, Mr..." before it was cut off abruptly by what Lois imagined was a hand placed over the phone's mouthpiece.

Just when she was about to hang up and try again, Caleb's familiar voice came on the line at last. "I'm sorry about that. I was in the middle of a meeting, but I'm done now. What's up?"

"It's about you-know-who." Lois was still trying to get her head around the idea that Caleb was somewhere in Metropolis, dressed as his Other Self, talking to her in a room that he had apparently cleared for that express purpose.

"Our friend in blue? What about him?" he asked easily.

"Well, apparently every charity and P.R. agent on the East Coast has decided that, since the Planet published his first official interview, we must know how to reach him. I've got a stack of messages for him on my desk, and my editor's breathing down my neck to get them to stop."

"Oh, my. I should have thought of that. I'm sorry. Tell your editor that he — and every other major newspaper in the country — will have a press release naming Superman's PR firm on his desk within the hour. Do you want me to send a messenger for the pile?"

"No. They can call back once the press release is out. If it gets here by 3:00 it will make the evening edition."

"I'll make sure of it. Meanwhile, if anyone else calls, you can tell them that Superman has his own secretary, and you're not it. They can read about it in the Daily Planet." The smile was definitely back in his voice. "I'll see you tomorrow. I'm really looking forward to it."

"Me too. See you then."

"Well," Lois thought as she hung up the phone, "He handled that better than I would have expected." It wasn't the first time she'd had that thought, she mused.

By approximately 5:45 that evening, Caleb Knight — or rather Norbert Enterprises, LLC — was the proud new owner of a townhouse on Hyperion Avenue. It even had a secret compartment for Superman's suits. He shook his head in wonder as he brought his mother in for a quick landing in the fenced and tree-lined back yard.

"I can't believe how quickly you got this done, Clark. Or should I say Caleb?" she frowned in obvious disapproval of his new name.

"Yeah, me either. Lloyd is pretty amazing. With enough manpower to shepherd the paperwork, he can set up a company in an hour. It was sheer luck that the right house was on the

market, though, and that the owners were willing to turn over the keys right away." Clark unlocked the back door as he spoke and ushered his mother inside.

"I'm sure that paying the asking price by cashier's check helped." If Martha's tone was a little sardonic, it was at least subtle.

"You don't approve," Clark stated the obvious while leading his mom into the large, airy kitchen whose built-in breakfast nook provided the only available seating.

Martha gave him a searching look, then replied, "It's not a matter of approval, honey. You're a grown man, and I know you have your reasons. But I worry about you. You've spent years creating identity after identity so you can get the background material for your books. That always made perfect sense to me. Then you developed this rich playboy persona, which made less sense, but I gave you and Lana the benefit of the doubt. What do I know about marketing books and movies? Maybe it really is necessary. But if it makes you so miserable, it seems there ought to be another way. Superman makes a lot of sense to me; he's obviously been a huge hit, and he lets you use your talents openly, which is of great benefit to the world, as well as being good for you. But this third person — Caleb Knight? I'm not sure I understand why he's necessary. If you want to stay in Metropolis, why can't you just do it as you?"

Clark handed his mom a paper cup of milk and a couple of store-bought cookies on a napkin. He took a seat across from her and tried to find an explanation that wouldn't hurt her feelings. "I love who I am, Mom — who you and Dad raised me to be. You two are the best parents any boy could dream of. But like you said, the Clark Kent that most people know isn't the same man you raised. He's an image, almost a cartoon. The guy I am when I'm at home with you and Dad is not who most people think of when they hear that name. And now I've met this amazing woman who's way too smart to fall for a lightweight like Clark Kent, and I desperately want to be myself with her — all of myself, including the part that can fly and light fires with his eyes. Miracle of miracles, she already knows about the strange things I can do, and she likes me anyway. But I can't be Superman when I'm alone with her — he's just as one-dimensional as the playboy. I want her to know all of me, the way you and Dad do, or Pete and Lana. But the name you gave me, that I'll always be proud to carry, leads to certain preconceptions. So I figured that if I could be the real me, but with a new name, she'd have a chance to really know me before she has to overcome the baggage that comes with my name." He reached to cover her hand with his own. "Does that make sense? Is it okay if I set Clark aside for a little while, just until Lois can hear that name and still see the man under the façade?"

"Alright," she agreed thoughtfully. "I guess I can understand that reasoning. Just be sure not to take too long. No woman likes to feel like she's had the wool pulled over her eyes."

"I won't, Mom. And it's not like I'm lying to her. She knows I have another identity. Heck, she's the one who named me — twice."

"Well, I named you first," his mom countered. He thought she was only half joking.

"So you did. And I wouldn't trade that name for the world," he assured her. "I just need to make a few adjustments to it before I can take it back again. And I think you and Lois are just the two brilliant women to help me do it."

"So, when do I get to meet this bewitching young lady? I'm only here for a week, you know. Your dad couldn't survive on frozen meatloaf and Bruno's pizza much longer than that."

Clark's eyebrows climbed into his hairline and his eyes opened wide. "Meet her?" he squeaked. Then, lowering his voice back into its normal range, he managed, "Who said anything about meeting her?"

Martha simply fixed him with a steady gaze. “I’m your mother, Clark. If I’m going to abandon your poor father to come all the way back East and help you furnish this house that you bought on the spur of the moment, the least you can do is introduce me to the young lady who inspired this sudden burst of domesticity.”

“I’ll think about it,” was all he was willing to concede for now.

“You do that,” Martha replied with a satisfied nod.

Lois picked at her tuna salad and tried to focus on the movie she’d rented, but Mel Gibson just wasn’t doing it for her tonight. What was wrong with her? She was used to eating dinner alone. She’d done it every night since Lucy moved out, and most weekend nights before that. Just because she’d had one admittedly terrific dinner with Su...Caleb didn’t mean she had to see him every night. She’d be with him again in less than twenty-four hours. And it wasn’t his fault he had to work tonight.

Speaking of work...what kind of job did Caleb have that kept him working late on a Friday night? He could be a policeman or fireman or some other job with an evening shift, but she didn’t think so. He’d phrased it differently. Not, ‘I have to work that night,’ but ‘It’s a work thing.’ That implied a special event of some kind, like a party or a reception. Or dinner with a client? Was he a lawyer — she certainly hoped not — or an investment advisor or in some other kind of service job where he had to entertain clients after hours?

He definitely had experience talking to reporters. Now that she knew he’d been raised on Earth, she could read his interview responses through new eyes. He hadn’t lied, but he’d certainly been selective about the truth. He’d deliberately given the impression that he’d been raised on another planet and just recently come to Earth. Of course Lois was as guilty as he was as far as that deception went. She’d known that someone from Krypton had been around for years. She just hadn’t focused on the precise implications of that idea. So what kind of job required regular contact with the press? He could be a spokesman for just about anyone — a government agency, law enforcement, any large business — they all had press officers. That would make a lot of sense. How else would he have been so familiar with PR firms and press releases?

It was so tempting. He’d already given her enough clues to get started. She knew his age, and therefore the year he’d landed on Earth. That would almost certainly be the year his parents reported on his birth certificate. She could start with a search for UFO sightings in that year. She knew that he’d been to college — okay, so had a lot of people, but not everyone. He’d almost certainly been raised in the U.S., judging by the way he spoke. Now that she thought of it, he had a slight Midwestern accent. She had a phone number. He wouldn’t have actually registered the phone in his own name, would he?

Lois stopped. What kind of a friend was she? Caleb had trusted her with so much, she was ashamed of herself for even considering investigating him behind his back. Besides, she had the impression that if she really wanted to know his other name, she could just ask him. She didn’t think he’d refuse to tell her if she asked him point blank. And she did want to know, but not as much as she wanted Caleb to get over whatever hang-ups he obviously had about that name. He’d said he wanted a clean slate. At least for now, she was willing to give him one.

Giving up on the movie, Lois turned the TV off and idly flipped through the pages of her Daily Planet evening edition. Sure enough, there was a small article on page 6 and a larger advertisement on page 2 naming the Metropolis office of Temple, Baker, and Lodge as Superman’s official public relations contact. Perry should be happy.

Across from the TB&L ad was one from The Inkwell

reminding the Planet’s readers that Clark Kent’s book signing that evening was his final scheduled public event. Seven to nine p.m....Lois checked her watch. In all the hubbub of the Messenger investigation and then the excitement over Superman, she’d almost forgotten about Clark Kent. This could be her golden opportunity to talk to him without his personal assistant in the way. She needed to time it just right so that it would be almost closing time when she got to the front of the line. Then a casual invitation for coffee when he was finished...it was a long shot, but it was worth a try. Grabbing her copy of ‘Little David’ from her nightstand, she did a quick makeup check and headed for The Inkwell.

Clark was well into the second hour of the book signing. Lana had just handed him the twelfth Sharpie pen of the evening, but, luckily for him, his hand never really got tired. And he had the idle chitchat game down to a science.

He’d been letting his mind wander a bit when he saw something that sent him into panic mode. Lois had just walked into the store with a copy of his latest book under one arm. She glanced briefly at the display tables at the front of the store and then took her place at the end of the line. Good thing for him there were still a couple of dozen people waiting. She was still several yards away, and, since the line snaked sideways away from his table, she wasn’t looking directly at his face.

He couldn’t let her get close to him! It was one thing for her to have seen Clark Kent up close during their interview when she had no one else to compare him to, but now that she’d spent so much time with both Superman and Caleb, there was no way she wouldn’t recognize him. How she had failed to make the connection just from the blow-up of his face on the publicity poster, he’d never know. Must be the glasses; they really did change the shape of his face. Quickly, he leaned over and whispered in Lana’s ear. She listened carefully, and then, suppressing a smile at his expense, he was sure, she smoothly rose and walked to the end of the line, bringing one of the store’s employees along with her.

Lois was certain that Clark had noticed her when she’d entered the store. He had looked up suddenly, locked eyes with her from across the room, and then hurriedly lowered his face back to the book he was signing for a balding forty-ish nerd in a button-down shirt and horn rims. He leaned over and whispered something to Lana Ross, who sat next to him at the signing table. So much for catching him alone. Then Ms. Ross got up and, motioning one of the store’s clerks to follow her, approached Lois with what was obviously her best PR smile.

“Ms. Lane! It’s so nice to see you again!” Oh, yeah, Lois was sure that Ms. Ross was just delighted to see the reporter who had wasted an entire evening of her employer’s time as well as hers and her husband’s.

“How have you been?” Lois asked in automatic schmooze mode. “I hope you’ve enjoyed your stay in Metropolis.”

“It’s been lovely, thank you. My husband even got to take in the Tigers/Browns game last week.”

“That’s great. The offensive line held for a change and Kowalski had a pretty good game. I still think Garvey’s going to be shopping for a new quarterback in the spring draft, though.”

“So Pete tells me. But what are you doing standing way back here in line? Let me have your book and Eric here will take it right up front for you.” Before Lois had time to react, her book was in possession of the aforementioned Eric and being carried directly to Clark Kent.

“That really wasn’t necessary. I don’t mind waiting,” she protested.

“It’s no trouble at all. It will only take a moment; it won’t really hold up the line. It’s the least we can do after wasting your time with the interview. I’m sorry you weren’t able to get a

workable story out of it.”

“Well, like I told you all at the time, no harm, no foul. Actually, I’d been hoping to take Clark out for coffee after the signing if he’s not too busy. Just to show there’s no hurt feelings.” She wished she didn’t have to make the request through the indomitable Ms. Ross, but it didn’t look like she had any other option at this point.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Somehow Lois doubted that. “Clark has another commitment right after this, and we’ve got an early flight out tomorrow morning. I’m afraid he’s just not available. Maybe the next time he’s in town. Or if you’re ever in Wichita, give us a ring. Here’s my card. It’s not too far from Smallville, and I’m sure he’d love to see you. I hope it works out. Oh, look, here’s Eric back with your book.”

Automatically, Lois opened the proffered book. There on the frontispiece in a firm, remarkably legible script she read, “For Lois, with fond memories of a delightful dinner. Best wishes, Clark Kent.”

When she looked up, she saw that the line had disappeared, all the waiting fans having had their thirty seconds with the dashing Mr. Kent, and he was standing up and pocketing his pen. With one brief friendly wave in her direction, he disappeared into a back room.

“Well, it looks like we’re done here. I’d better go meet Clark and get him off to his next engagement. It was nice seeing you. Good night!” And with that, the redhead followed her employer into the back room. Lois had the distinct impression that she’d just been headed off at the pass.

Lex Luthor looked up from his Eggs Benedict as Nigel approached and stood quietly a respectful distance away. “Yes?” he acknowledged his underling’s presence, “What is it, Nigel?”

“You wished to be kept informed of Mr. Kent’s movements, sir. I am pleased to report that he and his associates left this morning on United Flight 2360 for Wichita. I personally watched them board the plane and remained vigilant until takeoff.”

Lex waved a dismissive hand. “Fine, Nigel, fine. I don’t think we need worry ourselves any further with Mr. Kent. Has Mrs. Cox had a reply from Lois Lane? Will she be joining me for luncheon?”

“I beg your pardon, but Ms. Lane is apparently otherwise engaged for both luncheon and dinner today. She inquired as to your availability for a formal interview on Monday.”

“I see.” A brief frown crossed Luthor’s face as he contemplated this unwarranted turn of events. It was not every day that a woman turned down an invitation from Lex Luthor. Especially one who had been so obviously eager to make his acquaintance only weeks before. He knew she had dined with Clark Kent only days after they’d met at the White Orchid Ball. But the charming Mr. Kent had left town. That left only Superman as a potential rival for the striking reporter’s attention. Lex knew that she’d been chasing down an interview with the flying Boy Scout for weeks. He’d assumed that, now that her article had been published to wide acclaim, she’d finally be free to turn her attention back to Metropolis’s favorite philanthropist. Apparently not. He put his newspaper down with a decisive thump.

“Nigel, I’m curious,” he announced casually. “What could possibly be taking up so much of the lovely Ms. Lane’s time on a beautiful Saturday afternoon?”

“Shall I have her watched?”

“Yes, Nigel. Please do.” Lex wiped his mouth and placed his fine linen napkin next to his plate. “Let us find out what has Ms. Lane so preoccupied that she has no time for Lex Luthor.”

Lois stepped out of her bathroom clad in her terrycloth robe and stood in front of her open closet. What did one wear to dinner

at a family restaurant in Italy? Caleb had said slacks, but Lois didn’t want to replicate her outfit from Thursday night. She didn’t own a lot of nice pants — her work outfits tended toward short skirts. There was that one tan pair with the matching jacket, but it was way too baggy for a date. Was this occasion casual enough for jeans? No, not on a second date.

A second date. With Superman. She wondered if she would ever get used to that idea. She slid three more hangers from right to left. Skirt...skirt...dress...oh, my. Did she dare? Those pants fit like a second skin. She knew she had the figure to pull it off, but would Caleb be interested or shocked? With a decisive nod, she decided that a man who regularly appeared in public wearing briefs on the outside of his tights had no cause for complaint.

Ten minutes later she was hurrying to put the finishing touches on her makeup when her phone rang. She glanced at her watch. 2:58. Please don’t let it be Caleb calling to cancel! She picked up the phone and answered as casually as she could.

“Hello?”

“Lois? It’s Caleb.”

“Hey, Caleb. What’s up?” Don’t sound needy, don’t sound needy.

“I’m sorry, but I’m going to be a little late. I was just on my way, but something came up. I’ll be there in about fifteen minutes.”

“Are you sure? I mean if there’s an emergency...” Please don’t let there be an emergency.

“No, no, nothing like that. It’s just a little glitch. I’ll be there as soon as I can get a cab.”

“Okay. I’ll see you soon.”

“See you.”

Now what? Lois finished her toilette, checked that her purse was stocked with her lipstick, cash, credit card, and passport, and sat down to wait. She picked up ‘Little David’ and lost herself in it for a few minutes. Finally, her doorbell rang.

This time she peeked before she opened it, and there he was. He was wearing khaki trousers and a cranberry Henley shirt with the same black leather jacket from Thursday.

“Hi,” she greeted him, “I’m all ready. Did you want to come in for a minute, or do we need to get going?”

“There’s no rush. I’d love to see your apartment.” Hadn’t he seen it enough on Monday and Thursday? Caleb reached as if to shake her hand and said, “It’s good to see you again.”

Lois gave him her hand and, as he shook it, he pulled her forward and leaned in to kiss her cheek. As his lips left her face he pulled her even closer and whispered, “Play along.” Then he released her and looked around the apartment as if seeing it for the first time. “I like it. Very stylish. Did you decorate it yourself?”

“Yes. Lucy couldn’t care less what the furniture looks like as long as the rent is cheap.”

“How long since she moved out?” he asked, strolling into the kitchen and leaning lazily against the countertop.

“About a month. Her friend Amanda found a job bartending in Miami and convinced Lucy to move down and wait tables in the same place. She thinks it’s some grand adventure.” Lois rolled her eyes at her sister’s lack of career ambition.

Finally, Caleb dropped whatever crazy act he’d been pulling. “Sorry about that. I noticed someone with an earpiece watching your window on my way over. I was going to land on the roof and take the stairs down, but I detoured downtown and took a cab. I couldn’t be sure whether your apartment or your phone was bugged until I got here. They’re clean; he’s just watching from outside for now. And your sheers are closed, so he can’t read our lips. We can talk freely. But try to look casual.”

“Oh?” Lois said, a smile plastered on her face. “You mean I shouldn’t march straight downstairs and pull the guy’s spleen through his nostril? Because that’s what I’d really like to do.

Coffee?”

“Well, that would be one approach. I can think of others. And coffee would be great while we decide which of our many options to pursue,” Caleb answered with a matching smile. “By the way,” his eyes made an appreciative trip down past her hips to where her long red sweater with the deep V-neck ended and her tight black stirrup pants showed off every curve of her legs, “I like your outfit.”

“I almost didn’t wear it,” she admitted, making her way into the kitchen. “I thought these pants might be a little daring for a second date. But then I figured, given what you’d be wearing for the flight, you couldn’t exactly complain.”

He stood on the other side of her kitchen island, his elbows leaning casually on the counter. His eyes dropped to her legs again and an appreciative smile pulled at his mouth. “No, I’m not complaining at all.”

Lois reached for the canister and started scooping grounds into the filter. “So, which are we trying to do? Ditch the louse or find out who he’s reporting to?” she asked.

“I’ve already got the who. He reported in when I arrived.”

“And...”

“And I’m not going to tell you until we’ve ditched him because that’s going to be a long conversation best had in private. Or at least over fresh pasta at Mama Paola’s restaurant.” She wished his grin wasn’t quite so disarming. She gave him a token frown, just to show she wasn’t a complete pushover.

“Okay, then. Ditching first. What’s your plan?”

“Actually, I was hoping you’d tell me. You know this city a lot better than I do.”

She threw him a disbelieving frown as she started the coffee maker. “Caleb, I already know that you didn’t just arrive here three weeks ago. You remember...a certain conversation on a tropical island?”

“Ah, but just because I’ve been on Earth for years doesn’t mean I’ve been in this city. Not everyone is Metropolis born and raised, Lois.”

She was getting out mugs and sugar, but she turned to him in surprise. “You don’t work in Metropolis? Where were you when I called you yesterday at lunch time?”

“Actually, I was in the city. But it was only for a short-term assignment. Metropolis isn’t my home base.”

Lois tried to keep her voice calm and casual as she poured milk and sugar into his mug. “So you’re not staying?” Please stay, please stay, please stay.

“Well, my assignment in Metropolis is over, but I don’t have anywhere else I have to be. Whether I stay or not is pretty much up to you.” Their eyes held for just a moment before Caleb said, “But we’re supposed to be figuring out how to get rid of the leech across the street. Any brilliant ideas?”

“He saw you come in, so I’m assuming that a quick take-off from the roof is out of the question?”

“I’d rather he saw us leave together, yes.”

“How about going for a walk in Centennial Park and taking off fast from the woods?” She poured the coffee as she spoke.

“That’s a possibility. But I’d rather not use Superman at all if we can avoid it. Let’s think public buildings with crowds and lots of exits.”

Lois handed him his coffee and took a careful sip of hers. “There’s Randolph’s Department Store downtown. It’s not really Christmas shopping season yet, but there’s usually a crowd on Saturday afternoon.”

“Okay, so this mystery man comes to your apartment on a Saturday afternoon and you dress in that,” he gave her an admiring once-over, “to go shopping.” Yep, definitely no complaints there.

“Well, there’s the Art Museum or the Riverwalk, but if you’re looking for possible date destinations, you’re probably down to a

busy restaurant or Movies 16.”

He set his coffee mug down with a hopeful expression. “The cineplex. Now that has serious ditching possibilities. What’s showing?”

Lois pulled her newspaper out of the pile of papers littering her kitchen island and they put their heads together over the movie listings.

“‘The Joy Luck Club’ is still playing,” Lois read. “Or there’s ‘The Good Son,’ ‘Rudy,’ or ‘The Nightmare Before Christmas.’”

“What? You don’t want to see the remake of ‘The Beverly Hillbillies’?”

“I’m not even going to dignify that question with a response.”

“Okay, so for this non-date, we can not see a chick flick, a thriller, Notre Dame football, or Tim Burton.”

They turned their heads toward each other, noses almost touching, and said in unison, “Tim Burton.”

“Do you want a blow-by-blow plan,” he asked, “or are you more of a wing-it kind of gal?”

Lois just looked at him pointedly.

“Forget I asked,” he grinned, folding the paper under one arm. “Do I at least get to mess with Bozo’s head a little?”

“Mess away!” she agreed, leading the way out of her apartment. “Mess away.”

As they emerged from the apartment lobby onto the sunny street, the tail was still waiting patiently, working the crossword on the bench in front of the apartment building. Not the most clever hiding place, but Clark wasn’t complaining. He took the paper out and gave the listings a quick glance, then tucked it back under his arm.

“Okay, so the movie starts in twenty minutes. Do we need a cab, or is it near enough to walk?” he asked, his voice just a little louder than normal.

“It’s only a couple of blocks. Let’s walk.”

“Sure.” They started in the direction Lois had indicated. The tail stood and followed them too closely, making a show of checking a slip of paper and searching the address numbers of the houses they passed. Clark would have thought that Luthor would be able to hire more competent spies, but he wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. “I really appreciate you giving up your Saturday afternoon for this, Lois. I know your Aunt Opal kind of foisted me on you. If she and my Grandma Tucker weren’t such good friends...but this way I can tell Grandma that we went out and you can tell your Aunt Opal that you gave me a chance. Then maybe they’ll both stop nagging us.”

Oh, he was asking for it. Two could play at this game. “I know,” she commiserated, “Aunt Opal can be a regular bulldog when she wants to be. You should have heard her last week. ‘Lois, he’s such a sweet boy, and he’s all alone in the big city. Just one date, Lois! Is that too much to ask for your favorite auntie?’ How did she and your grandmother get to be such good friends, anyway?”

He didn’t miss a beat. “Pinochle. They used to play every Thursday evening. It was always the boys against the girls, and I get the feeling the girls usually won. To this day, Grandpa swears that Miss Opal and Grandma cheated.”

“Really? That’s funny, because Aunt Opal swears they were just sitting the right way.”

“What? Why does it matter which way you sit?”

“The bathtub, silly.”

“The bathtub?”

“Of course. The couple that sits with the bathtub always wins.”

“Who sits in the bathtub to play cards?”

“Not *in* the bathtub, you nitwit. *With* the bathtub. Haven’t you ever played Pinochle before? Lucy and I got roped into it every Thanksgiving with Aunt Opal and Uncle Rupert. The partners sit across from each other, right?”

“Yeah...”

“So, if the bathtub in the house runs north and south, you want to be the couple sitting at the north and south ends of the card table. If it runs east and west, you want to sit on the east and west.”

“What if there are two bathtubs in the house?” Caleb asked.

“That’s simple; the closest one trumps.”

“I can’t believe you just said ‘trumps.’”

“What? You’re allergic to bad puns? Oh, look, we’re here.

Two for ‘The Nightmare Before Christmas,’ please.” Lois unzipped her purse, but Caleb had a twenty on the counter before she could get her wallet out. “Hey, we said Dutch treat,” she protested.

“Tell you what; you can buy the snacks.”

“I think you got the better end of that deal.”

“I think you’re right,” he grinned.

Juggling a bag of popcorn and two drinks, Caleb followed Lois to the middle of the theater. Once she was settled, he handed her the popcorn and set the drinks carefully on the floor before removing his jacket and hanging it on the back of the chair. The tail entered the theater three minutes after they did and sat four rows behind them on the other side of the aisle.

Just as the previews began, Caleb kicked his drink over, knocking off the already loose top and sending a river of Dr. Pepper flowing under the seats in front of him. He let out a frustrated grunt and stood up quickly, backing away so as not to step in the sticky puddle. “I need another drink, Lois. You want anything while I’m going?”

“You know, I did forget to buy Junior Mints. Would you mind?”

“No trouble. You stay right here and I’ll be back before you know it.” Caleb took off up the aisle, leaving his jacket hanging on the back of his seat. Two minutes later, Lois got up and headed for the ladies’ room.

The corridors of the cinema formed a rough H shape, with two long hallways leading to the theaters and a short hallway connecting them, with restrooms in the middle. As she entered the ladies’ room, Lois spotted the tail sauntering to the nearby water fountains. Halting just inside the restroom, Lois cracked the door just enough to get a look at her unwanted guardian. He took a sip of water from the fountain and then leaned against the wall as if waiting for someone to emerge from the restrooms. She’d painted herself into a corner. There were no windows in the restroom, and no way out without walking right past that bank of water fountains.

She was attempting to muster a spark of creative genius when Caleb loped into view at one end of the short hallway, large soda and Junior Mints in hand. He stopped and called out, as if he’d just spotted her further down the long corridor where their theater was, “Lois! You didn’t have to come out here. See?” He waved the box of Junior Mints at his imaginary companion, “I’ve got it covered. Let’s get back in before the movie starts.” With that, he trotted off down the hall toward the theater. Faced with contradictory evidence of his target’s location, the tail made the wrong choice and strolled casually around the corner, back toward the theater.

A minute later, Caleb, his hands now empty, walked quickly to the ladies’ room door, opened it just enough to pull Lois through it, put an arm around her waist, and almost carried her as fast as they could get away with toward the opposite hallway. They ducked into the nearest theater, ignored the cheering, snow-covered crowds of Fighting Irish fans chanting ‘Rudy, Rudy,’ from the screen, scampered down the aisle, and dashed out the back exit door into a dingy alley.

As the heavy door clanged shut behind them, Lois turned to Caleb and asked, “Well? Did we lose him?” She gestured back

toward the theater wall.

Clark did a quick scan of the theater they’d just come through. No one was following them down the aisle. “He’s not right behind us. There are too many people for me to check the whole cinema.” He glanced briefly up and down the alley. “There are too many exits into this alley. We need a quieter spot.” His eyes narrowed momentarily, then he grabbed Lois’s hand and said, “Come on. I see just the place.”

Hand in hand, they ran down the long alley and turned a corner into an out-of-the-way area full of dumpsters. The ground was littered with dirty, squashed popcorn kernels and splatters of dried-up soda pop. Lois poked her head briefly back around the corner. “No sign of him,” she confirmed.

Clark didn’t think he’d ever seen a more beautiful sight than Lois, cheeks flushed and hair flying every which way, standing in that filthy trash dump with her eyes shining at him.

“Well?” she prodded, “What next?”

Clark smiled and motioned for her to stay back. “Watch this. I’ve been practicing and I think I’ve got it down pat.” He paused just a moment before adding, “But don’t laugh if I fall on my butt.” Then he began to spin.

“Wow.” That was about the only possible response.

“Well?” Superman grinned cheekily. He reached for Lois’s left wrist and gently turned it so that he could read her watch. “It’s almost four. Mama Paola’s is open till midnight, so we’ve got time. You still up for dinner?”

“Absolutely. I think I’ve worked up an appetite,” she grinned back.

He held his arms open. “Come here, then.”

Instead of cradling her in his arms like a child, he took her into his embrace, tucking her head under his chin. She was very tempted to lift her face for a kiss, but she resisted. It would never do for Superman to be caught kissing Lois Lane behind the movie theater. He held her close, one arm around her waist and the other hand cradling the back of her head. His voice came from directly above her ear. “I’m going to take us up pretty fast. You might want to close your eyes.”

She squeezed him a little tighter, closed her eyes, and said, “Okay. I’m ready.” With a whoosh, they were over the cloud layer in seconds.

“You can open your eyes now,” he said. She did. They were floating, not moving, just hanging in mid-air between a floor of white and a sky of brilliant blue. All around them the afternoon sun cast long shadows of cloud on cloud. “You ready to go?” he asked.

“Almost.” She lifted her head with a knowing smile. His smile answered hers as he lowered his head in response. It was not a long, passionate kiss. It was soft and quiet, warm and affectionate. A reaffirmation of their still-new relationship and a celebration of the fun they’d had together. When their lips parted, she grinned up at him and said, “Now I’m ready.”

Gently, he turned her around so that they were floating side by side, his right arm around her waist and his left hand holding hers. As they began their transatlantic flight, they moved from a vertical to a horizontal position, watching first the clouds, then the open ocean pass below them. “It’s a little breezy. I’m glad you don’t have some fancy hairdo,” he said.

“Nope. I used to have long hair in college. My first journalism professor — a woman with short, curly hair — took me aside after the first week. ‘Lois,’ she said, ‘you’ve got the makings of a great reporter, but the hair has got to go. You won’t have time to take care of it, and it calls attention to you as a woman. This is a man’s world, chica. Better get used to it.’ So that weekend I went in to see my stylist, took a deep breath, and said, ‘Cut it off.’ I had to close my eyes. I’ve gotten used to it now.”

“Well, I think it’s beautiful.” Just in time, he stopped himself

from saying, “And you can still put it up like you did at the White Orchid Ball.” A new thought occurred to him and he asked, “Are you warm enough? I should have warned you to bring a jacket.”

“Actually, I feel fine. I guess I should feel cold this high up, but I don’t. Hey! Speaking of jackets, I just remembered — you left yours on the seat at the theater.”

“Yeah, I figured it would make it look like I was planning to come back. I’ll just pick it up from the lost and found tomorrow.”

Lois gave her head a little shake. “You really aren’t from Metropolis, are you? A jacket that nice will never make it to the lost and found. If one of the customers doesn’t take off with it, the guy who sweeps up will.”

“Then I’ll buy another one. It’s really no big deal.” Well, there was another clue. That jacket had probably been worth \$500. Anyone who could be that blasé about losing it obviously wasn’t hurting for funds. He was definitely some kind of professional, and a pretty successful one at that. She really hoped he wasn’t a lawyer.

Dusk falls quickly when you’re flying east, and even faster when you’re flying east with Superman. The water below them was now completely dark. Except for... “What’s that tiny light that keeps twinkling in and out in the water?”

His voice was a warm rumble in her ear, low and soft, “Look up.”

She turned her head and let out a gasp. “Oh my God! I’ve never seen the moon so bright. Or so many stars.”

“Do you trust me?”

He was teasing her, she knew, but she meant it when she said, “With my life.”

“Stay close.” With that, he rolled them both over so that they were facing up, the sky spread over their heads like a black canopy studded with diamonds. His arm supported her back and her head rested on his shoulder.

“It’s so beautiful! If I could fly I’d be out here every night. You never see stars like this in the city.”

“I’ll bring you out any time you like. I grew up looking at stars like this.”

“Really? I thought you said you didn’t fly until you were 18.”

“I didn’t. But the ocean isn’t the only place to see a sky full of stars. They look the same in the country, or the desert, or the mountains, even many beaches. Anywhere there isn’t any light pollution. Remember the story of Abraham? God brings him outside at night and tells him to look up at the sky and count the stars if he can, then He promises, ‘That’s how many descendants you’ll have.’” He nodded up at the shining display. “That’s what Abraham saw.”

“Well, they didn’t look like this at Girl Scout camp, I’ll tell you that much.”

“Was the camp in the woods?”

“Yes, now that you mention it, and even in the clearing there was the campfire.”

“There you go, then. You have to have wide-open spaces to see a sky like this. Or a friend who can take you above the clouds. I’m not kidding. I’ll take you up any time you want to go. You’ve got my number.”

“I may just take you up on that.”

“I hope you will.” He tilted his head back until he could see the horizon. “We’d better turn over again. I see lights ahead.”

He rolled them over gently and, once she had her bearings again, Lois looked ahead and saw the same lights that Caleb had. “Which part of Europe is that?” she asked.

“That’s the coast of Portugal on our right. In a few minutes we’ll see the French coast. We’re coming in over the Bay of Biscay. We’ll pass over southern France and over the Alps into northern Italy. You’re not afraid of ghosts, are you?”

“Ghosts? No, I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Good, because I’d like to land us at the edge of a cemetery I

know. We won’t even be near any graves. It’s just a park-like setting and a quick walk to the street, but it’s almost guaranteed to be deserted at this time of night. Then it’s just a short walk to the restaurant. Or we can try to hail a taxi if you’d rather.”

“No, walking’s fine as long as the weather’s okay.”

“Not a cloud in sight. We’re just about there. You ready?”

“Sure.”

“I’m going to turn you to face me again for the landing. Is that okay?”

Oh, you can hold me in your arms any time. She thought it, but she didn’t say it. “Okay.”

Two minutes later, Lois and Caleb walked out of the cemetery hand in hand and strolled leisurely down the sidewalk. Light spilled onto the pavement from cafes and shops, some closed for the night, but others still doing a healthy business. Suddenly, Caleb felt a tug as Lois stopped in her tracks, forcing him to stop with her. He turned and raised a questioning eyebrow.

“I can’t believe I forgot to ask you!” she said, resuming their walk. “Who was that creep at my apartment reporting to?”

A frown creased Caleb’s brow. “A man who used to work for MI-6. His name is Nigel St. John.”

“MI-6? Why would British Intelligence be interested in me? I haven’t been in the U.K. since high school.”

“He *used* to work for MI-6. He got greedy and went freelance several years ago.”

“And now he works for?”

“Luthor.” Dark clouds gathered in his face at the name.

“Lex Luthor? But he’s the biggest philanthropist in Metropolis. Why would he have a rogue ex-spy working for him?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Lois. Maybe because he’s also the biggest crime boss in Metropolis?”

She stopped again. When he turned to face her, she said, “You’re serious.” It wasn’t a question.

He sighed in frustration. “I’m dead serious, Lois, but I can’t prove a thing. He practically admitted to being the one who tested Superman. He implied that the population of Metropolis would be safer if Superman left town. But I don’t have a recording of the conversation. It’s his word against mine. As far as a court is concerned, all I have is circumstantial evidence, innuendo, and a huge hunch.”

“Well, a journalistic investigation is not the same as a court trial. I’ve started a lot of investigations based on just that combination. Sometimes they pan out, and sometimes they don’t, but it can’t hurt to take a look.”

“It can’t hurt me, but it could hurt you. Luthor doesn’t play around, Lois, and he’s not above killing anyone who gets in his way — even beautiful women. You know what happened to Dr. Baines.”

“You don’t think that was an accident.”

“I’d bet money it wasn’t, but I have no proof.”

“Proof turns up sooner or later. You just have to figure out where to look for it. You can plow your way through a lot of dead ends on the way, but all it takes is one good hit, and the pieces start to fall into place. I should know, Caleb; this is what I do.” He opened his mouth to protest, but she cut him off. “And I know how to do it carefully. I don’t *always* jump in without checking the water level. Besides, you’ll have my back, won’t you?”

“Always.”

Lois started walking again, pulling Caleb along with her. “That’s enough shop talk for tonight, but come Monday morning I’m going to be drilling you for everything you’ve got on the esteemed Mr. Luthor.”

“It’s not much, but I’ll tell you what I know.”

“Every little bit helps. You never know what the key piece is going to be.” She swung their still-joined hands lazily. “But not tonight. Tonight I’m on a date, and I’m getting hungry.”

“That’s a good thing, because we’re almost there, and Mama Paola likes to see people enjoy their food.” A gaggle of university students came spilling out of a doorway ahead of them, and they scooted to one side to make room for them to pass. The bulk of the group was past them and they were nodding politely to the stragglers when one of them, a tall, athletic girl of eighteen or nineteen with long dark hair, gave them a second glance.

“Enzo? È lei? Non posso credere! Quando prendi indietro?”

“Antonia! Siamo stati solo sul nostro modo di ristorante della vostra nonna.”

Caleb and the young lady grasped each other’s shoulders and exchanged kisses on each cheek. Lois, who had only understood one word of their exchange — something about the restaurant, she gathered — stood by feeling a strange mixture of awkwardness and curiosity.

The young lady addressed her with a smile and an outstretched hand. “Mi dispiace. Noi non soddissafte. Io sono Antonia, nipote del Mama Paola.”

Caleb jumped in immediately. “I’m so sorry. Lois, this is Antonia. Her grandmother is Mama Paola, the restaurant’s owner. Antonia, this is Lois. She’s American, and I’ve been terribly rude speaking Italian in front of her.”

“I’m pleased to meet you.” Antonia’s English was obviously a lot better than Lois’s Italian.

“Antonia! Sono provenienti o non?” someone called from the group, which was now halfway down the block.

Antonia waved at her friends. “I’m sorry. I have to go. Will I see you later?”

“I’m afraid not. We head back to America early tomorrow.”

“Shame on you, Enzo!” The young lady gave Caleb a playful slap on his arm. Next time you’re in Florence, you have to come see us at the beginning of your visit, not the end.”

“Antonia!” Her friends were losing patience.

“So long. It was nice to meet you.” And with that, Antonia bounded down the sidewalk to catch up with her companions.

“Sorry about that,” Caleb said, leading Lois onward.

“Antonia, hmm? She’s pretty.”

“She’s grown up a lot since I last saw her. I wouldn’t have recognized her if she hadn’t spotted me first.”

“Oh? And when did you last see her?”

Caleb looked confused for just a moment, then a knowing smile spread over his face. “That would be four years ago. You know, when I was twenty-three and she was fourteen.”

“Oh. So she was more like a kid sister.” Lois wished her sense of relief wasn’t quite so obvious.

“Yeah, I guess. I’ve never had a kid sister, so I wouldn’t know exactly. I was a regular at Mama Paola’s, and Antonia used to hang out there after school until her parents got home from work. I helped her with her algebra.”

Just as they approached the restaurant, Lois said, “Your name is Enzo?”

Caleb leaned close and whispered, “Only in Florence.”

The conversation was interrupted by their arrival at the restaurant. There was a parallel conversation to the one they’d just had with Antonia: Mama Paola greeting ‘Enzo’ enthusiastically, and ‘Enzo’ explaining that his friend Lois only spoke English. Mama Paola delighted in making a big fuss over Enzo and his pretty lady friend, dashing back and forth like a mother robin, bringing them bread, wine, antipasti, and promising them a fresh batch of Fussili Puttanesca. Caleb ordered a dish of Fettuccine Alfredo as well.

“In case you don’t like the Puttanesca sauce,” he explained as Mama Paola hurried off to the kitchen. Like coffee, it’s an acquired taste.”

Lois could feel her cheeks burning. “You rat! You were laughing up your sleeve at me that whole night, weren’t you?”

“Not at all. I was too busy trying not to let you see how

attracted I was to you.”

“We head back early tomorrow?’ You’re an expert liar, Mr. Knight.”

If she’d expected her accusation to raise an answering blush in her date, Lois was disappointed. “No, I’m an expert at telling only part of the truth. By the time we’re done with dinner and Mama Paola closes up, it will be after midnight here. So we will be heading back early tomorrow.”

“So you’re telling me I just have to listen very carefully to everything you say and not assume that I know what you really mean.”

He leaned close and lowered his voice so that only she could hear him. “No, Lois. Not you. And not most people most of the time. I don’t like stretching the truth. I only do it when it’s necessary to protect my secret. I couldn’t have told her that we’d just flown in for dinner.”

“You took an alias, though. Do you do that everywhere you go?”

He sat up straight as a young woman brought two salad plates to the table. He ran one hand through his hair. “When I was eighteen, I found myself suddenly very mobile.” I.e., he’d learned to fly, but he wasn’t going to say so in public. “Once I got used to the idea, it seemed like a great opportunity. I could go anywhere. And I did — the summer between high school and college, every break I got from school, and later after I graduated. I started with all the famous places — the Great Wall, the Taj Mahal, the Grand Canyon, Angel Falls — then the famous cities — Paris, Rome, London, Moscow, here. That was how I discovered my gift for languages. I don’t know if it’s part of the whole package, or just part of me. I guess it doesn’t really matter. It was a grand adventure, traveling around, seeing all the sights, meeting all kinds of people. After a while I learned that if I liked a place I could pick up odd jobs and make enough money to stick around for a while. But there was always this fear in the back of my mind. What if something happened?” I.e., what if he got caught doing something super? “I didn’t know what would happen to my parents, so I never used my real name. I never lied if I could help it. I just used a local name, spoke the local language, and people saw what they expected to see.”

Lois’s eyes went wide and her wine glass toppled over into her lap.

“Oh!” Lois gasped.

“Are you okay?” Clark asked at the same time.

“I’m alright. Good thing it’s white wine. I’d better see what repairs I can make in the ladies’ room, though.” She shot him an apologetic glance. “I’ll be right back.” She hurried to the restroom, carrying her napkin with her.

Once through the door, Lois grabbed the edges of the sink with both hands, lest she crumble into a heap on the floor. Oh my God! How could she have been so blind? She’d spent an entire evening with him, before Superman was even invented. His face had been staring at her from the book on her nightstand for a week. She’d seen him just the night before — from a distance, the rat! And all those clues he’d dropped, whether he meant to or not — how could he not have expected her to figure it out?

Did he want her to know? Was he hoping she’d put the pieces together? She turned on the faucet and dabbed the water onto her pants with her napkin, mostly to give her something to do while her mind spun in circles. Maybe part of him did want her to know. But he’d avoided her at the bookstore. In retrospect, he’d been a little panicked when she first walked in. Why? Why would he care if she knew him as Clark Kent instead of Caleb Knight? Did he think that one wasted interview would make such a difference in her opinion of him?

Then she remembered his words from the island. “I’m not sure that even I know who I really am anymore. Or that I like who I really am. And I’m almost certain you wouldn’t.” And her

own thoughts about Clark Kent, “After a while, things at work would calm down and she would have time to worry about how to get Clark Kent to herself for a couple of hours without Lana Ross there to change the subject.” Well, this was one way to go about it. Lana wasn’t going to be anywhere near Caleb Knight, or Superman.

My goodness — the man had *two* celebrity personas. No wonder he relished the chance to be plain old Caleb, or Enzo, or whatever else his name was when it wasn’t Clark. Clark, who didn’t even like himself. Or rather, the role he played as himself. She was absolutely certain that the Bruce Wayne wannabe character was not the real man. Caleb wasn’t shallow, and he wasn’t fickle.

She wasn’t sure where Clark’s reputation as a womanizer had started. Probably at least half his dates had been just friends, like Lana, and the entertainment press believed what they wanted to believe. And Clark let them, for his own reasons. She wasn’t too happy about that, but the past was the past. She’d make sure Clark Kent didn’t have any more mysterious redheads on his arm. In any case, she was certain that he’d never kissed all those women he’d been seen in public with. Not the way he’d kissed her.

No, Caleb Knight was twice the man that Clark Kent seemed to be. For that matter, so was Clark Kent, because, no matter what name he was called or what clothes he wore, he was always the same man underneath. There had to be a way for him to get out from under that façade. He was a good writer. His books were entertaining as well as compelling. There was no reason he couldn’t be honest about who he was and why he wrote them. He seemed to think that he’d lose half of his audience if he was straight with the public, but Lois didn’t think so. Maybe the flashy image had helped in the beginning, before his books were popular, but she was certain that Clark Kent could stand on his own at this point if he’d give himself the chance. He’d still be hiding his special gifts, but not his basic personality.

Except that those special gifts shaped his personality just as much as his values or his writing, didn’t they? What had he said in her apartment? “He can’t fly, and I can.” This new person, Caleb, that he was when he was with her, could never go public. The public powers belonged to Superman, and could never be acknowledged as belonging to Clark Kent. He might be able to bring Clark’s public image more in line with his true self, but it could never be his complete self. That kind of openness would always be reserved for a select few trusted people. Lois felt anew the weight of the faith that Caleb had put in her.

Meanwhile, she had to go back out there and face him. What was she going to say? Should she tell him that she knew his secret and it didn’t bother her? That was her first impulse. It might lift a big weight from his shoulders, free him to be himself with her with no more barriers between them. But some instinct made her hesitate. He’d seemed so relieved to have this new person to create. He’d said that the trouble with his real name — Clark Kent, she now knew — wasn’t only her perceptions, but his own. He’d said that the clean slate was a precious gift.

Well, let him have his clean slate. Clark Kent was on sabbatical, so the press release had said. Let him stay there. Caleb could have a vacation from Clark Kent and everything that name meant to him, and Lois would help him find the man that Clark could be happy to be.

Clark was getting worried. Lois had seemed more upset than a little spilled wine would warrant when she took off for the ladies’ room, and now she’d been in there for over ten minutes. He’d been raised better than to peek into a public restroom, but maybe he should send someone in to check on her.

Just then, the door to the ladies’ room opened and Lois emerged. She looked much better. Clark was sorely tempted to

listen for her heartbeat, just to make sure she was as calm as she appeared, but he knew she wouldn’t appreciate that. Lois treated him like an ordinary man, and it would be a betrayal of her trust for him to use his special abilities in any way that would put them on unequal footing. That would be just as bad as Pete digging up ghosts from her past.

“Everything okay?” he asked as she took her seat across from him.

“Yeah,” Lois smiled as she realized that her answer was the simple truth. “Everything’s fine. I see the pasta has arrived.”

“Just a minute ago. It’s still hot.” The fusilli and linguine were heaped on serving platters in the middle of the table so that they could share. Lois spooned a little of the fusilli onto her plate and took a bite. Her eyes went a little wider.

“It’s got a kick to it.”

“Yeah, it’s one of those things to either love or hate. It’s got red peppers and anchovies in the sauce. Would you rather have the fettuccine? We don’t have to share them.”

“No, I’m a pretty adventurous eater.” Lois spooned servings of both dishes onto her plate. “I actually have a recipe for rumaki, but I’ve never been brave enough to try it. My cooking skills run more toward desserts, especially if they involve chocolate and come in a box.”

He smiled at her. “I’ll tell you what, then. When I’ve got my new kitchen set up, you can help me break it in. I’ll make the dinner and you can make the brownies. Duncan Hines is fine by me.”

“You have a new kitchen? Where? Not in Metropolis?”

“Actually, I bought a house this week. It’s on Hyperion Avenue. My mom is in town helping me get it furnished.”

“You bought a house. After your temporary assignment was over. Not that I’m unhappy that you plan to stick around, but isn’t that a big commitment?”

“Don’t worry, Lois. I’m not assuming anything or trying to pressure you. I was getting tired of living out of a suitcase, that’s all. If I stay, I’ll have a place to call home, and if you want me out of your hair, I can rent it out furnished. It’s in a part of town that’s got a lot of young professional couples moving in. The whole real estate sector’s been depressed lately, but I think it’s about to turn around. So, even if I don’t live in it long term, it’s still a good investment.” Only a man with Clark Kent’s money could be so blasé about such a big purchase, but he didn’t seem to realize that. Lois knew he hadn’t always had that kind of money. Until his career took off, his hometown’s claim to fame had been its annual corn festival — not exactly the high finance capital of the world. Still, everyone got used to living with whatever money they had available, and the rich were no exception. No wonder he wasn’t fazed by the loss of a \$500 jacket. He’d just bought a \$500,000 house on a whim.

“She wants to meet you,” he said.

“Who does?”

“My mom.”

“You told your mom about us? I haven’t spoken to my mother in over a month.”

Caleb shrugged. “I’m pretty close to my parents. There aren’t many people who know all about me. My mom and dad, a couple of close friends...” Pete and Lana Ross, Lois would put money on that one. No wonder Lana was so careful about what Clark said and to whom. “...and now you. It’s a pretty exclusive club.” And every other member of it was paired up, Lois realized. There were Mr. and Mrs. Kent, Mr. and Mrs. Ross, and Clark, the center of the circle but also the lone single person in it.

“It must get lonely.” She’d said that out loud, hadn’t she?

“Sometimes.” His eyes held hers for a moment. “Not as much as it used to.” He reached for his wine glass and took a sip.

“What about you? You said you haven’t spoken to your mom in a while. Are you close to your folks?”

“Not really. My dad left when I was twelve.”

“I’m sorry. That must have been awful.”

“It was.” She avoided Caleb’s concerned gaze, discovering a sudden interest in the strands of fettuccine she was twirling around her fork. “But not as awful as the fights they used to have before that. I guess they must have loved each other once upon a time, but you couldn’t tell from the way they acted. My dad was always busy with his work or his women. After he left, my mom started drinking more and more.” She tried to shrug it off. These kinds of things happened to lots of kids, but that fact didn’t make it hurt less.

Lois knew that Caleb could see through her brave front, and she was grateful that he didn’t press the issue. “What about your sister?” he asked. “Did you really live together recently? Or were you making up the part about Lucy like I made up your Aunt Opal?”

“No, Lucy’s real, all right. I guess we’re pretty close. We’re as different as night and day, though. My dad was always very demanding of me. I think he always wanted a son to follow in his footsteps — be the next great sports surgeon, or at least a doctor. When he didn’t get his son, he figured he’d make do with me.” She rolled her eyes. “So I was the typical over-achieving firstborn, but it was still never good enough for him.” She tried but failed to keep the sadness from her voice. “Lucy went the other way; if she never showed any potential, she’d never get any pressure. Her job was to look cute, and she’s still pretty good at it. She’s got a new boyfriend every month. For a while I was so jealous that I moved out of my mom’s house and went to live with my dad. Then, when I was seventeen, Dad realized that I was never going to go to med school. We had a huge fight and I moved out for good.” She tried to sound matter-of-fact about it. The last thing she wanted to do was cry on Caleb’s shoulder on their second date.

“So you’re the prototypical independent career woman of the 90’s,” he said cheerfully, once more leaving her dignity intact, though she was sure he hadn’t been fooled.

“Mad Dog Lane rides again,” she agreed. “I’m one small woman in a man’s world, but I don’t let it get me down. I live by three rules, and one of them is ‘Never let anyone else get there first.’ It’s worked pretty well career-wise, even if it doesn’t make me many friends.”

“What are the other two rules?”

“‘Never get involved in your stories.’ They teach you that one in Journalism 101.”

“And...”

Lois realized too late that she never should have said how many rules there were. “‘Never sleep with anyone you work with,’ she mumbled.

Caleb laughed out loud. “Well, in that case, I’m glad I don’t work with you.”

They both froze, eyes locked and cheeks on fire.

“Oh my gosh,” Caleb said, covering his face with both hands before peeking to see if the coast was clear, “I can’t believe I said that.” Lois couldn’t even muster the presence of mind to stop staring in wide-eyed disbelief. She searched desperately for some appropriate response.

They both were saved from utter mortification by the arrival of Mama Paola with a plate of tiramisu and two cups of coffee. For the first time since Lois had returned from the restroom, Clark looked around the restaurant. “Oh! I didn’t realize how late it’s gotten. They should have closed up half an hour ago.” He shot Lois an apologetic glance. “Would you mind if we take our dessert to go? I don’t have much in my kitchen, but I’m sure I can find us some coffee.”

“Why don’t we take it back to my place? I may not have anything else in the cupboards, but I’ve always got coffee.”

He gave her a warm smile. “I’d like that very much.”

Caleb said their goodbyes to Mama Paola, and it was time to go.

The walk back to the cemetery was quiet, but not uncomfortable. They were both content just to be together, Caleb’s arm around Lois’s shoulder, walking down the now-deserted sidewalk, listening to the rhythm of their own footsteps.

As they passed over the coastline and left the lights of Europe behind them, Caleb broke the silence. “You don’t know how good this feels, to be able to share all of this with you.” His nod took in the continent behind them, the water below, the night sky above. “I’ve had some terrific adventures over the last few years, but I always had them alone.”

“Well, you’re not alone any more. You can fly me off on an adventure like this any time you like.”

“Where would you like to go? There are so many wonderful places I want to share with you, I don’t even know where to turn next.”

“I don’t know. I suppose it would be nice to see the big landmarks, but what I’d really like to see is the places that mean the most to you.” Caleb’s brilliant smile told Lois she couldn’t have given a better answer. “Like Mama Paola’s tonight,” she continued. “You were laughing at me for being a little jealous of Antonia, but I learned something about you. You help because that’s who you are. It doesn’t matter whether it’s lifting shuttles into orbit or helping a high school student with her algebra. It’s just part of your character.”

He gave a self-conscious shrug. “It’s no big deal. That’s how everybody is where I grew up. People help each other; everybody does what they can. I’m not some noble hero, Lois. It’s just that I can do some things that no one else can. I know a lot of folks who would do the same if they had my gifts.”

“And I know plenty of people who wouldn’t. Don’t sell yourself short, Caleb.”

“You do the same thing, Lois. You’re a terrific writer. You could make a lot of money if that’s what you wanted. But you choose to use your writing to fight for truth and justice.”

She gave him a playful slap on his chest. “No fair using my own words against me, flyboy.”

“Hey, you said it, not me.” The mutual admiration society was getting a little awkward. Searching for a new subject, Caleb landed on, “I really did love the article. How did it go over at work? Is your boss happy, even if he did have to play press agent for a few hours?”

“My boss is delighted, my colleagues are green with envy, my sister is jealous — she thinks you look ‘yummy,’ by the way — and Lex Luthor is finally returning my phone calls. I’d call that an all-around success.”

“‘Yummy,’ huh? That isn’t the adjective I thought of when I first saw the Suit. But then, your sister isn’t the one who has to wear it.” The laughter left his voice, and he said, “Is Luthor going to give you an interview? I’m assuming that’s why you’ve been calling him.”

“I don’t know. I’ve been calling him for an interview, but I think he’s been calling me for a date. He wanted to have dinner or lunch today, but I told his assistant I wasn’t available.”

“That would explain why he had you watched. A wealthy man like Luthor is not used to being turned down.” Neither is a wealthy man like Clark Kent, Lois realized. He must have women throwing themselves at him everywhere he went. “Are you going to see him?” he asked.

“For a date? Of course not.”

“I was just wondering if you thought it would help your investigation if you got close to him.”

“Stop.”

“What?”

“Stop flying. I need to tell you something, and I need you to

hear it.”

Caleb brought them gently to a halt and they hung, face-to-face, suspended between sea and stars.

“First off, remember Rule Number Two? Never get involved in your stories? That would imply Sub-rule Number Two-A: Never date the bad guy. Second, even if I were to try it, chances are it wouldn’t do anything for the investigation because a man like Luthor doesn’t let his girlfriend in on his business arrangements.” Gently, she held his face in both her hands. Her voice became a low, sultry purr as she said, “And third, the only man I want to be close to is you.” She reached up to press a soft kiss to his lips.

His arms came around her, and he mumbled against her lips, “Hopefully there’s no Sub-rule Number Two-B about not dating the good guy.”

“Hmm, hmm,” she replied, not moving her lips from his, “There are no rules for this.” She kissed him more deeply, letting her hands slip under his cape to caress his back muscles. She held him tighter and brought her lips past his cheek to whisper in his ear, “This we’re making up as we go along.”

She pulled back and gave him a wicked grin. For a moment his smile mirrored hers, but then it froze and changed into a worried frown.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I just remembered something.” Releasing her just enough to turn her so that she was next to him, he started west again. “I checked in with my new PR firm just before close of business on Friday. You weren’t kidding about the messages. Everybody and his uncle wants a piece of Superman. There’s no way I can do every public appearance that I’m invited to.”

“I think I should be insulted that you were kissing me and thinking about PR gigs at the same time.”

“No, you shouldn’t, because that wasn’t what I was thinking of.” He gave her an affectionate little squeeze and dropped a kiss on the top of her head.

“I don’t get the connection, then. Why the sudden worried look?”

“I was thinking how wonderful it is to have you for my girlfriend.” Lois turned her head just in time to catch the adorable shade of pink that crept into his cheeks. “You are my girlfriend, aren’t you? I mean, it’s okay if I call you that?”

She nudged him with her hip, and then she brought their joined hands to her mouth and kissed his knuckles. “Well, it had better be okay, because I don’t even want to think about you flying some other girl to Mama Paola’s for dinner.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m afraid of.”

“You sound like that’s a bad thing.”

“No! It’s a terrific thing! The best!”

“But...”

“But, when I was talking to Deirdre, Superman’s new agent, I wasn’t thinking in Caleb Knight mode. I was thinking in cool, detached, publicly very unattached Superman mode.”

“And...”

His next words came out in a rush. “And-I-said-that-Superman-would-appear-at-a-celebrity-bachelor-auction-next-week.” He flinched like a puppy expecting a swat with a rolled up newspaper. He opened one eye and said helpfully, “I can cancel if you want.”

The words “You’re darn right I want!” were on the tip of her tongue, but something made her ask, “Is that the only invitation you accepted?”

“Just that and the key to the city. It would be ungrateful of Superman to turn that honor down.”

“So, out of all the invitations that you got, what made you pick the bachelor auction to accept?”

“It’s for the Luthor Home for Blind Children.”

Now Lois was really puzzled. “So you accepted because it’s

Luthor? You said he’s the biggest crime boss in Metropolis. I would think that would make you reject his invitation. Unless you’re trying to show him up? You’re going to make sure he isn’t the biggest draw at his own auction?”

“No!” He was clearly appalled that she would entertain such a thought. “I accepted because it’s for kids. Luthor is a piece of work, but the charities he uses for his smoke screen are legitimate. The director and the teachers there are doing great work with those kids. Do you know the illiteracy rate for blind children? It’s outrageous. The education those kids get could mean the difference between a life of poverty and a fulfilling career. It’s also a good use of Superman’s time, fund-raising-wise. A date with Superman should go for at least ten thousand dollars by itself, and his name will draw donors who wouldn’t otherwise attend.” It occurred to Lois that this would be Superman’s first bachelor auction, but probably not Clark Kent’s. “But if it makes you uncomfortable, I’ll pull out.”

Lois sighed in resignation. “No, I think you should do it. You can’t exactly explain that you can’t come because your girlfriend is jealous.”

Caleb’s voice became very serious. “No, I can’t. Superman can never be seen to have feelings for you, Lois. We’ve already had one madman try to get to me by putting you in danger. As far as the public is concerned, Superman has no personal life.”

“I know that. Believe me, I have no desire to be known as Superman’s girlfriend. But I do intend to be the reporter with the best Superman scoops. I broke the story in the first place; I’m not going to back away from reporting on him just to protect our private cover.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to do that. I know how important your job is, and Superman is news. I get that. We just have to maintain a very professional manner when Superman and the Ace Reporter are in public together.”

“I can handle that.” They flew in companionable silence for a while until Lois asked, “Where would you take the winner?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Caleb mused, making a show of exaggerated innocence, “I was thinking maybe a nude beach on the Riviera.”

“Rat!” Her smile took the sting out of the epithet.

A feeling of great privilege struck her at that moment.

Women all over the world dreamed of flying with Superman, but she was the only one who actually did, and who knew what incredible warmth — not to mention a wicked sense of humor — lay behind the stoic veneer. She could have missed that so easily. If she hadn’t found that globe and earned his trust by returning it to him, he might never have let her see the man behind the hero.

Caleb’s voice brought her attention back to the moment.

“Actually, I was thinking of a picnic next Sunday afternoon. Deirdre thinks I should offer ‘a Sunday picnic in the clouds,’ but I have no idea how that would work. It’s not like I can levitate an entire picnic blanket. Maybe some mountain meadow could be called ‘in the clouds’ if you really stretched it. Anyway, I figure a Sunday picnic says ‘wholesome and innocent.’ I don’t want whoever wins the date getting any ideas about finding out whether the Suit comes off.”

“A Sunday picnic... I guess your jealous girlfriend can live with that. Just this once.”

“It’s a deal. One wholesome picnic with some matronly philanthropist, then Superman is out of the bachelor business.”

The same clouds that had hovered over Metropolis all day were still there when they returned. The sun had set and darkness had descended. Caleb had been right; with the clouds blocking the city lights from below, the stars were still brilliant above them. Caleb held them suspended over Carter Avenue and searched through the clouds. “No sign of the tail. If we’re lucky, he won’t even admit that he lost us. If Luthor asks, you were on a

duty-date with a friend of a friend.”

“He won’t. And if he does, he’ll get a none-of-your-business stare in response. As far as Lex Luthor is concerned, I’m all business.”

“I’m going to bring us down fast to your roof.” He tucked her head under his chin and wrapped his cape around her. “Ready?”

“All set.”

Ten minutes later, Lois brought two mugs of coffee and two forks through to her living room and placed them on the table next to the tiramisu. Caleb, back in his Dockers and Henley shirt, made himself comfortable on her love seat with a contented sigh. “It always feels good to get out of those boots.”

“The suit does look a little uncomfortable. Were you serious when you said your mother made it?”

“Yep. You should have seen some of the alternatives. Believe me, the blue and red is pretty tame compared to some of the other choices.”

“It certainly stands out.”

“That was part of the idea. It’s the same reason Superman doesn’t wear a mask like Batman in Gotham. Batman is dark and mysterious. That makes everyone wonder who’s hiding under that cowl. Superman is obvious. It gives the illusion that he has nothing to hide.”

“It’s a risk, showing your face so openly.”

Caleb opened his mouth to respond, a teasing glimmer in his eyes, but thought better of it and closed his mouth again.

“What?” she prodded.

“Nothing.” He reached for a fork and dug into the tiramisu with gusto.

“Caleb, I’m not going to let it drop. It’s against my nature. What were you going to say?” She pinned him with her best ‘You will tell me what I want to know or I will torture it out of you’ glare. For good measure, she pointed her fork menacingly under his chin.

Caleb threw both hands over his head. “Okay, okay, I’ll talk! Just don’t hurt me with the cutlery, lady!” With laughter in his eyes and voice, he complained, “Geez, Lois, and you claim Aunt Opal is the bulldog. If you must know, I was remembering something my mom said about the suit — that no one would be looking at my face.”

She laughed out loud. “Not any red-blooded female, that’s for sure.”

Suddenly her face sobered. “Is your mom serious about wanting to meet me?”

“She is, but that doesn’t mean she has to get her way. If you don’t want to meet her I can put her off, at least for this visit. She’ll hound me mercilessly, of course, but I can take it.”

“How long is she in town for?”

“Just for the week. That’s about as long as she and my dad can stand to be apart.”

“Why didn’t he come with her?”

“They run a small business. If they have something planned in advance they can find someone to cover for them, but it’s hard for them both to get away on short notice.”

“So I have to decide whether I’m up for meeting your mother after the second date.”

“There’s no pressure, Lois. I really don’t mind telling her she’s going to have to wait.”

“I don’t know,” she mused. “I am sort of curious. She must be an amazing woman to have raised Superman. And Caleb Knight. And whoever else you are.”

“Well, I like her. But then, I am a little biased. I know she’s going to love you. I think that’s why she’s curious; she knows that no woman has ever affected me the way you have.” He paused for a moment to let that sink in, then said, “We could have dinner one night after work this week, or we could meet somewhere for lunch after church tomorrow if you want.” Lois

blinked at him in surprise. “What? You don’t want to? That’s totally okay. I just need an up or down.”

“No, that’s not it. I think I would like to meet your mom. I just never thought of you as a church-going kind of guy.”

Caleb shrugged. “It’s how I was raised. I don’t really have a home church, but I try to go whenever I can. I’ve been to churches all over the world.” He gave a soft chuckle. “Remind me to introduce you to Ruben some time. He’s sort of my spiritual sounding board, and he’s a trip and a half. He has a little church on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa. There’s a couple there who runs the best pizzeria I’ve ever found.”

“Pizza? In Honduras?” Lois raised a skeptical brow.

“I know; who would have thought?” He sobered again, taking a sip of coffee while he gathered his thoughts. “When I’m in uniform, as you so aptly termed it, I spend half my time dealing with the worst the world has to offer, and the other half with people looking at me like I’m a god in a cape.” Lois blushed to remember that she had been one of the first Superman worshippers. She also wondered whether Clark Kent dealt with a similar dichotomy — sniffing around the underbelly of the world undercover, then hobnobbing with the glitterati in his Rich and Famous persona. “Going to church keeps me grounded, like talking to you or my folks. Sometimes I need to be reminded that the world already has a savior, and it’s not me.”

Lois reached a hand to cover one of his. “And that the weight of the world doesn’t rest on your shoulders.”

“Exactly.”

“Okay.” She took the last bite of the tiramisu, paused to savor it, then said, “My work hours are hard to predict, so I think I’d better bite the bullet and go for lunch tomorrow. When does church let out?”

“Mom and I haven’t decided where we’re going tomorrow, but just about any church will be through by 12:00 or 12:30 at the latest. Is 1:00 too late for lunch?”

“No, 1:00 is fine. Where do you want to meet?”

“Where do you recommend for Sunday lunch? Is there a restaurant with a nice brunch buffet? Where would you take your mom to show off the charms of the big city?”

“Well, if I were really trying to impress her, I’d say the Peninsula, but that’s pretty pricey.”

“Not a problem. Nothing’s too good for my two best girls. The Peninsula it is. I’ll call tonight and make a reservation. Should we pick you up, or would you rather meet us there?”

“I think meeting your mom is enough. I don’t need to worry about what she thinks of my apartment as well. I’ll meet you there.”

“It’s a date.” That seemed like a natural closing line for the evening. Their eyes met for a long moment as each of them realized that they weren’t quite ready for their date to end.

“I should probably...” Caleb began.

“I guess it’s...” Lois said at the same time.

They both stopped, smiled in mutual acknowledgement, and Lois looked at her watch as if to start on the ‘it’s getting late’ line again. Instead, she said, “Hey! It’s only 8:00! I forgot about the time change back again.” Feeling suddenly shy, she looked at him from under her lashes. “Do you want to go, or would you like to stay and watch a movie? I rented Lethal Weapon last night, but I only watched the first fifteen minutes. I still have it if you’d like to see it.”

“Sure. Why not?” He smiled.

A sudden thought caused Lois’s brow to crease. “Your mom won’t wonder what’s keeping you so long?”

Caleb rolled his eyes. “I’m twenty-seven, Lois, not seventeen. I don’t have a curfew, and my mother is perfectly capable of entertaining herself.”

“Good.” She found the movie and started the VCR.

Clark tried to settle back into a corner of the love seat. “I’ll

tell you one thing, Lois. When I pick out a sofa for my new house, it's going to be a lot softer than this one. I don't know what was on your mind when you bought it, but cuddling in front of a movie wasn't it."

Lois tucked her feet under her and leaned into his side, his arm around her shoulder. "No, I was probably thinking more of not giving the occasional date any ideas. I had sworn off romance. I was all work and no play, and I've got the Kerths to prove it."

"What changed your mind?"

He was fishing for compliments now, but Lois was feeling generous. She reached up to place a soft kiss on his cheek. "A god in a cape swallowed a bomb and then flew me back to my office. That sort of got my attention." She laid a meandering trail of kisses down his neck. "And then he let me see that he wasn't a god after all." She turned his head so she could reach his lips and land a kiss there as well. "He's a man." She kissed him again. "I'm a woman." One more kiss, slow and tender, but with a hint of teasing. "Do I need to draw you a diagram?" Their foreheads leaned together, smile matching smile. His fingers roamed lazily through her hair. Hers idly stroked the back of his neck. Neither of them paid any attention to Mel Gibson.

The autumn sun felt warm on Martha's face as she walked, one hand in the crook of her son's arm, down the steps of the Tenth Avenue Community Church. He looked very handsome, she thought, in his navy blazer, oxford cloth shirt, and red tie. She could get used to seeing him without his glasses, too. It was nice to have an unobstructed view of his warm brown eyes. "What did you think of the sermon?" she asked.

"I liked it. It was nothing especially new or earth-shattering, but it was just what I needed to hear this week."

"That even the greatest accomplishments are worth nothing if they're done without love?"

"Exactly. Without love, we gain nothing."

"You were trying very hard not to laugh half-way through the service, though. What was so funny?"

Clark chuckled in remembrance. "Did you notice the little boy, maybe four years old, in the pew two rows in front of us — the one who kept wiggling around and kicking the bench?"

"Yes. He reminded me of another little boy I once knew," she teased. "His poor mother was about fit to be tied. I think she was on the brink of taking him out to the parking lot for a manners lesson. Then all of a sudden he got very quiet and sat straight in his seat. He whispered something to his mother, and after that he didn't make a peep for the rest of the service." Understanding dawned in her face. "Wait a minute. That was when you started shaking. What were you were trying so hard not to laugh at? What did the little boy say to his mother?"

"I think the better question is, what did he hear? Do you remember what the Old Testament reading was, just before he got so quiet?" An amused twinkle danced in Clark's eye.

"It was..." Trying to remember, Martha replayed the earlier scene in her mind. She saw the man who had been chosen to read the Bible passage approach the pulpit. She pictured his crisp grey suit, his dark blue tie against his white dress shirt. She saw his graying hair and neatly trimmed beard. She heard his clear bass voice rolling over the congregation as he read. The penny dropped. "Oh, my!" she chuckled. "And the man who read it had such a loud, booming voice. No wonder the boy made such a quick turn around!" Martha chuckled.

Clark did his best imitation of the reader's deep, stentorian tones. "'Be still, and know that I am God!'" he quoted. He laughed at the little boy's misunderstanding. "That was what the boy asked his mother; 'Is that really God?' I'm sure he thought the Lord of Heaven had come down in person just to tell him to stop wiggling in church."

Suddenly, Clark's face went blank and his eyes took on a far-away look that Martha had never seen before. He held the pose for just a minute, then turned to her and said urgently, "I have to go. There's a multi-car pile-up on the Mortimer Bridge. Stay right here. I'll come back for you as soon as I can."

"Nonsense," she said. "You go take care of business and don't worry about me. I'll get a taxi and meet you at the hotel. The Peninsula, right?"

"Right. The reservation is under Caleb Knight." He cocked his head again. "I've really got to go." He bent his head to give her a quick kiss on the cheek. "I'll meet you there."

He ran around a corner into an alley and was gone. A moment later there was a soft 'swoosh' and Superman flew overhead in a streak of blue and red. Martha felt a warm current of pride well up in her chest. She'd seen her son as a public figure for years, seen his face on book jackets, magazine covers, and television many times. But seeing him fly off to the rescue — in the suit that she had made, no less — was something else entirely.

She took a long look around her, soaking in the stimulating atmosphere of the city. The neighborhood that the church was in was mixed use, with rowhouses lining the side streets and small shops and restaurants along the busier avenue. The sidewalk wasn't crowded, but there was a fair amount of traffic — couples dining in the cafes, women in twos and threes looking into boutique windows, families with young children on the way home from church or on the way to the park, even on occasional jogger with a walkman.

Keeping a firm grip on her purse, as she knew a woman had to do in the big city, Martha stepped to the curb and looked for a taxi. It wasn't long before one appeared, and she waved for it to pull over. The cab came to a stop a few feet to her left and the cabbie gave her a curt nod of acknowledgement. Martha headed for the door of the cab, but before she reached it a young brunette in a knee-length burgundy skirt and matching jacket and pumps reached for the handle and opened the door. At Martha's startled exclamation, the woman gave her a cursory glance, but got into the car nonetheless. "Sorry, lady," the woman said before she closed the door, "That's life in the big city." The taxi pulled away, leaving an irate Martha Kent staring after it.

Luckily, another taxi soon followed, and Martha had no difficulty flagging it down. This time she made a quick beeline for the car door, and was soon on her way to the Peninsula Hotel. Still shaking her head at the rudeness of city folk, she watched the scenery go by, the low rows of houses soon replaced by five- and six-story apartment buildings, then by towering office blocks. Soon she recognized the trendy shops and posh hotels of Metropolis's uptown. The taxi pulled under the awning of the Peninsula Hotel, and Martha paid the driver. A uniformed doorman helped her out. She was surprised to see the young woman who had stolen her first taxi emerging from the hotel's front entrance, a cell phone held to one ear.

Unable to resist the urge to eavesdrop, Martha heard the woman say, "Okay, Jimmy, I'm outside now. Can you hear me better? Yeah, okay, but make it quick, because I'm supposed to meet somebody for lunch in five minutes." The woman rolled her eyes at whatever Jimmy was saying. "No, I do not have Julie's phone number. Or Stacie's. Or Karen's. Good grief, James, do you think I'm best buddies with the entire research department? I don't care if you can't find a girl to see a movie with. I'm busy. I'll see you tomorrow. Goodbye." As the woman closed her phone, she looked straight at Martha, who realized she'd been caught listening in.

The two women looked at each other, both feeling a little sheepish — the one for stealing a cab, and the other for eavesdropping on a private conversation. Guessing whom the young woman might be, Martha was about to introduce herself, but she was prevented by the sudden eruption of angry shouts

from the sidewalk in front of the restaurant next door.

A well-dressed man and woman were arguing quite loudly, even by Metropolis standards. A boy of perhaps eight years old was crying and shouting for both of them to stop. The crowd of passers-by was divided between those staring in unabashed curiosity, and those pretending not to hear or see anything out of the ordinary. Before Martha could make out what the argument was about, the man raised his arm and cuffed the woman across the jaw. The woman let out a shocked cry, but rather than crumple in defeat, she shouted, loud enough for the entire city block to hear, "That's the last straw! No man lays a hand on me! Don't bother coming home tonight. I'm changing the locks. If you ever come near me or my son again, I will sue you for everything you're worth!"

Turning on her heel, she grabbed the boy by one hand and started across the street. In her haste, she didn't see the taxi rounding the corner, headed straight for her. There was a screech of tires, a chorus of screams, and a sickening thud. Martha and the brunette both ran toward the scene, the younger woman elbowing the gathering crowd out of her way and Martha following in her wake. The victim lay in an unconscious heap on the pavement, the taxi driver bent over her in alarm. The boy, apparently unhurt, was kneeling next to his mother, tears streaming down his face and sobs racking his body. The man from the argument headed toward the woman, his face a mask of shock and concern.

"You stay away from her! Don't you touch her!" the boy yelled at the man.

"Stay out of this, Trevor. Get out of my way," the man shoved the boy roughly aside.

"No! You heard what she said! She doesn't want you near her!" Trevor's cheeks were bright red with impotent fury.

No one in the crowd made a move to intervene. Martha looked to the young lady in burgundy and saw that she was talking on her cell phone, a finger stopping up her other ear in an attempt to hear the telephone conversation over the noise of the argument. She closed the phone with a snap and approached the participants.

"An ambulance is on the way," she said calmly, her look taking in the driver, the man, and the boy. She raised her voice to carry into the crowd of onlookers. "Are any of you doctors? Or at least trained in first aid?"

Martha was about to step forward when a middle-aged woman who had already been pushing her way through the crowd finally reached the front. "I'm a doctor. Let me through," the newcomer said in the tone of one accustomed to taking charge in a crisis.

As the doctor knelt next to her patient, the boy reached for his mother. The doctor reached out an arm to stop him. "I'm sorry, honey, but I need you to stay back. I'm going to help your mommy the best I can, okay?"

The man from the argument reached to grab Trevor's hand, but the boy jerked it away. "Trevor! Get out of the way and let the lady help your mom," the man ordered.

"You can't tell me what to do! You're not my father!" Trevor glared defiantly.

"Get over here right now!" Trevor made no move to obey. "You do as I say, young man, or you'll regret it." The same hand that had struck Trevor's mother now loomed threateningly over the child.

Out of sheer instinct, Martha found herself between the man and the boy. "Don't you lay a finger on that child." She barely recognized her own voice, low and steely.

The man's angry gaze shifted from the recalcitrant child to the petite blonde woman who had dared to get in his way. "Move aside, lady. I'm in charge of that boy."

"No you're not!" Trevor shouted from his refuge behind

Martha's back. "My mom said she's through with you, so I don't have to do anything you say."

The man took a step toward Martha and made a move as if to shove her out of his way.

"Oh, no you don't. Back off, buster." Lois planted herself in front of the brave older woman and took a position that would allow her to make any of several different Tae-Kwon-Do moves, depending on what the cretin did next. Given what had passed between them earlier in front of the hotel, Lois had a hunch who the child's protector might be, but, whether she was Martha Kent or someone else, Lois wasn't about to let her get pushed around by the bully who had already slugged his now-ex-girlfriend.

Clark didn't know what he had expected to see as he flew toward his rendezvous at the Peninsula, but he was almost certain that this wasn't it. Traffic in front of the hotel was at a complete standstill. The crowd of pedestrians that filled the street was making way for a departing ambulance. A police car was parked haphazardly behind a dented taxi, and the officer was standing, arms outstretched in supplication, between a very angry man and two women, one of whom held her arms protectively over the chest of a small boy. As Clark got closer, he wasn't really surprised to see that the women in question were his girlfriend and his mother.

Keeping his features carefully schooled, Clark landed a few feet away from the confrontation and addressed the officer. "I was just passing by and noticed the commotion," Superman explained. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yes, Superman, you can tell this flatfoot and those two busybodies to give me back my child!" The man looked like he was rapidly reaching the end of his rope.

"I'm not your child!" the boy shouted. Lois and Martha both glared defiantly back at the man.

Martha opened her mouth to speak, but Superman preempted her. Addressing the man, he explained calmly, "I'm sorry, sir, I can't do that. I'm not an officer of the law, and I have no authority to override the police, nor would I want to." Turning again to the policeman, Superman repeated, "How can I help you?"

"If you can keep these three from tearing into each other long enough," the officer's scowl took in the man and the two women, "I'd like to call in the Child Welfare department. Mr. Lyon here claims the boy belongs to him, but the boy says that Mr. Lyon is not his father. I can't just send the child home with someone who may not have legal custody of him."

"I'm sure we can all be patient while you call in the rightful authorities." Superman's stern gaze traveled from Mr. Lyon to the two women and back again. All three adults nodded in reluctant agreement. Superman knelt down and smiled gently at the frightened little boy. "Hi. What's your name?" he said.

The boy stared, wide-eyed. When he remained silent, Martha said, "Superman, this is Trevor. He's a very brave boy. His mommy got hurt, but the ambulance is taking her to the hospital, and the doctors are going to take very good care of her."

Clark raised a questioning brow at his mother over the child's head. She gave an infinitesimal nod. Trevor's mom would be okay. Superman smiled at the boy. "I know the doctors at the hospital. They've helped a lot of people that I've rescued. I'm sure they'll do their very best for your mom."

The officer made his call and the crowd began to disperse. All that was left to do was to wait for the Child Welfare representative to arrive. The taxi driver got permission to leave, but not before giving Lois, who now had a notebook in one hand and a pen in the other, his version of events. Lois was now talking quietly with the officer, asking questions about the standard procedures in cases like this and what would happen to Trevor if it were determined that Mr. Lyon was not his legal

guardian.

Clark looked at his mother, then down at the boy still protectively encased in her arms. He figured that the child was about eight or nine years old. He'd obviously been dressed up for lunch at a nice restaurant. His khaki pants now sported dark stains from kneeling in the street and his blue and tan plaid shirt was untucked. His freckled face was smeared with dried tears and the smudges his fingers had left in the vain attempt to wipe them away. His light brown hair was in disarray, and his green eyes were still puffy from crying, but his mouth had the firmness of a boy determined not to disgrace himself by crying in front of his hero.

Superman rose to his feet and spoke to the reporter. "Excuse me, Ms. Lane."

"Yes, Superman?"

"It's good to see you again," he said in his most professional manner. She gave him a courteous nod in response. "Would you mind if I borrowed a piece of paper from your notebook and a pen?" Her eyebrows rose slightly, but she readily gave him what he asked for. "Thank you."

He turned back to the little boy with a warm smile. "Trevor, what is your mother's last name?"

"Nichols, sir," the boy managed.

Superman wrote in clear manuscript letters, "Dear Ms. Nichols, Your son, Trevor, is a very brave young man. It was a pleasure to meet him. I am sorry to hear of your injuries. I wish you a speedy recovery. Sincerely, Superman." He showed the note to Trevor, whose eyes got wider and wider as he read until it seemed they must pop out of his head altogether. "Do you think you could give this to your mother for me, Trevor? I'd very much like her to know what a good job you're doing."

"Yes, sir," the boy beamed, his chest swelling with pride at the compliment.

As the child folded the note carefully and put it in his pocket, a thirty-ish woman in blue trousers and a yellow knit top approached the group. Smiling cheerfully, she said, "Is this Trevor?" She glanced at Superman and Martha, acknowledging them briefly, but her attention was on the child. The boy looked up at Martha, who gave the newcomer a nod and Trevor a reassuring squeeze. The young woman knelt down and said gently, "My name is Kristy. It's my job to help kids when their moms and dads are having trouble. I heard that your mom got hurt. Officer Dean tells me she's going to be okay, but she can't take care of you right now. Do you know another grown-up we can call to help us? Maybe your daddy or your grandma or grandpa or aunt or uncle?"

Trevor looked around him at all the unfamiliar faces, and the one famous one, before giving his head a forlorn shake.

Looking up at Martha, Kristy asked, "Who is this lady, Trevor?"

"I don't know," Trevor admitted, lifting his hands to grasp Martha's so that she wouldn't let go of him. "She wouldn't let Marcus hit me. And then the other lady wouldn't let Marcus hit her."

"I see. Well, the number one rule of my job is that nobody is ever allowed to hit anybody else. Okay?"

Trevor nodded, but didn't leave the circle of Martha's embrace. Clark looked around for Mr. Lyon, and saw that Officer Dean was keeping him at a distance from the child. Kristy continued in the same friendly voice, "What about the man who's standing with Officer Dean. Is he your daddy?"

"No. My daddy left last Christmas. That's Marcus. He pretends he's my daddy sometimes, but he really isn't."

"Did Marcus and your mom get married?"

"No. He sleeps over sometimes, but they aren't married."

"Marcus wants to take care of you while your mom is in the hospital. How would you feel about that? Do you feel safe with

Marcus?"

The boy frowned, but didn't answer.

"Does Marcus ever hit you, Trevor? Does he ever hit your mom?"

Trevor stared at the sidewalk and remained silent. The social worker appealed to Martha. "Did you see what happened? Is there anything you can tell me that will help me decide whether Trevor would be safe with Mr. Lyon?"

"I saw Mr. Lyon strike Trevor's mother in the face. I heard him threaten Trevor. I've seen how terrified Trevor is of him. That man is not fit to have a child in his care."

"Thank, you, Ms.?" In a moment of panic, both Martha and Clark looked around for Lois. Thankfully, she was deep in conversation with the restaurant manager, her pen scribbling in her notebook.

"Martha Kent," Martha said quietly, "but I'd rather not have my name used, especially in front of the reporter. Isn't there some provision for keeping me anonymous?"

"Don't worry, ma'am. I won't say another word about it." She turned back to her young charge. "And don't you worry either, Trevor. You won't have to go anywhere with Marcus. I'm going to take you with me. I know a very nice family who love to have kids visit them when their moms can't be at home. I'll take you to their house, and then I'll go see how your mom is doing at the hospital. As soon as the doctors say it's all right, I'll come get you and take you to see her. Okay?"

"Can't I stay with her?" Trevor asked, holding onto to Martha tighter than ever. Kristy gave him a sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry, Trevor. Martha has been very nice to you and helped you lot today, hasn't she? But I don't know her very well. It's my job to keep you safe. I have to take you to someone I know will do a very good job taking care of you until your mom feels better. Do you like football?"

A new animation came over the boy. "I love it. I watch the Tigers every Sunday. But my friend, Dylan, says Kowalski stinks."

"Well, the lady I'm taking you to has a boy just two years older than you. His name is Jeremy, and he loves football, too. I bet he'd love to play catch with you, and I'm sure they'll have the game on the TV at their house today. They always have pretzels and soda when they watch the game. I think kick-off is in forty minutes. If we hurry, we can get there just in time. Come on." She held her hand out with the no-nonsense attitude of one who expects to be obeyed, not out of fear, but as the natural course of things. To Clark's astonishment, Trevor complied readily, slipping out of Martha's arms to take Kristy's hand.

"Say goodbye to Martha and Superman," Kristy directed cheerily.

"Bye," Trevor waved.

"Goodbye, Trevor. I know your mom will be very happy to see you when you come to visit her," Martha said.

"It was nice to meet you, Trevor. Don't forget to give my note to your mom when you see her," Clark smiled.

Lois, her notebook full of statements from various witnesses as well as her own notes, made her way back to the dwindling knot of people. Mr. Lyon had been released once Trevor was safely away from him. Any decision about pressing charges would be a long time coming. Superman was talking with Officer Dean and the blonde woman, obviously making his farewells. Turning to give Lois a parting nod, he rose into the air and disappeared behind an office tower. The last few bystanders decided that there was nothing left to see and went back to their errands. The officer tucked his own notebook into his pocket and took his leave.

Just as Lois was about to introduce herself to the woman she was almost sure was Martha Kent, Caleb came jogging up to the pair. "There you are! They said they hadn't seen either of you at

the restaurant.” Lowering his voice for their ears only, he said, “That was a little adventure, wasn’t it? I see you two have already met.”

The women smiled broadly at each other. “Not formally,” Martha said. She held a welcoming hand out to the young lady. “You must be Lois. Thanks for watching my back.”

“Any time,” Lois grinned. Her smile turned sheepish and she said, “I hope it makes up for stealing your cab earlier.” She reached to shake her comrade-in-arms’ hand. “You must be Mrs. . . .” she stopped with the sudden realization that she had no idea what to call Caleb’s mother.

Martha knew exactly what Lois’s dilemma was. She only knew Clark as Caleb Knight, but she also knew that his mother’s name was not Mrs. Knight. Well, there was an easy solution for that problem.

“Fiddlesticks!” she said briskly, “I’m not *Mrs.* anything. Honey, you just call me Martha.” She gave her son a pointed look as if daring him to challenge her use of her real first name. He was wise enough not to.

They were almost an hour late for their reservation, but the maitre-d’ was very accommodating. After their orders for coffee and juice had been taken, Martha sat back in the padded chair and took a good look around. The dining room was built to impress, with high ceilings, glittering chandeliers, and tall windows that looked out into a landscaped courtyard. The cream-colored walls were covered with 1920’s-era reliefs depicting the glory of the captains of industry who had made Metropolis great. Agriculture, manufacturing, shipping, and railroads were all represented in the artist’s homage to the thriving port city.

Besides the dining tables for couples, foursomes, and larger groups, there were several long buffet tables at various locations around the room. Martha turned to her son and said quietly, “Give us the lay of the land, honey. There are so many choices I don’t know where to begin.”

Caleb scanned the room. After a moment, he reported, “The table in the corner has made-to-order omelets. Next to that are the American hot breakfast foods — pancakes, French toast, bacon, sausage, and scrambled eggs. To the left of that are pastries — bagels, bread with a toaster, muffins, Danishes, and croissants, including almond and chocolate. There’s also hot muesli with various toppings and yogurt parfaits with fresh berries. The table in the center of the room has luncheon foods — roast beef, ham, green salad, some kind of dish involving couscous and olives, shrimp cocktail, oysters, smoked salmon, sushi and. . . yes, I think that’s pot stickers.”

“Sushi and pot stickers for brunch? I never heard of such a thing. What’s on that pyramid set-up over there?”

“That’s the dessert table. I see chocolate mousse, crème brûlée, petits fours, fruit tarts, and assorted chocolates.”

“I’ll save room. I think I’ll try the sushi first. I can have eggs and sausages at home.” Martha headed for the buffet table, with Caleb and Lois right behind her.

When they were all seated again with their plates full Lois said, “I saw Martha arrive alone earlier. Was there an emergency?”

“Yes, a pile-up on the Mortimer Bridge,” Caleb answered. “The rescue crews couldn’t get through the traffic, and there was no place for a helicopter to land, so they needed some help. Superman flew several people to the emergency room at Met General.”

“Was it bad?” Lois said softly, reaching for Caleb’s hand and giving it a gentle squeeze.

“No, nothing serious. A couple of broken bones at worst.”

“Good.” Lois’s smile was warm, and Martha thought she looked. . . relieved? Yes, that was the word.

Martha had watched the quiet exchange with interest and a growing regard for the young lady who had turned her son’s life

upside down. She’d been a little worried about Clark’s obvious fascination with the reporter who had broken the Superman story. Lois’s romantic interest in the flying hero seemed a little too convenient when Martha first learned of it. But, seeing the two of them together, and Lois’s genuine concern for her son’s welfare rather than the newsworthiness of the story, she relaxed.

“So, Lois,” she said, “tell me what you do when you’re not busy protecting busybody old ladies and little boys from threatening men.”

Lois swallowed a bite of shrimp before answering, “Nothing as glamorous as you might think. A lot of reporting is research. I might skim through reams of records and make dozens of dead-end phone calls before I have enough material for a story that takes two hours to write up. I suppose most jobs are like that — lots of grunt work before the big payoff. My dad is a sports surgeon, and I know that the athletes he works with put in hours of practice drills and weightlifting that the public never sees — not to mention physical therapy for the injured ones.”

“Wait a minute,” Caleb put in, “You mentioned your dad before, but I didn’t make the connection. Your dad is Dr. Sam Lane?”

“So you’ve heard of him.”

“Anyone who reads the sports pages has.” For Martha’s benefit, he explained, “He practically invented reconstructive surgery for athletes. He builds them a new hip, a new knee, and they come back better than before.”

“Yeah, that’s my dad.”

“He must be very proud of you,” Martha said. At Lois’s questioning look, she added, “Three Kerth awards before thirty. You’re obviously a top-notch reporter.”

Lois didn’t know what to say in response. Her dad had never given any indication of pride in Lois’s work, but it would be embarrassing to admit as much to Caleb’s mother. She obviously supported her son in a way that made Lois a little envious.

Seeing Lois’s predicament, Caleb saved her from having to answer by chiming in, “So, what does the top-notch reporter have coming up this week?”

“Funny you should ask,” Lois grinned. “As it turns out, I have a ceremony to cover tomorrow morning. Superman is being given the key to the city.”

“Really? I hadn’t heard.” Martha threw her son a pointed look. He had the good grace to look down at his plate and blush. “Isn’t that quick? I mean, Superman’s only been in Metropolis for a few weeks.”

“That’s true,” Lois answered, “but it’s a savvy move on the Mayor’s part. Superman has done more for the people of Metropolis in the last month than anyone else could do in a year. And he hasn’t publicly committed to staying here. There are rumors that other cities are starting to make bids for him.”

“Is that true?” Martha asked Clark.

“Only Cleveland,” he mumbled.

“So giving him the key to the city is the mayor’s way of showing his appreciation,” Martha said.

“Yes,” Lois agreed, “but it will actually be the Deputy Mayor giving the award. The Mayor is in Atlanta at a national conference.”

“Too bad Lex Luthor isn’t in Atlanta, too,” Clark put in.

“What makes you say that, honey?” It wasn’t like her son to be so derogatory toward anyone.

“I’m sorry. That was rude.” He gave a bite of sausage a particularly vicious stab. “I’m just not looking forward to sharing the stage with him; he’s a real snake. But I can keep up a cordial front for now, at least in public. One of these days I’ll have something I can use to expose him for what he really is.”

“You mean *we*’ll have something,” Lois corrected. “That’s my next project.”

“Superman *is* planning to stay in Metropolis, isn’t he?”

Martha asked.

She watched as Lois and Clark exchanged glances, the meaning of which only the two of them knew. It looked to her like there was also some under-the-table handholding going on.

After a moment of this silent communication, Clark smiled widely and replied, “Yes. He’s staying.”

By Wednesday evening, Clark’s new house was starting to look like a home. Most of the furniture had been delivered, the kitchen cupboards were stocked with dishes, pots, and pans. The pantry and refrigerator were full. The built-in shelves, which concealed the secret compartment in the living room, were stacked with books and photographs. The only clue that he was still in the moving-in process was the large collection of art objects in one corner. He still hadn’t decided on wall coverings, so he couldn’t hang them up yet.

Clark spread half a dozen color sample cards across his new coffee table. “What do you think, Mom?”

“I think that after that rug is delivered tomorrow I’d better stop eating cold pizza in the living room,” Martha said with her mouth half full. “I can’t believe you flew this in from Honduras.”

“I wasn’t talking about your midnight snack; I was talking about the paint color for this room. Taupe? Dove grey? China blue?”

“How did you ever find this place? I mean, if I could fly I might look for pizza in New York or Chicago, but never Tegucigalpa.”

“Bruce told me about it. Maybe I should go for wallpaper. I sort of like the yellow pinstripe.”

“Bruce Davenport? The editor I met at that party in Greenwich?” Martha took a sip of cherry cola and squinted at the wallpaper swatches.

“Yeah. He loves to sail. One summer he took his two kids with him on a trip down the east coast and around the Gulf of Mexico to Central America. By the time they got to Honduras his son, Scott, was pretty homesick, so when they spotted this ‘New York Style’ pizzeria they were desperate enough to try it. When he heard I was heading down that way to work on ‘Northern Passage,’ he gave me the tip.”

“Well, thank you, Bruce.”

“Yeah, Mom, the pizza’s great, but I still don’t know what I’m doing with these walls. You’re supposed to be helping me decide.”

“I’m sorry, honey. It’s way past my bedtime. I’m afraid my brain just isn’t firing on all cylinders. Let’s take a fresh look in the morning.”

“Okay. I think that’s about the last thing to be done. It’s going a lot faster than I’d hoped.”

“Superspeed and ready cash are both big time savers.”

“Would you like to go back home tomorrow afternoon? Once I’ve got this wall decision made there isn’t much left for you to do here. I know Dad misses you.”

“And I miss him. Tomorrow would be great.” A small frown crossed Martha’s face. “I worry about you, though.”

“Me? Why? I’ve done enough painting around the house in Smallville. With superspeed I’ll have the whole house painted in half an hour.”

“Not that, silly. I wonder what you’ll do with yourself after the house is finished.”

Clark shrugged. “Get a job, I suppose. Superman doesn’t keep me busy full time.”

“But what kind of job can you get without a Social Security card and a valid I.D.? You aren’t going to get false papers for Caleb Knight, are you? You know that would be illegal.”

“No. That won’t be necessary. There are plenty of people who are happy to hire a strong guy for cash wages without asking too many questions. As long as I pay the income taxes at the end

of the year, it’s their problem, not mine.”

His mom was giving him an appraising look now. “What?” Clark asked.

“You’re going to go digging around Lex Luthor’s territory, aren’t you?”

“All of Metropolis is Lex Luthor’s territory, Mom. That can’t be helped.” He leaned across the coffee table and dropped a kiss on her forehead. “Don’t worry. I’ll be careful, but someone’s got to bring this guy down. Lois will do what she can from her end, but she can’t drop all her other projects to focus on Luthor full time. I can.”

“When you’re not busy being Superman.”

“Exactly. Now get some sleep. You’ve still got to help me pick my wall color in the morning, and then you’ve got to pack for home.”

Martha was carrying the remains of her pizza into the kitchen when Caleb’s cell phone rang. Not Clark’s, but Caleb’s. As far as she knew there was only one person who had that number. As tempted as she was to listen in, Martha went through to the kitchen, making sure the door swung closed behind her.

She’d just wiped the last crumbs from the counter when Clark poked his head in. “Mom? I’m heading over to Lois’s. I’m not sure how long I’ll be.”

“Take your time, honey. I’ll say goodnight now, though. I’m off to bed.”

Clark came all the way into the kitchen and hugged his mom goodnight. On his way out he turned back to add, “I may be bringing a houseguest home, so don’t wander around without your robe tonight.”

“Clark, don’t feel that you need to stay here for my sake. If you’d rather stay at Lois’s...”

“Mom! I wasn’t talking about Lois! I wouldn’t...never mind.” He took a breath and tried again. “Lois called because a strange man showed up at her apartment. He claims he’s the invisible man. I’m going over there to help her check him out. If I think he’s trustworthy, I may bring him here for the night.”

“Well, if Lois is alone in her apartment with a strange man, what are you still doing here? I’ll see you in the morning.”

When Martha emerged from the guest room the next morning, her son quickly stepped out of his room, fully dressed. “Mom,” he whispered, “there’s a man named Alan Morris asleep in the living room. Let me come down with you.”

“Sure, honey. We’ll sneak through to the kitchen and get some coffee going. Maybe you can duck out for pastries so I don’t wake him up cooking breakfast.”

“I’m not leaving you here alone with him. I didn’t even go out on patrol last night. Don’t worry, though. Lois should be here with bagels any minute now. She wanted to check in on him on her way to work.”

The coffee had just finished brewing when Lois arrived. Her entrance woke Mr. Morris, who looked around for a groggy moment before getting his bearings. “Thanks again for letting me stay here, Mr. Knight.”

“Caleb, please.” Clark corrected. “And, like I told you last night, any friend of Lois is always welcome here.”

“What’s this?” Lois asked, looking over the paint samples and wallpaper swatches that still littered the coffee table. Martha took the bag of bagels from her and headed into the kitchen.

“I’ve got everything set up except for the walls. I just can’t decide — wallpaper or paint? What pattern or color? I was trying to make up my mind when you called last night.”

Lois scanned the choices quickly and pulled one of the swatches out of the pile. Handing the square of material to Clark with a decisive nod, she said, “This one. I smell coffee.” Before he could answer, she disappeared into the kitchen. Clark pocketed the swatch and, bringing Alan along with him, headed after the

women.

“So you were the original invisible man, but you’re not the one who’s been pulling all these robberies?” Martha clarified, pouring Alan his second cup of coffee.

“That’s right, Mrs. Knight...I mean Martha. My lab was broken into and several of my suits were stolen. I explained it all to Ms...to Lois and Caleb last night.”

“So somewhere in Metropolis is an invisible thief. That must be very frustrating for the police,” Martha said.

“And for Superman,” mumbled Caleb. Just then he cocked his head at an odd angle. After a moment he asked Martha, “Could you turn that radio on, please? I haven’t heard the weather report yet.” Martha gave him a quizzical look, but she reached for the radio nonetheless.

The announcer’s voice caught everyone’s attention “Repeating our top story, the city is gripped with fear this morning after last night’s break-out at the Metropolis Penitentiary. The Invisible Man freed an entire cellblock holding some of the nation’s most vicious criminals. The Police Commissioner urges the people of Metropolis to remain calm, but has ordered a ten p.m. curfew for tonight. He asks all citizens to make sure that all windows and doors to their homes are securely locked.”

“Never mind, Mom.” Caleb sounded defeated. “I don’t need to hear the weather after all.”

“See?” Alan put in. “You know that couldn’t have been me. I was here all night.” He looked at Caleb for verification. “And so were you.”

“Yes, Alan, I was,” he confirmed gloomily.

Lois set her coffee cup down and stood up. “Well, I’d better get in to the office and see what I can do. I’ve got stacks of robbery reports to sort through. Are you going to be okay here, Alan?”

“I’ll be fine. If there’s anything I can do to help, please...”

“I’ll call if I think of anything.”

“Well, I’d better go take another look at those paint samples if I want to get home today.” Martha said, standing to see Lois off.

“No need, Mom. Lois chose for me.” Caleb showed the fabric sample to his mother.

She looked at Lois, then back at Caleb, and smiled. “I’d better get packing, then.” Looking from Alan to Caleb, she asked her son, “Will you still be able to take me to...the airport?”

“Will you be okay here for a little while?” Caleb asked Alan.

“Don’t worry about me. If anything happens, I’ll just...fade into the background.”

At six o’clock that evening, Lois was still buried in piles of police reports. She’d moved her screening operation into the conference room, and she still had every available surface covered with files. She looked up at the sound of a soft knock. Caleb stood in the open doorway, a paper bag in one hand and a six-pack of cream soda in the other.

“What are you doing here?” Lois smiled in greeting.

“I brought you dinner. I called a little while ago, and Jimmy said you hadn’t eaten yet. I hope you like Pad Thai.”

“I love it. Pull up a chair and clear off a space if you can.”

She began consolidating piles to make room for their meal. “Why did you talk to Jimmy and not me?”

“He picked up your desk phone when I called. He said you told him to hold any calls that weren’t about the invisible man or Superman.” He leaned closer and said quietly, “It’s nice to know at least one of me still makes the cut.” As he pulled paper boxes of steaming noodles and shrimp from the bag he said, “Jimmy and I are getting to be quite friendly. We have a nice little chat just about every time I call.”

“In other words, he’s been grilling you mercilessly.”

“I don’t mind,” Caleb smiled. “It’s nice to know you have a friend at work who looks out for your interests.” He handed Lois a pair of chopsticks and a can of soda.

“He’s a little protective of me ever since...” She stopped suddenly.

“Ever since...” he prodded.

She gave her head a little shake. “I’ll tell you about it another time, I promise. Just not here.” She shot a significant look at the surrounding newsroom. Ah. A workplace romance gone bad. No wonder Jimmy was so keen on checking out the new guy.

“So,” Caleb looked around at the piles of file folders and notepads, “what’s all this?”

Lois sighed. “Every armed robbery in the last ten years. Even after eliminating all the armed robbers still in jail or accounted for somewhere else, I’ve still got hundreds of suspects.”

“Okay, so what have you got to go on?” Caleb slurped a long noodle into his mouth and dug a paper napkin out of the bag to wipe his chin.

“Not much. First he robs a jewelry store, then a rare coin shop.”

“Jewels? Collectors items?”

“Precious metals?”

“All precious metals? Or just some?” Caleb asked.

Lois looked at him and then grabbed a sheet of notes from under the soda cans. “A gold ring with emerald stones, gold chains, gold brooch, gold coins.” She trailed off, grinning widely at Caleb.

“Gold,” they said in unison.

“He steals gold,” Lois confirmed. “Jimmy!”

Jimmy spread a section of old newspaper on top of Lois’s files. “‘Golden Boy’ Barnes and his gang all went down for the last job they pulled,” he explained. “Several of them were in the cellblock that broke out the other day.”

Lois and Caleb grinned at each other in triumph. “We’ve got him!” she crowed.

“But how can we find him?” Caleb asked.

“He’s bound to strike again,” Jimmy offered.

“But where?” Caleb wondered.

“I know exactly where,” Lois said.

Jimmy and Caleb stared at her, eyebrows climbing. She was leaning over the newspaper article that Jimmy had been reading. Without a word, she pointed to the headline. It read: “Robbery at the Metropolis Gold Repository Foiled.” Beneath that, the sub-head was, “Golden Boy Barnes and His Gang to Serve Time.”

Later that evening, a taxi pulled away from Hyperion Avenue. Lois watched it go and then turned to tuck her hand into the proffered crook of Caleb’s arm. “Maybe I should buy a car,” she mused as they started up the steps. “I’ve never bothered with one before — they’re such a hassle in the city — but I’m going to get tired of never being able to talk openly with you when we’re riding somewhere.”

“You’re not upset that I wouldn’t...?” his voice trailed off and he made a hand motion that Lois knew indicated flying.

“No, you’re right; that shouldn’t be your everyday mode of transportation. There’s always the chance of getting caught, and the neighbors should see you coming and going like everyone else.”

She was about to mention the silver Jeep that had always been her ‘maybe someday’ car when Caleb laid his finger over his lips in a shushing motion. At her questioning glance, he gave a sideways nod toward his front door. “Alan’s asleep on my living room sofa,” he said softly.

“Poor guy; he hasn’t gotten much rest this week. Let’s let him sleep a little longer. He’ll be able to give us better answers if he’s

rested, anyway.”

Taking her hand and pulling her gently down the steps, Caleb said, “Let’s sneak around to the back door. I’ll make us some tea while we wait.”

Lois followed Caleb through his back door into the warmth of his kitchen. He filled a teapot with water, stared at it for a moment, added the tea to steep, and reached two mugs down from a cupboard.

“I’m impressed,” Lois said. “Not an unpacked box in sight.”

Clark realized with a start that when she’d said she was impressed she’d been talking about the house and not his heat vision. For some reason he couldn’t articulate, that pleased him.

“Super speed,” he grinned cheekily. “It’s not just for rescues anymore.”

She leaned both elbows on the island counter and matched him grin for grin. “You don’t have any siblings, do you?”

He had a feeling she was going somewhere with this line of questioning, but he couldn’t imagine where. “No. Mom and Dad couldn’t have kids and they didn’t meet the criteria for adoption in the sixties, so there’s just me.”

“Just as well. You would have had an impossibly unfair advantage in sibling rivalry. You’d have had your Saturday morning chores done and been out the door to the movies before your brother had his bed made.”

“I don’t know about that.” He gave a self-deprecating chuckle. “I bet my hypothetical brother wouldn’t have set the barn on fire” — he pointed significantly at his eyes — “twice.”

Lois laughed. “Did you at least blow the fire out with your freezing breath?”

“Ha!” he scoffed. “You think any sixteen-year-old kid has that kind of presence of mind?”

“Sixteen? I thought you didn’t get your powers until you were eighteen.”

“I didn’t fly until then, but that was the last power to emerge. They came on gradually. At first it was so subtle we didn’t notice.” He leaned back against the countertop next to the sink and crossed his legs at the ankle. “The last time I remember being sick was my fourth birthday. I had the chickenpox for a week, then nothing else — not even a head cold. Then when I was ten I broke a knife tip while my mom was teaching me to slice onions. That’s when we found out I was invulnerable. Luckily I’d already had all my shots for school. The really weird stuff didn’t happen until adolescence.”

He poured the tea and reached over the island to hand one of the mugs to Lois. “Was it scary?” she asked with a tenderness that none of her newsroom colleagues would have recognized.

“Sometimes. It took me a while to learn to control my hearing and my vision. Thank goodness we lived in the country. There are enough things a growing boy doesn’t need to hear on a farm. I can’t imagine going through that in a city like Metropolis.” He opened the back door and held one arm out in a silent invitation for Lois to join him on the patio.

As she followed him through into the sheltered back yard, she teased, “Farm boy, huh? You do realize that you have just narrowed your true identity down to two percent of the population, don’t you?”

He came to stand beside her, draping his free arm easily across her shoulders. “First off, I would be delighted if you thought of me as a simple farm boy. I haven’t felt like one in a long time.”

Lois hadn’t missed the wistfulness in Caleb’s voice. Clark Kent desperately needed to get a life that he could be happy in. Well, she was working on it, wasn’t she? She was pretty sure it wouldn’t involve farm animals, though.

“And second?” she prodded.

“And second, my true identity is who I am with you. Whether

I’m dressed as Caleb Knight or Superman or anyone else doesn’t matter.” He gave her a one-armed hug and dropped a kiss onto the top of her head. She leaned her head against his chest for a moment, too touched to find the words for any verbal acknowledgement.

She took a moment to savor the weight of Caleb’s arm around her shoulders. It was both exhilarating and frightening to be the object of such confidence. For an instant Lois was accosted with the terrifying thought that she was responsible for the emotional wellbeing of the most powerful man in the world. What if she blew it? What if she broke Caleb’s heart and ruined Superman for everyone?

The thought receded as quickly as it came. Caleb was a man. He had the same needs as any other man — emotional as well as physical, she reminded herself quickly. And even if he did have relationship problems — which he wouldn’t necessarily, despite her past record — that wouldn’t mean that he couldn’t function as Superman. If he couldn’t risk his heart for fear losing his self-control then he might as well join a monastery. And if he was going to risk his heart with anyone, she was bound and determined that it would be with her.

Needing a distraction from such heavy pondering, she straightened up and took an experimental sip of tea. It was surprisingly different from any she’d had before. It wasn’t what she’d expected, but she liked it.

“Nice,” was her remarkably articulate assessment.

“Lapsang Suchang,” he explained. “My mother used to make me tea and raisin scones when I was feeling bad. Years later I had them for tea at the London Savoy, but it never tasted as good.”

Still holding her mug in her left hand, Lois leaned her head on Caleb’s shoulder and looked up at the waning moon. “When we were little, Lucy and I would play a game — we’d ask each other, ‘What would you rather be able to do — fly, or be invisible?’”

“And you chose…”

“Invisible. I wished I could walk through all those closed doors. I guess I still do.”

“And what do you think you’ll find there, behind those closed doors?”

“I don’t know. Something different, wonderful… something I don’t have, or can’t have.” She paused thoughtfully. “Or thought I couldn’t.” She set her tea down on the patio table and turned herself to snuggle further into his one-armed embrace. “You *are* pretty wonderful, Mr. Knight,” she said, her cheek firmly pressed against his chest.

He put his tea down next to hers and used both arms to encircle her. “I’m different, anyway, that’s for sure,” his warm voice rumbled in her ear.

The next afternoon, Clark flew through the clear October sky, his arms laden with bags of phosphorus. The scene that met him at the Metropolis Gold Repository was pretty much what he’d expected. Squad cars formed a barricade behind which crouched a dozen or more SWAT officers with automatic weapons. Confusion reigned as men shouted to each other, warning their colleagues about the presence of hostages and venting their frustration at the impossibility of taking a shot at invisible criminals. Using his hearing to estimate the location of the unseen robbers, Clark sprinkled the coarse white powder down on the scene below. Like a bad science fiction special effect, the members of Barnes’ gang appeared, brushing ineffectually at the grainy material that covered them from head to toe.

Clark landed and helped the police round up the thieves. He looked to the crowd of reporters gathered behind the police tape. That was odd. He was certain that Lois had said she’d meet him here. Quickly, he scanned the surrounding area. She must be getting a jump on the competition, maybe already talking to

Inspector Henderson.

In less than a minute, he was certain that Lois was nowhere in the vicinity. Unless...she wouldn't have, would she? Oh, yes, she might have. Activating his x-ray vision, he hurriedly scanned the inside of the massive building. What he saw made his blood run cold. There was no time to waste.

Lois could feel the first signs of waning consciousness. Her head felt light. There was a rushing sound in her ears. Her vision was going black around the edges. If Caleb didn't get here soon, there wouldn't be...There he was now, crashing through the wall. Thank goodness! She gulped the fresh air that followed in his wake with grateful gasps. Ignoring the two guards and Alan Morrison, Superman caught Lois in his arms, barely stopping himself from kissing her in relief.

Scooping her up like a child, Caleb headed for the front door. Once in the sunshine she revived quickly. As he lowered her feet to the ground, she went into reporter mode. "How did you know how to make the thieves visible again?" she asked.

His only answer was a wordless scowl. Without so much as a 'by your leave,' he placed one hand on either side of her waist and flew straight up.

Lois was opening her mouth to protest when he shocked her into silence. "What the hell did you think you were doing?" he shouted.

The shock and its accompanying silence were short lived. With a pointed glare at his hands on her waist, she matched him glare for glare. "I was about to ask you the same question. Since when does Superman kidnap innocent civilians in broad daylight?"

"Since he needs to have a shouting match with his irresponsibly reckless girlfriend, that's when! Would you rather we have this out in front of the entire press corps?"

Lois crossed her arms and lifted her chin. He might have her captive in mid-air, but, as long as his hands were occupied with holding her up, she at least had the advantage on the gesturing front. "I don't see what there is to 'have out' in the first place. I was just doing my job."

"No, the twenty other reporters who were waiting where the police told them to were just doing their jobs; *you* were risking your life. There's a difference."

"Those twenty other reporters don't have the inside story on Golden Boy Barnes and his gang, or on Alan Morris and his invisibility suit. And they don't have a single Kerth Award among them. Taking calculated risks *is* how I do my job. Get used to it!"

"How can I get used to seeing the woman I love in mortal danger, Lois? Another minute later and you could have been dead! Do you have any idea how that terrifies me?"

Lois opened her mouth to issue a scathing rebuttal. Then she closed it again as his words registered in her brain. For the first time since their argument began, she looked carefully at Caleb's face. What she saw there made her uncross her arms and bring her hands up to softly stroke his forehead and cheeks. His look of consternation at her sudden change of attitude made her smile. "Really?" she murmured.

"Yes, really," he answered, without anger, but with undiminished intensity. "I was scared to death. If anything happened to you, I don't know what I'd do."

"No, not that," she said softly. "I meant..." Finding herself suddenly shy, she forced out, "You really love me?"

For a moment he froze. Obviously he hadn't realized that he'd voiced the thought aloud. But, seeing that she made no objection, he drew her into a tight embrace. She could hear his heart pounding in her ear, feel his chest rise and fall with every breath. After a delicious eternity of wordless tenderness, he pulled back enough to look her directly in the eye. "Yes." His voice was strong and sure with no hint of doubt or reservation. "I

love you — with everything I am and everything I ever hope to be."

"I love you t..." she began. That was as far as she got. After that her mouth — and his, too, for that matter — was occupied with more important things than words.

Jimmy emerged from the darkroom and blinked as his eyes adjusted to the light. He'd been in there for longer than was strictly necessary to develop half a dozen shots of the William Mertz High School Quiz Bowl team, New Troy's 1993 Champions, soon to be competing for national honors in Orlando, Florida.

Truth be told, he'd been sulking. Lois was probably getting the scoop on the Barnes Gang's latest heist at that very moment. He should have been there. He'd wanted to be there. He'd asked the Chief to let him take a camera down to the Gold Repository. Perry hadn't even known that Lois was heading there this morning until Jimmy had filled him in on her discovery from the night before. Geez, it was Jimmy who'd found that old newspaper article. Without him, Lois would never have even known where to go. But, no, this wasn't going to be his big break after all. Ever since those first pictures of Superman flying Lois through the Planet's front window had come out a little fuzzy, Perry made sure that someone — anyone — other than James B. Olsen was at every important story. Jimmy was in photographer's purgatory, with no hint as to when he'd be getting out.

"Why the long face, handsome?" The new voice belonged to a slim brunette with violet eyes and a cute little turned-up nose. Jimmy was sure he'd never seen her before.

"Huh?" Oh, yeah, James, real smooth.

She'd been leaning against the railing of the newsroom ramp, but she stood up, adjusting her tight black v-neck sweater with a little tug at its hem. His eyes couldn't help but follow from the neckline to the hips to the purple miniskirt which barely covered the top of a shapely pair of legs.

"You look a little depressed. How about a cup of coffee and a donut to perk you up? I was just heading that way myself." Jimmy quickly brought his eyes back up to her face. If she'd caught him ogling her, she didn't seem to mind. In fact, she was smiling at him in a very friendly way. When he continued to stare blankly, she raised her eyebrows and waved in the general direction of the snack area.

"Oh! Yeah! Coffee. That's a good idea." Put your brain in gear, man! You're blowing this big time.

Luckily, the girl didn't seem to notice Jimmy's momentary lack of focus. She followed him to the coffee machine and accepted the mug that he poured for her, adding two packets of artificial sweetener while Jimmy poured his own coffee.

"I hope you don't think I'm being too forward," she said as Jimmy reached for the last glazed donut. He offered it to her, but she shook her head with a shy little smile, so he kept it for himself. "I just started in classifieds this week and I don't know very many people," she went on. "I hate taking my coffee break alone, and you looked like you could use some cheering up." After a beat, she added, "I'm sorry; I haven't even introduced myself properly. I'm Marnie Wilcox."

"Ji...James, James Olsen. I'm a photographer...which I guess is pretty obvious seeing as how I was just coming out of the dark room." Lame, Olsen! Lame!

"Wow! A photographer! That's so cool! I took photography classes in high school, but I could never get all the chemicals to work right. I guess it's just not my thing." She gave a cheerful shrug, obviously not too broken up about the derailment of that particular ambition. "I'd love to see some of your work. What were you developing just now?"

"Nothing very interesting, I'm afraid." Inspiration struck. "But I do have something you might like to see — the first ever

photograph of Superman.”

“Oh wow! That would be totally awesome!” She laid a warm hand on his arm. It was a brief touch, over before it even registered, but Jimmy was sure she was flirting with him. Yes! Score one for Olsen!

When her lips finally left Caleb’s and she drew back enough to look around, Lois found that they had drifted out to sea — or rather over the sea — with the prevailing winds. Superman’s cape was wrapped around them like a blanket, and, although they were still vertical, their legs were rather tangled up and their arms wrapped tightly around each other. Caleb brought his hands up to her face, burying his fingers in the hair behind her temples, his thumbs gently stroking across her cheekbones.

“Lord, woman, do you have any idea what you do to me?” he breathed, his brown eyes boring into hers, willing her to understand the impact she had on him.

“It couldn’t be half of what you do to me,” she answered. A girlish giggle escaped before she clamped her mouth shut on the end of it. Caleb’s only response was to raise a questioning eyebrow. “You know,” she said by way of explanation, “women all over the world dream about being swept off their feet by Superman, and I’m the one who really is. I wonder what they’d think if they knew that being flown off into the clouds for a lover’s quarrel was part of the package.”

“That’s why I need you,” he countered. “Not many of those women would be strong-willed enough to get yelled at by Superman and yell right back.”

The teasing smile left his face and he said in all sincerity, “I’m sorry, Lois. I was out of line. Of course you have to do your job, and I knew at the outset that you don’t always color inside the lines.” He smiled again and said, “Do you know what I was doing when I heard you yelling for me after Trask threw you out of that plane?”

“What?”

“I was wishing that I could hold you in my arms again, and thinking that would never happen. After all, what was the likelihood that the same person would need rescuing by Superman more than once?” He shook his head in bemusement. “I called you my first repeat customer, remember? I should issue you frequent flyer miles.”

He grew serious again. “I do wish you’d have told me in advance that you planned to sneak inside. It wouldn’t have taken me so long to get you out if I’d known where to look for you.”

If anyone else had said such a thing, Lois would have accused him of patronizing her. But Caleb had earned the right to worry about her, so instead she explained reasonably, “I appreciate that you want to keep me safe, but you have to understand how I work. I can’t plan every move in advance. When you left I didn’t exactly have my strategy all mapped out.”

“You knew enough to take the invisibility suits with you,” he countered. “You must have had some idea of how you would use them.” He wasn’t really angry, just concerned.

Lois was unapologetic on that point. “Hey, a girl’s got to be prepared for contingencies. Invisibility is a huge advantage for a reporter. Don’t tell me that you wouldn’t use every advantage you had if you were in my shoes.”

A new, speculative look came into her eyes, and Clark had the uncomfortable feeling he was being sized up. “You know,” she mused, “invisibility isn’t the only...special ability that could come in handy for a good reporter.” Her palms slid down his back, came forward around his waist, and worked their way back up to rest on his chest, leaving trails of fire in their wakes. “Take reconnaissance, for example. An Ace Reporter can’t always have access to an invisibility suit. And that’s not the most subtle way to go, anyway.” She sounded casually conversational, but Clark wasn’t fooled for a moment. “I mean, people can still hear you

when you wear those things, and they can see you opening doors or picking things up.” Her fingers played idly on his spandex-covered pecs, making it extremely difficult for him to focus on precisely what she was saying. “But suppose the reporter had a partner. Someone who could walk right into a place in a pair of pants and a sport coat, ask a few innocuous questions, take a few notes, and use his special hearing and vision powers to find out things that no one else would think he would know...”

“Wait a minute!” Her hands stopped moving and Clark brought one of his up to capture both of hers, thus preventing any further mischief. “You want Superman to spy on your targets for you?” Clark did his best impression of his dad’s ‘What were you thinking, son?’ frown.

“No, no!” Lois was the picture of misunderstood innocence. “I would never ask Superman to do such a thing. Superman is the symbol of honesty — the world’s biggest Boy Scout.”

Clark just looked at her skeptically, but he did release her hands. With a final pat on the chest and a satisfied grin, she said, “I want my boyfriend, Caleb, to spy on my targets for me.”

“Wow, James! The first ever photograph of Superman! And he’s flying! That’s way cool!” Marnie was perched on one corner of Jimmy’s desk, her legs crossed and the hem of her skirt riding up just enough to hint at...things Jimmy should not be thinking about at work.

“Yeah, well, the Chief wasn’t impressed. It’s not very clear — his face is pretty fuzzy.”

“But he was moving! Surely Mr. White doesn’t expect you to get completely clear focus on a moving target.”

“You’d be surprised what Perry White expects,” Jimmy said gloomily.

“Who’s that he’s carrying?” Marnie asked. “She looks happy.”

“That’s Lois Lane. And, trust me, she only looks that happy when Superman is carrying her. Or when she’s landed a major scoop. If you ever see her without that smile, it’s best to stay clear. She can be a little...”

“Prickly?” Marnie suggested.

“I was going to say ‘intense,’ but you’ve got the idea. Let’s just say they don’t call her ‘Mad Dog Lane’ for nothing.”

“I think I’ve seen her. Weren’t you working late with her last night? I thought I saw you talking with her in the conference room when I left.”

“Yep. That was her.”

“There was another man there, too. Tall, dark hair, looks a little like you, but not as cute. Is that her reporting partner?”

“No way. Lois Lane works alone. That was her new boyfriend, Caleb.”

“Caleb Johnson? I think we went to school together.”

“No. Caleb Knight.”

“Oh, well, my mistake.” She gave that same cheery little shrug again. Hopping jauntily to her feet, she said, “Coffee break’s over. I’d better get back to classifieds. Don’t want to get in trouble before my first paycheck.”

“We should do this again sometime,” Jimmy said hopefully.

“Sure! That would be nice. See you, James.”

“See you.”

“Bye now!” She gave one last parting wave, and then headed back to work.

As they approached the city, Caleb slowed and asked, “Where to? Back to the Gold Repository?”

“Nope. I’ve already gotten everything I’m going to out of Henderson and the manager there. Morrison and the guards will be sick of talking to reporters by now. Barnes and his gang will be in lock-up and not talking to anybody. There’s only one witness left, and I’m the only reporter with access to him. To the

Daily Planet roof if you please; it's time for Superman's interview. That is why he and I left so suddenly, you know. I asked him to fly me back to work so none of the other reporters would get to him. Very clever of me, don't you think?"

"Very. Your wish is my command." Superman veered left and, moments later, touched down on the roof of the iconic building.

When Lois emerged from the stairwell ten minutes later, she was in fine form. She headed straight for Perry's office, waving her notebook like a pennant. "You should have been there, Chief! I hope Sevison got some good shots of Barnes and his gang covered in phosphorous."

"Lois! Where in tarnation have you been? Sevison got back fifteen minutes ago. He says Superman carried you out of the Repository and took off like a bat out of Hell, taking you with him. People are wondering what's going on with you two." He gave a thoughtful frown and lowered his voice. "You haven't started something with Superman, have you? It was pretty obvious how enamored of him you were when he first appeared."

Lois waved a dismissive hand. "Don't be ridiculous, Chief. Every woman in America was enamored of Superman. He's a huge celebrity. But I'm a grown woman; I don't go around acting on every celebrity crush, and Superman doesn't have romantic attachments. I thought everyone knew that. Besides, I don't think my boyfriend would like it if I did."

"That Caleb Knight fellow that Jimmy's been telling me about?"

Lois smiled broadly, letting every ounce of her delight in Caleb shine through her eyes. "That's the one." Turning on her heel, she marched off to her desk to get started on the story.

Watching her go, Perry mumbled to himself, "I see it, but I don't believe it. Lois Lane is in love."

Lois was tweaking the last paragraph of her story when her peripheral vision picked up a person standing quietly next to her desk. Holding up one hand to indicate that she was in the middle of something, Lois put the finishing touches on the article, saved it to her hard drive, and sent it to Perry for his review. Only then did she look up to see who was waiting to talk to her. It was a young woman with dark hair and violet eyes who was in serious need of an office fashion mentor.

"Can I help you?" Lois asked in her best 'Make it quick, kid,' voice.

"Ms. Lane?" The young woman displayed the diffidence and respect that was Lois's due as top banana in the newsroom.

"Yes?" Lois's tone said, 'Get on with it and don't waste my time.'

"I'm Marnie. I started in classifieds this week." When Lois failed to respond, Marnie went on, "A bunch of us girls are going out for drinks after work. I was wondering if you'd like to join us." Her voice trailed off toward the end as she realized how little interest Lois Lane had in hobnobbing with the office ladies' club.

Lois merely pointed at her desk calendar, where "Dinner with Caleb" was scrawled diagonally across the bottom half of Friday's spot and said briskly, "Sorry. Can't." She turned back to her computer screen in what Marnie correctly understood to be a dismissal. The next time Lois looked up, Marnie was gone.

Fifteen minutes later, the phone rang in Nigel St. John's office in the LexTower building. "Yes?" he answered.

"Mr. St. John? It's Marnie. You sent me to the Daily Planet this week to check up on Lois Lane."

"Yes, Marnie. I trust you have something to report."

"Yes, sir. Lane definitely has a new boyfriend. I've seen him myself, and he matches the description you gave me."

"Does he have a name?"

"Yes, sir. Caleb Knight. They have a dinner date tonight."

"Thank you, Marnie. That will do nicely for now. You will inform me of any further developments." He hung up without waiting for a reply.

When Lois answered the door that night, Caleb held up one finger, took two steps into her apartment, and did a slow 180-degree turn. It took Lois a moment to realize that he was scanning her apartment — for bugs, she assumed.

Apparently satisfied, he relaxed and gave her a proper welcoming kiss before exclaiming, "Lois! Wow! You look...just wow!" He handed her a bouquet of red and white roses, his eyes still drinking in the sight of her.

"Thank you. You look pretty terrific yourself. Is this why you wanted to stay in Metropolis tonight? So we could dress up without worrying about flying in our best clothes?"

"That, and I've heard that jazz night at the Lawrence is some of the best dancing on the planet. Metropolis's restaurants can compete with the best in the world — there's no need to go anywhere else."

"You'll still take me flying later if we want to, won't you? Just for fun?"

"Of course. Any time. You might want to change first, though. That's an awful lot of skin to expose to the open elements." His eyes traveled slowly from her nearly bare shoulders to the daringly low plunging neckline of her deep green satin dress to the deceptively long skirt that hugged her hips and the slit which emphasized the tantalizing lines of her long legs. He made no effort to hide his attraction.

"Wait till you see the back," she grinned, turning to take the roses to the kitchen.

His only response was a low whistle.

"What was that bit when you first came in?" she asked over the sound of water running into a vase. "Do I have another spy downstairs?"

"You did," he said, removing his charcoal grey suit coat and hanging it over the back of a kitchen chair. The movement caused the light to glint off of his gold cuff links. Lois wondered if he even realized how few men could actually afford gold cuff links. They looked good, though, so she wasn't complaining.

"Did? You mean we don't have to bother ditching him tonight?" she said hopefully. "It was fun once, but it's going to get old quickly."

"That was my thought, too. This time I zapped his earpiece with my heat vision. Not only did it short out, it also singed some of his hair in the process. Luckily for him, he took off before I started zapping other parts of him."

"Caleb! You're awful!" she laughed.

"Hey! He started it! We're not going to put up with Luthor's goons trailing after us every time we want to go out."

Lois set the vase of roses down in the middle of the table and then turned to face Caleb with a determined set to her jaw. "No, we're not. First thing in the morning I'm getting on the phone to Inspector Henderson."

"Are you sure you want to tip your hand? It might be easier to investigate Luthor if he doesn't know we're on to him."

"Who said anything about Luthor? As far as Inspector Henderson is concerned, I'm being harassed by some unknown party. I'm an investigative reporter; the list of people who might want to spy on me is pretty long. Henderson can at least make sure that my home is off limits. That's what police are for."

Caleb smiled in admiration. "Do you always meet trouble head-on like this?"

"What other way is there to meet it? Ask anyone — subtlety is not my strong suit."

"Subtlety is overrated," Caleb declared, scooping her into a warm embrace and landing a kiss on the side of her neck.

Lois ducked away and gave him a playful slap on one arm. “Maybe so, farm boy, but dinner at the Lawrence is not. What time is our reservation?”

Accepting her rebuke with good humor, he glanced at his watch. “In twenty minutes. We’d better get going.”

Dinner and dancing with Caleb wasn’t as fun as Lois had anticipated. There wasn’t anything wrong with Caleb. He looked devastatingly handsome in his suit. He was a perfect gentleman, not only in the way he treated her, opening doors for her and holding her chair for her as she sat — even helping her in and out of her coat — but also in the respectful way he addressed everyone they saw that night, from the taxi driver to the maitre-d’ to the waitress who served them. He chose the perfect wine from the restaurant’s extensive list. He guided her around the dance floor with an easy grace that was a delight to follow. He held her in his arms and gazed into her eyes with undisguised adoration.

The trouble was Clark. Dressed up like this, eating gourmet food and dancing to the live jazz quartet, Lois’s mind kept going back to the first time she’d ever seen him at Luthor’s White Orchid Ball. He just didn’t look like Caleb tonight. He looked like Clark Kent in his element. She kept having to stop herself from calling him by his true name or mentioning how the dancing was bringing back memories of their first meeting. How the sensation of being in his arms had felt like coming home and she’d put up an all-business front to cover her consternation at being instantly attracted to the world’s biggest skirt-chaser. She caught herself wondering how many women — more sophisticated and beautiful than her — he’d dined with and danced with the same way. How plebeian she must seem in comparison to the debutantes and social queen bees Clark had at his beck and call.

By the time dessert was served, Caleb could no longer pretend that all was well. Before he lifted the first bite of chocolate cappuccino cake to his mouth, he bent his head to catch her gaze and inquired gently, “Lois? What’s wrong? Have I done something to offend you?”

It was a good thing she was an experienced liar. “No, Caleb. I’m sorry. I know I’ve been distracted. I guess I’m still a little upset about Luthor’s spies. It’s pretty disconcerting to think he’s that interested in me just because I wouldn’t go out with him.”

“If you don’t think Henderson can handle it, or if you want somewhere else to stay until it’s taken care of...” Caleb began.

“No. I’m sure Bill will rid Carter Avenue of lurking pests. And I refuse to be intimidated out of my own home.”

“You know I’m only one loud scream away. Or I could keep watch from above, just for tonight.” She knew he was only half-kidding about the scream and not kidding at all about keeping watch.

“Caleb, I’ll be fine, really.” Searching for way to reassure him, she added, “I think I know how to stop it, anyway.”

“Besides the police?”

“Maybe. Look at it this way: The first spy showed up right after I turned Luthor down last weekend. It’s probably just his bruised ego that’s got him so curious. He just can’t imagine what — or who — could be more important than an interview with Lex Luthor. So, I’ll give him what he wants. I had planned to interview him this week, but then the whole invisible man story broke and I didn’t get around to it. I think I’m going to make a point of doing it next week. I won’t get anything out of it, but maybe he’ll feel like I’ve paid enough attention to him that he’ll leave me alone.”

“What makes you think you won’t get anything out of it?”

Lois rolled her eyes as if the answer were obvious. “Because it will be just like my Clark Kent interview — very charming, pleasant conversation revealing absolutely nothing of any significance. Men of that social standing are experts at talking

without saying anything. Lex Luthor has plenty to hide, and he’ll do it by pretending not to hide anything at all. And I won’t challenge him on it because I don’t want him to know that I’m wise to him until I’m ready to pounce.”

Clark wasn’t really focusing on long-term investigative strategy at the moment. His mind had gone straight to a connection that Lois hadn’t really meant to imply. She’d mentioned Lex Luthor and Clark Kent in the same breath. That said a lot, Clark thought, about her opinion of Clark Kent. All the more reason to keep his true identity secret for a while longer. It looked like he had even more hurdles to leap that he had originally thought.

He should change the subject. He really should. But when he opened his mouth, what came out was, “You think Clark Kent has something to hide?”

Lois pierced him with an intense look, the meaning of which he couldn’t discern. All she said was, “I’m sure of it.”

The look of panic in his eyes made Lois realize how her behavior must look to him. He had no way of knowing — because she certainly wasn’t going to tell him — what had really been bothering her all night. And, as much as she might wish that he would come clean with her, she wasn’t making it any easier for him by comparing Clark Kent to Lex Luthor. In fact, she’d probably just shot herself in the foot. If he’d been reluctant to ‘fess up before, he was obviously terrified now. Her brain went into high gear in an attempt to repair the damage she’d done.

“But not anything like what Luthor is hiding,” she said, picking up where she’d left off. “Clark’s no criminal, I’m certain of that. In fact, he’s probably a pretty good guy. I know he’s a terrific writer. You might not notice if you only watched the movies, but if you actually read his books you’d see how much he cares about people. He likes to pretend that he’s some shallow playboy, but I’m not buying the act. There’s more to Clark Kent than meets the eye. I don’t know why he’s afraid to let it show.”

You can tell me. I’d love you no matter what your name was. The words formed in her mind, but something kept her from saying them out loud. Some part of her wanted him to tell her himself, because he trusted her, not because she’d figured it out and left him no choice.

“Maybe he’s like Superman,” Caleb suggested tentatively, “projecting a public image that isn’t really who he is inside.”

“I’m guessing that’s the case. I just don’t know why. It must get pretty lonely for him.” Almost there. Come on. Just tell me.

Clark knew this was his golden opportunity. He couldn’t have asked for a better lead-in. All it would take would be three little words. ‘I’m Clark Kent.’ That’s all he would have to say. On a good night he might have had the courage. But this hadn’t been a good night. This had been a really confusing night. He felt completely unbalanced, and he didn’t know if he had the emotional resources to handle whatever Lois’s reaction might be. He wanted to tell her. He really did. Just not tonight.

Lois could see the battle going on in Caleb’s head. She was sending him every sympathetic vibe she could, but he had no way of knowing that her sympathy was aimed at Clark as well as Caleb. In the end, she decided to let him off the hook, at least for tonight.

“What are we worrying about Clark Kent for?” she said, maybe just a little too brightly. “For all we know, he’s got his own inner circle who knows him for who he really is, just like our friend in blue does. You know what we need? We need to forget about Luthor’s goons and Clark’s image, and just enjoy the rest of our evening.”

After that, Lois consciously took her mind off her own misgivings and set about making sure that the evening ended on a better note. Strangely enough, the awkward conversation seemed to have made Caleb seem less Kent-like and more like the Caleb she had come to know and love. By the time they were halfway

through dessert she was finally enjoying herself.

As they approached her apartment door, Lois sighed and leaned on Caleb's arm. "I love dancing with you, but I can't wait to get out of these shoes," she said. Pulling her keys from her purse, she began making her way down the row of locks on automatic pilot. She had kicked the offending footwear into a corner and was halfway to her kitchen before she realized that Caleb was still standing in the doorway.

"Well? Aren't you coming in for coffee?" she asked.

His smile smacked of relief, as if he hadn't been certain he'd be welcome. "I'd love to. I just didn't want to assume."

Although he'd tried to relax and enjoy the rest of their date like Lois had suggested, Clark hadn't entirely succeeded. He loved being with her, but he couldn't quite shake the feeling that he should have told her the truth when he had the chance. He knew the moment had passed for tonight, and he wasn't sure when the time would be right again. His mother's warning about not waiting too long had been niggling at the back of his mind.

Crossing back to take him by the hand, Lois tugged him unceremoniously inside and shut the door behind them. "Don't mind my moods. I should learn to leave my work at the office when we're on a date. I guess I was a little nervous, too."

Clark gave himself a mental shake. He'd been so busy second-guessing his own actions that he hadn't focused enough on how Lois might be feeling. It was time to stop worrying about himself and show her how much he cared about her. She must never be left in doubt about that.

"Why on Earth would you be nervous with me?" He pulled out the milk and sugar while she started the coffee machine.

"It's silly, isn't it? But tonight — being so dressed up and taking a cab to dinner like ordinary people instead of flying off somewhere — I guess it felt more like an official date. I haven't been out with a man like that in a very long time."

Clark remembered the hint she'd dropped the previous evening. The one about the romance gone bad. Maybe that was the real reason she'd been skittish earlier. She was feeling a little gun-shy.

"And the last time didn't end very well?" he gently prodded.

She gave a disgusted snort. "No. Not unless you call seducing me in order to steal my first award-winning story ending well. Only he won the award, the jerk!"

"Oh, honey! I'm so sorry." All thoughts of his own problems evaporated in the warmth of his concern for her. He pulled her into a tight hug. "I better not ever catch that guy in a blind alley," he growled. She just squeezed him harder. For long minutes there was no sound but the two of them breathing and the coffee dripping into the pot.

It was strange how what had started out as a convenient lie to cover her earlier distraction had somehow turned into true confessions. She'd planned to tell him about Claude — in a vague, someday kind of way. She just hadn't meant to do it tonight. Yet here she was, feeling far less upset by the memory than she had imagined she would. It was hard to be really upset about anything while Caleb had his arms around her. At that moment she didn't think she could ever be out of sorts with him again.

As if to prove her right, he pulled back and said, "I've got an idea. You go get changed into your favorite, comfiest pajamas and I'll get it ready."

"What's the idea?" Her tone held a combination of teasing skepticism and child-like curiosity.

"Nothing improper, I assure you. Your virtue is safe with me. Change into blue jeans if you like — it just seems silly to change twice if you don't have to. Now shoo. I've got things to do out here." Lois wasn't sure she wanted her virtue to be too safe, but she complied nonetheless.

When she came out, dressed not in her comfiest pajamas, but

rather in her silkiest long nightgown and matching lacy robe, she found her apartment transformed. Every electric light was dark. Every candle she owned — and a few she was pretty sure were new — was lit, flooding her home in a warm, flickering glow. Frank Sinatra crooned from her CD player. Her loveseats and coffee table had been moved to one side of the room, leaving a makeshift dance floor in the middle. And standing in front of her was her Caleb, every trace of Clark Kent eliminated, in faded blue jeans, a soft, cranberry-colored sweater, and stocking feet.

"Come here," he smiled, holding out one hand in invitation. Slowly she approached him, savoring the view. She placed her right hand in his left. He raised his right arm to grasp her waist. "Dance with me?" he asked, already moving them to the first strains of 'Fly Me to the Moon.' "They're playing our song," he cajoled.

"We've been dancing all evening," she said, not really in protest. Quickly she relaxed into the rhythm of his movements, relishing the feel of his hand through the thin material of her nightdress.

"Not like this," he said. As he spoke, their feet left the ground and he twirled them around the room, drawing her close until her head was tucked under this chin, their joined hands resting against his shoulder. "I've never danced with anyone like this," he whispered in her ear. "Until I met you, I never wanted to."

Lois was folding her laundry when Caleb called late Saturday morning.

"Hi! What's up?" she greeted him cheerfully.

"Nothing. Does it sound pathetic to admit that I couldn't stand to go more than twelve hours without hearing your voice?"

"No. It sounds sweet."

"What are you up to?" He rolled his eyes at himself. He really needed to come up with some better conversation starters. He felt like he was back in junior high.

"Nothing all that exciting. Just laundry. I'm finally packing the summer things away now that there's no hope for warm weather again before spring. I can't believe I let another summer get away from me. I've had the same bikini stuffed in the back of my dresser drawer for three years. It's still got the tags on it. I always think I'm going to get away to Ocean City or Cape May, but something always comes up. I never even make it to the city swimming pool."

"Are you serious? You haven't been swimming in three years?"

"Pitiful, isn't it? What can I say — I'm an ambitious career woman."

"No, you're a workaholic in dire need of an intervention. You're not working this weekend, are you?"

"No, I don't have anything scheduled until Luthor's interview over lunch on Monday."

"You reached him already?"

"I reached his assistant, Mrs. Cox. Apparently she works weekends, too."

"But you don't. At least not this weekend."

"No, but it's a little cold for a beach trip in October."

"Not in Borneo, it isn't." From the tone of his voice, she could picture the mischievous smile he must be wearing. "You pack that bikini and a toothbrush," he said. "I'll take care of the rest." Thirty minutes later, they were off.

"Wake up, Sleeping Beauty. You're home." Lois didn't open her eyes in response to Caleb's voice. Instead, she tightened her grip on the corner of the red silk cape that she had commandeered for her own use as a blanket and pulled it further under her chin.

"Five more minutes," she mumbled sleepily, snuggling her face into the warm skin at the side of his neck.

Clark pondered his next move. It was very late Sunday night

in Metropolis — or rather, very early Monday morning. Maybe he could take the risk of carrying her through her living room window. On the other hand, Metropolis was notorious for its night owls. It wouldn't do for Superman to be seen carrying a sleeping woman in such an obviously intimate way — especially not the same woman he'd taken off with on Friday in front of dozens of witnesses. So he stayed where he was, hovering over Carter Avenue in the dark.

He could have happily held her for hours, but she needed to get a good night's sleep — what was left of it. When they'd arrived in Kuching on Saturday it had been midnight local time. They'd stayed up all night enjoying the city's nightlife and strolling along the nearby beaches in the moonlight. Then they'd spent most of Sunday — which would have been Saturday night in Metropolis — at the beach without so much as a catnap in the sun.

He smiled at the memory of Lois in that bikini. It would not be spending the next three years in the back of a drawer if he had any say in the matter.

Late Sunday afternoon Caleb had suggested that he take Lois home so she could get some rest, but she'd wanted to see the orangutans in the forests along the Sabangan River on Monday morning. So he'd checked them into adjacent rooms at the White Raja Hotel and they'd both gone shopping for a couple of warm weather outfits and some toiletries.

They'd left Borneo right after lunch on Monday, which, through the magic of time zones, brought them back home to Metropolis in the middle of Sunday night. If she didn't sleep tonight, and in a more comfortable position than curled up in Clark's arms, Lois would be running on eight hours of rest in two days.

When the requested five minutes were up, he woke her with a kiss. "Mmmm...what time is it?" Lois asked, looking around to get her bearings.

"Almost two. You've got to be at work in a few hours. Time to wake up and go to bed," he teased. Quietly he landed on the roof of her apartment building and, after setting her down and taking a step back, changed back into his blue jeans and new leather jacket.

"I liked the shorts and tank-top better," Lois pouted.

"I'll just bet you did," he grinned, "but I'd look pretty silly wearing them in this weather."

"Almost as silly as I looked wearing a turtleneck sweater in 90 degree heat when we left Borneo."

"Yeah, that's the problem with flying between climates. It's hard to dress for the weather." They talked quietly as they made their way down the stairs and through the corridors to Lois's door. "And I'm afraid you're going to have a terrible case of jet lag. I should have suggested Tahiti instead."

"No way. Then I never would have seen the orangutans or tasted Sarawak Laksa. And I don't think you've ever written for the Tahiti Gazette, have you?" She looked over her shoulder as she unlocked her door. She was just in time to catch Caleb rolling his eyes.

"I can't believe I told you about my freelancing days. You never would have known about the knob-tailed gecko if I'd kept my mouth shut."

"I can't believe you never mentioned before that you were a reporter," she said, stepping into her apartment and turning on a light.

"I'm not. A few freelance pieces here and there under various pen names do not make me a reporter. You're the one with the Kerth Awards. I haven't published a newspaper article in years."

Nope, just four best-selling novels, she refrained from saying. Her wide yawn put a stop to the conversation.

"I saw that, young lady. Off to bed with you. I'll call you in the afternoon to hear how your lunch with Luthor went." He gave

her one final goodnight hug and kiss, then pointed her toward her bedroom and let himself out.

Perry White had an open-door policy.

The primary and publicly acknowledged reason was that it encouraged his staff to come to him with problems or questions. The gruff exterior that he projected kept the policy from being abused. However, on this particular Monday morning, Perry was taking advantage of a secret side-benefit of the rule. Nobody in the Daily Planet bullpen realized just how sharp the Chief's hearing was. At the moment, although he appeared to be deeply absorbed in reviewing the mark-ups for Tuesday's Lifestyle section, in reality he was listening intently to a conversation between his office gofer and his society columnist.

Jimmy had walked past Perry's open door with an armful of files and had just rounded the corner on the way to the records room when he was stopped by Cat, who was going the other direction.

"Jimmy! Hold on a minute. You're just the man I want to see."

Perry didn't have to actually see the pair to know that Jimmy would be lapping up the attention, as he did from any attractive female. "Sure. What's up?" came Jimmy's predictable response.

Cat lowered the pitch of her voice, but, fortunately for Perry, not its volume. "What's the story with the Ice Queen? Why do I detect a thaw coming on?"

"Who? You mean Lois?"

"Of course. Only a month ago she was as focused as a laser-beam, never even cracking a smile unless she was being lauded for yet another front-page scoop. Now look at her; she's working just as hard, I'll give her that, but something has changed. She looks positively...happy."

Involuntarily, Perry's eyes went to his star reporter, who was sitting at her desk rapidly skimming a stack of magazine and newspaper clippings, her pencil jotting occasional notes as she went. She must be preparing for her lunchtime interview with Lex Luthor. Now that he looked closely, Perry saw what had attracted Cat's attention. At first glance, Lois looked just as intensely busy as always, but there was a certain lightness about her that was new. The corners of her mouth turned slightly up, as if she were prepared to break into a smile on a moment's notice.

"And she's got a new tan," Cat's voice continued. "I'm telling you, Jimmy, all the signs are there. The healthy glow, the happy look, the dark circles from lack of sleep that her makeup can't quite hide...Lois went away this weekend. To somewhere warm and tropical. Nobody does that alone. So spill. Who's the guy?"

To Jimmy's credit, he answered with more presence of mind than Perry would have expected. "It's not like it's some big secret, Cat, but if you want to know about Lois's love life, I think the person you need to ask is Lois."

After that, Perry heard Jimmy's footsteps retreat down the hall. Then he saw Cat saunter nonchalantly toward the snack area. Her path took her right past Lois's desk, where she slowed her pace just long enough to take a surreptitious look at the open calendar. It was a good thing that Daily Planet employees were off limits for Cat's column.

However, there were no limits to Perry's own curiosity. It was time to find a way to meet the mysterious Mr. Knight.

Fortunately, Perry didn't have long to wait for an excuse. Lois had just returned from lunch when Perry's phone rang. It was Gus from accounting begging off from the monthly Monday night poker game. Perry made a show of disappointment. "What do you mean you can't make it? The poker game starts in a few hours. Where am I supposed to find another player at the last minute?" He spoke a little louder than was strictly necessary. Lois couldn't help but overhear. Not bothering to listen to Gus's

excuse, Perry cut him off with a resigned-sounding, “All right, all right...” When he hung up, he made a beeline for Lois’s desk.

True to his word, Caleb called at 3:00. When Lois picked up, he got straight to the point. “So? How did it go? Does Lex Luthor still have all his digits intact?”

Lois couldn’t help laughing, even though it made Eduardo look up from the desk across from hers. “Yes. He never even touched me. Not that he didn’t hint at a future dinner date, but I made it very clear that the meeting was strictly business.”

“And you think he’s going to take that lying down?”

“Luthor’s not stupid, Caleb. He knows how to project the Perfect Gentleman image. Continuing to pursue someone who’s made it clear that she’s already in a serious relationship would only be a distraction for him. And he’s not particularly interested in me personally, anyway. He was just miffed that he wasn’t at the top of my priority list. I made sure to stroke his ego enough that he’ll feel properly appreciated — as Metropolis’s Great Philanthropist, if not as its Most Eligible Bachelor.”

A metallic clang in the background made her ask, “Where are you?”

“In the equipment shed. Dad wanted some help fixing the combine.”

“So you’re talking to me and fiddling with farm machinery at the same time? That’s impressive multitasking.”

“Nope. Dad’s the mechanic. All I’m doing it holding it up for him. He has to get to some of the parts on the underside.”

“I see. He’s got a lot of trust in you not to drop it on his head.”

“Nah, I wouldn’t do that. Mom would tan my hide for sure. Speaking of Mom, she wants to know when I’m bringing you out here for a ‘real home-cooked meal.’”

“That means to meet your boyfriend’s old man!” came a friendly-sounding voice from the background.

“Dad! Don’t scare her off!” Caleb scolded good-naturedly. Then to Lois, “Seriously, are you free tonight? Mom’s making beef Burgundy and pecan pie.”

“I’d love to, but I can’t. I’m not sure how long it’s going to take me to write up my Luthor piece, and I’ve got to be back here by 9:00. I promised Perry I would be at his monthly poker game. One of the regulars already backed out. In fact, he wanted me to ask you to fill in.”

“Uh oh. Your boss wants to meet the new boyfriend.”

“You got it.”

“Okay. I think one family meeting a night is plenty. We’ll make it your ‘family’ tonight, the rest of mine another time. Tell your boss I’ll be there. Do you want to have dinner together first? In Metropolis, I mean.”

“No. You stay and visit with your folks. Tell them I really do wish I could come. I had a great time with your mom last week.”

“I will. I know she enjoyed seeing you too. Should I swing by your place around 8:30?”

“That sounds great. I’ll see you tonight.”

Clark closed his phone and slid it back into his hip pocket.

“You can put that down now.” Jonathan closed his toolbox and placed it carefully on a shelf before wiping his hands on a clean rag. “What are you going to tell him?” he asked.

Clark set the combine down gently and turned to face his dad. “Tell who?”

“Lois’s boss. I take it he’s sort of a father figure?”

“Yeah, I think so. She talks about him like a favorite uncle sometimes.”

“Uh huh. And he wants to meet you. Which means he wants to know if you’re good enough for his little girl. So what are you going to tell him? That you’re an unemployed dockhand just passing through town? That’s not going to go over well. That

you’re a famous writer but you don’t want Lois to know yet? That’s not any better. You’ve woven yourself a pretty tangled web, son.”

Clark frowned and ran a hand through his hair. “I hadn’t thought about a cover story. I don’t need one with Lois. But you’re right; anybody else is bound to ask what I do for a living. Got any brilliant ideas?”

“Oh, no. I thought you should have been straight with Lois in the first place. You’re the one with the identity crisis; you figure it out. Now come on — I promised your mom I’d get that pile of gravel spread on the driveway before dinner.”

Lois thought Caleb seemed a little distracted on the way to the game. “Nervous?” she asked, laying a hand on his knee in the back of the cab.

“A little. I know Mr. White is your boss and not your dad, but I do feel like I’m being brought home to meet your parents.”

“Well, I guess the Planet does feel like home in some ways, but you’ve got nothing to worry about. You’re a great guy. Perry’s going to like you fine. Especially if he wins a few dollars off of you.”

“Is that a subtle hint to throw the game?”

“No. I already told you — I don’t do subtle. Just make sure he’s at least \$50 up by the end of the night. But don’t make it look obvious.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He smiled at her, but then his expression grew worried instead. “My dad brought up a potential problem. What’s the first conversation starter with any new acquaintance?”

Lois shrugged. “I don’t know. I usually ask people where they’re from or what they do...ah. I see what you mean. We need a cover story.”

“We?”

“Of course ‘we.’ I’m not going to leave you hanging. What good is a partner in crime if she can’t cover your rear end now and then?”

“Partners in crime? Is that what we are?”

“Among other things.” She nudged his knee with hers, a suggestive smile playing at her lips before she turned back to the business at hand. “You said Jimmy’s already been drilling you. What have you told him?”

“Not much. He asks things like what kind of music I like and whether I think Kowalski will be back next year. That, and none-too-subtle things like how we liked the movie last night. He’s never asked me about my work.”

For a moment she was lost in thought, but then it came to her. “I’ve got it. You’re a freelance reporter.”

“No, I was a freelance reporter. Over four years ago. For only half a dozen stories under different pen names in newspapers nobody’s ever heard of.”

“Caleb, work with me here. We’re inventing a cover, not an autobiography. You came into town chasing the Superman story like everybody else. We met after the Carlin Building explosion.”

“And you didn’t immediately blow me off as a hack from Nowheresville because...?”

“Good point. Let me think.” There was a long pause. “Okay, strike the Carlin Building. We met in line at the Clark Kent book signing. It was a Friday night at the Inkwell. The line was long and we struck up a conversation.”

“Okay. And I ask again — you didn’t immediately blow me off because...”

“Hey, don’t sell yourself short. I was bored out of my skull and you are very handsome. Stranger things have happened.”

“I suppose they have at that,” he grinned. “So, we met at Kent’s book signing, got talking in line, found we had something in common, stayed for coffee afterwards...”

“And the rest is history.”

“But since, like every other reporter in town, I lost the

Superman scoop to the great Lois Lane, why am I still here? Besides the obvious reason of being utterly enamored with you?"

"Oh, that's easy. You stumbled onto something big, but you aren't ready to go public with it yet. You're still looking into it, so of course we all understand why you can't talk about it."

"You're brilliant."

"I know. That's why you love me."

"Among other things." He picked up her hand and kissed it. Before he could do more than that, the taxi pulled up in front of the Daily Planet.

Clark tossed two chips into the pile in the center of the conference room table. "Twenty," he said casually.

"Too rich for me." Lois folded her cards and leaned back to watch the others.

"I'll see your twenty and raise you...how much do you make?" Perry white teased.

"Not a cent unless I sell a story," Clark answered easily. Which, come to think of it, was true — if you didn't count investment income. And merchandising fees for Superman, but those went straight to the Foundation.

"I'm just pulling your leg, son." Giving Clark a quick once-over, Perry mused, "You don't look like you're in danger of missing a meal. Let's call it another fifty."

Clark glanced at his own cards, then at Perry White, who grinned back at him like a frog that had swallowed a June bug.

"Now take your time, son. Make the right decision," Perry said.

"You know who'd be a great poker player?" Jimmy asked. "Superman."

Perry gave his underling an impatient glance. "Next time we'll invite him."

"I don't know if Superman gambles," Lois put in.

"I'm almost certain he doesn't," Clark said. "Wouldn't fit the Boy Scout image."

"In his case it's not gambling," Jimmy argued.

"Hey!" Perry interrupted. "Shut up and let the man think."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Clark said. "I forgot you were waiting on me." He tossed a few more chips in the pile. "Seventy to you."

Oblivious to his boss's scowl, Jimmy whispered, "The guy's got x-ray vision. He could read everyone else's cards."

"Jimmy!" Perry finally had the young man's attention. "We all get it. But Superman isn't here, so will you please just *be quiet* and let us play?" Jimmy's eyes got wide and he nodded in silent assent.

Turning back to Clark with a disgusted grunt, Perry said, "Fold."

His displeasure only lasted for one round. The lead went back and forth a few times, but by the end of the night, Perry was ahead by \$100. In the meantime, he was accomplishing exactly what he'd hoped to. He'd pumped Caleb for information about his current project — something very big and very hush-hush that the young man politely refused to discuss. He'd quizzed him about his past experience. "Ask him about the mating rituals of knob-tailed geckos," Lois had suggested gleefully. And they'd had a friendly debate about the comparative merits of Elvis Presley and Louis Armstrong as candidates for American Musician of the Century.

Mostly, Perry watched Lois watching Caleb, and vice-versa. Everything about the way those two looked at each other, spoke to each other, even gave each other surreptitious little touches when they thought no one was looking — everything pointed to one inescapable conclusion. Lois was indeed in love, as Perry had suspected. But the good news was, so was Caleb Knight.

This was going to be fun to watch.

The next day, Lois stood in Perry's office, her feet planted

and her hands gesticulating wildly. They'd been arguing for at least five minutes, but she was still barely able to believe that Perry was asking her to do such a thing.

"It's still boxing!" she argued.

"It's a civic event!" he countered.

"It's sports!" she insisted.

"Lois ... Just do the story!" She let her hands drop in defeat. There was no reasoning with Perry when he used that tone.

"All right. I'll do it," she conceded, "but not alone."

Perry's eyes went wide, and then he let out a frustrated sigh, the kind that said she was asking the impossible — again. "I can't give you anyone from Sports. You know that. They're all banned from the Menken gym. They'd be tossed out on sight. You're the only one who even has a chance of getting to the fighters."

"I know that, Chief. I'm keenly aware of why you want me on this story. I can get through the door and possibly get some information from the trainer and my...other connection. But I don't know the fighters themselves. They might talk more freely with a man they think they can relate to. Someone who isn't part of the sports press, but who can at least talk a good game."

"Come on, Lois. Don't give me that. You know more about sports than any two men put together."

"Yes, but these are boxers, Perry. Super-aggressive guys. They aren't going to take a five-foot-six woman seriously, no matter how much I know. And besides, a man can follow them into the locker room."

Perry's eyes narrowed. It wasn't like Lois to imply that she couldn't do everything any man could do. And to come right out and ask for a partner — that was unheard of. She was up to something.

Perry's frown said 'What are you up to this time?' Out loud, he asked, "Who did you have in mind?"

Lois knew that Perry wasn't buying her reasoning. She could only hope that his fondness for her and his curiosity would combine to make him acquiesce to her request. It was worth a shot. Looking him straight in the eye with her most innocent look, she said, "Caleb Knight."

"You're kidding." Caleb's voice was strong and clear, even over the phone. "Lois, I can't work with you. I don't know how you pulled the wool over Perry White's eyes, but you at least know the truth. I'm not really a reporter. I've never done anything close to the level of investigative work that you have. You have three Kerth Awards, for goodness sake. You're way out of my league."

"Bull feathers."

"Excuse me?"

Lois double-checked that the conference room door was closed. "Caleb, you've never told me what you really do for a living, but I know you've written several freelance articles, and you cannot convince me that you haven't learned something about detective work from your...extracurricular activities. Besides, something tells me that your regular job also involves some investigative skills. How else would you have known about Lex Luthor? It can't all be from his run-ins with Superman."

He didn't answer right away. Lois could just picture the wheels turning as he tried to think of a response that would be at least a partial truth. Not really wanting to hear whatever excuse he came up with, she played her trump card. "Look, even if you didn't know the first thing about reporting or investigating, you'd still have a huge advantage. No one else I know can see through walls or hear a whispered conversation on the other side of a room."

"Ah. So the truth comes out at last. You only want me for my hidden talents." Luckily for Lois, he sounded more amused than annoyed.

"Not only," she wheedled, "but you can't tell me they

wouldn't come in handy now and then. Come on, Caleb. You wrote those freelance pieces for a reason. You must have liked reporting at least a little bit. And now you have a chance to do it for the Daily Planet instead of the Borneo Gazette. There are people all over the world who would give their eyeteeth for an opportunity like this."

"Not to mention a chance to work with the Planet's Ace Reporter," he teased.

"Not to mention," she agreed. "So? Will you give it a shot? Just for one story?"

"All right. But only because you asked so nicely." She could hear the warm affection in his voice. "When do you need me there?"

"As soon as you can get here. I want to get down to the gym this afternoon."

"Okay. I'm in Honduras now. Give me a few minutes to say goodbye to the kids." Kids? What was Caleb doing with kids in Honduras? And was he doing it as Superman, or as Clark Kent? Or as someone else entirely? "Then I've got to go home and find some work clothes...hold on a minute, there's an ugly Honduran waving his hand in my face." She could hear Caleb and another man conversing in rapid Spanish. "Lois? Ruben wants to know if you're free on Sunday. And whether you have a sense of adventure."

Ruben? She knew she'd heard that name before. "Tell Ruben my sense of adventure is about as strong as my sense of curiosity. And the Ultimate Street Fight is on Saturday, so I should have Sunday off."

"Okay, sounds like a plan. You're going to love him. And vice-versa. Anyway, I should be there in about twenty minutes. Is that okay?"

"That's perfect. I'll see you then."

As Lois hung up the phone, she wondered what one wore for an adventure in Honduras. Maybe she shouldn't have packed those summer clothes up after all.

Clark followed Lois out of the Menken gym into the bright October sunshine. He'd seen her at work before, of course, when she was interviewing Clark Kent and later when he'd brought her supper while she was working on the invisible man story. But to be at her side, introduced as her partner, watch her navigate the tricky path between taking advantage of Allie Dinello's obvious affection for her and being tougher with Garrison and Menken... he'd seen an entirely new side of Lois Lane. He'd even thrown in a question or two of his own. He still didn't feel anything like a real reporter. It seemed more like playing a part, like when he did his research for his books. But it was a fun part, and it was a delight to watch Lois work.

Lois leaned close to him. In a low voice, she said, "Great acting job in the ring with Garrison. Even I almost believed you were frightened toward the end there."

Caleb's reply was little more than a whisper. He wasn't going to let anyone else overhear their conversation. "That's because I was. If Garrison had actually landed a punch he might have broken his hand. Then my cover would have been blown and Caleb Knight could never be seen in public again. Not only that, but anyone who knew you'd been dating him would also know you'd been dating you-know-who."

Lois was taken aback. "I hadn't thought of that. You can't ever let anyone actually hit you? You must spend a lot of time running away from fights and looking like a coward. Doesn't that bother you?"

"No, it doesn't happen very often. How many grown men do you know who get into fist fights on a regular basis? Most guys grow out of that stage by high school."

"Yeah, I guess." Up to this point they had been walking very slowly due to their almost whispered conversation, but at least to

any outside observer, they'd kept up the professional manner in which they'd treated each other at the gym. So Clark was a little shocked when Lois suddenly grasped him by the back of the neck and pulled his face towards hers, landing a slow but firm kiss on his lips.

"What was that for?" he couldn't help asking when she finally pulled back.

She took his hand in hers and swung his arm in lazy arcs while they continued to saunter as slowly as possible down the sidewalk. At this pace they'd reach the end of the block by Thursday at the latest. "That was for the benefit of the man in the green sweater across the street," she said in the same quiet voice.

"Okay...." His tone said that he was more confused than ever.

"His name is Alex Alston. He writes sports for the Star. He's obviously casing the gym."

"And you obviously want him to know that we're more than work colleagues. But why?"

"Because the best defense is a good offense. Alex is friends with half the reporters who saw Superman fly off with me last week. And he's a notorious gossip."

"Ah," Caleb smiled, "so you wouldn't mind if I were to, say, put my arm around your shoulder," he suited actions to words, "and maybe give you an affectionate squeeze now and then."

"Don't let it get out of hand, farm boy. I do have a certain dignity to maintain in public."

"Oh, really? You're worried about your dignity?" His face held an exaggerated innocence, but a wicked gleam danced in his eyes. "So it would be a bad idea if I were to..."

"Don't even think about it, buster." The scolding effect of her words was ruined by the smile that broke out as she prepared to defend herself from whatever mischief Caleb might have in mind.

He took a playful swipe at her ribs as if he wanted to tickle her. She grabbed his wrist and twisted it behind his back in one deft move. Of course he was letting her best him; it was all in fun. "Say Uncle," she demanded.

"Not so fast," he countered, freeing himself from her grasp and turning to catch her from behind in a playful embrace, pinning both of her arms at her side. "Aha! The tables are turned, my sweet," he said in his best melodramatic villain voice. "Now you say it."

It had all happened so quickly, a physical version of their normally verbal banter, neither of them was paying any attention to the curious looks they were attracting from the other pedestrians, nor to the taxi that pulled up in front of the gym and disgorged one well-dressed middle-aged man.

"Come on, Lois. You started it. Say Uncle," Caleb prodded, both of them grinning from ear to ear.

Lois opened her mouth, prepared to give in with good grace. But what came out of it was not 'Uncle.'

"Daddy!"

"Huh?"

"Lois?" The two men spoke at once.

Clark instantly released Lois and the two of them stood up straight, self-consciously straightening their clothing. No one spoke for what felt like a very long time. Finally, Clark could stand the tension no longer.

"I'm sorry," he offered. "I guess we got a little carried away." Glancing at Lois, Clark saw her blushing furiously. He was sure he looked about the same.

"What are you doing here?" Dr. Lane addressed his daughter.

Still fighting to regain her dignity, Lois tried to act as if nothing had happened. "The Ultimate Street Fight," she answered.

Dr. Lane seemed happy to play along. "Right... Right. What else?"

"Trying to... you know... get to the fighters," Lois

continued.

Dr. Lane looked at Clark. “And this is...” he began, his tone betraying nothing of his opinion of their earlier silliness.

“Caleb Knight, sir. I’m Lois’s...partner...on this story.” The two men shook hands, each looking the other directly in the eye.

“I’m sorry, where are my manners?” Lois put in. “Dad, this is Caleb. He’s working with me on the Ultimate Street Fight story, and he’s also my boyfriend. Caleb, my father, Dr. Sam Lane.”

Dr. Lane looked back at Clark with a new level of scrutiny. Clark desperately tried to project an air of quiet respectability.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Knight,” Dr. Lane said.

“Please, sir, call me Caleb.”

Dr. Lane nodded silently in response. Then, addressing both of them, he went on. “Well, I wish I could help you, but the press is not my department.”

“Sure, we know that.” Lois answered, more quickly than she would have for anyone else.

“And of course, you’ve got to understand... the fighters are jumpy,” her father offered.

“And need protection from us wicked reporters,” Lois joked, rather lamely. Her father gave a sad little half-laugh.

“You going to have some time, Lois? And Caleb? For dinner...”

“Sure,” Caleb began, but Lois talked over him.

“Maybe... soon... We’re so busy...”

Her father looked resigned. “Well, when you get out from under...”

“Sure...” Lois was already backing away, waving vaguely in her father’s direction, pulling Clark along with her. Clark gave Dr. Lane a parting wave and a friendly smile. He thought the older man looked very sad.

It was a little crowded having two people working at Lois’s desk, but Lois wanted access to her computer. It was late, and the rest of the staff had gone home, leaving only the night editor on duty, so at least Lois and Caleb could talk freely.

“You know, I thought I was being so clever, asking you to have a good look around the gym, but now I’m not so sure. Robotic limbs on boxers — this is big news. But I know Perry. ‘I know they’re in the secret compartment behind my dad’s office, but I can’t tell you how I know,’ is not going to cut it. So now I have a huge story that I can’t print because I can’t prove a thing.”

“Welcome to the club,” Caleb mumbled.

“Huh?”

“Never mind. I always have Luthor on the brain. What you need is a way to prove what you already know.”

“That means either getting a confession out of my own father or breaking into his office and getting pictures.”

“Lois, are you sure you want to...” Caleb began, but was interrupted by the ringing telephone. Lois picked it up.

“Lois Lane...” She listened for just a moment before waving at Caleb and pointing to the phone. “Allie, calm down. What’s wrong? Just tell me where and when...Okay.”

Hanging up the phone, Lois turned to Caleb. “You heard?”

“Yeah. Let’s go.” They both stood up and started toward the elevator.

After three steps, Lois stopped and turned to face Caleb. “You know, maybe I ought to go alone.”

“Okay.”

“I think he’d be more...”

“...more comfortable talking to someone he knows. I get it. Go.”

Smiling her appreciation for his understanding, Lois gave Caleb a quick kiss goodbye and headed on her way.

Alone in the darkened office, Clark headed for the stairs. He needed to talk to a man in Smallville.

Pete and Lana were clearing the supper dishes in their downtown Smallville apartment when their doorbell rang. “I’ll finish up here,” Pete offered. “It’s probably Joan or Amy wanting a little company.”

“Put a pot of coffee on,” Lana called over her shoulder on her way to the door. Pete heard the door open, then Lana’s surprised exclamation. “Clark! What are you doing here?”

“Hey, is that any way to greet a poor, wayfaring stranger?” Not waiting for an invitation, Clark wrapped Lana in a friendly hug before turning to shake Pete’s hand and give him a one-armed side-hug.

“Poor, my foot! But stranger is right,” Lana said. “We didn’t expect you back in town for a while.”

“Decaf?” Pete called from the apartment’s small kitchen.

“Sure. Thanks,” Clark replied, taking a seat in the proffered armchair.

“So, what’s up?” Lana asked without preamble. “And where are your glasses?”

“Oh! I completely forgot about them.” Clark was momentarily distracted from his mission. “I forgot I wasn’t Caleb here.” He shook his head to get back on track. “Anyway, I need Pete to do some research for me.”

“What do you need?” Pete asked, carrying in a tray with three mugs of steaming coffee.

Clark reached for the one with the lightest coffee. He knew it would also be the sweetest. “I need to know where Dr. Sam Lane is getting the funding for his research into robotic limbs. He’s working for the Menken Gym, but no single promoter could possibly afford to fund that kind of research, no matter how many champions he’s got in his stable.”

“So someone bigger must be bankrolling the project.

Anything else to go on?” Pete asked.

“No. The parts were in a secret compartment in a basement office. I was looking through several walls. There were files as well, but I couldn’t focus long enough to read any of them. There were other people around and I wasn’t in the Suit.” It took the Rosses a moment to realize that he was referring to Superman. The caped hero was not a part of everyday life in Smallville as he was in Metropolis. Clark was still talking. “This has to be done very quietly. The people at the gym think the artificial limbs are still a secret. I’ll let you know if that changes.”

“You haven’t given me a lot to go on,” Pete pointed out.

“I know, but since we’re talking about Metropolis, I’d start with Lex Luthor. If there’s something dirty going on in Metropolis, you can bet that Luthor has a hand in it. I’m checking into it from the front end on the ground, but if you could work your computer magic, it would give us another angle of attack.”

“You got it. I’ll give you a call when...” Pete was interrupted by the ringing sound coming from Clark’s backside. Pete gave Clark a sardonic look and raised one eyebrow.

“Excuse me.” Clark stood and reached into his back pocket for his cell phone. “This is Caleb,” he answered in a friendly voice. “What? Oh, honey! Are you hurt? Are the police there? Where are you? I’m on my way.”

Hanging up the phone, Clark looked grimly at his friends. “I have to go. Get on that as soon as you can, Pete, but be careful. A man was killed tonight to protect this secret.”

Caleb sat on Lois’s loveseat, her head cradled against his shoulder, handing her tissues as necessary. Only one small lamp was on. It was easier to cry in the dark.

“I’ve known Allie...almost my whole life. To see him like that...”

“I’m so sorry, Lois. I wish I’d been there.” He stroked her hair in a slow, soothing rhythm.

“No, Caleb. It wasn’t your fault, or mine. I had good reasons for meeting him alone. We’ve talked about this before — you

can't save everyone."

"I know, but it feels different..."

"...when it's someone you know," she finished. "Yeah, it does."

They sat in silence, listening to the sounds of the city and watching the light from passing cars sweep across the room. Just about when Caleb thought he might be able to coax Lois into getting some sleep, she said, "I'm going to talk to my dad."

He didn't argue. It was the right move for the investigation, if a difficult one for Lois. God, he admired her courage. "Okay," he said. "Do you want me to come with you?"

She thought about his question for a moment. "Yeah. I think I'd like that."

Sam Lane walked into the End-o'-the-Line Diner at 10:00 Wednesday morning. He spotted Lois and her new boyfriend/reporting partner sitting together in a back booth. He wasn't sure what had made her change her mind about getting together. Maybe the shock of Allie's death, which the morning papers were calling a hit-and-run. Whatever the reason, she'd volunteered to be in the same room with him for one meal, and he wasn't going to question his luck. It was probably more than he deserved.

He slid into the seat across from Lois and Caleb. "Good morning, Pri... Lois, Caleb." It had been a long time since Lois had welcomed being his Princess. He knew he only had himself to blame.

Lois offered him a wan smile. "Thanks for coming."

"You heard about Allie." It wasn't really a question — more of an explanation for everyone's depressed mood.

"Not only heard, Dad. I saw."

Sam looked sharply at his daughter. "What exactly did you see?"

Lois leaned across the table, her voice quiet but her eyes boring into her father's. "Allie's murder. I was there, Dad. I saw the car coming at him — straight and fast. It wasn't a drunk, and it wasn't an accident."

"What were you doing there?" It was bad enough that Sam was caught up in this sordid enterprise. Now Lois was in danger as well.

"Allie asked me to meet him."

"Did the driver see you?" Sam was already wracking his brain for ways to get Lois out of harm's way.

"No." So there was still hope.

"Lois, I want you to stay away from this."

"I can't do that. I'm a reporter. This is my job."

"No job is worth your life, Lois!" Sam hissed, trying to impress the seriousness of the situation on his daughter without drawing the attention of the other patrons.

"I know that, Dad. That's why we're here." At Sam's confused stare, Lois went on. "We're concerned for your safety. Whoever is behind Allie Dinello's death most likely knows that you were talking to us in front of the gym yesterday. Chances are they know who I work for and what my relationship is to you. You could very well be next on their hit list."

Sam tried to appear calm, to give the impression of a man with nothing to hide. "I appreciate your concern, but I think it's misplaced. There is no reason to believe that Allie's death had anything to do with the gym at all, let alone with me."

"We know about the surgeries, Dad." Sam froze, but only momentarily. He made one last effort to bluff his way through. "Of course I've performed surgeries on athletes. I'm a sports surgeon — that's my job."

Lois nodded silently at Caleb. The young man addressed Sam. "Dr. Lane, I've seen the hidden compartment behind your office. The models of arms, legs, hands, jaws, chest plates on the walls, samples of artificial skin in various colors, diagrams of

artificial limbs, even the motors to drive them. It's brilliant work, sir. Unfortunately, it's also illegal. When this comes to light, as it must, you will be in the center of it."

"They've already killed once, Dad. They won't hesitate to do it again."

Sam looked from Lois to Caleb and back again. He'd known that Menken was shady. He'd known that the surgeries he'd performed could cost him his license. He'd never meant to get in so deep. It had just happened, a little at a time. Like the way he'd let his family slip away. Only now did he realize exactly how deeply entangled he was. And he still couldn't see the way out. But maybe Lois could.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

Standing in front of Perry's desk, Caleb at her side, Lois watched Perry scan the pile of documents she'd gotten from her father. She could see his anticipation of a front-page story growing by the minute. When he finished, he looked up and, with only a half-hearted attempt to hide his delight, asked, "This is for real?"

Lois beamed back at her boss. "Every bit of it."

"Does Henderson know about this?"

"Yep, and he has a copy of the tape." Pulling her recorder from her shoulder bag, Lois pressed the play button. Dr. Lane's voice could be heard, followed by Menken's:

'I want out of this.'

'Sure, Doc. At the end of your contract.'

'We don't have a contract.'

'Yeah, we do. Lifetime.'

'Dinello have the same contract?'

'It's a dangerous business.'

'You killed him...' Sam Lane sounded shocked.

'Who'd you think? I'd hate to waste you, too.' Lois turned the recorder off with a click.

"Nailed him cold!" she crowed.

A worried frown crossed Perry's brow. "What about your father?"

Lois's face fell. "He'll probably lose his medical license. But that's the least of his worries. Henderson's got him in protective custody for now. But this is bigger than Menken and a handful of fighters. Someone with deep pockets is behind this."

"Your dad doesn't know who financed the project?"

"No. And if we can't find out by the time Menken's trial is over, Dad may have to go into the witness protection program."

A small sound from Caleb drew Lois and Perry's attention.

"Knight? You have something to add?" Perry asked. "You know something we don't?"

"Maybe." Lois turned to Caleb, obviously as surprised as Perry.

"It's not really an answer. More of a lead. I have a...source... who's been looking into the funding question. He just called a few minutes ago, which is why Lois hasn't heard about this yet. Whoever's behind this is savvy. The trail leads through three or four subsidiaries and shell companies, but it ends at..."

"...Lex Luthor," Lois finished. Perry's jaw dropped, but Caleb held up one hand in a cautioning gesture.

"Not quite. It would be nice if it were that simple. It leads to a Limited Liability Corporation called High Ground Enterprises. The attorney of record is Sheldon Bender."

"Like I said, Lex Luthor." Lois said the name as if it belonged to a known criminal, not Metropolis's greatest benefactor.

Perry looked at his star reporter and her new accomplice. "I think you two had better sit down," he said. "You've got some explaining to do."

Nigel St. John stood quietly in front of the heavy mahogany

desk in his employer's private office. After a moment, Lex Luthor carefully folded the front section of the Daily Planet's Thursday evening edition. He set it down with a soft rustle. The headline read 'Garrison, Menken Arrested. Street Fight Cancelled.' Lex leaned back in his leather chair and regarded Nigel with an unreadable expression.

"Yes, Nigel?"

"I'm sorry to report that there is no sign of Dr. Lane's whereabouts."

"Our regular police source has no word of him?"

"No, sir. He has not gone through the normal protective custody channels. I'm afraid he appears to be out of our reach for the time being. I will continue to pursue every available lead."

"Of course you will. What about Max?"

"Mr. Menken was questioned at the 8th Precinct, then transferred to the county jail for detention."

"I see. You will make sure that he hears from one of our representatives on the inside. Let us hope that his sense of self-preservation is strong enough to overcome his urge to spread the blame." Lex let out a deep breath and turned a hopeful eye on Nigel. "Have you nothing but bad news for me tonight? Nothing to offer a pleasant distraction from this litany of depressing, if temporary, setbacks?"

"There is the matter of Ms. Lane's new love interest," Nigel offered uncertainly. He was relieved to see that Lex seemed pleased to have a new subject to take his mind off his current troubles.

"Ah, the dashing Mr. Knight. I notice he made a 'special contribution' to Ms. Lane's article this evening. What news of him?"

"Only that he doesn't appear to exist."

"That is intriguing. Please elaborate."

"There are four people in North America with that name. One is a kindergartener in Florida, another an octogenarian in Nebraska. The third is currently serving 15 years for armed robbery in Saskatchewan, and the fourth is a horse jockey in Kentucky. None of them could possibly be the young man who has been spotted in Ms. Lane's company."

"How interesting. What about the phone number from Ms. Lane's message pad?"

"It belongs to a mobile phone with an officially unlisted number."

"And the unofficial list says?"

"Norbert Enterprises, LLC. Their only other holding is a house on Hyperion Avenue, purchased two weeks ago. Shall I have it watched?"

Mr. Luthor gave his head a small shake. "Not yet. Ms. Lane is aware of our previous surveillance attempts, if not their source. Let us not arouse Mr. Knight's suspicions unnecessarily. Have Ms. Wilcox keep an eye on them at the Planet for now."

"As you wish."

"Thank you, Nigel. That will be all."

Sunday afternoon found Lois and Caleb heading south. He still hadn't told her exactly what adventure he and his friend Ruben had cooked up. She knew she could get it out of him if she really wanted to, but he was having such fun surprising her, she let it slide.

"Perry is still after me for not putting your name on Thursday's byline." Flying with Caleb was still fun, but the solid bank of clouds that covered the Mid-Atlantic states made for dull viewing at the moment, so a conversation starter seemed in order.

He answered with a casual air. "You offered to; I turned it down. Besides, you did ninety percent of the writing."

"I know, but we worked together on the investigation. I would have been happy to share the byline."

"That's very generous of you, but it's really not necessary."

"Perry's going to wonder what kind of a reporter you are if you aren't jumping at the chance to have your name on a Daily Planet front page story."

"Perry's going to wonder even more when I can't come up with a Social Security number for the paycheck paperwork."

"Ah. I guess they weren't so picky about the red tape at those other papers you worked for."

"Sold stories to, not worked for, and no, they weren't." He regarded her with a slightly worried look. "Lois, I hope you don't have your heart set on us working together on a regular basis. I wasn't kidding when I told you that I'm not a real reporter. I do have another job."

"I know that." She tried not to sound defensive. "But I thought you were 'between assignments.'"

"I was. But I have some background research to do on a potential new project."

Clark winced inwardly at his own evasiveness. He knew how he must sound to Lois — like he didn't care enough or trust her enough to be completely honest with her. It wasn't true. He loved her, more than he had known he could love anyone. He'd trust her with his life. And she'd demonstrated many times over that she could see the man under Superman's suit. There was every reason to believe she'd see the man behind Clark's playboy persona just as readily. She deserved to know the whole truth.

But he was scared. Not for himself — for her. He knew now what his next project would be. Lex Luthor was a menace that had to be taken down. At first he had thought that would mean working side-by-side with Lois until the job was done. But Allie Dinello's murder had shaken him badly. Lois had been a witness. It was only by sheer luck that the driver hadn't seen her. If she knew who Caleb really was and what he was up to, she'd want to be right there in the thick of it with him. But, unlike Clark, Lois was not invulnerable.

He knew he couldn't keep Lois from doing her job, but there was no reason he had to put her in danger by embroiling her in his own investigation as well. It would be better if he dug around Metropolis's illegal economy on his own. Then, when he had a good, solid lead that could bring Luthor to his knees, he'd confess everything and Lois could write the expose of the decade. He only hoped it would happen quickly. He didn't know how much longer Lois would put up with his 'inventing the new man' routine.

For her part, Lois was wondering the same thing. How much longer was it going to take before Caleb got it through his thick skull that she loved him, no matter what clothes he was wearing? His evasive answer about researching a new project — it was a barrier between them. If he'd come clean with her, they could discuss his work openly. He could tell her about whatever his new book idea was and she could ask him about how the research was coming, what kinds of characters he was thinking of, what the setting and the plot arc would be. It was disconcerting to think of him having a career that they couldn't talk about.

She was seriously considering broaching the subject with him when the cloud cover broke and they were suddenly over the blue waters of the Caribbean. She could see the islands below her and the Yucatan Peninsula ahead on her right.

"Beautiful," she said. Caleb caught the wistfulness in her tone. He'd expected a little more enthusiasm.

"You're not jaded already, are you? After one weekend in Borneo?"

"No," she gave an apologetic smile. "Just distracted. Too many thoughts running around my head."

Clark couldn't help but worry that her troubled thoughts concerned the two of them. He turned his head to study her. "We're okay, aren't we? You know I'll still help out with a 'special contribution' whenever you need me to."

"Yeah, I know. And I really do understand that you have your

own job.” He could tell by her tone what the trouble was.

“You just wish I would tell you more about it.”

“Well, yeah.” For a moment she felt bad for bringing up the subject that they been avoiding for the last two weeks, but that only lasted an instant. “And, you know what? I shouldn’t need to apologize for wanting to know about your work life — your *whole* life. You know me well enough by now. You know I’m not some shallow Superman groupie or a snob who will look down on you for whatever it is you think you can’t tell me. Really, Caleb, what are you waiting for?” Clark’s conscience flinched. She had a point. She had no way of knowing that he was trying to protect her, not shut her out.

He stopped flying and turned her to face him, the two of them hanging suspended above the azure sea. Keeping one hand at her waist, he raised the other to brush the hair from her face. “I do know you. And I trust you with everything I have and everything I am. I’m going to tell you everything, I promise.”

His words were heartfelt, but at this point Lois was looking for actions. She raised one skeptical eyebrow. “But...?” It was a challenge.

Caleb’s pleading expression crumpled into defeat, but only for a moment. He quickly reminded himself why he was stalling. He could be as stubborn as she could. It was for her own good. Projecting as much love for her as he could, he told her, “But I have some things that I have to work out first. It has nothing to do with trusting you or knowing that you accept me for who I really am.”

She rolled her eyes in frustration. “Of course I accept you. I *love* you. But how can I know who you really are if you insist on keeping secrets?” She was almost shouting, but it didn’t matter. There was no one around for miles.

“You do, Lois.” He kept his voice calm, not feeding her anger with argument, just trying to pour all the love he felt for her into his words, his voice, his touch, desperately hoping that would be enough for now. “You know me better than anyone. The stuff I can’t tell you yet is only about what I do. Who I am is an open book.” She was listening, weighing his words. He waited anxiously for her verdict. Slowly her face softened from righteous indignation into resigned acceptance. She looked like she might be willing to allow the delay — reluctantly, and probably not for long. “Please,” he pleaded, “just give me a few weeks to get some things in order. Then I’ll tell you everything. I swear.”

Her mouth twisted in a wry grimace. “All right. A few weeks. Tops. I can live with that.” At his relieved smile, she cautioned, “But I don’t have to like it.”

“I know. I don’t like it, either, but it can’t be helped.” She opened her mouth, and he hastily added, “For now.” He turned his most apologetic puppy dog eyes on her. “Forgive me? Pretty please?”

Pretending to think it over, Lois hemmed and hawed. “Maybe, if you’re very good to me.”

“Aren’t I always?” he cajoled. “Who else flies you off to tropical beaches any time you want? Who brings you Swiss chocolate or French cheese or authentic Shanghai cuisine at the drop of a hat?”

“I’ll bet you do that for all your fan girls,” she pouted, but the corners of her mouth were twitching.

“Oh, no. Not a chance. I only do that for Ace Reporters. And not even for all of them. Only for the beautiful, fiery, brilliant, stubborn one that I’m in love with.”

“Well, since you put it that way...” her smile spread slowly and her hands came up to trace a blazing trail across his ribs and up his chest before entwining themselves behind his neck. “I suppose you’ll have to make it up to me,” she ordered, her lips on his demonstrating what his penance was to be.

He could live with that for as long as she liked.

“Uh, Caleb? Have you forgotten something?” The east coast of what Lois assumed must be Honduras was growing closer, but Caleb made no move to prepare for their usual rapid descent. “We’re coming in a little low and slow. We’re bound to be spotted.”

“Yep. That’s the plan. Oh, I should tell you, though. You’re not Lois Lane here.”

“Oh? Then who am I?”

“You’re Superman’s American friend. Pick any name you like. I suggest Linda. It means ‘pretty’ in Spanish.”

“No. Definitely not. I feel about Linda the way you feel about Charlie. I’ll take Susan. Now, what’s the deal?” Her narrowed eyes said she knew he was up to something. “You said we were coming for an adventure.”

“I didn’t say that — that was Ruben’s interpretation.” He was all innocence. “And I guess you could call 50 elementary school children an adventure.”

“Children?! That’s not such a good idea. Trust me on this one; kids and I do not mix.”

“Don’t worry. Their teachers will keep them in line. All we have to do is read to them.”

“Reading? That’s all?” That didn’t sound so terrible. Lois had been reading since she was four years old. “Why do you need me, then? Can’t Superman read by himself?”

“Sure he can, but it’s more fun when he has a pretty lady friend to do the English parts.”

“The English parts. Uh huh. I take that that Superman will be reading in Spanish.”

“Si,” he grinned. At her questioning look, he explained, “Ruben runs an after-school tutoring program at his church. The kids get homework help, a nutritious snack, and a safe place to play soccer or tag with their friends. And — this is where you come in — English lessons. They just finished building a new addition to the church building with classrooms and a library and a new playground. Today is the dedication party. The kids worked hard — they’ve read 2000 books this quarter. So Ruben promised them a surprise guest reader. I brought down a case of books this week. The Cat in the Hat, Green Eggs and Ham, Ferdinand the Bull, things like that. They have the stories in both Spanish and English. So Ruben thought it would be fun if you came to read the English parts. Actually, I think he just wanted an excuse to meet you.”

“Wait a minute. Superman flew a case of books down last week? How often does Superman visit these kids?”

“No, no. Miguel brought the books. They see him at church every once in a while. Kind of a big brother figure. I told you Ruben was my spiritual sounding board, remember?”

“Aha. Nice to meet you, Miguel.”

Caleb brought them in with a flourish. He held Lois slightly away from him, their clasped hands the only point of contact. His aura held her up, and it was a much more dignified way for her to arrive than cradled in his arms or held tightly at his side. He smiled and waved at the children. His cape billowed majestically behind him. Lois had to make do with her khaki walking shorts and turquoise safari shirt.

The children crowded around the caped hero. Even in this little town on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa, Superman was a household name. The children didn’t touch him. In fact, they left a buffer zone of about two feet around him and his companion. At first no one spoke, but soon the sea of children parted to let a man of about 45 pass through, his hand extended in greeting. “Superman, thank you for coming,” he said in accented but fluent English.

Caleb shook the man’s hand politely. “You must be Pastor Carrasco,” he said in what Lois had come to call his Distant Hero

Voice.

“Please, call me Ruben.” Caleb hadn’t been kidding. Ruben’s face was scarred with pox marks, his nose was out of joint, his brown eyes were small and squinty — he really was one of the ugliest men that Lois had ever met. And then he smiled. Lois had heard all the platitudes about true beauty coming from the inside. Ruben made her believe them in a new way. Meanwhile, he was talking to her. “You must be...”

“Susan.” She returned his smile and held her hand out to shake his. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Won’t you both come inside? We’ve got a few stories picked out, and afterward we’ll have some refreshments.” Ruben then turned to the children and said something in Spanish, the result of which was a cacophony of high-pitched voices and a general scramble into the utilitarian cinder-block building that must be the church’s new wing.

Two hours later, Caleb and Lois — both in shorts and sandals now, not a red boot in sight — were sipping cold beer and downing mushroom and onion pizza in a cushioned booth when Ruben slid into the seat across the table from them.

“Hey! There you are,” Caleb greeted his friend. “All the kids home safe and sound, I assume?”

Ruben nodded a friendly greeting toward Lois before replying, “Safe, sound, full of sugar, and dying to show off their new books and tell all their friends and family about meeting Superman.” His easy grin turned to sincere gratitude when he said, “Thank you, Miguel. And I don’t mean just for the books. Thank you for the library and the classrooms. They will make our work much easier.”

“Who said anything about the library and classrooms? I thought those came from an anonymous donor.”

“So they did. Like I said, thank you.” He turned his warm smile on Lois. “And thank you, too, Susan.”

“You’re very welcome,” Lois said. “It was...an adventure.” Her smile assured both men that she had taken it with good humor. “And well worth it for a taste of this pizza. I can’t believe I’m not in New York City.”

“Miguel has a talent for finding good food in unexpected places,” Ruben said. He helped himself to a slice of pizza while Caleb filled Ruben’s glass from the pitcher of beer that sat on the table.

“So I’ve noticed,” Lois agreed. Watching Caleb and Ruben together, she got the feeling they the two men went way back. “How long have you known...” she trailed off. She assumed that Ruben knew that ‘Miguel’ and Superman were the same person, but she wasn’t going to be the first to say so out loud.

“Ruben’s known me since I was 18,” Caleb supplied. “I was...traveling around a lot, looking for adventure, but also thinking about some pretty troubling questions. Ruben helped me find some answers.”

“Don’t believe half of what he says. Mostly I just listened.” Ruben reached for another slice of pizza. “Miguel had the same questions every teenage boy has. Who am I? Why am I here? How will I know what to do when my parents aren’t around to guide me day-to-day? What do I really believe?”

“Where do I fit in?” Caleb added.

“Yes, that is a big one, for a lot of young people.”

The pizzeria wasn’t crowded, but Caleb lowered his voice nonetheless. “Ruben helps me remember that I’m not as different from everyone else as I sometimes feared. I grew up being taught that human beings are special, made in God’s image — that Jesus became a human man to make a way back to God for us. Then whammo! Right in the middle of adolescence I’m hit with the possibility that I’m not human at all. It really threw me for a loop.”

Lois had never thought about the spiritual implications of

being an alien. She didn’t grow up in church and hadn’t thought very deeply about religion. And she certainly never thought of Caleb as an alien any more. But obviously it had been a big deal to Caleb at the time. “What did you come up with?” she asked.

“Well, after a lot of baleadas and Cokes, we pretty much decided that it didn’t matter whether I was biologically human or not. For one thing, adoption is a huge theme in the Bible, and I’d been adopted by my folks, so that made me part of the human family one way or the other. But mostly, we figured that the kind of God who would send his son to show people how to love one another wouldn’t turn his back on me because of an accident of birth. It seems silly to have even questioned it now, but at the time I was pretty anxious about it.”

Lois couldn’t even imagine the kind of crisis of faith that would cause a good Midwestern boy like Clark Kent to wander the globe looking for answers to such a basic question as ‘Does God love me, too?’

She reached for Caleb’s hand, but she looked at Ruben. “I’m so glad that he had a friend like you to stand by him,” she said.

Ruben smiled that glowing smile again. “I have a confession to make, Susan. I didn’t ask you down here just to read to a group of rowdy children. I wanted to meet the woman who is standing by my friend now. Miguel has always helped when and where he could. I’ve known that for a long time. But when he put on that suit and stepped into the spotlight, he took on an entirely new level of responsibility. It eases my mind to know that he is not alone.”

Something had been bothering Lois during this entire conversation. “Ruben, I have a confession of my own. My name isn’t really Susan.”

She got no farther before Ruben smiled knowingly. “I know that, just like I know that his parents never named him Miguel. But it doesn’t matter. I know who he is in his heart, and the fact that you are here with him tells me a lot about who you are in yours. For me, that is enough.”

After that dinner with Ruben, Lois and Caleb were able to put the secret identity issue aside, at least for the time being. Clark knew it would come back to haunt them if he didn’t deal with it, but he was confident that he’d be able to confess all soon.

He had a new job — or rather, Charlie King did — tending bar at a nightclub that was a known front for the Metros gang. He wasn’t certain whether the Metros were in league with Luthor or rivals of his. Either way, he figured that, given Luthor’s recently announced redevelopment plans, he must have several fingers in the Riverfront pie. If Clark kept his ears and eyes open he’d get to know Metropolis’s unsavory underbelly, and that had to lead to Lex Luthor sooner or later. If he got any leads on the arsonist who had been keeping Superman and the Metropolis Fire Department busy all week, so much the better. If he picked up anything newsworthy, he’d be sure to give Lois the tip. That was a lot of if’s, he realized, but he had to start somewhere.

As it turned out, Lois wouldn’t need any tips from him; she was working at the Metro Club as well. So much for not entangling her in the seedy side of Metropolis. It looked like she was perfectly capable of entangling herself without any help from Clark. Whether she was after the arsonist, the Metros, or Lex, Clark wasn’t sure. It took all his self-control not to grin at her the first time he saw her on stage in that chicken get-up. As soon as she was out of her poultry costume and back to serving drinks, she let him know that she’d recognized him as well.

Clark watched Lois as she approached the bar and slapped her drink order down on top of her empty tray. “Two highballs and a Long Island iced tea,” she ordered in a conversational tone. Then she leaned forward, affording Clark and anyone else behind the bar a clear view of cleavage, and hissed, “What are you doing here?”

Unfortunately, Clark's fellow bartender, Gus, came out from the back room just in time to hear Lois's question. A quick sideways glance informed Clark that Gus had heard and was clearly eavesdropping on their conversation. Clark and Lois locked eyes for a brief moment. He hoped she was good at ad-libbing.

"What do you mean, 'What am I doing here?'" I work here. Is that a crime?" Clark pretended to whisper, but kept his voice loud enough to Gus to hear.

"No, just an unlikely coincidence," Lois shot back in the same stage whisper. "You keeping tabs on me?" Although she was clearly acting for Gus's benefit, Clark couldn't help but wonder whether her question was real. He tried to reassure her with his answer.

Mixing the drinks while they talked, he said, "I just got back into town and I'm short on cash. This was the first job that came along. How was I supposed to know you'd be working here too? The last time I saw you, you were dealing Black Jack in Atlantic City."

"Really?" Her tone was skeptical. "So Vinnie didn't send you down here to make sure his little Lola ain't got nothing going on the side?" Nice way to slip in her cover name, Clark thought. She's fast on her feet.

"Nothing doing, toots. Charlie King ain't nobody's stooge. You oughta know better than that." He placed the tall glass next to the two shorter ones and handed her the tray. "Now get back to work, Lola. Those gents look thirsty."

For the rest of the evening Clark looked for an opportunity to catch Lois alone, even if it was only long enough to sneak in a word about great minds thinking alike. But before he could come up with a viable excuse to leave his post at the bar, the festive atmosphere of the dinner club was shattered by the arrival of four men in fire-retardant suits. Brandishing huge flame-throwers, they announced, "Johnny, you're a dead man!" in stereotypical mob hit style. There was no time to change into the Suit or capture the attackers — Clark was too busy making sure everyone got out safely.

At last the flames were out, courtesy of a little super-cool breath. Clark and Lois were the only two people left in the club. Feeling the same sense of camaraderie that had warmed him during their joint investigation at the boxing gym the week before, Clark turned to Lois with a warm smile.

"I really didn't know you'd be here," he offered by way of preemptive apology.

"I believe you," she reassured him, "especially now that I see why you're tending bar in the Riverfront." She nodded toward the unmistakable scrawl of 'Toasters' spelled out in scorch marks. "I know they've been giving you trouble all week, but I didn't know Superman went undercover to catch the bad guys. How did you know they'd hit here tonight? And why aren't you out catching them right now?"

With a twinge of conscience that he hoped didn't show on his face, Clark let Lois's assumption that he was there to catch the arsonists slide. It was partially true, after all. "I didn't know for sure," he admitted. "I just hoped I might pick something up if I hung around the Riverfront, and this job was open." Belatedly, Clark scanned the street outside before turning back to Lois with a frown. "No sign of them. I should have gone after them sooner, but I was too busy making sure everyone was okay."

"It's all right," Lois reassured him. "You can't be everywhere at once."

Clark smiled, relieved that Lois was taking him at his word. Given her reaction after the Gold Depository incident, he knew she wouldn't appreciate it if he had been sticking his nose into her work in a fit of overprotectiveness. "You sound like my mom," he said. "She said the same thing when I first started out as Superman."

"I'll take that as a compliment." Lois took Caleb's arm and steered them both toward the back rooms. "Nice beard, by the way."

"You like it? It's my rakish look." Clark followed easily, vaguely wondering why Lois was headed for the back instead of the front door.

"And you said I wouldn't like Charlie," she teased, nudging his hip with hers. She stopped in the employee locker room long enough to pick up her coat. That explained why they were taking the back route.

"Oh, you won't, believe me." Clark took Lois's coat and held it up while she slipped her arms in. "He's pretty rough around the edges. Just wait till he slaps your rear when you're walking by with a tray full of drinks."

"He'd better not try it." Lois headed for the back door, and Clark reached over her head to hold it open.

"Where are we going?" Clark asked as she slipped her hand around his elbow and walked briskly down the back alley.

"My place. I need a pair of blue jeans and a cup of coffee, then I'm going to tell you what I learned in Johnny Taylor's inner sanctum today, and you're going to tell me if you've heard anything interesting as well."

"What? I don't get to stop home to change, too?"

"Out of a tux? Why would I want you to do that? And don't try to tell me that it chafes. You're invulnerable."

Twenty-four hours later Lois and Caleb were huddled together in the Metro Club's storeroom. Lois had just finished a smoky rendition of 'I've Got a Crush on You.' To both of their surprises, Lex Luthor had been in the audience. There was no way he could have failed to recognize Lois.

"Did you see him?" Caleb whispered as soon as the storeroom door closed behind them.

"Of course I saw him," she shot back, all business. "He threw a rose at me."

"Get out of here now," Caleb urged. "Don't even stop to get your things."

"I don't think that's necessary. Luthor doesn't know I'm after him. He'll just figure I'm investigating the Metro Gang — which I am. He has no reason to hurt me and he's way too smart to let anything slip."

Clark could see her reasoning, but that didn't stop him from complaining, "I don't trust him. What's he doing here anyway?"

"You tell me. Didn't you listen in while he and Toni Taylor were talking?"

Clark shook his head. "I tried, but I couldn't hear them over the music." His eyes landed on three neat holes in the wall of the storeroom. About the size of bullet-holes, come to think of it. Clark leaned forward and peered through one of them. Even without his super senses, he had a clear view of the room next door. It looked like a conference room. "So this is how you spied on the meetings. Nice."

Lois grinned wickedly. "Yeah, I'd tell Johnny thank-you for the holes, but he's taken a sudden vacation."

"You know, I think I read something about that in this morning's newspaper," Caleb mused with a conspiratorial smile. Then, to Lois's surprise, he suddenly clutched her to his chest and kissed her hard. She would have pulled back — not in protest, really, more like in shock — but he wouldn't let her.

Before she could wonder too much about his sudden ardor, the door opened and Toni Taylor's voice said, "Hello, Charlie."

Lois and Caleb — or Lola and Charlie — stepped quickly apart and made a show of straightening their clothing. Toni raised a sardonic brow and said, "Gus told me you two had a history together. I don't care what you do when you're off the clock, but this is my place now, and I run a tighter ship than my brother did. Back to work, both of you. And don't let me catch you

fraternizing on company time again.” She crossed her arms and glared at both of them as they silently made their way back to their respective posts.

Later that evening, Lex Luthor called his gentleman’s gentleman into his den. “I saw Lois Lane tonight, Nigel,” he announced. “She was undercover at the Metro Club. And, unless I mistake the meaning of the glances she was throwing at the bartender during her torch song, Caleb Knight is working there as well.”

“Indeed? Ms. Wilcox reports that Mr. Knight doesn’t actually work at the Planet. He appears there only occasionally to pick up Ms. Lane for lunch or after work.”

“Be that as it may, after what I observed this evening, I can only assume that they are working together.”

“Shall I have them followed? Tap their phones? Bug their apartments?”

“No, Nigel. Nothing that could be noticed or traced. Ms. Lane’s article this morning concerned the Metro Gang, not any of my activities, so let’s not do anything that might raise suspicions. Still, the fact that both of them are frequenting the Riverfront area just as my redevelopment plans are coming to fruition does seem like a remarkable coincidence. Get me this month’s telephone records for Lois Lane’s apartment, Caleb Knight’s cell phone, and Norbert Enterprises’ house on Hyperion Avenue. I want to know who those two have been talking to.”

“Of course, sir.”

The next morning, Lois stood in front of Perry’s desk, basking in his praise. ‘Superman Saves Riverside from Toaster Torching’ read one headline. ‘Toni Taylor and Metro Gang behind Toasters’ read a second.

“This is the second story in a row with special assistance from your young man,” Perry said. “You sure he doesn’t deserve part of the byline?”

Lois shrugged. “He probably does,” — this time he’d actually done about half of the writing, in addition to helping Lois spy on Toni Taylor the night before, thus saving her the trouble of spending the night in a rat-infested warehouse — “but he keeps insisting that I did most of the work. Personally, I think he’s nuts to turn it down, but I can’t seem to get through to him.”

“Well, you tell him from me that if he ever wants a steady reporting job, I’ll gladly give him an interview. I can’t make any guarantees without seeing his resume and work samples, but I’d give him a fair shot.”

“Thanks, Chief. I’ll tell him.”

“Why don’t you have him pop in here when he comes to pick you up for lunch?”

“I would, but he won’t be coming by today. He’s having lunch with his parents. He invited me to join them, but I’ve got an interview with the city health inspector at noon.”

“All right, then. I guess I’ll see him some other time.” Perry turned his attention to the next item in his in-box, and Lois knew that was her cue to get back to work.

Lex looked up from his morning paper as Nigel approached. “Delightful story by Lois Lane, don’t you think? Pity about Toni. We could have done some good business together. Oh, well. There are plenty more fish in that sea. Is it safe to assume that the folder in your hand contains the phone records I requested?”

“Yes, sir. You will be pleased to know that there is no indication that either Ms. Lane or Mr. Knight has spoken to anyone with ties to LexCorp.”

“Yes, that does please me, Nigel, although it doesn’t surprise me. Anything at all out of the ordinary?”

“Perhaps,” Nigel said with a speculative air. “Ms. Lane’s calls are all what you would expect — she speaks to her sister,

her mother, Mr. Knight on his cell phone, the Daily Planet office, a few local numbers belonging to probable snitches, and a variety of restaurants. Mr. Knight, however, is a different story. His cell phone seems to be used almost exclusively for conversations with Ms. Lane — whether at her home or her office. The telephone belonging to the Hyperion Avenue house has the normal variety calls to local businesses like restaurants, but also frequent calls to two unlisted numbers in the same town.”

“Nigel, I know you have a keen sense of drama, but please, don’t keep me in suspense. Where is it that Mr. Knight is calling so often?”

The corners of Nigel’s mouth turned up ever so slightly as he said, “Smallville, Kansas.”

Lex let the smile bloom slowly. “Smallville. Yes, now that you mention it, I can see the resemblance. We thought he’d left town, but it seems he doubled back on us. We are to be congratulated, Nigel. Without even trying, we’ve accomplished something that the combined intelligence networks of every gossip columnist and entertainment tabloid in the country have been unable to achieve: We’ve discovered where Clark Kent is spending his sabbatical.”

He wouldn’t reveal it to his underling, but Lex felt a strange mixture of envy and relief. His estimation of Lois Lane had certainly gone up a notch. In retrospect, he’d been rather disappointed in her lack of taste in men, blowing off Metropolis’s most eligible bachelor in order to spend her free time with an unknown nobody. That was part of the reason why Lex had never seriously pursued her romantically. The fact that she had actually gone into the arms of a worthy opponent like Kent — well, perhaps that made her a prize worth stealing, if only for the entertainment value of the contest.

“May I ask what you plan to do next?” Nigel’s voice brought him out of his reverie.

“I’ll have to give that some thought. I was willing to give Mr. Kent the benefit of the doubt when he was here openly, conducting legitimate publicity interviews. But now that he’s here in disguise and working with Lois Lane, I can only assume that he means to cause me trouble sooner or later. Of course he’ll need to be eliminated. But a man of his standing and reputation needs to be handled with finesse. I’ll let you know when I’ve come up with a suitably creative plan.”

Martha laid the iced tea pitcher on the lunch table and took her seat. Clark and Jonathan were having an animated discussion about NASCAR racing, so it took both of them a couple of minutes to notice that Martha wasn’t eating. She was just staring at Clark. The moment her son turned toward her, he knew he was in trouble. He just didn’t know why.

“What?” he asked in the exact tone he’d been using unsuccessfully against that look for more than twenty years.

“When are you going to tell her?” Martha asked. There was no need to ask what she meant.

“Soon. As soon as I have what I need to bring Lex Luthor down.”

Martha merely raised one eyebrow. “Explain,” was all she said.

Clark laid his sandwich down and wiped his fingers on his napkin. This wasn’t going to be simple. It never was when Martha got an idea in her head. “If I tell Lois who I am and what I’m up to, she’ll want to be right there in the thick of it.”

“I thought that was the idea. When I was in Metropolis the two of you were talking about bringing Lex Luthor down together.”

“Yes, we were. But then Lois was a witness to a murder and I realized that it would be better if I do the messy part of the investigation on my own. I’m going to be trawling around some pretty nasty places and I don’t want her to get hurt.”

"I see. You have some serious work to do and Lois would just be in your way."

"No! It's not like that! Lois is the best investigative reporter in the country. If the two of us worked together, I'd be the one slowing her down, not the other way around."

"That's not how it's going to look to Lois when she finds out that you decided to cut her out of her own investigation without even talking to her about it."

Clark opened his mouth to respond...and realized that he had absolutely nothing to say. His mother was waiting for his next argument, but he was coming up empty. Perplexed, he searched for a way to explain his decision to his mother, and by extension to Lois as well. He was forced to admit defeat.

"I have to tell her the truth," he finally conceded.

"I think so, dear," Martha agreed mildly.

"It scares me silly."

"I can see that." Her tone was sympathetic, but not apologetic. "I don't know why. You've shared a much bigger secret before — with Lana, then Pete. You were terrified of how they'd react, but they understood, and it only deepened those friendships. What makes you think that it would be any different with Lois?"

Clark took a bite of roast beef on rye while he thought that over. Finally, he said, "In my head, I know you're right. I can't see Lois rejecting me for being Clark Kent. It's not like I've even been hiding anything or lying to her. But there will be adjustments. Caleb Knight isn't famous, for one thing. Lois is an investigative reporter. She goes undercover as part of her job. How's she going to do that when her picture is on the cover of every entertainment magazine as Clark Kent's first steady girlfriend? She won't be able to go anywhere without people recognizing her."

"You do realize how crazy that sounds coming from you, don't you? It's not as if everyone *you* meet recognizes *your* celebrity face — either one of them."

Clark gave a wry half-smile. "Okay, you have a point there. But that doesn't mean Lois is going to like it."

"She'll learn, Clark. Just like you did."

"I know. But that's just one aspect of what I'm talking about. There's so much baggage that comes with my level of fame. It seems like a lot to ask her to take all of that on."

"If she loves you, she's going to have to adjust to it sooner or later."

"I guess I've been putting it off, hoping it would be later rather than sooner. But you're right. I've run out of excuses. Lois deserves to know the whole truth."

"So you'll tell her sooner rather than later." It wasn't really a question.

"Yes, I will. But I'll do it someplace public and fancy so she can't yell at me too loud. Maybe Angelino's next Saturday."

"Don't be silly, honey. Bring her here. Let her see the way you *really* live. Then maybe the red carpet life won't seem so intimidating."

"No, Martha, I think the boy has the right idea." Both Clark and Martha turned in surprise to Jonathan. He didn't say much, but when he did speak, it was generally a good idea to listen. "She already knows that 'Caleb' isn't a playboy at heart. But 'Caleb' is only part of who Clark is. The high life is part of the package as well. She deserves to know *all* of what she's signing up for. She's been with Superman and Caleb. It couldn't hurt to give her a taste of what Clark Kent can offer. Let him impress her. Besides, if you stay in Metropolis she'll have an easier time if she wants to go home alone. She'll only need a taxi, not an airplane."

"I appreciate the advice — from both of you," Clark said. "I'll figure it out. Now, are you going to call me on the carpet for anything else, or can I finish my lunch now?"

"Nope. I'm done," Martha said cheerily. "And I'm hungry."

Caleb stopped by to pick Lois up after work that night. It was getting to be a habit. They'd have dinner together — sometimes at a local restaurant, sometimes take-out at Lois's apartment, but most often Caleb would cook and they'd spend the evening at his house. It was more comfortable than Lois's apartment and afforded them more privacy. Tonight he'd made a simple chicken curry dish with apples and raisins.

"Mmmm...this is terrific," Lois said around a mouthful of curry. She managed to swallow before adding, "Don't tell me — you got the recipe from the owner of a little restaurant in Agra when you visited the Taj Mahal."

Caleb grinned cheekily. "Not even close. I got it from my college football teammate who got it from his older sister whose roommate grew up as a diplomat's kid in New Delhi. *She* got it from her aya."

"What's an aya?"

"An Indian nanny."

"You played football?" Lois sounded surprised.

"Yep. I even have a game ball."

Really? Why haven't I seen it?"

Caleb blushed. "It's in my bedroom."

Lois covered her own blush with a follow-up question. "I'm kind of surprised you played sports in college. I would have thought you'd sit it out for fear of having an unfair advantage."

Caleb shrugged. "It's only unfair if I use my powers. I did drop out of sports for a while in junior high when I was still learning to control my strength, but by the time I was in high school I could play again. It's hard to explain, but I don't use my powers all the time. Sometimes things like hearing just seem to 'kick in,' like when I hear a call for Superman, but my strength is mostly under my control. Same with my speed or my enhanced vision. I can turn them on or off pretty much at will."

"So you were really just like any other player?" She sounded curious, if skeptical.

"Mostly. My reflexes are still better than most people's, but not entirely out of the normal range. And the mandatory weight lifting was probably a waste of time," he winked. "The trickiest part was the contact, because of my invulnerability. I played safety, so I might be the guy doing the tackling or the guy getting tackled. Either way, I had to be careful so the other player wouldn't get hurt."

Caleb took a bite of saffron rice and changed the subject. "I want to take you out for dinner soon. Someplace really nice. I was thinking of Angelino's. It might take me a couple of weeks to get a reservation, but I've heard it's worth the wait."

Lois's eyes widened. "Angelino's? That's probably the best restaurant in Metropolis. What's the occasion?"

Clark's smile was enigmatic. "No occasion. Just a chance to show my best girl a good time." His face turned serious and his voice got quiet as he added, "And to have a conversation that's been delayed too long. I figure if we're in a fancy restaurant you won't yell as loud."

Lois's mouth went dry. Dinner at Angelino's would normally mean only one thing: a proposal. Given that he was worried about her yelling, she trusted that Caleb had the good sense to mean something else: a confession.

"Angelino's would be great," she smiled. "Just don't make the reservation for this weekend, even if you could get it. I'm going to need all Saturday just to find the right dress."

He chuckled. "Don't worry — I don't think even the President himself could get into Angelino's on that short notice." He laid a warm hand over hers. "But soon." It sounded like more than a date — it sounded like a promise.

Superman's early Monday morning patrol had been relatively

uneventful. There had been a couple of fender-benders on the main commuter highways, but Clark let the local emergency services handle those. Mostly he'd just let himself be seen in the Metropolis sky. Landing in his fenced back yard, he quickly changed back into his blue jeans and Henley shirt.

Just as he came through the back door into his bright, cheery kitchen, the phone rang. A slight frown crossed his face as he reached to answer it. Who'd be calling his house at 7:45 on Monday morning?

"Hello?"

"Congratulations, Clark!" Now he was even more confused — it was only 6:45 in Kansas.

"Lana? What are you doing up this early? You're usually a night owl."

"Not today. This morning I was awoken by a phone call at 6:30. It seems the committee couldn't find Clark Kent, so they opted for his PR representative instead." She sounded remarkably cheerful, given the hour.

Clark leaned back against a counter and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry to be dense, Lana, but I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Clark! I know you've been busy, but have you really forgotten what day this is?"

"It's November 8," Clark began, a confused frown still on his face. Then the pieces came together. It couldn't be. "You're kidding me," he said.

"No, sir. I wouldn't kid you about this. The American Book Award nominations will be announced at 9:00 Eastern this morning, and you, my friend, are on the list. I'll give you a little time to bask in your own glory, but I need an official reaction for the press by 7:45 my time. That gives you one hour."

Clark stood up straight. "Wow. I didn't see that coming. Do my folks know?"

"Not yet. I figured you'd want to tell them in person."

"Yeah, that's a good idea. I'll be in Smallville in ten minutes and at the office by 7:30."

"Okay. I'll try to be out of my pajamas by then." Before she hung up the phone, Lana added, "Clark? I really am proud of you. I know you don't think so, but I think you have a good shot at winning."

"Thanks, Lana. It's an honor just to be nominated. I couldn't have done any of it without you and Pete. I hope you both know how much I appreciate you."

"Of course we do. I'll see you in a bit."

A wide smile on his face, Clark hung up the phone and reached for Caleb's cell. He had dialed five digits of Lois's home number before it hit him.

He couldn't share this joy with her.

And that was just plain stupid.

His initial impulse was to tell her his secret that very morning, but he quickly thought better of it. She had to work today and she deserved better than a hurried explanation with no time to process it afterwards. He had a reservation at Angelino's in less than two weeks, but there was no way he could wait that long.

Tonight. It had to be tonight. She could yell all she wanted, but he wasn't going to let this secret come between them any longer.

Lois sat in the morning story meeting and tried to focus. She'd already given her own briefing — what there was of it. Things were pretty quiet around the city at the moment so she was going to have to go out and beat the bushes. She dragged her attention back to Pete, who was finishing up his explanation of the Tigers' hopeless downward spiral.

Next up was Tim Stevens, who covered the arts beat.

"'Riverdance' has been held over for another four weeks." Yawn.

"We've got a profile of Diana Stride coming out in Thursday's lifestyle section." Double yawn. "But the big news in the arts world is the American Book Award nominations." Tim waved a computer printout dramatically in the air. "Hot off the presses. It's got a local connection because the awards dinner is going to be in Metropolis this year. Garrison Keillor is going to host it."

"Well, who's on the list?" Cat asked with mild interest.

"There are four categories, each with five nominations. Do you really want to hear all twenty names right now?"

"Nah — who cares about poetry? Just give us the fiction list," Ralph chimed in.

Rolling his eyes, Tim complied nevertheless. Reading from the paper in his hand, he rattled them off. "'The Shipping News,' 'Come to Me,' 'The Pugilist,' 'Swimming in the Volcano,' and 'Little David.'"

"Oooh, Little David," Cat mused out loud. "Now *that* has potential."

"Since when do you care about literary awards?" Lois knew she sounded petty, but she couldn't stop herself. Something about that woman just brought out the worst in her.

"I don't," Cat answered breezily. Then her voice dropped an octave into her sultry zone. "But 'Little David' means Clark Kent will have to come out of hiding. And Clark Kent..." she paused for dramatic effect, "... is good for the gossip business."

Lex Luthor leaned back in his leather desk chair, his feet propped up on his desktop. His eyes meandered back and forth between two objects. The first was a glowing green crystal, about the size of a softball, which he turned idly in his hands. He'd paid dearly for it and it still needed to be tested, but if it could do what the seller claimed, he'd finally found Superman's Achilles' heel. The second object was the arts section of the Daily Planet that lay open on his desk. Clark Kent was about to be flushed out of hiding. There had to be a way to make those two facts work together.

Within minutes, he had a plan. It had flair. It had panache. It had everything a Lex Luthor plan should have. And it would rid him of two rivals at one stroke. Smiling, he buzzed for Mrs. Cox. If his test had the desired result, Clark Kent was about to get an invitation he wouldn't be able to resist.

Lois was in a funk. She knew exactly why. What she didn't know was what she was going to do about it. Caleb — no, that wasn't his real name, and that was the problem — *Clark* had been nominated for an American Book Award. He must be on cloud nine. She'd been itching to call him all day. She wanted to tell him how proud she was, how much he deserved it, how confident she was that he would win. She wanted to send him something, take him somewhere — do *something* to celebrate his moment in the sun. But she couldn't. Not without revealing the secret that *he* should be disclosing to *her*.

It didn't help that work was so slow. She was systematically working her way through every snitch she had and every half-baked idea in her 'potential stories' file and she was still coming up empty. By quitting time she was in rare form. If anyone besides Caleb came within ten feet of her, they were liable to have their head handed to them on a platter, and the only thing keeping Caleb safe was his invulnerability.

Lois was still scowling at a blinking cursor when Caleb arrived, bearing chocolate *and* a vase full of flowers. "What are these for?" Lois asked, accepting the gifts with less grace than he had expected.

"Just because." He tried a winning smile, but it didn't have the intended effect.

"You're sure Jimmy didn't call and warn you what a rotten mood I was in?" Her tone was almost belligerent.

Caleb frowned with concern. "No, he didn't. What's wrong?"

Lois turned her scowl on Caleb...Clark...whatever his name was. "I can't tell you. And that's what's wrong."

Clark took both her hands in his and lifted her to her feet before wrapping her in a tender embrace. "How can I help?" he whispered.

By telling me the truth, you idiot! That's what she thought. What she *said* was a strangled, "Not here. Get us out of here. Somewhere with no other people around."

"Okay." Clark had no idea what had made her so upset, but he was determined to do something about it. Putting his own plans on hold — what Lois needed was cheering up, not a shock to the system — he stepped back and took her hand to lead her to the elevator. He felt a tug as she resisted coming with him. He turned back to her to see what the trouble was.

"Just a minute." Lois turned back to her desk and picked up the box of chocolates. "Okay, now I'm ready." It was obvious to Clark that she was barely holding herself together.

"Come on then," he said, wrapping a protective arm around her shoulder. "Let's go get you some dinner and some cheering up."

It was a quiet flight. Lois didn't seem inclined to talk, and Clark didn't want to upset her further by pushing her. He thought she looked surprised when then landed on the same tropical beach where she had first offered to protect Superman by not revealing his second identity. He set her down gently. She turned to look over the water, facing away from him.

He was about to offer to go fetch a carry-out supper, but she spoke first.

Turning on her heel — an impressive maneuver on sand — she looked him directly in the eye and said, "What are you waiting for?" It was clearly a challenge. Yep, it was back to bite him with a vengeance. He opened his mouth to reply, but she talked over him. "And don't give me that nonsense about Angelino's and me not yelling at you. I'm yelling now!" So she was.

He set the box of chocolates down on the beach and tried to take her hands in his, but she pulled them away. "I was planning to..." he began. She cut him off before he could say 'tell you tonight.'

"Planning what?" She paced back and forth on the beach, her arms flying about wildly. "Another delay? Another excuse? What's the holdup?" Boy, she really could yell when she had a mind to.

She blew out a frustrated breath and made an effort to speak calmly. "I understood at first. I really did. You obviously had some issues to work out, and I was willing to let you do it. But enough is enough. I don't know what else I can do to convince you that I'm not shallow enough to judge you for what your name is or what you do for a living. I don't really care, except that now it's coming between us."

She'd just about worked up to yelling again by the time she got to the real zinger: "For heaven's sake, Caleb! I can *handle* Clark Kent! Why can't you?"

Their startled gasps came in stereo. They stared at each other, both of them slack-jawed and wide-eyed.

At last, Clark spoke. "I am such an idiot." She didn't answer, but he thought her face softened, at least a little. He kicked a pebble fifty yards out to sea. He wished he were wearing his civvies. He really felt like shoving his hands in his pockets, but the suit had none. Sheepishly, he tried again. "I don't suppose you'll believe that I was going to tell you tonight?"

She raised one eyebrow. "Why?"

Did she mean why was he going to tell her now, or why should she believe him? Maybe both. In any case, he wasn't about to ask for a clarification. This was his chance, he knew. He'd get one shot to convince her that he was for real.

Taking a deep breath, he motioned for her to sit on the log that he'd pulled onto the beach only a few weeks ago. It seemed a lifetime ago. She sat on the log, and he sat on the sand at her feet, one elbow resting on the log as he looked up at her. He picked up a palm frond and idly broke it into pieces as he talked, not daring to look her in the eye.

"I almost called you this morning," he began. "Lana called with the news of the Book Award nomination, and the minute I hung up with her I started dialing your number."

"I wanted to call you, too, as soon as I heard." The pain in her voice caused him to look up. He'd thought he was protecting her, but he'd only ended up hurting her.

"I am so sorry." He didn't know what else to say. "I never meant to hurt you. I thought that by not telling you I was keeping Clark Kent from coming between us, but it didn't work. He came between us anyway."

She didn't argue, but she didn't yell at him either. That gave him some hope. "I guess you've known for a while?" he ventured. "I should have known you'd figure it out."

"Yes, you should have," she agreed. Then her voice softened. "And I probably could have told you before now that I knew. I was trying to give you some space."

"You did." He reached tentatively for her hand and was pleasantly surprised when she let him hold it. "You gave me a precious gift — time and space to be an ordinary man. I loved being Caleb Knight. We had a lot of fun together...didn't we?"

She squeezed his hand and gave him a watery smile. "Yeah, we did." Now she took on a look of determination. "And we still can. What's so scary about Clark? Why can't he do the same things that Caleb can? I don't understand why anything has to change just because I know what you do for a living. You're still the same man, aren't you?"

Clark sighed and tried to explain. "Of course I am. It doesn't change who we are. And yeah, we can still have pizza in Tegucigalpa or pasta in Florence. The people there don't know me as Clark in the first place. But other people...they treat me differently, and if you're known as Clark Kent's girlfriend, they'll treat you differently too. That's the problem."

"You think that I can't handle the limelight?" Her voice carried both disbelief and a hint of offense.

"No!" His vehemence made her jump, and he took a moment to calm himself. "You can handle anything you set your mind to, Lois. Believe me, I've been to more black tie affairs than I care to remember, and there isn't a woman at any of them who can hold a candle to you."

"Then what are you afraid of?"

He discovered a sudden interest in his knees and she had to strain to hear his reply. "That you won't want it. That you won't be happy in it. That you'll wish I was only Caleb and not Clark." He looked up at her again, his eyes pleading for understanding. "That you'll think I pulled a bait-and-switch on you."

Lois gave him an appraising look. He waited for her verdict. Finally she said the last thing he'd expected. "Don't you want to know when I figured out who you really were?"

He blinked at her. "Only if you want to tell me." He really didn't think he had the right to ask anything from her tonight.

"In Florence." His eyebrows shot up. That early? She'd obviously seen the question in his eyes, because she nodded her head and added, "That's why I spent so long in the bathroom after I spilled that wine. I knew who you were, and I was trying to decide what to do about it."

He opened his mouth to reply, but she laid two fingers on his lips to silence him. "The point I'm trying to make here is that I knew what I was getting into almost from the very beginning." She slipped from the log to join him on the sand, her knees almost touching his. Placing her hands on his shoulders, she made sure she had eye contact.

“Clark, I knew exactly who I was falling in love with.”

Lois stretched her bare legs out in front of her and wiggled her toes. The very edges of the incoming waves lapped at her feet and washed the sand from under her heels, causing them to slowly sink into the wet beach. She leaned back against Clark, who sat behind her, his legs straddling her and his arms wrapped around her waist. The gibbous moon was setting in front of them, throwing a silver shimmer across the water. She was still in her work clothes — or rather, in her short skirt and blouse. Her jacket, nylons, and shoes sat in a neat pile above the tide line along with Clark’s shoes and sweater — he’d finally gotten into those civvies when he brought their supper back. A cheap plastic basket lined with paper sat within arm’s reach.

Clark peeked into the basket. “There’s one last shrimp. Do you want it?” His voice rumbled softly in her ear.

Lois shook her head. “It’s all yours, flyboy. But I get the last chocolate.” They sat quietly for another minute. “This island has a lot of history for us,” she mused. “Are we going to have every vital conversation here?”

He bent his head to kiss the side of her neck. “I don’t know about that, but we can come back any time you want.”

“I know. Why do you think I’m dating you?” she teased.

“Only for the tropical beaches?” he asked in mock alarm.

“Well...not *only*...” she conceded.

After another minute of quiet the moon had disappeared altogether. A field of stars was scattered over the sky.

“Did you find a dress you liked?” Clark asked, apropos of nothing.

“As a matter of fact, I did. And I’m not telling you a thing about it. You’ll just have to wait and see it in a couple of weeks.”

“I’m really looking forward to Angelino’s. Even more so now that I’m not worried about you yelling at me.”

“So am I. And don’t be so nervous about me yelling. You seem to be able to take it.”

He gave her a gentle squeeze and answered, “Just as long as we always get to kiss and make up afterward.” After another moment of silence, he asked, “Do you like dressing up? Or is it a chore?”

“I enjoy it. Especially if there’s dancing involved. It was wonderful dancing with you at the Lawrence the other week. You’re very graceful.”

“You didn’t appreciate me cutting in at the White Orchid Ball, though.”

“No, I didn’t. But that was only because you got between me and my mark. The dancing itself was incredible. That’s why I was so out of sorts at the Lawrence. It kept reminding me of the first time we met, but I couldn’t say anything because you didn’t know that I knew.”

“I was such a fool. I should have told you ages ago.”

“Probably. But I forgive you.”

“Thank you.”

There was another brief pause, then, “I want to take you to a black tie event. It’s on December 4. That’s a Saturday.” She knew that date. She’d heard it that morning at the story meeting.

She turned to face him, a playful smile on her lips. “Why, Mr. Kent, are you inviting me to the American Book Award dinner?”

“Indeed I am,” he smiled, “if you don’t mind being on the cover of every entertainment magazine in North America, that is.” His tone became serious and he added, “I’d really love to have you there.”

Reaching to lay one hand on his cheek, she replied, “I’d really love to be there with you. It doesn’t matter to me whether we’re barefoot on this beach or in black tie and evening gown in a crowded ballroom. As long as we’re together, I’ll be happy. *You* make me happy.”

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her as if he never

intended to stop. “You make me happy,” he breathed. “I’ve never felt like this before. I can’t imagine my life — any life — without you in it.”

Lois never made it into the Planet on Wednesday. She told Perry that she would be out of the office trying to drum up a half-decent story. Given how slow things had been around the city that week, she didn’t get any argument from him. It was even partially true. Clark had a file on Lex Luthor in his Smallville office. Lois and Clark planned to go over it to see if they could find any connections that Clark might have missed before. The sooner they brought Luthor down, the sooner they could go public with their relationship — or rather, with Clark Kent’s part in it. Mostly, though, it was an excuse for Clark to show Lois around his hometown.

Clark steered his Ford-150 pick-up through downtown Smallville. He loved being home. There were no gossip reporters within miles — his standing threat to boycott any media outlet that dared to harass anyone in Lowell County assured that — and he could be himself in boots and jeans instead of Herringbone and lamb’s wool. It was a sunny day and, although the air was cold, there wasn’t any snow, so the sidewalks were busy with people running morning errands. That was the great thing about small towns — he knew just about everyone he saw. And today was even better than usual because Lois was with him. Spotting a parking space in front of Maisie’s, he pulled in. He was reaching for his door handle when Lois stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Are you sure this is a good idea? Maybe we shouldn’t be seen together, even in Smallville. Aren’t you afraid that word will leak out and Caleb’s cover will be blown?”

Turning to face her, he laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Trust me, Lois. It’s true that small town folks are notorious gossips, but only with each other. Nobody here will breathe a word to any outsiders, especially not the entertainment press. We all value our privacy too much for that.”

As he stepped out of the truck, he pulled the collar of his shearling barn coat up. The cold never bothered him, but he had long ago learned to mimic the reactions of his neighbors. Even in Smallville, he had to work to fit in.

A small string of jinglebells rang as Clark opened Maisie’s front door and ushered Lois into the busy restaurant. Most of the customers had long since tuned the bells out of their conscious hearing, but Maisie and the two waitresses — Sarah and Kendra — glanced over to greet their latest customers. Maisie’s face lit up as soon as she saw Clark.

“Well, I’ll be! If it isn’t Smallville’s favorite son!” She hurried over to give him a warm hug. “The news is all over town, Clark. We’re so proud of you.”

Clark could feel the blush climbing up his face. “Thanks. I think I’m still in shock.”

“Not me — I’m not a bit surprised. I just don’t understand why it took them four books to finally nominate you. You should have won two years ago. ‘Northern Passage’ should have beat ‘Mating’ hands down.” Maisie rolled her eyes at the obtuseness of big city critics.

Putting his arm around Lois’ shoulder, Clark said, “Lois, this is Maisie.” He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial stage whisper and added, “She’s the one who gave me that recipe for apple crumble, but don’t tell my mom.” Turning to the older woman, he finished the introduction. “Maisie, this is Lois.”

It took just a beat too long for Maisie to answer. She was too busy staring back and forth from Lois to Clark to Clark’s arm around Lois’ shoulder to the proud grin on Clark’s face. Giving her head a little shake, she finally said, “Where are my manners? It’s nice to meet you, Lois. What can I get for you two? I’ve got a nice quiet booth in the back.”

Clark smiled. “Actually, we need four coffees and a bag of donuts to go. We’re going to surprise Pete and Lana.”

Maisie stepped behind the counter to fetch the donuts and coffee. Clark was the only one who heard her mutter, “Yeah, I’ll say they’ll be surprised.”

Clark carried the donuts and coffee down Main Street, cheerfully accepting congratulations from half a dozen more neighbors. After the second block Lois leaned close and whispered, “Why is everybody staring at us? They’re not still wowed by Clark Kent, are they?”

Clark laughed and whispered back, “Not one bit. Most of these folks have known me since I was a baby. It’s you they’re staring at.” At Lois’ concerned frown, he hastened to clarify, “You’re the first woman I’ve ever brought home.”

Just then he led her through a nondescript door into the lobby of a three-story brick building that housed several offices, including Clark’s. They took the elevator to the second floor and stepped into the third door on the left. A plaque on the door read simply “Kent Enterprises.” As they entered, the Rosses looked up from their respective desks and froze.

Pete was the first to recover his wits. “Breakfast! Thanks, Clark.” He walked over, reached into the bag, and pulled out a glazed donut. “Hello, Ms. Lane. It’s nice to see you again.”

Lois smiled and extended her hand. “I think you’d better call me Lois,” she offered by way of greeting.

By this time Lana had joined the circle. “Hello, Lois.” Her cheeks were burning. At first Lois couldn’t think why, but then she remembered the last time she’d seen Lana. “I’m sorry about the book signing,” Lana said. “I hope you’ll forgive me for keeping you away from Clark that night.”

Now it was Clark’s turn to blush. Lois couldn’t help rubbing it in just a little bit — to Clark, not to Lana. “No harm done, Lana.” She held her hand out to show that there were no hard feelings. After the two women shook hands, Lois went on, “After all, you were just doing your job. I’m sure it was Clark’s idea.” She gave her boyfriend a withering scowl, but everyone saw the twitch at the corners of her mouth.

Clark held up both hands in self-defense. “I plead temporary insanity.”

“Really?” Lois was having a hard time keeping a straight face. “On what evidence?”

“Expert testimony. Just ask Lana and Pete how blown away I was when we first met.”

“I’ll vouch for that,” Lana put it, “but I think you’ve got your tense wrong.” She smiled broadly, looking back and forth between Lois and Clark. “Looks to me like she still blows you away.”

“You’ll get no argument there,” Clark agreed easily.

Pete brought them all back to the business at hand. “As I was saying... breakfast?” he motioned to the bag and cup carrier that Clark still held in his free hand.

“I think you mean second breakfast,” his wife corrected.

“Only if granola and yogurt counts as the first one,” Pete told Clark and Lois. He made a face to show what he thought of such healthy offerings.

Clark grinned back at his friend. “Well, the sugar’s on me and the caffeine as well.” Clark set the bag and cups down on the coffee table in the office’s seating area. Pulling a donut out for himself, he lowered himself into one of the four chocolate colored leather armchairs that served as both waiting area and conference room.

Lois took the seat next to Clark’s and the Rosses took the other two. When everyone was settled, Pete turned to Clark and said, “Now don’t take this the wrong way,” his questioning look took in both Clark and Lois, “but why are you here?”

Two hours later, Clark looked up from the file he was reading

and ran a hand through his unruly hair. “I’m still not seeing it.”

Lois set down the spreadsheet she was perusing. “Me either. I’ve read through these financial statements at least three times, and I can’t find anything illegal.” She leaned back and laced her hands behind her head, resting her eyes. “I believe that Luthor’s crooked. There are certainly plenty of ‘convenient’ accidents that end up benefitting LexCorp. But he’s slippery. The hard part is proving it.”

“Tell me about it,” Clark mumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose. He looked up as Lana hung up the telephone and approached their impromptu workstation. Her expression was hard to read — a mix of disbelief, wry amusement, and... suspicion?

“You’ll never guess who that was on the phone.” When every eye in the room was on her, she went on, “One Katherine Cox, personal assistant to...”

“Lex Luthor,” Lois and Clark chimed in chorus.

This got Pete’s attention and he crossed the room to join the pow-wow. “What did she want?” he asked.

Lana handed Clark a page of handwritten notes. “It seems that Mr. Luthor wants to host a charity dinner to raise money to fight child labor overseas. Since Clark will be in Metropolis for the Book Awards in a couple of weeks, and since the dinner’s cause fits in so well with ‘Little David,’ Mr. Luthor hopes that Clark will consent to be the keynote speaker.”

Clark glanced at Lana’s notes. “December 3rd. That’s the night before the Book Awards dinner. I can hardly claim that I won’t be in town.”

“I don’t like it,” Pete frowned. “He’s up to something.”

“Maybe,” Lana put in. “Or maybe he’s just trying to get his share of the spotlight that weekend. What do you think, Clark?”

Clark thought for a moment before replying. “I don’t know. I’m sure he has some ulterior motive — Luthor always does — but his fundraisers really do bring in a lot of money for legitimate causes. He might be using me to get some personal glory for himself, but I don’t see what else he could be up to. He can’t stand Superman, but he has no reason to want to hurt Clark Kent. Even if he tried, it wouldn’t work. I’m invulnerable.” The disquieting memory of yesterday’s brief dizzy spell after a false bank alarm flashed through Clark’s mind, but he quickly dismissed it as a fluke. There was certainly no reason to worry his friends about it. “And there’s always the chance that I’ll be able to use a little judicious eavesdropping to learn something that will finally get through his shiny white armor. I say ‘yes.’”

“You’re the boss,” Lana agreed. “I’ll call Mrs. Cox back tomorrow. There’s no need to seem overeager.”

For the next couple of weeks, Lois felt like she was being introduced to Caleb all over again. Not that Clark was any different than he’d always been, but she was getting to know the context of his life — his hometown, his parents, his friends — in a way that hadn’t been possible before. Seeing him in his native element, she was more convinced than ever that the carefree playboy image the world knew as Clark Kent was even more of an act than Superman.

In a strange twist of irony, the invitation from Lex Luthor was good for Clark. He’d never been asked to speak publicly about any of the social issues behind his books before. As he worked on his keynote speech for Luthor’s fundraising dinner, he realized that he had something to say, and the Book Award nomination gave him the confidence that people would be willing to listen. When Clark Kent reappeared after his ‘sabbatical,’ he was going to be a different man. A one-woman man, for starters. And he was definitely through with hair mousse and lamb’s wool.

Smallville was like a sanctuary, and Lois and Clark spent as much free time there as they could. The people were warm and welcoming. Martha Kent was just as terrific as Lois remembered,

and Jonathan was a teddy bear. They both welcomed Lois into their home with open arms. Lana and Pete had gotten over their initial suspicions of Lois and seemed glad to have another member of the ‘people Clark can be real with’ club. The two couples shared more than one double date of barbecue and line dancing. It was still a small circle, but bigger than the ‘just the two of us’ one that Lois and Caleb had had before. It was only in retrospect that Lois realized how isolating sharing such a big secret could be.

The only fly in the ointment was that Clark was still undercover in Metropolis. In some ways it was no different from how it had been all along — Lois was dating Caleb, who still got the occasional ‘special thanks’ in her stories, and Caleb was known around the Planet as a freelance reporter who still hadn’t broken his big story. Caleb, as Charlie King, took odd jobs that paid cash under the table and got him into at least the outskirts of Metropolis’s seedier side. But as Thanksgiving approached and December loomed, they were still no closer to bringing Luthor down. That was a problem for two reasons.

The merely annoying reason was that, as Luthor’s dinner and the Book Awards got closer, Lois was forced to endure Cat and Jimmy’s endless speculation about who Clark Kent would have on his arm at the respective events. Ralph even had two betting pools going on under the table. The first was a simple yes or no bet on whether Kent would bring the same woman to both events. He’d never been known to do that before, but, then again, he’d never been to two black-tie affairs within 24 hours. The more intricate pool involved *which* woman he’d bring to the Book Awards. To make matters worse, when Lois fumed to Clark about the speculation, she was sure she’d caught him stifling a smile when she told him that the smart money was on Julia Roberts.

The more serious problem was that Lois fully intended to be that woman, at both events, and that would put an end to Caleb Knight. Clark tried to argue that he could still go undercover as Charlie King, but he knew there was slim chance of that working. Once it was common knowledge that Clark had been in town for weeks — and Caleb was too well known as Lois’s boyfriend for that fact not to make its way back to Luthor — the ‘people see what they expect to see’ effect would be useless in Metropolis because the ‘people’ he wanted to fool the most would be on the lookout for Clark Kent.

Of course, given how little progress he was making anyway, maybe that wasn’t such a loss after all. He was reluctantly learning that there’s a big difference between getting to know the underworld in general and trying to pin something on one person in particular, especially a person as sophisticated and well-connected as Lex Luthor. Clark had come across all sorts of hints about what ‘the Boss’ was up to in Metropolis, but still nothing he could take to the police or that Lois could put in print. It was increasingly frustrating to *know* what he couldn’t *prove*.

Added to all of this was, of course, the complication of Superman. He’d had an eventful November. It started with being accused of causing a heat wave. Clark himself wasn’t sure what to think at first, and he had to spend a night at Perry and Alice White’s house when the Daily Planet vouched for Superman’s behavior. That spandex suit might be great for aerodynamics, but it was not the most comfortable thing to sleep in. Besides, it was hard to look heroic while eating Alice White’s tuna casserole or watching ‘Jailhouse Rock’ with Perry. Thankfully, Lois had tracked down the real source of the heat before Clark had been forced to leave town. Luthor’s nuclear power plant leak — just one more ‘unfortunate accident’ to add to the list.

Then there had been the pheromone incident. Lois had been pretty angry when Clark refused to stay in the same room with her while she was under the influence. He flew her off to Smallville — holding her at arm’s length for the entire flight, no less — and left her in Martha’s capable hands until the noxious

stuff wore off. That took some explaining afterwards. The simple fact was that Clark knew he didn’t stand a chance if Lois Lane decided to seduce him. And, while he fully intended to be seduced by her one day soon, he wanted it to be when they were both sober enough to enjoy it and remember it afterward.

Even after what Clark thought was an eloquent apology and a relaxing Thanksgiving weekend in Smallville, Lois was still just a little bit put out. No woman likes to be rejected when she makes a serious effort at coming on to her man, even if he thinks he’s doing it for noble reasons. Maybe that was why Clark, or rather Caleb, found himself saying ‘yes’ to a certain proposal that he really should have declined.

It was all Cat’s fault. She started it. The Monday after Thanksgiving — just four days before Lex Luthor’s dinner — she walked into the bullpen at the uncharacteristically early hour of nine a.m. and handed a roll of film to Jimmy. Thirty minutes later she walked into Perry’s office with a stack of photos. Fifteen minutes after that, Perry hollered for Lois to join them.

Perry and Cat were huddled over Perry’s desk, which was covered with grainy black and white photographs. Lois leaned in to see what had them so interested. “Isn’t that...?” she started.

“Congressman Ian Harrington,” Cat confirmed. “Chairman of the House Defense Committee. Also the most notoriously sexy man in Washington.” Cat tapped one lacquered nail on a picture of Congressman Harrington holding a folder labeled ‘Top Secret.’ “But this is no weekend fling.”

“That’s why I want your input, Lois,” Perry said. “This is more your bailiwick than Cat’s.”

Lois pointed to another photo. Harrington and two other men were standing near a calendar, apparently arguing over their schedule. “Who are these guys?” she asked.

“We don’t know,” Perry said. “I’ve got Jimmy running our Identafile program looking for a match. We do know those offices are leased to a company called Apocalypse Consulting.”

Lois’s brow creased in thought while she continued to leaf through the photos. Theoretically there might be an innocent explanation, but this definitely smelled like a clandestine deal in the making. After a minute, she ventured, “Chief, I was just thinking...”

“Let me take a wild guess,” Perry interrupted, “you want the Daily Planet to put you up in the Honeymoon Suite until we figure out exactly what’s going on in Apocalypse Consulting.”

Lois looked up at Perry in surprise, then at Cat. “These photos were taken from the Honeymoon Suite? At which hotel?”

“The Lexor,” Cat answered. “I don’t really enjoy holidays with my family, so I was hiding out in one of my favorite getaways.”

“Really?” Lois raised a skeptical brow. “You spent Thanksgiving weekend alone in the Honeymoon Suite?”

Cat just smiled and purred, “I never said I was alone.”

Lois rolled her eyes. “Whatever,” she shrugged. Then, turning back to Perry, she said, “Actually, I hadn’t thought of going undercover, but that’s a great idea. I’ll need Jimmy to set up the surveillance equipment.” Lois headed for the door. She needed to get packing. Perry’s voice called her back.

“Now, hold on a minute. We’re talking a major operation here.”

Lois turned to face her boss and crossed her arms over her chest in what Perry recognized as her ‘I’ll go to the mat on this one’ stance. “Hey, it was your idea,” she challenged. “Besides, Perry, this *is* major. A Washington VIP is selling highly classified information.”

Perry held up one hand for silence while he thought it over. Then he gave a curt nod and said, “Okay, you two have got three nights.”

Lois and Cat looked at each other, then at Perry. “You want Lois and me to go undercover in the Honeymoon Suite?”

Together?" Cat was incredulous.

Perry shook his head. "No, Cat, not you. I appreciate you bringing this to my attention, and of course you'll get credit if we actually get a story out of this, but I meant Lois and Caleb."

"Excuse me?" Lois's eyebrows climbed into her hairline.

"Face it, Lois. If you're going to spend several nights in the Honeymoon Suite masquerading as a blushing bride, you're going to need a groom. You got anyone better in mind?"

A couple of weeks ago Lois would have jumped at the excuse to get Clark alone in a hotel room, but after his rebuff of her dance of the seven veils, she wasn't sure how he'd take the suggestion. "I'm not even sure he'd agree to it," she protested.

Perry just smiled. "Darlin', that boy would walk on water if you wanted him to. Just ask nicely and you'll see."

Perry was right. Neither Caleb nor Clark could say no to Lois Lane when she really wanted something. Besides, after the way he'd bundled her off to his mom's house last week, he felt that it was the least he could do. He'd really enjoyed working with her in the past, and she'd been quick to point out how helpful his special talents could be on a surveillance operation.

And that was how 'Caleb Smith' found himself carrying his 'bride' over the threshold of the Lexor's honeymoon suite, a simple gold band on each of their left hands. Clark wondered briefly whether the moment felt as surreal for her as it did for him. He couldn't ask her, though, because the bellboy was filming their grand entrance. Glancing at Lois for permission, he gave her a brief kiss before setting her down gently. The bellboy set his camera down and hurried into the bedroom with their luggage, leaving the two of them temporarily alone in the suite's living room. Clark draped an arm around Lois's shoulder and led her to the window to check out the view.

"Is this as weird for you as it is for me?" she whispered.

Clark gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze and whispered back, "Possibly more." Lifting her left hand in his, he placed a soft kiss on her knuckles. The gold ring shining in the lamplight caught both of their eyes. Before he could stop himself, Clark blurted out, "I like the look of that."

Lois's eyes snapped up to his, but before she could answer, the bellboy cleared his throat loudly behind them. They both turned to face him.

"Hanging garments in the closet. Toiletries in the bathroom." His next words were directed to Lois. "You're in the drawers on the left."

"You unpacked our stuff?!" Lois sounded truly horrified.

Pride obviously wounded, the young man replied with all the dignity he could muster, "This is a full service hotel."

Deciding to rescue the young man before he got Lois truly riled up, Clark hustled him to the doorway, shoving a few bills in the boy's hand as they went. "Thanks for your help," he glanced at the boy's name tag, "Phil. We'll call if we need anything else."

Phil was on the verge of protesting when he glanced at the money in his hand and did a double take. Clearly, his sense of righteousness indignation was mollified. "Any time, Mr. Smith. We're here to make your stay as pleasant as possible." Clark gave him one last friendly nod and closed the door behind him.

Turning back to Lois, Clark was surprised to see that she still looked upset. "Lois? What's wrong?" He held out his arms in open invitation.

Instead of stepping into his embrace, Lois hurried into the bedroom. Clark followed in time to see her fling the closet doors open then rifle through the drawers in turn. He was reaching for her shoulder when she turned to face him. "Where are your suits?"

Clark frowned in consternation. "In the closet, like Phil said." When Lois continued to stare at him, he realized his mistake. "Oh! Those suits. I'm wearing one under my clothes. I didn't

pack any extras. I wouldn't want the staff to come across them by accident."

Her worry relieved, Lois slumped onto the edge of the bed. "Of course not. I don't know what came over me. You've certainly stayed in enough fancy hotels. You'd know what to do with your own suits." She looked up from beneath dark, long lashes. "I feel pretty silly," she confessed.

Clark came to sit beside her. "It's no big deal, Lois. Like you said earlier, this whole situation is a little strange. It's bound to leave us a little on edge."

Once again, they were interrupted by the arrival of a third party. In this case, it was Jimmy and Cat knocking on the suite's front door. Lois let them in quickly before anyone saw them.

Jimmy set a pair of duffle bags down with a soft thump. "Where do you want this set up?" he asked.

Lois looked out the living room window. The windows across the street all looked the same. "Which windows are we watching, Cat? Did you see them from here or from the bedroom?" There was no sarcasm in Lois's voice. This was a huge story, and she owed Cat a favor for bringing it in.

Taking her cue from Lois, Cat was also all business and no gratuitous digs. "I was in the Jacuzzi when I first saw them, but let me see if I can spot the same windows from here." She approached the window and looked out. "Yep. There it is. Sixth floor, fourth window in from the right corner."

Lois joined her at the window. "Got it." Turning to Jimmy, she added, "You can set the equipment up in here. That will give us more room to work."

"And keep the bedroom free for other pursuits," Jimmy grinned. He lost the grin when he noticed that neither Lois nor Caleb was returning it. "Anyway, I'll just be a few minutes, and then I'll show you how to work the recorder and the alarm system."

"Alarm?" Caleb asked.

"Yeah. You can set the mic to warn you when it picks something up. That way you don't have to stay up all night if nothing's happening. You can get on with... getting a good night's sleep," he finished awkwardly.

Cat rescued the situation. "Come on, Lois and Caleb. I'll show you the secrets of the wet bar while Jimmy works his techno magic."

Fifteen minutes later, Clark gave a surreptitious glance through the walls to make sure the coast was clear before seeing Jimmy and Cat out. As he closed the door behind them, he took in the view of cameras and tape recorders arrayed in the living room. "Well, I guess that kills the room service idea," he said.

Lois looked from Clark to the equipment and smiled sheepishly. "Yeah, I hadn't thought of that. Do you think we should move it all into the bedroom?"

Clark shook his head. "I don't think so. We're going to have to stash it somewhere when the maids come, though. Unless..." he trailed off.

"Unless?" Lois prodded.

With a blush, Clark finished, "Unless we keep the 'Do Not Disturb' sign out all week. I guess plenty of newlyweds must do that."

Lois's blush matched Clark's. "That's probably our best bet. If you don't mind skipping the maid service, that is."

"I don't. I could tidy this whole suite up in thirty seconds anyway. And they can always leave us clean towels outside the door. We could even ask them to leave room service in the hall for us. If I answer the door in a bathrobe they won't wonder why I'm not letting them in."

For a moment Lois was distracted by the idea of making sure Clark's bathrobe wasn't just a ruse for the bellboy, but soon she snapped out of it. "Okay. That sounds like a plan. I am getting hungry. You're the seasoned traveler; what's good at the Lexor?"

Clark reached into the desk drawer for the menu. “Actually, I wouldn’t know. I’ve never been to Metropolis before this trip, and I stayed at the Jade, as you recall.” He flashed her a smile for the shared memory. Then, menu in hand, he sat down on the sofa and patted the cushion next to him in invitation. “Let’s see what they’ve got.”

Clark wiped his greasy fingers, tossed the linen napkin onto the room service cart, and leaned back against the sofa back with a contented sigh. “Well, I’ll say this much for Luthor — his restaurant makes the best cheeseburger this side of the Mississippi.”

Lois swallowed her last bite of salmon and shook her head. “I can’t believe you came to the Lexor Hotel and ordered a cheeseburger. You could have had prime rib or lamb chops.” Setting her empty plate down on the coffee table, she scooted over and snuggled up to Clark.

Taking the hint, Clark slipped his arm around Lois shoulder and pulled her close. “I can have those any time I want. Tonight I felt like having a cheeseburger. So sue me.” He pushed her hair out of the way and placed a few soft kisses on the side of her neck. Then, with a saucy grin, he said, “Did you see what the manager sent up for dessert? Compliments of the house for the newlyweds. She even signed the card herself.”

Lois grinned back. “I suppose I should feel at least a little guilty about accepting champagne and chocolate on false pretenses, but I don’t.”

Clark landed one more kiss. Then he reached to take the bottle from the ice bucket and popped the cork out with his thumb. With practiced ease, he poured the bubbling wine into two champagne flutes. He handed one to Lois and proposed a toast. “To Mr. and Mrs. Smith.”

“Hear, hear,” Lois agreed. There was a soft clink of glasses. When they had both sipped their champagne, Clark reached for a chocolate covered strawberry and held it to Lois’s lips. As she bit into it, their eyes locked. In unison, they each set their respective glasses down and reached for each other. The first kiss tasted of strawberry and sweet wine. The second carried a hint of chocolate. After that, they tasted only each other.

Pretty soon both of their hands were touching bare skin — Lois’s roaming over Clark’s shoulders and chest where his bathrobe parted easily, and Clark’s ducking under the hem of Lois’s blouse to trail fingers of warmth across her lower back and waist. Things were progressing very nicely, Lois thought, when Clark rather suddenly pulled back. “Lois, honey, we have to cool this down.”

Not much liking the sound of that, Lois continued her assault on Clark’s chest. She was glad that he hadn’t bothered to change out of the bathrobe before they ate. There wasn’t much to slow her down, and nothing underneath except a thin pair of boxers. Her hands snaked under the terry cloth and wrapped around to knead his back muscles. The result of this action was to press her very feminine curves tightly against his now almost bare chest.

With a herculean effort of will, he took her by the shoulders and gently pushed her away, just enough to allow him some semblance of clear thought. “Honey, please, if you don’t stop now, I won’t be able to stop at all.”

“Who says we have to stop at all?” She traced his face with her fingers, across his forehead, around his temple, along his jaw line. She ended with two fingers on his lips. Before he thought what he was doing, he drew the tips of those two errant fingers into his mouth. With just a hint of victory, she smiled. “See,” she purred, “that’s the idea. After all, it *is* our wedding night.”

Clark froze, his formerly muzzy expression suddenly clear as ice. “No, it’s not. That’s why we have to stop. Right now.” In an apparent attempt to flee temptation, he stood up and tightened the belt of his robe. Not even looking at Lois, he strode to the

window and gazed out.

Sitting back into her corner of the sofa, Lois stared at him in disbelief. Surely he didn’t mean...but maybe he did. Carefully, she formed her question and sent it into the gulf between them. “Clark, are you serious about that? Are you waiting for marriage? Is that part of your religious beliefs?” The thought had never occurred to her, but if it was, she would do her best to support him. And she would try not to take it personally.

Running a hand through his hair, he turned back to face her. His face betrayed the effort of controlling his desires, mixed with a pleading for understanding and a fear of rejection. Lois reached toward him in invitation. Keeping a slight distance between them, he resumed his place next to her. He reached for her hand, which she gladly gave him, but he looked at his terrycloth-covered knees. “Sort of,” he said. When she didn’t press him, he went on, “That’s part of how I was raised, but I know a lot of people don’t believe that any more. Even a lot of people that grew up in the same church as I did don’t wait that long. But I had planned to.”

He ventured a quick glance up at her. He must have found the reassurance he needed, because he went on with a little more confidence, stroking his fingers over the back of her hand the whole time. “When I was in high school, I waited because it was what I’d been taught and because I had enough strange changes going on without adding sex to the mix. It wasn’t so much a conscious decision as just maintaining the status quo. But before I went away to college, I gave the matter a lot of thought. I had a pretty good idea that the opportunity would arise somewhere in my college career. So I tried to figure out ahead of time whether I would be open to crossing that line, and under what circumstances.

“The first thing I decided was that sex could never be casual for me, and not just because of what I am.”

“Who,” Lois corrected.

At Clark’s questioning look, she clarified, “You said ‘what I am.’ You’re a ‘who,’ not a ‘what.’”

He smiled and squeezed her hand in silent thanks for the vote of confidence. “Okay, not just because of *who* I am. Anyway, I thought about all the reasons for waiting that our youth group leaders had talked about, and I found that two of them really resonated with me. The first was that no form of birth control is perfect. If I made love with a woman and she got pregnant, I would want to be there for her and for our child, forever. I believe that’s every father’s responsibility, and it’s doubly vital for me. Any child of mine — if I can even have kids, which maybe I can’t — could end up with my powers, or some of them, or even special medical needs from having parents from two different planets. I would *have* to be in that child’s life, and I would want my child to grow up in a home with two parents who love her and love each other. I’ve known some great single parents — my friend Lana was raised by her dad after her mother died — but that’s not what I want my child to start out with.

“So that’s the ‘noble’ reason, if you want to think of it that way. My other reason is actually pretty selfish.” He took a breath and turned to face Lois, holding her hand in both of his. “I really do believe in the spiritual idea of the two becoming one. I didn’t want to become one with a woman only to have us torn apart afterwards.”

He raised his eyes to hers. The look on his face begged her to understand and not to feel rejected by his desire to wait. “Lois, I love you so much.” There was a catch in his voice, and he took a breath to clear it. “I can’t imagine my life without you in it. If you ever leave me, I don’t know what I’ll do. But if we’d made love, if we’d become truly one, and then you left, I don’t think I could go on breathing.” He let go of her hand and cradled her face in both in his hands. “When we make love, I want it to mean forever.”

His gaze was intense, full of love, longing, pleading. As his

final words registered, it was Lois who caught her breath. “Do you mean that?” she breathed, barely daring to believe that his words implied what she hoped they did. “Do you really mean ‘when,’ not ‘if’?”

Clark didn’t hesitate. “Absolutely.” He drew her to him and their kiss felt like a vow.

In that moment, Lois wanted nothing more than to do exactly what Clark had talked about — to become one with him in every possible way. She knew what he meant about not being able to survive if they were ever parted. He was part of her now, and she didn’t want to wait another day to express that union with their bodies as well as their hearts.

And why should they? He’d as much as said that he planned on marrying her some day. She certainly planned on marrying him, the sooner the better. So when their lips finally parted, she asked the obvious question.

“What are we waiting for?”

“Huh?”

Lois gave a wry smile. “Not exactly the answer I was looking for, so I’ll say it again. I love you. You love me. We want to be together forever. So what are we waiting for?”

Understanding dawned and Clark’s face filled with wonder. “Are you serious?”

Lois slapped him playfully on that gorgeous bare chest. “Again with the wrong answer, Kent. Come on, third time’s the charm: will you marry me or not?”

When he recovered the power of speech, Clark pushed the coffee table away from the sofa and knelt on the carpet at her feet. Feeling a little foolish in his robe and boxers, he sheepishly explained, “I was going to wait until Christmas, and I don’t have a ring here tonight, but since you asked...” His face and tone became solemn and he poured every ounce of love he possessed into his next words. “Lois Lane, I have loved you from the moment I saw you. I have loved you as Clark, as Superman, and as Caleb. I will love you until the day I die. I want to share everything I have, everything I am, everything I will ever do or be with you. If you’re sure you want to put up with two celebrities and all of their baggage, I will gladly marry you.”

By the time he got to the end of his speech, Lois was running her hands through his hair. As soon as he stopped talking, she slid down next to him and kissed him soundly. The moment their lips parted, she stood up, pulling him up with her by one hand. “Come on,” she beckoned, pulling him toward the bedroom. When he failed to follow, she turned back to him and tugged a little harder. “Come get changed, Clark. You’re not going to get married in that bathrobe, are you?”

Instead of following, he pulled her closer to him. “You’re serious? You want to get married tonight? In the middle of an investigation?”

She stepped toward him until they were only inches apart. She raised both hands and wrapped them around the back of his neck. She raised her face toward his, but she didn’t kiss him. Instead, she murmured, “What I don’t want is to spend one more night apart from you. Have you seen the bed in there?” She nodded toward the bedroom. “And the Jacuzzi? It seems a shame to waste them.” She raised her mouth to his ear and nibbled softly on his earlobe before whispering, “I really don’t think you’d be comfortable on this sofa. Not when you can hear every move I make in the next room.” Pulling back to look him in the eyes again, she said, “If we leave now we can be married before midnight.” Running one finger from his collarbone to the point where his chest disappeared behind the robe, she offered, “It’s a big bed. We can share.”

Grasping the errant hand in his larger one, Clark rolled his eyes and grinned, “I was right.”

“What about?” Lois smiled.

“What I thought last week — that if you ever made a serious

attempt to seduce me I wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Lois grinned. But then a frown creased her brow and she asked in all seriousness, “You are kidding, right? I mean, I’m not pushing you into this with the wrong kind of...persuasion, am I?”

“Are you asking whether I’ll still respect you in the morning?” Clark teased.

“No, I’m asking whether you’ll grow to resent me for seducing you into marrying me before you were ready.”

The teasing smile left Clark’s face in an instant. Dropping a tender kiss on her forehead, he stepped back and said, “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.” Then, faster than Lois’s eyes could follow, he disappeared, a couple of doors opening and closing in his wake. By the time Lois got her bearings, he was standing in front of her again. He was wearing the same suit he’d had on earlier that day, the one that was supposed to be ‘Mr. Smith’s’ wedding suit, just as she was still wearing ‘Mrs. Smith’s’ wedding outfit.

As soon as she registered his presence, Clark scooped Lois into his arms and carried her to the sofa. Settling himself in one corner and her on his lap, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a telltale black box. “I’m not down on one knee because this isn’t a proposal. You beat me to that and you have my answer.” His tone held no anger or defensiveness, only tenderness and reassurance. “But I want you to see this — to have this — so that you will always know that you didn’t talk me into anything. This has been sitting in my nightstand drawer for more than two weeks now. Like I said, I was going to wait until Christmas, but I’d rather give it to you now.”

With a lump in her throat, Lois took the box from his hand and opened it. She expected a diamond solitaire, but instead she found a ring with three stones — diamond in the middle and deep blue sapphires on either side. Her surprise must have shown on her face, because Clark hastened to explain, “I know it’s not the traditional ring, and if you’d rather have a solitaire I’ll gladly take you shopping for one. This one has been in my mom’s family for generations. My Great-Grandma Clark was the last to wear it. I have her and Grandpa’s wedding bands, too.”

Lois had to swallow before she could speak. “Oh, Clark! It’s beautiful. I’ll be proud to wear it.” She pulled off the gold band that Perry had loaned her and held her left hand out to Clark who slipped on her new engagement ring.

Holding her hand up to the light, he repeated his earlier words with even more feeling. “I *definitely* like the look of that.”

Pulling her hand from his grasp, Lois used it to draw his face to hers for a passionate kiss. “I love you, Clark.”

“I love you, too. More than I can say.” He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and leaned in to touch his forehead to hers. “And there’s no rush. If you want to wear that ring alone for a while, the other two will still be here when we’re ready for them.”

It took Lois just a moment to figure out what he meant. “You have your grandparents’ wedding bands with you?”

He gave a little shrug and a sheepish smile. “Well, you were talking about eloping. I figured it couldn’t hurt to be prepared.”

Lois grinned. “Oh, I’m still talking about eloping. Let me see the rings.” She held out her hand, palm up. Clark reached into his breast pocket and drew out a second velvet box. This one contained two matching rings, one small and narrow, the other larger and broader. A pattern of interlocking links encircled them both.

“Again, we can go shopping for something more traditional if you like.”

“Uh, uh. I like them.” She gave her engagement ring an experimental tug. “And this ring fits just right, so I’d say your grandma and I are the same size.”

“Grandpa’s fits me, too.” At Lois’s look, Clark admitted,

"Yes, I tried it on last week."

"So we're all set then. We could really go get married right now."

"Yes, we could, if you're certain that's what you want. I don't want to rush you either."

"Are you kidding? I'm not waiting another hour."

"What about Congressman Harrington?" Clark asked.

"Do you see any signs of activity?"

Clark scanned the building across the street. "No. But they could come back at any time."

"I know, but that's what video recorders and automatic microphones are for. We'll check the recordings when we get back."

"So it's a working honeymoon, eh?" Clark seemed more amused than annoyed.

"Only temporarily. We'll get away for a real one next week."

"And the week after. I'll need two weeks minimum to show my new bride all the romantic places I know."

"It's a deal," Lois agreed with a wide smile. But then her face fell and she exclaimed, "Oh, no! This won't work."

Clark's frown matched hers as he asked "Why not? What's the matter?"

"I forgot about Clark Kent!" she wailed.

"Come again?" Clark's face was a mixture of confusion and worry.

"You're famous, Clark."

Clark's face was a mask of confusion and anxiety. "I know my life as Clark Kent involves a lot of hoopla, but I thought you'd considered that before you proposed."

"Well, I didn't. I forgot. So sue me. I guess we'll have to wait after all."

Clark's frown only grew deeper. He was obviously struggling to understand something that didn't make sense to him. "Wait a minute. So you *aren't* saying you don't want to marry me." It was more of a statement than a question.

"Of course I'm not! Who said anything about not marrying you?"

"I'm sorry, honey. That's what had me so confused. It would be totally out of character, but for a minute there it sounded like that's what you meant. That I was famous and you didn't want to deal with all the hoopla."

Lois rolled her eyes. "First off, 'hoopla' is your word, not mine. And second, I was talking about the wedding, not the marriage, you lunthead. Do you really think a little publicity is going to keep me from marrying you? I just thought you wouldn't want word to get out to the press just yet. If we fly off to Vegas tonight, it will be all over the papers in the morning."

"Oh! I hadn't thought of that, but you're right." He hugged her tight. "That makes a lot more sense now."

Lois returned his hug. "I should think so." Her tone said that he'd been silly but she forgave him. "I'm still disappointed, though. Eloping sounded like a really good idea. I hate that we have to wait."

"Yeah, me too." Lois was beginning to wonder whether an engagement would satisfy Clark's reasons for waiting when he suddenly released her and grasped her face in both hands. Kissing her soundly, he announced with a wide grin, "I'm a genius."

"Really?" she smiled back at him. "And what particular feat of brilliance leads you to that conclusion?"

"You're going to kick yourself for not thinking of it first," he warned playfully.

"I'll take my chances. Do tell," she prodded.

"I know someone who can marry us tonight. Someone in a very out of the way place who has a lot of discretion. He wouldn't breathe a word to the press."

Clark was right. Lois was kicking herself for not thinking of it first. Nevertheless, she grinned back at him as they both said in

unison, "Ruben!"

Lois glanced at her watch. "Will we wake him?"

Clark's gave a cocky grin. "Do you really think he'll mind if we do?"

"Give me your hand." Obediently, Clark held his right hand out to her. "No, the other one." Lois reached for Clark's left hand and quickly removed 'Mr. Smith's' plain gold band. "Come on, then, let's go get married."

As it turned out, they didn't wake anyone. Tegucigalpa is an hour behind Metropolis, so it was only about 10:00 p.m. when Clark, one hand holding Lois's, knocked confidently on Ruben's front door. Lois heard a muffled call that she couldn't make out before the door opened to reveal the pastor, clad in shorts and a t-shirt and holding a mug of coffee in one hand. His welcoming smile turned to surprise and then quickly back to the smile again.

"Miguel! Susan! What a pleasant surprise. Won't you come in?"

"I hope we aren't keeping you up," Lois offered as the couple stepped into the small but cheery house.

"Not at all. I was just catching up on some reading."

"Is Carmen home?" Clark asked.

Before Lois could wonder who Carmen was, a plump middle-aged woman with a motherly air stepped into the room, wiping her hands on a towel. At the sight of Clark, she broke into a wide smile and came forward to hug him. "Miguel! Como estas?"

Returning the woman's hug with an equally affectionate one of his own, Clark said, "I'm fantastic, thanks, Carmen. It's great to see you." When the friends released each other, Clark put an arm around Lois's shoulder. Ruben did the same to Carmen.

"Lois, this is Carmen, Ruben's wife. Carmen, Ruben, this is Lois Lane, my fiancée." Clark beamed at the new word.

"Lois Lane. That explains a lot," Ruben nodded. "I read your Superman interview. I was very impressed."

"We were just about to have a snack," Carmen put in. "Won't you both come back to the kitchen and have some coffee and cake?"

Clark and Lois followed their hosts and took the proffered seats at their kitchen table, but Clark hastened to clarify, "Actually, we can't stay long. I know it might seem a little rude, but we came by to ask Ruben a favor."

"Oh. I'll give you some privacy, then." Carmen stood as if to take her leave, but Clark stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"That's not necessary, Carmen. In fact, I'm glad you're here. I think we may need a witness."

"A witness?" Ruben looked concerned. "For what? You're not here to sign some kind of contract?"

"Not exactly," Clark smiled. Reaching for Lois's hand, he looked at Ruben and said, "We want you to marry us. Tonight."

At least ten seconds passed before Ruben moved a muscle. Finally, he gave his head a little shake and said, "I'm sorry. I'm just a little..."

"Shocked?" Clark supplied with a cocky grin.

"Pleasantly surprised," his friend corrected.

"Then you'll do it?"

"I didn't say that...yet." Ruben looked at Lois and Clark in turn, his expression serious. "Have you two talked this over? Are you both certain that marriage is what you want?" He looked at Clark directly. "You know, Miguel, that I don't take this lightly. Are you in this for the long haul?"

"We're in this for life," Lois said.

"Yes, we are," Clark confirmed. "And, as you know, Ruben, my name isn't Miguel. It's Clark. Clark Kent."

If Lois had expected an awe-struck response to that revelation, she would have been sorely disappointed. Ruben just smiled and rolled his eyes and said, "Of course it is. Why not? I should have suspected. I thought that pastor in 'Northern

Passage' seemed familiar."

"Hey, a guy's got to get his material somewhere," Clark defended himself with a self-deprecating smile.

"Okay, then. If you're both certain that you know what you're getting into..."

"As much as any of us ever knows what we're getting into when we marry," Carmen put in with a teasing glance at her husband.

"...let's get you two hitched," Ruben finished.

"Well," Clark asked as he flew north with his new bride in his arms, "was that about what you had in mind when you proposed that we elope?"

"Not one bit," Lois answered. She laid a kiss on her husband's neck. "I was picturing a Vegas chapel with an Elvis impersonator."

"I bet you never planned to use the traditional vows either."

"You'd lose that bet, Mr. Kent. I've always been a secret romantic at heart. I grew up dreaming about those vows and finding the perfect man to say them to some day. I just never really expected the dream to come true."

"I meant every word, you know, even if we didn't write them ourselves."

"I know you did. And so did I. We belong to each other now, till death do us part."

Clark would have stopped flying to gaze at her then if he hadn't been in such a hurry to get back to the Honeymoon Suite. Instead, he contented himself with a quick kiss as they sped north. "I don't think I'll ever stop being amazed at that. I can hardly believe we're really married."

"Well, get us back to that honeymoon suite and I'll prove it to you."

It was midnight in Metropolis when Clark set his bride down on the roof of the Lexor and spun back into his civvies. They held hands all the way down the stairs, only letting go when Clark needed to fish the hotel key from his jacket pocket. He quickly opened the door and then surprised Lois by scooping her up into his arms.

"What are you doing?" she asked with a smile in her voice.

"Carrying my bride over the threshold, of course," he grinned. "The first time didn't count. And no Phil this time," he added, closing the door behind them. The moment he set her down again he drew her into a close embrace.

As much as she wanted to get her new husband into that big bed as soon as possible, Lois forced herself to pull away just long enough to check the surveillance equipment. She was relieved to find no indication of any activity while they were gone. Turning back to Clark, she caught the look of barely restrained desire in his eyes. Obviously she wasn't the only one in no mood to deal with a corrupt politician. "Looks like the coast is still clear," she assured him, "which is a good thing, because I've got more important things to do tonight than spy on Ian Harrington."

Clark returned his wife's knowing smile and stepped toward her, his eyes never leaving hers until he was standing only inches in front of her. His arms went around her waist, and her hands reached up to meander through his hair. Their lips melded together with an intensity that neither had allowed themselves before this night. This was no light necking or foretaste of pleasures to come. It wasn't the heat of hormones getting carried away only to be reined in at almost the last possible moment. This was kissing with intent — the intent being to lead from one level of intimacy to the next with no stops before that ultimate intimacy that would make them one in every possible way.

When it seemed that the next step would be more enjoyable in the bedroom, Clark pulled away just enough to take Lois by the hand and lead the way. They were almost at the doorway

when a loud beeping noise made both of them jump.

"Oh, no. Don't tell me," Lois started, letting out an exasperated sigh. Simultaneously, the audio feed kicked in. Clark clenched one hand into a fist and let out a frustrated grunt, but he went to the window and looked out, his attention now completely focused on the office across the street. Lois saw lights come on in the windows. At the same time, the sounds of movement and voices coming from the audio equipment announced the arrival of their targets. With a resigned shrug, Lois double-checked the aim of the video camera and then reached for the binoculars. She was on the verge of offering a second pair to Clark when she caught herself. He didn't need them.

In the Apocalypse Consulting office, the congressman handed a thick envelope to one of his companions. His voice came clearly from the recording equipment. "That's the last of the system specs. I'll have the information on the testing for you tomorrow. Dates, procedures, the whole thing."

"Good. What about a new vote?" the one Lois had dubbed Tough Guy replied.

Harrington's exasperated voice said, "I can't initiate a re-vote until after the test results are analyzed and the plan rejected. Hopefully..."

But Tough Guy was brooking no excuses. "'Hopefully' isn't good enough. That's why I bought insurance: *you*."

The congressman's reply was quick. "You don't own me, Roarke." Well, that supplied a name to go with Tough Guy's face.

Roarke grabbed Harrington by the collar and pushed him hard against the wall. His voice was a deadly growl as he stated, "I own you lock, stock, and re-election fund, Mr. Chairman. Never forget that."

The third man dragged Roarke off the beleaguered politician. Harrington straightened up and drew himself together. In a shaky voice, he tried again. "I only meant... are you sure you can pull this off?"

"I guarantee it."

"Because if you don't, what happens to me?" Harrington sounded as nervous as he looked.

Roarke's only answer was an ominous, "Pray you never find out."

Harrington beat a hasty retreat, not bothering to close the door behind him. The minute he was gone, Roarke and his companion burst into noisy laughter. Soon they also left, closing up the office as they went.

When it was clear that nothing else would be happening, Lois turned to Clark and said, "What would you say if I said that I don't have a clue what they're talking about, but that, whatever it is, it's even bigger than I originally thought?"

Clark's frown slowly morphed into a smile as he replied, "I'd say two things. One, you're absolutely right. And two, there's nothing to be done about it until morning. Whatever vote they're talking about, it isn't going to happen tonight. I think our best bet is to take these recordings to the Planet first thing in the morning and see if Perry can make more sense of that conversation than we can."

Lois thought for a moment before replying, "I think you're right. We'll leave the automatic equipment set up and take what we've got to Perry first thing tomorrow." A small frown creased her brow. "I'm sorry we can't sleep in. It doesn't seem right to set an alarm clock on our wedding night."

Clark just smiled and drew her close to him. "Say that again," he said.

"What? Setting an alarm?" She let her eyes go wide with mock innocence.

"Nope." He drew her even closer and started trailing kisses down her neck. "Wedding night. I like the sound of that."

"Mmmmm. We've got a busy day tomorrow. I guess we'd better get to bed."

"I guess we'd better," he said, scooping her into his arms again, "but not to sleep just yet."

"Oh, no," she agreed, grasping him around the neck and placing her own kisses wherever she could reach, "Definitely not to sleep."

Clark was the first one awake in the morning. As he slowly rose towards consciousness, he quickly progressed from a vague feeling that something wonderful had happened to renewed wonder at the unbelievable truth — he was married to Lois Lane. To Lois Kent? They hadn't even discussed a possible name change for her, but that was only a fleeting thought. His attention was much better spent on gazing down at the sleeping form of his wife and turning that delightful word over and over again in his mind. Wife...wife...wife...he'd never get tired of that word.

Outside, the sun was not quite up yet. Inside, it wouldn't have mattered if it were because the heavy hotel drapes were drawn tight across the window. Still, there was enough light for Clark to make out the shape of one tussled dark head, a fan of hair spread across his own bare chest, a shapely bare shoulder leading to a slender arm, and a hand, curled in the relaxation of sleep, resting in the crook of his right elbow. It was her left hand. He noticed because of the rings. Just for the sheer joy of seeing it, he raised his own left hand and brought it into his field of vision.

The movement disturbed his sleeping beauty, and she raised her head to look at him. "Morning," she said, her smile mirroring his own earlier dawning realization. They'd really done it.

"Good morning to you, too," he returned. He knew he was staring at her, but he couldn't stop. Not that he really wanted to, anyway.

After a moment, a small frown flitted across her face. "What?" she said in the tone of a woman who wonders whether she has spinach stuck in her teeth.

"Nothing," he assured her. "It's just that...you're beautiful first thing in the morning." He couldn't stop smiling at her either.

"Yeah, well, you're not so bad yourself," she replied with a dazzling smile of her own. Grasping her gently with a hand on either side of her waist, he drew her higher up his body until he could easily reach her mouth for a good morning kiss. "Mmmm, I could get used to waking up this way," she mused.

"You and me, both," he agreed readily. "I've never woken up with a beautiful woman in my bed before."

"Oh?" she teased, "Who *have* you woken up with?"

"Only my cousin, Jake, when my dad took us camping the summer after sixth grade. Trust me, Jake can't hold a candle to you."

"High praise, indeed. I'll bet he never kissed you like this, either." She fitted action to words.

When she drew back, Clark replied, "Jake never kissed me at all, thank goodness. You, on the other hand, are quite a handful in the morning."

"Oh, I'm a handful any time of day, in more ways than one. Lucky for you, your hands know just what to do with me." She wagged her eyebrows suggestively.

"So you liked what these hands did last night, did you?" His hands roamed over her body as if looking for something fun to do this morning.

"Do you even have to ask?" Her hands were giving his a run for their money. Then, faster than she could follow, he laid her down next to him and covered her to the chin with the sheet. He was staring intently at the bedroom door.

"Clark? What is it?"

After a moment, he shook his head and turned back to her. "Nothing. Just the maid with fresh towels. She tried to open the door, but the lock stopped her. I guess she finally noticed the 'Do Not Disturb' sign because she left the towels in the hall."

Lois scowled at the incompetence of the Lexor's staff. "She

should be more careful. Doesn't she know what people do in a honeymoon suite? And who does she expect to be awake at this hour anyway?"

Clark gave his wife an easy grin as he resumed his earlier explorations. "Well, I don't know about the maid, but I'm wide awake, and I certainly know what to do in a honeymoon suite."

"How long until the alarm goes off?" Lois asked in one final moment of lucidity.

"Long enough," was all he said.

They were wrapped around each other, both of them floating in and out of a very satisfied doze, when the alarm finally rang. "Mmmm...make it stop," Lois grunted.

Clark obliged, freeing one arm to reach for the offending machine, then brushed her hair back from her face and kissed her temple. Easing himself out from under her, he said, "I'll take the first shower. You roll over and catch another five minutes of sleep."

That brought Lois wide awake. "You expect me to sleep while you're in that shower? And miss the view?"

That earned a chuckle from Clark. "Honey, there isn't anything you haven't already seen."

"True, but there's more light in the bathroom," she countered.

"Have it your way," he grinned. When he was half-way across the room, he turned back with a saucy, "You know, we can leave the lights on any time you like."

Fifteen minutes later, they were both showered and wrapped in plush terrycloth robes. They were quickly discovering that, while the idea of sharing a bathroom might seem romantic at first blush, the reality was a little awkward. It was a large bathroom with two sinks, but that didn't stop them from issuing a long string of 'excuse me's' as they reached past each other for toothbrushes, combs, and various other accoutrements. Clark was especially nervous about shaving while Lois was in the room. One wrong move and she could end up with a serious burn.

"It's going to take some getting used to, isn't it?" he ventured with a sheepish half-smile. "You know, we don't have to get ready at the same time. I could wait and let you finish first."

Lois brushed a final stroke of mascara onto her lashes. "Don't worry about it, Clark. We'll work it out one way or the other. I used to share a bathroom with Lucy at home. Sometimes we took turns, sometimes we worked around each other, especially on cold school days when neither one wanted to be the first one out of bed. It all worked out. Like you said, it just takes a little getting used to."

Clark wrapped his arms around Lois from behind and looked over her head at their joint reflection. "I can hardly believe this is real — that we're not just undercover here and I don't have to go back to sleeping alone when this investigation is over. It seems too good to be true."

Lois placed her hands over his where they rested at her waist. The tender gesture belied her teasing words. "Oh, believe me, Kent, if you were only my undercover work partner, you would have slept alone last night. On that sofa in the living room."

Clark gave a playful shudder. "Ouch. I would have hated that."

"I'll just bet you would have." She turned in his arms to face him, bringing one hand up to toy with that adorable curl that always fell over his forehead, her other hand resting lightly on his chest. "Lucky for you you're my husband and not my work partner."

"See, there's another word I'm going to love getting used to. Husband...husband...husband. It has a nice ring to it, don't you think?" He bent down to nuzzle her ear.

Lois leaned her head to one side to give him better access, but then she straightened up and freed herself from his embrace. "I'll tell you what I think — I think we're both going to be late if we

don't get a move on. I haven't even had my coffee yet."

Clark laughed and followed Lois out of the bathroom. "Okay, but I'm calling my travel agent this morning, as soon as I get the number from Lana. We're getting away for a real honeymoon as soon as possible."

"Oh!" Lois had been reaching into a drawer for her underwear, but she stopped and turned back to face Clark. "I hadn't thought about calling people. We haven't told anyone that we're married. As much as I like Lana, I don't really think she should be the first to know."

"No. Nor Perry, either. We'd better call both sets of parents right away." A thought struck Clark and he almost went pale. "Oh, oh. Lois, I've never even met your parents. What are they going to think when they find out you ran off and married a celebrity playboy?"

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that, either." Very quickly, Lois gave an easy shrug and said, "I'm not worried, though. I learned long ago not to pay much attention to what my parents think. And Lucy will be over the moon," she added with a smile.

They both continued dressing while they finished their conversation. "You know my folks will be thrilled," Clark said. "They loved you right from the start, just like I did."

"They won't be disappointed not to have been at the ceremony?"

"Maybe a little, at first, but mostly they'll be happy for us. What about your mom? Will she feel left out that she didn't get to help you plan a big wedding?"

"Maybe, but that's just too bad. I wouldn't have wanted to be part of any wedding she planned anyway. We can make it up to her with a reception after the holidays. If you don't mind, that is."

"I don't mind at all. We'll probably need to have one just to get the entertainment press off our backs anyway." Clark adjusted his tie and, seeing that Lois was almost ready as well, he held her suit coat for her to slip her arms into.

"The press," Lois frowned. "That's something else I hadn't thought about."

"Honey, I hate to break it to you, but you *are* the press," he said in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Yes, but I'm not the entertainment press."

"Mud-slinging rumor-mongers, I've heard you call them."

"Precisely."

"Actually, they're not all that bad. You just have to know how to handle them. The trick is to get your story out first the way you want it told. It helps if you can find one or two reporters you trust in case you need to 'leak' something. How do you feel about Cat? Could we trust her to do a good job if we offered her an exclusive?"

Lois cocked her head in thought. "You know, I think we could. I've never really taken her seriously, but I have occasionally read her work. She's flamboyant, but I think she's fair. Should we talk to her today?"

"Maybe. I think we can probably wait a little bit, though. As far as everyone at the Planet is concerned, you've married Caleb Knight. That might be good for water cooler gossip, but it hardly rates a mention in Cat's Corner. We won't hit the papers until you show up somewhere with Clark Kent."

"Somewhere like Luthor's dinner this Friday?"

Clark frowned at that. "I guess that's the logical first public appearance..."

"But?" Lois prompted, straightening his tie.

"But I just hate the idea of us 'coming out' at any event associated with Lex Luthor. It may sound silly, but I'd like our first public appearance to be free of Luthor's taint."

Lois gave him a thoughtful frown followed by a small nod. "I guess I can understand that. Who else would you take to Luthor's dinner? Would you take Lana again?"

Clark shook his head. "No. Clark Kent is through showing up

anywhere with any woman other than you. I'll go alone."

Lois's eyebrows shot up. "Clark Kent going stag to a public event? Won't that raise eyebrows?"

"Not as many as this ring will," he answered, holding up his left hand with a smile.

"You're going to wear it? You could take it off until Saturday. We *are* going to the Book Awards dinner together, aren't we?"

"Of course we are. And, no, I'm not taking this ring off. It means too much for that. I want to put off telling the world *who* I married, but only because I want us to choose our own time and place for that announcement. Even so, from now on everyone is going to know that Clark Kent is taken. Period."

"What about Superman?"

Clark paused for a minute. He hadn't really thought about Superman. There hadn't been anyone to see them on their way back from Honduras and he'd worn his wedding ring for the trip. As soon as he gave the matter a moment's thought, however, the answer was obvious. "Superman is a special case. He's not really me. He's more like a character I play." Before Lois could argue, he preempted her. "I know he's part of me, but I'm not talking about my identity issues here. My point is that, as far as the public is concerned, Superman has no private life, and he certainly has no family. It would be far too risky for you, especially given how distinctive our rings are."

As much as she hated the idea of either of them taking their rings off, Lois knew that Clark was right. She might even have to do the same thing if she ever went undercover. It came with the territory for both of them, so she nodded her acceptance. "I agree. So the ring comes off for Superman, but not for anything else."

"Yep. That's about the size of it." A small frown crossed Clark's face. "If you agree, that is. You don't want to keep our marriage a secret, do you?"

"Are you kidding? You're not the only one who wants the world to know that Clark Kent is taken."

"And so is Lois Lane Kent," he pointed out.

"Just sort of slipped that name in there, didn't you?" she teased.

He grinned back at her. "It sounds nice, don't you think?"

She gave that a moment's thought. "Yeah, I guess it does. I'm still keeping Lane for professional purposes, though."

"You can keep it all the time if you really want to. I'd love to share my name with you, but it's your call."

"I know it is, but I like the idea of sharing a name. And since it would only confuse everyone if you changed your name to Lane," she teased, "I guess Kent will work for our private lives."

Any further logistical planning was forestalled by a loud rumble from Lois's stomach. It was one of those sounds that couldn't be ignored. They both looked at each other, and Clark grinned. "Come on, hungry lady. Let's get you some breakfast and get us both into the office."

"You mean get us some breakfast, call our parents, and *then* get us into the office."

"Yeah, that's what I meant." Clark gave a mock cringe to show how much he was looking forward to calling Lois's parents. Then he ushered her through the bedroom door into the living room. "How about room service? That will give us a chance to call our folks while we wait."

"Sounds like a plan, as long as they're fast with the coffee."

Lois gazed idly out the window while Clark leafed through the menu. "You know, I'm pretty sure I saw some file cabinets in that office," she mused aloud.

"I wouldn't be surprised," he answered absently. "They're pretty standard office furniture. What would you like? Besides coffee, I mean?"

"Huh?" Lois was obviously distracted. "Oh, French toast sounds good if they've got it." Her eyes never left the window.

"Yep. It's served with fresh berries. Don't ask me where the

Lexor gets fresh berries in December, but there you are.” When his comment received no reply, Clark set the menu down and approached his wife. He didn’t have to look hard to realize that she was planning something. Approaching her from behind and laying a kiss on her cheek, he said, “I know that look. That’s your ‘I’ve got an idea that Clark probably isn’t going to like but I’m going to talk him into it’ look.”

That finally got her attention. “Really?” She raised an eyebrow. “You’ve seen that look before, have you? Is that how you recognize it so easily?”

He grinned unapologetically. “Yep. So let’s have it. What are you cooking up?”

“For your information, oh all-seeing husband, I’m not ‘cooking up’ anything at all. I’m just wondering what’s in those files.”

“Ah. And you want your reporting partner to help you break in and copy them.”

“I didn’t say that. Breaking and entering is illegal. I wouldn’t ask you to do that.”

“Uh, huh.” Clark waited for the other shoe to drop. He knew there was one.

“That’s right,” she said in a very reasonable tone. “I only want you to take a peek and see if there’s anything in there that’s worth *me* breaking and entering for.”

Clark rolled his eyes, but the corners of his mouth twitched. “Tell you what,” he offered, “You order breakfast while I take a look from here. I’m not promising how much I’ll be able to read — it’s not easy to read small print through so many layers of walls and paper, even for me. But maybe I’ll find something that will help us know where to start investigating.”

Lois raised herself up on her toes to kiss him. “My hero,” she gushed.

“I said investigating, not breaking and entering,” he clarified.

“I heard you,” she confirmed. She didn’t seem very concerned about the distinction. “What do you want for breakfast?” she asked, the phone receiver already in her hand.

When Lois hung up the phone, she turned to ask whether Clark was able to read the files. The look on his face stopped her from speaking. Instead, she came to stand silently beside him, one hand on his shoulder for moral support. A hand placed over hers was his only acknowledgement. He continued to stare through the hotel window and the office wall, his frown growing deeper by the minute. Lois was really starting to worry when his countenance cleared and he turned to her with a sigh of relief.

“Well?” she prompted. “You obviously found something. What is it, and do I need to break in there and get a copy of it?”

“It’s Luthor.” To Lois’s surprise, Clark’s voice didn’t carry the same tone of disdain that normally accompanied that name. Then he continued, and she understood why. “Only Luthor’s not the bad guy this time — he’s the victim.”

“Come again?” Lois gestured to the sofa and they both sat down to talk this over and wait for breakfast. “Let’s start at the beginning,” she suggested. “What had you so concerned? You looked ready to faint.”

The frown crossed Clark’s face again, but only as a memory. “The vote that Harrington and Roarke were talking about involves a Defense Department contract for an early warning coastal defense system. Roarke is apparently an arms dealer. His company put in a bid for the contract, but they lost.”

“And the winner’s system is scheduled to be tested soon, which is why they were talking about a test failure and a re-vote. Roarke is going to sabotage the test of the winning system, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, and that was what had me so upset. Roarke can’t just gum up the works for his rival. He needs a catastrophic failure, one that leaves no room for readjustments. If his sabotage works

as planned, Metropolis and most of the Eastern Seaboard will be hit with a tsunami. Thousands of people will be killed.”

“Clark! That’s terrible! I’ve got to get in there and get copies to give to the police, the Coast Guard, the Governor... someone has to put a stop to that test.” Lois was already on her feet, but Clark stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

“It’s okay, Lois. You don’t need to go in there. That’s why I was so relieved. I was worried that no one would believe us without hard evidence, but then I finally found the crucial piece of information.”

“Luthor.” Lois put the pieces together. “Luthor’s company won the contract. He’s the one Roarke is trying to sabotage.”

“Exactly. If you call Luthor and tell him that an anonymous source — that would be me — told you about Roarke’s planned sabotage, Luthor can have his entire system checked for tampering. Meanwhile, you can tell Bill Henderson that the same anonymous source tipped you off about the files. Between your tip, whatever tampering evidence Luthor finds, and the tapes from last night, the police have got probable cause to search that office. There’s no need for us to go in there. Meanwhile, we can keep the surveillance operation going here in case anything else comes up before the police get there.”

Lois opened her mouth to argue — it just couldn’t be that simple, could it? — but she quickly thought better of it. Clark was right, and, given the longstanding arrangement she had with Bill, she’d get an exclusive in return for the tip. Problem solved. Which, she soon realized, made this working honeymoon a little less work and a little more honeymoon.

Her smile faded as another thought struck her.

They still had to call their parents.

As Editor in Chief of the Daily Planet, Perry White often had to take calls from important people. Usually they called to complain about some part of the Planet’s coverage that they found unfair or biased. So it was a pleasant change of pace to be on the receiving end of a grateful VIP call for once. “Really, Mr. Luthor, no thanks are necessary,” he said graciously. “We’re just doing our job as the fourth estate... Yes, I’ll make sure to pass your message on as soon as I see her.” Perry caught sight of Lois and Caleb striding down the bullpen ramp and waved for them to come into his office. Meanwhile, he still had one ear on his telephone conversation. “Yes, I’m looking forward to it. I’ll see you Friday.” As he spoke, he watched the pair part ways. Caleb headed for Lois’s desk and pulled a stack of papers out of a leather briefcase. Lois headed for Perry. He was just hanging up when she popped her head in his door.

“You waved?” she asked jauntily. My, she was in a good mood this morning. And why not? She was the hero of the day, at least as far as Lex Luthor was concerned.

“You’ll never guess who just called,” Perry said, although he was sure she knew exactly whom he’d been talking to.

“Let me guess. Lex Luthor’s personal assistant,” she offered, making herself at home in one of Perry’s guest chairs.

“Even better — the man himself. He wanted me to pass on his personal gratitude to you for saving his Project Shockwave from an embarrassing and potentially disastrous sabotage attempt. Should I even ask who your anonymous tipster is?”

Lois gave a cocky grin. “Sources, Chief — they’re the lifeblood of journalism.”

“Hmmm... seems I’ve heard that somewhere before,” he teased. “I take it there’s going to be a story to go with Mr. Luthor’s heartfelt admiration. How much room should I save you in the evening edition?”

“Half a page, Chief. Front page, above the fold,” Lois answered triumphantly.

“It’s that good, is it?” He didn’t really doubt her, but he didn’t want to give her a swelled head either.

“Oh, yeah, it’s that good,” she answered, rising from the chair and checking her watch. “And I’ve got to get working on it right now.”

She was half-way to the door before Perry said, “Where’s the fire, Lois? You’ve got four hours until the evening deadline.”

“I know,” she shot back. Her mouth gave a wry twist as she added, “But I’ve only got two before I’m supposed to meet my mother for lunch.”

Ellen Lane was the first to arrive for the lunch date. She looked around and glared at the elegant tables and their equally elegant patrons. She didn’t know what Lois was trying to pull by insisting that they meet at Robert Henry’s, the fanciest restaurant in the business district. Probably hoping that Ellen wouldn’t dare make a scene in such a sophisticated setting. Well, if that was the case, her wayward daughter was in for a rude awakening.

A tall middle-aged man in a surprisingly well-tailored suit approached. “Ms. Lane?” he asked tentatively.

Ellen was surprised that the man knew her name. “Yes,” she confirmed, her scowl morphing into consternation.

Neither expression seemed to affect the maitre-d. He merely smiled warmly and offered to take her coat. After handing the garment off to an underling, the man explained, “Your daughter arranged for a private dining room. If you will follow me?”

Ellen trailed after the man without serious objection, but she did have to ask, “A private room? Whatever for?” She really did think that Lois and her new... whatever he was... were carrying things a little too far. She refused to think the word ‘husband.’ Once Ellen was through talking some sense into her oldest child, she was sure that this so-called marriage could be easily dealt with. Running off and marrying some guy that Ellen had never even heard of before — what on Earth had gotten into that girl?

Ellen was on her second Long Island Iced Tea when her prodigal daughter deigned to appear. Looking at her watch in the most obvious way possible, Ellen said, “You’re late. Where’s your...” she waved her hand in a vague gesture.

Lois leaned down to kiss her mother on the cheek. “Good afternoon to you, too, Mother,” she said in a cheerful voice that took no notice of the rudeness of Ellen’s greeting. Taking her seat, Lois unfolded her napkin and placed it in her lap before continuing in a conversational tone, “My *husband* is just a few minutes behind me. He had a small work crisis to deal with, so he’s meeting me here.”

That excuse didn’t impress Ellen. “Hmph. So you married a man who thinks that work is more important than his family. I’ve been down that road, young lady, and it doesn’t end well, believe me.” When she saw that Lois had no intention of rising to the bait, Ellen went on, “Maybe it’s just as well. It gives us an opportunity to talk alone.”

Lois was spared the necessity of replying to that remark by the arrival of their waiter. “Welcome to Robert Henry’s, Mrs...” Lois cut him off before he could finish his sentence.

“Thank you. My husband is running a little late. I’ll have seltzer with a twist of lime while we wait. He’ll be coming in the back entrance. I assume that the hallway is clear?”

If the waiter was offended at Lois’s abruptness, he didn’t show it. He merely smiled and assured her, “Of course. We at Robert Henry’s pride ourselves on our discretion.” The two of them exchanged a glance that Ellen couldn’t decipher. Whatever the secret message was, it caused a marked improvement in Lois’s manners. She gave the waiter a warm smile and a sincere “Thank you.”

“My name is Ernest, and I’ll be taking care of you today,” the young man introduced himself. “Can I interest you ladies in an appetizer while you wait for the gentleman?”

Lois glanced briefly at the menu, then at Ellen. “What do you think, Mother? What looks good to you?”

Ellen scowled. “At these prices? I’ve just about lost my appetite.”

Lois shot the waiter an apologetic look, and then she turned that warm smile on him again. “I’ve never been here before. Is there something you especially recommend?” she asked.

“Well, I’d have to know what you plan on having for your entrée in order to make a good recommendation. If you like, I can have the chef put together a complete menu of his choice,” the young man offered.

Lois brightened at the suggestion. “That sounds great, Ernest. Just don’t give us anything with capers, and make sure that the dessert involves chocolate.”

Ernest gave Lois an answering smile of his own. “As you wish. I’ll be right back with your drink.” So saying, he turned on his heel and left mother and daughter alone again.

“Well, that was informative.” Ellen gave her daughter an appraising look over the rim of her glass.

“What was?” Lois was obviously trying to sound innocent, but Ellen wasn’t buying it.

“The way you gave the waiter carte blanche to serve what will no doubt be the most expensive lunch on the menu.” Ellen leaned forward and pinned Lois with narrowed eyes. “Please tell me you haven’t married a surgeon.” When Lois didn’t answer right away, Ellen rolled her eyes. “You have, haven’t you? It fits. The work crisis, the freely flowing money — although one would think that a successful surgeon would be able to give his bride a larger ring — and I don’t know why he feels the need to sneak in the back hallway and hide out in a private dining room.”

“Mother, calm down, please. I didn’t marry a surgeon.”

A new thought occurred to Ellen and she frowned. “Not a lawyer, I hope?”

Lois gave a very unladylike snort and rolled her eyes. “No, Mother, even I’m not crazy enough for that.”

At that moment the man in question came striding through the door. Ellen recognized him instantly, of course. His was one of the most famous faces in the world. She thought at first that he had wandered into the wrong room — this couldn’t possibly be Lois’s new husband. But his eyes lit up when he saw them and he headed straight for Lois. Oh, my. No wonder he’d come in the back entrance. For a moment she was frozen by a combination of shock and celebrity awe. If he realized the effect he had on her, he didn’t show it. In fact, he gave absolutely no indication that he was anyone special.

“Sorry I’m late,” he announced with an easy smile. He leaned down and kissed Lois — briefly, thank goodness — before pulling back and asking, “What aren’t you crazy enough for?” His amused tone implied that he was having a hard time imagining anything that Lois wouldn’t be nuts enough to try at least once.

For a moment Ellen thought that Lois looked just as startled as Ellen felt — as if she, too, were a little taken aback by the appearance of the famous man with the elegant style and the brilliant smile. But then Lois grinned up at him and answered, “I was just reassuring my poor worried mother that I hadn’t married a doctor or a lawyer.”

“Ah. That would be my cue to introduce myself, then.” He reached across the table to offer Ellen his right hand. “You must be Ellen,” he smiled. “You’ll be relieved to know that I am neither a doctor nor a lawyer. I’m a writer. My name is...”

“Clark Kent,” Ellen and Mr. Kent said in unison. Kent’s smile grew wider in friendly acknowledgement of Ellen’s recognition, but Ellen’s face was still frozen in shock.

As Mr. Kent took his seat next to Lois and across from Ellen, Lois acted as if nothing untoward had happened. “See, Mother? You don’t have to worry. Clark won’t be missing dinners and ballet recitals for emergency surgeries.”

The comment brought Ellen back to reality. It was all very

nice to think of Lois married to a rich celebrity, but Ellen wasn't a bit reassured about her daughter's judgment in men. In fact, she was more worried than ever. Snapping out of her daze, she turned a somber face on the pair of young people. "I'd really hoped that you would learn from my mistakes, Lois, but I suppose you are doomed to repeat history."

Lois frowned in confusion. "What do you mean, Mother? We just told you, Clark's not a doctor. He's nothing like Daddy."

"Isn't he?" Ellen turned a challenging glare on her daughter. "He's not a doctor, no, but he is exactly like your father in the one respect that matters most." Her glare moved to take in Mr. Kent as well — he might be a celebrity, but that didn't give him the right to seduce Ellen's daughter for his own selfish ends. "He's a philanderer," she accused.

Lois's reaction was instantaneous and furious. "Mother! How dare you! I don't care what you..." She was working up a good head of steam in defense of her husband, but he stopped her with a gentle hand on her shoulder. She broke off in mid-sentence and the pair exchanged glances. Kent's mollifying look was met with an expression from Lois that even Ellen could interpret. It said "I'll hold my tongue for now, but only because it's you asking, and I reserve the right to continue this thought if I'm not satisfied with what you're about to say."

Apparently that was good enough for Kent, because he moved his hand from Lois's shoulder down to grasp her hand supportively. Then he turned to Ellen with a look of open apology. "Mrs. Lane, I am more sorry than I can say that I have given you every reason to doubt my faithfulness to your daughter. Frankly, if any daughter of mine had run off and eloped with a man of my reputation, I'd be just as angry at him and just as worried for her as you are now. I can't think of anything I can say to reassure you. I can only ask that you give me a chance to prove to you that my reputation is unfounded." Ellen opened her mouth to argue, but Kent pressed on before she could get a word in. "I don't deny that I've dated many women, and rarely the same one twice. But that's as far as it went — just a date. I was always completely up front with every one of them. They all knew that a date with Clark Kent was not a long-term proposition, and that, in fact, there was no *proposition* involved at all, if you take my meaning."

"Not that it's any of your business," Lois put in pointedly.

"No, honey, it is her business. Not the details, obviously, but your mother is worried for your happiness, and she has every right to be." Turning back to Ellen, he went on, "Mrs. Lane, please believe me when I say that I've never broken any woman's heart, and I don't intend to start now. Up until now, no woman's heart has ever been mine to break. And now," he gave Lois a tender glance, "Lois has given her heart into my keeping, as I have given mine into hers. I'm sure we'll make mistakes along the way, just like any other couple, but neither of us is going anywhere. We're both in this for life."

The look Clark gave Ellen at the end of his little speech was both pleading and hopeful. She was skeptical, but, really, what option did she have? It was all well and good to try to bully Lois into backing out of her hasty marriage, but now that she saw the two of them together, Ellen had to admit that it was a losing battle. Lois was an adult. She hadn't taken advice from Ellen in years — why would she start now? But that didn't mean that Ellen had to swallow Kent's snow job hook, line, and sinker.

She settled for a noncommittal, "We'll see, Mr. Kent. Time will tell."

The smile he gave her was relieved more than charming. "That's all I can hope for, Mrs. Lane...that you give me a chance and let my actions speak louder than my reputation."

"Oh, all right. If you're really going to be around for a while, I guess you'd better call me Ellen." The offer may have been a little begrudging, but it earned her a full-blown patented Clark

Kent smile nevertheless.

An hour later, Lois walked her mother to her cab while Clark stayed behind to settle the bill. When she came back to the private dining room, she passed Ernest on his way out. Clark was just tucking his wallet back into his pocket, and he stood as she entered the room and held out his arms in silent invitation. Lois walked into his embrace and rested her head against his chest.

This was a nice side benefit of having a private dining room — no worries about public displays of affection. Clark's right hand was running up and down her back in a slow, soothing rhythm.

"I am *so* glad that's over," she sighed. "And I'm glad my dad already knows you."

"Your dad knows Caleb," Clark corrected, "but after what happened with Menken and his fighters, I think some of Caleb's brownie points are probably transferable to Clark."

"They'd better be, because I'm not making you sit through a grilling like that one again."

Clark gave a low chuckle that Lois found incongruous. She pulled back just enough to see his face. "I'm glad one of us can find something to laugh about," she challenged. To her consternation, he only smiled wider.

"I'm laughing at you," he said, his affectionate touch on her cheek taking any potential sting out of the words. "My dad was a little worried about how you'd stand up to the entertainment press..."

"Mud-slinging rumor mongers," Lois corrected automatically — which made Clark laugh again.

"I wouldn't recommend calling them that to their faces, but that's just what I'm talking about. The way you kept defending me to your mom — who, by the way, wasn't giving me anything that my reputation doesn't richly deserve — I'm not one bit worried about you getting run over by the Cat Grants of the world, or the Leo Nunks for that matter."

Lois could feel the corners of her mouth twitching, and she soon gave up trying to suppress the smile. No one but Clark was so adept at teasing her out of a bad mood. No one but Clark or Perry would even dare try.

Taking a step or two backward, she surveyed her husband from head to toe and back again. Knowing exactly what she was doing, Clark cooperated by turning in a slow circle.

Coming back around to face her, he gave her a hopeful look and said, "Well? It's been a while since you've seen Clark Kent up close and personal. What do you think?"

"Well..." she drew the word out in a mock-critical tone, "He's a little formal for my taste, but maybe that's just because I'm used to Caleb. The clothes are okay. You look really good in blue jeans, but I guess you can't wear them to all your book signings."

"Wait till you see me in a tux," he grinned cockily.

"I *have* seen you in a tux. You were wearing one the first time I met you. And yes, you looked great in it." Her tone said not to let it go to his head. She resumed her critical inspection, affecting the concentrated gaze of someone looking for the fatal flaw in an otherwise perfect work of art. After a moment she gave a decisive nod and announced, "It's the hair mousse. It's got to go."

Clark merely grinned in easy acquiescence. "I agree. I only wore it today so your mom would recognize me. From now on, I'm done with hair mousse. And lambs wool, too, come to think of it. And probably a few other things." Beaming at Lois, he summed up, "Clark Kent is back, but he's not the man most people will be expecting any more. He's...just me."

Lois gave him an answering grin, but then she looked at her watch and switched gears. "Well, just you sounds great to me, but just me needs to get back to work."

"Do you need any more help on the Shockwave story?" Clark asked.

"No. It's already in to the editors. There's really no need for Caleb to put in another appearance at the Planet today. But that reminds me — Perry wants you to come to the morning staff meeting tomorrow if you're free."

Clark gave a confused frown. "Why does your editor want your husband at his staff meeting?"

Lois shook her head. "I don't think Perry even realizes that we're married yet. We were both so busy today that no one got close enough to notice that we're not wearing our undercover rings. My editor wants my 'special assistant' at his staff meeting because he's hoping to convince you to come on staff full time. At least that's my guess. You might as well show up and turn him down to his face. He'll only keep wheedling us both until you do."

"All right. Let me pick you up after work tonight," he offered. "We still have the suite at the Lexor. We can order room service and enjoy an evening in without spy duty. Or we can stay at your place or mine if you'd rather. I can cook or we can grab some carry-out on the way home."

Lois thought for a moment. They hadn't discussed the issue of where they would live. Her lease wasn't up for another few months, but it wasn't as if they needed to save on rent. "Let's stay at the Lexor tonight," she suggested. "We've already got clothes for both of us there. We can check out in the morning and move some of my stuff into your place tomorrow night."

"Or I can move some stuff into your apartment. You don't have to give up your place."

"I know I don't. But your place is bigger, and it's new. I kind of like the idea of starting off together in a new house. We'll move some of my old things in and still have plenty of room for new things that we choose together."

For a moment they just looked at each other, silently savoring the novelty of having one place for both of them to call 'home.' "I'd like that," Clark finally said, his voice still full of that 'I can't believe this is really happening' feeling.

Then, giving her head a little shake, Lois gave her husband one last parting kiss and headed back to work.

Lex Luthor looked up from the financial report he was perusing. "Yes, Nigel? What can I do for you?"

Nigel took a few more steps into his employer's office. "I beg your pardon, sir. I have made arrangements with a Mr. Ross, Clark Kent's security officer, to tour the ballroom tomorrow evening. Given this morning's developments, I thought it prudent to reconfirm your plans for Friday evening."

"No change, Nigel. Mr. Knight may have had a part in saving my Shockwave project, but that doesn't get Mr. Kent off the hook. I'm not saying that Superman wouldn't intervene even if I were the only one kidnapped, but the presence of a second high-profile hostage will certainly sweeten the pot. Besides, someone needs to get shot so that I can kill our stooge in his defense. With Superman dead from our glowing green secret weapon, the kidnapper killed in my struggle to save my guest, and the unfortunate guest dead at the hands of the kidnapper, I will be the only witness alive to tell the tale."

"As you wish, sir. Everything is in order."

Something in his underling's tone made Lex give the man a second look. "You seem troubled, Nigel." When the older man hesitated, Lex prodded, "I don't pay you to be a yes-man. If there is something that I've overlooked, spit it out, man."

Nigel took a moment to gather his thoughts, then he ventured, "I realize that you are counting on the element of surprise with this..."

"I've dubbed it 'Kryptonite'," Lex supplied with a touch of pride.

"...This Kryptonite," Nigel continued. "Nevertheless, I'd feel a good deal more confident if we had more than Mrs. Cox's

single field test and the theories of an arguably unstable rogue military officer. At the risk of sounding blunt, sir — What if it doesn't work?"

Lex leaned back in his chair and placed both hands behind his head with a satisfied air. "Ah, Nigel, you underestimate me. That possibility has crossed my mind, and that is the reason for the hired help. If the stone has no effect on Superman, then he simply rescues me and my esteemed guest from the kidnapper and we both live to fight another day."

"And the kidnapper? You aren't worried about being ratted out, to put it less than delicately?"

Lex dismissed that possibility with a wave of his hand. "It will be his word against mine and he will be dead from some unfortunate jailhouse accident before he can find anyone willing to take his story seriously."

Nigel nodded in understanding. "As usual, sir, you have thought of everything."

"Indeed I have, Nigel. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other business to attend to."

Catherine Grant sauntered into the Daily Planet elevator and flashed a wide smile at her fellow passengers. She noticed the variety of reactions she got. Cat noticed everything, though she tried not to show it. A ditzy demeanor was an asset in her line of work — it fooled people into being less careful than they should be around any Daily Planet reporter. There were the usual admiring looks from the young men — and from some of the men who should have been old enough to know better. There were the normal looks of envy or disapproval from the women. A few stalwart gentlemen pretended not to notice the tight dress that accentuated those few assets that it didn't reveal.

Underlying all the usual responses to Cat's intentionally flamboyant image was a new one — they were all surprised to see her. She smiled to herself as she realized why; Cat Grant rarely graced the office with her presence at this early hour. Well, let them wonder, she thought as she tossed her long hair over one almost bare shoulder. This was one morning staff meeting Cat wouldn't have missed for the world. For one thing, she wasn't about to let Lois Lane take all the credit for this week's Shockwave stories. Cat had been the one to give Lois the lead, and she wasn't going to let everyone forget it. But mostly she wanted to see the look on all those 'hard news' reporters' faces when she told Perry her big news.

When the elevator reached the bullpen floor, Cat headed for the coffee area. The first thing she noticed was that Lois's boyfriend, Caleb, was there. He and Lois were involved in some sort of light-hearted debate. As Cat got closer she discovered that the topic of their discussion was the relative merit of chocolate versus cake donuts. The 'argument' seemed to have come to a draw by the time Cat had her coffee poured. As she turned around to head for the conference room she was surprised to find Lois and Caleb apparently waiting for her. Something in their friendly expressions made her swallow whatever snarky comment might have popped into her head. Instead, she acknowledged them with a nod and motioned for them to precede her towards the morning meeting.

In answer to Cat's unspoken question, Lois said, "I...that is, we...just wanted to thank you for giving me the lead on the Shockwave story."

Cat managed to stifle her natural surprise at this unexpected graciousness on Lois's part. "You're welcome," was all she could think to say in response. How odd. Lois Lane seemed to have had a personality transplant. The only explanation Cat could come up with was that half a week in the honeymoon suite with Caleb Knight had done wonders for Lois's temperament. Cat was certain that it would have done so for hers.

Naturally, she observed the couple closely. After all, curiosity

was her stock in trade. Yes, they were definitely giving off the telltale vibe of two people who had recently got very lucky indeed. Then, as Lois preceded Caleb into the conference room, he rested his left hand on the small of Lois's back. A glint of gold caught Cat's eye, and she did a double take. Cat had seen the plain gold band that Perry had loaned Lois's 'special assistant' for the undercover assignment at the Lexor, and this was definitely not it. The ring that Caleb now wore bore a distinct pattern of interlocking links. A glance at Lois's left hand showed a matching wedding band and a new addition that could only be an engagement ring — apparently for the world's shortest engagement. Oh, my. Cat had the feeling that her big announcement was about to be upstaged, and she couldn't even find it in her heart to resent them for it.

There were never enough seats at the conference table for every staff member. Because of this, an informal pecking order had emerged, with Perry at the head of the table and the most prominent reporters seated around it. The junior staff members stood around the edges of the room. Lois and Eduardo occupied the choice seats to the Chief's right and left these days. Cat was usually in the standing room crowd, but this morning she took the seat next to Eduardo. This signaled to everyone present that she had a hot story to announce. It also gave her an excellent view of Lois and of Caleb, who stood quietly behind his new bride.

The room filled up quickly. Perry was the last to enter. He scanned the room as he took his seat, no doubt taking a mental roll call. His eyes rested for a moment on Cat and he acknowledged her unusual seating arrangement with a half smile and a barely perceptible nod before he called the meeting to order.

Laying a notebook on the table in front of her, Cat rested her forehead against one loose fist and let her long bangs hang down over her eyes. As Eduardo briefed Perry on the latest potential kickback scandal in the City Council, Cat lazily doodled a couple of flowers around the margins of an empty page. Ostensibly, she was bored. In reality, she was observing Lois and Caleb through her veil of hair — not for professional purposes, of course; they were just fun to watch. And subtle, she had to give them that.

Lois gave every indication of listening to Eduardo in rapt attention, but her left thumb kept toying with the palm side of her new diamond and sapphire ring. This caused the jewels to waggle back and forth in a miniscule seesaw motion. Caleb was only slightly more obvious. He kept his eye on Lois more than on anyone else in the room, but that could have been explained away by the simple fact that she was his girlfriend and his only real connection to the Planet. After all, the two of them were unofficial reporting partners as well as an acknowledged romantic couple. Cat was probably the only person who noticed that Caleb's gaze kept falling on Lois's wiggling ring — and that he kept glancing at his own gold band with a mixture of suppressed joy and pride. It was as if he knew a delightful secret and was waiting for just the right moment to spill the beans.

It was just after one of those furtive glances that Caleb looked up and caught Cat watching him. She had to suppress the urge to laugh out loud at his easy blush. Instead, she subtly touched her own left ring finger and raised one eyebrow to let him know that she was on to him. She let one corner of her mouth turn up to show that she approved. He raised his right hand to rub his chin then very subtly placed his forefinger over his lips in the universal 'mum's the word' sign. It was quick, and no one who wasn't already watching him carefully would have caught it. Cat's answering wink was just as fast.

When Eduardo wrapped up his briefing, Cat expected Perry to call on Lois next, but he surprised her by turning in her direction instead. "Miss Grant," he began in teasing mock formality, "it's only 8:30 in the morning, yet here you are, fresh as a daisy. To what do we owe the honor?" The twinkle in his eye

told her that this was his way of making sure every eye was on her for whatever big announcement she must have.

Cat bowed her head graciously in Perry's direction, playing along with his light tone. Then she straightened her shoulders, lifted her chin, and said in a clear alto voice guaranteed to carry to the arts reporter in the far corner, "The honor is all mine, Perry. We all know that Clark Kent is going to be back in town this weekend."

"Yes. He's the keynote speaker at Lex Luthor's fundraiser Friday night, and then he's slated to be at the American Book Awards on Saturday evening." Perry's tone said that this was not exactly front-page news. There must be something more.

"So he is," Cat agreed. She paused slightly for effect. "But he'll be spending Saturday morning with me — in an exclusive interview which his office requested."

Perry's eyebrows shot upward, indicating that he understood the significance of Cat's announcement. Clark Kent did not give exclusive interviews. When he did talk to the press, he did it in brief snippets to every Tom, Dick, and Harry.

"Did he say why?" Perry asked, clearly intrigued.

"His PR handler tells me that he has an announcement to make — one of a potentially delicate nature — and he is relying on the Planet's reputation for...how did she put it?...oh yes, 'integrity and discretion.'"

There was a disbelieving snort from somewhere near the arts reporter, as if perhaps some of Cat's colleagues found the identification of Cat Grant with 'integrity and discretion' amusing, but it was quickly squashed by a stern look from Perry. Cat noticed that Lois didn't give her the kind of smirk that Cat might have expected in this context. No, ever since Cat had given her the Shockwave lead, Lois's estimation of her seemed to have gone up a notch or two. Either that or she was too happy with her new husband to have the need to put anyone else down. Cat supposed that she might miss their mutual jibes after a while, but for now she was happy with the new respect she seemed to be receiving.

Respect or...nervousness? She looked at Lois again. It made no sense, but all her observational skills told her that Lois Lane was nervous — about what Cat might think of her? Or about what Cat might do? Since when did Lois Lane care about anything Cat did or thought? She wasn't worried that Cat would spoil her secret about marrying Caleb, was she? Let them have their fun. They were so cute about it. Lois seemed to relax when Caleb laid a hand on her shoulder. Cat gave the two of them a little shrug to show that she wasn't going to mess up whatever grand revelation the young love birds had in mind. Jeez, it wasn't exactly front-page news, anyway.

"Well," Perry said in a voice that immediately quieted the murmur of general speculation as to what Clark Kent's delicate news might be, "I'm sure that Mr. Kent can count on integrity and discretion from every Planet reporter. There will be no rumors about him emanating from anyone in this room, will there?" When he was satisfied with the chorus of 'No's' and 'Of course not's' he turned his attention to Lois and Caleb.

"I assume that most of you have met Caleb Knight some time in the last few weeks," he said brightly.

"He sure hangs around here enough!" came a cheerful voice from the back that sounded suspiciously like Jimmy Olsen. Caleb and Lois both blushed, much to Cat's amusement.

"As I was saying," Perry continued, "Mr. Knight here is a freelance reporter who's been helping Lois out on a couple of stories. Given the success of their latest investigation, I'm hoping to convince Caleb to join us on a full time basis. Lois has finally found a partner she can work with, and that would be a terrible asset to waste." Was Cat imagining things, or did Perry wink at Lois as he said that? "So y'all make him feel at home while he's making up his mind, you hear?"

Caleb looked like he was about to object, but Perry cut him off with an authoritative, “No need to decide anything right now. You and I will talk privately later. Just try to keep an open mind, okay, son? Now, Lois, besides a large bill from the Lexor hotel...”

“Hey, that was your idea, Chief,” Lois protested.

“...and Lex Luthor’s undying gratitude for saving his defense contract...”

“Thanks to Cat’s lead, we should add,” Lois put in, to Cat’s surprise and delight.

“What have you got coming up?” Perry finally finished.

“Actually, Chief,” Lois began in a tone that implied that Perry might not like what was coming next.

“Wait a minute,” Perry interrupted. “Speaking of bills, you and Caleb are still wearing those rings I loaned you. Assignment’s over, kids, and the \$300 for those little bands of gold isn’t coming out of petty cash, so hand them over.” He held out one hand palm up in expectation.

It took all of Cat’s self-control to suppress a smile while Lois reached calmly into a side pocket of her messenger bag and produced a small zip-lock bag containing two plain gold bands. “Here you are, Chief,” Lois said casually, dropping the little package into Perry’s upturned palm. At Perry’s look of shock, all three of them — Lois, Caleb, and Cat — lost the ability to keep a straight face.

It took the editor a minute to recover the power of speech. Finally, he grinned back at Lois. “Why, you sneaky little...” Perry sputtered. “When were you planning to let your old Chief in on this?”

“Right now, of course,” Lois said with an unrepentant smile.

“Knight, you sly dog...” Perry began. Then turning to Cat, he accused, “And you, young lady, look like the cat that swallowed the canary. How long have you known about this?”

Cat held both hands up in a show of innocence. “Not until this morning, Chief. I’m as surprised as you are. And besides, it wasn’t my secret to tell.”

Amidst the general hubbub of congratulatory exclamations, Cat thought that Lois and Caleb exchanged glances of... reassurance?...at her last remark. She couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more going on with those two than met the eye, and that they still had a secret or two that hadn’t yet come to light.

The meeting broke up and Clark and Lois found themselves surrounded by a crowd of well-wishers. Clark had shaken a lot of hands in his day — both as himself and as Superman. Even so, it felt a little strange doing it as Caleb Knight. He realized with a sort of anticipatory nostalgia that Caleb had become his private persona — someone who belonged to him and Lois alone. After this weekend, Caleb would be gone. He would be Superman or Clark Kent all the time. Well, most of the time, he thought. Perhaps Caleb would join Miguel and Enzo and all those other personas who would make an occasional appearance when he and Lois needed to get away from the limelight. The tricky part would be transforming Clark’s public image to match up more closely with Caleb — to make his true name stand for his true self.

The limelight. Despite her assurances that they could manage it together, he still wished that he didn’t have to drag Lois into the intense scrutiny that was the lot of any public figure. Not that Lois couldn’t stand up under any kind of pressure — she was the strongest woman he knew, and, coming from Martha Kent’s son, that was saying something. He was sure that she could handle it. He just wished she didn’t have to.

Clark’s musing was interrupted by a low rumble in one ear. “See me in my office when you’re finished here.” He turned his head just in time to see Perry White nod to him as the older man

headed out of the conference room.

“What did Perry say?” Lois asked as the last straggler made her way back to the bullpen.

“He wants to see me in his office.”

A small frown of confusion creased Lois’s brow. “You? Not us?”

Clark shrugged. “He didn’t say specifically, but I think so.”

“Huh.” Lois looked a little surprised, but not really worried.

“He probably wants to sweet talk you into letting him put you on the payroll. He’s been after me to talk you into it for a while now.”

“Yeah, probably,” Clark agreed. Privately, he wasn’t sure whether he was about to face a smooth talking salesman or a protective father figure. Either way, it was time to face the music.

The door to the editor’s office was open. Clark rapped gently on the frame and waited for Mr. White to look up. The older man finished the last paragraph of whatever he had been reading and set it aside before beckoning Clark into the room. “Come in, son.” As Clark stepped into the office Mr. White said quietly, “Shut the door.” The editor stood up and walked around to lean on the front of his desk. He motioned for Clark to take a seat in one of the guest chairs and then crossed his arms over his chest. This left Clark at a disadvantage, looking up to meet the older man’s eyes as they bored into him. Mr. White was clearly reconsidering his appraisal of the younger man in light of recent events. It seemed that passing muster as Lois’s boyfriend and being welcomed with open arms as her husband were two different matters.

A few years ago, this kind of scrutiny might have intimidated Clark, even flustered him. But he was no longer the naïve farm boy who’d left Kansas so long ago. Clark knew exactly what Lois’s self-appointed guardian was looking for, and he looked right back at him with an open, friendly, and confident expression. He knew where he stood with Lois, and Perry White had no real power over him. He didn’t need this man’s approval — but it wouldn’t hurt to give him the reassurance that he was looking for.

After a minute or two of this silent sizing up, the older man seemed to decide that a soft touch was in order. Still, he seemed to feel it was his duty not to let Caleb off without at least a little interrogation. Uncrossing his arms and planting his hands on the edge of the desk, he began with the obvious. “You’re a very lucky man, Mr. Knight.”

Clark tried to let all of his love and admiration for Lois show as he answered truthfully, “I can’t imagine there’s a luckier man on the planet. Lois means the world to me, Mr. White. I’ll do everything in my power to make her happy.”

The editor gave a noncommittal nod in response. “She certainly seems happy since you’ve been around.”

“But...” Clark prodded.

“But she’s been fooled before by charming, handsome young men. I love Lois like a daughter, but I don’t trust her judgment in men.”

“And you don’t know me well enough to trust me,” Clark finished for him. “I don’t know what to tell you, Mr. White. You and I both know that Lois isn’t asking for anyone’s permission.” Clark’s direct gaze carried the unspoken words ‘and neither am I.’ “She’s a grown woman...and my wife. If you keep an open mind I think your concerns will be eased with time. I don’t know what else I can do to earn your confidence.”

“Well, now that you mention it,” Mr. White said, making his way back to his desk chair and reaching for a file folder, “you could start by explaining why none of my editor colleagues has ever heard of Caleb Knight and why there’s not one paragraph under that byline in any database that I can find.”

Clark couldn’t help smiling, which was obviously not the

reaction that Perry White was expecting. “You find this amusing?” the older man questioned.

“I’m sorry.” Clark tried to clarify, “I’m just glad to see that Lois has someone like you looking out for her. You ran a background check on me?”

“Don’t be so surprised, son. I wouldn’t be in my position if I went around making job offers willy-nilly to men who lied to me. I hope you haven’t been lying to Lois as well.”

Clark straightened in his seat and met the accusation head on. “Mr. White, I haven’t lied to you.” Well, except for about how Lois and I met, but that’s not really important, a voice in his head amended. “As you’ve realized, Caleb Knight is a pen name. I couldn’t do the kind of investigations I do if I used my real name everywhere I went. I really am a writer, and I really have published free-lance stories, though under other names. I really am working on an investigation in Metropolis. Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem to be getting anywhere. I don’t know whether it ever will, but I’m going to keep trying. Lois is helping me with it, which is good since she’s a much better reporter than I am. I’m sorry if my secrecy offends you, but I’m sure you understand that the fewer people who know a secret, the better the chances of keeping it. And, for what it’s worth, I have never lied to Lois. She knows everything there is to know about me, and she loves me for who I am.”

“And you wouldn’t consider continuing this investigation under the auspices of the Planet? You know, I’m not exactly a stranger to investigative reporting, or to the occasional pen name. And we have resources that no free-lancer can hope to muster.”

Now it was Clark’s turn to be surprised. “You’d still consider hiring me?”

“The key word in that sentence is ‘consider.’ I’d want to know who you really are first, and I’d need to see some writing samples and talk to some references. I wasn’t only joking earlier — a reporter who can work with Lois Lane is a rare find. She’s the best investigative reporter I’ve seen in a very long time, but she’s a handful.”

“Tell me about it,” Clark agreed with an affectionate smile.

“So? Would you like to formally apply for a staff position?” the editor asked.

“I don’t know, Mr. White. I’ve never seriously considered it. There are...complications...that I’ve always assumed would make it impossible. I do have to admit that the prospect of working with Lois is appealing. And I know I want to do less travelling than I have been. I just don’t know whether it would work out given some of the other things going on in my life. Lois and I haven’t really talked about what I’m going to do now that we’re married.”

“Well, you think about it and talk it over with Lois. You can get back to me next week.”

“Oh.” Clark could feel a sheepish blush creeping up his face. “Lois started to ask you in the staff meeting, but she got interrupted...”

“Ask me what, son?”

“Well, not to speak on her behalf, but I’d really like to take my wife on a proper honeymoon. We were hoping to leave on Sunday.”

“For how long?”

“Through Christmas? That’s only a couple of weeks.”

The editor flipped a couple of pages on his desk calendar. “All right. She’s certainly earned enough leave over the last few years. I’ll tell her she’s on vacation until Monday the 27th.”

“Thank you, sir,” Clark said, standing up to go.

Clark wasn’t sure which of them put a hand out first, but the two men shook hands over the desk. Clark wondered briefly whether he should have just told Perry White the whole truth — about Clark Kent, that is, not Superman. But he consoled himself with the thought that the whole world would know soon enough,

and that silence until then really was the best way to keep a secret. He was about to let go and turn to leave when the older man pulled him back.

Looking the younger man straight in the eye, Perry said in a husky voice, “Take good care of my girl, you hear?”

Clark returned his gaze with a mixture of reassurance and gratitude for being given the chance to prove himself. “I will, sir, with everything I have.”

The next 24 hours came and went in a kind of happy blur. Lois was still working on follow-up stories for the Shockwave case, and when she wasn’t busy with that she was clearing up loose ends so that she and Clark could get away for their honeymoon. Wednesday evening was spent gathering a few of Lois’s things to move into the Hyperion Avenue brownstone, then having dinner in Smallville with Jonathan and Martha. Luckily, Clark’s parents were much happier about the marriage than Ellen Lane had been. Of course, they’d had the benefit of watching the young pair together on several occasions, so, although the timing might have surprised them, the actual marriage didn’t. There was some talk of planning a hometown reception for the happy couple — after the honeymoon — and speculation about whether they could get away without a more formal East Coast Publishing World reception. In the end the four Kents decided to bounce that idea off of Lana, but they were definitely leaning toward the ‘skipping it’ option.

Thursday was another busy workday, and Lois hadn’t seen much of Clark. She’d been trying to clear the decks at the Planet, and he’d been in Smallville working out some last minute details for Luthor’s fundraiser Friday night. It was 6:00 when Lois walked through the front door of her new home — she smiled to herself at that thought — and dropped her shoulder bag on the front table. She kicked off her work shoes and checked her watch. Clark wouldn’t be home for another hour — boy, was she looking forward to that honeymoon without work commitments for either one of them.

Carrying her shoes, she padded up the stairs to the master bedroom. What her aching feet needed was a hot bath before dinner. Stepping into the attached bathroom, she started the hot water then went back into the bedroom to divest herself of her clothes. As she was heading back into the bathroom her eye landed on the copy of “Little David” which sat on Clark’s — or, rather, her — nightstand. For a moment she wondered what had possessed her to even keep a book on her nightstand now that she had Clark in her bed every night. It wasn’t as if she’d gotten any reading done since their wedding, she thought with a wicked little smile. But now that she was getting ready for a long soak, the last two chapters of “Little David” seemed the perfect accompaniment.

Forty-five minutes later, Clark stepped through the front door and, in a cliché he couldn’t resist, called cheerily, “Honey, I’m home!” He got no answer in reply, but he could tell that Lois was in the house. Some sixth sense always told him when she was near these days, even without consciously using his super senses. He made a quick detour into the kitchen to put the carry-out bags he was holding on the table and went to look for his bride. Taking the stairs two at a time in an easy lope, he popped his head into the bedroom.

His smile widened into a delighted grin at the sight that met him. Lois, wrapped in a terrycloth robe, a towel turbaned around her hair, was sprawled diagonally across his bed — their bed. She was lying on her stomach, feet kicking the air lazily and elbows propping up her head and shoulders — affording him a tantalizing view down the front of her robe — her head bent over the last pages of a book. A second glance with his enhanced vision confirmed that the book in question was, in fact, his own. His beautiful wife was so absorbed in her reading that she hadn’t

heard him come in. Not wanting to spoil the tableau, he leaned casually against the doorjamb and waited for her to finish.

A few minutes later, Lois closed the book and looked up. He'd been right; she hadn't known he was there. "Clark!" she said with a startled little jump, "What are you doing just standing there?"

He let his smile blossom slowly, still savoring the moment. "Watching you," he said warmly. He watched an answering smile bloom on her face, followed quickly by a double take.

"You cut your hair," she remarked in surprise, "and you're wearing new glasses." Still holding the book in one hand, she performed a surprisingly graceful move that ended with her sitting up, her feet dangling over the edge of the bed. He took that as an invitation to sit next to her.

"Well, you said the hair mousse had to go, and I'm all for that. I left the top long enough to slick back for Superman." He bent towards her for a long-overdue welcome home kiss, then continued, "And I figured darker frames on the glasses would change my look a little more — give more of a contrast between Clark Kent and Superman. Besides, maybe the new Clark Kent look will help people adjust to the new Clark Kent persona."

"Or the fact that Clark Kent isn't just a persona any more," Lois mused, her right hand caressing his cheek.

"Exactly," he agreed. Something in Lois's smile made him curious. "What?" he prodded with a little smile. Lois looked down at the back cover of "Little David." In a gesture that Clark couldn't quite interpret, she brushed her fingers lightly over his publicity photo. After a moment she looked up at him again.

"I was just thinking about that interview at the Jade Inn." She kept looking back and forth between the jacket photo and her husband. "I was pretty sure that there was more to Clark Kent than you or Lana wanted anyone to see. I almost wrote up an article to that effect."

He raised one brow in surprise. "What stopped you?"

Lois gave a little shrug. "Lack of evidence. Oh, and an annoying little thing called a preview agreement." Her twinkling eyes showed that she was only teasing. "Actually," she amended in a more serious tone, "I had a half-baked plan to get you away from Lana's protective clutches long enough to convince you that you were hiding your lamp under a bushel."

Clark was taken aback. "You're serious? You weren't completely turned off by the playboy front?"

His wife gave him a wicked grin. "Well, that is my job, you know, looking beyond the external."

Clark laughed out loud. "Well, you've certainly done that with me. Twice, as it turns out." He reached one hand around the back of her neck and pulled her close for another kiss.

Soon his fingers slipped under the collar of her robe and followed the edge of the fabric across her smooth skin. He traced a tantalizing line from the nape of her neck across one smooth shoulder and down her chest to where the lapels met right between her breasts.

"Hmmm...no fair," Lois mumbled against his lips.

"What's not fair?" he whispered against hers.

She broke their kiss and pulled back just enough to run her eyes up and down his body in mock disapproval. "I'm half naked and you're fully dressed."

"Oh, and how do you propose that we restore equity to this situation? Please don't tell me that you want to get dressed," he grinned.

"Oh, no, that would definitely be moving things in the wrong direction," she purred, working her way down his shirt buttons. Her lips followed behind her fingers, kissing every inch of his chest as soon as it was exposed. Clark's last coherent thought was that he'd been exactly right when he'd decided that a married man should not wear spandex under his clothes when he was at home.

Clark was roused from a very contented drowsiness by the distinct sound of his wife's stomach growling. She lifted her head from his chest and gave him a sheepish smile. "Hmm," he teased, "It sounds like living on love alone is only for poets. Ace reporters apparently need actual nutrition." He kissed her on the forehead and eased himself out from under her. Retrieving his boxers from the tangle of sheets at the foot of the bed, he slipped into them and began collecting the rest of his clothes.

"Party pooper," Lois pouted. She reached for him but he ducked out of the way.

"Uh, uh, uh. You need your sustenance. Supper's waiting in the kitchen. I'll have everything hot and the wine poured by the time you're dressed."

"All right, be that way," she conceded. "But only because I need fuel for later."

Fifteen minutes later, Clark laid his fork down and looked at his wife. "You're thinking about something," he said. "I can hear the wheels turning from here."

Lois looked up from her plate where she'd been absent-mindedly prodding the same piece of chicken paprika for the last three minutes. "Is he real?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"Who?"

"Little David. Did you know him? Did he know you?" Ah, that made sense. Lois had been reading his latest novel earlier that evening and, now that he was no longer distracting her with his romantic attentions, her mind had obviously gone back to that world.

Clark leaned back in his seat and let his mind go back to a time and place that he'd rather forget. Of course he'd spent months living with those memories as he wrote the book, and the writing itself was a kind of therapy for him, but Lois's mention of his fictional character brought back the faces of all the very real children on which Clark's imaginary boy had been based.

"He's real...or real enough. His name isn't David. It's Abaho. And Jean-Claude. And scores of other boys. Some girls, too, and it's worse for them."

"And you?" She reached across the table to give his right hand an encouraging squeeze. "What was your name there?"

"Luc." He gave it the French pronunciation. "I met them in the rehab center in Kinshasa. I was passing through and I helped the caretakers to drill a well. I didn't know the kids when they were in the jungle." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I didn't rescue them." Shame burned his cheeks and choked off his breath, but he looked up at her in spite of it. He needed her... comfort? Absolution? "I didn't know what I could do without giving myself away. I was afraid."

She kept hold of his hand as if to keep him from pulling away, to keep him open and listening to her words. "Clark, it's not your fault," she said in a kind but firm voice. "You didn't kidnap those children. You didn't force-feed them drugs until they were addicted. You didn't turn them into weapons against their own families."

"No," he agreed. He pulled his hand from hers only to run it through his own hair in a gesture of frustration. "But I should have gotten them out. I should get the rest of them out even now."

"No, Clark. You can't be everywhere at once, and you can't single-handedly stop every injustice on earth or rescue every abused child."

"I know, but I feel like I should be able to." This time his hand rubbed the back of his neck.

"I know you do." She reached for him again, and he met her halfway with his left hand even as his right curled into a fist. "But what would Pastor Ruben say to that?" she continued, her thumb stroking the back of his hand. "You must have talked with him about this sort of thing."

Clark shrugged. "A little. He says I have to remember that, as

strong as I am, I'm still only one man. I'm not God."

"No, you're not. And you can't do everything. What you can do is enough."

Clark opened his mouth to protest, but shut it again without speaking. He could feel the tension leave his shoulders and he uncurled his right hand and brought it up to envelope her hand in both of his. "How do you do that?" he asked, a tone of wonder in his voice.

"Do what?" She smiled.

"Bring everything back into perspective so quickly? I mean, I have talked about that kind of thing with Ruben before, and most of the time I remember it, but sometimes I just get buried under this huge pile of guilt and nothing Ruben's ever said seems to make sense. But you tell me the exact same thing and I believe you."

Retrieving her hand and picking up her fork again, Lois looked back at him with a cocky grin. "That's because deep down you know that I'm always right."

"Ah, yes. That explains a lot," he grinned back.

Clark thought that the conversation would move on to other subjects, but Lois wasn't quite finished yet. As he resumed eating, she took a sip of wine and opened with, "Speaking of what one man can do..."

"Yes?" he said, a bit warily.

"The Planet has an international news section."

"And..." he prodded, wondering where she could be going with this line of thinking.

"And an expose about child soldiers would fit in very nicely. You could talk about how widespread the problem is, what's being done about it, what the recruitment laws are and how they're not being enforced — the same kind of things that you've already got in your keynote speech for Friday, but in more detail and to a wider audience."

"I could? That's a great idea, Lois, but you're the reporter in this family. I just write novels."

"Nonsense. You're a good enough reporter that Perry White offered you a job..."

"That I haven't accepted yet," Clark pointed out.

"... and I'm a hard news, city section reporter. You know a lot more about Africa than I do, and you're much better at the emotional stuff."

Clark gave her a look that he hoped was noncommittal. He'd been avoiding thinking about Perry White's job offer or, for that matter, about what he would do next career-wise. The way he'd been living for the past four years was not going to work now that he was married. He just wasn't sure what would come next. Could he really do what Lois was suggesting? Could he learn to write real news? Did he want to? He liked writing fiction and he thought his books made an impact in the world. Was there a way to do both? Seeing that Lois was waiting for a response, he ventured, "I'll think about it. After the honeymoon, and after we bring down Luthor."

"Ugh!" Lois grunted in disgust. "I don't even want to think about him. We've been combing through everything we can find for weeks and we're still not any closer to hard evidence than when we started. The man's like Teflon."

"I know. But if anyone can catch him in the act, it's Lois Lane, Ace Reporter. He's bound to make a mistake sooner or later, and when he does you'll be there to nail him."

Lois seemed to buck up at the vote of confidence. "You're right; I will," she agreed with a determined air. Then her mouth turned up at the corners and she added with a mischievous twinkle, "*after* the honeymoon."

Friday evening found Clark in the back seat of a Lincoln town car, which was nothing unusual for him, but this time he felt strangely naked, which was odd given that he was dressed to the

nines in the same black tuxedo he'd worn to many events before this. He'd done this kind of thing countless times before, but tonight was different, and it felt wrong. He knew exactly what the problem was.

For one thing, he dreaded being Lex Luthor's guest. He tried to console himself with the possibility of using his super powers to get a good look at Luthor's private files, but he wasn't sure he'd be able to get out of the spotlight long enough to be able to focus on them, even with x-ray vision.

Mostly, though, he'd never — not even once — arrived at a black-tie affair alone. There should be a woman at his side, and not just any woman. He missed his wife and he questioned the wisdom of leaving her at home. He hadn't wanted to announce their marriage at Lex's affair, and he was still glad that they wouldn't be doing that, but he didn't know how he would make it through the evening without her. One more day, he told himself. Tomorrow night at the Book Awards you can let the world know what a lucky dog Clark Kent is. For tonight, muddle through and let them wonder.

As the car pulled up to the front entrance of the LexTower, he adjusted his white gloves. They were a little over the top, even for evening wear, and he planned to take them off once he was inside, but he didn't intend to let the hordes of society photographers catch sight of his wedding ring just yet. The rumors would start soon enough; there was no need to help them along. Besides, it was December, so he figured he could get away with wearing gloves, at least while he was still outdoors.

The driver opened his door and Clark stepped out. The photographers leaned in, each of them trying to be the first to spot the lady emerging from the limo. Clark counted silently to himself, wondering how long it would take them to realize that he was alone at this party. The driver closed the door behind him and there was a momentary silence as the crowd gathered its collective wits. Then, in two seconds by Clark's count, the questions began raining down. He smiled and waved and ignored all of the questions until he was nearly at the LexTower's front door.

Just before he stepped through, he heard one question that he couldn't resist answering. "Hey, Clark! Where's that gorgeous redhead from the White Orchid ball?" Clark turned and looked for the questioner. Brad Curtis from People caught his eye and Clark gave him a smile. Using his thumb to point over his shoulder into the LexTower, he quipped, "I believe she's already inside...with her husband."

Lana was, indeed, in the ballroom-turned-dining-room with Pete. The pair caught Clark's eye as he emerged from the elevator. Lana started toward him, but before she could get to him a tall mocha-skinned beauty approached him with a confident smile and an outstretched hand.

"Mr. Kent, it's so good to meet you at last. I'm Mrs. Cox, Mr. Luthor's personal assistant. Please, let me take your coat and show you where you'll be sitting once dinner is served." She gestured to a young man who came forward to take Clark's coat. Before removing his outer wear, Clark pulled his gloves off and tucked them into the deep pockets of his long wool coat. The young man took the proffered coat with a nod and headed off toward some inner recess of the apartment. Clark fought the urge to plunge his left hand into his jacket pocket. He felt certain that the ring on his fourth finger must be shining like a beacon for all to see, but if Mrs. Cox noticed it at all, she gave no sign.

Instead, she showed him to the head table, where the place cards showed that he was seated between Luthor's date — a young woman whose name Clark didn't recognize — and one Anita Eskin, whom Mrs. Cox explained was the director of the child development fund which tonight's dinner would be benefitting. Luthor was seated on the other side of his date — Clark was glad for that buffer, at least. On Anita's other side was

a John Eskin whom Clark assumed was her husband. No one was actually at the table yet, as the guests were all mingling in another room across the hall. A slightly raised dais with a lectern stood behind the head table. After explaining the order of the evening — Mr. Luthor would introduce Ms. Eskin and Clark as soon as the soup was served, then Clark would give his speech — Mrs. Cox led him into the other room and introduced him to Luthor and the Eskins.

It was a good thing that Clark could make small talk on autopilot, because his attention wasn't really on the circle of partygoers who surrounded him, asking polite questions about his latest book and congratulating him on his award nomination. Normally he could tune out the background hum of voices at these kinds of parties just like everyone else did. But tonight he kept overhearing snippets of conversation, all of which centered on Clark Kent's lack of a female companion and his apparent acquisition of a new piece of jewelry. Surely it must be nearly time for dinner to be served. Not that the rumors would stop circulating over the meal, but at least he would have a little respite while he delivered his speech. On the pretense of refilling his drink, he excused himself from his admirers and ambled slowly in the direction of the bar.

He was halfway there when he felt someone approach him from behind. A sultry alto voice purred in his right ear, "Does your wife know you're here?"

Clark turned quickly to face the speaker and barely stopped himself from greeting her by her first name. He took a step back and put on his best 'I acknowledge you but do not return your blatant flirting' smile. He managed to keep his voice smooth as he answered her. "Of course she does, but she had other plans tonight, Ms..."

"Grant. Catherine Grant, Daily Planet."

Clark took the proffered hand and shook it. "It's good to meet you. I believe we have an appointment tomorrow."

"So we do. And now I think I know what your assistant meant by 'an announcement of a delicate nature.' Although I have to say, it will be a little anticlimactic after your appearance here tonight. I'm surprised you didn't announce your marriage before this. It's hardly a secret now."

"I'm afraid that's true, Ms. Grant,"

"Cat," she corrected.

"Cat," he agreed. "Let's just say that I didn't plan my wedding around this dinner, but I would hate to steal Mr. Luthor's thunder tonight. This evening is about the children and the development fund. I know there are rumors circulating, but I'm not going to answer any questions tonight. Rumors aside, you'll still have the exclusive story tomorrow."

"Fair enough, but you know I have to print the same rumors as everyone else."

"I realize that. But look at it this way, Cat. The rumors in the morning papers will certainly pique your readers' curiosity, and you will be the only reporter who can promise the whole story in the evening edition."

"I'm looking forward to hearing it, Mr. Kent."

"Clark," he corrected with his most charming smile.

"Clark it is." Something in her smile made Clark wonder how much she already guessed. He could only hope that she had as much discretion as the Planet's reputation would suggest. And he was glad that his arrangement to give her the exclusive tomorrow meant that said discretion was also in her own best interest. Better the whole story straight from the horse's mouth in the evening edition than wild guesses in the morning.

Lois was at a bit of a loss. Pete and Lana had stopped by earlier to take Clark to the Jade Inn suite where they were staying. Separate town cars would take the Rosses and Clark to

Luthor's fundraiser from there. Lois had felt a little out of place in her blue jeans and sweatshirt, given that the other three were dressed in eveningwear. Nevertheless, she'd given them all her best smile as she sent her husband on his way with a kiss and an unnecessary straightening of his bow tie. God, what that man did for a tuxedo!

In her former life, she would have handled an idle Friday night by going in to the office and finding something — anything — to do in an often successful attempt to convince herself that her work was more important than her non-existent social life. That option held little appeal on this particular night, mostly because she'd spent the last few days getting her desk cleared so that she and Clark could leave for their honeymoon. It seemed silly to start a new project at this late hour. Her back-up plan from her single days — a stack of Ivory Tower tapes and a carton of chocolate ice cream — didn't appeal either. She'd finished "Little David" and wasn't really in the mood to start on another novel. She could go over to her apartment and pack another box or two, but she just didn't have the motivation. Face it, girl, she finally admitted, your husband is out for one evening and you're in a funk. So much for Miss Independent!

In the end, she consoled herself with delivery pizza and a TV showing of Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn in 'Holiday.' The movie stars were turning somersaults in the heroine's childhood nursery when the phone rang. For a moment, Lois wondered who in the world would be calling Caleb Knight's home telephone, but then she remembered that she'd had her own phone line forwarded to the new house. She quickly swallowed her last sip of cream soda and answered.

"Hello?"

"Lois, it's Perry." The southern drawl was gone, replaced with the clipped cadence of Perry's 'all business' voice.

"Perry? I thought you were going to Lex Luthor's fundraiser." Lois could hear several voices talking excitedly in the background, but she couldn't make any of them out. "Where are you? What's going on?"

"I'm still in Luthor's penthouse, but all hell's broke loose here. Luthor, Kent, and the fund director have all been kidnapped. Luthor was just starting the introductions when one of the waiters pulled a gun and herded them into Luthor's office. Apparently there's some kind of security system that locks down the office. But this time, instead of keeping Luthor safe, it's keeping him and the other hostages prisoner. Cat's here with me, of course, but this is no society column puff piece any more. I know you're supposed to be leaving on Sunday, but I thought you'd want to be here, honeymoon or no."

Lois was on her feet and slipping her shoes on by the time Perry finished talking. She gave Perry a quick, "I'm on my way," before she hung the phone up, grabbed her purse and coat, and headed out the door.

Lex Luthor was not pleased. When he'd hired this man he'd been very clear in his instructions. The thug — Sky, he called himself in a pathetic allusion to Guys and Dolls — was supposed to bound onto the dais just as Lex introduced Clark Kent and usher both of them at gunpoint into Lex's private office. There he was to 'force' Lex to activate the security program that would cause reinforced steel shielding to cover the doors and windows, thus imprisoning Lex, Kent, and Sky and keeping the other guests — and the police — out. That would make Superman the only possible rescuer when Lex, and presumably Kent as well, began yelling for the hero. Superman would easily break through the steel barriers and, if that green rock resting on Lex's desk did its job, the hero would be incapacitated. A few well-timed gunshots — one to dispatch the flying do-gooder, one to make Kent look like Sky's victim, and one to kill Sky in 'self-defense' — and Lex would walk out of there the lucky survivor of a tragic crime. Of

course, Lex would hide the Kryptonite in his secret safe before he let the police in to search the crime scene.

It was a good plan. But now Sky had taken it into his moronic, hormone-driven head to complicate matters by adding a third hostage to the mix. The leggy brunette who ran the child development fund had been too much of a temptation for the gunman to pass up. So now, instead of one fellow hostage to dispose of, Lex had two potential witnesses besides the thug. He took a deep breath and forced himself to remain calm. It was only one woman. She could be shot just as easily as Kent. It was a pity to destroy such a beauty, of course, but business was business.

Lex let himself be ushered into his own office, Kent and the woman, Anita Eskin, at his side. Sky closed the door behind them and locked it just in time to stop Nigel — who was making a show of trying to get in — and Kent's security man — who was no doubt sincere in his efforts — from following them. Kent's man was shouting and pounding on the door. The woman's husband was close behind him.

"Quick!" Sky brandished his weapon a little too close to Lex's nose. "I know you got some sort of armor for this room. Close it now before that hero kicks the door in."

With a show of reluctance, Lex moved to his desk and reached under it. He found the right button and pushed it. He also found the hidden shelf that held his own weapon. As the steel doors closed with a loud clang, Lex straightened up and fired two shots into Sky's chest. The thug was dead before he hit the floor.

Clark didn't understand what was happening. He'd let himself be ushered into Luthor's office with the thought that he'd have time to come up with a plan once he got there. A man who kidnapped celebrities must have a list of demands, and there would be time between his making his demands and whatever reply he'd get from the police. Of course, Clark would reveal himself if necessary to protect the other hostages, but he hoped it wouldn't come to that.

But, as it happened, he had no time at all. The moment he walked into Luthor's office he was assaulted by a wave of pain and nausea. He managed to hide it — he hoped — by collapsing into a leather armchair. Hopefully he'd look terrified rather than sick. Before he had time to wonder what had happened to him, the room was full of loud noises that hurt his head — the metallic clanging of steel on steel and the percussive noise of gunshots. He forced himself to look up and take in the scene. The kidnapper lay bleeding and unconscious on the floor, his gun still held in his lifeless hand, and Luthor stood over the man holding a gun of his own.

"That was quick thinking," a female voice said. It sounded strange — like he was hearing it through water, although he knew he was on dry land. What was happening to him? "Are you all right?" The woman's voice again. Clark tried to respond, to say that he was fine. He opened his mouth, but the woman wasn't looking at him. She'd been talking to Luthor. Clark closed his eyes again in a vain attempt to block out some of the pain.

"Quite well, thank you," Luthor's oily voice said. He sounded terribly cool, not like a person who'd just killed a man — even if it had been in self-defense.

"Mr. Luthor, it's going to be okay. You did what you had to do, but it's over now. Let's put the gun down and open the doors." It was the woman's voice again. How could she be so calm and in control? Clark felt like hell. His head was pounding, his stomach was cramping, and every muscle in his body ached. He must be sick, but how? He hadn't been sick since he was four years old.

"Stay where you are." Luthor's voice again. It was a warning.

"It's okay, Mr. Luthor. You're in shock. Let me help you."

"You misunderstand your situation." Luthor again. "You are still a hostage, Ms. Eskin. I never was. This moron works for me,

or he did before his untimely demise. I regret that he pulled you into my plot, my dear, I really do. He was supposed to limit his captives to Mr. Kent and myself. But, what's done is done."

"Why? Why would you possibly want to kidnap Clark Kent? You have as much money as he does, and you're putting your reputation — not to mention your freedom — at risk." Clark heard the woman's voice, but he was having a hard time focusing on her meaning. He forced his eyes open and tried to concentrate. Luthor was still behind the desk, and his gun was pointed at the woman. He looked at Clark now and then, but he kept the gun on the woman.

"It's not so much my gain, Ms. Eskin, as Superman's loss." At this, Luthor used his free hand to pick up a rock — green and strangely luminescent — that had been lying on the corner of his desk. "Beautiful, isn't it?" he mused. "Beautiful, and entirely harmless...to us. But, according to my sources, deadly to Superman. He'll be here any minute, I suppose. In fact, let's make it easy for him." Clark struggled to focus, to see what Luthor would do next. Not that Clark would be able to stop him, no matter what he did.

Luthor reached under the desk again, and the steel plating over one window retracted. "There," Luthor said. "Now we'll know which way to expect him." Something in Clark's cloudy mind gave a little leap of hope. The window being open was good. He just couldn't remember why. Superman wouldn't come through it, of course. Superman wasn't here.

"Now," Luthor went on, "when the flying Boy Scout comes zooming to the rescue, he'll get a nasty surprise." Then, as if to hurry the hero on his way, Luthor yelled at the top of his lungs, "Help! Superman!"

Superman didn't come, of course. Luthor was getting impatient. And Clark was getting worse. He wasn't very close to the rock — it was on Luthor's desk and Clark was in a far corner of the room. But if he couldn't get away from it soon, he was sure he would collapse and Luthor would figure him out. He couldn't let that happen. Not only would Clark be dead, but Luthor — and soon the whole world — would know that Lois had been married to Superman. His enemies might go after her in revenge, and Clark could not let that happen. He couldn't hold up much longer. How could he explain Clark Kent passing out without giving away the effect of that rock?

Clark became aware of the voices again. Luthor and Ms. Eskin had been talking — arguing — for a few minutes now. Forcing his foggy brain to concentrate, he looked for a cover for his weakness — and found it. Summoning the last of his strength, he waited for just the right moment, and he leaped. Well, he tried to leap. It was more of a stagger. In any case, it worked. There was a gunshot, a struggle, and that was it. It was over.

By the time Lois's cab arrived, police cars surrounded LexTower. The driver couldn't get closer than half a block from the front entrance. Lois handed him the twenty-dollar bill that was already clutched in her hand and got out without waiting for a reply. She made her way along the sidewalk, fighting against the flow of a steady stream of well-dressed Metropolitans who were being ushered out of the building by uniformed officers. The arrival of an ambulance only added to the chaos, but Lois turned it to her advantage by following in the wake of the gurney being pushed through the LexTower's front doors by two EMTs. Two men in blue ushered the EMTs into a waiting elevator. One of them reached out an arm to stop Lois, but she waved her press pass under his nose and ducked into the elevator before the doors closed.

She turned to the nearest EMT and, still brandishing her press pass, said, "Lois Lane, Daily Planet. Who's hurt?"

"One dead, one gunshot to the upper torso. Now get behind

me, because when those doors open I've got to move and you'd better not be in the way when I do."

"Got it." With a quick glance at the floor indicator, Lois worked her way around the gurney and the EMTs. They were almost at the penthouse level. As promised, the EMTs pushed through the doors the moment they opened. Lois attempted to follow behind them, but she was stopped by yet another blue-clad arm. This particular arm was attached to one Theresa Callahan, an MPD veteran whom Lois had met on several occasions.

"Sorry, Lois. You'll have to wait behind the yellow tape just like all the other reporters."

Lois opened her mouth to argue, but Terry fixed her with a glare that matched her own and she decided that discretion was the better part of valor, at least for the time being. Besides, she already had an inside source — Clark would tell her everything that had happened in that office as soon as they got home.

She scanned the room quickly in search of familiar faces. There was no sign of Superman or Clark. He must still be talking with the police in Luthor's office. She spotted Cat and Perry at the front of the crowd of people, right up against the yellow tape, and hurried over to them. "What's the scoop?" she asked as she approached.

Perry brought her up to date quickly. "One gunman, three hostages — Luthor, Kent, and the development fund director, Anita Eskin. They've been holed up in Luthor's private office. Luthor's and Kent's security men tried to break in, but the door was blocked with steel plating until just a few minutes ago. We couldn't hear or see anything, obviously, but then the plating retracted and the door opened from the inside — couldn't see who opened it — and the police rushed in. Nobody's come out yet. You came up with the EMTs, so you know as much as I do after that." As he spoke, Perry nodded in the direction of a dark paneled door, which stood open several feet away from the police barrier. Lois could see a confusion of police and medical personnel milling about, but she couldn't see any of the civilians, either hostages or anyone who might be the kidnapper. As she watched, Bill Henderson elbowed his way in and she could hear his gruff commands over above the general cacophony of voices as he attempted to bring some order out of the chaos.

Perry added, "Oh, yeah, the two security men — St. John and Ross, I believe — pushed their way in with the cops. Mr. Eskin too. The police got names and contact information from the civilian guests and sent them home. So the mob you see here," he indicated the two dozen or so people who crowded the yellow police tape and craned for a view of the office door, "are all reporters. Some from the party like us and some just arrived like you."

Lois pitched her voice for Perry and Cat's ears only. "I got some info on the ride up with the EMTs," she reported. "They said there's one dead and one gunshot wound to the torso." She hoped that Clark hadn't been shot at. It wouldn't do to have multiple people witness bullets bouncing off his chest, especially since one of those people was Lex Luthor.

Just then a buzz swept through the crowd of reporters as one of the EMTs emerged with a gurney. The body was covered from head to toe with a white sheet — obviously this was the one who hadn't made it. Several voices erupted at once, all asking the same question: "Who died?"

The police had kept a corridor clear from Luthor's office to the elevator, and the young man in the white uniform didn't slow down. He did throw the answer over his shoulder, though. "It's the kidnapper. Two gunshots to the chest at close range. That's all I got."

As the elevator doors opened, the man with the corpse in tow was forced to back up and make room for another two EMTs with an empty gurney. The techs exchanged information in the curt, business-like manner of people who see death on a regular basis.

"Where's the vic?" asked the older of the new arrivals.

The man pushing the body used his chin to point in the direction of Luthor's office. "White male, late twenties, single GSW to the upper chest. Rodney's got him stable for now, but his security guy doesn't want him transported."

A frown crossed the newcomer's brow. "His who?"

"His bodyguard or some such." By this time the room full of reporters was holding its collective breath, so every one of them heard the young man tell his colleague, "Clark Kent's been shot."

The men with the gurney disappeared into Luthor's office.

There was an initial burst of murmurs from the crowd of reporters, but it soon died down as they all strained to hear what was happening behind that mahogany-paneled door. Lois knew there had to be some mistake. Clark was invulnerable.

In a matter of minutes the gurney re-emerged and Lois gasped in horror. Clark — beautiful, invulnerable, indestructible Clark — lay unconscious and pale, that perfect chest bare and wrapped in bandages, an IV bag held aloft by one of the EMTs.

Pete came running out after the techs, yelling at them to stop. They pointedly ignored him. "You have no right," Pete insisted. "I told you, I have standing orders from Mr. Kent: no hospitals. Let me take him home and I promise his private physician will treat him."

The EMTs didn't break stride as the senior one explained — obviously not for the first time in this argument — that it didn't matter what Mr. Kent's security officer said — only Mr. Kent himself or his next of kin had the right to make medical decisions for him. And since Mr. Kent was in no position to give his opinion, they had no choice but to get him to the nearest trauma center.

Pete looked around in near panic, apparently searching for someone — anyone — who would take his side and help him stop the EMTs. His eyes landed on Lois and he looked relieved. It took her a moment to clear her head enough to make the connection. She had no idea what had happened in that office, but it was clear that not only Clark but his secret as well were in serious danger. She wouldn't risk his life to save his secret, but she could at least buy enough time to figure out what was happening and exactly how much danger he was in.

She lifted the yellow tape and started to duck under it. Perry put a restraining hand on her shoulder. "Hold on there, Lois..."

Before Perry could finish his sentence, Cat interrupted him. "No, Chief. Let her go."

As she straightened up on the other side of the police tape, Lois threw a quick, grateful glance back at Cat. Then she strode briskly toward the gurney. "Stop!" she shouted. By this time the EMTs were almost to the elevator, but Lois's unexpected outburst caused them to stop long enough to ascertain who was shouting at them.

She was almost at Clark's side when Bill Henderson stopped her with a firm grip on her arm. "Lois, you know better. This is no time for games — a man's life is at stake. Now get out of the way and let these people do their job."

Lois pulled her arm out of Henderson's grasp and looked him straight in the eye. Her voice came out low and deadly calm. "No, Bill, you get out of my way, because I'm not playing, and no one is going anywhere with that gurney until I say so. Now back off and let me get to my husband."

Lois didn't notice the questioning looks that the techs threw at Bill, nor the detective's look of shock that morphed into a confused shrug. She had eyes only for Clark as she leaned over him and brushed a tender hand over his forehead. He felt warm, maybe even feverish, but also sweaty. Was that a good sign that his body was trying to bring the fever down or a bad one? She couldn't remember ever seeing Clark sweat before.

She looked up at Pete who leaned over her shoulder, his face as drawn and anxious as her own. He gave a miniscule shrug —

he didn't know what to do any more than she did. "How bad is it?" she asked the chief technician.

Once again, the man looked to the detective for guidance, and once again got very little direction. Lois was losing patience. Lifting Clark's left hand in her right and holding her own left hand next to his, she practically waved them under the man's nose. "Look: matching rings. Are you satisfied? I'm Mrs. Kent, and I want answers. How bad are my husband's injuries?"

Whether the man was satisfied or intimidated, Lois neither knew nor cared. In either case, he answered her. "I can't tell much from here, ma'am. The bullet entered near his left collar bone and exited just under his shoulder blade. The fact that it went all the way through is good. There's no obvious bone fragments near either of his wounds. But that area has a lot of important parts — nerves, blood vessels, lung — which could have been damaged. He's breathing okay for now, but there could be all sorts of internal injuries. He hasn't regained consciousness since he was shot, and that's not a good sign. We really need to get him to a trauma center."

Again Lois looked to Pete, and to Lana who had now arrived as well. It was obvious that they were just as torn as Lois herself. Did they dare risk Clark's health in order to protect his secret? She knew what Clark himself would say — he was always willing to sacrifice his own welfare in order to protect his loved ones. But Clark wasn't the one making this decision, and he'd certainly never anticipated any physical danger to himself. She was his wife, and it was her job to decide what was in his best interest. She wouldn't let him die — that was never even a question. But how much danger was he really in? How could she know? Did he really have a private physician who was in on his secret, or had Pete made that up? Why would Clark have ever thought he'd even need a doctor? He was invulnerable, after all — only now he wasn't. Would the hospital staff even be able to detect any difference now that something — who knew what — had made him vulnerable? Did he look any different from any other injured man? But looks could be deceiving. He could look and act entirely human, but what about blood tests? Did Kryptonians have the same blood types as humans? Would something in Clark's physiology stand out as alien in a hospital laboratory?

"Oh, Clark," she said softly, her forehead almost touching his, "what am I going to do?" She still held his hand in hers, and she was surprised to feel a squeeze as if in answer to her question. He didn't open his eyes, but it seemed he knew that she was there. She didn't know whether he could understand what she said or was just vaguely aware of her presence, but she leaned even closer and murmured, "You're hurt, Clark; you've been shot. They want to take you to the hospital." She was sure she saw him frown in response. "Pete wants to take you home instead," she offered. Another squeeze in response. She guessed that meant yes. "I'm worried. You could be in real danger," she told him.

This time his eyes did open briefly and he tugged on her hand. He seemed to be beckoning her closer, which was almost physically impossible. Then she realized what he wanted. She put her ear next to his mouth and heard a faint whisper, "Very... weak...but...getting better...fast. Don't...let them...find out."

That settled it. Lois placed a kiss on Clark's forehead. He felt cooler than he had only a few minutes ago. She didn't know how, but he did seem to be recovering much more quickly than a normal human would. His secret was definitely in danger, and his health apparently less so. She'd check him over thoroughly as soon as she could, of course, but it looked like Pete's first instinct had been right; the hospital was to be avoided if at all possible. She told herself that if necessary she would track down her father. He was a surgeon, and he owed her and Clark a lot for saving him from Lex during that boxing scandal. If push came to shove, she

would risk trusting him with their secret. But for now she needed to get Clark home away from prying eyes.

Her decision made, she turned her mind to the thorny problem of actually implementing it. Her first step was to gather her allies. She turned to Pete and Lana. Her voice came out low but urgent. "We have to get him home. Now!"

Pete nodded his agreement. "I've got a car waiting by the back door." At Lois's surprised look he added, "It's standard procedure for celebrities. You never know when you're going to have to make a quick exit."

"Okay." She turned next to the senior medical tech. "Can we use your gurney to get him to the car? We can take him from there."

The man was clearly reluctant. "Like I told you, ma'am, he really needs to get to a hospital. I can't be responsible for what might happen if you take him home now."

"No, but I can, and I am." She tried softening her tone.

"Look, I know you're trying to help, but I'm his wife, and I have to do what I think is best for him. I know he doesn't want to go to the hospital, and he'll be under the care of an excellent physician. Now, are you going to help me get him to his car or not?"

The man looked helplessly from Lois to Clark to Bill. "You're really his wife?" Bill asked Lois.

"I really am. The Rosses can vouch for me."

At Pete and Lana's confirming nods, the detective gave a resigned shrug. "She's in charge, then," he told the tech. Then to Lois, "If that private doc can't handle him, you call 911. Whatever your husband has against hospitals, it isn't worth his life."

"I will." Turning back to the tech, she asked, "Can we go now?"

The tech advised them to leave the IV running until it was empty, just to make sure Clark was hydrated. But moments after they pulled away from the LexTower's back door Clark began scratching at the site where the needle entered his arm. Pete was driving, Lana sitting in the passenger seat next to him. Lois sat in the back with Clark's head in her lap, his body lying across the back seat. She tried to stop him from scratching at the IV needle, but, half-awake, he insisted, "It itches."

"Clark, stop. You're going to hurt yourself." She spoke firmly to him on the theory that he wasn't really aware of what he was doing.

He didn't stop. Instead, he opened his eyes and, in one swift motion, pulled the needle out and ripped the tape off his arm, thus freeing himself from the annoyance. "That's better," he said drowsily and drifted back to sleep. Lana, who had turned around at the sound of Clark's struggles, pulled a small first aid kit from the glove compartment and fished out a Band-Aid, but when Lois tried to apply it to the IV site, she couldn't find the wound. Clark's arm was whole and unmarked, as if the IV had never been there.

"I think we got him out of there just in time," Lois remarked. She was sorely tempted to peek under Clark's bandages, but she didn't have anything to replace them with if her hopes proved premature. She turned on the dome light and looked him over as well as she could in the limited space available. He'd been pale when he'd first emerged from Luthor's office, but now his color looked healthy. He was no longer sweating, and his temperature felt normal. She could feel a strong, steady pulse at his wrist. It was slightly slower than a normal man's, but she knew from nights of falling asleep with her head on Clark's chest that his heartbeat was always slow. They had both chalked it up to his super strength.

"How's he doing?" Pete asked.

"Better than anyone who's just been shot should be doing. I don't know about his blood pressure, but all his vital signs that I

can check seem normal. He's asleep, but he seems comfortable." Lois was no doctor, but she'd learned enough from her parents to feel relatively confident in her assessment.

"Okay. Let me know if he seems to be getting worse. If he's okay, I'm going to take the long way home. And hold on tight, because there may be some sudden turns. We've got about four cars of reporters to lose."

As it turned out, it only took Pete about fifteen minutes to lose their tails. Twenty minutes after that, they pulled into the alley that ran behind the brownstones on Hyperion Avenue. Lois got out and let herself into the house through the back door, then down the basement steps to open the garage door. Pete pulled the car into the garage. It took all three of them — Lois, Pete, and Lana, to lift Clark up the stairs, but after some huffing and puffing they managed to make it up the two flights to the bedroom. Lana pulled the covers back before they laid him down on the bed.

Lois retrieved the plastic bin full of first aid supplies from the cabinet under the master bathroom sink. She'd teased Clark when she'd first seen it there. Why in the world would an invulnerable man keep a stash of medical supplies? But he'd just said that his folks always kept one around — accidents were pretty common on a farm — and he never knew when a visitor might need some first aid. Neither of them had ever imagined that she'd be using it on him. She pulled out a box of gauze pads, a roll of bandages, a bottle of hydrogen peroxide, and some adhesive tape. Pete helped her get Clark's jacket and shirt off, and Lana appeared with a bath towel to lay under Clark's head and shoulders. "Easier than changing the sheet," she explained.

Lois was encouraged when Clark stirred enough to at least try to cooperate as they undressed him. "How do you feel?" she asked on the off chance that he was awake enough to reply.

"Tired," he mumbled as they laid him down on the towel.

Deciding that it would be easiest to cut the bandages off rather than try to keep Clark upright while unwrapping them, Lois sent Lana to the kitchen for a pair of scissors. While they waited, she asked Pete, "Does he really have a personal physician?"

"No, I was bluffing," he answered. "I've been thinking that if we needed to we could call Dr. Gibson. He's the Kents' family doctor. He helped them forge Clark's birth certificate years ago, but I don't think he's retired yet. It would take him hours to get here, though, and he's a general practitioner, not a surgeon. I don't know any doctors in Metropolis; I wouldn't know who to trust."

"I do," Lois reassured him. "My dad's a surgeon. He's actually in Philadelphia hiding out from Luthor, but he could get here in a couple of hours. We could trust him if we had to."

Lana returned with the scissors and Lois very carefully eased one blade between the cloth and Clark's skin and cut the bandages away. Her first job was to clean the dried blood away from his shoulder. "Sorry, honey, this might sting," she warned her sleeping husband. Pouring a little hydrogen peroxide onto a gauze pad she went to work.

All three of them stared in astonishment as the last of the old blood was wiped away. Other than a small round patch of new, pink skin, there was no sign of injury whatsoever. "Help me roll him over so I can check the exit wound," Lois told Pete.

"I can do it," Clark mumbled, suiting actions to words. Lois surmised that he must be awake enough to hear what they said, if too tired to respond much. After cleaning the second wound — or rather, what had been the second wound — she was satisfied. Clark was healing at super-human speed. She was a little concerned that he hadn't completely regained consciousness yet, but she figured that most of his energy was going to repair his body. Still, she couldn't quite relax until she'd asked him some questions.

"Clark, can you wake up for just a minute?" she prodded.

"I am awake," he answered, eyes still closed.

"All the way, honey. Can you sit up and talk to me for just a little while?"

With a visible effort, Clark roused himself enough to open his eyes and sit with his back against the headboard.

"I'm sorry," she told him. "I know you're tired. I just need to make sure you're okay. Talk to me — how does everything feel? Does it hurt anywhere?"

"No. It did earlier, but not anymore."

"Can you breathe easily?"

Clark took a couple of experimental deep breaths before answering, "I can breathe fine."

"Let me see you move your arm."

Slowly at first, then with growing confidence, Clark raised his arm to the front, side, and over his head. He shrugged his shoulder up and down and rolled it in a circle. "It feels pretty good," he told her with obvious surprise.

"No pain at all?"

"Not really. A little tender maybe."

"No headache? Vision problems?" She wasn't sure that was even relevant, but she thought it had something to do with blood pressure.

"No headache. And I can see fine..." his voice seemed to trail off for a moment and he frowned.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I can see normally, just not...super."

"You mean no x-ray vision, no telescopic sight..."

"Exactly." He cocked his head to one side in the motion that Lois recognized as his super-hearing pose. "No super-hearing, either." Reaching for the paperback novel on his nightstand, he tried to tear it in two. "Not too strong, either, just...normal." Lois couldn't tell whether he thought that was a good thing or a bad one. Perhaps he wasn't sure himself.

"You're exhausted, Clark. I wouldn't worry about that tonight. What you need is a good night's sleep, and I bet you'll be back to your old self in no time."

"Maybe." He didn't sound convinced.

Lois leaned in to place a tender kiss on his mouth. As she pulled back she told him, "You know I love you, powers or no powers. We all do. It's the man under the suit that we love." Pete and Lana murmured their agreement.

Clark started to lie down again, but then he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"Where do you think you're going, mister? You need to rest." Lois tried to push him back down.

"I need to go," Clark insisted.

"Go where?" He wasn't delirious, was he? He'd seemed so lucid just moments before.

"Lois," he countered, "I have to go." The light bulb went on.

"Oh. I'm sorry. Do you need help?"

"No. I can manage." Lois wasn't sure which of the four people in the room was the most embarrassed.

As Clark made his way into the master bathroom, Pete and Lana started backing toward the bedroom door. "It looks like you've got things under control here," Lana offered.

"If it's okay with you, we'll crash in the guest room," Pete suggested.

"Of course. Let me show you..." Lois began.

"No need," Lana reassured her. "I'm the one who bought this house for Clark — we can find our way around. You stay with him. And just holler if you need help."

"Thank you." It was all Lois could think of to say, but Lana's answering smile told her it was enough.

"Well, you two get a good night's sleep," Lana said in parting. She checked her watch. "I doubt Martha and Jonathan have heard the news tonight. They would have called if they had."

I'll call them in the morning, unless you want to."

"I didn't even think of that," Lois admitted.

"Of course not," Lana replied with a sympathetic tone. "You had other things on your mind. Besides, they won't worry, even if they do hear that Clark's been shot. They'll assume there's been some mistake. And, at the rate he's healing, we'll have good news for them in the morning."

"Thanks." Lois looked from Lana to Pete and back again.

"You two are good friends, to both of us."

"Any time," Pete said, stepping forward to give Lois a chaste kiss on the cheek. "That's what friends are for."

"Goodnight," Lana said as she closed the door behind them.

Clark came out of the bathroom clad in only his briefs. Lois stepped toward him to offer him her support as he made his way back to the bed. Instead, he turned her body to face his and enveloped her in a bear hug, his head resting on the top of hers. She wrapped her arms around him and breathed in his scent. As she let the breath out again, she could feel some of the tension leaving her body.

"Oh, Clark!" That was all she could manage to say before her voice broke. She nuzzled her face against his bare chest, desperate for some tangible confirmation that he was still there, safe and sound.

He lifted one hand to stroke her hair. "Shhh, it's okay," he said, his voice soft and low. "I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere."

She squeezed him tightly. "I'm never letting go," she announced in a fierce, almost challenging tone.

"I wouldn't let you if you tried," he agreed, "but do you think we could do this lying down?" She could hear the smile in his voice, and it soothed her jangled nerves.

Somehow, she managed to climb into bed with him without once entirely losing contact. Her only concession to undressing was to kick off her shoes. The lights were still on, but she wasn't going to let go of him long enough to turn them off. Besides, they were both too tired to care. She made sure he was comfortably settled. Then she snuggled into her favorite spot, her head on his chest, and let sleep claim her.

Jimmy stepped off the elevator onto the bullpen landing. He didn't know what had caused the Chief to call him in on a Friday night, but he hoped it was something good, especially since he'd left a very cooperative young co-ed sitting in his apartment — or rather, walking quickly out of his apartment. Oh, well. The news business was a 24/7 deal, and Jimmy wanted to show Perry White that he was serious about making it as a reporter.

Scanning the bullpen floor, he spotted Perry in the last place he'd expected — leaning over Cat Grant's shoulder, both of them peering at her computer screen. The Chief was wearing a tuxedo — or rather what was left of one. The jacket was missing, the bow tie hung loose, the top button of the starched white shirt was undone, and the sleeves were rolled half-way up to Perry's elbows. Meanwhile, Cat was wearing a relatively conservative — for Cat, anyway — evening gown. The two had obviously come straight from some black-tie event. Jimmy remembered vaguely that there were a couple of those coming up this weekend — one with Lex Luthor and one with Clark Kent?

Before he could figure it out, the Chief caught sight of him and waved him over with an impatient gesture. "Olsen! What took you so long?" Jimmy trotted over to Cat's desk and opened his mouth to answer, but his boss cut him off. "Never mind. Just get on the Infonet database and find me Clark Kent's marriage license."

"Clark Kent is married?" Jimmy was pretty sure he would have heard if the king of the playboys had tied the knot.

With exaggerated patience, Perry explained, "That's what we're trying to find out. Now get going. Check every state

registry for the last 30 days. If that doesn't work, look under Caleb Knight or Lois Lane. Now!"

"Lois?!" The look the Chief gave him silenced any further inquiry. With a resigned shake of his head, Jimmy headed for his desk.

An hour later, he was forced to admit defeat, at least on the marriage license front. He hoped the Chief would be pleased with the other stuff he'd come up with. It was always good to show initiative, right? He started back to Cat's desk, where Perry had taken the guest chair. The editor held Cat's phone to one ear, so Jimmy hung back, waiting for him to finish.

"You're certain of that? There's no possibility of his getting out on bail?" Perry asked into the phone. There was a brief pause, and then, "What about St. John? Somebody in his inner circle must have cut a deal." A longer pause. "No kidding." Perry smiled. "I'll bet Luthor didn't know that. That's a good detail to put in — increases her human interest." One more brief pause, and then Perry said, "No. I know Bill Henderson, and if he insists he's not saying anything more tonight, then it's best not to badger him. He'll be more talkative tomorrow if we let him get some sleep tonight. You go on home and do the same, but meet us here first thing in the morning. Seven's fine; I'll send Jimmy for donuts."

Perry hung up and turned first to Cat. "Here's what we've got on the police front: They've charged Luthor with first degree murder, attempted murder, false imprisonment, assault with a deadly weapon, and resisting arrest. They're holding him without bail. There's no sign of his major-domo, Nigel St. John. Eduardo saw a woman at the station who fits the description of Luthor's personal assistant, Mrs. Cox. I'd bet dollars to donuts that she's looking to make a deal. The original 'kidnapper' turned out to be a hired thug, but he's dead. Clark Kent is incommunicado. As you know, Lois took off with Kent, his security man, and his assistant, so nobody has talked to any of them. Lois said she was taking him home, but nobody knows where home is. There's no answer at Lois's apartment. That leaves Anita Eskin as the only eyewitness." At this point an amused half-smile crossed Perry's lips. "Here's a funny coincidence that I'll bet Luthor didn't know when he told his man to nab her: She put herself through college on the GI bill — spent four years in the Military Police."

Cat smiled in response. "I'll bet she handled herself a lot better than Luthor expected. He thought he was grabbing another innocent hostage to bring Superman running, but he ended up with a cop in the room. It's almost ironic."

Jimmy was having a hard time following this conversation. Lex Luthor, Metropolis's biggest benefactor, was under arrest for murder? Lois had taken Clark Kent home? And who the heck was Anita Eskin? Well, at least he had an inkling of what was going on between Lois and Clark Kent. Perry had given him the clues when he asked him to search for marriage licenses for Lois and Caleb as well as Clark Kent. He wondered now whether the information — or lack thereof — that he'd dug up on Caleb would be news to Perry or not.

"Well, Olsen? What have you got?"

Jimmy brought his thoughts back to the task at hand. "There's no record of any marriage licenses for Clark Kent, Lois Lane, or Caleb Knight for the last six months. I checked every state, plus Canada. If any of them got married recently, they didn't do it in this country."

"Hmmm...so we have Lois's word for it, plus confirmation from Kent's staff, but no hard evidence." The editor started to turn back to Cat, but Jimmy wasn't finished yet.

"Also, I did some digging on Caleb Knight." Perry turned back to Jimmy. Was he pleased, or just surprised? It was hard to tell. Jimmy hurried to fill the Chief in. "There are a few Caleb Knights in the infonet, but they're all too young or too old to match Lois's Caleb. There's no record of any tax return, driver's

license, phone listing, property records, anything for a Caleb Knight that could remotely match our guy. As far as the Infonet is concerned, our Caleb Knight doesn't exist."

"Thank you, Jimmy. I can't say I'm surprised, but it's good to have that confirmed. Good work."

"So," Cat put in, "What can we print for the morning edition? That Clark Kent has been in Metropolis for weeks disguised as a free-lance writer? That he's married to Lois Lane, even though nobody can find any record of it? All we've got so far is unsubstantiated rumors."

Perry checked his watch and frowned thoughtfully. "No. We say what everyone who was at the Lexor already knows: That Lois Lane claimed to be married to Clark Kent, and that she was convincing enough that the police let her prevent the EMTs from taking him to the hospital."

"Wait. Clark Kent was injured? By Luthor?" Jimmy shut up when he caught sight of Perry's impatient scowl.

Ignoring Jimmy's questions, the Chief continued, "Right now we don't have any proof that Caleb Knight is really Clark Kent, and most people wouldn't care if we did. Caleb Knight is not newsworthy."

"But Clark Kent being married is," Cat countered.

"Yes, it is. And we've already got Lois's claim to that effect. But we've got to stay focused on the main story here — Lex Luthor. What have we got that no other paper has?"

Cat smiled knowingly and answered, "Lois's beeper number."

Perry smiled back approvingly. "That's right. We'll let her see to her husband's injuries tonight, but I want an eyewitness account from Clark Kent in tomorrow's evening edition. And Lois Lane is going to get us to Clark Kent."

Clark woke up slowly. The sky outside was beginning to get light. Lois was snuggled up against him, her head nestled between his shoulder and his neck. As he moved to kiss her, he felt the rough texture of her jeans against his bare legs. It was a strange juxtaposition — Clark in only his underwear and his wife fully dressed under the covers. She stirred but didn't wake, and he savored the feel of her presence. He was alive, and Lois was here with him.

He remembered his near-panic of the night before — his desperation to protect his secret, to shield the ones he loved from Superman's public exposure. He'd been sure that the truth would come out when Clark Kent collapsed from the influence of Luthor's glowing rock. He'd known he couldn't keep himself from showing its effects. His only other option had been to find an alternative explanation so that no one would connect his illness to the rock, and therefore to Superman. And, irony of ironies, Luthor had given him just the cover he needed. In a split-second decision, Clark had managed to get himself between Luthor and Ms. Eskin just in time to take the bullet meant for her. If he'd been thinking more clearly at the time, he might have wondered whether he was still physically invulnerable despite how miserably sick he felt, but the thought had never entered his head. And, as it turned out, he hadn't been. He remembered the awful sting of lead ripping through flesh, his fall to the floor, the sound of a struggle very close to him, then nothing else until he half-woke to hear Lois talking to him.

Lois...beautiful, brave, brilliant Lois. She'd saved him. Not physically, but she'd kept him out of the hospital and protected his privacy — their privacy. Without her, his secret surely would have been exposed. Overcome by a wave of sheer gratitude, he squeezed her tight and whispered fiercely, "God, woman, I love you!"

This time she woke up enough to squeeze him back. "Oh, Clark! I was so frightened! If I'd lost you..."

"Shhh. It's okay. I'm okay, thanks to you."

"More like thanks to some super healing abilities we didn't

know about," she said, still holding him as if she were afraid to let go.

He smiled and pulled back enough to see her face. "Okay," he agreed, dropping a kiss onto her forehead, "but it's thanks to you that I'm home in my own bed and not answering a lot of very awkward questions in a hospital."

She smiled back. She still seemed a little fragile, but Clark had no doubt she would regain her usual confidence quickly. "Well, to be honest," she said, "it was Pete's idea to bring you home, but I'll take credit for convincing them to let us do it. Those EMTs really wanted to get you to a trauma center." Her eyes dropped to the spot under his collarbone where the bullet had struck. Even the little circle of pink skin was gone. Tenderly she ran a hand over the spot. "I still can't quite believe it," she said. Looking up at him again, she asked, "How do you feel?"

"I feel perfectly healthy." He paused for a moment, concentrating. "Still no super senses," he reported. "But mostly what I feel is...hungry, which is kind of strange because I usually don't really need food."

"Well, your body must have used a lot of energy making all those repairs. Let's get you something to eat." Lois got quickly to her feet and started pulling him along after her.

"Okay, but I seem to remember that Pete and Lana are still here. Don't you think I should get dressed first?" Clark teased.

"All right, if you insist," Lois said with a mock pout.

Clark resisted the urge to accost Lois while she showered. They were supposed to be honeymooners, but he really was very hungry, and they had houseguests. For the umpteenth time in the last week, he thought how happy he would be to get away for a real honeymoon. He smiled when he remembered that today was Saturday. They'd be leaving tomorrow.

When both of them were clean and dressed Lois made the bed while Clark opened the window shades. It was a routine he'd learned from his mother. She called it 'opening the house.' As he pulled up the shade on the south-facing window, a stream of sunlight flooded the room. The winter sun was low in the sky, and its rays fell directly on his face. It felt wonderful. He was still standing there with his eyes closed, just soaking it in, when Lois prodded him to come down to breakfast.

As Lois and Clark stepped into the kitchen, Lana looked up from the morning paper. "Good morning," she greeted them cheerfully. "I made coffee. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not," Lois reassured her.

"Still feeling okay?" Lana asked Clark.

"Perfectly healthy, just not super," he answered.

Lois still couldn't tell how he felt about the loss of his powers. She hoped that they would come back as his body continued to heal, but she couldn't be sure. She didn't prod him to discuss it. There would be time for that later when they didn't have company.

Meanwhile, Clark got busy making breakfast. Even without his superpowers, he moved about the kitchen quickly. Lois made herself useful setting the table and pouring orange juice. Pete appeared just in time, and the four friends sat down to a heaping platter of eggs and bacon with toast and jam on the side.

"I talked to your folks earlier," Lana told Clark as they ate. Lois was surprised, given that the time was an hour earlier in Smallville, but she quickly remembered that Martha and Jonathan were farmers, and therefore early risers. "I told them that you were healthy, which of course they already assumed, and that you were home safe and sound. I didn't go into any detail about the shooting — I wasn't sure how much you wanted them to know. I didn't want to worry them about that rock without talking to you first."

"Especially since, by the time Ms. Eskin told the police about the rock, it had disappeared," put in Pete.

“What rock?” Lois asked.

“Here.” Lana handed Lois the front section of the Planet. “You can read it for yourself.”

Lois skimmed the article, slowing down for the parts she didn’t already know about. Someone at the Planet had talked to Anita Eskin, and she’d been a good source. Lois had been so focused on Clark’s health that she hadn’t given much thought to the other events of the night before. Now, for the first time, she found out why Luthor had orchestrated the kidnapping, what had caused Clark to lose his powers, and how exactly he had been shot.

“Clark!” She looked at him in horror. “Is this really true? Could that rock have killed you?”

He gave her a rueful shrug. “I don’t know. Luthor seemed pretty confident that it could, but I don’t know how he could be certain. I sure felt pretty awful. I guess if it had been bigger or closer, or if I’d been exposed long enough, it might have killed me. That’s why I needed to get shot.”

“You what?! You did that on purpose?! What kind of a lunkheaded move was that?”

“It was all I could think of,” he defended himself. “I couldn’t let Luthor or anyone else see that the rock was making me sick. This way, they all think it’s the bullet that did it. Besides, it turned out well; Ms. Eskin got the gun away from Luthor and let the police in.”

“Lucky for us, but you couldn’t have known that it would work out that way. You could have been killed!”

For a moment, Clark looked as if he were about to argue the merits of his decision, but his face quickly softened and he scooted closer to Lois and pulled her into a sideways hug. “I know, honey,” he soothed, “I know. But I wasn’t. I’m right here, I’m healthy, and I’m not going anywhere.” Only the awareness of Pete and Lana sitting across the table from them kept Lois from collapsing in an emotional heap as the protective barrier of her crisis mode eroded.

Lois and Clark hugged quietly for at least a minute while the Rosses ate in silence, pretending great interest in the sports section. Finally, Lois drew back and took a deep breath. “I’m okay,” she reassured everyone. She was searching for something to say in order to move past the awkward moment, but Clark saved her the necessity.

“Lois?” He had his head cocked in his listening pose. He turned around to look through the open door into the living room. “I think your purse is beeping.”

Lois couldn’t hear anything. She did have her beeper in her purse, which she’d left on her desk in the living room. “You can hear my beeper from here?” she asked Clark.

“It’s faint, but yeah.” Then, “It stopped.” A hopeful look passed between the four friends. No one wanted to be the first to say it out loud, but it looked as if Clark’s powers might return after all.

Shaking her head to bring her thoughts back to the present, Lois excused herself and went to check the beeper. Sure enough, the City Room phone number was blinking in the display window. Resuming her place at the table, Lois confirmed, “You were right; it was my beeper. Perry’s trying to get a hold of me. What am I going to tell him?”

Lana opened her mouth to speak, but Clark started first. “We are going to tell him the truth,” he said. Then, before anyone could make an objection, he clarified, “The truth about Caleb Knight and Clark Kent, that is. After all, Superman wasn’t even around last night.”

“Are you sure you’re up to an interview?” Lois asked.

“Sure. Why not? I feel perfectly fine. And, now that you mention it, I had an appointment for an interview with Cat Grant today. Besides, I still plan on showing up at the Book Awards tonight.” Lois had completely forgotten about that.

“Clark,” Lana put in, “You were shot last night. How are you going to explain your remarkable recovery?”

“With the truth — the bullet went through, miraculously missing any vital organs, and, thanks to the great care I got, I’m feeling much better now.”

At first it looked as if Lana would object, but she caught sight of Clark’s determined look and settled for, “Will you at least keep up the fiction of the personal physician?”

“All right,” Clark conceded. “That and a bandage peeking out from under my shirt collar should keep anyone from questioning any further.” With a cheeky grin, he added, “I’ll even move a little stiffly if that will make you feel better.”

“It will,” she agreed.

“Well?” Clark turned to Lois. “Do you need to call Mr. White back?”

A smile slowly blossomed and Lois replied, “No need. Let’s go down to the newsroom and surprise him.”

Perry hung up his phone and headed for Cat’s desk. “I just talked to Eduardo,” he told her. “Mrs. Cox just showed up at the police station with a man who looks an awful lot like a lawyer. I’d say she’s cut herself a deal.” He checked his watch and frowned. “Still no answer from Lois. I paged her half an hour ago.”

“Well, I just hung up with Lana Ross, Mr. Kent’s assistant and PR rep,” Cat reported.

“How did you find her?” Perry interrupted. “Did you manage to track down Kent as well?”

She shook her head. “No such luck. I called Kent Enterprises in Smallville, Kansas, and left a message on their answering machine. She must have called in for her messages, because she just called me back. She wouldn’t comment on the marriage question, but she did say that Mr. Kent’s injuries are not as serious as we all thought, and that he is planning to attend the American Book Award ceremonies tonight. Apparently his personal physician has given him the go-ahead.”

Just then Perry noticed that the room, which had been humming with the normal Saturday morning activity, grew suddenly quiet. He looked up to see Lois making her way down the ramp from the elevator, arm in arm with Clark Kent. Or Caleb Knight. Or a strange hybrid of the two men. His clothes and posture were Caleb’s — khaki pants and a blue-and white striped oxford, with an easy lope. The glasses were Kent’s, as was the hair cut that Kent had been newly sporting at Luthor’s dinner. As the man got closer, Perry could see the edge of a bandage peeking out from the loose collar of his shirt. Now that he knew, the similarities were obvious. He could hardly believe that he hadn’t seen it before.

Ignoring the openly curious stares of her colleagues, Lois walked straight to Perry and said cheerfully, “You rang?”

Before answering her, Perry gave a well-practiced growl to the newsroom in general. “What are you all staring at? Haven’t you ever seen a pair of newlyweds before?” The hum of conversation returned to its normal volume and Perry turned back to Lois and Caleb...Kent...whatever his name was. “I’m glad to see you...both,” he added with a significant look at Lois’s young husband. “How are you feeling, son?”

The young man gave him a sheepish smile. “A lot better than I did last night. It sure felt like I was dying at the time, but apparently there’s no lasting damage. I’ve still got some healing to do, but I expect to make a full recovery.”

“And to be at the Book Awards tonight, according to Ms. Ross,” Cat put in. “Can I assume that Lois will be with you this time?”

“Absolutely.” He draped his good arm around his bride’s shoulder with a proud smile. “This time and every other time from now on.” Then, turning back to Perry, he said in a more

serious tone, “I’m guessing you’ve got a few questions for me. And I do owe Ms. Grant an interview.”

Perry smiled. “You’re right on both counts, Mr. Kent. Let’s all step into the small conference room.”

“Clark,” the younger man corrected, holding out his right hand.

“Clark it is. I’m glad to know you,” Perry answered, shaking the proffered hand warmly.

Soon the four of them were seated around the small table. Cat started a pot of coffee on the conference room’s sideboard.

Jimmy poked his head in with the excuse of bringing them the last of the donuts. Perry kept the donuts but shooed Jimmy out. When they were finally settled, Perry began. “Well, you two are just full of surprises, aren’t you?” He smiled affectionately at Lois.

“Yeah, well, he kind of surprised me, too, Chief,” she answered with a teasing look at her husband.

This caught Cat’s attention. “You mean that you didn’t know he was Clark Kent when you met? You met him undercover?” This would make a juicy story.

“Well, kind of. I did meet him as Clark first. Remember, Chief? You were after me to get an interview from Clark Kent when we were both at Luthor’s White Orchid Ball.”

“I remember. I also remember that, even though you spent an entire evening with the elusive Mr. Kent, you insisted that you weren’t able to get a publishable story out of it.”

“Ooh,” purred Cat. “Does that mean that something unpublishable went on between you two that night?” Her eyebrows wiggled suggestively.

“No.” Lois’s tone suggested that Cat should drag her mind out of the gutter. “Actually, I didn’t see Clark Kent after that night — well, except for the time he ditched me at a book signing, but I’m getting ahead of the story...”

“That was after she knew me as Caleb Knight and I didn’t want her to recognize me yet,” Clark explained.

“Hey, I just remembered,” Perry put in, “you told us you two met at a Clark Kent book signing.”

“Sorry.” Clark was blushing furiously. “I didn’t know you very well then, and I needed a cover story.”

“Anyway,” Lois continued, “Clark was in Metropolis on his book tour, but he was also working undercover as Caleb Knight. We actually met when we were both covering the same story and we kind of bumped into each other.”

“So Clark Kent left town after his book tour, but Caleb Knight stayed to pursue that story that you wouldn’t tell me about,” Perry summed up.

“Actually...” Clark began, but Cat spoke at the same time and he let her go first.

“Let me get this straight. Lois met Caleb Knight and didn’t recognize him as Clark Kent?”

“So did both of you,” Lois pointed out.

“Well, I suppose he is famous for his talents of disguise,” Cat conceded. “But it’s still pretty funny.”

“You print that and I’ll wring your neck,” Lois started.

“Calm down, Lois. Your secret’s safe with me.” Cat was still smiling.

“In her defense, Lois did figure out who I was pretty quickly,” Clark informed her.

“Figured it out? You didn’t tell her?” Cat was clearly intrigued.

“She beat me to it.” Clark shrugged. “What can I say? My wife is a lot smarter than I am.” Perry wasn’t sure that was true, but it was probably a good thing that Clark thought so — just as long as Lois didn’t really think so, too.

“So,” Cat went on, apparently taking the opportunity to get the interview she’d been promised. “I’m assuming that your marriage is the ‘delicate announcement’ that Ms. Ross told me

about.”

“Yes. I’m sorry the events of last night got ahead of us. We really wanted to give you the exclusive, but I’m afraid it’s common knowledge by now.”

Cat shrugged. “Yes and no. Everyone knows by now that Lois claimed to be your wife and that Henderson let her override the EMTs and take you home, but I’ll still be the only one with confirmation from you. By the way, we couldn’t find a marriage license in the national database. Where and when did you two get married?”

As if in answer, Lois reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “This is a copy,” she said, handing the paper to Cat. “We thought you might like to see it.”

Perry watched Cat’s eyebrows rise as she read the marriage certificate. “Honduras?” she said with that same amused smile.

“I have a pastor friend there,” Clark explained. “I met him when I was researching one of my books. So when Lois said ‘yes,’ it just seemed natural to fly down there.” And Clark Kent could afford to fly anywhere in the world on a moment’s notice, Perry realized. He might even have a private plane for all Perry knew.

“So, Lois,” Cat asked, “Where else has your wealthy husband flown you to? I imagine you’ve had some very romantic dates.”

Perry watched Lois for her reaction. Would she bristle at what she must consider a puff-piece question? It looked to him like Lois was having her own internal debate about how to answer.

After a moment, Lois said, in a too-sweet voice, “Now, Ms. Grant, you can’t expect me to divulge all our little secrets. Let’s just say that I’ll never look at Florence in quite the same way again.” Then, in her normal tone, she said, “Seriously, though, Cat, I didn’t fall in love with Clark Kent the famous writer. I fell in love with Caleb Knight, the man. The fact that he had another name...”

“...and a fortune,” Cat added.

“...and a fortune,” Lois conceded, “is not what attracted me to him. You don’t know him like I do.” She gave her husband a tender look. “Clark is something special, and it has nothing to do with his money, or his fame. That’s all on the outside. It has to do with who he is underneath all of that. I was very lucky that I got to know the real man first.”

Cat directed her next question to Clark. “And what about you, Mr. Kent? You usually have a new woman on your arm at every appearance. What made you suddenly want to settle down?”

“Lois, of course.” His smile and his amused tone said that the answer should be obvious.

“Of course.” Cat gave him a smile in return. They were two pros at the celebrity interview game, and Cat clearly enjoyed the repartee. “But could you elaborate? Just to humor me?”

Clark gave a little shrug. “You know how the game works. There’s an event coming up, you’re expected to have a date, so you ask someone — someone you know or someone you’d like to know. You know and she knows that it’s just a casual thing, someone to spend the evening with, nothing more. You have fun, you say goodnight, and that’s that. No expectations, no commitments, it’s all on the surface. You both know the ground rules, so there’s no hurt feelings. No big deal.” He paused and looked at his wife, a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. “Now Lois, on the other hand...well, there’s no such thing as ‘no big deal’ when Lois Lane is involved. She had no idea who I really was, so she didn’t know those ground rules. She pushed, she prodded, she asked questions...in other words, she treated me like a person, not like a celebrity. It was a little scary at first, but I was fascinated. By the time I knew she’d figured out my real name, it was too late. We were way past the surface, and the rest is history.”

It looked like Cat had her story, so now it was Perry's turn. "So you stayed in Metropolis on an undercover story, and you ended up helping Lois out on some of her investigations. I guess I understand now why you wouldn't let me make out a paycheck to Caleb Knight. But maybe Clark Kent wouldn't mind an occasional byline? You two really do make a terrific writing team."

"I'll give it some serious thought. I certainly enjoy working with Lois. I'd never seriously considered reporting full time. Fiction is my strong suit, and I think I've got a few novels left in me yet, but somehow I think Lois is going to keep sucking me into her investigations. I guess I might as well get some credit for it." His teasing smile told them all that he didn't really mind getting sucked in to Lois's work life.

"Lane and Kent..." Lois mused aloud, "I guess it does have a certain ring to it."

"I thought you were already doing some reporting of your own," Perry said. "Or was that all part of your cover story?"

"Yes and no," Clark answered. "I didn't really stay here because of a story." He smiled again. "Truth be told, I stayed because I met Lois. But we really have been working together to try to get proof of Lex Luthor's underworld dealings."

Perry could feel his own eyebrows shoot up at this news. "That was the undercover story that you wouldn't tell me about? I mean, you told me early on that you suspected him of being involved in the Menken case, but I didn't think that made him a major criminal. Why didn't you say something?"

"Would you have believed me if I had? A no-name freelance reporter claiming that Metropolis's favorite son was really a criminal mastermind? I had no proof. So I just kept digging around and hoped that he'd slip up."

"Which he did big time last night," Lois said with a very satisfied tone.

"Yes." Clark sobered. "I'm just sorry that it cost another life before he finally gave himself away."

"Another? You mean that there have been others? What exactly are you accusing Luthor of?"

Clark reached for Lois's bag again and pulled out a thick folder. "Actually, I was hoping that you could tell us who we should give these to. Do you have a reliable police contact? I wouldn't put it past Luthor to have bribed half the MPD."

Perry took the file and began leafing through it. "Gunrunning? Drug dealing? Prostitution? This sounds like a regular crime syndicate." Then, after another couple of pages, "The Messenger explosion? The riverfront fires?" Perry looked up at Lois and Clark. "Is there anything this man doesn't have a hand in?"

"Not much that we can figure out, but we can't prove any of it," Lois said. "We're hoping that, now that he's been arrested, people will start talking. I saw Bill Henderson at the scene last night. If he's heading the investigation, this stuff might help him know what questions to ask. Someone in Luthor's inner circle might be willing to make a deal. Maybe Nigel St. John."

Perry shook his head. "St. John's disappeared. But it looks like Mrs. Cox, Luthor's assistant, is talking. She's been seen at the police station last night and this morning."

Lois nodded. "Okay. I'll talk to Henderson today." She glanced at her watch. "If he cooperates, we'll have time to get at least one story out under the Lane and Kent byline before we go."

"It will have to be Lane, Friez, and Kent this time, Lois. Eduardo's been covering this since last night. He's down at the precinct right now."

Lois stuffed the papers back into her bag and stood up. "Well? What are we waiting for? Let's get down there." She pulled Clark after her, and he followed willingly, if slightly bemused.

Perry watched them go. Then he turned to Cat with a smile.

"That boy has no idea what he's got himself into, does he?"

"Don't worry, Chief," she answered. "If anyone can hold his own with Lois Lane, it's Caleb Knight."

"You mean Clark Kent," Perry corrected her.

She gave a jaunty shrug of an almost-bare shoulder. "Yeah, him too."

Lois sat cross-legged on the living room sofa, peering at her laptop screen. She wore a comfortable terry-cloth robe, which looked a little funny considering that her hair and makeup were already done for the awards dinner. Clark supposed that this must be a normal thing for women — after all, they must not wear their evening gowns to the hair salon — but he felt somehow privileged to see her this way.

She looked up as he set a fresh cup of coffee on the table. "Thanks." She checked her watch. "I'm almost done. Come see what you think."

He leaned over the back of the sofa and put one hand on her shoulder as he read. "Murder, conspiracy, wire fraud, RICO. Nice. That alone tells me that they've got Luthor for more than just what he did last night."

"Yep. Henderson won't give out too many details because he doesn't want to give Luthor's defense team any warning as to what's coming, but if they're charging him under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations act, then they've got to have some evidence of organized crime. It looks like Mrs. Cox came through." She looked up with a proud grin. "And Henderson's promised us first dibs on the details once they go to trial."

"C-K," he told her.

"What?"

He pointed to the screen. "Racketeer. It's spelled with a C-K, not a Q-U."

"That's what editors are for, Clark." She slapped his arm to make him move it away from the computer screen.

"Hey, you asked me to check it." He came around to sit next to her.

"For content, not for spelling," she corrected.

"Okay, next time I'll know better." He smiled, completely unrepentant.

She rolled her eyes at him. "Anyway, all I need now is a quote from Superman."

"Superman? Why? He wasn't even there last night."

"Exactly. Luthor set this whole kidnapping plot up in order to lure Superman to his death, and Superman never showed. What does that imply? That he knew about the green rock and decided to stay away for his own safety? That would confirm Luthor's poisonous rock theory as well as making Superman look like a coward. We need to come up with another explanation for his absence."

"I hadn't thought of that, but you're right." Clark was quiet for a couple of minutes, and then he said, "How about this?" He sat up straight and let his voice drop into Superman's lower register. "I deeply regret not being able to help in this situation. I realized some time ago that I can't be there every time someone needs my help. That is my burden. Some of the things I do or help with do not get publicized. This was an instance where I was otherwise occupied and unable to respond."

Lois played along, stepping into reporter mode herself. "Does this mean that you don't believe Luthor's theory about that rock being able to hurt you? You weren't just staying away to save yourself?"

"Ms. Lane," Superman responded, "Until the incidents of last night, I had never even heard of such a rock. So you can understand that I could have had no reason to assume that it could hurt me. I've certainly never encountered anything else that could. Now, I'm not saying that it is impossible, but if I were

you, I would consider the source. Regrettably, Mr. Luthor has shown himself to be unscrupulous, and I wouldn't consider him a reliable witness." Clark dropped the Superman persona and asked, "What do you think? Will that work?"

"I think it's a good as we're going to get without an outright lie."

"Don't let that stop you, Lois. I will lie if I have to, to protect you."

"No. I don't think that's necessary. This will do." She glanced at her watch again. "Give me ten minutes to add the Superman quotes and get this off to Perry, then I'd better get dressed." She smiled warmly at him. "You've got a big night ahead, you know."

He leaned in and kissed her. "I'm so glad you'll be there with me. I hated going without you last night."

"Well, you'll never have to go anywhere without me again."

"Oh, I don't know about that. Somehow I think your work may occasionally interfere with my publicity rounds, but at least I'll be able to be honest about why I'm out alone when I have to be." He smiled in eager anticipation. "I can't wait to show you off tonight."

She rolled her eyes again. "Yes, I'll be sure to hang on your arm decoratively and fade into the background like the perfect date."

"You'd better not. I want you front and center, right where you belong. From now on, anyone who thinks of Clark Kent better have 'and Lois Lane' in the same thought."

She gave him a genuine smile. "I'm sure they will, once we win our first joint Kerth Award. But seriously, this is your night, and you've earned it."

"Well, in any case, it's a night I want to share with my beautiful wife."

"And so you shall, Mr. Kent, but not if you don't go away and let me finish this article so I can get dressed." She gave him a playful shove and he left her in peace.

Thirty minutes later Clark, dressed in a new tuxedo — the old one having been shredded by Luthor's bullet and the EMTs — finished zipping Lois's burgundy dress up the back and gazed at their joint reflection in the bathroom mirror. "You are so beautiful," he told her softly. Then, giving her reflection a critical once-over, he said, "Something's missing, though." He bent down to kiss the juncture of her shoulder and neck. "Don't move."

He ducked into the bedroom, and Lois heard the sound of his nightstand drawer opening and closing. In less than a minute he was back, a long black velvet box in one hand. She turned to face him, and he handed it to her. She opened the case to find a glimmering necklace, brilliant diamonds interspersed with deep blue sapphires. There was a matching pair of earrings.

"Clark! You didn't have to..."

"I know I didn't, but I wanted to. I like buying you gifts. Besides, they match your ring." He looked a little uncertain. "You don't have to wear them if you don't like them. Maybe you had something else planned."

She hastened to reassure him. "They're beautiful, Clark. I'd love to wear them."

"Well, you know I think you're beautiful in blue jeans and a t-shirt, but I thought these might be fun, since you're dressing up anyway." He reached for the box. "May I?"

She nodded and turned around again so he could fasten the necklace behind her neck. Then he handed the box back to her and she put the earrings in. Once more their eyes met in the mirror. "I am the luckiest man in the world," he told her.

Snow was falling as the town car pulled up in front of the Mayflower Hotel. "You ready?" Clark asked, giving Lois's hand a reassuring squeeze.

"As ready as I'll ever be," she replied, giving him a brave

smile.

Clark waited for the driver to open the door for him, and then he stepped out onto the red carpet and reached back to help Lois out. She took his hand and gracefully stood to join him. The lightening storm of flashbulbs was immediate, as was the shower of shouted questions. Ignoring them all, Clark put a supportive arm around Lois's waist. He smiled down at her, and was glad to see her smiling up at him in response. She really was something, but then he'd known that all along. When they were almost at the front door, they shocked the assembled press by turning around to face them. The cacophony of voices grew even louder until Clark held one hand up to call for silence. When he had all of their attention, he spoke clearly.

"Good evening. I'm not going to take any questions tonight, but I will make a brief statement." He waited for the clicking of cameras to die down before he went on. "First, I will confirm, as you have no doubt read by now, that Lex Luthor was indeed the instigator of my brief kidnapping last night, and that it was he who killed his co-conspirator, and who fired the shot that wounded me. I owe my life to the brave actions of my fellow hostage, Ms. Anita Eskin, who disarmed Mr. Luthor, thus rescuing us both." There was a wave of murmured comments and Clark waited for silence to return. "Second, I am happy to report that my injuries were not as serious as they first appeared, and I expect to make a full recovery." He held his hand up for silence again. "Finally, I believe that most of you know this beautiful woman at my side, and I am delighted to say that Lois and I were married earlier this week."

Having finished his statement, Clark turned to lead Lois into the hotel. The shouted questions grew even louder, most of them now directed at Lois. Just as the door opened fully to admit them to the hotel, she turned around and faced her colleagues. Silence descended once more as they all looked hopefully at her.

"You heard the man," she told them saucily. "If you want to know anything more, you'll have to pick up tomorrow's paper. You can read all about it in the Daily Planet." And with that parting remark, she walked proudly into the lobby, her husband chuckling at her side.

THE END

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Finally, we all owe the existence of this story to Mary, Queen of the Capes, who requested more stories in which Lois begins a relationship with Superman, not Clark. My initial reaction was, of course, "Lois can't be with Superman because Clark won't let her. Superman is what he does, Clark is who he is, and all that." But then I got to thinking, "Unless..." So here we are. Thanks for coming along for the ride.