

Krypton's Legacy

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Summary: With Krypton dying, Jor-El and his family escape to a little planet called Earth. But even with all of Jor-El's planning, he could not have anticipated what comes after.

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Author's Note: This plot bunny was spawned by a discussion on the Lois and Clark fanfiction message boards. It asked a simple question — what if Jor-El or Lara had come to Earth with the infant Kal-El? This where my muse went with it.

"Jor!" came the desperate, pained cry.

It cut over the loud rumbling of the planet as it lurched and trembled beneath every Kryptonian's feet. For long moments, the planet shook violently. Walls cracked. Books tumbled off shelves. Monitors flickered between research work and snowy static. Instruments clattered to the floors, some breaking upon impact. A glass filled with a sweet blue beverage danced off the cluttered workstation and hit the floor, smashing into a thousand pieces and sending the drink everywhere.

"Lara?" he called, trying to make himself heard over the clamor of noise.

At last, the planet gave a final shuddering heave and then quieted down, as though it had exhausted itself with the latest series of quakes. Jor-El abandoned his grip on his workstation and rushed to his wife's side.

"Is it...?" he asked, breathlessly.

"Soon," she replied, nodding. "It's starting."

Jor-El glanced around at the mess in his home. "It's ending," he said in a quiet tone. He shook his head. "The people..."

"They still won't listen, will they?" Lara asked, taking his hand as he slunk down to sit on the floor beside the couch where his wife lay, her hand on her swollen belly.

He shook his head again, this time sadly. "They're blind. They can't see...or *refuse* to see...that this planet is dying. We *must* leave before the core becomes too unstable."

"This is not your fault," she reminded him. "You've been warning the council for years that this was going to happen. They were the ones who chose to withhold the information from the people, hoping that you were wrong, until it was too late and the core began to become unstable."

"I know," he whispered. Then, "Lara, the colony ship leaves in less than twelve hours, to search for a new home. Get on that ship. Save yourself, and our son. Our people need him. One day, he *will* be wed to Zara, and lead our people as their ruler. Please."

But the woman shook her head. "No."

"Lara...think of the child! It took us so long to conceive him. Please...don't stay. Don't make him lose his life. There is nothing here. Only death."

"I'm not going without you."

"You know I have to stay. I have to make the people

realize..."

"It's too late for that!" Lara cut in. "They've sealed their own fate. Don't throw your life away with theirs."

"I can't just..."

"Forget the people of Krypton, Jor! You've been warning them for years. They've had their chance. Those who've listened will be on that ship. Those who won't have had their chance. This child *needs* his father."

Jor-El took a deep breath and let it out of his nose in a controlled manner. It served to calm some of his anxiety. After a long moment, he dipped his head in a nod.

"All right."

"Good. I've packed everything we'll need. All we need to do is..."

Lara's voice cut off as her body spasmed with pain. She grasped Jor-El's hand tightly and squeezed as the pain rolled over her. Jor-El's features deepened into a frown. This should not be. Their child could not be born now. He was not due to make his appearance into the world for another three or four weeks.

Weeks that Krypton would not see, he knew now with certainty.

At last, the contraction seemed to abate. He wiped away a bead of sweat from Lara's brow with his thumb.

"Are you okay?"

For a moment, she didn't answer. Then, finally, "I think so."

"Here," Jor-El said, straightening as he stood. "Let me get you something to drink. Then we'll secure spots on the colony ship."

"No time," Lara said, sudden panic in her voice. "He's coming."

Jor-El's head snapped around to look at his wife. A dark, wet stain was spreading on the couch beneath her.

"Oh, no," Jor-El whispered.

"It's too early," Lara said, echoing his thoughts.

He shook his head. "He'll be fine," he vowed.

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I refuse to let anything bad happen," he said. "Just try to relax. I'll call for the doctor."

Lara nodded. "Okay." She braced herself as another contraction hit.

Jor-El went to the small wall panel and pressed one of the buttons there. He waited for a response, impatiently tapping his foot.

"Yin Shen," came the voice over the speaker. "What can I help you with, Jor-El?"

"Lara's in labor," he said, forgoing the usual pleasantries. "We need you."

There was a pause on the other end. "I'll be right there."

Jor-El didn't respond. He was already on the move, striding back across the room to his wife. He put out his hand, helping her to stand, then supported her as she shuffled her way out of the room. Together, they left Jor-El's work space behind and made it to the bedroom. Jor-El pulled back the sheets before Lara laid down, then used them to cover her up to make her as comfortable as possible.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"For what?"

"I never meant for our son to enter this world in this way. Too early and amid too much chaos."

"Oh, Lara," he said, sitting on the edge of the bed and brushing his hand over her hair, soothing her. "You've done nothing wrong."

"Maybe I have. I wanted a baby in the worst way. But maybe I've condemned him to death before he can even be born. Our planet is dying. Our people are facing homelessness at best, total annihilation at worst. What kind of life can we give him?" Desperation and an intense sadness suffused her words.

"The best we can," Jor-El answered in a quiet voice. "We

fought hard to have him and we'll fight just as hard, if not harder, to give him the best life possible. Even if he spends his whole life on the floating palace with his soon-to-be bride, it will be a life, and a comfortable one at that."

"Promise?"

"I swear it. Rest now. The doctor is on his way, and you'll need your strength for what's to come."

"I'll try."

Less than half an hour later, Yin arrived, a robotic assistant lugging the doctor's instruments. Jor-El greeted both man and machine at the door. Yin immediately apologized for the delay.

"I'm sorry it took me so long," he said as he followed Jor-El through his home. "These last quakes seriously damaged the hospital. It was difficult to get what I needed. It's actually a good thing this baby will be delivered here."

Jor-El nodded. "The hospital is right on one of the major fault lines," he said.

They reached the bedroom.

"Lara," Yin said, greeting her with a smile. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay, so far," she said. "But the contractions are coming stronger, if not yet closer together."

"Let me take a look at you," Yin said. "Jor?"

He looked to Lara.

"It's okay," Lara assured him. "I'll be fine."

Jor-El nodded. "I'll give you some privacy," he said, backing toward the door.

He shut the door as he passed into the hallway, where he proceeded to pace. Lara would be fine, he knew that in his heart. But time was running out. Time to get onto the floating palace. Time before Krypton's unstable core tore the planet to pieces. A wry smile crossed his lips. His son, still unborn, was not only impatient, but had the most incredible timing. It would make for a great story, once the boy was older.

He stopped his pacing as the door to the bedroom reopened. Yin stepped out.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

The doctor nodded. "Everything looks great. She's already halfway there. The baby looks good. Still a little high, but so far, everything is good."

Jor-El breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't realized he was holding in. "I'm glad. Can we move her to the floating palace?" he asked anxiously.

Yin shook his head. "I would not risk it. She may be lucky and deliver quickly. I would not dare risk her being in the middle of a transport when the time comes to push. You can go in to be with her. She can have ice chips. But let her rest as much as possible."

He nodded. "I will."

Yin smiled. "I know you will. Go on. Go to her."

"If you need anything..."

"I'll let you know."

Again, Jor-El nodded. He called for one of his robotic assistants and instructed him to ensure that Yin's needs were met while the doctor waited things out in the living room. Then he ducked back into the bedroom. Lara lay awake, her strawberry blonde hair a stark contrast against the dark blue, nearly black sheets. He couldn't help but thinking that she looked so small there in the overly large bed. Small and frightened, but also somehow glowing with confidence as she waited to birth their son. He crossed the room and pulled his favorite chair to the side of the bed. He sat and took Lara's hand in his own as another contraction rocked her.

"What can I do for you?" he asked when it finally subsided.

"Just be here," she said, closing her eyes briefly.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said, using his other hand to stroke her hair. "Sleep now."

She hesitated, but nodded. "All right."

She settled into the pillows and closed her eyes. Soon, she was asleep, though Jor-El could tell from their long years together that it was light and would be easily broken. He only hoped her contractions would not rob her of the rest she needed. She'd been awake half the night with him, trying to find some suitable place for the floating palace to go so that a new Krypton could be established. So far, it had been a frustratingly fruitless search. The universe was too vast. And he had waited too long to begin the search. He should never have wasted his time trying to fix the problems Krypton had with its core.

He looked down at his wife's sleeping form. Should he call ahead to the ship and ask them to wait? Did he dare jeopardize the safety of those aboard? While it was possible for his son to be born before the ship departed, what if Lara's labor lasted far longer than the ship was currently willing to wait? Krypton would truly die if those potential survivors perished. No, he could not ask for them to put themselves in peril. Not when he had no idea how long it would be before his son was born. Not when Zara, heir to Krypton's throne, was on that ship.

All he could do, for the moment, was hope and pray that Lara delivered the baby fast enough so that they could get on that ship.

Although...

He considered moving Lara, now, while she was only in the first stages of labor. He knew at least a thousand people had chosen to be a part of the expedition to find a new home, likely more. Doctors would be among them. Lara could labor and deliver safely while aboard the ship, whether it remained docked or made its way through space. True, Yin had a point that Lara could go into labor in the midst of a move to the ship, but the risk of that was small, wasn't it? She'd only just begun the birthing process. He gently removed his hand from Lara's grasp, careful not to wake her. He went to the wall panel and pressed a series of buttons, in an attempt to contact the ship directly. There was no answer.

His brow furrowed. He tried a different series of buttons, trying to contact the palace itself, the one built of stone and crystal, which stood gleaming in the center of the city where Jor-El himself lived. Again, no one answered. Frantic, he tried the dock where the ship was stationed.

"Hello," said a pleasant voice.

"Hello, this is Jor-El. I need to be connected with the floating palace, right away, please."

"I'm sorry, Lord El. The ship has departed."

"Departed?" He had to work hard to keep his voice a low whisper, in an effort not to wake Lara. "What do you mean, departed?"

"They left," was the simple reply.

"How? When?"

"Just after the last of the bad quakes," said the voice on the other end. At least the girl sounded truly apologetic, he thought. "They said they could no longer wait, that it was getting too dangerous."

"And no one thought to contact me?" he almost roared in indignation.

"I'm sorry, my lord. I don't know anything about that, only that the palace is gone," came the reply.

"Fools," Jor-El muttered under his breath, though he understood their fear. Still, the quakes hadn't been bad enough to indicate that the planet was going to die at that very moment. "Did everyone make it aboard?"

He heard a clicking of computer keys as the woman checked. "Not everyone. Most, though. I see a total of twelve hundred and thirty two. Fifteen hundred and six were supposed to be aboard."

It made Jor-El's heart glad to see that so many had escaped, yet it made his heart bleed for those whose only chance at survival had been jerked out of their grasp.

"Did they say anything about what their coordinates would

be?" It was a long shot, but he had to ask.

"I'm afraid not," came the reply after another short pause while the owner of the voice checked.

Jor-El sighed. "I didn't think so. Thank you for your help."

"My pleasure, my lord."

Jor-El ended the call.

"Jor? Is something wrong?"

He turned back to where Lara lay. "The ship," he said, swallowing around his despair. He could not — would not — lie to her. "It's gone."

"Oh, no," Lara groaned. "What do we do now?"

"I'll have our own ship readied for departure," he replied, decisively. "We'll go it alone, try to meet up with the mother ship on our own. We *will* survive this, my love."

"How will we find them? They can be anywhere."

He shook his head as he thought. "We'll broadcast a constant signal as we travel. I'm confident they'll find us. They'll be looking for others who might still leave this planet. If anything, they are sure to be looking for the future king of our people."

"I hope so. Our ship...it's not exactly meant to traverse the universe in." Though she tried to hide it, her worry showed clearly enough in her voice.

"It will serve," Jor-El said, his own voice a promise.

He once again turned back to the wall panel. Pressing a button, he ordered his household robotic staff to provision his ship as best they could with all of the essentials they and the baby would need. He had left instructions with them, when he'd first realized that Krypton was living on borrowed time. Food and water were of paramount importance, followed closely by the chips and computers which housed all the research he'd done over the course of his life, including that which he'd done, up to that very moment, in looking for a new home for his people. Everything else was far less important. The ship would keep them warm and comfortable even in the cold endlessness of space. Changes of clothes would be nice, but not the worst thing to leave behind.

Next, he commanded the robotic laboratory assistants who worked alongside him to check over the ship and to make a few adjustments to it, upgrading the computers and adding extra shielding to protect them against the dangers of space travel. Lara was right — their ship was far more suited for quick trips to neighboring planets and galaxies for diplomatic missions than it was for indefinite travel. As a precaution, he had extra fuel cells loaded aboard the craft.

Satisfied that they at least had a plan, he felt himself relax, though only slightly. His son would soon be born into a dying world. But at least he would live.

Jor-El smiled at his wife and went back to her side. "There. Everything is in motion now. All you have to worry about is becoming a mother."

Lara's hand instinctively went to her stomach. She rubbed it lovingly. "After all this time, I can hardly wait to meet this little boy."

Jor-El's hand covered hers as he smiled at her stomach. "Me too. You hear that, Kal? Your mom and I are ready to meet you."

But the baby wasn't yet ready to meet his parents. For all his rush to arrive weeks early, he kept Lara in labor well into the day. And then, suddenly, his sense of urgency seemed to return all at once. Lara's labor, stalled for several hours, took a swift turn. She very quickly moved into the next phase of the birthing process. The baby, tiny as he was, easily emerged from her sweating and tired body after only four serious pushes.

Naked and screaming, the son of Jor-El made his debut known. Jor-El could only stare in wonder as Yin cleaned the newborn and checked him over. The boy was so tiny and so delicate that Jor-El could scarcely believe it — just five pounds, but tall for a newborn. Yin swaddled the baby before handing him over to Lara, and the new mother held him close, openly weeping

for joy.

"He's perfect," she said, her eyes never leaving the boy.

"Yes, he is," Yin agreed. "I'm happy to say that he's small, but he's completely healthy. His lungs sound perfect, thankfully. I'd feared that, born so prematurely, he might have difficulty breathing on his own. But he seems to be absolutely fine. Congratulations."

"Thank you," they both replied with one voice.

"I will let myself out," Yin said, smiling at the new family.

Jor-El looked up at his old friend, though it was an effort to tear his eyes from the sleeping form of his son. He wondered if the man would deliver any more children before the planet died. He knew, with certainty, that he would never see the man again, save for past the veil of death. Yin staunchly believed that Krypton could still be saved, despite the years of work and research that Jor-El and others had done on the planet's core. He would die along with the millions more who either did not have the means to escape, or refused to, as Yin did.

"Goodbye, my friend," he whispered after Yin's retreating form. Then, to his son, "Welcome to the world, my little Kal."

The planet, however, remained restless, blind to the peaceful moment being shared between Krypton's newest family. It groaned and bucked as a fresh series of quakes rocked it. Lara clutched the baby to her breast fearfully, while Jor-El wrapped his arms around both, as if he could ward off any danger with that simple act. For at least ten minutes, the planet's unrest continued while Kal screamed in terror.

"We need to go," Lara said when it was finally over. She looked down at her son's face, tears glistening in her eyes. "Oh, Kal. It's okay. Mommy's here. Ssh, baby. It's all right. I'm here." She looked at her husband as she gently rocked and bounced the newborn. "Oh, Jor. I've been dreaming about this my whole life — holding my baby for the first time. But I never imagined it would be like this. We can't stay. We need to leave. The quakes are getting worse."

Jor-El sighed. "I agree. But first, you need rest."

Lara shook her head. "I can't...we can't afford to wait. I've got this feeling, deep inside. If we don't leave soon, we won't be able to."

"I know," Jor-El admitted. "All of the data that I've been collecting on the quakes...they keep getting worse. But stay here and feed Kal. I need some time to finish installing a few things on our ship. An upgrade to the heat shields. The hyperlight drive. It shouldn't take me long."

"All right," Lara relented. "But hurry, please."

Jor-El smiled at his wife. "I promise."

Kal squeaked his displeasure at not being fed yet. Lara rocked him and spoke in a low tone for a moment before shrugging her top down to allow her son to nurse. For a moment, Jor-El watched, beaming with pride, before rushing off to finish the final preparations. Lara was right. He could sense it, even without the ever more dire data that his computers kept collecting on Krypton's impending demise. There was no time to lose.

He worked as quickly as he dared, every passing second weighing more heavily on him than the last. Several times, he had to force himself to stop and take a breath to calm his shaking hands. He could not afford any mistakes. His family's survival depended on his competence. Still, even with those small delays, all was soon ready. He tore his way through his home, making his way back to his wife and child. Lara had Kal on her shoulder and was rubbing his back. As Jor-El reached the bed, the baby loosed a tiny belch, then yawned and closed his eyes once more.

"It's time," he said simply.

Lara handed Kal over to him as she tried to stand. She winced in pain as she moved. Jor-El reached down and helped her out of the bed, offering his arm for her to hold and lean on. She did so, offering him a grateful smile. Together, they made slow, but steady

progress through their home. Lara stopped for a moment outside of Kal's nursery — a room he was destined to never use. The door was slightly ajar and she pushed it open all the way to gaze inside. A single tear rolled down her cheek. Jor-El saw it and wiped it away with his thumb before planting a kiss on the top of her head.

"He'll never get to use any of this," she said in sad realization. To Jor-El, it sounded as if the enormity of the situation was finally hitting her.

"No, but, when we link up with the others, we will make an even better room for him," he promised her. He knew it wasn't quite the answer Lara wanted, but he too felt the overwhelming sadness of leaving behind the home they had made together, and all the dreams they'd once had about raising their family in that same home.

A mild tremor shook the house. They braced themselves as best they could. Luckily, it did not last long and they were soon at the door. Just outside, their ship lay in wait for them. Again, they both hesitated, giving their home one last look, trying to remember every detail. Then, with a sigh and a silent look from one to the other, they exited their home for the last time. Once they were in the ship, Lara secured Kal in the specialized pod that Jor-El had installed. It would keep him completely safe and allow him to sleep in comfort during their travels.

Jor-El and Lara strapped themselves in and the ship roared into life. Jor-El pressed a series of buttons and the ship began to rise into the air, just as the most violent quake yet rocked the planet. Cracks appeared in the ground, right where the ship had rested only moments before. Dust rose into the air. The sky shone blood red with the setting sun. As the ship rose higher into the air, the shaking of the planet became less and less noticeable. Jor-El watched out of the window as the ship finally cleared the atmosphere and entered into the vast, cold reaches of space. He adjusted the temperature inside the ship, making it warmer, mostly for the sake of Kal. He was aware that, as a premature baby, Kal would need help keeping his body temperature where it needed to be. Then he brought his gaze back to the window.

Krypton hung motionless against the blackness of the universe, distant, cold, and alone. And yet, it looked peaceful and silent. For long moments, Jor-El watched as his home grew inexorably smaller as the ship put it behind them.

Then, in a violent explosion of light, Krypton died.

Pieces of the planet flew out in every direction, doomed to spend eternity zooming through the universe. Tears pooled in Jor-El's eyes as he looked away, and one or two slipped down his cheeks. All those poor souls, lost forever. The close call it had been for he himself to escape with his family. The loss of his world and sudden homelessness. All of it weighed heavily on his mind. A quick glance at Lara showed him that she felt the same way.

Kal cried as the ship sped away. Bits of Krypton, now radioactively charged by the blast of its death, hitched a ride in its wake, unbeknownst to the occupants of the ship. Some larger chunks hit the ship and bounced off the metal sides. It sounded like they had created small dents in the ship. Jor-El had known that was a possibility. After all, the ship was barely more than a recreational vehicle, meant for trips to Krypton's nearest interstellar neighbors, not for voyages across the entirety of space. He only hoped the ship would last until they could find the rest of their people.

Static flickered across the monitors as debris from the explosion continued to pelt the ship. The shockwave of the blast caught up to them and sent them hurtling through space. Jor-El lost control of the vehicle until, at last, the wave passed them and the ship was able to settle once more. But some of the monitors continued to stay offline.

"Why haven't those computers come back?" Lara asked over her shoulder as she went to check on Kal. In a moment, she

returned with him in her arms, swaddled in a deep blue blanket, the mark of their house stitched into the soft fabric.

"I'm not sure. Could be interference from the shockwave that needs to work itself out. Could be damage from the debris. Either way, I'll see what I can do to fix them. Don't worry about them. Luckily, they are the least important ones right now. Here, let's start scanning for any messages from the mother ship."

He pressed two buttons on the control panel and twisted a knob. Then he sat back and allowed the computer to scan for radio waves that matched the unique signature for the floating palace. He wondered, for a moment, what direction they should travel in. But the truth was, there was no telling which way the mother ship may have gone. He turned the autopilot on and turned his attention to his son. Lara saw him looking at the boy and handed him over to his father.

Jor-El took the child into his arms and, for the first time, really got to study the boy's features. He could see so much of himself in Kal already, though the infant had a lot more growing to do. Early as he'd been born, he still had some filling out to do. Jor-El could cradle Kal's entire head in one hand. But he was strong! A tiny hand wriggled out of the loose swaddle and blindly grabbed Jor-El's pinky finger, gripping it with a strength the man hadn't thought possible for so young a child.

He was all at once a fragile, yet strong newborn. Jor-El had no doubts that he would grow to be an impressive man. A man who Jor-El would teach to be a true and compassionate leader, so that their people, the tattered remnants of their society, would flourish, no matter where they might make their new home. He would ensure that Kal would be a worthy match for the infant princess he was to wed.

"My little Kal," Jor-El whispered to the now calm and sleeping child. "My pride and joy. You don't know it, but your mother and I have waited a long time to meet you. And we love you, son. So, so much."

Kal took no notice of his father's words, and, instead, slept on, peaceful and unaware of how traumatic the day had been.

Days turned into weeks. There was no sign of the mother ship. The computers picked up nothing, remaining traitorously silent. Food and fuel reserves steadily declined. Jor-El and Lara grew more nervous by the day. Soon, Jor-El turned his attention to looking for a hospitable place to refuel and resupply their ship, so that they could comfortably continue their mission to be reunited with the rest of Krypton's survivors.

Day by day, Kal grew. His weight increased. His body filled out. He got longer. His strength grew. His eyes focused and before long, he rewarded his parents with a huge lopsided smile. He did not laugh, but they could see him trying to figure out how to do so. He began to hold his head up and took interest in the isolated world around him.

Despite all that had happened, it was the happiest time in Jor-El and Lara's life together. Though they had enjoyed their marriage for many years, it had always been missing a child. And now that Kal was finally there, in their arms, they could not have been more thrilled. Jor-El had never seen Lara's eyes sparkle quite so brightly before. Her smile had never been so wide. And he himself had never laughed so much in his life as he did now, at each and every moment spent with his son.

Life was good.

"Lara," Jor-El said late one night as Kal slumbered. "I think I found a place to land."

"Land?" she asked, half asleep in her chair.

He nodded. "A planet well suited to our needs. A place where we'll be able to breathe the air, eat the food, drink the water. I'm not sure if they possess the fuel we need, but, if anything, I should be able to rig up some new system to meet our needs. Besides, it's our food and water reserves that I'm the most worried about at the

moment.”

“I am too,” she said, waking a bit more fully. “How long?”

“A few more days,” he said. Then he sighed. “Two months. Two months and not a single shred of evidence that the mother ship is out there.”

“You don’t think...?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “They are out there, alive and well. I’m sure of it. Something must have happened to their transmitter, or maybe they are just too far away for us to pick up anything.”

“So...what do we do?”

“I don’t know. I’ll check over the outside receiver once we land on this new planet...Earth, the inhabitants call it. I’ll try to boost its power. Maybe it just isn’t strong enough to detect a signal.”

“What do we know about this...Earth?” Lara asked, looking at the details listed on the computer.

“From what I can tell, the inhabitants of the planet are good people, if not primitive in terms of their technology, when compared to our own people. But the vast majority seem to be good people, living their lives as peacefully as they can. My plan is to land here,” he said, pointing to the screen and enlarging the area selected, “in a land called America. I believe we may have our best chance of finding what we need there. It seems to be a land of prosperity.”

“That is good,” she agreed. She studied more of the photos that popped up on the screen. “The people...they look exactly like us.”

“Another reason why I’ve chosen this planet,” Jor-El agreed. “No need to scare the people of Earth with tales of people from other planets landing on their own. We can, I hope, stay as inconspicuous as possible — be in and out before anyone is the wiser. Then we can continue our search for the mother ship, though, I admit, finding them is only going to become all the more difficult, with how much time has already passed.”

“I know,” Lara said with a sigh. “Unless...unless we make a life on Earth.”

“I don’t know, my love. While the planet is similar enough to our home world, Earth’s sun is yellow, not red. How that may affect us, over a long stretch of time, I cannot be certain. But we can try. For Kal’s sake, we will try.”

Hours turned into days before the ship entered into the Milky Way galaxy, making as swift a course as possible for Earth. Jor-El and Lara spent their time playing with and fawning over their son, as well as learning as much as they could about the planet. Tinkering with what scraps he had aboard the vessel, Jor-El created two translator devices for Lara and himself, which would not only translate the languages of Earth to Kryptonian, but would transmit what they said in the native tongue of those they might speak to. True, the design was crude, but the units would suffice for their needs. And, if all went as Jor-El hoped, there would be no need for them to interact with the people of Earth.

They were half a day from their destination when the attack came. Interstellar pirates happened upon their ship. Shots were fired at the family’s ship, causing severe damage to the vehicle. Jor-El fought hard to keep control, maneuvering as best he could to stay out of the pirates’ reach. He knew the markings on the other vehicle. Pentharks. Cannibalistic beings who roamed the entire universe, never settling in one spot. Making it to Earth was their only chance. The oxygen-rich atmosphere of the planet would be fatally toxic to their attackers.

Another blast hit the ship as it entered into the Earth’s atmosphere. All of the instruments went blank or filled with static. The control panel smoked. What little control Jor-El had managed to keep from the first attack was now totally lost. The ship went into a free-fall, hurtling toward the planet’s surface at a terrifying

rate. Flames engulfed the outside of the ship and Jor-El sent up a prayer to Rao that the heat shielding would hold. If it didn’t, they would be incinerated in seconds. The ship picked up even more speed and the ground rushed up to meet them. Jor-El wrestled with the manual control to deploy a twin set of parachutes to slow them, but by the time he got it to work, it was too late for them to do much good.

With Kal already secured in his specialized cradle, Jor-El and Lara strapped in and braced themselves for impact. But nothing could have prepared them for the actual shock of hitting the ground, even with the emergency chutes deployed. Dirt and grass erupted into the air as they touched down, creating a long scar in the ground as they slid to a stop. Metal crunched and bent at the impact. Kal, awoken by the jolting crash, screamed in terror. Jor-El and Lara, despite their safety restraints, felt every injury caused by the sheer force of the landing and objects that had torn loose from the inside of the ship which became airborne and pelted them.

When, at last, the ship came to a final screeching halt, Jor-El unfastened his restraints. Drawing a breath hurt. He suspected cracked or even broken ribs. Warm, sticky blood rolled down his head and body from a number of wounds. Looking at Lara, he suspected the same with her. She rose slowly out of her seat and immediately made her way to Kal. His cradle had come loose and damaged in the crash, but the baby was, thankfully, unharmed.

She picked him up and cuddled him close, wincing with pain as she pressed him to her chest. Still scared, he continued to wail, even though Lara rocked and whispered soothingly in his ear. Eventually, though, he cried himself back to an exhausted sleep.

“We need to get out of here,” Lara said, not looking up from her son. “Someone had to have seen that.”

“I agree,” Jor-El said, though it pained him to say so. They were both hurt and needed time to assess the damage to themselves and their ship.

He helped her exit the battered vehicle, his arm around her body as much as he dared. They leaned on one another, taking strength and aid from the other. Leaving everything behind, they emerged out in a quiet field. Jor-El craned his neck to look at the sky.

Night.

A deep blue-black sky with a billion distant points of starlight arranged in strange patterns that the man had never seen before. *Alien*, was the word that came to mind. He’d hoped to arrive during the daylight hours, to experience for himself how strange and new the rays of a yellow sun would be. Would it warm his skin, the way his native red sun had? How odd would it be, to look up into the sky and see it awash in blue, as opposed to the pinks of his home? Was his recent research correct, when it suggested that this sun might react with his Kryptonian genetics to give him powers?

A cool, comfortable breeze swept over the nearly silent field. Frogs and crickets, hidden in the blades of grass, were the only sound, aside from the crackling of fire. Behind Jor-El, the heat of the flames that had once licked the sides of his ship was already starting to die. He took a deep breath, as deep as he dared with his aching ribs, and savored the new scents that his nostrils inhaled. Rich soil. Thick grass, springy beneath his feet. Even the wind smelled differently than it had on Krypton, though it was not unpleasant, just foreign.

Then, in the distance, shouting, and what Jor-El could only assume, from his research, was the baying of hounds. Someone had obviously witnessed the ship’s descent, as the voices were growing closer.

“Come,” he said to his wife. “We need to find a safe place.”

Lara nodded and clutched Kal closer. “That way,” she said, pointing.

Jor-El nodded in turn. He had no idea why his wife had chosen

that direction, but he was never one to argue with her. He simply followed her lead, urging them both to move as fast as they could, even though it pushed them past the point of pain. Every breath hurt. Every movement sent shockwaves of agony throughout their battered bodies. They cut across the field to the road, where they would not leave any footprints in the hard-packed dirt as evidence of their passing. Soon, the sound of voices grew ever more distant, as did the barking of the dogs.

"They must have found the ship," Jor-El said, mostly to himself.

It was the only thing, he reasoned, that would distract any pursuers. He wasn't even sure why he felt so afraid of whoever was behind them. Instinct fueled him, propelling him forward. He had to get his family to safety. That was of paramount importance.

Before long, the empty fields gave way to farmland, with neat little houses dotting the landscape. Lara ignored the houses for a time, before she finally began to lag behind, her remaining energy almost completely spent. She tugged on Jor-El's sleeve to get his attention.

"I can't go on much further," she said, gasping for breath.

"Okay," he said, stopping and take stock of their surroundings.

They were at the very edge of one of the farmsteads, practically at the front gate leading up to the house. A shed stood to one side, silent and dark. But lights blazed merrily in the house's windows, beacons of warmth and hope in the darkness. Some of the windows were open, allowing the night breeze in.

Behind them, the sound of dogs grew closer once more. Jor-El worriedly looked from side to side, trying to find a safe place to lay low and wait for the threat to his family to pass. The shed, he decided. Limping, the young family made their way to the shed, careful not to make any noise. But the door was locked.

"The house?" Lara asked in a whisper.

Jor-El frowned. There was no way to tell if they could trust the occupants.

"For Kal's sake," she pressed. "He's shivering."

Jor-El looked at the infant in her arms. As Lara had said, the baby was shaking and trying to nuzzle in closer to his mother, even in his sleep. He whimpered once. Jor-El had no defense against that. He nodded and looked back toward the house.

"Okay," he relented. "Just until the danger has passed."

He helped his wife and child to the porch. Now a car's engine could be heard, faint, but steadily moving closer. Lara collapsed onto the wooden floor as soon as they reached the door. In the pools of light coming from beyond the windows, he could see now that Lara's injuries were worse than he'd feared. She was having difficulty breathing and blood oozed from dozens of wounds.

"I'll draw whoever is behind us as far away as I can," he said, stooping to kiss her lips. "I'll double back once the area is clear. I don't want them to know you are here, in case their intentions in following us are less than noble."

"But Jor..." she protested.

"I wish I could stay," he murmured. "But I can't take that risk. I promise, I will be back for you both as soon as I can. Keep Kal safe."

"I will."

"I love you," he said, cradling her head and kissing her brow. He took his son in his arms and kissed his cheek. "And I love you, my son."

For several heartbeats, he held his son and stared at his perfect features. Then he gave him one more kiss and placed him back in Lara's arms. Again, he kissed his wife's lips. Then he pulled away and hurriedly shambled away from the house.

Once alone, Lara knocked on the door, forcing herself to gather enough energy to rap her knuckles against the outer glass storm door. She fought to stay awake as she waited for someone to answer the door. A moment later, she heard the shuffling of

footsteps within the house before the door opened. A kindly man answered, confusion quickly melting into concern when he saw her.

"Martha!" he cried over his shoulder, before bending down to assist Lara. "My God, what happened to you?"

"What is it, Jonathan?" came a female voice, though the owner was momentarily out of Lara's view.

"A woman," he replied. "She looks to be hurt pretty badly."

He hooked her under the armpits and helped her to stand, ever mindful of the child she held in her arms.

"Oh, my," the woman, Martha, said, catching sight of Lara as Jonathan helped her stand. "Come in. Jonathan, get her to the couch."

Martha raced ahead. By the time the kind farmer got her to the couch, Lara could see that it had been set up like a bed, pillows on one end and a quilted blanket thrown over the back of it, presumably to help warm her and the baby. Jonathan eased her down onto the couch and Lara gratefully sank into the cushions, though she never loosened her tight hold on her son.

"Call Doctor McSwiggan," Martha instructed as she held a glass of water out toward Lara.

Lara accepted the drink and drained the glass in six large gulps. Tears stung her eyes as the cold liquid hit her parched throat.

"I'm Martha," the woman said, by way of introduction.

"Martha Kent. That's my husband, Jonathan."

"Lara," she wheezed out after a few long moments of indecision. "And Kal."

"What happened to you?"

"Accident." It was all she could manage to get out.

"Well, don't worry, we'll get you patched up in no time."

"Please...no."

"Oh, honey, you're in bad shape."

"Can't. Too risky. My husband will be back soon. He'll take care of things."

"Tim's on his way," Jonathan announced as he reentered the room.

Terror ran through Lara. Though she knew she looked just like an Earthling, she could not be sure her body worked the same way as theirs. True, they had the same parts — hearts and lungs and the like, but how could she be sure that this human doctor would not be able to determine that she and her baby were not of Earth?

"Need to go," she said, trying to push herself back into a sitting position.

"I'm sorry," Martha said, sympathy in her voice. "But I'm not sure that's possible. You and your boy need to rest up and heal. Let me get you something to eat."

Before Lara could decline, the woman was already sweeping out of the room. Heaviness weighed on Lara and her eyes closed of their own volition. She could not prevent herself from dozing while Kal slept on her chest. It was nice, she admitted to herself before sleep claimed her, to enjoy a simple comfort like the soft cushions of the couch. Sure, the ship she and her husband had traveled in had had a plush bed, but after the trauma of the night, to be warm and safe — at least, she *hoped* she and Kal were safe for the moment — was a great relief. It would likely be the last bit of comfort she would experience.

She was dying.

She knew it, deep down inside. Her wounds were too grievous. There was not much to be done. Her life forces were waning as steadily as the blood which still flowed from the deepest of her wounds. If not for Kal, she doubted that she would still be alive. It was only for him that she kept pressing on. His safety. His chance at life.

"Here," Martha said gently, sitting down on the coffee table.

Lara opened her eyes to see the woman holding a steaming bowl of soup. She tried to sit up, but she was in too much pain.

"Easy now," Martha cautioned. "Here, let me hold your baby." Reluctantly, Lara handed Kal over. Martha was right. She *did* need to eat, if only to fuel her long enough to see Kal happily and safely in Jor-El's arms once more. Martha took the baby and Lara took the soup and gratefully ate. But her eyes never left Kal. Martha held the boy gently and bounced him a little as she walked around the living room with him. When the boy made a fussing sound, she smiled down on him and shushed him.

"Hush now, sweet boy," she cooed at him as the baby settled down once more.

There was a knock at the door and Jonathan went to answer it. When he returned, he was trailed by a tall, thin man with a serious demeanor. Jonathan quickly made the introductions and explained how they'd found Lara on their doorstep. Though Lara protested, the man checked her over, patching up the worst of her wounds as best he could, cleaning them with some kind of stinging liquid with an astringent odor, sewing shut the most gaping ones, and taping white gauze over the rest, applying pressure as he worked to stem the flow of her blood.

Then he turned his attention to Kal. Lara watched, wide-eyed and fearful, as the doctor inspected her son for evidence of injury. Finding none, he handed back the boy. Then he exited the room, motioning for Jonathan and Martha to follow him.

"I'm afraid the outlook isn't great," Lara could just barely hear him say. "She's lost a lot of blood. We need to get her to the hospital. I've done what I can, but, without better equipment and blood to transfuse..." his voice trailed off.

"Just tell us what you need from us," Jonathan said. "Whatever it is to get her the help she needs."

Lara, the voice of Jor-El cut into her thoughts, blocking out all else. Lara, are you safe?

Yes, she replied, back over their telepathic link. For the moment. Where are you?

Still running. They are getting closer. He sounded terrified.

Jor...I am afraid. My time grows short.

No, Lara. Fight! For us. For Kal. You are the strongest person I know. You must fight now, to be with your family. You must...

His voice cut off suddenly. Through the telepathic link, she could hear men shouting and dogs howling. A shot rang out and suddenly, the link was gone.

Jor? she cried out to him, trying to establish a new link and failing. *JOR???*

But he was gone, lost to her. Tears slipped from her eyes as she cried aloud, her sob shattering the silence of the living room. In an instant, Martha and Jonathan were there, the doctor once again on their heels.

"He's gone," she murmured to herself. "He's gone. Oh, Jor. Jor. Jor."

"Honey? What's wrong?" Martha said, kneeling by the couch.

"He's gone." She felt completely numb. "My husband."

"Take it easy," Martha tried to soothe, but Lara was past the point of being comforted. Her heart was broken and her wounds were catching up to her. Her tenuous grip on life was slipping rapidly now.

"Take the boy," she urged the other woman. "Take my Kal. Be good to him. Please. Love him. I'm so sorry, Kal. I'm sorry. I'm so..."

With that, she felt the last of her life force slip away. Blackness took her and she breathed her last.

"Oh my God," Jonathan said, as Kal slid from his mother's arms.

Martha grabbed the baby, who woke and began to frantically cry. She tried to soothe him as Tim checked Lara for signs of life. He shook his head as he tried to find a pulse, and found none. He checked for breath and failed to find that as well. He attempted CPR, but the woman was gone.

"I'm sorry," he said, when he finally stopped trying to revive her, some ten minutes later. "She's gone."

He set the woman's wrist down again, as he'd been checking once more for a pulse. As he did so, his fingertips brushed against the delicate bracelet that Lara had been wearing. He studied it for a moment. He rubbed his finger over it once more.

"Stunning," he commented. Then, "What's this?"

A red light had begun to slowly flicker on it. Tim peered at it quizzically.

"What on Earth?" he said again.

The pinpoint of light expanded. Tim pulled his hand away from the woman's wrist, a crease of worry furrowing his brow. He was not a moment too soon. Lara's body began to shimmer, fade, and then, simply ceased to be. Within moments, it was as if the woman had never been there. Kal was the only evidence that Lara had ever existed.

"What in the name of..." Jonathan stammered.

Martha shook her head. "I don't understand... Oh, it's okay, baby. I'm here." She tried, in vain, to shush Kal.

"What do we do?" Jonathan asked, slumping onto the far end of the couch, away from where Lara's petite frame had rested.

For a long moment, no one answered. Then, as if waking from a dream, Tim spoke.

"Nothing," he said. "We do nothing."

"Nothing?" Martha repeated. "A woman just died."

Tim nodded. "And vanished without a trace. Look, if we say anything, we all get in trouble. A reported death without a body? How is that going to look? No one will believe the truth."

"But...the baby," Martha argued.

"I know," the doctor sighed. "But maybe...maybe we say that you found him, alone, on your doorstep. You called me to give the infant a checkup. What you choose to do after that is up to you."

"What do you mean, what we choose to do?" Jonathan asked.

Tim shrugged. "That woman obviously asked you to care for her boy. And I know you two haven't been able to have a child of your own. Maybe this boy was meant to come to you. My sister works with adoption cases. I could get you in touch with her. Or, if that's not something you're interested in, then we need to contact the Sheriff and get this child to an agency."

"I, uh..." Jonathan said, appearing to be lost for words.

A harsh knock rapped at the door. Martha, still holding a screaming Kal, went to answer it. Opening the front door, she was greeted by three men, dressed in suits. One held out an identification card in a leather wallet, not unlike a police officer. But his attire told her that he was not with any law enforcement agency.

"Good evening, ma'am," he said.

"Can I help you?" Martha asked as a chill raced up her spine.

"I hope so. I'm General Burton Newcomb. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

Martha shifted the baby on her hip as she leaned against the doorframe. It was clear that the men on her porch expected to be invited in, but somehow, every instinct she had was telling her not to let them in. There was something about the men that she didn't quite like, though she could not pinpoint what it was.

"Sure," she forced herself to say as pleasantly as possible.

The men shifted their weight on their feet, uncomfortable, it seemed, with being forced to stand out on the porch as opposed to being invited in to sit on a couch or at a table. Their leader cleared his throat, but Martha stood her ground.

"Well, we were wondering, have you seen anyone around tonight? Anyone...out of the ordinary? Or anything else at all strange?"

"Strange...? No. Just you," she said, pointedly.

"Are both of the cars in the driveway yours?" the man asked, ignoring the jab.

"No, one is the local doctor's. He's here looking after our

son.”

The words rolled smoothly, naturally off her tongue. She hadn't gotten the chance to even consider Doctor McSwiggan's proposal — that she and Jonathan adopt the now orphaned boy, though they were in the midst of looking over the information packets for several adoption agencies. But she knew now, without a doubt, that she wanted to be the baby's mother more than anything.

For his part, the infant certainly *did* appear to have something wrong. He was still crying, his face red and puffy from the effort. Tears streaked his cheeks. Hiccups punctuated his screams. He looked, as far as Martha could tell, like a normal, colicky baby. She placed a kiss on his forehead and tried to calm him. He did, a little, his screams turning into whimpers.

“Your son, right,” the man said, disinterestedly.

“Clark,” Jonathan said, coming up behind Martha.

That surprised her. Not only was Jonathan going along with her ruse to protect the baby, but he had so much conviction in that one word. *Clark*. The name they had dreamed about giving their son someday, back before all of their hopes and dreams of becoming parents had been shattered. But now, Jonathan was giving that name to the precious little boy in his wife's arms.

Clark.

Yes. It fit the boy perfectly. *Clark*. Their son, just as soon as the doctor's sister could get them the paperwork that they needed. *Clark*. The answer to every one of Martha's prayers.

Clark.

“You're sure no one has been around?” General Newcomb pressed.

“We're certain,” Jonathan said. “We've been up all night with our boy. We would have noticed anything out of the ordinary.”

“If you see anything...” The man let his voice trail off as he produced a business card from the breast pocket of his jacket.

“I'll be sure to let you know. Now, if you excuse us...”

“I appreciate your time. Goodnight.”

“Night,” Jonathan said, through gritted teeth. Martha could tell her husband's patience was just about worn through.

He closed the door perhaps a little more forcefully than he needed to, just as soon as the men inclined their heads in acknowledgement that the conversation was over. Immediately, he crinkled the business card in his hand and tossed it in the wicker garbage pail in the living room. He took the baby from Martha's arms and smiled down as the infant shoved his tiny hands into his mouth.

“So, Clark? What do you think? You want to be our son?” he asked.

The boy smiled around his knuckles and laughed.

“I thought so,” Jonathan said, as he kissed Clark's forehead. “Your new mom and I will keep you safe, I promise. Sleep now. You're home, little boy. You're home and we love you already.”

Clark thrived in his new home. It seemed, some days, that he grew right before Jonathan and Martha's eyes. Day by day, he appeared to learn more and more about his new home. He took to the new environment easily, never fearful of the unfamiliar surroundings or strange people who now cared for him, though it did seem that he looked for his biological parents for some time in the beginning. But even that passed and the Kents became his entire world.

He was forever smiling at his new parents, rewarding everything that they did for him — a diaper change, a bottle, a bath. And once he learned to laugh, that first night with them, he did not stop. “The world's happiest baby,” Martha called him. It did not escape her, the irony of that statement. She knew, deep in her heart, that her son was not of Earth. It was the only thing that made any sense. No wreck was ever found, though Lara had said she'd been injured in an accident. Only a strange, unexplained scar

in Schuster's Field had ever been discovered. And the way Lara's body had vanished after her death — technology like that did not exist on Earth.

But those were not only the big indicators of how unique Clark truly was. There were also a hundred little things that set him apart from normal babies. As the time went on, Clark began to show signs of invulnerability. The normal bumps and cuts of infancy and childhood simply did not appear. Clark could roll into anything, stumble and trip, scratch his fingernails against his soft baby skin, all without being injured. At first, Martha barely noticed that anything was different about Clark. Then, gradually, she became aware that he never seemed to get a diaper rash, which plagued all of the babies that her friends had. It was odd, she thought, but mostly she was grateful that Clark didn't need to suffer the discomfort brought about by such an irritation. Then, one night, as she went to cut his fingernails, she slipped and the clippers hit his skin. She braced herself for the inevitable scream, but it never came. She checked the finger in question, expecting to see blood, and found none. Not even a nick was visible.

From then on, she kept a sharp eye on what injuries Clark should have sustained, and didn't. Soon enough, a pattern emerged, one that perplexed the Kents at first. Sometimes, Clark was hurt and sometimes, he was not. A little more careful thinking revealed that on the days that were heavily overcast or stormy, Clark could be injured the same as any ordinary child. And on bright, sunny days, nothing could harm him, though, little by little he seemed to grow invulnerable even on days where sunshine was scarce, until he never suffered another cut or bruise.

There were other things too, as Clark grew out of babyhood and into his childhood. As a preteen, he grew fast and strong, more so than any other person on Earth. And that was the least of what set him apart. Other abilities manifested as well. The ability to x-ray right through objects. Powerful hearing — so much so that, prior to Clark getting a handle on it, the neighbor's sneeze down the road became crippling to him. Sight that went well beyond that of normal men.

“What's happening to me?” Clark asked miserably one morning when he was thirteen. He'd just broken the kitchen table by placing down his mug of hot chocolate too hard, even though he hadn't used any abnormal amount of strength.

“I don't know,” Jonathan said, shaking his head.

“I'm a freak,” Clark lamented.

“No, honey,” Martha said, leading Clark into the living room and sitting on the couch next to him. “You aren't.”

“Yes, I am!”

“You're just...a very special little boy,” Martha said, squeezing his shoulder.

Clark shrugged out of her touch. “Special is just another word for freak. I don't like what's happening to me. I'm *afraid* of myself. I mean, what if that hadn't been the table? What if I'd been handing the mug to you or Dad? What if I'd hurt you?”

“But you didn't,” Jonathan said.

“I know. But what if I *had*? The table isn't the first thing that I've broken. I just don't get it. How am I able to do this stuff?”

“Son...”

“Yeah, Dad?”

“I'm not...I'm not really sure how to say this.”

“What is it? Do I have some disease or something? Am I dying? Was I given some sort of experimental drug as a baby that made me this way?” A world of self-derision was in his lowered voice.

“Martha?” Jonathan asked, looking for help.

She sighed. “Clark, the truth is, we haven't told you the whole truth about yourself,” she began. “Your father and I...we thought it for the best, though we always knew that the day would come when we'd have to come clean.”

“Come clean? About what?”

"Well...we've always been honest with you, with the fact that we adopted you," she answered cautiously.

Clark nodded. "You said that you found me on your doorstep one night and that Doc McSwiggan's sister helped you finalize the paperwork so that I could be your son."

Martha nodded in turn. "That's right. But...that's only half the story. We always knew, somehow, that we'd need to tell you the full story. We just...we wanted to wait, until you were old enough to handle the truth. It looks like that time is now."

"I don't understand. What else can there be?"

Martha took a breath and let it out slowly, steadying herself. "You weren't alone when we found you. You were with your mother...your biological mother."

"My...?" he seemed unable to finish. He gulped and tried again. "My mother?"

Martha nodded and sighed. "Yes."

"What happened to her? She just left me here, to be raised by someone else? How could she leave?" The words came spilling out of Clark's mouth in rush. He seemed lost in his own thoughts, then flushed as he realized what he'd said. "I mean...I'm sorry. You know you guys are my parents. And you know I love you. I couldn't ask for a better family. But...how could anyone walk away from their kid? How could she leave me?"

"Clark," Martha said, putting her hand on his back and looking at Jonathan for the strength to go on. He gave her an encouraging nod. "She didn't leave you. She...she was hurt, badly. Some sort of accident, she'd said. Your father and I were sitting here, in the living room, that night. He was reading the paper and I was in the middle of a book when we heard knocking at the door. When we opened it, we found your mother on the porch, slumped against the house, holding you in her arms."

"So...you really *did* find me on your doorstep?" Clark managed, not looking up from the floor.

Martha smiled. "We did."

"What happened?" he asked, his voice low and tremulous.

"We helped her into the house, got her fed and comfortable. Doctor McSwiggan did what he could, but...it was too late. Lara...that was her name...she'd lost so much blood. Too much. Later on, Tim thought that she'd had some internal bleeding, as well as her external wounds. Before we could even call for an ambulance, she..." Martha swallowed, hard. "She passed away."

"She's dead?" Clark asked, looking up, his face troubled.

Martha nodded. "I'm so sorry, Clark."

"Before she died, she asked us to take care of you," Jonathan put in. "You were her main concern."

"So...? That's why you adopted me? Because my mother asked you to?" She watched as Clark's heart broke as he imagined himself to be some kind of burden or obligation to the Kents.

"Of course not!" Martha said, trying not to show how his words had stung her, though she knew he couldn't possibly mean them. "We fell in love with you as soon as we saw you. When your mother passed...there was no way I was going to give you up. As much as I wish you could have known your biological parents, I've always felt like it was meant to be, that she showed up on our doorstep. That somehow, you were always meant to be our son. It didn't matter to us how that happened. You were ours, the answer to every prayer we'd ever prayed."

"What about my father?" Clark asked in a small voice.

"Lara said, just before he died, that he was gone. And no one ever came looking for you, so we assume he was killed in whatever accident she'd been injured in."

Clark swallowed back either a reply or a sob — Martha couldn't quite tell what it had been intended as. For a couple of minutes, he was silent. Martha and Jonathan both gave him as much time as he needed, to process all that he'd just learned.

"Wh...what does that have to do with how fre...how abnormal I am?" he finally asked.

"Well..." Martha began, searching for the right way to word things.

"When Lara died, her body...vanished," Jonathan supplied.

"Vanished? What do you mean, vanished?"

"Just...vanished. One minute she was there, the next, she was fading away, literally. Until, finally, she was gone. Body, clothing, jewelry, everything. Like she'd never even been there. You were the only evidence that she'd been in our house."

"So, you're saying..." he asked, confused.

"We think," Jonathan continued, "or rather, we believe that you and she were not exactly...from this planet."

"As in, aliens?" Clark asked, incredulous.

"Not the word I would use," Jonathan said.

"Alien," Clark said, stronger this time. He thought for a moment. "Did she say anything else? Anything that made you think that we're not human?"

"Clark Jerome Kent, you are more human than anyone that I know!" Martha exclaimed.

"No," Jonathan admitted. "In fact, she was hesitant to say much of anything. All we know for certain is that her name was Lara, and that she called you Kal."

"Kal?"

Jonathan nodded. "When we adopted you, your mother and I thought it best that we change your name. The night we found you — and I personally believe that is the night you landed — some strange government men came knocking on our door, asking questions about if we'd seen anyone around. We were afraid for you and had no idea how much they might have known about you and your family. So we didn't dare use the name you'd been given at birth."

Clark sighed. "I guess that makes sense. But all of this still doesn't explain what happened earlier. Uh, with the table."

"Clark, from the moment you came into our lives, we've noticed certain things that have set you apart from everyone else on this planet. We think that your abilities are the result of your unique heritage — the fact that you weren't born on this planet. We've noticed that the sun seems to fuel these abilities, these powers," Martha said. "It's...well...it's reinforced our suspicions about your origins."

"I guess...I guess that makes sense. I've always felt better when I'm in the sunlight than when I'm not. But I always thought everyone was like that. I just...even knowing this now...what good does it do me? I'm a monster. I'm always afraid. Afraid that if I sit down too fast, I'll demolish a chair. Afraid that, one day, someone is going to notice how many pencils I go through at school, because I keep pulverizing them into dust when I concentrate too hard. Afraid that, if I run into someone playing football in the school yard, I'll seriously hurt them. Every second of every day is terrifying because I don't know what to do or how to control myself. I try, but it's so hard, to keep in mind what I can do, constantly. What am I supposed to do?"

Jonathan sighed. "Work at it, I suppose. Work on your control until it becomes a natural part of who you are. Remember how we worked on your hearing abilities?"

Clark nodded. "Well, sure, but that took months. And I still sometimes hear things I shouldn't be able to, when I'm not actively trying to. This...strength thing..." he let his voice trail off as he shrugged helplessly. "Why me?" he whispered quietly.

"Clark, you know that I believe we all have God-given abilities. We may not understand them at first, but at some point, we'll always find a way to use them to make the world a better place."

"A better place? How, when I destroy half the things I come in contact with?"

Jonathan shook his head. "I don't know yet. But I do know one thing. You won't have this problem forever. Even if this increase in your strength continues, even if you become the

strongest man on Earth, eventually you *will* be able to control it, as naturally as breathing.”

“I’m not so sure,” Clark said miserably.

“We believe in you, Clark,” Martha said.

“At least someone does,” he sighed.

Martha’s heart was broken for her little boy. He was always so optimistic, so full of a fierce love for life. Now though, he sounded so small and lost and utterly depressed. An intense fear marred his features, mixed with his sadness. She wanted to comfort him. Never before had she so desperately wanted to hold him close and make his world better. But she knew that there was nothing she could do. This was one time when Clark would have to work things out for himself. She could be there to love him and encourage him, but in the end, that was all she could do.

Nothing in her life had ever been more difficult.

“Oh, Clark,” she finally said, putting her arms around his slumped shoulders. “Have faith. Your father is right. I don’t know what may be in store for you, in the future. But there is one thing I *do* know. Whatever it is, it’s big. And, given your uniqueness, you’ll be the only one who can handle it. In the meantime, we’ll work as hard as we can to get these abilities...these powers of yours under control. Okay?”

Clark took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Okay.”

Crickets chirruped in the night beyond the windows of Clark’s room. A warm breeze blew in, stirring the freshly washed white curtains. Sleepless, Clark lay back on his bed, stretched to his full length, his hands behind his head. He inhaled deeply, taking in the familiar scents of his world. The lavender scent of the laundry detergent his mother had used on the curtains. The cedar of his dresser. Rain-washed earth, still damp, from a brief afternoon storm. The residual smell of the fried chicken cutlets his mother had cooked for dinner. The musty leather of the football his high school team had bestowed upon him for winning the last game of the year.

All things that would soon be lost to him, once the summer waned and fall whisked him off to college. All things that distinctly smelled of home. Home and safety and acceptance and comfort.

Clark sighed. It wasn’t that he felt unready for college life. If anything, he was more than ready for the academic and athletic challenges that awaited him. But, at the same time, he wasn’t ready to leave home. Out there, in college, he would be exposed to all sorts of new people and situations. And, while he was confident in his control over his powers, as he now came to think of his abilities, he was still nervous. What if he slipped up somehow, and people realized that there was more to him than met the eye? Ever since finding out what had really happened on the night he’d come to be the Kents’ son, he’d feared that the men who’d shown up that night would somehow find him, capture him, and, in his parents’ words, “dissect him like a frog.”

Still, the opportunity to get out a little and see the world was exciting and enticing. He’d known from an early age that he wanted to be a journalist. And not just any journalist, working for a small paper like the Smallville Post, but one who covered huge stories anywhere they might occur. Leaving behind his childhood home would be bitter, but the promise of his future had too strong a hold to allow him to stay put.

“Besides,” he whispered to himself in the dark, “it’s not like I can’t ever come home.”

He smiled. Of all the strange and typically terrifying powers that had gradually emerged over his teenage and pre-teen years, his ability to fly was his favorite. The last to manifest, it had never frightened him, only thrilled him. When he flew, he felt oddly complete and at peace.

He floated off his bed now and maneuvered himself out his window. Rising to the highest point of the farmhouse’s roof, he

finally settled down and looked up into the clear night sky. The moon was dark that night, hidden in shadow as it cycled through its various phases. Clark didn’t mind. The moon wasn’t what he wanted to look at anyway. It was the stars.

For a long time, he simply stared upwards, his eyes tracing the familiar patterns of the constellations that he’d learned as a child. He wondered if his birth planet was out there somewhere, within the scope of his sight. He knew now that his parents’ guess had to be right. He had to have come from a distant planet. No one else on Earth had the abilities he did. No other explanation made any sense.

Still, knowing even that basic truth about himself, he had questions. What was his birth planet called? Why had his mother left it? Had she gone alone, taking just her infant son? Had his father made the journey as well? Why had he been brought to Earth? Had his mother fled the planet in fear? Had she simply been exploring the universe and crash landed? Did everyone on his birth planet have powers like he did?

The not knowing ate away at him, every time he allowed himself to think on the topic.

More questions swirled in his mind. What had his parents looked like? The Kents had given him the best description they could of the woman, Lara, who had brought him to their front porch. But Clark still wondered. Were there parts of him that resembled her? The shape of his eyes, for example. Or the way he smiled. Or his nose. And what of his father? He knew absolutely nothing of the man who had sired him. Had he been tall? Short? Had Clark gotten his thick, black hair from him? What had the man done for a living? Had he enjoyed writing, as Clark did?

Mostly, he wondered what they might have been like. Had they been as warm and open as the Kents? Had they been as loving? What would they have thought about him, now that he was grown and ready to head out into the world? Would they have been proud of the man he’d become, thus far? If they could know of his life with Jonathan and Martha, would they have approved of how that life had played out? He thought he could say with some degree of certainty that they would have.

Simply put, the Kents were the greatest parents Clark could have ever wished for. Ever patient, they had guided him through the scariest and most challenging moments of his life. Ever optimistic, they had given him the support and encouragement that he’d needed, especially as each of his powers had manifested, or he’d had a particularly rough day at school. He’d had a lot of those lately. With graduation only two weeks away, he and his girlfriend, Lana Lang, had had a bad break-up.

She’d wanted Clark to attend the same college she would be in the fall. But Clark had no intention of going to the same college. Its journalism program was laughable, at best. And besides, they didn’t have a football team. Clark needed a school with both — a solid academic program and a strong sports program. The only reason why he was able to attend the school he wanted was because they’d offered him a full scholarship, including room and board, so long as he played ball for them.

Lana had spent the entire year pestering him about applying to her school. He had done his best to evade the subject, but it had often been the cause of fights between them. But with graduation looming, the fights had become more and more frequent and intense. Then, there was the fact that Lana had been pressuring him for other things as well. If he refused to attend college with her, she had argued, then he’d better show his commitment to her. For several months, she’d hinted at what kind of engagement rings she liked. Finally having had enough of Lana’s attempts to bully him around, and being far from ready to promise himself in marriage to anyone, Clark had stood up for himself, and ended their relationship.

He thought he’d have a rougher time, ending the two year long relationship. He’d thought he’d be heartbroken. But, the truth was,

he felt nothing but relief. Pure, unadulterated relief.

He hadn't realized, before the break-up, how tiring being Lana's boyfriend could be. How demanding she could be. How manipulative. He counted himself lucky now, for his extraordinary speed and nearly flawless mind, which helped him balance the otherwise overwhelming demands of school, football practice, helping with the farm, and dating Lana. Still, breaking up with her had been hard on him. One of the things that made him feel connected to the world, like a normal young man, had been dating a beautiful girl. But he knew now, with one hundred percent certainty, that there never could have been a future with her.

He thought back to the conversation that had ended their relationship.

"Clarkie," she had whined to him, while they'd been at her house, studying for their upcoming history test.

"Yeah?" he had responded, still rereading the final passages of the chapter they were to be tested on.

"How serious are you, about this whole journalism thing? I mean, it *is* just a fad, isn't it?"

"Pretty serious," he had answered, still distracted.

"Clark!" she had said, her voice suddenly growing sharp. "Pay attention to me!"

Clark had sighed and closed his textbook. "What?" he had asked.

"This journalism thing. When are you going to grow up and realize that it's so beneath you? You can be anything you want to be. A lawyer or...a doctor." Her eyes had lit up at the thought. "Yeah, a doctor. Better, even. A surgeon. A plastic surgeon," she had rambled on, lost in her own thoughts and steamrolling right over Clark's attempts to get a word in edgewise. "One who works on celebrities and all those rich people out in California. Yeah," she had continued, her voice going dreamy. "We'd be rich, live in a huge mansion, have a couple of kids. What do you think?"

"What do I think?" Clark had said, incredulous, shaking his head. "What do I think? I think I'll stick with being a reporter."

"But Clarkie..."

"No buts, Lana," he'd said, his ire rising. "I'm not interested in being a surgeon or a lawyer, or a restaurant owner, or whatever else you might suggest. I want to make a difference in this world. And the best way I know how to do that is by being an investigative reporter, like I've always dreamed about."

"So, you've always dreamed about being dirt poor? Come on, Clarkie. Don't tell me you *like* living a mediocre life."

"There is *nothing* mediocre about my life," he'd shot back, pushing the textbook away and getting up from where he'd been laying on his stomach on the floor.

"Right. Farm life is *so* glamorous. Don't you want to do more with your life?"

"Yes," he'd said, trying to get his point across. "I want to help people. That's why I'm going to be a journalist."

"But don't you want to make me happy?" she'd said, thrusting out her lower lip in a pout and twisting a lock of her hair around her finger.

"Your happiness?" he'd said, fighting back his laughter. "What about *mine*, Lana?"

"If you gave it a shot, you might find that you could be happy doing something where you'll actually make money!"

"Look, Lana, enough is enough. You've been pestering me about this since Christmas. It wasn't funny then, when I thought you were trying to joke around. It's downright obnoxious now."

"I was never joking about it," she'd said, crossing her arms before her chest. "If you want to make me happy, you'll drop this stupid idea of being a reporter and do something *useful* with your life."

Clark's fists had clenched and the muscle in his jaw had ticked. "That's it!" he'd finally said. "I've had enough, Lana! I'm sick and tired of you trying to manipulate me away from what

makes *me* happy."

"I don't think you even *know* what makes you happy," she'd shot back. "You're completely lost. I mean, we've been dating, what, two years? And you *still* haven't made a move to try to get me into bed."

"What?" he'd sputtered. "Is that what this is about? The fact that I've tried to be a decent guy?"

"Don't pull that gentleman act on me, Clarkie. For God's sake, even the *janitor* has tried to get into my pants!"

"What do you want from me, Lana?" he'd asked, exasperated.

"I want you to give up on your stupid idea of being a reporter."

"No," he'd said, his voice grown hard and brooking no argument. "You know what, Lana? I'm done. No...*we're* done."

"Done? What do you mean, *done*?" she'd demanded to know.

"*Done*," he'd repeated, picking up his books and shoving them in his backpack. "I am not your punching bag *or* your boyfriend any longer."

"But, Clarkie, what about our future?" She'd done her best to sound like a wounded victim, but Clark wasn't having any of it.

"There is *no* future," he'd said firmly. "We're through. You'll go off to college and meet new people and study whatever it is that you want to. I'll go off to a different school and onto a different life."

"What about our wedding plans?"

"There *never were* any wedding plans!" he'd said, slinging the bag onto his back, working hard to control his anger. "Those only existed in your own head!"

"Don't you love me?" she'd tried, making puppy dog eyes at him.

"Goodbye, Lana," he'd said, ignoring the question and moving passed her and gaining the door.

To his eternal surprise, he was out of the house before he heard her attempting to follow and calling to him. By then, it was too late. Clark was far enough to pretend not to hear her. As soon as he could, he'd ducked out of sight behind the town library and took to the sky. He'd flown straight home, with as much speed as he'd dared, not wanting to break the sound barrier and cause talk in town.

Now, looking up at the stars, Clark felt free. He was still plagued by guilt at how things had ended between Lana and himself, but he was relieved that it was, in fact, over. He wondered too, if there was anyone out there in the world who would be a good match for him. Someone who would treat him right and not want to use him for what they thought he could do for them. Someone who he would feel comfortable enough with to trust with the secret part of his life — the things he never, ever allowed anyone else to know.

Someone he could love and build a future with.

"There has to be someone," he whispered to himself. "And I'll find her."

"Clark!" Martha called as she weaved her way through the crowds of proud parents, siblings, and significant others.

"Over here, Mom," he called, waving to her.

She reached his side and hugged him tightly. "Oh, honey, your dad and I are so proud of you!"

"Thanks, Mom," he said, blushing a little.

He swiped the dangling tassel of his black graduation cap and gown away and out of his eyes. In one hand, he clutched the rolled up, faux diploma which took the place of the real one which would be mailed to his home, once the college had a chance to print them all off after double checking that each graduate had met their requirements.

"Magna Cum Laude," Jonathan said, finally maneuvering his way to where his wife and son stood, amid the swirling sea of people. He shook his head. "I'm so proud, son. Not that I ever

doubted you. And that was some valedictorian speech.” He gave Clark a proud smile and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Thanks, Dad. You really liked it?”

“I did,” he confirmed with a nod.

Clark smiled. The truth was, he’d spent weeks trying to figure out what to say in his speech. There was so much he wanted to say, but he knew that his best bet was to keep it short, sweet, and as relatable as possible to as much of his audience as he could. So, for weeks, he’d scribbled notes, ideas, and little sayings on a pad of paper that he kept constantly in his backpack, hoping for the proper inspiration. By the time he’d decided on exactly what he’d wanted to say, he’d only had a week left to write it up, edit it, and practice it before his dorm room mirror.

In the end though, he’d been happy with it. He’d only hoped that everyone else had enjoyed his speech.

“Why don’t we get out of here?” Martha suggested as the crowds began to thin.

“Good idea,” Clark said. “If we want to get dinner, we’d better get going soon anyway. There aren’t too many places to eat around here, so they are going to get packed, fast.”

Of course, he could always fly them all someplace for their dinner. Italy, or France, if they wanted. But Clark didn’t want to. It was his last chance to soak up the atmosphere associated with college life. He wanted to hear the rowdy clusters of students and family all out celebrating their graduation. He wanted to see the groups of friends laughing together for the last time before they were forced out into the real world.

The real world.

Clark sighed. He’d be looking for a job within a few days, once he and his parents packed up the car and drove back home to Smallville. Again, he could have flown some of his things home in the small hours of the night, but that felt somehow like he was cheating himself of his last true college experience — like he’d be neglecting to close the final chapter of this stage of his life.

He looked forward to getting out into the world, and for the opportunity to finally pursue his dreams. He imagined that he would find a job with a well-respected and world renowned newspaper. He dreamed about finding leads nobody else could find. He looked forward, even, to stakeouts, if it meant cracking a case no one else could. He envisioned crime lords locked away, dirty politicians exposed, and drug rings busted because of his efforts. He was meant for that life, he knew it, deep down in his bones.

Still, the idea of leaving the comfort of college was somewhat daunting. All his life, he’d been a student. He’d had a strict regiment of classes, homework — sometimes achieved with a little help from his incredible speed — and football practice and games, not to mention the school newspaper and his duties as a resident assistant in his dorm building. Now, faced with shaking up his entire life, he had to admit he was a little scared. Once again, he was going to have to leave home. He didn’t want to work for a small time paper, like they had in Smallville. He knew he was going to have to live in a major city, if not a completely different country.

It would be an exciting adventure, but it also slightly terrified Clark.

He wondered about where he might live. New York? Los Angeles? Chicago? Who might he meet? Was there someone out there, waiting to meet *him*? Though Clark had gone on the occasional date during his years in college, none of the women had been right for him. Something was always “off” about them. Who had been polite enough in classes, but who’d shown a mean side when out of the public eye. Who had only been using him as a meal ticket, when they’d had a boyfriend in a different university. Who had wanted to date him only because of his academic prowess, expecting him to do their advanced calculus work for them. And one young woman who had been gorgeous, but who’d

had absolutely nothing in common with Clark. The final straw had come when she’d told him that she had no interest in reading, at all.

Clark could only hope that, wherever fate led him, he would find the woman of his dreams. Tall or short, thin or heavy, he didn’t care. All that really mattered was who she would be on the inside. Her mind. Her heart. Her personality. He hoped too, that he would recognize her when he found her. So far, his track record wasn’t so great. Though he had tried to patch things up with Lana so they could be friends again, she had refused to speak with him. The last he had heard of her, she was dating an older guy, already out of college and who was in medical school to become a neurosurgeon. Clark had no ill will toward her, and wished her the best, but was, all the same, infinitely relieved that he was no longer the object of her affections.

“So,” Martha said, as they finally were seated at the most popular Italian restaurant in town. “Have you thought about where you might apply for a job?”

Clark nodded. “I have. I’ve sent out a bunch of resumes in the last couple of months, but so far I haven’t gotten any bites.”

“Did anyone say why they’ve...?” She paused, looking for the right words, perhaps.

“Why they’ve rejected me?” Clark asked with a grin. “No. It’s been mainly just form letters. You know. ‘Thanks for applying but we have no openings at this time’ kind of responses.”

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry. Why didn’t you say anything before?”

Clark shrugged. “It didn’t seem like that big of a deal. I’ll find something. I guess, maybe I set my sights a little too high, sending to the New York Times and the like. Maybe I should lower my standards, but I can’t shake this...I don’t know...hesitation to get stuck at some small paper. Yeah, the experience would be good, but I can’t help but to feel like it won’t make that much difference, in the long run, when I reapply to those other, bigger papers.”

“So...” Jonathan hedged, trying, it seemed, to figure out where Clark would go from there.

“So...I guess, for now, I go home and keep applying to places. One of the nice things is, I can fly out for interviews on a moment’s notice, if need be.” He lowered his voice and grinned.

That made his parents laugh. “True,” Jonathan said, still chuckling.

“Well, we’re glad to have you home, for as long as you want to stay,” Martha put in as the waiter came and set glasses of ice water down before them.

“Thanks,” Clark said. “It’ll be good to be home again, even if just for a bit.”

That was the truth. He’d missed the familiar comfort of the tidy farmhouse where he’d grown up. He’d flown home whenever he could, to see his parents and eat a home cooked meal. But spending a few sporadic hours here and there hadn’t been the same as really being home. He was ever conscious of how long he’d been gone, where he might have to land in order not to be seen, the questions his roommates might ask about where he’d been — especially if he missed having dinner with them or showed up late for a movie night. He hated lying to them — it was against how he’d been raised. So instead, he gave them vague answers that seemed to satisfy them enough to keep them from prying deeper.

Home.

He hadn’t realized before now how much he’d missed the place, now that he was hours away from moving out of his dorm room and heading back to the farmlands of his youth. He missed the scent of the freshly tilled earth, the smell of rain on the crops, the way the summer sun seemed to bathe everything in a golden glow. He missed swimming in the quarry with his childhood friends, climbing up to the roof of the house to study the stars, how everyone in town knew each other and always warmly greeted each other.

And yet, even without moving back, he was deeply aware that

he'd outgrown the place. Smallville was a wonderful place. But it was too small and he had grown too large for it. It wasn't his powers that had set him apart from everyone else there. It was more of a deep, personal need to explore the world. A longing, as he thought of it, to find the place where he was most needed, could do the most good with his investigative abilities. And despite his love of and for Smallville, that wasn't the place where he needed to be.

Clark tore open the envelope and scanned the words on the paper, his heart sinking. *Of course* it was another rejection letter. If it the paper had wanted him to come and interview with him, they would have called. Clark sighed.

"Batting a thousand," he muttered to himself as he crumpled the impersonal form letter into a tight ball. With a careful burst of his heat vision, he incinerated the thing and watched the ashes waft slowly down to the floor. "What am I doing wrong?" he wondered aloud.

Pounce, one of the cats who helped keep the Kents' barn mouse-free, yawned and stretched his body to soak up the patch of warm sunlight that came in through the open doors. Clark knelt and scratched the tabby behind his gray ears, eliciting an immediate purr. It made Clark smile a little. But only a little.

The summer had come and was now nearly gone again. And still he had yet to receive a job offer. Or an interview, for that matter. He sighed and kicked at a piece of stray straw. He'd really thought that he'd have a full time job by now. Maybe it was time to lower his sights. Maybe it was time to start applying to smaller, less well known papers. He knew the Smallville Post was always open to freelancers. He could start there, make connections if he could, and continue to keep his eyes and ears open for work at other papers.

"I guess I'll talk to Greg on Monday," he said to himself or to the cat, he wasn't quite sure.

But saying the words aloud made it seem more real, somehow. He needed that, at the moment, even if the cat was his only witness. Jonathan and Martha had gone into town for the afternoon to celebrate their anniversary. Clark had respectfully bowed out of their invitation to join them, wanting to give them some private time together. He wasn't much in the mood for celebrating either, not with the recent string of rejection letters he'd gotten. They had been a blow to his normally optimistic ego.

"Yeah," he continued quietly, standing up from petting the now sleeping cat. "Monday."

"Last one in is a rotten egg!"

With a tremendous splash, the group of boys all ran toward the edge of the rock. One by one, they each did a cannonball into the cold water of the old quarry's lake. The once serene surface of the water erupted and boiled as each body churned it up as the boys jumped in and began to splash around.

"So much for a quiet day at the old swimming hole," Tommy said as Clark and his friends approached the water's edge.

Clark shrugged. "I'm not turning back."

"Me neither," Tommy said, though his voice had lost a lot of the enthusiasm it had held when he'd called Clark to say that everyone was going swimming. "It's the hottest day of the summer. I think we *all* need a swim."

"Can we go all the way over to the far side?" Keith asked. "Away from the cannonballs?"

"I agree with Keith," Josh said.

"I don't have a problem with that," Clark said, shrugging.

Together, they all trudged to the far side of the lake, then carefully arranged everything they'd brought with them — folding chairs, coolers, and whatever personal items they'd each brought. Clark opened up the battered, but sturdy, old chaise lounge chair he'd brought, then stripped out of his shirt and stuffed it into the

small duffel bag he'd taken with him. He sat and wiggled out of the sandals he was wearing, then pulled out his towel from the bag and draped it over the back of the lounge chair.

"This is great," he finally said, smiling and taking everything in. "Getting the old group back together, coming back down to the quarry. When was the last time we did this? The summer after high school?"

"Yeah," Keith confirmed. "The weekend before you headed off to college."

"That's right," Clark said, nodding in remembrance. "I had to go a little earlier to start with the football stuff."

"Now look at us," Josh said, gesturing widely. "Out of college and moving on with our lives."

"Yeah," Clark said, nodding, though his heart sank.

He'd managed to sell a few freelance articles to the Smallville Post, but his plans to make connections wasn't moving fast enough for his taste. Of course, he'd only been working with them for three whole weeks, but considering his extraordinary speed, it seemed like forever since he'd first joined the paper. He was restless, plain and simple. He felt like he was stuck in place, waiting for his life to start while he watched everyone else's lives take off. Josh, for example, was headed to medical school to become a pediatrician. Tommy was in the midst of studying for the LSATs. Keith had recently gotten engaged to Chelsea, whom he'd been dating since their freshman year of high school. Even Rachel was planning on following her father's footsteps and was in training to become part of the local police department.

"What's the matter, Clark?" Rachel asked, picking up on his subtle sigh.

"Nothing," he said, unwilling to get into things.

He liked Rachel a great deal, but as a friend only, whereas he knew that she had been lusting after him since their elementary school days. But even with their long history together, Clark had never been comfortable showing any sort of vulnerability in front of her. He never had, not with any of his friends, not with any of his girlfriends. It wasn't a macho thing, born out of the knowledge that he was the strongest man on the planet. It was a very deep and personal thing, born out of mostly fear, he knew. He was simply too afraid to let anyone get to know the real him — his unique abilities, his alien heritage.

"Clark..." she pressed.

"Really, it's nothing," he said, a bit more forcefully. "Just lost in my own thoughts, okay?"

"Help!"

The scream pierced Clark's mind like a lance. With his super hearing, it was louder than it should have been, though the echo off the surrounding rocks hurt his ears. Without a conscious thought to do so, he whipped his head around to appraise the situation. He knew, from the desperate tone, that the cry for help hadn't been one of the kids fooling around. Something really *was* wrong. Telescoping in on the opposite side of the lake, he could see some of the kids waving their arms above their heads, trying to get someone's attention.

"Help!" came the call again. "Please, somebody help us!"

Without even stopping to take off his glasses, Clark launched himself into the water. Using all of his strength, he began swimming. Stroke after powerful stroke brought him ever closer to the group of screaming kids, but he felt like he was going too slowly. Every second seemed too precious, and the distance wasn't closing fast enough. Breaking a personal rule he'd had to never use his abilities in public, he allowed himself to employ a burst of his super speed. In seconds, he'd covered the rest of the distance.

"What happened?" he asked as he reached the side of the boy who'd been pleading for help.

"Robby," he said, by way of explanation.

"What?" Clark prodded. "What about Robby?"

"I didn't mean it. Honest."

"What happened?" Clark asked again, lightly gripping the boy's shoulders while he treaded water.

"We were pushing each other around for fun. I accidentally pushed him too hard. He fell off the rocks, but I think he hit his head. He went under and didn't come up. We've tried to get him, but it's too deep."

"Go," Clark commanded him. "Up to the old guardhouse. There's a payphone there. Call an ambulance."

He didn't wait for a response. He took a deep breath and dived down. He frantically began swimming toward the rocky bottom of the quarry's lake. It was true that he could hold his breath for a good twenty minutes, but he knew Robby wasn't that lucky. Every second counted, and too many had already passed. As soon as Clark was beneath the water's surface, he once again loosened the restraint he held on his speed and shot to the bottom of the lake.

He began scanning, and was thankful for his better than average ability to see in dark places. The lakebed was deep and housed in shadows. But Clark was finally able to see the boy in question. He sent up a silent prayer of thanks, grateful he'd given that section of the bottom a second check. He'd nearly missed the unmoving body, dressed all in dark blues as he was.

Clark made a beeline for the boy and easily lifted his body. Robby was limp and unresponsive in his arms. Clark tucked him under one arm, then, with a swift push from his feet, used the uneven lakebed to propel himself upwards. Up, up, up he went, now flying through the water, rather than swimming. It was easier, with his one arm full and his dense molecular structure, which wanted to pull him down to the bottom and keep him there.

Seconds passed, each one like a physical weight on Clark's shoulders. And, while he tried to will himself not to panic, to know that he had everything under control, he was nervous. More than nervous, if he were to be perfectly honest. Robby had been underwater a long time. But, at last, Clark's head broke the water's surface. He gasped for breath, more to maintain his facade of normalcy than for need, and began to half swim, half drag Robby to the shoreline, which, thankfully, was not all that far away.

"Come on," he murmured to the unconscious boy in his arms as he finally reached the water's edge.

Here he was able to stand and reach the bottom. He gathered Robby in both of his arms and walked him to the shore. He carefully laid Robby down on the hot gray stone and checked for signs of life. There was a weak pulse, but no signs of breathing. Clark shifted his position as he knelt on the ground and began to administer CPR.

"Come on. Come on," he repeated as he cycled through chest compressions and attempts to blow air into the twelve-year-old's lungs. "Come on, breathe for me."

After a small eternity, Robby stirred, tried to gasp, and vomited up water. Clark helped him to pull himself into a sitting position, and held the boy as he finally did suck in a shaking breath. Relief washed over Clark. He could feel the tension slipping from his body with every cough and shuddering breath Robby took. He patted the boy's back lightly.

"It's okay," Clark said, as Robby continued to choke and gasp for enough air. "Take it easy. You're okay."

"What happened?" Keith asked as Clark's friends raced over to where he sat on the ground with Robby.

"He hit his head and sank to the bottom," Clark said distractedly, as he watched the boy spit up more water.

"That must have been some adrenaline rush," Josh put in.

"What?" Clark asked, a little confused.

"You dove in and swam the distance in a minute, maybe less. And then, when you went under," he shook his head before continuing, "if you got all the way to the bottom, then you must have been swimming for your life. I don't think you were under for more than two minutes."

Great, Clark lamented. *Way to blow your cover, stupid.*

"Yeah, I guess it was," he said instead, shrugging off the apparently fantastic speed the rescue had taken place with. "I wasn't really paying attention. I'm just glad he's safe." He nodded in Robby's direction.

In the distance, he heard the wail of a siren growing closer. Apparently he hadn't been the only one to move quickly. The other kids had made record time in making it to the guardhouse to call for help, it seemed. At least, he *hoped* that the siren he'd heard was for them. After ten more minutes, the ambulance came bouncing down the gravel roadway. As soon as it came to a crunching stop, the rear doors burst open and two paramedics jumped out. They hit the ground running, making it to Robby's side in less than a minute.

Clark stepped back, letting the professionals take over. Robby still wasn't talking, so his friends filled in as much information as they could while the paramedics started to assess the boy. Clark added what little he knew as well, starting from hearing a change in the kids' screams all the way up to getting Robby to finally take a breath. After Robby was stabilized and the ambulance was on its way to the hospital, Clark and his friends went back to their own little area where their belongings still sat.

"I think I'm going to head home," Clark said, picking up his shirt and pulling it over his slowly drying body.

"How come?" Rachel asked.

"I, uh...this whole thing...I'm a little shaken, that's all. I mean, someone almost died here today. I'm not exactly in the mood to stay around," he deflected.

In truth, his unease ran deeper than that. Josh might try to explain away Clark's enhanced speed as an adrenaline rush, but Clark knew his friends. They would discuss the rescue, asking him questions, and somewhere along the way, something wouldn't make sense to them. And Clark could not afford any suspicions to be placed on him. Not when he'd spent most of his life worried that someone would discover that there was more to him than met the eye, and that it would result in him being captured and dissected like a frog. Although, he had to admit, now that he was grown and knew his strength and speed, he doubted that anything or anyone could hold him against his will. But it was definitely not something he wanted to test either.

"I'm sorry, guys," he apologized to them all.

"Hey, no problem," Keith said. "You need a ride?"

Clark shook his head, sending water droplets in every direction. "Thanks, but no. You guys should enjoy yourselves. Besides, I think a nice long walk might be just what I need."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely. I'll catch up with you guys some other time. Okay?"

"All right, man."

Clark quickly repacked his things and set off down the road, out of the quarry. He could feel the tension in his body rising, the more he thought about the events of the afternoon. In fact, he could feel his hands beginning to shake, but it was just too difficult to stop thinking about what had happened. He took several deep, cleansing breaths as he walked, attempting to funnel out his nervousness with every exhalation. Before long, he found that he'd subconsciously quickened his pace as he headed home, until he was running, then running at super speed.

The speed was freeing, even though the fear of discovery was still fresh in his mind. It simply felt good to be himself, now that he was completely alone out in the fields of his childhood. He only stopped when he reached home.

"Back so soon?" Jonathan asked, barely looking up for the day's paper as he sipped a glass of cold lemonade.

"I'm afraid so," Clark said, leaning his chair against the weathered farmhouse once he'd ascended the porch steps.

Jonathan put the paper down, a concerned expression on his face.

"What is it, son?"

Clark sat in one of the wicker chairs, looking across at his parents.

"Something..." he paused and swallowed hard. "Something happened."

"What?" Martha asked.

"Down at the quarry. Some boys were swimming at the far end of the lake from where we were. One of them fell in and drowned."

"Oh no," Martha said, her face falling in grief.

"Nothing like that, Mom," Clark said, folding his hands on his lap and looking down. "I swam over and saved him."

Haltingly, he told them the whole story, starting with his arrival at the quarry with his friends and ending with finding himself speeding home at top velocity. Throughout the telling, he kept his head bowed, ashamed of how careless he'd been with using his powers. He couldn't meet their eyes. After all they had sacrificed for him, had done to help train him to keep his powers under control and out of the public eye, he'd failed them. In one miserable moment, he'd blown his cover and potentially put them all in danger.

"I'm sorry," he said at the end of his tale. "I know I messed up."

"Messed up?" Martha asked, incredulous.

"Son, we've never been prouder of you," Jonathan jumped in.

"Proud? But...I slipped up. Used my abilities and raised some eyebrows. What if...what if word gets out? And you know it will. It's a small town. I can't just fade into the background and watch as the mysterious rescuer is never found. There are too many witnesses. Everyone knows it was me."

"Well, like your friend said, it can easily be chalked up to an adrenaline rush," Martha said. "Like when a mother lifts a car to save her baby."

"I wish I could believe that."

"Trust me," Martha said. "The important thing is, you saved that kid's life. And *that's* what everyone will be talking about. Not how fast you swam over, or how deep you had to dive to get him."

"I hope so," he said, though he knew his words couldn't conceal his skepticism.

"The important thing is, how do you feel about all this?" Jonathan asked.

"Scared," Clark admitted. "I mean, my whole life, I've been hiding what I can do. Now, I might have blown everything."

"And?" Jonathan prodded, sensing, perhaps, that there was more to Clark's feelings.

"And...elated," he finally confessed. "I never thought these powers would be good for anything, except for personal use...like when I used to fly home for dinner sometimes while I was away at school. But using them today for the benefit of someone else? It was the greatest feeling in the world. Maybe you guys were right. Maybe I really do have these abilities for a reason. Oh, I'm not saying that I want to parade around as Clark Kent, super weirdo, but I just can't help feeling like I was meant to be there today, to save that kid."

Jonathan and Martha smiled as Clark talked, seeing his face widen out into a smile as he talked. He couldn't help it. Despite his lingering terror of being discovered for what he really was, his heart was swollen with pride and happiness. He'd used his powers for good. Robby was alive because of him. His powers, and the split-second decision to employ them, had made the difference between life and death.

He knew he could never risk doing that again. But for the moment, he basked in the knowledge that his strange, sometimes frightening, powers had managed to accomplish some good in the world.

Restless.

The word fit Clark like it had been invented solely to describe how he felt. He paced the floor of his studio apartment in Paris, sighing heavily as a thunderstorm raged out beyond his windows. He'd been there for three months and, already, he was itching to move on. It just wasn't the right fit for him. The food was amazing. And most of the people he'd met had been nice, even tolerating his less than stellar accent when he spoke in French.

But it wasn't home.

Clark reached the far wall and placed his arm against it, then laid his forehead in the crook of his elbow. He sighed again, torn. Should he move on? Should he risk giving up the staff job he'd gotten with one of the local papers? And if he did leave, where would he go? He'd been so many places already, and none had quelled the wanderlust in his heart. Should he stay? Should he force himself to settle down and make a life here, in this city? Would he — could he — eventually learn to be happy here?

"No," he whispered to himself.

He could never be happy here. There was something lacking. Something Clark couldn't quite put his finger on.

"Homesick," he uttered to himself.

He pushed himself away from the wall and dropped heavily onto his worn and beaten couch. Homesick. It hadn't occurred to him in quite that way before. But it rang true nonetheless.

Homesick. He knew he wasn't looking for an excuse to return to Smallville. He needed to find where he truly belonged.

"It's not possible, is it?" he asked the empty air around him. "To miss a place I've never been to?"

Even as he voiced the question, he knew the answer. Yes, it *was* possible. He ached for home — a place he hadn't yet found, but somehow missed terribly. But where? Where was his home? It certainly wasn't here, in France. It hadn't been in Guam, or China, or Australia either. Japan hadn't been it. Neither had Borneo or Norway, or any place else that Clark had spent any amount of time in.

Lonely.

That was his life. Lonely and empty. While it was true that he was thankful for the editors that had hired him so far, and had loved the work he'd done, he felt completely unfulfilled. His work thus far, while it had been interesting, hadn't done much to change the world or the lives of the people involved. Puff pieces, mostly, if he were to be honest. But it was more than that. It was an emptiness in his heart.

All his life, he'd wanted to be normal. To fit in and have friends. As he'd grown, though, he'd learned that, although he had friends — some of whom he considered as close as family — he would never truly be normal. He'd wanted a job, like everyone else. It was true that he'd worked for several papers already, but most of it had been freelance, not the steady job he'd always dreamed of. But most of all, he wanted to find his soul mate, the one woman he could love and be completely and totally honest with. The person he could finally let down his guard around and carry no secrets with. And when he did find that one, special woman, he wanted to marry her and start a family of his own with her.

But at the moment, he felt like that was something that might never happen. He'd been all over the globe, visited most of the major cities. He'd even been in some of the worst areas of the planet, covering stories and trying to help people. He'd seen hundreds of thousands of women in those travels. And not one of them had appealed to him enough to make him ask them out on a date, or to lure him into giving that city a chance to become his home.

"Maybe what I'm looking for doesn't exist," he lamented softly. He paused a moment, then sighed. "I really *must* be in bad shape," he mused. "I'm sitting here talking to myself."

He sighed again and fidgeted in his seat. He looked around his tiny, though comfortable, apartment. It was pretty sparsely

furnished, but it serviced his, admittedly few, needs. He'd even forgone getting a bed. The couch was long enough to stretch out on to sleep if he wanted. But half the time he just skipped even that and simply floated. It was so right, so natural to him, to defy gravity like that, that he had no problem doing it in his sleep.

All in all, he wouldn't miss the place. It was totally unremarkable in any way. He didn't even have a decent view to enjoy — just a blackened brick back wall of a music store to stare at. At least it concealed him from prying eyes, which was one of the reasons why he wasn't afraid to do things like float in his sleep or boil a cup of tea water with his heat vision instead of a teapot.

"It's time to move on," he said. "But...where? Where do I go?"

That was a question that was not so easily answered. He hated uprooting himself all the time. He just wanted to find where he belonged and stay there for the rest of his life. He wanted permanence in his life. He hated his spotty work record. He despised his month-to-month rental agreements. He was tired of changing what language he needed to speak on what felt like a weekly basis.

He stood and crossed to the small table near the window. He picked up the newspapers there. Whenever he could, he picked up as many papers from as many different places as he could from the local newsstand. Today's assortment began with the Daily Planet, one of Clark's favorite papers, now that he was out in the world. At the time when he'd left home, four years prior, none of the stores in Smallville had really carried it. Now he simply stared at the logo, a globe with a ring around it.

"The Daily Planet," he said, standing in place, eyes still fixed on the distinctive logo. "That's it!"

He dropped the papers on the table and began to pack his meager belongings. As soon as night fell, he would be on his way.

Clark hovered, hidden in the heavy, rain-laden clouds above Metropolis, looking for a place to land. He scanned carefully, as he always did, before choosing a spot behind a donut shop. It was perfect. Abandoned and with no windows for prying eyes to peek out of, it would offer him total cover. He flew down to it with all speed, ensuring that no wandering eyes would see his descent.

Keeping a casual stride, he ducked out of the alley and onto the sidewalk. At this late hour of the night, though, there were virtually no people there to see him emerge out of the darkness. He shrugged down into his jacket. The cold water droplets didn't bother him much — the cold never did — but it was a little uncomfortable as the water slid down his skin, wet his clothing, and matted his hair down.

Still, there was something about the city, even at night, that felt inviting and comfortable. Clark couldn't place his finger on what it was. Perhaps it was that, even as late as it was, the city never slept. Just two blocks over and Clark left the quiet place where he'd landed and found himself amid a bustling hub of activity. People rushed from place to place or strolled hand-in-hand with the one they loved. Taxis raced down the streets and irate drivers honked angrily as others cut them off. Lights turned the night into day.

And gleaming in the center of it all — The Daily Planet building, the ring around the globe glowing an enticing and soothing electric blue.

Clark stared at the logo for a good long moment, soaking up the feeling of being so close to his dream job. The more he'd thought about the paper, the greater his need to work for it had become.

"Tomorrow," he said to himself, the word carrying all his conviction, as if it could ensure him a position with the paper.

Tomorrow indeed. He'd managed to secure an interview with the editor, a Perry White by name. Clark was excited and impatient for the interview. But, he had to admit, he was a little

nervous too, as he always was before interviewing. And now, it was worse, because he'd never before wanted a job so badly. Only one thing was certain. Tomorrow, he would be ready. He would do his best to secure a job with the paper.

"Mr. White, thanks for seeing me," Clark said as he shook hands with the grizzled old editor of The Daily Planet. "I appreciate it, especially on such short notice."

"Well, Professor Carlton gave his highest recommendation of you. Ah, I haven't seen him in years. How is the old goat?"

Clark smiled. He already liked the man, gruff demeanor and all. "He's great, last I talked to him. It's been a few years since I last got the chance to sit down with him, face to face."

The editor smiled. "He's a good man. Cheats like a son of a gun at poker, but he's a good man."

"Can't say I've had the privilege of playing cards with him," Clark said, the same smile crossing his lips.

"Well, come on. Let's see what you've got," the man encouraged Clark.

Clark opened his old, but neatly kept, briefcase. He reached in and grabbed a copy of his resume and handed it over before taking out a stack of news articles he'd written. Mr. White pored over the resume, humming to himself now and again.

"Quite the ah...assortment of papers," he noted.

Clark nodded. He'd known that his spotty work record could be a problem. "I moved around quite a bit," he confessed. "Most of those positions were as a freelancer. It was great, and I loved the experience, but I kept hoping and looking for something more permanent."

"And if I were to hire you? How could I be assured that you'd stick around?" Mr. White asked skeptically.

"I know it doesn't look great," Clark confessed. "But I can promise that, if I were to work for this paper, I would never want to leave it. It's been my dream since childhood to work for a major newspaper such as this. The Daily Planet is one of the most respected papers in the world. What more could anyone ask for?"

The editor cracked another smile. Apparently, Clark's answer had pleased him.

"Let me see those articles," he said after a moment, and Clark dutifully handed them over. But as the man rifled through them, his face fell further and further. "These articles..." he started.

Clark nodded. "I know they're mostly puff pieces," he began as Mr. White paused.

"Mostly? There's not a single hard hitting story here, son."

"I know I lack some experience..."

"Some? Look here, Kent, work like this...I just don't have a use for it. No offense, that is."

"Mr. White, if you just give me a chance, I can and *will* prove to you that I can hold my own with your top reporter."

"Perry!" interrupted an extremely agitated voice.

"Lois, honey, I'm in the middle of something here," the editor said as a woman came bursting into the room. To Clark, he muttered, "Speak of the devil, there's my top reporter now."

Clark automatically stood as the newcomer came barreling in. It was just who he was, thanks to the way his parents had raised him. He turned to see who had interrupted his job interview, which, admittedly, wasn't going well and found himself face to face with the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He tried not to stare but found it hard to pull his gaze from her. For her part, she seemed oblivious to the fact that he was standing there.

"A beauty pageant?" she complained. "A *beauty pageant*?" she repeated, more forcefully this time, and beginning to pace. "Have I done something wrong, Chief? Perhaps you hated the way I busted open that story on the car theft ring? Or maybe you were offended by the Kerth I won for my coverage of the Presidential campaign. Oh, no, I got it. It was the series of articles I wrote on those headless corpses last year when that serial killer was loose.

Because there can be no other reasons that I can think of why you're assigning such...such...*trash* to me."

"Lydia's out this week," Mr. White said by way of explanation. "I need someone to cover it."

"Find somebody else," she said, crossing her arms over her chest but finally coming to a halt. "Because I'm not doing it."

"You will, and you'll do it well."

"Perry, you *know* how I feel about the disgusting meat market mentality of these things. Turning women into nothing but sex objects. I won't cover it, Chief. There has to be someone else who can cover it. I'll do anything else, but not this one."

Mr. White let loose a long sigh, exhaling noisily through his nose. "Lois," he began in a warning tone.

Lois, in turn, gave him what looked to Clark to be a triumphant look, like she already knew that she'd won the battle. Clark rocked back on his heels, uncomfortable as the two stared each other down. With a start, the editor seemed to remember that Clark was still in the room.

"We'll discuss this later," he said at last. "I'm in the middle of something here." He gestured to Clark.

"Oh, sorry. I'll just wait over here," she said, backing up a step to lean against the wall. "So you don't forget."

Mr. White sighed again. "Clark Kent...Lois Lane," he said as an introduction.

"Lois...Lane?" Clark asked, his eyes going wide.

This was simply too good to be true. He'd been following Lois Lane's stories for a long time. She was, by far, one of the most talented writers he'd seen in any of the numerous papers he'd read. He'd never imagined that she could be so beautiful as well as so talented. Now, more than ever, Clark was desperate to secure a position at the paper.

"I...uh..." he stammered for a moment. "I'm honored to meet you." He stuck out his hand in greeting.

"Oh, well...thanks," she said, a bit awkwardly. But she shook his hand nonetheless, almost causing Clark to literally float right there.

"Anyway, son, I'm sorry," the editor said, turning his gaze back to Clark. "I just can't use you right now."

"Please," Clark said, aware that his voice had taken on a pleading tone. "I'll do anything you ask. I'll...I'll..." he scrambled for something — anything — that could help him make his case. "Work for a month...for free," he blurted out before he was even aware of what he was saying.

"I'm sorry," Mr. White repeated.

"Two months," Clark said, readily upping the ante. "I'll work for two months, completely free. If I haven't proven myself at the end of that time, I'll leave. Just please...give me a chance. I mean, what harm can come from that? It's a win-win."

"I don't know..." Mr. White hesitated.

"Please. I know what my resume must look like to you. But every reporter has to start somewhere, right? We don't all start out covering the hardest hitting stories. I just need a chance. I'll prove to you that I'm better than this," he said, gesturing to the stack of worthless articles.

"Well..." Mr. White said, now sounding like he was possibly considering Clark's proposal.

"I'll even take the pageant," he offered, "if you have no one else to cover it."

"Typical," Lois muttered under her breath.

Clark gave her a smile. "Hey, I'm with you on this. I might be male, but I see these kinds of things the way you do. The same goes for the Mr. Universe type of competitions. But if taking a puff piece like the pageant can help me prove myself, I'll do it."

"You've got yourself a deal, Kent," Mr. White said. "I'll let you intern for two months. But if you don't show me that you're up to the Planet's standards, you'll be out of here faster than you can say 'great shades of Elvis,' got it?"

"Got it," Clark said with a smile, shaking the editor's hand. "Trust me, you won't regret this decision."

"I better not. Now, then, the pageant is tomorrow at the Metropolis Arena, ten sharp, got it? Oh and Lois?"

"Yes, Chief?"

"You still working on that drug bust story?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I was just about to start it when I got your little note on my desk."

"Take Kent with you."

"What?" she sputtered.

"You said you'd do anything if I reassigned the beauty pageant story. I reassigned it. Now you get to take Kent here under your wing and teach him the ropes. Got it?"

"You can't be serious!" she argued.

"I am," the older man said, his face betraying no amusement. "You're the best reporter I've got. And he should learn from the best."

"But Perry!"

"No 'but Perry' this time, Lois."

"Chief! The First Mercantile Bank is being robbed. It's a hostage situation," came a new voice as a young man stuck his head in through the doorway.

"I'm on it," Lois said before the boss could answer. Then, yelling after the young man, "Jimmy! Get your camera. You're coming with me."

"With us," Clark corrected her as she dashed through the door. Before he could follow though, he turned and shook the editor's hand. "Thank you, again, for the opportunity. I won't let you down, I swear it." Then he was jogging out of the office and into the bullpen, hot on Lois' heels.

When they reached the elevator, the door was opening, letting out just one person. Lois, Clark, and Jimmy got into the car and Lois pressed the ground floor button. Lois turned her gaze on Clark and her face clouded with anger.

"Let's get something straight, Kemp."

"Kent," he gently corrected her. "Clark Kent."

"Whatever. I'm in charge. I'm the star reporter here. You're just here through Perry's good graces. You will defer to me, got it?"

"Got it," Clark said. "You're the one on top."

Lois rolled her eyes.

"Well, I, for one, am glad to have you with us," the photographer said. "Nice to meet you. I'm Jimmy Olsen. Mind if I call you CK?"

Clark smiled and shook Jimmy's hand. "Be my guest."

"Cool," Jimmy said with a smile as he loaded a fresh roll of film into his camera.

The bank wasn't too far from the paper. Lois, Clark, and Jimmy were able half walk, half run there. They had to jockey for a position, as a wide area around the bank had been cordoned off by the police already. Still, they managed to maneuver themselves into a space where they could just see inside the building. Clark could see the robber holding a gun to a pregnant woman's head. The woman looked to be near hysterics, but doing an admirable job of holding it at bay. Still, Clark could see the way she shook and the unshed tears in her eyes as he telescoped his vision in.

It made his heart ache to see anyone in that kind of situation, but seeing that the hostage was a heavily pregnant woman was almost more than he could bear. He had to do something. There was simply no way he could just stand back and watch whatever events were about to unfold. Not while two lives hung in the balance — the woman and her unborn child.

A police officer was trying to talk the man down, attempting to keep the woman safe, but the robber wasn't being swayed. He sent a couple of bullets out through the plate glass windows. Shards of glass went flying and people screamed. One of the bullets hit one of the other officers, striking him in the center of his Kevlar vest.

The force of the impact staggered the man, but Clark was relieved to see that he was unhurt.

Still, the broken windows were exactly the opportunity Clark had been looking for. He subtly inched his glasses down and focused his vision on the gun in the man's hand, which was sliding back to its former position at the woman's temple. Using some of his heat vision, he began to make the gun hot. He very carefully controlled how much heat he applied, making the weapon heat up enough to make the man drop it, but not so hot that it scalded his skin. With a yelp of pain, the robber dropped the gun. The police sprang into action and made the arrest while the woman that had been held hostage was checked over by the waiting paramedics.

Clark smiled to himself as he pushed his glasses back up. Ever since that first rescue, when he'd saved that drowned boy in the quarry lake years before, he'd known that he needed to find ways to help people. It felt so good, so right, so natural to use his powers to save people when he could. The problem was how to do it without exposing the fact that he had powers and that he wasn't exactly human.

"Incredible," Lois breathed as the robber tossed aside his weapon. "I wonder what made him do that?"

"What?" Clark asked, feigning ignorance.

"Drop the gun like that."

"Maybe he couldn't take the heat anymore," Clark offered.

"The heat?" Lois gave him a sideways look.

"You know... 'the heat was on' him from the police," he scrambled, covering his earlier slip in word choice.

"Oh," was all she said. Then, "Stay here. I'm going to see if I can grab an interview or two."

"No way," Clark said firmly. "I'm going with you."

"I'm warning you, rookie. Stay out of my way," she said, and there was no missing the anger in her voice.

Before he could retort, she stormed off as best she could, half slipping through the crowd and half forcing a path to open up. Clark took his time, apologizing as he jostled his way out of the crowd. Already, Lois was talking to one of the police officers on the scene, her pen practically flying as she jotted down notes and quotes for the story. Clark hesitated a moment, then made the split-second decision to see if the woman who'd been held hostage would talk to him, now that the paramedics had checked her over.

To his surprise, she agreed to speak with him once he introduced himself. As tactfully as he could, Clark interviewed her, producing a notepad and pen from the breast pocket of his suit jacket. He didn't really need to take notes — his mind was almost flawless — but it looked natural and helped him blend in like a normal person. When he was done, he thanked the woman and rejoined Lois, who'd just finished with the police officer she'd been grilling for details.

"I wonder if the hostage will talk to me," Lois wondered aloud, though Clark could tell she was mostly talking to herself.

"Already done," he said proudly, holding his notepad up for Lois to view.

He face darkened. "You... *what*? I specifically told you to wait, Kent. *I'm* the one in charge, remember?"

"I know," he said diplomatically. "But I figured we could cover more ground if I pitched in. Not to mention that I have my career on the line. I *need* to prove myself to Mr. White. Besides," he said, gesturing, "she's already leaving."

Lois huffed but said nothing.

"Take a look at my notes, if you'd like," he offered.

For a moment, Lois didn't move and didn't say a word. Then, wordlessly, she took the proffered notes and perused them. After a moment, she nodded.

"There might be something we can use in that," she admitted gruffly, handing back the notepad. "Come on. If we hurry, the article can make it into the evening edition."

She walked away without another word. Clark smiled to

himself. Since the moment he'd met Lois that morning, he'd promised himself that he would do whatever it would take to win Lois over, not only as a friend, but possibly as a girlfriend as well. It was odd, he thought. He'd never believed in the concept of "love at first sight" before. But as soon as he'd laid eyes on Lois, he'd become a believer.

Within the hour, they had the first draft of their story written. At least, Clark thought of it as their story. Lois, on the other hand, thought of it as solely *her* story. But, after some gentle prodding from Clark — and the interview notes he'd taken — she allowed him some input on the story. She even — begrudgingly — added his name to the byline, after he'd given enough suggestions and provided enough choice quotes from the woman who'd been held hostage. On his own, he quickly typed out a sidebar article, including all of the details from the interview he'd conducted on his own that he and Lois hadn't been able to include in the main article.

"Great stuff, kids," Perry praised them as he strolled past their desks on his way back from the vending machine. He bit into the candy bar he'd bought.

"Thanks, Chief," Lois said.

"Nice work on that sidebar piece, Kent."

Clark smiled. "Thank you, sir."

Mr. White waved the air before him, as if to dismiss Clark's words. "None of that Mr. White or sir stuff. Perry or Chief, if you don't mind."

"Okay... Chief," Clark said.

Perry smiled. "Good man. Now then, you keep on giving me articles like that, and you might just find that you have a future here after all."

"Count on it, Chief," Clark said, his heart swelling with hope and pride.

"Now then, that said, there's no time for resting on our laurels. Back to work."

Perry's voice was gruff, but there was no mistaking the affection in his voice, in particular, toward Lois. Clark could tell, even only having known the two for a few short hours, that there was a strong bond between them. It was clear that Lois looked up to the editor, and his pride in her was unmistakable. It made Clark absurdly happy to see that.

He cares, he thought to himself. He genuinely cares about his employees. He respects them as much as they respect him. This is what was missing at all of those other papers — what I knew was lacking but couldn't put my finger on. It's no wonder why he's able to maintain such high standards for his paper. I already love it here. Everything I've been missing in my life is here. Especially Lois. She's smart as well as beautiful, feisty and fierce. She's everything I've been looking for in a woman. It sounds crazy — I mean, I barely even know her. But... I'm certain that I want to know her better... and that I want her to get to know me too. But how to start? She doesn't trust me. She barely tolerates me. But... whatever it takes, I'll find a way to change the way she looks at me.

"Lunch?" Clark offered a little while later, as the clock inched past the noon mark.

Lois hesitated and Clark could see that she was unsure if she wanted to spend any additional time with the lowly intern she'd been saddled with. But after a second, she nodded and poured the rest of her cold coffee on the half-dead aloe plant on her desk.

"There's a pizza place a few blocks over," she said.

"Sounds great," he said, genuinely meaning it.

Though he had to be careful with his money, now that he had committed himself to two months of unpaid work with no guarantee of a job afterward, the idea of a hot, gooey slice of pizza sounded heavenly. Even better, he'd be getting to spend some time with Lois. And that, alone, would be worth every penny.

"I'm buying," he continued, almost before he realized he was

speaking.

Lois arched an eyebrow. "You? Mr. Unpaid Intern?"

He wanted to make a retort, but found himself drawing a blank. "Please?" he simply asked instead.

"Fine," Lois said, as though she were doing him a favor.

"Great," Clark said. "Lead on."

It didn't take long before they were at the tiny, nearly hole-in-the-wall pizza shop. They squeezed into the last two seats at the counter and bit into their slices as soon as they were served to them. Clark took a minute to really savor the flavor before swallowing. It really *was* very good.

"Lois?" he ventured after several minutes of silence had lapsed.

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," she said before taking a sip of her cream soda.

"Did I do the right thing today? Offering to work for free? I mean, you know Perry far better than I do."

For the first time, Lois gave him a half smile. "It was gutsy, I'll give you that. I've never seen anyone do that before. But... yeah, I think you did the right thing, if you want to work for the paper. Perry... he's... how can I put this? He's one of those guys who isn't easily impressed. He admires when people take initiative and refuse to back down from getting what they want. Unless you went out and tracked down a story for him, there was probably nothing better that you could have said or done to change his mind than what you did today. With Perry, boldness is one of the best assets a person can have."

Clark breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm glad to hear that."

"Let me ask you something."

"Sure. It's only fair."

"Why? Why give up two months without pay for no guarantee of getting the job?"

"Because," Clark said, shrugging, "this is my dream. And I'm willing to do whatever it takes to attain that dream. Besides, I didn't really plan on making that offer," he admitted. "It sort of just came out in the heat of the moment." He rubbed his neck as he felt a flush creep up it. "It's probably a good thing he agreed to two months and didn't let me offer up a year or something."

Lois nodded as though she understood where he was coming from and checked her watch. "Come on. We've got a few interviews to do before the end of the day." She sounded annoyed.

"Look, Lois, I'm sorry. I hope you understand that. I'm not looking to take credit for all the stories that you've already begun investigating. You can keep my name off the articles if you want, just do me a favor and at least make sure that Perry knows I contributed. I know you don't owe me anything, but I swear, I'll do my best to earn at least that."

For the first time, Lois smiled. "You know something? You surprise me."

Clark felt his optimism perk up a bit. "How?"

"Most guys I've worked with — even some women — haven't exactly been shy of using me to get what they want. They haven't shied away from claiming undue credit, if not completely stealing the credit, for what they haven't earned."

"What?" Clark asked, his restored happiness instantly replaced by concern and a sense of heartache for Lois. "Are you serious?"

She nodded and sighed. "There have been times... as much as I've tried to prevent it... where my partner at the time has stolen my work. The last time, the guy even won an award with the story *I'd* written. He didn't even have the decency to thank me in his speech. At least Perry fired him."

"I'm so sorry," Clark said, his heart hurting for her. "But, I swear, I'm *not* that kind of guy. I work hard and earn whatever credit I take. But, at least I understand now why you hate having a partner... even one who's an unpaid intern."

"I appreciate that," was all she seemed able to say as she stood

and threw out the paper plate, used napkins, and empty soda bottle she'd used.

By the end of the day, a contented tiredness had settled over Clark. He and Lois nailed down five interviews and managed to finish up two of the stories they were working on. A third had been started, but put aside in favor of making Perry's edits to the ones they had completed and submitted to him. Clark stretched at his computer desk and switched off the power button. It was time to call it quits for the day. He stood, stretched again, and walked across the way to Lois' desk.

"Goodnight, Lois," he said as she powered her computer down.

"Goodnight, Clark. We've got a lot of ground to cover tomorrow. I'll pick you up at nine, okay? Where are you staying?"

Clark shook his head. "I can't. I've got the beauty pageant at ten, remember? And I'm staying at the Hotel Apollo."

Lois' face scrunched up in revulsion. "Oh, gross!"

"What?"

"The Hotel Apollo. Philomena just did an expose on that place. Mold in the walls, several bedbug infestations in the last three years, asbestos in the pipes. My advice? Find a new place before it lands you in the hospital."

Clark shuddered. Sure, he didn't have to worry about those things affecting him, but the very thought of the things Lois had mentioned gave him the creeps. He knew the place was shabby and in desperate need of repair when he checked in the night before, but the price had been right and he'd been to five other hotels before finding one with a vacancy. He'd been too preoccupied with thoughts of his interview at the Planet to give the place a once-over with his enhanced senses.

"Thanks for the head's up. I'm looking for a more permanent place. You don't happen to know of anything, do you?"

"Not off hand. Ask John tomorrow. He's our classified guy."

"Great, thanks. Well, I'll see you tomorrow after the pageant."

"Right. Enjoy the meat market," she said disdainfully.

Clark shook his head as he turned and headed for the elevators. As much as he hated that he was, once again, covering a puff piece instead of hard news, he vowed to knock the article out of the park. And, as things stood, he wasn't even bent on changing Perry's mind about his writing abilities.

More than anything, he wanted to impress Lois.

At six o'clock at night, sharp, Clark finally stepped foot in the bullpen of the Daily Planet. As he exited the elevator, he felt like he could finally breathe. It was a complete relief to be in the newsroom. Chaos still reigned there, as people rushed around the room, spoke into phones, and typed at furious paces. In a few short hours, Clark knew from his experience the day before, the place would be more subdued as the night shift took over and the day shift slowly made their way home.

Deep in thought as he began to mentally draft his story, he made his way through the bullpen to his desk. He sat heavily and leaned back in his computer chair. For a minute, he closed his eyes as he ordered his thoughts. He was so focused on the task at hand that he never heard the click of Lois' heels on the tile floor as she approached him.

"How was the pageant?" she asked.

Clark's eyes sprang open. "Brutal."

"Nice try. I'm not buying it. It's every man's dream to cover that."

He shook his head. "Not mine. I'm more interested in the *real* news, Lois, the same as you. I was only there in the interest of securing my job."

"For someone who claims to not be interested in that sort of thing, you sure are getting in late," she said, baiting him. "Those things are usually over by the early afternoon."

"For someone who claims to not to be interested in that sort of

thing, you sure do seem to know a lot about it," he countered with a lopsided grin, baiting her right back.

"You aren't the first partner I've been paired with who has been sent to cover the event," she replied with a smug smile. "None of them has ever gotten back so late."

Clark couldn't help but to smile, even as he shook his head. "That may be the case, but they had a ton of technical difficulties. The speakers died in the beginning, the spotlight blew halfway through, hair and makeup artists fell behind...it was a mess."

"Really?"

"Really," Clark sighed. "The mishaps put everyone on edge. Security got amped up. It took forever to nail down an interview with the winners. Perry is going to be mad that it took so long. I can feel it."

"Kent! Where in blue blazes is that article?"

"Speaking of," Lois muttered.

"Coming, Chief," Clark replied. "I just got in. There were... multiple issues. You'll understand when you read my article."

"You've got an hour before I need to get out of here to have dinner with my wife," the gruff older man replied as he came to a stop beside Clark's desk.

"Anniversary, right?" Lois asked.

Perry nodded. "Thirty-seven years."

"Congratulations," Lois and Clark both replied, their voices nearly one.

"Thank you." He gestured for Lois and Clark to resume working.

Clark nodded and switched his computer on. Lois wandered back to her desk. Clark fidgeted with a pencil while he waited for the computer to boot up. He knew he should be feeling lucky. Any red-blooded, straight male should have been thrilled to have spent the afternoon ogling the seemingly endless stream of gorgeous women which had graced the stage at the pageant. But all throughout the event, Clark had found that his mind kept straying back to Lois. He'd wondered what she was up to. What stories she might be writing. Had she finally cornered that City Hall official who kept avoiding her attempts to interview him?

But mostly, he found himself comparing the women on stage to Lois, only to find that they couldn't hold a candle to her. Piercing blue eyes looked dull compared to the chocolate in Lois' eyes. Carefully applied layers of makeup looked cakey and heavy compared to Lois' more minimalist approach. High pitched, deliberately cutesy voices were as nails on a chalk board, compared to the natural and real tones Lois used.

Being at the pageant had hammered home one point to Clark. He finally knew what it was to be in love.

"Morning, Lois," Clark said cheerfully, a full week of work now securely under his belt. Lois didn't answer as she tapped away at her computer. "Morning, Clark," he answered himself, when she remained mute.

"Mmm," was the only reply he got out of her.

"Must be something interesting on that screen," he said.

"Mmm."

"Care to share with your partner?"

"Hmm?"

"Oh look! A Double Fudge Crunch Bar!" he said.

Instantly, Lois' head snapped up. "What?"

Clark chuckled. "What's so interesting that you're ignoring your partner?"

"We are *not* partners," she said in a huff. For the last week, she'd been saying the same thing.

"Perry seems to think we are," he said in reply, a smile on his face. "And you know what? I'm inclined to go with his line of thinking."

"No. I don't do the whole partner thing anymore," Lois said. "I've already explained this to you. There is you. There is me.

There is no us. I'm simply...mentoring you until you either earn your job here or Perry decides to send you on your way."

"Keep telling yourself that," Clark said pleasantly.

But deep down, Lois' rebuffs hurt. He knew she wasn't purposefully trying to hurt him. At least, not in the way it hurt. He knew that her refusal to accept him, willingly, as a partner, or even an equal coworker, was more of a defensive tactic than anything else. It wasn't — he *hoped* — born out of a dislike of him personally. Still, he'd thought that over the past week he would have proven himself to her — not only as a serious and competent journalist, but as a genuinely nice guy who wanted to befriend her.

Lois merely rolled her eyes at him.

"So, what do we have going on today?" Clark asked, allowing her to take the lead.

She hesitated a moment before answering. "Horseback riding."

That took Clark off guard. But, never one to miss an opportunity to trade some friendly banter, he quickly replied, "Why, Lois! Are you asking me out on a date?"

She rolled her eyes again, but there was a hint of a smile there. Perhaps his efforts to befriend her weren't being wasted. "You wish, Idaho."

"Kansas," he reflexively corrected, though gently.

"Whatever," she threw back, a little more harshly than he'd anticipated. "I got a lead that there may be some animal abuse going on at the Golden Horseshoe stables. You in?"

Clark nodded. "Absolutely. But...I thought there was no us," he teased.

"There isn't. I just figure that your farm roots might come in handy. Unless, that is, you didn't have animals?"

"It just so happens that I did. When I was a kid, I had my own horse, Bolt. My dad thought it would be a good idea to expand the farm to include some animals. For a while, it was great. Then he threw his back out a couple of years later. We had to sell the animals just to make ends meet and keep food on the table. They were just too expensive to keep."

"You had to give up your horse?" Lois asked, sounding surprised.

Clark shrugged. "It wasn't a big deal."

"That's got to be hard on a kid, giving up a pet."

"I loved that horse," Clark admitted, lowering his voice just a little. It felt a little strange to be opening up to Lois like this, but at the same moment, it felt right. "But I loved my family more. It wasn't so difficult to say goodbye to Bolt knowing why I had to do it."

"So...can I count on you to keep your eyes peeled for anything that looks suspicious? The most experience I have with animals is with fish and my late grandmother's hamster, back in the day."

Clark chuckled, then turned serious. "You can trust me with everything and anything."

"Good. Let's go."

The trip to the Golden Horseshoe stables turned out worse than Clark had wanted it to be. He'd hoped that the suspected abuse would turn out to be nothing more than someone seeing villains where none were to be had. Instead, he'd found dirty stalls with rotting straw, oats that were beginning to grow mold, and evidence of rat droppings. A few of the horses looked underweight to his eye as well. More than one looked on the verge of death. All of it made his heart quietly break as he and Lois discreetly took stock of everything, as they posed as a couple looking to buy one of the available horses, Firebrand. Lois took photos with a disposable camera when she could, but Clark was disappointed with how many she was able to take. He distracted the stable owner, Big Hank, as much as possible, trying to give Lois an opportunity to snoop around as much as she could, while

attempting to catch the man in a confession about the environment the horses were being kept in.

All in all, Clark left the stables with a heavy heart.

"Hey," Lois prodded, as she drove her Jeep back to the Planet. "Are you okay? You haven't said two words in the last hour."

Clark shook his head. "That was...one of the most disgusting and unhealthy environments I've seen animals kept in," he finally said. "I'm glad we called the ASPCA on them, but I can't help but to hurt for those horses, having to continue to live in that filth until they can get out there and evaluate the situation."

"We did the best we could," Lois said, her voice soft as well.

Clark looked over and could see lines of pain written in her features. What they'd seen had affected her deeply as well, it appeared. No, it was more than just hurt over the poor conditions the animals had been subjected to. There was something else there, Clark could see at his second glance.

"What is it?" he asked in near whisper. "What's wrong?"

For several minutes, Lois didn't answer, and kept her eyes studiously trained on the road before them. Then, finally, "I can't believe the conditions there." She sighed. "Every year, when I was a kid, my Girl Scout troop would go to those same stables and spend the day riding the horses and having a picnic out in one of the clearings along the nature trail. Seeing it in such disrepair now...it's like seeing part of my own childhood crumbling at the seams. It used to be such a clean, wonderful place. And now..." she sighed and didn't finish her sentence.

"I'm sorry, Lois," Clark said, resisting the urge to reach out and touch her shoulder in a comforting manner.

"Well, at least we can help those horses get some justice," Lois said, brushing off Clark's tender tone. "That's a start."

"And we will," Clark vowed.

Ring!

Clark groaned as the phone rang and shattered his otherwise peaceful sleep.

Ring! Ring! Ring!

The phone seemed to become almost more insistent as Clark attempted to block out the noise and return to dreamland. When that failed, he groggily opened his eyes. It was still dark in his shabby hotel room. The red digits on the bedside clock told him that the sun would soon be peeking over the horizon. He picked up the phone, cutting it off in mid-ring.

"Hello?" he croaked out, his voice thick with sleep and his tongue dry from lying for some time with his mouth open.

"Clark?"

"Lois?" Instantly, he snapped to attention. "What's wrong?"

"Oh...nothing," she said, her voice fumbling a bit. "Just thought you might like to know that the Golden Horseshoe has been permanently shut down, the owners are facing jail time, and the horses are all in the ASPCA's hands." Clark could not miss the triumph in her tone.

"What? When? That's fantastic!" Clark said, allowing himself to match her level of excitement.

"Two hours ago. I just got a call about it myself from Officer McGuire."

"Congratulations," Clark said, wishing he could be with her, to see the smile on her face and possibly manage to share a victorious hug with her.

"You too," Lois said, still sounding like she was riding the high that came from seeing justice served. "I mean, you *did* help with the investigation."

"Thanks, Lois," Clark replied, a little surprised at how easily she was sharing the credit with him.

"I'll be by to pick you up so we can get the story written. Twenty minutes okay with you?"

"Yeah, sure," Clark said, nodding though she couldn't see it.

"Okay. See you then." Without another word, she hung up.

Clark pulled the phone from his ear and looked at it for a moment, smiling, before he hung it up again. Over the past couple of days, he'd felt like he was making some progress in cracking Lois' tough outer shell. He wouldn't say that she considered him a friend, but at least she seemed to be becoming more accepting of the fact that they were partners.

Standing, Clark stretched, then stripped out of the clothes he'd been sleeping in. He took a quick shower, and was half dressed when he heard the first knock on his door. He finished buckling his belt and answered it. Lois was behind the door, and Clark thought he saw her eyes widen a bit as he came into her view.

"Hi," he said. "Come on in."

"Hi, yourself," she replied, but she did enter the room. "I said twenty minutes. I thought you'd be nak...ready," she corrected herself.

"Sorry. I had to take a shower. Let me just grab a shirt."

He turned, but he could still feel her eyes on his back as he pulled on his shirt, buttoned it, and tucked it into his pants. With deft hands, he pulled a tie out of the closet and put it on, tying it as he turned back to Lois.

"I can't believe you're still living in this dump." She was trying to make small talk, he knew.

The Palace was certainly cleaner than the Hotel Apollo had been, but it was still shabby with furniture so worn that a person could easily feel the springs threatening to poke through.

Clark shrugged, allowing her change the subject from her near slip up. "I'm still looking for a place. Actually, I'm seeing one this afternoon around lunchtime."

Lois eyed him for a moment, taking in his now fully clothed appearance. "Where?"

"Some place on Clinton. I have the address at the office."

"Clinton?" she asked. "344 Clinton?"

Clark nodded. "That sounds about right."

"That's been on the market for months. My sister looked at it two months ago when she was thinking about moving here. She said it was a total dump, like a bomb had gone off inside the apartment."

"Maybe the landlord has made some repairs?" Clark tried.

"Doubtful," she said scornfully.

"Well, it can't hurt to look at it," Clark said as he locked the hotel room door behind them as they left. "Besides, I grew up on a farm. My parents and I were always fixing things, so I've learned to be at least a little handy. It might not be so bad. Did you happen to see the apartment, when your sister looked at it?"

"No," she admitted after a moment. Then, changing the subject, "I could go for a breakfast burrito."

"Sounds like a good idea," Clark said, once more deferring to her lead in the conversation. "Marty's?"

Lois nodded. "I love Marty's," she said, referring to the small deli a couple of blocks from the Daily Planet. She and Clark had ordered sandwiches from the place a few times already.

"Okay then," Clark said, giving her a grin. "Come on, I'm buying."

"You're always buying," Lois observed. Was it Clark's imagination, or did she sound a little concerned about that? "I mean, with you being unpaid right now..." She let her voice trail off.

Clark shrugged. "It's not that big of a deal, Lois. A couple of breakfast burritos here, a few coffees there aren't going to make or break me. Besides, I don't plan on working for free for much longer." He gave her his biggest smile.

The two reached the crosswalk and waited for the light to change. Clark rocked on the balls of his feet. As always, he could scarcely believe his good luck. He was in one of the biggest, busiest cities in America. He was employed, for the moment, with one of the most prestigious papers in the world. He was partnered with one of the most talented journalists he'd ever had the pleasure

of reading. And, although he had to hide it, he was in love with that same woman, the person he worked with, day in and day out. "Yeah, but now you're looking at apartments," Lois argued.

"It's fine, Lois. Trust me."

Truth be told, he *was* in need of a paycheck. As it was, the hotel charges and footing the bill for his and Lois' meals *was* putting a drain on his meager savings account. He'd taken to not eating at all unless he was with Lois or could fly back to Kansas to have a meal with his folks. It didn't bother him. He didn't specifically need to eat, though he liked to. The only reason why he was even bothering with the hotel and not flying back to his parents' farmhouse at night to sleep was because he needed to establish himself in the city. He needed an address, even one as feeble as a hotel room, to keep away unwanted questions. Plus, there were times when Lois had offered to pick him up on the way to work.

He wasn't going broke by any means, but he *did* want to be able to maintain a comfortable living.

The light finally changed and they began to cross. They were in the middle of the street when Clark's sensitive hearing picked up something.

Help! Somebody! Anybody! Watch out! The brakes are gone! I can't stop!

Clark's head jerked to the right. A truck was weaving in and out of traffic. He could just see glimpses of *Benny's Fish Market* on the side of the vehicle. Frantically, the driver was blaring his horn, trying his best to alert people to his situation. With his enhanced hearing, Clark could hear the man pumping his brakes, but to no avail. Then, mercifully, he heard the engine click off as the man turned the key, but he was coming too fast and the thought had come to him to cut the truck's power too late. Anyone caught in the truck's path was in serious trouble.

"Lois!" Clark cried, giving her a shove forward in an effort to get her out of the way in time. He only hoped that he wasn't going to be too late to protect her.

"Hey! Watch it, Farmboy!" Lois said in an irritated manner as Clark pushed her out of harm's way, her body jerking forward.

Clark braced himself for impact as he turned toward the oncoming vehicle. The truck struck him full in the chest as he brought his hands up, as if to ward off the blow. He dug in his heels as the truck pushed him backwards, but between his strength and the natural loss of power from the now silent engine, the delivery truck slowed and stopped. Before he could fully stop the vehicle, Clark allowed himself to fly backwards onto the pavement.

Shocked gasps and screams surrounded him throughout the ordeal. Chief among them, he heard Lois calling his name in horror. He let his head hit the asphalt in an attempt to look like a normal man and he heard the back of his jacket shredding as he dragged along the ground for a foot or two. When he came to a stop, he just lay there as if in a daze.

"Clark?" Lois cried out, rushing to his side. She immediately dropped to her knees and checked him for signs of injury. "Clark? Can you hear me?"

Clark groaned and rolled his head from side to side, as if starting to come to. He let his eyes flutter open. Lois' concerned face immediately filled his entire field of vision. She smiled tenderly at him when she realized he was awake.

"Clark? Are you hurt?" she asked.

"I think...I think I'm okay," he said, pushing himself up to sit.

"Don't move. Let me call an ambulance," she said, trying to get him to lay still.

Clark reveled at the feel of her warm hand on his chest. But he didn't allow her to stop him from getting up. He stood and brushed off his clothing, taking stock of the rips and tears in his suit. His jacket was a complete loss. Not even his mother's impressive sewing skills could salvage the mess that it was. The back looked

like a tiger had mauled it and the elbows had simply ceased to exist. He groaned. It wasn't an overly expensive suit by any stretch, but he had liked it.

"I'm okay," he repeated, still assessing the damage to his clothing. "My suit, however, has seen better days."

The driver of the truck, apparently still in shock but starting to come around, hopped out of his vehicle. He didn't bother to close the door behind him. It remained open, the rusty hinges squeaking as they moved. The driver himself was a tall, thin black man, dressed in neatly pressed jeans and a matching shirt. He shook his head, as if in disbelief of what had happened, then made his way to Clark.

"Hey, are you okay, man?" He sounded really worried to Clark's ears.

"I'm fine," Clark said in a friendly tone.

"I'm so sorry. The brakes went out. I couldn't stop. I tried."

"I'm sure you did," Clark replied, clasping the man's shoulder in a gesture of comfort and acceptance. "Are *you* okay?"

The man looked shocked. "*Me*? I'm fine. My heart's racing and my mind's a mess, but I'm not hurt, I mean."

Clark smiled and chuckled a little. "I can imagine."

"You going to call the cops?" the man wanted to know, sounding scared.

Clark opened his mouth to speak, but, before he could say a word, sirens filled the air. Moments later, several police cars arrived on the scene, lights flashing and sirens blaring. Clark sighed. He wanted nothing more than to vanish into the crowd, especially as an ambulance pulled up. The paramedics would want to examine him. Would they be suspicious of him when they found not a scratch on him? Before he could attempt to merge with the crowd, however, one of the paramedics took him gently by the arm and led him off to the truck to be looked over.

With a sigh, Clark submitted himself to their check, trying his best not to become too impatient or annoyed with them. After all, they were just trying to do their jobs. He couldn't fault them for wanting to do it well, or for being concerned for someone who'd been hit by a truck. He did try to politely brush off their concerns, to no avail, until they were completely satisfied that he wasn't in immediate danger of dying on the spot.

Then it was time for the police to take his statement. Before they could speak to him though, he managed to get a private word in with Lois.

"Lois?" he asked, as he led her off to one side.

"Clark...I can't believe..." she looked more in shock than the driver of the truck had been.

"I know," he said, gently cutting her off. "Listen, there isn't much you can do here. I have to give my statement...it might be a while, depending on how things go. Why don't you go on ahead? I can meet you at the Planet. Besides, I'm going to have to go back to the hotel and change." He gestured helplessly at his clothing. Then he pulled out his wallet and gave Lois a twenty dollar bill. "Here. I promised you breakfast. I don't want to make you wait."

"No, Clark."

"Don't worry about it. Just get me a number eleven combo, okay?"

"I'll get you your breakfast," Lois said with a smug smile.

"But you aren't going to be the one buying. In fact, you aren't buying lunch or dinner either today."

"Lo-is," he began to argue.

Lois pressed the crisp twenty dollar bill back into his palm.

"No arguments. I refuse to let you pay. Go. Do what you need to do. I'll let Perry know that you'll be running a little late."

Clark opened his mouth to argue, but Lois was already moving away. And one of the officers was already approaching him, pad and pen already out and ready for Clark's version of the story. Clark recognized Julius Corzone from one of his previous investigations with Lois, not three days past. He gave the man a

friendly smile before they got down to business.

Not much later, Clark finally was able to duck back to his hotel room and change. He wound up completely swapping his wardrobe, none of his clean jackets matching his pants, shirt, or tie. To be fair, he changed at super speed, not wanting Lois to have to wait too long for him. Still, he couldn't join up with her at work too quickly, lest she ask questions he didn't want to answer. Luckily, his hotel wasn't too far from work, and he was able to walk the distance, at a normal, human speed, in just under thirty minutes.

"A gift for the writing gods," Clark said, walking up behind Lois and plopping a small notepad on her desk.

Lois jumped a little. Apparently, she'd been completely unaware of his presence. That made Clark feel a little guilty. He hadn't meant to scare her. He'd merely walked behind her desk to avoid the mail cart which had been parked right in the middle of the aisle between his desk and Lois'.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you it's not polite to sneak up on people?" Lois said as she brushed off her surprise at Clark's appearance. Then, seeing the notepad, "What's this?"

"Story notes. For you," he said, clarifying.

"Story notes?"

He nodded. "From the accident. There were a couple of things that came up after you left. So...here you go."

"You're giving me your notes?" she asked, incredulous.

"I can't exactly write the story myself," he said, brushing it off like it was no big deal. "I'm a bit too close to it, remember?"

"Still..."

"It's no big deal, really."

"It's not 'no big deal,' Clark. You're handing me a story on a silver platter," Lois argued. "Most reporters would be doing the exact opposite."

"A story I can't write," he reminded her gently. "Lois, please. Just take the notes and write the story. I'm not the kind of guy who steals stories."

"Then you're unlike any reporter I've ever known," she replied, if not a slight bit skeptically.

"Trust me, Lois, I've unlike *anyone* you've ever met," Clark said with a smile.

"We'll see about that," she said with a playful grin. "Go, eat your breakfast."

Clark nodded and grabbed the breakfast burrito and coffee from his desk. Quickly crossing the bullpen, he warmed them in the microwave in the break area, then returned to his desk. He was just biting into the southwestern style egg burrito when Perry stopped by his desk. Clark swallowed and frowned, unhappy with the lack of hot sauce. He reached for one of the packets Lois had left for him.

"Morning, Chief," he said cheerfully as he squeezed three entire packets onto his breakfast.

"Morning, Kent. Whoa, that's a lot of hot sauce. Careful or you'll burn your insides quicker than you can say 'blue suede shoes.'"

Clark chuckled. "I'm tougher than I look, Chief. My dad's spicy chili makes the term 'five alarm' sound tame."

"Speaking of being tougher than you look, Lois told me what happened earlier. You okay, son?" He gently put a fatherly hand on Clark's shoulder.

"Yeah, I'm fine. My suit's a goner, but luckily that was the only damage."

"Mmm," the editor hummed in agreement. "She also mentioned that. Uh, the suit that is. She suggested that I assign you a locker, to keep some spare duds in. Not that either of us anticipate anything like this again, that is."

"A locker?" Clark asked.

Lois nodded. "I find it's helpful to keep a change of clothes on hand. You never know when you might need them. A stakeout

pops up and you can't get home to grab something to wear. Or you have to go undercover and your work attire's just going to make you stand out like a sore thumb."

A light bulb went off in Clark's head at the suggestion. A change of clothes. That could solve his problems, just not in the way Lois was thinking. For a while now, he'd been toying with the idea of finding some way to use his abilities to help save people. He wanted to help, he really did.

No, he thought with a sudden realization. *I need to help.*

As though written into his very DNA, the need to help those in trouble was there — had always been there. Would always be there, if he was any judge. He'd often wondered if it was something that actually *was* part of his genetic makeup, or if it was the result of a lifetime of having his parents as shining examples of how a person should be.

Maybe both, he thought. *All I know for sure is that I need to be free to help people, without drawing attention to the fact that Clark Kent is more than he appears to be.*

"That sounds like a great idea," he said aloud. "I just hope I won't need any more changes for completely ruined suits. Thanks, Perry. And thank you, Lois."

Perry handed him a small silver key. "Here you go, son. Number one fifty-nine."

Clark pocketed the key, planning on adding it to his keychain when he had a free moment. He nodded his thanks again.

"Now that that's taken care of, I'll let you two get back to work. I want you two to head down to the wharf. Three bodies were found there this morning, right about daybreak, by a jogger. All were tied up and shot, execution style, from what I've gathered."

"We're on it," Clark said enthusiastically.

He was more than eager to shift the focus off of himself and the accident. But first things were first. He took another bite of his breakfast burrito, wanting to finish it while it was still hot from the microwave. Although he could always heat it with his eyes again, should it grow cold, he didn't want to. He'd already drawn enough attention to himself for the day, if not the month.

"Take your time," Lois said, when she saw him trying to hurry up and finish his breakfast. "I want to get the accident story off to Perry before we head out. If the crime scene was found at dawn, the police and the bodies will be long gone by now. There's no rush."

His mouth full, Clark could answer with no more than a nod. Lois nodded in acknowledgement and went back to typing. Clark watched her while he ate, slowing down his chewing speed as he did so. It was incredible to him, just having the privilege of watching Lois work.

Everything about her is incredible, his inner voice whispered with awe. *Her mind. Her beauty. Her passion.* His inner voice sighed. *Clark, when you fall for someone, you sure do fall hard*, he acknowledged.

"Ready?" she asked him not long after.

"Ready," he confirmed, standing from his chair and tossing his empty coffee cup in the wastepaper basket at his feet.

"Then let's go catch some criminals," Lois said, giving him a grin. To Clark's surprise, she grabbed his arm almost affectionately. "That is, of course, if you're feeling up to it."

"I told you, Lois, I'm totally fine. The paramedics gave me a clean bill of health as well. Come on, let's talk to whoever's in charge of the police investigation."

Clark let out a low whistle as he took in the apartment at 344 Clinton. Lois had warned him that her sister had said the place had been in bad shape. But he hadn't expected this level of filth and brokenness. It looked like a tornado, hurricane, earthquake, and bomb had all hit the place at the exact same time. Still...Clark couldn't deny that the place had potential. It was one of the more

spacious apartments he'd seen so far. Plus, the terrace was perfectly isolated and hidden from view. He could use it as a place to take off and land when he needed to fly. He wasn't having too many issues finding deserted alleyways so far, but it would make things much simpler if he always had at least one reliable place to utilize.

"Ugh!" Lois said as she side-stepped a sheet of newspaper on the floor. It was stained with some unidentifiable brown smear. "This place is disgusting!"

"Oh, it needs a little cleaning," Larry, the landlord said, munching on a buttered bagel. "That's all."

"That's all?" Lois repeated, incredulous. "A little cleaning? This place should be *condemned*."

Clark rolled his eyes, thankful that Lois had her back to him. Taking advantage of the fact that the two were focused on each other and not him, he slid his glasses down just enough to peek over the lenses. Pretending to give the place a cursory look, he scanned the entire apartment, top to bottom, with his x-ray vision. When he was done, he pushed the frames back up his nose. Remarkably, he'd found nothing amiss — no evidence of vermin, no mold, and what appeared to be a very sturdy construction.

"You're over-reacting," the landlord was arguing with Lois.

"I don't think so. In fact, I might just have to write up an article on this place and the slumlord land owner."

"*Slumlord*?" the man half-roared. "Now wait just a second!"

"Well, what do you call a man who keeps apartments in this condition?" Lois folded her arms before her chest in a defiant manner.

"I've been trying to get the previous owners to pay for a cleaning service," Larry tried to explain.

"How much?" Clark cut in.

"For the cleaning service? All the ones I've gotten quotes for are over a grand."

Clark shook his head. "I meant for the apartment."

"Clark!" Lois scolded. "You aren't seriously considering renting out *this*," she gestured wildly at the entire apartment, "the gateway to hell."

"How much?" Clark asked again, this time a little louder, to show Lois that he was, indeed, serious.

"A grand a month," Larry replied.

"A thousand dollars?" Clark asked in disbelief. He shook his head. "No way."

"You're out of your mind," Lois said, though Clark wasn't sure if that was aimed at him, Larry, or both of them.

"A place this size, this close to midtown...?" The portly landlord shrugged and let his voice trail off.

"It's also in pretty bad disrepair," Clark pointed out. He lifted the broken top of the newel post at the bottom of the stairs in the living room to drive home that same point.

"I really can't go any lower," the man said.

"Oh please," Lois said. "Listen up. I happen to know that you've been running the same 'for rent' ad in the Daily Planet for the last three months. Don't even bother trying to deny it," she said as Larry opened his mouth to argue. "You need a tenant. And for some God-forsaken reason, Clark here seems to be willing to take the place. Lower your price."

"I really can't."

"I'll do the cleaning and repair work myself," Clark said.

Larry looked skeptical. "You?"

Clark smiled and shrugged off the near-insult. "I'm pretty handy."

"Well...I guess I could take fifty bucks off the rent," Larry said as he considered Clark's proposal.

"Fifty bucks? That's all?" Lois looked and sounded annoyed. "Come on, Clark. This place isn't worth it. At least this visit wasn't a total loss. We'll get a story out of it, if nothing else."

She tugged on Clark's arm to get him to follow her. Clark

hesitated, undecided if he should go with her or if he could commit to the place. Despite its ramshackle state now, he knew he could turn it into a wonderful place to live, given enough time and effort. He could make it his home. Still, the price was steep and would leave him almost completely strapped for cash until Perry decided to hire him as a full employee.

I wonder... he thought as he stepped forward to follow Lois.

He was almost at the door when Larry called out to him.

"Wait, Mr. Kent."

Clark turned back, wondering if his bluff had worked. "Yes?"

"How about I knock a hundred off? Nine hundred a month and the place is yours."

"Eight-fifty," Lois immediately countered. She arched her eyebrow in a dare for him to haggle with her.

"Eight seventy-five," Larry said. "My final offer."

"I'll take it," Clark said before Lois could argue further and perhaps cost him the apartment. He extended a hand to shake on the deal, which Larry accepted. "When can I move in?"

"As soon as the check clears."

Clark nodded. "I'll drop it off tomorrow before I head to work."

"Welcome to the building, Mr. Kent."

"I can't believe you actually rented out that pig-sty," Lois huffed as they sat together back in the bullpen of the Daily Planet, hours later.

They were in the conference room, working on the story Perry had given them. A stack of papers stood before them — all of the research Jimmy had managed to find for them as they followed what few leads they had on the execution-style murders. A pattern had emerged as they sifted through all of the gathered information. For the past five years, on the same date, the same type of murders had been committed, with all of the victims matching the same general profiles.

"It's really not that bad," he insisted.

"I'll bet it's just crawling with vermin," Lois argued. "In fact, it probably has roaches the size of poodles."

"It wasn't," he assured her.

"How do you know?" she asked, arching an eyebrow. "You barely looked at the place before agreeing to it."

"Something the size of a poodle is pretty hard to miss," he said, winking at her just a bit. "It...just looked clean...that way," he said when her eyebrow failed to fall back into its normal spot. "Besides...why do you care what apartment I rent?"

"I just think it's a shame that the landlord has had that apartment up for rent for three whole months and hasn't bothered to do anything about the condition that it's in. He's either completely lazy or a total cheapskate. In any case, he doesn't seem like the world's greatest landlord."

"I admit that he *should* have done something with the place,"

Clark said. "But, I don't know. There's something about the place that sort of...feels right to me." He yawned a bit and stretched his arms above his head briefly. He picked up a print out, studied it for a moment, then placed it back on the long conference table again with a sigh. "Have you found anything with your stack of research?"

Lois' sigh matched Clark's. "Nothing yet." Her stomach growled, loudly enough to cause her face to flush in embarrassment.

"Do you want to call it a night?" Clark asked. "Get some dinner and start fresh in the morning?"

Lois hesitated before answering. In the short time Clark had known her, he'd come to learn some basic truths about her. Chief among them was her drive. She was a woman who hated leaving loose ends, a person who loathed to give up on things, even for a short time to gain a clearer head and better perspective. But in the end, she nodded.

"It might be for the best. It's getting late. I doubt we'll hear back from any of those messages we left."

"Okay," Clark said, standing and arching his back to loosen a kink that had formed from sitting in the same position for so long. "Dinner?"

Throwing a glance over to the wall clock, Lois nodded again. "Sure."

"Where?" Clark asked, straightening up their work and tucking it under his arm to bring to his desk for safe keeping.

Lois went to her desk and scrawled a quick note. She handed it to Clark, who glanced down at it. It was an address.

"What...?" he asked.

"That's my apartment," she explained. "Give me..." She paused, thinking. "An hour?"

"Lois, you don't need to have me over. We can just go grab a burger or something."

"No, no. I want to. I just need to run a couple of errands. Okay?"

"Better than okay," he assured her.

"Great. See you later."

"Later."

Clark watched her hurriedly pull her jacket on and rush off through the bullpen. He couldn't help the smile that started to curl his lips. Lois had just invited him to her apartment. He had no illusions about her intentions. Knowing Lois, it really would just be about eating dinner together. But still, it made his heart glad. If she was inviting him into her home, it meant that she was beginning to accept him as more than a work partner. It meant that they were paving the way toward a friendship.

That didn't take as long as I'd feared, he thought to himself, feeling a sense of happiness seep through his entire body.

"Kent? You leaving?" Perry asked as Clark passed him in the break area while on his way to the elevators.

"Yeah. I, uh, I'm having dinner with a friend," Clark said, slowing his pace and stopping for a moment.

"Lois?" Perry guessed.

"Actually, yes. How did you...?"

"I've seen the way you two interact," the editor said, cutting him off with a knowing wink. "A word of advice, son. Lois is a bit like...well...a bucking bronco."

"I'm not sure that I follow you, Chief," Clark said, rubbing the back of his neck and scratching his ear. "A bucking bronco?"

"Wild. Dangerous. Thrilling to be sure. But chances are, you're going to get thrown from the saddle and trampled over."

"I don't know about that, Perry," Clark replied, unconvinced.

"Trust me, Clark. You go after her, you're liable to get your heart torn right out of your chest and stomped on. I've seen it happen before. She doesn't mean to do it, but she sure can be a heartbreaker."

"Things are a little different with me," Clark said, feeling confident. "I'm not your average guy."

Perry chuckled and shook his head. "Then I wish you luck. You'll need it."

"We're only friends," Clark tried to assure his boss.

"Oh, I know that. But, like I said, I've seen the way you look at her. You've already got it bad for her, don't you?"

"I'm not sure I want to answer that, especially when I'm only an intern," Clark replied cagily.

Perry nearly roared a laugh. "Fair enough. Say no more. Good luck tonight."

Clark grinned as Perry patted his shoulder. "Night, Chief. See you tomorrow."

An hour later, exactly, Clark knocked on Lois' door, now dressed in a freshly pressed pair of jeans and soft brown sweater. In one arm, he carried a small brown paper bag — just a modest bottle of red wine nestled in the crook of his elbow. He heard

movement within the apartment, then the sound of five locks being opened.

"Just a second," Lois' voice called from within as she worked.

A moment later, the door opened. Clark smiled at her.

"Hi, Lois."

"Hi, Clark. Wow, right on time. Come on in. Don't mind the place. I haven't had much time to clean lately, what with the way work has been and everything."

"What?" Clark asked, looking around. "Your place looks fantastic."

It was the truth. Everything looked spotless as he swept his gaze around the room. Not even a single rogue sweater lay on a chair or on the back of the couch. The only thing Clark could see that Lois might have been referring to was several stacks of folders and papers on her coffee table, alongside her closed laptop. He didn't doubt that it was research for one or more of her solo stories.

"Thanks," Lois said.

"Here, this is for you." He handed her the bottle of wine. "I wasn't sure what we are having for dinner, but I figured red goes with a lot. Although, now that I think about it, I'm not even sure if bringing wine was even appropriate, given the circumstances."

"It's fine," she assured him in a soft tone. "Thank you."

"So...what *are* we having?" Clark asked.

"Italian. I remembered that you liked that place we ordered from last week, Spoto's." She moved off into the kitchen as Clark closed the door to the apartment. He followed her as she continued to talk. "You raved about the shrimp scampi, so..." Her voice trailed off as she gestured to the small table in her kitchen, where their dinner sat, awaiting them.

"Looks great," he said.

"Anyway," Lois continued as she popped the cork on the bottle of wine Clark had bought, "I thought it was best if I got food out somewhere." She poured two glasses of the heady wine and sat as Clark took his own seat. "I'm not much of a cook. I would have hated to have killed you with my cooking the very same night that you risked your life to save mine."

"Lois, we've been over this," Clark said, accepting the wine glass she held out to him. He took a sip, savored it, then continued. "It was no big deal."

"That's where you're wrong," Lois said in a quiet voice.

"Clark...what you did today...no one has ever done that for me before. Risked their life for me. Saved my life. Until today, it's always just been me on my own, caring for me, looking out for myself. But you...you took a real chance, doing what you did. You could have been seriously hurt or even killed." Her voice took on a reverent, almost awed quality.

"Lois, I was never really...I mean," he said, catching himself before he could slip up. "I didn't really think about it. I just saw you in the truck's pathway and acted. I couldn't let you get hurt, even if it meant that *I* would be the one to take the hit."

"See? That's exactly what I mean," Lois said, her voice still low and grateful sounding. "It was probably the most selfless thing I've ever witnessed. And then, to top it all off, you handed me your story notes on a silver platter, asking for nothing in return. Like I said, I've never had that happen before. I just wanted to say thank you."

"You're welcome," Clark replied, smiling. "How about a toast? To life and new friendships," he said, clinking his glass against the side of hers.

"To new friends," Lois agreed.

"In any event, the food is fantastic," Clark said after taking a few forkfuls of the shrimp scampi. "Thanks for picking it up."

"Any time."

The phone began to ring. Lois excused herself, then stood and crossed the kitchen to the closest headset, which was mounted to the wall.

"Hello? Oh, hi, Dan. You what? Bermuda? I see. For how long? Uh-huh. No, no, I'm not disappointed. No, I totally understand. You need to do what you need to do. No, that's okay. No, don't call me, I'll call you. Uh-huh, right. Bye."

She hung up with a sigh, then went back to her seat to pick at what remained of her lasagna.

"Everything okay?" Clark asked, concerned.

"Yeah," she answered distractedly.

"Boyfriend?" Clark asked.

Lois shook her head. "Not quite. We went out a few times but never really became a couple. But he was supposed to accompany me to the White Orchid Ball next Friday night."

"White Orchid?"

Lois nodded. "Every year Lex Luthor hosts his White Orchid Ball. It's sort of a huge charity event. Anyone who's anyone attends. It's a great place to rub elbows with the rich and famous. It's actually how I've nailed down some of my interviews."

"Lex Luthor? Isn't he the third richest man on the planet?"

"One and the same," Lois confirmed.

"And you have tickets to this ball?" Clark asked. "How?"

"Simple. I'm with the press."

Clark thought about it. "Well, yeah, of course that makes sense," he said, more for his own benefit than Lois'. "What's the point of throwing a party if you can't show the rest of the world what you're up to?"

"Anyway, Dan was going to go with me but now his job's got him on assignment in Bermuda for the next month, if not longer. Some DEA thing that he's not allowed to discuss."

"Yikes. Sorry."

"It's not a big deal. I just hate going to these things alone, as much as I wind up working during them." She took another bite of her meal before speaking again. "You wouldn't happen to have a tuxedo, would you?"

"I could rent one," he answered, just as casually as she had asked the question.

"Would you want to go with me?"

"Like a date?" he teased.

"Like a partner and colleague," she replied, though Clark couldn't miss the small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"I'd love to go with you," he said sincerely.

Again, that soft, almost shy smile crossed Lois' features. Clark loved those moments — when the otherwise hard-bitten newswoman faded away and left the real, human woman exposed. And Clark was absolutely enamored with the real Lois Lane — the one who loved cream sodas and who fearlessly ate hotdogs from even the shadier street vendors, the one who tucked her hair behind her ears like a shy schoolgirl when she was not quite at ease, the one who could be roused to anger so easily by the injustices she saw around her.

"Thanks, Clark."

"Actually, thank *you* for even asking me. But, well... I'd like it if it was more along the lines of a date," he admitted. His cheeks immediately flushed as he realized what he was saying.

Lois shook her head. "Don't fall for me, Farmboy. I don't have the time. Or the desire to have yet another wrecked relationship under my belt."

"It may already be too late," Clark said, casting his eyes downward to study what was left of his shrimp scampi. "And no one says it will be a disaster."

"Clark, look. You're a nice enough guy and all but... I'm just not sure I want to get involved. Especially with a coworker."

"I know, you have a... history, with dating coworkers," Clark said, swirling some of the remaining angel hair pasta around on his plate. "But, if you gave me a chance, you'd find out that I'm not like the guys you've gone out with so far."

She seemed to think that over. "That's for sure. You proved that today."

"Give me a chance?" It almost sounded like a plea to him. "I mean, you *do* owe it to me," he joked.

Lois laughed deeply, her eyes sparkling with her amusement. "Pretty bold, for an unpaid intern."

Clark chuckled in return. "Only for a few more weeks. Then I'll be a full employee."

"I hope so," Lois confessed in a softer tone.

"Really?" It took him by surprise.

"Really," she said, nodding. "You're a good reporter, Clark. I wouldn't have guessed it when you first came into the Planet, but I've met shockingly few reporters with your skills and dedication. And I know I didn't act like it when you first started. I'm sorry."

"Well, thank you, Lois. That really does mean a lot to me."

"But, we'll never get your position secured if we don't nail down the person responsible for those murders."

"We'll get them," he assured her.

"You sound pretty confident."

"I am."

"How come?"

"Because," he said nonchalantly, with a slight shrug, "we're Lane and Kent."

"Just a minute!" Clark called out as someone knocked on the door.

He finished washing his hands and dried them on a dishtowel. As he trotted through the living room on his way to the door, he grabbed his t-shirt and pulled it on. Just before he reached the door, he stuck his glasses back on his face. Opening the door, he was surprised to see Lois standing on his doorstep, a bag of what smelled like tacos in her hand.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi. Come on in."

Lois nodded and entered his new apartment, then stopped dead in her tracks as she looked around. Her mouth opened into a small O. She looked to Clark, confused.

"How...?"

"How, what?"

"This place," she clarified. "I saw it not five days ago and it looked like a nuclear waste dump. And now... well, look at it."

Clark blushed a bit. He hadn't expected company so soon. If he had, he wouldn't have cleaned the place at super speed. Starting with his bathroom, he'd given the entire place a deep cleaning over the last few nights, making sure to dedicate enough time, even with his speed, to make the place sparkle and shine, and to get rid of the odd odors that had lingered behind when the previous tenants had vacated the place. Now he only hoped Lois wouldn't get too suspicious, especially since he'd even given the walls a fresh coat of paint to hide the places where the old coat had been cracked and peeling.

"You must have had a lot of help," Lois observed.

"Some," Clark said in a non-committal tone. The way he saw it, his super speed *had* been his help. "Sorry that I don't have much furniture yet." He felt bizarrely ashamed of his paper plates, plastic spoons, and lack of furniture. In fact, the only thing he'd been able to buy yet had been a new and plush couch, which, for the moment, also doubled as his bed. "Once I start making a paycheck, I'll be able to completely furnish the place," he explained.

"Well, whatever help you had, it looks great. I barely recognize the place. And I no longer feel like I need a tetanus shot by stepping foot in here."

Clark chuckled. "Thanks. I'm glad it passes your inspection." He took the bag of food from her, brought it to his kitchen, and set it out on the paper plates he had stashed in one of the cupboards.

"So, what brings you by?"

She shrugged as he passed her a plate. "I was in the neighborhood and figured I'd see how things were going with

your place. Besides, Taco Loco is one of my favorite taco places and I thought you might be hungry.”

“I was. Thanks.” He bit into one of the tacos she’d gotten for him. “Next time though, let me get the tacos. I promise that they will blow your mind.”

“You’re on, Farmboy,” she said with a grin.

Clark nervously knocked on Lois’ apartment door. When she didn’t answer right away, he rocked on the balls of his feet, blowing out a controlled, cleansing breath. Lois didn’t intimidate him in the least. But, he would be escorting her to the White Orchid Ball that night. And while he wanted to view the event as a date, Lois didn’t. It literally made his heart ache with desire.

After a few moments, he knocked again. This time, he heard shuffling behind the door.

“Just a minute!”

Locks unlatched. The doorknob turned. And then, suddenly, the door swung open to reveal Lois standing there in a tastefully low cut red gown, a modest slit up one thigh. She held matching pumps in one hand. A single teardrop shaped ruby hung about her throat, surrounded by white diamonds that glinted like stars. But even those could not compare to the sparkle in her eyes as she caught sight of him.

“Lois,” Clark finally choked out, completely floored by how gorgeous she looked. “You look...wow! Fantastic,” he managed. He shook his head. “I mean, you always look nice but...would you be offended if I called you stunning?”

“I certainly would not,” she said, stifling a giggle. “And you look very handsome in your tux,” she offered in return. She patted his lapel, brushing a small piece of fuzz from it, making Clark’s heart miss a beat.

“Here,” Clark said when he found his voice again. It was a struggle for him not to listen to her heartbeat, to see if he was affecting her the way she was him. He held out a small plastic box. “I picked this up for you.”

“What is it?” Lois asked, moving a step closer to peek into the box.

Clark opened the lid and pulled out the single flower within. “I thought it was only appropriate that you should wear a white orchid to the White Orchid Ball.”

“Clark, it’s beautiful,” Lois said in admiration of the white flower. It had just the faintest splashes of purple in the very center. “Would you pin it on me?”

“Absolutely,” he said.

Expertly, he pulled the straight pin from the base of the stem and closed the distance between himself and Lois. With her so close, he thought that surely his hands would tremble. But somehow, they remained steady as he held the flower above her left breast and fastened it to her dress with the pin.

“There,” he announced. “Perfect.”

“You’re something else, Clark,” Lois said after a moment as she stooped to put her shoes on.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked playfully, leaning his hip against the couch.

Lois smirked at him. “It means...you constantly surprise me. I guess I’m still not used to having a friend like you.”

“What kind of friend is that?” He needed to know how she viewed him.

“A best friend,” she said in a solemn voice so low that he almost missed it.

He smiled warmly. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m not used to having a best friend quite like you either. I feel like...I don’t know. Like I’ve gotten closer with you in a month or so than I’ve been with the people I’ve known all my life.”

“We make a good team, don’t we?” Lois asked, standing back up to her full height.

“The best,” Clark agreed.

Less than an hour later, Clark found himself in the penthouse suite at Lex Tower, surrounded by a sea of wealthy and famous people, as well as key members of the media. He stuck with Lois, taking her lead as she greeted those she had met before, allowing her to make the introductions. Jimmy and Perry were there as well, which put Clark more at ease. It was comforting to see some familiar faces there. For a time, Clark stood speaking with Jimmy as the two men sipped exquisite and rare wines. It seemed that Lex Luthor spared no expense when he threw parties.

“There’s Lex Luthor now,” Lois whispered into Clark’s ear after a while. The faint breeze created by her words sent a jolt of electricity through his body. “He doesn’t give interviews to the press.”

“Let me guess,” Clark said, not taking his eyes off the man, as the billionaire greeted the mayor and his wife. “You intend on changing that.”

“Not only changing it, but being the first one he gives an interview to,” Lois confirmed. “Come on. Let’s go over.”

Clark set down his wine glass and followed Lois across the marble, mosaic floor.

“Lex Luthor,” Lois called out when she was no more than five feet away from the party’s host. “You haven’t returned my calls.”

“And you are?”

“Lois Lane. Daily Planet,” she said. “This is Clark Kent. My writing partner.”

“Ah, yes. It’s good to meet you, Miss Lane, Mr. Kent.” The billionaire extended a hand. “I apologize for not returning your calls sooner, Miss Lane.”

Clark shook the man’s hand. Luthor had a strong, firm grip. But something in his eyes betrayed the friendly smile on his face. It was there and gone in less than a second, but Clark had seen it nonetheless. It made the short hairs at the base of his neck stand on end.

“I’d like to interview you,” Lois said, getting right to the point. Clark had to hide his smile at her directness.

“Well, Miss Lane, as I am sure you are aware, I don’t give interviews,” Luthor replied with cool nonchalance.

“I know. I’d like to change that.”

To Clark’s surprise, the billionaire laughed. “I admire your dedication, Miss Lane.”

“Lois, please.”

“Lois. And you may call me Lex.”

“Lex.”

Clark had to stop himself from rolling his eyes.

“So, Lex, is your wife here this evening?” Lois inquired.

Luthor shook his head. “Sadly, no. Some family business called her away. A sick uncle.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Clark put in, almost before he realized he was speaking.

“Yes,” Luthor said, nearly dismissing him. “I nearly rescheduled this soirée, but Laura would not hear of it.”

“She sounds like an amazing woman,” Lois said, though Clark could detect a little disappointment hidden in her voice. It was clear to him that she’d planned on speaking to the wife if Luthor didn’t come around to her way of thinking.

“She is,” Luthor agreed.

“But back to the topic at hand,” Lois said, smiling sweetly. “There must be some part of you that would like the world to know the man behind the mystery.”

“Is that what I am? A mystery?” Luthor asked, returning an amused look.

“Well, there *is* relatively little that’s known about you,” Clark answered for Lois. He caught the side scowl that she shot him.

“And for a reason,” Luthor replied. “I rather enjoy my privacy.”

“No doubt,” Clark said, putting his hands into his pockets as

he spoke. "But you must be aware that there *are* certain rumors out there about you and how you've accumulated such wealth. An interview, especially with a paper as well-respected as the Planet, could lay many of those rumors to rest. After all, Lois *is* the best there is."

The last part, at least, changed Lois' annoyed look into one of gratitude. But Luthor looked less than convinced.

"If I change my mind, you'll be the first one I contact," he said amiably, yet firmly enough to let it be known that the topic of conversation was now closed. "If you'll excuse me, there is someone I must speak with." With that, he shook their hands again, then melted away into the crowd.

"Well," Lois said, more to herself than Clark, "that could have gone better."

"At least you got to talk to him, maybe even make him second guess his no-interview policy."

"I'll believe it when I see it," she grumbled.

"Come on," Clark said, lightly laying a hand on her shoulder. "Let's just enjoy the rest of the night, okay?"

Lois huffed but eventually relented. "Maybe you're right."

"Would you care to dance?" Clark asked as the music changed from some upbeat tune he didn't know to the softer, slower tones of "The Way You Look Tonight."

She looked uncertain, but was, perhaps, reassured by the other couples who began to migrate toward the center of the room and dance together. "I'd like that."

Clark led her to the cluster of couples in the middle of the room, then held her close. His heart began to hammer in his chest at the close contact. He'd hoped, but never truly believed, he would have the chance to hold Lois in such an intimate position. She felt so good there, in his arms. So right. So natural, like it had always been meant to be.

Soul mate, his mind whispered at him.

He wondered if Lois felt the connection as well, for after a moment, she laid her head against his chest and sighed contentedly. He tightened his arms around her ever so gently as they swayed to the music. Softly, he sighed in happiness as well.

"Clark?"

"Hmm?"

"This is really nice," she said after a minute.

"It is," he affirmed.

"Where'd you learn to dance like this?"

"From a Nigerian Princess," he said, shrugging it off like it was no big deal.

"Really?"

"Really."

"You must have some incredible stories from traveling," she said after a pause.

"I guess. The truth is, I feel like my greatest adventure so far has been living in Metropolis and working with you."

"Clark..."

"I know," he said, gently cutting her off. "You're interested in friendship only. I get it. But it doesn't make what I said any less true."

"You're a sweet guy, Clark."

"Thanks."

"And I think...is it too late to change my mind?"

"About what?"

"About tonight," Lois clarified. "About your offer."

Clark was thunderstruck. Was Lois asking him what he thought he was asking? He cleared his suddenly too-dry throat before speaking.

"To make this...a date?" he asked, very carefully, half afraid he'd misunderstood her.

Against him, Lois nodded her head. "I just feel like...tonight has been so perfect so far. It hasn't felt like a work obligation, the way it always does. Having you here...it's felt like a date ever

since you knocked on my door a few hours ago. I know, I'm crazy."

"No, Lois, you're not crazy. Believe me, nothing would make me happier than to consider tonight our first date."

"First date? Feeling confident, are you?" she teased him.

"Confident enough to do this," he said, bending his neck and capturing Lois' lips in a kiss before she could make a retort.

Stars exploded before Clark's eyes as his lips met hers. His already racing heart felt as though it might burst right through his chest. For the first time in his life, the world around him — all the lights, colors, smells, sounds, and distractions — simply ceased to be. He was encased in an invisible bubble with Lois, where the real world couldn't touch them, couldn't distract them, couldn't pull them apart. It was as if all of his senses were seared away in that moment, leaving only his ability to feel the softness of Lois' lips and the way that she squeezed his body, ever so slightly, as she responded to his kiss.

When they broke, the world seemed to come crashing back around Clark, the magical spell of their moment broken as the contact between their lips was severed. It had only lasted a second, and hadn't been a deep kiss, but Clark felt his life had been profoundly altered in that moment.

"Wow," Lois breathed, even as Clark brought his head away from hers.

"You said it," he agreed, well aware of the dreamy tone his voice had taken.

A little while later, as the party was in full swing, Lois and Clark found themselves separated. Perry found Clark and pulled him off to one side, near the open bar but well out of the way of other people.

"I saw what happened before," the editor said gruffly.

"What?" Clark asked.

"Don't play dumb with me. I saw you and Lois share a kiss."

"Oh. That." He blushed.

"Yes, that. Clark, son, I don't mind telling you that I don't have a hard-and-fast rule about coworkers dating. It's happened before in my newsroom. But Lois...Lois is very special to me. Almost like a daughter, you might say. And, well, that makes me very protective of her."

"I see," Clark said, shyly stuffing his hands into his pockets and rocking back onto his heels. "But, I'm not messing around, Chief. I'm not trying to hurt her. I care about her, deeply, even though we've only known each other a short time."

"Good. See to it that it stays that way, with you not doing anything to hurt her."

"You have my word," Clark vowed. Then, scanning the crowd, "Say, Chief? Have you actually *seen* Lois in the last twenty minutes?"

Perry stopped for a moment, scratching his chin as he thought. "Come to think of it, no. Have you, Jimmy?"

Jimmy broke off his conversation with an attractive enough redhead to answer. "Sorry, Chief, no. But I've been a little preoccupied. Oh, and CK? Congrats, man. I saw those smooth moves of yours."

"Uh, thanks," Clark said, decidedly uncomfortable with his and Lois' kiss being the topic of discussion. "I'd better go look for her. Excuse me."

He found her snooping around in what appeared to be Lex Luthor's private office. Clark hurriedly shut the door behind him as he entered.

"Lois!" he whispered, so as not to be heard by anyone but her.

She still jumped a little at his voice. Her back had been toward the door, so she hadn't seen him enter.

"Clark! You startled me."

"I'm sorry. But what are you doing in here?"

"Looking for something."

"Apparently," he shot back, unable to suppress the small vein of sarcasm in his comment. "What, exactly, are you looking for?" "I don't know," she said, blushing a little.

Clark rolled his eyes. "Lo-is!"

"I need to find something — anything — that can give me a leg up in nailing down an interview," she whispered back. "Help me."

"Lois, getting caught rifling through the man's personal items is guaranteed to *not* land you an interview."

"If you help, we can get done faster and get out of here, which gives us less of a chance to be caught," she shot back as she opened one of the drawers to his desk.

She pulled out a stack of file folders and fanned them out on the wide mahogany desk. Clark glanced at them but saw nothing of note. Plans for the new LexMart down by the docks. Contracts for LNN workers. A bill of sale for his newest yacht. Something called Project Blue. Plans for a new cruise line, set to start sailing three years in the future.

"There's nothing here," Clark whispered as he gave in and helped Lois dig through Luthor's private files.

"I guess you're right," she admitted after a few more moments of searching. She put everything back neatly. "I'm sorry, Clark."

He shook his head. "Don't be. I love how you dive right in to things...even if maybe you shouldn't." He offered her a crooked smile. "You want to go back and join the rest of the party?"

"I suppose," Lois said, sounding less than enthusiastic.

"What? What's the matter?" he asked, putting an arm protectively across her shoulders.

"It's just so..." she gestured as she spoke, "nice and quiet here."

"Yes, it is." Luthor's voice was coldly neutral sounding. "And also very private."

"I...uh...sorry, Lex," Lois said, having the sense to at least sound abashed, even if she might not be feeling it. "Clark and I just needed a minute alone, out of the party, to catch our breath. You throw such elaborate soirees, Lex. We didn't realize this was your office."

"Thank you. But now, I really must insist that we move back to the affair at hand." He eyed them coolly.

Silently, Lois and Clark exited the study. Lex trailed behind them. Clark heard, rather than saw, him lock the door to the study behind him, clearly trying to prevent a second intrusion of his privacy.

"Sorry, Lois," Clark said as they attempted to melt back into the crowd by joining in on another slow dance. "I wish I could have helped you get whatever you needed."

"It's fine," she said. "All it means is that I'll have to work even harder, and, when I *do* get that interview, it will be all the better, and the victory all the sweeter. For now, though? Another dance?"

Clark didn't respond other than to hug her even closer to his chest and start to sway. He was in heaven. In roughly a month, he'd attained some of the biggest, most important goals of his life — a permanent home, a job — unpaid as it was for the time being — at the Daily Planet, and Lois Lane, the only woman in his entire life that he had ever loved. Happy could not adequately express how he felt.

For a second, his feet lifted right off the floor and he had to remind himself to stay rooted to the marble beneath the soles of his feet.

Careful, Clark, he warned himself. No one can know. Not even Lois. Not yet.

"Mom! Dad! What are you guys doing here? I thought I was coming out to pick you guys up?" Clark said as he opened the door to his apartment.

"We made good time and landed early. We figured we'd just

grab a cab and save you the trip," Jonathan said, wrapping his son in a hug. "How are you, son?"

"I'm good, Dad. Really good," Clark said, ushering his parents into the living room. "I know I haven't been here long but Metropolis is fantastic. For the first time, I feel like I might have found what I'm looking for."

"A place to call home," Jonathan said soberly.

"Well...yeah. I know it's hard for you guys to hear me call someplace other than the farm home, but...I feel like, somehow, I belong here. Like I'm meant to be here."

"I'm glad for you, Clark," Martha said, putting her purse down on the couch before embracing Clark tightly. "It's good to see you."

"You too, Mom. So, what do you think of the place?" He gestured broadly. He'd done a bit of furniture shopping and decorating in the couple of weeks he'd had the apartment.

His mother took a long moment to take in the apartment. She finally smiled.

"It's you," she declared. "I love it."

"Really?"

"Really," she confirmed. "It looks fantastic. I can tell you're really happy here."

"I am," Clark said, retrieving their luggage from the landing and moving it into his bedroom. He set the suitcases on the floor. "I just hope I get to stay put this time."

"Oh, Clark, you didn't..." his father nearly pleaded.

"No. I haven't jeopardized my identity. Not here. But if Perry doesn't approve of my work...if he doesn't hire me...I'm not going to be able to stay."

"He will," Jonathan said with certainty.

"I hope so. I've been giving it my all, no matter what kind of story gets thrown my way." He checked his watch. "Actually, I'm due for my evaluation today. I should get going. You guys will be okay here?" He gave them an extra set of keys, just in case.

"Here? Who said we're staying here? Your mother is chomping at the bit to get out shopping." Jonathan smiled at Martha, a laugh perched on his lips and dancing in his eyes.

Clark chuckled. "I figured as much. That's why I had the keys made."

"Go, and good luck," Martha said, kissing his cheek before waving him off to the door.

"Thanks. I'll bring home something for dinner," he promised.

"Only if you let me cook tomorrow," Martha said.

Clark's mouth was already watering for a good, home-cooked meal. "Agreed."

"Kent? Step into my office, would you?" Perry asked as Clark passed him by in the break area as he went to make two mugs of coffee — one for himself and one for Lois.

"Sure, Chief. I just have to make this delivery," he said, lifting Lois' mug and nodding in her general direction.

"Ah, a wise move," Perry joked back. "What's the old expression?"

"Happy partner, happy life?" Clark suggested.

That made the Chief laugh. "Something like that. How's everything going with her?"

Clark kept his eyes trained on the milk he was adding to both of their mugs. "Good. I mean, I think it's good."

"You two make a good team."

"Yeah, I think so."

"And your, ah, personal partnership?"

Clark paled. "You know? Uh, that it's been more than just the White Orchid Ball a couple of weeks ago?"

"Kent, let me tell you something. Nothing happens in this newsroom that I don't know about. I wouldn't be much of an editor-in-chief if I wasn't completely on the ball."

"Good point." Clark carefully measured out sugar into each

mug. He sighed, uncomfortable with talking about his personal life with his boss, even if Perry already felt more like a father-figure than a true boss. “Things are going pretty well, I think. We haven’t been out much but...for me...”

Perry smiled and put his hands up in a “stop” position. He, like Clark, gazed out in Lois’ direction. “Say no more. I know the feeling. Felt the same way after I first started dating Alice.”

Clark nodded. “I still can’t believe it sometimes.”

“Son, I’ve been married for a long, long time and I *still* can’t believe that Alice chose me, out of all the other men out there. I don’t understand it but I sure don’t question it.”

“Yeah,” Clark agreed, unsure of what else he could say.

“Go. Bring her that coffee while it’s still hot. But you come right to my office afterwards, got it?”

“Got it, Chief.”

“Good man.”

Clark didn’t wait for Perry to say another word. He picked up both cups and made his way back through the newsroom. It occurred to him how familiar the bullpen was to him now. Never before had he felt this comfortable at his place of employment. Never before had he felt like a natural part of any newsroom. Everything about the Planet seemed to pulse in his very veins.

Please, he begged the universe, *please let me get this job.*

“Clark, hi,” Lois said, barely glancing up from the furious typing she was doing.

“Hey. That must be some story you’re working on.” He placed the mug on her desk. “My humble offering.”

Lois threw a look over to see what he was talking about. “Oh, great! Thanks! I could use a good cup of coffee.”

“I thought so. So, what are you working on?”

“Shooting down by the docks. Drug fueled, from the report Wolfe sent over.”

Clark nodded. “Ah.”

“Pull up a chair.”

“Can’t. Perry wants to see me.”

Lois took a sip of her coffee, her eyes sliding shut in bliss at the hot caffeine. “What for?”

“Well, I can only assume he’s going to give me his verdict. My ‘unpaid internship’ status expires today.”

Lois swallowed involuntarily and winced at the heat.

“Already? Wow! Nervous?”

“A little,” he confided.

“Want a little moral support when you go in?”

“I wish I could. But I think it’s better if I go in alone,” he said with gratitude.

“Okay, well, I’ll be here,” she said, awkwardly, as though not sure how to gracefully remain at her desk. “Actually, I found some interesting dirt on Lex Luthor I wanted to talk to you about. Nothing concrete yet, but it *does* make me raise an eyebrow.”

“Sounds good and thanks. Well, here goes...”

“Good luck,” she called after him as he started off.

The walk to Perry’s office had never seemed so quick or so very, very long. He knew he was perhaps being a little ridiculous. After all, he’d poured his heart and soul into the work he’d done while at the Planet. On the other hand, he’d poured his heart and soul into his work, and if he learned that it wasn’t good enough, he knew he’d be crushed beyond repair. He wasn’t even sure he’d be able to continue in the journalism field if Perry White chose not to hire him.

He reached the door to Perry’s office and knocked on the doorframe. Perry looked up from his work, editing some of the articles Clark’s co-workers had produced.

“Oh, Clark, come in. Shut the door, would you?”

Clark wordlessly complied. For a moment, he just stood there, feeling almost at a loss, until he finally settled down on the plaid couch Perry kept in his office.

“So...” Perry began.

“So...” Clark nervously repeated.

“So, your trial run is up today.”

Clark nodded. “Yes.”

“Tell me, how did you enjoy it?” Perry asked, knocking Clark off guard.

“I loved it,” Clark said honestly. “I’ve never worked in such a great environment before. It’s been...kind of like a home for me.”

Perry nodded thoughtfully. “Well...uh...I’m glad. I’ve enjoyed having you with us. But, uh, I’m afraid I’m going to need that temporary press pass I gave you back.”

Clark’s heart sank and he felt suddenly queasy, as though the world had lurched into a too-fast spin unexpectedly. He blindly reached for his wallet and pulled out the pass. He forced himself, through sheer willpower, to maintain a neutral face as he handed it to Perry.

“Well, thanks for the opportunity,” Clark said. “I really did find it a pleasure to work for you.”

“Now hold up just a second,” Perry said as Clark started to rise from the couch. Clark sat back down. “I needed the temporary pass back so I can give you this.” He handed Clark a laminated rectangle of plastic. “That’s your permanent pass. Welcome to the Daily Planet, son.” His face cracked into a wide smile.

Clark’s heart skipped a beat. “What? You’re...you’re serious?” It sounded stupid to his ears but he simply couldn’t believe what he’d heard.

“You’ve proven yourself to be worthy of the paper. I don’t know what the other editors you worked for thought, but I know I’d be a fool to let you go. Unless, of course, you don’t want the position?” He cracked another smile, letting Clark know he was teasing.

“I don’t know, Chief,” he replied playfully. “I mean, it’s a tough decision. Working for a world class paper or something like the Dirt Digger...” He shrugged. “I guess I’d have to say...I’ll take you up on your generous offer to join the Planet.”

Perry chuckled. “Good man.”

“Um...about my partnership with Lois...”

“Right. You know, when I first teamed her up with you, I really only intended it to be just long enough to get your feet wet. After all, there’s no one better you could hope to learn from. But I’ve changed my mind. I think it’s for the best if I keep you two as permanent partners. Oh, I’ll send you solo from time to time, but for the most part, the writing team of Lane and Kent can’t be beat.”

“That’s great,” Clark said with a grin.

“Now, this all comes with the stipulation that everything remains professional between you, now that you two are an item.”

“Believe me, Perry, I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize either my personal or professional relationships with Lois. Or my employment here.”

“Good. That’s what I like to hear. I’ve lost good reporting teams before due to dating. And none were half so good as you and Lois have been so far.”

“You have my word,” Clark vowed.

“Good. Now, go get your partner and find something to fill in the blank spaces of my paper.”

“No problem,” Clark replied with a grin. “And thanks, Chief. You don’t know what this means to me.”

“Don’t thank me. *You* did all the work. Including making me think twice about sending you away when you initially came in here.”

Clark nodded once in acknowledgement, then left his boss’ office, gently shutting the door behind him as he left. He fought hard not to float through the bullpen in his euphoria. His heart was soaring. Somehow, in the span of two months, he’d secured some of the biggest goals he had in his life. He’d found the one place in all the world where he truly felt like he belonged. He had a great apartment — a place where he felt relaxed, as opposed to the

constant feeling of anxiety and wanderlust during his days abroad. He'd found his dream woman, the other half of his yearning heart. Though they hadn't known each other long, he felt like his soul was complete when he was with her. And now, he'd secured his dream job.

Soon, he thought to himself. Maybe soon I'll be able to finally start using my powers in a better capacity to help people. I'll talk to Mom about my idea tonight.

"Hey, how'd it go?" Lois asked as he approached. Her rapid fire typing had ceased, and she appeared to be leisurely checking though the emails in her inbox.

"Perry...took my press pass," Clark said, deciding to have a little fun with her.

"What? Is he insane? You're a good reporter. How can he let you leave? I'm going to go right in there and give him a piece of my mind. I thought he was smarter than this. The very idea of letting you go. *Especially* after seeing what you can do."

"Whoa, whoa, Lois, calm down," Clark said, raising his hands before him, trying to break off the sudden rambling rant she'd launched into.

"Calm down? *Calm down?* When Perry just gave the boot to the only partner I could ever stand to work with? Are you nuts?"

"Lois, I never said Perry fired me. Or...opted not to take me on, I guess is the better way to describe it. He took the temporary pass and gave me a permanent one. You're stuck with me as a partner for the foreseeable future." He grinned as her mouth hung open, whatever new rant she'd been brewing dying out on her tongue before it could be born.

"Oh, Clark! That's fantastic news!" she exclaimed, rising to give him a quick squeeze of a hug. "Congratulations. You've earned it."

"Thanks, Lois. You helped me earn it. I hope you know that."

"Well, that's a given," she teased. "We should celebrate. Dinner tonight?"

"I wish I could, but my parents flew in this morning," he said regretfully. Dinner with Lois sounded wonderful.

"Tomorrow then?"

Clark smiled apologetically. "Mom's already committed to cooking something."

"Okay, well, a rain-check then," she compromised.

"Sounds good. So...you're okay with having me for a partner?" he teased.

"So long as you pull your weight," she teased back with a indifferent shrug.

Clark chuckled. "I think I can keep up with you."

"Good, because Lois Lane slows down for no one."

"I believe it," Clark said, slipping behind his own desk and sitting down. He picked up his coffee, which had cooled somewhat, and took a sip. It was still passable, without needing a burst of his heat vision. "Well, now that I'm still going to be around here for a while, what's on the agenda for the day, partner?"

"Congratulations, son! I knew you could do it," Jonathan said, toasting Clark with his glass of iced tea.

"Thanks, Dad," Clark said with a bob of his head. He sliced a lemon into wedges, threw two into his ice water, then drank. "Sorry I got in so late. That rash of jewelry store robberies got a little more complicated than Lois and I had planned on. I'm almost certain Intergang is at the source of it all."

His father gave a grunt of acknowledgement around a mouthful of stuffed shells that Clark had brought home with him from one of the local Italian places. He'd initially planned on getting something more exotic, but when he'd called home during a brief break, his mother had mentioned a desire to eat from one of the local restaurants.

"I just can't prove it," Clark continued. "Yet."

"I'm sure you, of all people, can find a lead...somewhere," Jonathan said, his voice heavier than usual with the unspoken reference to Clark's powers.

"Believe me, I've been looking," Clark said, digging in to his penne ala vodka with chicken. "Whoever is doing it — Intergang or not — they've been covering their tracks really well."

Martha gave him a conspiratorial smile. "Not for much longer. Not with you and Lois on the case."

"I hope so. I want to find out who's behind this so I can help get them behind bars where they belong so badly."

"You always did take a special pleasure in helping people," Martha replied.

Clark nodded. "I was raised really well," he grinned. "It's always killed me inside that I have to hide my powers. I could do so much good with them, if only I didn't have to be afraid of exposing myself as something other than a regular human being." He looked down at his pasta as though contemplating the sauce.

"I know," Jonathan said, reaching over to rest a hand on Clark's shoulder. "I wish you had the freedom to fly right through the center of the city without anyone batting an eye. But you know what would happen."

Clark sighed. "Yeah. I'd expose myself to lunatic scientists who'd want to dissect me or run batteries of tests on me..." His voice trailed off as he shrugged. "But...what if? What if *I could* just fly through the center of the city? What if *no one knew* that it was Clark Kent flying around out there?"

"Why wouldn't they know it was you?" Martha asked.

"Maybe...maybe I'm in disguise," he replied, swallowing hard. Now that he'd said it, it sounded ridiculous to his own ears.

"A disguise?" Martha raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"What kind of a disguise?"

"I don't know. Something far off from who I am. Something that no one will ever suspect would belong to a regular Joe...a mild mannered reporter, if you will."

"Sounds risky," Jonathan said.

"While I agree, did you have anything specific in mind?" Martha asked.

"I'm not sure. Something...unreal. Something...bright. Something that won't hinder me or slow me down when I'm flying at top speed to someone who needs help."

"Aerodynamic, got it," Martha said. "Spandex might work."

"That might be a little *too* aerodynamic," Clark said, embarrassed already to think of how form-fitting Spandex would be.

"Nonsense. When every second counts, you'll be glad of it." She ate a mouthful of her chicken piccata. "Any particular colors in mind? I'm thinking something maybe in red. Maybe blue. Or black."

Clark shook his head. "Not black. I don't want it to look like I'm trying to hide anything. And not white either."

"Of course not. The dirt and blood stains would be a bear to keep trying to get out, if you plan on helping people in trouble," Martha scoffed lightly.

"I need something distracting. Something that will make it impossible for people to imagine the guy in the costume wearing anything else. Kind of like...remember the old cartoons I used to watch? In every episode, the main character would wear the same thing, so it was hard to imagine them suddenly wearing a different outfit." He was more thinking out loud than anything else.

But Martha seemed intrigued. "Something cartoonish could work," she mused. "I'll swing by one of those big craft stores tomorrow and pick up some material."

"I'll fly home and get your sewing machine," Clark volunteered.

"Thanks, honey. That will help a lot."

Clark shook his head. "No, thank *you*. For not laughing in my face about this idea."

"There's nothing to laugh at, son," Jonathan said. "You know we'll back you up one hundred percent, no matter what."
 "Thanks, Dad."

"How's that one fit?" Martha called in the direction of Clark's bedroom. She was bent over the sewing machine, carefully fitting material together.

"The size is right, but the design...uh..."

"Well, for Heaven's sake let me see," she called back.

Clark stepped around the privacy screen he'd picked up during his travels through Japan. His cheeks flooded with heat in his imagined embarrassment.

"It's not quite my style," he said about the leopard print monstrosity he was currently wearing. "I'm trying to become someone new, I'm not trying to become Tarzan."

"That's not what you said when you were six," Jonathan said with a laugh, looking up from the television news. "You practiced that yell for the longest time."

Clark chuckled. "Yeah. I was so disappointed I didn't have a jungle with vines to swing through. I always wanted to 'fly' like he did."

"And now look at you."

"Flying for real," Clark finished for him. "Anyway, Mom?"

She gave him a thumbs down. "Try this one." She handed him something that looked like it was out of a fifties sci-fi movie, all metallic blue and silver.

Clark dutifully pulled the new costume on, but quickly decided against it. Judging from his parents' reactions, they were even less of a fan than he was.

"No," was all his mother said.

Two days passed in this fashion. Martha worked on costumes during the day when she could, or in the early evenings as Clark tried on some of her finished creations. Everyone was starting to get disheartened, even though they all agreed that none of the finished prototypes were right for what Clark was trying to do.

"Maybe this was a stupid idea," Clark called from the kitchen, during a break in costume changes, as Martha finished a few seams to her latest attempt. He used his heat vision to heat a cookie sheet full of frozen mozzarella sticks. "Maybe there is no 'perfect look' for what I'm trying to accomplish. Maybe cartoonish was the wrong way to look at this."

He deftly picked up the scalding sticks with his bare fingers, portioning them out onto plates before heating up the frozen packet of sauce that had come with the snacks. He took them into the living room and settled on the couch next to his father, who was engrossed in an old war movie.

"Careful, they're really hot," he cautioned, before biting into one himself.

"We're getting closer," Martha argued. "I felt like we're just about there." She finished the last of the stitches. "Here, try this one on. Last one tonight, I promise."

Clark sighed tiredly. "Okay," he relented after a minute.

He found himself eating more slowly, however, in an effort to put off trying on yet other potential failure. He was even getting to the point where he was second guessing his idea to create any kind of character whatsoever. Maybe he could just find ways to help from the shadows, like he'd done all over the world.

Martha got up from the sewing machine that had taken over Clark's dining room table. She stretched and moved to the armchair, retrieving the plate of mozzarella sticks Clark had left there for her. She picked one up and blew on it to cool it before taking a bite. Clark could see she was anxious to see if he would like her newest costume attempt and felt guilty for eating so slowly. He finished the last stick and went to retrieve the freshly sewn material from its place, draped over the back of a chair.

"Well?" Martha called a few minutes later, after he'd changed into it at super speed and stood taking in the new look as he stared

at his reflection in the full length mirror in his bedroom.

"I'm not sure," Clark replied.

He could almost hear his mother's silent exasperation.

"Is it the look?" she asked.

"The look? No. The look is fine. It's easily the best one you've made, but..."

"But what?"

"But, seeing it on — even one this good — I'm not sure I can actually go out in public in this," he said, stepping out into the living room. "Well?" he asked as his parents both stopped to appraise the new look.

"Oh, honey, I think we found the look," Martha said.

"It's a bit...revealing," Clark said uncomfortably.

"I was thinking of adding a cape. It'll give you some coverage in the back, plus it will look absolutely majestic, especially when you fly."

"I'm not really looking for majestic," Clark mumbled uncomfortably.

"Nonsense. You want to stand out from the crowd, right? A cape will brand you as someone...new and interesting and unique," Martha said.

"Won't the flying take care of that?" Clark asked weakly.

"Clark, your mother is right. If you really want to go through with this, an outfit like that will do the job," Jonathan offered. "It's just missing something."

"Modesty?" Clark offered in a limp attempt at humor.

"A symbol. Something to announce to the world who you are," Jonathan said. "Martha?" he asked after a slight, thoughtful pause. "Do you remember the S?"

"How could I ever forget?" she asked quietly.

"The S?" Clark asked.

Jonathan nodded. "The night you became our son, your biological mother was wearing this stylized S on her clothing. You had the same S on the clothes and blanket you were in. I don't know what it meant, but it was clearly some identifier."

Clark nodded. "Can you sketch it?" he asked as Martha went back to the sewing machine.

"Mmm-hmm," Jonathan said as he picked up the pad of paper and pen Clark kept near his phone. He quickly sketched the symbol for Clark. "It's a bit rough, but you get the drift," he said.

Clark took the drawing and looked at it. It felt oddly "right" to him. He was drawn to it in some inexplicable way. He couldn't begin to guess at the meaning behind the S, but it was a piece of his mysterious past. He nodded slowly.

"You're right. It's exactly what this suit needs."

"Clark! Open up! I know you have to be home!"

Clark groaned and rolled off the couch as he woke. He was so groggy that he actually hit the floor, where he normally would have caught himself. Still, the impact did serve a purpose. It helped to force him into full wakefulness.

"Clark?!"

"Coming," he called back, nearly forgetting his glasses as he headed for the door. At the last second, he remembered them and put them on. "Lois? What are you doing here at..." He checked the living room clock. "Five-thirty in the morning?"

"I couldn't sleep well. I've been thinking about all those businesses being pushed out. The mom-and-pop shops?"

"Yeah?" Clark asked, losing the battle to a mighty yawn.

"Clark?" Martha called, stepping into the living room, tying her robe tighter. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, Mom. Everything's fine," he replied as Jonathan stepped up behind Martha. "Mom, Dad, this is Lois, my partner at the Planet. And, well, the woman I've been seeing."

"Oh, God, I forgot you said your parents were staying with you," Lois said, blushing. She tucked a sweaty strand of hair back behind her ear. "I'm so sorry. First I barge in here at this hour, then

I don't even look presentable." She gestured to her jogging clothes. "Hi, I'm Lois."

She shook hands with Jonathan and Martha as the introductions were made. Since everyone was already up, and since Lois and Clark had to be at the Planet by eight anyway, the Kents fixed breakfast. Clark hadn't had such a feast in a long while. Eggs, bacon, toast, fruit, sausage, bagels, coffee, hash browns, and freshly squeezed orange juice all materialized on the table as Lois excitedly filled Clark in on the thoughts that had interrupted her sleep and which had brought her to his doorstep so early in the morning. For his part, Clark found himself growing excited about Lois' theory as well, and could scarcely wait to get to work so that they could dive into their research. He was nearly certain they would soon be able to pin things on Luthor.

Still, he was glad of the fact that he didn't need as much sleep as a normal person. He'd been up pretty late working on the costume Martha had designed earlier in the evening. Together, they'd fine-tuned the vibrant blue and red suit, giving it a few highlights of yellow and adding the S that was somehow bound to him. They'd toyed around with where it would go, ultimately deciding on the chest and the back of the cape. The final product hung now in his closet, waiting for him to gather the courage to actually use it.

"Okay, I need to shower and get ready for work," Lois said as she finished her second cup of coffee. "I'll meet you at the Planet?"

"Okay," Clark said, nodding.

"Thanks for the breakfast, Mister and Missus Kent," she said. "It was delicious. And it was really great meeting you. Again, I'm so, so sorry for waking everyone up this morning."

"We're used to being up with the chickens," Jonathan smiled. He took another sip from his mug.

"Maybe, but you're on vacation here," Lois protested.

"Oh, honey, don't worry about it," Martha said. "And please, you can call us Jonathan and Martha," she reminded Lois.

"We're glad we got to meet you," Jonathan added. "We've heard so much about you from Clark, so it was nice to be able to put a face to the name."

"He talks a lot about you too," Lois replied. "I've never met a son so proud of his parents before."

"Why don't you come by again tonight?" Martha offered. "Jonathan's going to be cooking up some steaks and I'm baking an apple pie."

"Sounds delicious. I'll be there," Lois said, grinning, and, from what Clark could see, practically salivating at the thought of a home cooked meal. Even after just a couple of months of knowing her, he knew her diet consisted, for the vast majority, of take-out.

"Thanks, Mom, Dad," Clark said.

"I really should head out," Lois said, throwing a glance to the clock. "I'd jog back, but I'm not sure that's possible after such a hearty breakfast. And getting a cab at this hour... See you later, Clark?"

"See you later," he confirmed.

Lois collected her belongings and headed out, leaving Clark behind with his parents. Already, he missed her. Somehow, even though his parents sat across the table from him, he felt incredibly lonely, as he did whenever he was separated from Lois.

"Does she always make a habit of visiting you at odd hours?" Jonathan finally joked, breaking the fragile silence of the apartment.

Clark chuckled. "That was a first."

His father grinned and chuckled in response. "She's wonderful, Clark."

"She really is," Martha agreed.

Clark felt himself blush. "Yeah, well, we've only been out a couple of times. But she makes me so happy. For the first time, I

can see a future with a woman."

"But...?" Jonathan prodded, sensing Clark's hesitation.

"But...well...it almost feels too good to be true, you know? I find a place where I can finally fit in. I land my dream job. And now I've managed to start dating my dream woman. I can't help but feel like...I don't know. Like something's bound to give, you know? Like something's going to come along and take this all away from me." Clark sighed and drained the last of his coffee. "I'm over-thinking this, aren't I?"

"Maybe just a bit," his mother grinned at him, patting his shoulder.

"I just...what happens, if things get serious between us? She's going to have to know about me. *All* about me. What then? What if she can't handle the fact that I'm...not from here?"

"If she loves you, it won't matter," Jonathan assured him.

"I don't know if that's true, Dad. This isn't like some bad habit I have or some personality quirk that can be overlooked. I'm...for all intents and purposes...a different...species," he lamented.

"Clark!" Martha admonished.

"It's the truth, Mom! You and Dad both said that I'm not..."

"Clark, listen to me," Martha said firmly. "It doesn't matter where you came from. What matters is who you are — one of the best people I know. And, if Lois can't appreciate that..." She shrugged, letting her voice trail off so Clark could fill in the rest on his own.

"I don't know if I can handle a rejection from her," he said quietly.

"Look, son," Jonathan said. Clark looked over to his father. "It's not something you need to worry about yet. Let her get to know you for you, not for your powers or your unique background. If and when the time comes when she finds out or needs to know, well, you can worry about crossing that bridge then. Until then, she'll get to know the real you. And my guess? She'll care about you too much to be bothered by your differences."

"I hope so, Dad. I hope so."

"Lois? CK? Perry wants you," Teddy said as he passed by, making a beeline for the darkroom.

"Thanks," Clark said, nodding at the older photographer.

Lois huffed in annoyance as she clicked the 'save' icon on her computer. She and Clark had been probably minutes from finishing their article. She pushed away from the desk, letting her chair roll back a few inches before standing. Clark stood from his own chair and wheeled it back over to his own desk. He stretched a little, feeling a release of tension as a few things popped in his back. It felt good and he couldn't stop a small smile from crossing his lips. Without a word, he and Lois made their way to Perry's office.

"Chief?" Clark asked as he knocked on the door frame, sticking his head in through the open doorway. "You wanted us?"

"Yeah, come on in, you two."

"What's up?" Clark asked.

"Come in, close the door," Perry said, waving them in.

The lights were low in his office. A bottle of aspirin stood open, next to a half-full glass of ice water. His head was in his hands and, despite the low lighting, Clark could see the pallor of Perry's skin.

They did as they were told, with Clark gently shutting the door behind them. "Something the matter, Chief?"

"You could say that. Ever had a headache so bad you wanted to die?"

Lois winced. "Once or twice."

Clark grabbed a pad of paper from Perry's desk and jotted a few quick notes. "If the aspirin doesn't work, try these," he said, putting the pad back down.

"What are they?" Perry asked.

"Just some home remedies I've heard people swear by in my travels."

Perry grunted an acknowledgement.

"What's up, Chief?" Clark asked, cutting right to the chase. The sooner they knew what Perry needed them to do, the sooner they could leave him be to hopefully feel a little better.

"I've got an assignment for you two. High priority."

"What is it?" Lois asked, turning serious.

"The mayor's daughter is missing."

"What?" Lois and Clark both said together.

Perry nodded, steepling his fingers together. He looked troubled. "From what I gather, he took the family on a weekend camping trip, you know, before the weather turns too cold. The first night, the little girl must have wandered off. Her grandmother and the family dog are missing too. It's been twenty-four hours now since they were reported as missing. There's a search party forming up at the campgrounds. I want you two to cover it. Take Jimmy with you."

Clark could see that Lois was both horrified at the thought of the missing child and older woman, but also less than enthused about covering such a "soft" news story. But his pulse had skyrocketed. A child lost in the woods in even the balmy late September they were enjoying would be at great risk — dehydration, hunger, hypothermia when the overnight temperatures plunged.

Now would be the perfect time to unveil the still-unnamed character he and Martha had created.

For months, he'd debated about bringing the Spandex clad hero to life. For months, he'd always found his courage fleeing him when he made ready to introduce the alien to the world. He knew in his heart that there would never be any going back from that. Once the world met his alter-ego, he could never make the people forget that a super-powered alien lived amongst them. Even if he made only one rescue as the caped avatar of his powers, the world would always remember, and maybe even search for the hero.

There would be no putting that cat back into the bag, once it got out.

But now Clark was suddenly filled with resolve. He felt neither eager nor apprehensive about exposing his super side to the world. He felt oddly calm and very sure of himself.

"We're on it, Chief," he said, conviction in his voice.

"We'll check in with you later," Lois promised.

Perry didn't respond with anything more than a gruff noise of acknowledgement in his throat. Lois and Clark left his office without another word, making a beeline for their desks.

"Jimmy, grab your bag," Clark said as he approached the younger man. "We have an assignment. Perry wants you with us." He picked up his light jacket and shrugged into it while shutting his computer down.

Jimmy grabbed the camera bag from the floor. He reached into a drawer and threw a handful of extra rolls of film into the bag. He often joked about his tendency to travel like a "pack mule," but Clark had yet to see the young photographer ever be unprepared in any way, shape, or form.

"What's the assignment?" he asked, slinging the bag over one shoulder.

"We'll explain in the car," Lois said, digging her car keys out from her purse. "Come on."

It took nearly two hours to get to the campgrounds, between construction on the road, the light traffic, and the location of the place. Lois cursed under her breath most of the way. The trip should have taken a little over an hour. Clark felt sorry for all the roadwork crews they passed. Had Lois possessed heat vision, they would have been nothing more than piles of smoldering ash. But, finally, they pulled off the main road, the Jeep bouncing down the

rutted dirt road to the grass-covered parking area. The place was almost completely filled with cars. Clark could only assume they belonged to people who were helping with the search party. Judging from the knots of people standing around, he thought he was probably right.

"There," he said, pointing out an empty space where the Jeep would fit.

Lois expertly pulled the vehicle into the spot and threw it into park. "Let's do this," she said with conviction in her voice.

Clark mentally smiled to himself. As soon as Perry had mentioned that a child was missing, Lois' entire outlook on the assignment had changed. She was determined to help find the missing seven year old. He retained his silence though, and climbed out of the car.

The three walked over to the nearest group of people, ready to aid in the search, but also ready to take statements and gather their information for their article. Jimmy hung back just a little, snapping photos of the people who were slowly getting themselves organized. The very air crackled with expectancy and an eagerness to get started. Clark felt his muscles growing taut with anticipation as he mentally tried to figure out how and when he could best slip away, unseen, to take on the role of the Spandex clothed character he'd created.

I really should have thought up a name for him, he thought to himself in a wry manner, as he craned his neck this way and that, trying to take in all of the details of the scene.

He jotted some notes down in his notebook, more for Lois' benefit than for himself. He tried to stretch out his hearing, to see if he could pinpoint a direction to start his search, but there were too many bodies around and far too much noise. Voices, heartbeats, coughing, the barking of search dogs, new vehicles bumping their slow way into the parking area all deafened him. There was no way he could get a lock on the missing child's location — or that of the dog or grandmother. He sighed to himself.

"What's the matter?" Lois asked, picking up on his sigh.

"Nothing," he said, shrugging. "Just anxious to get underway. Every minute we spend mulling around here, that little girl is in danger."

Lois nodded in response, her mouth twisting into a frown. "I know."

Clark craned his head to the heavens, squinting against the brilliant sunlight. He could smell a storm brewing. He only hoped the search party found those who were missing before the storm could break.

As if in reply to their concerns, the Chief of Police climbed up on a broken stump of some long dead and toppled oak tree. He held a bullhorn in one hand to address the crowd with, giving them instructions on how they were to carry out the search. Several other officers handed out sheets of paper to everyone gathered — a simple, one page description of those missing, complete with photos. Clark took the paper looked it over.

Lena — sixty-four years old, salt-and-pepper hair, blue eyes, and the beginning stages of dementia. Last seen wearing a heavy red sweat suit. Katie — seven years old, blonde with green eyes, last seen wearing pink fleece pajamas featuring several Disney princesses. Link — ten years old, German Shepherd mix with markings that were reminiscent of a Doberman, approximately fifty pounds, red collar with his identifying information on a bone shaped tag.

Clark instantly committed the information and images to memory.

I'll find you, he swore to them in his mind. *If it's the last thing I do, I'll find you and bring you home.*

"Clark?"

"Huh?" he asked, pulled from his inner thoughts by Lois' voice.

"Which team did you want to join?" she asked, her tone indicating that she'd asked him more than once.

"I think we should split up," he said, coming to a sudden decision.

He had to get away from Lois if he had any chance at all of changing into his other persona. It was the only way he stood a chance of being able to get away from everyone without being noticed.

"It's the best way we can cover the most ground," he quickly added. "The three of us can each go in a different direction. That way, when everyone is found, we have a good chance of at least one of us being there to witness it first hand and get all the facts."

"Good point," Jimmy said, checking his camera and slipping the strap around his neck. "I'm with CK on this one. In fact," he added, throwing a glance around, "I'll cover that group over there."

Lois followed his gaze and cracked a half-smile. "You mean the group with the hot brunette in the teal windbreaker?"

Jimmy blushed in response.

"Thought so," Lois said, her smile widening a little. "Go on. But *try* to focus on the story?"

"You got it," he said with a mock salute before heading toward the group in question.

"I'll take that group," Clark said, nodding toward the knot of people being lead by a young man in a red plaid jacket. "See you later?"

"So long as you don't get lost out there," she teased.

"Ha!" Clark mock-laughed. "I should be warning *you* not to get lost, little Miss City Girl."

"I had my Girl Scout badge in navigation while you were still learning how to plant corn, Farm Boy," she replied, her eyes twinkling in amusement.

She didn't give him a chance to respond before walking off. Clark watched her go for a minute, then strode over to the search group he'd selected. He pretended not to notice as two or three college-aged women looked him over. His mind was solely on the task at hand. It was a relief when they finally started moving, the group spreading out as much as possible while maintaining sight lines with each other. Clark purposefully hung back as much as he could while careful not to draw attention to himself. Eventually, he worked himself as far back as he could, then dashed off deeper into the woods, faster than any human eye could follow.

When he was far enough away from everyone, he spun into the costume his mother had painstakingly put together for him. The Spandex was tight against his body. It felt both snug like a comforting hug and like it exposed him to the world. Once again, he wished he'd given this new identity an *actual* identity, complete with a name, but it was too late to contemplate that now. With another careful glance around, he took to the sky.

Once he was high enough, he allowed himself to simply hover. Up above the trees, he finally had some space to stretch out his enhanced senses. He reached out with his hearing, hoping to find a child's voice. He traded his normal vision for his x-ray vision, and scanned right through the trees and other thick foliage. He set off at a hurried, but restrained, pace, flying in ever-widening circles. Below him, he could hear the progress of those on foot as they called out for the missing child, grandmother, and dog.

He soon left the search party far behind. The rushing of a waterfall grabbed his attention, as it drowned out all other sounds with its thundering spill of water. He had only his sight to go on now. Above him, the sunlight dimmed as dark clouds began to roll in. Thunder rumbled in the far distance, but Clark knew that it wouldn't be too much longer before the rain would start. His heart sank and his stomach knotted. He *had* to find them before the storm and its deadly chill could break.

Please, he pleaded with the universe. Let me find them.

Not ten minutes later, his heart skipped a beat. A flash of

movement on the ground near the base of the waterfall. He pulled out of his x-ray vision and telescoped his vision in. It was the dog! Clark swiftly pulled into a landing, carefully landing behind a screen of bushes so as not to startle the creature. Cautiously, he stepped out into the canine's field of vision.

"Hey, boy," he called in a soft voice. "Hey there, Link. It's okay, I won't hurt you."

He stretched his hand out before him, trying to offer his scent to the animal. Link paused and looked at him, his intelligent eyes seeming to size up Clark, as though he were deciding whether or not to trust this strange new, not-quite-human person.

"It's okay," Clark repeated in a soothing tone. "I want to help."

Link studied him for another moment as Clark inched his way closer. Then, suddenly, Link barked at him. Not in warning. Not as a threat. Not playfully. It was a bark that sounded almost pleading. Link whined and pranced around, appearing to want to get Clark's attention.

"Okay, boy. I'm here. Take me to them," Clark said, daring to give up his cautious approach of the dog. "Please, take me to them."

Of course, he knew that, given enough time, he'd find the people he was looking for. But it didn't hurt to get whatever help he could. Link barked again, took five steps away from Clark, then turned and barked at him again.

"Right behind you, Link," he assured the dog.

As if satisfied by Clark's assurance, Link bounced away through the underbrush, Clark hot on his heels. Half a mile away, he came to a small clearing. Relief washed over him as he saw the missing girl and her grandmother, huddled together to ward off the chill that was slowly creeping over the woods as the storm closed in. The grandmother was asleep — Clark could tell from her even breathing and steadily beating heart. The girl looked up at him with wide eyes. She clutched a dirty Cabbage Patch doll in her arms.

"Katie?" Clark called softly.

"Who are you? How do you know my name?" she replied in a quavering voice.

"I'm a friend," he responded automatically. "There's a whole search party looking for you and your grandmother. Link too," he added, giving the dog a grateful pat on the head.

"How'd you find us?" the girl asked, not moving from her spot.

"Link brought me to you. He's a good dog."

"Yeah," she agreed warily.

"Are you hurt?" Clark asked.

"No. Hungry. And cold."

"I'll bet," Clark said, kneeling down on the ground, to seem less imposing to the young child. "If you come with me, I'll bring you back to your mom and dad," he promised. "They've been looking everywhere for you."

"Mommy? Daddy?" the girl asked.

Clark nodded. But the girl continued to stare at him with wide-eyed, unmasked fear. Clark nodded toward her grandmother.

"Is your grandmother okay?"

She shook her head. "Nonna's sick. She's coughing a lot."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Can you wake her up for me? I need to talk to her."

The girl nodded and shook her grandmother gently. The older woman roused slowly, coughing as she sat up. Her eyes, Clark could see, looked glazed and her brow was beaded with sweat from a fever. He fought the natural impulse to frown and instead, maintained a neutral expression for the sake of the child.

"Who? What?" Lena asked, confusion suffusing every part of her words.

"It's okay. I'm here to help," Clark told her.

"Help? Why do we need help?" she replied.

Clark realized the woman wasn't in her right mind. He

recalled that she'd been diagnosed with dementia. That complicated things. He'd hoped that she'd be experiencing a period of clarity when he found her. He quickly ran through his options in his mind.

"Lena? You've gotten lost in the woods. I'm here to help you get home. Can you stay here with Katie while I go get your son?"

"Eddie? You know my Eddie?" she asked.

"Not quite," Clark said with a friendly smile. Then, turning to Katie, "Katie? I'm going to go get your mom and dad. Can you stay here and keep your grandmother company?"

Katie nodded mutely, still regarding him with a healthy dose of "stranger danger."

"Okay," Clark said with a smile. "I'll be right back. I promise."

Slowly, so as not to scare the child or the woman, Clark rose into the air. He only allowed himself to move quickly once he was above the treetops. Then he bolted away, streaking toward the search party, which had closed some of the distance between the parking lot and the place where Clark had found the missing child and grandmother. He slowed a bit as he angled into a landing, directly before the mayor and his wife.

"What the hell?" the mayor, Edward Lombardo, exclaimed in alarm and surprise as Clark touched down.

"Mr. Mayor," Clark said, inclining his head in respect.

"Please, don't be alarmed. I found your daughter and mother. Your dog too," he added.

"Where are they?" Edward asked, taking a threatening step toward Clark. "What have you done with them? If you've hurt them, I swear to God..."

"I haven't done anything," Clark said, cutting him off, his hands up in a gesture of pacification. "I heard about the search party for them and decided to help. I found them, thanks to your dog. I can bring you to them, if you'll allow me. They aren't far. Just about a mile and a half from here."

"What are you trying to pull?" Edward asked, his voice dripping with mistrust.

"Nothing," Clark said sincerely. "I just want to reunite you with your daughter and mother. Please, let me help you." He knew it sounded a little like pleading, but it didn't matter. Getting everyone to safety was the only thing that mattered.

Edward hesitated until his wife, Dana, spoke up.

"For crying out loud, Eddie! If you won't go, I will."

"No, no. I'll go. Stay here, where I'll know you're safe," he said, putting his hands on her shoulders and looking her in the eyes. Then, to Clark, "Okay, take me to them...ah..."

"I'm just a friend," Clark said. "It's faster if we fly. Do you mind?"

"Fly?"

"Well, I'll do the flying. All you have to do is let me carry you," Clark said with a slight smile.

Again, indecision hung in the air, until a low, far rumble of thunder threatened the storm to come.

"All right," the mayor conceded, though he sounded nervous.

He allowed Clark to scoop him up in his arms. Clark quickly ascended into the sky, which was growing cloudier. He heard the gasps, comments, explicative language, and sounds of awes from the group of people the mayor and his wife had been with. In particular, he heard Lois' voice as she commented to herself on the bizarre scenario that had just played out before her waking eyes. He tried not to smile.

She hadn't recognized him. At least, she didn't appear to have.

A weight lifted from his shoulders. If Lois didn't recognize him, what chance did anyone else have of connecting the reporter and the superhero? None, to his mind.

Clark sped away to the clearing where he'd left Lena and Katie. The two were still there, and Clark let out a breath of relief over that. He landed swiftly and let the mayor out of his arms. As

soon as Edward's feet hit the ground, he was running to his daughter, hugging and kissing her.

"Katie! Oh my God! Katie! Are you okay? We were so worried about you. What happened? Did that man hurt you?" He reminded Clark of the rapid-fire way Lois often spit out questions when upset or nervous.

"I'm okay, Daddy. Nonna left the camp at night, even though you told us not to go out alone. I went with her. I tried to get her to go back, but she wouldn't until it was too late and I couldn't find the way back. Link found us, but Nonna was tired and went to sleep under a tree. We couldn't get back. He found us and said he would help," she added, pointing at Clark, no longer with fear in her eyes, but gratitude.

Edward turned to Clark. "I don't know who you are, but thank you," he said in a hoarse whisper, as thankful tears rolled down his cheeks. "If it wasn't for you..."

"I'm just glad I could help," Clark cut in gently.

"Who are you?" the mayor pressed again.

"He said he's a friend," Katie said, wiggling out of her father's embrace.

"That he is," Edward agreed.

A low rumble got their attention. Clark looked at the sky, trying to judge how long they had before the storm would reach them. The weather system seemed to be moving slowly, but Clark didn't want to risk it.

"I can fly you back," he offered.

The mayor nodded. "I think that's for the best. Take my mother first. I'll wait here with Katie."

Clark nodded and moved toward the older woman. Gently, he took her in his arms. She smiled weakly and coughed as she automatically put her arms around his neck. Clark rose into the air and swiftly ferried her to the rest of the search party.

"Thank you, young man. It's been a long time since anyone's swept me off my feet," she mused as he set her down on solid ground again.

He smiled at her. "It was my pleasure," he assured her.

Then he was off again, making three more trips — once with Katie, once with the dog, and finally bringing the mayor to the waiting group of people. He noted with relief that paramedics were checking over Lena and Katie, and that someone had given them sandwiches to eat, hot chocolate to drink, and warm blankets to wear draped over their shoulders.

He noted too, how everyone stared at him. He couldn't blame them. Between the eye-catching, distracting costume he wore, and the fact that he could fly, he was something the world had never seen before. Some feigned common politeness and tried not to stare openly. Most didn't bother with the courtesy and openly ogled at him. While it made him self-conscious and be fearful that he'd be recognized, he didn't mind the staring much. He'd learned something important that morning.

He loved being the caped hero.

This trial run of publicly using his abilities in full view of other people had gone exceedingly well. He loved being able to swoop in and help. He loved not having to hide his powers. He loved the feeling that he got inside from knowing that he helped save lives and reunite a family. There was no doubt in his mind. Showing up as the unnamed hero was not a one-time event. This new alter-ego was now an indelible part of what made up Clark Kent.

Questions flew at him as the little girl and her grandmother were carefully checked over. He tried to answer them as best he could, but the impromptu press conference soon became an overwhelming assault of questions.

"Who are you?"

"Where are you from?"

"What does the S mean?"

"How can you fly?"

"How'd you find the missing people?"

Clark did his best, though he was always aware of what Lois and Jimmy were doing. He knew that, at any moment, they could realize that Clark was missing. A sense of urgency filled him, and he apologized to the crowd as he retreated from the scene, flying up into the heavy clouds and speeding away, just enough to cause a sonic boom. Then he circled back, a bit more slowly, and came into a landing behind three maple trees growing cheek-by-jowl. Most people had their backs to the trees, still looking up into the sky where the benevolent stranger had risen into the heavens.

"Clark? Where have you been?" Lois asked, as he approached her.

"What do you mean?" he asked innocently. "I've been here." Technically speaking, he wasn't lying.

"No, you weren't. I was just looking for you," she argued.

"Lois, relax," Jimmy interjected. "Maybe nature gave CK a call that he just couldn't put off."

"Oh, gross," Lois complained. "Men!" She began to stalk off. "Get some reactions from the people about that flying guy, would you?" she called over her shoulder. "I want to be out of here before it starts raining."

As Jimmy moved off to snap a few final photographs of the scene, Clark grinned to himself. Oh yes, this new hero was here to stay.

"Listen up, folks!" Perry commanded as he paced the conference room. The idle chatter died immediately. "That's better. Okay, let's get straight to it, shall we? Two weeks ago, a man *flew around* the woods outside of Metropolis and found the mayor's missing daughter and mother. Two whole weeks ago. Two full weeks without us getting one, single interview or even a measly quote. Two entire weeks where that same man has made multiple other rescues around Metropolis, let alone the world. Does anyone *else* see the problem here?"

"It's not like we haven't been trying," Lois protested. "Superman's not exactly easy to track down."

Superman.

The name still felt weird to Clark. It seemed somehow pompous, to think of himself as a "super" anything, even if his powers did fit the word. Granted, it had been Lois who'd been the one to brand the mysterious rescuer as "Superman," but it was still unsettling to hear the name on a daily basis. Although, he had to admit, the world's reaction to Superman had been nothing short of welcoming and loving. Oh, sure, there were small pockets of people who were fearful of the alien amongst them. Clark couldn't blame them for their worry in the least. He supposed he might be uneasy too, if he'd seen someone with such outrageous abilities. To be honest, he'd been afraid of *himself* back when his powers had first manifested.

"Oh, well now, that should sell lots of papers," Perry said. He spread his hands as if displaying the paper's headlines. "Daily Planet *tries* to track down Superman. Superman remains elusive. Read the exclusive here! Blank pages inside where Superman's interview ought to be."

"Maybe he's shy," Jimmy suggested.

"Shy? And wearing that outfit?" Cat Grant purred dreamily. "Not a chance."

"Maybe he's afraid of being found," Clark offered. "Maybe all of this is a bit...I don't know...overwhelming."

"Please," Lois said, giving him a patented eye-roll. "He *had* to have known what a sensation his appearance would be."

"I'd hate to agree," Cat said, "but I agree. They don't call them tights for nothing."

"All I know is, I want to track him down for my own reasons," Betty said with a smirk. Laughter rippled through the rest of the conference room.

"Not if I find him first," Cat swore.

"Please," Clark heard Lois mutter under her breath.

"Okay, okay, let's get back on track," Perry ordered. "We need to get to work. What would draw Superman out, so that we have a chance to talk to him?"

"A rescue," Allison offered.

"Yeah, great, only he's made a few other rescues since he first appeared and still hasn't stuck around long enough to talk to the press," Marco countered.

"Well, what do *you* suggest?" Allison retorted. "Shining a big light into the sky to signal him?"

Marco just huffed, but didn't otherwise respond.

"Maybe we ought to dangle Lois out a window or something," Jeff teased. "It seems like this Superman guy is constantly showing up on stories she's reporting on."

"That's not funny, Jeff," Lois growled before Clark could.

"Maybe I ought to bloody your nose enough to require Superman to come whisk you off to the hospital."

"Enough!" Perry roared. When the room settled back down a bit, he nodded. "Better. Now, I want everyone on this, day and night, until Superman and the Daily Planet are synonymous, got it?"

"Perry!" Lois cried out. "That's not fair! I found him, he should be mine to follow up with. That's always been the rule."

"Uh, I was there too," Clark gently reminded her.

She waved him off — Mad Dog Lane on the scent of a big story. "Yeah, sure, whatever. The point is, no one else should be on this one."

Perry shook his head. "A story like this is too huge and important. The typical rules don't apply. Someone get out there and *get me Superman!* Meeting adjourned."

"Ugh, I can't believe this!" Lois muttered angrily as the conference room emptied. "Superman should be *mine*."

"Ours," Clark reflexively corrected.

Lois sighed. "I guess. It's just...this is the kind of story I've waited my entire life for. Something so huge, so important that I'll finally have a shot at the Pulitzer." She sighed again. "I guess...ugh!" she growled. "I'm being selfish. You've probably dreamed about the Pulitzer too."

Clark shrugged as he stood. "It would be nice," he admitted, "but it's never really been a priority for me. What we do everyday — helping people, putting bad people in prison — this is what my dream has always been."

Being Superman helps too, his mind whispered.

Lois rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "Goody two-shoes," she joked.

"Blame my parents," he retorted with a smile as they left the conference room.

"Ready to leave?" Clark asked, stretching and trying to suppress a yawn. A few joints in his back and shoulders popped, bringing a sense of relief.

Lois shook her head. "I've got to stay and finish this article," she said, gesturing to her computer monitor. Though they were partners, they did still have their own occasional solo articles.

"I can stay, if you'd like," he offered.

She shook her head again. "Go home. There's no reason why we both need to hang around here. I'll call you later tonight, okay?"

"Okay," he hesitantly agreed. "Can I at least bring you back some dinner or something?"

"No, but thanks. I'll probably just order some take-out in a bit."

"Are you sure?" he pressed.

"Yeah. I'm good. I've done the same thing a hundred times before."

"Okay. I'll talk to you later." He crossed the aisle and gave her a quick kiss on the lips.

She smiled as she pulled out of the kiss. “Goodnight, Clark.”
“Night, Lois.”

He hated leaving her like that, but he always knew enough not to press the issue. Lois was used to doing things her way. And, though they were dating now, he knew that she still needed time to adjust to having someone there who cared so much about her that he’d willingly sacrifice his entire night just to sit next to her while she worked. A call for help caught his attention, however, making it much easier for him to leave the bullpen.

It wound up being a short rescue — just putting a stop to a mugging a few blocks over from the Planet. He took the young victim to the hospital to have a gash on his arm stitched closed — a gift from the mugger just as Clark made his appearance — and dropped the mugger off at the local police station. Three more rescues kept him busy for the next hour, all of them thankfully devoid of fatalities. Then, while still in the suit, he flew back to the Planet to check on Lois with his x-ray vision. She was still there, typing away, an open carton of Chinese food sitting next to her. He watched as she grabbed her chopsticks, pulled out a few lo mein noodles, ate them, then stuck the chopsticks upright in the container.

Clark took a deep breath, trying to make up his mind. Two days had passed since Perry had tasked everyone with snagging the Superman exclusive. Two days of an internal debate. Should he take the leap and break his silence to the press? Or should he keep his silence in order to try and protect his true identity? Ultimately, his father had persuaded him to give an interview.

“It’s safer, Clark,” Jonathan had told him the night before, when Clark had flown home for dinner. “The longer you refuse to speak, the more people are going to speculate. And the longer they do that, the more misinformation about you will circulate. Misinformation can lead to a lot of fear that make take you years to overcome. If you want the public’s trust, you have to be transparent with them. Or, well, as transparent as possible.”

The talk with his father had reinforced everything that Clark had already known on a deeper level. Still, it had been good to have his instincts reaffirmed. Of course, it hadn’t even been a question who would be the one to get the interview. Lois was the only person he trusted with Superman’s press debut.

He flew down and let himself in through the large window of the bullpen, so quietly that no one noticed. Not that many people were left at this time of the night. Just Lois, Perry — engrossed in singing along with WLEX-radio’s “Non-Stop Elvis Hour,” and a few members of the janitorial staff. He landed next to Lois’ desk with a whoosh, startling her out of whatever she was writing on her computer.

“Hello, Lois,” he greeted her with a smile.

“Superman!” she gasped, hastily trying to swallow down a bite of the rice she’d just put into her mouth when he’d arrived.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt your dinner,” he apologized. It was true enough. He’d known she was eating, but he also hadn’t wanted her to be left waiting, even if she didn’t know he was en route to give her the interview she sought. “I can come back, if you’d like.”

“Oh, no, please stay,” she said quickly, as though in a rush to convince him to stay before he could fly off. “I was just picking, really.”

Clark gave her an encouraging smile. “Well, if you’re sure...”

“Oh, I am,” she rushed to assure him. “Egg roll?” she offered. Clark chuckled. “Thank you, no.”

“Oh...do you not, uh, eat?” she asked with a blush.

“I don’t need to, but I like to,” he clarified. “In fact, I enjoy most foods. But, uh, not egg rolls.” He smiled.

Lois smiled shyly. “So, uh, what can I do for you?” she asked, tucking a stray wisp of hair behind her right ear.

“Well,” Clark said, fighting down his nervousness, “I was thinking...people are going to want to know about me — who I

am, what I stand for. I’ve just been sort of...wrapped up...in rescues lately that I haven’t really thought about speaking to the press. But I need to. I want *you* to tell the world about me, Lois.”

“You...you know my name?” she asked, star-struck incredulity in her voice and shining in her eyes.

Clark smiled again. He’d used her name in greeting her, of course, but he guessed it hadn’t registered with her until now that he knew who she was. “Of course I do, Lois. I’ve been following your work for a very long time now. That’s why I trust you to tell my story.”

“You...read my work?”

“All the time. I’ve always been very impressed with your ability to get to the truth.”

“Really?” Clark could tell she was working overtime to keep the appearance of calmness.

“Really,” he assured her. “It’s why I know you’ll do my interview justice.”

“You have my word on that,” she swore. “So, uh, would you like to take a seat?”

He nodded once. “That would be good.”

He turned and took the seat from his own desk, realizing belatedly what he’d done. But Lois didn’t seem to notice. Feeling even more uneasy, he sat, mindful not to look like his normal self at all. Lois, in the meantime, had pulled up a blank document on her computer.

“Mind if I take notes?” she asked.

He gestured to the computer. “Be my guest.”

“Okay.” She smiled — that brilliant, completely disarming smile that Clark had no defense at all against. “Before we start, I just want to say thank you for trusting me with your story.”

He smiled. “So, what is it that you want to know?”

“Everything.”

When the interview hit the newsstands the next morning, Lois was hailed as a hero. Even Cat had to give her some respect. Lois had managed to do what every other reporter in the world had failed to do — she’d broken Superman’s media silence and presented to the world exactly who the mysterious new hero was. Everyone wanted to know how she’d managed to score the biggest story of the decade, and Clark had to give her credit when she’d admitted — well, maybe *boasted* a little — that Superman had specifically sought her out for his formal introduction.

Watching her chatting with a few of their co-workers that morning, smiling from ear to ear, Clark felt good. *He’d* managed to give Lois such great joy. That was what mattered most to him. Lois’ happiness. He just wished he could tell Lois about himself. Having to hide who he was from the world was easy. Hiding from Lois was excruciating.

Not now, he reminded himself.

Lois had been practically salivating over Superman the night before. He didn’t think he’d endangered his relationship with Lois as Clark, but tiny seeds of doubt had taken root anyway. If she knew that he pretended to be Superman in his spare time, would she love him for his powers? Or would she be able to see past that to the man he truly was? The man he was working hard to show her that she was. He couldn’t risk wrecking the only good relationship he’d ever had in his life.

You’ll wreck it eventually. You can’t keep her in the dark forever. And, let’s face it, it’ll be better if you tell her and she doesn’t have to figure it out on her own.

He sighed.

“Everything okay, Clark?”

“Huh? Oh,” Clark said, coming out of his thoughts. “I’m fine, Chief. Just got a little lost in thought.”

“You know something, son? I’ve known Lois since she was a college kid looking for an internship. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her this happy before,” Perry said, never taking his eyes off Lois.

"This Superman thing sure has her excited, huh?" Clark replied, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

"Oh, yeah, sure. But that wasn't what I was talking about. I had my reservations about having two of my reporters dating. But I have to admit, you've done her a world of good in the short time you two have been together."

"You think so?" Clark asked, brightening a bit. "I mean, I haven't done anything... I don't know... special or anything."

"Trust me," Perry said, giving him a pat on the shoulder. "Oh, uh, by the way, nice work on cracking the rash of car thefts. I just finished going over your article."

"Thanks, Chief. It feels good to have those suspected Intergang members behind bars. I just wish I could figure out who the head of the organization is, so Lois and I could make sure he or she goes to jail too."

"Knowing you two? You'll figure it out sooner or later," Perry assured him. "I know you haven't been here all that long, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit that you two are the best damn reporters I've ever seen."

"That means a lot to me, Perry."

Perry nodded and wandered off toward the break area, making a beeline for the bagels and coffeemaker. Lois approached, filling the space Perry had just vacated.

"Incredible article," Clark praised her.

"Oh, thanks," she replied, grinning. "I can't believe you missed it. It was amazing. It was like he knew that Perry was on our cases to get the interview. I'm still kind of in shock that, out of all the reporters in the world, he picked *me* to be the one to tell his story."

"I don't find it hard to believe at all," Clark said, leading the way back to her desk.

"Really?"

"Lois, why would he go to anyone else? You're the best, right? Why would he want the second best to, well, introduce him to the world?"

She grinned. "You know what? You're absolutely right," she said with a laugh.

"Of course I am," he shot back playfully. "In all seriousness, Lois, Superman would have been an idiot to ask anyone else to handle the interview. I know that, if I were relying on someone else to tell the world about me, you'd be the only one I'd want to do it."

"You're just saying that because I'm going out with you," she teased.

"No," he said with a serious shake of his head. "It's not. Lois, I've been following your career since probably when you first started as a full reporter. No matter where in the world I've been — and you know I've traveled a lot since college graduation — I've always been able to find a copy of the Planet and read your work."

"You know, Superman said he follows my work too," Lois mused.

"Then he's a smart man," Clark replied.

"Maybe," she answered with a shrug. "So, what's on your agenda for the day?" She sat down at her desk and moved her mouse just a bit to get out of screensaver mode.

"A few smaller articles that Perry asked me to crank out. The MPD's graduation ceremony, a birthday party for Esther Williams, Metropolis' oldest resident, and a piece about adopted men and women meeting their birth parents."

She nodded dismissively. "I did that one four years ago. High expectations, crushing disappointment, resentment, the whole nine yards." Boredom rang in her voice.

"Not always," Clark countered. "Sometimes they turn out well, these meetings."

"I don't know. If I'd been adopted, I don't think I'd want to meet my birth parents. I mean, if they didn't want me in their life,

why should I want them in mine?"

"What if they had a really good reason for giving you up?" Clark asked. "Like a debilitating illness or they were living in poverty and couldn't provide for you or maybe they were just so young that there was no way they were ready to raise a child?"

The hurt in his voice must have broken through his efforts to bury it. Lois' look softened.

"Hey, did I say something wrong?" she asked, reaching for him.

"It's nothing," he said.

She lifted his chin to force him to look at her. "It's not nothing, Clark. Tell me."

He sighed. "Okay. It's not a big deal, okay, but, well, I'm adopted. And I wish I had the option to decide if I wanted to try to find my birth parents."

"Why don't you?" she asked, genuine curiosity in her voice. "I could help you. I know a guy who has connections..."

"No, Lois," he interrupted her. "Thanks, but no."

"Why not?"

"I wasn't adopted through the system. No one contacted my parents and said 'hey, want to adopt my baby?' I was a foundling, left on my parents' doorstep. We have good reason to believe that my birth parents are both dead."

"Oh, God, Clark! I'm so sorry," she gasped.

He shook his head. "I'm not. I have the greatest parents I could hope for. I've long since come to terms with the fact that my parents will forever be a mystery. Anyway, I was thinking we could go for Mexican food tonight."

"Nice topic switch, Farm Boy," Lois grinned. "But I'd only go for it if it's Aztec Temple."

"You've got yourself a deal," Clark said, his grin broadening.

Two months passed from Superman's initial debut, when he'd brought home the mayor's lost mother and daughter. The world embraced their hero. Even those who'd initially been wary of the super-powered being had come around. Most people loved the man in blue. Oh, sure, there were still those who fretted about the alien in their midst and those whose criminal activities made them outright hate him. But they were now few and far between.

Clark felt fantastic about his alter ego.

It was like a natural high, each time he made an otherwise impossible rescue.

He worried only about how his role as Superman was affecting his relationship with Lois. Too often, he had to dash out on her with a flimsy excuse or none at all, when someone called for his aid. And Lois, for her part, though Clark could tell that she still liked him, became more and more intrigued with the Man of Steel. Clark couldn't blame her for that. He supposed Superman would be attractive — who wouldn't be drawn to a man who could make your every whim a reality? Especially when that man befriended her while her boyfriend often appeared to run away, even in the midst of a serious conversation.

He had also belatedly realized that he'd allowed Superman to become too close a friend to Lois. He was cordial to all members of the press of course, but Lois was different. She alone was allowed into Superman's inner circle. She alone was allowed to be a true friend. And Clark knew, without a doubt, that she prided herself on that status and that it only fanned the flames of the crush she had on him.

When he let himself think about the fact that he'd complicated his relationship with Lois, even inadvertently, it made him feel sick to his stomach. But telling her his secret so early on in their friendship and relationship terrified him even more.

Superman and the Daily Planet became synonymous, just as Perry had wanted. It wasn't even a conscious effort on Clark's part. It had everything to do with the exclusives Lois and Clark snagged, thanks to Clark's inside information, and how close he'd

allowed Lois and the superhero to become. Of course, it only made Perry expect even better articles from all of the Planet's staff. They had a reputation to maintain, after all. Clark didn't mind in the least. He loved the challenge and appreciated that Perry trusted him on the important stories — something no other editor had ever done before.

Clark loved the new routine of his life. Solving cases at work with Lois. Saving lives as often as he could as Superman. Taking Lois out on dates and learning all there was about her. It seemed like nothing could break the perfection he'd finally achieved.

He should have known it was too good to last.

"Everyone, stop what you're doing!" a strange man declared one afternoon, just as Lois and Clark were settling back down at their desks after a lovely lunch date.

Clark looked up from his computer monitor to see armed men in military fatigues taking up positions around the newsroom. His heart leapt up into his throat and his stomach tightened into knots. He swiftly scanned the room.

No escape, he thought. No way to get Superman in here.

"What in the name of Sam Hill is going on here?" Perry roared as he stormed out of his office. "Who the hell do you think you are, disrupting my newsroom?" he demanded.

"Jason Trask," a man said, stepping forward. It was the man who'd ordered the bullpen to a halt. "Bureau Thirty-Nine. I have a warrant issued by Federal Court." He raised his voice. "Everyone back away from your desks, hands where I can see them."

"Now wait just a cotton-picking minute," Perry demanded. "You can't just barge in here and disrupt my entire newsroom like this." He stabbed his finger violently in the direction of the bullpen.

"If you have a problem, you can take it up with Washington," Trask said dismissively. With a sharp hand signal, he sent several of his men to secure the room. "Moore, Schwartz, the computers," he ordered.

"I'm not following," Perry continued. "What, exactly, are you here for?"

"Superman."

"Superman?" Perry repeated, scoffing. "You'd do better looking for him at some disaster or another."

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Trask asked. "I *know* he's not here right now. But I also know the Daily Planet seems to be bosom buddies with that alien creature. Smart money says that at least one of you has a way of contacting him. In particular, a reporting team consisting of Lois Lane and Clark Kent."

"Lois and Clark?" Perry asked. "What do they have to do with anything?"

"They have *everything* to do with things. Every time Superman's in the area, *they* get the exclusive, don't they? Come on, you're the editor here. Didn't it ever occur to you that it's not natural for two people to consistently stumble across the story?"

"My reporters are the best," Perry countered gruffly. "They work their butts off to get the story."

"*Wrong!*" Trask snapped. "They *must* have a connection to Superman. Somehow, they know his every move."

Oh, God, Clark mentally groaned as his stomach churned in fear. This nutcase wants Lois and me.

"Oh, Miss Lane! Oh, Mister Kent! Come out, come out, wherever you are!" Trask taunted.

We need to get out of here. But...how? he wondered, desperately scanning the room for some way to slip away unnoticed.

Trapped.

Clark started to feel his heart rate picking up speed. Beads of nervous perspiration

began to gather on his forehead. He felt his body flush cold with fear. He tried to force himself to remain calm and unaffected and put on the mask of detachment that Superman was famous for.

There was no way he was going to give these strangers any reason to suspect him of any kind of close relationship to the Man of Steel.

Relax, Clark, his inner voice tried to tell him. They don't know anything. They can't. Play it cool and they'll leave you alone.

He swallowed hard and took a steadying breath, hoping that his inner voice was right. He attempted to force his pulse to slow, but his efforts were in vain. He looked to Lois. She didn't look nervous. She looked livid.

That's my Lois, he thought with a mental grin at her feistiness.

"Come with us," two burly men said as they each grabbed Lois and Clark by an arm.

"Hey! Hands off, you human wall!" Lois demanded as she jerked her arm out of the man's hands.

Clark shot her a look that she either didn't see or ignored. She was right about one thing though. The man who was escorting her *did* sort of resemble a wall with his huge body.

"Perry! You can't let them do this to us!" she called out.

"Don't you worry, Lois. I'll get this straightened up faster than you can say 'blue suede shoes,'" Perry tried to assure her. Clark only hoped that was true.

They were dragged off to Perry's office and left alone, with the "human wall" — as Lois had so aptly named him — standing guard, ensuring that they would not escape. Once inside, Lois turned to Clark.

"Lunatics! What do they want with us?"

"You heard them. They think we can contact Superman for them," Clark replied bitterly, his mind still churning as fast as he could fly.

"What do you think they want with him?"

Clark frowned. "I'm sure it's nothing good. Did you see the weapons on them?"

Lois nodded. "Yeah." She shuddered a little. "I don't get it. Why not just call for help to attract his attention?"

"Insurance," Clark said simply. "Or, at least, they think so. They think we have some way of making sure he'll show up."

"I wonder what will happen if he does," Lois mused, staring out to the bullpen.

"I worry about what will happen if he *doesn't*," Clark confided, knowing that Superman couldn't possibly make an appearance.

"He'll show," Lois said confidently.

"I wouldn't count on it, Lois," Clark cautioned. "I mean, it's a big world. He could be anywhere."

Lois huffed in annoyance and crossed her arms as she threw herself down onto Perry's plaid couch. "Why Superman? Why now?" she mused aloud, more to herself than to Clark, judging by the sound of her voice. "He's been around for what? Two months already?"

"I wish I knew," Clark replied, sitting down next to her. "All I know is, I don't like it. No one with good intentions would storm the Planet armed to the teeth. Superman is in danger."

"Hey, you two," Perry said, slipping into his office and closing the door behind him.

"Perry, what's going on?" Lois demanded. "Who are these guys? What do they want? Why Clark and me?"

Perry waved his hands in a gesture of pacification. "I talked to that Trask fellow. They just want to talk to you about Superman... ask you some questions and the like. Said it's a matter of national security."

"What?! Are they afraid he might accidentally do some good deeds or something? Maybe do some charity work or save some more lives or something? Stop a war or two? Pluck a little girl's cat out of a tree? Come on, Perry! You *can't* believe Superman's some kind of threat!" Lois fumed.

"No, I don't," Perry said evenly. "That's why I told them to shove their warrant where the sun don't shine. But, I made a

phone call to his superior officer. I hate to say it, but it looks like they're legit. My hands are tied. I'm sorry."

Clark sighed. "Don't be, Perry. Things happen. Did they say what they wanted to ask us?"

"No," their boss said, shaking his head. "Their lips are tighter than Fort Knox's security."

Clark dragged a hand through his hair in nervousness. "So... what now?"

"I really hate to say it, but I'd let them ask you whatever it is they want to ask. The warrant is real. They'll either make you talk here or in prison, son."

Clark's heart sank. Perry was right. If their orders were real, he wouldn't have a choice but to do whatever it was that was demanded of him. At least if he cooperated here and now, he could control some of the interrogation. So why was every fiber of his being screaming for him to run for his life?

"They, uh, want your computers too," Perry said, clearing his throat.

"Perry! You can't let them! I have private stuff on my computer," Lois protested.

"Don't you back up your hard drive externally?" Clark asked, surprised by Lois' outburst.

"Of course I do! I'm not stupid. But I have really personal stuff on the computer's internal hard drive anyway. Notes for my novel are on there!"

"Your... novel?" This was a new revelation for Clark.

"Never mind about it now," Lois snapped angrily. "This is a total invasion of our privacy!"

"I agree, but what can we do?" Clark asked miserably, sending up a prayer of thanks that he had nothing incriminating about Superman on his computer.

"Nothing at all," Trask said, entering the office. "Come with me."

"Where?" Lois asked, ice in her voice.

"I'm afraid that's confidential. But have no fear, Miss Lane. You'll be returned, safe and sound, once we're done with our conversation. Benson, Rockwell. Escort these two reporters to our vehicle, would you?"

Wordlessly, the two men complied. Lois and Clark were both taken by the arm and guided out of Perry's office, through the bullpen, and out of the building. They were ushered into the back of a military style vehicle and driven to the Metropolis airport, where they were loaded onto a military aircraft. Once aboard, Trask rejoined them.

"Where are you taking us?" Lois demanded again.

"Just a little trip. No big deal," Trask replied, as casually as if he'd taken them down to the corner deli. "We're just going to head out to our facility, to ensure the complete and utter privacy of our conversation."

"We could have done that in the conference room," Lois complained.

"Every wall has ears, Miss Lane."

"What is it, exactly, is it that you want?" Clark asked. "What do you think we can do for you, in regards to Superman? What is it that you're after?"

Trask took a long, deep breath and exhaled it slowly through his nose, as if contemplating answering Clark's question. Finally, he met Clark's hard stare.

"Information, Mr. Kent," Trask said in a quiet, menacing voice.

"Information about *what*?" Clark pressed.

"I need to know everything you know about Superman."

"What makes you think we know anything?" Lois replied. "Yeah, sure, we've covered his activities in Metropolis, but reporters all over the world have been doing the same thing."

Trask didn't answer. One of his men, Colton, by the name Clark could see in the man's nametag, came up and whispered

quietly and swiftly into Trask's ear. Clark used his super hearing to try and listen in, but what he heard was ambiguous at best and he was unsuccessful in learning anything of value. Trask, for his part, only nodded in approval.

The flight was long, every second amplified exponentially by Lois and Clark's worry. Tension filled the air like an unseen poison, weighing down their hearts and tongues. When he could, Clark scanned through the windowless plane's body, hoping to find identifying landmarks to give him some sort of direction. But Trask's vigil over them rarely broke, and Clark had a hard time discreetly using his abilities. He was, however, certain, by the time they landed, that they'd been flown to Nevada. He guessed, from the brief glimpses of the outside world that he'd been able to sneak, and from his memories of flying over America, that they were in the top secret area known best as Area Fifty-One. Of course, he couldn't be sure. He usually didn't fly near the place. The rumors of it being a government facility dealing with alien life forms and technology made the short hairs on the back of his neck stand at attention.

Yes, he was certain now, as he saw a few distinctive landmarks. They were, indeed, in Area Fifty-One.

That, more than anything that had happened so far, chilled him to his very core.

"This way," Trask dictated as they disembarked from the aircraft.

He led them through a simple metal door that was embedded into the very stone of the desert. Beyond, air conditioning cut through the day's warmth and the world outside was forgotten in a tangle of man-made metal passages, tile floors, stairs, and machinery. It felt as though they'd entered a hidden city as they descended further down into the underground bunker.

"Here we are," Trask said at last. He gestured to two doors next to each other. Each was slightly ajar, exposing the tiny rooms beyond the threshold. "Miss Lane, you get door number one. Mister Kent, door number two."

"What do you think you're..." Clark started to ask, just before one of their armed guards shoved him through the open door, closing and locking it once they were both in the room.

"Sit," the guard commanded.

Fuming, and wishing he could just burst out of the room in a show of his extraordinary strength, Clark did as he was told.

Bide your time, he reminded himself. *Find out what these people want before you do anything rash.*

"What is all this?" he asked instead, motioning to the wires and computers and electrodes that were laid out on the room's only table.

"Just standard polygraph equipment," the guard, Rockwell, said as he began to hook Clark up to the machines.

"You can't do this," Clark tried to reason. "Lois and I have done nothing wrong..."

"Enough!" snapped Rockwell. "You'll get to talk soon enough." He touched a couple of fingers to his weapon in an unspoken threat.

Time wore endlessly on in that miniscule, windowless, clock-free room. Clark stretched out his hearing to try and learn more about the compound he and Lois were in. All around him, he heard voices — some casually chatting about sports games or favorite television shows, some issuing commands that meant nothing to him, some whistling tunes as they went about their assigned tasks. He heard nothing of any help to him, so he tried to focus on Lois. But he was too late. He heard the scrape of a chair as Trask stood and left the room, and Lois swearing at the man under her breath.

A moment later, Trask appeared in Clark's own room. He took a seat next to Rockwell, across the table from Clark.

"This is a polygraph machine," he explained. "It's very important that we get to the truth here. I'm going to ask you two questions to begin with. You will answer in the affirmative for

both. We do this to calibrate the machine. Any questions?"

"Why?" Clark asked, growing nervous, despite his best efforts to remain calm. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because we believe that Superman may pose a threat to not only the United States, but to the very world. Now...is your name Clark Kent? Remember to answer 'yes.'"

The cold, emotionless way in which Trask spoke sent a shiver down Clark's spine.

"Yes," he answered.

Trask watched the machine's read-out for a moment, then nodded.

"Are you also Superman? Again, remember that we are looking for a 'yes' answer."

Clark took a deep breath. "Yes."

Trask frowned. "That didn't read as a lie."

Rockwell checked the machine. "Must be a glitch. Let's try it again," he said, fiddling with a dial.

"Again, are you Superman?"

"Yes," Clark answered, slyly blowing the machine's needle so that it read out as a lie.

"There, it's working again," Rockwell said, sitting back a little in his chair.

Trask eyed him coldly. "Good. Now, Mister Kent," he said, turning his expressionless gaze back to Clark. "You and Miss Lane seem to have extraordinary luck in grabbing Superman stories. Tell me, does he contact you in advance and tell you where to be?"

"No," Clark replied honestly.

"Can you contact him?"

"You mean like call him on the phone, or send him an email or something?" Clark asked, buying himself some time.

"In any way possible. Phone, email, telepathy, homing pigeon, *anything*."

"No," he answered, knowing that wasn't really the truth and watching as the needle swayed in response.

"Is Superman an alien?"

Clark took a steady breath. "Maybe."

"Maybe?" Trask arched an eyebrow as he repeated Clark's word.

"I don't know his history, past what he's already told the press. All I know for sure is that he can do things no one else can," Clark responded, feeling an emptiness in his heart over his still-mysterious origins.

"Do you think he is here to cause harm to human beings?"

"No," Clark instantly answered. "I've seen him do too much good."

"Could all of his good deeds be no more than a front? A way to lull us into a false sense of security?"

"No." Another easy to answer truth.

"Do you believe there are more like him out there in the world?" Trask asked.

"I don't know."

I wish I did, he added sadly in his mind, though he'd long ago come to terms with the idea of being the only one like him in all the world.

"Do you consider him a friend?" Trask asked.

"Yes," Clark had to answer honestly. "I mean, I guess so. He's always been nice enough to me. He's a friend to everyone, except, maybe criminals."

And so the line of questioning continued, until even the questions that Clark could answer with complete honesty made him jittery in nervousness. Finally, he was given a reprieve as Trask called for an end to the polygraph test. Clark breathed a sigh of relief as the electrodes and wires were removed from his body.

"And now Lois and I are free to leave?" he half-asked, half-demanded.

Trask looked up from the polygraph's read-out. "Not quite yet. I'm afraid I have a few matters to attend to before anyone goes

back to Metropolis. I have a man waiting outside, who will escort you and Miss Lane to an area where you can wait while I set some things in order."

"You're imprisoning us," Clark guessed.

"Oh, I wouldn't put it that way. Not exactly. More like putting you in holding. You see, Mister Kent," he said, leaning in threateningly, "I don't believe you've told me the whole truth about Superman. You know something. I don't know what, but I'm going to find out. I can promise you that." His voice was low and menacing.

"And Lois?" Clark shot back. "Why are you keeping her here? Or do you think she morphs into Superman in her spare time?" He had to bite back the rest of the words on his tongue. Belatedly, he'd realized that Trask might just be crazy enough to believe such a crazy notion.

"I can't very well send back one nose, obnoxious reporter without her partner, now can I?" Trask cracked a farce of a smile and spread his hands on the table. "No, she'd just try to stir up the media. Better if she stays here with us until I get the answers I'm looking for."

"*What* answers, Trask?" Clark said, exasperated. "We've told you what we know about Superman. What more do you want?"

"I want him here, now," Trask said, his voice like the hiss of a venomous snake.

"For what purpose?"

"That is classified information."

Clark wanted to scream in his frustration. He felt like he was going in circles with Trask. He wondered if he'd be at least able to use his powers to break out of Bureau Thirty-Nine's compound once he was put into holding. With any luck, he would be able to change into Superman and make it look like the hero had tracked Lois and Clark to the desert, only to break them free of their imprisonment. Reluctantly, he allowed himself to be brought into the hallway, where an armed man he hadn't yet seen stood waiting for him.

Braxton, the man's ID badge read.

From the other room, a different man brought Lois out. Clark recognized Benson, the other man who, with Rockwell, had forced them to leave the Daily Planet. Benson passed Lois off to Braxton wordlessly, then spoke to Trask.

"Sir? The boss wants to see you, sir," Benson informed him.

Trask nodded. "On my way. Thank you, Benson." Then, to Braxton, "You know where to go."

Braxton cracked a partial, menacing smile. "Sure do."

He marched them through the underground complex. Clark tried to keep up with the twists and turns, but his mind was racing too fast to be able to concentrate much. He was too busy trying to think of some way to get Lois out of this mess, even if he couldn't get himself out. True, Lois was Superman's closest friend in the short time the hero had been around, but there was nothing she could tell Trask. She knew nothing of any real value to offer the man, but Clark was terrified that Trask was insane enough to hurt her anyway — either because he didn't believe her innocence, or in a twisted attempt to draw Superman in for whatever nefarious purpose he had.

Lois.

He *had* to save her.

It was all his fault she was a part of their current situation. It was his duty to get her safely out of Trask's reach. He loved her too much to even *think* about what would happen if Lois got hurt or killed in Trask's deranged attempt to get to Superman.

"Down this hall," Braxton said after a while.

"Over my dead body," Lois shot back, shoving the man in a vain attempt to get free.

Braxton grabbed Lois and threw her violently against the opposite wall. Clark heard the air whoosh out of her lungs. Braxton raised his gun.

"Trask needs you alive, but he never stated what condition of 'alive' you have to be in," Braxton said as he took aim.

"Don't," Clark said, fear in his voice, his hands before him as if they alone could form a shield that could protect Lois. They could, of course, but neither Lois nor Braxton knew that. He stepped before her, acting as a shield, no longer concerned for his own safety or that of his secret. "Put the gun down."

"Clark, what are you doing?" Lois asked, her own fear rising as Clark stepped directly in front of her.

Clark ignored her and kept his eyes on the man before him. "You don't want to do this."

As if in response, Braxton fired his weapon. The bullet bounced harmlessly off Clark as he shifted his body to further block Lois. The man looked at him in surprise. But the look of shock on his face swiftly turned into a scowl.

"Son of a..." he swore at Clark while slipping a different sidearm from his belt. "You're one of them alien freaks too!"

Clark heard Lois' gasp as he dove for the man's weapon. But Braxton got one shot off. That was all it took. Clark cried out as the bullet tore through his flesh, searing it with an inferno of pain like he'd never imagined possible. The shock of the wound ripped through his body along with the unexpected lance of agony. He hit the floor hard and tried to cradle his injured shoulder. Blood pumped out through the ragged hole in his flesh and he tried to stem the flow of it, only to jerk his hand back as a fresh stab of lightning skewered his body.

"Clark!"

Through a fog of pain, where time seemed to stand still and the world faded away to nothing but the bullet hole in his torso, he heard Lois screaming.

He tried to reassure her, but his tongue felt leaden. His entire being felt like the life was pouring out of his body, faster than his blood could spill. The world around him grew dim around the edges before becoming mere pinpricks of harsh fluorescent lighting. Breathing hurt. Thinking was torture. Closing his eyes against the pain brought fresh agony.

So, this is what pain is like.

It was more of a concept in his mind — a single, glaring thought — than anything he consciously thought.

At least Lois wasn't hit.

Again, it wasn't so much a conscious thought as a searing moment of knowledge.

"Clark? Oh, God! What did you do to him?"

"Lo..." was all he managed to get out.

He was dimly aware of Braxton grabbing Lois and shoving her through the closest cell door. He thought he may have seen another person in that same cell, but his vision was too poor by then to know for sure.

"Clark! Hold on! I'll figure something out!" Lois called as Braxton grabbed him under the armpits and began dragging him down the hall.

Finally, darkness took him and he knew no more.

Inside the now cramped little cell, Jor-El watched the human woman as she fretted over her friend's departure. Oh, but how he hated sharing his prison cell with such a creature! Humans had been nothing but trouble and a source of heartache over the years. How long had it been? Twenty years? Thirty? Too long. Too long being stuck on this miserable, unworthy little rock of a planet. Too long being at the mercy of the pathetic little life-forms that populated this rough, unrefined world.

"What are they doing to him?" Lois wondered aloud for the hundred time as she paced the small, single room cell she'd been roughly shoved into.

Jor-El declined to answer. He'd already tried to calm her down and been unsuccessful — an action that had been more for his benefit than for hers, as he'd grown weary of her incessant

babbling. The fact was, as much as he could try to reassure the young woman before him, his own mind was a wreck with worry for the young man. A young man who, like Jor-El, seemed to be impervious to ordinary bullets. A young man who, like Jor-El, had been helpless against the special guns and green bullets all of the members of Bureau Thirty-Nine kept on them at all times.

His son.

It had to be.

Kal.

Still alive after all these years, and grown into a handsome young man. A man who Jor-El could see himself in. A man who reflected the best parts of Lara.

"Come on, come on," Lois muttered under her breath, her foot tapping impatiently as she leaned against the door, straining for a glimpse of something or telltale sound that would prove to her that Clark was still alive. She whirled on Jor-El. "Why isn't he back yet?"

"How should I know?" Jor-El replied, a little more harshly than he'd intended. God, this Earth-woman was already grating on his last nerve!

"You seem to know these people," Lois shot back.

"Yes, unfortunately I do," Jor-El spit out. "But open your eyes, woman! If you think these people are friends of mine, you're sorely mistaken. I'm no less their prisoner than you are."

That appeared to give her pause. She looked around, sighed, then dropped to sit cross-legged on the floor. She sighed heavily a second time, leaning against the cold cinderblock wall.

"I guess you're right. I'm sorry. I'm just so worried about Clark," she said after a few minutes.

"I am too," Jor-El finally admitted with a sigh.

Lois gave him a funny look. "You? Why?"

"I just...am. You're right about one thing — I know these people. I've been their prisoner for...I'm not even sure how long anymore. The days and years all blend together nowadays." He kept his answer purposefully evasive. How could he possibly trust an Earthling with the suspicion that her friend was his son? Although, she *had* to realize that her friend was no mere human.

"Why you?" Lois asked, seemingly more to herself than to Jor-El. "They want us to get to Superman...but why keep you here?"

Jor-El opted to ignore the question. How could he possibly explain it, even if he wanted to tell this annoying young woman his story?

"Move it, alien scum!" came the gruff voice of a man.

Lois got up with lightning speed and went to the cell door, peering out between the bars of cold steel. Jor-El rose from his seat on the rough cot as well. He could just see as Lionel Watson came around the corner, shoving a worn and sick looking Clark before him. Jor-El could see the heavy shackles on Clark's wrists and ankles, which made the young man shuffle clumsily. But that wasn't the only reason why Clark seemed to be having trouble even standing. Jor-El knew only too well that any member of the Bureau who was having direct contact with a prisoner they suspected of being Kryptonian — so far, the only ones being Jor-El and now his son — always carried a piece of glowing green stone on them, as a precaution.

Proximity to the stone and the exertion of walking was killing Kal.

"Watson!" Jor-El called out, pleading. "Put it away, please! He can't harm you! You know that!"

"Shut up," came the growled response. "Move it, alien!" he said again, directing a kick at the back of Clark's knees.

Clark stumbled and fell. Even Lois could see that his skin was ashen and his breathing labored, and Jor-El heard the sharp intake of her breath as Clark fell. A sheen of sweat shone on Clark's brow and his eyes were full of pain. He grunted as he made contact with the floor. A cough escaped him. Watson rolled his eyes and

grabbed Clark by the elbow, jerking him roughly to his feet. It was only by sheer luck that Clark's shoulder didn't dislocate in the process. Clark stood for a moment, unsteadily, looking for all the world like he was about to pass out. Then he bravely started to move, his eyes fixed on Lois, as though she was the only thing in the world that existed.

"Come on, Clark," Lois called to him in an encouraging voice. "You can make it." Shooting a dagger-look at Watson, she swore at him. "I don't know who the hell you think you are, but I promise you, you're going to pay for whatever it is that you did to my friend."

Clark weakly shook his head at her, as if to discourage her, but the scowl on Lois' face never left.

"Watson! Put it away! He can't hurt you," Jor-El called out again. His voice cracked through his own Kryptonite sickness. "You're killing him!"

"Quiet! Or I'll give you a dose of it too," Watson vowed.

Agonizing moments passed until Clark finally reached the cell. Jor-El instinctively put a hand to Lois' shoulder, gently urging her back. He didn't care if Watson struck her, as he was prone to do to those too slow or stupid to get out of his way. All he wanted was access to the son he'd lost a lifetime ago.

"Put him in here, please," Jor-El requested, realizing that it sounded like the plea that it was and feeling beads of sweat sprouting on his brow as the Kryptonite came closer.

"What's it to you, freak?" Watson asked.

"Nothing," Jor-El lied. "But, let's face it, I'm familiar with the sickness he's got," he added vaguely. "I doubt Trask wants him dead or he wouldn't be here now."

"Fine. It's all the same to me if you all rot together or alone." He shrugged and addressed Clark. "Get in," Watson said, unlocking the shackles that had weighed Clark down. "The boss is going to want to talk to you later. *All of you*. Enjoy your stay," he sneered, delivering a savage blow to Clark's back.

"Clark!" Lois called out, horrified.

Clark lost his balance and pitched forward. Before Lois could react, Jor-El was there, his arms ready to receive his son, just as they had on the night the boy had been born, back in another world, light-years away. Clark loosed a soft cry as he collided with the older man, a cry that was muffled by the other's shirt. Watson only watched for a moment before shutting the cell door again. The lock closed with a harsh clang, followed by the click of Watson's boot heels on the tile floor as he retreated back to his other duties.

"Here," Jor-El soothed Clark, as he helped him onto the bed, ignoring his own Kryptonite sickness and weakness.

Clark didn't reply. He only curled into a fetal position, too hurt and sick to do anything else.

"Clark," Lois said, her voice cracking with withheld panic. "Oh, God. What did they do to you?"

She climbed up onto the bed next to him, pushing past Jor-El, despite an attempt by Jor-El to get her to back up. Gently, she sat down, crossed her legs, and coaxed Clark's head into her lap. She stroked his hair, feeling the dampness there from his sweat and the feverishness of his brow. When he didn't protest, she looked down at his bare chest, where he'd been hit by the bullet. A large, sloppily placed bandage was there.

"What did they do?" she asked again.

"Took...bullet...stitched..." he managed weakly, against the residual pain in his body.

Lois let out a sigh of relief. "Thank God," she murmured. "I was so worried about you."

Clark managed a weak smile. "Take...more than...that to...get rid of me."

"I was worried as well," Jor-El said, stepping forward, already recovered from his brief exposure to the poisonous meteorite.

"How are you feeling?"

"Who are you?" Clark asked, small amount of his energy returning, now that Watson and that accursed green rock were gone.

"My name is Jor-El," he said. "And, unless I'm mistaken, you are Kal-El. My son."

Clark knew that felt Lois felt his body stiffen slightly at the mention of his name — a name his parents had told him his mother had called him. But all he could do was nod. After all, as he saw it, his cover was already blown and he didn't have the energy yet to even begin to pretend that he was anything more than simply just Clark Kent.

"Yes," he whispered, awestruck by the fact that he was meeting his biological father — a man he'd long ago presumed to be dead.

"Clark?" Lois asked. He could hear confusion and anger in her voice as the truth began to dawn on her. "I know you're hurt right now. But what are you saying?"

"Lois, I'm sorry. I never meant to lie to you," he began, trying to push himself up to look at her, but failing as his arms turned to mush. "The truth is, I *am* Clark Kent. But that's not the name I was given at birth. My name...the one my birth parents gave me... is Kal-El."

"Kal-El?" she asked. "But Superman's name is..." She cut herself off sharply. "*You!*" she exclaimed, righteous anger tainting her voice as she pulled away from him. "You're Superman?! All this time and you've been lying to me!" He could see her fighting the urge to slap him.

At least she had the decency to hiss out her words in a lowered tone, he mused darkly. Not that it mattered. Word had probably already spread through Bureau Thirty-Nine's compound.

"I had to! When I decided to become Superman, I knew that no one could ever find out that the untouchable hero was nothing more than a farm boy reporter in a ridiculous costume. My life depended on it. So did the lives of everyone I care about. You. Jimmy. Perry. My parents. *Especially* my parents. I knew Superman would make a *lot* of enemies, and that anyone associated with him would become a target. I'm sorry, Lois. I thought what I did was for the best. I wanted so much to protect you." He was proud that managed it to say it all with only minimal pauses to catch his breath with his still aching lungs.

"You could have told me!" she replied back, still furious. "Did you think I was going to run to print the story of how Clark Kent and Superman are the same person? Did you think so little of me? How could you lie to me, every day?"

"I think the world of you, Lois," he said in a soft tone. "You have to know that by now. You're my best friend and the woman I've fallen in love with. I can't imagine my life without you in it. I've wanted to tell you. I just...how could I? You don't just order a pizza and casually mention 'Oh, by the way, I'm an alien and masquerade as Superman in my spare time' while you slip a movie into the VCR."

"So you thought it was better to keep me in the dark? That it was okay to keep something this huge from me?" Her anger now held a healthy amount of hurt in it. He could see unshed tears brimming in her eyes, threatening to fall at any moment, and it broke his heart.

"Of course not," he said, his voice going even softer somehow. "I knew I had to tell you, if I had any chance to trying to make a life with you. But I was afraid. Afraid that the idea of being with an alien would turn you away. Afraid that you'd only want to continue being with me *because* of my powers. Lois, no one in the world knows about me, except for my folks. Telling anyone, even you, or maybe even *especially* you, is terrifying on a primal level. It makes me vulnerable in a way that I can't even describe."

Lois didn't answer right away, appearing to think over what he'd said, while Jor-El remained respectfully silent, watching the exchange. Finally, she nodded firmly, as if shoving aside her anger

and hurt. "Okay," she said. "Right now, we need to focus on getting out of here."

"How?" Clark asked, leaning against the wall, finally able to push himself up to sit. He fought down a lingering bout of nausea before continuing.

"How? You're *Superman*," Lois said, as if it was the most obvious thing in all the world. "You bend the bars or melt them with your eyes or something." She gestured to the bars which imprisoned them.

"I...can't," Clark replied, hanging his head in shame.

"What do you mean? Of course you can. I've seen you do it numerous times already," she argued. "And these *people*," she said, spitting the word out as though annoyed to have to acknowledge the members of Bureau Thirty-Nine as human beings, "seem to already know about your secret. So there's nothing to hide, right?"

"I mean...I *can't*," Clark tried to will her to see how serious he was. "Whatever they shot me with...my powers are gone, Lois."

"Gone? *Gone*? What do you mean, *gone*?" she asked, her voice pitching higher in her panic.

"I mean, right now, I'm nothing more than a regular guy, Lois. Believe me, I've been trying. I can't fly, I have no heat vision, I can barely even sit up on my own," he tried to explain. "I've never been this weak before in my entire life. I don't understand it." He looked to Jor-El for an explanation. "What did they do to me?"

"Kryptonite," the other man replied. "Fragments of our home world, Krypton. I believe they became radioactive when our planet exploded. Some must have been pulled along in the wake of our ship as we escaped the planet's demise. All I'm sure of is that it makes us sick. I believe, given enough exposure to it, it can kill us. All it takes is being in the same proximity of the rock. They don't even need to shoot us, though they all carry bullets made of the stuff, as a precaution. That's what they shot you with." He moved forward to sit on the edge of the cot, though the movement was deliberate, as if gauging how close Clark would allow him.

Krypton.

For the first time in his life, Clark had a name for the place where he'd been born.

"You didn't seem to be affected," Lois observed. "If they all carry the stuff like you say, and if you're like Clark..."

"Kryptonian," Jor-El cut in.

"Right. Kryptonian. If you and Clark are both...Kryptonian... then shouldn't you have been suffering too?"

"I was," Jor-El said, barely sparing a glance in her direction. "But, over the years, my recovery time has improved. In the beginning, I, like Kal, took much longer before the sickness wore off." He dared to touch Clark's arm, hesitating as if he feared Clark would melt away into mist at the slightest contact. "How are you feeling, my son?"

Clark fought the knee-jerk reaction to flinch at the phrase "my son." He'd dreamed all his life what it would be like to meet the people who'd given him life, but to hear a stranger call him "son" felt wrong on every level. Jonathan and Martha Kent were his parents. They were the ones who'd always referred to him as their son.

"A little better," Clark replied. "Weak, but at least the pain is gone."

Jor-El nodded. "Good."

"How long can I expect my powers to be gone?" Clark asked, eyeing the bars of their prison again.

He didn't want to broach more private matters at the moment. He didn't want to deal with his conflicting emotions yet — the curiosity he had over who this man was, the awkwardness of their non-existent relationship, the need to know why Jor-El had left his mother to die in the Kents' living room, the need to know why he'd never come to claim his son.

Jor-El tried to hide the fact that he was crushed over Clark's

determination to stick to impersonal topics. But Clark saw the fleeting look of hurt that crossed his features anyway. A stab of guilt tore through his heart, but he knew that, if they got away from Bureau Thirty-Nine, they could both find time to ask all the questions he knew they both had to have. In the privacy of his own apartment, he could sort through his feelings and get to know the man whose DNA he shared.

Jor-El shook his head reluctantly. "They won't."

Clark's face fell along with his heart. His powers were a part of him. Without them, he felt like the shell of a man. How could that part of himself just be gone?

"What?" he asked in a whisper, the word sticking in his throat.

"Without sunlight, they won't come back," Jor-El clarified. "I learned that long ago. So did the Bureau. Which is why I've been caged down here, a long way from the yellow sun of this world for too many years to count."

"How?" Lois asked. She'd yet to vacate her seat at the head of the cot. "How did they know?"

Jor-El sighed. "It's a long story."

"Please. It's important," Clark pressed.

"I should start at the beginning. You need to understand everything, Kal."

"Clark," he gently corrected. "I'm sorry. I know I'm Kal to you, but I've always gone by Clark." He almost regretted his words as he saw Jor-El's saddened expression, but it was enough for Clark to keep track of two identities from day to day. He couldn't handle a third right now.

"Clark," Jor-El obliged. "When you were born, our planet, Krypton, was on the threshold of death. Your mother and I escaped with you with only moments to spare. There had been another ship — a floating palace — filled with other refugees, but before we could board, your mother, Lara, went into labor and the palace left. I believe they must have gotten spooked by one of the larger quakes and made a snap decision to leave before they had scheduled to depart. We took our own ship and planned on meeting up with the others, but we were unable to contact them to coordinate a rendezvous. Our ship wound up taking damage as we searched for the palace and we had to make an emergency landing, here on Earth. Lara and I were injured — she worse than I. We were pursued — the Bureau had somehow witnessed our crash landing. I drew them away from her and you, hoping to double back once I'd shaken off our pursuers. That was the last time I ever saw or heard from her. Our telepathic connection was severed that very night. You were too young for me to link to you. The ability doesn't manifest until the onset of puberty, and besides, these walls are shielded, preventing anyone from using telepathy anyway...a stolen technology from another race, believe me. In any case, I had to assume the worst."

"She died," Clark confirmed for him. "My parents always told me that they did what they could for her, when she showed up on their doorstep. Even the doctor they called to the house couldn't do anything for her. She was too badly injured. When she died, they said that she...vanished, making them suspect that there was something...different about the two of us. I'm so sorry."

Jor-El nodded as a look of fresh grief washed over his features. Clark could imagine how heartbreaking it would be to have his worst fears confirmed, even after so many years.

"I had prayed that I was wrong," he sighed. "Not too long after I left you and your mother at some small farmhouse, the Bureau caught up with me and I was captured," he continued. "I was knocked out and eventually brought here, to this facility. At first, things weren't too bad. I was treated well enough. My injuries were tended. I was given food and shelter. But it quickly became apparent that the sunlight gave me abilities beyond reason. It made them fear me. At least, it did until it was discovered that Kryptonite robbed me of my abilities and acted as a poison, so long as I was exposed to it in some way. I was kept indoors during

the day, and allowed outside only once all traces of sunlight were gone.”

He sighed, his eyes seeming to see the ghosts of the past rather than his immediate surroundings.

“At first, I didn’t mind as much as I probably should have. I understood their concerns. The powers were frightening even to me. I didn’t blame them for being afraid of what I could do... intentionally or not.” He sighed again. “You must understand, Kal...Clark. The Bureau was not always the evil organization it now is. In the beginning, they seemed to have noble intentions. I freely shared my knowledge with them, hoping to better this planet. After all, I was a scientist, back on Krypton, and have always been at ease creating things. Much of your technology today is crude imitations of what we had on Krypton. Your internet, your cell phones, your fax machines, even your CDs. It’s all based on technology we once had on Krypton. Ancient technology, to be sure, but cutting edge for this young planet.”

“Hey, now wait just a minute...” Lois started to protest angrily.

Jor-El gave her a hard look. “Your species is young. Very young, compared to much of the universe. Krypton had developed artificial intelligence while Earthlings were building the pyramids. We were exploring space while your people were learning how to make fire. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Earthlings simply haven’t been around long enough to develop the technology other planets do.”

“Other planets? You mean, more than just Earth and Krypton?” Lois asked.

Jor-El nodded. “It’s an infinitely large universe. Did you think you were the only planet with intelligent life?” he asked, somewhat biting.

“Of course not,” Lois shot back. “I was just curious, that’s all. There’s always been speculation, but never any proof. At least, until Superman started flying around.”

“How many?” Clark asked, like Lois, too curious to resist asking.

“We don’t really know for certain,” Jor-El said, shaking his head a little. “Hundreds of thousands. Millions. New ones were being discovered all the time — either accidentally or through deliberate attempts at making contact with new places.” He shrugged. “A few men and women from other places have been captured by the Bureau during my time here. I’m the only one who still lives.”

Clark felt his fist tighten in anger. “Others?”

Lois looked horrified. “Only one...? You mean, they’ve killed them?”

“Some, yes. Others were either too unsuited to this planet’s atmosphere to survive long or too injured from their own crash landings to live.”

“And now? Are there others here now?” Lois asked, her concern rising to match Clark’s.

“No. The last was a woman from Oa, maybe a good six months or so ago. It’s hard to tell down here in this windowless hell. Bex, was her name.”

“Oa?” Clark asked, the word completely foreign to him.

Jor-El nodded. “A small planet not far from Earth, relatively speaking, that is. It’s used primarily as a meeting place for the Lantern Corps, a sort of interstellar peace-keeping group. But, like I said, Bex died a while back. She was here only a day or two.” He pointed to the empty cell across the way. “We spoke only briefly. Her ship had crashed and her injuries were grievous. I was surprised she lived for as long as she did. There was Zokila, from Ujinka. She was here maybe a week. Pren, from Quahth. He was shot by Trask only hours after arriving here. The shielding I spoke of? To block telepathy? Stolen technology from the planet Markilth, some years before Lara and I ever crash landed here. It’s been rumored around here that the Roswell incident left survivors

aboard the crashed space craft but that the Bureau refused them medical assistance and dissected the bodies once they had died.”

“So, you’re the only one left,” Lois said, as though speaking her private thoughts aloud. “Why? What’s the Bureau’s angle? Bait for Superman? Dangle the idea of another Kryptonian in front of him and see if they can draw him to him? But wouldn’t they have done it sooner? And why keep you alive for so long when Superman only entered the scene a couple of months ago? How could they have even known?”

“A presidential order protects my life,” Jor-El explained, keeping his eyes focused on Clark. “I am alive for no other reason than the fact that no one has been brave enough yet to cross that line.”

“Why would the White House care if you lived or died?” Lois mused.

“As I said, the Bureau once had noble intentions, at least when I first was brought here, and my contributions, small as they were, to your technology were noticed. They were deemed important enough to ensure that I lived. I was too valuable to be allowed to die, though there were times when I wanted nothing more — when the grief over losing my wife and son was unbearable.”

“You said they were once noble. What happened? When did they start feeling like it’s their duty to eliminate alien life?” Clark asked, thinking back to his interrogation by Trask.

“I’m not sure how long it’s been. A decade or more, certainly. Time runs into itself when all you know is the inside of a cell.” Jor-El sighed. “When I first arrived, Stanley Robbins was the head of the Bureau. Things were good under him. I was treated like a colleague and friend. I was valued for my input. After he retired, Burton Newcomb took over. That’s when I first felt like a true prisoner. Almost from the start, Jason Trask worked to undermine and edge out Newcomb. He finally succeeded and took over. Since that day, I’ve spent every day wishing he would finally violate that accursed presidential order and just kill me.” He broke eye contact with his son and looked at the floor instead. “What did I have to live for? My family was gone. Even if I could contact the mothership somehow, what could my fellow Kryptonians offer? And I would finally be free of Trask’s deranged paranoia. His sometimes daily torment of me. His insane demands.”

“He’s a sicko,” Lois agreed. “He thinks it’s his job to kill you, Clark. He thinks you’re some kind of scout for other Kryptonians, and that an invasion is inevitable unless he kills Superman. Or, at least, that’s the impression that I got from our little ‘discussion’ earlier.” She pulled her eyes from Clark to look at Jor-El. “What kinds of demands did he make of you?”

“Weapons, mostly. Things that could wipe out large numbers of people in seconds — people born of Earth or other planets, it didn’t matter to him.”

“A weapon like that in the hands of someone like him...” Lois visibly shuddered and Clark snaked an arm around her to pull her a little closer.

Jor-El nodded, just a slight dipping of his head. “I know. I refused. Krypton had such weapons, it’s true. They were created as a last resort against some of the more warlike, barbaric alien races. Thankfully, we never needed them. But their creation cost us dearly. The resources we needed to build the weapons...it took its toll on our world. I believe, though I could never prove it, it’s what caused our planet to become unstable.” He paused for a moment. “As much as I’ve grown to hate this world, I wouldn’t wish that fate on anyone. And,” he added, “your world lacks the materials to build such weapons anyway.”

“Let’s be thankful for that,” Clark muttered.

“Let me guess,” Lois said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Trask didn’t believe you.”

“No, he didn’t.” There was an audible sigh.

Silence fell over the cramped cell. Clark decided to try standing, since he felt like he was a bit stronger. This time, when

he put his feet on the floor, his muscles remained solid. He tentatively stretched, finding most of the pain in his body gone. His gunshot wound still ached, but he ignored it and paced to the bars. He gripped them as tightly as he could and tested his strength. They held fast and he was rewarded with a shooting pain where he'd been shot.

"I've got to figure a way out," he whispered to himself. "Their lives depend on it."

"Get up, alien scum!" Watson said, his gun raised and ready. "The boss wants to have a word with you."

Clark blinked rapidly, trying to banish the last shreds of sleep from himself. He got to his feet and moved to the bars. He gripped them hard, anticipating the poisonous assault of Kryptonite on his body. But none came, much to his relief.

"What's the matter? Trask can't do his own dirty work? He sends you to come get me?" Clark asked, his anger and fear adding an unintended harshness to his words.

"Trask?" Watson chuckled. "You aren't seeing him right now. You're seeing the boss. And you're not *going* anywhere."

"Who is this 'boss'?" Clark asked.

"Me."

A chill ran down Clark's spine at the voice. It was one he knew. One he hadn't heard for many long years. One he'd counted himself lucky for having put firmly in his past. And yet, by some cruel twist of fate, here it was again. Here *she* was.

"Lana," he breathed. "What...?"

"Lana?" Lois echoed. "Lana, your ex-girlfriend, Lana? Lana Lang?" She sounded as shocked as Clark felt. "This is her?"

"Lana *Luthor* now," the woman corrected, as she stepped into their line of view, her black leather pumps clicking like gunshots on the tile floors.

"Luthor," Clark repeated, spitting the name out like a curse.

Lana nodded. "After my father died, my mother and I moved. She met Lex at a business conference and they fell in love. When they married, he adopted me. What better way to get ahead in the world than to use such a powerful last name? Of course, my line of fashion designs is nothing more than a very lucrative hobby. I spend most of my time keeping the Bureau in order for my father."

"Your father? But this is..." Lois began.

"A legitimate military operation, yes," Lana said, as though reading Lois' thoughts. "Welcome to Project Blue," she said gesturing around them.

"Then how can you be keeping 'in order' for Lex?" she asked.

Lana snorted. "Who do you think funds this little operation, hmmm? Those bozos in Washington? They ran out of money for this years ago. My father offered to run it on his dime, so to speak."

"Why would he even care about the Bureau?" Lois asked. Clark could almost see the wheels spinning in her mind.

"Do you *know* how much money he's made, building on the technology this freak," Lana replied, gesturing dismissively at Jor-El, "and the others used to supply the Bureau with? Taking control of the Bureau meant taking control of the technology."

"Why are you doing this?" Clark asked, drawing Lana's ire from Lois, but still ever mindful of the green bullets he knew would be in Watson's handgun. "What do you want from us?"

"You've been a thorn in my father's side, ever since you first started wearing that ridiculously hideous costume," Lane said bluntly. "Going around, interrupting things. Costing him money."

"Putting away the criminals he deals with?" Clark added, spitting the accusation out through gritted teeth.

Lana ignored him. "A presidential order protects *him*," she said, waving a hand disgustedly at Jor-El. "But, fortunately, *nothing* protects *Superman* or the pathetic little reporter he pretends to be."

"So, what then? You're going to shoot me? Why bother

keeping me alive as long as you have? I could have bled out earlier," he said, the words shooting like acid from his mouth, though he knew he was inviting trouble.

Lana gave him a dangerous smile. "Oh, I have something much better planned for you. You see, there *is* one thing that my father does admire about you. *Your powers.*" Her voice was a snake's hiss by now, and Clark felt a cold fear creep down his spine. "Now, my friend Jason here," she said, nodding toward her side where Trask stood silently watching their conversation, "thinks that, if we dig deep enough, we'll find out the source of your powers. And when we do, we'll find a way to pass on your abilities to my father."

Lex Luthor with my abilities? Clark thought with growing alarm. *The world wouldn't stand a chance. He'd destroy everything.*

"He thinks," she continued on, "that all we have to do is crack you open, like an egg, and we'll find what we need. And if we don't...well, there are other experiments we can run on him." Again, she gestured dismissively at Jor-El. "At least, the non-fatal ones."

"Non-fatal," Lois repeated, a hint of a question in her voice. "What...?"

She wasn't given a chance to finish speaking before Trask jumped in.

"Vivisection." He grinned a deadly grin at Clark. "Do you know how much I've waited for this moment, *alien*? I'm going to *love* every minute of watching your alien body being opened and explored. I want to hear your screams. I want to smell your blood. And when they are done with your carcass, I'll be the one to throw it into the furnace."

Clark's fear turned into full-blown panic. His worst nightmare was coming true. And, what was worse, was that he would be alive for at least some of it as it unfolded. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lois and Jor-El go stark white at the threat.

"You know as well as I do that you won't find anything different that you can steal to bestow powers on another," Jor-El said, coming to Clark's side.

Trask shrugged in a bored fashion. "Maybe. Maybe not. We won't know until Massimo's up to his elbows in alien guts."

"You can't do this!" Lois protested.

"I can, and I will," Trask said, glaring at her. "Well, our surgeon will, at any rate."

"Don't you get it?" Lois called out, panic tinting the edges of her words. "If you kill him, you kill the world's hope for a better tomorrow."

"No. I'll simply eliminate the *false hope* this invader has duped the masses into believing in. The same glassy-eyed idiocy that will keep the world from defending themselves when more of his kind come to forcibly take over this world and enslave us 'lesser mortals' who have no powers of our own to fend them off with."

"You're delusional," Clark said defiantly. "We're not here to take over. We have no one waiting in the wings to do so much as throw a party, let alone to seize control over the world. All I've ever wanted was to help people. Even people like you."

Trask snorted in what sounded like disbelief.

"You want to protect the world? Fine. But you're going after the wrong guy. Go after Luthor," Clark continued.

"And why would I do that? He's the one holding this organization's existence together. He's the one standing as the world's guardian."

"With blood money!" Clark spat out. "He's not a hero, Trask. He's nothing more than a common criminal. Murder, Trask! That's what we're talking about here."

"Oh really?" Trask asked in a bored, dismissive tone. "If he's such a bad guy, why is it that he's given us millions to ensure that no alien life-form ever leaves this compound to terrorize the

world?”

“Because he knows that one day, one of us will uncover his misdeeds and expose his evilness to the entire world,” Clark replied. “Because he’s been making billions off the patents for technology he’s stolen from more advanced races that live among the stars. Because he knows that nothing can stop *him* from taking control of the Earth if he gains the abilities that Jor-El and I have.” He shifted his gaze to Lana.

“You can’t possibly believe that he’s looking to gain my powers for altruistic reasons. Think about it, Lana! You’re smarter than this! He sends you to do all his dirty work. He won’t have to lift a finger but he’ll gain all the reward. Right? You’ll have all the blood on your hands, ordering my death, and you won’t be given so much as a *hint* of power. Oh, maybe he’ll make you his personal assistant once he has the world on its knees.”

“Probably not even that,” Lois spoke up. “He likes his assistants to be available for his... baser desires, from what I understand. And I highly doubt that even he will be so depraved as to do that with his stepdaughter. He probably won’t even make you head of any of his companies. No, you’ll probably be stuck leading this group of alien-hunter misfits for the rest of your life. Lana Luthor, head of Bureau Thirty-Nine. An organization that will be so despised for killing Superman that even the most cowardly of men would gladly put their lives on the line to assassinate its members. Particularly its head. And trust me — somehow or another, the truth *will* come out about that.”

“Enough!” Lana fairly roared. “Believe me when I assure you that no one will ever know of how ‘Superman’ met his demise. He’ll simply... fade away from the public’s thoughts. Jason, is your team ready?”

“Chomping at the bit,” he replied with a cold, satisfied smile.

“Good. I expect a report by midnight. *Don’t* fail me. Or I swear, things will *not* end well for you,” she ordered.

Trask nodded brusquely. “You can count on me. I’ve been waiting long enough to rip into one of these freaks. I’ll see to the final preparations myself.” Without another word, he strode off.

“Good,” Lana said, more to herself than to Trask as she eyed Clark like a caged animal.

Clark felt his heart thudding faster with every step Trask took. He felt nauseous, despite the fact that no one had pulled out any Kryptonite. He gripped the bars tighter, in an effort to support his body as his knees threatened to give out. Never before had he faced such terror. Never before had his death been so close. He could almost feel it there, reaching for him with icy fingers.

“Lana, wait!” he called out as the woman and her underlings turned to leave.

She took one more step, then, to his relief, she stopped and looked back at him. After a moment, she waved the guards away.

“Leave me,” she instructed them.

Wordlessly, they obeyed. She turned her emotionless gaze on Clark.

“What?” she asked, annoyed.

“Think about what you’re doing,” Clark pleaded. “There’s no coming back from ordering another person’s death.”

“I’ve done it before. You’re no different.”

“Aren’t I? Come on, Lana! I know we could have ended things between us better, but you *know* me! Do you honestly believe that I pose some threat to the world?” Clark asked, shoving his rising desperation aside.

“No,” she said in a monotone, her eyes boring into him. “But I *do* believe that you pose a risk to my father. No matter which suit you’re wearing.”

“He’s a criminal!” Clark reminded her. “I can prove it! I’ve been working on gathering enough evidence to put him away for good.”

She ignored the comment. “You know, you could have had it all, Clark. A good life. *Me*. The protection that only I can give you

from all of the people in this building, *all of them* hungry for the chance to extinguish any alien life on this planet.”

“So, what then? This... this death sentence is some kind of revenge? Some way of punishing me for realizing that we would never be compatible?”

Lana laughed, the sound of it harsh and bitter, and totally out of place in that metallic hell. “You misunderstand me. This has nothing to do with our past. The pathetic life you used to live... being a poor working grunt of a reporter... dashing around the world in a grotesque costume... all of that would have held me back. Sad to say, but you did me a *favor* by not staying with me.”

“Let me go, Lana. Let all of us go. You were never like this before. Never so... coldhearted. I know the old Lana has to still be there inside, somewhere. You know this won’t end well for you. Do yourself a favor and let us go. Things will go easier for you, in the long run.”

Again she laughed — a sound completely without any heart to it. “Do you really believe I’ll ever be implicated in Superman’s disappearance? No, Clark. Let me tell you something about *real people*. As soon as Superman’s absence is noted, people are going to assume that he left the world high and dry. That he up and left just as suddenly and without explanation as he appeared. They won’t care to look for you. They won’t remember you as a hero. You’ll go down as a speck in the footnotes of history as a jerk who gave the world false hope for less than a season and who abandoned humanity without so much as a farewell. And as for Clark Kent, measly reporter? People go missing all the time. Sure, the Kents will probably grieve for you for a time, but even they will likely think that you just left without saying goodbye.”

“That’s not true!” Lois protested. “Superman is loved. People will always remember the good that he did, no matter for how long or short a time he was able to. People will always want to find out the truth of what happened to him. And when they do, they’ll call for your head on a platter. And Clark? Clark has touched more lives than you can possibly imagine. His family and friends will spend their lives looking for him.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Once my father has his powers, *he’ll* be the one people will remember. A true human, not some alien masquerading as one.” She looked Clark up and down for a moment. “You know, I always knew something was off with you.” She spat the words out like poison, turned on her heel, and strode away, barking orders at a few guards down at the end of the hall as she drew near them.

Clark wearily retreated from the cell bars. Snubbing the cot, he leaned back against the wall and let his body slide down until he sat on the floor. He took a moment to gather his thoughts.

“Clark? Are you okay?” Instant concern bloomed across Lois’ face and mingled with her words.

“Yes. No.” He sighed. “I’ll be fine. I just... I never once imagined Lana being... like that. That’s not the woman I used to know.”

“I’m sorry,” Lois whispered, sitting cross-legged on the floor beside him. She put her arms around him in a comforting manner.

“Can that really happen?” He directed his question at Jor-El.

“Can they really find some way to... steal our powers, to give them to someone else?”

Jor-El shook his head slowly. “As far as I know, our powers are possible due to the particulars of our genetics interacting with the yellow sunlight of this world. Not from, say, some organ that can be transplanted into another. They will be killing you for no reason and they know it.” His voice was bitter and enraged as he stared off in the direction Lana had disappeared.

“Thank God,” Clark whispered, relieved. “The thought of Luthor with these abilities...” His voice trailed off as he shuddered at the unspoken thought.

“They won’t kill you,” Lois swore. “We’ll think of something. I just...” She shrugged, unable to complete her thought, though

Clark could read it in her eyes. *I can't think of anything*, they screamed in silent desperation.

The three fell silent as they each became absorbed in their own, futile thoughts. And, though Clark was usually an optimist, he could see no clear solution. His thoughts became bleaker as he focused more and more on the horrors to come, despite his best efforts to shove such thoughts aside.

"There *has* to be some way!" Lois finally uttered frantically.

"I have been trying to find a way for many long years," Jor-El replied contemptuously, as though Lois were an idiot, incapable of understanding the situation she was in. "This compound is secure. Even if we made it out of this cell, we are in the very bowels of the place. Numerous check-points would still stand in our way. We might get through some of them, but, eventually, someone would find us. I tried it myself, years ago. If not for that presidential order protecting me, I would have killed on the spot."

"Clark *will* be killed if we don't figure something out!"

"You think I don't know that, woman? He's *my son*!" Jor-El roared. "I would gladly give my own life to see him safe and out of this place!"

"Enough! Both of you!" Clark cried, raising his hands in a 'stop' gesture. "This isn't helping anything."

"You're right. I'm sorry," Lois relented after a few seconds, while Jor-El looked sheepishly at the floor.

"Now, assuming we could get out of this cell, do you think you can guide us out of here?" Clark looked to Jor-El, waiting for a response.

"Yes," he said with a confident nod.

"Good," Clark said, nodding in turn. "That's one less thing to worry about." He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall, trying to will his way out of the cell. "Now for the hard part."

"Oh, it won't be difficult at all," the voice of Jason Trask said, as he approached the cell. "You won't have to do anything but lay on the table." He looked to his right, where one of his men stood ready. "Bring him."

The man nodded and grunted his acknowledgement. Clark could see the name "Hastings" embroidered on the fatigues he wore. He was a big, heavily muscled man who easily towered over Clark by half a foot or more. He pulled a keycard from his pocket and held it up for just a heartbeat or two. There was a buzz as the lock on the cell opened. Hastings opened the door and grabbed Clark, shackling him and pulling him out into the hall in a swift, practiced manner, while Trask closed the cell door. It was when Hastings pulled his keycard back out that Clark took his chance. Before the scanner could register the information on the card, Clark mustered all his strength. He turned and rammed his body into Hastings, knocking the man off balance as he was caught off guard.

The man immediately seemed to forget about the lock as he went after Clark. He struck back, catching a fist in Clark's wounded shoulder. The pain momentarily blinded Clark in a haze of black and red, though he did not stop fighting. He lashed out, striking Hastings in the stomach. But the man's muscles were rock-hard with many years of punishing bodybuilding, and he appeared not to even notice, even though a new wave of pain exploded in Clark's hand as he made contact. Hastings smirked and put one arm around Clark's neck, choking off his airway.

"Enough!" Trask roared. "You may not care much about your own life, *freak*, but I know you care about *hers*, he said, nodding in Lois' direction. "One more false move and I swear I'll empty my gun into her."

Clark instantly gave up the struggle. He went limp in Hastings' embrace. After a moment, the man loosened his grip, allowing Clark to breathe easier.

"Okay," Clark choked out, coughing. "You win. I'll go quietly. Just...one last request."

"And why would I grant you a request?" Trask asked, now sounding more amused than anything.

"Because," Clark said, "it's the decent thing to do."

"Amongst *humans*," Trask amended for him. Then, as though turning the question over in his mind, "Very well. What is it that you want?"

"Just to...say goodbye," Clark said, nearly unable to get the words out. His move to ensure that the lock didn't actually lock hadn't been for his benefit. It had been to give Lois and Jor-El their chance. In his heart, Clark knew he was going to die. "Please."

"You have thirty seconds." Trask turned to Hastings. "Let him go, but keep your weapon at the ready."

Clark felt the massive arm come completely away from his body. He stepped to the cell door, to where Lois stood.

"I'm sorry, Lois," he began. "I wish I could have done more to save you. For what it's worth, my life has been so much better for knowing you. You took away all the hurt and loneliness I once had. I love you." He leaned in to kiss her, the bars standing like cold soldiers between them as their lips met. He could taste the salt of her tears as they started to flow. He kissed her lips, her nose, her eyes, then moved to kiss her cheek. "I did what I could," he whispered in her ear, so lightly that he prayed she didn't miss his words. "Save him for me. Save yourself."

"Clark...no. Please," Lois pleaded.

"I can't. I love you, Lois."

"I love you," she whispered back, her voice choked with tears.

Clark pulled back and looked to the man who'd fathered him. "I wish I could have known you better. Please, watch over Lois for me, Dad."

Jor-El nodded, swallowing hard as he did so. "My son," he breathed. "I love you."

"Enough. Time's up, alien." Trask said as Hastings put a hand on Clark's shoulder and pulled him away before he could clasp hands with Jor-El. "You don't want to be late for your doctor's appointment, now do you?"

With that, Clark allowed himself to be led away to his fate. But, though his feet led him further from the woman he loved, his heart stayed behind.

Please, Lois. Get out of here, he pleaded in his mind.

He'd never been one to shed many tears, but his vision soon fractured beneath a wall of water. He didn't want to die. Though he would gladly give his life in order to give Lois a chance of escape, he couldn't just accept his death without a fight. But...how? Clark didn't doubt that Trask would kill Lois before his waking eyes if he so much as sneezed the wrong way. How could he fight, knowing that it would cost the woman he loved?

Then too, without his powers, what hope did he have of surviving a fight? Even if he got the upper hand, he was only too aware of the Kryptonite he knew Trask and Hastings had to have on them. A second would be all they would need to bring Clark to his knees. One bullet — even a regular one — expertly placed to his head or other vital area of his body, would kill him, just as surely as the vivisection he was facing.

A bullet would be merciful, he thought bitterly. *Just a split second of pain and then I'd be gone. No dragging out my misery on a cold metal table while my insides get ransacked in a morbid, pointless scavenger hunt.*

No! another part of him screamed. *You can't give up! Fight, Clark!*

It was enough to rouse him. Using what strength he had left, he tried to break away from his captors, knowing, in his heart, that he wouldn't know where to go even if he *could* get away. But Trask was ready for him. The moment Clark tried to make a move, Trask pulled a box containing a piece of Kryptonite from within his pocket. As the lid snapped open, Clark felt the deadly effects. His attempt to break free died before he really even began. Trask

slipped his sidearm from its holster and smashed the butt of it into the back of Clark's skull.

The world went black.

"Clark!" Lois screamed after Clark was taken away, her heart feeling like it was being squeezed in a vice. "Clark!"

But, of course, Hastings and Trask never stopped or allowed Clark to turn around for one last, final look. They only pressed onward at the same steady pace, until they, and Clark, were lost to her sight. Next to her, Jor-El also cried out for the young man who'd been ripped away from them to meet a grisly fate.

Finally, knowing their voices were not being heard, they fell quiet. As the deafening silence enveloped them, they both took a moment to take stock of the current situation. The guards, who'd been posted to ensure that Clark remained a captive until Trask came to retrieve him, were gone, for the most part. A lone guard stood with his back to them at the end of the hall.

I did what I could. Save him for me. Save yourself.

Clark's final words to her came back to her mind.

I did what I could.

"I wonder," Lois muttered to herself, eyeing the lock and the cell door. She checked the hallway again, ensuring that the guard was still looking away from them.

"My son," Jor-El groaned to himself, leaning against the bars of the cell, just to the left of the door.

"Just one guard left," Lois whispered him, unhappy that she had to work with a man who so clearly seemed to resent her, but willing enough to collaborate with him if it gave her a chance to save the man she loved. "Should be easy enough. Follow me and be ready to guide us."

"What are you...?" Jor-El began, trying to follow what Lois was getting at.

"Now!" Lois hissed.

She carefully opened the door to the cell. Luckily, Bureau Thirty-Nine appeared to take pride in their compound. The door swung open soundlessly on its well-oiled hinges. Abandoning her high heels, she crouched and crept along the floor, painstakingly placing each footstep as she drew closer to the guard. When she got within a few steps of him, something — a sound, a shadow, or maybe just plain intuition — alerted him to her presence. He turned to confront her but Lois was already on the move. In two quick steps, she knocked him out completely.

"Glad I took those self-defense classes," she grinned to herself. "Give me a hand," she commanded Jor-El as she bent to grab the man who lay sprawled out on the floor.

Jor-El nodded and grabbed the guard under his armpits. Together, they dragged him back down the hall to the cell. He grabbed the man's keycard and used it to lock the cell securely before they moved on.

"Where would they have brought Clark?" Lois asked, not sparing a breath of thanks for his help in locking the guard up. It simply didn't cross her mind. She was completely focused on saving Clark.

"This way," Jor-El said without hesitation, already on the move.

He led her down what felt like a twisting maze of hallways. In retrospect, Lois would admit to herself that it was probably more straightforward than it had felt at the time. But with her pounding heart, her growing sense of urgency, the suffocating fear that she would be too late to save Clark, and the constant feeling that they would be caught at any moment, her head was soon spinning. At first, she tried to keep track of the turns they took, but after the fifth hallway they turned down, she gave up and focused only on her surroundings, checking every direction constantly to ensure that no one saw them.

Several times, they came seconds from being discovered. Each time, they ducked down a different passageway or behind

something or into an empty room just in time to avoid detection. By the time they reached the medical area, Lois' nerves were completely shot and Jor-El had needed to use the stolen keycard several times.

"He should be here," Jor-El whispered breathlessly.

"I'll check the right wing," Lois said grimly, steeling herself for whatever she might find.

Without waiting for a response, she started off in her chosen direction. It felt good to be away from the older Kryptonian's distrusting and flat-out judgmental gaze. She couldn't blame him for distrusting people, given all the vile things that had happened to him during his years on Earth. But she did feel indignant that he extended that same mistrust and hatred to her, when she hadn't actually done anything wrong. She knew that he hated her simply because she was an Earthling, and that didn't sit well with her at all. Sure, she was no stranger to being hated. It was part of her job, as she exposed the worst of society and helped put criminals behind bars. But Jor-El had no reason to extend his hatred to her.

In fact, he had every reason to like her, in her mind. After all, she was working to save his son. Not only that, but she was in love with his son. Jor-El should be embracing her, not wasting his energy hating her.

"Can't focus on that now," she whispered to herself as she scanned every room she passed. "If we all get out of this alive, then I can worry about it."

A noise caught her attention, stopping her dead in her tracks. She stood stock-still, listening. Singing. She could hear singing. It was coming from the greenish-gray double doors ahead of her. Swiftly, she crossed the distance, then carefully opened the doors just wide enough to slip through the crack between them.

Operating rooms.

Just two, one on either side of her. The one on the right was dark and dead. The left was lit up. A man was singing to himself as he prepped the various instruments he would be needing. Harsh metal tools that would tear into Clark's now-vulnerable flesh. Silent as a shadow, Lois slunk inside the room. As she'd done with the guard earlier, she employed a few lightning fast moves she'd learned in her self-defense classes, and knocked the man out cold. Once he was down and she was certain he wouldn't be moving for a while, she closed the door, shutting out any prying eyes.

"Lois?"

In the center of the room, on a cold metal table, Clark was strapped down, spread-eagle, at least as much as the operating table would allow. A thin white sheet covered him from his navel down, but it wasn't difficult to see that he'd been stripped naked. Lois let out a shuddering, thankful breath. Clark was okay. He hadn't yet been cut into. She'd gotten there in time.

"Oh, thank God, Clark," she whispered, her relief evident in her words.

"Lois, what are you doing here?" he whispered frantically, his eyes darting to the door, trying to see as much as he could.

"Saving you," she replied. Then, cheekily, "After all, it seems only right. How many times had you saved me already?"

"Lois, I did what I did so you could get out of here and to safety. You need to get out of here while you still can."

"Not without you," she vowed.

"If they catch you, they will kill you. If they find me gone, they'll know what happened. Leave me, Lois. They'll be so distracted with their...work...on me that you should have time to escape."

"Clark, I am *not* leaving here without you. So just shut up, stop it with the self-sacrifice thing, and let me help you," she commanded as she set to work loosening the straps that held his right arm in place.

It took a long, nerve-racking couple of minutes, but soon Clark was free from the restraints. He hopped off the table, wrapping the inadequate sheet around his waist.

"At least they gave you that," Lois said as he secured his paltry covering.

"Not out of the kindness of his heart," Clark said, glancing at the doctor. "He threw it over me saying he just didn't want to look at that until he absolutely had to." He paused, looking at the doctor again. "We can't leave him here."

Lois nodded. "You're right. We could drag him into one of the empty rooms down the hall." She bent down and snatched the keys hanging from his belt, as he hadn't yet donned his scrubs.

"Good plan. They took my clothes in one of those rooms. With any luck, they'll still be there."

Clark grabbed the man, and, with effort, slung him over his shoulders, thankful that he earlier encounter with Kryptonite had likely been brief and that he was already feeling close to normal. Then he led Lois to the room he'd first been brought to. He went inside, while Lois stayed in the hall, keeping watch. A moment later, he returned, now clad in his work pants and shoes again. Evidently, he hadn't found a replacement for his shirt, which had been taken from him during the rough patch job the Bureau had done on his gunshot wound.

"That's better," he announced as he closed the door gently behind him.

Lois locked the door. "Good. Now let's find your father and get out of here."

"Gladly," Clark replied. "But one thing first." He grabbed her and kissed her hard, all of his relief and gratitude trying to pour out of him at the same moment. "Thank you, Lois."

"I'm just glad I got here in time," she replied, giving him a kiss back.

"Let's go get Dad," Clark said, grinning at her.

"He's down this way," Lois said a few minutes later, as she led Clark back to where she'd parted ways with Jor-El.

They found the older man waiting for them at the T-intersection where Lois had gone her own way. He was pacing, head down, and clearly agitated. But when he heard them approach, he looked up at them and relief flooded his features.

"Thank Rao," he whispered.

Rao? The thought flashed through Clark's mind before he realized it. *Must be one of those Kryptonian things I missed out on.*

"Let's get out of here," Clark said.

"You're okay?" Jor-El asked, concerned.

"Perfect. Let's move, before someone realizes we're gone."

Again Jor-El took the lead, snaking them through the complex compound of Bureau Thirty-Nine. He took them down little-used maintenance passages as far as he could. When they reached an end, they took a moment to catch their breaths. A silver metal door stood before them. Once they stepped through, they would be exposed to anyone who happened by.

"Please, tell me we're almost at the front door," Lois begged as she leaned against the cinderblock wall, taking deep breaths.

"Nearly there. We have to pass through one large room and then we're free, as far as my memory serves."

"We passed through that room on the way in," Clark confirmed for him. "Lois? Are you okay to move on?"

"More than ready to get out of this hell-hole," she said grimly. "Let's do this."

Cautiously, Clark opened the door. He peeked his head around and thoroughly checked his surroundings. As far as he could tell, no one was around. But there wasn't anything in the world he wouldn't have given for his super hearing as well! Even his x-ray vision would have been a tremendous help.

Here goes nothing, he thought wryly.

"Coast is clear," he whispered. "Stick together and move fast."

He threw open the door and they filed out. They made a beeline for the door across the room, moving as swiftly as they dared. But they didn't move quickly enough. A door on the right

side of the room opened.

"Hold it right there!"

Out from the hidden office, Lana came, a handgun raised and pointed at Lois.

"One move and she bites it," she threatened. She eyed them as the three came to a halt. "I don't know how you got free and I don't care. This ends *now!*"

"Lana! Listen to me!" Clark commanded, his voice slipping momentarily to the authoritative tone of Superman. "I know you think you're doing something great here. I know you're trying to impress Luthor. I know you're trying to earn his respect. He never truly adopted you, did he? Never passed along the last name of Luthor to you. Not legally."

"Of course he did!"

Clark noted the bluff in her voice. He remembered it far too well from his days spent dating her. Wasted days, as he'd come to see them.

He shook his head. "No, he didn't. I did some thinking when your man had me strapped to that table. Luthor eloped with your mother. The press coverage was there, but small, when it became known that he'd remarried, because he wouldn't talk much about it. There was even less coverage when your mother died last month. No mention was ever made of a daughter. Not a word of the newest member of the Luthor family. He never really accepted you, did he? Never found a true use for you. He shipped you off here, to the Bureau, to get you out of his hair. And maybe, just maybe, he could use you to kill me, so that his hands remained clean."

"It's not...you know *nothing!*" she screamed at him, but Clark could see that his words had struck home.

"I know Luthor," he replied. "He only cares about what people can do for him, not about the people themselves. Killing me for him won't change that, Lana. It won't make him care for you. It won't make him bestow his empire to you in the future. It won't make you his equal in his eyes. All it will do is remove the greatest obstacle in his path to whatever sick plans he has for the future."

He chanced three steps forward. "Lana, listen to me. I know the girl I grew up with is in there inside of you, somewhere. You trusted me as a kid. Trust me now. I have no reason to lie to you about Luthor."

"You have *every* reason to lie," Lana protested. "You just want to save your alien skin."

"Okay, I'll admit it. Dying isn't high on my list of things I'd like to accomplish today," Clark conceded. "Look, you can kill me if you don't believe me. After all, you have the gun and I'm completely without my powers right now. But ask yourself, have you ever known me to lie and cheat to get something that I wanted? With my words or my powers? Answer me honestly."

She hesitated and Clark saw something change in her eyes. "I guess not."

"Then believe me now. Let us go."

Something broke inside Lana. A single glimmer of a tear shone for an instant in her eye.

"I...can't," she said.

"You *can*. Or take me back down to that operating room and dissect me like a frog. Just let Lois and Jor-El go."

"You really care what happens to them, don't you?" she mused. "You're weaker than my father...Lex thought."

"Caring for other people doesn't make me weak, Lana. It makes me human. Like you. Like your mother. Like your father. They were good people, your parents. Always quick with a smile or a helping hand."

She nodded. "They were."

"Is *this*," Clark ask with a sweeping gesture, "what they would have wanted? Would they have been proud of this?"

As Lana cast a look around at the compound, Clark took his opportunity. He took the last two steps forward and grabbed the

gun from her hand. Her grasp on the weapon was weak as she stood there in a conflicted state. She didn't even attempt to keep hold of it. All the fight seemed to have bled out of her.

"Go," Clark said over his shoulder to Lois and Jor-El as he gently wiped a tear from Lana's cheek before stepping out of her reach, in case she made a grab for the gun.

They didn't need to be told twice. Clark hung back, ensuring that Lana made no moves to call for help. But she looked utterly defeated now, and a little like a lost child. She neither moved nor uttered a word until Lois and Jor-El reached the door and wrenched it open.

"Are you happy now?" Lana asked in a hoarse whisper.

"None of this makes me happy," Clark replied. "Of all the enemies in the world I thought I would need to face, I never wanted you to be one of them. Despite what you may think, Lana, I never harbored any ill feelings toward you."

"And now?" she challenged.

"Not even now," he said as he took a step backward and away from her. "Goodbye, Lana." He flung the gun away from them both.

She gave him a hard, unfeeling look. "Get out of my sight."

He held her gaze for the entire length of the room, ensuring that she made no threatening moves. She remained still, however, and Clark's heart quietly broke for the girl he'd once known and cared for. Maybe he'd never loved her, but he cared for her as a friend.

Well, former friend, his mind said sadly.

It was weird, he mused. He hadn't really thought of Lana as a friend since their breakup, years before. But in this moment, it felt so...so...

Final, he thought.

There would never be any coming back from this. It was as if the door to the past had suddenly been slammed shut and locked. What Lana had done — had planned to do — could never be erased. Though she'd done the right thing in letting them escape, she'd done too much evil for Clark to ever fully forgive her. She would, however, always have his pity, for falling under Luthor's spell, for being so completely used by him.

He turned only when he felt the door at his back. Swiftly, he pulled the door open and stepped out into the blessed sunshine. He wanted to stop and soak in all the healing, nourishing light that he could, but knew that such a thing would be impossible. Behind him, in the compound, he heard the unmistakable clanging of an alarm. Their absence had been noted. Or, perhaps, Lana had changed her mind. It didn't matter. Getting Lois and Jor-El to safety was the only thing that mattered.

He started to run, heading to where he saw the two making their way across the desert sand. Faster and faster he pushed himself, feeling the hot sun beating down on him. It felt so good, so right, and he felt his body drinking in the power of the yellow star. He felt himself growing stronger. Like a puzzle, he felt the missing pieces of himself returning and locking into place. His powers had returned. He shot forward, easily catching up with Lois and Jor-El.

"Clark!" Lois said in surprise as he skidded to a halt before them, dust kicking up around him. "Are you...?"

"I'm back," he affirmed. "One first class trip back to Metropolis, coming up!" He scooped her up in his arms, as he done so many times before while in the blue, red, and yellow of Superman. "Can you fly?" he asked Jor-El.

The older man made a few attempts before shaking his head. "Not yet. It might take a while. I haven't seen the sun in I don't know how long."

Clark nodded. "Put your arms around my neck and hold on," he instructed. "Hurry, before Trask and his men find us."

Jor-El did as his son bid. When Clark was satisfied that his father's grip was tight enough, he shot up into the sky, leaving the

compound and Bureau Thirty-Nine far below. He didn't stop until he was well out of the reach of any Kryptonite bullets that might be aimed in their direction. Then he took off in the direction of Metropolis, to the safe haven that was his apartment.

"Stay here," he instructed them as he grabbed a suit and spun into the familiar garb of Superman. "Call the authorities. Get them out there *now*. I'll make sure no one escapes."

"But the Kryptonite," his father protested.

"Is something I'll work around," Clark said, the neutral mask of Superman naturally falling over his features.

"Be safe," Lois pleaded, kissing his cheek.

"I will."

There was no time for any other words. He had to make sure no one from Bureau Thirty-Nine got away. He would make sure that each and every one of them faced justice. He stepped out onto his terrace and rocketed into the sky. Exhaustion threatened to slow him. Need pushed him faster than he'd ever flown before. Before he knew it, the desert was stretched out endlessly before him. Inconceivably, he found himself flying even faster, until he at last found himself looking upon the Bureau's hideaway. Members of the Bureau stood about in the heat, scanning in every direction, weapons drawn.

"Superman!" Trask called in a mocking voice. "Miss us already?"

"Only in your sordid dreams, Trask."

"Come down and fight like a real man! Or are you too afraid of us 'mere' humans?"

One of Trask's men fired off a shot at Clark. Clark heard the trigger being squeezed a second before the weapon fired. He evaded the bullet easily. The bright green projectile whizzed past him, too quickly to effect him much, only causing him to wobble in the slightest before he caught himself. He crossed his arms as he hovered, looking down on Trask.

"Give it up, Trask! The authorities are on their way. Go quietly and it'll go easier on you."

Trask looked to his men. "Kill anyone who approaches."

"Stand down," Lana commanded, as she stepped out from the compound.

"Never!" Trask said defiantly.

"Trask, that's an *order*."

"I don't take orders from *traitors*," Trask replied, turning to face her. The rest of his men froze, watching the scene between their superiors unfold.

"Are you calling me a traitor?" Lana asked in a threatening tone.

"So what if I am? What are you going to do about it, *traitor*? You let the alien escape once. I'll make sure that doesn't happen ever again."

He'd steadily closed the distance between them as he spoke, until he stood right before her. Quick as a flash, he pulled the large knife that hung from his belt and plunged it into her guts, twisting it to cause maximum damage. A wordless cry burst from Lana's throat, matching the shocked, anguished cry Clark let out.

"No!"

The desert rang with the sound of Clark's cry.

Heedless of the danger to himself, he dropped from the sky, flying to where Lana lay bleeding out into the sand. He knelt by her and took her hand. Even without the use of his powers, he could tell that she wouldn't survive the wound. He tried his best anyway, putting pressure on the wound in an attempt to stem the flow of blood. Instantly, his hands were coated in sticky red blood. Her life was literally slipping through his fingers.

"Lana," he said softly.

"Cl..."

"Ssh, don't try to talk," he urged her. "Save your strength."

It was a false hope he was giving her, he knew, but it was better than nothing. If it was the only measure of comfort he could

grant, than he would maintain the lie for as long as she continued to draw breath.

"S...S...Sor..." she choked out. "So...sorry. Bout...every..."

With a shudder, she expelled a breath and did not take another. Clark pulled his hands from her wound and gently closed her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Lana," he whispered. "Why?" he asked with a hard look at Trask as he stood, leaving Lana's body on the ground.

"Traitors must always be killed," Trask replied, casually examining the sheen of red on his blade, as though it had been no big deal that he'd just murdered the woman in cold blood. "Speaking of..."

Clark felt the effects of the Kryptonite that Trask carried before he felt it. The man had had it fashioned into the blade of a knife — smooth, flat, and dangerously sharp. Clark tried to turn away, to flee to some distance away from the lethal stone, to get out of the rock's sphere of influence, but his muscles refused to cooperate. He crashed to his knees, then pitched forward onto his hands. Trask reached down and, using all his might, stabbed Clark in the back with the shard of radioactive stone. Clark couldn't help crying out in pain as the little piece of his home-world tore through his now-vulnerable flesh and burned him like a raging inferno.

Long minutes passed as Trask gazed down upon his victim.

"I might not get to slice you open from stem to stern," Trask whispered in Clark's ear as he finally squatted down beside him. "But I *will* see you dead, *alien*."

He pushed Clark down, so that he lay flat on the hot desert sand. Clark tried to rise, but the Kryptonite in his back made it feel like he bore the weight of the entire universe. Lying as he was, flat on his stomach, even breathing was a painful chore. He suspected a punctured lung.

"Sir?" The young man's voice sounded worried. Clark tried to place it, but he didn't recognize it.

"Can't you see I'm busy here, Crowley?" Trask snapped.

"But, sir? We have incoming hostiles, sir."

Trask looked up, forgetting Clark for the moment. Clark lifted his gaze heavenward, then breathed a small sigh of relief. The cavalry had arrived.

"Damn it!" Trask muttered to himself, just loudly enough for Clark to hear. Then, yelling so that all could hear him, "Hold your ground!"

Thank you, Lois, Clark thought to himself, fighting to maintain consciousness against the excruciating pain shooting through his body.

He must have blacked out for a few moments. The next thing he knew, someone was kneeling by his side and the sound of gunshots rang out around him. The man beside him was gently shaking him, trying to get his attention.

"Superman?" he called out.

"Ugh..." was all Clark could manage at first. Then, "The... knife...p...p...please."

The man grasped the handle of the knife. Clark winced as the movement jostled his body. He tried to brace himself against what he knew was coming.

"Ready?"

Clark managed a weak nod.

His vision went white as fresh agony exploded inside his wounded body. The other man looked down at the glowing weapon, an expression of confusion and wonder on his face.

"What in the name of hell...?" he asked no one in particular.

"Get it away from me. Please," Clark wheezed, trying to back away from the toxic stone.

The man nodded and stepped away from him. Clark breathed easier with every inch put between himself and the Kryptonite. After a moment, he felt his wound close up and his strength returning. His punctured lung seemed to knit back together and he no longer had the sensation of drowning. But by then, it was too

late. Trask and his men lay dead in the sand, along with a few of those who'd come to subdue the Bureau. A sudden silence fell, with only the barest echoes of the final few shots that had been fired fading in the wind.

In that moment, the world itself felt surreal to Clark.

His nightmare was over.

He knew the nightmares would linger in his mind for a long time to come.

"Superman? What happened here?" asked the same man who'd come to his rescue by removing the blade from his back.

"It's a long story," Clark replied. "First though, I want to thank you for your help. If you hadn't come when you did..."

"Yeah, what was that weird knife?" the man asked, interrupting.

"Something deadly," Clark answered vaguely. "Look, I don't know what your procedures are, but if it's possible, I'd like for that knife to be entrusted to Dr. Klein at S.T.A.R. Labs."

"In Metropolis?"

Clark nodded at the policeman. "Dr. Klein is a friend of mine. He'll know what to do with the knife."

After I have an honest conversation with him, Clark reminded himself.

"You've got it," the officer answered. Then, lowering his voice, "I'm surprised though. I thought you were, well, invincible."

You can trust him, some instinct, deep inside, told Clark.

"It's a pretty powerful stone," Clark replied, not wanting to get into it.

"You can trust me," the man vowed solemnly. "It'll get where you want it. But, uh, should I be worried about its effects on the rest of us?"

Clark shook his head. "No. As far as I can tell, it's only something Kryptonians need to worry about. You and your men will be fine, uh...sorry, I didn't catch your name."

The man cracked a small smile. "Sorry about that." He stuck out a hand, which Clark took and shook. "Detective Bill Henderson."

"Good to meet you, Detective Henderson," Clark said, giving the other man a smile of his own.

"Look, I know you're a busy man and all, but, uh, I need your statement on what happened here," Henderson said.

Clark nodded to one side, indicating that they should separate from the group a bit. "Of course."

And so, leaning against the side of one of the now silent helicopters, Clark told his story to Henderson. Of course, he curtailed the details, since it had been Clark, not Superman, who'd been held inside the compound. He spoke only of "finding" his friends in the desert after their escape, of ferrying them to the safety of Metropolis, and his return to the desert. He fought to remain stoic as he recounted how Trask had murdered Lana before his eyes and of how he'd been stabbed by the strange green knife.

The rest he would leave for Lois, Clark, and Jor-El to fill in.

Henderson mutely took his notes, only asking his questions to clarify things once Clark had finished his tale. Clark found himself impressed with the detective and the shrewd questions he asked, even as he undercut them with understanding and sensitivity. When they were finished, Clark thought to himself that it was a shame that the man wasn't with the Metropolis Police Department. He would have liked having a regular, working relationship with him.

"Thanks, Superman. I think I have everything I need. But, uh, in case I need to contact you again..."

Clark smiled. "Contact Lois Lane or Clark Kent at the Daily Planet in Metropolis. They'll get the message to me."

Henderson nodded, scribbled a note, and clicked his pen shut. "Perfect."

"Is there anything else I can do to help?" Clark asked,

glancing at the scene around them. He did his best not to watch as a body bag was zipped up around Lana's unmoving form.

"No, we're fine. You do whatever you need to do. But if you see your friends, let them know I'll need to speak with them."

"Of course."

"And, again, I'll get that knife where you asked me to."

"Thank you," Clark said gratefully. "I really appreciate that."

"It's the least I can do, believe me."

Clark would have preferred to take the blade to Dr. Klein himself. But the thought of getting close to Kryptonite again terrified him down to his very soul. Even locked away in a lead box, he'd simply had too many encounters with the stone since arriving at the Bureau's compound. He just wanted to be as far from the deadly rock as he could get.

Nodding once more, he lifted off the ground and shot away from that accursed place. He didn't feel any measure of safety, however, until he landed on his terrace. Only then could he feel like he could breathe. Only then did the knots in his stomach begin to uncoil.

"Oh, God. Clark, what happened?" Lois asked, springing up from the couch as he stepped inside the apartment and eyeing the blood on him.

Words failed him. He simply shook his head.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I...I...I guess," he managed. "I think...I need a minute."

"Of course," she said, moving back a pace.

Clark ducked into his bathroom. The blood that covered him — Lana's and his own — revolted him. He needed to wash it off *now*. It almost felt as if it was burning his flesh. He couldn't get out of his soiled suit fast enough, tearing it off as soon as the bathroom door was closed. Turning up the heat in the shower as hot as he could, he showered at super speed. As the lather of the soap slid down his skin, carrying the blood and sand away, Clark started to feel comfortable in his own skin again.

After thirty seconds or so, he turned off the water and wrapped a towel around his waist. Then he set to work rinsing the blood from his suit and examining the gash in the back where he'd been stabbed, wondering if the suit was ruined forever or if his mother could salvage it somehow. He set it aside in the hamper, then finished drying off and dressing, taking a moment to use his heat vision to sear off the short crop of stubble that had started to emerge on his chin and cheeks.

"Clark? Are you okay?" Lois asked worriedly, going to him and embracing him tightly around his midsection, like a little girl seeking assurance.

"What happened? Were you injured?" Jor-El wanted to know.

"All of that blood," Lois said with the shake of her head as Clark returned her hug. "Please, tell me you're okay."

"I'm okay. At least, I am now. Trask...he..." Clark stopped, shaking his head. "He killed Lana. I tried to help, but there was nothing I could do." His voice was hoarse and hollow as he spoke. "Trask had a knife...with a Kryptonite blade."

"Oh, God," Jor-El gulped, dread in his voice, despite the fact that his son was alive and well before him.

"He stabbed me," Clark continued, "but, thanks to Lois, the authorities showed up just in the nick of time. A man named Detective Henderson saved my life."

"I'm glad to hear that. But, what happened to the blade?" Jor-El asked, scowling, likely at how quickly Clark had pointed out that a human had saved him.

"He's sending it along to S.T.A.R. Labs once he's done processing the evidence. There's a man there whom I trust to keep it safe and to run tests on it. The more we understand about why it affects us so seriously, the better chance we have of maybe finding some way to break its hold on us."

"Kal...Clark. How can you trust a *human* with something that can kill us? Did you not see what Trask and the others did with

that stone?" Jor-El demanded indignantly.

"Yes. I saw *exactly* what can happen when Kryptonite falls into evil hands. That's exactly *why* I want Dr. Klein to keep it safe for us. He's a good man. I trust him. Look, I know trusting the people of Earth is not something you are used to, but you need to trust *me*. I know what I'm doing. I've lived amongst good Earthlings my whole life. I've seen the bad too. I know the difference. I know who I can trust."

It was hard not to be defensive, Clark acknowledged to himself. Yes, it was true that Jor-El's experiences with humans had been nothing short of nightmarish, but Clark felt like his own judgment was being questioned. No, more than that. He *knew* it was being called into question.

"I just want you to be *safe*, my son."

"I know...Dad. But you have to understand that giving the blade over to Dr. Klein *is* the safest bet...for *both of us*."

"You are young, my son. You know nothing of the evils of the world."

"Stop it! I am not a child!" Clark argued. "I have traveled the world...many times over already. I've seen things you can't yet imagine. Things that maybe I can show you."

"You're right. You aren't a child. *Humans* stole your childhood from me," Jor-El fairly spat.

"*Humans* have also saved my life," Clark countered. "The Kents. Lois. Even Detective Henderson."

Jor-El looked about ready to argue, but then seemed to think better of it. He nodded slightly. "If you say so."

"So...what now?" Lois asked, perhaps to break the sudden tension in the room. She touched Clark's arm lightly to get his attention.

"Well, Henderson wants to speak with us. He's going to need our stories. But I'm sure it can wait until the morning," Clark said wearily.

"Of course it can," Lois said, taking him by the shoulders and guiding him to the couch. "You need to rest. I don't think I've ever seen you this exhausted looking."

"I'll be fine," Clark said distractedly. No matter how hard he tried, he kept seeing Lana's death play before his waking eyes. He shook his head, in an attempt to dispel the images. "I think it's best if we all stay together tonight. It seemed to me like everyone from Bureau Thirty-Nine lost their lives in the shootout, but I'd rather err on the side of caution. That is, if it's okay with the two of you."

"I'd like to stay," Jor-El immediately answered. "I'd like to get to know you...Clark."

Clark nodded. "That would be nice. For a long time, I wondered who my biological parents were. I have so many questions I want to ask."

Jor-El nodded. "And I have questions about you." He smiled.

"Lois?" Clark asked, almost afraid, now that the dust had settled, that her anger with him for lying about Superman would tear her away.

She nodded. "I'd hate to be in the way while you get to know your father, but I have to agree with you. I don't like the idea of us being apart tonight. God, Clark, I almost lost you...what, three times? More? I'm not letting you out of my sight ever again."

Relief flooded him. Maybe she wasn't so mad at him after all.

"Well then. We're going to need pizza," he said with a small smile as he picked up the cordless phone. "And lots of it."

Clark woke and yawned. He stretched, feeling his muscles pop in a pleasant way. His body felt riddled with knots between his run-ins with Kryptonite and from falling asleep in his armchair. He looked to the couch, where Lois had fallen asleep after insisting that Jor-El take the bed after years of sleeping on a barely adequate cot in the bowels of Bureau Thirty-Nine's compound.

The couch was empty.

He listened for a moment, locating her heartbeat. For a long

minute, he let the sound of it wash over him and calm him. He felt his own heartbeat responding, as though it were adjusting its rhythm to match hers. He looked out his windows, to his terrace. Instantly, he was on his feet and moving toward her.

"Lois?" Clark asked as he approached where she stood, bundled in one of his coats, hunched in an effort to ward off the bite of the cold predawn air. It was sorely oversized for her, making her look small and vulnerable.

"Clark," she acknowledged.

"Can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure."

"You want to come inside? It's freezing out here. What are you even doing out here?" He gestured vaguely to his terrace.

"I just wanted some air. I thought it might clear my head a little. So much has happened. It's kind of hard to process it all."

Clark nodded. "Come in. I'll get you something hot to drink."

Lois shook her head. "No. I'll come in, but I'm not in the mood for anything right now."

"Fair enough," Clark said, leading the way back inside and to his couch. They sat next to each other, with Clark slipping the coat from her shoulders only to replace it with a thick, handmade woven blanket he'd had since childhood.

"Thanks," she said, pulling it tighter and staring, unseeing, into space.

"Lois? Are we...okay?" Clark asked, worry tainting his words. "I know you have to be mad at me for keeping the whole Superman thing a secret. And it's okay if you are. I just...I need to know, Lois. I need to know how angry you are with me. Scream at me if you want. Whatever you need to do. I want you to ask whatever questions you have. I want to be completely honest with you now and always. I don't even care how personal your questions might be."

"I'm not mad," she said, taking one of his hands in hers. "I mean, I *was*, when I first found out. But after everything that's happened, after seeing how far some people will go to kill you, just for being different than everyone else on this planet, I get it. I understand why you didn't want anyone to know. I get why you hide what you can do...why you've adopted a whole different identity for when you need to help people. If anything, I'm mad at myself for not seeing past the glasses...or the cape." She smiled tentatively and snuggled into his side. "Yeah, I think we're okay."

Clark gave her a small smile as his arms came up to encircle her. "Don't be mad at yourself, Lois. When you didn't see Clark in Superman...it was a relief. I spend most of my waking hours with you. If you didn't see that Superman was nothing more than Clark Kent in a Spandex suit, chances were that no one else would. It meant I was safe. It meant I didn't have to worry about being targeted in both of my lives. It meant I could still have a life — a *real* life, without losing myself to the man in the blue suit."

She smiled back at him with such a look of tenderness that it nearly broke his heart. "I wish it was that simple, Clark. But the fact is, I'm a reporter. A damn good one too, if I can toot my own horn for a second here. I should have looked at the facts harder. I should have seen the obvious. I mean, the way you treated me, in both your roles, so to speak. It should have tipped me off. No one has ever treated me with such...such..." She struggled for a moment, looking for the right word. "Such respect, such love, such openness and friendliness," she finally said. "Whether I was talking to Clark or Superman, he...*you*...always acted as though the rest of the world ceased to exist and I was the only other person in the entire universe."

"Lois, I do respect you. I *do* love you. I have, ever since you barged in on my interview with Perry. You had such fire, such passion, that you forced me to take notice of you. And when I'm with you, yes, in a way, the rest of the world fades into the background. I *want* to be able to listen to what you have to say. I *want* you to know you have my attention. That you mean the

world to me."

"I'm glad," she said, bringing his hand to her lips and kissing his knuckles. "You're the first man I've ever been close to who's ever made me feel special."

Clark drew her closer, and she pressed into his side. She sighed tiredly and contentedly. Clark did too. He rubbed his eyes with his free hand.

"So..." Lois hesitantly said after a few minutes of blissful silence. "After all that's happened...are you still going to...you know? Be Superman?"

"Absolutely," he said without the need to think it over. "Superman...it's funny. He never existed up until recently, but now...he's an essential part of who I am. I won't let one group of insane people kill Superman. I didn't allow them to do it with Kryptonite, and I won't let them do it with fear."

"Good," Lois said with conviction. "Because the world needs Superman. It needs Clark too. You do so much good for this world, no matter what suit you wear. But most importantly, *I* need Clark. If I've learned anything over the past day or so, it's that I can't live my life without you in it. *All* of you. The ordinary man and the brave hero both. I don't think I could stand it if the Bureau...I don't know. Changed you, somehow."

"That'll never happen," Clark assured her, pulling her into a hug.

Silence fell between them for a moment before Lois spoke again.

"Well, I guess one good thing came of all of this. You gained a father during this whole mess."

"It seems I have," Clark said, leaning his cheek against her head.

"How does it feel, getting to connect to your roots?" she asked gently.

Clark thought it over for a moment. "So much has happened, I guess I really haven't processed it all yet. I know he's my father but...I don't know. It's like the reality of it all hasn't really sunk in yet. It's nice to know that I'm not the only person like me out in the world. It's nice to meet the man responsible for bringing me into the world. At the same time, it's been so long since I last imagined what it would be like to meet my biological parents. I was just a kid then. A kid with budding super powers, but still just a kid. It feels...a little surreal, right now," he admitted. "Like I'm in some kind of dream and, when I wake up, none of this will be real and I'll just go back to being the only Kryptonian out there."

Lois nodded.

"There is so much I want to know. So much I want to ask. But it feels...awkward, to think of Jor-El as my father. All my life, *Jonathan Kent* has been my father."

"He still is. Jor-El doesn't change that," Lois pointed out gently.

"I know. But...I don't know. I know Jor-El is my biological father. I know it in my heart and in my mind. But it feels weird, to call him 'Dad.' And weirder still for me to call him by his first name. I'm not sure *what* I should be calling him. Nothing feels right yet."

"That's not an uncommon feeling, from what I understand," Lois said, rubbing his arm in a soothing fashion. "I had a friend in high school — Carol. She and her sister were both adopted. She met her birth mother right before she left to go to college. When I asked her how it had gone, she told me something similar to what you did. It made her pull away from her biological mother because she wasn't sure how to handle her conflicting emotions. She...the mother, that is...died two months later to a drunk driver. So, just promise me, no matter what, you'll make the most of this second chance with Jor-El."

Clark nodded mutely. "I wish I'd known that he was alive all this time. I wish I could have gotten him out of the Bureau's compound sooner."

"How could you have known?" Lois asked gently. "None of this is your fault, Clark."

She knows me too well already, he thought to himself. She knows I'll always blame myself for not being able to help, even if I couldn't have. It's the same guilt I have when I can't save a life, only deeper. Jor-El is my father. I should have saved him sooner.

He nodded sharply. "I know. I just can't help thinking about the what-ifs."

"So...you're going to give him a chance, right? A chance to get to know you?"

Clark smiled at her, loving the way she so tenderly asked, loving the concern she had for him.

"Of course," he said, his voice a soft whisper. "I lost years with him. I'm not about to turn away, not when I've finally reconnected with a piece of my past. I want to know who I am, fully. Who I was. At least, who I was to the people who gave me life. I want to know about the world I came from — the good and the bad — not because I'm sorry to be on Earth, but because I am so *thankful* to be on Earth. So thankful to be anywhere you are." He smiled down at her again. "Because of you, this planet is the most beautiful spot in the universe, as far as I'm concerned."

She smiled at him. "I'm glad that you'll give him a chance."

"He's my father, Lois. Even if he didn't raise me, he's still a part of me," Clark said. "I just wish...because of Bureau Thirty-Nine, I lost my only surviving family. A man lost his only child. Jor-El was tormented for years. For all I know, he could be mentally scarred beyond repair. And it makes me furious. But, then again, because of them, my parents finally got to become parents. Because they raised me, I'm the man I am today." He passed a hand over his face, trying to wipe away some of the conflicting emotions he felt and the sleep which called to him. "I'm grateful for my life as Clark Kent. But I feel almost like I shouldn't, because of what my father went through. I feel like...I don't even know how I'm supposed to feel at this point. This isn't your typical adoption story. My parents didn't give me up because they were too young, or too sick, or too poor, or anything like that. They were stolen from me...one in death, one by a sadistic group of people who held him prisoner for almost thirty years."

The anguish of his heart threatened to spill out of his eyes in the form of salty tears, but he bit them back and refused to allow them to escape.

"Maybe you should take Jor-El out to Kansas," Lois said after a thoughtful silence. "Let your parents meet each other. I know your parents, Clark, maybe not for long, but I still feel like I know them pretty well. I'm sure they would love to meet the man who helped bring their son into the world. I know they must feel grateful to him. I know I would be grateful to whoever fathered my child, if I were a parent. Maybe once you see them together, it might help you to sort out some of your feelings."

Clark thought it over. Lois was right. Martha and Jonathan had always expressed gratitude to the woman who'd chosen them to raise her son after she passed away. He knew they felt the same way toward the man who'd sired their son. And Jor-El seemed so bitter toward the entire human race, thanks to his very limited exposure to Earthlings. It would be good for him to see the best of society, so he would know how great a planet he'd landed on, even if his start to his new life on it hadn't been good. He just hoped that, after almost thirty years of mistreatment, Jor-El was capable of opening his heart and mind toward the rest of the human race.

"Maybe," was all he said in return. After all, even if he wanted to make the meeting happen, it didn't mean that Jor-El would be open to it, even if Jonathan and Martha were. "You should get some sleep, Lois. It's been a long couple of days, for all of us."

Lois stifled a yawn. "Yeah, it has. Thanks for letting me crash here."

"Sure," Clark said, his voice soft. "I'm just glad that you still want to be around me." He flashed her a brilliant smile. Then,

"Just wait here a second. I'll get you some extra pillows and blankets. I wanted to get them earlier, but I didn't want to wake you."

He crossed the room to his closet and floated up a couple of inches to comfortably reach the top shelf. When he landed, he had two pillows and an armload of blankets. He brought them over to Lois, putting the pillows beneath her head and covering her with the old, hand-woven blankets that his grandmother had once crocheted. He kissed her brow once she was snuggled beneath them.

"What about you?" she asked, nodding in the direction of Clark's bedroom, where Jor-El was resting.

Clark gave her a half-smile. "Got it covered," he said, rising from the floor and stretching out as he hovered in midair.

"God, I wish I could do that," Lois grinned sleepily. "You can really do that while sleeping?"

Clark rolled onto his stomach and folded his arms to make a pillow for his head. He nodded.

"It so easy, so second nature, that sometimes I wake up only to find myself floating above my bed, even if I hadn't been floating prior to falling asleep. It's not often, but it happens. Particularly in times of high stress."

"Your life is so strange," Lois mused.

"And it gets stranger by the day," he agreed with a smile.

"Lois?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm glad that you know...about me. I've wanted to tell you for so long. I'm glad that I can finally stop lying and hiding...that I can be myself around you, completely, without holding anything back."

"I'm glad too," Lois said, trying to hide another yawn. "Night, Clark."

"Night, Lois. I love you."

"I love you too."

Somewhere in the gray hours before sunrise, Clark awoke feeling mostly refreshed. Physically, he could have slept some more, but his mind wouldn't allow him to fall back into his dreams. Eventually, he stopped trying altogether and got dressed for the day. He left a message on Perry's voicemail, letting the Chief know that he and Lois were taking the day off, but not to worry, they had something huge brewing. What he didn't say was that it involved taking down the city's resident multi-billionaire, exposing him as the head of at least one very evil organization.

I'll let him be surprised once we turn in our article and all the evidence we've been compiling to send Luthor to prison, he thought as he brushed his teeth in an effort to feel cleaner and more awake.

As he exited the bathroom, he saw that Jor-El was awake now too. The older man poured himself a glass of water and drank it down.

"I'll make us some coffee," Clark offered.

Jor-El nodded. "I would appreciate that. It's been an age since my last taste of coffee, back when I was more of a valued colleague to the Bureau, when the old management still had control of the operation."

"Are you hungry?"

"Not yet."

"Are you sure? I could make you something," Clark offered as he started the coffeemaker.

Jor-El shook his head. "I'm fine for now. Thank you."

While the coffeemaker worked its magic, Clark checked on Lois. She was still asleep. One of her blankets had slipped a little, so he gently fixed it, brushing a few strands of hair away from where they'd fallen over her left eye. Standing back, he looked down on her, his heart full to bursting with the love he carried for her. Then, not wanting to wake her, he retreated to the kitchen and

fixed his own mug of coffee while eating a granola bar, letting Jor-El prepare his to his own liking.

"Dad? Could we talk? Outside, so we don't wake Lois," he asked in a soft whisper of a voice.

"Absolutely."

Clark led the way out to the terrace. Cradling his mug in his hands, he leaned against the side of the building, looking up into the sky. Beside him, Jor-El did the same. Neither one seemed willing to broach the silence.

"What will you do now?" Clark asked quietly, not quite able to look at his father just yet, fearing the answer.

"I don't know," Jor-El replied in a matching tone. He sighed. "I still feel as though I have a duty to our people. Our *true* people, not these Earthlings." Clark winced a little at the harshness of Jor-El's words. "But it's been so long," Jor-El finally added. "I've no doubt that I've been replaced, that there is no place for me among the surviving Kryptonians."

"Do you think they're out there, somewhere? Do you think they found a new home?" Clark asked. He'd been thinking about potential survivors since he'd first heard his father's story in its entirety the night before while the three of them demolished two pizzas.

"I hope so," Jor-El replied. "Finding them, however..." He shrugged. "It's an impossibly large universe out there, and I've never known a single race of people to have mapped it all out. Our people could be anywhere."

"Why not stay here?" Clark asked after a moment. "Why go back, with no promises of finding anyone else still alive and thriving?"

"This isn't my home," Jor-El said flatly.

"Neither is... wherever the others might have settled," Clark argued back in a neutral tone. "Krypton is gone. You could just as easily make Earth your home. For *real* this time." He sipped from his mug, enjoying the feeling of the hot brew as it raced down his throat. It was a simple pleasure he never thought he would enjoy again while he'd peered into his own death.

"I know this is where you grew up," Jor-El said, hesitation in his voice as though he was carefully choosing his words, "but this is not where I belong. It's not where I *want* to belong."

"I know," Clark said, now cherry-picking his own words and staring into the depths of his coffee, "that things were bad for you. I don't blame you for your disgust for Earth and the people who inhabit it. I can't be sure I wouldn't feel the same way, under the same circumstances. But, please, don't let one *very small* group of zealots shut your mind to all the wonderful things this world has. Sunsets and warm, sandy beaches. December snowfalls. Summer thunderstorms. People who are so diverse, so different from one another, but so much the same. People who love and share their joy. People who wouldn't hesitate to help out even total strangers."

Jor-El snorted as though in disbelief or disgust.

"I'm not going to say this world is perfect," Clark continued. "Yeah, it has its fair share of evil — people like Trask and the rest of the Bureau — who make it their business to hurt people instead of helping them. It can be overwhelming, sometimes. But there is so much good out there too. So much hope. So many people who fight, daily, to make this planet a better place to live."

He paused for a moment, looking up at the sky again. Before he could continue, Jor-El cut in.

"Kal... Clark..." he began, correcting himself.

Clark didn't mind the slip. For almost thirty years, the man had thought of his son as Kal. Switching to Clark would take some getting used to, he was sure.

"I know your experience is different than mine. I know you've seen more in your years on Earth than I have. I've heard about this... Superman... that you've created. I know that, right now, the world embraces you for it. But for how long? How long will they love the alien in their midst? How long before they turn their

backs on you? How long before they begin to resent and hate you for having abilities they will never have? What then?"

Clark shrugged. "I'll keep on doing what I do. Being Superman isn't about getting the world to accept me. There's only one person in the world whose acceptance of me matters — Lois. And, I think, she has. I don't care if the whole world turns into an army of Bureau Thirty-Nine members. I *like* helping people. I *like* being able to save lives. I *like* knowing that my powers are serving a higher purpose than just a lazy Sunday afternoon fly or bringing Lois takeout food from Shanghai."

Jor-El fell silent for a few long moments.

"I think, if you gave the world a chance, it might surprise you," Clark finally offered quietly, before taking another long overdue drink from his mug.

"I think not," Jor-El replied.

"I used to think the same way as you. I was accepted as Clark. No one knew I was anything more than a regular guy. No one knew anyone on this planet could do the things that I can. That we can," he corrected, to include his father. "I thought that everyone would be... well, like the Bureau if they found out about me. I imagined they would all be just like Trask. But I took a leap of faith when I created Superman. And I was surprised at how well he was embraced."

"You've never been locked up in a cell for years on end, not knowing how long you've been there, whether or not an insane man is finally going to against the Presidential order that protects your life," his father said with quiet intensity.

"Maybe not," Clark countered, "but I *do* know that all it takes is one person to change a life." He cast a glance through the window to where Lois still slumbered on the couch.

"You care for her." It wasn't a question. It wasn't said with contempt or enthusiasm. It was merely spoken, a flat statement of fact.

"I love her," Clark corrected him. "For a long time, even though no one knew of my powers, I felt... isolated. I wasn't sure where, if anywhere, I belonged. Then I met Lois, and, in an instant, my entire life changed. Everything seemed to click into place for me. The world changed from a vast, lonely place, to someplace warm and inviting."

Jor-El seemed to process this over a long sip of his coffee.

"And her? Does she feel the same?"

Clark nodded. "She says that she does."

"Then I pray that never changes," Jor-El said, though Clark knew that the man disliked her for the simple fact that she'd been born on Earth. "A great love has a way of changing a man. Your mother... I shall never see her like again."

"I wish it was as simple as just... finding her," Clark admitted. "I've always wondered what she was like. What *you both* were like. It killed me to learn that she'd died, when my parents told me the truth about the night I became their son."

A silence fell between the two men as they both drank from their mugs and tried to find some way to break the sudden quiet. Around them, only the light, cold breeze could be heard, as well as the rumbling of a truck on some distant street.

"I can tell you about her."

It was a simple statement, but the weight in Jor-El's voice was palpable. It was clear how much love he still bore for the woman he'd been wed to. And the pain Clark heard in his father's voice, knowing that Lara was gone, almost broke his heart.

"I'd like that," Clark replied sincerely.

A silence fell between them once more. Clark waited patiently to see if his father would say more, but Jor-El spoke not a word. Clark wondered if, perhaps, the other man was gathering his thoughts. But Clark wasn't ready for stories just yet. It felt too soon, too rushed, to hear them now. He wanted to be able to take his time and ask all of the thousands of questions he'd always had about his origins and the people who'd brought him into this

world.

"Will you stay then?" he asked instead, hoping to convince his father to stay on Earth, even if for a short while.

Jor-El studied the strong brew in his cup before answering. "I don't know. I have no ship. I don't know if Earth has the materials I would need to build a new one, something capable of traversing the infiniteness of space. But I do know one thing. If I go, Clark," he said, the name 'Clark' sounding like it took great effort to say, "I want you to come with me."

"No."

"No?"

Clark shook his head for emphasis. "No. Krypton...or whatever is filling in for Krypton now, is your place, not mine. I belong here, on Earth. My place is with Lois, and with all of the people Superman defends on a daily basis."

"You *have* a place there, even if you don't know it. Before you were born, you were promised to the daughter of Krypton's ruler. If you returned to me, you would be bonded to Zara, and the two of you would rule over what is left of our people. It was to be your legacy, your destiny."

Again, he shook his head. "My legacy is what I leave for Earth, in both of my roles. It's in the way I can make this planet better and safer as Clark through the written word and my investigations. It's the lives I protect as Superman, the criminals I catch, the people I can give hope to. Not in ruling a people I don't know along with some woman I've never even heard of before and cannot possibly love. If I'm to spend my life bound to anyone, it'll be to Lois." He kept his voice soft and low, but firm, leaving no room for an argument.

"Think of the good you could do!" Jor-El urged.

"I *am*. The people here need me more than some distant group of people who don't even know I'm alive."

"I wish you'd give this some more thought."

"I don't need to. *Nothing* will change my mind," Clark said.

Hypocrite! his mind screamed at him. *Asking him to open his mind to the idea of staying on Earth when you're just as closed-minded about going with him to your own people.*

No, he yelled back in his mind. It's not the same! Without Lois, there is no life for me anywhere. It took me a lifetime to find her. I won't ever lose her again.

"Hmm," Jor-El hummed in response. Clark had the sneaking suspicion that the conversation was not yet over, though he was glad to let the subject drop for the moment.

"There *is* one other thing," Clark said after a moment, after another peek through the windows to ensure that Lois was still sleeping.

"What's that?"

"I'd like to...to bring you home with me," Clark said, working hard to get the words out, feeling awkward in calling Kansas home, when Jor-El clearly only viewed Krypton as their home. "I'd like you to meet my parents...the people who raised me. I think they'd really like getting a chance to meet you."

"Ka...Clark...I don't know," Jor-El said warily.

"Look, I know it's got to be hard, knowing that other people raised the child you wanted to raise yourself," Clark said quietly. "I can't imagine being in the position you are...to lose the child I loved only to reconnect with him years later...to miss out on such a huge portion of that kid's life. But...well...I think it'll be good for you. For *all of us*. Nothing about this situation is easy, I know. But I can't imagine you leaving this planet without getting to know some of the best, kindest, most loving people that I know. Because of them, I'm the man that I am now. They've never once turned their backs on me or even been afraid of my powers. Instead, I've always been able to count on them. They were the ones who helped me figure out how to control my powers as each new one manifested. Please, Dad. Give me a chance to show you the polar opposite of Bureau Thirty-Nine."

Jor-El hesitated. "I'm not sure that's a good idea..."

"Why?" Clark asked bluntly.

"Well, for one thing, I'd feel like an intruder," Jor-El stammered.

Clark shook his head. "You wouldn't be. All my life, ever since I was old enough to understand that I'd been adopted into the Kent family, I've only ever heard expressions of gratitude for the people that gave me life, and a wish that my parents could thank them for filling their lives with the one thing it lacked most — a child to love."

"But it was never done out of the goodness of our hearts!" Jor-El protested. "Yes, I am glad that someone was there to love you and raise you when I couldn't, even if it wasn't a fellow Kryptonian. But, selfishly speaking, I wish the Kents had never had a reason to meet you." Frustration and anger rang in his voice.

Clark's voice went to a soft near-whisper. "You think they don't know that? Or that they won't be able to understand your feelings? They've always regretted that my parents had to die — so they thought — in order for them to become parents themselves."

"Clark..."

"No, Dad. Please, just give it one chance. One dinner. If it doesn't go well, or you're too uncomfortable or...whatever...I'll never ask you to see them again."

"It's just...a lot...especially given, well, everything," Jor-El said, each word sounding harder to get out.

"I know. I know the Bureau did unspeakable things. But, I'm telling you, the vast majority of people are not like that. And if you wind up staying here, on Earth, by choice or by circumstance, you'll need to know that there are good people out there and that the world is just so...so...incredible and wondrous." Clark sighed. "Please. Let me try to show you some of the good out there. Whether you stay on Earth or not, please don't let your only memories of the planet be the horrors of the Bureau. Don't you owe yourself that much, at least?"

Again, Jor-El hesitated. A thick silence fell between them. Clark noticed that the barest hints of pink were blooming in the sky. A new day was dawning.

"All right," Jor-El finally agreed. "I will meet the people who took you in and loved you as their own."

Clark knocked on the door of the farmhouse he'd grown up in. He took Lois' hand for a boost of confidence. She gave his hand a squeeze, as if to reassure him that all would be perfectly fine. After a moment, he heard his parents coming. Jonathan opened the door, his face a broad smile.

"Come on in," he urged as he held the door for everyone.

"Lois, so great to see you again. Clark, it's good to have you home." He hugged Lois warmly.

"It's good to *be* home," Clark said, giving his father a hug.

"Mom! It smells *fantastic* in here."

The delicious smells of pot roast, carrots, onions, potatoes, buttermilk biscuits, Martha's famous homemade macaroni and cheese, and a cherry pie filled the farmhouse. Clark breathed the scents in deeply, the different aromas invoking many happy memories of his childhood. This was his *home*. These were his *parents*, no matter what his DNA said.

"Thank you, honey," Martha said, pulling him into a hug.

"Lois, I'm so glad you could come. And I'm so glad that you're part of the inner circle now, of those who *really* know Clark." She smiled brightly, the smile of a woman glad to lighten the burden of a secret even if only by the slightest of degrees.

"Thanks," Lois said. "Me too. It means a lot to me that you and Jonathan are okay with me knowing things."

"Of course we are!" Martha exclaimed, her smile impossibly wider.

"Uh, Mom? Dad?" Clark stammered, toeing the floor the way

he used to when he was a young boy confessing to having done something he wasn't supposed to. "I want you to meet someone. This is Jor-El. He's..."

"Your father," Jonathan finished for him. "It's okay, you can say it in front of us."

"Yeah," Clark said, nodding, trying to will himself to feel less awkward about the situation.

Jonathan smiled and waved away Clark's unvoiced concerns. "He looks like you." He turned to Jor-El. "I'm Jonathan and this is my wife, Martha. We're glad to have you here. We've always hoped that Clark would get the chance to find his biological father, however slim that possibility might have seemed at the time."

"You did?" Clark asked. "You never told me that before."

"I know," Jonathan said. "I didn't want you to get your hopes up. Right before you mother passed away, she said that her husband was gone. We didn't know if she meant that he'd died or if he'd simply...gone somewhere. We didn't want to plant the seed in your head that you'd definitely find your father out there somewhere, because we didn't want you to get hurt if you couldn't find him." He laughed a little. "I have to say, Clark, when you said you you'd found a piece of your past, I never once imagined this at all. And when you said it was your father..." He shook his head with a soft smile. "I couldn't believe it. I'm happy for you, you know that, right?"

"Glad to hear it," Clark confessed. "I'm sorry. I know the way I told you was a bit...well...awkward and clumsy. I didn't quite know how to break the news on the phone when I called this morning. I was so nervous about how you'd take the news."

"It's okay," Jonathan said. "I knew something was up, but I just chalked it up to excitement over Lois being in on the whole Superman thing. Then, when you said you'd found one of your family members...well, our first thought was a sibling or a cousin. Then you said it was your father and I have to admit it...we were even more thrilled for you. But come on. Let's not just stand around here by the door. Come in, sit. I think dinner's close to ready."

"I'm actually just about to check on the meat," Martha replied. "I'd hate for it to dry out. Why don't you all go into the living room and I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Sounds great, Mom," Clark said, relieved that everything felt normal with his parents, despite the fact that the situation should probably have been a lot more awkward.

Jonathan led them all into the living room. Only Martha didn't follow, disappearing into the kitchen. Clark could hear her checking on the various dishes — stirring a pot here, lowering the heat of a stove burner there. She reappeared a few moments later. Jor-El remained mute and spent the time looking at the photographs around the room. He picked up a frame or two, in order to study the images of the childhood he'd missed out on seeing his son experience.

"I want to thank you for taking in my son," Jor-El finally said as he sat on the couch.

"It was our pleasure," Martha assured him. "I don't know what Clark's told you, but having him as our son has been the biggest blessing of our lives. He was the miracle child brought to us when all other avenues of parenthood were closed to us. He was nothing less than an answer to our prayers."

Clark heard the lump in his mother's throat. After all these years, he knew it still brought her to the edge of tears to think about how close they'd come to being completely childless. It still stabbed at his own heart to think of how unfair life had been to two of the most loving people he'd ever known. Again, he took Lois' hand to steady himself.

"He's spoken highly of you both." Jor-El sounded as awkward as he must have felt, Clark mused.

Martha smiled in response. "He's a good son."

"So, Clark, you didn't say...how *did* you find your father?"

Jonathan asked, simple curiosity in his words. "You never mentioned you were looking for him."

Clark shook his head. "I wasn't. It was just sort of luck that we found each other. It's kind of a long story. But, the important thing is, first and foremost, that we're all okay. Just...remember that, okay?"

He could see concern settling on his parents' features like a mask. Swiftly, he recounted their dealings with Bureau Thirty-Nine, how he and Jor-El had found each other, the terrifying new discovery of Kryptonite and what it could do to him, Lana and Lex Luthor's involvement. It took some convincing, but Jor-El related his own story, from before he and Lara had left Krypton, up until he and Clark had met in the bowels of Bureau Thirty-Nine's compound.

When they were finished speaking, Clark could see unabashed agony in his parents' faces. Not just for him and his brush with a stony green harbinger of death, but for Jor-El's captivity as well. He hoped Jor-El recognized how deeply their hearts hurt for him.

Martha shook her head, horrified. "I can't believe...that's terrible!" she sputtered out.

Jonathan looked ready for a fight. "I've never been one to be glad over someone's death, but in this case...I'm glad I can't get a hold of them. I'd teach them a lesson they wouldn't soon forget. How can anyone be so cruel?" He shook his head.

"I've long since given up trying to answer that question," Jor-El said wearily. "It's not a problem unique to Earth, unfortunately. Out there, among the stars," he said, gesturing vaguely toward the ceiling, "there are entire civilizations which seem to consist solely of those who would seek to harm, kill, or enslave others. It's not surprising to find people like that here on Earth as well."

"Thankfully, that's only a small percentage of the world's population," Lois countered smoothly.

"She's right," Jonathan put in.

A timer chimed in the kitchen. Martha stood and smiled.

"Dinner's ready. Shall we move to the table?"

"Sounds great, I'm starving," Lois was quick to respond.

Clark could sense her eagerness to dispel some of the tension in the room.

"Me too," Clark agreed. "My mouth's been watering ever since I stepped through the door. Mom? Why don't you sit? I'll take care of everything."

"Thank you, Clark," she said, giving her son a fond smile.

"I'll help," Lois offered.

"No, no. I've got it," Clark said with a grin cast over his shoulder as he headed to the kitchen.

He sped through his work, knowing that it would almost seem as though the various dishes of food were simply just appearing out of thin air. In seconds, everything was on the table, and Clark had loaded the dishwasher with as much of the used dishes and utensils they were finished with as he could. He popped a soap tablet into the dishwasher as well, preparing it for later. Then he calmly walked out of the kitchen and took his seat at the table.

"You cheated," Lois accused him, good-naturedly.

"I had to," he mock-defended. "I had to make sure Mom didn't tell too many embarrassing stories about me in my absence." As soon as he said it, however, he felt guilty. Would it be a wound to Jor-El's heart to hear about all the things in his son's life that he'd been forced to miss out on?

But he needn't have worried. Jor-El paused only for a moment before asking, "Stories? Would you mind if they told some? There's so much I've missed."

Clark nodded. "Of course. Mom? Dad?"

And so the two gentle farmers began to talk, relating any story that popped into their minds. Clark filled in when he could, telling both Lois and his father of how his powers had manifested, how he'd learned to control them, his decision to never tell a soul. He thought, perhaps, that his father might be particularly interested, as

his own abilities began to reemerge. Some of them hadn't yet, and Clark wondered if nearly thirty years of being deprived of sunlight meant that it would take longer for his body to absorb enough nourishment from the sun to fuel his powers. He had no doubt, however, that soon his father would possess all the powers that Clark had had for years.

When dinner was over, Clark once more volunteered to take care of everything, leaving his parents and Lois with Jor-El for a whole thirty seconds while he cleaned up, stored the leftovers, and filled the dishwasher. He didn't yet turn the machine on, knowing that his mother would want the dessert plates and utensils added as well. Instead, he set the table and readied everything they would soon be needing, even filling the tea kettle with water to boil when it was time. His work done, he rejoined everyone in the living room. To his delight, he found Jor-El laughing.

"Okay, what'd I miss?" Clark joked as he sat in one of the empty armchairs.

"Oh, nothing. Just the story of when you accidentally set the Christmas tree on fire," Martha answered between laughs.

Clark felt his face go hot in a flush. He remembered the incident well. He'd been focusing so hard on changing out the bad bulbs on the strings of lights that he'd wound up setting the tree alight. He'd spent a month's worth of allowance money on buying a new tree for the family, not because his parents had made him — they never would have asked such a thing — but because he'd known in his heart that it was the right thing to do.

"Yeah, well..." he said with a shrug, trying to brush the incident off. He left his statement unfinished.

And so the night continued on. Clark noticed a marked change in Jor-El as the hours passed. The unhappy, almost depressed feeling that surrounded the man fell away, piece by tiny piece. He laughed more freely, more frequently, and more deeply. A twinkle kindled in his eyes and his smile grew ever wider. His body language — once so stiff and formal — softened. He became more relaxed, leaning into the couch cushions, using ever more expressive hand motions. It warmed Clark's heart and gave him hope that the Bureau's grip on Jor-El might be able to be broken.

"Hey," Clark said to Lois, long after dessert was eaten and cleaned up.

"Hey," Lois replied.

"Can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure."

Clark glanced at his three parents. They were all deeply involved in conversation. No one would notice if he and Lois slipped away for a bit. He grabbed Lois' coat as well as his own and ushered her outside. They walked in silence for a few minutes, until the farmhouse was left behind, the windows all lit up and cozy seeming in the chill night air. Clark leaned against the tree where his Fortress of Solitude lay nestled within the sturdy branches.

"Is everything okay?" Lois asked.

"Better than okay. Lois, I just needed to say thank you.

Suggesting that I bring my father out here was a stroke of genius." She gave him a tender smile that melted his heart. "I'm so glad he seems to be bonding with your parents." She paused for a moment, and Clark could see another question burning in her.

"What?" he asked in a soft voice, encouraging her to ask whatever it was she wanted to ask.

"Do you think he'll stay?"

Clark sighed, watching his breath mist in the cold night air. "I've been asking myself the same question all night." He sighed again. "I hope so, Lois. I know he's had a terrible experience in dealing with the human race. I don't blame him for wanting to leave. But, especially after tonight, I feel like I finally have a piece of my past back. Before tonight... I wasn't really sure if I could think of him as my father. I have no memory of him. He was taken from me too early for me to have any recollection of him, other

than what I'm now starting to learn about him. And it felt like a betrayal to my folks, to think of him as my father."

He pulled his gaze from Lois' face. "I don't want to lose him, Lois. Not again. Not when I know there's no chance of ever finding him again. I won't leave Earth. Not for him. Not for anyone."

"I'm glad to hear that," she said, taking his hand and twining her fingers with him. "I don't want to lose you." A mischievous twinkle glinted in her eyes. "After all, you're the only partner I could ever stand to work with."

Clark chuckled. "You're just saying that because you have the inside track to Superman exclusives," he said with a lopsided grin.

"I'll admit, it *does* have its perks," she said, still giving him a wicked grin herself.

Clark laughed again and looked up into the night sky. He felt, rather than saw, Lois snuggle into his side. He looked over only to see her gazing at the stars too.

"It's so beautiful and peaceful out here. I can see why you've always spoken of your farmland roots with such love in your voice."

"What? The great Metropolis-lover, Lois Lane, enjoys being out in the country?" he teased.

"I never said I'm ready to move out here, but I can see its appeal," she retorted, her breath misting in the crisp air.

"Lois?"

"Hmm?"

"I meant it before. Thank you. For suggesting this. For coming out here with me. For being so understanding about, well, everything. You really are a rare woman."

"Considering the one ex-girlfriend of yours that I've have the misfortune of meeting, I can see why you'd think that."

Clark shook his head. "I've always felt that way about you. But Lana..." He shook his head again. "I've thought about her role in everything since the moment we learned that she was in charge of the Bureau. She was always assertive, difficult, and demanding, even as far back as kindergarten. While we were dating, she always pushed me to be someone I wasn't... someone I had no intention of *ever* being. But she was never cruel. The things that happened out in the Bureau's compound... I had a hard time recognizing the girl I used to date in that unfamiliar, sadistic woman." He thought for a moment. "Still, in the end, she did the right thing, and I have to give her credit for that."

"The right thing? Clark, you can't be serious! She ordered her men to cut you open, stem to stern, while you were still alive!"

"I know," he said in a whisper-quiet voice. "Believe me, the nightmares of that order will haunt me for a long time to come."

"So, how can you possibly defend her?"

"I'm not defending her," he clarified. "I'm just... recognizing that she did do the right thing, in the end. Without her help, we wouldn't have escaped. You can't deny that, Lois. For a moment there, I even saw a glimmer of the old Lana in her. It gives me hope that, maybe, Luthor hadn't completely corrupted her."

Lois fell silent for a few heartbeats. Then, tentatively, "Did you still care for her?"

Clark had to smile, albeit a sad, tentative smile. "No. Not the way you mean it, anyway. She was a part of my past, Lois. I've known her all my life. We grew up together. I could have easily spent the rest of my life perfectly content to never cross her path again, but I never wished her ill."

Lois nodded. "I have a few people from my past that I feel the same way about."

"There's only ever been you for me, Lois," he said, feeling her burrow deeper into his side. He put his arm around her shoulders, luxuriating in the fact that she was there with him, and that he could speak so freely with her.

"You know I feel the same way about you."

"In all my life," he said quietly, "I've never met anyone like

you. Someone who encourages me to be exactly who I am. I mean, my parents do, but they're my parents." He shrugged. "Of course they would. But you...it's such a unique experience for me, Lois. To be with someone who doesn't see me for what I can do for them. Lana...she always tried to force me to be something I'm not. Someone who could best service *her* desires in life. Someone to be...broken and reshaped into what *she* wanted. And she didn't even know about my powers. You *do* know, but you haven't once mentioned all the things I could do for you."

"I don't want you to do anything. I want you to be happy. I want *us* to be happy." She paused, then spoke again. "Are you worried, Clark?"

"Worried? You mean about us? No," he said, shaking his head. "I think we'll be fine. Won't we?"

Lois shook her head in turn. "That's not quite what I was getting at. I meant...well, the Bureau. If they knew your secret...who else might? What records did the police find?"

"I don't know," Clark admitted. "I don't know what kind of proof the Bureau might have gathered and kept. I was so out of it in Bureau Thirty-Nine's compound thanks to the Kryptonite and the fear I had, not to mention the shock of meeting my father and trying to find some way to get the two of you out of the compound alive. I have no idea if Lana recorded anything — when we spoke, when I was hauled off to have that bullet taken out of my shoulder, the prison cell we shared, any of the prep that Trask and the like did when they were getting me ready to be dissected." He swallowed hard and shuddered. "You know, being strapped to that table...it was my worst nightmare come true. My parents and I have always been afraid that if it became known that I was different from everyone else, that some scientists would take me away to dissect me like a frog."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," she apologized.

He just stared into the far distance, hearing her but not responding to her, lost in his own nightmarish thoughts. "I just kept thinking to myself that, after all the years of hiding and lying and pretending, that this was how it was all going to end. Strapped to a cold metal table in some God-forsaken compound in the desert mountains, hacked to pieces by a lunatic. I wasn't even going to be able to die with any kind of dignity. No one would benefit from my death. And, worst of all, my death would have sealed your own fate, because I wouldn't be able to at least try to defend you. I felt so responsible for everything that would have happened to you."

"You did nothing wrong, Clark! My death would have been on Lana and Trask's hands...on *Luthor's* hands. Never on yours. I knew you were doing the best you could, under the circumstances. I didn't blame you then and I certainly don't blame you now."

"You don't understand," he said his voice raising by only the slightest of degrees. He dropped his arm from around her and moved off a few steps, as though distancing himself from Lois could lessen the agony in his heart. "Your life is more valuable to me than my own. If my alien origins had cost you your life..." He sighed, leaving his thought unfinished. "It's because of *me* that Bureau Thirty-Nine connected Lois Lane with Superman. The whole world does. The reporting team of Lane and Kent gets all the Superman exclusives. Lois Lane is the one reporter Superman is constantly seen speaking with. All because I have no willpower around you. All because I'm so in love with you, I can't maintain the aloof — and safer for you — personality of Superman when I'm near you. If I had, the Bureau wouldn't have targeted you. So, yes, Lois, your death *absolutely* would have been my fault."

"Clark," Lois replied in a quiet, intense voice that matched his own, as she reached out to him and placed a hand on his shoulder, "you don't get it, do you? I gladly would have given my life to protect the — as I knew it at the time — two men I care most about in this world. Superman protects so many. But who protects *him*? If I could have kept him safe, I would have done anything.

And once I found out that you and he are one, it just made me more determined to do whatever I could to keep you safe."

He finally broke his unfocused stare to look at her. He gave her a small smile. "I guess it's nice to know that Superman isn't all alone in this world."

She smiled back. "He's got a lot of people who've got his back." She nodded in the direction of the house. "And he's finding new ones all the time, it seems."

Clark gazed thoughtfully at the house for a long moment. Then he shook his head.

"I'm not so sure about that, Lois. I may be Jor-El's son, but he's had too traumatic of an experience with the people on this planet. I'm not sure he'll ever like the fact that I've chosen to dedicate my life to helping them — both as a reporter and superhero."

"Give it time. He'll come around," she promised, sounding so sure of herself that it made Clark smile in his mind.

"I hope so. I mean, I don't need his approval. I've lived my whole life without knowing really anything about my birth parents. But, now that I've found him...I want him to be proud of who I've chosen to become."

"I get it," Lois said with a nod. "I've lived my whole life with my birth parents and I've long since come to the realization that the only person in this world I have to make happy is myself. I know I don't need my parents to approve of the way I live my life. Journalism is the last thing my parents wanted me to pursue. But that doesn't mean that part of me doesn't want that approval from them anyway, that recognition that I've made them proud of me."

Clark nodded. While he hadn't yet met the Lanes, he'd heard plenty about Sam and Ellen already from Lois. It made him wince inside to think of the father who'd never reconciled his disappointment with only having daughters and whose affairs had broken up his entire family. It made his heart ache to think of the mother who, by all accounts, usually had harsh criticisms to offer her daughters and whose alcoholism had alienated her children for so long.

"I guess you really do understand," he said, offering her a small smile. He paused a moment, drinking in the tranquility of that cold night. "I really meant it, Lois. Thanks for making me do this tonight. I feel...like a burden's been lifted from my shoulders, to have my parents meet each other, and for everyone to be getting along as well as they have. It...it gives me hope."

He knew he didn't have to explain anything to Lois. He knew, just by the look in her eyes, that she understood him fully.

Please, he thought in a silent plea to the universe, *let him choose to stay*.

"Lois! Clark! Drive-by shooting on Barstow," Perry barked as he came their way.

"On it," they replied with one voice.

Clark grabbed Lois' coat and held it as she slipped into it. He shrugged into his own a moment later. He contemplated his nearly cold coffee for a few seconds before tossing the Styrofoam cup into his waste bin. He could have heated it up without any real effort, but the fact was, Pablo, who worked down at the newsstand in the lobby, had made an incredibly foul tasting brew that morning.

"Ready?" he asked her.

"Ready," she nodded, following his lead and dumping her own coffee on an unsuspecting and mostly dead cactus plant on her desk. She frowned at the browning plant. "I thought these things were supposed to be easy," she said with a mild touch of disgust.

"They are," Clark replied with a grin. "However, the desert is not exactly rich in coffee."

The desert.

Clark nearly shuddered at the mental image that brought up. A scant six weeks had passed since their time as Bureau Thirty-

Nine's prisoners. Six measly weeks during which, at least, their testimonies, along with Jor-El's, had secured a criminal investigation into Lex Luthor. More about the billionaire had come to light in those six weeks than even Clark had suspected.

Luthor was behind more than just the criminally insane group of misfits that had comprised Bureau Thirty-Nine. He was, in fact, one of the biggest crime bosses in the country, running the crime syndicate known as Intergang. For years, before Superman had ever been conceived of in Clark's mind, Intergang had terrorized the businesses and citizens of Metropolis. But now, Clark hoped, with the organization's head behind bars and awaiting his trial, the city would see more peaceful days, without Superman working himself to death.

Lois must have caught the fleeting look on Clark's face. She took his arm in hers and guided him to the elevator bank.

"Still having the nightmares?" she asked as the silver doors slid closed, locking them away from the prying eyes and ears of their coworkers.

"Sometimes," he replied truthfully. "Not as bad as right after our time with the Bureau, but...well, it's not easy for me to forget. I've never been that...exposed and...and...vulnerable before, and that's not even taking the Kryptonite into consideration. Having you and my father to try to protect, thinking I was going to lose you both..." He shuddered a little. "And you? Do you still have nightmares?"

"Sometimes," she said, her voice mirroring his. "I guess...I guess it's been a little easier on me. It was terrifying for sure, but not in the same way as it was for you. When they took you away that last time, to that operating room, I went out of my mind with worry for you. But at least I didn't have the Kryptonite to deal with." She sighed. "Having Lex Luthor behind bars helps a lot, knowing that the Bureau is completely disbanded now. I hate to say it, but I'm so glad Trask and the rest are dead. At least they can't use your secret against you."

Clark nodded as the elevator let them out into the parking garage.

"So...can I ask?" Lois asked as they made their way to her Jeep. "Has your father made his decision?"

"Not yet." He sighed. "I've tried showing him how great the world is, but Trask and Lana and the rest...I'm scared his scars might run too deep for him to ever see the world even a fraction of the way I see it."

"Give it more time," Lois said in a reassuring manner. "It's still so soon after his first taste of freedom in almost thirty years."

"I know but...having him around? It's been pretty amazing. For the first time in my life, I have the answers to every question I've ever had, or *could* ever have. It was strange, at first, thinking of him as my father, when for my entire life, I'd always just thought of the *idea* of him as just 'the guy who gave me his DNA.' But now...I can't imagine losing him. And I *will* lose him if he decides this world isn't for him. Because I am *not* leaving. Not Earth and not you."

They reached the car and climbed in. Lois cranked up the heat in the vehicle before pulling out of the parking space.

"Clark, believe me, if he leaves, *he'll* be the one losing out. You're an amazing person. And if he can't stay for you alone..." She left the statement hanging in the air, letting Clark draw his own conclusions as to how to end it.

"Thanks, Lois," he said, giving her a smile. How was it that she could instantly lift his spirits?

They drove the rest of the way in silence. Clark thought back over the last six weeks. He'd taken his father to everything he could think of to show him the good of the world. Sporting events, concerts, museums, art galleries, bustling cities, ancient ruins, zoos, aquariums, religious buildings of various faiths, peaceful walks through the woods, soup kitchens to service the poor, school yards filled with playing youngsters, neighborhood parks, national

parks, amusement parks. No idea that either his own mind or Lois threw out as a suggestion was rejected. Often, Lois accompanied them, and Clark was glad for her company. He still spent plenty of time with them both one-on-one, but he felt it was important for Jor-El to be around Lois as much as possible. After all, she was the woman Clark was planning to marry, as well as the best person he could think of to show Jor-El how great human beings were.

Lois found a spot to park in that was reasonably close to the scene of the crime. Once there, they split up, wordlessly slipping into their comfortable routine. They were nearly finished when Clark caught sight of a familiar face.

"Detective Henderson?" he asked before he could stop himself.

Good thing Henderson has met me face to face before, when he flew in to get our statements after all that happened with Trask, he mused.

"Kent, hi."

"What are you going here?" He couldn't stop himself from asking. "I mean, this is pretty far from home."

Henderson cracked a small smile. "After I came out here for your statements, I decided to put in a transfer request to Metropolis. I needed a change of scenery as it was, and, let's face it, there are worse places to be than in a city where I'd be working alongside the Man of Steel. Am I right?"

"It is pretty nice," Clark said. "At least, it helps having a resident superhero in town when your job requires you to write about him."

Again, Henderson smiled. "You have a minute? I need to talk to you about something."

"Yeah, sure."

"Good," Henderson said with a nod of his head. "Walk with me a moment, would you?"

"Sure," Clark said, now feeling uneasy as they walked some distance away from everyone else. "What's up?"

Henderson threw a careful glance around before speaking. "I thought you'd like to know that the Bureau, or, rather, Lana Lang wrote up some detailed information on you."

Clark gulped and felt beads of sweat popping out on his forehead. "Information?" he repeated.

The policeman nodded. "About your...shall we call it...alter ego. About *Superman*."

"I...uh...Su...Superman?" Clark stammered, caught off guard. He needed to deny it, but found no words coming to his fear-frozen brain.

"Don't worry. I'm the only one who saw her notes. I was in charge of going through the evidence. And...well...you don't need to worry about them. I had a 'mishap' with the computer files and everything got erased. Oops." He smiled at Clark, a genuine, friendly smile. "Look, I don't care that you're Superman. I don't care if Lex Luthor was really Batman. I just want you to know that your secret is safe with me."

"Why?" It was the only thing to come to Clark's mind.

"Because," Henderson said with a shrug. "I respect what you do. I have no desire to see more whackos like Trask try to harm you. Which is also why I flew out here the same night as the raid on Bureau Thirty-Nine's compound to deliver that weird green stone to S.T.A.R. Labs like you wanted. And, by the way, we found a *lot* more than just what was in that knife."

"I know," Clark whispered. "Dr. Klein told...Superman. I just want to let you know...thank you. I never got the chance to really say that. For everything you did that day...thank you, from the bottom of my heart. I don't know what I can do to even begin to make it up to you."

Henderson shook his head. "You already have. You're a symbol of hope, not just to the average citizen, but to all of us. Especially people like me, who pull on a uniform every day, hoping to do some good in the world. And...maybe sign

something for my little boy?"

Clark laughed, all of his tension leaving him in that sound. "Sure. Superman will even swing by to say hello to him personally."

Henderson laughed in turn. "Thank you! That'll go a long way in helping Nate forgive me for uprooting him from his school and friends."

Clark laughed all the harder. "I'll bet."

"You have no idea what this'll mean to him. Here," Henderson said, scrawling on the back of one of his cards, "this is my address."

"Tonight around eight work for you?" Clark asked.

The policeman nodded. "Perfect."

"Clark? Did you find out anything?" Lois asked as she walked over. Then, with a double-take at Henderson, "Detective Henderson?"

"Miss Lane," he said with a slight dip to his head.

"He got himself transferred to Metropolis after everything with Trask," Clark explained briefly. "He's...uh...one of us now."

"One of us?" Lois asked, confused. "What does that mean?"

"It means he's...a protector of the secret," Clark said with a lowered voice, throwing a cautious glance around.

"Wh...what?" Lois said, failing to keep her face neutral, though Clark knew she was trying.

"It's okay, Lois," he assured her.

"Are you sure?" she asked, eyeing the police officer.

Clark nodded. "Absolutely."

"Well then...I guess...welcome to the club," she said, extending a hand to Henderson.

He laughed. "It's an honor, believe me."

More days passed. Everything remained the same. Lois and Clark conducted their investigations, setting wrongs right. Clark responded to calls for help, donning the blue, red, and yellow of Superman. At night, he would return to his apartment — sometimes with Lois, sometimes alone — and spend the evening taking to his father, who was still staying with him until he could figure out his next move. They talked about anything and everything — the news of the day, Krypton and all the questions Clark could think of concerning it, some movie Jor-El had watched while Clark was at work, books, Jor-El's questions about Earth. Nothing was off limits. On his days off from the Planet, Clark continued taking his father around the world, hoping to prove that Earth was a good place full of good people.

He noted, over the weeks since Jor-El's release from the Bureau, a steady change in his father. He still didn't trust humans much, but he *did* seem to be more relaxed around them, even if only in the tiniest of ways. He smiled when he saw children at play. He laughed deeply when he saw something amusing. He stood in silent awe at impressive landscapes or works of art or architecture. He spoke politely with the people he met. He enthusiastically sampled whatever foods Clark brought him. He was less quick to judge, and less harsh in the judgments he *did* make.

Still, Clark couldn't be sure that Jor-El would ever be able to find it in his heart to stay on Earth.

"Son? What are you doing out here at this hour?" Jor-El asked as he silently padded up alongside Clark, late one night after Clark returned home after responding to a few calls for help.

Clark didn't look over. He stayed where he was, his back against the brick of his apartment, arms folded across his chest, his civilian clothes already donned. A light breeze caressed his skin. He breathed in the night air for a moment, savoring the moment of peaceful quiet over the city.

"I just got home," Clark explained simply.

"You were out helping people again," Jor-El said emotionlessly, eyeing him as though the hero's suit was still on

display.

"Yeah, I was," Clark said simply.

"You really do like it, don't you?"

Clark nodded, surprised. He'd expected Jor-El to have some negative comment. "I really do."

"Why?"

Clark took a deep breath, gathering his thoughts before he spoke. "When I'm out there, helping people, I know that I'm making the world a better place. I know that someone is alive because I was able to get them out of a bad car wreck or a burning building, or that I was able to stop a bus from running them down. Ignoring the cries for help isn't an option. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't help and someone died because of that."

"It makes you feel important," Jor-El supplied.

Clark shook his head. "No. But it makes me feel...accepted. Like my alien roots don't matter. When I first started out as Superman, that was my concern. That people would fear me or hate me or just flat out reject me because I'm different from them. But, with a few exceptions, the world loves Superman."

"You would be accepted by our own people too."

"Maybe. Maybe not. After all, I've been raised as an Earthling. All of my experiences have been shaped through my upbringing. I'm a Kryptonian in blood only. In my mind, heart, and soul though? I'm an Earthling."

Jor-El sighed. "It certainly does seem that way, doesn't it?"

"It's who I am," Clark whispered into the small hours of the night.

"I see that. Every day, I see it," Jor-El fell silent for a moment. Then, "Was it bad?"

That caught Clark off guard. "Yeah," he managed after a moment, hiding his surprise. Never before had his father taken much of an interest in Superman's efforts to save mankind. "There was an electrical fire in a duplex in Chicago. The firemen think it was just old, worn wiring that caused the blaze. The place was pretty old. Five people died, including two children. Another is in critical condition. It'll be a miracle if he survives," Clark sighed. "Everyone else is okay but..." He shrugged, letting his voice trail off.

"Children, huh?"

Clark nodded. "Yeah. An eight year old and a four year old. And the one in critical condition is just eighteen months old. I did everything I could, but the two kids that died were gone before I even got to the scene."

"I'm sorry," Jor-El said at last. He put a supportive hand on Clark's shoulder. "I know you love these humans. And I've seen how their suffering affects you."

"Thanks, Dad."

"I also know that you are only one man. Even with the powers we wield, we have our limits. I know you did everything in your power to save those people."

"I did. But sometimes...sometimes it's hard to accept, that's all. Especially when kids are involved," Clark said.

"On that, we can agree," Jor-El said with a nod.

Clark nodded mutely. He'd noticed, over the past weeks, that for all of Jor-El's mistrust of Earthlings, he had a special place in his heart for children. He knew, in particular, that it was difficult for Jor-El to see fathers and young sons together. It didn't take a genius to realize that the man was still trying to come to terms with losing out on seeing his own son as he grew from his babyhood and into a man.

"So, what are you doing up?" Clark asked.

"I couldn't sleep. My mind's been spinning. I tried watching that television of yours but...only a society made up of humans could devise torture like that of infomercials."

Clark chuckled. "Yeah, those are pretty terrible. What's on your mind though? Maybe I can help?"

"It's been more than six weeks."

"It has," Clark affirmed cautiously.

"When we left Trask behind, I thought for sure that by now I'd be on a ship, looking for the rest of the survivors, looking for wherever their new home might be. But, instead, I'm still here."

Clark nodded. "Do you still want to leave?" he asked in a low, soft tone.

"For a long time, it was all I could think about. Taking you and getting off this rock and back to our own people," Jor-El admitted. "Even if I had to use my powers against you to force you to come with me."

"I would have fought every step of the way," Clark said, looking up into the sky.

"I know," Jor-El said softly.

"And now? Do you still fantasize about that?"

"Now..." He sighed. "I still miss them, Clark. Somewhere out there, I still have friends and family. At least, I pray that I do. If you said that you would leave with me, I would go in a heartbeat."

"You know that I won't," Clark said in a hushed voice.

Jor-El bobbed his head once in a nod. "I know."

"This is my home. This is where I belong. Leaving Lois...it would kill me," Clark tried to explain.

"I see that now. I didn't — *couldn't* — understand why you are attracted to her when I first met her. She's a human, for Rao's sake! And a fairly annoying one at that when you first meet her. But now I think I'm starting to see in her what you do. She loves you, Clark. One day, if you're lucky, she might just be the perfect wife for you...the way Lara was for me. And if that happens, I wish you every happiness."

Clark wasn't sure what to think. He was insanely glad to hear his father speaking so well of Lois, but his final words sounded like an ending. They sounded like a farewell. Clark's heart sank.

"So, you've decided then. You're leaving?" he asked, unable to help himself.

"No."

"No?" He almost dared not hope that he'd heard that correctly.

"No," he repeated. "I will stay." The words exploded in Clark's ears though they had been uttered only slightly louder than a breath of air.

"What?" he gaped, his heart pounding.

"I will stay. For all that I will miss by not finding our people, nothing can compare with losing you. I will admit, at first I had hopes of simply wooing you away from the life you've built on this planet. But I see now that you are right. You *do* belong here. And if you belong here, I will find a way of making sure that I belong here too."

"That's fantastic news!" Clark said, embracing his father. "I'd hoped you would stay, even if I never really believed that you would. But...are you sure?" He was almost too afraid to ask that question. "I thought you hated it on this planet?"

"I did, for many years. But being free now...being able to see a side of Earth that I never have before...the world is not as bad as I'd believed it was. You've shown me that, yes, there is goodness in most human beings. Like our fellow Kryptonians, most people are good. Some are evil. And just as no one can condemn all Kryptonians for the few who are rotten, I cannot do the same with humans."

Am I dreaming? Clark asked himself. *Surely this can't be happening.*

"I...I'm glad you feel that way," Clark stammered, groping for words. "This is amazing. I'm so excited. You won't regret it, I swear."

Jor-El smiled. "How could I, when it gives me a chance to spend my remaining years with my son? But there is much to do. Like you, I will need an identity and a place to call my own. I've already invaded your home for far too long, though I've been grateful to have a place to stay."

"You're always welcome here, Dad, you know that. It's been

nice, spending time with you here in the evenings when I get off of work. You don't know what it's meant to me, to have you tell me all about my Kryptonian heritage."

"It's been nice to have someone to tell. Someone who can appreciate Krypton's legacy."

"You know," Clark said thoughtfully, "I think I might know of someone else who would definitely appreciate the knowledge you have."

"Oh?" Jor-El sounded intrigued, if not a little worried.

"Dr. Klein, at S.T.A.R. Labs. He's been a friend to me since I started at the Planet and he's become sort of Superman's physician. I trust him completely."

"The one you entrusted with the Kryptonite?"

Clark nodded. "Yes."

"Does he know...?"

"No," Clark said with a shake of his head. "The fewer people who know about Superman's day job, the better. But he's a good guy, and if the circumstances ever arose when he had to be let in on the secret, I would be comfortable with him knowing. Anyway, he could use a fellow scientist to work with him. Particularly one who's been exposed to far more superior technology than Earth yet possesses. Actually, I was just at S.T.A.R. Labs today and he was talking about taking on an assistant. You'd be perfect for the job."

"I must admit, it would feel wonderful to be in a laboratory again," Jor-El said with a grin.

"Good. I'll visit him just as soon as we establish your new identity. If Superman recommends you for the job, you can count on getting it."

"I've already thought about who I want to be," Jor-El said, his smile disappearing. He looked to the heavens as if the coming words needed some kind of cosmic forgiveness. Or maybe just a boost of cosmic strength. "I will be Jordan. Jordan Kale."

"Jor for short, I would assume," Clark said with a laugh.

"And the Kal in Kale after my son," Jor-El finished for him.

Clark grinned and stuck out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Jordan," he said as he pumped his father's hand up and down in a shake. "I'm sure you're a perfectly normal guy with absolutely no super powers whatsoever."

Jor-El laughed. "Nope, not me. I'm just your regular Joe. Absolutely nothing alien about me."

Clark leaned back against his apartment, a laugh on his lips and his heart soaring. "This is great, Dad. Really. I'm truly happy for you."

"For the first time, I'm truly happy about it too," Jor-El confessed.

"I'll talk to Dr. Klein first thing in the morning," Clark vowed. "I'll fly over before work. Now, let's get inside. We have a lot of planning still to do."

He's staying, Clark's heart seemed to beat as they turned to enter the warm comfort of his apartment. *He's staying.*

Help!

Clark's head snapped up from where it had been bent over his research. He listened intently for a moment, waiting for the call to be repeated. When it was, he breathed a discreet sigh of relief. Now that he had a general direction, it would be easier to pinpoint the location once he was airborne. Lois saw the expression on his face.

What? she mouthed.

Clark made their now-familiar hand gesture that signified that Superman was needed. She nodded and stood, moving to his side and matching him step for step as he made his escape through the bullpen.

"Fire," Clark said in the elevator, answering her unspoken question. He listened again as he picked up the police scanner with his enhanced hearing. "Over on Yorkshire."

"Yorkshire? That's mostly low-income apartment housing," Lois pointed out with concern.
 "I know," Clark said quietly. "See you there?"
 "You bet."

Swiftly, they exited the building, only for Clark to duck down the nearest deserted alley. He spun into his alter-ego and shot away into the sky, picking up speed with every passing second. He scanned the city as he flew, looking and listening for where he was needed, though it didn't take long for him to find it.

Sirens blared in the otherwise still afternoon. Flashes of red and blue lights competed to be seen in the glaring sunlight. The roar of a raging fire drowned out almost everything else. But not for Clark. He heard everything. The crackling as the fire devoured the apartment building. The way the building creaked. The thud of bricks as parts of the building collapsed. The screams of those trapped. The bellowing of the firefighters as they vied with everything else to be heard.

Clark sped into a descent, landing next to the fire chief.
 "Superman! Thank God!" the man breathed, coughing against the billowing black smoke that was overtaking everything. "The building is collapsing. We're doing what we can to get as many people out as possible, but I'm afraid our efforts aren't going to be enough. There are people trapped where we can't safely get to them."

Clark nodded once in the decisive, professional manner of Superman. "I'm on it. Tell your men to stick to where it's reasonably safe." He touched the man lightly on the shoulder in an effort to ease some of the chief's anxiety.

"Thanks, Superman. I'm not sure what we'd do without you." Again Clark nodded, then, quick as a flash, he zipped away into the building. Instantly, he was engulfed in a raging inferno. It was like entering the gullet of a fire-breathing dragon, he mused. Around him, the flames danced and devoured everything in its path, like a living being. The sound was deafening. Not missing a beat, he began to x-ray the building, noting just how unstable the structure was, and looking for survivors.

He knew he wouldn't have much time before the building came down.

Spotting his first glimpse of life amongst the blaze, he set to work. The two little boys he found recognized him immediately and went to his waiting arms right away when they saw him. He swiftly, but carefully, ferried them to safety. A soot-streaked woman ran to them, still coughing, and embraced them tightly, almost before Clark had set them fully on the ground. Satisfied that the kids were okay, Clark turned and went back into the fire.

He worked steadily, trying not to rush, knowing that he could not afford to make any mistakes, but feeling pressured all the same, knowing every second mattered to the people still stuck inside. He pulled out an elderly couple next, followed by a teenage girl, then a man and his dog. Each person pulled to safety lightened his heart by the slightest of degrees. But more were still inside, and the floors were giving way.

Suddenly, through the thick, choking smoke, a figure emerged, unfazed by the lethal flames.

Clark had to blink several times to convince himself that he wasn't seeing things. A figure in black shot with silver. The stylized S on his chest. The near-perfect, but older, reflection of his own features.

Need a hand? came a voice inside Clark's mind.

Dad? What are you doing here? he thought back in surprise.

The telepathy didn't surprise him at all. Jor-El had worked with him on many a night to develop the ability. Though it was a natural ability that all mature Kryptonians possessed, the skill needed to be refined. And Clark had already missed out on years of honing it. But seeing his father dressed in a black Superman-like suit with silver accents — the toes of his boots, the cuffs of his sleeves, the cape on his back, the belt around his waist — was

astounding, to say the least.

When did you...? Clark thought to his father. He did not stop searching for more survivors as he did so.

Surprised? Good. It was a difficult secret to keep from you.

Did Mom make that? Clark knew his father would know that he meant Martha.

She did. Ah, over here. I found a couple of women.

Clark joined his father. The two women looked from one to the other as Superman appeared with the strange new man clad in black. But the older of the two — a woman nearing retirement age, if Clark was any judge — took the hand Jor-El stretched out to her and allowed him to help her up. Perhaps it was that Superman himself was with the new, unknown hero that gave her the confidence to go with Jor-El. Perhaps it was sheer desperation to save her life. Perhaps it was how similar Superman and the other man looked. Perhaps it was the S on his chest — a symbol that had stopped meaning Superman but which now stood for hope and justice.

Whatever it was, Clark didn't care. All that mattered was that someone who needed help was getting it. The woman would live, thanks to Jor-El.

Together, father and son rescued a few more people. On their last check of the building, they found a firewoman stuck inside one of the apartments with an infant girl. The floor had collapsed, leaving an impassible crater that stretched down for several floors. There was no way to get to the window and the ladder to safety that lay beyond.

"Who are you?" she asked, though the fire burned away her voice.

"Give me the child," Jor-El urged. "I'm here to help."

Instinctively, she clutched the baby closer. Clark touched her on the shoulder.

"He's with me," he said in her ear. "We'll get you both out of here."

Reluctantly, she relinquished the child. Clark scooped her up immediately and flew her across the chasm and out the window. He did not let her out of his arms again until they were both standing on solid ground. Jor-El lightly touched down not two seconds later and gave the infant up to a waiting paramedic. The firewoman sputtered and coughed as she tried to catch her breath.

"Thank you," she wheezed at Clark. Then, to Jor-El, "I don't know who you are, but I'm grateful."

Jor-El smiled benevolently and touched her on the shoulder. "Glad I could help. Kal? One more check?"

Clark nodded in affirmation. *Kal*. His father had called him by his birth name. Not Clark. Not Superman. Jor-El hadn't given away Clark's identity, nor had he deferred to the nickname the world had branded Clark with. He decided that Kal was the perfect way for his father to address him while in the suit of the superhero.

"Let's do it," Clark added as he nodded.

Together, they flew off again, side by side, scanning the apartment building with their x-ray vision, and extinguishing as much of the blaze as they could with their superbreath. Eventually, their efforts, combined with the unflagging efforts of the firefighters, contained and finally vanquished the inferno. Floating in mid-air before the remnants of the scorched brick building, father and son took a moment to catch their breath. Clark looked over to his father with a smile.

"Thanks for the help," he said.

Jor-El nodded. "I know you're used to doing this alone. I hope I didn't...step on your toes, so to speak."

Clark shook his head. "No, it was wonderful having you with me. There are people alive today because of you. People who would have certainly died, if not for a little alien intervention."

"You know, everyone is staring at us," Jor-El playfully observed.

Clark laughed. "I think they're staring at *you*. You're the new hero. The unknown one. I'm old news."

Help!

"Ready for another rescue?" Clark asked.

"Lead the way."

And so it went for the rest of the afternoon, in an unusually busy day for Superman. After the fire, the pair of alien saviors rescued a school bus filled with Girl Scouts after the driver had a seizure and the vehicle crashed through a guardrail and sailed into a lake. Then they stopped an armed robbery, saving a dozen hostages in the process, and finally rounded out the day saving a plane from crashing in Paris.

By the time they were finished, it was getting late and news of the mysterious accomplice on each of Superman's rescues had spread. It was all anyone seemed capable of talking about. Worldwide excitement over something in the news hadn't been this high since Superman had first introduced himself to the public. It was hard not to laugh at all of the hype, speculations, and theories they overheard as they dined in Germany that night. Clark knew that Lois would be dying to talk to them both, so they visited her once they arrived back in Metropolis.

It was too nice a night to stay indoors, and Lois insisted that they talk things over somewhere outdoors. Jor-El agreed and a place sprang to Clark's mind. With Lois safely nestled in his arms, Clark led the way as they flew through the night, until they reached a quiet cliff jutting out from a mountainside no more than an hour's drive outside of the Metropolis city limits. He'd found the cliff not long after he'd begun flying around in broad daylight, unafraid of being seen doing something super. It was a favorite spot for him to come and collect his thoughts when he preferred being earthbound to floating unconnected to anything out in the void of space. Together, the three settled down on the rocky shelf, suspended above the trees and ground. A fat, round moon illuminated everything and gilded the world in silver while silent stars looked on.

"So, I hear you've had a busy day," Lois said, grinning at Jor-El. "How did it feel?"

"It felt...wonderful," Jor-El said, his eyes shifting to some far-off point, as though recalling the emotions of the day.

"You did a lot of good today," Clark added, gently patting his father on the shoulder.

"I guess I did." There was no mistaking the satisfaction in the older Kryptonian's voice. "Clark, you must forgive me."

"For what?" Clark asked, taken a little aback.

Jor-El shook his head. "Before today, I don't think I ever really understood why you do what you do. Why you continue to be Superman in a world with such a short memory and such a tendency to fall back into old habits. I've wondered why you bother catching today's criminals when tomorrow new ones will inevitably rise to take their place. Why you waste your time saving a planet that seems so dedicated to its own destruction."

"What made you change your mind? After all, you spent all afternoon doing exactly those things. Don't tell me it was just some kind of father-son bonding time," Lois said quietly.

Jor-El chuckled a bit.

Even his laugh sounds like mine, Clark thought with wonder in his mind. Even now, after months of having his father back in his life, it still amazed Clark to see pieces of himself so perfectly mirrored in Jor-El.

"No, it wasn't a bonding activity," he agreed with a grin, and it warmed Clark's heart to see how well his father now got along with Lois, especially now that she was Clark's fiancée. "I finally decided that I would never understand it unless I did it myself. I had to experience it for myself."

"It's a good feeling, isn't it?" Clark asked softly, looking out over the moon-drenched world around them.

"When Krypton was dying, I tried my best to save it. I did

everything I could think of to convince the rest of the elders, the ruling houses, even the lowliest of citizens to get away before the planet could die. I worked night and day trying to find a way to heal the wounds that had bled the life out of Krypton. I was too late and my efforts did too little. Precious few of our people heeded my warnings to abandon our planet. And Krypton itself only got worse and more unstable as time passed until the core gave out and the very stone of the planet was ripped apart." Jor-El paused and took a breath.

"When I joined you at your rescues today, I felt...almost like I was making amends for being unable to help my fellow Kryptonians." His words were slow and deliberate in coming, each one meticulously searched for. "But more than that, I felt proud. Proud to be making a difference. Proud to know that someone lived because I had been there to lend them aid. Proud to know that I *could* help at all. And, suddenly, I knew what it is that you feel each time Superman makes an impossible rescue."

Clark smiled but was too choked up to speak right away. His heart felt like it might literally burst apart from trying to contain all of the love and pride he was feeling.

"This feeling...it's so new to me," Jor-El continued. "For so long, I'd forgotten what it was like to contribute something so important to the place I call home. For a long time, after I'd come to know the Bureau, I didn't *want* to contribute anything to the world. Today...today I *finally* felt free."

"Exactly," Clark said. "That's how I felt, the first time I was able to fly around in broad daylight, without caring who saw me. I finally felt free to be myself. Being able to use these powers of mine...they finally felt like a blessing that I could share, instead of a curse that I needed to hide."

"When I first found out about the whole Superman thing, I was torn. Should I be proud that you embraced your powers and assumed a role of natural leadership, as you would have, had you been married to Zara? Should I be upset that you'd chosen to help human beings — a species I, at the time, only saw as vile, evil, creatures not worth saving?"

"You seemed pretty settled on upset," Clark observed neutrally, his voice still low and thoughtful.

Jor-El nodded solemnly. "I know. I was. I couldn't see past my own experience with people. So I owe you an apology, Clark."

"I never blamed you for feeling the way you did," Clark replied, looking at his father. "I told Lois once that I didn't need your approval of what I do — as Superman or as a reporter. But I'll admit it, it's nice to have it after all."

"If I may, I'd like to make this a regular thing. Helping out. Aiding you at rescues when I can. Being present at a situation you can't be."

"I'd like that," Clark said with quiet intensity. His voice surprised him. He would have thought it would have come out as a shout so exuberant it would have shaken the mountains.

"Of course, this presents a problem," Lois said. Two pairs of eyes settled intently on her, eagerly waiting for her to continue. But she smiled. "The world is going to want to meet their newest hero. Everyone in the world must have their own theories and opinions by now."

"We'll need a press conference," Clark supplied. "What do you think about linking yourself to the Daily Planet, along with Superman?"

"I'd love it. How soon can we set it up?"

Clark studied the moon for a moment, gauging the time. "It's a little late to call Perry tonight. I'll talk to him first thing in the morning. We should be able to get everything in place for the day after. Which, I think, is great. It gives us enough time to figure out what we want to say."

"How to brand you, so to speak," Lois added.

Clark grinned. "If you need a name to go by, Lois is pretty good at coming up with superhero nicknames."

Lois laughed. "Hey! I had nothing to go on other than an S on your chest and an assurance that you were a friend."

"Having you name me... I couldn't have asked for a more appropriate or amazing thing to happen," Clark replied, leaning over for a brief, chaste kiss. "You know I love the name you gave me."

"I don't think I could have picked a better name. You *are* pretty super," she replied, sneaking another kiss.

Jor-El cleared his throat softly, bringing them back to Earth. "I'm not sure I *want* a name."

"Trust me, it's better if you do," Clark said.

Lois nodded in agreement. "He's right. You may be known as Jordan Kale now. And maybe no one knows the name Jor-El. But the public is going to make up a nickname for you anyway. You may as well control what it is."

"I'm destined to be Superman Senior without it, aren't I?" The older man chuckled.

"Maybe," Lois smirked. "And they *will* peg you for being Superman's father, or at least a close uncle or something. You two look too much alike."

"The same way they realize Superman and Clark Kent are twins, with different eyewear and hairstyles?" Clark teased.

Lois laughed. "Especially those who work right alongside one half of the whole," she said, blushing a little and tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"You're right though," Clark said. "It *is* pretty obvious that the two of us are related. I've already heard several news reports pointing out that fact."

"What do you want to do about it?" Jor-El asked.

Clark shrugged. "I say we meet the speculation head on. We be completely upfront. Yes, this is Superman's father. But we spin it. People are going to want to know why they haven't seen this new hero before. So we say that he just arrived, the last inhabitant of Krypton. Which, for all we know, might be the truth. And, technically speaking, he *did* just arrive...as a hero, even if he was a prisoner of a bunch of psychopaths for many years. We'll say that he had matters to attend to before he arrived, so he sent his son on ahead. Again, not totally a lie, if not really the truth."

But, even as he tried to convince himself of the partial truth hidden within the story they would weave, he felt uncomfortable. The fact was, Jor-El had never meant for his son to become a hero to an alien world. Clark had never been sent on ahead. He'd been spirited away by his dying mother just in time to prevent Bureau Thirty-Nine from capturing a second prisoner.

Lois seemed almost to read his heart.

"It's okay, Clark. It's not lying to the world. It's a deception, yes, but along the same lines of making the world think that Clark and Superman are different people. The story we're going to tell the world, it's to protect your father."

"I know. I've just never been comfortable with deception. Even hiding who Superman is, especially when I was hiding it from you..." He sighed and shrugged, leaving the light breeze to whisk his words away.

"I know," she said, snuggling into his side while he put his arm around her waist. She leaned in, putting her head on his chest. "So...we still need a name for our newest hero. Let's think. AstroMan?"

"What is this, a bad fifties sci-fi movie?" Clark asked with mild disgust at the terrible name, though he smiled fondly at Lois.

"Splendidman?"

"No way." Clark shook his head.

"Cosmic Defender? Galaxy Guy? The Shadow? Sentinel? Centurion? Silver Bullet? Silver Warrior?"

"You're not even trying now," he teased.

"Well, what's *your* suggestion?" Lois asked, grinning.

"How about...Krypto?" Jor-El suggested, cutting in.

"Krypto?" Clark asked.

"My dog's name from when I was a child," his father explained.

Clark grinned. "I like it. Very Indiana Jones of you," he said with approval. Then, "Uh, you've seen that one, right?"

Jor-El laughed, a deep, rich belly laugh. "Lucky for you, I saw it last week. So, I get the reference, even if the movie *didn't* inspire my idea."

"You know what? This is great. The three of us, together," Clark said.

"It is," Jor-El and Lois agreed, nearly together.

"Lois?" Jor-El asked after a moment.

"Hmm?"

"I don't think I ever said this, but, thank you."

"For what?"

"For being a woman worthy of my son. For loving him and accepting him. For giving him your unconditional support. You and I started off on the wrong foot, but I'm proud to call you my friend."

"Jor, I love Clark. I should be thanking *you*, for risking everything to bring him to Earth. I don't know what my life would have looked like without him in it, but I'm glad I'll never have to know. All I know for sure is that my life would be a lot poorer without him. And just know...just as I protect Clark in both of his identities, I'll protect yours."

"I know. I trust you."

It was incredible, Clark mused to himself. For a long time, his biological father hadn't mattered. He'd been dead, as far as he knew. But now...now his father was alive and well before him. And a piece of Clark's heart — a piece he'd never known was missing — had been restored.

Krypton's legacy wasn't in the gadgets and gizmos Jor-El had guided mere Earthlings to develop. It wasn't in the caped figures who flew through the sky and protected mankind from whatever evil befell them.

It was this perfect, peaceful moment.

Krypton's legacy was, simply put, family.

THE END