

Newsworthy

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Rated PG

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Summary: The story that never should have been told is told, and Lois and Clark, along with the world, are left shattered in its wake.

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A/N: This story is a difficult one, but a ‘what-if’ I definitely wanted to explore. I couldn’t have done it without the encouragement and aid of my beta-readers, though, so I just want to give them a huge thank you for all their work and faith in me while this story was being written — thanks, groobie, KenJ, and Morgana! Also, thank you to GooBoo for the quick, fantastic GEing job!

1

He ran the story. Of course he did. It was news, the biggest news since Superman’s debut, maybe even bigger, and he’s Perry White, editor of the top newspaper in the world. It was the story of a lifetime, so there was never any question that he’d run it. Besides, Lois was adamant that it be published immediately, vehement in her ruthless pursuit of this Pulitzer prize-winning article, a consummate professional save that cold, hard anger cracked and jangled beneath her paper-thin surface. If he hadn’t run the story, hadn’t printed it on the front page of millions of copies of the Daily Planet, another paper would have, and Perry would have lost Lois too. So he picked his reporter, chose his side...and ran the story.

If he could do it all over again, he still doesn’t know that he would make a different decision. But if he *could* do it again (and oh, how he wishes he could), he would warn Clark, would call him, would tell him not to come in. It still makes his blood run cold when he recalls it—how could he have not thought even *once* to warn the young man? Why had it never crossed his mind? But he was too busy dealing with the circling vultures, ordering extra copies printed, grilling Lois in a useless attempt to find out what exactly had happened in Smallville.

And yet, despite all that, he’d thought to pull Jimmy aside and warn him to be ready to pack up Clark’s things for him—how much more effort would it have taken to pick up a phone and call Clark?

Jimmy, clueless as to the fact that history was being made right there in the bullpen, had looked at him askance when Perry told him to be ready to gather Clark’s belongings, and he had asked why Clark was leaving. That simple question made Perry feel as if he were firing Clark, but he wasn’t—he *hadn’t*. He’d offer Clark a job as long as he wanted one...even if the story he ran made it impossible for Clark to do that job. So, irritated, he’d shooed Jimmy away without giving him an explanation.

When Jimmy saw the headline in the typesetter’s office, when he was asked to comb through archived pictures for the double headshot they needed, he’d confronted Perry, asked him how they could do this to CK.

“It’s news,” Perry had said, and he wonders when that became excuse enough to destroy people’s lives willy-nilly.

But by then, it was already too late.

And still he had not thought to call and warn Clark that his life was, in all but name, over.

And so Clark walked into work unsuspecting. Unknowing. Still idealistic. Still happy. Relaxed, secure in his perceived safety.

He’d been on a rescue just before, hadn’t read the historic morning edition, hadn’t seen Superman and Clark Kent’s identical faces staring side by side out at the millions of people across the world all mobbing every newsstand. He walked into the Planet lobby (surely he’d noticed how it fell silent at his entrance, how everyone turned to stare at him). He’d taken the elevator (maybe still unaware that everyone knew he could simply fly up to his floor and in through any of the windows). He walked out into the newsroom and whether he’d figured it out on the elevator or the instant he stepped out into the midst of friends-turned-ruthless-reporters, Perry still isn’t sure.

But Clark knew.

For one instant, Perry saw terror wash over Clark’s expression, saw panic scribed with a bold, vicious pen over his features, saw despair change the very shape of his character—his face, his posture, his gait.

His silence.

No accusations. No excuses. No explanations. No appeals.

Just that awful, condemning, tragic (endless) silence.

And Perry curses himself because, in the end, he knows exactly why he didn’t call the younger man, why he didn’t warn him that his secret was out for all the world to know.

It was shame, pure and simple. He hadn’t wanted to face Clark, hadn’t wanted to look him in the eye and tell him a news story was worth more than his life, his happiness, his job, his parents. His safety.

Not that Clark had approached Perry to hear his excuses. He hadn’t even looked over to Perry, hadn’t said a word. He avoided everyone’s eye, slipped through the statue-still ranks as if he were a ghost come to haunt the vestiges of his past life.

And no one was more haunted than Lois. Only, she hadn’t known it then. She’d been armored in righteous indignation, cloaked in professional integrity, protected and goaded on by the taunts of injured pride and betrayed pain.

Surely Clark had known that. Even without seeing the article that outed him, he’d somehow known instantly it was Lois who’d written it, so surely, *surely*, he must have known any attempt to speak with her was useless. But still he’d approached only one person, met only one pair of eyes—broken his silence only for her.

He walked to her desk, stood by it as he’d done so many times before, and said one word.

“Lois.”

She watched him come, her arms crossed over her chest, the article that ensured her name in the annals of history spread out across her desk, proudly flaunted before her former partner. “How does it feel, Superman?” she asked with a raised eyebrow. “You’ve always claimed to stand for truth and justice—isn’t it only fair that everyone knows the truth now?”

Even Perry had flinched before that strange mixture of challenge, accusation, excuse and plea (for both understanding and an explanation, Perry thinks). Clark hadn’t flinched visibly, not with a physical withdrawal, but if Perry were to guess, he thinks that *that’s* the exact, precise moment when Clark Jerome Kent died.

His ghost, pale and ashen and slow, had turned to his old desk, looked blankly at Jimmy when the young man dared to step forward, put a hand on Clark’s arm, and say, “CK, is there anything I can do for you?”

Perry will never know how Clark summoned the strength necessary to smile wanly at Jimmy and ask him, so politely, to bring him a box for his belongings.

It took Superman less than a minute to calmly pack up the mementos of Clark’s tenure at the Planet, to write a simple two-

line letter for Perry—*Due to recent circumstances, I believe it best for me to resign. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work here.*—leave it unsigned on his stripped desk, and walk out of the newsroom without a backward look. He said goodbye only to Jimmy, avoided by everyone else, and despite his own part in the travesty, Perry had raged—*still rages*—against the fact that the world’s greatest hero was forced to skulk away as if he were a criminal.

Lois watched Clark leave, and for the first time, Perry had seen uncertainty cross her face, tension crimp her mouth, shocked realization widen her eyes, some unnamed emotion that looked a lot like regret, remorse, and something deeper, move through her—had felt all those same things within himself, pierced to the core by the fact that Clark had done no more than give him one downcast glance before the elevator doors closed between them.

An hour later, Clark’s landlord received a letter similar to Perry’s, and Clark Kent’s apartment was emptied, stripped bare of everything that pointed back to the young, idealistic reporter who’d lived there such a brief, transient amount of time. Several hours after that, a horde of reporters descended on Smallville only to find an abandoned farm and townspeople who refused to say a word about the Kents’ whereabouts.

As if he’d never existed at all, Clark Kent disappeared from off the face of the planet, memorialized only in the print used in Kerth-worthy articles, sketchy adoption records, and varied employment files.

And Superman vanished too. For two long weeks after Perry ran that life-changing article, there was no sign, no trace, no hint at all of the brightly colored superhero.

And then a devastating tsunami hit Japan...and Superman reappeared. He’d shown up and saved lives and cleared rubble and helped out in all the myriad ways open to him...and spoken not one word. He answered no questions, made no statements, talked to no one in charge. Some victims even now claimhemurmuredlow reassurances to them, but no one has been able to verify that.

For a long week after the tsunami, Superman disappeared again, and Perry had been filled with grief for what he’d done—not just for the hundreds of crises that went without rescue, but for the empty desk he still doesn’t have the heart to fill, as if that desk with its obsolete nameplate is the grave marker for Clark Kent’s all-too-short life, avoided by all, glanced at by all, touched by only Jimmy, who kept it clean and dusted and protected from interlopers until he gave his own resignation notice and left only days after Clark.

Finally, though, sparking a whole new round of speculative news, Superman reappeared. And this time, he came to stay. Oh, not in a particular city or home, but if an emergency develops, he’s there, all over the world, almost twenty-four hours a day. Earth’s very own on-call emergency system.

And still he refuses to speak. Still there’s only that terrible silence. If any reporter comes near him, he leaves, and soon enough, it became common for all reporters to be banished from the sites of emergencies, as if they’re scarecrows and Superman the crow everyone courts.

The Superman Foundation releases press statements after rescues, always written in Clark’s distinctive style, all avoiding more than a brief mention of Superman and drawing attention to people who need help or cities that need volunteers or situations that need addressing or charities that need money. The Foundation has remained faithfully silent on the question of how they receive those statements, and no amount of relentless investigating has brought inquisitive minds any closer to an answer in the intervening months.

And so life goes on and the world continues to turn and Perry was given a raise for his ‘esteemed contributions’ and Lois turns in lackluster, bread-and-butter articles that sell simply because

her name’s on them (and she’s almost as famous as Superman these days).

It’s three months to the day since Perry White helped murder Clark Kent, and he’s sitting in his office drinking in memory of the reporter he took a chance on, the man who so temporarily breached Lois’s walls, the son who kept a picture of his happy parents on his desk and unashamedly talked to them on the phone in front of all his co-workers. The friend who was betrayed by his colleagues.

Perry toasts in the direction of Clark’s desk outside his office and gulps the fiery drink down. The bullpen is too quiet, his office even quieter; he doesn’t have the heart to listen to Elvis, hasn’t since he saw Clark’s shattered expression (as if that mere sacrifice can act as some form of penance for his crimes).

He can just imagine his own epithet now...

Perry White: Champion of the news—he ran the story.

As bitter and condemning as it is, it’s more of a memorial than Clark got, so who knows? Maybe he’ll demand they leave his tombstone blank (more penance that can’t alleviate his regret, can’t help him sleep at night, can’t turn back time).

He hates the silence worst of all, Perry thinks. The absence of everything. Sometimes, like now, he thinks of everything that happened, and still, no matter how many times he goes over it, the most painful part of the whole thing is Clark’s mute refusal to speak. His utterly quiet acknowledgment that nothing he says will do any good at all. His realization that he is not needed for his words any longer, but only for what he can do.

And Perry’s own silence, he hates that too, because Clark is right—it won’t help. Wouldn’t have helped even then. Perry had made his decision without even asking Clark for a quote. Without warning him. Without saying a word. So maybe Clark’s silence is only a direct result of Perry’s own mute declarations.

No good at all to speak when there’s nothing he can possibly say to excuse himself.

“Bleak thoughts,” Perry warns himself, and he caps the bottle and stores it in his desk. It’ll sit there until the next month, the next anniversary of the tragedy that was Clark Kent’s life. He knows better than to drink any more often than once a month, knows not to go down that downhill slope any faster than he already has.

“Perry?” Lois’s voice in the empty newsroom startles him, even more so when she pokes her head into his office. “Perry, what are you doing here so late?”

Perry studies her a long moment, moved by the exhaustion painted across her face, the absence of that spark that once enlivened her eyes, enough so to make a superhero reporter fall in love with her at his first glimpse of her. She’s been wasting away since her article (no need to specify *which* article; Lois Lane articles sell, but only one is remembered), has gradually but inexorably stripped herself of her personal life as surely as Clark’s was taken from him, as if she echoes back his loss (her own form of private penance). Not that she’ll admit to it—not to guilt, not to grief, not to anything at all except fierce, desperate satisfaction she might not even realize herself she’s faking.

In a way, Perry thinks, regardless that he chose Lane over Kent, he lost her too, more slowly but just as surely.

“Maybe you want to join me,” Perry offers, gesturing to his couch and moving to sit on it as well. It’s excuse enough to move away from the desk he now finds stifling and the bottle in the drawer he finds entirely too tempting.

Tentatively, looking somewhat uncomfortable, Lois sits beside him. “Do you have something you want to talk to me about?” she asks hesitantly. “A lead?”

“No, no, nothin’ like that.” Perry waves a dismissive hand, a certain bitterness pervading his tone. He feels too old. Old and worn and decades past when he should have moved on, moved over, let someone else in who might have been wiser when their

star reporter came to them with a story that should never have been printed. “No *news*,” he says, and pretends he does not spit the word that is both his livelihood and his greatest damnation.

Lois regards him uncertainly, obviously wanting to be anywhere else, just as obviously having nowhere else to go. She has film rights, publicity contracts, unending requests for book deals, all of them offered to her on silver platters with diamond lights to blind her to what’s right and wrong, but she has no friends. No family to speak of. Nothing at all but the Daily Planet and the job they can’t possibly take away from her now that she has catapulted them to lasting fame. Everything she ever wanted, but she’s taken none of it, accepted none of the deals, appeared on none of the talk shows, and hasn’t finished even a chapter on any of the books they want her to write. Alone and haunted, he thinks again (and maybe he should have stopped a few drinks before he did).

“Have you been drinking?” Lois asks cautiously.

Perry nods unashamedly. “I have. I drink a toast every month on this day.”

Lois’s hands tighten to white-knuckled claws over her knees, and she looks away, shrinking in on herself. She knows, of course, what this day is. (Everyone does.)

“Do you know,” Perry says casually, “that I was asked two days ago if I knew how to get in contact with Superman?”

She looks at him sharply, sudden interest igniting the memory of that spark in her eyes. Interest and betrayal, because she and Perry have an unspoken agreement to never bring up the ghost hovering between them, turning them into old soldiers alone in the foxhole, abandoned by their fellow comrades, cowering behind in the dirt and pretending they don’t blame each other.

“Of course, I have no idea how to call Superman,” Perry continues as if he doesn’t notice. “But they said it was urgent and imperative, life-threatening even, and they had the rank, the credentials, and the authority to back that claim. Not that it mattered—no one knows how to contact Superman, apparently not even the Foundation. But these people looking for him were desperate, so I told them their best bet was to try and find Jimmy.”

Perry swallows, missing the kid more than he can quite explain to himself. And yet, he’s never been more proud of Jimmy than when the kid came into Perry’s office and told him he couldn’t, in good conscience, continue to work for the paper that had valued an article over the lives of a friend and his parents. Poor kid hadn’t realized what it meant to value the newsworthy over the noble, and that would have been a liability for him if he hadn’t quit. A liability, but great shades of Elvis, Perry had mentally cheered to see Jimmy walk out of the Daily Planet building with his head held high and his conscience clear.

“I just got a call today from a source of mine in the Pentagon,” Perry’s throat is dry and he almost gets up to fetch another drink, but he knows that won’t alleviate the cause of this hoarseness. Knows it will only make him bleaker and grimmer and even more bitter. “He said they’d found Jimmy, informed him of the situation...and a day later, the crisis was over. I called in about a dozen favors, and now I know just how much of an understatement ‘life-threatening’ is.”

Lois listens quietly, not even bothering to interrupt him. It’s something she never would have done before, but as he is constantly reminded, things are different now. Still, he hates her silence almost as much as he does Clark’s.

Standing and welcoming the wash of pain from his limbs straightening, Perry puts his back to her and says, neutrally, “There was an asteroid. Seventeen miles long. It would have wiped out everything on the planet. But it’s gone now—and no one’s seen Superman since. In fact, he’s been MIA for a day and a half now, which is the longest he’s been absent since he came back after that tsunami.”

Alarm shoots Lois bolt-upright, her legs thumping against the couch as she leaps to her feet, and Perry feels a muted thrum of satisfaction. When he turns to look, he nods to himself. Yep, that’s concern, fear, and worry on her face, not interest in a big story. “He’s gone?” she asks, and there is something almost childlike about the shock and fear in her voice. “Do you...do you think he’s okay?”

“I think maybe only Jimmy could tell us for sure,” Perry gazes at Lois intently, conveying his unspoken message. Silence is the language of the day, it seems, and he’s not so old-fangled that he can’t catch on eventually. “Of course,” he adds casually, “knowing how Jimmy left here, I doubt he’d let any reporters get within a mile of him.”

Lois frowns. “You want me to go undercover?”

A snort escapes Perry, and he crosses the office, pretending his Elvis picture is crooked so he can busy himself righting it, using the movement to hide his disappointment at her question. “Do you really think he wouldn’t see through any of your disguises?”

She stares at him, stricken, before Perry shrugs and turns back to her. “After all,” he says, “Jimmy helped you come up with most of them.”

A tiny shake of her head dispels the hurt look, but only for an instant. “Then...what should I do?” she asks him, and naked despair drenches her voice in hopelessness. The old Lois Lane died as surely as Clark did, Perry confirms with a sort of detached horror; maybe they even took the whole Daily Planet with them. But the miracle of resurrection isn’t entirely unprecedented; maybe, just maybe, in a world where Superman can exist at all, it can happen again.

“You know, Lois, it’s my fault too.” He meets Lois’s suddenly hesitant, shimmering gaze and does not back down. Not talking about this hasn’t helped anything (silence rarely helps anything even if it is sometimes the only escape), so maybe it’s time to let out the news that’s worth something rather than the news that’s sensational. “It’s the editor’s job to decide whether to run a story or to kill it. I made the wrong choice that day, and that’s on me.”

There’s a moment of complete stillness, and then Lois raises her eyebrows, frantically retreating until she’s once more ensconced in her world of make-believe. “It was the biggest news since...since *ever*, Perry. Of *course* you ran it. We didn’t do anything wrong.”

But Perry’s always been able to tell when Lois is lying to herself, and there’s not enough conviction in her voice to convince even herself let alone him.

“Didn’t we?” he asks, and he looks past the open blinds to Clark’s desk. So empty. So barren. Such a taunting reminder of all they’ve lost. All they threw away.

With a deep breath, he picks up his jacket from the back of his chair and slings it over his shoulder. “I don’t know what happened a day and a half ago, but Clark may be hurt and Superman is missing. Whichever reason you choose to go after him, Jimmy’s the one to find.” He pauses halfway out the door and looks over his shoulder at her, left frozen and unsure and terrified in his office. “One more thing, Lois—Clark’s already gone and, as far as I can tell, Superman’s only hangin’ on by a thread. You know a lot about Superman, wrote most of it for this paper, but there’s one thing I don’t think you ever realized—you’re one of the only people in this world who can either sever that thread or strengthen it to something that can last.”

She doesn’t move, and Perry takes in a shuddering breath. “We murdered one man, Lois,” he says softly, “both of us. But luckily for us, there are two of him. Let’s not put Superman’s death on our conscience too. I don’t think I could handle it.”

It’s too harsh, maybe, and far too blunt, but the silence is excruciating and Perry cannot stand it any longer. Besides, he

knows Lois as well as he knows himself and she needs a challenge, a threat, an obstacle to overcome to galvanize her into action. And it's no more than the truth—and isn't the *truth* newsworthy anymore?

He's halfway across the newsroom when he hears Lois call his name. He swivels in place to look at her, sees her with one foot out of his office, one hand hanging onto the wall, as if she's taking that first tentative step out of her fantasy world and into the weightier gravity of reality.

"Yeah, darlin'?" he asks, and holds his breath, hoping she'll make the right decision, praying she'll take the bait. (Hoping this will help, in some small way, to make up for all he's stolen from Clark.)

"I..." In the dim shadows it's hard to tell, but he thinks he catches a glimpse of her long-lost spark, resting like buried coals in her eyes. "I need the next couple of weeks off. Maybe more."

A smile of pure relief overtakes his gruff features.

She's done it.

"Take as much time as you need," he tells her. "We'll be waiting for you whenever you get back."

He turns and leaves her to her furious, purposeful packing at her desk, leaves her to her planning and her investigating and her searching. Steps into the elevator and lets the doors close between them and wonders how long it will be until he sees her again. Wonders if he'll ever see her again.

But Clark, he thinks, needs her more than the Planet does, and she needs Clark more than she needs her familiar refuge.

"Just hold on, Clark," he whispers under his breath. "Hold on, she's coming."

He only hopes it is not too little too late.

2

Lois is uncomfortable. It's hot—sweltering, actually—and the vinyl booth in the dingy diner with its cracked tabletops and ancient salt and pepper shakers is pretty much the last place she expected to find herself in when she asked Perry for time off. From the halls of the Daily Planet to the backwoods of the country, she muses, and it all seems so useless, so unnecessary. So pointless.

This diner is the twelfth place she's been to in as many days, looking for Jimmy, hoping to meet him, thinking that any minute he'll walk through the glass doors with their blistering metal handles and grin at her and slide in to sit across from her with all the boyish eagerness and young charm she's missed. But he hasn't been in any of the other places she's gone, hasn't answered any of the numbers she's tried, hasn't responded to any of the ads she's placed, and she's fairly certain this is going to end up being a dead end too.

Two weeks.

Superman has been missing two weeks. Clark's been...well, Clark's been missing for so much longer than that, but the numbers cut into her soul like blades so she usually avoids spelling it out for herself.

Two weeks and she's not anywhere nearer finding him now than she was the night Perry told her what Superman had faced. Alone.

Terror chokes her, lumped up in her throat like bile, like bitterness, like guilt. Because he's alone and because he can't ask for help and because she should have been there for him and because this is all her fault.

Well, not *all* her fault. But partly (maybe even mostly; maybe so much more than she can bear to admit).

She *needs* to find Jimmy. Now. Before another two weeks can pass. Before Perry starts drinking salutes on a different day to another anniversary of a death (of the same man). Before she loses it completely and gives up on the Daily Planet and the mentor who sometimes looks at her like she's just as dead as

Clark Kent and the desk where once she ruled and glowed and conquered whole corporations and congressmen and crimes and now she only rusts and dims and dwindles away. Give up on it all because none of it is what it once was and she's tired of realizing that anew every morning.

And Jimmy better hurry up if he's coming, she thinks, because she's getting more maudlin with every empty moment that passes.

The bell over the door tinkles, and Lois looks up hopefully (a stupid hope, because Jimmy hasn't come into the tinkling of a bell over any of the other doors in all those other anonymous, tiny towns she's been to, but there it is, that hope, struggling gamely on against all the odds). But it's just a businessman, white shirt, pressed slacks, neat hair, sunglasses that Lois wishes she had because the glass walls do a phenomenal job of filtering the sunlight through in a direct line over her corner booth.

Sighing, Lois looks away, back down to her hands, playing with her cool, sweating glass. Tea. She never drank iced tea, not before. In fact, it was coffee or cream soda or water, maybe something stronger if Superman—if he—well, if things weren't quite as she wished they were. But never tea. Never, ever, and certainly not when he gave her that unaffected look and quirked an eyebrow in that gentle-cocky way of his and told her it was better for her.

Certainly not then.

She thinks, though (in some tiny, hidden, damped part of her mind), that she'd give almost anything for him to be here right now, sitting across from her, cocking his eyebrow at the half-empty glass in her hands, saying...

Saying nothing.

Because he doesn't say anything. Not anymore. Not at all. He's silent, expressionless. Swoops in and saves and rescues and fixes and catches and helps and then disappears again and never a single word spoken (certainly not the one word he spoke to her when she wasn't listening, the last word Clark Kent ever spoke).

"Lois?"

The world tilts around her. Shakes and trembles and swirls so that the glass of iced tea falls to its side with a resounding clatter and dark tea mingles with ice cubes to draw a map of a world she's never seen across the cracked tabletop. Her hands are as cold as those sticky cubes, pale and nerveless, and when she looks up, she thinks that maybe she will fall apart into just as many pieces (just as much of a mess) as her tea; maybe her own fragments will map out a truth she's never admitted.

But it's not him.

Not Clark. Not Superman. Not a silence broken and a name spoken (in a way no one else can duplicate) by a voice the exact nuances of which she's beginning to forget.

It's the businessman who came in a moment before. Clean and put together and obviously on top of things, so sure of the way the world is and the way everything should go and just how he will affect that all. Just like she used to be. Before it all went so very wrong.

"Lois," he says again, and then this man (with his dark hair and his dark eyes and his narrow chin) gives half a smile, and suddenly Lois recognizes him.

"J-Jimmy?" she asks, and cannot even fault herself for stumbling, because this cannot be the young, earnest, eager-to-please kid she's missed so much.

"I almost didn't recognize you," he says, warmly (and that, at least, is familiar), and slides into the booth across from her. His long fingers place his sunglasses down, very neatly, against the sun-warmed wall, reach out to the napkin dispenser and pull out several napkins, begin to mop up the mess she's already forgotten.

"Same here," she manages to say, but she cannot make her numb hands reach out to this man (this stranger) and help him

clean up the spilled tea. “You look good, Jimmy.”

“James,” he corrects her, matter-of-factly. “No one calls me Jimmy anymore.”

“Oh,” is all she can say. But really, she thinks, she shouldn’t be surprised. Everything else has changed; why shouldn’t *this* be different too?

“So,” Jimmy (James) pushes the sodden napkin to the end of the table and folds his hands in front of him. His dark eyes turn fully to her, and Lois finds herself frozen. The diner’s air conditioner is old and outdated and over-worked, and the New Mexico sun is broiling her in this glass and metal cage, and still she is cold and still, some frozen heart of her, trapped in stasis, trembling on the brink of something new and frightening.

“So,” she echoes, when Jimmy says nothing else.

His smile is gone, and he is once more unrecognizable. He is grown up and competent and composed (and not smiling), and Lois looks at him and thinks that this secret identity, this alter ego, is just as good as Clark’s was.

“You’ve been looking for me,” he prompts, finally, giving her a small nod, as if to remind her of a cue. As if this entire conversation has already been scripted and she’s the one who forgot to learn her lines (and maybe she has; maybe she’s wandered into the wrong theater, and now she’s stuck in the middle of a play completely foreign to the one she knows, written in a strange language, set among alien props, populated by unknowable characters).

“Yes.” Inwardly, her mind reels. She has a speech, planned out and suffered over and readied for a meeting just like this (only different, because in all her plans, she’s only ever met with Jimmy, not James), but she cannot think of any of it. And somehow, she doesn’t think rote words will work, not now, not here, not facing a man who seems all too sure of himself and his place in this world and his part (his lines, his script, the ending to this scene she hasn’t rehearsed).

Jimmy only looks at her. Before...the boy of her memories would never have been able to take a sustained stare like this. He would have broken, would have shifted uncomfortably and sweated and babbled out whatever he thought she might want. But this man sits before her and his gaze remains steady and his hands don’t shake. The waitress comes over and takes his order for a coffee, but when she leaves, he simply turns back and regards Lois again.

It unsettles her. She feels, then, as if *she* is the young cub reporter, all nervous anxiety and hopeless awkwardness. As if their roles have been switched, leaving her scrambling behind him.

It’s been months since she’s written an article worth the money Perry pays her. Months since she’s felt like the reporter she’s always known she is. Months since she’s felt that lightning spark in her veins, that surge of gilded energy mixed with molten adrenaline. Months, and yet when it hits her, like a rush of cold water flung straight at her from point-blank range, it feels as familiar as ever.

So she straightens in her seat and wraps her hands around her righted glass. “Perry’s doing well,” she says, conversationally (she lies). “Still going strong.”

“I know.” Jimmy gives that almost-not-quite familiar smile again, a mere curving of his lips rather than the grin that used to light up his entire face. “I keep abreast of what’s going on at the old place. I’m glad he hasn’t given it up.”

She wonders if she only imagines the slight hint of reproof toward her she thinks is implied in his brief statement. (She wonders if *she* has given up.)

But she only nods and wishes she hadn’t spilled her tea so she could take a sedate sip of it and pretend to be as unaffected as he is. “Me, too. The Daily Planet wouldn’t be the same without Perry White as the chief.”

This time, Jimmy’s smile is a bit wider. “Don’t call him chief,” he teases her.

It’s not much, little more than the thinnest of lines leading back to the time when they were more than casual acquaintances, but Lois takes it. Reaches out and grasps hold of it and clings to it as if it is strong enough to hold up all her expectations and wants.

“I’m glad to see you,” she tells him bluntly. And it’s not a line. She really *is*. Jimmy was just the sometimes-endearing, sometimes-annoying office gofer—until he left. Then she realized she likes him, liked his help with her disguises and his streetwise savvy given out so freely and his youthful optimism. She liked *him*. And right now, looking at this man with the echo of his smiles and the hint of his resemblance, she still misses him. Maybe even more than ever before (because he is so tantalizingly close but just outside of reach).

Jimmy nods and studies her. “So I gather. You’ve been going to quite a bit of trouble to find me.”

“Haven’t seen you in a while,” she says evasively, but knows it is only for show. As many polite courtesies as they exchange, they both know why she is there.

“I’ve sent a postcard or two.”

“Have you?” She shakes her head, then waits for the waitress to set down Jimmy’s coffee and her iced tea refill. When they’re alone again (or as nearly as they can be in this decrepit diner), she takes a deep breath and forces herself to continue. “I remember a post-it note shoved in an envelope that said, ‘Doing fine, talk to you later,’ and then a couple weeks later, a card that said ‘Happy Birthday—found a job, like it a lot, look after yourself.’ And it wasn’t my birthday.”

He shrugs, easily. Smoothly. Unaffectedly. Takes a sip of his coffee, and for the first time (seeing and recognizing her own avoidance moves, reflected back at her) Lois realizes that he is *not* as calm as he wants her to think he is. She looks at him, and finally, belatedly, she *sees* him. Dark shadows under his eyes. Red veins showing at the corners of those eyes. Crimped lines around his mouth. A bit *too* much attention given to keeping his hands steady.

He is tired. He is worried.

He is afraid.

Pure terror sheers its way through Lois’s body, headed straight for her heart. An instinctive, immediate reaction, emotions she cannot control, so powerful they prompt a visceral response. Her breath catches in her throat. Her hands are shaking. The blood drains from her cheeks. Wind rushes in her ears, blocking out the clatter of silverware and the muted murmur of distant conversation.

“*There was an asteroid. Seventeen miles long.*” Perry’s words are like approaching thunder, far-distant, growing louder, rolling over open prairie, blasting everything in its path with a violent deluge and forking lightning. “*Superman is missing.*”

“It was the only card I could find,” Jimmy says, and for a long, uncomfortable moment, Lois can only stare at him in complete confusion until she remembers their conversation, remembers her own comment, remembers that he cannot read the thoughts in her head (only one person could do that, but even then, he didn’t do a good job of it, did he, not in the end).

“Jimmy,” she says, “I—”

“James,” he corrects her.

“James,” she amends without missing a beat. “I know about the asteroid. I know the military asked Superman to stop it. And I know that it’s been two weeks since anyone’s seen him.”

He betrays no surprise. He’s not gullible or naïve (not anymore), and he knows why she is here. Knows why she has chased him across eleven states and a territory, knows why they are sitting in this stupid diner she hopes never to see again, drinking tea and coffee and pretending they’re just here to catch up on old times.

"Please," Lois says, and her voice cracks, and she doesn't even care.

For the first time, Jimmy breaks eye contact. He looks down at his coffee, and she thinks she sees the hint of a tremble in his hands when he opens and pours in a packet of sugar (and she remembers that he hated the artificial sugar, was always making fun of their little colored packets). "There's nothing to worry about," he says.

She does not believe him.

"Then where is he?" she demands. Quietly. Intently. She doesn't want to make a scene. Doesn't want to scare him away. She just wants him to know that she *needs* to know this.

A flash of something shoots through Jimmy's eyes, turning him once more into a stranger (dangerous and unknown). When he looks up to glare at her, she realizes it is anger, glimmering there in his eyes like cosmic storms raging in the far-off skies over the heads of oblivious Earthlings. He is angry with her. No—he is *furious*.

"He's resting!" he hisses. "If you know about Nightfall, then you know exactly how much it was asking of him to expect that he could go up there and stop it single-handedly! He may be special, Lois, but he's still a man, and heading out into space to stop a rock bigger than Smallville is just a little bit daunting. So, no, he's not flying around saving people, and he's not out there being Superman for a world that treats him like some kind of a cross between their savior and a ghost. He's recovering, and when he's ready, he'll come back, all right? Now is that enough for your article?"

"I don't believe you," Lois says, coldly. Numbly (because his words *hurt*, and they are unjust and unfair, and they paint a picture she does not want in her mind for all the dark nights when she can't sleep and terrible thoughts come creeping out from under their mental rocks). "If all that's true, then why are you afraid?"

He swallows. Hard. Then sets his cup down with force enough to make her blink and glance down at it, expecting to see shards of white ceramic littering the table. But the cup is not broken and when she looks back up at him, she sees a dispassionate mask staring back at her, reflecting her back on herself in the image on his sun-bright eyes.

"I'm afraid of *you*, Lois," Jimmy finally says.

It hurts more than anything because, much as she wishes otherwise, she can tell he is not lying.

"He's *okay*, Lois. Really. He is. It was hard and there've been some scary moments, but he's better. He's okay. So, just go. Just... just tell me some more about Perry and funny office stories and then drive or fly back to Metropolis and write your articles and just let him go. Okay? Just let him go."

Lois stares at him. She cannot read him, cannot comprehend the truth behind the almost desperate plea staining his words. "Wh-what?" she stammers.

Jimmy leans over the table, intensity crackling from him, dispassion falling away to reveal that fear and defensiveness and desperation. "It's taken him a while, but he's moved on. He's... adjusted. Don't mess this up for him. Don't take away everything he's worked to build back up. You ruined his life once, Lois, isn't that enough?"

Her refill of iced tea slops over onto the table, dribbling down the rim, jarred by the force of her grip on it, almost strong enough to shatter the glass. "I don't want to ruin anything," she hears herself say, as if from a distance. "I just want to see him."

And it is not until then, hearing herself say the words, that she realizes why she has left the Daily Planet and sits in grungy diners and spends her savings on hundreds of classifieds and begs this stranger before her. She wants to see *him*. Nothing more, nothing less, and it is like a weight has fallen from her, to have the sum of her wants, the extent of her life's desires, distilled

down into one, simple statement.

Jimmy's eyes slide closed, as if she has just hammered the last nail in his coffin. "No," he says.

"So this is what you do now?" she asks, and now she feels anger to match his rising up within her. "You screen his calls? Stand guard at his door? What do you do, interview everyone before they can meet him? Did you appoint yourself his bodyguard—or is the correct term 'warden'—or did he ask you to fill in?"

His jaw firms, his eyes narrow, and Lois almost chokes because that expression (that determined resoluteness he never exhibited before) is Clark's. It's Clark's expression, sitting there on his face like it belongs, and if she ever doubted that Jimmy does know where Clark is and sees him and talks to him regularly (*talks* to him, when *no one* talks to him anymore), then all her doubts are shot and buried and laid to rest right then.

"You don't get to pass judgment over this," he says with finality.

"But you get to pass judgment over me?" she retorts. "I'm not asking for you to help me ambush him. I don't want it for an interview or an article—I'm on my own time here, on a leave of absence. And I don't need you to 'approve' of me, all right? Just ask *him*. Tell him I want to see him. If he says no, then I'll leave. I'll go back to Metropolis and never bother you again. But just, first, ask him if he'll let me see him."

"No," Jimmy says, but it is more a hopeless denial than an answer to her plea (the murmur of a man over the body of his child, hoping it isn't so even though the blood staining the cloaking sheet is incontrovertible).

Lois finds it hard to breathe, every breath saturated with hot sunlight. "Why not?"

"Because," he murmurs, almost inaudibly, "if I tell him that Lois Lane wants to see him...there's no way he won't say yes."

For the first time since Perry told her about this asteroid, Lois thinks she feels a glimmer of hope limn her heart, like the half-glimpsed, half-doubted flash of lightning behind thick clouds at the corner of her eye.

"This isn't fair," Jimmy says. And now, finally, he sounds like the young boy she knew. "He's just starting to move on."

"I'm not here to ruin anything," she says again. "But the way things ended wasn't...it...don't you think it'd be better to clear some things up?"

"How?" he shoots back, all bristling anger and righteous indignation. As if he is restraining himself, he wraps the fingers of his right hand around the band of his watch on his left wrist, holds on so tight she can see his knuckles turn white as bone, sharp as pain. "Slapped across every front page in the world like last time?"

Lois flinches away from him, and cannot meet his gaze. "No. No, not like that." When she does look up, Jimmy looks caught between fury and grief. "But if he's really moved on, if he's really okay...then doesn't he deserve the right to make that choice himself?"

She sees it, the moment he admits defeat. The moment he drops his weapons to the ground and slumps to his knees on the battlefield and bows his head in abject surrender. The moment he looks at her, and there is only resignation, dull and weary and oh so very jaded, there in his eyes. (And she wonders what she has become, to slay superheroes and disillusion young men and leave their innocent bodies in her wake.)

"You think I'm wrong to try to protect him," Jimmy observes slowly, lifelessly. His hand clenches his watch even tighter. "But don't you see? Someone needs to save *him*."

Impulsively, Lois reaches out and places her hand over Jimmy's, fever-hot next to the warmth of the coffee, beneath the blistering glare of the sun (feels the bones tense even tighter, whiter, harsher). "I'm not going to hurt him, Jimmy."

“Oh, Lois,” Jimmy breathes, “how can you do anything *but*?”

3

She waits, in a run-down motel that stands as the perfect complement to the decaying diner. One day passes, and that’s okay, because she’s asking a lot and if Superman was hurt by this Nightfall, then he needs time. Another day passes, and that’s okay too, because Jimmy isn’t sure about this and he will try to talk himself out of it before succumbing to what he surely knows is best. A third day passes, and now Lois begins to pace and bite her nails and leave a mess of chaos in her room just to give herself something to tidy up later on. A fourth day passes, and for the first time, she wonders if *he* will not see her. Regardless of what Jimmy said, regardless of all she has gone through to get to this point, she thinks that in the end, he will hear her name and he will fall into that guarded (trapped) silence, and when Jimmy asks him, he will say one more word.

“No.”

Even when he left that first time, when she began to wonder if she had gone too far and she went to his apartment and picked the lock and walked in, she didn’t truly believe that he was gone. Yes, his belongings were cleared out and his apartment looked like the desiccated husk of something that had always before been alive and vital and entrancing, but he could not be gone. He was Clark, and he was always there when she calmed down. He always let her be angry and nodded and smiled and rolled his eyes and comforted her, and then, when her anger burnt itself out and she could start to look at things more clearly, he was always there to laugh at her and tease her and make her smile.

He was always there.

So maybe what she’d done was worse than a tirade, and maybe she was still reeling from the look in his eyes when he’d said her name in the newsroom, but of course he wasn’t *gone*.

And then she saw it on the news, that his parents were missing, that everything in their house was packed away (all the pictures of that young, dark-haired boy with smiles that turned into pensive looks as he grew older that faded into a more reserved smile on a teenager that transitioned into a single photo of an adult Clark, glasses and all, at the top of that staircase of memories; all the awful, whimsical art Martha Kent delighted in showing her while her husband staunchly supported her even as he scratched his head in puzzlement over each one; all the farm equipment Jonathan Kent knew everything about, from the least screw to how many times he’d had to fix each one; all of it gone like it’d never been). She’d stared up at the television screen with its unwelcome news, and that was when she’d begun to suspect that Clark Kent wasn’t going to be there when she looked for him.

Not at his desk across from hers, where he could watch her with that small, secret smile of his he thought she didn’t know about.

Not at his apartment, where he kept a mind-boggling array of teas just to irritate her.

Not at the street vendors, where he’d buy her coffee and snow cones and pretzels, and then pretend he didn’t notice when she offered to pay this time.

Not at the park, where they’d walk, sometimes, while discussing a case that had fizzled out or what newest idiosyncrasy of Metropolis’s irritated her or Perry’s latest attempt to make Jimmy stand up to him again.

Not anywhere.

He was gone.

But she’s here now, Lois thinks. She’s here, and she’s come all this way, and Jimmy said he’d tell him—said Clark would let her come to him, would *want* to see her—but it has been five days and she has heard no word, and maybe he is gone again. Maybe this strange, grown-up version of Jimmy is better at lying

than even she guessed, and he told her to wait here only so he would have time to go to Clark (to Superman) and get him to move again. Make him uproot his new life and pack up all his new and old things and once more disappear where even a hundred classified ads and an army of private detectives won’t be able to find him.

Maybe she will never see him again (except on the news, in flashes of red and blue and expressionless mask, distant and vague because reporters and photographers and cameramen are not allowed to get too close lest they spook him and send him once more blurring into hiding).

When the phone rings, she slips in her haste to reach it and slides to the floor and bangs her elbow on the nightstand, but she answers it on the third ring. “Hello?” Her voice is breathless, panicked, tremulous.

“Hello,” Jimmy replies (no, not Jimmy, *James*, because he does not notice, or care, that she sounds so anxious, and there is no smile in his own voice). “You’re still set on this?”

“Yes,” she says firmly, and the truth has never tasted so certain on her tongue.

“Then get on a plane headed to Coast City,” he tells her. “There’s one leaving this afternoon; I’ve checked and there are still seats available on it.”

“Coast City,” she says, and no matter how many times she has wondered where he is now, has imagined what his new place looks like, she does not think she ever gave a thought to the Californian city of test pilots and air force bases and strange myths about glowing green men.

“Yes,” Jimmy replies obliquely. “Unless you want to go back to Met—”

“No!” She swallows and tries to sound moderately more in control of herself. “No, I’ll go.”

The dial tone is her only reply, and she can see him, expensive sunglasses hanging from one hand, slamming the receiver down with a thunk and then looking around guiltily to make sure Perry didn’t see the abuse of Planet property. Except James, she reminds herself, probably has his own phone, and he would not look guilty at all.

It’s a good thing she hasn’t been fired like her current writing deserves, because her savings is dwindling fast. The last-minute plane ticket doesn’t help matters, and she hopes she can find a cheap motel in Coast City; otherwise, she might find herself staying at their local soup kitchen. But that is a passing concern, one forgotten as soon as she puts in the last of her credit card information and finds herself in possession of the ticket that will lead her to a recovering Superman.

Recovering.

She’s done her best not to think of it, these past five days (past nineteen days), but sitting in a plane and watching the sky and the obscured land pass her by out the tiny window, she has little else to think about.

Recovering. A meteor the size of Smallville, Jimmy said, and he sounded as if Superman had had trouble with it. As if Clark had been afraid.

It makes her breath short, makes her vision cloud and her thoughts haze, to imagine Clark afraid and unsure, but still firming his jaw into Superman’s and launching himself into the blackness of space. She cannot quite imagine why no one knew about this. Shouldn’t this be something that would be reported in every country in the world for *months* beforehand? Shouldn’t they all have been there to send Superman off and wish him well and pray for him and think of him and then welcome him back and thank him for his latest sacrifice in saving a world and a people not his own? Why have they kept it so quiet?

Because, she answers herself (ash heavy in her mouth and cloying in her throat), this is only another example of Superman’s silence.

He does not need gratitude. He does not need recognition. He does not need acclamation.

He is a ghost. An angel. A spirit protecting Earth, haunting it. A specter that wards off evil and tirelessly defends its charge—but invisibly. Incorporeally. Clark Kent is dead, and Superman is an alien, and so he does not belong, does not live. Only fulfills his self-ordained purpose and fades back into the woodwork.

She excuses herself from her seat and stumbles into the lavatory and is sick. It's not an uncommon reaction to her thoughts these days. She carries mints in her pockets everywhere nowadays, and so after rinsing her mouth with flat airplane water, she slips two of the mints behind her lips. The taste of peppermint is now inextricably linked to the feelings of remorse and the image of nightmares, sitting heavy and bitter on her tongue.

When she drags herself and her single bag off the plane into Coast City's bustling, organized airport, she looks all around. Jimmy's instructions were as sparse as they were brief, and she's not quite sure if this is a test or just a testament to his displeasure with her. But there, against the doors leading out into the warm Californian air, she sees a man holding a sign with the Daily Planet logo.

Without a second thought, without hesitation, she strides toward him. It is like James, this man who is not Jimmy any longer, to make her identify herself by the paper that assured her fame (her infamy) rather than by her name. She told him she is here for herself, but he does not believe her, and this sign is a pointed, poisoned reminder of that.

"Lois Lane?" the man asks her.

"Yes," she replies. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"Follow me." He's big and broad, bulky and brisk, and Lois has to work hard to keep up with him (just another sign of how far she's fallen, how out of practice she is; once, when she was the reporter she should still be, she could keep up with the best of them).

He leads her to a black car with windows tinted to obscurity. Lois hesitates (she's been in situations like this before and they seldom turn out well), but she has come so far and if there is even the slightest possibility that climbing into this unmarked car with a stranger will lead her to Superman, then she will take it.

The man drives her through a winding, circuitous route she's pretty sure is mostly to confuse her (not that it matters; she knows nothing about Coast City geography), out past an abandoned looking base with only a few planes on its tarmac ('Ferris Air,' the sign reads), back into town, to the sprawling downtown where skyscrapers rise into the air (blunt and oblong and so very different from Metropolis's sleek and rounded skyline), through a residential area with identical houses, and back into a busier part of the city. When he finally stops in front of a towering hotel, Lois glances in the direction of the airport and thinks they could have halved the trip entirely if he weren't trying to mislead her.

"Thanks for the scenic route," she observes when he pulls the door open for her.

"I have a feeling it's only just starting," he replies, and does not give her time to react to that before he directs her to a taxi waiting on the curb.

Lois is caught between the urge to roll her eyes and the desire to stomp on the man's foot and lecture him on just how ridiculous this is. Instead, she only sighs and climbs into the taxi. "I sure hope *you* know where we're going," she mutters.

The driver winks at her in the rear view mirror (she gets the sudden feeling he's one of those people who enjoys surprises and scavenger hunts and secrets he's in on). "Not to worry, Miss. I know a general direction."

And once more, she's off. After thirty minutes of scenery she could do without, Lois leans her head against the warm glass of the window and lets the swaying of the car lull her to sleep.

When she wakes to the cabdriver shutting off his engine, it's

dark. She looks around and can make out only that they're on a city street, quiet for all the moderately high skyscrapers on either side of the road, lights shining in maybe half of the windows around her.

"You all right, Miss?" the driver asks her.

"Sure," she says before she even realizes what he's saying (before she can realize she's lying). "Um...where are we?"

"Don't exactly know," the driver says with another delighted smile. "All I know is, once we're here, I'm supposed to give you this." He hands an envelope (grainy and not quite pure white) back to her.

Lois raises an eyebrow and tears it open. A piece of paper (whiter than the envelope; whiter than her hands) is revealed. *Building 229, floor 19, room 38.*

Obscure, she thinks, all very cloak-and-dagger, and if she wasn't so desperate, she might even be able to work herself up to a full-blown rant. But things being what they are, she lets her frustration go and clasps the paper tight.

"Am I supposed to pay you?" she asks the cabdriver.

He pretends he hasn't been watching her curiously, and shakes his head. "It's all taken care of."

She glances to the meter and feels her eyebrows rise almost to her hairline. Her savings account breathes out a sigh of relief that this is one tab she's not picking up, because shelling out four-hundred bucks for a drive she didn't even want to take would have been a bit much. (Except she knows she would pay it if she had to, knows she will pay out the entirety of her material possessions if it means that Clark Kent will speak to her.)

Pulling her bag behind her, Lois pretends she doesn't notice the driver watching her avidly, and she takes a deep breath, strides to the door of the building across the street (229 marked along its side with ornate copper figures), and buzzes for entrance.

The door blinks open immediately.

She is halfway through the lobby, is pushing the button to the elevator, is stepping inside and selecting the button labeled '19' before she lets herself realize that this is it.

All this time, all these obstacles, all the delays and the days when she talked herself out of even trying to go after him...and here she is.

There is a void in her stomach, sucking all her internal organs into its dubious gravity. She thinks her hands should be shaking, her knees should be giving out on her, her eyes should be misting.

But none of that happens.

Instead, she feels...numb. Detached. As if this is only a dream. She will walk through door after door after door. She will shout his name and reach for his cape and see a gleam reflected from his glasses—and then she will wake. Alone.

The elevator dings, the doors slide open, and Lois enters...a suite. She expected a hallway full of doors to apartments or hotel rooms (only belatedly does she realize she failed to notice what this building is or what kind of lobby she breezed through). Instead she is in what looks to be a living room, almost circular, fronted on one side by glass windows revealing a cityscape she doesn't immediately recognize, lit by lights and the paltry effect of struggling stars. There are couches ringed a center coffee table to her left, plants (real ones, not fake ones) set out at decorous intervals and above the counter/bar to her right. Behind that counter is a door, open so that she can see a kitchen through it. Two more doors in front of her, against the far wall, one straight ahead, the other nearer the wall leading to the kitchen, are numbered—37 and 38. Another door pushed into the corner behind the couches, almost against the windows, is numbered 39 and is the only door with an obvious lock on it.

It's cozy and clean and nice, but look as she might in the dim lighting (light from the kitchen and from the outside city, but not in the living room itself), she cannot spot any personal details

(pictures of a small, dark-haired boy; African masks or eclectic books or football trophies).

Her breath shudders when she releases it, and it doesn't feel quite as dreamlike anymore.

Lois tightens her grip on her bag, pretends that she cannot hear her swallow as an audible gulp, and crosses the room to the door marked 38. Her hand, though (she notices with a sort of vague appreciation) is steady as she reaches out and twists the knob.

It opens to an expansive bedroom.

Adark, empty bedroom.

Her breath whooshes out of her, and she almost does go boneless (with relief; with disappointment).

"It's your room."

Lois whirls around, her bag thrown in the direction of the voice so fast that her wrist twinges in protest. "Oh!" she exclaims when she sees Jimmy staring down at his chest where the bag hit, and then down at the floor where it now rests. Luckily, it's pretty durable, and nothing spills out of it.

"Sorry," she offers after a moment.

"No." When he looks back up at her, there is a hint of his boyish grin curving his lips. "I should have known better than to sneak up on Lois Lane."

"I didn't know anyone was here!" she protests defensively, moving forward to bend and pick up the bag.

"Yeah, I just came in." He gestures over his shoulder at a door she hadn't noticed, on the same wall as the elevator. It's ajar, she notices, and through the crack, she can see a bedroom almost identical to the one behind door 38, except there's a camera on the nightstand and black and white photos framed on the walls and the covers on the bed are rumpled. "I heard the elevator," he adds. "Figured you must have finally shown."

"Finally!" She straightens, feels some of her bone-deep exhaustion recede before her indignation. "Listen, it wasn't my idea to go for a ride through the scenery of Coast City and then another ride that took me who-knows-where. I was ready to be done after the long plane ride, but you're the one all into this cloak-and-dagger routine—"

"I know," he says, so calmly she is cut off mid-word. (It's what Clark always did to her, and she hates it; hates that Jimmy keeps doing Clark things as if he doesn't even notice.) "I know it's been a long day, Lois, but it's necessary. Trust me, if you knew how many times we've had to move because we got careless...well, believe me, it's worth it to take a bit of extra time."

"Oh," she says in a small voice. Because she should know. She *does* know. He's Superman, the most famous figure in the world, the biggest news to ever happen, and unlike the President or other heads of state, he doesn't have Secret Service and bodyguards and multi-million dollar protection plans. He has only Jimmy, and his own natural abilities (unless he doesn't; unless those are still *recovering* too).

"Anyway," Jimmy says, stepping forward to gesture at door 38. "That one's yours. I mean," he corrects himself hurriedly. "It's the guest bedroom. There's a bathroom connected, and it's fully stocked, so hopefully, you're all set. If you're hungry, there's food in the kitchen. If you don't need anything else, though, I need to get some sleep. I have an early start in the morning."

"Wait." Lois looks from him to the bedroom behind her to the kitchen, then back to the stranger standing so comfortably before her. "I don't understand. I thought...I thought he was going to be here."

His expression turns oblique so fast it's as if she flipped a switch. "I told you. He's still recovering. And you've had a long day. If you really want closure, then don't you think it might be better to approach it after a good night's sleep?"

To that, she really has nothing to say. Because, if she were really here for closure, then she'd have to agree with him. But she's here just to see him (can't think of anything past that, can't wonder about more, can't imagine what will happen after that), and so this only seems one more in a long line of useless delays.

But Jimmy doesn't want her here, and he is still trying anyway, in his strained, disapproving way, so the least she can do is meet him halfway.

"All right," she says. "Thanks."

"Yeah." For an instant, she thinks she sees sadness ghost across his face like a cloud across the surface of the moon. But it is gone in an eye-blink, and maybe she only imagined it. "Good night," he offers, in a voice she cannot read, and then he turns and enters his room and shuts the door behind him.

Lois stands in the living room a long moment more, looking all about her. Jimmy's door is numbered 36; it makes her wonder who lives behind doors 37 and 39. Makes her look at the door with the lock on it, the bedroom against the wall made of windows. Makes her wonder if maybe Clark is closer than he's been for so much longer than she wants to acknowledge. Makes her heart stutter and quake in her chest at the thought that the only thing between them is a door.

But there is a lock on the door, and the last time she went where she shouldn't, she ended up destroying a life (her own, and his, and Jimmy's, and the Kents', and Perry's, and who knows how many others), and she doesn't want to ruin this before it even begins.

So she turns back to her own door and enters the guest bedroom and shuts it behind her. She sets her bag down at the foot of the bed and turns in a circle to assess the room.

There's a closet, and a narrow door open to a small bathroom with the light on, and a queen-sized bed with a burgundy comforter, and though there is no window, there is a framed picture of a city skyline. Metropolis's skyline. Recognizable and as familiar to her as her own face in the mirror. When she steps into the bathroom to look around and set out her toiletries, she finds shampoo and conditioner—aloe and jasmine, just like hers at home, even if they are a different brand. There's a notepad and pens on the nightstand by the bed. There's a current copy of the Daily Planet tucked into the shelf. There's a black and white teddy bear in the closet, as if left behind by some other guest (but it wasn't, because she remembers it, remembers dust and heat and crowds and Clark smiling at her with that odd mix of shyness and confidence).

Lois backs up to the center of the room and wraps her arms around herself.

It's as if this room was made for her. As if someone who knows her, who remembers everything about her (who knows more about her than most ever learn) wants to make her comfortable.

And this, finally, is just too much. After everything, after four months, after weeks of searching and days of hoping (fearing), it is this that breaks her.

Inside her chest, the shards of her broken heart shift and scratch at her ribcage before settling once more into their ash and dust.

Lois crumples to the floor, buries her head in her hands, and she weeps.

4

He can hear her crying. It is loud and unfamiliar next to the other sounds this apartment (this building, this city, this coast; this new life of his) makes. It is strange (unwelcome, because he did not know her long, but he never knew her to cry, never knew her to let loose hold of her walls to allow more than a few stray tears here and there to trickle through) and different, and it catches his attention so that he cannot breathe, cannot think,

cannot move.

He's been listening for her, of course. Has been caught up, ever since James told him that Lois Lane wished to see him, in a maelstrom of emotions so strong, so powerful, they threaten to carry him away and so he holds himself still and motionless in the center of them. Not quite numb, not quite overwhelmed; just... caught. Trapped. Arrested in a moment, in between the divergent reactions he wants to make (or thinks he *should* want to make but no longer knows how to allow himself to make).

But even though he's been listening for her, even though he's followed her progress to Sullivan Drive through the winding route all visitors have to take (if there were any besides her), even though he has his eyes squeezed tightly shut to make sure he doesn't look toward her room (*look*, in the way only he can, where walls don't matter while barriers ever so much more abstract and intrinsic set him further apart than mere walls could ever accomplish), still the sound of her crying startles him.

He doesn't know what he should do.

He thinks he should go to her.

The sound of her lungs filling with air and then compressing is strained, a slight whistle to it betraying the effort it takes her simply to breathe, which means she must be hunched in on herself. Must be curled up and wrapped around herself, and he thinks, from the way the slight breeze of the air conditioning moves past her form, sliding across fabric and flesh and diverting around her, that she is not in the bed, but is on the floor, nearer the center of the room.

The image of her in his mind, crumpled to the ground like a tissue squeezed in a careless hand and then dropped aside, makes his every muscle tense in a violent convulsion.

Except...except that movement only reminds him. Reminds him of everything he tries so hard to forget (and cannot, because his memory is truer and more consistent than any nation's approbation). Reminds him of why he sits alone in his own room, huddled up on the floor, straining toward the sky through glass walls.

Reminds him that he is not well.

Letting out his own quiet breath, he shifts slightly, bites back a grimace when he remembers why he does not like to move after a long day of pacing the confines of his cage, and quickly relaxes his muscles, breathes again in relief. It's been weeks since Nightfall (all black, sucking space, the absence of everything and all around him to such an all-encompassing extent that Earth itself seemed only a dreamlike memory, and cold so intense he thought it would have stolen any breath he might have been able to snatch, and stars that tried to suck him away from Earth's orbit into strange and foreign galaxies that would welcome him and praise him and then cast him aside in their turn, and a rushing mountain so large he felt tiny, dwarfed and insignificant and so very helpless), but still he is not fully back to himself yet.

His whole body hurts. Aches and twinges and stiffens in odd ways (his dad smiles at him and says that now Clark knows what *he* felt like all those years during harvest, trying to keep up with him, and his mom fusses over him and takes his temperature and pretends not to be worried at all when the thermometer explodes on her). Bruises that do not fade as quickly as the ones Trask gave him (but he does not think of that, hides it away behind the walls he's learned to build), and maybe he should not have slammed himself quite so hard against the asteroid save that he does not know how else he could have stopped it.

There is a ringing in his ears, even now (with *her* sobs crashing through him like unending, unstoppable tidal waves), and though it has faded to almost nothing compared to what it was after spiraling in dazed, senseless circles amid the debris of Nightfall, it still frightens him a little, to have a constant noise that has no origin, no basis for *being* (points to no person to save, no crisis to avert, no way to bring it to a stop).

And worst of all, his hands tremble. Ceaselessly. Minutely. Frighteningly.

Clark (not Clark, not really, because Clark has been subsumed entirely beneath Superman; and yet, Clark always, because he does not know how to be anything, *anyone* else) wraps his arms around himself and flattens his hands against his own ribcage (more durable than anything made under the glare of the yellow sun). His heartbeat thumps against his right hand, steady and much slower than a human's, implacable and unharmed (as if it's still in one piece, unbruised and unbroken and unmoved). His lungs fill with air and then empty, a broader, wider echo of the stuttering, soprano breathing catching the whole of his attention.

The windows are cool, thanks to the apartment building's more than adequate air conditioning, and Clark leans his body more heavily against the glass, careless of his bruises. His east bedroom wall is made completely of glass (tinted so that no one from the outside can easily see in), and Clark likes to stand in front of this wall every morning and watch the sun rise, likes to feel the sun creep its teasing, luxurious hands along his form, from the tips of his toes to the top of his head. He likes the brightness of those sunbeams, here in California, likes the richness of them, the tangible quality to them. He likes that he can retreat to his room after days full of nothing but rescue after rescue (after rescue after rescue after rescue after rescue, ad infinitum) and soak in the proof that there's still light and goodness and beauty in the world (likes to pretend it is still there for him to reach out and take part in).

Of course, it's night now. Night, with cloaking shadows and falling stars and reminders of what happened almost three weeks ago. (Night with its screams and its pleas and its shattering glass and its speeding bullets.)

Slowly (knowing what he will see, but hoping anyway because if there's one thing he can't afford to lose, it's hope), Clark sets his shoulder fixedly against the cool glass and unwraps himself long enough to look down at his own hands.

Trembling. Still. Continuously. Inescapably.

(*Always*, he begins to fear.)

Quickly, he hides them again, tucking them under his shoulders, stowed away, kept sequestered from anything they might harm.

"Reaction to the stress," his mom decided after days of worry and debate about whether to seek a doctor. "What you faced was certainly traumatic, Clark, and super or not, your body's going to need a bit of time to adjust to it."

"It'll go away," his dad reassured him. "Just give it a bit of time."

"But," James had cautioned, always the pragmatic one, "until then, Superman might need to take a break."

Clark had argued (vehemently, because he has lost so much already, and he cannot lose anymore). He needs to stay busy, needs to help people, needs to avert what catastrophes he can (needs to do something, to *be* something, and if he cannot be Clark, then he certainly cannot stop being Superman). But James was adamant.

"Look, CK," he'd finally said, regretfully. "You know better than me—what would happen if you had one of these spasms while you were helping someone?" When Clark had stared at him, stunned by the implications, he quickly added, "I know you wouldn't hurt anyone, CK. I *know* that. But *you'd* be afraid that you would—you know you would—and you'd blame yourself for anything and everything that happened, no matter what really caused it."

So Superman disappeared, as easily, as seamlessly, as mutely as Clark Kent had.

The tremor of his breath hitting the glass and being redirected back into his room rushes through Clark's hearing like a

comforting rhythm of give and take. The sound of the city beyond the window, the people who live on other floors of his building (patterns and rhythms he has come to know, to recognize as *familiar*), the ocean murmuring its constant complaints against the shoreline (and he is glad for that ocean; he was raised in Kansas, but he quickly learned in Metropolis that having the hum of waves to overpower other, more monotonous noises is a blessing), the sound of clouds moving in from the west—all of it tickles at the edge of his hearing, begging for attention. The carpet beneath him is plush but stark, not quite abrasive, not quite soft, evident even through his sweat pants. The glass is cool, but the slight, invisible-to-the-average-eye imperfections are extremely evident to him against his brow and the bruises along his arm and shoulder. The scent of his room, his things, of James and his parents and the food they ate for dinner (and *her*, filling up the suite more and more with each passing moment), wafts through the air, adding something else to the mix, giving dimension and depth and color to the world, making it real.

And still his hands tremble.

He could have hurt someone, he thinks yet again. Superman has become so much a part of his life, so all-encompassing (so greedy, sucking everything else away), that he had not even stopped to consider the trembling. But James is right. The tremors are constant, but every once in a while, there is a slight, uncontrollable spasm.

Slight, yes. Small. All but undetectable.

Except that nothing is undetectable for *him*, is it? A sneeze and cars crash into one another. A wrong blink of his eyes and forests are ignited into a raging inferno. A flick of his wrist and whole buildings are demolished.

Now, every time he closes his eyes and feels his hands shaking, he sees disaster. Sees death and destruction. A wall Superman holds up suddenly lurching under a jerky, stuttering spasm and falling into rubble on top of fleeing children. A woman cradled in his arms on the way to the hospital arriving with a crushed ribcage and pierced lungs and mangled skin from the split thousandth of a second when Superman's strength surged in an uncontrollable twitch. A crisis arrived at too late because he couldn't hear it over the ringing in his ears, that high-pitched whine that threatens to send him crazy.

Superman, he thinks. He is Superman (now and always and forever) and he cannot be afforded any leeway. He cannot tremble, and he cannot shake, and he cannot be unwell. He must be perfect. Untouchable. Must be completely in control. Completely competent.

And right now...right now, he is not.

So he sits here. Useless. Helpless. *Recovering*, as James calls it. Day after day, pacing and worrying and listening. Night after night, sitting and worrying and listening.

It's the right thing to do. Of course it is. He tells himself that over and over again, a mantra recited non-stop in his head to the accompaniment of that incessant whine. Ordinary men can go into shock and react to stresses. Ordinary men can have hands that shake and still go about their lives. But he is not ordinary (maybe never was; maybe only fooled himself into ever thinking an alien could live among a people not his own and fit in), and so he is left here, half a man (except not even that, because he's already only half a man, so maybe he is only a quarter of a man; or maybe he is not a man at all, just displaced and disconnected).

But it's safer this way. It's safer for all the people he could harm, and it is only temporary, and so he waits.

But if it's the right thing to do, he thinks for the thousandth time, then why does he feel like a failure? Every day he sits here, and he listens. Watches. *Feels*. And every day, every night, he is given a front-row seat to all the things he cannot stop. The people he cannot save. The places he cannot be. The dangers he cannot avert.

They are worried about him (about Superman, the hero, the savior, the shadow over their heads). He hears it on hundreds of news stations, in dozens of languages. They worry and ponder and theorize and begin to plan for how they will handle life without him should he stay missing this time.

They're moving on.

It pleases him, in some basic way. To know that they *don't* need him like they think they do. To realize that they can imagine life without their powerful protector. It makes him think that maybe, one day, he won't have to be Superman anymore.

But that is a long time away (years and decades and centuries from now, when he is all alone and the world has moved on and forgotten the alien in red and blue and yellow), and for now, Clark is intimately aware of all the people who *have* needed him and who he has not been there for.

Like the woman in the next room over.

Lois.

The name slips through his mental defenses like a breath of stolen air, like exotic spices flavoring forbidden fruit. He tries so hard not to think of her, not to wonder about her, not to look her up at all. (Not to let his heart free to consider what he'd once thought she might be to him.)

But she is here (so very, insanely close, so that he wonders if the ringing in his ears isn't actually from her proximity), and he knows that things will never ever be the same, as they once were (knows that dreams he once dreamed all fell to ruins and have decayed into ancient relics buried beneath dirt and sand and time and mistakes that can never be taken back) and that she is only here to get closure ("She wants to make some peace with what happened," James said, reluctance written in every line of his body).

But.

But she is *here*, he thinks to himself (desperately, disbelievingly, wonderingly). She came after him and she has been looking for him and James said she was worried when Superman disappeared, and she is here—and she is crying.

And he should go to her.

It has been so long since he was Clark to her (to the world, to anyone but the three most loyal to him; the three who love *Clark* instead of *Superman*), but he knows their brief weeks of partnership by heart (Lane and Kent; Kent and Lane; partners, two against the world). Memorized that brief, enchanted period, etched it into his heart, inscribed it along his soul, and now he takes it out some days (when the pain is not too bad; when he feels strong enough to face the hurt) and relives it, replays it in his mind—each second of being at her side, watching her, listening to her, being a person to her, a man, a partner.

He *knows* (her, them, Lane and Kent, partners and maybe-friends), and so he knows that he should not be sitting here while she is crying. No, Clark-from-before would go to her (would have come up with some flimsy excuse to rationalize showing up at her door this late at night, but would not have to give it because she wouldn't ask, or if she did, wouldn't stop talking long enough to listen to his reply), and he would ask her if she was okay.

Clark feels the ghost of a smile settle across his lips, and he makes himself more comfortable against the window, closes his eyes so he can envision the scene in every detail, every nuance, every scent and sound and flutter of his heart.

She would brush off his concern (she never admits to not being okay), but then she would start babbling to hide the truth (hide how *not-okay* she was) and eventually the truth would slip out anyway. And if she was still crying, if she was lonely enough or scared enough, she would give Clark-from-before this...this *look*. So vulnerable and pleading and *brave* anyway, and Clark-from-before (Clark-from-any-time, really, even Clark-who-is-Superman) would not be able to stop himself. He would say her

name (in that way he tried not to because he knew she didn't want him to care about her like that; didn't want him to love her), and he would reach out and tug at her arms.

And she would step forward and fall into his embrace, and he would hold her and *will* his strength into her own more fragile, more special body. Will his strength and his hope and his power (and his love, but it's too painful and hopeless and useless to think of that anymore, so that, too, is set behind thick, impenetrable walls) into her, wishing he could heal her soul and mend all the hurts ever done to her and make her realize just how valuable and precious and wonderful she is.

The moment (the memory; the fantasy) is shattered when her breath hitches in her throat as she catches her composure. Not because she's in his arms. Not because he's holding her. But because she is exhausted and her heart is tired of struggling along at this frantic rate and her muscles are probably complaining about their cramped position.

Clark holds his breath and listens even more intently. Listens as she stands, as she heads into the bathroom and brushes her teeth. Then he turns his head away (he's turned it toward her at some point, even though his eyes are still shut as tightly as possible, to avoid any further temptation) and focuses on the city outside his glass walls while she changes into pajamas (because some sounds, some mental images, shouldn't be banded about as if they're cheap and tawdry; as if they're within the realm of possibility).

When he tunes back into her, he hears her sliding into bed. Her breaths catch in her throat, her heart rate slows a bit at a time, her lungs shudder and shake from exertion, her limbs quiver ever so slightly, and then, a bit at a time, he hears her succumb to exhaustion.

She's asleep.

Clark wraps his arms more tightly around himself and finally lets himself open his eyes to look out on the city. Not *his* city (like he'd thought Metropolis once was); just *a* city. His apartment is here, but Superman can't be. Superman belongs to the world, not to any one city or any one person. Far to the east and just a bit south, he can see Mount Pacific straining toward the sky. North and a bit west, he can hear the cacophony of sounds marking out Coast City. But here, in this room, in this apartment, in this moment, all he can focus on is the sound of Lois breathing.

Asleep, but still that small, infinitesimal hitch to every third breath. Tiny, unacknowledged sobs.

He wonders if she would be breathing easier if he'd gone to her. Wonders if she would have stopped crying. (Wonders if *he* would have cried.)

Wonders what he will do when he finally does see her. Wonders what he will say (or if she wants him to talk at all).

But most of all, he wonders when he will finally be fully recovered.

For an instant, he reaches out a hand to place it against the window before he remembers and catches himself, places it back against his own invulnerable side.

And as if to remind him of just how dangerous touching anything is right now, one of his spasms hits him.

His hands quiver. His arms jerk. A millimeter. A microscopic amount of space, really, in the grand scheme of things. But motivated by power enough to take out Mt. Pacific with scarcely an effort. The glass window would have shattered, if he'd been touching it. The floor beneath him would have been turned to splinters and mangled remnants of carpet, if he'd let his hand rest on it.

Lois's bones would have been pulverized, if he'd been touching her. Holding her. Embracing her. Quieting her tears and pretending that being Clark Kent is still possible.

But he did *not* go to her. He is still sitting in his own room, in

the dark, and his hands are only touching his own flesh, and so no damage was done.

She is safe.

Calmly (there's no use in being anything else; he's learned that, after all this time, learned to take things slowly and methodically), Clark hunches in deeper around himself and focuses once more on healing. Recovering. Becoming safe again for the world (for his parents; for James; for *her*).

Lois sleeps. His parents sleep. James sleeps. Outside his window, the world moves on, revolving in an endless rotation that Clark fancies he can sometimes feel. The sun pulls them along in its inexorable orbit.

And Clark listens. Sits on his perch in the dark and watches life pass him by.

Observes the world outside and counts the cost of his enforced hiatus.

Hears their screams. Listens to their pleas. Notices the moment some heartbeats blink out of existence. Tries not to think about how many he could have saved if he weren't so weak, so scared of that black nightfall. If he could only, simply *stop* trembling.

And behind him, taking the place of that ringing (so that he doesn't even notice when the high-pitched whine finally vanishes), Lois breathes in and out, and Clark's heart begins to beat in tandem. A lullaby that eventually soothes him so that, almost without even realizing, his head slumps gently against the glass as his eyes flutter closed and sleep claims him for the first time in nearly a week.

5

When morning hits, Lois wakes with a dull headache threading its monotonous twinges behind her eyes. Sunlight pours in from a small window, cascading across her bed and illuminating the twisted tangle she has made of the smooth coverlet. Lois groans, places a hand over her temples, and wishes she could sleep for the next week, month, year (until she can wake and find everything back to what it was when things were still right and good and hopeful and not ruined forever).

And then she remembers.

With a gasp, she sits straight upright and looks all about. Daylight reveals little new about her room. The light in the bathroom is still on (she hadn't wanted to turn it off and leave herself locked in total darkness), and there are the comforting distant sounds of traffic and a bustling city even this high up, and from outside her door, she thinks she can smell bacon and pancakes and other homey scents. Her bag leans against the closet, innocuous and compact and proof of just how little leeway she has (how soon she might be asked to leave).

Some part of her wants to leap to her feet and throw on the nearest, easiest to grab set of clothes, and charge out into the living room, finally confront him after so long of not seeing him.

But she is not so good at charging anymore. Not so good at drive and motivation and spontaneity. So instead, she gets slowly to her feet and she goes to her bag and she (methodically, pointedly) unpacks all of her things. Hangs up her clothes in the closet. Slides her laptop onto the shelf beside the day old copy of the Daily Planet. Sets out the last of her toiletries in the bathroom. She takes her time showering, and she dresses without much thought to impressing anyone (here, before the one she's come to see, she doesn't think she can possibly make a worse impression than she already has), in a pair of jeans and a sweater that feels fine in the air-conditioned room but would probably be too stifling outside.

Only then, when she is ready, when she has swallowed some Advil and hastily chewed a peppermint (to preclude her stomach's violent roiling from resulting in humiliating her in front of anyone), does she go to stand in front of the door. Terror

eats its prickly, cobwebby way through her veins, trapping her nerve endings in a blanket sense of numbness, with the expectation of pain creeping up on them, making her hold her breath.

He's there. Outside that door. It's definitely bacon she's smelling, maybe a bit of sausage, definitely pancakes or waffles, maybe even eggs, and he was always telling her she should take more time with her breakfast. Always telling her his mom gave him the best pancake recipe. Always inviting her to stop by before work, or offering to bring her some, or making her stop in a café.

He's there, and she is not ready, she suddenly realizes. One wish in this world, one life's goal, but she is afraid to meet it because once she does... well, then what? What will be left for her (*of* her)? What will she do? What will *he* do?

Will he speak?

But she can't hide here forever, so she fixes a smile (wan and forced and probably more harm than good) on her lips, and she emerges from her cold, dry cocoon.

As much time as she took preparing herself, she is not prepared for the sight that greets her. She expected Superman (the ghost left behind to mark Clark Kent's passing), sitting at the counter with a plate of breakfast in front of him. Looking up at her entrance the way he always did, already searching for her as the elevator doors opened on the bullpen. She hoped for a greeting, maybe one of his slow, easy smiles. She wanted him to say her name and offer her breakfast. (She wanted everything to be like it was before.)

But he is not here. Not in one of the couches with his feet up. Not at the counter with breakfast. (Not standing, cold and implacable and grim, by the elevator, ready to escort her out and away.) The locked door in the corner is still closed, shut up tight and stern and impassable. But, when she turns her head the other way, she sees door 37 open, though her angle keeps her from seeing inside. And through the other door, the one leading to the kitchen, she sees Jonathan Kent emerging, carrying a laden plate in front of him to the wide counter. Behind him, she hears Martha Kent saying, "No more bacon for you, Jonathan—remember what the doctor said."

Her throat closes up on her so suddenly Lois almost chokes on the splinters of her peppermint.

His parents. They're here.

An instant later, she is furious with herself. Of *course* they are here. They had to leave too, had had their lives uprooted and destroyed irrevocably. They're two of the most sought-after people on the entire planet; everyone wants to know their story, wants to hear from the parents responsible for raising their beloved, venerated superhero, and yet no one has yet been able to track them down. (And he loves his parents, always talking to them, about them, referencing them, visiting them; she remembers the way he smiled with such relief and love when they'd stumbled out of the barn behind Trask's raving back, remembers how he'd hugged them, been enfolded into their arms, a loving, cohesive family in a single embrace.)

Of course they are here.

Jonathan sees her first, and she braces herself. Waits for the frown and the wary expression, the silence or the denunciation, the clatter of the plate being thrown at her head, the shriek of Martha demanding she leave.

And for the third (or countless) time, she is surprised.

Jonathan sets his plate down on the counter and gives her a smile (and it is small and it is guarded, but it is a smile nonetheless). "Lois," he says, then gives a short shake of his head as if chastising himself. "Or should I call you Miss Lane?"

"I..." She clears her throats, coughs up the last pieces of her peppermint (thinks she will throw the rest away because she will not be able to bear the taste again without feeling this hot, heavy

rush of humiliation and guilt). "Lois is fine."

"Lois." Jonathan nods, stiltedly, then calls over his shoulder, "Martha, Lois is up."

The clatter of movement and activity in the kitchen stills, and Lois only realizes that it was there when it is silenced.

Silenced.

The entire suite is quiet. Frozen. Stuck in limbo as they all decide on their reactions, fight through emotional responses and wade through unwelcome history and try to come out the other side.

Everywhere she goes, Lois thinks, she brings total and utter silence. She vowed to give voice to those who couldn't otherwise get their story out, and instead she has become the one who mutes them all, strikes them dumb and leaves herself gaping and breathless behind in the void.

But finally Jonathan gives her that polite smile again and gestures to the high chairs around the counter. "Why don't you just sit down?" he invites her. "I'll go grab you a plate, all right? There's plenty, and Martha made a bit of everything. What will you have?"

"Um..." She doesn't want to eat (she never wants to eat anymore; Chinese never tastes as good as what he brought her, breakfast only conjures up memories, even coffee only makes her try to tally up how many cups he brought her for which she never thanked him), but he is being so much kinder to her than she deserves and she does not want to refuse this offer of a truce. "Pancakes," she says. "I heard her pancakes are amazing. And maybe some sausage?"

"Oh, they are amazing," he assures her, perhaps just a bit too jovially. "Is orange juice okay?"

"Yes," she says quietly (and she doesn't care for the tart juice, would prefer coffee even with its fruitless reminders, but she would rather bite off her tongue than admit that to this stolid, bluff man trying so hard in front of her).

He makes another smile (so obviously strained with effort; so obviously touched with deeply engrained courtesy) and ducks into the kitchen, leaving his own plate of food cooling behind him.

Tentatively, afraid she will break anything she touches (ruin everything she comes into contact with; destroy everything these victims of hers have managed to reclaim in her absence), she climbs up onto one of the chairs and tries to look comfortable (or failing that, tries to look like she is not being inundated with guilt so strongly she feels as if she is bathing in scalding remorse).

When Jonathan comes back into the room with another plate, Martha comes behind him, carrying her own plate and a glass of orange juice. "Here you are," Jonathan says. He sets her plate in front of her, turns and plucks the orange juice from Martha, twists again and slides it to just beside Lois's plate. Then he hurries back into the kitchen (leaving her alone with Martha, who is staring fixedly at her own plate) before reemerging with another glass of juice that he gives to Martha.

"Well," he says, when neither Lois nor Martha say anything. "Shall we dig in?"

"Yes," Lois says, quickly, leaping at the opportunity to busy herself (busy them all) with eating rather than sitting here in awkward, uncomfortable silence. "It smells delicious."

"Thank you," Martha says with a careful courtesy that makes Lois flinch despite herself.

She's seldom passed a few more uncomfortable moments than these, sitting around a counter in a chair too high for her, across from the parents of a man she ruined (a man she killed; *murdered*, Perry had said, and the word strikes too close to home), eating breakfast as if they are casual acquaintances on good terms. She thinks the pancakes probably are delicious, but she cannot taste them and they clog like sawdust in her mouth and she manages to swallow only a few bites. Jonathan and

Martha do little better; Jonathan eats almost his whole plate, but slowly and almost anxiously, and Martha plays with her food almost as much as Lois does.

Jonathan tries to start up a conversation a few times, and each time Lois tries to respond to him (tries not to give him more reason to resent her), but soon enough, they fizzle back into silence while Jonathan shoots unreadable glances in Martha's direction and Lois tries to pretend she is not counting the seconds until their son arrives. It is taking all of her self-control not to blurt out a demand to see him, a question as to where he is, when he will be here, why are they keeping him from her (although she is glad she doesn't ask these questions, because she doesn't think she will like the answers, not when the blame for so much of what's happened lies solely at her feet).

Eventually, Martha finally looks up from her plate and looks straight at Lois. The direct gaze, so unexpected and startling, locks Lois in place, and she feels, suddenly, completely unprepared for any of this. For a brief moment, she wishes she had never come into Perry's office that night, wishes she hadn't taken a leave of absence and left everything safe and familiar (and so very empty) behind. Wishes she hadn't come here, to sit across from the Kents (who probably aren't the Kents anymore, are probably Smiths or Jones or some other common, ordinary name), and face exactly what she did four months ago.

"Lois," Martha says. Lois thinks her tone is tightly reserved. Thinks it is neutral and blank and maybe even just a bit strained. She thinks there is no inflection to the name (and yet all she hears is condemnation). "We're not angry with you."

The laugh that escapes Lois is caught between scoffing disbelief and tearful astonishment (and she hates herself for both). "*Why not?*" she gasps out.

She thought she was doing the right thing. The best thing. The only thing for her to do. Thought that everything would remain the same even after she plastered their son's face across international headlines and branded him as Superman. She's always been so much better at reacting than thinking, acting than considering. Striking first than waiting for explanations.

Shoot first and ask questions later, she thinks; it's what she did, and she cannot understand how her victim's parents can sit across from her and serve her breakfast and tell her they do not hold it against her.

Martha and Jonathan exchange one of those glances only true partners can (the way Lois Lane once looked at Clark Kent, for just a few brief weeks), the kind that speaks paragraphs in an eye-blink, asks and answers questions in the slant of downturned mouths and minute nods. They look at each other, and Lois is excluded, and she still feels like an outsider, like the loner, the unwanted and uninvited guest in the room (which is what she is, she harshly reminds herself), when Martha turns back to meet her gaze.

"We knew from the moment we found Clark that it was always a possibility people would come looking for him," Martha says. Jonathan nods his agreement behind her, sets a pudgy, supportive hand to her thin shoulder. "We've always known that what we had... what we wanted... couldn't last forever. But we had good years with him, and he was able to get to us before anything too bad could happen. Besides, it's not as if we lost everything. We're still together and that's what matters."

They're trying to make her feel better, but instead Lois feels about two inches tall and made of slime. She shrinks in her seat, wishes she had the power she always told Lucy she wanted, the ability to turn invisible (only this time, she doesn't want to enter locked doors, doesn't want to expose hidden secrets; this time, she wants to make those two pairs of kind and accepting and sad blue eyes stop looking at her and seeing so much more than she wants them to see).

She pretends, for their sake, that she doesn't notice just how

many evasions that paragraph held, pretends Martha actually answered her question (pretends that means they will be willing to answer another one), and says, "Is... is he okay?"

Because maybe she doesn't deserve the answers, but she is here and she is done sitting here and feeling guilty and doing nothing to complete her self-appointed quest. Done worrying about him when they could give her an answer so quickly, so easily.

"He's doing better," Jonathan reassures her when Martha only seems to dwindle and turn inward. But at her husband's words, the farmwife (who took in an alien child as her own; who raised a hero and sent him forth to save the world) straightens her shoulders and wraps her courage and her strength around herself like a mantle. Like a cape, as noble and as grand as Superman's, as blatant and as beautiful.

"It was hard," she adds, in a voice so steady it can only be made that way through a will of iron. "But he's almost back to normal now."

"What..." Lois pauses and swallows, then gulps a sour mouthful of orange juice to wet her throat. "What happened?"

Another exchange of glances, and this time it is Jonathan who takes up that cape of bravery, swings it around his broad shoulders and transforms, right in front of her, from a kind farmer to a pillar of integrity, a rock of strength, all earnestness and boldness and quiet, steady power (power that comes from within, that can turn ordinary men and super-powered aliens alike into so much more than the sum of their parts), and Lois looks at him and is awed. Looks at them both and is speechless, to see Clark's compassion and his strength, to see his nobility and his empathy, staring back at her from two very different faces, worn and weathered and wrapped in concern they try so hard to hide from her.

She looks at them, and she wonders how she could not have seen it the last time she met them. Wonders how she could have met them and spoken with them and rolled her eyes at their assumptions and helped them crawl from a burning barn and *not* immediately recognized that all the things that made Clark Superman were right in front of her, staring back at her.

"The asteroid was almost too big. Almost too heavy," Jonathan is saying, shaking her from her awed musing. "It took everything he had to shift it out of its path, to shatter it into more manageable pieces. It took a lot out of him, and he wants to be sure he's at a hundred percent before he goes back out."

It is a concise report. Coherent and brief and adequate... but nothing more. Lois wants details. She wants minute-by-minute replays. She wants to understand the flashes of fear that spark behind their voices, that showed in Jimmy's eyes in that diner, that keeps Clark hidden away behind his locked door.

But she has no right to ask it of them. No right to demand anything more than they give her. And anyway, she does not want to hear it from them. (She wants to hear it in a voice that has been silenced as definitively as she's been destroyed from the inside out.)

So she nods and looks down at the congealing remains of her breakfast. "I'm glad," she murmurs, then clarifies, "Glad he's all right, I mean. I've... Perry and I have been worried about him."

She doesn't need to look up to know that husband and wife are exchanging yet another weighted glance (and no wonder, she finds herself thinking incongruously; no wonder Clark believed so much in love, in romance, in finding the right one, when he has had such a clear and present example before him his entire life).

"Lois," Martha says abruptly, a thread of iron determination and fierce resolve turning her voice into a shield to cover her family as she plants herself between them and Lois. "James said you were here on a leave of absence. Obviously, he never would have brought you here if he didn't believe it. But... but you *do*

realize that nothing you see here can be reported, right?"

Hurt as heavy and large as that asteroid they keep referencing slams onto Lois's shoulders. "Yes," she grates out. "I'm not here as a reporter."

"Good." Martha gives a short, decisive nod. "We wouldn't have let you come if we thought differently, but sometimes it's best to just get everything out in the open so there can be no misunderstandings."

"Right." Lois swallows back her (angry, hot-tempered, loud-voiced) objections about how they obviously hadn't thought that about Superman's true identity. The hypocrisy of speaking that aloud (of throwing hostility back at them when they have offered only polite welcome) is too much even for her. "Well, I promise, I won't write about any of this. Truthfully, I don't write much anymore anyway."

Awkward silence scarcely has a chance to fall for the dozenth time since she exited her room (the guest bedroom, she reminds herself) before the elevator dings. Lois's heart rate skyrockets through the roof at a speed only Superman could match, and she leaps to her feet. She's not ready, not yet, not so soon after facing his parents! She needs more time, to compose herself, to think of what she will do when she sees him, what she can possibly say in the face of all he has to blame her for—

But it is not him. Once again, she looks for Clark and finds Jimmy instead.

She looks into Jimmy's steadfast, impenetrable face, then, and feels a sudden surge of unreasonable resentment. If he cannot be Clark, if he will not bring her to Clark, then he should stop reminding her of him, should stop throwing Clark's expressions and Clark's mannerisms and Clark's stride in her face.

"Lois." Jimmy gives her a slight nod of recognition before turning and smiling widely at the Kents. It's the first time she's seen Jimmy's smile on James's face, and it hurts so much that Lois has to spin around, turn her back on them and their congenial conversation, the sound of Martha bustling about, fussing over Jimmy as if he *were* Clark, Jonathan setting out a glass for him, asking how his meeting went.

The remnants of her investigative instincts struggle to rouse themselves from their hibernation, try to shake themselves up and turn her attention to whatever this meeting is Jimmy (dressed in a pressed suit) had so early in the morning, but Lois ignores them. Superman can appear at any moment, can unlock his deadbolts and open his door and walk out into this room and join his family while they tease each other over breakfast. He can step into view and meet her gaze and strike her instantly into a pillar of salt (for looking back at things she'll never be able to have again), disintegrate her into a pile of dust (for daring to think that seeing him again could help either of them), send a bolt of fire through her to transform her into singed ash (for what she did to him, what she took from him, what she said about him).

And if he walks in, if he appears, Lois wants to be ready. She will have only moments, she thinks, to say everything she might want to, to notice everything she did not take the time to before and has thought of so often in the last months. Only moments to last her the rest of her life (because if Jimmy barely let her come this time, then he will never let her find him again), so she will have to absorb them and store them and burn them into her very cells as quickly, as fully as she can.

So she walks away from the family (and finally Jimmy's found a family that accepts him even more readily, more openly, than the Daily Planet staff; found the family he's always been searching for) and over to the glass windows. They are completely uncovered, tinted so that it's a bronzed, ambient light blanketing the suite, turning tan couches almost gold. Lois stands in front of these windows to the outside world and looks out on the bustling metropolis of a city she doesn't recognize. She's fairly sure it's not Coast City, its multiple buildings too short, no

sign of the harbor, but beyond that, she has no idea.

And it doesn't matter. Coast City or Central City, Keystone City or Gotham City, London or Tokyo—she doesn't care where she is so long as Clark (Superman) is here. So long as she gets her chance to see him for however few minutes he allows her.

"Lois?"

She startles at the sound of her name (so tentative, so gentle, and this too is like Clark, and so she knows without even turning that it is Jimmy at her shoulder), then turns to meet him.

"You okay?" Jimmy's dark eyes are concerned. She thinks he is trying to appear wary and unaffected, his hands in his pockets and keeping a few feet between them, but she knows him better than he thinks, and she can see that he is worried for her.

"Fine," she says, and forces herself to unwrap her arms from around herself, straighten and face him as if she is not ashamed to even meet his eyes. "Just a bit impatient."

The concern vanishes as if it had never been. Jimmy disappears and Lois once more finds herself confronting the young, self-assured businessman from the diner. "This isn't about you," he says coolly, turning his head to stare with narrowed eyes out at the cityscape. "He's not here right now."

Lois frowns. "I thought he wasn't going out again until he was fully recovered."

"He isn't going on rescues," Jimmy replies, still not looking at her. "But sunlight is the only thing that rejuvenates him. He's been going out every day to soak up as much of it as he can."

"Oh." She can think of nothing else to say, too busy reeling at this thought (at Superman blooming in sunlight, unfurling with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men; at Clark *needing* recovery so much that he has to go and seek it out every day for three weeks). "Is it that bad then?"

Jimmy doesn't answer for a long moment, the struggle plain to see in the tension mapping out the edges of his form. Finally, though, he gives a half-shrug. "Not bad in the way you're thinking. But he hates that he can't be helping as many people as possible." After another hesitation, he adds, almost reluctantly, "He doesn't like taking time for himself. Not anymore."

And she doesn't need to ask the next natural question, not when she already knows what's changed, why he doesn't take time for himself (for how can he, when she has left him no *himself* to give time to?). So she gives a short nod and looks back out the window. "You really think I'm going to hurt him that badly?" she asks, the question torn from her before she can think better of it. "You really think I'm the enemy?"

His expression is almost contemplative as he turns to face her full-on, his scrutiny so uncomfortable and off-putting that Lois raises her chin and meets his glare with her own, unwilling to shrink away. "I think," he says, very slowly, very intently, "that you could be the worst thing that has ever happened to him." She doesn't even have time to flinch (to cry out at the agony of the blow he has struck, to fold in over this mortal wound and drop to the ground to hide the bloodstains), before he continues. "But *he* doesn't see it that way. So...so I'm trying to see it the way he does. The truth is..."

She holds her breath, waiting for him to finish his statement (*willing* him to finish it). Holds her breath so long black spots are dancing at the borders of her vision. Waits so long she wonders if she will pass out right in front of this silent, stubborn stranger.

"The truth is," Jimmy finally says, swiveling to walk away as he finishes, throwing the words over his shoulder, "he needs something. And if *you're* the one to give it to him, well then, maybe I'll just chalk it up to poetic irony."

He disappears into the kitchen (where she can hear the murmur of Jonathan and Martha over the clatter of dishes and running water) without even turning to see the effect of his words. Not that it matters. Lois has become an expert, in recent months, at keeping her reactions and thoughts and emotions

locked away inside.

She does not show just how much she wants to believe him. Does not show the thousand thoughts spiraling through her mind, all the implications of his statement. Doesn't show anything, just stands there in the sunlight-drenched room and looks out at cloudless blue skies and sees a pair of silvery brown eyes covered in glass lenses staring at her with that look only he ever gave her (that look of awe and devotion and discovery and amusement and awful, *awful* hope).

Stares ahead and sees into the past and is too afraid to contemplate the future, and the hours slip by her while the sun falls in its well-worn path through the sky.

6

The Kents bring out sandwiches for lunch and Jimmy emerges from his room with a crease in his brow to eat one and have his unnamed worry cajoled away by Jonathan and Martha's easy conversation. Lois nibbles at a sandwich while she watches the three of them together, and absently examines the unfamiliar envy creeping along the edges of her being. She offers to help with the dishes, but Martha says there's hardly enough to bother with and Jonathan assures her she's a guest while Jimmy disappears with the muttered excuse of having a call to make.

Lois thinks about retreating to her own room, but some last gasp of her old stubbornness breathes life into her determination, and instead, she plants herself on a couch in the living room. She will not give them excuse to forget about her. Will not give Clark a way to squirm out of seeing her. She will sit here and make sure they see her, and even if they have to trip over her as they each do their thing—Martha working on some art project that involves a lot of magnets, paint, and glue at the counter; Jonathan disappearing for a few hours before coming back in and fiddling with some kind of odd mechanism, a small case of tools on the coffee table between him and Lois—she at least knows that she is here. Waiting.

The windows let in plenty of light, and Lois watches it change, from afternoon to evening, gold and yellow to orange and purple and russet red, all diffused and altered by the tint to the glass. Jonathan eventually sets aside his tools and brings out a magazine with a picture of a green tractor and a red barn on its cover. Martha cleans up her art project and heads into the kitchen, presumably to work on dinner judging by the smells that start wafting into the living room a few moments later. Lois thinks about offering her help, but she has the feeling Martha would prefer she didn't, and anyway, Lois wouldn't even know where to begin.

So she waits. As silent as Superman. As stubborn as Jimmy. As solid as Jonathan. As strong (she fancies herself, a delusion that helps her get up in the morning) as Martha.

When twilight hits, when Martha brings out plates of roast beef and potatoes and corn and salad, Lois tenses. She forces herself to sit quietly, to stay still and patient. Her eyes are locked on the windows, on the closed door, on the elevator.

"He won't come."

At Jonathan's quiet statement, Lois gasps and looks over. Meets his soft gaze.

"His hands shake," Jonathan explains. "He hasn't eaten with us since Nightfall. Martha always hopes, always sets out a place for him, but...he uses the time to chase the sun a ways across the ocean and store up some extra sunlight for the night."

"Oh," she says, in a shaky, raspy voice, dry from disuse. "When will he be back?"

Jonathan shrugs, tidies the corners of his magazine and places it in a drawer in the coffee table. "Depends. He's so close to being back to normal that he's getting impatient. Has the idea that if he just gets a couple extra minutes of sunshine, he'll finally snap back. But don't worry, he always comes home."

"Is this home?" Lois asks, wistfully. She glances around the suite—it's nice, luxurious almost (and she wonders how he's paying for it, *who's* paying for it), but it is not a farmhouse in Kansas, and it is not a newsroom or homey apartment in Metropolis, and she cannot imagine Clark Kent being comfortable here (but then, she couldn't imagine Jonathan and Martha Kent anywhere but their quaint little farm either).

Jonathan's small, warm smile takes her breath away. It transforms him, turns him from a squat man past the prime of his life into something nobler, almost handsome in a silver and steadfast way. "Home's not a place, Lois," he tells her, like a benediction, like he's unfolding the secrets of the universe just for her. "It's people and family and love. So don't worry—no matter how far away he flies, Clark always comes back to the people he loves."

She is speechless, frozen, and almost does not even notice as Jonathan gets up at a quiet call from Martha and leaves her alone in the living room.

But they call to her, and Martha asks her, kindly, if she isn't going to eat, and so Lois shakes herself back into action (stirs herself to life even when it seems there's so little left to live for) and joins them around the counter.

For a while, she can pretend she is not an outcast. Pretend she is as welcome there as Jimmy, as if the conversation doesn't include her for longer than a question or statement at a time simply because she is quiet today and does not feel like joining in. Pretend that she has not forced herself into their life in multiple, unwelcome ways.

She notices the extra plate set between Martha and Jonathan's, notices that there's plenty of food leftover, notices that sometimes Martha looks toward the windows with a tight look around her eyes until Jonathan clasps her hand and gives her a steady nod. The conversation is light and easy, Martha commenting about how hard it is to find good corn out here, Jimmy talking about the pictures he's been taking of people out in the parks, Jonathan chiming in with his plans to maybe go out and visit one of the museums if Martha wants to come with him in a few days.

They have a life here, Lois realizes for the first time. This isn't just a hide-out, a place to stay for a few weeks until they once more pick up and leave (and it could so easily be that, too, but they all take great pains to pretend that it is not); it is a home, a place where they are doing their best to put down roots. And maybe Martha grumbles about the price of food and maybe Jonathan shakes his head over the lack of things to do if one doesn't like to sightsee, and maybe Jimmy only practices photography as a hobby now, but they have settled in nonetheless.

It both eases some quiet tension inside of Lois and makes her feel even worse (that they have to settle for so little in comparison to what they once had).

"Thank you, Mrs. Kent," Lois says, when the edge of her vague hunger is gone, when her plate is near enough empty that she can set her fork aside and stop pretending. "It was delicious."

Martha sets her own fork down and gives Lois a look. It's a 'mom' look, Lois thinks, an expression that needs no words to let her know she has seen through what Lois is doing and will not allow for it. "Thank you," she replies, then adds tartly (forgivingly), "but I believe I've told you before to call me Martha."

Lois smiles. A real smile. A small, tremulous smile that seems a bit too close to tears for comfort but that she doesn't mind anyway because, for the first time, she feels like perhaps she is *not* the enemy. "All right, but only if you let me help with the dishes. I may not know what to do with a roast, but I certainly know how to wield a washcloth."

Jonathan chuckles. "Might as well let her, Martha," he says,

and winks at Lois.

In short order, Lois finds herself with an armful of dishes, and she finally gets to enter another door besides her own. The kitchen is warm and golden and everything Lois thought it would be (bigger than she expected, as everything in this suite is). The countertops are clean, though riddled with bits of whatever Martha used to ready the meal. There are homey dishtowels hanging from the stove; there are a few pictures affixed to the refrigerator with magnets (Jonathan and Martha in front of their house in Smallville; the Kents with Jimmy at a park, a mountain visible in the background; but none of Clark, none that will betray that Superman lives here, none that give a hint where they have stayed between Smallville and here); a few of Martha's in-progress art projects are spread out across the small table pushed to the side of the room. Over all, Lois thinks, it looks like a kitchen Martha has appropriated as her own space, and she thinks of the living room with Jonathan's little tools and his magazines and the kitchen with Martha's work and Jimmy's room with his framed photographs, and she wonders what Clark's room looks like (wonders if it is as bare as the places on the fridge where *his* pictures should be, or if he lets himself have that one, locked space).

"I'll wash," Lois says quickly. "Seems easier since I don't know where any of the dishes go after they're clean."

"Sounds good," Martha agrees easily. She has made peace with Lois's presence (has resigned herself to it, or maybe, Lois thinks, has decided on a course of action and can now be patient in the meantime), sometime throughout the day, and she bustles around Lois as if there is nothing unusual about her being there at all.

Jimmy and Jonathan bring in the last of the dishes, but Martha chases them away after that. "Too many people in the kitchen and I just start feeling crowded," she admits before picking up a cloth and beginning to dry the growing stack of now-clean dishes.

Lois nods, and focuses on the bowl in her hands, on the flecks of mashed potato marring its surface, on the swirls in the color of the bowl itself—anything to distract herself from the thought that *she* is crowding Martha. Crowding them all. They have moved on and settled in and adapted to each other. They have survived...and here she is, as if on cue, ready to come in and destroy their lives all over again, and Lois cannot understand why they allow her to be here at all. She knows that if she were Jimmy, she would have packed them all up after his meeting with her in that dingy diner, packed them up and moved them on with nothing but a bare fridge and an empty living room and too-high chairs at the counter to mark they'd ever been there.

They've invited the enemy into their midst, and it doesn't matter that Lois has no intention of ruining what they've built or taking anything away from them. Her presence is enough to do that all on its own, reminder of all they once had and no longer do thanks to her.

She's gone through several dark periods in the past three and a half months. Days when she couldn't get out of bed, couldn't rouse herself enough to even call Perry and tell him she wouldn't be in (he never mentioned those days later, never talked about them; he was too busy drinking his anniversary salutes). Weeks when she merely went through the motions, whole days blurring in her memory so that she couldn't remember what she'd done, where she'd been, if she'd written anything, or how she'd gotten to work.

Dark periods. Bleak moments. But she does not think she's ever felt so bad as she does now, her hands wrist-deep in soapy, dirty water, holding a ceramic bowl and a washrag. Teardrops fall into that water (further dirtying it, sullyng it with guilt she shouldn't even have the luxury to feel, to indulge in), tiny ripples pushing aside soap bubbles, plink-plink-plinking alongside the

rim of the bowl.

"I think that one's done now, honey," Martha says gently, and she reaches out, infinitely slowly, and unwraps Lois's fingers from around it. Before Lois can do more than take in a shuddering breath, Martha has placed another bowl in her hands. "Start on this one, okay?"

Lois gives the impression of a nod. She doesn't say anything and Martha lets her hold on to her impossible hope that neither of them know she is crying.

It takes a while to finish up. There are a lot of dishes (but not so many that Lois doesn't notice Martha taking the empty plate set aside earlier and filling it to overflowing with leftovers, wrapping it in plastic and placing it in the fridge), but Lois wishes there were more. She wouldn't mind if she never ran out of dishes, if Martha just kept handing them to her one by one (giving her an excuse to stay; giving her the illusion that she can possibly do something to help them, to give back to them, to make up for what she's stolen).

She's just draining the water (as slowly as possible, not wanting this to be over, not wanting to go back to just sitting in their way and waiting for a man she's starting to think is never going to appear) when Martha suddenly stills. She covers it quickly, finishing drying the plate in her hands with a few decisive swipes, but it is the first time Martha's shown any hesitation since breakfast and it catches Lois's attention. And as if the movement was a switch thrown, Lois suddenly becomes aware of the sound of voices, a murmur coming from the living room, background noise that's been there since Jimmy and Jonathan exited the kitchen.

Jimmy's voice. Jonathan's voice.

And a third voice.

A hum. A dim, distant swirling of noise. A gentle sound more soothing (more disturbing) than any other noise Lois has ever experienced.

And she knows.

(He's talking. He's broken his silence. He is alive and just outside the door.)

"He's here, isn't he?" she asks. Watches the last of the water flee down the drain, a whirlpool of purposeful chaos, of motion, hypnotizing because it gives her excuse not to look up.

Martha glances at her, picks up another plate to dry. "Yes, he is." She pauses, then sets aside the plate and cloth, takes hold of Lois's shoulder, hands her a dishtowel from the stove. "Dry your hands and then go on out there. I'll finish up in here."

A bolt of sheer terror sparks a revolution in Lois's system, deadening her nervous system, shooting adrenaline through her veins. Freezing her in place. "Wh-what...what do I say?"

Something like compassion, like sympathy (or maybe just pity) moves through Martha's eyes, turns them almost silver, highlighted with sapphire, reflecting gold sparks from the warm tones of the kitchen. "Oh, honey—whatever it is you came all this way to say."

And with that, Lois finds herself propelled to the door (the dishtowel whisked out of her wrinkled hands), and she cannot make her mouth cooperate long enough to inform Martha that she didn't come to say anything, has come only to see him and make sure he has survived (Nightfall, the past hellish four months; what she did to him), and that he is all right.

The door into the main suite, already half-ajar, swings open traitorously easy, stripping her of the last obstacle between herself and the man she murdered. She steps through it, fully expecting the scenery to change to something grim and bleak, or for another door to appear, and another and another and another (it's what always happens in her dreams, when she thinks she's finally going to get to see him).

But he's there. It's him, standing by the coffee table. Dark hair, shorter than she remembers. Tall. Broad shoulders (he's

dressed like Clark, and she can't stop the room rushing in circles around her long enough to decide if that makes it better or worse). Hands with long fingers that gesture as he talks.

Talks.

He's talking.

His back is to her and yet...and yet he knows she is there.

The line of his shoulders becomes just a bit more rigid. His voice, in the middle of a sentence (and how long has it been since she's heard him speak a sentence that is not just comprised of her name?) wavers before finishing ("...the ringing went away last night," she thinks he says, but she cannot focus on anything past frantically re-memorizing every nuance of the sound of his voice to decipher the comment), and then...he falls silent.

Mute.

Dumb.

It's a cruel, cutting coincidence: she walks into the room and he is instantly cut off, separated so fully that he does not even attempt to breach the distance with speech (and she suddenly thinks Jimmy was right, this was a bad idea, this is so wrong, she's going to ruin everything for him again).

She wants to say his name (wants to make him turn toward her because there's still plenty of time for him to fade away if this is a dream, to be someone else, some featureless mask, when she grabs his shoulder and yanks him toward her), but she doesn't. Doesn't because she knows, instantly and startlingly, that she doesn't want to speak first. Doesn't want to talk, to state her case, to so blatantly exercise the right she's taken away from him.

She does not want to talk to him if he will not speak to her in turn (if he will give her only silence, as she gave him coming back from their trip to Smallville).

So she, too, is mute. Motionless. Hovering on the threshold to the room (to him; to more; to anything other than the torturous limbo she hasn't been able to escape).

Jonathan and Jimmy, seated on the couches, watch her, and they do not speak either. Behind her, Lois can feel Martha's eyes, locked on her back, willing her to do something (but she cannot imagine what that is, unless it is to walk out their door and never come back).

And then, as she knew it would be, it is Clark who breaks the tableau. Who reaches up a trembling hand and removes something (something that glitters and shines) from his face, and turns toward her.

She finds herself face to face with a stranger.

Neither Clark, nor Superman, he is some strange hybrid, a facet of him she has never seen before (the facet she didn't take the time to get to know before splashing it across every newspaper and television screen in the world). An amalgamation of both the parts that she knew (Superman, the son of Krypton, and Clark Kent, farmboy and investigative journalist). It is Superman's eyes and Clark's mouth, Superman's brow and Clark's nose, Superman's stance and Clark's hair. But his expression is not Superman's polite, bemusement. It is not Clark's open wonder with the world and everything in it.

It is...different. It's soft and guarded and kind and arrested and a hundred more things she cannot interpret (because she does not know the man standing in front of her). He tucks something in his pocket (the something he took from his face) without looking away from her, and then he crosses his arms over his chest, hides his hands away. That's familiar, Lois thinks, remembers the superhero's customary stance (or at least, it was customary before; he does not stick around anywhere long enough for her to know if he still uses it or not), but without the Suit, it looks strange and new and unfamiliar too.

He's unfamiliar (but it's him, it is, she knows it; she could not make this up, could not dream this), and she doesn't know what he will do. When she imagined seeing Clark again (after Jimmy told her that Clark would not turn her away), she imagined him

with his forgiving, accepting, fond smile. When she imagined seeing Superman (in those days when she still thought there was a chance she could track him down at the scene of a crisis, before every reporter in the world learned how impossible that was), she always imagined a stern, disappointed look and a blur of colors as he put the globe between them as quickly as only he could.

But she does not know what this stranger will do. She doesn't know what to expect of him. She doesn't know what *he* wants of her or expects of her. So she only stands there and stares and matches his silence.

Out of everything she could imagine him doing, though, out of all the possible scenarios, he chooses the unlikeliest of all.

He smiles at her.

And as Clark Kent exited this world with a single word, so this stranger enters her world with the same one.

"Lois," he says. A breath. A murmur. A *sound* (when for so long there has been only silence).

If she had not spent almost four months layering herself up with fake resolve, with false determination, with forced control, she would have crumpled right then. Would have bent in on herself and folded to her knees and bowed before him and covered her face with her hands and wept.

But she *has* been building herself up in a steel mold, has poured all that is left of herself into an invisible body-cast that keeps her upright, keeps her looking as people expect her to look, saying the things the Lois Lane of old would say. And so her only reaction is the breath escaping her lungs in a shuddering, involuntary rush.

"Lois," he says again, and he smiles. *Again*. (And this stranger, this unfamiliar hybrid before her, is even more unbelievable than the man who befriended the woman no one else could, than the superhero who flies and bends steel in his bare hands and shoots fire from the skies.) "It's good to see you."

He is insane. He has cracked and broken and doesn't remember what happened. Or worse, he never read the article, never realized it was she who wrote it and so he has spent all this time blaming the wrong person (poor, *poor* pitiable person) for what has happened to him. He is delusional or misinformed or deceived, or maybe he has grown clever and sly and vindictive in retaliation and is planning something slow and cruel and terrible to avenge his own death and this is only a game of cat-and-mouse. Or...or *something*, because there is no way he is actually smiling at Lois Lane (at his murderer, his enemy, the woman who unmasked him to the world without even asking for a quote) and telling her it is good to see her. As if he is glad she has come back into his life. As if she is not the specter that haunts his nightmares, the face put to his childhood fears.

"You came." She hears the words, recognizes her own voice, and yet, she doesn't know where those words came from. Doesn't know why they are the first words she chooses to say to him. But nonetheless, it is her voice and she is the one who said them, and everyone can hear the tears surging up behind them, can hear the disbelief and the relief tainting those two words with a weight they aren't strong enough to bear up under.

His smile (another one, and this is a Clark smile, teasing and slight, curling up higher at one end of his mouth than the other) makes the room steady around her. Makes the light dim a bit so that it isn't stabbing into her eyes, into her brain. "Shouldn't I be the one saying that?" he asks wryly.

As if he can still laugh. As if he was not destroyed by what she did. As if...as if he has survived (and that is what she came to see, isn't it, to reassure herself of?).

She blinks, realizes he is waiting for her reply (though she doesn't know why, doesn't know why any of them care to let her talk at all when they could just be sitting there and letting *him* talk and luxuriating in the fact that she did not entirely steal his voice from him). "Oh, right." She blinks again, gives herself a

small shake, and takes a tentative (brave) step into the room, rests her cold, wrinkled hands on one of the slats of the tall chairs. “Thank you for that. For letting me come.”

He gives a short nod, this stranger, not a real nod, just confirmation that she spoke. He waits (she holds her breath, afraid she has scared him away, has lost him again), then, as if he cannot help himself, says, “I missed you.”

Lois swallows. Hard. Curls her hands into fists so tight that she feels a couple of her nails puncture the flesh to release tiny pinpricks of blood. As if in response, the stranger (Clark, her heart stubbornly says; Superman, her mind reminds her; neither, she thinks) flinches. His eyes dart toward her hands, and for the blink of an eye, she thinks he will drop his arms from their crossed position and stride across the distance separating them and then, with hands as gentle as his mother’s, will uncurl her fists and tsk over the puncture wounds and chide her about being more careful. (She thinks he will turn into the Clark she killed; thinks she can resurrect him from the dead with less effort than it took to kill him.)

But then his own hands form into fists, and he tightens his position, resettles his arms across his chest, and does not move (does not rise from his grave to comfort her).

Behind them, Jonathan pointedly asks Jimmy a question in a low voice, drawing the young man into conversation, as if they can all pretend that Lois and this stranger are alone and not being attended by family all too ready to leap between them (like a mother before her child, leaping into the path of bullets, and Lois wonders if bullets always feel so used up and reluctant and agonized over their task).

“How’s Perry doing?” the stranger asks, and Lois almost flinches, to hear this man she almost-but-not-quite knows ask after the editor who was a mentor to Clark, to her, to them both.

“Good,” she says automatically, but that’s a lie. He’s talking to her (talking, breaking the silence with words that mean things and say more than she’s ever said before in her life), and she’s lied to him. Without even thinking. Without even meaning to. So she winces and says, “I mean...he’s still the chief. But he’s...he’s tired. And he says he feels old. He’s muttering about retiring, but I think that’s an annual thing he goes through.”

He nods, but there’s a flicker in her eyes, and Lois realizes, with a pang, that Clark Kent didn’t work at the Daily Planet long enough to know what was annual and what wasn’t. She forgets, most of the time, that he wasn’t there very long (only two months; only eight weeks and four days); he slipped in so easily, fit in so well, that it seems he was always there.

“And Cat?” he asks after another tiny slice of silence tries to sneak in.

“Umm...she left. Transferred to Los Angeles.”

“Well.” He smiles, but this is not a Clark smile. It’s almost (but not quite) a Superman smile, reserved and more perfunctory than real. “Lots of gossip there for her to find.”

“Yeah.” He hasn’t stopped looking at her yet, hasn’t looked away, and it would make Lois uncomfortable except that *she* hasn’t looked away either. This is her one chance to make sure he is all right and doing well and that he is *recovering*, and she might not ever get to see him again (might never hear his smooth, silky voice again), and if this is all she will get, then she will not waste a second. So she gathers her courage and she steps around the counter, closer to him. Watches him, notices that he tenses at her motion before obviously forcing himself to stay in place.

She takes another step nearer, toward the couch, and this time, he does not stop himself. He backs up until he is only a foot away from the windows, until he is not touching anything at all. But he does not look away from her.

“And you?” not-Clark asks. “How are *you*, Lois?”

A tremor ghosts across her at the sound of her name from his mouth (the death-cry of Clark Kent, the birth-cry of this

amalgamation before her). “Fine,” she says, but that is another lie, and she would take it back, but she can’t. She can’t because she is *not* fine, but that is her fault, not his, and even if he is a stranger, there is enough of both Superman and Clark Kent in him that she knows he would feel guilty. He would feel duty-bound to help her in any way he can. He would set aside his own needs (his anger and his resentment; his fears or his hopes) to make sure she has what she needs. So this is one lie that will stand. This is one lie that cannot be bad.

Except, even though he is not Clark, he gives her a Clark look, one that tells her he sees right through her and he is disappointed that she is lying but he understands and he is trying to decide if he should call her on it or let it go until later when she is most unsuspecting and vulnerable (Clark could always say so much with a single look).

“Fine,” she says again, firmly (that is always what she did with Clark, and then he would decide to drop it temporarily and give her space and time). “But that’s not important. How are *you*?” She has to bite the end of the question off, has to tuck her bottom lip in her mouth, to keep herself from finishing it the way it was about to slip out (to avoid saying *Clark*, because she lost the right to call him that, and she does not want to see his eyes go blank at the sound of it; does not want to hear this stranger tell her that Clark is dead and he is Superman now).

“Fine.” Clark was a bad liar (most of the time) and she never knew Superman to lie (until later), and this stranger is no better at it. For the first time, he looks away, and she is free to look at more than just his eyes, free to study him from top to bottom, and it has been weeks since she’s acted like a reporter, but she has not lost the knack entirely, and she can see behind the brittle veneer spread too thinly across his surface.

He is exhausted. He’s been out soaking in sunlight (apparently a good thing), but he looks tired and pale and withdrawn. He moves stiffly, with none of the grace both Clark and Superman displayed. And still his hands are drawn into fists against his own chest (*His hands shake*, Jonathan had said, and Lois hadn’t understood why that stopped him from coming to eat with others, but she looks at this man who is Superman and thinks she understands why he touches nothing).

Recovering, Jimmy said. Recovering, Jonathan and Martha told her. Recovering, she thinks, and *aches* for him, that even this has been denied him (though this was sacrificed freely rather than stolen blindly), that even his own body has turned on him.

“You’re okay?” Lois asks again, skeptically.

He cannot meet her gaze. “I’m here,” he says in a small voice. “And I’m getting better.”

It’s the same thing the others said. The party line, she thinks, and they’re all sticking to it without backing down.

But he is not okay. He is not well. He is not surviving.

He is lost. And he is alone (even with his family around him). And he is adrift. And he is sick.

And she suddenly knows that she wants more than to just see him this once. She wants more than she ever knew she did.

Because now, seeing him, hearing him, this stranger who is so familiar, this man who is so alien, she knows that she will never be satisfied with this brief conversation (with the sound of his voice once more falling away into endless silence). She will never be able to pack up her things and walk away and not look back.

She came to see that he was all right, and now she has her answer.

He isn’t.

And so, Lois decides, she has a new wish (a new desire; a new goal), and she will not leave until it is accomplished.

She is going to take this stranger, and she is going to make him better.

7

The sunlight is thick as a blanket, cloaking him more heavily than the weight of his cape at his back. It's bright and vivid and Clark can feel it soaking inside him, settling into each of his cells, wrapping them in warmth and power, ensuring that he can continue to hang in the air dozens of miles above the earth without succumbing to the pull of gravity. For days, for weeks, the feel of that sunlight has been all-consuming as he chases it across the miles of ground and ocean, begging it to return him to his natural state, pleading with it to allow him to once more be Superman. But today, it holds little of his attention.

Today, all he can think of is Lois Lane.

He's been...worried...about meeting with her again. Afraid, if he's honest with himself. He's long since made peace with what happened between them (and what didn't), and he's (mostly) come to terms with the way his life is now. But seeing her again, coming face to face with her... He couldn't deny her request to meet, but he worried about what would come of it. Worried that they would simply tear open old wounds and find that reality is nowhere near as forgiving as nostalgic memories. Worried that he would lose what little he has left of her (his memories, his old fantasies, his wistful dreams).

But he saw her. He spoke with her. And he is not disappointed, not hurt, not anything but relieved and...content. Yes, he is content.

He saw her, and they spoke, and the world did not end. The sun did not stop shining. The moon did not fall into the seas. They spoke, and he is not quite happy, but not disappointed either, and that is better than he realistically thought to expect.

And his hands aren't shaking anymore.

He slept last night, slept well and deeply (two nights in a row, when he's become accustomed to only eight or nine hours in four or five days), and when he got up from his place by the window, he moved easily. Smoothly. Painlessly. His bruises are gone, his aches have vanished, and his hands are as steady as the sound of Lois's heartbeat at the edge of his awareness.

He's better.

And it probably has nothing to do with Lois Lane, save perhaps in that he doesn't have to worry anymore that she blames him for what happened or resents him for how he upset her life. It's probably simply because he's been doing nothing but resting and soaking in sunlight for three weeks now and it was bound to restore him eventually. He's slept better because...well, because she is here, and he no longer has to worry about her, on the other side of the country, in a dangerous profession and a target for anyone who wants to get to Superman. His parents and his friend and his...and Lois Lane are all together under one roof, and so he can rest a bit easier.

But whatever the reason for his recovery, it doesn't matter. What matters is that he can be Superman again, can respond to the cries of help he's been listening to so helplessly, can stop being no one and go back to being someone.

He's been practicing all day. Lifting rocks in the Nevada deserts, testing his speed and reflexes in the Arctic, straining his super-senses to their extreme over the oceans, picking up and depositing anything and everything delicate and fragile and helpless (dandelions and snowflakes and feathers drifting from flocks of flamingos, wavering strips of cobwebs and seaweed filaments and dancing cotton). Lifting them and holding them and playing them through his fingers (and he never realized before how very much textures and weights and pressures matter to him, until now, after they have been denied him for so long), and reveling in the fact that he can set them all back down without having harmed them in the least.

He's better.

Superman is back.

Lois Lane is here, with his parents, waiting for him (she

hadn't said anything about leaving, hadn't given any sign of being satisfied with what she came to do and disappearing out of his life again), and now, he can look at her as the hero she had a hand in creating rather than the non-entity he's been sentenced to these past weeks.

He'll start tonight. Spin into the Suit and go back out into the world, let them know their savior has not abandoned them, perhaps start working on a statement (now that he can trust himself not to crush his trusty old laptop beneath his fingers) for the Foundation to make about where he's been. But maybe not. His only safety now is in his silence, in everyone in the world knowing nothing but *what* Superman does (not any of the *whys*), so perhaps it is wiser to say nothing. He'll ask James; his friend is skilled at sifting through internet forums and multiple news sources and various personal contacts and coming up with a concise picture of public perception.

Regardless, he won't have to simply sit and listen tonight. He'll be able to fly to the rescue, answer cries for help, silence alarms, aid the police of whatever city or country he happens to be over. He'll be able to *do* something, and that is more freeing than he can quite comprehend. He's been trying all day and still cannot make himself quite believe that his long period of enforced helplessness is over.

For now, though, he hovers over the Pacific Ocean, California's coast in view only for someone with eyesight as good as his, and absorbs the last few rays of this hemisphere's sunlight. It makes him feel energized and lethargic at the same time, renewed but satiated. For the past few weeks, drinking in sunlight has only made him feel thirstier, as if it pours itself into him only to drain out of holes he can't quite see or reach to plug, as if he could not possibly pull in enough solar radiation to counter the darkness of space and the vastness of Nightfall. But now, finally, he is restored.

Recovered.

He smiles faintly at the past tense of that word, and turns for home.

It's late, even for him. His parents will be worried, especially his mom. He knows she doesn't understand why he won't eat dinner with them, won't touch them or hug them or let them do the same to him. He tried to explain it to her, but in the end, he couldn't. Couldn't say aloud how dangerous he was, not to his mom, the woman who took him into her heart and loves him and has never once feared him. He thinks his dad understands, or perhaps he only believes that Clark can make his own decisions and knows better than to try to talk him out of it. He worries, too, though; he hides it better, but it's plain for Clark to see.

Well, that's all over with. He's late (but confident now in his own recovery), and he picks up speed, suddenly impatient to see them again (to feel their arms around him, unconditional and unyielding). He can't wait to see the joy in their eyes, to hear them tell him how glad they are, to reach out and pull them into the hug he's wanted to give (to receive) since seeing Nightfall fill his vision.

He takes his usual precautions flying into the suite—moving fast enough to evade normal surveillance, blowing a gust of wind toward the news building a couple blocks away to blur his approach (he's never received any indication they even suspect Superman's presence in their city, much less that they're keeping cameras turned toward his building, but better safe than sorry), and keeping all his senses alert for anyone looking up toward the darkened sky. They won't be able to see or hear him, not at this speed, but it never hurts to be wary. The windows in his room are open, allowing him to swoop in and through into the walk-in closet; if anyone's watching his window, they won't see a man appear seemingly out of thin air in the middle of the room. Only when he's safe in the dark does he come back to normal speed, spin into slacks and a shirt, reach out by memory to pick up the

glasses waiting on the small shelf beside the door, and put them on.

When he emerges from the closet, he flicks his bedroom light on, the signal to his parents that he is home. He already has his hand on the doorknob before he remembers—Lois is out there.

As if thinking of her summons it to the foreground of his awareness, her heartbeat grows louder. It's sedate, steady, so slow he thinks she is probably asleep. His parents are talking, sitting on the couch, close together, their heartbeats as familiar and comforting as an old, worn quilt, warm and encompassing. James's is a strong counterpoint; he's probably sitting across from them, and his voice weaves a beacon of warmth around them all, his hands slicing through the air and causing tiny disturbances in the sound of it as he speaks.

They're all there because of him, and all for different reasons. If not for him... Clark shakes his head. His mother has warned him not to think like that, her finger waving in the air as she sternly admonished him against ever blaming himself for what's happened. He thinks about it anyway (so much more often than he can ever admit), but he tries not to when he's around them. He prefers to enjoy what little time he gets to spend with them rather than regret what's happened.

Smiling again at the sight of his hand, motionless on the knob (safe, again, to touch and be touched), Clark opens the door and quietly walks out into the living room.

His parents are aware of him immediately. It doesn't take them long to notice the spring in his step, the smile on his face, and they rush to him immediately. "Clark?" his mom asks, checking with him, and without even saying a word, Clark simply opens his arms and steps forward into their waiting embrace.

There's a catch to his mom's breathing, an extra thump to his dad's heartbeat, a much louder whoop from James. His dad's hand settles on his shoulder, his mom's arms wrap around his ribcage, her head against his neck as she laughs and blinks back tears and murmurs that she never doubted it, she's so glad he's back, and his dad echoes her with his own words of joy and reassurance. Clark looks over their heads and sees James smiling broadly back at him, and it's been so long since he's been able to feel the calluses of his friend's hand, so with a jerk of his head, he urges James forward into the close circle. Jonathan welcomes the younger man immediately, wrapping his free arm around James and bringing him in closer, while his mom angles a bit to face him.

And finally, *finally*, after four weeks, Clark is home. They hugged him before he launched himself into space, had encircled him in their arms and their hearts and tried to hide their fear and project only confidence, and then they'd let him go, and he's been waiting ever since for this homecoming (long days and nights of watching them from afar, listening to his parents' worried whispers, hearing James pacing in his room). They have been waiting for this, too, he thinks, can sense their relief, feel it emanating outward from them, as if they are solar radiators every bit as effective as the sun, infusing him with strength and faith and hope.

Clark closes his eyes and bends to rest his head against his parents', clasps a hand with James's, and feels gratefulness larger than Nightfall grow to encompass him. This, here, is how he can still be Superman. *Why* he is Superman. For these people, who love him and accept him and have followed him even when it meant leaving behind everything they knew and loved and expected of life. It's his fault they're in hiding, using aliases, lying every day to anyone and everyone they meet—his fault, and yet here they are, loving him unconditionally, and how can he do anything *less* than to keep trying to help as much as he can when their example is always before him?

But there is one heartbeat that isn't included in this small circle (so few people in all the world, but enough, even if he'd

once hoped it would be just a bit larger). One heart that beats on slowly, unaware of everything happening not far from her.

Lois is asleep, curled up against the arm of one of the couches. Clark doesn't move away from his family, but he does watch her. It doesn't take a Superman's eyes to see the shadows above her cheekbones, the pallor to her skin, the boniness of the hands curled up near her face.

Another life he's ruined. Another one who's come after him, if for entirely different reasons (that he's not sure he understands but that he doesn't care to question when things are going so well). So many people after her, so many targets painted on her back, and all because he was foolish enough to think he could have a normal, ordinary life. Her career silenced in the face of a single article, and only one Pulitzer to her name because no one will ever be able to separate Lois Lane from Superman.

Clark turns his head away, and closes his eyes, and turns his attention to soaking in the care and affection of his family.

"Way to go, CK!" James exclaims, softly, as he pulls away. He's finally grown used to the open affection Clark and his parents show him, but he's always the first to grow awkward when a handclasp extends too long or a hug doesn't end in mere moments. "You feeling okay? Everything back to...well, you know, *super* normal?"

"Yeah," Clark says with a chuckle, reluctantly letting his own arms fall away from his parents. He's happy, though, when his mom keeps her hands clasped around his arm, when his dad stands close enough that Clark can feel the heat emanating from him. "I've been practicing all day—making sure."

"And?" his dad asks.

"No shaking?" Martha asks on top of him. "No spasms?"

Clark doesn't try to hold back his answering grin. "None at all. Superman's back."

"Superman never left," his mom says tartly. "You've been here all along, Clark, even if you couldn't go out."

"I know." He ducks his head, ashamed of his own insecurity. So many problems in the world (and he sees so many of them, hears even more, so that he can never deny that bad things happen, even if he tries to keep them in perspective) that it seems selfish, almost petty, to focus so much on his own. There are people dying every day, people starving and lost and haunted, and in comparison, his own discomfort (his loss at feeling simply ordinary rather than like the superman so many want and need him to be) is nothing at all. "I just...I'll be glad to be able to help again."

James cocks his head, arches a brow. "Even when you can't be out there, your Foundation is still helping people, CK."

"Thanks to you," Clark says with a smile for the younger man. "You've done more with it than either Murray or I could have dreamed."

"Still," James says, turning away to hide the flush staining his cheekbones and upping the body heat rising from his skin, "it was your idea to begin with."

"And you still have quite a lot of say in what goes on there," his dad points out.

"Not to mention all the public appearances you make for charity." His mom moves with him as he sits in a couch—not that he minds. He likes (loves, depends on, *needs*) the weight of her hands on his arm, the feel of her eyes on his face, the proof of her love in every move she makes.

"All right, all right." He holds up his hands in mock surrender and smiles at his dad for sitting on the arm of the couch (for not leaving him even after what he'd so long feared would happen and warned Clark to avoid actually came to pass). "I'm sufficiently encouraged, thank you."

Jonathan laughs and shares a fond look with Martha.

"You sure?" James teases him. "Should we mention how no one else can make a cup of tea like you? Or maybe the way

housework is *so* much easier with you around?”

“No.” Clark smiles, makes sure to share it out equally between his family, wanting them all to know just how much they mean to him (hoping they read his smiles as he means them because words just never seem enough). “Really, though, I couldn’t do it without you. I mean, Superman wouldn’t even be a reality if not for you, Mom, Dad—or still be around if you hadn’t shown up when you did, James.”

His mom tries to hide her tears, then snuffles and buries her head against his shoulder. “I’m just so glad you’re better, Clark. I was getting so worried for you.”

“Just a matter of time,” his dad says, but there’s a note of evident relief staining his voice.

“Right,” Clark agrees, though his eyes stray beyond them to the woman asleep on the other couch. “Just a matter of time.”

After a few more moments, Clark manages to get the conversation turned toward their own days. James rants for a few moments about the stubbornness of certain businessmen who refuse to sign with the Foundation until ridiculous demands are met, but then admits that he’s already gotten more backers for their next venture than he’d expected. Jonathan mentions that his garden has started showing signs of growth, though he’s still surprised by the differences between California and Kansas sunlight. Martha fusses over Clark a while more, brings him out his plate and insists he eats it right then (and Clark doesn’t mind, not when it makes her so happy to see him finally eat with her), then brings out pie for them all to share. Martha wonders if she should wake up Lois, but Jonathan shakes his head and says to let her rest while James remains silent and doesn’t look toward Lois at all. Clark himself tries not to look at her (not to watch her while she’s so vulnerable and unaware) but consistently finds his gaze drawn to her.

“Well,” Martha finally says when the pie has a serious dent in it and Jonathan has taken the plates back to the kitchen. There’s perhaps the merest hint of concern playing along the edges of her face as she studies Clark, who tries to pretend he wasn’t just watching Lois. “I’m glad you’re feeling better, Clark, but I imagine you have a long night ahead of you. Jonathan and I are heading to a museum in the morning, so we’d better turn in. Right, Jonathan?”

“But—” Clark hides a smile when his dad catches his mom’s pointed stare and hastily changes what he was about to say. “Right,” he says quickly. “Early morning, got to get lots of sleep.”

James rolls his eyes and doesn’t even attempt subtlety. “Fine. I’ll leave, too. Just remember, CK—she said she was only going to stay for long enough to see you. Don’t...don’t get too attached.”

“I’m not,” Clark says, truthfully (because maybe he had high hopes for them once, but that was a long time ago in a different lifetime). “But she was my friend, James. I want to make sure she’s okay.”

For a moment, Clark is sure James is about to argue with him. He has a serious look in his eye, a gleam of something almost affronted shining there in russet. But then he shakes his head and closes his mouth over whatever it is he swallows back. “Okay. Your call. I just...I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Clark wants to shrug and make a joke about being the Man of Steel (the appellations given him by the world’s media only get more imaginative with every rescue, as if *Clark Kent* is not enough for them), but James knows better than most exactly how much Superman can be hurt, and he cannot bring himself to dismiss his friend’s concern so easily. “I’ll be careful,” he promises instead, and James seems somewhat mollified as he nods and heads toward his room.

“Oh, honey.” Martha pulls him into another hug, which Clark returns gratefully. “You be careful out there tonight, okay? Some

people have probably gotten a bit too comfortable with Superman being gone and they won’t like seeing him back.”

“Don’t worry, Mom,” Clark says, though he knows it’s useless.

His dad places a sturdy hand on his shoulder, solid and dependable. His blue eyes are weathered and worn, but so concerned, so fond, that Clark has to reach out and hug his dad too (has to touch him and revel in the fact that he won’t hurt him). “You come back to us safe,” Jonathan tells him gruffly.

“I will,” Clark says, making yet another promise. They make him promise often, as if they think he will one day cast aside the last remnants of Clark Kent and simply drift into the ether. As if they’re afraid he will leave them behind in a fruitless effort to protect them (but he knows that it won’t work; everyone would still want to talk to his parents even if Superman were to disappear forever). As if they don’t realize that he could never leave them behind when they are all that tie him to the person he most wants to be.

A last hug, another snuffle and proud smile from his mom, a nod from his dad, and they disappear into their own room (a far cry from the farm he remembers so fondly, but at least they’re safe here, for now).

And Clark is alone with Lois.

She’s so small, so fragile, and looking at her, he is reminded of all the vulnerable things he played through his hands today, the gentleness he used to ensure he didn’t crush or snap or break them. Before, when they were partners, she seemed...larger than life. Confident in a way he’s never been. Bold and unafraid and unapologetic (in a way he tries to be now, but has never quite captured). So beautiful and bright, like a star that gleamed like a sun, pulling everything around her into her orbit as she charged ever forward, never looking back to see what she dragged in her wake. But now, curled up in the corner of one of their nondescript couches, her head pillowed on her arm, she is tiny and delicate and something he’s afraid to touch, afraid to try to capture in the curve of his palm lest it destroy what he sought only to savor.

But he had watched over her to make sure nothing happened to her (to make sure this didn’t happen). For weeks after her article, he’d watched her from afar, terrified that every criminal, every enemy Superman or Clark had made, would come after her. He’d followed her, kept his hearing attuned to her despite his guilt at eavesdropping so shamelessly. There’d been a few attempts, small enough and clumsy enough he’d been able to stop them without ever revealing himself to her. But then the police had given her an escort and Henderson had made sure that routine patrols were being taken around her apartment and the Daily Planet and Superman came back far away from Metropolis (and made it clear he didn’t tolerate any of the news media at all), and he’d realized she didn’t need him. She’d never wanted a partner, never given any hint that she would accept his overtures at friendship, and Smallville had failed him and only driven them further apart.

So he’d let her be. He’d stopped watching, stopped following, stopped checking in on her. Oh, he still occasionally flew over the East Coast, still fixed his hearing in on her, but just enough to make sure her heart was still beating, her lungs were still working, her life still continued on without him.

He had thought she was okay. But she is here, and she is not like he remembered. She is tentative and scared and so very...weak (and that is not a word he ever thought to associate with Lois Lane), and he does not know what to do. That first night she arrived, when he heard her crying, he was sure that if he were better, he would go to her. But he is better now and he does not think going to her will help her.

On impulse, moved by a fear he can’t bring himself to put into words, he lets his vision unfocus on her, lets his eyes peel away skin and muscle, lets himself examine her from head to toe,

searching for anything, any flaw, any imperfection, any sign that she is sick (or dying). He finds nothing (nothing but the hum and precision and beauty of a million parts working in harmony to keep a single life here in this world, existing and hoping and dreaming and contributing, a miracle wrapped up in flesh and blood and cloth), no tumors or cancer or wounds or internal bleeding. He listens to her heart, but there is no extra skip, no flutter of exhaustion, no sign that it is winding down. He inclines his every sense toward her, bends all his attention to the frail form in a tumble of limbs and dark hair...and finds nothing out of the ordinary (but, taken altogether, something inarguably extraordinary, even if not in the way he had once imagined).

"Lois," he calls softly. He kneels beside her, in front of the couch, and his hands hover between them. He wants to touch her, wants it so badly he has to hold himself completely still while he brings himself under control once more (because he does not know what he would do if he *were* to touch her). Her hair gleams in the light, like a night sky with winking stars, and her skin is pale and smooth and tantalizingly close. Her lashes lay against her cheeks, more delicate than the feathers or cotton he played with all afternoon, and her breath sighs out between them like a song just at the edge of his hearing. His hands itch and tingle, longing to play with the textures and pressures of her cheek, her strands of hair, the curve of her shoulder or the lines of her hand (to wake her and shake her and try in vain to understand).

But she has always been skittish about touch, always accepted it only in certain situations, in measured doses, in tiny increments. And they are not partners anymore, and he is an alien and a farmboy both, all rolled up together, and she came only to see him (the alien who came into her life with a lie and left her with a Pulitzer), nothing more.

So he does not touch her. He just says, "Lois," again, a bit more loudly, and watches her stir. Watches her eyelashes flutter and cast tiny shadows along the bend of her cheekbones, her lips move and twist as she murmurs a wordless noise. Watches her eyes open and fix on him—and too late he remembers that he forgot to take his glasses off.

He stands and takes a quick step back, his hand blurring as he removes the glasses, hides them behind his back (as if that will fool her), and holds his breath.

She tilts her head, a crease marring her brow as she sits up. "Why do you do that?" she asks without preamble, and he has to smile in relief (to hear her asking questions, to hear her speaking to him; to realize that even though she looks pale and drawn, she is clearly still as tenacious as ever).

"Do what?" he asks, because that is what he does. The whole world knows his secret, but still he plays this game of obtuseness, of oblivious ignorance. It is what he knows, what he does, what he has based his life around for so long that it is almost as much a part of his character as floating in his sleep (bits of Clark Kent peeking through the shroud of Superman).

She huffs and rolls her eyes and crosses her arms over her chest, and Clark is delighted (overjoyed) at these glimpses of the Lois he knows and misses (and thought never to see again). "Take your glasses off every time you see me. I saw you do it last night, too. Why?"

He shrugs, lets his hand fall to his side, the glasses hanging in the curve of his fingers. Now, with the eyes he wanted to see locked on him, he cannot look up. "I don't know. I guess...I didn't want you to think I was still trying to hide from you, or deceive you."

"Oh." At that, he has to look up. He does not like this tone (defeated and weary and resigned), and wishes he could make her roll her eyes again. Or laugh. Or look at him with that smug smirk she used to give him before. Or say his name. But miracles aren't something he believes in anymore, and this almost listless Lois Lane is just more proof of why not.

"I can't wear them...outside...anymore," he says, even though he doesn't know why. She doesn't need to know this, doesn't need to hear about what he can or can't do. But he doesn't stop talking. "Anyone in a pair of glasses is instantly suspect anymore, no matter what they look like. But..."

"You like wearing them," she finishes, and catches his eyes, holds them hostage. "Don't you?"

"Yes," he whispers. "They remind me of who I want to be. And even if I can't be him anymore, I like remembering what it was like."

Pain ghosts across her face, and she flinches as if she's been slapped. "I'm sorry," she says. She stands, then, and braces herself, as if preparing for him to...what? Hit her? Touch her? (Kiss her? Kill her?) "It's all right, really. I know what you're feeling, and it's okay, just...you don't have to hide it. I mean, it's really sweet of you, but it's okay—I don't need you to hold back. I don't blame you for being mad at me. Just tell me. Say everything you've ever wanted to say."

Despite his shock, his confusion (his compassion for the brave way she holds her head up and faces him and doesn't run as her frantically beating heart seems to want her to do), Clark can't help but smile. He very much doubts that she *really* wants him to say everything he's ever wanted to tell her.

"I'm not mad at you, Lois," he tells her, gently. Soothingly. She stares at him, her eyes wide, her hands dropping limply to her sides. "What?"

"I'm not mad."

A scoffing breath is pushed out of her mouth, and she shakes her head almost wildly. "Don't be ridiculous. This is what I mean—you're holding it in. You're pretending that—"

"Really," he says, and he lets all his sincerity touch his voice, lets himself take a step nearer her. He ducks his head to catch her eyes and ventures a smile. "I mean, don't get me wrong—I *was* mad for a while. *Really* mad. But...when it comes right down to it, it was *my* choice to get a job at the best newspaper in the world. *I'm* the one who was crazy enough to think I could keep the two parts of my life separate, the human and the alien. You're Lois Lane." He waves his hand at her, framing her, admiring her because it is impossible for him *not* to. "I always respected you for being a great reporter. And you..."

He looks away, swallows, because this is something he's reconciled with himself already, something he's long since faced and dealt with and put behind him, but hearing it said aloud, confronting it all again...it reminds him of those first anguished weeks after that article was published. Reminds him of the isolation he felt when everyone looked at him and *knew*. The terror that dogged his every step as he worked so frantically to tie up every loose end being Clark Kent had left. The constant panic that he wouldn't be able to protect his parents while he was watching Lois or that he would lose Lois while he was with his parents. The gaping loss that felt like an open wound bleeding out in him. The fear every time he was seen by anyone, by everyone. The blame he'd heaped on himself for thinking that a suit and a cape and a different hairstyle would ever be enough to let him have everything he ever wanted.

But it is past, he reminds himself. It is past and over and done with, and Lois is blinking back tears in front of him (the scent of the salt burns at the back of his throat), and if this is why she came (seeking forgiveness or atonement or reparation), then he can give it to her. He cannot be her friend (or more), and he cannot be a part of her everyday life, but he *can* give her forgiveness and understanding, can take away any blame she might feel, and maybe do his part to heal the bruises and shadows and weakness afflicting her. (He can make up for what he brought into her life without ever once considering the repercussions, the consequences, that would come crashing down on her should his wild plan fail, as it inevitably did.)

"You were just doing what you do best," he tells her. "And if I was going to be found out, I'm...I'm glad it was by you. You always believed in Superman, and even...even after you knew I lied, that belief still showed in your story."

"Clark," she whispers. Nothing else, just his name, but he feels a slow, wistful smile touch his lips at the sound of it.

Clark.

Not Superman. Not Man Of Steel or Man Of Tomorrow or Metropolis Marvel or any of the other grandiose names given him by the adoring public. Just Clark, as if she looks at him and *knows* that he is more than the world ever sees.

"Thank you, Lois," he says, the words heartfelt.

She stares at him, her expression unreadable, her eyes gleaming with unshed tears. "For what?" Her voice is so soft that even Superman can scarcely hear her.

"For calling me Clark." He smiles again, feels it pull like a scar stretched too tight. "Hardly anyone does, anymore, and...it's nice, to hear it. I'm glad that you know who I really am."

"Doesn't everyone?" she asks bitterly, and sinks back down to the couch.

Clark shrugs, says wryly, "You'd be surprised."

The silence that falls between them isn't really silence at all. Clark can hear the blood rushing through her veins, the trudging pace of her heart, the steady drone of his own, the distant murmur of his parents' voices, the rustle of movement from James's room, the whirr of the elevator moving, the seething, rippling sea of noise from the other occupants of this building, the pulse of the air conditioning. And beyond that, the city, the sea, the sky, the wind, the ponderous weight of the Earth itself. And the cries and the chaos and the cacophony of people waiting for Superman.

Crying out for him. *Needing* him.

He's wanted to see Lois for so long, has thought on her all day, but he can't stay here. He can't be selfish with his time when he has no excuse for sitting by and doing nothing.

So, regretfully, he straightens. "You're tired, Lois," he remarks, hoping it does not sound too abrupt. "You should sleep. Your room is okay, isn't it? Do you need anything?"

She blinks up at him. "No," she says. "It's...it's fine."

"Good." He nods (suddenly glad she does not mention any of the things he left for her in that room, the tokens of penance he dropped before her arrival to make up for all the days when he had cursed her and blamed her and even, almost, hated her for that story she had written). Then, holding his breath (hoping even though he knows exactly *why* it's a bad idea to do so, because he is not angry any longer and has moved on to more and better things), he extends his hand toward her. "Here. Let me help you."

There's an instant of motionlessness (when the air freezes to ice in his lungs and the drone of his heart skips several beats), a second where he thinks she will not take his hand (will not trust him). But then she lets out a breath (a sigh, and he thinks it is of relief), and she says, "You're better," like she never doubted it would happen, and she slides her hand into his.

A frisson of energy surges through his hand, tingles along his skin, running up his arm and spreading in concentric ripples through his entire body. A visceral reaction, a tangible effect, to simply her touch. To no more than her fingers resting in his palm, his fingertips against her wrist, their pulses beating in counterpoint time so close to each other.

A touch, and his world slides and skids. A single touch (and it's a mistake, a mistake so large, so momentous, he does not know if he can recover from it again, not when he still bears the scars from last time), and yet, Lois doesn't seem to notice it at all. She rises to her feet, a smile on her lips, nothing at all in the workings of her body or the expression on her face to show that she feels that electric shock between them.

"All the way better?" she's asking, and Clark gives himself an inward shake. It was just a touch (that means she trusts him

not to hurt her), just a simple movement of flesh on flesh (that he never thought to feel again). And she's talking and expecting him to respond, and he cannot afford to let unfounded fantasies (unwanted memories) once more take wing in his heart. Not again.

"All better," he says.

"So...you're off to be Superman again?"

"Always," he replies. He follows her to her bedroom door (carefully, pointedly, does not put his hand to the small of her back as he wants to do, as his body instinctively moves to do), and smiles at her when she turns to face him. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"I'm not going anywhere," she says. There is a strength, a firmness, to her tone that he hasn't heard since before that fateful article.

He doesn't quite know what to say in reply. Doesn't know whether to smile in gratitude or beg her to leave him be (doesn't know if he should be smart or foolhardy). So he only nods and takes a step backward. "Well...I should be going. Good night, Lois."

"Good night, Clark," she murmurs. "Be careful out there."

And now he does have to smile, because maybe she wasn't in their group hug and maybe she isn't a part of his family, but she is voicing the same concerns they all did (she is worried about him), and it warms him. "I'll be fine," he promises, and then he lets the world freeze in place (lets her pause, slowed to motionlessness, a perfect instant where Lois is staring at him, standing in his sphere without impacting it in any other way, the echo of his name from her lips still swirling through his mind). The cries for help stop, for this millisecond, the world silent and still and something he can, in this instant, survive.

Lois's blink is half-completed by the time he spins himself into the Suit, his glasses carefully placed back in his closet. Clark allows himself one last look at her (but does not let himself think about how little time he has left with her, how quickly she will be gone), before he turns and slides through the windows in his room.

The earth hangs beneath his feet, his cape floats around him like a comforting sea carrying the scents of home and family and love, and Clark slips away, merging and melding with the hero so many cry out for.

And Superman returns.

8

She doesn't sleep well. Or at all, truthfully. Every time she closes her eyes, she hears Clark's voice (*I'm glad that you know who I really am*, he'd said when she called him Clark; *Always*, he'd said when she asked him if he was Superman). Every time she opens her eyes and stares up into the darkness punctuated only by the light from the bathroom, she sees his face. His eyes, so open and forgiving and...haunted. (Lost. Alone. Adrift in a way she doesn't think she can quite understand, and that scares her even more.) Everywhere she turns, she is confronted by the ghosts of what she's done, so that she cannot sleep, cannot breathe, cannot see how she will ever survive the coming of morning.

He's out there, she knows. Out in the world, rushing from place to place, going from one cry for help to the next, arriving as quickly as he can and doing more than anyone will ever know and leaving again to find another victim to save, and for the first time, it occurs to her to wonder how much evil he sees as Superman. How many dark acts or sickening crimes. How much death and chaos and twisted depravity that a farmboy from Kansas could never have imagined (should never *have* to imagine). He must come into contact with the worst humanity has to offer, and yet...and yet he can kneel at the side of the woman who destroyed him and he can smile and tell her he doesn't

blame her for what she's done.

She hates him. Lois decides that when the night is darkest and the morning seems furthest away. She hates him for being so good and noble and selfless and ridiculously accepting. Doesn't he know that he should get mad? Doesn't he realize that he'd feel so much better if he fought back instead of just gave in? (Doesn't he know her well enough to know she needs something to blame him for?)

But he's Superman. He's Clark Kent. (He's neither, not really, but she doesn't think she can ever tell him that, not when he's thanked her so earnestly, so sincerely, for seeing him and knowing him.) And of course he will not blame her or hate her. Of course he will not allow the darkness of humanity to seep inside him. Of course he will continue to fly above them all, unsullied, pure, his colors bright and vivid and blinding, buoyed up by all the good he sees side by side with the bad. Of course he will not let her hate him or blame him or find any reason at all to think she did the right thing four months ago, coming back from Smallville with his secret clutched in her greedy hands.

And she *doesn't* hate him. She can't even pretend that she does, not when the dawn begins to throw creamy gold colors across her room, reminding her just how tired she is. She thinks it might just be impossible to well and truly *hate* Superman, or Clark Kent, or the stranger in between. She can resent him and she can be frustrated with him and she can even roll her eyes at his propensity for self-punishment—but she cannot hate him. After four months of trying, she has come to the conclusion that it is a physical impossibility.

And finally, with that weight removed from her chest, she slips into a light doze that at least allows her to pretend she's gotten some rest. Dreams elude her, always dancing just ahead of her, taunting her, leading her deeper into sleep even though she knows they will turn into nightmares as soon as she gives into their seduction. But when she startles in the bed and jerks herself awake, she thinks that maybe the nightmares would be worth a bit of rest. She feels like she sleeps all the time (a mindless, numb haze that follows her everywhere she goes), but she never feels rested, and as ridiculous as it sounds, she is so *tired* of being tired.

But it's obvious that it's nowhere near night anymore, and when she turns her head to look at the gentle glow of the clock on the bedside table, she sees that it's almost ten in the morning. She thinks that should send a surge of adrenaline through her, make her leap to her feet and rush to get ready for the day.

But.

But she doesn't work for the Daily Planet, not right now, and there are no deadlines (and she isn't trusted with those anymore anyway, even when she is working), and Perry doesn't expect her, and she is pretty sure that the Kents won't mind if she sleeps half the day away (if they don't offer more than a hint of reproach for what she did to their son, then sleeping in past what their farm-sensibilities deem appropriate won't even be a blip on the radar) and Jimmy would probably prefer it if she just stayed in this guest room and faded away altogether.

And Clark...well, he's gone, isn't he? She'd stopped seeing him when she'd felt Trask's hand curling around her neck and heard Clark's voice transmogrify into Superman's, and as soon as she'd gotten back to Metropolis, she'd made sure no one else would ever see Clark again, and now he is Superman with the ghost of Clark Kent inhabiting his body and leaving him less than he was before. So it doesn't matter if she gets up early, or if she puts any special care into her appearance, or if she walks out into the main suite and waits around for more long, endless, dazed hours for him to return to her (so she can see all over again why she shouldn't have come). In fact, she's almost overcome by the temptation to roll over and pull the covers over her head and sleep the rest of this day away too.

Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately, she's not sure; it's too hard to think it through and decide), there's just a bit too much of Lois Lane left within her for her to give up so easily. Her eyes refuse to close, her hands don't budge from their place holding the comforter down by her waist, and she knows she will not be going back to sleep again. Not yet. Not until she's gone outside and confronted whatever new surprises (new horrors) this day has to give her.

She's sluggish and slow, but she showers and changes into a clean set of clothes (she reminds herself, absently, to ask Martha where she can launder her clothes; she supposes it'll be a necessity soon), aware of little more than that the tan slacks and red long-sleeved shirt are comfortable and don't draw too much attention to herself. She pulls her brush through her hair a couple times, stares listlessly into the mirror, and realizes that she'll have to try harder (have to put in some effort to her own life if she wants to make the Clark-stranger realize he needs to put effort into *his*). But later. Not right now. She's already so tired, and she's already ready, and it's already late, and...and there will be time for anything more later.

She's out of her room and standing at the counter before she remembers that Jonathan and Martha mentioned going to a museum in the morning. The suite seems too quiet (she hates the quiet, now, more than anything else; she longs for sounds, always, in the background, loud and invasive or muted and distant, somewhere, just so long as she is not trapped alone with nothing but her thoughts). It's empty and abandoned, its life drained from it now that its occupants are gone. *She's* still here, of course, but she's aware that that counts for very little nowadays. There isn't enough left of her to breathe life into even a simple article, let alone an entire apartment.

For a long moment, she's stumped. She feels, confusingly, almost betrayed, as if simply since she went to all the trouble to get up and dressed, they should have made sure to be here for her. To stand out here and give her their inexplicable smiles and place a plate of breakfast in front of her and...and help her know what to do next. Because (as is becoming so frighteningly clear to her) she has no idea what to do with her life, with her days, with *herself*, now that her life is so irrevocably ruined. And all she can do is stand there, in an empty room, in the utter quiet, and look around herself and tremble with fear (because once she stops moving, her momentum will fade away and then she will be stuck in place forever).

It takes her longer than she wants to admit (long enough for her bare feet to protest the chill of the linoleum of the dining area) before she notices the piece of paper sitting prominently on top of the counter, right next to a toaster and a loaf of bread she knows weren't there last night. She tilts her head at an awkward angle to read the note (not sure it's for her, because really, why would the Kents leave a note for their unwanted guest), and then has to blink back sudden tears as the words are burned into her consciousness.

Lois, headed out for the morning. We left bread, butter, and honey for toast—Clark said that you'd think that was enough for breakfast, but if not, we should be back before noon. There's juice or coffee in the kitchen. Make yourself at home.

No signature, but then, they hardly need one, do they?

Hesitantly, as if it will disappear should she actually set her hand to it, Lois reaches out and fingers the edge of the hastily written note, traces the curves of the sloppy cursive letters (concern and attentiveness and care layering the words on the paper in place of mere ink), pauses on the name of *him*.

Clark.

So simple. So unadorned. So stark. As if there is still a Clark and he is still their son and he still remembers everything about her even though they've been separated for twice the amount of time they knew each other.

There is something about this note that breaks her already decimated heart. Something about it that makes her want to take the single piece of paper and smooth it out as carefully as if it is made of pure gossamer gold and tuck it away like the treasure it is. With a furtive look around, Lois snatches the letter, folds it almost obsessively, and stows it in her pocket. It's just a piece of paper, but it feels... warm. Solid. It feels like the first bit of an anchor holding her to her body, to her place here, to the life she's now living.

And when she goes into the kitchen and finds the coffee machine on a counter, finds coffee and a filter and a pitcher of water already waiting for her, she braces herself for an onslaught of more tears but finds, instead, that she is smiling. It's odd, and unfamiliar (she cannot remember the last time she smiled genuinely, impulsively, freely), but she savors the feel of that smile (the proof of their care, even if it is only because they are inherently good people and not because she deserves it). She sets the coffee to brew and watches it drip into the carafe a drop at a time, and when she finally pours herself a mug, she thinks it is the best coffee she has ever tasted (and that's saying something, she knows, because once she had a partner who brought her coffee every day, flavored with his friendship and warmed by his hope).

Eventually, she wanders back out into the dining area and puts a couple pieces of bread in the toaster. She's not hungry (is content with the warmth and the scent and the taste of her coffee), but this toast (this memory he's kept of toast and butter and honey snatched on the run because her hick farmboy of a partner was actually on *time* picking her up) is another gesture, another symbol of just what has not been lost, and she refuses to give them reason to think she does not appreciate it.

She is just finishing slathering honey over her toast (and registering her surprise that the sight of it is actually making her feel hungry) when she hears a whoosh from behind her and feels the blur of a cool breeze.

Calmly, methodically, she sets down the hot piece of bread, takes a deep breath, and turns.

And Superman is striding out of Clark's room, shutting the door behind him, his cape fluttering around his ankles.

Lois's breath catches in her throat.

He looks toward her, and smiles in greeting. "Good morning," he says. Easily. Smoothly. Casually.

It's world-shaking, that smile and greeting. It ruptures her tentative peace and leaves her once more gasping in the distance, struggling to catch up, always left behind in the dust. He's Superman. Right there. Right in front of her. Superman with his cape and his blue and his S and his courtesy—and he is talking.

(He talked before, last night and the night before, but that was a stranger, and this is different in a way she cannot articulate, cannot pin down, can only recognize and know.)

He is talking to *her*.

"G-good morning," she stammers back. There's so much more she should say, but words are elusive (*right* words impossible to find), and she has nothing else to give this familiar hero with Clark's friendly smile.

He cocks his head, studies her. "How are you?" he asks, gently, as if she is the one acting strangely and he seeks to calm her.

"You've been out all night?" she demands, and only after the question is out does she realize that she didn't answer his question (he's talking to her, and she's ignoring him, and that's a crime, but it's only one more in a long list so she doesn't let it faze her).

"Yes." His brow creases and he glances down at his attire, almost awkwardly. "I just dropped by to get a new cape." A tiny smile dances along his lips as he plays the edge of his new, unblemished cape through his fingers. "Mom gets so frustrated

by how fast I go through them, but they're not close enough to be protected by my aura, so—"

She looks up from the hypnotizing movements of his hands against crimson material and sees a quick flash of consternation burn through his eyes. As if he's said too much. As if he forgot (even if just for an instant) who it is standing before him. Who he's talking to. As if he forgot (for an entire, eternal moment) that she is the one person in all the world who is *most* to be distrusted with his secrets.

Hurt, old and bitter and festering, sparks again from where it's lodged in her chest, but Lois ignores it. "You're just getting back?" she checks again. Asks even though she already knows the answer because she wants the answer to be *different*. She wants him to say that he was out for a while but then he came back here (home, this suite, where his family resides and his heart will always return) to rest. To recuperate. To heal from all the darkness she's only just realized he sees so much of.

"Yeah." He frowns at her. "But not for long."

"And," she says (pretending his frown, even as slight as it is, doesn't hurt), "how are you? Are you still all right?"

His eyes go shuttered and dark. His cape flutters free of his hands as he shrugs and crosses his arms over his chest. "I'm better, Lois. No one was hurt."

"That's not what I said!" she snaps back, insulted and stung and so very horrified that he could think *that's* what she's worried about. "I asked how *you* were doing!"

He goes quiet (the now-familiar silence feels like a slap). She closes her mouth over her retort and looks at him (drinking in the sight of him still) and sees an impassive mask staring back at her. But there, glinting from the corners of his eyes—suspicion.

"It's not for a story!" she gasps. And she can't be mad. Not at him. Not for this. Not after what she did. "I...I'm on a leave of absence. I'm not here to write anything, and I won't. Ever. Nothing of what I see or...or hear...or *anything*...here. I promise." Her heart skips a beat, flutters in her chest like a moth trying to beat its way through to freedom even as its efforts leave it bruised and dying. "I promise," she repeats, forlornly (because why should he believe her?).

A muscle tics in his jaw, and then his mask falls away and he breaks her stare. She thinks he is contrite. She thinks he is sorry for his suspicion. But if he is, he does not apologize for it. Just gives a slight nod (accepting her promise, and now there is another goal springing to life inside her, a commitment to this promise she has made him and that he is trusting).

"So," she says after a moment (when she is sure he isn't going to turn and walk away). "How was it?"

Strangely, a ghost of a smile haunts his lips, faded and pale and barely there but so much better than a frown or a glare or a neutral mask. "Fine," he replies, his posture loosening, even if just slightly.

"Really?" It is her turn to frown at him. (He's not a good liar.) "You're fine?"

"Yes," he insists, his eyes wide as he tries to maintain the answer. But she only looks at him, her own stance firm (and it never is, not anymore, but he is here and he is talking and she cannot understand it, but there is new strength filling her up, layered over her skin like a second epidermis). His eyes drop away and he sighs. "All right, so...Superman's been missing a while and...well, people have been wondering where I've been. They've come up with their own reasons for my absence and...some of those reasons make them a bit upset with me. But," he adds, straightening, his jaw firming in that stubborn expression Clark used to get when she proposed something dangerous, "I'm back now and I'm helping and that's what matters."

"Unbelievable!" Lois exclaims. She throws her hands up in the air, starts to pace in short lines before him, and there (her breath catches in her throat at the realization) is adrenaline

surging through her, energy and effervescent *purpose*. For the first time since Smallville, she feels awake and alive and afire with anger, with resolve, with a cause bigger than herself, a purpose that can swallow her up and strengthen her until she swells to become so much more than she is on her own and give her a reason for *being*.

“What?” Superman asks (a bit nervously, she thinks).

“I can’t believe the government won’t let anyone know about Nightfall even now!” She glares forward at nothing in particular (savoring the tingle in her fingertips, begging her to contact sources, chase down leads, type up a story; savors the sensation even though she is committed to her own silence now). “What? They’re so attached to their ‘classified’ nonsense, they can’t tell people that Superman—”

“I asked them not to.” His voice, quiet though it is, is enough to silence her almost without effort.

She wishes he would stop throwing her off-balance so consistently. (She wishes she weren’t living in such an alien world.) “Why?” she finally asks, simply. “Why would you do that?”

He tilts his head again, as if he needs to observe her from different angles to be able to understand her. But he says nothing. Just watches her. Maybe, she thinks, he believes that she will divine the answer simply from his silence, but she *can’t*. She can’t hear anything in the silence (except the blame, the guilt, the reproach, and they are so loud they will consume her completely if they are not kept at bay).

“Please,” she whispers (*please don’t shut me out, don’t leave me in the quiet dark again, don’t stop talking to me*). “Why not let everyone know what happened?”

“Lois,” he says, almost wistfully, “finding out that your entire world can be destroyed in only a moment is terrifying. It’s...it’s not something you recover from very quickly. Everyone’s safe now, there’s no more danger, so what reason is there to make people go through—”

“Hey, CK!”

Lois startles at the sound of Jimmy’s voice coming from the direction of the elevator, though she’s interested to note that Clark flinches, too. They both turn to look at Jimmy as he strides toward them. He’s dressed once more in a suit, though he’s lost the jacket somewhere and loosened his tie so it hangs crookedly from his neck. He doesn’t look at Lois, just looks at Clark with a wide grin and an open expression.

“Hey, James,” Clark says, and he grins at his friend. And it’s only then, as Lois looks at the man before her (Superman transformed into Clark Kent with no more than a single expression), that she realizes that all the smiles he (this stranger between the two) has been offering her aren’t true smiles at all. They’re pale imitations. Cheap knock-offs. Smiles that prove he is glad to see her (or at least, polite enough to pretend he is), but smiles that are guarded. Wary. Waiting for the other shoe to drop (for the next article to hit the newsstands).

“How’d the rescues go?” Jimmy asks, oblivious to Lois’s turmoil (and that’s only fair, isn’t it, after she was so steadfastly oblivious to Jimmy’s turmoil when her Pulitzer prize-winning article was first printed?). She would think his appearance to be merely a coincidence, but there is something calculating about the single glance he casts her before turning the whole of his attention back to Clark. “Feel good to be back out there?”

Clark’s smile turns softer but no less real. “Yes. It feels even better than I remembered. Their heartbeats don’t disappear anymore, James. At least, not as many of them.”

Jimmy reaches out and clasps his hand over Clark’s shoulder, a brief touch that’s there and gone and so easily missed (but so telling, so pointed, so important that it makes Clark’s entire form straighten, as if some extra strength has infused him to better bear the weight of the world). “That’s good, CK. Anyone you can save

is a good thing. Heading back out?”

“I have a lot of lost time to make up for.” Clark pauses, his expression turning pensive. “How about you? Did you meet with the board we were talking about?”

Jimmy flicks a careful glance to Lois. She feels its weight and stiffens, and yet, she says nothing. After everything, considering all they are risking by allowing her to be here, she can allow them their coded terms, their hidden messages. So, pointedly, she looks away (though she cannot stop herself from watching Clark out of the corner of her eye), gives them the courtesy of pretending she is not listening.

“Not yet,” Jimmy says. “I’m meeting with them tomorrow. Until then, it’s just a waiting game.”

His nod is only half-completed when Clark’s head suddenly swivels away from them, his eyes gone so far-seeing that Lois feels, abruptly, as if she has ceased to exist (as if he has chosen this moment to do what she’d thought he would do four months ago and erase her from his world).

“All right,” Jimmy says without missing a beat, clapping Clark’s shoulder for another brief second. “Try to make it to dinner if you can—Mrs. K’s going to be awfully disappointed if you don’t at least make an appearance.”

Clark smiles again (she wants him to smile, to be happy, but she almost wishes he could do it without smiling; the sight of it twists something deep inside her). “I’ll do my best. Thanks, James. I’ll see you later, Lois.” His eyes fix on her—not for long, for no more than a goodbye nod—and Lois can breathe again, can relax in the knowledge that he hasn’t yet locked her outside his high, muted walls.

But...but he’s turning. He’s leaving. Again. Without eating anything. Without sleeping. Without looking at her in such a way that she *knows* he is okay.

“Wait!” She steps after him, her brow furrowing, her hand raised in the air between them. “You’re...you’re leaving again? So soon?”

“They’re calling for me,” he says simply, and then he vanishes right in front of her eyes. There one instant, gone the next. A blink—that easy—and he is gone from her life.

Jimmy turns away and sticks a piece of bread in the toaster as if nothing unusual has happened. As if his friend hasn’t just disappeared to go right back out into the cold, harsh world. To face more death and darkness and blame.

“It’s okay,” he says, and it takes Lois an extra moment to realize that he’s talking to her. His voice is quiet, his eyes fixed on the toaster, his hands resting slackly on the counter. “It’s good for him, really. Trust me, I haven’t seen him this happy since before Nightfall. He needs to help.”

“I know,” she murmurs. She stares down at her own pieces of toast. They’ve gone cold, sitting there on her plate, the butter congealed, the honey dripping off the edges; her moment of hunger has long passed. Abruptly, she gives a sharp shake of her head and pushes the plate away, then fixes Jimmy with a stern glare (it has no discernible effect on *James*, but it feels good to know she still has it in her to glare, so she doesn’t care). “I know what you’re doing,” she accuses him.

He raises an eyebrow, all cool innocence.

“You’re trying to make sure I’m never alone with him. Aren’t you?”

“Do you *want* to be alone with him?” he asks, so smoothly that Lois has no answer. His toast pops up, and he reaches for it (as if she is not rooted to the floor, gaping at him), slathers butter over it, and takes a large bite.

Traitorously, Lois feels tears building back up behind her eyes, a never-ending supply of them filling her up, taking up all the empty spaces where, once, more important things had resided. The breath she takes in is unsteady and chopped up with uncertainty. “I want him to be okay,” she admits. “That’s all.”

“He’s okay,” Jimmy tells her. There’s no pity in his voice, no defensiveness; just a flat statement.

“I want him to be *good*,” she clarifies.

“He is good.” Jimmy (no, James, because this man staring back at her, daring her to do anything to hurt his friend, is as much a stranger as the hybrid Clark-Superman) narrows his eyes at her. “He’s Clark, Lois. And above all else, Clark is a good man.”

“I want him to be *happy*!” she cries, furious with him for making her admit this hope, this desire, out loud (where it can so easily be crushed). “That’s all! I’m not here to stab him in the back or accuse him of anything or ruin his life again—I just want to make sure he’s happy!”

And Jimmy laughs. Laughs at her, as if this isn’t imperative and life-altering and important enough to bring her all the way from Metropolis. “Only you can make that sound like a threat,” he says, and laughs again.

“I’m not,” she whispers through stiff lips, her anger evaporated like steam before a breath of cold air. “I’m not a threat.”

“Smooth,” Jimmy says. It’s such an incongruous statement (a word that sounds foreign coming from this businessman he’s become; a slang term that doesn’t fit the moment at all), except for the wink he throws her, the twinkle in his eyes, the smile hidden in the corners of his mouth.

And the corner of Lois’s own mouth quirks up. A tiny twitch. Almost not even there. But it *is* there (conjured up by this glimpse of the young man she once knew, the friend she’d once had, this proof that he is not entirely set against her).

“Eat some breakfast,” he advises her before she can try to wrestle past her conflicting emotions to figure out what to say next. “I’ve got to head out, but the Kents should be back soon.”

He crams the last of his toast into his mouth, brushes the crumbs off his shirt, and then he heads for the elevator. Lois is almost surprised to remember that it’s an elevator that brought her (that she did not just dream herself here), but she loses interest in it quickly, because the suite is once more cold and silent around her.

It’s just like her nightmares. Everything in front of her and then, with so little warning, all of it gone and she’s left all alone. Her body threatens to seize up on her; with an effort, she forces herself into movement. Movement is always good. It implies momentum and purpose and a destination. It means she hasn’t given up completely; she is more than just a hollowed out husk.

She takes her plate of toast into the kitchen, forces herself to eat a few bites of the cold, too-sweet breakfast (so she can tell the Kents that their hospitality didn’t go to waste), and then she throws the rest in the trash. Washing her plate and coffee mug (and she did drink the coffee, because now more than ever she needs the shot of caffeine) doesn’t take more than a few minutes, though, and then she’s right back to where she was before.

The suite closes in around her, the walls shrinking, the air sucked away, and she’s afraid she’s going to hyperventilate. Her breaths echo in the expanse of the kitchen, so she breathes heavier, louder, desperate for the noise.

The sound of the elevator doors opening seems like salvation. Brushing a hand back through her hair (wiping away the cold sweat on her brow), Lois hurries through the kitchen door and out into the main suite.

And the Kents are there. Coming back into her life. Laden down with grocery bags, a museum gift shop bag dangling from Martha’s wrist, a laugh decorating Jonathan’s bluff features.

The sight of them calms Lois. Slows her heartbeat and steadies her breathing and restores her equanimity. They are here, and Martha is greeting her, and Jonathan is making noise as he stumps over to the counter to dump down his burdens, and they bring with them a rush of motion and life and *sound*, and Lois

feels the world right itself.

“Everything go all right?” Martha asks. “Did you get some breakfast?”

Lois feels another smile (three in one day, in the space of an hour, and she hopes against hope that she is as good for this family as they are for her), and she looks at the tiny, fragile woman in front of her (so full of boundless strength and unending compassion) and thinks that she can do this. She can learn to live with life the way it is now. She can learn to live with *herself*. And Clark can be fixed, can be brought back, surely, *surely* he can, with parents who have so much love and understanding to give, with a friend who is strong and fierce and loyal. And with her. Here and ready to try to start over again and help him pick up the pieces of his life.

She can do this. She can.

It’s a revelation, but a welcome one, and she holds it close to herself, basks in its warmth and its light, and starts to (tentatively, fearfully) hope again. She came to bring back Clark Kent, but maybe...maybe Lois Lane can come back too.

9

Dinner is a much happier affair this evening. Martha chatters away to Clark, beaming every time he takes another serving or compliments a dish or just looks at her with all his love for her in his eyes. Jonathan’s happiness isn’t quite as blatant, but it’s there for anyone who looks for it, in the chuckles that shake his frame, in the twinkle of his eye as he teases his wife, in the way he says ‘son’ as many times as he can. James, too, seems different in Clark’s proximity. He stands straighter, smiles like Jimmy, and the cool persona drops away from him to leave him relaxed and unaffected.

Lois doesn’t say much herself. Instead, she watches them, this unlikely family brought together not by blood, but by choice, by love, by loyalty, by things (emotions and commitments and sacrifices) so much greater, so much stronger than the simple blood ties between her own family. Jonathan and Martha move in synchrony, perfect harmony achieved in the way Jonathan lifts his arm without looking behind him just in time for Martha to slip to his side without missing a beat and their conversation that slides in and out and over and through in such a way it seems it must be scripted to be so gracefully choreographed. James’s plate is filled for him because (Martha says with the hint of a frown that cannot last) he doesn’t eat enough, and James laughs and says he eats more of her cooking than he’s ever eaten before in his life. Clark is quiet, but his gaze rests, always, on his parents, on his friend (on her), with such gentle affection, such open fondness, such vulnerable tenderness that Lois cannot bear to look at him directly for more than a second or two at a time (as if he shines as brightly as the sun, burning afterimages to sparkle in her eyes every time she blinks). And he laughs, occasionally, flashes that (real, undiluted, refined) smile and does not look quite so lost or adrift.

She still feels very much like an outsider (but not because of them; because of her own sins, seared through her blood like fire), but she doesn’t even care. For these moments, she is content to be merely an observer, to get a firsthand look at how things are not as bad as they could so easily have been. Their lives aren’t perfect (she still has so much to answer for), but there is perfection in their lives, and for now, it’s enough.

But it doesn’t last nearly long enough. All too soon, Clark is brushing a kiss over his mom’s cheek, dropping a hand over his dad’s, bestowing a smile on Jimmy, giving a nod and ‘Good night’ to Lois, and then he blurs into primary colors and is gone. Martha smiles while he’s there and frowns in worry when he’s gone, until Jonathan gives her a forced smile of his own and she straightens her shoulders and gives him an encouraging smile back. James sighs and shakes his head and drops his fork and

stares pensively into the distance.

And Lois, once more, feels like an extra part. A part they didn't order but can't send back and now leave lying around because they just don't know what else to do with it.

She does the dishes again, though this time, she avoids crying and Martha lets Jonathan into the kitchen with them to help her put the dishes away (so they can reassure each other, Lois thinks as she catches sight of all their hidden glances to one another). The dishes don't last long enough, of course, and Lois once more watches the suds drain away.

"Come on," Martha says abruptly, breaking the forlornness of the moment with determined purpose. "James should have the television set back up."

A frown ghosts across Lois's face, quick and sobering, and she follows the two Kents into the living room where, sure enough, James is tinkering with a television set up on a stand against the wall between the windows and the elevator.

"We put it away for a while," Martha explains in an aside. "It was just bothering Clark, hearing about all the bad things he couldn't help with."

"Made him feel more pressured," Jonathan adds with a spark of unhappiness in those twinkling eyes of his.

"But now we can watch again." Martha manages a hint of a smile and curls up on the arm of the couch next to Jonathan, his arm on her knee. "I like to know where he is. It's nice to have some idea of what he faced before he comes home."

Jonathan nods. "Not that the news ever has the whole story or even any good shots of him."

"But it makes us feel a bit closer to him."

"And he can hear us," James interjects, startling Lois, who feels her body tense. He turns, but his gaze meets the Kents', and for once, his words don't seem to be a pointed message to Lois. "He said he likes to attune his hearing to us. So if we notice that he's upset or tired, we can talk to him. I know he can't always listen, or hear us, but I've noticed that it does help."

"He can hear you? From anywhere?"

Lois's voice breaks the spell, and all three of Clark's family turn to look at her (she feels their eyes like brands on her skin, like spotlights highlighting a prisoner seeking to escape her prison). She wants to shrink in on herself, but instead makes herself stand straight and tall, her jaw firmed, her chin canted high in the air.

"Not from anywhere," Martha finally answers her. "But if he's in the States somewhere, he can usually hear enough to know that we're talking to him."

"Wow," she murmurs, and nothing more, because James flicks the television on and everyone is much too engrossed in searching for mentions of Superman to worry about whatever else she might say (and she has nothing more to say, anyway, because it takes time for her brain to wrap around each new revelation she uncovers).

The world is overjoyed to have their savior back. Oh sure, there are the detractors, the critics, who wonder where he's been and why he hasn't been seen lately, but James is very good at muting the television at all the right spots so that Lois (and Martha, swelling with indignation) can't get too worked up over it. But mostly, what Lois remembers best are the stories of people who openly thank Superman. Who smile at him or cheer him when he appears or willingly accept whatever he gives them. He's Superman, and so many people abuse him, take for granted the fact that they have a super-powered being in their midst who really, truly wants to do no more than help. But there are others who *do* realize what a gift he is. What a blessing he is. A miracle. A guardian angel in solid form.

But not a man.

Lois hasn't watched the news in months, not intently, not with the whole of her attention. She wasn't scooping them,

wasn't finding the stories before they did, and couldn't find the motivation to change that, so she simply ignored them. But now, for the first time, she watches Superman (silent and stalwart and steady; silent and stilted and scared), and she watches interviews of the people he rescues, of the emergency workers he works alongside, listens to the reports and the commentators and the quotes taken from people coming off the scene (as close as the media are allowed).

Superman saved us, they say.

Superman appeared out of nowhere! they exclaim.

Superman apprehended the criminals, they report.

Superman...

Superman...

Superman...

They discuss his rescues—his speed, his strength, his power, his appearance, his mighty acts.

But there is no word of Clark Kent. No mention of the man wearing the cape. No thought at all of what he must think of these things he sees. These crimes he stops. These disasters he helps clean up. No indication at all that any of them remember there is a person underneath the distinctive Suit, with a beating heart and a working mind and a soul so good and pure Lois isn't sure she'll ever be able to fully believe it.

Superman swallows up all, and there is nothing left for Clark Kent (nothing but a personal life that is not personal anymore, but public and trod all over because it is *Superman's* and Superman is a public figure).

He is a man, a person, a human being (Kryptonian DNA or not), but whether they condemn him or applaud him, no one seems to remember that.

Lois turns her face from the too-bright, too-loud television screen and studies Martha. Jonathan. James. Watches them watch the news. They smile when Clark makes a rescue, and frown when a reporter says something critical (before James can mute it), and whisper, sometimes, under their breath, words and assurances and encouragement meant for a superhero half a world away. But they do not give any sign that this is unusual. They do not shout at the television screen and rant about what Clark Kent deserves or reach out to the phone or a notepad or a computer to start instituting changes.

Because this isn't new.

That revelation (so obvious and clear and blatant) hits her like a train so that she is left gaping and reeling and stunned.

This isn't new. It's been happening since she first stormed into Perry's office and slammed down her article without one thought to who else could see it. And for Martha and Jonathan... well, they've had even longer to grow used to it, haven't they? Months and months of watching Superman on the news, hearing the tales of the inhuman, aloof superhero and what he accomplished (or failed to accomplish), before they picked up the ringing phone and spoke to their all-too-human son, or opened the door and pulled him into their home to ply him with apple pie and buttermilk and fond touches to ground him to this world. Years of knowing their son is special but also knowing that the world could never know that because they would never appreciate him fully.

And they were right.

Trask did find out—and he'd tried to kill Clark (had almost succeeded, came so very close with the glare of deadly green and the gunshot that belatedly echoes through Lois's nightmares).

Lois found out—and she'd murdered Clark Kent with no more than a few keystrokes.

The world found out—and now only Superman is welcome. Only Superman is allowed. Only Superman is acknowledged with a clamoring that never lets him be still and calls him always out into the harsh, relentless world.

The evening stretches on interminably, news report after

news report (blurring into primary colors so much more garish and incomprehensible than Clark's familiar flash of light). Eventually, James flicks the television off and says good night to the Kents. The Kents talk to Lois, soft murmurs she nods and replies to (though only seconds later she cannot remember what they said) and head into their own bedroom. The living room light is too bright, stark and almost blinding next to the cool, concealing darkness cloaking the windows. Lois thinks she should get up, should turn the light off and retreat to her bedroom, but she can't move. Can't breathe. Can't think past this stunning, obvious revelation she should have considered (should have *known* would happen, should have taken into account and used to dissuade herself) before she wrote her infamous article.

Clark Kent is gone, and she's known that (it's been hammered into her every day for the past four months), but she doesn't think she's really *believed* it until this evening. Doesn't think she's ever let herself realize that he's not in hiding, he's not on the run, he's not wearing a mask to keep himself safe until the furor dies down.

He's gone.

Forever.

Irrevocably.

Permanently.

More sure even than the grave because at least then people would remember him for *him*, but now they will only remember Clark Kent as a footnote to Superman, as the amusing but unnecessary and all-too-temporary disguise for the so-much-more-important Superman.

She's not quite sure how late it is when she finally comes numbly to her feet, remembers to switch the light off before she heads into the guest bedroom. It's late, she knows that, so late that there's no sound coming from the other bedrooms. No sign of movement from anywhere else in the suite. Just her, standing in the middle of her bedroom and not moving because anything she can do just seems so useless and unimportant. She remembers that she was tired this morning, that she wanted to sleep all day, and maybe she should try to sleep now, but why? What does it matter if she sleeps or not when Clark (when *Superman*) is still out there doing everything he can for a world that stripped his humanity from him without even giving it a second thought?

The whirr of the air conditioner as it clicks back on in its cycle finally snaps her into motion. She toes her shoes off, lets them fall sloppily inside the closet, reaches in to grab her pajamas, and then...well, then she runs out of steam. Sitting on the edge of her bed, a bundle of clothing in her lap, staring blankly ahead, and it's like she's run out of batteries.

It's stupid, to be this affected and this surprised. She should have realized all this long before. Should have come to terms with it before she ever decided to act on the spur of the moment (on Perry's nudge and her own long hours of guilt and the need to do something, *anything*) and start this wild goose chase for a man who no longer exists. But she hadn't, so here she is, numb and...and...and *worried*. She is worried, because Superman is out there (and whether he's Clark or not, he shouldn't be so terribly alone) and no one else is awake to whisper encouragement to him when he needs it and he should be back by now. It's the middle of the night (she doesn't bother to turn to the clock; she doesn't really care what time it is, just knows it is *late*), and he's been out since the night before without stopping and he's only just recovered and why didn't his parents stop him from going out again so soon after dinner?

Maybe, she thinks to herself, he *is* home. Maybe he's whooshed back into his room and has put aside the Superman Suit and donned the remnants of Clark (complete with the glasses he holdson to, like a drowning man holding onto the last sliver of his wrecked ship) and has laid down on his bed and is even now sleeping. Maybe he's safe and at home and secure in the

hollowed out remains of Clark Kent's cocoon.

Maybe...maybe she should check. Just to be sure. Just to know that he's here. That he's not still out there, driving himself too hard in an effort to be everything everyone wants him to be and thinks him to be and punishes him for not being when he cannot measure up to impossible standards (and she tries to pretend she does not remember the echo of her own voice telling an ordinary Clark Kent all the virtues of an unassailable hero on a par with the Greek gods).

She is out of her room and across the living room and standing in front of the locked door before she can even realize she has come to her feet (and how strange it is, to move so quickly, to feel so decisive, when for so long she's been so lost and aimless). It is an ordinary door, and the lock is simple (she could pick it in her sleep even without Jimmy's lessons), and it stands like a moat, like a bridge drawn up with spikes set on it and crocodiles in the water between and archers lining the ramparts with their bows all strung and arrows nocked.

It's *his* door.

She's taken his name and his privacy and his job and his home and his parents and his friends and his future (his *life*), and now all he has left, all that remains to him (untouched by her) is this single door. This lone bedroom. One thing left to call his own. But if she touches it...if she opens it...if she goes inside and looks into the last sanctum left to him...she will have taken *everything*. She will have ruined him and destroyed him even after promising Jimmy so earnestly that she wouldn't.

But a knock, she thinks, would not be so bad. If he is in there and he does not want to see her, he just has to refuse to answer. So one knock. One knock and she will have her answer (whether he is home or not; whether he wants to see her or not). One knock and she can go back to her own bedroom and her own bed and fall into the pillows and shut out this horrible, dead-end reality for a few transient hours.

Her hand hovers next to the door, knuckles forward, ready to apply pressure to the wood. Just a soft, quiet knock, because if he can hear a whisper from a country away, she certainly doesn't need to bang on it, now does she?

Her hand falls back to her side, limp and useless, without knocking, because if he is asleep, then why is she even thinking about waking him up?

But then she raises her hand again, because she just needs to know. One minute of something that's not exactly easy (that's calling for more courage than she thinks she's had since before Smallville), and then it'll be over and she can leave.

But what if he's not there (her hand drops again)? Then she'll just worry over him all night, or even turn on the news again just to catch a blurry glimpse of him and that might push her back into numbness again. No, better to walk away now and let him do whatever it is he does. His parents went to bed, after all, so obviously there's nothing to be worried about. She's already intruded enough, coming without invitation; no need to disrupt their routine any more than necessary.

For all that her heart is thudding in her chest like a heavy jogger forcing his steps down on a treadmill, it's one of the hardest things she's done, turning away from the door without knocking. She takes one step toward her bedroom only to be shocked into whirling back at the sound of that (ordinary, impenetrable) door opening (as if it's easy, as if it opens all the time; as if her self-control is being rewarded).

And Clark—Superman—is standing there, coming up short at the sight of her.

"Clark!" she gasps, the name torn from her unwilling throat.

"Lois." He looks puzzled as he steps forward, pulling his door closed behind him. His cape swirls around his ankles, attracting the light emanating from the kitchen and reflecting it back on her, like a halo he carries around with him everywhere he

goes. “Are you okay? You need something?”

“No.” She blinks, shakes her head, tries to look confident (tries not to look as awkward and embarrassed and small as she feels). “I just...I didn’t know if you were here or not.”

“Oh.” He still looks confused, but he gestures to the crack beneath his door, at the light peeking out almost shamefacedly beneath it. “I usually turn my light on when I’m here so my parents can tell I’m back.”

“Oh.” She nods, her head loose like a puppet’s on a slack string. “Right. Of course.” His gaze is so steady, so intent (so concerned) on her that she can’t bear it, and she turns to leave as if that’s all she needs. As if, now that her curiosity is satisfied, she can finally go to bed. But it’s *not* all she cares about and she doesn’t want to toss and turn all night wondering (and she doesn’t want to be one of the people who so thoughtlessly tosses aside the husk of Clark Kent in favor of Superman), so she spins back toward him.

“You haven’t slept,” she accuses him.

He’s frozen in mid-step, his brow furrowed.

Lois tries to strike a natural pose. “Ever since you started going out again, you’ve only stopped for dinner tonight. Well, and to get a new cape. You were gone all last night, and it sure looks like you’re about to head out again.”

He cocks his head at her. Silent. Waiting. (And Clark always did this too, stayed quiet and let her come up with the excuses for him while he watched her with such a guileless expression that she gave up any suspicions in exasperated impatience.) “So?” he asks her.

“So!” Lois gapes at him before flinging out her arms wildly. “So you need *sleep*, Clark! You need to rest and make sure you take time to recharge! You can’t just keep pushing yourself like this!”

His expression clears like morning dullness vanishing at the first whiff of coffee, and he offers her a faint smile, shadowed in the dark. “I don’t actually need much sleep, Lois.”

“Well, I don’t actually need much food,” she says sarcastically (suddenly so aggravated, so annoyed by him, that she wonders how anyone could look at him and *not* see Clark, even without the glasses), “but I find that two or three good meals a day drastically affects my outlook on life.”

For an instant, she thinks he will smile. His mouth curves, his eyes slant (her breath catches), but no. A blink of an eye and he is solemn, somber, regarding her as seriously as ever. He opens his mouth as if to say something (and even now, even after hearing him speak dozens of times, she still feels her heart skip a beat at the thought that she will hear his voice), then seems to think better of it. Finally, leaving her more confused than she was before he began his silent routine of back-and-forth, he reaches out and takes her elbow. Gently. Softly. As mildly as he used to put his hand to her back to guide her from place to place, brief touches she shrank away from or batted away or, during the case with her father, accepted gratefully.

He’s touching her. He’s been smiling at her, and talking to her, and not blaming her, but now he is *touching* her, and Lois’s brain short-circuits at this development.

It’s not for long. He only leads her to the couch and indicates that she should sit down. She does, and his hand is gone. But still she feels it. Like a phantom touch. Like the echoing pain of a limb that’s been amputated.

Looking patient (as if there are not countless people crying for his help even now), he sits beside her, a respectable distance between them, and props his elbows in his lap. He has, she notices distantly, drawn his cape around him as he sits, and she wonders if he is self-conscious (if being Superman is still less natural than Clark Kent ever was).

“Superman’s been missing a long time,” he tells her slowly (and she has to listen, has to pay attention, because he speaks so

rarely, and every word he directs to her is a gift she never thought to be granted). “People are worried about the future. They’re afraid that no one will come when they need help. They need the reassurance of Superman.”

And suddenly Lois understands. A flash of lightning, a burst of chaotic light to illuminate the darkness, and she has to look away, her chest tight. “And,” she says (because he won’t), “you’re trying to make up for all the people you couldn’t help these past couple of weeks while you were”—she looks away and gives a mirthless chuckle at having to use the word again —“*recovering*.”

“I know I can’t save everyone,” he says (but does not believe, she can tell), “but there were a lot I should have been able to.”

“Clark!” she exclaims, hating the self-reproach painted over him like echoes of Kryptonite, leaching him of color and strength and hope. “People don’t even realize that you just saved the entire *world*!”

Clark’s gaze is steady. Level. (Reproachful.) “I don’t do any of this for glory. I don’t care if people know what I did.”

She pretends, with the utmost of control, that that sidelong accusation doesn’t hit home and hurt like a body blow. “I know,” she says quietly. “Believe me, Clark, I *know* that. But the reason Superman’s been gone for so long is because you single-handedly tackled an *asteroid* on a collision course with Earth—and even if all those people blaming you for being gone or doubting you don’t know that, *you* do. But I saw the news—you listen to every accusation they make, hear every person asking where you’ve been, and you *take* it. You believe everything they say even though you *know* you had a good reason—an *excellent* reason—for not being out there on rescues!”

“Maybe I had a good reason this time,” he allows, suddenly nervous. Shifting his weight, looking away, down at the cape he plays between his steady hands, the picture of shame. “But I’ve let people die before, Lois, and not for a good reason.”

Her expression closes down as Lois is brought up short. For a millisecond (for an instant that spans less than a heartbeat), she looks at him and wonders just how well she knows him. Wonders if he plays judge and jury before each rescue. But only for that microsecond. Only for that split instant it takes her to look at this man sitting on a couch in a dark room in a hidden apartment he shares with his family, wrapped in colors he would never wear if not for his selflessness, awash in guilt and shame he has no reason to feel but takes on anyway—and she does not care what he says or what the night shadows try to intimate to her. She knows that he would never *not* save someone if it was in his power to do so.

For a much longer moment, Clark is silent (she thinks he is debating with himself whether to elaborate). But then he breathes in (honesty winning out, as always, and she wonders how he ever thought he could keep a secret identity when he cannot lie) and meets her gaze. “Lois,” he says softly. Intently. “Being Clark Kent was selfish.”

She has never been hit (stabbed, shocked, shot, *hurt*) harder in her life. Never felt so much crushing pain (and maybe his now-habitual silence is only another of his ways to protect the world, if so few of his words can inflict this much damage). She has never looked at someone and felt so much horror.

“All those times I could have been saving lives,” he continues relentlessly, “but I let them die because I was too busy protecting a life that didn’t even really exist. You were right in your article, Lois. You said the world needed Superman.” He lets out a shuddering breath and his eyes flutter closed to hide whatever it is (anguish, resignation, defeat) smoldering in their clouded depths. And then he drives in the final nail. “But it doesn’t need Clark Kent.”

Her mouth is dropped open, her eyes wide and dry (because she can’t blink in this nightmare lest it get even worse), but

finally, at this last blow, she forces dusty words to emerge from her aching throat. “I never said that,” she insists (promises herself). “I never wrote that.”

“Well, no.” He shrugs. “Not in so many words.”

Not in so many words. But it was there. Layered between every line of that article. It was inherent in the fact that she’d written it at all. Because why, why, *why*, write an article telling the world Clark Kent was Superman if she didn’t mean to tell them all, simultaneously, that Superman was more important.

“I have these powers,” Clark says, angling to face her more fully, his conviction evident in his tone and his body language (and how can he be so certain of something that’s so very *wrong?*), “these abilities that no one else does, and that means I have to use them to help as many people as I can. I can’t afford to be selfish anymore. I can’t value my own fantasy over lives in danger.”

And he stands, as if now that this little matter is cleared up between them, they can get back to what they were doing. Back to what is important and crucial and necessary (and so very, very empty).

As if she is not drowning in his lifeblood, spilling out of a mortal wound he cannot see and does not even seem to realize he has, too in shock to comprehend the pain (or maybe he does realize it and simply chooses not to acknowledge it; or realizes it and *hopes* that it will end him so that all his pain will then, too, end).

As if she can ever move or speak again.

He’s leaving, moving away to go back out and be Superman (*Always*, he’d said, and she’s only now beginning to realize exactly what he meant by that). And she cannot let him leave, not like this, not thinking that she has no use for Clark at all.

“Clark!” she calls out desperately, and she reaches out with hands that shake to grab hold of his own solid hand, holding him in place because she came to make sure he was all right and this is *not* all right. “Clark,” she says, “it is not selfishness to live your own life.”

His smile is sad (not hopeful, or patient, or optimistic), almost pitying (not amused, or happy, or wondering, or awed, or any of the usual, painfully beautiful Clark smiles she misses so much), as he looks so gently down on her. “Superman *is* my life,” he tells her. Then his head cocks and his eyes look far beyond her, and he tugs his hand free of hers (setting her loose, letting her go, casting aside everything that grounds him to this world as anything more or *else* than the beacon she once thought so important). “I have to go. Good night, Lois.”

He stands. This stranger with a (cracked, bleeding, ruptured) heart is gone from the room an instant later, but Clark Kent was gone long before that. He’s gone to a night and maybe another day (and another night and another day after that and a lifetime after that) of grief and anguish, of destruction and death, of isolation and loneliness (of a burden so staggering it makes Nightfall look like a pebble). Gone and swallowed up in a symbol so much bigger than him that it’s made him think he is nothing.

And it’s all her fault.

Her face crumples, and she breaks into sobs, there in the living room, out in the open where any of the others can come in and see her, perched on the edge of the couch and feeling as if she is falling and falling and no one is there to catch her (because she killed the only man who would want to save her). He’s gone. She killed Clark Kent, but what’s worse, she left him with only an accusation graven into his tombstone, a lie bigger than any he’s ever told.

He’s gone, and even though Superman is out there saving lives, she does not think the world has ever felt quite so empty, or quite so hopeless.

10

The sun isn’t even up when James slaps off his alarm and yawns his way out of bed. He lets himself take a moment to wish he could sleep for another couple hours before shrugging aside his exhaustion and heading straight for the shower. He has a full day planned and a late start will only make it harder, on him and on the Foundation’s different boards and committees waiting to meet with him. The shower is just what he needs, shocking him to awareness and setting his thoughts racing ahead to everything that’s yet to be done (CK keeps trying to get him to take things slow, but James hasn’t quite gotten the knack down yet).

He’s still not a huge fan of the suits expected of him, but he slips into one with the ease of long practice. Even tying the knot on his tie has become almost second nature, though he knows that before lunch comes around, he’ll probably have managed to lose at least the jacket and probably the tie too. It’s a necessary evil, he reminds himself. Hard enough to get all the officials he spends so much of his days with to take him seriously without showing up in just a sweater or a t-shirt, and if it’s a choice between wearing a tie every day and CK being on his own with the often-mercenary business side of the Foundation, James knows there’s no choice at all.

Still, as mature as he tries to pass himself off as, James refuses to carry around a briefcase. A suit comes with an abundance of pockets, and it’s easier to fold the papers he needs and stick them in one of those than to give in and carry around a suitcase full of nothing but papers. Give him a computer anyday, he thinks with a smirk, and circles his left wrist with his right hand to make sure his watch is secure.

Regretfully, he sneaks a glance at his camera as he pats down his pockets with their crinkly cargo. It’s been too long since he’s been able to go out and get some good shots. Perry would probably go back to calling him a rookie if he came in with some of the photographs he’s taken lately. Not that it matters what Perry thinks anymore, James reminds himself, and he straightens his shoulders.

He checks himself in the mirror one last time. Clean-shaven cheeks. Alert gaze. Neat hair. Crisp suit. Clean lines. Straight back.

The picture of a businessman. The image of a man who knows what he’s doing and will not take no for an answer.

It’s an illusion only paper-thin, but it is all James has. He doesn’t remember what he thought he’d find those first days, fresh from stalking out of the Daily Planet after speaking his mind and tossing down his resignation. He thinks he imagined that he would find Clark in a farmhouse somewhere with his parents, his calm unshaken, his confidence unflappable. He thinks he imagined Clark spinning into Superman and going out to save the day and then coming back in with his smile still fixed in place.

He thinks he was probably dreaming.

What he found... Well, James is still trying to come to terms with what he found at the end of his long, desperate search. Superman isn’t invulnerable, Clark isn’t optimistic, and James is still doing everything he can to fix those two things (those flaws that keep the world from being perfect).

Satisfied that he is as ready as he’ll ever be, James heads for his bedroom door, his pace quick. The Superman Foundation is still based in Metropolis, and a significant portion of his busy days are spent on the private jets and rented helicopters used to ferry him from California to New Troy. He’s careful to use different flight companies, different aliases, different credit accounts (all set up and paid for by the Foundation), careful never to let a pattern develop or a routine set in. The entire point of having CK and his parents live in such an out-of-the-way place is to make sure no one can trace Superman there, and if there’s one thing James has sworn he will never be, it’s the weak link.

The living room is gray with pre-dawn streaks of almost-light. The kitchen light is on, like it always is, but there's no sign of movement and the Kents' bedroom door is still closed. James feels a twinge of disappointment but ignores it. He does need to make some time to spend with Jonathan and Martha, and soon. Having them around is one of the best things that's ever happened to him, and he's afraid that he's been taking them too much for granted. Today's out, of course (too important, the meeting he only alluded to with Clark hanging like a shadow over his mind, only he's afraid to think on it too much because he doesn't want to jinx it), but...soon. Soon he'll take Martha and Jonathan out to the park or something. He can't exactly photograph them (they've already had to leave two cities because of photos of the distinctive, famous couple getting out), but there's always something to be done in a city. If not here, then in the neighboring Coast City.

He's already put his code into the elevator pad and called for it before he realizes he's not the only one awake.

Lois is curled up on one of the couches, pressed so tightly into herself that she looks like nothing more than a smudge in the darkness, a shadow in the scant illumination. James stares at her (at this dim wreck of a woman he once equally feared and admired) for a long moment, not sure what to do, what to say. He thinks she is asleep, thinks that maybe she never went to her room at all. Quickly, almost afraid of what he will see, he flicks a glance to Clark's door, then breathes out a sigh of relief when he sees that the light's off. That means CK's been out for almost two days straight (and he tries to ignore the tightening feeling in the pit of his stomach at that realization), but he's been out for longer before and it's not like there's anything James can say to bring him back. Besides, Lois isn't asleep (she moves enough to let the light of the arriving elevator gleam in minute reflections off the dim pools of her eyes), and James has enough to worry about without adding more (without envisioning Clark's broken heart when Lois inevitably leaves).

"Lois?" he asks, and after a slight hesitation, he abandons the waiting elevator and moves to where he can get a better view of her (ignores the time ticking away the minutes he has left to make it to the Foundation on its East Coast time and conduct all his business before the Board leaves for the evening).

She shifts again, and James feels his breath catch in his throat at both the sight of the tears on her cheeks and the sound of her rasping, painful voice. "You were right," she says. Numbly. Dimly. As if it doesn't matter at all (except the fragility of her admission makes it matter so much that James is frozen in place).

"Right about what?" he asks cautiously.

He knew even before he went to meet her that letting Lois come here was a mistake. He knew he should ignore the ads, the searches being done on him, the letters sent to his past addresses (the begging pleas from a proud woman). But...but she's Lois Lane, and he's never really been able to stand up to her or tell her no (never been able to stop admiring her, even if just with some hidden part of him, long enough to give up on her), so he went and he told CK she wanted to see him, and now here they are. And maybe it's not only Clark he should have been worrying about—maybe he should be worrying about Lois, too.

"I ruined his life," Lois says. She stares straight ahead, a gray shadow against the dark suite, a pale silhouette against the lightening sky ahead of her. "I killed him, and I made him think—" Her voice trembles, breaks, vanishes (James's heart seizes up inside him in mute echo of that tragedy). "Do you *know* what he thinks?"

A grimace passes across his features, and James gives in to the inevitable and lowers himself to the couch (the Board will have to wait). "It's not exactly something we chat about over lunch, but...yeah, I've picked up on a lot of it."

She brings her hands up to cover her face (such a childlike

gesture that James has to fight the sudden urge to hug her), and she seems to shrink even though he doesn't know how because she's already so small. "I made him think he was public property, Jimmy! I made him think he was nothing more than a hobby for a superhero!"

"Yes," James agrees, ignoring her shocked, wounded look. "You did. You made him think it. Perry made him think it. Every one of us at the Daily Planet made him think it. The entire world lets him think that. And right now, there's only a very few of us who are trying to let him know that the world is wrong. Clark's probably the most selfless person I've ever met, so it's not exactly easy trying to convince him to put Clark Kent ahead of the world. But you know what, Lois?"

And he leans forward, lets a little bit of the intensity caged inside him show, lets his cool façade slide a bit to reveal the fierce determination he's felt ever since finding Clark in a run-down hotel, in hiding, terrified for his parents and running himself ragged trying to keep them both safe while constantly flying to Metropolis to check on Lois (ever since the day he found Superman frayed and desperate and lost). There's a terrible purpose living inside James now, always, a voracious beast locked up within his ribcage, pacing and rumbling, waiting, always, for its perfect moment, to come out and protect CK and his parents, to make sure they are not harmed and to give them everything they deserve.

The Kents all share a lack of self-regard, a selflessness that borders on all but suicidal, and they will not protect themselves. They will not put their own lives ahead of anyone else's, or go out of their way to find their own happiness if it means being even slightly selfish. And all that stands between the Kents and the cold, harsh world James has known since running on the streets and then ending up in prison is James himself.

One lone defender to stand between them and the worst life has to offer.

Only him. Only him and the businessman image he projects. Only him and the computer skills he uses, always, to cover their tracks, to make sure they cannot be traced, to reroute Foundation funds to pay for this apartment and their transportation and whatever else they need (and Clark can argue until he's blue in the face about not wanting to take charity money, but James knows that the Kents deserve it just as much as or more than any other hopeless case). Only him and the optimism he forces himself to show around the Kents, to make Clark smile and stand straighter, to make Martha confident someone is fighting for her son, to make Jonathan rest a bit easier that they have a place to live and a home for his boy to come back to (to make his own personal fears stay confined to the dark shadows of his mind).

Only him in a world full of enemies, but he will not fail. He will not give up. He will not give anything but his best, even when that means facing a woman he once feared, means looking into her wrecked eyes and telling her that she did this to them. Even when it means looking at her and making the desperate, intuitive, half-insane leap that maybe she can be an ally (can stand with him to protect the Kents; can join forces with him so that there will be two defenders where there has been only one).

"You know what, Lois?" he asks softly. Intently. Urgently. "We know that Clark is important. We *know* the world is wrong. And we *can* convince CK of it. It'll take time, and effort, everything we have, and maybe more besides. But I'm pretty sure it's worth it. So I guess the question is...what will *you* do to bring Clark Kent back?"

"Anything," Lois breathes, her eyes locked on him as if she has never seen him before (the way she's looked at him, briefly, a few times this past week, but never like this, so openly, so fully). "I'll do anything."

Something loosens its suffocating hold on his lungs, and James can't help but grin at her. Proud and relieved but still

wary(because for Lois Lane, *anything* is a broad spectrum).
“Then, Lois, welcome to the family.”

Of course, it won't be as easy as that. He knows that (if there's one thing he's learned in the past six months, it's that nothing ever comes easy), but it feels good to know he doesn't have to worry so much about Lois's presence. He's beginning to think that she doesn't realize her own reason for coming (has begun to accept that she has no idea why she cannot forget Clark Kent), and yet, it doesn't really matter. He's pretty sure she won't betray their location to anyone, accidentally or otherwise, and so all that's left is to worry what she'll do to CK's all-too-vulnerable heart before she heads back to Metropolis, and that isn't entirely James's business (he'll still worry, but from afar).

He's desperately late, but he takes the time to nudge Lois toward her bedroom, to extract a promise from her that she'll sleep (to wonder what exactly happened last night, or how long CK was here, talking alone with her, when James and the Kents both have been doing their best to make sure Clark doesn't have to face her alone). She goes too easily (the fight drained out of her), but James doesn't have the time or the energy to worry about her, not right now. Later, when he's waiting for his plane to reach Metropolis, he can think back on the bruises under her eyes, the boniness of her shoulder under his hand, the brokenness to her voice. But right now, he's got to get to the airport before the day's a total loss.

The sun's risen by the time he makes it through traffic to the airport where his latest jet is chartered. Next time he'll have to leave a day before his meetings are scheduled since he'll have to go to a different city (probably a different state, too) to catch a flight. Or, he thinks with the beginnings of a grin as he spots a blur of red and blue descending toward him, he could just catch a ride with his friend.

“Hey, CK!” he calls out with a wave as Superman lands in front of him. He doesn't bother to look around to make sure no one's looking; Clark knows better than to land and talk to him where anyone can see them. “How's it going?”

“Not bad,” Clark says, and James relaxes a bit when Clark smiles. A real smile. So, James thinks, no bad rescues and no over-the-top accusations. He's glad. After the past couple weeks (after the days of his friend looking so tired and drawn and *hurt*; after weeks of watching Clark get more and more despondent, to the point where James had almost talked to a few doctor friends of his), it's more than good to see Clark with a smile. He needs the rescues, James thinks yet again. Needs the assurance that he is helping.

But Superman needs Clark Kent, too (needs the assurance that he is human), and that's only one of the reasons James needs to get to Metropolis.

“I actually came to see if you wanted a ride,” Clark adds, and he grins at James's blatant sigh of relief. “I noticed your plane wasn't gone yet, and I thought you'd wanted to be in Metropolis by two their time.”

“I'm sure you hear this all the time,” James says cheekily, “but you are a lifesaver. I'm running about half an hour late already, and I have a full day planned.”

“Glad to help,” Clark says, and he steps forward.

In the beginning, Clark would carry James like he did anyone else, scooped up in his arms like a bride being carried over the threshold (and even lately, during a few of their close calls when people with less-than-sterling qualities have come for James, Clark's scooped him up that way to get him to safety), but James has finally managed to convince him that is just *not* a manly way to be carried. Now, James slings an arm over Clark's shoulder, Clark slings his own arm around James's back, and they fly side by side. It's more comfortable for James, and if it isn't for Clark, he's never mentioned it.

“Anything special going on?” James asks, fighting to keep

his voice casual as the ground disappears into a smudgy panorama beneath his feet.

Clark shrugs, making James tighten his arm around his friend's shoulders. “Not particularly. We should probably talk about what the Foundation's stance is on Superman's recent disappearance.”

“Nothing.” James firms his chin, looks straight ahead, anything to avoid looking into Clark's eyes and letting his friend see the pity swimming there. “We say nothing and let them realize that Superman has his own life and sometimes that has to take precedence.”

Clark's silence is (as always; as proven so ably these past months) as eloquent as another man's rant. He does not, James knows, think that his life should *ever* take precedence over anyone he can help. But that is why James is here. That is why James is heading toward a meeting Clark only *thinks* he knows the reason for.

“Don't worry, CK.” James manages a clumsy pat to Clark's shoulder. “Trust me, all right?”

He wishes Clark would joke back. Wishes he would roll his eyes and make a snarky comment. But that is what Clark would do, and Clark is hidden, half-submerged beneath the smothering, suffocating weight of his own preconceptions about what is left to him and what has been stolen from him. So all he does is nod and say, “You know I do. Do you think this meeting will produce results?”

“I hope so,” James says, and wishes he had a better answer, but he doesn't (not if he doesn't want to lie). “But I promise, CK, I'm doing everything I can.”

“I know. I just...I want them to be safe. No matter what.”

“They will be,” James promises (and it's a stupid promise with absolutely nothing behind it, but he makes it anyway because he already made it to himself that first day after finding Clark on the run with his parents, and makes it anew every single day, when he puts on a suit and knots a tie around his neck). “I won't let anything happen to Mr. and Mrs. K—if they weren't around, I'd starve!”

The answering smile that transforms Superman's face into something more closely resembling the Superman of old (the Superman worn around the softened contours and rounded edges of Clark Kent) is slow, but it's real, and that's good enough for James.

He thinks that will be it (conversation with Clark is brief and rare nowadays, snatched between rescues or fly-offs to the rejuvenating sun), but Clark surprises him by slowing down just as the cityscape of Metropolis comes into view. Not that James looks too closely; flying is great in theory, but just a bit too harrying in practice.

“James,” Clark says, almost warily. “I...I picked up a few more paper trails on the Boss, and they all very conclusively lead to Luthor. With the statements I have from Phillip Manning and Toni Taylor, I think I'm ready to take it to Henderson.”

James takes a breath, another, and then another, because this is important (this means a lot to the remnants of CK, a quest left over from before the end of everything) and he doesn't want to blow this (doesn't want to undermine this last bit of Clark Kent confidence displayed in Superman). “Okay,” he finally says. “You're the investigator; if you say you have enough, I believe you. But if Superman swoops in to talk to a New Troy inspector, you can bet the media will be swarming. Let me take a couple days and get a meeting ironed out somewhere quiet. If Luthor's as dangerous or as sneaky as you say, the extra precautions can't hurt.”

“All right,” Clark agrees. “But I want this all taken care of before Lois goes back.”

James frowns. “I thought you said Luthor wasn't bothering her anymore.”

“He’s not bothering her, but he is following her. He knows she flew to Coast City, though he doesn’t know exactly where she is now, or what she’s doing. He had a hard time keeping up with her on her cross-country foray.” Clark pauses and gives James a wry smile. “Really, James, just how long did you intend to make her chase you?”

“I had to see that she was serious, didn’t I?” James laughs, and pretends he doesn’t notice that he laughs alone. “So, I’ll make sure the meeting is soon, just to make sure Lois isn’t around. You really think Luthor would go after her?”

“I think that when he realizes he’s been had, he’ll go after whatever leverage he can get his hands on. Which is why I intend to stop him, before he can hurt anyone else.” Clark’s voice is hard, implacable. Stern and impenetrable, as unyielding as the world believes Superman to be. And yet, James has heard it turn this steel-like only when Clark Kent speaks of Lex Luthor. He doesn’t know what caused the enmity and hasn’t ever felt the need to ask, but he’d have to be blind and stupid to miss just how badly Clark burns to take down this millionaire.

A determination shared equally with Superman, as if here, finally, the two identities can mesh and merge and mingle.

Sometimes it’s seemed Luthor is the only thing driving Clark outside of the Suit, the only topic that can pause Superman long enough for the reporter to peek through the seams (and secretly, deep down, it has made James glad, to have this link back to the CK he admired so much he followed him out of one life and into another). But...but if this quest is about to come to an end (if Clark is about to see justice served for at least a few crimes committed against the reporter and man he used to be), then what will happen next? What will, in the coming weeks and months, supersede Superman and wake up CK and remind them all of the man they’ve sacrificed so much for?

A problem for later. For another day when he does not have a special meeting planned without the Board’s knowledge and a full afternoon with the Board itself.

“I’ll have a time for you by tomorrow,” James promises smoothly. Easily. Another quick promise. Another rash statement. But James can’t help it. Clark deserves everything, and receives so little, and so James finds himself trying to get him everything he possibly can, no matter how many suits and ties he has to wear. No matter how many jets he has to charter or how many early mornings he has to face or how many times he has to move in a year. None of that matters, not next to what he wants to do for Clark.

And all because of a single Godzilla doll.

Funny. Even after all this time, all that has happened between, it takes only the slightest memory of that absurd doll with its red trunks and sloppy red S painted across its chest to take James straight back to that moment. Laughing at the doll. Hiding his amused smile from the furious and...aromatic...Lois. And then realizing what that Godzilla doll meant. Looking up to see Clark smiling innocently and reaching out a daring hand to brush across Lois’s cheek (teaching her a lesson).

That’s all it had taken to make Jimmy (the boy he’d once been; the young man CK had befriended and encouraged and believed in; the idealistic could-have-been that had been killed just as surely as Clark had been, struck down before he could become as jaded and cynical as the rest of the Daily Planet employees) realize that bravery could sometimes come in small but explosive forms. That taking a stand and fighting for the right things were as noble and heroic as breaking through bank vaults and taking down prize fighters. That he could stand up to his own Lois Lane (and maybe Perry White wasn’t quite as volatile or as vindictive as Lois, but he was scary enough anyway) because Clark had showed him how.

And that Godzilla doll (a casual conversation between himself and Clark; throwaway words he’d never thought would

come to fruition because no one ever listened to him...but Clark had) was all it had taken to make Jimmy hand in his resignation. Walk out of the only place he’d ever wanted to work, away from the people he’d made into a pseudo-family. Follow a cold, hard trail after a man he still admires and a hero he can’t stop trying to protect. Get up far too early in the morning and dress in business suits and meet with corporate executives and spend his life on the run.

Because Clark had listened, and Clark had cared (about Jimmy’s ideas, and Jimmy’s troubles with Perry, and Jimmy’s life; about *Jimmy*, before he became James), and James wants to do the same for Clark.

Not for Superman (or not *only* Superman).

But Clark Kent. CK. The reporter who wanted to make a difference. The man who wanted to help. The son who wanted to make his parents proud. The friend who wanted to be there.

The person who simply disappeared so few months ago.

He wants to listen to *Clark* and *care* and try to make his casual conversation *matter*. But it’s hard when Clark has gone so silent. All he has now is Superman (harrowing and draining and so destructive that sometimes James wonders if maybe the superhero doesn’t do more harm than good), and this quest against Luthor (and if that’s coming to an end, then that’s one less thing to keep Clark here, connected and involved).

One Godzilla doll, and sometimes James wonders what would be different now if Clark *hadn’t* sent Lois on that wild-Godzilla-chase. He wonders if he would have had the courage to tell Perry what he thought about that fateful article. Wonders if he would have the family he does now or if both he and the Kents would be alone, but separately. Wonders if there’d be a Superman at all, or a world for that matter, in the wake of Nightfall.

It makes him wonder, but things are what they are (and no amount of wishing or praying or bargaining can change them; he’s already tried), and all they can do is go forward. Even if he is alone. Even if he’s constantly afraid that his juggling act just isn’t enough.

Clark drops him off a few blocks from the Foundation, down an empty street, and looks at him so earnestly (so hopefully, this little bit of hope he still allows himself to have). And James gives him a solemn nod (a sober promise) and waves him off, and then he takes his time walking toward the high-rise that houses the largest charity organization in the world (he’s gone from being hopelessly late to being shamefully early; it’ll give him time to prepare a meeting between Superman and Henderson). The walk in through the back doors by way of an underground alley only a few people know about is one he’s taken countless times, the elevator so familiar he can see it in his sleep (and often does, unfortunately), but that gives him the time he needs to compose what he plans to say to his special committee.

Or rather, Clark’s special committee—with one important distinction.

“Find a way to keep my parents safe no matter what happens to me,” Clark had asked him, just before hurling himself up into space to stop a meteor so big James doesn’t think he can fully comprehend it (and he chooses not to spend too much time thinking about it; seeing Clark flying up into space alone and then finding him passed out in his bedroom, tattered and torn, is too much for him already).

A simple enough task in theory (though the Secret Service would be a better solution than any James can come up with), but James has chosen to interpret it slightly differently.

CK wants his parents safe no matter what, and *obviously* the best way to keep them safe is to bring Clark Kent back from his imprisonment behind the red cape.

To resurrect Clark Kent as a whole. As an individual. As a mask.

As a man.

“How’s it going?” James asks without preamble as soon as he’s through the door. He’s assembled only the most loyal, the brightest, the ones who call Superman Mr. Kent (the ones he’s vetted through a dozen different means and methods in the hopes none of them will betray him), but they’re absentminded and prone to distraction; he’s learned it’s best to approach them directly, startle them into straight answers, and then exit before they can regain their composure.

“Mr. Olsen!” Dr. Klein is the first to stand, always the most eager, the most frenetic. Dr. Hamilton is slower and more eccentric, while Dr. Irons is the voice of calm reason; and Dr. Faulkner, though hot-tempered, brings a touch of much-needed patience to the group. None are, on their own, what James would call his first choice, not when he’s looking for a miracle, but they are what he has and they are fiercely devoted to Superman and that is good enough (and all he can do besides).

“James, we weren’t expecting you for a while more.” Dr. Irons nonetheless pulls out a chair from around the table strewn with blueprints, scribbled outlines, random doodles, and a myriad of other things James doesn’t examine too closely.

He shrugs and sits down, loosening his tie so that it doesn’t feel nearly so constricting in the close, dark room. “Change of plans. Please tell me you’ve thought of something.”

Dr. Faulkner glances at the others before giving a soft shrug. “I don’t know, James. Maybe if we’d tried coming up with something just after the reveal... As it is, it’s very likely that too much time has passed for any solution to be viable. The fact that Superman is Clark Kent is too firmly entrenched in the public consciousness.”

“I know,” James says, trying not to show his frustration (his desperate, ferocious desire to *fix* this), “but there’s got to be something we can do or say to explain it away. I mean, Superman having the persona of an ordinary man who grew up in Kansas—a super-powered being contained by the morals of a really good man—would ordinarily be too fantastical for belief! The tabloids are always coming out with ‘proof’ that the whole thing is a hoax. Conspiracy theorists constantly emerge with new ways it could all be a sham. Surely there’s something in all their doubts that we can use!”

“That’s exactly our problem.” Dr. Hamilton taps his fingers over the surface of the cluttered table, his shock of hair glinting under the fluorescent lights. “No matter what we say or do, there will always be people who won’t buy it, who will insist that Clark Kent and Superman are the same.”

“I’m not worried about the fringe elements.” James takes a deep breath. It’s always so hard to put this into words, to dare to consign his fragile hope to the confines of harsh reality where it can be so easily flattened. “I just want to find a way for Clark Kent to come back. For him to be able to have a life, a job, a walk down a street without being mobbed. Now, surely you’ve come up with *something*?”

There’s a long silence (his hopes crumbling a tick of the clock at a time) before Dr. Klein finally scoots forward to perch on the edge of his stool, shoved up against a counter holding various scientific equipment familiar from James’s once-frequent visits to STAR Labs. “We may have a way,” the scientist says. “It’s risky, and definitely not foolproof, but it’s about the only thing we can come up with.”

“Something?” Every nerve in James’s body is set suddenly alight. “That’s far more than we’ve had up until now. What is it?”

The group of brains all exchange looks, and then they turn, agitatedly and intently, back to James.

It’s not hope he’s feeling. Not exactly. But it’s the closest thing to it he’s felt in almost four months, and suddenly his suit jacket doesn’t feel nearly so constricting.

11

James’s admonition gives Lois the strength to rise to her feet, to take just enough heavy, lethargic steps to reach her bed (the *guest* bed, but she doesn’t plan on leaving any time soon to make room for any other guests so it might as well be hers). She realizes, as soon as she crumples onto the edge of the bed, that she didn’t close the door behind her. Not that it matters; why should she be granted a modicum of privacy when she’s stolen every bit of that same luxury from the Kents? Besides, she finds that she likes the shaft of artificial light stamped across the dark room, a straight, narrow golden beam contrasted sharply against the more diffused, more abstract, silvered light creeping in along the edges of the window. That golden rectangle looks like a path. A road clearly marked. An arrow pointing the way she should go, giving her direction and purpose and hope.

“We know that Clark is important...and we *can* convince CK of it,” James had said. “What will you do to bring Clark Kent back?”

“Anything,” she’d replied, and now that promise thrums in her like strength, like resolve, like purpose and adrenaline and a reason to keep going. It no longer feels as if she is held together by an invisible body-cast. Instead, she feels as if James (not *Jimmy*, as she’s been so stubbornly pretending he still is, but *James*) has reached inside her (with surgeon’s hands; with a blazing trumpet’s call to arms) and threaded her through with silken titanium lines, with artificial bones, pumping her heart full of infused blood so that she is borne up under the power of what lies beneath her skin.

A promise (to fix what she broke).

A vow (to resurrect the man she killed).

A common purpose (to bring back hope and light and sound to the world; to her; to *him*).

And she thinks that she should be filled with restless energy, with urgent impatience to accomplish this impossible end. But she is *not* filled with energy. She is *not* ready to take on the world and wrestle with impossibilities, to battle death and misconceptions and her own guilt. She feels, instead, as drained as if she really has just emerged from surgery and now sedatives are pulling her down into a dark, echoing well. She feels...weary and empty (but a good empty, like a wasted victim finally cleansed and emptied and stripped of a debilitating disease).

“I *am* going to help you, Clark,” she murmurs into the still air (a reaffirmation of the sacred oath she has made, the order she has just bound herself to), staring at that golden shaft (that promising path). And she wonders if he can hear her. If, somewhere (between rescues as he hovers in the air and listens for heartbeats on the verge of *stopping*; shoulder-deep in helpless people so in need of a hero that they latch onto him with no care of the price), he hears that whisper. If he stops whatever he is doing and tilts his head in her direction and shivers beneath all the implications of her whispered vow. She hopes, if he does hear her, that it makes his burdens lighter. Hopes he knows she is truly sorry (the remembered taste of peppermint burns on her tongue like fire) and that she will do anything to make amends. She hopes he is happy to know she is here, waiting for him.

She fears that she hopes in vain.

She fears that he feels only a cold foreboding, a shiver down his spine that makes it harder for him to focus on the impossible task he has set himself of saving the world one victim at a time.

And with these dual images stark in her mind, these twin thoughts of Clark’s reactions, she succumbs to the exhaustion rampaging through her unchecked.

And for the first time since her terrible crime, Lois feels, when she wakes up to a hand on her shoulder, actually *rested*. She feels as if sleep has finally been able to reach past the heavy, cloying barriers isolating her, has reached past and left them as rubble in its wake and swept away her weariness like cobwebs

and dust. So she isn't scared or startled or confused when she opens her eyes and rolls to her back and sees Martha Kent looking down at her, expression shadowed in the dim light.

"Lois?" Martha asks. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Lois says, and though her voice is rusty, she smiles to know she isn't lying. She isn't *well*, isn't *wonderful*, isn't *good as new*, but she is *fine*. She is healing, has repented and seen how to make amends for all the wrongs she's done, and that is more progress than she made in all those weeks and months sitting so listless and frail at her desk.

"Are you sure? You've slept through breakfast *and* lunch. Are you..." And here, surprisingly, a hint of uncertainty slithers through Martha's normally unwavering voice. "Are you sick? Do you need a doctor?"

Oh.

No wonder, Lois thinks (with a swift spurt of shame), Martha sounds so worried. No wonder she hesitated before asking this fateful question. After all, Lois Lane going to a doctor in a strange city (she still does not know the name of it) so far from Metropolis can only attract attention. Lois Lane (the reporter who exposed Superman, who discovered his secret before anyone else did, who many still believe to have an inside track on him) showing up on the West Coast would draw so many questions. So much media attention. A multitude of people flocking after her in the belief that she might have uncovered a new world-shaking secret (and she has, one that has done more than shake it, has changed it altogether, but she is jealous of this secret and does not intend to share it with anyone).

Lois Lane *here* would mean the Kents and James will have to pick up and leave (pack up their scant pictures and the crumbs of their life that they've gathered around themselves to dress up the emptiness of their future; pack it all up and leave even more of themselves behind in the process). Start all over again somewhere else. Assume different names. Find a new suite of rooms. Hope this newest setback doesn't rip away the last few fragments of Clark remaining to them.

Lois realizes all this in an instant (a blinding flash of shock and guilt and terrible responsibility, like phantom pains), and she doesn't feel *fine* anymore. She feels *awful*. She feels lower than the criminals she used to spend so much time seeing locked behind bars. She feels as if she is bathing in peppermint shame.

"I'm fine," she says again, quickly (the lie returning to the phrase so that she wonders if she will ever again be able to tell the truth). She sits up in bed to prove it, to reassure Martha that she will not be stealing this life, too, from them. "Really. I just...I didn't get to sleep until it was already light outside."

"Ah." The relief that lightens Martha's voice is enough to make Lois's tension ease, ever so slightly. "That'll do it, I suppose. I'm an early bird myself—comes from living on a farm."

Lois forces a smile, aware that Martha can see *her* clearly even though the light at Martha's back (that golden pathway turned into a blinding halo silhouetting this humble, admirable woman) means *she* can't read Martha's expression. "I'm sure. Yet another reason the country life has never appealed to me."

But that, apparently, is the wrong thing to say (the wrong reminder, of Smallville and green rocks and burning barns), because Martha stiffens slightly (and Lois begins to think that she should adopt Superman's silence for her own because words, written or spoken, do too much to harm and wound and destroy). "Well," the older woman says, "I didn't mean to intrude. But the door *was* left open."

"Right. I...forgot to close it. But it's fine, really. I should be up by now anyway."

"There's food in the kitchen," Martha says, and she leaves, pointedly closing the door behind her.

Slowly (but purposely too, because she cannot forget the

sacred trust James has extended to her, inducted her into), Lois drifts to her feet and over to the closet where her few remaining outfits are stored. She reaches out and chooses (carefully, but numbly, without allowing herself to think too hard on it and lose her tiny burst of momentum) an outfit. Coordinated and nice and colorful, purples and tans, flattering (or at least it was before she stopped caring about eating) and comfortable (or at least it would be if she could focus on such trivialities). It's been so long since she's taken any special care with her appearance (she tries not to remember the dress she'd seen displayed at that Smallville Corn Festival, the temptation to buy it that she'd ignored in favor of sneaking into Trask's camp), and it feels alien, anathema to her, that she should worry about how she looks when a few strokes with a hairbrush and a sprinkling of perfume and a clean outfit cannot possibly distract from all the ruin she's caused.

For Clark, she reminds herself. She cannot expect him to care about himself if she will not bother to care about herself either. Perry sent her to save Superman in order to make up for destroying Clark, but Lois doesn't want to save Superman (or not Superman *only*), not when it is Clark Kent she wants to revive and rejuvenate and restore.

When she emerges from her room into the amber-lit living area, there's no sign of Martha, James is still gone, and only Jonathan is present. He looks up from the cupboard he's digging through beneath the counter, and offers her a smile. "Good morning, Lois," he offers, and Lois has to stifle the sudden, surprising urge to hug the sturdy man, to try to soak in some of that strength and forgiveness like Clark soaks in sunlight.

Trembling with the force of denying that urge, she offers a shaky smile. "More like afternoon, I think."

"Morning for you," he says with a wink (and if his joviality is a bit forced, Lois doesn't let herself dwell on it). "Breakfast? Martha left out some bread and honey, and I'm sure I can rustle up some juice for you."

Opening her mouth to refuse, Lois stops and reconsiders. "All right," she decides. "That sounds good."

She's grateful for Jonathan's gruff warmth, his steady presence, as she makes and eats a few slices of honeyed toast (taken aback by the pleasure of the taste, so unlike peppermint, exploding on her tongue) and drinks a glass of orange juice (and she finds she doesn't mind the strong citrus flavor this time).

"So, uh...what were you looking for in the cupboard?" she asks when her breakfast is winding down (when she starts to be afraid that Jonathan will leave her all alone in the draining silence).

"Oh." Jonathan smiles and holds up a small hand spade. "I try to keep most of my tools up by the garden, but sometimes Martha appropriates a few pieces for her art projects."

Lois decides not to even try to puzzle out how a spade could be used for art. "Your garden?" she asks.

"Just a small one, more for enjoyment than necessity, but I take it seriously anyway." Jonathan stops and regards her a moment, then offers, "Would you like to help me?"

It's every bit as much an inclusion, an induction, as James's call to arms, she thinks. Every bit as daring and risky as Clark allowing her to come here at all. She halfway expects another load of responsibility to bow her shoulders, another layer of pressure to crush her, but none comes. Instead, she feels as if Jonathan has added more titanium threads to hold her together, poured more steel into her bones, more fire into her blood.

"Yes," she whispers (so she will not shout). "I'd love to help. Thank you."

"Everybody needs a second chance at one point or another," he murmurs, and then he turns and leads her to the elevator.

A tremor of something (fear or uncertainty or maybe just an awareness of the poignancy of this moment, the first time she's left the suite) surges and trembles inside her. She watches her

feet, stares as they pass the threshold of the elevator, one after the other, then looks up to see the double doors slide closed on the setting (bare and homey; scant and comforting) that's grown so familiar to her. And even though she knows Jonathan would simply tell her to leave if he were kicking her out, she nonetheless feels an instant of loss, of gaping emptiness at losing the little ground she's managed to gain.

"James made sure we could set aside a bit of the roof for a garden," Jonathan confides as the red numbers tick upward. He pretends not to notice her thinly veiled panic. "He's worried I'll get too depressed if I have nothing to do. And," he leans closer to her, lowers his voice, mischief sparking in his voice, "don't tell him, but he's probably right. A small garden is nothing at all like running a farm, but it's a fun hobby. And a very nice thought."

"Is James the one who finds you places to live?" The question is out before she can think better of it (before she remembers what he will think to hear *her* asking such things) and bite it back.

But Jonathan doesn't give any hint that he's nervous about her line of questioning.

"He does what he can for us," he replies, and it isn't a full answer, but she doesn't care (it's so much better than cold silence).

When the elevator comes to a stop, it opens to a top floor, a hallway and a door leading to stairs that in turn lead out to the roof of a skyscraper she only vaguely remembers seeing from the outside. Lois has chased a handful of people onto rooftops, has set up surveillance on dozens of concrete stretches, but she has never seen a roof like this. It's green and lush, layered in rows upon rows of ankle-high sprouts, several different kinds, stretching out to every side of her. The concrete is hidden beneath plants, the emerald of life back-dropped by sapphire skies, a familiar scene turned magical.

"This is a *small* garden?" Lois blurts as she steps out onto the only concrete in sight, a straight gray pathway leading to branch out between the rows of greenery, which are, she notices, set in deep, long boxes of wood—planters of a size that make her blink and gape. Some paths have a sheen of water spraying out from nozzles set along the edges of the planters, sparkling like diamonds in the undiluted carnelian and topaz sun.

Jonathan's deep chuckle reverberates just behind her, and when she looks back at him, she sees the layer of soft pride coating his features. "We might have gone a bit overboard," he admits, then grins. "But it keeps me busy and out of Martha's hair. I know it's more than we can eat ourselves, but Martha already has plans to sell most of it at various farmer's markets, and to give some of it away to a few shelters she volunteers at. We'll see how that turns out."

Questions leap to her mouth, crowding there like anxious informants, but fortunately, her lack of practice in indulging her curiosity gives her the second she needs to realize the answers herself.

"We'll see how that turns out," he said, because they cannot plan too far ahead. Because they have to be careful in what they decide to do and what markets they attend and where they might be spotted. Because their everyday activities can only be planned around constant uncertainties.

The ever-present threat of exposure, of discovery, of ruin, hounds their every decision. Every plan. Every moment.

But Jonathan smiles anyway. He stands there among the seeds of wonderment, of beauty amidst mediocrity, and he has dared to care again, to devote himself to something that might be snatched away from him at a moment's notice. Has invited his son's destroyer into this lovingly tended oasis. And he still smiles.

She cannot comprehend it. Cannot understand it. Cannot value it enough.

And she stares at this older, heavysset man, so weathered and beaten, and thinks he is more beautiful than all the lushness surrounding her.

"Can..." She pauses to lick her lips (to gather up courage enough to speak the rest of her request). "Can I help you?"

He winks at her, and Lois has to clench her fists to keep from hugging him (knowing he probably wouldn't welcome the tactile gratitude). "I was hoping you'd ask."

She's never had a green thumb. She can kill even the hardiest plant stuck on the corner of her desk every time New Year's resolutions roll around. She doesn't like to dig in the dirt while the sun presses down on her back and insects crawl out from under her knees and straight, healthy rows seem to grow more crooked under her care. She's not farmer material by any stretch of the imagination.

But she doesn't care. That afternoon—and the afternoons following after, when she follows Jonathan up to his refuge—are treasured moments quickly stored away as beloved memories. Jonathan's soft, instructive voice. His dry, warm hands guiding hers in weeding and watering and pruning. His welcoming smile each time she follows him into the elevator. His quiet (as opposed to *silence*, and she's not sure how he balances that distinction so well) presence when she doesn't dare let herself think of anything but the dirt under her fingers. His understated wisdom that brings her, unbidden, countless thoughts of a young, smiling Clark kneeling at his father's side in a Kansas field or an older, pensive Clark following his dad from field to field, employing terrifying, alien power to grow crops of food, to nurture living, fragile things, to contribute to continued life.

Occasionally, when she stays quiet and manages a few, real smiles, Jonathan will begin to talk, to tell her about how they found tiny, baby Clark in a field after following a blazing trail through the sky. About how they hid him from suspicious government men (Bureau 39, Lois thinks, and for that night, experiences a resurgence in her nightmares). About Clark's young years, about his earnest desire to help, his terror of isolation, his simultaneous resignation to always being alone.

Small memories. Tiny moments. Quiet confidences. But taken altogether, they paint a beautiful, shining picture of the man she killed. The man she's come to save. Soft, fond recollections that form a quilt covered over with budding plants and glowing sun and gruff voice and beneath which she begins, slowly, to heal. To recover. To remember who she is under the scars of her crimes and to see what she has become with them, like physical therapy for her soul doled out by the kindest, most patient of therapists.

For the first few days of this new routine, James watches her suspiciously over dinner. Warily, as if fearing she will fracture the tenuous peace this small family has managed to find. Martha is surprised at first, then thoughtful, then, days later, she gives what seems to be (Lois hopes) grudging acceptance, displayed a bit more openly when she freely offers to help Lois get her laundry done in a small room through a door in the kitchen Lois always supposed to be a pantry.

It's hard to tell what Clark thinks because she sees him only rarely, briefly, and she's never quite sure when he's out or when he's home (and she has the idea that it would only make her feel awful all over again to know how little he allows himself to stop being Superman, so she tries not to think of it). He is always unfailingly polite when he alights long enough to see her, always greeting her with a smile and asking her if everything is all right. He never says anything about her leaving, never asks her how long she's planning on interrupting his life (none of them ask, and she wonders if they're that afraid of what she'll do when she leaves); he makes simple, easy conversation about topics that matter only to him (and to her, simply *because* they matter to him), bouncing back and forth between a diminished Superman

and a wistful Clark.

Not that it is entirely his fault their conversations never go any deeper.

She is awkward with him. Not sure what to say or how to face him after getting such a clear, in-depth look at the ruins left to him. She wants to apologize, but he will not let her. She wants to explain herself (to tell him about Trask's voice whispering in her ear and tests posed him he didn't even know about; explain about adjoining tents and overheard confessions and shattered misconceptions), but he has already found and made an explanation for her (as if being a reporter is enough to excuse her actions). She wants to tell him she will not rest until she fixes what she did to him, but she does not want to listen to him try to explain away all the many, *many* reasons that's impossible.

She wants to reach past the hybrid-stranger in front of her and pull out the endearing, intriguing, innocent Clark Kent who worked at the Daily Planet so very briefly, wants to talk to him and make him laugh and see him smile with that secret hope... but she knows that is beyond even her.

So she cannot help but be awkward and stilted and unsure every time he gives her that distant smile and lets her hear his voice once more. She cannot help but look at him and hear the echo of Jonathan's voice in her head, pulling back the curtain on what it must be like to be him, and it is insight given (and sought) too late, but it's nestled inside her now and she cannot look at this broken stranger and *not* see that young man so restless and on fire to make his mark in the world (not as a hero; not as a strange visitor; but as a *man*). And gradually, as the days become a week, and then another week, and then fades into the beginning of a third one, Lois cannot keep her own silence any longer. She can't keep pretending he is a stranger, or that she is here only to assuage her guilty conscience or find some form of closure. She can't let him keep walking away from her, not when her promise (to James, and to herself) sits inside her like a story left unwritten, a trail left unfollowed, an investigation left uncovered.

Bravery, she tells herself. She must be brave. Must take hold of that solid, silken strength implanted within her and use it to stand her ground. To look into Clark's aloof eyes and try to break his silence.

Because he *is* silent. Still. Always.

He talks, but the words don't mean anything. He asks her questions, but they are inane. He makes conversation, but it never goes anywhere.

It is only another form of silence, a second wall, and she has made her way past the first, but this second one is even thicker and higher and deeper.

But she is Lois Lane, she reminds herself. And James's steady looks during dinners, Jonathan's thoughtful expressions when he doesn't think she knows he's watching her, Martha's worry so sloppily hidden—they all remind her of how much she has yet to do and how little she has accomplished so far. *She* feels better, feels more in line with her old self (but a *better* self, a *self* that would never print the story she did five months ago), but Clark...Clark is still lost. He is still broken.

And he deserves to be whole. Deserves it far more than *she* does.

So she waits, until an evening when he is home. When he eats dinner and then makes to get up and leave but catches his mother's eye and instead nods and relaxes (he will go out later, Lois knows, after Martha is asleep; but for now, he will stay to ease his family's worry). She waits until they have all moved into the living area. She waits until Martha and James are discussing Martha's latest painting, and Jonathan is engrossed in the news. She waits until Clark looks happy (or as happy as he ever looks anymore, which means he looks contented and tired), and then she approaches him.

"Clark," she says, and pretends it doesn't hurt to see the tiny,

instant smile that flashes almost every time she uses his name. "I was wondering if I could talk to you."

His eyes flicker, quickly, emotions trailing through them like comets, burning and dying faster than she can interpret them. But he smiles again (an awkward, polite smile) and nods. "Okay."

Trying hard to look open and harmless, Lois forces a smile of her own and gestures him after her. She takes him only to the counter; she wants the semblance of privacy without scaring him away.

"Anything wrong?" he asks, watching her perch on the edge of one of the chairs.

"No." She smiles again (because she doesn't know what else to do, and this isn't as easy as she hoped it would be) and nods to the chair adjacent to hers. "I just...wanted to talk to you." She pauses, narrows her eyes, and decides that challenging him can do nothing worse than return them to the impasse she's already trying to break. "Do you not *want* to talk?"

He hesitates and actually seems to consider the question before he gives her another, slightly more real smile. "Talking sounds nice."

"You do so little of it nowadays," she says wryly, and manages a real smile of her own (because reminders of his silence used to hurt but now she has learned to accept both it and her complicity in causing it).

He startles her by actually almost laughing himself, a tiny exhalation that carries the hint of a chuckle. "Yeah," he says, and looks down at his hands.

And then they sit there, and it falls quiet, and neither of them can quite look at the other (except Lois can feel the pressure of three stares, can sense the wary curiosity, the banked suspicion, emanating from the living area).

"Well, this is ridiculous," Lois finally exclaims. "Surely we can find *something* to talk about."

"Like you said, I'm out of practice." She wonders if she imagines the tiny spark of mischief buried in Clark's silvery-brown eyes. "What's *your* excuse?"

"I'm afraid of hurting you more," she says bluntly, and sees shock daze him before he blinks it away.

"You shouldn't be. I told you, I don't blame you."

His sincerity shouldn't hurt, but it does. It hurts worse, she thinks, than his blame would.

"I do," she says, and she catches his eye and will not let him look away. "*I* blame myself. For what I did to you. To your family. For what I took from you. And you can tell me that it's not my fault or that it doesn't matter, but it *does*. You're not happy, Clark!"

His smile is so small, so fake, that Lois wants to reach out and smear her hand over it, erase it from ever existing (so that she does not have to know Clark is capable of even making such an abomination). "I'm happy enough," he tells her, and then he reaches out with a gentle hand and sets it over one of hers, stills its wild trembling. "And this *isn't* your fault. Lois, Trask knew —"

Trask.

It's been months since she's heard the name spoken aloud. Since she's let herself hear it, or think on it, or remember the man who threw her out of a plane and captured her and played her like a violin so that even when he had to disappear into obscurity, his work was still completed.

Months since she let the doors of her mind crack open enough to let more than the lightning-flash of Smallville memories assail her.

The pain stirred up by that name, by the memories associated with it (plastic tied around her wrists and panic stuffed inside her thoughts and his voice whispering in her ear), are so strong and overpowering that Lois can't help but flinch. Clark notices, of course (because no matter how blind she was concerning him,

he's never failed to take notice of the smallest details about her), and he cuts himself off.

"Well," he says, forcibly casual, "it doesn't matter, anyway. The point is that the truth was bound to come out eventually, one way or the other, and this way, at least I got my parents out in time. We may not be...as happy...as before, but we're content, and that's not bad, Lois. It's good enough."

"Is it?" Lois wonders how this conversation got so far off track; she meant to ask about him and instead once more he is comforting *her*. She studies him closely (hopes he does not take his hand away from hers) and says, very quietly, "I do have a question I want to ask you."

She thinks she sees a flash of pain in his eyes. A burst of fear. Maybe it is only her imagination. Maybe it is her own guilt that puts it there. Or maybe he has nightmares, too, about headlines and newspapers and Pulitzer prizes earned at the cost of his own life.

Regardless, she hurriedly adds, "Not for a story, or an interview, or... It's just a question. And you don't have to answer it if you don't want to, of course! Maybe I shouldn't—"

"It's all right, Lois." His hand tightens over hers, heat that spirals through her flesh, past the titanium lines threading her through, refining her in a cleansing fire that takes her breath away and makes her forget what she was planning to say. He almost sounds like the Clark of old as he stares into her eyes, silvery brown shining with as much goodness and kindness as ever. "You can ask it."

She has to look away. Has to break his gaze and swallow back the flames licking their way up from where his fingertips rest along her wrist. Has to close her eyes and force herself to remember the question she wants to ask him (the last bit of impetus she needs to make herself into the champion James has asked her to be and Clark needs so badly).

"Why didn't you start over again? Why didn't you come up with a new name? A new disguise?"

He's silent so long she's sure he must be offended. Or hurt. Or wondering why this nosy reporter, this colleague from a place he worked at so briefly, is coming here and asking him stupid questions. Silent so long that she has to look at him again even though her entire body is trembling and there's a scream inside her warning her she doesn't want to know what he's thinking.

But all he does is shake his head. "I have enough trouble with just one disguise—adding another would be too much."

This is a conversation she should have had with him almost five months ago (though in a very momentarily different way). It's too late now. Too late to make a difference. Too late to stop her from writing an article. Too late to warn him about what she planned to do, outlining the steps and writing that infamous article on the plane back to Metropolis. Too late, but she has to have it anyway. Has to let them both say out loud what he's known his whole life and she's known for...well, she's not sure how long she's known. Not sure when she first figured it out. She only knows that she figured it out sometime after seeing her name sold out in every language in the world and before Perry told her to come save what was left of Clark Kent.

"One disguise?" she asks him. Tears are building up behind her eyes, a constant pressure like floodwaters pressed against a straining dam, but she pushes them back and watches Clark. She wants him to know that she is listening (now, when it is far too late; now, when she could have let him be and never looked back).

"For a while," he says, staring past her, as if seeing beyond her (or as if afraid, in his own way, of seeing what he fears is written across her face), "it was my only lifeline—planning someone else to be, someone normal. I came up with names and careers and disguises. I don't think the glasses would work anymore." He chuckles (hollowly) and reaches up a hand to the

glasses he still wears, even in front of her (and she wishes she could take some form of solace in that, that he does not hide them anymore). "And then Superman came back, and I told myself that the reason I wasn't going out as someone else was that if Superman disappeared for eight hours a day five days a week, there would be a world-wide search for him, everyone side-eyeing any new employees, looking for a superhero. I told myself I couldn't because I needed to find a way for my parents to have a life, too. But the truth is..."

Lois holds her breath. Watches him. Cannot look away. Cannot let the tears go (because they would never end).

"The truth is...I don't want to be someone else."

"Clark is who you are," Lois whispers. And it is truth and injustice and her own personal indictment all wrapped into one, and she could spend the rest of her life serving him on bended knee and still never make up for what she's done.

But he smiles at her. Smiles as if he does not realize, even still, who is to blame for the pain that shadows his every move, colors his every expression, touches his every sparse word. "Exactly," he exclaims, and she feels like a fraud for making him think she understands him when in truth, it's taken her far too long (and so many afternoons beneath his father's gentle tutelage) to come to this moment. This place. This conversation. "I didn't have to pretend to anything as Clark, not *really*. I could just...just be *me*. But being someone else...it'd be as much of a mask, of an act, as Superman is. I wouldn't be able to be *me*, so what would be the point?"

"Superman's what you do," Lois murmurs, and wins another Clark smile for herself.

"Yes."

"Do you...do you think you can ever be Clark again?"

Unexpectedly, a hint of confusion ghosts across his face, puts a crease on his brow. "What do you mean? I am Clark. I've...I've tried to stop, but as you can see"—he fiddles with the edge of his glasses—"I haven't really succeeded."

And for the first time, Lois's heart feels lighter. For the first time she can breathe. For the first time, her smile is real, and she gifts it to him in return for the ones he's given her, for the warmth he's infusing through her, for the forgiving touch of his hand over hers.

"Good," she says, relief making her whole and well and light. He's still Clark.

Clark Kent is dead, but he's still Clark. He hasn't forgotten, hasn't given up hope, hasn't entirely succumbed to the bleakness of this prison she's delivered him into.

And if Clark is what he wants (if Clark is what makes her smile), then she will bring Clark Kent back from the dead (and erase that horrible accusation from the face of his grave), if it is the last thing she ever does.

12

"Come with us," Martha had said, and the Lois who searched for James without knowing why, the Lois who docilely let the winds of fate bob her about in its whimsical current (the Lois who lied to herself so well and so thoroughly that she'd managed to almost pretend she didn't miss Clark Kent) would have stared and blinked back tears and peppermint-tinted bile and searched in vain for her voice until maybe her chance passed her by. But the new Lois (the hybrid-stranger she now sees every time she glimpses her reflection, the mix of the redeemable qualities of the old Lois mixed and mingled with a new Lois refined by stress and grief and fire) is enough in place to make her smile instantly and agree to the startling invitation.

"We try not to go out too often," Martha explains as they wait for the elevator to reach the ground floor (and Lois is so intent on not missing a cue and messing up this unexpected sign of reconciliation that she forgets to look at the signs in the lobby or

find recognizable landmarks around the building).

"And it's so rare that James takes the time to remember we like seeing him for more than a few moments at a time," Martha says, teasingly, in the second of three taxis they take (and they're not living in Coast City, after all, because it takes two hours to reach the city, but Lois tamps down her waking curiosity and does her *bestnotto* think on what she knows of Californian geography).

"We don't do much, but it's fun to do it together," Martha explains, after James has finished laughingly reassuring her of his intentions to spend more time with her and Jonathan. They wander leisurely along downtown streets, past small shops filled with books or coffee or clothing or souvenirs stamped with an emerald sigil shaped like a lantern. It isn't until then, hearing Martha's staggered explanation, that Lois realizes the older woman is nervous, is talking so much—not to include Lois—but to fill up the awkward silence between them.

And that is not all right. Lois has become intimately familiar with awkwardness and with silence, and if there is one thing she knows above all others, it is that the Kents do not belong in that realm. They do not need to feel unsure in themselves, do not need to justify their decisions or their lives, certainly not to her.

So she offers Martha a tentative smile and tries to sound completely accepting (and as understanding as Martha has been for her) when she says, "I don't need to do much." The compassion that stirs inside her, struggling up through rusty disuse and dusty inexperience, is strange and new and so welcome that Lois feels like skipping and laughing and throwing her arms around first Martha, then Jonathan, then even James (if he would ever stand for such a thing). "Really," she adds. "I think all that gardening has made me lazy. Soft."

"Not lazy," Jonathan corrects, throwing her a wink. "Just content. Able to take a breath and savor the small things."

He's teasing her, but he's right. Of course, it's not the gardening that's the miracle cure, she knows; it's Jonathan himself, and James's promise, and Clark's forgiving smile, and Martha's nervous efforts.

"Content," Lois repeats (and remembers Clark telling her that contentment is enough). "I guess that's the right word. In fact, you've done such a good job of converting me into your amber-waves-of-grain society that I find myself thinking that a walk through that park over there would actually be fun."

The shop with the fashionably dressed mannequins in the window and prominently displayed shoes actually looks much more tempting than slow, winding paths through grass and sparsely planted trees, but Jonathan has been looking bored and she saw his eyes light up when he caught sight of that park, and James has been fondling the camera he's stashed away in a nondescript bag at his side—and Lois wants to see the park because she wants *them* to be happy. Because she wants to see this strange little family come alive with laughter and sunshine and a measure of freedom (even if there is a hole where Clark should be; a stain of guilt at the constant knowledge that she's the reason he can never have this again). Because she wants to treasure her presence with them (for the first time by *invitation*, by choice, by mutual consent). Because she wants to take this day and freeze it in time and tuck it away in her heart as a healing balm she can use to soothe her soul on the darkest and bleakest of days.

"The park?" Jonathan makes a sincere but woefully inadequate attempt to hide his hope, and for the first time since inviting Lois to join them, Martha laughs.

"The park sounds good," she says, threading her arm through Jonathan's. "We can eat our sandwiches there."

Jonathan laughs. "Even better!"

"I hope there's a bit more than sandwiches in that basket," James finally speaks up. He has been quiet, almost abnormally

so, since leveling a steady gaze at Lois when she stepped into the elevator with them and saying, "Make sure you keep that cap pulled low so no one recognizes you." A few weeks ago, his protectiveness would have stirred indignation, would have ignited anger. Now, it only warms her. (Now, it only reminds her of Clark's quiet resignation and his absence from their side so that their disguises have a chance of working.)

Martha narrows her eyes at James and gives a slow shake of her head. "It's been a while, but I haven't quite forgotten what your favorite cookies are."

The laughter that escapes James makes him look younger. More innocent. Unburdened by the task he has set himself. He slips an arm around Martha's shoulders and lightly tugs on a lock of her brunette wig, his own fake blonde hair flopping over his brow. "All right, all right, Mrs. K, I get the hint! I'll stay home more often if you make the cookies more often. Deal?"

"I don't know." Martha's laugh is softer, shorter, but just as unabashedly happy. "If this is a negotiation, I may have to make sure I stipulate how many batches there will be to equal a day of your company—and who exactly will help me bake all these incentives."

James slants a mischievous look to Jonathan. "Well, Mr. K is obviously the first candidate. He's the one who promised to love and support, right?"

"Oh, I support." Jonathan chuckles, his shoulders losing some of their tension now that they are surrounded by living plants rather than specialized boutique stores. "If Martha wants to corral you into the kitchen with her, I'll help her block the door behind you."

"Don't even think about it!" Lois exclaims when James's gaze slides to her. She holds up warding hands. "I help out by staying *away* from the kitchen."

"Abandoned on every side!" James rolls his eyes and does his best to look aggrieved (a familiar expression, calling up long-ignored memories of Perry's sly smirks and the underhanded protection he'd sent the young man's way).

"Helping throw some eggs and sugar in a bowl is hardly going to hurt you," Martha tells him dryly. "Jonathan sets the table, Lois does the dishes—that leaves you to show us some productivity."

James says something else that makes a silver, joyous laugh shake Jonathan's frame, and Martha replies and James darts ahead to walk backward while saying more, but it all fades away in Lois's consciousness. All of it muted and frozen in a picture-perfect moment by the sparkling, gilt-edged realization exploding in Lois's mind and heart and *being*.

She is included.

James pulled her into their teasing. Martha listed her contributions to their daily chores alongside Jonathan's.

Her two detractors, and they are including her.

Accepting her.

Teasing her.

As if she's part of the family. Part of their unit. One of them.

Not an outsider. Not a murderer. Not their worst nightmare.

An ally. A compatriot. Someone who will do anything for Clark up to and including giving up her life for him.

And she will. She knows it without thought, without hesitation, without doubt. She feels it in the lightness of the day outside their apartments, in the happiness to be outside the cloak of hiding, in the guilt to be experiencing all this without Clark, away from Clark (possible only because Clark is *not* there, reminding them of all the reasons they have to be grim and watchful and sober).

Those silken threads lining her bones, strengthening her muscles, pulse deeper, more vivid, so that Lois feels as if she is about to explode with urgent energy, with what feels almost like relief (like atonement; like absolution). The sunlight is amber and

warm, sweet like honey as she pulls in an overly large breath to swell her ribcage, expand her chest, make herself large enough to contain the frothing, sparkling feelings boiling up within her.

She thinks the moment will pass quickly, glowing drops of condensation that evaporate into dispelled, invisible liquid under the glaring light of day. She thinks she will shrink and retract and grow up a protective shell to shield and camouflage that instilled, borrowed strength. (She thinks these noble, too-good-to-be-true people, these three brave but weary defenders, will remember who she is, what she did, and take back their forgiveness, their inclusion, and bring out their spiky shells of awkwardness cloaked in engrained kindness.)

But the moment doesn't pass. The feeling doesn't go away. Her body (her determined resoluteness) doesn't abandon her. The clock ticks on, storing up the seconds and minutes, a reservoir of time filled with an ambling stroll along green pathways under dappled shadows shaped like the leaves of the passing trees, with a picnic alongside a fountain of topaz-colored stone pebbled like honeycomb, with a meal eaten to the accompaniment of tinkling water and relieved laughter. Moments that continue uninterrupted and give no indication of slipping away from her.

And gradually, so slowly she almost doesn't notice it (so momentarily she cannot understand how there is not a full orchestra and a media team there to commemorate and proclaim it), the knot of ever-present tension at the base of her spine loosens, spirals outward and allows air through, lets her shoulders slump, makes a smile easier to claim.

They're different outside that tinted, cool suite, Lois realizes, studying Jonathan, Martha, and James in turn through eyes unbounded by tension and fear. They are survivors, in those rooms, witnesses in hiding, victims gone to ground, pretending (for Clark's sake) to strength and sanguinity and contentment they don't really have (not more than surface deep). In those rooms, they are constantly on edge, waiting (for the alarm, the siren, the flash of a camera) to leap into desperate flight once more.

But here, away from their small self-contained world, away from covered windows, away from the remnants that can only remind them of all they've lost (away from Clark? she wonders with a surge of discomfort), they change. Transform. Morph into strangers. Civilians. Anonymous citizens untouched by that infamous Pulitzer prize-winning article (by gaping loss and tiny slivers of hope). Regular, normal people who can relax in their average anonymity, their relative mediocrity...their alter egos.

Relax in everything that the separation of Clark Kent and Superman once gave that lost, uncomfortable stranger even now out saving lives. Relax in everything that has been taken (stolen, ripped, torn away from, by Lois herself, though she's doing her best not to think on that, not to keep heaping guilt onto her shoulders to slow herself down) from the man who deserved his fate least of all.

Enjoying the very things that he no longer can.

The realization, the sense of truth clicking into place, threatens to send Lois back into the morass of guilt and regret she's only just pulling herself from. It's not new, but it's just as painful this time around as every other time of remembering all he's lost. Only...only she cannot allow herself to fall again. Cannot let herself second-guess her precious, hard-won success. (Cannot allow herself the luxury of numbing self-pity to take away her responsibility to *act*, to *heal*, to *fix*.)

"You okay?"

Lois smiles at Martha. At the concern in her voice. At the feel of her age-smoothed hand resting so gently atop Lois's. "Getting there," she murmurs beneath the flow of James's voice and Jonathan's chuckle.

Martha's own smile is cracked and tremulous. "Me too. It's a slow road sometimes, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Her voice breaks, but Lois doesn't care. No need for false pride or defensive facades here. Not now. Not with this woman, with this family (with these few who see beyond her disguise and know her in all her forms). But she cannot help adding, in little more than a whisper, "I just wish Clark could be here."

Instead of denouncing her for her hypocrisy (for wishing for the very thing she made impossible), Martha only tightens her grip over Lois's. "So do I. He could sure use a day like this. Or even just an hour. Sometimes, I think he's gotten so focused on what he still has left to him that he forgets he can have more."

An idea sparks in Lois's mind. It feels like creativity. It feels like purpose. It feels like adrenaline. It feels like an echo of what she lost when she pulled that metaphorical trigger. She's afraid to look at it too closely, or examine it out in the cold light of day, but she cradles it close. Hugs it inside herself and lets it grow in warmth and seclusion and hope. Promises herself she will take it out and nurture it further when she is alone.

As if she knows that Lois doesn't have words to give her (cannot compose herself quickly enough to scramble for a reply), Martha blinks, trading tears for mischief. "And don't worry about having to stay here all day. After we're done with lunch, I'll distract Jonathan long enough to let you slip into one of those shops you keep eyeing."

Lois laughs. "Thanks. But what do I do about James?"

"Him? Well..." Martha sips her tea in a contemplative fashion. "Well, he's much sneakier than Clark ever was. You're on your own with him—though I have the feeling that if he sees you headed into a shop, he'll find a way to distract himself."

"Careful, James." Jonathan's voice breaks through their quiet conversation. "They're whispering together—who knows what they're conspiring for us."

"Conspiring?" One of Martha's thin eyebrows arches in an eloquent manner Lois can only hope to emulate. "Does a bit of quiet conversation *not* filled with silliness scare you that much?"

"It does when you get that cunning look in your eye."

Jonathan winks at James, who laughs with him but shoots a helpless glance to Martha when Jonathan looks away, adeptly playing to both sides. "You can always tell when to be scared, son, when a woman gets that look in her eye and starts sizing you up."

"Suspicious, isn't he?" Lois asks, and despite the warm feeling expanding her chest, still feels relieved when none of them freeze up or give her reproachful stares.

"Paranoid, more like," Martha replies. "More cookies, James?"

"It's not paranoia," James says, but doesn't hesitate to take two more cookies.

"They're buttering us up." Jonathan turns tender as he meets Martha's gaze, their hands idly caressing each other when he takes a cookie from her. "Must mean we're going to be stuck with an afternoon of shopping."

He's right, though just barely. First they follow James along a scenic bridge and give him helpful (increasingly silly) suggestions about what shots of the scenery he should snap (only scenery; no people; no family photos to betray them to the harsh, consuming world). They then stop at a small café to let Martha sample a new tea. Finally, Martha gives Lois a smile and tugs Jonathan over to a street-side vendor. Lois smiles back, pulls her cap low to shade her features, and ducks into the boutique they've passed three times now.

It's comfortable and familiar to browse through stiff fabrics and sleek gowns and luxurious lingerie. She can't remember the last time she went shopping. Can't remember the last time she gave it a thought (and realizes anew just how much of Lois Lane was tied up with Clark Kent). Minutes trickle by unnoticed as she feasts her eyes on colors and cuts, lets herself try on a few things,

and even taxes her limp savings account by buying a new dress (*without* letting herself think on why she suddenly wants a new dress Clark has never seen her in before).

She's just tucking her wallet back into her purse and looping the handles of her plastic bag over her wrist when she feels it.

A tremble.

A shudder.

A ripple passing through the ground beneath her feet and spreading outward in every direction.

Lois freezes. Stares down at the floor with a perplexed wrinkle in her brow.

"Ma'am?" the salesclerk calls behind her, frantic panic and urgent fear evident in her voice. "Ma'am, you need to duck and cover!"

She's turning toward the lady, opening her mouth to ask for clarification—and the world cracks and buckles beneath her.

The doors and windows shatter. Glass flies through the air, singing as it whirls toward her, and Lois falls into a crouch, arms covering her head and knocking aside her cap (mind cowering beneath incomprehension). When the melody of whistling danger is silenced, transmuted into the tap-tap-tap percussion of shards settling on the ground, when Lois peeks up, she sees the clerk huddling against an inner door frame, beckoning to her.

The ground is shivering, is sloping up and down (as if finally, so very belatedly, recognizing the extent, the enormity, of Lois's crimes and is now trying to hurl her off into empty infinity, rid itself of her blemish), and Lois tries to find some balance, enough stability to crawl toward relative safety. Clothes rain down from hangers all around her, glass is murmuring beneath her, hushed by crimson blood that turns her hands and knees slick, and Lois cannot make any headway. Rocks are shattering, there is a crack running a chasm through the tiles beneath her, her entire body is shaken until every single molecule within her is rattled like dice in a cup, threatening to unravel her from the inside out, and every thought in her head is turned upside down, made weak and quivering.

There's a scream shrieking against her ears, pounding against her eardrums. There's a rumble carving furrows through her veins and grinding against her breastbone. There's a cacophony of car horns and blaring alarms and shouts drifting in through the gaps where once there were windows—and Lois cannot take it anymore. Why try to make headway when there is nowhere to go? When the world itself has turned against her? When there is nothing in her worth saving?

She stops where she is, perched atop lines spider-webbing through the solid ground (no longer solid or unmoving or trustworthy), curls herself up in a ball, wraps her arms around her head, and waits for the end.

It's loud and raucous and dangerous, but silence seems to enwrap her in a smothering cape, as if she cowers in the eye of the storm. And here, alone, cut off from everyone and everything, only one thought can shoulder its way through the mess of this earthquake to keep her company.

This must be what Clark felt like that day.

This is what he must have thought was happening when he walked into the Daily Planet, straight into the firing squad.

Like the world had vanished beneath his feet. Like every rule and law of nature had been broken, remolded and shaped to oh so perfectly and neatly destroy the life he'd oh so carefully built. Like Earth itself had risen up in revolt against him.

This must be what he feels like every day. Each moment facing a quaking world, all stability gone, unable to find any form of balance. Facing the unknown while reality shakes him like a mouse in the jaws of a cat, and the lives of everyone he loves teeter on a fragile precipice.

The insight quakes through Lois's soul long after the ground has stopped shaking beneath her. It ripples across her psyche as if

to echo the aftershocks that send her crashing back to the soiled clothes and sharp glass as soon as she tries to get to her feet. It stays with her, numbing her, while she checks to make certain the clerk is safe, both of them half-covered in plaster dust and bits of dirt and debris from the ceiling.

"Are *you* okay?" the clerk asks in reply, eyes locked on the various cuts and scrapes carving a scrawled map of guilt and realization over Lois's exposed flesh (her sins finally shown on the outside, bleeding out into the open).

"I'm fine," she says, brushing off the concern. (It's another lie, but she doesn't care.) "But why on earth do people choose to live in a state that tries to periodically throw them into the ocean?"

The clerk doesn't seem to hear the question. Her gaze has moved past Lois to the world (large and alien and hostile) outside the gutted windows. Her eyes widen, her ebony skin bleached ashen. "Wow." Her voice is small and washed out. "It's a bad one, the worst I've ever seen. I'm glad you weren't out in the open when that hit."

Horror hits harder and longer and more devastating than the earthquake. Fear (as big as Nightfall, as vast as Superman's silence, as debilitating as Clark's death) assails Lois like a disease. Like a virus that attacks and drains and steals and wounds (and kills).

Because Jonathan and Martha were standing outside.

Because they promised to wait there for her until she was done shopping. Because James was there with them. Because they were in the open.

Unprotected.

In danger.

Because the only things left to Clark (the only people he loves and daily saves the world for; the only people he will talk to and for) were all in one place. And if they are gone (if they were taken from him while they waited for Lois, of all people), then Clark will not be the only one broken and crushed. Superman will be broken too. Superman will be devastated. Will be cut loose from the Earth, ripped from his only tether.

And there will be nothing at all left to save, no alter ego to keep him here.

And all because of Lois.

Again.

The shop's door is hanging loose on its hinges, inviting her to see the entirety of the desolation awaiting her (awaiting Clark). Lois slips through the revealed gap, heedless of the remnants of glass, and walks into a scene that looks as if it's been pulled straight from some end-of-the-world movie. The road has been chiseled into rocks, into canyons, into an obstacle course keeping her from finding Clark's family. People are shouting and crying, their voices intermingled with sirens and alarms to make a symphony of fear and pain and loss and confusion.

Lois stumbles over debris she doesn't bother to identify as her eyes dart from one empty space to another, looking for landmarks that are no longer there. Searching for the green awning of the vendor Jonathan and Martha had stopped at. Praying for a glimpse of pink blouse or worn plaid shirt or flashing camera.

She sees the camera first. It is sitting incongruously in the middle of the street, its cracked lens reflecting back rays of a sun that should be veiled but isn't, as if heedless of the momentousness of this moment, this hour, this afternoon. The camera's strap is empty, placed almost decorously beside a downed telephone pole, and Lois doesn't know whether to be relieved it's not laying atop a body or frustrated that it brings her no closer to finding James. She has no time to decide because it's then that she spots a swatch of green beneath the crumbling remains of a storefront.

Lois doesn't stop to think on what she might find there (on

how little there might be left for her to find), just climbs and stumbles and crawls her way toward it (and if tears are swirling through the dust she walks through and that cakes her face, if sobs are shuddering their way through her, she cannot take the time to realize it). And when she climbs atop a stone (a bit of the road churned up and spit out to resemble a rock with yellow lines adorning its surface), she sees James.

He is digging through the rubble. His blonde wig is lost somewhere, but his dark hair looks gray with the dust that covers up the sheen of skin and blood (painted over his forehead and shoulder and leg) alike. His right arm hangs limp and lifeless at his side, but he digs anyway with his left hand, his watch incongruously black against smudged skin. He digs methodically. Desperately.

Alone.

Lois needs to join him. To help him. (To mourn with him). She means to, but she can't. Her limbs won't cooperate. Her voice won't work. Her entire body rebels against her to leave her frozen and motionless for a long, eternal moment.

But they need her. And Clark needs them. And she *needs* to do something (something besides bring them into danger and have them wait in the most dangerous place and huddle frozen in a shop while they are hurt). So she forces herself downward. Forces gravity to help her move from her perilous perch. Forces herself to lift up a hand toward James.

Then everything stops.

The sun's rays seem to halt in place.

The clouds cease moving forward.

The symphony goes silent.

Lois's heart stutters to an uneven, slowing beat.

Because there is a rush of wind. There is a blur of red and blue high up in the sky. There is a thud that rivals the beginning of that earthquake as Superman hits the ground. There is a rush of held breath as he looks at the rubble before him (at the young man fallen utterly, hopelessly still in his digging). There is a single instant when the world itself stops its revolution to see what Superman will do.

Except that when he moves, he moves too quickly for anyone to see, for the world to comprehend. He is gone, a flash, a blur, a whisper of sound, and the street's new geography shifts and changes again. Cleared and smoothed and tossed away from the bit of space where a shredded green awning hangs limp on the ground like a fallen standard.

Superman, when he comes once more into mortal sight, is on his knees. He is staring down at two bodies, uncovered by stone, drenched in blood, their angles unnatural enough to make Lois's eyes skitter away from them. She looks, instead, back up to Superman.

But Superman is gone. Vanished. Dead. Transformed, in an instant, in the blink of an eye, back to the haunted, dying remnants of Clark Kent. It is Clark who kneels there before his parents, beneath the eyes of James and Lois (and the onlookers and the other victims and the cameras sure to come), unveiled. Stripped naked and exposed once more to everyone.

"Clark," Lois whispers with a half-step forward. But it's too little too late (and there is no comfort to be found), and when he turns to look at her, she does not see the devastation she expected. She does not see heartbreak or anguish or pain.

Instead, all she sees is emptiness.

Bleak, hopeless emptiness.

And she did not realize how much she depended on his last slivers of hope until they are gone.

James is apologizing, explaining, crying as he says he is sorry, he should have been with them, he should have gotten to them sooner, he should have signaled or called immediately. Clark is a void, numb to all that's been taken from him, sucking in all James's words and giving nothing in return. And Lois can

do nothing but stumble forward. Can do nothing but hate this world that can cause so much hurt to a truly good man who doesn't deserve it at all.

Then, breaking the silent, fractured tableau, Clark bends. So slowly. So infinitely gently. He curls his arms under his mom's tiny form and then straightens as if the entire world will shatter should he not do this exactly, precisely right. And then he is gone, a swirl of wind to batter at Lois's ankles all that marks his passing. Lois doesn't even have time to register the swiftness of his actions before he is back, passing Lois and not seeming to hear James's apologies.

"Dad," Clark croaks out (and the entire world shudders in astonishment, to remember that Superman can talk). He bends again and once more cradles his parent close, the bulky form of his father turned somehow fragile and child-like in Clark's grip. Once he's on his feet, he hesitates, then looks at James. "I'm taking them to Mercy Hospital," he says, his voice so distant, so inflectionless, that it is as if a stranger is speaking. He narrows his eyes at James, sweeps a look from his head to his toes, then does the same to Lois (but he is not seeing *her*; is seeing only muscles and bones and tendons and organs). "You both might want to get checked out, too—your arm is broken, James."

He turns, about to burst into invisible movement and action, but Lois reaches out a hand (that drops before reaching him, because who is she to offer comfort to him). "Clark," she says, because the murmurs of the crowd are full of *Supermans* and because he seems more elusive than ever before (even when she hadn't seen him in months and knew nothing about where he was).

As if he cannot help himself, he looks at her. Casts her a silent, screaming look (like a child left abandoned and desolate and searching for impossible answers). Then he once more shuts himself down, and he is gone, leaving Lois and James to follow in a more sedate fashion.

Or maybe just gone, period. Gone so far that no one and nothing can bring him back, and Lois should have come sooner, should have promised to help him earlier, should have done more instead of playing around in gardens, because now it's too late.

Clark is gone, and even Superman cannot save him.

And without them, what is there left for Lois Lane?

13

Tha...thump.

Tha-thump.

Tha...thump.

Tha-thump.

Two heartbeats. Separate. Distinct. One so very, very slow, the other too frenetically quick. One heavy and lethargic, the other racing ahead, bounding toward a place not even Superman can go.

"Stay," Clark wants to say. *Needs* to say. "Stay with me. Don't go. I need you. Don't leave me all alone. Stay."

But the words do not emerge. They are not even whole, coherent, legible in his own mind, distilled instead into mere emotions and gut reactions, to the overwhelming, cloying feel of desperation so thick it threatens to choke him. It's a plea he needs to speak, to let out, to put into words so that he can do more than sit here in a chair that might or might not be uncomfortable, in a waiting room that might or might not be too public and open, and try his hardest not to vomit up his invulnerable organs onto the slick tiled floor that might or might not cause echoes of voices and whispers and hushed murmurs to swirl about him, threatening to drown out those two heartbeats.

Tha-thump.

Tha...thump.

His parents. They're in surgery. Two teams of doctors are fighting to keep them here. To keep them alive.

Those are more words, more concepts, more thoughts he cannot bring into clear comprehension because to do so will mean facing the fact that he might lose them. That they are leaving him behind. He clings to the heartbeats, closes his eyes to shut out everything else, *willing* those two quiet beats to continue pulsing in his ears.

Tha...thump.

Tha-thump.

But to hear them, to listen to them, he cannot help but tune in enough to also hear the words everyone else are spilling out over unsterilized floors (and why, why, *why*, can everyone else release what he cannot, open their mouths and hear their own voices and let out the constant, imprisoning clamor chained up within them?). The staff, the patients, the ambulance workers in and out with other victims of the earthquake he should have heard, should have known was coming, should have stopped, should have been there to divert or alleviate or help before he was brought to this moment, in this place, listening to those two contradicting beats...all of these people whisper. Murmur. Speak and gasp and argue and exclaim in hushed voices they cannot possibly believe are quiet enough to keep him from actually hearing.

They're talking about Superman. About the way he strode in through the door with two broken bodies and begged the doctors to do anything, everything, *something* to save them.

They're talking about him.

They're talking about him *talking*.

His parents are dying (one heartbeat slowing to a near-stop, the other blurring forward into oblivion), and all these people surrounding him can think about, all they *care* about, is the fact that Superman has broken his long, impenetrable silence.

The doctors in the rooms where those heartbeats emanate are working as hard as they can, of course (he watches them through the walls, through solidity peeled away to nothing just as he will be stripped down to nothing at all should the divergent pulses in his ears fall silent and still), doing all they can to save his mom and dad. But he can see the sweat beading on their brows. Feel the tremors in the air stirred by their barely trembling hands. Sense their fear and their focus held only through practiced experience.

And closer, back behind invisible walls, in the room with him, he can feel the surreptitious gazes, the stares at the brightly attired (and useless, utterly helpless, completely redundant) superhero sitting like a statue in the waiting room he doesn't bother to look at (because what lies beyond it is so much more important, so much more precious), his cape hanging about him, lending him a blank, disconsolate, abandoned air.

Superman, they whisper. Not *Clark Kent*.

Superhero, he thinks. Not *son*.

They know his Secret, but they don't know anything, not really, and he is still just as hidden, just as masked and anonymous, as he's always been. They are standing or walking through or sitting in the same room with him, and they do not see him. They do not care. They do not understand.

And *why* aren't they *helping*? *Why* aren't they in the operating room with the surgeons making sure his parents make it back to their suite of rooms (or another suite, another city, another state, another *world*, he does not care, just so long as they *live*)? *Why* can they not see that he would not have spoken, would not have invited their barrages of questions if this didn't *matter* more than anything else in the universe?

He needs them (his dad with his supportive wisdom and his quiet, sturdy presence; his mom with her boundless enthusiasm and her eternal, unquestioning love; his *parents*, the ones he came half a galaxy to find and love because he *needs* them). He needs them more than he needs air. More than he needs the sun. More than he needs the glasses or the cape or a name or his soul. He needs them because without them he is nothing, and with them he

is someone, and in their arms he is alive, and in their hearts he is a man worthy of love, and in their eyes he can believe that he belongs here, even if only for them, for their sakes.

So he needs them to live. The *world* needs them to live, only he does not think it realizes that yet. Does not think any of the curious and suspicious and awed observers all agape about him have yet realized what will happen to their savior and hero if he loses the very people who are *his* saviors and heroes, who taught him everything he needs in order to *want* to be a savior and hero.

Even after they lost his voice, he does not think the world realizes how little there is left of him overall, and how very fragile is what remains (does not think they've yet recovered from their shock enough to recognize what it means that he is *here* and not *out there*, bringing in more earthquake victims for them to murmur and whisper with).

Tha-thump.

Tha...thump.

"Stay." And finally the word emerges from his mouth to enter the air, rusty and brittle and so quiet only super ears can hear it. But there. Audible. Legible. Coherent.

"Stay with me. Don't leave me."

But of course, they cannot hear him.

He thinks he is about to slide off the chair (not in flight, because why fly when there is nothing to keep him in the air?), about to fall to his knees and press his cape over his face and let out the tears building up like inescapable pressure strong and voracious enough to beat and devour even Superman. He thinks he is about to come spinning to his feet and whirling toward the whole mass of colorful nurses and doctors and crimson-soaked patients and victims, thinks he is about to lift up his fists and shake them at the heavens and scream at them that who *cares* that he is talking, of *course* he can talk, *why* does it matter at all when there are people (more than just his parents, and that should mean something to him, but it cannot penetrate his desperate daze) hurt and dying and heartbeats are getting slower and quicker and the sweat is dripping faster off the surgeons' brows and the machines are beeping so ominously, and how *dare* any of them waste time looking at him when they should be *helping*.

He thinks he is about to come undone, about to come apart at the seams and rip open and spill out all the broken and insignificant and un-special things inside him right out in the open for everyone to see.

But then he hears it.

Another heartbeat. Steady and healthy and well. Quick and agitated and energetic as it's matched by footsteps rushing toward him. By breathing, ragged and uneven, panting with haste.

And then Lois turns the corner and she is coming toward him. There is blood scrawled across her hands, her knees, her brow, darkening patches of her hair. There is a plastic bag hanging as if forgotten and unattended (like him, in this waiting room, listening to dwindling heartbeats) from her wrist. There is fear and concern and worry and guilt and relief mixed and mingled and crowded like prisoners crushed into a cattle car in her eyes, the corners of her mouth, the set of her face.

But she is here. She is coming toward him. Her heart is beating, the blood is singing through her veins, her organs are smooth and unpunctured, and as bad as this day is, at least there is this. The image of her. Lois Lane. In the same room, the same city, the same *world* as him (and not running away). Healthy and alive and relatively unscathed.

She hesitates before she reaches him. *Common sense*, some rational, all-but-forgotten part of his brain whispers to him. After all, if the media were to catch any wind of Superman and Lois Lane being in the same place, spending time *together*, then all of James's carefully constructed plans and safeguards and fail-safes will start to crumble all around them (if they have not already; if it is not already necessary for them to have to move from here

and try to find echoes of home in yet another empty set of rooms James will find in some other unknown city).

Ordinarily, Clark would care. He would listen to that whisper of rationality, and he would shake his head at Lois and let her fade into the background, because he does not want her to become a target again, does not want to let Luthor think this is a way for him to wriggle out of the charges he is being held under, does not want every reporter to think he is going to start giving out interviews again.

Ordinarily, he would be strong and smart and safe.

But this is not ordinary, and he has never been as strong as everyone needs him to be or as smart as he wishes he could be or as safe as he once thought he was. So he meets Lois's eyes, and he does not shake his head, does not send her away, does not keep the pieces of secrecy left to him.

He is not sure what his face shows. He is not even sure if it shows anything at all other than a terrible blankness mirroring the blankness inside his soul (*tha-thump, tha...thump* all that fills him up, all that keeps his own heart beating in empty mimicry). But whatever she sees in him, Lois lets go of her own doubts and hesitations, and she moves to sit in the seat beside him (and if the onlookers are still whispering, Clark cannot hear them anymore). The bag hanging from her wrist plops gracelessly to the tiled floor (finally an echo that does not whisper of Superman's voice, of the words he spilled out in front of them all).

"James is in with a doctor," Lois says, looking only at him. As if he still exists. As if he matters. As if he has not come undone. "I may have made something of a scene to make them look at him now, but I don't care. He didn't look good. They're x-raying his arm and skull right now, but aside from a slight concussion and the broken arm, they think he's going to be okay."

In a while (moments or days or years, he cannot quite decide, because time seems so measureless, so meaningless right now), he will be relieved to hear that. He will worry about the fracture along the forearm that he saw when he thought to x-ray James before abandoning him in the rubble of their lives. He will want to see James, to reassure his friend that there was nothing he could do (it is not James, after all, who should have been there to save their parents), to accept his apology and tell him that there is no need for it but he forgives him anyway.

Eventually. But not now. Now, he cannot process it. Cannot face it. Cannot tear himself away from those two mirroring heartbeats long enough to consider his reaction.

He does not want Lois to leave, but he doesn't know what he feels to have her there. He does not want James to be hurt, but he cannot spare any strength of will or any fraction of emotions to be glad that he is not seriously injured. He does not want to be here, but he dares not leave.

He is frozen. Arrested, motionless, hung on a precipice that will suck even him down into the dark, fathomless depths of an endless chasm should he fall. So he cannot move at all. Can only sit there, empty and weightless and devoid of anything at all lest the slightest thought or feeling topple him.

"Clark," Lois whispers (a whisper that pierces through the rest, that does not rub him raw), and she reaches out, so hesitantly, as gently as he played cotton and seaweed through his fingers, and lays her hand on his shoulder.

He breaks (the minute weight enough to tip the scales). He bends and shudders and falls forward, hunched over, his head in his lap, his eyes squeezed shut against the seemingly hopeless tableaux hiding behind the walls in front of him. "I should have been there for them!" he cries out (and now, where before there were no words, there are too many of them, overbalancing him, weighting him down, crushing him).

"You were—you *are*!" Lois insists, her hand tightening on his shoulder blade so that he can keep himself, at the least, off the floor, as if she holds up his entire body (his entire weak and

wasted form), saving him from splattering against the bottom of that chasm. "You came so quickly, and you got them straight to the hospital—"

"No!" he shouts (and the hospital falls as silent as he should be, their terror like bile in his mouth). He is straight-backed in the chair now (Lois's hand fallen away, back to her lap, to clutch her other blood-stained hand), staring straight at her. And calm. Calm. So calm. He cannot shout or come apart. Cannot let his own cries drown out the sounds of those all-important heartbeats. He listens, intently, obsessively, and lets them lull him back to a deceptive blankness.

"No," he says again, quietly, when he is sure his voice will not frighten away the twin beats pulsing through his being. "I should have *known*."

"Clark, you did every—"

"I'm Superman now!" he exclaims, and it would be a roar, a scream of defiance, if he were not holding himself so resolutely beneath the tempo of those beats. "I save hundreds of people every day—I should have been Superman for *them*!"

Lois swallows. Opens her mouth. Shuts it. Swallows again. She does not look away. Does not let him look away. And then, like steel (like she is not afraid of him at all), she says, "They don't *want* Superman. They want Clark—they *love* Clark—and Clark is—"

"Their son," he says, and the words, spoken out loud, slice through everything he has managed to reclaim. They leave him weak and quivering and broken again. "I'm their son, and I didn't even know they were in danger."

"Really." She gives him a flat stare (and this is the Lois Lane he remembers, the one that seemed to see straight through him even as she dismissed him). "Then why did you get there in such a hurry? How did you find them so quickly? What were you even doing on that exact street?"

"James, he...he used... And my mom said my name," he manages to say, only because Lois is looking at him, waiting for an answer, expecting him to be strong enough and whole enough to give it to her. He has to look away, has to hold himself aloof from the memory of his mother's voice, cracked and broken, threading into his ears like the bell tolling someone's doom (but not his parents', *please* not his parents', let it be *his* instead).

"But don't you see?" he exclaims before Lois can reply, leaping to his feet to pace, to walk, to *move*, but there's too much wild uncontrollable energy surging inside him—too much, and it'll all come boiling out of him. He'll hurt someone if he's not careful, if he doesn't control himself, doesn't beat himself back behind the walls he's created for just this sort of thing. So he takes a deep breath, attunes himself once more to those fragile, stuttering heartbeats, a duet of life, of love, of worth.

Tha-thump.

Tha...thump.

"Don't you see?" he asks again, sinking back down into the tiny, ill-made chair (his red boot knocks against the poor, abandoned bag). He wants Lois to understand, wants her to see why this matters, why he should have been there *before* his parents were bent and folded in on themselves. (He wants her to put her hand on his shoulder and hold him together again.) But to do that, he needs to find words, needs to reach back past months of silence and find the eloquence he once aspired to through his writing. It's been so long, and he's so rusty, but desperation is a powerful motivator.

"When my spaceship came down," he says, quietly, in a monotone (because anything else will send him crashing into that endless chasm), "Mom and Dad were driving down an old country road. All they *saw* was a falling star, a dropped meteor. They could have just kept driving, could have looked back on it as nothing more than an interesting anecdote. But they didn't. They stopped, and they looked for me, and when they found a

defenseless baby in a UFO, they kept me. They...knew... somehow. Knew enough to go looking. Loved me enough to take me in and never seem to regret it even when it became obvious I'm not normal. They *knew* I needed them...and I should have known when they needed me. I should have...I should have *known*."

Tha...thump.

Tha-thump.

He turns his face, just enough to see Lois, just enough to look into eyes he once dreamed of looking into every day of his life. There's something in his own eyes. Something wet and blurry and stinging. He's falling apart. He can feel it, all his carefully held walls quaking and tumbling and falling to crash and shatter at her feet. He's breaking, and he knows he's looking to Lois to keep him together (though he doesn't know why she should be the one he turns to; after all, his dreams of a future with her were a long time ago and they will never come to fruition and she should not have to help a fractured Superman, a ghost of a man, a shadow of an alien). He knows he's looking to her to save him from falling, to keep him from being knocked to pieces by the uncertain hammering of those heartbeats.

"Everyone I save, Lois, everyone who's been rescued by Superman, and yet when it mattered the most, I didn't... Don't *they* deserve it most of all? How could I not save *them*?"

Her eyes are soft and luminous (and they will fill his future dreams as well as his past ones, he is suddenly sure), and they do not turn away from him. She doesn't say anything. Doesn't try to answer him, or rationalize what happened, or tell him life doesn't work that way. She doesn't get up and pull him to his feet and force him to stop feeling sorry for himself and start being Superman again.

Instead, she does what he needs most (what, he only realizes in that moment, is exactly what he wanted her to do, was begging her to do). She stands, and she reaches out her arms and slides them around his shoulders, presses them loose and firm around his neck, and she pulls him up into her.

And then he does fall. He does lose his balance. He does break and shatter and fall apart. But she catches him. She steadies him. She picks up his pieces and cradles them in cupped hands until he can put them all back together again.

She hugs him, and she does not let go, and Clark feels her shirt grow damp against his cheeks.

Lois Lane. The reporter who exposed him. The reporter who ensured his anonymity in public for the rest of his life.

The woman he needs.

The woman he loves (and it's stupid and impossible and so utterly foolish, but he cannot lie to himself any longer, cannot pretend that he has gotten over her, or that it is possible to *ever* move on from her).

Her heartbeat thumps against his breastbone, her head fits on his shoulder, beneath the curve of his chin, her skin soaks in the tears he sheds (the first he's allowed himself in over a decade), and Clark doesn't ever want to move. He doesn't want to leave this unexpected, precious refuge. (He doesn't want to break the moment or move on only to listen to another sacred heartbeat fade and vanish as he stands so helplessly.)

"Clark," Lois murmurs in his ear. Only one word. Only one name. But it is more than all the whispers and all the murmurs put together. He stands as Superman, red and blue and yellow, and his cape hangs about them both, but she calls him Clark (and finally, here, with her, the right part of him is anonymous and silent).

He wants to tell her how much this means. He wishes he had the words to express how much he needs this (needs *her*). But instead he is silent. Again. Always. Never able to speak lest he say too much (declarations of love and wishes for a different future and questions as to why she ever wrote a story she had to

know would destroy him). Never opening his mouth lest everyone realize just how little, how useless, how paltry any of his words (his answers for the choices he's made, his excuses for why he thought being Clark Kent more important than the lives he could have been saving all these years, his mute reply for all the accusations sure to be leveled at an alien pretending to be a man) could ever be.

Silence.

It's fitting. It's just. It's so much better for him to be silent than for the heartbeats crowding out the fears clamoring in his head to go silent.

Tha-thump. (His mother, her heartbeat slowing, stabilizing, a breath of relief in the surgeon's snapped commands.)

Tha...thump. (His father, still so slow, dragging, his surgeon still hard at work, still sweating, still glancing toward the door where he last saw Superman.)

Thump. Thump. Thump. (James, across the building, drowsy, enforced steadiness through drugs as they put his arm in a cast.)

Thump-thump-thump. (Lois, in his arms, quiet, quiescent, as if content to be here, to be with him.)

And his own, but he cannot hear that, not over the sound of the others. Not over the sound of his mother's surgeon telling him she will need to stay in intensive care for a few days but the surgery fixed the bleeding before it got too far and she should be okay, things look hopeful. Not over the sound of his father's surgeon asking for another tool, and another, and another, as the clock ticks on and Lois finally guides Clark back to a chair and sits beside him and comforts him with the thrum of her heart and James eventually comes in to sit at his side, his face so very pale, his voice a constant murmur into the cell-phone at his ear as he tries to save their place here and arrange another for them and hold off the media and make this waiting room private and set up a perimeter of protective police officers outside the hospital.

Endless sounds. Noises that make it okay for him to keep breathing. That keep him from being completely useless (so long as that last, slow heartbeat does not fade).

Hours pass. More hours. Outside the hospital, the city tries to come to terms with its new, crumbling appearance and families find one another and emergency workers continue to do all they can beneath silver and emerald light. Inside, Clark tries not to lose hope. Tries to focus on his mother's sleeping pulse, and James and Lois shoring him up on either side, and the fact that his father is still here.

By the time the surgeon finally comes out of the operating room, Clark is sure that an entire eternity has passed. By the time the surgeon finishes speaking, Clark wishes he could have that eternity back.

14

It's a disaster. No. It's worse than a disaster.

Disaster is enough to cover the 8.2 earthquake that has reshaped Coast City's geography (and filled the news to such an extent that he can never escape it, and the line creased between his dark eyes is etched so deeply it looks like a wound). It's enough to encapsulate the casualties of thousands and the couple hundred fatalities so far confirmed (and confirmed again in the slope of his shoulders, the stooped way he walks, the way he cannot meet anyone's eyes). It's enough to describe the slow clean-up, the enormous effort required to make a dent on the damage, the bits where that shows, so tiny they make the rest of the damage look even vaster (make him look tired and small, *diminished* in some way).

But that is all *disaster* covers.

This is worse.

This is *catastrophe* (and even that word feel like it struggles to aspire to the heights, the depths, of what's happened).

The blankness in his eyes. The listlessness in the way he

moves. The loss of that last bit of hope there in silvered brown. The quenching of that ember that ever before has shone, undimmed, within him, as much or more than a symbol as the crest on his Suit.

His mother is in intensive care, slow to recover, worried about Jonathan and Clark and James, fragile and frail so that the doctors spend their time telling Superman and James all the things that might go wrong. His father hangs onto life by a slender thread, helped along by machines and surgeons, and even should he wake up, there will be a long, slow recovery ahead of them (and no more afternoons in the garden with Jonathan kneeling in the dirt himself; no more long walks through straight lines of crops).

And Clark himself seems to be in stasis, in hibernation, retreated into himself as if he's endured too much and now would rather simply *stop* than endure anymore.

The elevator dings, and James steps into the apartment. He looks harried, exhausted; he has not stopped, not ceased talking into the phone and taking multiple trips to who-knows-where since emerging from his hospital room with a cast on his arm. Lois would worry about him, would think about telling him (even this new, more self-sufficient James) to take it easy, except that she knows it is only due to his constant efforts that Clark hasn't lost this home too, that his parents have round-the-clock protection, that Lois's very visible presence in the hospital hasn't caused another disaster (or worse, another *catastrophe*).

She jumps to her feet and stops herself from rushing to James's side only because he looks as if a strong draft will blow him over and she does not want to be the one to cause it. "Well?" she demands (and if it weren't for the catastrophe raining bloody shards off her heart, she'd rejoice to hear the fire in her voice, feel the purposeful, enlivening adrenaline flooding through her being, her momentum and drive restored, if in an altered way).

"It's as safe as it ever is," he replies, and leans against the back of the couch with his good arm. "It's been a week since the quake today, and the news outlets all still assume we were in Coast City for a day trip. I made sure they 'discovered' the wigs we were wearing, and it was obvious we'd been shopping. Plus," he adds almost off-handedly, "hardly anybody consistently remembers or realizes that *Superman* lives like an ordinary person. More than half the time, that's all that keeps us from being tracked down."

"So he can stay?" Lois checks, so that she cannot be disappointed by a misconception.

"We can stay," James affirms. But he doesn't look relieved.

Lois frowns at him. "Isn't that a good thing?"

His sigh is heavy, gusty, so big it seems incongruous coming from his slender, exhausted frame. "It should be. None of us like moving after we've come to rest for a while—and we've been *here* longer than most anywhere. But..."

There's a terribly sad note in his voice, so resigned (so terrified), that Lois has to force herself to speak (has to hold onto her newfound drive with both hands). "But?"

"But." His eyes lock onto hers with uncomfortable intensity. "But if Mr. K doesn't make it... will any of us *want* to stay here?"

There's a fist around her heart, and her dazed eyes can only see those cool, green rows of vegetables stretched out before her, like damp, earthy lines of pain. Like scars. Like open wounds, and the remembered smell of dirt and watered greens, the sound of Jonathan's gravelly voice threading around her, is only salt on those open wounds.

"But..." She has to swallow twice, has to clench her hands into fists, has to cant her chin upward and fiercely blink away debilitating tears. "But he'll make it. The doctors said we only had to wait."

"They said that a week ago. Now they're saying... they're saying... He hasn't woken up yet, Lois." And suddenly, as if a

switch has been thrown (or a curtain pulled back to reveal the real man behind the flashier stage persona), Lois looks at the young man in front of her and sees the boy she knew. Hears the tremulous, pleading note sucking his voice down so that he sounds as if he's far away.

Lois's entire body twitches, as if to move toward him (as if to pull him into an encompassing hug; as if to stroke his hair and reassure him; as if her touch could heal instead of destroy). "Jimmy," she whispers.

The wrong name. (Another disaster to pile on top of the others, stair-steps of tragedy leading to something even worse than *catastrophe*.)

The switch is thrown again (the curtain descends and the stage-lights once more shine blindingly bright), and Jimmy vanishes in front of her eyes, subsumed beneath James. He straightens, stands upright, shoulders back, jaw clenched.

"I've got a meeting to get to," he says. Calmly. Not quite coolly (a stage actor falling back into his character so that he can forget who he is, alone, at night). "I won't be back until the day after tomorrow. If you see Clark, tell him I'll talk to the lawyers in Metropolis and he doesn't need to worry about it."

He turns, ducks into his room and reemerges with an overnight bag hanging from his good shoulder, heads to the elevator, is almost there—

"James!" Lois calls, and she can move fast again, can seize a moment and do something with it (can think of the future instead of sink once more into the mire of the past). So she strides forward and sets a gentle hand onto his arm. It's tense beneath the fabric of his suit coat; the edges of his watch are cold where they peek out along her fingertips. She meets his eyes, searches in them for the last visible dregs of that scared boy hiding inside. "He'll be okay, James," she tells him, careful to use the right name (careful to let none of her own doubt and fear leak into the open). "He's held on a whole week; he's strong. And he has so much to live for. So many people who love him. Who need him. You know Jonathan—he'll never leave if there are people depending on him."

James's only reaction is to give a small nod. But in those dark eyes (reminiscent of Clark's own, but so different, so *individual*, and filled with more determination than Clark's are anymore), she sees hints of a young boy reassured, able to take in a deep breath for the first time in ages.

"Thank you, Lois," he says, his voice hoarse, the words scratchy. And then he practically dives into the waiting elevator, hiding the rest of his reaction behind thick doors and growing distance. Not that Lois minds; she's already turned herself, to conceal the doubt she refuses to acknowledge. The fear that never goes away. The trepidation over a future that, even compared to the bleakest moment of these past months, seems so much bleaker and sadder and lonelier and *worse* than ever before.

She's alone in the apartment (hiding so as not to draw any more attention to herself and this small family; hiding her bright colors and cape of important pasts so that a mild-mannered, anonymous life can continue). The quiet creeps in behind the final, distant clunks and hum of the descending elevator. Silence. Quiet enough to hear the voiceless accusations. Quiet enough to feel her newfound purpose and fire dwindling, drained out of holes punctured all through her (one for every bad decision she's made).

It might make it worse, might give the accusations a voice to echo through this fractured hideaway (but she thinks it will help, instead; thinks hearing the accusations rather than only inferring them will make her put on her armor and pick up her weapons and *fight*). Regardless, she cannot bear the silence, not anymore. Not ever. So she picks up the remote (heavy with *inferred* meaning) and turns on the TV.

To beat back the silence.

To fill up the lonely hours.

To count the disasters.

To find out where Superman is (and look for a word worse than *catastrophe*).

He's not on the news. Or rather, he *should* be, but the media vultures don't care what he is out there doing or who he is saving *now*, or how amazing it is that after everything (after all the disasters, after the catastrophe, after the *calamity*, and that word is almost good enough but still not *quite* there), he is still out there doing good. No. Instead, they only care about the past. About what happened a week ago. They only care about his failure (and it's *not* a failure, she knows that, she *burns* with that knowledge, but Clark is cold, ice, untouched by those warming, healing flames).

In between never-ending footage of the earthquake's widespread damage and interviews with experts assigning blame and predicting effects, there are endlessly repeating bits of footage. Grainy images of Superman's cape descending to the hospital's roof. Blurry video of red and blue disappearing around a hospital corridor behind a barricade of police navy blue. Frantic pictures of doctors and nurses holding hands up between their faces and the cameras, ignoring the hailstorm of questions directed their way. Aerial footage of the police and National Guard surrounding the hospital. Interviews of witnesses, passersby, former patients who answer repetitive questions about that day when Superman burst through their doors (bleeding bodies cradled in his arms, terror in his eyes, guilt slathered all over him) and *spoke*.

He spoke.

He speaks.

Superman can talk.

"Of course he speaks!" Lois shrieks, and she throws the remote. Hurls it at the TV and feels disappointment when it only bounces back and falls with a muffled thud to the lush carpet. "Of course he speaks," she says again, but this time it is only a whisper (touched with guilt of her own, because not that long ago, *she* was the one frozen and held immobile in shock every time he spoke).

"He speaks. And he hurts. And he eats and sleeps and *lives*."

Or he used to. She doesn't know that he allows himself anything he sees as mere luxuries anymore. Anything that will distract himself from the image of his parents in their hospital beds and the constant reminder of all he did not do and thinks he should have done.

Lois wants to tell him he can't do everything, no one expects him to be everywhere, he was saving other people, his parents aren't dead yet, he doesn't have to punish himself, he should rest, give himself a break, she will even try to make something for him in the kitchen, she is so desperate...

She wants to tell him...anything. Everything. Nothing. She just wants to look at him and pull him into another hug and feel him tremble as his silent, cleansing tears warm her neck. She wants to ease his depression and remind him how much he has to live for and let him know he is worth so much more than he thinks. She wants a lot, but every wish she has includes Clark... and she does not know where he is. She hasn't seen him except in quick glimpses, almost as blurry as those in the news, since that day at the hospital when he held her as if she were all that was keeping him afloat (as if she mattered to him; as if she hadn't ruined absolutely *everything*; as if he *wanted* her there, in that moment, with him).

He's gone. Not just physically, she's afraid (so afraid that her sleeping patterns have degenerated again to the point where she's taken that black and white bear from the closet and sleeps with him locked in rigidly tight arms), but in every other way. In the ways that matter the most.

Rather than stand there and mourn for a man she's still doing her utmost to save (to resurrect, to hold to this life, to keep him

here by way of the emotional ties he's created and sustained and strengthened), Lois bends and swoops up the remote. She flicks the television off and sets the remote aside before she can throw it again in another futile attempt to make reality echo the cracking, grinding sound her heart's been making for days now (or maybe for weeks, for months, for thousands of minutes that all lead back, not to a revelation in Smallville, but to that tiny, terrible moment in Metropolis, in the Daily Planet newsroom, when a fading man whispered her name before sinking beneath obscurity).

She throws herself onto the couch, backs into the corner, and huddles there. The lights are all on, in the kitchen, the dining area, the living room, all glaringly bright (to mask the silence). It's still daylight outside, too, and the now familiar amber-tinted sun rays beam in through the windows (as if to spotlight her and keep her from slinking away in shame and defeat). It still smells of Martha's paints and searing metal, of Jonathan's earthy fresh smells, of James's cologne, of that extra, undefinable *something* (like starlight or sky or winds of far-distant places) that Clark adds to the mix (and maybe just a bit of her own familiar shampoo, transplanted here and putting out tentative roots). Everything is the same. There shouldn't be anything to break the spell Lois tries to weave around herself. Nothing to remind her that this *isn't* ordinary, that Jonathan and Martha *aren't* just each out of sight, out of the room, pursuing their own special interests. There shouldn't be anything but a tiny moment of comfort in the flawed bit that remains of her haven.

But no matter how much Lois squeezes her eyes shut and *tries* to pretend, she cannot fool herself (and how ironic is that, that she cannot now deny reality or lie to herself when she's been doing it for months now, to everyone's detriment—or maybe it isn't irony, maybe it's growth, progression, but if so, she can't appreciate it). The apartment is empty. She is alone. And all the good she's managed to reclaim is slipping away once more.

Defeated, Lois lets her eyes slide open, lets her head sink back against the couch cushion. She sits, balled up, taking as little space as possible, in the one place where she found healing (as little as she deserves it), and forgiveness, and love that made her better even though it does not, cannot, fully include her. She huddles there in the midst of deadening silence, and wonders if maybe nothing ever will be better. Maybe she never will be able to alleviate all the damage she caused (and maybe *crime* is a better, more fitting word than *catastrophe* or *calamity*). Maybe she can't help Clark at all.

And there, in the midst of these utterly terrifying wonderings, another tiny shaft of light joins the others. A small sliver of hope and brightness seeping from under the door to Clark's room to join the symphony of light she already sits in. She shouldn't be able to notice it, but it's accompanied by a hum to break the silence, a tug to awaken and hold together her heart, a flare to warm her veins and unravel the knot she's tied herself into.

It's his light.

He's here.

After a week of absence or blurred appearances and disappearances, he is here. A room away. A single door standing between them. She comes to her feet instantly (he may only be here long enough to grab a new cape). She pauses there (he may not want her to knock at his door, to barge into his life any more than she already has). She moves to the door anyway (he needs her, needs *someone*, even if the only one around is the woman who stabbed him in the back). And though her mind is screaming at her that she promised she wouldn't threaten this last refuge of his, that she would leave this last bit of privacy to him, her heart makes her hand lift up and give a firm set of knocks to his door.

He's so alone.

He's so afraid.

He's so good and deserves so much more.

For all these reasons, Lois knocks. For all these reasons, and for one more. One made up of many, many reasons all condensed into something simple and elemental and invaluable.

He's Clark.

He's Clark and Clark was always there for her (even when she pushed him away). Clark has never let her down or abandoned her or blamed her (even when he had more reason than anyone else ever has).

He's Clark and she cannot fail him again. She cannot walk away. She cannot live without him again, but he's slipping ever further away and she has to do *everything* she can to hold onto him (because she didn't the last time, and it was the biggest mistake, disaster, crime, catastrophe, calamity that's ever been).

He's Clark. And so she knocks because she's Lois and she cannot turn away (and that tiny, almost negligible light bathes her toes in fragile possibilities).

After a pause that lasts no more than a handful of heartbeats (after an eternity that makes the air solidify in her lungs), he opens the door.

He's dressed as Superman, but it is Clark looking at her with something...something almost like hope, like joy, like relief, like gratefulness shining there. He's looking at her, but there is something else he's still seeing, some memory or thought. He's a foot away from her, but he feels closer than ever before, as if there is no distance (no crime, no blame, no guilt, no life-changing mistake) between them.

And before she can even open her mouth, Clark says, "He woke up. It was only for a minute, but Dad woke up. He talked to me."

"Oh, Clark!" she exclaims, and without giving herself time to think better of it, without thinking of anything but the relief and awe and hope filling her up and birthing tears to sting in her eyes (and the memory of that awful, wonderful, unbelievable hug in the hospital), Lois flings herself forward, wrapping him in her arms.

For an instant, she thinks she made a mistake (ruined this moment where *Clark* is back), as he goes stiff and straight and silent. But then, like that shaft of light spilling out, he bends and enfolds her in his embrace, and he lets his head rest against hers.

(And she *knows* she made a mistake, because these hugs of his are far *too* much, awakening feelings and stirring wishes better left unawakened and unstirred.)

"I'm so happy for you," she whispers (every bit as much an understatement as *disaster*).

"Mom's already doing better," he whispers against her hair, his breath a dance of sensation against her cheek and the side of her neck. "As soon as she heard, it's like she started *willing* herself better."

Lois laughs, tightens her grip on him and wants to laugh again (and gasp and sigh and freeze in wonderment) when he does the same. "I wouldn't put it past her."

"She's as strong as someone else I know," Clark says ruefully. He pulls back, then, just enough to look at her, to meet her eyes. There is life in his again. Life and hope and everything she thought was gone forever. "Thank you, Lois. For not giving up on them. For not letting me give up either."

"I didn't really do anything." It's only as she says it that she realizes how true the words are—and how much she wishes they were not.

Of course she wants Clark to be back, whole (or as whole as he ever is these days) and happy (or at least content, which is *not* as good as happy, no matter what he says, but is still a fair sight better than the bleakness of this past week). But...but *she* wanted to be the one to put that edge of hope back in his eyes. To relieve, even if ever so slightly, the burdens that stoop his shoulders. To help him and give back to him and save him as he has saved her in the past. She wanted to atone, and instead...instead, he is

strong all on his own. He is enough to shake off the catastrophes and calamities and disasters following in his wake, enough to find hope in the darkest of days, enough to survive and thrive—all on his own.

He doesn't need her. He's never needed her, of course, but she had begun to hope that she could fulfill a need in his life (be something other than the colleague who betrayed him and ruined his life). She had begun to hope...

Well. It doesn't matter. He is well and he is happy and that is all that matters. She is only being selfish to wish that she could have been his hero. She is only being presumptuous to think that she could ever be anything more than the worst thing that ever happened to him. She is only being foolish to ever imagine a future in which things are different (in which he smiles a smile only for her and hugs her often and says her name without a trace of blame or fear or wariness).

"Lois," he says, and there is a smile on his lips. He hasn't smiled since before the earth itself rose up against her, since before rocks were riven and roads were demolished and the foundations of her life were toppled. But he smiles now, a soft, slow smile that is, perhaps, less than the smiles he gave once upon a time, but beautiful all the same. "You held me together when I thought that nothing could. That's not nothing."

Her own smile is not as sincere. Not as beautiful. Not as easy to find or reclaim. "You would have been all right. You're the strongest person I know, Clark."

His shrug is almost embarrassed. He does not quite meet her eyes. "Maybe. But sometimes I don't want to have to be strong. And I'm glad you were there to be strong for me."

She has no words to say to that. All the words she looks for seem too minor, too *little* to encapsulate their full meaning. All the things she wants to tell him flit just ahead of her, never slow or still enough for her to grab hold of. And so she has nothing, no words to give him, no way to voice everything filling her up with life and purpose and meaning (filling her up with everything that bled from her when he walked out of that newsroom). All she can do is hug him again and hide her face in his chest so that he cannot see what she is thinking.

All she can do is hope (even though she is a fool to do so).

But with his arms around her, with his scent surrounding her, with his words still ringing in her ears (undiluted by any of her own meager replies), it is all too easy to hope and dream of things that can never be.

15

She wants to see Jonathan and Martha. They've been in the hospital for eight days now, and Lois hasn't seen them yet. In her mind's eye, they go straight from laughingly pushing her toward that boutique to bloody and broken in that ravine Clark uncovered uncomprehendingly quickly. In her mind's eye (in her fractured dreams), they are dying and pale on black stone ran through with yellow lines and splotched with scarlet blood, a ripped green awning serving as their shroud. In her mind's eye, there is no rescue, no hospital, and no smiling, hugging Clark.

Martha is out of intensive care, worrying others more simply because she will not stay still, will not stop trying to get up to go see Jonathan, rather than because she is not recovering. Jonathan is still in intensive care, still watched carefully by hovering doctors, but he has not slipped back into a coma, and they tell her that he wakes up for small periods at a time, to blink at them even though he cannot yet speak. Lois thinks she would give almost anything to be able to replace her emerald and scarlet memories with these new white and gray images (anything to soak in more of Martha's acceptance and Jonathan's kindness; anything to know and *see* that not all hope is gone).

But she cannot.

"I've managed to spin their presence here as a one-day family

outing, a novelty,” James told her bluntly over the phone, “and I’ve led people to believe you were only sighted here because you were just leaving from a visit with your sister. But if you keep showing up—not just *here*, but invited into the Kents’ rooms, obviously connected to *Superman’s* family—there won’t be any way to spin this. We’ve only just managed to get things under control, Lois—don’t mess it up.”

And James wins the argument as simply as that, because she will not steal their lives from them again, will not come back into Clark’s life only to once more publicize his secrets (as if she has no other skill in life, no other reason for being). So Lois ignores her own urgent desire and her restless energy, and she stays behind. Alone. Locked in a haven made into a prison filled with the echoes of her first meeting with James, his warnings and fears about what she might do to Clark and his family. His threats (and maybe she did not take him seriously then, but she has come to know James since, his ferocious resolve, his scary intensity, his all-consuming love for the Kents, and she will not ignore his very serious threats now) if she *does* bring ruin to them.

But more than the threats, she cannot ignore or forget the forgiveness offered her by Martha and Jonathan, the care and the second chance. Cannot forget the loss in Clark’s eyes, the desperation in his embraces, the gratefulness in his eyes for her simply being there.

No. If any danger is to come to this small, struggling family, it will not be because of her.

But still. She wants to see them. Wants to escape this prison of silence and light and emptiness. Wants to do something, *anything*, other than flip channels between news of the earthquake (though at least they’ve finally moved on from Superman’s aberrant behavior) and news of the astonishing and unexpected, all-but-overnight fall of Lex Luthor and his empire.

It had shocked her, the first time she’d heard his name. Not because she knew him and dated him and had once looked for a story (that had apparently been bigger than she even guessed at), but because she had not expected to hear the name of her city or the name of someone the old her had known. It surprised her and took her aback because that seemed another lifetime, a world lost to her forever, and the sound of their names, the image of the familiar streets and the ubiquitous LexCorp symbol and the severe features of Lex are like wispy remnants of a dream she tries in vain to remember once waking.

So she watches the news of evidence brought to light and witnesses agreeing to testify and an anonymous source working with the Metropolis police and Henderson calmly fielding press conference questions as his men move constantly in and out of Lex Tower behind him, and she wonders what she would have thought of all this before her article (before her Pulitzer Prize, and her accolades, and her place in history, and her nightmares).

Not that it matters. Metropolis is far away. Perry has reporters so much better suited than her to cover this particular story and make sure the Daily Planet isn’t left behind in the dust. She has her own problems, here, to handle. She has a new life to figure out how to live (and she wonders if it is like blasphemy to compare her own journey to this new world with that of tiny baby Clark’s journey from Krypton to Earth).

Besides, she can only watch so much TV. Can only bottle up her frustration and anger with their angles and stories for so long before she feels herself begin to fray at the edges. If this hiding had been necessary even just a month ago, she thinks she would have been able to stay locked away in here without losing her sanity. But it is not a month ago, and she is not quite the listless, defeated wraith she was on her arrival. Fire runs through her veins, titanium ribbons bind her bones, and she *needs* to do something (preferably to help Clark, but after a week of this forced inactivity, she will take anything).

It’s past noon, she is wearing a path in the carpet along the

counter, and the keypad to open the elevator’s solid doors seems to be taunting her. She has been staring at it for three hours now, but she is still as far away from it as ever.

It shouldn’t be this hard to push in the code Jonathan showed her and then step inside the elevator, but then, it shouldn’t be possible for her to be in Clark’s home by invitation either, so clearly the world is full of impossibilities.

“Come on,” she whispers to herself. If Clark can come back from the abyss all on his own, then surely she should be able to enter the elevator by herself (without Jonathan’s calming, permissive presence, or his reassuring smile, or his steady direction).

In the end, it is only the memory of Perry’s gruff praise, the twinkle in his eye as he winked at her, the way he’d sent her knowing it was exactly what she needed (the memory of him sitting locked alone in his office, as wounded and beaten and immobile as she), that makes her take the handful of steps to the elevator and press in the five-digit code. The ding of the doors opening sounds as accomplished as a victory song played by a full marching band.

She doesn’t like stepping in alone. She especially doesn’t like the way the car seems to close in on her, able to press in so much more closely without Jonathan’s sturdy frame keeping her from being squashed, squeezed dry and left as a withered husk. But the elevator ride is as nothing compared to her first sight of those long, seemingly endless rows of green spreading out before her (conjuring up memories that are so bittersweet they hurt). Not quite so green, on a closer look. Not quite as lush as they should be, and dry beneath her fingers. Not quite as encouraging or as easy without Jonathan’s wisdom and knowledge bearing her up.

It is too big. Too much. How could she possibly think that *she* could take care of this small farm all by herself?

“You’re Lois Lane,” she whispers to herself, but where once that might have spurred her into impulsive action, now it only reminds her of how easy it is to make a terrible mistake and how much damage can be caused by one rash decision.

“There’s no one else,” she finally says, and those ribbons of strength tighten around her and enable her to take her first step.

She spent three weeks under Jonathan’s patient tutelage, and though she is still not a gardener or a farmer by any means, at least she can water the plants. She can give them moisture and care, and she can spot the weeds Jonathan warned her about, can pull them out and dispose of them where their seeds will not fall into more of the planters. She can take as much time as the plants will need (there is nothing else to do, nowhere else for her to be), and give them whatever she has in her to give (not nearly as much as once there was, but so much more than she had before coming here and learning to move on). She is no replacement for Jonathan, but she can be his stand-in (and tired or sweaty as she gets, she knows this is so much more rewarding than that article she wrote and for which she is so venerated).

She can do this. And so she does.

Her knees ache, her hands are grimy and muddy, knuckle-deep in dirt, her hair is sticking to the back of her neck, and she is quietly humming to herself when Superman descends from the sky and Clark Kent alights in front of her. Half-uprooted weeds drop from her nerveless hands. She sits back, eyes intent on him (locked to him with no key to free her and no will to find it). But he is not looking at her at all. In fact, she almost wonders if he even remembers or knows that she is there.

His gaze moves from one planter to another. Flicks to the stains darkening the pathway where Lois spilt out water before figuring out the sprinklers. Rests briefly on the growing (but now, looking at it through his eyes, seemingly measly) pile of dying weeds. Moves again through the maze of growing things. His hands fondle the heads of the plants closest to him, straining up to receive his all but reverential touch.

He does not look at her, but Lois cannot look at anything *but* him. Clark Kent. Glasses, flannel shirt, jeans, tousled hair, and wide-eyed, awed expression. It feels like a vicious kick to her stomach. It feels like a hand has just astonishingly let go of its fatal grasp on her throat and let her take a huge, life-giving gasp of air. It feels like a dagger in her heart and an infusion to her soul. It is a reminder of all she's done wrong and a sense of homecoming so overwhelming she feels lightheaded, dizzy, his image wavering between the sparks in her vision.

(And she cannot help but wonder, tentatively, if this—this view, this image, this realization of just how much *Clark* means to her—is what she missed on their trip to Smallville; if this is what she blindly overlooked in favor of becoming Trask's captive in pursuit of a story she should never have gotten.)

He begins to move toward her (she wants to rise to her feet). His eyes finally fall, and rest, upon her (she cannot move). He smiles, slowly, shyly, wonderingly (her heart moves for her in a startling, dizzying leap toward her throat).

"Lois," he whispers, and his eyes are so wide she feels as if he will draw all of her in (and she will not struggle).

He is not angry. He is not offended. He is not hurt, or disbelieving, or suspicious, or any of the other things she thought he might be (the envisioning of which made her pace and glare uselessly at the elevator for so very long). He seems, instead, to be...awed (and that is almost worse).

"I'm sorry," she blurts out (because it is not right for him to think her better than she is). "I just...I didn't—"

"Dad will be so happy," Clark interrupts her, as if he did not hear her apology. There is a sheen in his eyes, a shaft of sunlight sparkling there (a tiny measure of tears hidden there beneath its brilliant camouflage). "He hates when he loses crops."

She looks around helplessly. It suddenly seems as if she hasn't done nearly enough. "I don't know how to do much," she says. And then she looks back into Clark's shining eyes, and feels, inexplicably, a swell of confidence fill her to overflowing. So she smiles at him, reassuringly, and finishes, "But it's better than nothing. I've made sure only to do what he showed me. I think there are a few more different types of weeds, but I didn't want to pull them up without knowing for sure."

Clark's smile grows. When he kneels next to her, warm and solid and so close, Lois thinks she will be the first person to actually spontaneously combust. "Here," he says, still so softly, as if he does not want to break this spell, does not want to let the world know where they are (and he shouldn't be here, out in the open where he can be so easily spotted and their sanctuary so carelessly destroyed, but Lois doesn't care, because he *should* be able to stand out here in the sunlight).

Lois's breaths come shallow and quick as he shows her which plants are weeds and which are food, which can be uprooted and which should be cared for. He is gentle, strong, confident, humble (power filling him to overflowing, but held back in a dark well he taps only sparingly and only at need), so at home in this task that Clark Kent can do so much better than Superman. It is hard to focus on the lessons he is teaching her when he is so near, but this is important for her to learn (and she is willing to do anything to keep that small smile lightening his features), so she focuses her newfound resolve on the task.

Gradually, eventually, she realizes he has stopped talking; his hands have fallen to sift through the weeds they've pulled (together, partners again, even if only in a small way). The silence is rich and golden, full and lush, but Lois is afraid it will let cries for help (for *Superman* rather than *Clark*) filter through to shatter the moment. So she summons up a smile (as soft as his, and just as awed) and says, "Thank you. I'll...I'll know what to do now."

"Lois." The odd, shifting note in his voice makes her look up and meet his intent gaze. His hand is warm, almost too hot except

that it sends a cooling shiver through her, as he reaches out and places it over her dirt-stained fingers. "Thank you for this. I'm... I'm glad you're here."

Words abandon her. Thought flees. Coherence vanishes. All she can do is stare at him, feel the potent quality of his touch, *hope* this moment never ends (hope he doesn't let her go and send her crashing back down to the ground he's lifted her from so far below).

But then, as always, Superman is needed.

His head cocks, his attention shifts, and a wall slides down behind his eyes. Or maybe it is not a wall; maybe it is armor, a mask designed to shield him from the expectations of the world (a prison designed to keep all the wants and wishes and needs of Clark locked away inside). Regardless, it slides between them, destroying the moment, the rapport, the connection (the earnestness, the awe, the openness). It takes the impossibility of almost-partners, almost-friends, and restores them to the reality of superhero and reporter, victim and criminal (god and mortal).

But.

He pauses. Hesitates in a way he hasn't since this new age of the world. Looks at her as if wanting to explain.

"You have to go," she says so he will not have to. And she gives him an encouraging smile. "Don't worry. I'll make sure to only pull up the ones you showed me."

There's an answering smile that wants to come out (strains past the bars of its armored prison), but Superman, even with the glasses and flannel, cannot allow it release (cannot give his own soul freedom when so many still depend on him). "I'll see you later," he says.

And then he's gone. The whisper of his presence, though, still breezes its gentle way along her cheek, cooling her and stirring her hair.

Strangely, when she turns back to this job she has set herself (this penance that has coaxed a smile from him), she does not feel alone. She does not feel defeated. She feels strong, borne up by that glimpse of Clark. By his touch.

By his words.

"I'm glad you're here."

Glad. That *she* is here. In his haven, his refuge, the closest thing he has to a home.

"I'm glad you're here."

Glad. Happy. That is more than acceptance, or resignation, or forced concession. Most of all, it is more than (*better* than) contentment.

It is forgiveness. Pure, simple, unadorned forgiveness.

It is a new beginning.

She does not want to go in. Does not want to stop weeding and watering and wondering (about impossible things). Doesn't want to move from this garden in case she can never get this feeling of hope back.

But finally, when dusk shadows turn green to ebony and muddy fingers grow stiff and chilled, Lois regretfully sets aside Jonathan's tools and heads back inside. The door opens at her touch. The elevator does not refuse her entrance. The suite looks just as it did before, still there (not packed away and moved and hidden while her guard was dropped). It is still quiet, still too bright, but it is not so scary as she ducks into the bathroom and showers, emerging smelling just as she did in Metropolis but feeling (again, always, never again to revert back to the Lois Lane the world knows her as) like a completely new person.

It's late enough, and she's tired enough, that after eating a few bites of toast, she thinks she should probably go to bed. But she is not ready for this day to be over (for a new bright, silent day to begin as if this one never was), so instead she turns off most of the lights, sits on the couch in the living area, and sets her eyes to the dark crack at the bottom of Clark's locked door.

Because she forgot to pass along James's message. Because

she wants Clark to realize there are reasons to come back. Because he said he'd see her later, and no matter how much the rest of the world needs him (how much his parents might wish to receive a visit from him), she hopes he meant tonight.

She's dozing when she feels something warm draped over her. Instinctively, she burrows into it, before her half-opened eyes see the form standing over her, the red cape backlit by the starlight behind him, and she sits upright, his name spilling from her lips.

Clark's immediate smile at the sound of his name (*Clark*, the name of something extinct and mythical and lovely) is white and bright in the darkness, but it doesn't last nearly long enough. "You should be in bed," he says. "Isn't your room comfortable enough?"

"Yes." She almost blushes before remembering that she does have a reason (an excuse) for waiting up for him. "James wanted me to tell you something, but I forgot. He said he'd talk to the lawyers in Metropolis and you don't have to worry about it."

The diffused city lights from the windows half circling the room aren't much for illumination, but they're more than enough to showcase the tension suddenly crowding out any memory of that earlier bright smile. He sinks to the couch beside her, warming her with his proximity, his brow furrowed as he studies her. "Did...is that all he said?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't...you didn't ask him what the lawyers were for?"

Lois frowns at him, not sure whether to reiterate her promise that she is not here to investigate him or ask him, now, what is behind this (apparently secretive) message. "I assumed he meant the Foundation's lawyers. Why?"

Clark's sigh is so deep it seems to come up from the very depths of his being. "I didn't want to be the one to tell you, Lois. I'm sure you've seen the news about Luthor?"

"Yes," she says slowly, wondering at the cold note in his voice that appears on Lex Luthor's name and then fades away just as quickly.

He peers more closely at her, as if puzzled by her reaction, and when he speaks, he sounds like a man she thought she'd killed irrevocably. "Well, *I'm* the source for their investigation. I know you...that there was something between you two, but he isn't what you thought. But I don't want you to feel bad. I mean, as Superman, I knew things about Luthor no one else would—"

"Clark," she interrupts him, and (boldly) places a hand on his arm. Only for an instant, but it cuts off his voice as easily as she did once before with an article (not a comparison she likes, and she shivers and tries to unthink it). "It sounds like Lex Luthor is a terrible criminal, maybe even a monster. If you knew that, then of course you had to stop him. I have no idea how you've found the time with everything else you do, of course, but I'm still glad that you did it. Glad," she adds in a softer voice, looking away, "that you have not abandoned Metropolis entirely."

"Why would I?" he asks, and he tilts his head to look at her. Curiously, he seems almost relieved, almost happy, as he gives her the suggestion of a smile. "Metropolis was the first to accept me, the first to make me realize that being an alien did not mean I would be hunted and locked away and dissected."

Lois stares at him, gaping and trying not to show it. Even after Trask, even after Smallville, even after Jonathan's rising and falling voice in her ear, she has never realized (perhaps never *let* herself realize) just what fears a young Clark might have grown up with.

"And," he says, almost casually, "I had time for it because I made time. For a while, there wasn't much that I thought more important than taking Luthor down. He had some plans involving...someone I know. Plans I could not bear to see carried out."

And now she smiles, because how can he think he is only Superman when there is so much *Clark* concern and protectiveness in his voice? "And now they are safe, thanks to you. I'm a little sorry I never got the story on Luthor that I wanted, but not nearly sorry enough to regret being here."

In return for that (daring) admission, she gets another hint of his smile. "I'm a little sorry not to be writing the story of his downfall too."

A searing pang of guilt hits low and hard and fast, and to distract them both from it (to make sure he does not remember who he is sitting with and smiling at), Lois reaches out and touches him again (because she cannot quite help herself, and because she thinks he needs a hint of human contact).

"How are your parents doing?" she asks when the mood eases, dispersed by the sound of the air conditioner cycling back on.

It's the right question to ask. It makes him relax and allows another white smile to flash through the darkness. "Mom's going to be able to be discharged in not too long, I think. She'll need physical therapy, but she's already working out her own regimen. I think she's determined to be able to do everything for Dad that..." His voice goes hoarse and trails off before he shakes his head and forces himself to finish. "That he might not be able to do."

"And how is Jonathan doing?" she manages to ask, because he's smiling and even though he's tired, he's not *wrecked*, so she's fairly certain the answer won't be a bad one (won't be a catastrophe on top of everything else).

He sobers slightly, but does not lose the shimmer to his eyes. "He still can't stay awake for longer than a half hour or so at a time, but the doctors say he's stabilizing. They mentioned maybe being able to move him out of intensive care in a few days—nothing definite, but it's more hope than they've let themselves show me before. I think...I think he might actually pull through this."

"He will," Lois says encouragingly.

Clark nods, still somber. His shoulders are slumped, his eyes shadowed; she sees his silhouette straighten, resettling his burden. He gives her a slight smile, though it doesn't shine white in the darkness, shadow on shadows. "What about you, Lois? Aside from picking up farming, how many award-winning articles have you written today?"

Lois freezes, statue-still (and if it were anyone but Clark, she would think he was trying to hurt her; trying, and succeeding). "Clark," she says, softly. Mournfully (because she thought they were past this, thought he was giving her the benefit of the doubt and she was doing her best to live up to that). "I promised—I'm not writing any stories on you. I'm only here—"

"I know," he says. Promises. His own reminder for them both, spoken through another shadowed smile. "But the best investigative reporter in the world doesn't take vacations. In fact, if I recall correctly, she didn't even take weekends."

He's teasing her. His tone is light and free. His eyes are sparkling with reflected light. His mouth is tilted in the suggestion of a smile. He's teasing (accepting her just as his family did in the park on that ill-fated day), and she wishes she could reply in kind, but the hurt is too real, the wound too deep. He's been bleeding out since she first saw him again; this is the first time she realizes *she's* been bleeding out too, only she's hid her wound better than he has.

"Clark," she says. But then trails off, because it's one thing to think that his Secret was outed by the best reporter in the world—quite another to realize he'd been discovered and unmasked and destroyed by a has-been nobody whose career ended before she turned thirty.

"I'm sorry," Clark says, and unbelievably, *he* sounds apologetic, misreading her numb silence. "I did keep up with the

Daily Planet for a while—I had it delivered by mail. But we were tracked down twice that way, so I had to stop getting it, and I’m afraid that I haven’t...I haven’t had a chance to stop by anywhere and pick up a copy in quite a while.”

Lois stares at him. It’s hard to breathe. “You...you don’t have to keep reading the Daily Planet. Not after...not now.”

“I know.” He looks away. Quiet. Grave. Wistful. “But...sometimes I miss reading your articles. Miss getting to edit them over your shoulder.”

“Yeah, well.” Lois swallows hard and wishes the darkness were deeper so she could sink into it. “You don’t have to.”

“What do you mean?”

“They can’t fire me,” she says. It’s her turn to avoid his focused, curious gaze. “So it doesn’t really matter, but...I haven’t written for a long time.”

He’s silent, but he’s *listening* (just like he always did, to complaints about traffic and coffee or family secrets spilled out like it didn’t matter), and so Lois feels the words pulled out of her. “I turn in articles, but they’re...they’re not real stories, not anywhere near Kerth-worthy, or even Daily Planet-worthy. I think...” She wipes away the tears wetting her eyelashes, making her eyes heavy, hard to keep open. “I think I lost whatever I used to have. Lost the ability when...”

But she can’t finish that. They both know the end of that sentence anyway, both know what happened (and who was to blame) to make her a has-been and him a caricature. But she hopes that only she knows about the nightmares, the dreams that wake her shuddering and sweating and hyperventilating in the night. Dreams of lives destroyed with no more than a keystroke, real people’s names erased as soon as she writes them down. Dreams of people turned into ghosts on the newspaper page and the life drained from her as she gathers trophies for her destructive articles, all stacked up in her apartment and gathering dust.

“Oh, Lois,” Clark says, and he sounds truly compassionate (as if he understands what it is to lose something so fundamental, and once more peppermint chokes her as she realizes just how fully he *can* understand). His hand is warm and heavy on her shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

Lois turns her face into the side of the couch and shrinks down into the blanket he draped over her, pretending she can hide her tears from him. “I wish you would stop doing that.”

He draws his hand away as if burned; she doesn’t need to open her eyes to see the hurt, stilted look on his face. “I—”

She reaches out blindly and grabs hold of his hand. “Stop being sorry for things that should make you happy, or at least vengefully satisfied,” she clarifies. “Stop forgiving me instead of hating me.”

“Oh,” he says, and out of every reaction he could have given, she supposes she shouldn’t be surprised to hear a laugh in his voice as he squeezes her hand lightly. He can squeeze coal hard enough to turn it into diamonds, she finds herself thinking, but he holds her hand with just enough pressure to make her feel warmed all the way through. Or maybe there isn’t a difference (maybe he’s gradually turning her into something worthwhile and valuable and beautiful with no more than slight hints of pressure).

“I’m sorry,” Clark says again, but this time, he’s teasing her. “I’ll try to be more vindictive from now on.”

“Do that,” Lois agrees. She’s smiling (her lashes are still wet, but no longer heavy), and that almost makes her want to cry even harder (at how he can turn something so hurtful and damaging into a reason to smile). “I’d appreciate it.”

“Then I’ll work on it.”

Her lips twitch again, and she relaxes back into the couch, suddenly aware of how tired and sore she is from her unaccustomed physical labor. She doesn’t want to look at him (in case he looks into her eyes and remembers, or learns, how to be

vindictive after all), so she keeps her eyes shut. “Liar,” she whispers, and is glad she did when the sound of his chuckle resonates through the room.

“Here.” Before she realizes what he means to do, Clark stands and bends and scoops her into his arms, cradles her closely to him as if he’s never carried so precious a burden. She is not quite sure how, cannot really explain it, but he makes her feel as if she is appreciated, valued, respected. Cherished. He makes her feel as if he can think of nothing better to do with his superhuman strength than to use it to carry her gently into her bedroom (*hers*, no one else’s, not ever again, because she has no plans to leave him). Lois cannot explain him—she wrote an article claiming she could, claiming that she had stripped him of all falsehoods and evasions to reveal the naked truth.

But she’d lied. (The biggest article of her career, with a Pulitzer Prize to serve as a landmark for it, and it is all wrong).

He’s inexplicable. He’s incomprehensible. He’s unknowable. Soot-stained, salt-marked, blood-touched, but still smelling of sky and wind and rain, as if he is composed of the elements themselves. Wounded and worried and weary, but still emanating only strength and compassion and gentleness. Man of steel, but when her fingertips wrap around the curve of his neck (when she nuzzles her nose closer into him), he shivers, a sound soft and delicate and unbelievably invigorating.

She cannot understand him, but she doesn’t need to understand him to love him.

(And a deep foreboding hums through her like distant cannon fire, like heavy drums, at the confession, the admission, the realization that this, after all, is why she came all this way to find him.)

“This isn’t exactly being vindictive,” she tells him, and she means her tone to come out chiding, but instead it sounds entirely too awed.

Clarks lays her down on her bed, and he can fly halfway around the world in seconds, but he is infinitely slow setting her down, his touch lingering. “Of course it is,” he whispers, somehow able to keep the teasing mood. “Banishing Lois Lane from her self-appointed vigil to get some sleep? That’s about as vindictive as it gets.”

“You’re right. This means war, Kent,” she says, but it’s not a threat.

“Bring it on,” he replies, and then he pauses. Another hesitation. Another meaning-laden gaze. She cannot see him except as a silhouette, but she knows he can see her, and she wonders suddenly (with a burning longing to *know* instead of just *fear*) what he sees when he looks at her. What he thinks of her. What future he would want with her if he were not trapped on every side by the life she’s left to him.

She thinks he swallows. Thinks his hands fist at her side. And then he leans forward, large and looming and not frightening at all, and he kisses her cheek. “Good night,” he breathes, a caress of air that has her eyes sliding closed to hide whatever he might see that no one else can.

“Good night, Clark,” she replies, soundlessly except that he can hear even her heartbeat (galloping and elated and tripping around her ribcage).

Her hand rises as if to stop him when he stands and takes a step back. But he does not take that pause to look back at her (as if he cannot stand to be here any longer; as if he fears her reaction; as if he already regrets this night). He slips away and Lois is left behind. Alone in the quiet. Only...Clark’s presence still lingers in the room (a ghost come to haunt her every waking moment, never to fade away or leave her), and so she does not feel alone at all.

form, but Clark takes inordinate strength from the way the fingers cling to his and the feel of the calluses still evident on the palm. He cradles the hand gently, carefully, so sure not to harm this slender, frail (but *important*) link to the man who took him in and loves him and worked with him for days and weeks and months to make sure he *could* hold even hands this fragile without hurting them. Jonathan's eyes are closed against the dimmed lights, his strength not quite enough to force words past the tubes running along his face, into his mouth and nostrils, snaking along arms and legs.

But his hand...that holds on, curves around Clark's so that Clark can know what he would see in faded, sparkling blue eyes (love and compassion and concern); what his dad would say if he only could (love and compassion and concern, because his dad is nothing if not steady and constant and predictable in the same way as earth and hope and green, growing things).

So Clark holds his dad's hand, and he refuses to feel despair at the overbearing sound of machines helping his dad continue to live, the glass windows letting a constant parade of medical personnel keep Jonathan Kent under constant observation, the casts around his leg and wrist, the bandages on too-white skin. It would be easy to feel his fledgling hope trickle away, but Clark refuses. Because maybe they are in the middle of a hospital under heavy guard, but his dad's hand is wrapped around his (his heart still beats, in a better, more joyful tempo), and so Clark can do nothing *but* feel relieved and grateful.

"I'm going to go see Mom now," he whispers (words just for his dad, not for the curious, watching staff around them). "But I'll come back and see you tomorrow."

His dad squeezes his hand, an almost negligible pressure that sparks the birth of a wide smile on Clark's face.

"I love you, Dad," he says, and without a flicker of self-consciousness (determinedly, heedless of the stares), he stoops and kisses his dad's brow. A point of contact, a flash of heat, a burst of love, to keep his dad here and bring him back to life and wellness and health.

Another tiny, appreciated squeeze before Clark regretfully sets the hand down in safety on the thin coverlet. And then he's backing away and heading to another floor to see his mom.

She hates being on a different floor than Jonathan, hates not being able to get out of bed and take care of her husband and son and James. But she is still weak, still wobbly on her bruised legs, still tender around her midsection where her ribs are wrapped and stitches march beneath bandages, still not quite able to take breaths that aren't shallow and quick. She still sleeps eight hours out of ten, and she is not so well that Clark doesn't feel a flutter of fear every time he goes to see her.

"Clark," she says as soon as he knocks on the door of her private room and pokes his head in (after giving a grateful, acknowledging nod to the police officers stationed outside). Her smile is not as wide as usual due to the stitched gash along her left cheekbone, but it is still warm and accepting and immeasurably beautiful.

"Mom," he says (a sigh of relief), and he lets her opened arms command him forward to nestle her (so gently) in his embrace. Her heart beats out a steady, invigorating tune next to his, old and worn and slower than before, but so necessary to his continued wellbeing. "I missed you."

"Oh, Clark." She laughs breathlessly (he tenses at the wince of pain she tries to hide from him) and pulls back to examine him closely, as if he will have wasted away without her food to keep him going (without her constant affection, her changing but enduring love, like seasons that cycle and grow and move and revitalize, to give him a reason to live and love and hope). "How are you doing?"

His chuckle is quiet, but real, and that means everything to him, to her (to the world, if they want Superman to keep existing

in any form or fashion). "I'm fine, Mom. How are *you*?"

She shrugs that aside, picking distastefully at her hospital gown. "Won't lie, son—I've been better." Then she laughs, banishing any bitterness. "But they said I can finally visit your father tomorrow. You know he'll do better seeing me and knowing I'm all right. Also, I think I've managed to finally corrupt the night nurse well enough to sneak me in some paper and pencils. I haven't had a sketching class yet, but I'll surely be able to get *something* down. I'll experiment anyway."

"Painting, sculpting, metal-working, and now sketching?"

Clark winks at her, grabbing hold of her hand and clinging, but softly, subtly, not wanting her to know how much he needs this tangible reminder of her life. "I'm starting to think you're something of an overachiever, Mom."

"Oh, hush," she replies, but her eyes are twinkling. As he smiles and looks down at her hand (thin, frail, capable of so much life and creativity and miracles), he feels his steady cheerfulness waver, just a bit (his own want sneaking through to reveal itself to his mom, who doesn't need someone else to worry about). "Clark," she says, and when he looks up, he knows she's seen it (she knows him too well, and he has never been able to fool her). The twinkle is gone, replaced by somber concern. "How long can we stay here? How long can you keep coming?"

He looks away.

It's been hard, finding ways to come into the hospital without making it any more of a target than it already is. James told him not to make habits, to change up the methods of arrival, the timing of his visits; the hospital has been gracious enough (or intimidated enough) to let him visit even during the night, enter through any door he likes. James has protected their home, but...but Clark knows (as well as his mom does, apparently) that despite all these precautions, this can't last. The police can't keep guarding the hospital all the way through his parents' long recovery. The National Guard should be out there helping rebuild, not keeping back the media and curious tourists and any criminals with a longstanding grudge.

This can't last. Not forever. Not for long. Not long enough.

But he has only just gotten his parents back (gotten his hope and strength back), so recently that he doesn't want to think about a dangerous move and the inevitable trust he will have to show to some hospital somewhere and the complications this might cause to an already precarious situation.

He doesn't want to think of it, and if there is one thing Clark is good at doing, it is avoiding unpleasant truths.

So he doesn't let any of his inward worry show on his face when he looks back to Martha. He makes sure he looks confident, relaxed, reassuring (as she has done so often for him). "I'll keep coming as long as you're here," he promises her.

She brings over her other hand to cradle both of his, hers small and fragile but strong enough to contain and strengthen his. "I know you will, honey." She catches his eye with steely resolve. "But your dad and I don't want to be responsible for anything bad happening to you—or to any of the other innocent people in this hospital."

Clark sighs (wishing she were not so good at cutting through all his defenses) and bends nearer to her. "I know, Mom. But Dad can't be moved yet. When he can, then...then we'll move."

"You'll have to get James looking for an alternative hospital—assuming he hasn't started already."

"I will. He's getting back this afternoon."

Martha pats his hand. "Make sure he's eating enough. You know with all the time-zones he crosses, he forgets when meal times are and just skips them."

"I will," he promises with a chuckle. "You just make sure you're resting in between sketching your masterpieces."

"Depends on how fast I pick it up," she teases him. She's tired already, though; Clark can see her eyes drooping, feel her

hands sagging around his.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he says, and bends to kiss her too (but this time maybe he's looking for a reminder for himself rather than giving one). "I love you, Mom."

"I love you, honey. Tell James we love him too and miss seeing him."

"Tell Dad not to worry," Clark returns, and then he has to tear himself away, walk through the heavy door, past the layers of security, to a window he found in an upper floor waiting area. He leaves too quickly for more than a blur of color to show, but he's assuming it will be caught by cameras anyway (can hear them clicking and humming and grinding for a solid block in every direction). He has grown used to feeling always watched by now.

Morning sunlight pours down on him, the kind of nutrients his body needs more than food or water, but somehow not nearly as rejuvenating as the two sets of hands that curved around his mere moments ago. He feels tired, weighted down by worry he's afraid to acknowledge lest it fully conquer him. He feels like a solid night of sleep, a warm breakfast, and a hot cup of coffee would be almost as welcoming at this point as his old life back (or maybe they're one and the same, Clark Kent bestowing on him the small comforts that Superman cannot). He feels like going back home, pretending he has a reason for not being Superman, swooping into the suite and going out of his room to the living area. Staying there, listening to a heartbeat, a pattern of breathing, whatever words (astonishing, enlivening, unpredictable, always somehow just what he needs) Lois might give him. Looking at her, drinking in the sight of her, the smell, the *presence* of her until he forgets about Superman entirely and remembers only Clark (dreams only Clark-dreams, impossible for him now but once so seemingly achievable). Talking to her, maybe finding another excuse to take her into his arms, let her hug him until he feels real and whole and right in his own skin again.

He feels like casting off Superman and stepping into Clark Kent.

He feels like being selfish.

And that is dangerous, so very completely dangerous and all the more because of how achingly *tempting* it is. He cannot be selfish. He has no excuses anymore, no alter ego to hide behind, no white lies to give as explanation for why he did not save others beloved to people out there (maybe to the police officers guarding his family or members of the National Guard protecting that hospital helping his parents or the doctors healing the people he loves best of all). He has no reason to get rid of Superman, not when Superman is the one who is needed and Clark is only the one who delivered Superman to the needy, desperate, dying world.

Lois Lane. He let her come because he wanted to see her again. Because he missed her. Because he thought closure would be good for them both (would make him stop dreaming dreams that just make him *want* and make disappointment sharper when he wakes). And, if he is truly honest with himself, because he was so hurt, so *wounded* beyond what he thought could be healed, so tired that Nightfall seemed only the last in a long line of hurts, that he didn't have the strength to turn aside this last hope offered him by a reluctant James just when he least expected it.

He let her come because he wanted to say goodbye to that time of his life. To shut the door on it and realize, for once and for all, just how irrevocably changed everything was, and thus, resign himself fully to the life now before him.

But she is Lois Lane, and so he is not resigned or content anymore. No, now hope *seethes* inside him like a storm, like a hurricane of dreams and memories all meshed together (her kneeling in the garden, her arms around him in the hospital, her eyes heavy on him in the darkness of her room, her tripping heart when he kissed her cheek, her tone of voice when she says his

name). Hope and temptation and impossibility and a siren luring him onto things that can never be his (and he will not survive being dashed against the sharp rocks, not again, not when he is still so scarred and trembling from the last time).

Lois Lane. She is trouble, and he should have known that (he *did*, just not in this way, not in a way that would offer him such jagged hope, not when he never expected her to look at him as if she *wanted* him to kiss her cheek), but he is not prepared for it anyway.

He is Superman now. Clark is only for his parents and James, a secret he keeps because he cannot help it (because he will die without it, has already felt the growing loss, before Lois came, when he was fading away, a wraith with shaking hands), because Clark refuses to die. But the world needs Superman, and the world has accepted him and let him live here when it could have rejected him, and he owes them all for that. The world needs Superman, and Superman has a reason for being here, a reason for continuing, and Clark does not (Clark has no reason at all for thinking himself more important than the people out there screaming for a savior to keep their hearts beating and their own hopes alive).

So he cannot give into temptation. He cannot do anything more than attune his hearing long enough to realize Lois is in his father's garden again, humming softly to herself as she pulls up weeds in a stubbornly endearing way (muttered imprecations breaking up the sweet sound of her alto voice). Even that is unwise since it makes the *wanting*, the *longing*, the *desire* to be more than a superhero, rise up in him.

But there are other noises besides her humming, other voices that are louder and more imperative. Other sounds that remind him of the necessity of his continued service.

So he is Superman (always and forever with no end in sight because it is too *hard* to see an end only to have it disappear over and over again). He soars through the skies and swoops down to save and rescue and help, and he keeps his lips clamped over all the words he wants to give the scared people before him (because if he speaks once, then he will have to speak forever, will have to answer any question or accusation they put before him, and that is more than even Superman can endure). He roams without direction or purpose, tethered only by the long, looping cord of his name (the name the world knows, needs, accepts), going where he is called, acting as quickly as he can, not lingering anywhere, and still, always, there are more people calling, crying, asking, demanding, *needing* (and he wishes, just once, there would be people *wanting* him instead of *needing* him), and there will never, ever be enough of him to answer every cry or help everyone who needs it (always, *always*, he will be found wanting).

Eventually, when it is dark and his Clark memories tell him he should be eating dinner, he lets himself turn back toward home. James will be back, and he needs to hear about the meeting with their lawyers, needs to know when to meet with Henderson again and how much more they need before a court date can be set and Luthor can be put away for good. He needs to go back home, and it has nothing to do with his wanting to see Lois again, even if just for a moment.

(He wishes he were not so good at lying to himself; it only makes the temptation harder to deny.)

Almost, at the realization of the true reason he has turned away, he makes himself turn away, follow the lodestone of his name being called in fear and hope. But even as he wavers, hovering unsteadily in the air while wind whips and tears at him, he hears a familiar voice (as if he knew Clark's dilemma; as if he would follow him anywhere, as he did before, to save him and bring some measure of *home* back to him) that makes up his mind for him.

"Come home, CK," James whispers, in a faraway suite,

sitting at a counter used as a table, food laid out before him, his arm cradled in a cast because Superman wasn't there quickly enough for him. "Come home."

And so Clark does, because as hard as it is to turn away from cries for Superman, it is impossible to ignore this solitary cry for Clark Kent.

When he emerges from his room, James and Lois both look up from the pan of soup and the empty, waiting bowls (three of them) placed before them. They both smile to see him. They both say his name (*Clark* and *CK*, echoes of a newsroom he never wanted to leave). They both welcome him, and for a wonder, even with his parents sleeping so far away, he feels like he *has* come home.

"James made the soup," Lois says quickly, as Clark comes forward and takes the seat left for him. "It should be safe."

"Very safe," James agrees, "since it came out of a can. We were hungry and decided speed was better than quality—otherwise we would have *you* make dinner, CK."

Clark laughs to hide how startled he is by the reminder that he *does* know how to do something so ordinary. Something so normal, so benign, so mundane that it requires no superpowers at all. "Soup smells good," is all he says, and he isn't lying. It's hot and fragrant and fills up the suite so that it feels *lived* in, and that is enough to make him eat it even if it were burned and salty and out of date.

Conversation swirls around him as he savors the sips of soup, the chunks of potato and ham, the salt and the feel of the napkin. James and Lois both seem to sense that he cannot talk now (that he cannot stop *enjoying* this slice of normal, beautiful life long enough to conjure up any conversational skills), and so they banter back and forth. And when the soup is gone, Clark is still silent, watching them with enchanted eyes, the scene before him dissolving in and out with memories of that newsroom, of an impetuous reporter and an indefatigable copyboy. It's been a long time since he's felt so much like *Clark*, and yet...and yet, at the same time, it's been a long time since he's allowed himself to feel himself so *removed* from that Clark, from that life, from that world as alien to him now as Krypton.

The sense of removal, of isolation, is only heightened when he realizes that dinner is over and James has already told him that he doesn't have to see Henderson for another week and he has no more excuses for sitting here in jeans and a t-shirt and glasses that veil the world in a more idealized sheen. Reluctantly, not wanting to interrupt Lois and James, he stands and takes care of the dishes before they can realize he's moved, and then he clears his throat.

They both fall silent, instantly, and look at him. Lois blinks when she notices the empty table between them. "Wow," she says. "That's handy." Then, so quickly it takes Clark aback, she grins at him. "Very handy. Now that we have a clean table, we can play some poker. You in, James?"

"Oh, definitely." James moves as if to rub his hands together in glee before remembering his cast. His expression falls into a studiously mournful mask. "And since I'm playing at something of a handicap, you'll have to go easy on me. Right, CK?"

"You will play, Clark," Lois says in a suddenly soft, inviting voice. "Won't you?"

And they both look up at him. Waiting. Hoping.

It is too much for him. He's already tempted, already torn between his longing to stay and his responsibility to go. Their combined plea crumples the last of his resistance.

"I will," he says (decisively, to hide the guilt). "I might even give a better showing at this poker game since Perry isn't around to cheat."

He regrets the words (the reminder of their missing friend) when both Lois and James wince at the name, but he cannot stop himself from smiling anyway. Not when he gets to sit down

again, directly across from Lois and her shining eyes, her shimmering hair, her beguiling presence. Not when this is what he's wanted for so very long. (Not when he *wants* the reminders and memories of a man who took a chance on him and gave him opportunities no one else had.)

But he should have known it was too good to be true.

James hasn't even emerged from his room with the cards and chips when Clark hears the clamor of hundreds of voices crying for him all at once. The update of a tidal wave in the South Pacific on televisions from the floors beneath them. The news bulletins on radios of passing cars. He wants to be selfish, but it would be more than selfishness to ignore this; it would be a crime.

He thinks Lois already knows what he's going to say when he opens his mouth. The sparkle is leaving her eyes and her mouth is tightening around whatever words she wants to spill. But she only watches him as he stands and says, "I have to go."

He almost wants her to protest (almost thinks that if she asked him to stay, he would—more proof that she is trouble he cannot afford). But she only gives him a half-nod, so he ignores the pang of regret and longing surging inside him, and he turns to leave.

Her hand on his sleeve stops him.

"I'm not going to stop you from going," she says, intently. Fiercely. "Or tell you that you shouldn't. But I do want you to know that you don't have to answer *every* cry for help. You don't have to be on call 24/7. You're still a person, Clark, and you deserve to have a life too." Then, as if by magic (she was always so quick, in that time of before, so sure, so abrupt that she left Clark feeling slow and mesmerized), she drops her hand and intensity and gives him a sad smile. "Now go. The game will still be here when you get back."

Clark makes it to the door of his room before he can hold back no longer. He turns to look at her (facing away from him, arms wrapped around her middle, hair concealing her face), and feels unsure. Lost. Confused. "Lois?"

"Yeah?" She turns back to him, her face composed when her hair falls away.

The question sits on his tongue, ready to be asked. Impatient to be out in the open. But he cannot speak, not for a long moment. The words (the plea behind it, the weariness and hurt and guilt) only bring back unwelcome memories, dark and battered flashes of endless days and nights before and after Nightfall, when he couldn't breathe, couldn't see, couldn't *live* past the weight and pressure clogging him up on every side.

But she watches him so patiently, and he has always been able to say and confess things to her that he cannot to anyone else. So the question slips from him before he can stop it or think better of it.

"If I'm not saving people all the time...if I take time off... how do I justify that? What do I tell them when they ask me why I wasn't there?"

Lois's gaze turns to steel faster than even he can move (or maybe it's always steel, always hard and confident and unbreakable, and she only hides it behind a mask as thick as his). "You tell them that you are a gift to this world and that whatever you can do is more than enough. You tell them you help us because you believe there's a hero in each of us and we can all do the same. You tell them that you are inspired by them and that if you are not there, then you trust everyone else to help out. You tell them that maybe they made you into a symbol, but you're a person too. You tell them that it's not only regular people who need to be saved and even heroes need time to themselves to remember why they're doing what they do."

Lois Lane, he thinks wonderingly (feeling as dazed as if standing beside Kryptonite and sucker-punched). He knew she was trouble, but this...this is more than trouble. This is desire and

hope and impossibility and miracles all rolled up into one, and none of those things are for him anymore. This is strength and confidence and help and support and vindication on a level he cannot comprehend because those exist only for Superman (and only to a certain degree), not for Clark.

This is beauty. This is love. This is...is more than he can comprehend. More than he can understand. More than he can internalize.

But he *wishes* he could.

“Lois,” he says, but closes his mouth over the rest before it can escape (before he can vocalize what he wants more than anything else and see her blink and swallow before either turning away or agreeing only because she thinks it is what he wants and she feels like she needs to atone for what she did). So he gives her a smile instead and says (because he cannot quite turn away from *everything* she offers), “I’ll be back soon.”

He lets the world freeze into near motionlessness, lets everything fall away until he is all that is alive and moving, but even there, in this realm that is his and his alone, her words still ring in his ears (promise and temptation and taunt). Because he cannot bear to go out alone into the night after that bubble of normality and family, he takes her heartbeat with him, listens to the tune and tempo, the rhythm and range. Listens to it and examines it and tries to discern what about it makes Lois Lane so much *more* than anyone else he’s ever met.

It’s not his intention to eavesdrop, as he flies toward the distant sounds of pain and terror, but he’s so intent on the heartbeat, he almost doesn’t even realize he’s hearing Lois and James’s voices too.

“That was quite a speech,” James says as he comes back into the room.

“It’s true,” Lois says, almost defiantly. “Even if I didn’t phrase it as condemningly as I wanted to.”

“Probably best.” Clark can hear the grin in James’s voice. “He’ll listen to it better this way.”

He thinks Lois smiles back, can hear it in the rounded shape of her words. “Yeah, that’s what I figured.”

There’s silence unbroken by anything but their two heartbeats (and a world of motion and life and despair, but Clark is used to all that and does not focus on it lest it destroy him; lets only their heartbeats keep him afloat and above the clamor of the world) for a long moment before James finally speaks again. “I’m glad you came to me,” he says. “It is just what we need.”

Lois makes no reply. Clark cannot figure out what James means. James, apparently, does not seem to realize the effect of his own words and only drops something on the table with a clatter. “Shall we have a practice go of it before CK gets back?”

At that, Clark realizes what he is doing (taking the privacy away from the very people who are all that is left of his own privacy) and he lets his hearing slip away (reluctantly, grudgingly) from Lois’s heartbeat to turn instead to the emergency before him. But even when he is surrounded by foaming, raging water, even when people beg him for help and thank him for saving them and call out after him, he cannot escape the words (the path of escape) Lois offered him.

To be Clark Kent. To not be Superman all the time. To draw a line and not feel guilty about it. He does not think he can do that without falling once more beneath the weight of guilt and pressure and responsibility. But the idea that he can, the very possibility...it’s powerful enough to knock the breath out of him. Powerful enough to make the force of the surging ocean seem tame in comparison. Powerful enough to make him leave before the cleanup is all done, and head back to the suite of rooms. Back to *home*.

When he swoops in through his window, steps out of his closet in clothes much more comfortable (and comforting) than the Suit, and emerges from his room, he finds Lois and James

laughing over what looks to be silly and even made up words on a Scrabble board, their heads tilted toward each other, a pack of cookies and a bottle of soda sitting, half demolished, at their elbows. Clark’s step checks upon sight of them, so happy and relaxed and *normal* (so easy and comfortable and *right* together), that he almost turns around. Almost flees back into the Suit and the skies and the strife that only Superman can alleviate. Almost leaves them to their fun and their ease (unwilling to bring the abstract stench of suffering and distress in amid their cozy atmosphere).

But Lois turns (as if she can sense him there, just outside their aura of light) and invites him over without hesitation (with a wide, bright smile), and James nudges a chair back for him and hands him a stack of cookies saved back for him, and unbelievably, ineffably, he is able to slip right into their private group, able to join the laughter without bringing it to a screeching, silent halt.

It seems as impossible as the words, the gift, Lois gave him, and yet it happens. He never thought he could feel so truly like Clark Kent again, never thought he wouldn’t be able to hear the cries of his new name long enough to find a spark of happiness amid his determined contentment. And yet it happens.

And if something this impossible can become possible, then maybe...maybe the rest of what Lois said can happen too. Maybe there is more hope than he’s ever allowed himself to realize before. Maybe he really can live again.

17

He’s starting to understand. He’s starting to realize that he doesn’t have to act like a living sacrifice, that he doesn’t need to buy his acceptance here. He’s starting to believe that there’s more. More for *him*.

Lois watches him each day, as she gives him reasons to come back home, to stay, to spend time outside the role of superhero. She watches him and rejoices (feels stronger and better and more *alive*) every time he hesitates less, agrees quicker, relaxes more.

Ever since that first evening, that night of laughter over board games and banter over soup, she’s begun reaching out (and it’s scary, it’s *terrifying*, every time she extends herself in an invitation and waits for his response, but she must be brave now, for his sake). Little things. Small steps. One day she asks him to stop by in the afternoon and look at a few planters that weren’t seeming to respond to the water she poured over them (he shows her small, ugly insects in the soil and spends almost an hour teaching her how to get rid of them). Another evening, she tells him to bring back a movie for her and James (and together, she and James get him to stay for the duration of the entire film, though none of them can say what it was about afterward). A few mornings, she finds him over breakfast and gets him telling her stories about his parents (and memories of Smallville are painful, but the sight of Clark smiling, a twinkle in his eyes that brings Jonathan poignantly to mind, is so much more important—and appealing).

Sometimes he doesn’t stay for more than a moment or two. Sometimes they’re interrupted. Sometimes her excuses can’t reach past the bars of the prison (the mask, the armor) he keeps around himself. Sometimes he tells her he has other prior engagements—a meeting with Henderson, an appointment with Metropolis attorneys and judge, interviews with Henderson’s men (and Lois tries not to mind these because even if he is not with her, at least this is a task that originated with Clark Kent rather than Superman). Or there are meetings with the Superman Foundation, mornings and evenings when he flies James to and from places Lois doesn’t ask about, hours when he says he needs to be with his parents.

Occasionally, he will agree to stay, but gradually she will realize he isn’t paying attention to her because he is listening to

something else (something distant; something imperative). In those moments, she finds a reason to excuse herself (to let him go) because she wants to free him, not bind him down in chains of a different make than the ones already tying him down. And when she does that (when she tries to pretend she isn't disappointed to see him leave her once again), before he leaves, he always looks at her with something...bright. Something hopeful and tender and surprised and grateful in his eyes (something that begins to visit her dreams at night, begins to disperse nightmares of life-destroying articles and make her almost eager to sleep with that Smallville bear clutched in her arms).

Still, Lois tries to go slow. She tries not to pressure him. She tries to keep herself from grabbing him by his shoulders and shaking him and shouting at him, screaming at him that there is so much more for him, that he can have so much more, *should* have much more, *will* have much more if she has anything to say about it... She tries to remember that he has lost everything, that his parents are still not completely out of danger, that his life is in constant peril, that she cannot destroy what solid ground he has managed to find, can only try to build bridges out toward him. (She tries to ignore just what her dreams mean, just how much longing she feels when she wakes up, because that is not what he needs; he needs some of his burden taken away, not another thing to worry about.)

But it is hard when all those reminders of what he has lost and what he faces make her more determined to free him and help him (to save him as he has saved her). It is hard not to push when she sees him begin to relax. When it begins to get easier to distract him from the cries for Superman. It is hard, but it is also *important*, and if impulsive rashness is what destroyed him, then only patient understanding will rebuild and resurrect him (as far as it is possible to do so, but she does not dwell on the future, on the big picture and how little she can do for that, because she cannot afford to sink into despair and hopelessness again).

Patience and understanding aren't traits the old Lois Lane possessed, but she has them now, infused through a baritone voice behind her shoulder under a steady sun. Through trust extended by a young man with all too many reasons to be bitter and cynical instead. The forgiveness offered by a hurt mother. The open acceptance, and the patient understanding of his own (that Clark's always so naturally displayed), so freely and uninhibitedly given her by the very man she so badly wronged.

She was so sure he didn't entirely forgive her (*couldn't* because how could he?). So sure there was buried anger that would eventually erupt. But it has been months and no one is that good a liar (especially him). No one can hide that kind of hatred for this long.

Clark really has forgiven her.

He really is glad she is here.

And he really is as good and wonderful and appealing as her dreams and newly informative memories tell her.

"You don't have to glare," Clark says without turning around, and Lois startles and casts her eyes down. "You'll get dinner in just a couple more minutes, I promise."

She and James (who has said nothing to her, asked nothing, but who seems to know what she is doing and backs her up flawlessly) have managed to bring him home this time by telling him over breakfast how tired they were of toast and soup. When Clark admonished them for not eating better, James hadn't skipped a beat before wringing a promise out of him to cook them all a real meal.

Lois forces a smile, worried Clark will look at her and somehow guess the direction of her thoughts (and he cannot do that, not when she is finally making some progress and he is finally looking more than just *content*). "I'm just making sure you're doing it all right," she says, trying to pretend away the

flush on her cheeks.

He looks over his shoulder long enough to give her a level stare. "And how would you know the difference between the right way and the wrong way?"

A laugh is surprised out of her. "I may not be able to cook, but I can tell what looks and smells good."

His half-smile is mischievous as he effortlessly transfers the three (no, four, she notes with vague awe; she hadn't even noticed him putting that corn on the stove) dishes over to serving bowls. "And?" he asks. "What's the verdict?"

"You're definitely a better cook than me," she says loftily (and who would have guessed she'd ever be able to tease Clark Kent again, let alone provoke that full, real laughter from him? Had Perry known, or had he only hoped, or does he still drink alone in his dark office?).

Clark laughs aloud and lets her help him carry the dishes to their dining area.

James joins them briefly over dinner, long enough to sample each dish and pack away enough food to make Lois blink, before he's excusing himself to retreat into his room with his phone already at his ear. Lois is glad he was there as long as he was, though. He made her tense and awkward and defiant, when she first came (when he stood before his friend, his brother, with shield and sword raised, to draw her attack, her ire, any danger, to him rather than to Clark); but now he causes Clark to smile when he's being too serious or starting to look distracted, eases the slow tension building between Lois and Clark, fills up silences that threaten to turn too long.

Not that anyone else seems to notice her tension or uncertainty (or better dreams).

James draws Clark to this world, makes him laugh, reassures him about things Lois doesn't know enough to understand, and he does it all so effortlessly, so seamlessly, as if Lois's presence changes nothing (and where once that would have relieved her, now it only rankles). Clark teases both Lois and James, cooks and dishes up their plates and does the cleaning up afterward (watches the movies and talks about his parents and plays boardgames), and all without any sign of the growing shyness, the fledgling feelings, that are growing in Lois (and she can ask nothing else, can *expect* nothing else, can only dream of it in the dark solitude of her own room). It is only *she* who is off-balance. Only *she* who is not *content* in this less-than-perfect, better-than-could-be world.

Only she who longs for something so specific and so impossible.

Only she who feels each touch between them like a substantial weight, each word like the slot of a combination lock, a click that either leads her closer to unlocking the enigma in red and blue and glasses, or takes her too far and leaves him more trapped than ever.

Only she, and she tries to ignore it (tells herself over and over again all the reasons there are that nothing beyond the already-miraculous friendship can happen). But when James leaves them alone, and the dishes are cleared, Lois finds herself once more at a loss, once more fighting a blush as she tries not to stare.

It takes her an instant to realize Clark has vanished (he moves so quickly now, all the time, as if afraid to be trapped in place), and she blinks in surprise when he materializes in front of her. The mischievous smile playing along his mouth doesn't help her find her voice.

"I have something else for you," he says, and sets a sheaf of papers down before her.

Of course. She should have known.

Clark has been waging his own campaign, just as slow and purposeful and intent as Lois's own. But where she seeks to ground him (to the world, to his own life; to her), he seeks to give her pieces of herself back. Where she seeks to show him that

there are reasons for Clark to exist, he seeks to return her freedom to her (as if he wants her to be able to leave him and go back to her life in Metropolis and return to the Lois Lane she was before she brought herself down in a ruin of newspaper and Pulitzer prize).

Ever since she told him she doesn't write anymore, he's been bringing her things. A puff-piece on a philanthropist collecting donations to help the clean-up of the earthquake. An interview, in a much lesser paper, of a former employee claiming that the philanthropist was receiving far more than he was giving out. Bank records. Phone histories. A little bit more paperwork every day—a few more breadcrumbs on the trail of an investigation.

Every day he hands her more and waits while she looks through them. He never says anything until after she reads whatever he brought her, until she says her own piece first. Then he will ask her a question, seemingly innocent but always so insightful that it makes her see things clearer, further, better (he's always been able to do that, and once she'd ignored it or resented it, now she regrets it because she knows she'll never be able to find a better partner, but she ruined this before she could even enjoy it).

Today, Lois dives on the papers as soon as he sets them down. She doesn't even really care what these papers tell her or where the story takes her. More than anything, she just wants to feel the fire in her veins, the thunder in her bones, the lightning-sharp clarity of her mind as it seeks and makes connections. She wants to feel *alive* and *good* and *useful*; she wants to *be* a reporter again, even if just in this safe haven.

But it's just blank paper. No interviews with people who knew the seeming philanthropist. No background info on the foundation of his charity. Nothing but a ream of empty, blank, too-white paper.

"What is this?" She looks to Clark with a puzzled frown. "Dead end?"

His eyes are actually sparkling (as they used to do, when he teased her and ignored her short-tempered remarks; when he took her to his hometown and told her she might find more than she expected). "Not a dead end," he says. He reaches out a careful hand and sets a single pen down atop the blank papers. "It's time to put everything we have together."

Time to write the story. She notices how he avoids the words (a wise decision considering the nervous fear already flaring like jagged, frazzled sparks inside her skin). She also notices that he isn't blocking her escape, but he is angled so that he fills her vision. Notices that he's keeping his voice low and his movements slow. That he is saying only enough to make her draw her own conclusions and then leaving her to read the implications.

In short, she notices all her own tactics being used against her.

And he is still here. She has not given him an excuse, has not enticed him or even invited him to stay, has not used her own voice and a flow of words to drown out the calls for Superman. She has done nothing, but he is here. If she actually does do something (gives into the nervous temptation making her fingers itch), then how much *longer* can she get him to stay?

Besides. She is not the only one who is not a reporter anymore. Not the only one who misses writing stories to make the world a better place. Not the only one who wants to reclaim an important piece of herself she has lost.

"Okay," she says, determinedly, to hide her panic. Her hands tremble as she pulls the pen and paper toward her. "What first?"

And the hours slip away. After just a few moments, she forgets to be nervous or afraid, forgets to doubt herself. After just a few easy exchanges between her and Clark as they bounce sentences back and forth (sentences, but not the pen; he always makes *her* write their chosen words down), she forgets that she

and Clark haven't worked together for years, for decades, for all their lives, bound and twined together until there is no way to tell them apart. After just a few lines of blatant black ink spilled over white paper (bringing use and purpose out of emptiness), she forgets that they really don't have as much evidence, as many hard facts, as Perry would demand of them. She forgets everything but that this is what she was born for, what she is good at, what she *loves* doing.

But when she's finished, when an actual, complete article lays before them, she is alive and afire, but also suddenly and intensely scared. Because if she can write again, then that means she can destroy Clark's life all over again, just when he's finding some measure of level ground again (just when he's stopped being polite and started being friendly again).

Clark, though, looks incandescent with happiness, his smile wider than she's seen it since before her last good (awful, dangerous, *stupid*) article. "I knew you could do it," he says, all sincerity and pride and belief. "Perry will be overjoyed when he gets this."

Lois's own brilliant smile is doused immediately. "I'm not sending this in. Thank you, Clark, for helping me, but this article is never going to see the light of day." And without giving herself time to reconsider it, she reaches out, picks up their article, and rips it neatly in half.

"What?" Clark's brow furrows, his eyes wide behind the glasses. "Why... I don't understand. I know it wasn't as fleshed out as it should have been, but it was *good*, Lois. Really, I'm not just saying that. This proves that you *haven't* lost your talent like you thought. You're still one of the best—"

"No." She interrupts him before she collapses under the weight of her guilt (her rising pride, her answering assurance, her desire to *prove* to the entire world that she is still Lois Lane, investigative journalist; the burgeoning temptation to forget the lessons she's learned and go back to destroying her life and his and others she never takes the time to consider). The awakening fire he's stirred up within her turns into resolution, fierceness in her conviction—like coal turned into diamonds. "It's not that. But if I start writing articles about events and people in Coast City—the city where Superman's parents are now so widely known to be, and so soon after I was already spotted here—everyone in the world will suddenly be absolutely certain that you weren't just visiting here. That you live here, and I've uncovered you again. It would expose you, and pull even more danger down on your parents and James. Kind of defeats the whole purpose of hiding me, you know? So, as good as it feels to be writing again, it isn't happening. I won't do that to you again."

Clark just looks at her, eyes brimming with so much open emotion that tears spring to Lois's own eyes (and she is not even sure why). Then, slowly but all in one smooth motion, Clark rises, steps close, pulls her to her feet. And while she is still breathless and trembling, he draws her into a hug.

It is better than the other two hugs that already fill her dreams and her vacant thoughts and her foolish dreams. Better because he is the one who initiates it this time. He is touching her, pulling her into his orbit—of his own free will. Voluntarily. Without coercion. He is not hugging her because she hugged him first and he is too polite and kind to rebuff her. He is hugging her because he *chooses* to. Because he wants to.

He is glad she is here, he had said.

He wants to touch her, he is saying, through his arms looped around her and his hand cradling the back of her head to his shoulder. Through the steadiness of his chest rising and falling beneath her cheek and the rapid flutter of his heart in her ear.

Two truths so much more impossible than babies from other planets falling to Kansas or a super-powered hero dedicating his life, above and beyond the call of duty, to saving as many lives as he can. More unbelievable than Lois Lane realizing she was

wrong and traveling all across the country to apologize for it and finding herself all too willing to make herself over for a man (who deserved it; who did not ask it of her; who seemed oblivious to just how much she's been wanting to hug him for weeks now).

"Thank you, Lois," he breathes, the words stirring a strand of her hair and sliding it against her temple. A tickling impression that reassures her this is not just another dream, doomed to bring only disappointment when she wakes. Her heart does a strange tripping skip when his lips brush over that same temple in a light kiss that feels almost (too much) like a benediction, reverent and aloof.

"For what?" she manages to ask even though she is terrified to say anything (to break her own silence and cause more damage with her own words; to turn truth into nightmare).

"Just...just for being you," he says. And Lois has to pull back (even if it means waking herself), has to look up into his eyes to see what they say (even if it means crushing disappointment). She needs to know, needs to *see*, needs to imprint every instant of this moment into her brain so that she can never forget it (so that even if this is the only moment she ever gets, she will be able to relive it every day for the rest of her life).

Clark looks down at her, and he is smiling. A soft, secretive kind of smile, close-mouthed and lop-sided and heartfelt. He bends his neck, and his eyes flutter closed, lashes dark against his cheekbones, and then he kisses her other temple, her cheek, both cheeks, the center of her brow, and finally, the corner of her mouth. Closer, closer, closer to a real kiss, as if daring himself, as if testing himself (as if trying to convince himself she is not the one who betrayed him and ruined him and came back in time to lead to his parents being hospitalized).

She is holding her breath, suffocating, drowning, her own eyes wide open because she can't go through life with her eyes closed and blinders on again (not when the cost is so high). Her heart is pounding at the inside of her breastbone, reverberating through her veins, beating for freedom, for hope, for *love*.

But it cannot get out (is trapped forever), and Clark apparently can go no further (can pretend no longer, not nearly enough, his imagination failing in the face of her crimes), and he does not bring his lips to hers. Does not pull her into the kind of kiss she's been remembering (been trying to forget because it's easier to miss something when you've never had it, never experienced it, never let it slip through your fingers before you even knew you wanted it) from the plane over Metropolis, the cover story and Trask's eyes on them and Clark's fingers in her hair and the hesitation before he'd followed her lead.

He does not kiss her. Because he thanks her, in the same moment, for being her—and she is Lois Lane and he is Clark Kent and Lois Lane will forever be synonymous with the end of Clark Kent and how could she have ever let herself think that that could be ignored or forgotten or forgiven?

Instead, he pulls her back into a close hug, and sighs a heavy sigh that rattles against her frame and sends her heart slinking, beaten and cowed, back to its usual place.

And Lois finally closes her eyes, and hides her face in his chest, and pretends she is not shattering into a million dust-and-ash-like pieces.

18

Lois feels inordinately nervous to have James up here on the roof with her, amidst the maze-like planters filled with crops she's nurtured and protected and helped along as well as she knows how. If he were still *Jimmy*, she wouldn't be so anxious about what he might be thinking as he looks around at the fruit of her clumsy labors; she would be impatient and careless, heedless of how the younger man judges her and her efforts.

But he is not Jimmy. He is James, and he has earned her

respect on top of her dormant affection for him. He is James, and he is like a brother to Clark and a son to Jonathan and Martha, and that makes him important. He is James, and his opinion, his judgement, *matters* (because out of all the employees of the Daily Planet, he is the *onlyone* who chose right on that fateful, infamous day).

Her knot of tension barely has time to grow, to send out tendrils of roots (and oh man, she *has* become a farmer if *that's* the simile she picks), before James ends his perusal, turns to her, and smiles his young, wide smile. "Looks great," he proclaims, and Lois feels twenty pounds lighter. The grin turns mischievous almost instantly, as fast as the twinkle in his eye appears. "Looks like that black thumb you had in the newsroom was just a disguise, huh?"

A disguise. A mask. A lie.

She's not sure if he means the backhanded reference to what she stole from Clark. She thinks he does. She thinks he wants her to remember where they started (in that old, dying diner with salt and pepper shakers as cracked as the trust between them) and realize how far they've come (to a rooftop covered in green, staring at the skies for a glimpse of Superman oh so carefully flying his injured parents to an undisclosed location). She thinks he's using a reference to the worst time in their relationship, turning it into a joke, to remind her that things are different now. She is an ally (not an enemy), a friend (not an uninvited guest), and the genuineness of his grin makes it impossible for her to take offense or fall back into debilitating guilt.

"My greatest secret," Lois replies casually, and she is not talking about green thumbs.

James's smile turns soft and slow and relieved all over again (as if he worries always, constantly, ceaselessly, and has lost hope that there will ever be a time when he does not need to; as if he is not used to allies to his cause and help in these lonely moments and a worry falling away).

A glimpse of red and blue in the sky distracts them. It is Clark, impossibly distant (but visible expressly because he knew Lois wanted to see Jonathan and Martha in whatever way is open to her), on his way to a new, secret location with his parents. He and James haven't told her where the Kents are going, and truthfully, Lois doesn't want to know (doesn't want another secret to protect, or give away, or to be used as a test of her loyalty). She wants them to be safe, and if ignoring her curiosity on this subject is the only way to see that done, then she will practice a bit of the self-control she's had to take a crash-course in since arriving at this private suite.

"The cameras and helicopters can't track him?" she asks, even though she already knows the answer. James spent over an hour the night before reassuring her they had all the kinks in the plan worked out.

"No," he tells her anyway, patience as dark and heavy in his voice as the sunglasses over his eyes. "And Clark made sure all the satellites that could be tracking him are temporarily...unaligned, shall we say. Besides, once he's out of sight of the immediate spectators, he's going to accelerate to a speed the human eye can't discern. Don't worry—his aura will protect the Kents while he's carrying them."

"It doesn't protect his cape," she points out (for the tenth time).

The glasses give him a cover, but she's relatively sure James is rolling his eyes anyway. "He's holding his parents a lot closer than the cape, trust me."

"I just want them to be okay," she whispers.

"They're okay." His voice is calm, his expression steady, his hand on her shoulder warm and comforting. "They're fine. Clark made a lot of friends in his journeys around the world—friends who are more than willing to help him without tipping off the press. The Kents will be well taken care of."

“Something that cannot be said for you.” A shadow falls across them both, blotting out the sun, distracting from that glimpse of red and blue, startling both Lois and James as they turn away from the skies.

The careless, drawling voice is one that Lois has heard in her nightmares for months (since the suffocating heat of tents and the feel of fingers around her throat and the sound of a gunshot cloaked in green), and for a long, frozen moment, she thinks she has imagined it. Here. In her sanctuary. In the pseudo-fields where she has found some measure of peace with herself (has achieved *contentment*, which she found lacking all the way up until the instant she hears this voice and now realizes there are oh so much worse things) and learned of the Clark she lost in Smallville.

From behind the planter near the stairwell emergency exit (the same planter that had been infested with bugs, Lois thinks numbly), from behind the cloaking lushness Lois herself has helped cultivate, he steps. A figure of terror and regret and choking guilt and blame. A man embodying so many of Clark’s childhood fears. (So many of her own recent terrors.)

Trask.

Here. In this moment. *Not* a dream. *Not* a nightmare. *Real*.

He is standing four feet in front of her and he is holding a gun leveled at them and James is moving, darting in front of her, his hand raising up from near his ankle, and there is something dark in that hand, something black, something shaped very like a gun

—
The gunshot deafens Lois and sends her reeling backward. Silence envelops her like an atmosphere of private confinement, numbing her to the world, to this reality that is so much like the nightmares she hasn’t experienced in weeks.

For an instant, she is back in Smallville, beside a lake near the Kents’ barn. Clark is bruised and dirty and covered in the dirt but standing upright and defiant while a green rock glows inches away from him, and Trask is looming over him until the second gunshot sounds and then he is clutching his arm and running and leaping into the van that wheeled away and out of sight, pursued by (but ultimately evading, a fact she has conveniently forgotten or ignored all these months) the Smallville police.

For an instant, Lois is back in that moment, choking on anger and hurt and terror. For an instant, she is overwhelmed with the enormity of her emotions and the depth of her reaction. For an instant, she cannot think, can only scream a silent shriek that scrapes along the insides of her skull. Because Clark had been in danger, he’d been *hurt*, and she hadn’t known, hadn’t realized, had only seen the lies and the masks and the false conclusions. He’d been hurt, and she had not cared because other things had seemed so much more important and real and imperative.

But then James falls with a grunt to the ground, his shoes (smart and practical shoes, not the sneakers he used to wear) skidding through the gravel, and his gun (the gun *Jimmy* would never have owned) falls uselessly aside, and the scent of blood is overpowering, drowning out the smells of the plants on either side of them and the water misting from the sprinklers a few rows down.

“James!” Lois cries, and this time she knows what is important (knows the difference between false pride and practical possibilities), so she does not throw herself uselessly at the standing, smirking Trask with his (metaphorically) smoking gun, but drops to her knees at James’s side.

He is bleeding from his left shoulder, the gravel beneath him swimming in his life-blood. His face is pale, almost ashen, his sunglasses gone and his eyes dark and hollow. He tries to reach up with his hand, tries to lift his right hand toward his left side, but he forgets the splint still there, forgets his weakness, and he cries out in pain and curls in around himself.

“Shh, shh,” Lois murmurs, over and over again, trying to

think past her own panic. She sets her own hands over his shoulder, tries to staunch the bleeding (so much of it, wet and sticky and startlingly hot against her palms, filling up every crevice, every pore, staining her fingernails, a pool of it that she kneels in, her flesh forever marked by her sins and mistakes). He yelps again, flinches, and his entire body spasms. She presses harder (focuses on him so that the memories cannot drown her and Trask cannot cow her), shrugs off her jacket and uses it as an inept, bulky bandage.

Behind her, Trask comes nearer, his footsteps heavy. Ponderous. Implacable.

“I knew you’d lead me to the alien eventually,” he says, all cocky surety and brash insanity. “I knew all I had to do was follow you long enough, and he couldn’t help but show himself.”

Before, she would have tried to bluff him (would have stared him in the face and dared him to take his best shot at her, Lois Lane, the great investigative journalist, so sure and confident and immortal). But this is now, and the world is changed (so utterly different that it seems alien), and she cannot look away from James (so young and so important and so loved and so vulnerable), cannot think of anything past the blood pooling around her hands and staining her dove-grey jacket (cannot let herself think of Clark, right now bearing his precious cargo to a safe place, so scared for their safety that it had taken him and James and a team of people at the Superman Foundation weeks to come up with a plan he would accept; so relieved that after this morning he would not have quite so much to worry about with everyone he loved somewhere safe).

She is old and frightened and has lost too much already. It’s no longer in her to be quite so blasé about her life (about *Clark’s* life). So she does not try to pretend she doesn’t know what Trask is talking about, does not try to make him think there is help coming. She does nothing (because all she does brings ruin) but try to keep at least a few liters of blood in James’s veins (because she cannot help but keep trying and doing and hoping even with all the proof against her).

James’s lashes flutter a few times before a sliver of his dark eyes are revealed. They latch onto her, desperate, intent, as if he is trying to tell her something. He lifts up his splinted hand again, but the pain of the movement ripples in spasms across his face and he falls back, limp and beaten.

“Shh, shh,” she keeps saying, stuck on repeat (doomed to the endless cycle of being invited into Clark’s home and learning a bit more about him and then watching, *causing*, it all to turn on him, to transmogrify from hope and comfort and love to pain and fear and weakness).

“Don’t worry about him.” Trask’s shadow falls over her, heavy across her shoulders, blotting out the sun. “He’s not going to die. Yet. First, you’re both going to help me destroy the alien invader. I’m doing you a favor here, Lane, you and the kid—I’m giving you the chance to turn from traitors to your own race... into heroes for your world.”

“Never.” Her throat is dry, her mouth parched, her lips cracked, but her voice (her choice to break her own silence) is loud and defiant. Finally, she can look up at him, can crane her neck and skip past the view of the bullet (slick with James’s blood) embedded in the elevator doors, and look Jason Trask full in the face.

He smirks at her (laughs at her scraps of courage). “You forget, Lane—I turned you into a hero after my own heart once already. I can do it again.”

Then he brings his hand down, the gun dark and bold and stark, and Lois’s vision explodes in a shattering of light and sparks and the silhouette of brightness against darkness.

The rooftop vanishes. Lois falls.

She hadn’t wanted to go to Smallville. It was a waste of time, blatant favoritism on Perry’s part to give Clark a trip home on

the Planet's dime. There wasn't, she was so sure (so determined), going to be anything there worth her time or effort. Clark spent the entire plane ride and car trip trying to chivvy her out of her dark mood, his indomitable smile and innocuous attempts at humor almost enough to pierce her resentment if she hadn't been so flatly intent on remaining unimpressed.

But then they'd arrived at the Irig farm, and Clark had motioned to her to keep Sherman talking, and he'd faded to the side, back, back, back until even Lois's careful sidelong glances couldn't show her where he was. Later, she'd realize that when he fiddled with his glasses he must have seen Wayne Irig (inextricably linked in his mind with memories of happier times and an idyllic childhood and caramel apples) tied up inside. Later, when she is alone and there are no stories fizzing at the ends of her fingertips anymore, she'll piece it together and realize Clark had used her distraction to superspeed through the camp and snatch the bloodied, bruised farmer right out from under Trask's nose.

A noble gesture. A heroic act.

A foolish miscalculation.

Because then Trask had known, and he'd realized Superman was here, even if not in the Suit, and he'd connected the arrival of reporters Lois Lane and Clark Kent to the Kent farm down the road, and then...well, then that had been the beginning of the end.

But at the time, all Lois had known was that she didn't even want to be here but she was doing her best anyway, for crying out loud, and yet when Clark returned, he claimed he hadn't found anything and all her efforts were in vain.

"Nothing suspicious," he said, and Lois had looked at him and known he was lying (he's never been a good liar, even then when he had so much more need for it).

It made her angry. No. It made her furious. All this way, side by side with him, doing her best even on such a stupid excuse for a story, and he was finally doing what she'd been certain this whole time he would.

He was lying to her. Hiding something from her.

He was trying to steal this story and make it his own.

He was leaving her behind.

And suddenly she'd known there was a story, and it must be big, big enough to worry about, and she could not let this small-time reporter from a town that worshipped corn deities come out on top.

So she'd smiled and pretended to believe him, and she'd gone with him to the Corn Festival. And her own plan had begun to take shape.

If Clark wouldn't tell her what he'd found beyond the line Sherman hadn't allowed them to cross, well, she'd just have to pay her own visit.

Later, she'll realize how foolish that was, but later...later, it is already far, far too late.

When she opens her eyes, the lights are still there, floating in the center of her vision and swirling about all but psychedelically at the edges. She groans and brings one hand up to her brow—or tries to, but both hands come together, bound tightly with thick, scratchy rope.

"Lois?"

She squeezes her eyes shut again, does her best to *will* herself better, and then opens them. The sparks fade back, not gone but at least dulled, and Lois is able to take in her surroundings. A small closet-like space in a damp, cold office building abandoned what looks to be decades ago. There's water dripping somewhere, she has the damp feeling at her back to inform her she's lying in a puddle, and only marred, vague daylight issuing from painted-over windows illuminates the makeshift cell. It's been a while since she's last been kidnapped (the last time was Smallville, with Trask and his paranoid whispers and insane schemes and

effective manipulations), but she finds the entire situation all too depressingly familiar.

Except...except this time she has a lot more than a story or a source or her life to protect.

This time, Clark is depending on her.

Clark Kent, and everything that entails. The last vestiges of the man she came thousands of miles to find. The remnants that she and James have been working so hard to resurrect. The fledgling hope and confidence he has only just begun to reclaim.

With a sudden sick feeling of urgency and panic, Lois sits upright. Her head protests with a truly nauseating array of sensory upheaval, but she narrowly manages to avoid vomiting in the puddle seeping through her clothes, and looks up to see James. He's propped up near the door, his shirt gone, blood staining his pale skin (almost gray in the sparse light), and the bullet wound is stitched closed with jagged lines of inky shadow. His cast is missing; he holds his left arm close to his body, his wrist cradled in his right hand.

"L-Lois," he says again. "Are you okay?"

"Am I okay?" she repeats, not sure she wants to know the answer. Then, belatedly, she shifts to her knees and crawls toward him, awkwardly due to her bound hands. Her feet are bound too, a fact that seems trivial in comparison to the rest of their situation. "You're the one who was shot, James."

"Trask doesn't want me dead," James says with the suggestion of a shrug that makes his face go even more ashen. "They patched me up—a bit of a q-quick, messy job, but hey, I guess I can't complain."

"You..." Her throat is hoarse, her mouth parched, her heart shriveled up within the confines of her ribcage, and she almost cannot get the words out. Almost forgets that she has been learning how to be strong again (a *better* strong, a more selfless strong) and that she has vowed to do whatever she can, whatever she *must*, to save Clark even if that includes facing up to truths she'd so much rather avoid.

Again, she squeezes her eyes shut (as if that will make it any better), and clears her throat, and forces herself to say, "You know *why* he doesn't want us dead."

"Of course." James's tone, in direct contrast to hers, is almost cavalier. As if it doesn't matter. As if there is nothing to be afraid of. As if (in a delayed echo to her own actions) he is simply reflecting her own careless thoughts of months previous back on her. "Trask isn't exactly shy about admitting his plans. He expects Superman to arrive v-very shortly."

Lois gapes at him, stares with all the astonishment she can muster in the hopes that he will snap out of his shock or his drug-induced stupor or *something*, and realize how bad this situation is.

James only shifts a bit against the wall, adjusts his arm in his lap, tightens his grip over the watch adorning his wrist.

"James," she says slowly, calmly, rationally (because *one* of them needs to be thinking clearly), "you know we can't let that happen. We can't let Cl—Superman come here. Trask is dangerous."

She's afraid to spell it out, just in case her late-night musings, her regretful ponderings, have led her to the wrong conclusion. Just in case Trask is listening for any sign of weakness. Just in case the universe is trying to set her up to destroy Clark Kent again.

"He is," James agrees amiably. "Very dangerous. Of course, you'd know that better than anyone."

Flashes of long-repressed memory spark in front of her, specters crowding the room, looming over her, trapping her between their pain and regret and guilt. Trask coming in behind her after she'd snuck into his camp, jerking the tent-flap closed before she could even start to think about making a run for it, staring at her with that infuriating smirk twisting his lips. Her

anger at being trapped. Her foolish (stupid, *stupid*) defiance as she'd informed him Superman could never be harmed by Trask, that he was a hero, invulnerable and powerful and *good*. Her fear when Trask's hand had closed around her throat and mouth, the feel of him hard and dangerous behind her as he pushed her to the edge of the tent. Her shock at hearing Clark's voice, and irritation thinking he'd come after her and walked into the same trap as she did. And her complete and utter astonishment when that earnest, sarcastic voice had morphed into a deeper, more confident voice that she'd heard dozens of times in her dreams and her fantasies and her infrequent interviews.

The sense of betrayal.

The rage.

The humiliation.

When she'd written her article, she'd thought those feelings, that upsurge of terrible, broiling, mixed emotions, were the worst part. But later, when there was no one to call her, no one to buy her snow cones or pretzels, no one to touch her simply to let her know she was not alone during the hardest moments of her life—later, she'd realized the worst part came after those emotions. After she'd escaped Trask, after she'd joined Jimmy in rushing with the police to the Kent farm (but only so she could catch Clark in the act, not so she could save him; not then, and maybe that is the most shameful part of the entire debacle), after she'd seen the Kents stumbling from a burning barn out into the open only moments after their son had stood upright before a madman through sheer force of will while all the while a green rock burned and glowed and writhed with poisoned potency at his feet.

After, when there was no Clark left and Superman died a little bit more every day.

Yes. She knows how dangerous Trask is. She knows just what kind of damage he can do. And she knows exactly what he thinks of Clark (she still dreams of it, sometimes, his blunt voice in her ear, threading its way through her bloodstream like poison, coating her in a filth no amount of showers can ever cleanse her of).

"We can't let this happen," is all she says, though, because she cannot let James know just how weak she is. She cannot fail him, cannot let him down after he has trusted her and allowed her into their elite pact. She must be strong for him, must be calm and firm and clear-headed so that they can get out of here (and she can leave Clark Kent behind forever, then, before she ruins what little is left of his life yet again, because this *cannot* happen again).

James studies her, curiously. Bemusedly. "What do you suggest we do?" he asks.

"Well..." She's clumsy with bound hands, with the coarseness of the ropes rubbing her skin raw with every move she makes, but she finally manages to untie the bindings around her ankles. She stands and moves to the door. "First things first..."

"Locked?" James asks. He still sounds insanelly calm, still watches her as if he is not trapped here at all.

Lois throws her shoulder against the door, ignoring the complaints from what must surely be a concussion, and then kicks it with panic she's only barely controlling. "Yes," she finally says regretfully. "But maybe I can twist those pipes over there free and use them as a lever to pry the door off by the hinges."

James follows her gaze to the rusted water pipes against the edge of the far wall, the source of the dripping water. "Maybe," he says noncommittally. The pipes are heavy and corroded and spattered with rust and mold, but they are wedged solidly into the floor and the wall, and Lois doesn't have much more hope than James, but she can't just sit here. Not again. Not ever again.

(It's like a mantra, pounding in her head along with her rapid, uneven heartbeat: *Never again. Never again. I won't. I won't. Never again.*)

She has to do something. For once, for the first time, she needs to *help* Clark instead of hurt him.

So she pries at the casings around the pipes, scratches at them with her fingers, refuses to take notice when her nails tear and rip and blood begins to drip down the pipes along with the dank water. In the corner, tossed aside as if it were in the way, she sees the remains of James's splint, soaked and dirty just like her clothes and her hair and skin and everything around her. Her current surroundings are so different from the lush rooftop garden, her situation as a prisoner so far removed from her time as a guest in that suite of rooms she'd almost begun to fool herself into thinking she belonged in, that she wonders if maybe she *isn't* just imagining all this.

Except that James is so still, so calm, so uncharacteristically unworried. He could be in shock from the bullet wound, or maybe it's whatever drugs they gave him (if they gave him any at all, a question she doesn't bother to ask because knowing just exactly how cruel Trask is won't help her any at the moment), or...

Lois's movements still. She falls motionless, her mind turning, running, scanning through the possibilities. She can't believe it. She *won't* believe it. And it doesn't make any sense, but...

"This isn't a test, is it?" she blurts out. She studies James closely, squinting to make him out more clearly in the shadows. "I mean...that's impossible. Trask wouldn't—you wouldn't work with him, but..."

The twist to James's lips is entirely too cynical for someone as young as he is. He rolls his head back against the wall and hisses in his breath when he accidentally jostles his shoulder. "N-no, Lois. I mean, yes, I have tested you since I first agreed to meet you, of course I have, but this...this is not a test." His voice drops lower, beads of sweat visible on his brow, his cheeks, his upper lip, shimmering in the light that dances off the dark, silvery water puddled all around them. "I wish it were."

Strangely disappointed (because a test, even if cruel and extreme, would be better than *this*), Lois turns back to her useless tugging at the pipes. "This isn't coming free," she finally admits. Her wrists are bruised from moving against the bonds, and she temporarily turns her attention to trying to untie the ropes with her teeth. All she ends up with is a mouthful of coarse strands and the taste of copper against her gums (not quite peppermint but just as bitter).

"M-maybe just as well," James says, almost inaudibly. "Trask has a lot of men with him, probably all that's left of Bureau 39. P-plus, we've been here a couple hours besides however long before we woke up, so we might not be anywhere near Coast City or a-a-any kind of civilization."

"You have a watch," Lois points out, more to ignore the ramifications of what he is saying than because she cares what time it is. Clark planned to be gone all day anyway, moving his parents and settling them in wherever it was he took them. And with a whole day devoted to Clark duties, he will probably choose to stay out all night answering the cries for Superman. It could, conceivably, be a day or more before he returns to the suite and realizes they are missing.

"A w-w-watch," James stutters. He is shivering, hard, uncontrollably, sweat dripping down his cheeks. "Right." He looks down, curls his hand over the face of the timepiece. "It's not...not working."

He's going into shock. Or, more likely, has been in shock for a while now, and that, piled on top of the wound in his shoulder and his broken arm and whatever Trask's men did to stitch him up, is now resulting in a system shutdown.

"James!" Lois abandons the stubborn pipes and falls to her knees at his side. "James, talk to me. What can I do?"

"I'm j-j-just...r-really c-c-cold." He doesn't sound calm or in

control anymore. He sounds like a little boy, a young kid playing dress-up in his father's clothes and pretending to a maturity he only has because the world is far too cruel of a place. He sounds lost and alone and scared.

He finally sounds helpless, and contrarily, Lois wishes he would go back to that unnatural calmness (wishes he would reflect more Clark-traits back at her because that is all the Clark Lois will ever be able to get from now on).

"It's okay," Lois says, even though it is not, even though things could not possibly get more *not*-okay. She says it because he needs to hear it (and she needs to say it, to have control over this one tiny thing) and because she wants to help him, to give back to him. Because she does not think she will ever be able to face Clark again if she has to tell him that his adopted brother died in her arms. "It's okay, James. We're going to be okay."

She maneuvers herself until she is sitting propped up beside him, her bound hands resting on his knee to give him as much of her heat and touch and reassurance as she can. He stiffens, rigid, wracked with shuddering chills, for just the smallest instant before he is leaning down into her, resting his head against her shoulder. She tries to press closer, wishes her hands were free so she could wrap her arms around him, protect him from anything and everything outside this cell with her own flesh and blood and bone and fractured heart.

"I'm so sorry," she whispers against his hair, heedless of the mud and grime crusted into it (heedless of everything but his body spasming against hers and the deathly pallor to his skin and the catch in his breathing as he tries not to cry). "I'm so sorry. You told me I'd bring him nothing but pain, but I didn't believe you. And now this is all my fault. Trask only found us because of me."

"N-n-no!" James tries to pull away but falls back against her. The bone-jarring collision hurts, but Lois takes it stoically, braces herself against the wall to give him more support. "D-don't apologize. I...I was w-wrong, Lois. I was so *m-mad* at you for that story. F-for hurting him. I wanted to m-make sure y-y-you could n-never do it again. But...but he was so *w-w-wounded* after Nightfall. P-probably before, too, but h-he hid it better then. W-when he came back, all hurt and bruised and hollow, w-we couldn't help him. He j-j-just sh-shut himself down. That's the reason I finally went to s-s-see you, because even though y-you could hurt him, you were a-also t-the only thing that could make him react. Could ground him and pull him in, a-and we *needed* that. *He* needs that m-more than a-anything."

"But he loves you," Lois says. She's not sure if she is reassuring him or resenting the truth of that sentence. "You and his parents—you're the only ones that stayed with him. The only ones that still saw him as Clark."

"Th-that's not true." James huddles closer to her heat. She wants to believe that his chills are getting better, but she thinks it would be a lie. His skin is ice-cold against hers, except his cheeks; when they brush against hers as he speaks, she feels a feverish heat. "*You* s-still see him as Cl-Clark. In fact..." He takes in a huge, gasping breath. "I think you always saw him as Clark. I think th-that's why you were s-so mad when you f-found out the truth. He thought you w-would only s-see Superman, but it's the o-opposite, isn't it? You th-thought the story would only hurt Clark, not S-Superman."

The truth of those words hits hard and deep and terrible. Lois stares blindly ahead into the darkness and feels the world spinning beneath her, opening up in a gaping hole that sucks her down and under and away.

"Yes," she hears herself say. "I know it probably makes it seem worse, but I...I didn't think it would... He was *Clark*, annoying and endearing and too close, and he was lying even after I'd started to believe he wouldn't, and when I found out, I just...I thought he'd have to stop the charade but he'd still be

there. I just thought...that it was a game, and I'd win. I didn't think that he'd be gone forever. I didn't think we'd both lose *everything*. I...*I didn't think*," she finally finishes, and wishes she had more to say in her defense. But she doesn't.

She didn't think.

She didn't realize.

She didn't stop to consider.

She made a rash decision and let anger guide her, and now here they are six months later and the world is a darker, colder, crueler place and James is dying in her arms and Jonathan and Martha are in hiding and helpless and Clark has no idea just how much danger he is in or just how alone he is about to become.

"I'm sorry," Lois whispers again, but James makes no reply, slumped bonelessly against her, and there is only the echo of dripping water to answer her.

She is sorry. So very, utterly, completely sorry.

But it doesn't matter, because no amount of apologies, no amount of regret or guilt or ripped up articles or watered plants or board games can ever erase what she did. She can say she is sorry for the rest of her life, an endless litany of regret and guilt, but it won't change anything.

She is trapped in a prison of her own impulsive choices, and there will never be an escape. Not for her. Not ever.

19

James is drowning in cold and suffocated by heat. He is adrift, lost in a sea of numbness that bites deep and painful, and he thinks that if he tries to jolt himself awake—or to move at all—he will spiral down beneath the surface into agony deeper than he can endure.

But he doesn't have a choice. The one point of clear, concrete sensation is the cold, clammy feel of his watch imprinted against the palm of his hand, still clutched tight around it. He can hear nothing over his own ephemeral state of *being*, but it doesn't matter.

He knows the watch is screaming.

He cannot hear it. Lois cannot hear it. Trask will not hear it. Only one man in the entire world will hear it, a frequency unique to only him.

"Don't worry," Clark had told him dryly, sitting next to him in their first hiding place, a small house in some middle-class city James can't even remember the name of (they weren't there long enough for it to matter). "Whatever wavelength it uses, it slices through everything else. I heard it in Smallville even when the Kryptonite was right next to me."

"Are you sure you want *me* to have it?" James remembers asking. If he concentrates just a bit, floating on this sea of painful nothingness, he can almost convince himself this moment is real and present. Can all but feel the words forming and leaving his mouth. "Maybe your parents should—"

"No." Clark had looked him straight in the eye, *seeing* him. *Caring*. "Unless you want to leave, Jimmy, you're family now, always. And if you really intend on working with the Foundation, you're going to be the one that's out there the most, maybe sometimes where I won't be able to find you easily. I'm not saying we can't eventually get a couple for Mom and Dad, but right now...right now, I want *you* to have it. It's yours, and I'm afraid you're going to need it. Please, Jimmy—it'll make me feel better if you wear it."

James had smiled at him (because this worn down stranger he'd found was still CK; because Clark still needed some smiles in his life; because James didn't think it was possible to spend any amount of time in Clark's presence without learning how to smile all over again). "All right. But call me James, okay? I've been thinking of switching over anyway, and now seems as good a time as any."

Clark's never called him Jimmy again (still listening to the

young kid tagging along after him; still listening and hearing and *acting* on what he hears). James is glad. He doesn't want to be *Jimmy* again, doesn't want to be weak and young and naïve and so easily led around that he couldn't save CK from that story even though he'd known about it beforehand. He wants (*needs*) to be *James*, competent and strong and bold enough to stand up for what's right *before* it all turns wrong. (Needs to be *James* because in a world where there is no free CK, there isn't the luxury of an innocent Jimmy, happy and carefree, either.) And he needs to be *James* because *Jimmy* and *James* are both people Clark listens to, but only one of those two is someone who can make *others* listen too.

Jimmy would be able to float on this surface detachment and avoid the pain of waking up. *James*, though, is better than that. He has more depending on him than a tiny, cluttered apartment and a mom out of state. He is strong enough to hear the shrieking of a watch humming beneath his fingers and know that Clark will need him to hold on for just a while more.

Intense, serrated pain knifes through his shoulder when he moves, clear enough to jerk his eyes open to the same dim, depressing setting they'd closed on. Lois is huddled against his side, small and scared, but tight-jawed, narrow-eyed, all grim resolution and indomitable spirit.

He was so disappointed and angry with her that he'd thought he'd hate her forever, but sometimes...sometimes he sees in her what keeps Clark so captivated.

"James?" Lois whispers, as if afraid to look at him and realize he's not actually awake.

"I-I'm here," he grits out through wooden lips, rubber tongue, frozen throat. He feels feverish-bright, jangling with the intensity of over-saturation brought on by sickly sensitive nerves, and he knows he will not last for much longer. Trask and his ham-fisted men were not gentle when they held him down and poured alcohol over his shoulder and pushed stitches through his skin; his arm was not ready for the splint to come off and still grumbles discontentedly about the frantic way he'd ripped and torn at it to reach his watch with his sluggish arm; his head still pounds and thrums with the echoes of the blow that sent him spiraling into unconsciousness.

In short, he's a mess attached to a ticking time-bomb (drawing closer to his final detonation with every drop of blood sliding free of his flesh). All he can control now is letting Lois know about the signal screaming out for Superman.

But how?

He's no longer naïve enough to believe that Trask isn't watching them, listening in for any indication that they are calling (or *not* calling, as that is probably Trask's greatest fear right now) for Superman. James *is* calling for him, but he and Clark have used the watch enough by now to have a system worked out.

"Use it, always," Clark had ordered, the only thing he's ever demanded of James in return for being included in his life (for not being shut out in that colossal silence that had swallowed everyone else up). He'd been carrying James to one of his doctor friends from his wandering days, and James had been too weary, too scared, to explain why he hadn't used the watch (to finally tell Clark once and for all how much the older man meant to him and how James could not bear to ever put that in danger). But Clark had known anyway, and so he'd made James promise as they'd flown away from the British man with the smooth, sinister voice and white goatee and calm threats.

"I don't care if they have Kryptonite or not," Clark had said, and his voice had shaken, his jaw clenched tight so that the words almost could not emerge. "No matter what, just use the watch. I'll be careful—I won't go in without looking first and scouting around. But *call* me. I'd rather know where you are than be stuck searching endlessly."

Later, when James was feeling better and all patched up (when the wound was nothing more than another scar to add to his growing collection, badges of honor, marks to show that Clark didn't have to be the one to take every bullet for their small family), he'd sat Clark and the Kents down and they had developed a few rules and extracted a few promises of their own from Clark.

James only hopes that Clark *remembers* those promises now, in his growing isolation and his certain panic. He only hopes (as seconds tick away and he feels colder and colder) that Clark doesn't blame himself too badly for any of what happens here today.

(James only hopes he can forgive himself for dying without fulfilling his promise to bring Clark Kent back to the world; to give the world back to Clark Kent.)

"Lois," he whispers, trying to push past gauzy shock and shimmering agony, trying to remember how to be clever and sly (how to pass on messages in coded terms).

But his time has run out, in more ways than one.

The door shudders with the force of approaching footsteps (booted and implacable), then shakes as a lock clicks and a bar is removed (even hinges pried off and thrown aside wouldn't have helped, and James adds another hopes to his growing pile: that Lois realizes this and doesn't feel too badly anymore for the paltry results of her desperate efforts).

Then it opens.

Trask steps in.

He is arrogant enough to enter alone, smart enough to keep his hand tucked near his sidearm, and insane enough to scare James even past the clogging, cloying apathy seeping through his veins in an effort to replace his life-blood.

"I told you I wouldn't let you die," Trask says, and jerks his hand.

More black-uniformed soldiers enter. Lois looks small and thin (as fragile as the strength of an alter ego; as deceptively strong as the power of a name) when they haul her to her feet. He thinks she is going to say something, thinks she will denounce Trask to his face—and maybe she does.

James doesn't know.

Two soldiers grab his arms and yank him up and the whole world dissolves into sheets of white-hot fire sluicing down his skin, swallowed up by raging, methodical drumbeats pounding him into submission, originating from his right shoulder and his left arm. If he were still thinking coherently, if any kind of cohesion were left to him at all, he would have felt the world disappearing as he blacks out for a second (a moment; an eternity; not nearly long enough).

He had found Clark more by sheer dumb luck than anything else, starting in Smallville and moving out in concentric circles, sleeping in ditches and eating at soup kitchens, searching hotel databases for any aliases that strike him as familiar (because Superman might not need to sleep, but his aging parents will surely need a warm place to rest). It was not the alias that seemed familiar, but the initials: CK. Right there, staring back at him, and Jimmy had rushed to knock at the door.

There'd been no answer. Not that it mattered; Jimmy was even better than Lois at picking locks.

When he'd burst into the room, Clark had been standing in front of his parents. He's Superman—all impossible physique, incredible powers, and innate confidence—but he had looked sick, then, and haunted and so very, very weary. Clark had sagged in relief at the sight of Jimmy, and his parents had reached out to catch him, as if they were afraid he would vanish right in front of them if they did not constantly hold onto him.

"CK!" Jimmy had exclaimed (and to this day, he is incandescent with relief that out of everything he could have chosen to say, that is what burst out first). "I've been looking all

over for you!”

“Why?” Clark had asked. Later, James will realize that Clark was not as suspicious as he should have been simply because Jimmy had called him CK, not Superman. Later, he will think back and realize that Clark was so tired and so frantic and so devastated that he had not been thinking clearly. But in that moment, he was simply glad to have his friend.

“Because,” Jimmy had said, “I wanted to say I was sorry. For what they did to you. For not warning you. I told them it was wrong, but they wouldn’t listen to me. I...I did try, CK. I’m just... really, really sorry that it wasn’t enough.”

The Kents had smiled at him. Clark hadn’t, not a real smile (he didn’t smile for weeks, for months, until just before Nightfall when he wanted to reassure them that he would be fine and had smiled to mask his own terror; oblivious to the fact that they could see right through him), but the line of his shoulders had eased and he had sagged down into a nearby chair.

“It’s enough for me,” he told Jimmy, and Jimmy had smiled wide enough for the both of them.

They’d had to move the next day (because James isn’t the only one who can recognize a pair of familiar initials). Jimmy had been afraid they would leave him behind until Jonathan pulled him to his feet and Martha said Clark could fly him to the next location after her and before Jonathan. As easily as that, he’d been part of the unit. Part of the team. Part of the family.

“I promise I’ll never let you down again,” he told Clark when they’d arrived at their next hiding place, a bit more long-term, helped along with a few fake IDs Jimmy had hacked into the local DMV to procure for them.

Clark had turned and looked him in the eye (and there are no shadows under Clark’s eyes, because physical weakness doesn’t show up on his strong, smooth, deceptive exterior; but there were enough shadows in his eyes, in the memories dancing there in silver and brown, to make up for it). “Don’t do this because you feel guilty,” he’d said, very seriously. “If you want to help me, do it for a better reason. Do it for my parents—they don’t deserve this. Out of everyone in the world, they don’t deserve this kind of life.”

“All right,” James had agreed (and known that none of the Kents deserved any of this). “I’ll do it for them. I’ll do it for you. I’ll do it because it’s the right thing to do.”

That was the closest Clark had come to a smile, something easing in his expression. Until Jimmy had added, “Besides, I know whose fault this is—Lois’s. She’s the one who wrote the article and convinced the chief to publish it.”

Clark had gone cold and still, so remote that, for the first time, he’d seemed alien.

“I can’t believe she did it,” he’d said, and his voice had shaken with repressed emotion. “I just...I don’t understand. How could she do this to me? Or to my parents? I thought...I thought she at least cared for Superman.”

Jimmy had hesitated, but back then, he’d been a boy and hadn’t known when to keep his mouth shut. “Maybe that made it worse,” he’d said, thinking out loud. “Maybe it made her even madder when she discovered the truth.” He’d paused, then asked, “How did she discover the truth?”

“I think Trask must have told her,” Clark had said, looking away. “I think she knew since Smallville. I guess Godzilla wasn’t enough to teach her the lesson I wanted her to learn, Jimmy.”

And Jimmy, who had blamed Lois and resented her but until that moment had still thought there must be some reasonable explanation, had suddenly and with a passion that took him aback absolutely hated Lois Lane.

Because Clark had almost smiled until he remembered Lois, and then he’d been angry and harsh and bitter (and so very, very un-Clark-like when all Jimmy wanted to do was find and protect CK).

Because Clark had been good and decent and friendly, and now, after Lois, he was hurt and haunted and destroyed.

Because Jimmy had liked her, and now he knew firsthand how awful it felt to be betrayed.

(And he was oh so scared, because he was so much more like Lois than he was like Clark, and who was to say he would not turn out the same way? Who was to say that one day it would not be him who made Clark go so remote? Who was to say that Jimmy would not destroy Lois as easily and thoroughly as she had destroyed Clark?)

“Maybe not,” was all he’d said aloud, though, wanting Clark to ease and relax and maybe almost smile again. “But I learned every lesson I needed to, CK, and all of it was thanks to Godzilla.”

He only becomes aware again when he feels Lois’s bloody, blessedly cool fingers on his face, supporting his head, and he hears her, as righteously angry, as fiercely defensive (as admirable and beautiful) as she used to be (his champion and hero and idol; his lifeline in a world of competitive business that swept him up in its wake), in a time so removed that sometimes he all but forgets he ever had another life, another name.

“If you want him to live, you need to help him!” she is saying, her voice like a warm blanket placed just over his head and body to shield him from the stinging rain of harsh reality. “Please! He needs medical help, Trask!”

“How convenient,” Trask sneers. “That’s just what I’m going to give him.”

That sounds decidedly sinister enough that James once more rises from the ashes of Jimmy to pry his eyes open. What he sees is not encouraging in the least.

A grungy room, concrete walls and tiny grated window, very similar to the one they’d just left, only this one contains a thin, narrow hospital bed surrounded by curtains and an IV stand and a table full of tools James can’t bring himself to focus on. In short, it looks like a set straight out of those cheesy horror films he used to like to watch and laugh at. (He’s not laughing now.)

This cannot be good. In fact, it can only be *bad*.

“What is this?” Lois demands. If she is afraid, she hides it well. James hears only imperative curiosity and haughty disdain.

“This,” Trask says with a grand sweep of his arm, “is a message. A message for that *alien* that Earth is not his playground and that if any more of his kind come, we have ways to keep them...distant.” He squats, bringing himself close, so close that Lois tightens her grip on James to keep him upright when he flinches away from the aura of rampant madness circling Trask. “And you two,” he says, calmly, casually, “are going to send that message for me, just to drive it home.” He stands and moves back, jerking his head toward his men. “Do the kid first.”

Really? James thinks. Kid? *Still*? Don’t they ever get tired of that? Granted, his suit jacket and tie and even shirt are all long gone by now, but he’s wearing the suit pants and the stupid loafers and he’s had a haircut in the past couple weeks—when are they all going to get the message that he’s not a *kid*? He’s relatively certain these are his last moments, after all; doesn’t that merit at least a *bit* of respect?

“James!” Lois calls, but she cannot hold onto him when they are dragging him away.

Pain possesses him inside and out, and even James is not strong enough to keep himself above its rising swell.

They had tried to stop Clark from going after Nightfall, but it was impossible, and they had known it even before they began.

“I have to go,” he’d said. “I can’t let that asteroid hit Earth, no matter what it takes.”

“I know,” Martha had finally said, her shoulders rounded in defeat, something dark and twisted and broken in her eyes (and it had scared James, to see that look there when nothing else thus far had managed to bend the Kents). “But don’t do this because

you think you have to earn a place here."

"You're our son," Jonathan had added, "and that's more than enough to cement your place here."

"Relax," Clark had said, but how could they when he looked so old and resigned and scared? "I'm not doing this to earn anything. But there are a lot of lives at stake—the whole world. All Clark's friends. You guys. Besides, it's not like I have anywhere else to go."

Later, James will realize he'd meant it as a joke. He'll realize Clark was trying to lighten the mood. But all it had done then was remind them of just how much they had to lose.

The government knew the world was at stake (it was why they had hunted James down and cornered him and begged him to call Superman for them). The public didn't even know that much (and if CK had his way, they never would). But James and the Kents were the only ones that knew that Clark's life was on the line too.

They'd hugged Clark goodbye and pretended they didn't feel how tightly he clung to them or how slowly he stepped away or how minutely his hands trembled as he accepted their last farewell touches. They'd watched him take off anyway (even though his eyes screamed his reluctance) and dwindle away to nothing (and they had pretended they weren't watching history repeat itself, only with Superman this time rather than Clark Kent). They'd waited, tense and alert and terrified, for his return. Nothing on the news to help them, no word from the government because Clark hadn't wanted them to have a way to contact his parents, and no sign of a red cape descending from the skies.

It had been the next night before James had seen the light flick on beneath Clark's door, had thrown open the door and rushed in—and then stopped dead-still at the sight greeting him.

Clark hadn't been standing there as he had been the last time James had burst into a room to see him.

He hadn't been scared and haunted but still upright and protective.

He hadn't been still strong and Superman.

It had been far, far worse.

Clark had been sprawled on the floor, a jumble of limbs and rags and wounds. His Suit was in tatters, his cape was nothing more than spare threads dangling from his collar, bruises and blood spattered his skin like it was paint on parchment, and his entire frame had been shaking with spasms. James, when he could finally move again, had fallen to his knees at Clark's side; he'd tried to touch him, but it was impossible. Every time he got close, the tremors emanating from Clark's body sent reverberations resounding through James's frame, skipping through every one of his molecules. He'd called for help, screamed for the Kents, and they'd come in a flurry of worry and fear and relief, but it hadn't mattered. Nothing they'd done had mattered.

Clark Kent was broken.

He's the strongest man in the world, but still just a man, and Nightfall had been the last straw. The final act that sent him toppling over the brink and spiraling out into a place James couldn't reach.

They'd been scared. So scared. He'd spent hours talking with the Kents (pretending their own paper-thin façade of calmness and certainty wasn't completely transparent), trying to figure out what to do, how to help Clark, how to break through the detached aura of desperation clinging to him tighter than the Superman Suit. But there had been no solutions, no plans, no hacking that could help. They couldn't touch him, couldn't find the right words to reach him, couldn't save him no matter how they all tried.

And then Lois's searches had tripped his alarms, as if on cue.

James had known she'd been searching for him, but he'd had more important things to worry about, had shrugged it aside

because there was no way she could track him down and Clark had needed him so much more than Lois Lane ever could.

But Clark had been messed up in some primal, deep way that frightened James (made him wake screaming and sweating from nightmares where Clark was nothing more than a mindless shell, grunting in monotones and blank-eyed and no longer able to listen to James's words), and they were desperate.

So he'd gone to meet her, and discovered that Lois Lane could be just as broken, just as defective, just as hollow as Clark Kent.

Not that he'd cared at first. She was the enemy. The traitor. The villain of the story. The siren that had tempted Clark to try to find a solution to stay in one place and then had lured him to razor-sharp rocks and left him there to die, plucked apart piece by piece by vultures.

So what if the act had obviously gutted her too? So what if she clearly had her own nightmares and guilty conscience and scars?

They were nothing next to Clark's.

James should know; he had sat at Clark's bedside night after night and listened to him mutter about black space and aloof stars and massive asteroids. He'd sat there, night after night, and tried to calm him when he woke with suffocating, straining cries, afraid of being all alone and isolated once again (soothed him with only his voice because even touch was denied Clark, his somber, earnest brother who didn't deserve this at all).

So he hadn't felt sorry for Lois. He hadn't worried about her, or about Perry, or about anything but Clark and the Kents (so tired all the time now, so old and worn and scared).

But there were no better ideas, nothing they could do, and so, eventually, they had told Clark.

"Lois Lane wants to see you," James had said bluntly one night when Clark came back from his latest foray into the sunlight.

Clark had stilled (his hands trembling as always). His back was to them, his face to the night-dark windows, but James had seen his hands curl into fists.

"She wants closure," he'd said, and he was pretty sure he was lying for her (or perpetuating her lie; complicit in her crime of deceiving herself), but it was all he could articulate. It had become so hard to find words at all when staring at Clark's silent, shattered form. "She's...she regrets how things ended last time, and I think she wants to clear the air."

"Closure," Clark had repeated, and it was nearly the first word he'd spoken since waking up in the ruins of his bed after a particularly bad spasm ("What's wrong with me?" was what he'd asked then, and the memory of that helpless, trapped voice coming from CK is still enough to send chills up and down James's spine). "She wants to see me?"

James had hesitated, but he was already lying too much (had already dug himself too deep). "Yes."

"Closure," Clark had said again, his voice almost wondering. "I...I had thought that chapter of my life was over, but...but maybe it would be good to finally ask..." He'd trailed off.

"Clark," Martha had said, her own voice tightly controlled (she'd been the one most vehemently set against this, the one siding with James when he'd listed the possible consequences of this decision). "I know you're angry with her, but—"

"I'm not." Clark had finally turned to face them, his mouth curved in what James thinks was meant to be a reassuring smile. It looked like an abstract drawing, impossible to interpret, strangely arresting. "I was for a while, yes, but...but I realized that I didn't want to be angry forever. I didn't want that moment to define me. Besides, I'm the one who tried to deceive her, even knowing how good she is at her job. And I didn't exactly ask her whether she wanted to partner with the man hiding the biggest

secret in the world. With an alien."

Martha and Jonathan had both chimed in then, full of denials and reassurances and remonstrances. But James had watched Clark, dazed and clearly not hearing a word, and he'd known (had known from the moment he stepped off a plane onto New Mexico land; the moment he entered a too-hot diner and saw a thin, fragile woman who nonetheless unaccountably dominated the space she occupied) that it was too late.

"Yes," Clark had said, looking straight at James. "Yes, I'll see her. Whatever happens, it can't be worse than things already are, right? So, yes."

And that had been that. With one meeting, one question, one word, Lois Lane was back in their lives.

And James still can't decide if it is for the best or not.

He'd blacked out again, he realizes, but for not nearly long enough, because they're slapping his face, jostling him back and forth as they slam him down onto the hospital bed and tie restraints across his torso, his arms, his legs. There's no way to keep his hand on the watch trigger, no way to keep that signal shrieking out into the night skies as a homing beacon for Clark. No way to keep trying and hoping and planning and pretending to be more than he is for Clark's sake (for his own sake, too, because it's nice to feel needed even when he knows he's really the one who's needed Clark all along).

A part of James is gibbering in fear, protesting and denying and bargaining and begging, but he locks all that away beneath calm detachment and sarcastic thoughts about the word 'kid.' He wants to give into his fear (so strong, so overwhelming, that he nearly doesn't have a choice in the matter), but things are not so easy anymore. Clark might be here already, might be outside scouting the place, searching for weaknesses, counting the obstacles, looking through walls or listening for other clues if there is (as seems likely) too much lead in the way.

Watching. Listening. *Aware* of all that's going on.

Biding his time.

And James will not break, will not cave, will not give into his fear and sob and beg for his life. He will not be the reason Clark's compassion overwhelms his common sense and makes him barge in unprepared. He will not be the weak link that causes Clark to put himself in danger. (Or, if things go as badly as it seems they will, he will not let Clark's last memories of him be of terror and pain and hopelessness, goads to drive CK further into Superman, away from Clark Kent.)

And if CK is not here yet at all, well then, James still will not let himself reveal to either Trask or Lois just how weak and helpless he truly is.

So he doesn't fight (because all his will-power is turned to pretending to a calmness he holds onto only by the skin of his teeth), doesn't speak (because if he unlocks his jaw, he thinks he might start begging and pleading), doesn't do anything to stop Trask (because it is so much better that whatever Trask plans to do is done to James, who does not have much time left on his countdown anyway, than to Lois, who is still alive and fighting; who has vowed to do everything in her considerable power to save Clark Kent; who has already done more to bring back Clark's smile in a few months than James and the Kents have managed in twice that time).

"You do realize Superman is going to find us, don't you?"

Lois asks.

Trask sneers. "Of course. I'm counting on it. I haven't waited all this time as those dumb *sheep* out there accept this alien scout in our midst just to falter here at the finish line. Don't worry, though—we'll have time to finish up here before he arrives."

James squeezes his eyes shut to block out the lights swinging back and forth over his head. It works, though it simply makes the whole room swirl about him instead. He's tempted to just let the world fade away from him altogether in dizzying darkness.

That's the easy option. The harder route (the one Clark would take, and so the one James must choose) is to cling to consciousness and stay attuned to the voices that continue to move, in pointed contrast to the circles the room is taking him through, in linear form.

"You can't know that," Lois is saying, defiantly (of course, James thinks, taking comfort in the familiarity of it all).

"There are always people willing to stand up against an enemy so alien to us," Trask says. Gloats, really, as if he has waited (for decades) to be applauded and vindicated for his ravening paranoia. "A few tracers—operating at a frequency Superman will hear only after an extended amount of exposure to them—attached to those human traitors he calls parents, and I think he'll be distracted for long enough. He'll stick around to protect them, never knowing who's *really* in danger."

"What kind of message involves all of *that*?"

At that expressive but uninformative question, James risks opening his eyes. He wishes he hadn't. He could very easily have done without the image of a white-coated man (as bulky and muscled and clearly trained as every other soldier in Trask's little bureau) coming forward to hook a bag full of noxiously green liquid to the IV stand. He closes his eyes again, quickly, but that doesn't negate the feel of someone clamping at his broken arm to swab at the inside of his elbow. James rides the resulting ripples of bone-deep, knife-sharp agony to a place where he can't focus on what else (poisonous and deadly and so heavily foreboding) gleams as eerily green as that IV bag.

"There's one thing that can hurt that wolf in sheep's clothing," Trask says from somewhere far away. "What is it you called it, Lane? Kryptonite?"

There is a sharp, punctured silence (punctuated by the sounds of the man hovering over James doing things James refuses to contemplate). Finally, Lois says, in a hollow voice, "You can't know that. I *didn't* write that. I never told *anyone* about that!"

"I know." Trask sounds suddenly less pompous and more sinister. "A somewhat glaring omission from an article that was supposedly meant to be the tell-all about the creature known as Superman."

James is afraid. He is wounded more deeply than he thinks it is possible to recover from. He is nauseous and impatient and desperate. He is hazy and uncertain and fading. But no matter how much the room spins, he cannot keep himself from speaking (cannot help but respond, fiercely, when anyone calls Clark Kent, *CK*, a *creature*). "A tell-all," he forces through lips he clamps tight in an effort to keep from stuttering. "You said it yourself, Trask—everyone knows he's an alien and can pass as one of us, but they've accepted him anyway. Not quite the reaction you expected."

And for all the complaints James has about the way the world treats Clark, the way they *use* him, this one thing is true. The world does accept Superman. They do love him (maybe too much, a devouring love that obliterates Clark Kent entirely).

Trask, however, doesn't feel the same. His brows lower, his eyes black and hard, like chips of hatred frozen in place to pierce the bits of light struggling to survive in the dour surroundings. "Fools," he spits. "They think that just because he flashes some bright colors and saves a few individuals he's on our side. He's a very good PR man, I'll give him that, but all we need to strip away that illusion of humanity he hides behind is one simple message. No matter what he looks like on the outside, he's an alien on the inside. He doesn't belong here. And how better to illustrate that fact than if the two most high-profile people on his side—the human PR *he's* recruited for himself—suddenly can't stand to be near him? If you...simply...make him *sick*. A bit of proximity and he'll be powerless. A bit more and he's hurt. A touch"—Trask hovers close over James, his hand a hair's breadth from James's forehead—"and who knows? Maybe death can

strike even the most godlike of individuals.”

“Death?” Lois repeats, but James can’t concentrate on anything but the immense shadow silhouetted by the glow of poisoned emerald. The shadow of hatred and bigotry and death so massive, so intrinsic, that it is impossible to fight. The glow of a weapon so poisonous that Clark’s brows tighten whenever it’s brought up.

“Death,” Trask says again, like it’s a whisper of some promised land. “In one stroke, we will both prove to all those gullible fools out there that Superman is anathema to everything we are, and also send an inarguable message that we do *not* accept his presence here on our world. We will not meekly bow the knee to him, no matter how *superior* he thinks he is.”

“A god complex?” James gasps. “I don’t think you’re talking about Superman anymore, Jason Trask. It seems to me that *that* flaw is illustrated a lot closer to home.”

Trask’s lips quirk upward in a facsimile of a smile. “Maybe. But if so, it is only because I am all that stands between this planet and utter destruction.” He looks away from James, as if he suddenly ceases to matter (as if he has suddenly reverted to Jimmy again), and up to the white-coated man. “Do it,” he orders.

James’s heart tries to explode from his chest, his hands start struggling against the restraints tying him down—and Lois steps between him and Trask’s henchman.

“You want someone to give a death’s touch to Superman?” she asks, so calmly it rings preternatural in the darkness. “Then why go for James first? He doesn’t even look like he’s going to make it, but more than that... don’t you think I’d be a better fit?”

“The kid is the one the alien takes with him everywhere,” Trasks points out matter-of-factly.

Lois’s back, all that James can see, is stiff, as rigid as James’s resolve. “Sure, but how *close* do you think he gets to Superman? You think he can get closer to Superman than *I* can? I’ve already destroyed the alien once—I can do it again, and much more effectively than James can.”

Trask mulls it over, then shrugs. “Fine. You can go first. It doesn’t really matter—both of you are going to have the procedure done.” He steps closer to Lois (to James), looming over her. “And don’t think I don’t remember the first time I held you captive. You had a last request then, too, and thought you could use it to escape. This time, if I throw you out of a plane, Superman won’t be able to catch you without dropping like a fly himself.”

The restraints are being loosened, someone’s grabbing his arms, lifting him up and away, and Lois is lying down on the cot of her own free will, and James still cannot comprehend what is happening.

“Lois. Lois, what are you doing?” he mutters.

Impossibly, she seems to hear him. Looks over at him. Smiles a small, sad smile. “It’s okay, James,” she says. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

And then she looks down at his wrist. At the watch circling it. She looks up. Smiles again. And then goes limp, surrendering herself to the white-coated soldier.

“Lois!” James calls. He tries to struggle, but Trask bats him aside. He tries to fight his way up, but the ground is spiraling away. He tries to protest, to make the switch, to save Lois because he’s the one already dying and he’s the one who’s expendable and he’s the one who’s supposed to step between CK and the next bullet... but he cannot move. He cannot speak. He cannot think.

He is, as always, too little and too late.

20

Poison.

It’s not a word she’s considered before. Not really. Not as

how it applies to her. Some, bitter and angry, have called her stories poisonous, and Cat has not been above referring to her workaholic ways as a sort of poison, but real honest-to-goodness poison? That’s not really been something that’s ever mattered to her.

But now it does. Now it matters more than almost any other word at all, because Trask is about to leak poison all through her veins and because... because Lois is poison herself.

Poison: anything that tends to harm, destroy, or corrupt.

That’s her to a T, right down to the last comma and period, isn’t it?

From the moment Clark came into her life, standing and reaching out a hand she pretended not to see, she’s been harming him. Put-downs and barbs and insults, and maybe they seemed to roll right off of him, but not all poisons are fast-acting. Some are slow and insidious, building up in the bloodstream until the luckless person collapses with a system already too corroded to be healed.

But she wasn’t content with letting him die slowly. She’d destroyed him, utterly, in one moment. An article, a secret revealed to the entire world, and when he’d come to stand in front of her (asking her what, why, *how* could she possibly do this to him when he had never done anything to her except save her life and be her friend), she’d known exactly what to say to drive the last nail in his coffin. “*You’ve always claimed to stand for truth and justice—isn’t it only fair that everyone knows the truth now?*” she’d asked, because she hadn’t been content destroying Clark Kent—she’d wanted to destroy Superman, too (she’d wanted to make sure he knew she didn’t see Superman, godlike savior, when she looked at him, but rather Clark Kent, liar and deceiver and betrayer).

And then, when she should have called it quits and left him to the pitiful remnants that were all he’d had after she was finished with him, she’d come searching for him again. She’d found his haven, woven herself through it, pretended she wanted closure, wanted to help him, to *save* him, but all along, what had she been doing? She’s been corrupting him, tainting everything she touches, ruining his life all over again, leading his enemies to him (wanting him to save *her*).

The tension between the Kents and James and Clark and her.

The earthquake.

The doubts Clark has now about what he should do with his life and just *who* he is.

James dying right in front of her.

All because of her, weakening the tenets of his life, fracturing the contentment he has managed to miraculously find all on his own.

Poison.

She is poison to him. His own personal Kryptonite. She’s pretended that she isn’t, donning her own secret identity of friend, ally, help, but her mask is nowhere near as good as even Clark’s thin, frail glasses. He’s pretended that she isn’t, pretended that her presence doesn’t rend and tear and slash at him. Pretended that he can endure her presence and invite her closer, and ignoring, all the while, that he is bleeding out from the inside. But even he cannot take the pretense all the way to its natural conclusion.

So it’s better this way. Better to let the needle pierce her skin and the liquid Kryptonite draining from that IV bag to slide through her veins. Better to stamp onto her flesh her poisonous qualities, like a disclaimer, so that there can be no more pretending. No more masquerading. No more dreaming of different choices.

She’s Kryptonite, green with bitterness and jealousy and resentment in a Smallville tent. Green with sickness and guilt and regret in a Daily Planet newsroom. Green with the real Kryptonite that will bar her from forever getting close enough to

Clark to finish the job she's been making her life's work (that will save him from ever having to worry about her ruining his life again).

Because, sometimes, people can recover from poison. If it's identified early enough. If it's diagnosed and treated and avoided forever after.

"Better to have Kryptonite for blood than the red blood of a traitor," Trask says, and maybe he says more, but Lois does not bother to listen.

Instead, she turns her face away, to the wall, and listens (impossibly) for the sound of James's watch. Listens for Clark coming to save her and the man he loves as a brother. The man who never betrayed him, never left him, but who *will* destroy him if he dies before Clark gets here. The man Lois would do anything to save because Clark needs an ally, a friend, a brother, far more than he needs his betrayer (his Kryptonite).

She'd accompanied Clark to the Festival and met his parents and accepted their offer to stay with them. There was no better way to keep an eye on Clark, after all, than to stick close to him and follow him when he tried to sneak off on his own. She tried to listen in on their hushed conversation in the kitchen after they'd all come back in from outside in a rush, but the stairs had creaked and given her away. When she'd entered the kitchen with some excuse about hearing the fax machine, they'd all been staring at her with faux smiles.

Lying. All of them. Hiding something from her. Looking at her as if she was the outsider.

Whatever this was, she'd realized (so vindictively, so triumphantly, and later, she will cringe inside at the conclusions she drew) that this story was even bigger than she'd thought if they were all trying so hard to keep her out of it.

The next morning, she'd come downstairs and seen the Kents crowded around a truck driven by a battered-looking man. They'd waved him off and watched him leave, and when they'd come back in and found her, she'd done her best innocent impression.

The Corn Festival hadn't given her any new information. Not that she'd been trying too hard. The real story wasn't the people she was interviewing; it was the man she kept an eye on all morning. Constantly bracketed by his parents, Clark hadn't tried to sneak away, hadn't exchanged whispered conspiracies with anyone, hadn't done even one thing to show that he was trying to edge Lois out of a possibly award-worthy story.

She'd almost given in. Almost shaken away her suspicions and let herself buy the dress she saw at a stand. Almost let herself smile and laugh with Clark and enjoy this glimpse of a side she'd never guessed he had. She'd laughed when he'd tried and failed (and later, she will draw conclusions about a green stone, and realize what Kryptonite is and what it does to him) at a strength game. She'd given him a few extra tickets and helped him win her a black and white teddy bear.

Just lulling him to a false sense of complacency, she'd told herself when she wondered what she was doing. But the truth was that Clark was a far more compelling man than she'd ever given him credit for, far more intriguing and endearing and almost impossible to resist.

"That's who I am," he'd said. "Clark."

And she'd laughed. (Later, she will cry instead.)

But she'd still had suspicions, and she hadn't gotten to be the youngest Kerth award winner, three times, by not following every lead.

So she hadn't told Clark that she was going back to Trask's camp. She'd gone alone. Avoided Sherman and the guards and snuck toward the boundary and made her way into the main tent.

And when Trask's hand had come around her throat from behind, when he'd whispered his greeting into her ear, his breath hot and smelling of army rations, she'd done what she always

did.

She'd bluffed.

She can't hear or see James anymore, and that worries her. Scares her, actually. He's lost so much blood and endured so much pain and been thrown around far too often. But he is strong (stronger than she ever imagined), so she cannot doubt him. She has to believe that he is still alive, still breathing, still screaming silently out for Superman.

She has to believe that Clark will get here in time to save him.

"How long does this procedure take?" she asks, to stall. To know. To do something other than just lie here passively.

"Not long," Trask says, far too unconcerned for her liking. "We'll drain the Kryptonite into your veins, infusing your blood with its radioactive properties. It's a crude process—quite painful, I believe—but effective."

Lois stares up at him. She does not think she has hated anyone more in her entire life (except herself, every moment of every day since that Smallville afternoon). "How do you know? Have you tested it?"

"Turns out Bureau 39 isn't entirely without allies after all." Trask smiles and shrugs. "Before Superman went after him and put him into prison, Lex Luthor was quite helpful. Found and donated a large chunk of Kryptonite to the cause. A true patriot."

She feels, abruptly, nauseous again. Her stomach roils within her, remembering a date that wasn't an interview and a kiss at her door. Remembering charm and his hand curled around hers, and not only is he a criminal, but he's also capable of wanting to torture and kill Superman.

She wanted to be a reporter to help people. To uncover secrets and publish truths and right wrongs. But instead, all she has done is help the very people who are willing to go to any lengths to pull a hero from the skies, the criminals who attack a man giving his whole self to help and heal and protect. She told a secret that should never have been told, published a truth that in the telling became a lie, and turned the greatest right she has ever known into the greatest wrong she could ever commit.

Harming and destroying and corrupting—that is all her career as a reporter has done.

Her name is going to go down in history books. It's already there. And she would do anything to erase it, to blot it out of those black and white halls of fame. She would do anything to be anonymous and unknown and *happy* (with a smiling, friendly Clark Kent at her side, running off to save the world with some lame excuses she wouldn't see through because she doesn't want to lose this man who came so unexpectedly into her orbit).

She would do anything to stop this vicious cycle. To stop hurting him. To turn back time and undo her mistakes.

"Don't worry, Ms. Lane," Trask pats her hand. He seems a million miles away, so distant, so removed, so inconsequential that she has to force herself to concentrate on him. "Soon, it'll be all over. Soon, the alien calling himself Clark Kent will be dead, and Earth will be safe once again."

A needle pricks the inside of her elbow, the cold pinch of punctured flesh. Liquid fire spider-webs up and down her arm.

Lois screams.

She'd thought Trask a nutcase, no more dangerous than any of the dozen other crackpots she'd run into over the course of her career. She'd thought she could handle him. She'd thought there was no way he could do anything too bad while she was onto him and Clark was on his trail and the police were aware of his presence on the Irig farm.

She should have looked around and realized that anyone who could put together an operation on such a large scale, with all the official seals of approval, was more dangerous than the average criminal. She should have listened to his raving about Clark and Superman and a meteor rock found right here in

Smallville. She should have taken him seriously (only one mistake in a long line of many).

"You think Superman is a hero?" he'd asked her after a whispered conference with a soldier who'd poked his head in and asked to speak to him. She'd tried to overhear whatever news he'd imparted, but hadn't had any luck. "You think he's some shining beacon of what it is to be 'super'?"

"He is super," she had said defiantly. Later, she will think back on her stance—so defiant and proud—and her voice—so confrontational and aggressive—and she'll wish that she was half as strong as she'd thought she was. She'll wish she had remembered to be defiant and aggressive and independent later. She'll wish she hadn't been so easily manipulated. "He's a hero the likes of which you'll never be able to aspire to. I know you think you're doing the world a service, but he's the one who's saving us."

"Really? What is it you called him in your article? A 'paragon of truth.' The 'defender of justice.' Fighting for the American Way. But he's an alien, Ms. Lane. A creature from another planet, anathema to our way of life. He no more knows what it is to be human than a rock does. But he does know how to pretend. To lie. To put on a mask and play a part."

"Superman doesn't lie," she'd proclaimed, as if she'd known him all her life. As if he'd confided in her and taken her to his home and introduced her to his parents and shown her who he really, truly was (as if he'd been her friend rather than a stranger she'd met mere weeks before and spoken only a couple dozen words to).

Trask had sneered at her, so condescending that he couldn't quite pull off the pity he seemed to want to show her. "Why don't we just test that theory," he'd said, and then he'd pulled her out of the tent, down dusty paths into another tent beside a larger one, and he'd clapped his hand over her mouth and held her impossibly close to him. He'd started whispering words she couldn't quite distinguish, instructions that only made sense when she realized he was wearing an ear-piece and was talking to a soldier in another tent.

A soldier who was talking, in turn, to Clark Kent. Her erstwhile partner. Her would-be betrayer. He'd come to check the camp out, too, apparently, without her (or maybe, she'll realize later, so much later, when she is already alone, he'd come to find her, to save her), and fallen into the same predicament she was in. And now he was being questioned by Trask's man, his voice so distinctive, touched with that meek confidence so unique to Clark.

"We knew you'd come eventually," the soldier was saying, a delayed echo to Trask's whisper threading chills across Lois's ear. "You're predictable. Or you were. Seems like you have some skeletons in your own closet, though. You were adopted, weren't you?"

"I don't see what that has to do with anything," Clark had said, calmly.

"Everything," Trask's puppet had said, and his own tone was menacing, intent, deadly. "You came to Smallville just before Bureau 39 found and acquired a certain ship with a very distinctive symbol. You were adopted and raised here—and then the records turn kind of spotty. You showed up in country after country, always taking odd jobs, always moving on quickly. An unusual, though not exceptional, history...until one takes into account the strange meteor rock found right here in your hometown. A rock that has an...odd effect on you."

Clark had been silent for a moment, so long that Lois had wondered what had happened to him. Finally, he'd said, "I don't know what you mean," but even Lois, in all her ignorance, had known he was lying.

"We saw you!" Trask had hissed in her ear, and the soldier had relayed it. "Last night, your parents showed you a sample of

the rock Wayne Irig found on his property, and you were completely incapacitated. Not quite so super anymore, eh, Kent?"

Lois had been confused, left behind, not sure what kind of bizarre twilight zone she'd stumbled into. She might as well have been mouthing Clark's awkward, stumbling denials and questions for him, just as much of a puppeteer as Trask.

Until the soldier had said the magic words.

"We have your parents. Right now, they're safe, just a little tied up. But one word from us, one twitch of the finger on the gun, and the human traitors that harbored you all these years will be gone forever."

And Clark had disappeared, replaced by Superman.

A cold, confident, assertive voice. A calm, measured tone she'd heard before. Words that Clark wouldn't say, but that Superman would.

As if Clark had been there one instant, and Superman had replaced him the next.

As if Lois had suddenly switched realities.

As if the world had turned upside down.

"Don't hurt them," Superman had said. "They have nothing to do with this."

"Don't they?" Trask had demanded. "Don't they? They took in an alien child as their own and raised him to be the perfect chameleon, the consummate con artist. They took in an imposter and they sheltered him until he could grow up and bring the alien armies down on us. Nothing to do with this? They might as well have signed humanity's extinction papers along with your false adoption records!"

"If you hurt them," Superman had threatened in a low, dark voice that didn't match either the superhero or the reporter Lois had thought she'd known, "you will regret it."

"How?" the soldier had asked, laughing. "Right now, Superman, you're no stronger than me. Right now...you're powerless."

"Still think he's a hero?" Trask had demanded of her, pushing her down until she sprawled in the dirt, boneless, still, frozen in disbelief and incomprehension. "Still think he stands for truth and justice? You don't even know who he is, Ms. Lane. And you never have. And you never will. He'll always be lying to you, always be using you, laughing at how inferior he thinks you are. He's no hero, Lois Lane. He's just a con artist."

She wishes, later, that she had ignored him. That she had denounced him. That she had screamed so that Clark would know she was there, that he was not alone, that he was not powerless. She wishes she had done anything but what she had actually chosen to do.

She had said nothing.

She had done nothing.

Until she wrote her article exposing Superman. Until she spoke that jagged, poisoned question that killed Clark Kent.

Until she destroyed herself right along with him.

There is fire inside of her, searing, boiling heat expanding and contracting through her veins until she thinks her skin will explode. She can feel the path it takes, up and down her arm, reaching out, spreading like a contagion, roaring toward her heart where it will be carried to every inch of her body, turning her into a living, breathing radioactive piece of Kryptonite.

Trask is saying something, just like always. Probably more manipulations, more whispers and taunts and questions that mask themselves in pointless insanity only to slip insidiously beneath her armor to deliver its toxin to her heart. He's shouting, yelling, and there are people moving over her, and a wind that rushes past her with such force she wonders if she is dreaming (a nightmare, again, of things disappearing as soon as she touches them and newspaper ink spreading out from her hands to drown everyone around her and turn them into ghosts). There is a surge of

lightning across her arm and then the pinch of punctured flesh and a soft noise (like a whimper, a cry, a gasp). The fire spreading outward, gaining in intensity and heat, suddenly slows and dulls. Still there, inside her, still moving along in its inexorable path down the branching rivers of her veins, but no longer coursing through like the tides, like rapids and highways and stories gone viral.

Voices over her, more of them, two bouncing back and forth, questions and answers, one shuddering and one stuttering, both of them inherently familiar, so reminiscent of something *good* that she wishes she could open her mouth and speak.

There is another burst of wind, slower, colder. And then she is alone.

She can't open her eyes. Can't bring herself to push past the blaze of liquid heat still searing inside her (can't drag her focus away from *willing* her heart not to accept the poison moving toward it) long enough to look and see what has happened to leave her so completely isolated. There is no sound, no awareness of another presence, only her and the echoing expanse of empty space.

Until there is a caress of wind, and a voice murmuring to her (interspersed between more of those breathy whimpers), and there is a hand tracing the contours of her face (cooling the fever burning through her cheeks even as it awakens the dulled, liquid fire within) and an arm slipping under her shoulders, and Lois begins to weep.

Because she knows this touch. She knows this voice. She knows this care, this attention, this feeling of *safety*.

Clark is here. He is here and Trask is gone and James is rescued and she is being lifted and carried to safety, and Lois wants to scream and weep and rage at the world. He is here and he is touching her and his every breath is edged in pain, and she is hurting him again, and *why* didn't he just leave her there for the police to handle? Why didn't he stay at James's side and leave her behind, rescued and saved but no longer hurting him? Why does he let her do this to him over and over and *over* again?

She wants to say his name; she bites her lips hard enough to make it bleed (bleed out tainted blood that can only burn and sear Clark himself, brand him with the strength and potency of her presence).

She wants to lift up her arms and hug him as tightly as she can and refuse to let go; she clenches her hands into fists that draw crescent-shaped pinpricks of blood (tinted green with agonizing, weakening radioactivity).

She wants to do everything that she closed the door on six months ago; she does nothing.

She did nothing before and it destroyed him.

She will do nothing now and it will save him.

She said too much before and it killed him.

She will say nothing now and he will be healed (of the taint her own presence brings down on him).

He carries her for what seems like forever (the last minutes she will ever get to spend with him, trickling away into nothing). She wonders why until she realizes that he can't fly, not while she is touching him. He can't use his super-speed, not while he is carrying her.

He cannot be Superman while she drags him down.

He cannot be Clark while she lifts him up before the whole world.

Eventually, she hears him call out, and then he is opening a car door and placing her (so carefully, so gently, so reverently) down on a car seat. He sits beside her, but he does not touch her, and she lets his voice drift over her head (telling the driver where to go; *talking*, in public, *again*, and all because of her; just as she took away his voice, now she takes away the sanctuary of his silence). An indeterminate amount of time later, they pull up somewhere and Clark is lifting her free and there are voices and

movement all around her.

"It's okay, Lois," Clark whispers to her (and his breath threads past her hair just like Trask's did, but it is so different as to be alien, so welcome as to be entirely human). "You're going to be okay now. You're safe."

But there is a ragged edge to his voice as he speaks, pain lending its own signature to the voice she once thought she would never get to hear.

Poison.

She is poison to him.

So she turns her face from him (to separate him from her touch; to hide the tears trailing down her cheeks and tickling her neck) and relinquishes herself to the foreign, safe touch of regular, ordinary, mundane humans.

Trask had left her at the camp, abandoning her so he could accompany Clark—Superman, she had savagely reminded herself as she sawed uselessly at the cord binding her to the chair—to the Kent farm where he would... Well, she wasn't entirely sure what he planned to do there, only that he had some huge green rock he'd thrown in the back of the van with a chained Superman and he'd wanted to take care of Superman—Clark, she had thought incredulously—along with the Kents.

She'd worked to get free, and when her own efforts had proven useless, she'd recruited Sherman and swayed her to her side. They'd gone for the sheriff, and she'd met up with Jimmy, and he'd told her about his signal watch, and Lois had scoffed and hardened because what good was it to call for Superman when he was currently allowing himself to be tied up for whatever reason and pretending to be her reporting partner? What use in calling for a superhero who could claim to stand for truth and justice one minute and then lie right to her face and coerce her own secrets from her the next?

When they had arrived, pulling up in a squeal of tires and the flurry of dust-clouds, the barn was on fire and Trask was beating Clark, and the green rock was glowing malignantly, and Lois hadn't known what was going on or what to do. She'd watched bruises appear on Clark's face, watched blood spring from the cut in his lip and the burns on his hands (from where he'd tried to put out the fire in the barn, she'll assume later), and she'd been utterly confused. Because he didn't have his glasses on and he was obviously Superman, but he was hurt and wounded and unable to beat Trask, and that was something that would only apply to Clark, not to the superhero she'd been in love with since he'd swallowed a bomb and smiled at her.

But then Trask had lifted his arm, and there'd been a gun in his hand, and when that gunshot had sounded, Lois had been so sure that it suddenly, fatally didn't matter anymore what she thought or believed or had found out.

But his gun had dropped to the dirt, a look of surprise on his face as he'd turned to face Rachel, whose own gun was pointed unerringly at him. Clark (or Superman, in that one instant, it hadn't mattered who he was, only that he wasn't dead) had stood upright, proud and defiant, refusing to bend and fall beneath the agony scrawled across his battered features.

And the second gunshot had sounded, and Trask had clapped a hand over his bleeding shirt, and the grey van she'd seen at the campsite (where she'd seen Clark chained and Superman flinching away from that green stone now at his feet) had pulled up, and Trask had dived in. There had been more gunshots after that, more bullets sent to chase after the remnants of Bureau 39, but Lois hadn't been paying attention.

All her focus had been on Clark, bending and grabbing hold of the green rock (and the smell of searing flesh had momentarily overpowered the stench of smoke and blood) and he'd tossed it out into the lake. Then he'd been running—right past her, as if he didn't see her. As if he didn't care that she could see him without his glasses (as if he had known she wouldn't see past his masks

and lies even with those ridiculously nerdy glasses gone). As if she didn't mean anything to him now that she knew his game.

He'd dived past flames and into the barn, and he'd come out with his parents, both of them choking and coughing and soot-stained and still ridding themselves of the ropes that had been tied around them. Clark had collapsed in their arms (or maybe they had collapsed in his; it was hard to tell), and they had hugged and embraced.

And Lois had watched them. Expressionless. Motionless. Finally believing. Finally comprehending. Finally understanding exactly how much of a fool she had been played to make of herself. Finally realizing that the entire time she had thought she was on the inside, on the front lines, in the know, she'd been a dupe just like all the rest.

Jonathan and Martha had looked over Clark's shoulders. She thinks, later, that they had been about to smile, to laugh in relief that she was okay too, and to invite her into their embrace. She thinks, when she can think past overwhelming emotions, that they had wanted to include her. But at the sight of her, at whatever her eyes showed, they had both fallen silent and they had not smiled and they had held onto Clark all the tighter and closed their eyes on her.

And Lois had turned away.

She is unconscious for twelve hours. When she wakes up, the news is full of the reports of Trask's death in a fiery explosion out in the wastelands fifty miles north of Coast City. She doesn't know where James is (or if he is even alive) and Clark isn't there. The doctor comes in and tells her that whatever Trask had tried to inject her with has been purified from her system. She's clean now, he tells her, and she wants to laugh (she wants to weep, and she would except she feels too hollow to do anything but stare numbly at whatever happens to be in front of her).

They keep her for observation for a day. Clark comes to visit her, but Lois leaves specific instructions with the nurses that she doesn't want any visitors at all, even if he does wear a red cape and save people in his spare time (*especially* if he wears a red cape instead of silly ties and makes a habit of saving the very people who are worst for him).

She knows now that James was right, all those months ago when he sat across from her and mopped up her mess of spilled tea (cleaned up her mess of broken superhero and dead partner). She knows that she should have listened to him and stayed in Metropolis to drink salutes to a fallen friend with Perry. She knows that it was a mistake to ever believe she could possibly help Clark.

When they finally bring her a phone, she buys a single, one-way ticket back to Metropolis. From now on, Lois Lane is just as dead as what-might-have-been, and there is no going back.

21

"Whatever they injected into your bloodstream, it was a completely foreign substance," the doctor says as she signs the release papers. "There could be repercussions we're not aware of at all. I encourage you to come back often. We'll—"

"I'm not staying in town," Lois cuts him off. She offers him a tight smile that does nothing, seemingly, to reassure him. "Don't worry. I'll visit a doctor in Metropolis."

She means it too. She can't afford to endanger Superman if he has to make a rescue near her. She doesn't dare risk some other villain like Lex or Trask taking advantage of the weapon Trask has made of her. So even though it makes her cringe to think of it, she *will* see a doctor to make absolutely certain there is no Kryptonite left in her system.

The doctor keeps talking about staying in touch, letting him know who her Metropolis doctor is so he can send on what information they have on the Kryptonite. Lois nods and makes agreeable noises, and starts walking away. She needs to get out of

here, to escape, before Clark decides to circumvent the nurse's station and come visit her no matter what her allowed visitors' list reads. She needs to be gone before he's looking at her again with those earnest eyes and tempting her to give up on her noble, inevitable actions. She needs to flee while she can still do so somewhat gracefully.

Finally, after the elevator ride to the ground floor, the doctor is satisfied and leaves her to find the exit on her own. She is free, striding forward in donated clothes that are heavenly despite their bad fit simply because they aren't stained with James's blood. She can see the brilliant shaft of light that is the door.

And Clark appears in front of her. He is dressed inconspicuously, and he isn't wearing the glasses, and the hallway is nearly empty, which means they'll have a brief moment before he will be recognized.

She will have to face him after all. One last test before she can be deemed completely trustworthy (before she can leave him, safe, forever).

"Lois." He smiles to see her (*again* with the smiles), as if he's been worried. As if he's had time to think about her on top of whatever James's condition is and wherever his parents have ended up. "You're all right! I tried to see you earlier, but..." He trails off, waiting expectantly for an explanation, but when she answers him only with silence (because why should she get to defend and excuse herself when he's never had that same chance?), he shrugs. "I'm glad you're okay. James is—"

"Don't tell me," she interrupts, and knows he will not let this be easy. He will not give up on her as easily as she gave up on him in his hometown. "I don't want to know. Don't tell me anything."

His brow furrows. "Why not?"

"I'm not going to do this again." She looks past him, over his shoulder, to that shaft of light that is her exit, like the light at the end of the tunnel, signifying the end of her life and the beginning of forever. "Trask only found you because of me."

His expression clears, and Lois wants to scream because he looks almost happy, almost content, even with lingering shadows under his eyes from Kryptonite exposure (and she knows James is alive, at least, because he would not be *content* if James were dead). "Lois, Trask would have found us anyway. James and I recognized a few of the Bureau 39 men—we're pretty sure that a couple of the times we had to move because of what we thought was the media, it was actually Trask's—"

"Don't," Lois interrupts. "You can't tell me, Clark, all right? I'm... I'm leaving."

"I know," he says, and she thinks he really does and is simply avoiding the enormity, the reality, of it by stalling. "That's why I'm here. So I can take you—"

"To Metropolis," she says, firmly so she will not be tempted to stay just a few more days. "I'm going back to Metropolis. I've already bought my plane ticket; the plane leaves in just a few hours."

"Oh." That's all he says, and it's even more heartbreaking than anything else he might have done (because he seems resigned to it, to people leaving; because he is not trying to convince her to stay; because he already looks so alone and abandoned).

"I have to," she says. She wasn't going to explain, but the words come bubbling up and out anyway (she has never been good at holding anything back: secrets, truths, emotions... her heart). "This isn't going to work, Clark. I came because what I did to you wasn't fair and I wanted to make it right somehow, maybe give us both the chance to find some kind of closure, but... but we haven't. We're not. You're never even asked me the question that I know *has* to be burning you up inside. We haven't addressed *anything* yet—"

"What question?" he asks, and she stares at him. She cannot

believe that he is still trying to pretend he's not holding anything back.

"What question?" she repeats incredulously. "Why I wrote that article! Why I ripped your life away from you!"

"All right," Clark says, completely calm. Completely unreadable. "Why *did* you?"

She doesn't want to answer. She's been waiting for him to ask, has come out of her guest room every day with the expectation that she will finally hear him ask for her reasons, and now that it has finally come...she is not ready. But it's better this way. Better to say it all out loud and get it over with. Better to dose him fully and completely with the poison so that he will never try it again.

"Because I was mad at you," she says. "I was humiliated that you had lied and I had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. I was so embarrassed at the radically different ways I treated your separate identities. I was so furious that I had just been starting to trust you—to *like* you—and then to find out you had tricked me... I was mad, and that's the reason, Clark. The only reason."

He is pale and silent. Closed off. Locked away once again, as if none of her efforts can last or endure past the lingering effects of her crime. As if even the cure cannot fully wash away the residual results of poison.

"I'm sorry," she says, finally. Lets the words out in his hearing, and hears once again just how little they mean. "I'm so sorry. I know you probably told yourself that there was a good reason I did it, that Trask must have threatened me or that I had some grand plan." There are tears streaming down her face; she wonders if they are glowing as radioactively green as the pieces of his homeworld. "But there *was* nothing redemptive, Clark, nothing to excuse me or justify what I did. And I know you wanted there to be—you *had* to tell yourself there was in order to let me back into your life, I'm sure—but the truth is that I was just...I was just mad and hurt and disappointed."

"I know," he says. She is shocked—no, *astonished*—because she had thought she sent him fleeing back into his shell, his cocoon, of silence. She had thought she would never hear his voice again. "I *hoped* you had a good reason. I *wanted* to believe you did it for me in some way. But I know you, Lois, the good and the bad. And so I knew all along why you wrote that article."

"And yet, here you are, *still*!" she cries, frustrated and wounded and confused. "Ready to take me back into your life after yet another disaster, or crisis or calamity or whatever word there is to fit this! I came all this way to see you so we could face what happened, but instead you're pretending like it never happened! I *want* to live in that make-believe world with you, Clark—really, I *do*—but it will never work, not long-term. I would spend the rest of my life, every hour of every day, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for you to finally treat me like I deserve. And you...every time you got mad at me for anything, you'd be holding it all back, afraid to let the dam burst in case everything came roaring out and couldn't be put back in." She calms, not wanting the curious onlookers to be able to overhear her, and takes a deep breath. Looks at him for the last time. Soaks him in, engraves the image of him, the feel of him, on every cell, stores it up so it can last her a lifetime.

"Some mistakes can't be undone," she whispers. "Some things can't be fixed. What I did ruined...everything that might have been. And as sorry as I am for it, nothing I do can change what happened. You're never going to be two men again. And I... I am never going to be a part of your life."

And she walks past him. She waits (half-hoping, half-fearing), thinking he might come after her, might stop her and try to change her mind.

But he never does.

As she walks through those blinding doors, she looks back, just one final time (because she is weak).

Clark stands in that shaft of brilliant light, untouched by the shadow her body casts; he is a dark silhouette edged in gold, impassive and unbroken. His back is still to her. He does not turn. He does not watch her leave. He does not look for things that might have been. He stands as straight and tall as he did at the edge of that pond in Smallville, while green poison writhed at his feet; strong and self-sufficient and surviving (away from her; apart from her), and for the very first time, Lois begins to believe that maybe he can actually survive this. Maybe he will be all right.

Maybe he *is*, despite everything, better after all. Maybe she didn't completely fail.

She promised herself she would make him better. She doesn't know that she can take the credit for this miracle, but she will take the knowledge of it with her, and she will be...content.

When Perry sees her, he falls still. He brightens—she thinks it is the first time she's seen him smile since her new life began in the wake of Clark Kent's end. He moves toward her, and she steps into his arms...and she falls apart.

It's late evening (she came straight from the airport; Perry is all that is left of what feels even remotely like home) and there's almost no one around, but Perry pulls her into the privacy of his office anyway. He keeps her enfolded, small and young and not wholly broken in his arms. He smells of ink, of newspaper, of the *Daily Planet*. He smells of familiarity and acceptance...and terrible, biting guilt. So she hugs him because she needs the comfort, but also because he is drowning in guilt too, and he needs comfort perhaps even more than she does.

Finally, when they both manage to pull away and pretend, with their customary awkwardness, that they are not wiping away tears and building back up ruptured walls around their emotions, Perry looks at her with a straight, level (terrified) look. His voice is gruffer than ever before as he says, "So. Didn't really go that well from what I've gathered." He sounds resigned. He sounds tired. He sounds defeated.

Not at all the Perry she's known since he gave her a chance as an intern.

She thinks about her answer (because he deserves the truth, *needs* it as much as she does) before she says, "I'm not unhappy that I went. I think...I think I helped remind him that it's okay to be Clark Kent every once in a while. I think he's going to be okay. So, you know, it went better than it could have gone."

Perry's brows climb up his forehead. "Even with Trask?"

"What?" She frowns at him. She still feels stuffy and drained from the tears she just wept on his shoulder; maybe that's why she feels behind. "How much do you know?"

"Maybe more than you," Perry says.

She is reminded, suddenly and uncomfortably, of those days after returning from Smallville. Then, she'd thought she'd known everything, too, and only later had she learned all the pieces she'd missed.

She'd avoided Clark in the day between Trask's escape and their plane ride back to Metropolis—easy to do when his parents refused to leave his side and Jimmy was always around, bubbling over with questions and observations and commiserations. When Clark seemed preoccupied and disappointed (not that he knew that she knew, though at the time she'd suspected he did). She'd kept her knowledge to herself, hoarded it, clutched it close and curled up around it and ignored everything else, like a greedy miser huddling around the last embers of a fire in a world of night.

The night before their plane left for Metropolis, she'd decided to give him a chance (echoes of Trask's threats in her head, refusing to leave her be). She'd gone to him, sitting on the couch atop his blankets, and sat beside him. "Clark," she'd said.

"Lois." He'd smiled, because that's what he does. "I'm so glad you're okay. When I realized Trask had captured you..."

"Lucky for us everything turned out all right," she'd said, watching him and realizing just how big his lie was (and, in retrospect, just how bad he was at lying).

His grin had been uncomfortable. "Yeah." He'd reached out for her; but she had flinched away. She hadn't meant to; it had just happened. But he'd been hurt, and tried to cover it up, and lied to her again. "Trask didn't hurt us, though, in the end. You got away and my parents survived and I..."

"And you?" she'd prompted, begging him to tell her the truth. It would have all been better if he would be honest with her; she'd thought, and held her breath.

He'd shrugged. "And I'm fine."

Fine. Fine without her. Fine with lying to her. Fine with pretending. She'd wanted to be a part of the superhero's life since first meeting him. Clark had seemed to want to be a part of hers since he'd first met her. All of it lies. All of it a waste. All of it just window dressing to disguise what he did—and that, the costume and the persona and the lines she'd helped him come up with in that first 'interview,' were all just a disguise too. It had seemed to her, then, in her skewed, numb way of thinking, that there was nothing real to him at all (and she would make that reality, two days later).

"Clark," she'd said, in one last effort, because this was important and it meant something and there was no other way for this to go (willingly or not, with his cooperation or not, the article had to be written). "Did anything else happen? Why did Trask come after you? Why did he think you knew anything about Superman?"

He'd paused, for the slightest instant, but she'd noticed it because she'd been looking for it. Then he'd given her a pale smile and said, "He was deluded, Lois. All his conclusions were just the ravings of a paranoid man."

"Yeah, sure," she'd said, her disappointment like a blow to the very depths of her being. She should have known, she'd thought, that Superman wouldn't trust her, and she should have known that Clark was not as trustworthy as he'd promised to be.

She hadn't spoken to him once on the plane ride to Metropolis, or on the taxi ride to her apartment. She'd left him with silence and shut herself in her apartment alone, and she'd written her exposé.

And the next morning, she'd destroyed him.

(Later, it will not escape her notice that the very things she used to punish him, silence and isolation, are the very tools that drove her to the brink of ruin herself.)

Pretending he does not notice her preoccupation, Perry leads her to the couch she's sat on so many times before, and they both sit. A feeling of déjà vu sweeps over Lois like a warm tide. Late at night, alone in the bullpen, sitting in Perry's office, about to hear him confide some news about Superman. She almost expects him to tell her that the military came looking for the superhero. Half expects him to tell her that they both killed one man but the remaining persona needs her now and she should go after him. It feels so familiar, this scene, and holds such a sense of coming full circle, that she's almost afraid she dreamed everything that came before, and she will have to do it all again (and this time, Clark will hate her).

But she sits there anyway, passively, afraid to miss out on whatever Perry has to say. Afraid to lose another chance to see Clark before Kryptonite was ever released to flow through her veins in tangible evidence of her inner poison.

"Superman rescued you and Jimmy," Perry explains, "but he must have been in a hurry to do it—and no wonder. When they released the video of the surveillance footage, you and Jimmy both looked awful." He pauses to run a hand across his eyes, missing Lois's expression of confusion. "He just supersped Trask and all his men out to some solitary desert and left them there so he could go back and get you and Jimmy to the hospital. Trask

had some sort of homing beacon, though, and his remaining men were able to get to him in a van before Superman could make it back. By the time he did get there, Trask had started recording."

"Recording what?" Lois asks, impatient and not sure she wants to hear this after all. She intended to avoid talking about Clark after she returned to Metropolis (avoid risking any residual harm; avoid tempting fate), but she can't quite bring herself to stop Perry completely. She wants to hear this—*needs* to hear it—not from the impersonal news with only stock footage and neutral talking heads, but from Perry, who wasn't there but who *cares*.

"They were filming themselves—and Superman when he showed up. Actual close-ups, Lois." Perry sounds hoarse, wistful, and Lois is suddenly very glad that he didn't see Clark before he'd recovered from the after-effects of Nightfall. Hard enough to see him when he was suffering from the lingering effects of the Kryptonite in Lois's veins; no need to make it worse on the old editor's heart by seeing Clark when he was so desolate that he seemed only a hollow shell.

"Trask was trying to frame Superman," Perry explains. "He thought he could be some kind of martyr to the cause. They're still analyzing the remains, but apparently he had some kind of self-destruct device that mimicked Superman's heat-vision. His men got away from the blast—until Superman caught up with them a few days later—but Trask made a couple statements about how Superman was threatening him, and then he blew himself up. It was on every channel, really gruesome stuff, and I guess some people would have bought into it—if Superman hadn't gone back to that building Trask was keeping you at, and released the security footage from that to the media too. The testimony of the Bureau 39 men he captured later revealed more of it, and the depths of Trask's paranoid delusions."

Lois is still, absorbing this new information. Comprehending what all this must have meant to Clark—being seen close-up by the world again, confronting the man who'd directly led to his outing. Wondering anew if she's done the right thing in leaving him so soon, when his parents are still hurt and James is in who knows what condition.

"He talked," Perry suddenly says. "In both the videos. Clark talked. It...it's been so long since I've heard his voice, Lois. There's so much silence nowadays."

"I know," Lois whispers, and leans into him, joining her loud silence to his. "I know, Perry. I hear it too."

"Is he..." Perry hesitates, tentative, afraid to hear the answer, she supposes. "Tell me the truth, Lois—is he *okay*?"

"I think he will be," she says, and feels strengthened by the truth of it. She has the image of him standing straight and facing away from her in that hospital corridor to remind her that he is not broken (like her; like Perry). "He has a strength of character that is stronger than any of his powers, and he has his family—and James is part of that now, Perry—and he *wants* to move on and be okay, so...so he *will be* okay. Maybe not today, but soon. We didn't kill him, Perry. We didn't completely destroy him."

(Because she left when she did, before she could finish the job.)

"And you, Lois?" Perry looks her straight in the eye, searching for something, looking for hurt or defeat. She lets him look, knowing he will see the decimated ruins of her heart, but also knowing that he will see that the open wounds have finally scarred over. "Are *you* okay, honey?"

"Yes," she says, and hopes she is telling the truth. She has no accompanying image of herself to hold to as proof that she will eventually make it past this. "Not today, but...one day, I will be."

He gazes at her a long moment more, then nods. "Good. I'm glad."

"Me, too," she whispers in his ear as she hugs him, and hopes that *he* will be okay too.

When she gets to her apartment, her bag is there, sitting

neatly in the center of the room. Atop the bag, perched incongruously, is the black and white bear from Smallville.

She'd thrown a few sheets over her furniture when she'd realized the search for Jimmy (*James*, and she shoves aside the accompanying image of bravery shining through blood, loyalty through bruises, defiance and resourcefulness through a single wristwatch) would take a while. She pulls the sheet off a couch now, lets it fall carelessly to the floor, and then sinks down on the stiff cushion. And she stares at the bag and the bear. Belatedly, as a cold breeze whispers across her cheeks, she realizes the window is open, left conspicuously wide (he didn't sneak in; he announces his presence, even in *absentia*).

The bag is packed, its side bulging. The bear looks far too innocently happy, smugly smirking, unaffected by the fact that she has now left it behind twice, both times without looking back. Once in Smallville, because she didn't want any reminders of how close she'd come to letting Clark in past her walls and how far he was from the Superman she'd built up in her head. And once now, because she hadn't thought she'd want any reminders of how much Clark had let her in and how much she *wishes* she could let him in past the boundaries of her past choices.

Abruptly, she wonders what the guest room she'd claimed looks like now, stripped of all her things. Is there a different type of shampoo in the bathroom now, maybe strawberry instead of jasmine? Has he gotten rid of the picture of Metropolis's skyline? What color will the bedspread be now? What will relieve the bareness of the closet with this bear now in her apartment?

Of course, she's almost forgotten. Nothing. Nothing will replace the things left to make that room feel hospitable and welcoming. Nothing at all. The room is bare. The entire suite is empty, stripped of all personality and life. The room she never saw, guarded by that door with the lock she'd never breached—she'll never know now what was inside, how much Clark kept of himself besides the glasses. The long rows of thriving plants have no one to tend them; they will die, neglected and abandoned.

James worked so hard after the earthquake to make sure the Kents could stay in that suite of rooms that had become their home. But there's no way he could have saved it a second time (if he's even feeling well enough to save anything right now), not after Trask and the media exposure he'd brought down on them. Superman had been seen too often, too frequently, on the west coast. His silence had been ruptured, his distance breached. There's no way Clark wouldn't want to move on, put as much distance as possible between himself and the site of so many unpleasant memories.

Lois Lane and Jason Trask. They had both found him there. They had both played their parts in trying to pull him down from the skies and shatter the glasses he clung to so tightly. Who would have ever guessed that those two names would go together, she thinks bitterly.

But she left, she reminds herself. She left and now she is far away from him, and he will be okay. She has to remember that. She *will* remember that (it's the only way she will ever be able to find that *okay* she promised Perry).

Her legs shake when she makes herself stand. She forces herself steady. Reaches out a hand. And undoes the last thing Clark Kent will ever do for her (Superman might save her, incidentally or even individually, but packing her bag and giving her belongings back to her is the very last selfless, caring act from Clark Kent for Lois Lane). She picks up the bear, slings the bag's strap over her shoulder, and walks into the bedroom.

She unpacks slowly, pointedly, reality overlaid atop the memories of her defiant unpacking that first morning at the suite. She had tried to force a place for herself there, done everything she could—nonverbally—to insist there was a future where her life could merge with Clark's in some way. But now she unpacks clothes (still smelling, ephemerally, of that collection of rooms,

that collection of people, she'd once thought could be home) and toiletries and laptop, like the final laying down of arms, the ultimate surrender of all her unvoiced, all-but-unacknowledged dreams.

When she sets her laptop down on the nightstand, a piece of paper falls and flutters to the floor. A tremor squirms through her stomach, a tremor that packs a punch leaving her breathless when she picks it up and sees what the paper is.

The note the Kents left her months ago, just days after her arrival. The small piece of paper she'd tucked away in her pocket like a magpie stealing bright and shiny objects forever outside its comprehension, and then had hidden under her pillow and played between her fingers night after night while trying to sleep (hugging the bear to herself when the nightmares struck).

"Lois, headed out for the morning. We left bread, butter, and honey for toast—Clark said that you'd think that was enough for breakfast, but if not, we should be back before noon. There's juice or coffee in the kitchen. Make yourself at home."

The note, dashed off rapidly, probably without much advance thought at all, but so indicative of care she didn't (doesn't) deserve, and the bear, won by a man accustoming himself to subpar limits and still trying to be a friend to the reporting partner he hadn't asked for but had embraced (forgiven, repeatedly, over and over again, for crimes large and small). Two relatively unimportant objects that mean everything in the world to her. The only trophies she won in her desperate, foolish, guilt-ridden quest to undo her mistakes and win back any of the things she'd lost.

She sits on the edge of her dusty bed, and plays the worn paper through her fingers, and wonders why she cannot cry. She feels an ocean of tears surging and broiling within, but she's dry, hollow, emptied of all but the last purpose in her life.

To keep Clark safe by staying far, far away.

At this point, even basic contentment is tragically far outside her reach.

She goes back to work as if she never left. Perry doesn't tell her how he explained her absence, or how he made certain she could come back; but then, Lois doesn't ask. She just wants to get back to living her own life (*sans* Clark, because that is all that is left). She just wants to get used to this *normal* as quickly as possible so that the pain of wanting something different will ease as if already dulled by the passage of unrelenting time.

Unfortunately, everything reminds her of Clark. The newsroom (touched by his all-too-temporary presence). Perry (so damaged, still, by how Clark left). The desk that still stands empty as a memorial (and she can still see that naïve journalist with ill-fitting suits and mismatched ties smiling over at her as he dared to tease her). Writing, which she's trying to get back into doing again (because Clark's efforts to give her this portion of her life back to her should not be so easily spurned), *that* above all reminds her of the vast, gaping hole in her life.

She spent the first months after her article trying to forget everything, doing her best not to think of it at all, pretending it all away by telling herself nothing more special had happened than writing an article like any other. Now, she can't do that anymore, and the memories march forward ceaselessly, a constant assault that seeks to make up for lost time.

As pervasive as the memories are, though, she perseveres. First, because she has nowhere else to go and no idea what else to do with her life. This is what she's wanted to do, where she's wanted to be, since almost before she can remember; everything she did, every choice she made, had been to achieve her dream of working as an investigative reporter at the Daily Planet. But she has new dreams now, all of them cruelly dashed, and this is the only thing left to her.

The second reason she stays, though, is that gradually, as Perry gives her one small assignment after another, Lois begins to remember why she loves writing. Not the big stories (she doesn't

trust herself with that; every time she thinks of it, her nightmares resurface), but the small stories, the human interest articles. Puff pieces, as she once called them.

Now, she calls them her *lifeline*.

Other people's tragedies, their triumphs, their travails—their *stories*—call to her. She loves being assigned words on a paper, researching them, and then coming face to face with regular people and seeing them, question by answer, unveiled, their masks peeled away to reveal either heroes or villains or something in between. And adrenaline sparks inside her, purpose fizzles at her fingertips—but only when she sits down, not to expose their secrets and the insights she's gained, but to bring their needs to the readers of the Daily Planet. To reveal their endurance and heroism and efforts to an audience. To invite everyone out there to help them, to have compassion and to look beyond the surface and to make allowances for other people. To see the hero beneath the ordinary person.

She writes, now, like Clark.

They aren't the kind of stories that will make her famous or win her flashy awards. But they help. They heal and soften and sooth the raw pain of her scars. They are like breadcrumbs leading her down the path of redemption.

Perry notices (he watches her all the time; she can't figure out if he's afraid she'll disappear or hoping she'll leave to go back to Clark), but he doesn't say much (and this is easy to figure out; she knows he doesn't trust his own judgment anymore, a mirror reflection of her). After a month, he asks her if she wants back on the city beat, and a bolt of panic spears through her.

"No," she says quickly. Firmly. "No, Perry. I don't...I'm not that reporter anymore. The investigative side of me is what brought us *all*"—she knows he'll understand who she's really talking about without needing to name names in a bullpen full of curious reporters all eager to hear the full story behind her 'vacation' in California—"to where we are, but it's these human interest stories that will help me."

"All right," he agrees, seemingly unfazed by her life-changing decision. "Whatever you need."

And he means that (she is not the only one who has made some life-changing decisions in the last seven months), but still Lois isn't happy. Isn't comfortable. Isn't *content*.

This isn't the place for her, not anymore. It holds too many bad memories, too many ghosts haunt the rooms, echoes of people who should *still* be here, and it is too dangerous, constantly luring her back to her old ways. Besides, she doesn't deserve to be here. She is not good enough as a reporter nowadays.

And why should she get to work here when Clark Kent no longer can?

Her decision is made for her when she sees Clark again. He swoops through the newsroom late one night so fast she doesn't even know he's there until she feels a rush of wind, sees a blur of colors, and finds herself standing, upright and breathless, on the roof of the Daily Planet.

She doesn't understand what happens next. Even weeks later, after countless hours of running it through her head over and over again, she cannot puzzle out what happened on that rooftop. She thinks he was testing her (but for what, she cannot comprehend). She thinks he was saying goodbye. She thinks he was making his own life-changing decision.

Or maybe it is none of those things. Maybe he has morphed again into a stranger she does not know, a hybrid made up of bits and pieces of pre-exposure Clark and Superman, and post-exposure Clark and Superman, and other things she has no part in, to become a new, *post-Lois* version. Maybe he has written himself a new persona, one she will not discover and cannot expose.

She just doesn't know. She can't read him, can't decipher the

coded terms he spills out like ribbons wrapped all around her, past her, behind her, not quite touching her but defining her nonetheless.

What she does know is that the time has come for *her* to move on too. To stop holding onto the past and to find out what this new, emptier life of hers has to offer without the remains of her old one dragging her down.

So the morning after Clark whisked her to the roof and then back to her desk without any warning, she debates with herself, then writes, then works endlessly to fine-tune what she wrote. She puts more thought and effort into this one piece than she has any other since before Smallville. Not a story this time. A letter.

A resignation letter.

She finishes, prints it out, and actually has it in hand to turn in when Perry calls out, urgently, "Someone turn the news on right now! Superman is giving an impromptu press conference."

Lois gapes, soundless, motionless, her ticket to a new life dangling uselessly from her hands. The others are not so frozen, shocked and curious, a sea of noise and astonishment, and the TVs all around the room flick to life. No need to search for the channel; this press conference (the first of its kind in so very, *very* long) is on every one, preempting every program.

Superman. There. Larger than life, bright and bold and seemingly unaffected by these past long months. Standing on a podium in some exterior location she doesn't recognize. Stepping up to the sea of microphones. Opening his mouth.

Behind him, she sees James, proud and smiling (no blood, no bruises, not even a splint to give away their shared experience in Trask's clutches).

And beside James, as if he belongs there, as if it is not impossible for him to be standing, glasses and all, on the same podium as Superman, is Clark Kent. His tie does not match his shirt, his jacket does not fit, and he is the most beautiful (the most astonishing) thing Lois has ever seen.

And then, right there in front of the world, Superman speaks.

22

"There will never be a better time," James says. He's given up the splint, but still tends to hold his arm close to his side, a constant reminder of just how much he's had to endure thanks to his proximity to Superman. Clark tries not to look at the arm with its battered, *valuable* (because of what it has saved and the many times it has called him to get there just before it is *too late*) watch; he tries to focus on James's eyes instead, so alive and kindled with hope and earnestness and something deeper and darker. Something that looks a lot like zeal (like the beginnings of fanaticism; like a love that will not be deterred by hurt or danger or impossibilities).

"I know there's no reason you should trust us, Mr. Kent," Dr. Irons says, stepping forward and drawing Clark's attention. "I know that we're strangers. But we've been working on this for months, and Jason Trask's actions do provide the perfect opportunity."

Clark likes that these scientists, hunched in their small room over tables and desks and blackboards full of figures and variables and plans, call him *Mr. Kent*. He likes that they do not crowd him, that they leave him space by the door. He likes that they were worried about James when he walked in with the traces of bruising still evident around his cheek and that they know him well enough to call him *James* and nod at him respectfully.

He does not like that this feels like an ambush. He does not like that he asked James to find a way to keep his parents safe, and instead they are discussing castles in the air and dangling miracles in front of him as if he can endure having them snatched away yet again. (He does not like that his heart has forgotten how to hope at all, so that he feels only numb, distracted apathy rather than the fizzing sparks of excitement he thinks he *should* feel.)

Dr. Klein steps forward, taller than everyone else in the room except Dr. Irons, all gangly enthusiasm and nervous anticipation. “This *will* work, Mr. Kent. There will be people who won’t buy it, of course—we can’t expect to convince everyone—but it will be enough so that you can go back to having two identities.”

“It will be enough to save your parents,” James adds pointedly. “They can live on a farm again, go back to Smallville, not have to live in hiding.”

Clark flinches and tries not to scowl at the unfairness of this ploy. The door is only inches away, but it suddenly seems too far away. There are no windows here, no trace of air from outside, no hint of the sky, and he decides, abruptly, that he cannot stay here any longer. He needs to be free, to be *gone*. Needs to go answer the hundred cries within a mile’s radius, avert the natural disasters occurring in this hemisphere, stop the countless crimes being carried out right this moment (needs to be Superman, to remind himself that that is all that is left to him now and he cannot pretend otherwise; needs to leave before he lets the impossibilities and hopes and *Mr. Kent* sway him from the reality he has only just made peace with).

“CK.” James steps in smoothly, slides closer—not quite blocking the door, but interposing his injured shoulder between, and Clark would rather be trapped here forever than to jostle him and cause more hurt to his friend. James reaches out with an arm that had a bullet pass through it (for *him*), places a hand on Clark’s shoulder, looks him straight in the eyes, and says, so softly, so heavily, “I know you don’t believe this can really happen. But please, *please*, CK, just listen, all right? The hologram is only a temporary measure—they’re working on a robot, one that can simulate your powers or can type up a story, whichever is necessary. One that possesses enough artificial intelligence to hold up a conversation and looks exactly like you. Or rather, looks like you with just enough subtle differences—a sharper chin, a longer nose, a different angle to your brows—that when you stand next to each other, everyone will see a resemblance. *And*, more importantly, see the discrepancies.”

“It sounds like science-fiction,” Dr. Hamilton interjects. “But it really is very close to a reality. We have the skeleton and AI done already. With a bit of tweaking to the conversational patterns and the casting of your face and form to make the exocovering, the robot should be up and running in just a month or two.”

Dr. Faulkner nods. “Until then, the hologram will work to throw them off. It’s made of lights *and* forcefields, so if anyone tries to touch it, they will feel something. I recommend the hologram play Superman—we can only program it for so many variables, while you can move faster than the eye can perceive to make allowances for whatever happens at the public events. Complicated, yes, but it is a viable solution.”

They’re all looking at him expectantly. Waiting. Watching. Holding their breath. They’re doing an admirable job of appearing professional and detached and polite, but he can hear their heartbeats, smell their sweat, see their pulses beating like panicked birds in their throats and wrists. They call him Mr. Kent, but they know he is Superman, too, and no matter what comes of this meeting James has tricked him into, these four people will *always* know.

But then, four people instead of billions cannot help but be an improvement.

Right?

Clark swallows, tenses, *hates* himself for letting himself think, even for an instant, that things can ever go back to the way they were.

They can’t.

They won’t.

He is Superman now, and letting himself contemplate anything else is just going to be too painful when he is inevitably

disappointed. (Letting himself remember what it is like to be Clark Kent, without Superman wrapped around his ghost, just makes it harder to be content with who he is now.)

The scientists are still watching him. The robot form, set up on a stand behind them, provides a surreal atmosphere so that Clark wonders if he isn’t just dreaming this all up. He’d confronted Trask, after all, finally come face to face with the man who’s haunted his nightmares for months now and he’d emerged whole and relatively unscathed. His parents are safe (his mom free of all her bandages and his dad taking a few shaky steps each day) and James is alive and Lois is safe (gone, forever, far away from him where she will not be kidnapped because of him anymore, will not have an alien substance forced through her veins) and Luthor is jailed, and everything is going *too* good. *Too* smoothly. So maybe it *is* all a dream. Maybe he is tired of wanting soundlessly, wishing mutely, desiring silently. Maybe his subconscious has finally decided to simply spell out everything for him so that he can have at least a few precious hours when life is not so hard and endless and wearying.

“Thank you,” he finally says (when he belatedly realizes they are waiting for him, even though he is wearing the Superman suit, to say something). “It means a lot to me that you’d put all this effort into trying to help me. But—”

“Clark,” James interrupts, a thread of steel turning his voice hard and implacable. “Can I talk to you outside for a minute?”

Clark sighs, but he cannot deny James anything (does not *want* to deny him anything, now, when he is still so relieved and happy his friend is safe and alive and no longer needing blood infusions every twelve or fourteen hours). He gives a polite nod to the team of scientists and their robot witness, then follows James out into the hallway. It’s better than the room; there is a window at the far end of the hallway, promising sunlight and an easy exit, and there is no one staring at him. No one except James.

“I know what you’re thinking,” James says calmly. The threat is gone from his voice; in its place, there is only compassion. Empathy. Sadness. (So much worse, because this makes Clark look away and swallow back a lump and wish Superman could leave behind Clark’s sentimentality.) “I know that you don’t want to try this in case it doesn’t work. I know that it’s easier just to keep going with things the way they are than to try again after what happened the last time you came up with a new identity. What I’m saying is that I *know* this is hard for you, all right?”

“All right,” Clark says evenly, because there is no use denying it, not when James has been there through all the hardest moments, prodding and cajoling and *believing*.

James nods. His dark eyes are filled with sage wisdom, old beyond years, heavy with a weight even Superman balks at, but he does not look away. “Then I’m just going to ask you one question. Who do you *want* to be?”

The window fades into a distance that Clark can’t breach. The smells and sounds of the outside world seem to dwindle and die. Everything shrinks away until he is left standing in an endless hallway with too-knowing eyes intent on him. But he cannot voice the answer. He cannot put this into words. He cannot take the mortal wound still bleeding and searing and *hurting* from the deep, dark place where he has locked it away; cannot take it out and bring it into the exposed light of day where it will be ripped and torn and rent asunder until it can never be hidden again, and the pain finally conquers him.

He cannot let himself realize, again, just how much he has lost. Not now, not when he has survived his final encounter with Lois and heard her walk away and did not stop her. Not now, when he is finally able to wake up each day without gasping at the dull, thudding pain in his chest, when he can be Superman without having to *remind* himself constantly not to speak. Not now, when he has nothing left to hope for as Superman anymore,

and thus, nothing to risk losing.

So he says nothing. But James flinches and looks away, as if he hears everything that Clark cannot (*will/not*) say. Pain, worse than the superficial, physical pain he'd shown when Clark had exploded in from the sky to save him and protect him and rescue him, flashes across James's features.

"You have to say it," James whispers. He, more than anyone, knows that Clark will hear him. "You have to admit it, even if only to yourself."

"Why are you doing this?" Clark asks him abruptly. He does not like being confronted like this. He does not like feeling, once again (*always*), as if he is lacking something, missing something. As if he is foreign, alien, incomprehensible to the people of this world. "I told you to save my parents, not me."

James hesitates for only an instant before those wise eyes crumple and become the wide, shocked eyes of a young man, hurting and afraid and so much more affected now than he was when Clark found him unconscious and bleeding to death on a cold, grungy floor. "Because I miss CK!" he cries out, his voice too loud, echoing through the hallway, piercing against Superman's super-sensitive hearing. "Because I want Clark back more than anything, and this is the only way I can see that happening."

Clark feels cold and sick and twisted and *small*. He feels dumb and slow and lethargic, because he should have *known* this. He should have seen this. He should have realized that of course James is hurt and lonely and overwhelmed just as much as Clark or his parents are. He should have anticipated this in the same way he had anticipated that James would need the signal watch one day.

"Of course," he says, and it is not hard to reach out and put a steadying hand on James's shoulder, offering comfort in exchange for all that he has taken from his young friend. "I'm sorry. If this is what you want, then of course we'll do it. We'll try."

Because he cannot deny James anything, least of all what he most wants. He cannot look at this man who was willing, only weeks earlier, to die for him, and *not* do everything he can for him in return.

But James is strong and mature and steady once more, stepping back so that Clark's hand falls away, and he looks at Clark with an expression he cannot read. "No," he says, slowly, as if speaking to a small child. "No, CK. Don't do this for me. Don't do this for your parents. Don't do this for the world, or for anyone else. If you want to give me something, then just... think about this one thing. Ask yourself this one thing."

"What?" Clark asks, but he already knows the answer, has already heard James ask it and still cannot face it.

"Who do you want to be?"

The words hit him like weapons. Not Kryptonite, but like... like darkness, like the antithesis of sunlight, like a sucking void that steals away energy and life and replaces it with weariness and vague pain.

"Who do you want to be?" James asks, for the third time, as if the question is simple and the answer clear.

As if Clark has the luxury of choosing.

"When you know," James continues, (so oblivious to the impact of his own words; so insightful that he turns his back to offer Clark a chance to flee gracefully), "then you can give me your answer."

The window opens and closes in less than a second, and Superman is free. Alone. Unhindered by gravity.

Trapped. Alone. Weighted down with a burden he cannot escape and a choice he cannot make.

"We're not going to tell you what to do." Jonathan's voice is weak and raspy and he breathes in between every two or three words. He has dropped weight and muscle mass and just a bit of

the cheerfulness of his presence. But he speaks, and he is able to walk now, a few steps at a time, and he is safe, hidden here in this tiny town in the backwoods of Maine that only the citizens and Clark himself know about. His hand, when Clark takes it, is able to squeeze back now, too, and that makes Clark happy enough to be able to breathe.

"You have to decide this on your own," his mom adds, when Jonathan falls silent, breathless and exhausted. "We're happy just to be with you. We just want *you* to be happy."

"I am happy," he says, and wishes they would believe it (if they did, maybe he could finally believe it himself). "We're safe now—*safer*, at least, without Trask out there and with Luthor behind bars. We have a system now, and we've adjusted. If we mess that up, then... then how will we come back to this when it doesn't work?"

His mom frowns at him. "Who says it won't work?"

"This story they've concocted is nothing more than a conspiracy theory," Clark says. He turns to look out the window at the small backyard. It's nothing much, but there is a bench where his dad can sit in the sun and a small garden where his mom has begun to plant a few things for his dad even though it's far too late in the year to expect much of a harvest. The window is square and fringed with a white, laced curtain much like the ones they once had in their kitchen in Smallville (like their kitchen in the suite Lois made into an almost-home). Clark wishes the curtain was different, blue or straight or *something*, just so that it wouldn't remind him of the homes consigned forever to the past. "Who would believe it?"

"You'd be surprised," his mom says tartly, but falls silent when Jonathan lifts himself up to speak again. Clark turns, too, unwilling to miss anything his dad will give him.

"They will believe it," his dad says, "because they *want* to believe it."

Dusk lends cascading shadows to his father's form, cloaking and concealing the bandages, revealing and exposing the strength still there. Jonathan sits on the couch in the small, homey living room (a couch, not a bed, because he does not like feeling lazy and wants to be up and about), and he is hurt and broken and only slowly mending, but he does not flinch or hesitate or look away from his son. Clark feels immeasurable gratitude for that (feels immeasurable *relief*, that they have not turned away from him or left him or resented him for all that they have lost because of him).

"Son," Jonathan says in his halting, sincere voice, "you think the world is any happier with what's happened than you are? You think they haven't noticed that their Superman isn't quite the same as he was before?"

"He's right," Martha says when Jonathan stops to recover. She looks up at Clark, and there is a sadness in her eyes he doesn't understand. "Even if people don't believe it, they will pretend they do. For your sake. And maybe even for theirs, so that they can have Superman's voice back. So that they can have *Superman* back, the way he should be. The way he is meant to be."

Clark feels, at once, both very hurt and very touched. It hurts to think that after everything that's been done to him, after everything he has done to keep going and all the battles he has fought to make sure he can still be the man his parents raised him to be—it is not enough. But it is nice, on the other hand, to know that the world might want to give back to him (that maybe their adoration and attention and acclamation are just clumsy ways of showing their acceptance and affection).

But he doesn't know how to say any of that. He doesn't know how to put any of what he's feeling into words (and is not even sure that he *knows* what he is feeling).

"Superman helps," is all he can say, and wants to laugh (wants to cry) at the realization that he is arguing for the persona

he would have gladly given up a thousand times over if only he could be Clark Kent again. But then, he does not know that he can remember how to be Clark Kent anymore. He does not think he can stop being Superman now. He is almost sure that he has become so used to helping and saving and *moving* (constantly, always, at superspeed, in ways no human can move, a moving man in a world of statues) that he would not know how to be relegated to a slow, sedate, *human* existence.

(He does not think he can ever trust the world enough to make himself so vulnerable again.)

"Clark did too," his mom says softly.

It is a truth, and it cuts so deeply that Clark flinches away from it.

Jonathan settles back into the cushions of the couch, lets out a sigh that seems to leave him with only peace within. "I'm glad," he whispers, so quietly only Superman can hear him. "I'm glad James did this."

His dad wants Clark Kent back too, he realizes. James, and his dad, and...his mom too?

Clark looks over at her, and finds her looking back at him.

"Help me with these," she says. She picks up the tray of Jonathan's lunch dishes; Clark takes them from her and follows her into the kitchen, already decorated and cluttered with bits of the art supplies he's brought her over the past few weeks. When she takes the tray from him, he reaches out to fiddle with a couple metal filings, their metallic color a stark contrast to the tan flesh of his uncalloused, unblistered palms. He cannot look at his mom as he asks the question he does not want to ask (but he needs to ask it, needs to hear her answer, needs some solidarity in this, because if he cannot make this decision for himself, then he needs to know that he will be making *everyone* who loves him happy).

"What do you think I should do?"

"I'm not going to answer that, Clark," she says levelly. But he thinks she has answered it. He thinks the name she chooses to address him by and the way she will not look at him and the trembling of her hands are all answers. "You need to decide this for yourself."

"Why?" he asks, almost petulantly. "This decision affects all of us—why can't I ask you what you want?"

Martha turns to look at him, then, and he is taken aback by the fond smile she wears. "Because you always ask that, honey, and for once, *we* want to be the ones asking *you*. What *do* you want?"

It's funny, Clark thinks (without any inclination to laugh), that they only ask him that question now, when everything he has ever wanted has been taken away from him (or walked away from him of her own free will).

"I don't know." He sets down the metal filings with careful gentleness and moves so that he can look out of this window too. Superman likes knowing that the sky is still there for him to retreat to if necessary. (If he is Clark again, he will not be able to find so many ubiquitous exits; he will have to go back to lying and pretending and hiding.) "I've gotten used to being Superman, Mom. I *like* being Superman. He can save so many people and he doesn't have to lie and he...he's above it all. He can't be hurt."

He regrets the words as soon as he hears them and realizes, too late, what they sound like. He hunches his shoulders, waiting for his mom to grab him or smack him, to lecture him, to remind him of all the times he has already been hurt. But she does none of those things, and when he looks, hesitantly, back over his shoulder, he sees her standing stock-still, frozen, her expression so full of pain that he feels an instant surge of adrenaline.

"Mom?" he asks, alarmed.

When he reaches out and touches her arm, she finds movement again. She steps forward and pulls him into a fierce hug, so tight and all-encompassing that Clark feels as if he is a

young boy again, crying because he heard the kids in his class making fun of him behind his back and through three wooden doors. He feels as if she is trying to protect him from everything in the world, trying to pull him into her body and use her own mortal flesh and bone as a shield so that he will be safe. He is not a boy any longer, not young or defenseless, but he welcomes this feeling. He *needs* this feeling. (He needs to feel like *someone* will hold on to him and not let go.)

"Oh, honey," she breathes into his ear.

"I know," Clark says before she can. "I know Superman is vulnerable in some ways and Clark Kent is strong in some ways, too. I know—"

"Don't," she cuts him off, her arms tightening impossibly farther around him. He bends so that she does not have to strain herself (feels once again how incredibly fragile the strong, indomitable people in his life really are). "Don't explain or apologize, Clark. You don't have to make sense all the time—*life* doesn't make sense. If you feel like Superman is safer, then it's okay to say so. We've always just wanted the best for you."

Clark lets himself rest his head on her shoulder, lets himself give some of his burden over to someone else. Her scent (metal and sparks and bread and sunshine) infuses him and bears him up until he wonders if he is floating. "I don't know what's best," he admits.

He'd thought he did. He'd thought Clark Kent and Superman could be two different people, encapsulating the best of both worlds.

He'd thought he could live his life without Lois, without a voice, without a home.

He'd thought he could make Lois a part of his home, could forget the past and just find something new.

But he's been wrong every time, and he just doesn't *know* anymore.

"I just want someone to tell me what to do," he says.

She stiffens in his arms, pulls away, her face downcast so that he cannot see what has her so upset.

"Mom?" he asks, and hates the helpless note in his voice.

She gives him a fake, strained smile that lasts no more than a beat of her rapid heart before she sags and half-falls into the chair at the table behind her. Clark reaches out and takes her hand in his. She needs him, and it doesn't matter that he doesn't understand why, only that he is there for her as she always has been for him.

"I'm sorry," she finally says. "I can't tell you what to do. I don't know either. I thought I did before, but that was a mistake, and all of this is partly my fault."

Clark frowns. "I don't understand."

She sighs. "In Smallville, after Trask was gone...I saw Lois looking at you. She looked...angry and confused and...and like she was trying to figure something out. I guessed that she knew, but I didn't want to say anything in case I was wrong. I didn't know her well, and you liked her so much, I just...well, I just assumed that things would work themselves out. But maybe if I'd said something—if I'd at least warned you of my suspicions—then maybe we wouldn't be here right now worrying about all this."

"Mom," he says, his voice full of gentle chastisement, and incredibly, he feels almost light-hearted. He is not the only one who carries burdens and second-guesses himself (not the only one who carries secrets inside even when the whole world looks at him and *knows* him), and strangely, that makes him feel stronger and bolder. "It's not your fault. Lois has always gone her own way; she wouldn't have listened if you'd tried to talk to her. And if you'd warned me, I might have made things worse by trying to disprove her suspicions."

Martha rolls her eyes, squeezes his hand. "I know that. I just...well, I can't help but wonder, can I? Especially after how

things turned out.”

Clark averts his eyes. He has not brought up Lois since Trask, and no one has asked. Maybe they assume he sent her away. Maybe they think she left because of the kidnapping. Maybe they draw all the wrong conclusions (make all the right assumptions). Clark doesn't care, so long as they continue to keep their silence and do not make him try to explain what he does not quite understand himself.

Martha's hand under his chin brings his gaze up to her. “Oh, honey,” she says, so full of love and maternal affection that Clark can't help but take in a breath, trying to breathe her inside himself so that he will have her with him always. “You'll do the right thing. You always do.”

“What if I don't?” He tries to smile, but cannot. “What if I make the wrong choice?”

She gives him a real smile. “Clark, haven't you heard anything you've been saying? You've already made your choice—you just need to explain it to yourself now.”

He hangs in the sky, in that ephemeral boundary between the earth and space above, a symbol of in-betweens and not-quites and almoses. He used to come up here all the time, before, when he needed an escape from Clark Kent. Now that he is Superman, though, he does not have time to come up here anymore. He flew through the skies for weeks while trying to recover from the wounds inflicted by Nightfall (the hurts inflicted by betrayal and exposure and loss and grief and so many other things he hadn't admitted because they were too big and intimidating and *permanent*), but always in the daylight, always lower in the atmosphere so that he would not see stars and black space and be reminded of the immensity of that asteroid that had filled all his vision before he'd hurled himself at it.

Now, though, he is once more caught between two personas, two identities, two lives, and so he needs the familiar comfort of this old haven. He needs something to remind him of who he was (Clark Kent, a human but an outsider, separated by the secrets he kept inside and the desire to help he could not completely ignore) and who he is now (Superman, an alien but accepted, haunted by the life he once had and the life he wishes could still be his).

Who do you want to be? James had asked.

What do you want? his mom had asked.

Two questions that should be simple but are anything but. They are complicated and hard and rife with pitfalls and snares that Clark does not know how to avoid or escape.

Superman is safe and strong and secure, but Clark Kent... Clark Kent is wildness and the unknown, danger and hope, messy and uncontained but beautiful and full of possibilities just as much as humanity. And he is only a hope, only a miracle and a castle in the air, but he is human and normal and real and special in an ordinary way, and maybe the answer is simple after all.

He *wants* this, wants it so badly he can taste it in the thin air around him, can feel it surging through his bloodstream, pumping through his heart with a beat that spells out *hope, hope, hope, hope*.

He wants it, but he is so very, *very* afraid.

He has stopped Luthor and faced Trask and confronted Lois (had let her go when every molecule in his Kryptonian body, every cell in his human heart, was screaming at him to hold onto her, to not let her go, to clasp her close and *beg* her to stay with him and make his life that much brighter and bigger and better), but this...this is harder than all those things, with so much more potential to hurt him. If he lets himself hope, if he lets himself *try*—if it does not work, and he has to come back to this half-life—then he does not know that he will ever recover again.

He has learned how to be more than content now, is somewhere between contentment and actual happiness, and it is not the golden-touched, idealistic dreams of before, but it is better than anything since that hated story, and he does not want to ruin

what peace he has fought for and won.

But the thought that he *could* go back, that he *could* be just *Clark* again...he is breathless with wanting, paralyzed with the force of his sheer, wanton desire for it.

But if he is to do this, if he is to be brave and strong and desperate once more, then there is one thing he needs to do. For himself. For his happiness.

Closure, Lois had said she wanted, and he wants it too. She'd answered the question she thought he wanted to ask, but he'd already known that answer. There is another, though, that he does want to know, the question that had made him hold sharp, twisted, awful anger toward her for that first couple months, and the question that he eventually set aside and forgot because it was easier to forgive her if he did not think on it.

But if he is to start anew, then he wants to know. He wants an answer that he can use to give himself a reason for starting over again. (He wants to know the worst so that if Clark Kent is hurt again, he can already bear the scars and have the calluses to protect himself.)

So he goes to see Lois.

She is working late (just like old times, when he'd let himself believe this city and these people could be his future), and there is no one around, and he has not seen her in so long (four weeks and three days), so he almost comes to a halt when he catches sight of her. She looks good, not so thin, not so tired, not so brittle. She looks almost like she did before, and Clark does not know whether he is happy about that or bitter (and he *is* happy; he just wishes he could have had something to do with her recovery, like she did his). But he is on a mission, so he lets the world pause around him, and he moves through the newsroom in a blur (outrunning memories, evading pain, ignoring the parallels he could draw). When he finally lets the world come back to motion, he and Lois are standing on the roof of the Daily Planet building.

She is shocked and off balance. It takes her a second (an eternity) to focus on him. He is dressed in the Superman suit (because he has not quite made his decision, not yet, not until he can find a reason not to be afraid; not until he can find something to trust and believe in again); he stays still and motionless, a few paces back from her (because carrying her up here was a bad move and he does not need any more physical contact to distract him from what he needs to say).

“Wh-what?” she stammers.

He does not wait for her to catch up, nor does he explain himself (she hadn't given him those luxuries, after all, and he does not like to think of himself as vindictive, but maybe he is, a little bit). “You said that you knew the question I wanted to ask was *why* you wrote the article, but you were wrong. That's not the question I've wanted to ask all this time.”

“Clark!” she snaps, and despite himself, Clark feels like smiling. She almost sounds like she did before his secret ruined everything between them. “You can't—you can't just grab me like that! You're not supposed to connect yourself to me anymore, that's why I left. Didn't I do enough damage last time?”

The question twists a cold, sharp blade through his gut, but Clark ignores it. If he does not have this conversation now (if he does not make himself actually voice the words that have been festering inside him), then he never will. And then, no matter what decision he makes, no matter whether this last, desperate chance works or not, he will still only be living a half-life, trapped and haunted by might-have-beens and could-bes.

“What?” he says, matter-of-factly because that is always the best defense against an irritated Lois Lane. “You're allowed to upset my life for months at a time, but I can't upset yours long enough to have a conversation with you? A conversation, I might add, that you yourself said I needed to have.”

She blinks, shakes her head to clear it. “All...all right.

Then...what's the question you wanted to ask?"

And finally, even though he is hurt and desperate and unsure, he finds the courage he needs to ask her what he's wanted to ask since that long ago morning walking into the bullpen and finding reporters instead of friends.

"Why?" he asks, almost frantically, urgently, his calmness (his patience and understanding and avoidance) shattering like ice against concrete. "Why didn't you tell me you knew? Why didn't you *warn* me you were writing the article?"

There is pressure building up inside of him, an ocean, a storm, a tsunami, building and rising and crushing everything in its path until he thinks he will explode. He is trying so hard to remain still, but energy crackles along his veins, sweeping through the marrow-tracks in his bones, and he has to move, except that if he does, he thinks he will never come back to earth again but will remain forever wandering and homeless and adrift.

Her cheeks are gilded with tears, her eyes painted with guilt, and she stands as motionless as a condemned prisoner on the firing line. "Because," she says, "I knew you would talk me out of it."

Now he can move. He steps back (a retreat; a surrender; an acquisition of a new battleground), silent, absorbing that. He thinks he's known it, all along, but he needed to hear her say it. He needed to hear it said aloud so that he could face it.

"I'm sorry," Clark," she says (pleads with him, except that he does not know what she could possibly be pleading for when she is the one who first drove him away and then walked away). "I'm sorry I *didn't* talk to you. I'm sorry I told the world your secret. I'm sorry I never gave you a chance. I'm sorry I ruined your life. I didn't say it before because I didn't think it would matter—I didn't think you would believe me—and I...I had hoped that I could *show* you how sorry I was. How much I wish I could undo those days. But I guess...I guess telling you is as close as I'm ever going to get."

He's known for a while that she's sorry. He suspected it when James told him that she was searching for him. He knew it when he saw her and she could not find words (because a speechless Lois is a new thing, as new and different and unique as an apologetic Lois). He's known that she wants to make up for what she did, and she has said she is sorry in various, small moments. But it is nice to hear it, he realizes, nice to have it all spelled out and laid in the open so that there can be no doubts or second-guessing during the dark, exhausting, lonely nights.

That growing, surging pressure inside him is eased somewhat. Tamed and calmed so that it lies more restfully within him.

"I know you're sorry," he finally says. It has been a long time since he has let himself think of those few days in Smallville, but Trask is gone now and so he has been able to remember it recently, has thought back on it, and now that she has said she is sorry, he finds that he can actually bring it up between them. "You said that you didn't have a good reason for that article, but I remember...Trask said that he would make sure the whole world knew who I really was. When he was fighting me, with the Kryptonite, before you got there, he told me he'd make sure, one way or another, that my story would come out. And I think...I think that he must have told you the same thing. And when he got away, you knew that he would expose me." He takes a deep breath before finishing (because this is one of his last most deeply held hopes and if she denies it, if she has no idea what he's talking about, then he does not know that he will be able to find it in himself to hope again). "I think that even though you wrote that article the way you did because you were mad at me...I think part of the reason was also so that you could tell the world before Trask could."

Her breath is staggered, shaky, so uneven that it almost covers the rapid tempo of her heart. She takes a short, telling step

backward, avoiding his gaze. "So what?" she asks, bitterly. "Yes, Trask said that he'd tell the world about you, and maybe I justified writing that article by telling myself it was better if I did it instead of him. But it doesn't matter. It was only a very small part of the reason, and I can't pretend otherwise. I can't just lie and say that my motives were purely altruistic."

The pressure disappears entirely, so suddenly, so wholly that Clark feels as if the breath he takes in is the first whole breath he has pulled in for months. His hope has not been dashed, and he feels as if his faith in the universe has been restored. (He feels as if maybe he can risk his life and his heart again.)

"You can't say that your reasons were entirely wrong either," he points out. "I do know you, Lois. I knew why you wrote the article, I even knew why you didn't talk to me about it—and I know that you always see what you're lacking, not what you have."

"What do I have?" Her voice is hollow, fraught with tears she will not acknowledge. "I'm selfish, and I get angry too easily, and I never think about the consequences, and I'm only sorry when it's too late."

Clark lets out his breath in a heavy sigh. "Do you have any idea how many conversations I overhear in a day? Hundreds. Thousands. All the bad and all the good, ugliness and kindness in balanced measures. But through it all, in so many whispered confidences and private confessions and public arguments, you want to know what they all have in common? Everyone, every person in the entire world, looks into the mirror and sees their tiny pieces of imperfection rather than the beauty of the whole." He can't help himself; he steps closer, looks down at her. He feels... calm. Relaxed. *Sure* in a way he hasn't been his entire life, and he wishes that he could take a piece of that confidence and instill it in her so that she does not have to look so lost. "Sometimes," he breathes, "I think that *that* is the greatest tragedy of all in this world."

And then, because she is staring at him with such wide eyes (because she is too close and too warm and too beautiful; because she walked away from him for a reason he wishes he didn't understand), he freezes the world. She is caught between heartbeats, between one teary breath and another, but somehow, impossibly, even though she is lost a moment behind him, she seems to cling to him.

Or maybe it is only his imagination.

He places her back where he found her (because he has a meeting he needs to attend and he has made his decision; because stoicism is a necessary façade), and then he leaves her behind. He does not look back. Instead, he looks forward.

To a new life. A new beginning.

An old name.

He has faced the world a thousand times as Superman (his pieces of imperfection). It is time he faces it, for the first time, openly and unabashedly as Clark Kent (the whole that will make all the fractured pieces of himself beautiful and worthwhile).

23

"My name is not Clark Kent."

The first words Superman has spoken to the press in months, and they are a lie. It isn't even an equivocation, or an evasion, or a half-truth. It is a flat-out, no-holds-barred lie.

Once, that would have enflamed Lois. Once, it would have made her narrow her eyes and feel her heart beat faster and busy her mind with questions and follow-up investigations and an endless desire to know the *truth*.

Now, it makes her weak and boneless with relief. It makes her jaw drop and her heart stop and her mind think of nothing but overpowering, overwhelming *relief*. Because maybe she has not ruined everything, and maybe there is a way to come back from this, and maybe Clark Kent can still live. Maybe he will not be a

ghost forever, but a real live man, with beating heart and growing dreams and living reality.

Maybe she is not a murderer, after all.

It's a simple story that Superman tells the world, standing on that podium with the hundreds of reporters and the dozens of microphones and the sea of lights in his face (a face that looks, somehow, *off*, different lines and shadows and angles to make it not *quite* familiar). He tells them that he knew Jason Trask and Bureau 39 would come after him, would stop at nothing to tear him down and destroy him, would keep coming until he was dead. He tells them that since they had Kryptonite (and this is where she feels a surge of anger, of irritation, that he reveals his weakness to all, as if it doesn't matter or as if he is still invulnerable), he could not face them alone without risking being turned against humanity, without risking turning against the very people he has sworn himself to protect.

And then he spins a tale that paints Clark Kent as the hero (and in this ocean of lies, she is so glad there is a tiny island of truth amidst it). The brave friend who came to Superman and volunteered his life, his safety, his future on the gamble that he could draw out Bureau 39. A living, breathing Trojan horse, a target for the Kryptonite, because after all, Clark Kent is only human and what would it matter if he were to be hit with a radioactive rock from an alien world? So Clark Kent volunteered to pretend to be Superman, and Superman protested, and Clark insisted, and finally they hammered out a plan to make sure that Clark and his family would be protected, guarded at all times by Superman, who would remain silent so that, if Clark were to be forced to speak, no one would notice the differences in their voices.

It's a fairy tale. A nice, warm little story of heroism and friendship and loyalty and a battle waged against all the odds, and a happy ending where the hero can go back to his safe little life and the god can return to his home in the skies and all the loose ends are tied up, all the villains dead or locked away, and the book can finally be closed with a satisfied thump.

When Superman finishes telling the story (in a voice that does sound deeper, slower, with inflections just ever so slightly off), he steps aside and lets Clark move forward. Clark doesn't look at the cameras like Superman. He doesn't stand there as if he owns the stage. He fidgets, and he looks down at notes in his hands, and he leans against the podium as if it is all that holds him up (a man who didn't fully understand what he was getting into when he volunteered himself for such a dangerous mission but is now relieved down to the very depths of his being that he has come out of it safe and alive; a man who hates lying and is now having to tell a lie bigger than any he has before voiced, and all for what he would have once seen as selfish reasons, and Lois cannot figure out what magic James worked to convince him to take this wonderful, dangerous step).

"I'm just...so glad that Superman is safe and that I can finally go back to my life," Clark Kent (who is not different in any way, but just as she remembers him in every line and angle of his face, every nuance of his voice) concludes.

It's interesting, Lois thinks, standing alone amidst the mob of reporters glued to the television while this press conference (this storytelling session) unfolds. It's interesting that Superman lies, and Clark Kent stands there and tells the truth (the equivocations, the evasions, the half-lies, in a voice that is infinitely familiar). He does not lie, and Superman does not sound like Clark, and maybe Clark (Clark Kent, Superman, the strange hybrid of them both, the man she has come to know and love and leave behind because there was no other choice) does not lie at all in this day's proceedings. Maybe he is only an accomplice to the lie, standing there and letting his presence serve as proof for the lies this other...thing, this body double or hologram or robot or magical apparition...spills out all around him. He is keeping his hands

clean even while he swims in a river of deceit, and Lois wants to weep (again, always, she does not think there will ever come a day where she does *not* want to weep for what her actions have wrought) because this is her fault, and more than anything, she wishes that *she* could have been there for him, to tell the lies and shine the reflective mirrors and provide the distractions so that he did not have to get so deep into the lies himself. So that he could remain innocent and clean and honest and *good*. She would have taken that role on herself, would have gladly swam through sewers and swamps and Hell itself for him.

But it is too late for that.

"Can you believe it?" Perry asks her, when James steps forward and puts forward the paper proof (forged, she is sure, and wonders just how many people there are behind the scenes of this act) and reassures the people that the Superman Foundation will release a press statement with the full story and all the details (more lies Clark will not have to utter himself), and closes by saying he knows everyone will be glad to have their Superman back as he once was and how relieved Clark and his family will be that the terrible, worthwhile ordeal is over.

"Believe it?" Lois repeats numbly, because it is hard to shake herself free of a good story (because it is hard to come face to face, even so remotely, with Clark again, especially two of them, so very different and yet so much the same).

"Yeah," Perry says, and he is looking straight at her, intently, compassionately. His hand is on her elbow, holding her upright and steady, and somehow they're in his office where they are shielded from the rest of the bullpen (and she knows everyone will be thinking that she is being questioned about how much she knew of this affair). "Quite a story, isn't it?"

"Yes," she says, and finally she can think again. Can think and move and talk, and everything in her boils down to one conclusion: Clark Kent is back. He is back, and he wants his life back, and a part of that life is the Daily Planet. "I guess we didn't kill anyone after all, Perry."

Perry meets her gaze, and his is so sad, so resigned, that her heart turns to ash in her chest. "Didn't we?" he mutters, and he hugs her as if he knows what she has spent all morning writing. Hugs her as if he thinks he will never see her again. Hugs her as if he has finally realized that there is no more Lois Lane left.

She hands in her resignation the next morning (she didn't have the heart to do it to Perry the same day, not after that hug and the tears he hadn't been able to hide when he drew back). For a while, she doesn't know what to do with herself. She'll have to find something soon (her apartment will not pay for itself), but for now, she lets herself drift. She walks through the park and sits on benches and listens to people tell and retell the story of Superman and his mortal friend. It gets bigger and bigger, better, broader, until all the details have blurred and dulled, and that is when Lois knows that it has worked. They have accepted this story into their public consciousness, and maybe there will be people out there who know that Superman looks *too* similar to Clark, that their story doesn't *quite* make sense, that it is just a *bit* too coincidental, but the general public, the people on the streets, the people that will look Clark Kent in the eye and shake his hand and invite him out to a ballgame—they will believe it. Because it is a good story and because it captures their imagination and because they do not *want* to go back to the world they had before Superman was silenced and Clark Kent was forced to skulk away into the shadows.

Sometimes she goes to see Perry, but never in the newsroom (she does not dare risk seeing anyone familiar there). They talk about this and that, and look at each other sadly, and she is glad that she still has him in her life, but it is not the same for all that they pretend it is.

Her parents call, and Lucy, and Lois talks to them, sparingly with her mom, awkwardly with her dad, tentatively with Lucy

(because it would be nice to have someone she can talk to about *everything*, but she will not forget the sacred trust James extended to her and so there are secrets she will never tell even to her sister).

Eventually, three weeks after she left the Daily Planet for the last time (two weeks after Perry tells her, short and to the point before changing the subject entirely, that Clark Kent reapplied for a position in the Daily Planet newsroom), she gets a call from the Superman Foundation.

“We’ve been going over your work of the last few months, Ms. Lane,” the woman says, her voice polite and professional, “and you have quite a few pieces that interest us.”

“I do?” she asks, stupidly, because she does not remember writing anything outstanding for almost a year now.

“Yes. The pieces on the retirement home con and the adopted children being reunited with their birth parents are, specifically, the ones that caught our interest. We were wondering if you’d be interested in coming in for a job interview.”

Lois stares at the phone a moment before putting it back to her ear. This seems... surreal, even more so than Clark Kent and Superman standing right next to each other on a stage. “What?” she finally manages to say.

“The Superman Foundation is very much behind drawing attention to cases that need help. We like to raise public awareness of troubling situations and encourage ordinary people to help. But to do that, we need people—investigative writers—who can find those cases and bring them to light. Would you be interested in a position like that?”

“You do know who I am, right?” asks Lois (because this is the wrong number, or a prank, or a cruel joke; it cannot be real, cannot be for *her*). “I’m Lois Lane. I’m the woman who wrote the article that made Superman’s life more difficult than it had to be.”

The woman chuckles over the phone (as if she realizes how delicately Lois phrased that; as if she does not care what Clark and his family went through thanks to Lois Lane). “I assure you, Ms. Lane, we’ve done our research. We also know that you are no longer affiliated with the Daily Planet, and thought this might be the perfect time to extend an offer. Would you be interested in taking the interview?”

And she cannot, in that moment, think of a strong enough reason to make herself say no. So she says yes, and she writes down the date and time and floor number even though they are engraved into her skull with blazing hope and purpose and meaning. And as soon as she hangs the phone up, she wonders if she has made a mistake.

She wonders if she is being selfish again.

She wonders if Clark knows that his company is calling her and offering her a new life on a silver platter.

But more than that, she wonders how they knew she was about to go crazy sitting in her apartment, wandering aimlessly through city streets, doing nothing, having nowhere to go and no one to see and no reason to get up in the mornings. She wonders how they knew that she is down to her last dollars and her last thread of sanity and her last ounce of courage.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, just in case Clark ever listens for her voice. But she cannot be strong and noble and selfless anymore, not until she at least attends the interview. She cannot keep living a half-life forever in penance for a crime that has been mitigated.

So she will be brave and selfish and greedy, and she will go to this interview. Maybe she will be more selfless tomorrow. Maybe she will be able to say no. Maybe she will be able to see the dark catch to this bright opportunity to help people in a way that will not harm Clark.

Maybe. Or maybe she will finally be able to find a new place for herself.

Maybe she will be able to spin her own fairy tale story too.

The woman from the lobby of the Superman Foundation escorts her to the fifteenth floor, leads her down a maze of hallways, past closed doors and purposeful people striding along with files in their hands. She smiles when she stops before a door, pushes it open for her, and says, “Good luck.”

Lois smiles back stiffly (wonders why all these people working in a place emblazoned with *his* symbol are so nice and polite and *kind* to her), and enters the office. She has no time to notice more than the basic facts that it is small and cramped and doesn’t have much of a view, before the man behind the desk stands to greet her with a familiar (but oh so strange, so *incomprehensible*) smile.

“Hello, Lois,” James says.

She has been sleeping again, has finally managed to move past her nightmares, and it has been weeks since she has felt the blurring between reality and dream, but she finds herself wondering, once again, if she is asleep and dreaming this. Because he is well (he is *alive*) and he is *here* and she did not think she would ever see him again.

“James!” she exclaims (the name comes easily now, after cells and torture and Trask looming over them and James trying to help her). She has a dozen questions, but she has lost the knack of asking them, and so they spill out of her in a jumbled mess. “But... why are you—did I come to the right—what are you doing here?”

He grins his old Jimmy grin, the one she hasn’t seen in so long. The one she turned into an older, wiser, more cynical version. The one that shouldn’t be here, in this room, after how they parted and everything that has happened in the interim. “Yes, it’s me,” he says dryly, coming around the desk. His suit jacket is draped over the back of his chair, and his tie is nearly completely undone, but he still looks completely grown up. “This is my office, you did come to the right place, and I’m here to give you your interview. I think that’s all of them.”

“My interview?” She feels, suddenly, a hot rush of guilt flood her system, as if she’s done something wrong. And embarrassed, as if she was trying to pull something over on him, trying to sneak in and take something not for her before anyone could stop her. “I didn’t come here to try to get back into your lives, or to ruin anything,” she blurts out. “They... they called me about a job, and—”

“Yes, I know,” he interrupts, calm and collected and so *healthy* that she wants to hug him. “I told them to.”

She gapes at him. “*You*... told them to. But... *why*?”

“You left the Daily Planet.”

It is not an answer, merely an observation, but she is tired of making a fool of herself (tired of having it pounded in over and over again just how far behind she’s been left and how out of the loop she is), so she closes her mouth over all the anxious questions. James smiles, and offers her a seat—not at the desk, but at a tiny table squeezed into the corner beside a counter with a fridge and a coffee-maker and some basic cups and condiments.

“Tea?” he asks, and she nods dumbly. When he sets a glass of iced tea in front of her—when he sits down across from her with a steaming cup of coffee—she is hit with a burst of déjà vu so strong it feels like a literal attack.

He is doing this on purpose. Recreating their meeting at the diner all those months ago, before broken silence and gardens and earthquakes. Before board games and almost kisses and confusing rooftop conversations. He is letting her redo this meeting.

He is giving her another chance.

Lois is abruptly and completely petrified. The last time she did this, she was motivated by all the wrong reasons and sick with the strain and the tension of lying to herself, confused and lost and afraid to look in the mirror. She is better now (*content*,

she thinks with a bitter hint of irony), but she still sees a woman she doesn't know when she looks into her reflection and she is not lying to herself, but she still *wants* to. And she does not know, anymore, if her motives are the right ones.

But now, knowing how tenuous this opportunity is (knowing just how much James's respect matters), she *wants* this. Wants it so fiercely, so completely, that it burns inside her, a crackling, roaring fire filling her with lightning and lava, steel and titanium.

(But wanting something and getting it are two entirely different things.)

"I'm glad you're okay," she finally says, when he does not speak (waits for her, this time, to give the cues and choose the script). "I was worried about you. Both your arms are okay?"

He nods and stretches them out in front of him to demonstrate. "Still a few weeks of physical therapy left, but mostly good as new."

"Well," she says lamely when he adds nothing more, going back to his coffee as if that is all that needs to be said. "I'm glad."

The silence builds. Builds. *Builds*, until Lois feels thin streams of annoyance whisper through those flames inside her. She is trying, is doing everything she can, but James only sits there and sips his coffee and watches her. Waiting. Studying. Looking for something she cannot figure out (because surely there is nothing left in her worth seeing).

"You didn't tell Clark I was here, did you?" she asks, fear feathering the edges of her voice.

His expression is level over the rim of his plain coffee mug. "Do you not *want* him to know?"

Lois sighs. "You have the disturbing tendency of answering questions with a question."

He smirks at her, as if he can't quite help himself (as if the part is slipping to reveal a bit of the man beneath). "I'm a curious man."

"You're a secretive man," she corrects (almost sadly; very proudly).

"Comes with the territory."

Pain, needle thin and blade sharp, strikes through her, damping the urgency of those flames, turning them into a captured, steadily burning beacon, keeping her warm but tamped down to her own desires. Because he is still at Clark's side, still trusted, and she is still on the outside looking in—but it is for the best, she reminds herself. It is for the best, and this time, at least, it was partially her own decision (and this decision *was* made for the right reasons).

She has nothing to say in reply to that, but she cannot stand the silence, so she changes the subject (or maybe she doesn't; maybe she only dances around the subject, outlining it, profiling it so that she does not betray anything). "I saw the press conference," she says, cautiously. "I'm...I'm glad everything's been cleared up."

James nods. He is back to studying her closely. She does not understand the tiny smile playing along the edges of his mouth. "Why did you leave the Daily Planet?" he asks, taking her aback.

Right. The interview. The job. The real reason they are here. Apparently, he is done playing his game with her. (She wonders if that means she's already disappointed him.)

Struggling to claw her way back to the familiar territory of job interviews (except it is *not* familiar; she has never had to have one since college when she started interning at the Planet), she stammers, "It...it wasn't the right fit for me anymore."

He only stares at her, waiting (for a *more* she doesn't know she has in her to give).

"Because I'm not that person—that reporter—anymore. I can't—no, I *won't*—write exposés or big news stories anymore." She exhales, trying to put into words what she has not even allowed herself to face yet. "I want to help people, quietly but with long-lasting effects, and this position here seems like a good

way of doing that. The Daily Planet wasn't."

"Hm." James looks down at his coffee, flicks his gaze back up to her. She feels like a bug under a microscope (she feels like a game show contestant one question away from the jackpot that will change her life forever). "You know Clark is working there again?"

Her throat is clogged, her mouth dry, but she manages a jerky nod. (She will have to get used to having his name brought up unexpectedly, without any warning, without a chance to brace herself against the onslaught of regret and sorrow and loss.) "Yes. Perry told me."

Strangely, he smiles, as if pleased with her answer.

"So," he asks, as if he never changed the subject, "what can you offer the Superman Foundation that another candidate couldn't?"

"Passion," she says hoarsely, "and experience, and a willingness to make this work. I want to make a difference, but not like I have before. In a different way. A better way. Instead of destroying people, I want to build them up. Here, I can use what skills I do have to do that. To give people a voice instead of taking it away."

It's not a good answer. It's not a professional answer. It's the only answer she has.

James purses his lips a moment, for the first time seeming to be unsure of himself, choosing his words carefully. "The Superman Foundation has a lot of detractors. If asked about it, if confronted, what would you say to them?"

She can't help but frown, because this seems like an odd question. But she does not have to think to know what to say in answer.

"I would say that the Foundation is only here to help people. To protect ideals. To make a better world. I'd stand by it, until the very end."

It's strange, how James is waiting so silently for her answers. It's strange, how she knows, *knows*, that what she says now matters more than anything else she has ever said (matters even more than those thousand words of a Pulitzer Prize-winning article). And she cannot (does not dare) let herself think on *why* he is interviewing her like this, or why she picks her words so carefully (so honestly), but she trusts her instincts (and it is liberating, to realize that she *can*, again). So she keeps her eyes on James, and she tells the truth, and she doesn't think of anything but this moment. The iced tea she cannot sip. The small but uncracked table laying between them (like a bridge instead of a wall). The different script they are using. The chance he is giving her.

"So, Lois," James says, and she thinks he leans forward, almost imperceptibly, almost tensely. "Why do you want to be here?"

She's lost for a moment (because her answer is too simple) before she says, "There's nowhere else *for* me."

He gives the hint of a nod. "Here at the Foundation, we have a strict non-disclosure policy. Could you sign it, knowing you might never be able to talk about the details of your work with anyone?"

"I would sign it," she says evenly, more sure of this question and answer than any of the others, "but I don't need a piece of paper or a single signature to make me keep quiet. I know the value of secrets, and some things are worth lying about."

That earns her a slightly wider smile before he sobers and sets his coffee mug down. She can't help but tense at this change in his posture and approach. James meets her gaze, his expression almost...compassionate? No, it must be something else. A part of the script she didn't study. "You have a dubious track record, Lois," he says, quietly. "Why should we trust you?"

"Because," she says through burning eyes (as fire laces itself through her voice), "I admit that I made mistakes—colossal

mistakes—but I *learned* from them.”

Such a simple statement to encapsulate everything she’s discovered in the past months—in her search for James, and her invitation back into the Kents’ lives, and everything that happened afterward. So simple, but she knows it is true. She knows that now, if she were to be presented with a secret, a truth, worth protecting, she would do things differently.

She would not write an article.

She would give her life up in exchange for it. She would sacrifice her future for it. She would walk away from any chance of happiness for it.

She would make the right choice.

But James does not smile or give any other sign that he recognizes the immensity of her admission (her revelation). Just nods and stands up. “All right. I think we’re done.”

She’s choked by crushing, suffocating disappointment. By a loss so painful it rivals the one she felt walking out of a hospital behind Clark’s back. By the rising, growing sense of injustice at it all, that she could learn so much and come so far and still not be *enough* (and she is still getting 98 percent on her tests, still falling short of that vaunted 100 mark).

He liked her answers, she *knows* he did (can read James well enough now to know the differences between him and Jimmy), but it all comes down to the past and what she did. She’s known it would, *known* that there is no getting over some things, but... but she had dared to hope anyway.

To no avail.

She sets her iced tea down, unspilled, unbroken, no more maps of new truths and universal secrets. She stands. She tries to paste on a professional, or at least neutral, mask. “Of course,” she says. “Thank you for giving me a chance, anyway.”

Not much of one, but he’d tried. And she did too, and it still doesn’t matter.

“You’re welcome,” he says politely, going to the door and opening it for her. “And I’ll see you on Monday at 7:30 for your orientation and official paper-signing and whatnot. Or rather, I won’t see you since I don’t handle that stuff, but you know what I mean. Just ask the front desk when you get here, and they’ll direct you on where to go.”

Lois can’t believe it. It’s not dreamlike or surreal or hazy; it is just *unbelievable*.

She goes out the door he’s holding open on autopilot, but turns to look at him (to make sure he’s not playing some twisted practical joke). “I don’t understand.”

And it’s definitely compassion, this time, shining out from his face through the crack of his smile and the tiny wrinkles at the edges of his eyes and the light glowing in russet brown to match the embers within her own breast. “It’s yours, Lois.” He reaches out and hugs her, and for an instant, Lois lets herself lean into him. She feels the wiry strength beneath his dress shirt, senses the vast stores of loyalty and potential beating there in his heart beneath the armor of his breastbone and tie, and hopes (*lets* herself, finally, hope) that she can get to know him better. That she can be his friend again, and work to earn back everything she once took for granted.

“You mean...” Her voice is small and lost and uncertain (afire and blazing and hopeful). “I got the job?”

When he pulls away and looks down at her, he is smiling a smile she has never seen before, real but enigmatic and somehow wistful. “Truthfully, Lois,” he says, so quietly she almost cannot hear him, “I don’t think anyone but you *could* fill this position.”

She has the feeling he is not talking about staff writer for the Superman Foundation.

(She has the feeling he is talking about something so much more permanent and meaningful and wondrous.)

But he smiles again and closes the door between them, and Lois is left alone in the hallway to find her way out of this maze

and back out into the open sunlight.

He believes in her, he is giving her a second chance, and so she is not daunted. She is Lois Lane (again, always, her own true identity hidden behind the shroud of her alter ego, but now exposed once more, alive and unhidden and *real*), and so she can face this maze and this position...and whatever it was James was *really* interviewing her for.

24

Her office is small, barely enough room for a desk, a file cabinet full of papers jammed inside in no particular order, and two chairs, but Lois likes it. One of the walls is made up of a window, offering her a view of sky and rooftops and light. The glass is tinted almost amber, reminding her of the best parts of her time in that suite in California, bathing her in the color beneath which she first found forgiveness and redemption and hope. Occasionally, as she settles into her job, she thinks she sees a flash of red and blue out there, somewhere above the sky, among that sea of skyscrapers. Back in Metropolis (back where he belongs), reminder of all she once did and how far she has come and how much things have changed since that one fateful article.

Superman is careful to continue to appear around the world, but no one can deny that he is definitely calling Metropolis his home again. The press release said that Superman had made so many rescues during Clark’s ‘undercover’ month simply in a bid to draw Trask out quicker. It claimed that he is now somewhat depleted after so long a time without resting and recharging (more open vulnerability he has to risk to make his life work), and will no longer be able to appear as often. Lois has heard some of his detractors speculating about what that means exactly, but mostly, everyone seems to be taking it at face value.

Lois is glad. Relieved, even. She meant what she told James, and if she will stand by the Superman Foundation to the end, then she will stand by its inspiration and creator even longer. She is relieved, but worried, too. And curious. And afraid and hopeful and trying not to be any of it. It is a constant temptation not to ask Perry about Clark—if he is settling in, if he is the same or different, more skittish or wary (if he ever asks about her). So far, she has managed not to ask. If anyone deserves a new life (a new start, without old friends turned enemies turned allies turned something else turned *the past*), it is Clark.

Besides, she has her own new life (new start, without anything but *today* and stories about people in need) to consider. So she reads Clark’s stories (small, local stories, and she can tell Perry is trying to ease him back into swimming with the sharks so eager for the scent of blood), and then she goes into her new office and spends the next nine or ten (or twelve or fourteen) hours forcing herself to think about other people’s problems (anything but her own loneliness, and the dreams she cannot escape of a future with a man who wears colorful ties and smiles at her through thick glasses and *talks* to her).

It is a life, and one she can face with a certain amount of sanguinity (with more than *contentment*), and she is remembering more and more how to be herself, and she does not want to mess it up by once again chasing after more than Clark has to give her.

So she is completely astonished one morning, two weeks after she started at the Foundation, to walk into her office and find Clark Kent standing in front of the window, gazing out at the sky as if he has not heard her enter the building, come up on the elevator, walk to this office, and open the door to such an unexpected sight. As if he cannot hear her heart rattle in the cage of her ribs and her lungs implode and her world tilt and surge and explode.

As if it is not impossible, unbelievable, *unwise* (incredible) for him to be here.

But he turns, then (*Clark*, not a stranger or a hybrid or

whatever they are using to make him and Superman both seem to show up at events), and as he always does (so often she almost is not even surprised by it), he smiles at her. “Lois,” he says, a voice and tone and name instead of damaging, debilitating silence.

“Oh, no!” Lois blurts out, her satchel falling from nerveless fingers to hit the floor as the door swings shut behind her.

For just an instant, Clark’s smile vanishes, replaced by a tentativeness—almost fear. Almost disappointment. Almost crushing loss.

So Lois adds, hurriedly, “You’re not here to sweep me off to some rooftop for another confusing conversation I have to stay up late every night trying to decipher, are you?”

His smile returns (something inside of her eases). “No. At least, I don’t think so. What was so confusing about our last rooftop conversation?”

“Really?” Lois arches a brow at him, takes a careful step nearer (breathes out quietly when he does not tense or retreat or shut down). “To you, that conversation was straightforward?” She shakes her head. “No wonder you’re the quiet type, usually.”

She wonders if she has gone too far, is already regretting those careless words, when Clark laughs and turns away from the open vista the window offers him. “To me,” he says, leaning back against the windowsill, his hands in his pockets, “that conversation cleared up a few loose ends. It didn’t for you?”

“Unanswered questions, Trask’s insane ravings, tragedies of the world—those sound more like mysteries than loose ends.”

That smile again, but softer and smaller, his eyes intent on her. “I was trying to decide who I wanted to be. What I wanted. And those were just a few last things I needed to know—or to admit—to put everything into context.”

She swallows. Hard. But she has a new life and is (maybe, sometimes, on the good days when she gets some sleep and can almost believe in happy endings for fairy tales) Lois Lane again, so she takes hold of whatever bits of bravery she still has, and steps up next to him, leans back against the windowsill beside him, and makes herself meet his gaze.

Because she *has* been trying to puzzle out that conversation for over four weeks now, and she thinks she knows what he was trying to decide. Because he is here and she might never be this close to him again. Because he is here (he is *here*, with *her*, of his own free will; *he* is the one that came after her this time, and that has to mean something besides friendly compassion) and he is talking to her, and it does not sound like a goodbye or an end or a closing chapter.

(Because James was not interviewing her for a job at the Foundation.)

“And what are you here for today if not a ‘straightforward’ conversation?” she asks.

He tilts his head but does not break her gaze. He is so close her hands are trembling and she cannot breathe. He is too far away; she feels drawn to him as if they are magnetized, as if she has no choice but to sidle closer and reach up and pull him into one of those hugs he was so good at giving (she remains perfectly still, because if she takes a hug, she will be addicted forever, and all her efforts at weaning herself of them so far will be ruined; because she wants him to *give* her a hug rather than have one taken from him).

“I decided who I wanted to be,” he says, so softly she almost cannot hear him. “At first, I didn’t think I could trust the world enough to be Clark Kent again. But then I realized...I didn’t have to trust the world. It wasn’t the world who discovered me, or wrote up my first appearance, or unveiled me, or followed me into my life of hiding. It wasn’t the world who reminded me what it means to live instead of just be alive. It wasn’t the world who walked away to save me.”

“I’m confused again,” Lois whispers, nothing more than a confession, a quip, on an exhalation, but she is impressed she can

say anything at all.

His smile is nervous, but there. “I can never trust the whole world, Lois. That’s what hope is for. But I *can* trust a person. A single person who’s learned and moved on and proved what she will do for me if given another chance. And so I decided something else too—what I wanted. What I *want*.”

“What *do* you want?”

She cannot believe she asked it. Cannot believe that what little courage she has allowed the question to be voiced. But it is out there now, hanging in the air between them like a strip of water that could be either a puddle they can step across or through without drowning...or a river, a deep raging chasm of water with currents that will suck them down and under and away.

Her veins feel as if they are filled with electrical currents, tiny bolts of lightning surging up and down and through, bridging arteries, freezing muscles, encasing her heart in broiling energy that can either stop or strengthen its beat. She stares at Clark, and something is burning like hot liquid in her eyes, along the curve of her cheeks, but she notices it only vaguely. Notices *everything* only vaguely, except him. Except the yellow and brown of his tie and the fit of his suit and the way his glasses perch on the bridge of his nose and the amber tint the lenses give to his silvery-brown eyes and the feathering of his own stuttered breaths past the edge of her temple.

“What do you want?” she asked, as if the answer can’t destroy her. As if the answer can’t take her dreams and crush them into dust. As if she can survive hearing the future spelled out once and for all.

“What do you want?” she asked, as if she is still Lois Lane, after all, and would rather confront life than have it be a surprise that will trip her up later on.

Clark isn’t smiling anymore. But he hasn’t looked away either.

“Why did you leave?” he asks.

She feels as if he has slapped her. Despite herself, she recoils, her body tensing, her eyes leaving his to turn so that all she can see is the opposite wall of her office—and it is not nearly far enough away. She feels as if she cannot breathe, the walls closing in around her, shrinking to hold her in place while Clark toys with her in final, belated revenge.

“Leave where?” she asks, because as much as she has learned and changed and grown, she would still rather avoid emotional upheaval than face it.

“The hospital. California. The Daily Planet.” He lets out a breath and finally looks away from her. She watches, from the corner of her eye, as his head droops, sags, until he looks as weighted down as...well, as he really is. He just usually hides it so much better. (She wonders if he is really so tired he can’t fake it anymore, or if he has brought himself here, to her office, to her new life, with no secrets to stand between them or to reach between them.) “Me,” he adds, so quietly she can pretend she did not hear it.

If she wants to.

If she is too afraid. Too desperate. Too burned to try again, to hope again, to *live* again.

She must be honest. She must not lie.

She can’t let him leave. She can’t let this chance go.

The twin desires rage in her, fueled by confusion and longing and loneliness, and there is nothing left to do but forge ahead blindly (as she did before, with an article, but she has changed and learned as she told James, and she can only hope she makes better choices today).

“I left,” she answers, “because- I’m Kryptonite to you.”

“Are you?” There is no inflection to the question. No accusation. No mockery. Nothing but curiosity. Polite and aloof—and disbelieving because of that (because Clark, even in his

darkest moments, never sounds so *removed*).

She lets out a scoffing breath. “Clark, all I’ve done is hurt you. I ruined your life—almost permanently—and then came after you just to finish the job.”

“I think you’re only seeing the imperfect pieces,” he murmurs (and a shock of understanding jolts through her, recognition and hope, but it’s too brief, electrifying but temporary).

“Trask was going to kill you,” she reminds him, as if he could have possibly forgotten. As if he had not felt the pain diminish him as he carried her to safety. “*Through* me. He used me to get to you.”

“Trask was a madman,” he replies easily. He is watching her again, but his head is still lowered, like an animal sensing tentative safety but not sure it can trust it yet (or maybe that is only her own feelings she sees reflected back at her).

“I took your world away from you without even a warning,” (silence he only later reflected himself, she thinks), “and then I invaded your world again without asking—and then left you again. So tell me, Clark...when, *when*, have I ever done *anything* but hurt you?”

And she is looking straight at him, caught by his gaze, trapped and unable to look away (to free herself, to flee to her cold, lonely, almost-happy hiding place).

He does not flinch away from her or her question and open, burning reminders. He does not look away. (He does not flee to his own hiding place, the refuge he has surely fashioned himself to escape from the world, from the bad rescues, from everything...but not, seemingly, from her).

“When I first met you,” he says, “you made me *want* to try my best—as *Clark*, but also as something *more*. You made me fight to keep up, to try to prove to myself that I could do just as much, have just as much passion, as you. You showed me that I wasn’t the only one wearing a mask, but that I could try anyway, even if I was afraid.”

“And what did you get for that?” she interrupts, toneless and blank (so the pain of it won’t overwhelm her). She wants to weep, to scream, to break down in hysterical laughter, when she realizes she is arguing against herself, playing the prosecutor in her own trial.

(She is afraid. Afraid to hope. Afraid to try. Afraid she will make the wrong choice again.)

“Yes. There is that.” Clark looks away for only an instant, a flicker that ends with him looking right back at her again (as if the article, her crime, is only a flicker in *their* story). “But then you came back into my life. You showed me how to keep trying—keep getting up no matter how many times I’m beaten down. You reminded me how to live. You make me *want* to find more. You gave me something to believe in again. And when Trask kidnapped you, you...you saved James, Lois. You gave yourself in his place. And you walked away so you wouldn’t hurt me.” His lips quirk up in an expression that takes Lois’s breath away. “Didn’t work entirely, but the intention was good.”

She stares at him. She cannot look away, but this time it is because she does not *want* to. “That’s...that’s not the way it... It isn’t that clear-cut.”

“Isn’t it?” His smile becomes more defined before fading back into earnest sincerity. “You’re not Kryptonite, Lois. I know what that feels like, and...” He takes in a jagged breath, his own nightmares playing out in his eyes and the shadows under them. “It feels harsh and invasive, and it drains me of everything worthwhile, everything that makes me *me*. It makes me less, but you, Lois...you make me *more*.”

Her breath catches in her throat, an audible gasp filling up all the empty corners of her tiny office.

Clark, possessed by a sudden tangible intensity she can feel even inches away, angles toward her. He reaches out, forward.

Places his hand on hers. And it is all she can see, his hand reaching out to her, touching her, including her. A vision every bit as beautiful and improbable as her dreams.

“You’re the sunlight, Lois,” he whispers. “You give me something to rise toward. You make me stronger. You make me dare vulnerability because I know there’s something that can catch me and heal me. You fill me up with light and hope, and you make it okay to try again even though I’m still afraid—but you make being afraid seem okay too. You make me *better*, Lois, and I don’t want to lose that again. I don’t want to live a half life again when I—when *we*—could be whole. Let’s not be imperfect apart, Lois. Let’s be beautiful together.”

His eyes are sparkling, gleaming with light that’s always been there but now burns like a sun gone supernova. His hand is warm, heavy, inviting but not demanding, confident and tentative all at once (a duality, a hybrid, still, but different, alive and surging with *life*). He is here. He is looking at her. He is giving her another chance.

Giving her his heart.

Unmasking himself, this time of his own volition, secrets freely offered rather than unwillingly taken, spilling out truths like offerings, like a bouquet and an escorting arm.

He is more vulnerable than she’s ever seen him, nervous and breathless and reciting words she can tell he’s rehearsed. Hopeful and excited and anxious. And she has more power to hurt him now than she ever has before (with a word processor and a newspaper and a secret).

He is strong (so strong she stands in awe) and brave (so brave she cannot be anything but in reflection) and forgiving. So forgiving she cannot possibly keep her own masks and shields and secrets in the face of his open...love.

(She lets herself think it. Lets herself face it. Lets herself realize it.)

Love. It is love.

“I love you,” she says. Quickly. Easily. Without conscious thought. She simply needs to tell him the truth and this is the greatest, most imperative truth in all of existence, and so it is what comes out, the words slipping into her office as if they’ve always been there. As if they belong there. As if they have been layered over everything she has done and said and been.

She will never forget his expression. It is arrested, caught between a thousand emotions, a dozen reactions. Almost surprised. A little afraid. Completely happy.

Her bones are thin and frail and riddled with flaws and inconsistencies, helpless to keep her upright, but that expression ensures she does not fall. It bears her up, keeps her standing because she cannot take away that light in his eyes, cannot disappoint the sudden, overwhelming birth of hope wiping away every shadow, every *memory* of shadow.

“I love you,” he whispers. And still he does not move, just watches her, frozen on this precipice, waiting, perilously balanced, and Lois cannot even breathe lest she send him toppling (and if he falls, she will fall too, and shatter). “And I want you. And if you let me, I choose you. I choose *us*.”

He is spelling everything out, she realizes. There will be no more silence between them, no more unvoiced thoughts, no more concealed secrets. Only truth and openness. He is not leaving room for misunderstandings or confusion. He is giving her words and plans and the future. (He is erasing the silence she gave *him* and replacing it with something infinitely better.)

“If I let you,” she repeats, her voice high, the words tripping over you. “Right now, I couldn’t bring myself to stop you.”

A flutter of hesitance dilutes that happiness shining there in amber and brown. “Do you *want* to stop me?” he asks.

Her laugh is almost a sob, her muscles burning with the effort of restraining herself from leaping at him, into his arms (into his life). “No,” she says. But he is watching her, studying her,

patient, expectant, and she realizes he is asking her something important.

She has made mistakes. She has wronged him. She has committed crimes against him that should have ended their story long before, but he is moving past that. He is putting it in the past.

Will she?

Can she?

“I made mistakes,” she told James. “But I learned from them.”

And she wasn’t lying, she knows. She *has* learned—learned enough to know that some things are worth grabbing and holding onto and never letting go. Learned enough to know that life moves on and she has to move with it. Learned that when Clark Kent offers himself to her, she would be worse than a fool to turn him away.

So she takes a breath (the first full breath in weeks, in months, in a lifetime) and says, “No, Clark. I do want this. I want you. I choose *you*.”

His smile is an unfurling, delicate and slow so that she feels as if she is watching the blooming of a rare flower, a precious seed bringing life and beauty into the world. And then his hand isn’t on hers anymore; it is rising, gentle and slow against her chin, her cheekbone, her temple, a caress through her hair.

He leans forward, so slow, so intent. He is going to kiss her. Not her cheek or her forehead or her hair—he is going to kiss her on the mouth, a full kiss. A real kiss. Not for cover or distraction. Not to test himself or push their boundaries. Because he wants to. Because *she* wants him to.

A month ago, she would have wept. Two months ago, she would have pinched herself (or not, because she would not have wanted to end this kind of dream). Five months ago she would have hunched in on herself and hidden in the dark because this could never be for her after what she’d done. Ten months ago, she wouldn’t have even been able to fathom this. And a year ago, she wouldn’t have appreciated it.

But this is today. This is the present, touched by the past but not dictated by it. She is Lois Lane—not the Lois Lane who scorned a partner and idolized a hero and wrote an article. The Lois Lane who helped a garden thrive. Who reminded a boy grown into a man too fast that it is okay to be more than a sacrifice. Who learned from and listened to the married farmers who had sheltered an alien and helped nurture him into a savior.

She is the Lois Lane who loves a man with his own flaws and insecurities and terrors. A man who reaches past those things to be better than he is. A man who can forgive and forget because he has the greatest heart she has ever known.

She is the Lois Lane who recognizes a good thing when she sees it and is wise enough now to reach for it in turn. Because sometimes second chances are possible and crimes do not have to overshadow an entire life. Because love is worth a few mistakes and some trial and error. Because if Clark can forgive her, then she can surely come to forgive herself.

So she leans forward to meet Clark, her eyes fluttering shut, and he tilts her head so that when his mouth covers hers, she finds they are a perfect fit. He is warmth and compassion and empathy and desire all together, molding and forming against her, defining her even as he is defined by her own faults turned strengths in his presence. He is all around her, covering and enfolding until the entire world is comprised of only them and nothing else matters.

He reaches out and gives her the hug she’s been longing for (gives her the world), and she folds, falls, melts into him. He kisses her, and with his silence transformed into this eloquent, wordless language, Lois finds complete and total absolution.

25

Clark Kent walks down the street.

He walks down the street, and no one stops. No one stares. No one calls the media. One man does come over, but only to smile and shake his hand and thank him for what he did for Superman (a quiet, somber thanks next to the overwhelming gratitude often given Superman for his acts of heroism, but it means every bit as much to Clark Kent). When Clark replies, with a thanks and a shrug and a smile because it’s hard not to smile back when someone is offering him such acceptance, the man doesn’t do a double-take or gawk or stand in amazement to hear his voice.

Clark Kent speaks, and it is accepted as a perfectly normal thing to do.

He walks in public, in the open, with a suit on and glasses shielding the disbelief in his eyes, and it is not an occasion worth noting.

It has taken him this long (five weeks, three days, seven hours) to accept that he is *here* again. Alive and real and accepted and *dual*. He still goes out mainly at night, like now, when there are fewer people out (because he is afraid to tempt fate or mess with a good thing). He still stays quiet and fairly solitary in the newsroom (because he has forgotten the art of casual conversation, and has no impetuous, brave, foolhardy, compassionate woman to sweep him up in her wake). He still tenses up every time anyone looks at him (because he is used to eyes, thousands and thousands, millions through television screens, but one on one, they terrify him, so much more intimate and invasive). He still finds himself afraid he will face accusations or denunciations or disbelief (because this is a dream he has never allowed himself to fall into before for fear of how much it will hurt when he wakes up).

But despite all that, he *is* getting better. He does come out, as Clark, walking down a street instead of flying over it. He has begun, sparingly, tentatively, to talk to a few fellow reporters, those who weren’t there the last time he worked at the Daily Planet. He may tense up, but he relaxes almost immediately (reminds himself that *Clark* matters too, and maybe he is vulnerable again, but being Clark Kent is worth the danger).

He never thought he would have this (*be* this) again.

But here he is.

Clark Kent. Walking down the street. In the open. Smiling. Talking.

Heading to a date with Lois Lane.

That was something he’d never let himself consider (even before he was split into two and then ripped back into one and then merged back into two again), never really expect or fully envision. He’d hoped—oh, how he’d hoped—but lies and species and alter egos and ambition stood between them, a moat that could not be crossed, and even in his innocent naiveté, he’d known that the odds were so astronomical as to be nearly impossible.

But now...now here he is.

Centennial Park comes into view ahead of him, and Clark does an odd skip as he first speeds up and then slows down. Because he is Superman as well as Clark, even on this dark street, and he can see Lois already waiting, sitting on a bench and looking up to the sky where he has so often floated alone and looked down at the earth below. She is muttering something under her breath, as if rehearsing a speech. He could listen, but he doesn’t, choosing instead to focus on the sound of crickets and the hush of wind and the beat of a heart not as far away as he’d once thought. Choosing to approach this evening, this bench, this *woman*, as Clark primarily and Superman only incidentally.

It’s the little things that matter the most. Big things steal attention and draw eyes and command respect or fear, but the little things fill up the days and offer moments to remember and

stay with you long after the big things have faded away into history. The little things provide all the reasons he needs to keep doing the big things, give him the strength and the courage and the *hope* he needs to be more than a lonely hero wandering the skies and trying to hold the shattered pieces of his heart together long enough to find something worth being whole *for*.

He does not think he can really call Lois a ‘little thing’ (even in her darkest days, her personality still filled up that suite of rooms and made it impossible to think of other things), but she made it okay for him to start finding those small moments again. And he hopes (*hopes*, with as much joy and belief and innocence as he did once before, when they both worked in the Daily Planet newsroom) that she will share those small moments with him, give him things to remember, be there in the future opening up before him, sprawled out with all its promise and glory, stand at his side for the days when he can be *happy* (rather than just *content*) as she was in the days when even contentment was far outside his reach.

But first, he has to walk into that park. Sit next to her on that bench. Reach past rusty inexperience and find the words to give her.

It had taken him only a minute after she left him in that hospital (so obstinate and beautiful and frustrating) to realize that he just *couldn't* go back to a life without her. It had taken James and a team of scientists and his parents' encouragement for him to dare coming down into the world she inhabited again. It had taken him *weeks* to figure out how to approach her, to feel like he fit in enough to be able to offer her something, to practice his speech and imagine the different responses she might give him.

But in all that time, he hadn't ever thought about what he would do *after* that oh-so-important conversation. Now, he regrets that. Now he looks back on evenings spent furnishing his new apartment with James's teasing, laughing, *joyous* help and days flying from rescue to rescue, and wonders why he hadn't put more thought into what balance he should strike with Lois in a world where they don't work together and they have erred and forgiven and moved on. Now he scrabbles frantically for some idea of how to approach her.

In the end, he simply walks up to the bench and sits beside her. No ceremony. No pomp or circumstance or speech. Just a man walking up to a bench and sitting by his date. Simple. Ordinary. Absolutely *amazing*.

“Hey,” he says.

She smiles shyly, almost nervously tucking a strand of hair back behind her ear. “Hi,” she replies.

“Thanks for coming,” he offers after a moment. “I know it's late.”

“Not a problem.” She shrugs, then laughs. “You know I've never really kept normal hours.”

“Yeah,” he says, and he relaxes (because he does know, *remembers* it from those dreamlike days of a lifetime he's only just beginning to reclaim, and because she is acknowledging that shared history). “So...should we walk?”

“That sounds nice.”

There's even fewer people around now, strolling along the park's pathways under the light of a crescent moon, but Clark doesn't mind. He likes his relative anonymity, but he also likes solitude...in the right moments, with the right company. His life has made him used to solitude, even as it has offered him a few true friends. And now, maybe more.

“I love this,” he observes, letting his hearing drift just a bit (just enough to hear their shared footsteps crunching over miniscule particles of dirt and leaves and grass, to hear their twinned heartbeats, to hear her steady breathing and her clothes rustling and her hand brushing ever so often against his; just enough to hear that no one is phoning in the newsworthy report that Superman has been seen walking on the ground like a normal

human being). “Being able to walk in the open. Being able to be...normal, I guess. Being with you, in public, not having to hide.”

The sounds of their companionable togetherness are too loud, growing in volume and harshness as Lois remains silent herself. Her mouth is closed, her eyes tight, and Clark feels the familiar tightness winding his muscles in on themselves. The old Clark might have teased her (would not have confronted it openly); Superman might have left (would not have pushed the boundaries he was already so bad at keeping); even his silent in-between self would not have done anything (would not have known *what* to do). But he is freed now, and braver now, and has both Clark and Superman within to give him boldness, so he stops walking and turns to face her.

“Lois?” he asks, and when she does not answer, he makes himself continue. “Are you all right? Is this...is this still something you want?”

It's not as clear a question as he might have made it, but boldness only goes so far. After all, *he* has been given a new lease on life, but Lois is faced with suspicion and accusations every time she turns on the news. Plenty of people are wondering where Lois got the information to print her exposé on Clark and Superman, and whether she was in on the cover-up or not, and if she truly deserves her Pulitzer if she was lying. Clark had James talk to her about announcing that Superman had asked her to write the article she did, to include her in their elaborate ruse, but James said she had refused. Now, Clark wonders if maybe he should try to talk her into it, try to lighten her own load—or if, maybe, there is nothing *he* can do for her. He has forgiven her, and perhaps that is all she really wanted.

Maybe she does not really love him. Maybe it is only relief and guilt that has made her come this far.

But she looks at him, her eyes reflecting back twin moons, and she smiles, her hands clasping his. “I do want this, Clark. I just...sometimes I have a hard time believing that *you* can, after everything I've cost you. Still,” she takes in a breath, straightens her shoulders (demonstrates a strength equal to Superman's), “I'm trying to remember that that's all in the past.”

Clark doesn't even try to hold back his own smile (it has been so long since smiles came so easily, so quickly). “Exactly. Lois, I'm sure there are going to be days the past will still hurt, but we have so many more future days to look forward to, and I think they will outweigh our yesterdays.”

Her hand leaves his, moves to caress the side of his face. He cannot quite decipher the expression on her face. It almost seems as if she is trying to decide if he is real or not (it almost looks like the expression he is sure *he* wears, sometimes, when he looks at her). “I'm beginning to actually believe that, Clark. And...I want you to know—I can't remember if I told you before—but...I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure that you can *always* walk down any street you want. I will protect you.”

Clark cocks his head. “Thank you,” he says, sincerely. “But I don't want just a protector.”

And when she smirks in response, he realizes there must be extra boldness still swirling through him, or else he is just seized with a sudden wildness, a mania conferred by the freedom and elation bubbling up inside him, because he leans into her touch, and leans farther, farther, down, down, falling until she catches him with silken lips and flavored gloss and jasmine scent. Until she fills him up with warmth turning into heat as her arms wind around him, with affection turning into love he cannot deny as her mouth parts beneath his and sends him tumbling into worlds and galaxies he has never before even dreamed existed.

Her mouth curves up, though, into a smile, a grin, so wide it breaks the kiss (and Clark is glad, because *this* is not for the open streets, even in his newfound freedom, even as he is disappointed because he does not want to leave that unexplored cosmos until

he can map its every hidden corner and uncover every sweet secret). She is breathless, her arms binding him to her, her smile enthralling him. “Well,” she says, the words tickling his upper lip. “Good thing I plan on doing a *lot* more than just protecting you.”

And she tilts her head up to his, and kisses him.

He hasn’t dated in a very long while, but as much as he has missed in the past year (in a lifetime of secrecy), he is pretty sure this date counts as a success.

The walk into her apartment building, up the stairs, and down the hallway to her door, is as familiar to him now as if he has walked it a thousand times rather than a mere dozen or so a year ago. He wonders, briefly, if it is ridiculous to be so excited about such simple things as retreading steps before he decides that he doesn’t care. It is excitement that has been bought by James and a team of scientists and loads of publicity stunts and a multi-million dollar robot, so he will savor it all he wants.

Lois opens the door almost before he can knock, her smile every bit as bright as it has been during each of their dates. This is their twelfth date, two weeks after he told her he loved her, but only the fifth time they have not met in the park. He still loves taking walks, especially with her at his side, but he also loves getting to come here, to her apartment, surrounded by her things, a world of intimacy enveloping them in cozy arms while they eat take-out and laugh over fortunes and watch movies. He loves getting to know her all over again, falling all over again, becoming *comfortable* with each other.

He loves letting *her* see the real *him*. He loves that she *wants* to know him. He loves that she smiles every time she sees him.

A flurry of anticipation has been whirling about through Clark’s bloodstream as he makes the walk to her front door, and now that she is standing in front of him, dressed in blue and silver, her hair curling atop her shoulders, he feels almost giddy. She opens her mouth, and he leans down and gives her a small kiss. A brush, a caress of lips, a tiny sip of that galaxy she possesses within her—a greeting unparalleled by any other.

She stares up at him. He grins down at her.

“Hello,” he says, and relishes the word. He is so used to saying goodbyes (or thinking them; so many times there was not even time to deliver them in person); hellos are new and intoxicating.

“Hello,” she says, and her smile comes back. “The best hello I’ve ever had.”

He can feel his grin turning a trifle satisfied, even smug, so he changes the subject before she can tease him over it (and she does tease him now, sarcasm and affectionate mocking that is almost as welcome as her kisses). “How’s work?”

“Good,” she says, but as she pulls him inside and closes the apartment door behind them, she seems almost distracted. He doesn’t have time to register curiosity before she turns and faces him. “So,” she says, “I can call for some take-out like we’ve been doing, but...I was thinking maybe we could go out somewhere for dinner.”

Abruptly, he is nervous. Unsettled. (Afraid.) He shoots a glance to the window, covered by sheer curtains, gilded with sunlight. “Out?” he asks, and hates the tremor that mars his voice.

Lois is suddenly earnest, tender, so careful not to crowd him as she comes just two steps nearer him. “I’ve noticed you only ever go out at night, to places that aren’t very busy. But, Clark, you have nothing to hide.”

“I don’t know about that,” he tries to joke. His smile fails before it can do more than twitch along his mouth.

Her hand reaches out, her fingers curl along his, and he is suddenly grounded, anchored. Supported. “You’re Clark Kent,” she says. “Ordinary guy, but no less a hero for all that. Don’t you think it’s time for you to get to *live* your ordinary life?”

This time, his smile does not fail. “I don’t think any life with

you in it could ever be anything less than extraordinary, Lois.” He hesitates (contemplates whether he can lose his new boldness for just a moment), then finally blurts out, “They’ll be able to see you with me.”

She winces (flinches), then firms (bearing up under her burdens, handling them rather than being crushed by them). Her eyes are alight as she unearths a smile to dazzle him with. “And Lois Lane would never date a guy who lied to her and pretended to be two people—unless, of course, she’d realized how wrong she’d been.”

That is not what he meant, and they both know it. But maybe it is what matters.

When she’d come to California in search of him, into the suite where he and his family had been trying to piece themselves back together, Clark had seen how fragile she looked, and he had been so afraid that she was broken beyond all mending. He’d been terrified that his secret had added yet another life to its collateral damage. But now, staring at her as she makes light of this past year, he thinks that he had misjudged her as badly as she misjudged herself.

She is brave, and strong, and above all, strikingly resilient. Life and her own mistakes have beaten her down (as surely as life and his own secrets have crushed *him*), yet she still brushes herself off and stands straight and tall and unflinching. She learns and grows and moves on, and if she can be that unwavering, then Clark has to try to match her. Has to try to live up to her.

So he swallows (cannot quite muster up a smile) and says, “All right. Dinner it is.”

Her spontaneous embrace is reward enough, and the kiss she lands on his cheek is an extra prize. He tries to make himself relax as she grabs her purse, tries to remind himself of his parents, loving him enough to risk going back to Smallville even after everything they’ve endured, and James, encouraging him to go out and about. They make him brave. They make him strong. They make him better than he is on his own.

When they turn to leave, Clark reaches out and grabs Lois’s hand. She looks back at him, her eyebrow arched questioningly. “Just in case,” he says. “If I do end up having to leave in a hurry again, I want to make sure this time I take *everything* I need.”

Her purse drops to the floor as she reaches up and tugs him down into a kiss, but her hand never lets go of his.

“Why don’t you come over to my place?” he asks, casually, not quite daring to look up at her from the water sparkling beneath them. They are leaning, side by side, against the railing on the dock along the oceanfront; from behind them, the sunset casts jeweled lights in reality and in reflection while the sea merges its scents with Metropolis’s. A perfect night, a perfect moment, but Clark wonders if he’s ruined it.

Lois stills. It’s something new about her, he’s realized. When he first met her, she’d pace and flail her arms and talk a mile a minute, but now, when she does not know what to think or how to react, she grows silent and still and composed, locking up immediate retorts and kneejerk reactions. He thinks that the change would have bothered him-as-he-used-to-be. Now, it only reminds him of how far they have come and how willing she now is to protect him. (Now, her new stillness matches his new boldness, counterparts even as they switch places.)

“It’s different than my old place,” he continues after a pause to let her adjust, “but I think James and I have got everything settled now. I’ll be there all day tomorrow if you’d like to drop by.”

Easy and casual and not at all pushy—or at least, he hopes so. It seems a small thing to ask, but it isn’t. They don’t usually see each other two weekdays in a row, and they usually meet up either at her place or in a neutral location. This relationship is new and fragile and budding. They are both careful in each gradual progression, each new stage a valuable lesson, each step

claiming more ground. And this, somehow (he is not quite sure why), is a very important step.

"All right," she finally says softly, her voice reverberating off the water, dipped in salt and breeze and fading sunlight. "If I don't work too late, I'll come over."

He is on pins and needles all the next day, but she arrives late in the afternoon, her satchel bulging with papers from work. He greets her easily, as if he is not surprised that she is there, and shows her around (there are less of his world-traveling souvenirs so as not to draw attention to the Superman parts of his past, but there are more trinkets from James and his parents, so it rounds out). She follows him from room to room, and listens to him, and when he finally asks, "Why did you not want to come?", she takes his hand and urges him to sit beside her on the couch.

"I wanted to come," she says evenly, "but I didn't want you to feel like I invaded absolutely *every* place you've lived."

He pulls her into him, tension draining away, leaving him loose and free and uncontained. "Not *invaded*, Lois. Never invaded. You are welcome anywhere I go—I always want you."

Her smile is hesitant. Beautiful. Shy and wondering and relieved all at once. "Really?" she asks, a teasing note touching her voice with every bit of affection and happiness he could ask for. "So if I want to see *every* place you've lived, in all the world...you'd let me?"

"Of course." His laugh slips out of him without his permission, dancing along his spine and leaping up his throat and spinning into open air with gleeful triumph. It's still strange, to hear his own laugh. Strange, to have things to laugh over. Strange to hear his laughter joined with Lois's. "I moved around a lot, you know. It might take us...well, *years*...to visit them all."

"Together?" she asks, but she does not wait for the answer, just slides closer and tugs his head down (his bones of steel turn soft and pliable at her merest touch) and covers his mouth with her own, hot and open and world-spanning.

"Together," he confirms when he can breathe again, and for his trouble is rewarded another laughing kiss. He is beginning to get used to them (well, at least he no longer seriously wonders if he is dreaming anymore) even as he begins to realize he can no longer live without them.

(Without her.)

He cannot help feeling a bit melancholy and wistful as the one year anniversary of Lois's world-changing story approaches. Sadness twines its subtle poison through his veins as he steps out of the elevator into the newsroom, alone, every day. Regret courses along the electrical current of his cells as he walks home alone, or tells Perry good night and receives only a careful, measured good night in return instead of an Elvis story. A bitter wish for *what-might-have-been* sometimes descends on him in a cloud as he calls his parents in Smallville and hears about their encounters with eager journalists still hoping for at least an interview.

He retaliates against this unwished-for nostalgia with meticulous planning. Lois is determinedly cheerful whenever he speaks to her, purposely forgetful of the date fast-approaching, but they cannot hide from it and Clark is tired of avoiding acknowledgement of the things in his life (even the painful things). They will not be able to forget or ignore the day, so he speaks with his parents and arranges James's scientists to have Superman make a public appearance on the anniversary day (somewhere far away from Smallville), and he asks Lois if she will go to dinner with him.

"Of course," she says, studying him a bit suspiciously.

He smiles at her, blandly, absurdly glad to see her investigative instinct turned his way once more. "You'll let me plan the whole evening?"

"If you want to." Her fingers thread through his, all her suspicion melting away (or rather, tucked away where he cannot

see it). "I trust you, Clark. I hope you know that."

It's become a habit of hers, recently, to reassure him that she will not betray him or leave him or report on him or do *anything* he would not approve of. To remind him, again and again, that she trusts him and wants to be with him. He wishes she did not feel so unsure, but it is a delicate, complex task, to build a strong and sturdy and lasting relationship out of debris and rubble, and some scars will take a very long time to fade, so he merely smiles and nods whenever she repeats her vows.

"I know," he says. "I just want to take you somewhere special."

She meets him at his apartment a few minutes early on the anniversary of her story. Clark is happy to see her—almost *too* happy. Everyone at the Daily Planet knows what day this is, and it has been a long day of everyone tiptoeing around him, afraid to bring it up, giving him sidelong glances when they think he is not looking. Perry is the only one who acknowledged the day, but since he did so by apologizing profusely despite Clark's reminders that he'd apologized already, Clark could have done without the experience.

"Lois," he says with a small sigh of relief, and she steps forward immediately into his arms. This physical easiness between them, developed only in the last few weeks, is still new and intoxicating enough that Clark is silent for a long moment, preoccupied with memorizing every sensation about this moment. Lois trembles slightly in his arms; he thinks her day probably has not been any better than his.

"So," she says when she finally pulls back. There is a tentative smile curving her lips, but her eyes are locked on him almost desperately. "Where are we going, Clark?"

"Well," he says, swallowing and then stepping to the window. He stops, turns back, and holds out a hand to her. "Do you want to fly?"

She studies him, her eyes alight, her smile turning into a mischievous grin. "I've been waiting for someone to ask me that my whole life," she says, and before he can blink (and he is Superman, after all; he can blink rather fast), she is kissing him, her hands in his hair, fire erupting along his nerves, a cosmos of desire kindling so that he feels as if he is witnessing the birth of the universe, feeling it in every cell.

He finally pulls back (and a good thing he *is* Superman, because it requires a bit of superhuman speed, strength, and self-control to do so), breathless and shaken. "That's...not exactly the kind of flying I meant."

"Oh." She gives him a deceptively shy smile (and he thinks he is probably the only one who can recognize the desperation at the edges of her mask; not because he is Superman, but because he knows her as well as if looking into a mirror). "Your kind of flying is good too, I guess."

"I hope so," he murmurs. "It's certainly a better kind of flying to do just before meeting my parents."

He lets her pause in place, just for a moment, just so that he can change into Superman and sweep her into his arms and into the sky without anyone seeing (without giving her the chance to kiss him again or make a movement that will make him decide to forget his plans for the evening and his long-held, long-cherished fantasies of a special wedding night). When he allows time to flow back into its normal current, she gasps and clings to him. She stares about her at the sky opening up all around her, her eyes wide and alight and so full of curiosity and wonder that he is reminded of why she captured his heart so quickly. As cynical and hurt and scarred as she is, she has always had a way of looking at the world and seeing all its mysteries and wonders.

He cannot help but wonder what she will think of the mystery he wants to show her tonight.

"Your parents," Lois says. Her voice is feathered with a fear she uselessly tries to hide. "That's where we're going?"

“Yes.” He smiles at her (and wonders, in a small part of his mind, how he is here: free of secrets, holding Lois in his arms, flying through an open sky, headed to family and home, his contentment completely given up in immolation to complete and utter happiness). “James will be there, too. They’ve...they’ve wanted to see you for a while now. I guess I just wanted to keep you to myself while...”

“While we figured out who we are together?” she finishes for him, arching a brow.

He chuckles. “Yes. Maybe it’s a little silly, but—”

“No.” She strokes her hand along the side of his face, and even though his eyes flutter shut at the tender contact, he can hear the gentle fondness in her voice. “It’s not silly. I like that we’ve had this time together.”

“Yes, well.” Clark clears his throat and opens his eyes again. “They’ve been getting a little impatient.”

Lois looks away, her eyes tight. “I’m surprised they want to see me at all.”

“Things are different now,” he reminds her quietly. “And besides, after you passed James’s interview with flying colors, there was no doubt that you were part of our family now.”

He hears the catch in her breathing, can smell the salt of approaching tears, can feel her body shudder with her reaction to his words. She stares at him. For a long moment, she is as still, as hushed, as present as the wind flaring his cape behind him. But all she eventually says is, “James’s interview? I *knew* he wasn’t there about the Foundation position.”

“No,” Clark admits. “He and my mom insisted on the interview. Dad said that we didn’t need it to know you were one of us, but Mom and James wanted everything to be spoken out loud. I hope you don’t mind,” he adds, hesitantly. “They were just worried.”

“I know,” Lois says calmly. “And actually, I’m glad they did it. It is better to have everything out in the open. Besides, like I said, I think I knew what he was doing. I just hope they’re okay with me coming into their home again.”

“They are,” he replies confidently. “You make me happy, Lois, and they’ve seen that.”

“Happy,” she whispers. “Not content? Not okay? *Happy?*”

“Happy.” He smiles at her, draws her closer so that his aura will combat the chill of the sky. “Happier than I’ve ever been. And you?”

“Happy doesn’t even come close,” she says, and she rests her head against his shoulder.

He planned to show her his place up here, the sliver of sky between earth and space, the prison that had become a sanctuary. He’d wanted her to see that he didn’t think of her presence as an invasion, but that he *wanted* her there so that it would no longer be so lonely.

But suddenly, he decides he doesn’t need to show her. Maybe one day, but not now. She is already here with him, already complacent and happy and trusting in his arms, and willing to *fly* with him. She is his, and he is hers, and they have a family and a home awaiting them below.

They’ve both been lonely. Isolated. Haunted by the past and cut off from any future they wanted.

But now here they are.

Together.

Scared, but still alive and whole and with a future sprawling out before them, filled with as much promise as the Earth hanging beneath them.

Wounded, but stronger for it, and that is a mystery bigger than any he had planned to show her.

And he isn’t afraid anymore. Whatever happens, whatever comes, they will be able to face it, and endure, and come through the other side better than they were before.

So, Clark wraps his cape around the mystery cradled against

his chest, and kisses her brow, her cheek, her lips, and she was right.

He is not happy.

He is *joyous*.

Epilogue

It’s late (it’s always late nowadays, far too late to change anything) and Perry is alone in the newsroom (and he’s always that, too, even when surrounded by the hustle and bustle that used to define him). He stares at the bottle in front of him, the amber liquid gleaming in the shadowed light.

Thirteen months to the day. Another anniversary, and Clark is back, and here Perry still sits, alone in his office as if he doesn’t have a wife waiting at home, contemplating drinking another toast. After all, he’s lost so much already, why should he lose this single surviving tradition, this one drink on this one infamous anniversary day? This right here, shining in a bottle, encased so that it cannot be spilt out into nothing, is something he can contain and keep and hold (and not lose, or throw away, or destroy).

It seems stupid, ungrateful even, to be unhappy after the way everything’s turned out. Clark Kent is back in the newsroom, Lois is gone but she has a job and seems happier lately during their weekly dinners, and the Daily Planet is still running, still the top newspaper in the world, despite the battering its reputation has taken over the Superman/Clark Kent debacle. Everything, it seems, is looking up.

But Perry looks up from the bottle sitting on his desk, and he studies the darkened office that encapsulates his life, the bullpen beyond, quiet and dead, and the elevator. Silent and empty. No one coming up to see him. No little happy family of workaholics staying late to tease him. No idealistic country boy following behind a fast-talking city reporter, both of them fighting smiles and trading banter. No young copyboy barging into Perry’s office every few minutes to call him ‘Chief’ and bring him cold coffee and stale donuts. Just an old man, alone with his regrets.

“Telling the news doesn’t make you any friends,” a fellow reporter had told Perry once, slouched against a dingy wall in Beirut. “But it has its own rewards.”

“Sure,” Perry snorts to himself, and wonders where that man is now. Maybe he’s alone too (maybe loneliness and guilt were the rewards he was talking about and Perry had just been too young and stupid to realize it).

He’s been staring at the half-empty bottle too long. With a shake of his head and a low grumble, Perry snatches it up and stuffs it into the drawer. Slams it shut with a thump he wishes sounded more satisfying.

A chuckle sounds from the doorway to his office, and Perry jerks up. At first, he is merely surprised (perhaps embarrassed, because maybe he is old and left behind, but that doesn’t mean he wants everyone to *know* it), then he is shocked (perhaps a bit betrayed, because maybe the door to the stairs is standing ajar, but he always expects the ding of the elevator to warn him), and then, finally, he is suddenly perilously, tremulously hopeful (and perhaps a lot afraid, because he did not expect this, or even dream of it, and he has learned to resent and fear the unexpected).

“Jimmy!” he blurts, hastily standing and taking a step away from the hidden bottle of Scotch. “I mean...*James*. I heard you’re going by James now.”

“Yeah.” James stands in the doorway, peering at Perry, and he sounds a bit hoarse. A bit uncomfortable. Too grown up and different, standing too self-contained and self-aware, for Perry to make the mistake of confusing this man in front of him with the young man who’d come in here so wide-eyed and brightened up the place through sheer force of innocence.

“I...I didn’t expect to see you here,” Perry says. *Ever*, he thinks. He blinks, hard, two, three, four times, but James does not

disappear in a wash of amber and drunkenness.

James gives a slight nod, as if collecting himself. He reaches up and loosens his tie; he's not wearing a suitcoat, but if he were, Perry thinks he would have shrugged it off. "Clark," he says, slowly, "told me that...well, that forgiveness doesn't just happen. He said it's a conscious choice—one you have to work at constantly."

Perry swallows. It's hard to talk, or respond, or even just stand there and look unaffected, when James talks so easily of things Clark has said. Clark Kent is back at the Daily Planet, but he is a polite, aloof, quiet man in Perry's presence, courteous but not friendly, present but not familiar—and it has been thirteen months to the day since Perry has actually really heard anything of real heart and substance from Clark Kent.

But he cannot stand here in James's presence and quibble over small things. So he tries on a smile. "That sounds like something Clark would say."

"And something he'd do," James says, his eyes meeting Perry's with a noticeable jolt. The lights all come from the bullpen, but they shaft through the window blinds to leave James in barred shadow—all save his face, which is lit with something Perry cannot quite define (and doesn't dare look at too closely in case it is not what he so desperately hopes it is).

"Yeah, well." Perry shifts uncomfortably. "There aren't too many people like Clark."

"But I wish there were," James says forcefully. He takes a clear step into the office, all boyish bravado and manly courage mixed together to make him at once familiar and alien. "Because I know, in my life, I'm going to make mistakes. Big ones. Bad ones. Mistakes I'm going to regret. And I know that most people will turn their backs on me, spend the rest of their lives bad-mouthing me, judging me, condemning me. Blaming me."

Perry looks away (his hope dies an ashen death and is buried in ancient guilt). He deserves to hear these things, he knows he does, and yet, he wishes that James had not felt the need to come here and spell it all out so clearly for him. Superman and his new policy of honesty, all spearheaded by James Olsen, paraded here for the Editor-in-Chief of the biggest metropolitan newspaper to see. It's a newsworthy moment. He should be paying attention (he couldn't *not* pay attention; every instant is seared onto his every cell, branding him with shame).

"But I don't want to be one of those people," James says, and he walks forward as Perry gapes, uncomprehending, and stands right in front of him. (He's tall, taller than Perry remembers, and he has to look up to meet the younger man's dark eyes.) "I want to be like Clark. I want to walk in *his* footsteps—I have a feeling they lead to something so much better than bitterness and old grudges and anger that never goes away. I want to be able to forgive, Perry."

Perry cannot speak. He is choking on his tears and his pride (in a boy become as much and more than Perry had ever known he could be). All he can manage, garbled and almost unclear, is one word: "Jimmy—"

The strong man's face crumples into a boy's. "I miss you," Jimmy admits.

And Perry takes that last step forward. Pulls him into the hug he's regretted not giving him for over a year. Crushes him to himself and marvels that this is actually happening.

They stand like that, knitting back together, until Jimmy lets out a watery laugh and loosens his grip (Perry has to do likewise, another regret to add to the pile). "Well, I guess this forgiveness thing isn't nearly as much work as I thought it would be. Come on, Chief, you don't want to spend all night in this musty old office, do you?"

"No," Perry says (and finally, he is allowed to speak the truth; another newsworthy moment). "No, I certainly don't."

"Well then, come with me. Lois and Clark are waiting

outside, arguing about some story Lois has been chasing down for the Foundation. If it's anything like their other investigations these past few weeks, they're going to need a late dinner to keep up their strength. You look like you could use one too."

Perry laughs (a strange, new, fragile kind of laugh). "Dinner sounds great. I'll pay."

James laughs and makes some comment about how he can buy as he's got a *well*-paying job now, but Perry lets the words swirl above him in the dreamlike shimmer. *I'll pay*, he said, and never had truer words been spoken. He has paid (in the transient death of Clark), and paid (in the loss of Jimmy), and paid again (in Lois's daily absence and his own continued isolation). But sometimes instead of being called due, debts are forgiven.

Sometimes, in a world where a man can fly, miracles can happen.

It's enough for Perry. If he were younger and more foolish, he might dig in his heels and hide his face and slink away in the shadows. But he is too old and too desperate for such foolish heroics; he is wise enough to take any second chance that's offered him.

So when James takes Perry's coat from the rack by the door, Perry takes it. When James puts his hand on Perry's shoulder, Perry lets the young man lead him out of the bullpen, down the elevator, out the lobby, and into the night air. When he sees Clark and Lois standing on the corner, turning to him (Lois with a happy, whole smile, and Clark with a softened gleam in his eye and a hand outstretched to shake), Perry smiles and laughs and cries and pulls them both into a hug (altogether foolish and undignified and mawkishly sentimental, and he doesn't care at all).

Turns out, he hasn't lost any of his reporters (any of his kids) after all.

It's a momentous realization, a tiny meeting no passerby would take a second look at, but so ground-breaking, so breath-taking, that Perry wonders why there are not reporters and photographers and news cameras there to record the moment for posterity. And then, of course, he knows the reason why.

Because this small moment, this one meeting between former (and future) friends, is the most newsworthy thing that has ever happened in Perry's entire life. And if there is one thing he has learned, it is how to treasure the truly newsworthy.

(In silence.)

THE END