

Proposed Ignorance

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Summary: When Lois decides that Clark is the one for her, she doesn't leave anything up to chance. But she may know less than she thinks she does.

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Special Thanks: Go to VirginiaR, for inspiring this idea with her challenge on the Lois and Clark Fanfic Message Boards. The challenge called for Lois to realize that Clark is the one for her, so she pops the question first, before Clark can get up the courage to ask her to marry him. The rules were that Lois must be serious, that Lois has no idea that Clark is Superman, and that the proposal comes as a surprise to Clark. My muse loved the idea, so this is what she whipped up.

Author's Note: I'm messing with everything, as usual.

Clark whistled as he adjusted his tie in the mirror. It felt strange, to be wearing a plain black tie, instead of one of his typically more colorful, interesting ones. But the place Lois had picked out for tonight's dinner was one of the most upscale restaurants in the entire state of New Troy, let alone in the city. For the life of him, Clark couldn't understand *why* Lois wanted to go there. Or why she was insisting that tonight's date was on her. Sure, it was their six month anniversary, but that didn't quite justify the extravagance of this date, in his mind.

Date.

A goofy, dreamy grin spread slowly over Clark's face at the idea. He was dating Lois Lane. The woman of his dreams. The woman he hoped to one day to give himself over to in marriage. The one person in the entire world he would one day tell his secret to.

There were times when he still couldn't believe it — that Lois had agreed to date him, and that things had been going so well for them. He just wished things were a little better. Too often, his responsibilities as Superman cut into his quality time with Lois. He never failed to answer the cries for help, but more and more often, he found that it was taking a greater effort to pry himself away from their dates or discussions or even the stories they were working on. Part of him wished he could just tell Lois the truth — that he was more than just Clark Kent, that Superman was a part of him too. The other part of him was terrified of the prospect and the unknown that would come as a result.

Would Lois leave him? He wouldn't be able to blame her if she did. After all, he'd been lying to her since almost the day he met her. He'd manipulated everything to keep her believing that Superman was a real person. He'd lied to the *entire world*, to "prove" that Clark and Superman were separate entities. Would Lois stay with him, only because of her once overwhelming crush on the Man of Steel? Ever since Superman's appearance, when he'd saved both the space shuttle and Lois in one fell swoop, she'd been head over heels for the man in blue, even if she was now less

obvious with her affections.

One thing was certain. Lois was bound to be mad at him, no matter when and how she would find out the truth.

At least Clark knew that she would never, ever betray his secret. It was the one bright spot to this entire mess, he mused to himself.

"I can't lose her," he told the empty air around him in his bathroom.

But here again he found himself caught between the proverbial rock and hard place. If he told Lois his secret, it stood to chance that he *would* lose her. She would be angry. She would be hurt. She might very well throw him out of her life and lock the door behind him. But if he didn't, he was liable to lose her anyway. His constant disappearances were taking their toll on his relationship with Lois. He knew she was losing her patience with him, and he couldn't fault her for it. After all, if it had been the other way around, he knew each disappearance would drive another knife of doubt into his heart.

"Maybe it's time," he mumbled to himself as he craned his neck first one way, then the other, searing the stubble from his chin with his heat vision.

He knew Lois loved him. She'd already chosen Clark over Superman, so it was safe to say that she would continue to love him for his heart and not for his powers, right? And he knew that Lois knew how much he loved her. He did his utmost to make sure of that, every single day, in all of his actions — bringing her hot coffee the way she liked it, letting her choose what movie to watch, bringing her flowers and chocolate when she least expected it.

He shook his head as he continued to contemplate his dilemma. No. Not tonight. For whatever reason, Lois was going out of her way to take him on an expensive date. He couldn't ruin the night for her by dropping a bombshell like the fact that he was Superman on her.

"Coward," he whispered as he checked his appearance once again in the mirror. He added a splash of aftershave to himself. "How much longer are you going to keep finding excuses?" he asked himself.

He sighed as he hung his head, letting his chin touch his chest. Soon. It would have to be soon. But not now.

"Okay," he said, picking up his head again. He brushed a piece of lint off his black suit jacket before checking his watch. "Plenty of time to stop by the florist."

He left the bathroom, grabbed his coat, and headed out of his apartment. He locked the door and shoved the keys into his pocket. Once outside, he decided to go to the florist closer to his place. Benny, the owner, had always been very good to him, whenever he stopped by to pick up flowers for Lois. Carlos, the florist near Lois, was a nice enough guy, but his arrangements tended to be way overpriced, not that Clark begrudged the extra money. Lois' smile was always worth every penny, but for what he was paying for, the arrangements weren't nearly as nice as Benny's.

"Hey, Clark," Benny said pleasantly as Clark entered the shop.

"Hey, Benny. How's it going?" he greeted the man.

"Can't complain. You?"

"Couldn't be better."

"Date with Lois tonight?" Benny asked knowingly, as he eyed Clark's suit, which showed beneath his open coat.

Clark nodded. "Our sixth month anniversary."

"Ah!" Benny said with a smile. "Congratulations, my friend! Something extra special is needed then. Let's see what I can whip up for you."

Clark smiled. "That'd be great. Thanks, Benny. I was thinking roses but... I don't know. Seems kind of cliché, no?"

"Well, roses *are* always a classic," Benny hedged. "But maybe we can fix up something with a little more personality."

“That’s why I came to you. You’re the best,” Clark told him, meaning every word.

“Well, I don’t know about that, but it’s kind of you to say.”

Benny came out from behind the counter and started to collect various loose flowers out of the tall refrigerators which stood around the cramped shop. Roses, lilies, carnations, tulips and a half a dozen other flowers Clark didn’t know the names of all were added to the bouquet Benny was designing as he went. Martha would have known what they all were, Clark knew in his heart. Maybe he would try to describe them to her next time he visited, and see if he could get the names of them. Leafy greens and delicate white baby’s breath were the last to be added.

“How’s Ray?” Clark asked as Benny arranged the flowers in a vase.

Benny shook his head. “Staying tough as always. The chemo’s been so hard on him. But that kid hasn’t complained once, if you can believe it. The doctors all seem to think he’s responding well, and that he’s got a good chance of beating this thing.”

“That’s great!” Clark said.

“I pray to God every day that they’re right,” Benny continued, swallowing hard and blinking back tears.

“How are you and Tess holding up with all of this?”

Benny nodded distractedly as he snipped a few stems. “Better now than we were a few months ago. Back then, we had no answers and no idea if this was going to kill him or not. Seeing him doing so well now... well, he inspires us every day. Oh, and by the way, thanks for talking to your friend, Superman, for us. He visited the hospital last Tuesday. I’ve never seen Ray so excited about anything in his whole life. It did him a world of good, seeing his hero like that.”

“I’m always happy to help, in any way that I can,” Clark said truthfully. “Superman mentioned the visit, the last time I saw him. He said he was impressed by Ray’s spirit and will to live.”

Benny smiled softly. “That’s my boy. You believe he’s going to be twelve next week?”

“Already? Time flies,” Clark said, nodding.

“Yeah. He wants a Superman themed birthday party and everything. You know, practically the whole hospital turned up to meet your friend? Everyone well enough to make it out of their room went to see him. Yeah, he spent hours shaking hands, taking pictures, signing autographs. Then he went around to see the kids too sick to get out of bed. Your friend there? I’m telling you, he’s got a heart of gold.” He spoke without pausing as he wrapped the bouquet in cellophane and secured it with a couple of rubber bands.

“He’s always happy to spread whatever happiness and hope he can,” Clark said in a quiet tone.

The visit to the hospital wasn’t one he would soon be forgetting. He’d gone to hospitals before, of course. Superman was forever being asked to visit sick fans. But that had been the first time he’d personally known one of the people he’d been asked to visit. It had been a depressing experience, seeing so many kids stricken with illnesses — many of them terminal — but it had been uplifting as well, to see so many kids smiling and laughing amid their hospital stays. In the end though, he’d had to visit Lois under the guise of bringing ice cream sundaes, just to chase away the lingering grief in his heart.

“Well, thank him again for me, if you see him,” Benny said.

“Will do.”

“Okay, looks like we’re all set here with the flowers.”

“It’s beautiful,” Clark said appreciatively. A thought occurred to him. “Let me get a box of the truffles too, please.”

Benny chuckled. “Fastest way to Lois Lane’s heart, huh?” he said as he reached for a box of the chocolate truffles, knowing exactly the box Clark had in mind.

Clark shrugged. “Anything she wants, she gets.”

Benny laughed harder. “Smart man. So, six months, you said,

huh?”

“I know. I can’t believe it either.” He shook his head.

“She’s a lucky woman to have you.”

“No, *I’m* lucky to have *her*.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Benny joked as he rang up Clark’s purchase. “You take care not to lose her, you hear me? Women like Lois Lane are rare.”

“Don’t I know it,” Clark replied as he handed the florist his credit card. “Thanks, Benny. The arrangement looks fantastic. Lois is going to love it.”

“You take care, Clark. I’ll see you around.”

“Night, Benny. Say hi to the family for me.”

With that, Clark left the humble little florist shop and hailed the first taxi he saw. He supposed he could have flown over to Lois’ apartment, but he wanted tonight to be as normal as possible. And that included getting to her place in as conventional a manner as he could. He had hoped to walk, but a quick glance at his watch had told him he wouldn’t make it to Lois without being late. There was no way he was going to be late to this date.

Six months.

He’d never made it so long in a relationship before. He’d come close with Lana, but that ship had sunk five months in, when he could no longer take her belittling and manipulations. It had been the longest five months of his life. But with Lois? Six months had passed in a heartbeat. He’d never had so much fun in all his life, nor had his heart ever been so happy.

He made it to her door with three minutes to spare, thanks to the skillful way the taxi driver navigated the city streets. He knocked on her door, holding the chocolates and flowers before him, so she would see them right away.

“Coming!” he heard from within the apartment. A moment later, the door opened to reveal Lois in a tasteful burgundy dress that Clark was sure he’d never seen before. “Right on time,” she said with a smile.

“Happy six months,” he replied. “These are for you.”

“Clark, thank you! The flowers are gorgeous! Tell Benny I love the arrangement next time you see him.” She gave him a quick peck on the lips.

Clark chuckled. “Am I really that predictable?” he wondered aloud.

“Only a lot,” she gently quipped. “I’m not complaining. He’s the only one who sells these particular chocolates.”

“I know how much you like them,” Clark admitted.

“I do. You’re the best, you know that, right?”

He grinned. “I try.”

Lois laughed. “Are you ready to go?”

He nodded. “If you are. Did you want me to drive?”

She shook her head. “No, tonight’s completely on me. Is that okay?”

He shrugged. “If that’s what makes you happy, then I’m okay with it. Just... don’t feel like you *have* to do anything.”

“Believe me, I’ve been thinking long and hard about tonight,” she said cryptically. “Now, let’s get going. J’Adore doesn’t hold reservations for more than ten minutes if people are late.”

“After you,” Clark said, holding the door open for her.

Lois stepped through the doorway and into the hall, with Clark trailing her. She took a moment to set the locks and then took his arm as they headed for the elevator that would take them down to the ground floor. Clark greeted the few neighbors they came across.

“The car’s down this way,” Lois said, pointing, as they reached the sidewalk. “I had a hard time getting a spot after work.”

“How’d things go?” Clark asked. It had been one of the rare days when one had worked while the other had the day off.

Lois shrugged. “Slow day, but it was almost kind of nice, after how crazy the last month has been. It’s like all the nutcases have

come out to play this November and December.”

“Speaking of December,” Clark said, “I was wondering if you’d like to come out to Smallville for Christmas. Or if you’d prefer, we can stay in Metropolis and my folks will fly in. They’re okay with either option. Or did you have plans with your family?”

Lois shook her head. “Mom’s taking a cruise and Dad usually works straight through any holiday, heedless of whether or not his family would like to spend time with him.”

“And Lucy?”

“Going skiing in Colorado with her new boyfriend... Steve or Dean or George or Stanley... I don’t know. Something. She’s only been with him for two weeks.”

“You don’t know his name?” Clark teased.

“Why would I? She never stays with them long enough for me to get to know them,” she said with a shrug as they finally reached the Jeep. “It’s sad, really. You know, just before you started at the Planet, she was living with me. She kept pushing me to date, telling me she wanted me to be able to find one great guy so I could be happy. Now, I finally have what she wanted for me, only to want the same thing for her.”

“Lois,” he said, gently taking her shoulders as she tried to unlock the Jeep. He turned her around to look her in the eyes. “I think it’s very sweet that you want her to be as happy as we are.”

“Really?”

“Really,” he assured her. Then, after a minute, “So, what’ll it be?”

“Smallville,” she answered without hesitation. “I don’t know how to say this but... I’ve forgotten what a *real* Christmas is. You know, the kind where Mom cooks some traditional Christmas morning breakfast before everyone dives into the gifts. The one with a lazy afternoon filled with music and games and good conversation. The kind with a real Christmas dinner and talking that lasts long after when everyone would normally be in bed. Since I was maybe eight, my Christmases have been like any other non-holiday day, with the only difference being that somewhere before Mom passed out drunk and Dad snuck off to wherever he snuck off to, someone would shove a gift card into my hands with a tepid ‘Merry Christmas.’”

“That’s awful!” Clark exclaimed, aghast, though he wasn’t completely shocked, given what he knew of Lois’ family. “I swear to you, this Christmas will be one you will never forget.”

Lois smiled. “For the first time in a long time, I’m looking forward to the holidays.”

“Me too,” Clark admitted. “I’ve never brought anyone home with me for Christmas. I’ve never dated anyone long enough. But now I have the most beautiful woman in the world to spend Christmas with.”

He kissed her then, just a short, sweet, innocent kiss on the lips. He gave her a smile when they parted, then opened the door for her. She smiled in return and slipped into the driver’s seat. He jogged around to the other side and got into the Jeep.

Lois started the car and turned up the heat. “You know, I’ve been looking forward to this dinner all week,” she said.

“I’ve heard nothing but great reviews,” Clark said, nodding once. “I have to admit, I’ve been anticipating trying it out. But... I just... I wish you’d let dinner be on me tonight.”

She shook her head. “We’ve been over this. I really do *want* to be the one to well... to pamper you, if you will.”

“You don’t have to...”

“I know.” She smirked. “Just sit back and enjoy the night, Clark.”

“Okay,” he agreed after a moment.

It was clear that Lois was adamant about being in charge of the evening. For whatever reason, it was important to her. Clark decided that her happiness was worth more than any antiquated notion of dating etiquette, where the man had to pay for everything. Besides, it wasn’t the first time Lois had demanded

that she be the one to buy their meal. It was just the most expensive one, that was all.

They arrived at J’Adore a mere twenty-five minutes later. Lois handed her keys over to the valet, and Clark took her arm to escort her into the restaurant. The maitre d’ sat them right away, at a cozy little table tucked away in a corner by the windows. Since it was located high above the city streets in a penthouse suite space, they had a gorgeous view of the city, with the lights and colors gleaming in the darkness.

“It’s blander than I would have imagined in here,” Lois said, looking around at the decor.

Clark glanced around as well. “Maybe, but I kind of like it. There’s really no distractions. Just you, me, and a spectacular view of Metropolis.”

“And good food,” Lois said with a smile. “At least, I hope.”

Clark nodded. “And good food,” he corrected himself.

“This is nice,” Lois said after a minute or two of silence. “I feel like this is the first time you and I have gotten to relax in like a month.”

“It *has* been pretty busy,” Clark admitted.

Busy was an understatement, Clark knew. Between their investigations for the Planet and Clark’s work as Superman, he felt like he was a man submerged for too long under water. This date felt like his first breath of air in a long time. With any luck, the lull in activity would last for a day or two, giving them both a chance to recharge and reconnect as a couple, not as a couple who happened to work together. It felt like all they did recently was talk about their stories.

“I know it sounds strange,” Clark continued, “but, with everything that’s been going on, I’ve missed you terribly. I know we see each other all day every day and all night as well, but...” he shrugged. “I feel like we haven’t had a chance to really... be together.”

Lois nodded. “I know what you mean. All we’ve talked about lately has basically been tied to our job. I miss just being *us*. That’s part of the reason why I picked this place. That and... can you believe we’ve been dating for six months already?”

Clark shook his head. “I’m still in disbelief that we’re dating at all. It’s a dream come true for me and sometimes... sometimes it feels like it’s too good to be real. If that makes any sense.”

“It does,” Lois said agreeably. “There have been times when I’ve felt the same way.”

The waiter returned with the champagne Lois had requested. They each lifted their glasses in a toast.

“To love,” Clark said, raising his glass just a tad higher. “And the most amazing woman in the world.”

“To love,” Lois concurred. “And the best relationship I’ve ever been in, with a pretty wonderful guy.”

They clinked their glasses together and drank. Clark was surprised as the bubbly drink hit his tongue. He’d been all over the world and had tasted many exotic and expensive wines, beers, and champagnes. But this one had to rank among the best he’d ever had.

“Wow,” he said approvingly, as he inspected the bubbles that were racing to the top of the glass.

Lois dabbed her mouth with her napkin. “Yeah. I wasn’t expecting it to be that good.” She laughed a little, almost nervously.

Clark took her hand across the table. “Thank you, Lois, for asking me out tonight. You don’t know how badly I’ve been needing some quiet time with you lately.”

“Me too.” She smiled shyly, then gestured to the menu. “Shall we?”

Clark nodded. “Absolutely.”

His mouth was watering. With his heightened olfactory sense, he could pick up all kinds of wonderful smells wafting through the air. Garlic. Aged cheeses. Hot bread, fresh from the oven. Dozens

of spices. Juicy, fresh cut fruits. Seared meats. Heady wines. He could scarcely wait to get a taste of the restaurant's famous cuisine.

They each wound up ordering a steak and lobster combination dinner with a broccoli, carrot, and green bean medley. It was a delicious meal, and Clark immediately understood why the place had the lofty reputation that it had. He cleaned his plate and noticed that Lois did the same. All the while, they enjoyed pleasant conversation that studiously avoided anything related to their job.

"Dessert?" Lois asked as they sat back in their chairs, content as they began to digest.

"I could go for dessert," Clark said with a nod. He might have declined, but he could see that Lois was hoping for him to say yes, to justify getting some dessert herself. He picked up the dessert menu that the waiter had dropped off at the table just a few minutes before. "The Crème Brule looks good."

"I'm eyeing the chocolate torte," Lois replied with a grin.

Clark chuckled. "Of course."

He hadn't expected any different. Lois Lane's greatest weakness was, after all, chocolate.

"Any dessert this evening?" their waiter asked when he returned.

"Yes," Clark said. "The chocolate torte for her and I'll have the Crème Brule."

"And coffee for both of us," Lois added.

"Excellent choices," the waiter smiled. "It'll just be a moment or two."

When the desserts arrived, they, like the rest of the meal, were incredibly delicious. Clark carefully spooned some of his Crème Brule into Lois' mouth, while she fed him dainty pieces of her torte. Clark enjoyed every moment of it. There was something incredibly sensual about feeding Lois some of his dessert, and being fed by her in return.

"That was a wonderful meal, Lois," Clark said when they'd finished their desserts and drained their coffee cups. "Thank you for this."

"You're welcome. I'm glad this place lived up to its reputation. I was worried it might have turned out to be one of those over-hyped places that food critics love to rave about but that normal people wouldn't go to twice."

Clark chuckled.

Lois took the check on the table, checked it, and slipped her credit card into the black guest check presenter. She moved the whole thing to the edge of the table. The waiter was over just a minute later, promising to be right back.

"Clark?"

"Yes?"

"I was wondering. Could we go somewhere? Maybe a walk in the park? It's such a nice night out, after all."

"Sure," he said with a smile and a nod. "I'd love to."

Lois looked slightly relieved, though Clark couldn't imagine why. He didn't have time to dwell on it. The waiter returned and his thoughts scattered. Lois signed the receipt and stood. "I'll meet you up front in a few minutes. I'd like to wash up before we leave."

"Me too."

She headed off in the direction of the ladies' room while Clark headed to the men's room. He quickly washed up, checked his appearance in the mirror, and used the facilities. Satisfied that he hadn't inadvertently spilled food or drink on his suit, he went to meet up with Lois. Less than a minute later, she joined him at the front of the restaurant.

They rode the elevator down to the ground floor in companionable silence, then Lois had the valet retrieve her car. Clark offered to drive to the park, and this time, she let him. He found a spot easily enough. He helped her out of the passenger

seat, then linked arms with her.

"This is nice," Lois remarked in a dreamy voice as they leisurely strolled through the park.

"Mmm-hmm," Clark hummed in agreement.

It was a brisk night, but well above the average early December temperature for Metropolis. Still, Clark was ever mindful of Lois. At the first sign that she was getting too cold, he would find a way to persuade her to leave the park for the comfort and warmth of her Jeep and/or one of their apartments.

"It doesn't even really feel like December yet," Lois remarked, as though she could read Clark's mind.

"I was just thinking the same thing," he confessed. "I'm glad. It's nice to be able to get out and enjoy the nice weather."

Lois gestured to the left, and they wandered down the path to where the fountain was. She indicated that she wanted to sit, so Clark led her over to the stone benches.

"Clark? Can we... can I talk to you for a bit?" She bit her lower lip in nervousness.

"Sure, Lois. You know you can tell me anything. Right?" he said, trying to put her at ease.

"It's just... I've been doing a lot of thinking lately. *A lot of thinking,*" she said as she sat.

Clark sat next to her, angling his body toward hers. "Hopefully good things?"

"I think so," she said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "We've been going out for half a year now."

Clark nodded.

"And when I think about it, it's really only a very short amount of time. But, at the same time, I feel like we've been dating for years. I guess that's because we came into this as such good friends." She looked down, blushing. "It's made me very aware of how much..." She paused a moment, appearing to search for words. "I've changed a lot in these last six months, Clark. My priorities have changed."

Clark's stomach clamped and churned in nervousness. Was Lois trying to call it quits on their relationship? Was that what she meant by saying that she'd changed? But that didn't make sense, paired with the lovely dinner they'd just had. Or was she just trying her hardest to let him down as gently as she could?

"I used to be just fine as a loner. I felt like I didn't need anyone in my life. Not a boyfriend, not even a friend. And then, one day, out of the blue, you showed up in Perry's office and smack-dab into my life. If only I'd known back then how great a guy you really are." She sighed, appearing to be lost in her memories for a moment. After a couple of seconds, she shook her head, as if shaking off such thoughts. "I didn't want a partner back then. I felt like I didn't need one, that one would just drag me down. But no matter what I did — and I did some regrettable things — you never gave up on me. Before I even knew what had happened, you'd become my best friend and the best part of my life. Dating you... it's been incredible."

"For me too, Lois. It's been my every dream come true."

"The other night, after you brought over that sushi and we watched *Lethal Weapon*... I got to thinking. About us. About... where we're headed with this relationship of ours. And I came to some conclusions. Basic truths about myself."

She took his hands in hers and Clark's nervousness grew, despite the fact that her touch always soothed him.

"I can't live without you in my life," she said, gazing into his eyes. "I need you, Clark. Today, tomorrow, always. I know this seems crazy and impulsive. But... I've been thinking long and hard about this, Clark. This is what I want. I'm not jumping into this head first without checking the water level first. Please, believe me, Clark."

"I do, Lois," he replied, though he was confused. Just what was Lois getting at? "But, uh..."

He didn't get the chance to ask his question.

“Clark Kent? Will you marry me?”

Thunderstruck.

That was the only way to describe how he felt. Thunderstruck. And even that seemed inadequate, somehow. Clark had been hit by lightning more times than he cared to remember, but the shock to his body had never felt even remotely like this. A part of him wondered if he'd heard right. Another part of him wondered if Lois was pulling his leg. The greater part of him felt humbled.

Yes.

He wanted to say yes.

But...

No.

He couldn't.

Not yet.

It wasn't fair to her. She didn't know what she was getting herself into. It was one thing to ask average Joe Clark Kent to marry her. It was another to ask Clark Kent, aka Superman, to marry her. She needed to know all the facts before she could really and truly decide if he was someone she wanted to spend the rest of her life with.

But that would mean finally gathering up the courage to let her into that secret part of himself, the part he never let anyone get anywhere close to. It meant no more hiding and no more secrets. It also, on the other hand, meant no more lying. No more inadvertently hurting Lois.

It's time, he told himself, painfully aware of the fact that Lois was waiting for an answer. *Time to finally be completely truthful. Time to let her know everything.*

“Lois...I...” he stuttered, trying to find the right words. “I'm flattered, but...”

He saw the instant her heart broke as she thought he was turning her down. Guilt flooded him.

“I...understand,” she started to say as a blush began to flood her face.

“No, Lois, that's not it. There are things...”

Breaking news! he heard a radio announcer say as a car drove down the street. He almost groaned at his super hearing. *A nuclear reactor in Japan is melting down. Workers are trapped inside. Local emergency services are doing all they can to reach the trapped workers, but the radiation levels are too high for them to safely...*

He swiftly severed the connection. He had no choice but to go and help. He just wished the timing would have been better.

“I...I...I have to go,” he stammered. “I promise, we'll talk more about this.”

“So...it's a 'no,' then,” Lois said flatly, the hurt lancing through her words.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “It's...it's just that we need to talk some more, before I can answer you. And we will. I promise. I just...I can't stay here, Lois. I have to go.”

He couldn't afford any more of a delay. He stood and backed away from the bench, turning and disappearing down the trail as soon as he dared. He found a secluded section of the park, and, after carefully ensuring that he was alone, changed into his Superman uniform. In seconds, he was en route to the disaster, all the while kicking himself that he hadn't found a better way to leave things with Lois.

“Idiot!” he heard Lois chastising herself as he tuned his hearing to her. “I *knew* it was a bad idea to ask him. It's still too early in our relationship. And now I've scared him off. Good going, moron.”

“I wanted to say yes,” he whispered to the stars as he flew. “But you deserve better. You deserve the truth. And, once I tell you everything, if you still want to be with me, I promise I will say yes.”

He had no more time to think back on the proposal. Japan

came into his line of sight, and he had to focus solely on his mission. If he didn't, innocent lives could be lost. As much as it pained him to put Lois out of his thoughts, for the good of the people in danger, he had to. As the nuclear facility came into his view, he adopted the neutral mask and personality of Superman, leaving Clark Kent somewhere behind as he raced to the rescue.

He landed amid the throng of emergency workers and spoke rapidly to them in Japanese. They all seemed relieved that he was there to help, and eagerly briefed him on the situation that was unfolding. In mere minutes, Clark felt ready to enter into the building and begin what was sure to be a long rescue operation.

He found the first group of workers easily enough. They had made it fairly close to the door before collapsing. He brought them outside and to the paramedics, then headed back in. For hours, he searched the facility, from top to bottom and in every obscure corner. As he got deeper inside, he began to find the bodies of those who'd already died, thanks to the high levels of radiation inside. And, he noticed, as he got deeper and deeper into the facility, he began to feel strangely. He almost felt...sick.

It made him pause, as the thought occurred to him. He knew it wasn't the same feeling of “being ill” that filled him from seeing the people he hadn't been able to save. It wasn't the heaviness in his heart that he always felt during such disasters. It wasn't the guilt he carried when leaving the dead behind as he looked for those he could still save. It was different, in a way he'd never before experienced. His head felt stuffer and stuffer as the hours crawled by. His nose all but clogged up. His eyes watered. His throat went dry and raspy, until it hurt to swallow, let alone to talk. His chest felt like the entire world was sitting on it, making his lungs burn with every breath. Each time he coughed, a bit of mucus came up, though it did nothing to relieve the congestion he felt.

At one point, he sneezed, blasting a hole through the wall before him and through to the room beyond.

Sick.

So this was what it felt like.

The question was — how? How had he suddenly become sick? And why? His body was incompatible with Earthly diseases, or so Dr. Klein had once put it. The common colds and flues of the world couldn't grab hold in his body. His immune system instantly overpowered whatever illness he came in contact with and destroyed it, practically before the germs or virus knew what had hit it. It was one of the reasons why he never had to fear contracting something like AIDS or Hepatitis when dealing with people who were bleeding. It was a very good thing, to be sure. More often than not, Clark found himself covered in blood or other bodily fluids from the people he was helping.

So how could he be sick now? Was it due to the radiation in the air? But he shook his head as soon as the thought entered it. He'd been in worse radiation before and it had never affected him. So what in the world was going on?

Eventually, Clark was satisfied that everyone still alive inside of the building had been rescued, so he set about to sealing the leaks that were left — the ones he hadn't had a chance to solder shut in his haste to save lives. Only once he was certain that the solder points would hold and that he'd gotten them all, did he turn his attention to the dead. It should have been the easiest part of the rescue, but with his worsening health, it was a task of Herculean proportions.

Finally, he emerged for the last time, this time empty-handed, after making absolutely certain that no one — alive or dead — remained within.

“Everyone is out,” he told those in charge. He coughed harshly as soon as the words came out and it nearly sent him to his knees.

“Thank you, Superman,” responded one man, the name K. Hamada on his badge.

Clark nodded. “I've sealed up the leaks as best I can. It should

hold,” he told them, “at least for a while. Still, I would suggest that someone more experienced look at it once the radiation levels go down, just to be on the safe side.”

“We will,” Mr. Hamada assured him. “We are indebted to you for your help. There’s no telling how much more tragic things would have been if you hadn’t been here.”

“I’m just glad I *could* help,” he told everyone with a weak smile. Again, he coughed.

“Superman? Are you all right?” someone else asked.

Clark managed a nod, knowing it was a lie. “I’ll be fine. Is there anything else I can do?” he asked, praying the answer was ‘no.’ He was feeling worse by the second, it seemed.

Mr. Hamada paused, thinking. “I think we’re all set. We’ll take it from here. Thank you again, Superman. We are truly indebted to you.”

Clark nodded once in acknowledgement. Mr. Hamada extended a hand, which Clark took and shook. Then he slowly rose into the sky and started for home. He pushed himself as fast as he could, wanting to get back as soon as possible. He felt completely drained and in danger of collapsing, to the point where flying over the open ocean was terrifying. He breathed a sigh of relief once he had land beneath him again. He thought briefly about heading to his parents’ farm in Kansas, but dismissed the notion almost as soon as the thought crossed his mind.

He was run down, he told himself. He’d been too long in too high of a level of radiation, without the benefit of sunlight in between his trips into and out of the building. He needed to rest up, get some sunlight in the morning, and he would feel better, his mind told him.

His heart knew better.

By the time he reached Metropolis, he could barely fly. Knowing he would be forced into a landing, he found himself still a ways from either his apartment or Lois’. But he *was* near one friend’s apartment. Someone he could trust to get him where he needed to be. He angled himself down to land before the building in question. But when he touched down, he collapsed on the steps leading up into the building.

He must have blacked out, at least for a couple of minutes. The next thing he knew, someone was shaking him.

“Superman?”

Clark’s eyes slowly creaked opened and adjusted to the suddenly harsh light from the streetlights.

“Help,” he pleaded, the word an effort.

“Good going, Lois,” Lois criticized herself as she paced her apartment, still seething and embarrassed from Clark’s rejection.

For hours, she’d been ranting to herself, in an effort to bleed her emotions dry enough to begin healing her broken heart. After Clark had run off — and wasn’t that just *so* typical of him, to run off during an important moment! — she’d held it together long enough to make it to her car. But once she was behind the wheel with the doors locked, engine idling and the heat beginning to seep out from the radiator vents, she’d cried. She’d cried harder than she’d ever cried in all her life.

When she’d finally composed herself well enough to drive home, she’d begun ranting out loud to herself. She’d ranted all the way home. She’d ranted as she’d unlocked her apartment door, walked inside, and set the locks again. She’d ranted as she’d showered, dried her hair, and slipped into her pajamas. And now she was aimlessly pacing her living room, her mind still spinning, as the same words poured from her lips in an endless cycle.

“Now you’ve done it. You’ve scared him off. The one time I’ve ever been completely *happy* in my life, and I’ve gone and destroyed it. Why? Why did I have to ask him to marry me? Why couldn’t I have waited for *him* to make the first move?”

She abruptly changed direction and headed into her kitchen. She roughly threw open the freezer and grabbed the first cartoon

of ice cream her fingertips touched — chocolate. She frowned. It couldn’t have been rocky road or vanilla chocolate chip or vanilla fudge swirl. No. It *had* to be chocolate. Like Clark in that stupid analogy that girl had once given her, back when Lois had been confused over if she should continue dating Clark or take a chance with Dan. What had her name been? Elizabeth?

“No,” Lois said as she thought it over, grabbing a spoon as she did so. “Sarah. That was it. Her name was Sarah.”

She took the ice cream into her living room and plopped down onto the couch.

“This is all my fault,” she continued, shoving the first bite of the creamy frozen treat into her mouth. She let it melt as she savored it. “I’ve never been a patient woman, and this is my punishment. Still,” she said with a pause, “I never thought he’d actually *turn me down*. He’s been lusting after me since the day we met. I thought he’d *welcome* the idea of spending our lives together. Unless...”

She stopped, stunned, as the thought came to her.

“Unless he doesn’t love me the way I thought he did.”

Was that possible? Could she and Clark’s feelings toward each other be so different? She didn’t think so. She’d never seen Clark so mad, jealous, or possessive as he’d been when she and Dan had briefly seen each other. She supposed it could have just been some weird kind of competition that Clark had imagined between himself and Dan, and a need to win said competition. But she just didn’t believe it. Clark had never struck her as that kind of man.

Nor did he strike her as the type to need to be in control — that Lois taking the lead in their relationship and being the one to propose would have been a blow to his ego. In fact, he’d always told her how much he admired her initiative and willingness to take the lead on whatever needed to be done. No, he hadn’t been scared of the fact that she’d been the one to propose marriage.

So...what then?

The phone rang, shattering her thoughts. She glanced at the offending item, too tired and too depressed to answer. She let it ring. And ring. And ring. She even turned off the machine, not wanting to deal with anyone or anything. But whoever was calling wasn’t giving up easily. They called back. And they called back. On the fourth attempt, Lois finally picked up.

“What?” she barked into the mouthpiece.

“Lois?”

She didn’t recognize the voice. “Who is this?”

“Lois, it’s me. Mayson. Mayson Drake.”

That gave Lois pause. “Mayson? Why...why are you calling me?” Though the two had learned to tolerate each other, they were far from friends.

“I need your help.”

“My help?” she asked, aware that she was repeating everything at this point. “With what?”

“It’s...it’s Clark.”

Lois gripped the headset as anger shot through her. “What about Clark?”

“He’s here, at my apartment.”

“Yeah, well, you’re welcome to him,” Lois spat out.

The rat had left her and gone scurrying back to *that* overbearing bimbo? Fine. They could have each other!

“You don’t understand. He’s...he’s in trouble,” Mayson said, her voice shaking.

Lois’s pulse instantly skyrocketed as a bolt of worry zipped through her veins. But she wasn’t about to show it. “Yeah, well, obviously he picked *you* to turn to. I’m sure you can handle it.”

She was about to slam the phone down when Mayson spoke. “Wait! Don’t hang up! Listen to me, *please*.”

That almost sounded like begging. And the panic in Mayson’s voice was unmistakable. Lois’ guts twisted and the coppery taste of fear was in her mouth. Her hands started to shake and she had to strengthen her grip on the phone again. Mayson Drake was a

woman who didn't beg. She, like Lois, had a commanding, sometimes abrasive edge to her. No. She didn't beg for things. She *demand*ed them.

"What's wrong?" Lois heard herself ask, before she was aware that she was even asking.

"He's sick. *Very* sick. Lois...I'm afraid. I think...I think he may be dying," Mayson haltingly got out, her words watery with tears — whether they were shed or unshed, Lois couldn't tell.

"That's ridiculous! He was just with me not five hours ago!" Lois exclaimed, half in disbelief, and half to conceal her growing fear. Mayson wasn't one to exaggerate. If she was afraid for Clark, something must really be wrong.

"Trust me on this," Mayson said, begging once more.

"I'll meet you at the hospital."

"That's...that's not possible."

"What do you mean? If he needs help, for God's sake, *get him help!*" Lois cried, wanting nothing more than to reach through the phone and slap the irritating blonde.

"It's...it's complicated. You, of all people, should know that," Mayson said cryptically. "Just come to my apartment."

Lois mulled it over. "Fine," she huffed. "What's the address?"

"Nineteen twenty-two Ashbury. Apartment five B, like boy."

"Nineteen twenty-two Ashbury," Lois said as she scribbled it down on a piece of scrap paper. "Five B. Got it. You're all the way uptown and halfway across the city!" she said as the address registered in her mind. "I'll be there as soon as I can." Without waiting for a reply, she hung up.

She rushed out of her pajamas and into jeans and a warm red cable knit sweater. She stuffed her feet into her favorite pair of sneakers, then grabbed her purse, sticking the piece of paper with Mayson's address on it into the open top. As she pulled on her coat and hat, she momentarily paused.

Why was she in such a rush? Yes, Mayson had said Clark was sick, but what if she was lying? What if this was some kind of sick joke, meant to lure her over...for what? she had to wonder. To gloat? To show off that Clark had gone running to Mayson? To prove that Lois was old news?

"No," she whispered. "Clark would never allow that. And Mayson? She's overbearing and annoying, but she isn't cruel. If she says Clark is sick, he's sick."

Her resolved steeled, she grabbed her keys and left the apartment. Rushing to her car, she ignored the friendly calls of the neighbors she passed by, not even hearing them. As soon as she reached the Jeep, she climbed inside and, without waiting for the car to warm up, she started for Mayson's apartment. At that hour, there was hardly any traffic on the road, a fact Lois was forever grateful for, once she had the time to think back on that night. As it was, she took almost no notice of anything that wasn't immediately impacting her journey. Every stop sign and red light received a sharp word from her tongue. Every slow driver was cursed under her breath. But, at last, she found the building.

Her timing couldn't have been better. As she pulled up, looking for a place to park, a car exited a spot right outside of the doors. Lois drummed her fingers on the steering wheel as she waited for the elderly gentleman to finally vacate the parking space. Once he was gone, she carefully maneuvered the Jeep into the tight space. Then she was practically running into the building.

The elevator must have been on the ground floor. It opened seconds after she pressed the call button. The car was empty, and she pressed the button to close the doors as soon as she stepped inside.

One.

Lois tapped her foot as the lighted panel showed that the elevator was at the first floor.

Two.

She grew more impatient.

Three.

She bounced on the balls of her feet, wishing she could make the elevator go faster.

Four.

Dread washed over her. What was she going to find, once she knocked on Mayson's door?

Five.

Finally. She was there. The door slid open and Lois stepped out, cold fear rushing through her veins. Her gut instinct told her that whatever she was about to see, it wasn't going to be good.

She marched to Mayson's door before she could lose her nerve, though she hesitated before knocking. She took a couple of deep breaths to try and calm her frayed nerves and racing heart, then forced herself to knock. A second later, she heard movement behind the door.

"Just a second!" came the call from within.

Footsteps, then the turning of a lock. The door pulled open just a bit, the chain still attached. Mayson's face appeared in the opening she'd created.

"Oh, Lois," she said, sounding relieved.

The door shut again. Lois heard the scrape of the chain as it was freed from the lock. The door opened once more.

"I'm glad you're here," Mayson said awkwardly.

"Mayson, what's going on? What's wrong with Clark?" Lois asked, before she even took a step forward.

"I'm not sure. But he's sick. That's all I know. How and why is a mystery," Mayson said. "Come in and see for yourself."

She backed away from the door, allowing Lois entrance. Lois stepped inside the neat apartment. It wasn't at all what she'd expected, though Lois hadn't really expected anything specific at all. Clean, crisp lines dominated the space, though the modern design on the furniture was composed of soft curves. Neutral earth tones were in abundance, feeling somehow bland to Lois as she threw a cursory glance around the living room. Everything seemed to have a place — the television, the coffee table — the one messy space in the room, as it was covered with what Lois could only assume was notes on one or more of the woman's cases — the couch, the uncomfortable looking egg shaped chairs.

No sign of Clark, she thought sourly.

"Where's Clark?" she asked.

Mayson gestured down the hallway to their right. "This way. In the guest room."

Guest room, Lois sneered to herself.

Jealous.

She was actually jealous of Mayson and her apartment, which, if Lois had to guess, was twice the size of her own modest little abode. Sure, it made sense, Lois had to admit. As a deputy D.A., Mayson had to make more in a year than Lois did. Was this why Clark had been attracted to the woman? How many times had he been here, making out with the woman in her sterile looking living room? Or worse, the bedroom?

Focus, Lois, she reminded herself. *Comparing your life to Mayson's isn't going to accomplish anything.*

"Right here," Mayson said, stopping before the second door on the left.

She quietly opened the door. Lois peered inside. Beyond the door, the room was dark, with the only light coming from a dim lamp on the nightstand next to the bed. She could see someone laying in the bed, the comforter pulled up to his neck. But something was off.

She stepped inside the room and went to the bedside. She looked down on the familiar face snuggled into the blankets. Confused, she pulled the blankets back.

"Superman?" she asked, looking to Mayson. "I don't understand. I thought you said Clark was in trouble."

"He is, can't you see that?"

"Mayson, for the love of God, don't jerk me ar..." She bit off her words abruptly and looked back at the sleeping face next to

her. “C...Clark?”

Mayson’s face was white with embarrassment and fear. “I... I...I thought you knew,” she said softly.

“N...No,” Lois stammered shakily. A thought came to her and her shock gave way to anger. “How do *you* know?” she demanded.

“Lois, now’s not the best time...”

“Maybe not, but I need to know why he told *you* about this and not me.”

“I didn’t tell her,” Clark said groggily.

“Clark!” Mayson called out, sounding very relieved to see him awake. “How are you feeling?”

“Weak,” was the reply. He coughed immediately after. “But better than before.”

Lois crossed her arms, madder than ever. “So, Mayson knows that you’ve been keeping *this* a secret,” she said, pointing to the S on his chest with an accusing finger, “but you didn’t think it was important to tell *me*? I thought I knew you, Clark. Seems like I was dead wrong.”

She was tempted to leave and Clark knew it.

“Wait,” he called to her. “Let me explain.”

“I’ll give you some space,” Mayson offered.

“No, you should stay,” Lois challenged. “As much as I hate to admit it, I’m sure I’m not the only one feeling embarrassed here.”

Clark sighed, the sound thick with congestion and heavy with exhaustion. “Sit,” he offered, gesturing to the armchair across the room. “Sit and I’ll explain everything as best I can.”

Lois sat, arms folded over her chest. Mayson leaned against the tall cherry colored dresser in the room, following Lois’ lead and crossing her arms as well, though she looked far more at ease than Lois felt.

“This had better be good,” Lois warned him.

“I never *told* Mayson about my secret,” Clark repeated. “She found out by mistake.”

“*By mistake*. What, did you start floating in midair after a make out session or something?” Lois hissed, well aware of how juvenile she sounded.

“Lois, please. Do you *really* think I could have ever cheated on you?” he pleaded.

That gave her pause. No, he really *wasn’t* the type to cheat on someone he loved. And she was *certain* that he loved her. Or she had been, until tonight. Between fleeing from her proposal and now finding out that he and Mayson shared such an important secret while she’d remained oblivious, she was beginning to doubt his feelings for her. Still, Clark was a man of honor. He never would have cheated with Mayson, she decided.

“Well...no, I guess not,” she admitted.

He nodded weakly. “It was the night when that car bomb almost killed Mayson. I heard it clicking and getting ready to explode. That’s why I ran from you that night. I said it was gut instinct that made me aware of the fact that Mayson was in trouble. It was more than that. It was my super hearing kicking in at just the right moment to save a life. Anyway, my shirt ripped somehow as I pulled her away from the car. I don’t know if the explosion caught it or if it snagged on something and tore or what. Everything happened too fast and I didn’t even realize it had ripped until it was too late.”

“I saw the Superman suit beneath his shirt, right before I passed out,” Mayson supplied. “I confronted him about it one I was lucid enough.”

“I couldn’t lie to her,” Clark added.

“Oh? But you *could* continue to lie to *me*!” Lois snapped.

“It’s not like that! She’d almost died and I...”

“Oh!” Lois spat, cutting him off. “She almost *died*! Well then, maybe I should go put myself into mortal peril too, so you’ll finally be honest with me for once!”

She saw him flinch at the words, as though they’d been an actual, physical blow to his being. For a brief second, she regretted

her words. But then her anger came back in force. She cut off the apology that had been forming in her throat before it could be fully realized.

“Lois,” Clark said, his voice straining just the least bit.

“Please, let me explain. I know what I said sounds bad. But it’s not what it seems.”

“All right. I’m listening,” she said flatly.

He nodded once. “I couldn’t lie to her. Not after what she’d seen. And I knew that...or at least, I’d *hoped* that, once I came clean to her, she’d understand why I could never be with her.”

That intrigued Lois. “Go on.”

“At the time, Mayson hated Superman and liked Clark, remember?”

“I remember,” she confessed. How could she forget how the other woman had fawned over Clark while publicly denouncing Superman at every turn?

“It was one of the reasons why I couldn’t bring myself to date her. That and, well, she wasn’t *you*. I just...I had a hard time giving her a flat out ‘no’ when she’d ask me to lunch or whatever. And that’s my fault, Lois. It was never anything that you did or said. I guess, in a way, Superman or not, I’m a bit of a coward.”

“It didn’t help that I never really gave you a chance to speak when I’d ask,” Mayson admitted quietly.

“I don’t like hurting people, Lois, not if I can help it. I didn’t want to hurt Mayson so I tried to find ways to gently let her down. Instead, all I managed to do was to unfairly lead her on and hurt your feelings in the process.” He paused a moment and coughed harshly. When he was done, his breathing was ragged and fast as he tried to take in enough air again. “So, when she discovered the truth, I decided that I was done lying. I came clean with my dual identities and explained that I couldn’t be anything more than just her friend, if she even felt like she could trust me enough to be her friend.”

“It took me a long time to reconcile the two identities in my mind,” Mayson said. “I’d spent so much time hating Superman, to the point of almost villainizing him, all the while so relentlessly pursuing him in a different set of clothes.” She paused for a moment, blushing. “And, it was clear that he wasn’t interested in anyone who wasn’t Lois Lane. Although, I’m not sure why,” she added with a playful smirk.

“You still didn’t tell *me* that you were Superman,” Lois argued, truly hurt. “How could you do something like that?”

“Because I love you,” Clark said simply.

Lois arched an eyebrow. *Yeah, right*, the action said. He sighed.

“I needed to know, Lois. Could you love Clark Kent, without the powers? I know you’ve had a crush on Superman since the moment I first showed him to the world. If I’d told you the truth, back when Mayson discovered it, how could I be sure that you wanted the real me? How could I know for certain that you weren’t with me to live out the ‘Superman’s girlfriend’ fantasy? So, I didn’t dare say anything at all about it. I wanted to be sure I knew what the answer was.”

“But you *did* know that I fell in love with Clark,” Lois said, fighting back the angry tears that were threatening to spill. Her heart felt like it had been ripped out and trampled on. But she’d be damned if she’d let Clark see how destroyed she was.

“I know,” Clark said quietly. “I messed up, Lois. I was too afraid to tell you. Because...because of this moment, when I’d have to be afraid that my lies would have put too great a wedge between us. I was terrified of losing you. I still am.”

“If you lied about this, what else have you lied about?” Lois demanded. “Are you faking sick too, just to get me over here after you ran away from me tonight? Is this your way of distracting me from...what I asked you?” she asked, suddenly very aware of Mayson’s presence in the room.

“Of course not!” Clark wheezed as another cough wracked his

body. “The *only* reason I didn’t say yes was because of *this!*” he said, sweeping a trembling hand over the S on his chest. “I couldn’t accept until you knew the truth. I was going to tell you. I was going to bring you back to my place or yours and tell you everything. Then, if you still wanted to even know me, I would have said yes. But before I could, I heard about a nuclear reactor that was leaking in Japan.”

Understanding blossomed in Lois’ mind. Some of her anger softened, in the slightest degree. “That’s why you ran off.”

He nodded. “Yes. I thought I would fix the leak and save as many people as I could, then swing by your place with an offering of wine and chocolates as part of my apology. But the longer I stayed at the accident, the sicker I felt. I’ve never experienced anything like this. I’ve never been sick before. I barely made it back to Metropolis. Mayson’s place was closer than either your apartment or mine. I landed just in time. I passed out just after I landed and she found me.”

“I wasn’t sure what to do, so I brought him inside. No one can see him like this. Superman, brought to his knees?” Mayson shook her head. “If word got out that Superman is incapacitated, the criminal element would have a field day. It was all I could do to help him get into bed, and I thought, since you two are together, that you would know what to do. I had no idea that you didn’t know about Superman yet.”

“So...you’re really sick?” Lois was in disbelief. “But that’s... you don’t *get* sick. How...?”

Clark shook his head slightly. “I don’t know.”

“What...what do we do?” Panic started to creep up her spine, replacing her earlier ire. “There’s got to be *something* we can do.”

“I don’t know. It’s not like there’s a lot of knowledge out there on what’s normal for a Kryptonian,” Clark said, closing his eyes.

That’s when Lois noticed the beads of sweat that were sprouting up like dewdrops on his forehead. She pressed the back of her hand to his forehead. Not only was he sweaty, his temperature was alarmingly high. She swiveled her body to look at Mayson.

“Do you have a thermometer?”

Mayson nodded. “Yeah, in the bathroom.”

“Get it.”

For once, the Deputy D.A. didn’t argue with her and did exactly as Lois had asked. A minute later she returned, a digital thermometer in her hand.

“Here,” she said, extending the slender instrument to Lois.

“Thanks.” She turned back to Clark. “Here, put this under your tongue.”

Clark managed a smirk. “Hey, I may be a first timer, but I *do* know how it’s done,” he limply joked.

Lois couldn’t help the smile she gave him. “Just checking.”

She turned the thermometer on and stuck it under his tongue. Obediently, Clark closed his mouth and patiently waited for the machine’s verdict. A few seconds later, the thermometer started beeping. Lois took it from Clark’s mouth to read what it said.

“Error,” she sighed. “I don’t think it can read as high as whatever your fever is.” She handed the instrument back to Mayson. “Clark, I think it’s too dangerous to keep you here. You need doctors and a hospital.”

“What can a hospital do for me though?” he wondered aloud.

Lois shook her head. “I don’t know, exactly. But if anything were to happen, I’d feel better if there were doctors on hand to help you.”

“Dr. Klein,” Clark said decisively. “He’s the only one who knows anything about how my body works, as limited as that knowledge might be.”

“I’ll call him right now,” Lois said. “I’ll arrange something and we’ll get you the help you need. Okay?”

Clark nodded. “Okay. Lois?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I should have told you sooner. I don’t blame you for being mad, or hating me, or...”

“Ssh,” she gently interrupted. “None of that matters right now. Getting you healthy is all we need to focus on. And, when you’re better, we can talk more about this.”

“I want to tell you everything,” he said, his voice as solemn as though he was swearing an oath.

“And I want to know everything,” she assured him. “Rest now, and I’ll call Dr. Klein.”

Again he nodded, this time weaker than ever. Lois watched as he closed his eyes and settled further into the pillows, chewing her lower lip in worry. For Superman to get sick, something had to be seriously wrong. Lois only hoped that he would survive whatever was attacking his body.

Get better; she thought as she watched him sleep. *Please.*

After a couple of quick heartbeats, she left the room, leaving the door open so she and Mayson could hear him if he needed help. She padded silently down to the living room, where Mayson had retreated after seeing the thermometer fail to get a reading on Clark’s fever.

“He’s asleep,” Lois said, by way of a greeting.

Mayson nodded distractedly. “That’s good.”

“I’m going to call Dr. Klein, from S.T.A.R. Labs,” Lois continued. “With a fever like that, he needs more help than either one of us can give him.”

Mayson nodded. “That’s a good idea.”

Lois hesitated for a minute, wondering if she should say what she was about to.

“Mayson?”

“Hmm?”

“I think...I think you should come with us, to the hospital, when we go.”

“What for? I’m nothing but a third wheel at this point.” The despair in her voice was unmistakable.

“Clark trusted you enough to help him tonight. I think he’d want you to come. And...I want you to come. Look, you and I have had our differences. And maybe we don’t really like each other all that much but...I’d feel better, if you came with us.”

Mayson looked up, studying her, as if trying to discern whether or not Lois was telling the truth. “You would?”

Lois nodded. “Former Girl Scout’s honor.”

The other woman nodded in turn, slowly, as if not quite trusting the entire situation not to backfire on her somehow. “All right.”

“First thing’s first though. I need to get in touch with Dr. Klein.”

Lois sat on the couch and grabbed her purse. She opened it and dug around inside until she finally found her phone, which had gone into hiding under her heavy wallet. She flipped open the cover and scrolled through her contacts until she found the number for S.T.A.R. Labs. A sleepy sounding guard picked up.

“S.T.A.R. Labs, this is Jeffrey Wolcott speaking.”

“Hi, this is Lois Lane, from the Daily Planet. I need the emergency contact number for Dr. Bernard Klein.”

“Ma’am, Dr. Klein isn’t in right now. If you call back after ten tomorrow morning...”

“No, you don’t understand,” Lois sharply cut him off. She stood and started pacing. “I need to get in contact with him *now*. It’s an emergency.”

“Ma’am, I’m under strict orders...”

“I’m calling on Superman’s behalf.”

“Right,” the guard said, dragging the word out mockingly. “Superman.”

“Give me the phone,” Mayson said in barely more than a whisper, and Lois belatedly realized how loud the volume on her phone was. Shrugging, Lois handed her the phone.

“Now you listen here. This is Mayson Drake, Deputy D.A. I

need that number and I need it *now*, or so help me I will personally see to it that the police pay you a visit and get that number for me. Do you understand?"

Lois nodded approvingly. She had to admit it, having Mayson on their side was a definite perk.

"Yes, ma'am," Lois heard the man nervously gulp. "Just a minute while I look it up for you."

Less than two minutes later, Mayson hung up and handed Lois both the phone and a sheet of paper with Dr. Klein's home number on it. Lois took it with a nod. For the first time in her life, Lois felt gratitude toward Mayson, and that maybe, just maybe, the woman wasn't so bad after all.

"Thanks," she said.

Without waiting for an answer, Lois dialed the number Mayson had managed to get. A yawning Dr. Klein answered.

"Dr. Klein? It's Lois Lane," she said by way of an introduction. "I know it's late, but Superman needs your help."

"What?" Dr. Klein said after another yawn.

"Superman. He's in trouble. He needs your help, right now."

"What's going on?" At least he sounded a little more alert now.

"He's sick," Lois said.

"Sick? Can't it wait until the morning?"

Lois rolled her eyes. "The thermometer can't even register how high his fever is," she explained. "Plus, he's *Superman*. He doesn't *get* sick. He said you were the one to call, that you've been his doctor before."

"Meet me at Metropolis General Hospital," he replied after a couple of seconds, finally seeming to understand the urgency of the situation.

"Thank you," Lois said, a little bit of her worry dissipating. At least Clark would be getting some help. Then she ended the call. "Okay, we need to figure out how to get him to Met Gen," she said to Mayson.

"Taking him in one of our cars is risky," Mayson mused.

"So is calling an ambulance," Lois countered, gently, not to argue with Mayson but in an effort to look at all their options.

"Maybe, but I, for one, would feel better if medical professionals moved him, just in case anything happens on the way."

Lois thought it over for a minute, aware that every second of indecision could cause further harm to Clark. "I guess it *would* be better for Superman to show up via ambulance than with either one of us. He's got his secret to keep safe, after all." She couldn't help the pang of bitterness that stabbed at her heart at the thought of his secret.

Mayson nodded. "I think so too."

"Okay, then it's settled." Lois swiftly punched in the digits on her phone. "Hello? Yes, I need an ambulance at nineteen twenty-two Ashbury. Apartment five B. The problem? My friend is sick. He's running a high fever, for one. No, I can't move him on my own. It's uh...a bit of a delicate situation. I need the paramedics to be very discreet. That's right. Thank you."

She hung up and ran a hair through her hair in relief. "The ambulance is on its way." She sighed and allowed herself to slump down onto the couch. "Can I be honest with you?"

"Sure."

"I'm scared."

"Me too, Lois. Me too."

"Lois?"

Lois was instantly on her feet. Clark needed her. She sprinted down the hall to where he was laying in bed.

"Yeah, Clark? Is everything okay?"

He nodded slightly. "Did you get in touch with Dr. Klein?"

It was her turn to nod. She brushed her hand over his forehead. He felt inconceivably hotter beneath her touch.

"Yeah," she breathed, keeping her voice calm and soft, trying

to ward off the panic she felt bubbling up in her chest. "He's going to meet us at the hospital. An ambulance is on the way to take you there."

She expected him to fight her on the idea. But either he instinctively knew why it was better for the ambulance to take him or perhaps the illness was taking so much out of him that he didn't have the energy to argue.

"Good," he was all he said.

"I promise, Clark. We're going to get through this."

All of this, her mind said. *This mysterious illness and your secret.*

"Thank you," he said, stifling a cough. "For standing by me. With everything that's happened tonight, I wouldn't have blamed you for walking out that door. Thank you for staying. I...I'm scared. I need you. I can't get through this on my own."

"I'm here, for as long as you need me," she vowed.

The truth is, my heart still hurts from your lies. But I'm terrified of a life without you in it.

She took his hand in her own and simply sat there, on the edge of his bed, until she heard the paramedics knocking at the front door. She squeezed his hand in a silent show of support.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"I have to be," he said in a resigned tone. "Lois?"

"Yeah?"

"Once we know what's going on, I'm going to need you to let my parents know everything."

"You can count on me. And I'll handle Perry and everything else. All you need to focus on is getting well. Okay?"

"Thanks," he said with a singular nod.

"Mayson and I will follow you over to the hospital. You won't be alone for this."

"Dr. Klein...he doesn't know," Clark quietly warned her. "I'd like to keep it that way. Unless...unless it becomes absolutely necessary. I'm trusting you to make that decision. I'm trusting you to make *all* the decisions, if I'm not able to."

Lois didn't know what to say to that. Clark was quite literally placing his life in her hands. It humbled and terrified her, all at the same time.

"With luck, we won't need to go there," she told him.

A heartbeat later, the paramedics entered the room. It wasn't a huge bedroom by any means, so Lois made herself useful by leaving the room. She kept Mayson company in the living room, though neither of them spoke. It felt like an eternity passed before the paramedics emerged from the room, with Clark strapped to a stretcher between them.

"I'll drive," Mayson offered, once the paramedics were out of the apartment.

Lois wanted to say no, that she would take her own car, so that neither one was dependant on the other if they needed to leave the hospital. But she knew she wasn't in the right frame of mind to drive. She was sick with worry for Clark, and still reeling from his deception. She simply nodded.

"Okay," she managed a few seconds later. "And Mayson?"

"Hmm?"

"Thanks...for everything tonight. I'm glad Clark had someone he could trust and come to when he was in trouble. I...I know you and I haven't gotten along in the past but...well...you aren't so bad," Lois said in halting tones. She gave Mayson a tentative smile.

Mayson nearly blushed. "Yeah, well...you're not so bad either."

Lois chuckled lightly. "Thanks."

They left the apartment together, with Lois letting Mayson lead the way. It was a strange feeling, to be getting along with the woman who'd once been her most hated rival. But, in a way, it was kind of nice to drop that animosity toward her. More than that, it was a *relief*. Especially now, now that Lois knew Clark wasn't

interested in Mayson in that way.

“Do you think he’ll be all right?” Mayson voiced the words that were nagging at the back of Lois’ mind, once they were safely inside her car and away from prying ears.

“I wish I knew. I’ve never seen him like this,” Lois replied. “I *hope* he’ll be okay.”

Please, be okay, she silently prayed as Mayson pulled away from the curb.

It seemed to take forever to get to the hospital. By the time they pulled into the first available parking spot, Lois’ nerves were frayed. But that was only the beginning of the longest wait of Lois’ life. Once inside the hospital, the nurses wouldn’t divulge Clark’s location. They wouldn’t even confirm that he was there, even though Mayson herself demanded access to him. In the end, Lois had to have Dr. Klein paged — another waiting game.

“Lois,” Dr. Klein said, wiping at the sweat on his brow with a handkerchief, once he spotted her in the waiting area. “And...I don’t believe we’ve met,” he said, looking at Mayson.

Mayson shook the hand that the doctor extended. “Mayson Drake, Deputy D.A. I’m a friend of his.”

“Mayson’s the one who found him in his...unwell state,” Lois clarified, purposefully staying as vague as possible, in the event of prying ears.

“Well, any friend of his, is a friend of mine.” He looked to Lois again. “But, uh, what are you doing here?”

“We’d hoped to check in on him,” Lois said.

“Well, of course you’ve here for *that*,” he replied. “But, uh, it’s a bit late.”

“I told him I’d meet him here. *We* did,” she said, pointing first to herself, then to Mayson. “Can we see him?”

Dr. Klein nodded. “Come with me.”

He turned and led them down a series of hallways and into the elevator. He pushed the button for the ninth floor — intensive care. Lois’ stomach dropped when she realized that fact.

“I thought it best to bring him straight here,” Dr. Klein explained, likely seeing Lois’ returning fear. “Just in case, you understand. Plus, it’s a bit more private up here. I thought it might...stem the spread of the news that he’s sick.”

Lois nodded, feeling only minor relief. “Thank you. I’m sure he appreciates it.” She paused. Then, “How is he?”

Dr. Klein shook his head with a worried look. “Not well, I’m afraid. You did the right thing in bringing him here. He’s got a fever unlike anything I’ve ever seen. We’re doing all we can to try and break it, but he’s so different than someone like you or me, than I’m not certain any of the traditional methods are going to work. Still, we can try and hope.”

They reached the room where Clark was resting, but before they could go in, Dr. Klein turned and faced them.

“Listen, I want to be frank with you. I don’t know if I can do anything for him at all.”

“W...what do you mean?” Lois couldn’t help the wobble in her voice.

Dr. Klein glanced around, but at that hour, no one else was in the hallway. “I mean, what he has...I don’t think it’s anything this planet has ever seen.”

“Are you saying...?” Mayson started.

Dr. Klein interrupted. “My best guess is that it’s something only Krypton has ever seen. Where he picked up the illness, I couldn’t tell you. Maybe it was something that was dormant in his system that, for whatever reason, started acting up now. Or maybe he was exposed to something containing the virus. He said he started feeling unwell while tending to a leak at a nuclear reactor. It’s possible the radiation stimulated the virus.”

“Could it have been, I don’t know...something that someone released at the site?” Lois asked, her mind spinning. “This isn’t the first time he’s been exposed to high levels of radiation. Remember

the ‘leak,’” she said, making air quotes with her fingers, “at Lex Luthor’s facility, which caused that freak heat wave?”

Dr. Klein shrugged. “It’s very possible, though I have no idea where someone would get their hands on a Kryptonian virus.”

“Believe me,” Mayson said seriously, “I’ve seen too many murder and attempted murder cases to count. If someone wants to kill someone badly enough, they’ll always manage to find a way to do it.”

“I suppose that’s true,” the man conceded with a shrug. “In any case, I’m running every diagnostic test known to mankind. The problem is, he’s not born of Earth. Chances are, the tests are going to be useless. Still, I have to try.”

“There has to be something else,” Lois pleaded.

Dr. Klein signed and rubbed at his tired eyes. “I’m trying to manually cool his body. We’ve got cooling blankets and ice packs on him, but it’s a gamble at best. Again, his body doesn’t work quite like yours and mine. Normally, I’d give him some Ibuprofen to try to help the fever to break, but his body burns it off too fast for it to have any effect. I’m sorry. I wish I had better news to give you.”

“No, no. I get it,” Lois said absently, her gut twisting into knots of fear. “It’s uncharted territory, to care for a sick Kryptonian.”

“Thanks for being so understanding about that. It’s stressful enough trying to heal him. I don’t think I could deal with being judged on it,” Dr. Klein said. He paused a moment. “There *was* one other thing I wanted to speak to you about, Lois. It’s probably best if we speak in private.”

“If it’s about the medical proxy, he already told me, when we called for the ambulance,” Lois said knowingly.

Dr. Klein nodded. “Then I guess we’re all up to speed. Just, uh, he needs to rest. And visiting hours ended several hours ago. So if you two could make your visit short, I think we’d all appreciate it.”

“Of course,” Lois said.

“We appreciate that you’re giving us any time with him at all,” Mayson added with practiced professionalism.

“I’ll be back in a bit,” Dr. Klein said, opening the door for them.

Once they were inside, he turned and left to attend to whatever other duties he had. Lois and Mayson made a beeline for Clark’s bedside. Clark immediately reached for Lois’ hand, amid the wires and tubing that was attached to him. Lois knew it was merely meant to monitor his condition, but the sight of it all was terrifying regardless.

Over his body, which was now clad in a white and mint green hospital gown rather than the distinctive blue, red, and yellow of the hero, a baby blue blanket had been carefully placed. Lois could feel the coldness radiating from it as she took Clark’s hand. She noted the ice packs in his armpits and the one cradling the back of his neck as well. But his skin still felt aflame to her touch, which only fueled her worry.

“Clark,” she said, speaking in a low tone. “Are you okay? How are you feeling?”

“I’m all right,” he said. “Dr. Klein thinks I have some kind of Kryptonian virus.”

“He told us all about it,” Mayson said, moving from his side and sitting in one of the visitors’ chairs.

“It makes sense,” Clark continued. “At least, a little. I’ve come in contact with pretty much every disease known to mankind as I’ve helped people around the world. I’ve never gotten sick before. But where a Kryptonian virus would have come from has me stumped.”

“It had to have been at the nuclear facility,” Lois said with confidence. “You said that’s when you started to feel ill.”

Clark managed a small nod. “Yeah, I think so too. But where it came from in the first place...”

Lois could see that his breathing was labored. Clark coughed hard and then panted with the effort to regain his breath, despite the oxygen tubes in his nostrils.

“Are you okay? Should I get a doctor to up the oxygen?” Lois asked, concerned.

Clark lolled his head from side to side. “No. Dr. Klein said it wouldn’t really do anything. You know what’s weird? Three days ago, I was at a mudslide in Chile. Toward the end, I rescued this little girl. She couldn’t have been more than nine, I’m guessing. She was having this bad asthma attack and her mother couldn’t get to her right away because she was injured. I sat with that little girl for... I don’t know. Two hours? Maybe closer to three? I sat with her until her mother could join her. Once the girl was feeling better, after getting medicine at the hospital, she told me about how hard it had been to breathe, how every single breath was an exhausting effort. I nodded and offered what words of encouragement I could, but I didn’t understand it in the least. Now I feel like I understand a fraction of it. It feels like I’ve got this weight on my chest, making it hard for me to get air in and out of my lungs. It’s a weird feeling of heaviness that I can’t shake. And I’m scared it’s going to get worse.”

“Can’t the doctors do something? Give you some medicine, like they would for an asthmatic?” Mayson wanted to know.

“They tried it in the ambulance. It didn’t work. My body doesn’t react to medicine like a regular person’s body would.”

“What can we do to help?” Lois asked.

“You being here is enough.” A thought seemed to come to him. “Wait...you walked in together, didn’t you? Did you two... come to the hospital together?”

The surprise in his voice broke some of the tension in the room. Lois and Mayson both chuckled a little.

“Yeah,” Lois confirmed. “Leave it to you to figure out some way to make old rivals into tentative new friends.”

“Now I understand why you get called in on peace negotiations between enemy countries,” Mayson joked.

Clark gave them a smile. “I won’t lie. It’s nice to see you two getting along. It makes me happy.”

“Well,” Lois said, trying to hide a blush and knowing she was failing, “it helps that I don’t have to be so insanely jealous and competitive with her.” She looked to Mayson and pointed a stern finger at her. “If you tell anyone I was jealous of you, I’ll deny everything.”

Mayson chuckled lightly. “I don’t doubt it. But, to be honest, I was jealous of you too. Still am, a little. Clark’s a great guy. Even if he *does* fly around as a vigilante superhero in his spare time.”

Lois nodded and turned her attention to Clark. “Can I get you anything? Something to eat or drink? Another pillow? Anything?”

She knew she should still be mad at him for lying to her. And she was, deep down inside. But seeing him so sick and vulnerable pushed away her anger, letting concern and fear master her. She still loved him, which amazed her, in a way. If anyone else had tried to pull what Clark had, she would have had no problem turning her back on them and walking away without a second thought.

It was a skill she’d gained back when she was a child, after one too many friends had intentionally hurt her. She’d perfected it once she’d first stepped into the dating pool, and boys had hurt her heart in new ways. Paul had been the first to really, truly use her. Well, Paul and Linda had, but Paul’s betrayal had, perhaps, caused the bigger wound to her heart. For a while, she’d shut everyone out, until Claude had waltzed his way into her life and sweet-talked her long enough to sleep with her, steal her story, and win an award for it. Lois’ only consolation had been that Perry had been on her side. With his help, she’d proved that Claude hadn’t written the story and he’d lost all credibility. She wasn’t sure what had happened to the man once his actions had become common knowledge in the journalism world, but he’d never again done any

kind of reporting, which was just fine with Lois.

There had been others as well, but none that stuck out as prominently in Lois’ mind. Lois had walked away from each of those weasels, as she called them, easily. They weren’t worth her time. They’d each shattered her trust in new and devastating ways.

And now Clark.

Now Clark had lied to her about something so huge, so trust-breaking, that Lois was still reeling from it. It hurt. He hadn’t trusted her with the secret he carried. There was entire half — no, an entire other *person* — of himself that he hadn’t told her about. He’d deliberately lied to her - *for years!* her mind screamed at her — despite the fact that he *knew* how rare and fragile her trust was.

But...could she *really* blame him?

Had she stumbled upon his secret in those early days, when he was an unwanted partner and a brand new superhero, she absolutely would not have hesitated to print the story of his dual identities. Back then, it would have seemed like justice. She would have had the perfect excuse to dump the “hack from Nowheresville,” as she’d thought of him at the time, and a story that would have guaranteed her the Pulitzer. She wouldn’t have even felt guilty about it either, because she hadn’t yet learned what exposing his secret would have done — how it would have destroyed the most caring, loyal, decent, and amazing man she’d ever met. Not only that, she knew now that if Clark’s identity had been made public, she would have destroyed not just Clark, but his parents and friends too.

She supposed too that she couldn’t blame him for keeping the Superman thing a secret while she’d so actively fawned over the hero and ignored the real man who’d been pining after her from the moment they’d first met. Because, she knew, Clark hadn’t been lying when he’d said that he was the real man and that Superman was only his cover — a costume he wore like a suit of armor to protect himself. She supposed she wouldn’t have wanted to divulge her secret identity in a case like that, if the tables had been turned.

But that still didn’t excuse the fact that he’d continued to lie and hide even after he was secure in the knowledge that she loved him. He’d had ample opportunity after they’d first said those three magical words — “I love you” — and this evening for him to finally come clean with her about everything. It still would have hurt, of course. He still hadn’t been completely honest with her, but it would have been less humiliating if he’d told her the truth earlier. She wouldn’t have proposed to him like some desperate idiot, as she viewed herself now. She wouldn’t have stormed Mayson’s apartment, thinking that Clark was cheating on her with another woman. She wouldn’t have spent all evening berating herself for laying out her heart to Clark, only to think he’d rejected her and fled in terror.

“No, but thanks. Dr. Klein wants to keep an eye on everything I eat or drink, at least for the time being, and I’m comfortable enough, I guess.”

“You guess?” Lois asked. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“It’s not the bed or pillows or anything. It’s just that...my entire body aches. I don’t know if it’s from whatever this virus is, or if it weakened me enough so that I overexerted myself at the nuclear facility. I think I just want to get some rest, if that’s okay.”

“Of course,” Mayson nodded. She touched his shoulder gently in a show of support and comfort. “Get some rest. I...I, uh...I’m not sure if I should...”

“Come back when you can,” Clark encouraged. “I’m glad to have you here. I know we don’t exactly see eye to eye on Superman’s legitimacy as law enforcement, but Superman isn’t the one who needs you right now. It’s nice to have a friend by my side.”

He looked to Lois, worried, as though she might throw her hands up in the air and walk out of his life now that she knew he was getting what medical help Dr. Klein could offer. “Lois?”

She gave him a small, sweet smile. "I'll be back first thing in the morning, once the visiting hours start."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you. That means a lot, especially considering how unfair I've been to you."

Lois shook her head. "You hush about it. I just want to see you get better. And then we can work through all of this and, knowing the two of us," she said with another little smile, "be stronger for it. All relationships have rough patches. We're no different. If anything," she said, taking his hand and giving it a squeeze, "I'm surprised. For the first time in my life, I want to fight for a relationship, instead of walking away."

"I...I'm glad," Clark said. "You know something? Every day, I ask myself why you deem me worthy of your time. Tonight is no exception. I've spent the last couple of hours wondering how I've been so lucky as to have found you."

Lois fought down a blush and gave him a wobbly smile. "Get some sleep, okay? You need it in order to get well." She patted his shoulder and bent to place a chaste kiss on his feverish brow, as though it might bestow some strength or restorative powers to him.

He nodded in complete obedience. "See you in the morning."
"Night, Clark," she whispered.

"Goodnight, Lois."

Lois and Mayson left the way they had come in — together. They saw Dr. Klein, who locked eyes with them and inclined his head in acknowledgement. They nodded to him — a silent thank you for allowing them to see Clark, even though it had only been for a few brief minutes. Silence ruled until they reached Mayson's car.

"I don't know about you," Mayson said, finally venturing to break the fragile peace as she cranked up the heat in the car, "but seeing him put my mind at rest, even if just for tonight."

"Yeah," Lois agreed. "I'm still afraid for him, but at least he's with Dr. Klein now. If anyone can help him, it'll be Dr. Klein."

"Do you really think so?" Barely concealed hope clung to the edges of Mayson's words as she began to drive.

"I do. Dr. Klein is the absolute best. Clark couldn't be in more capable hands," Lois replied confidently, even though, deep inside, she too wondered if Dr. Klein would be able to help.

"If you say so, I'll trust you on it."

"Look, Mayson..."

"Yeah?"

"Thank you, for tonight. For driving me to the hospital. For being there for Clark when he needed you. I appreciate it all."

"You're welcome," Mayson said humbly. She sighed, as if weighing some decision in her mind. "Lois? I'm glad that Clark has you. I think...I think I always knew, on some level, that you were the only one he'd want. I think that's why I fought so hard. Why I was so...so forward and persistent with him. So aggressive. And I'm glad that, even in light of everything that's happened tonight, we both seemed to have moved past our past animosity toward each other. The truth is...I don't have many friends. I know, I know, how pathetic, right?"

Lois shook her head and sighed as she answered. "No. Truthfully, I don't have many real friends either. Coworkers, yes. Acquaintances, absolutely. But real, honest to God friends? Just a few."

Mayson laughed a little. "I guess we're more alike than we thought."

Lois smiled at little and chuckled in turn. "I guess so. So, what do you say? Friends?"

"Friends," Mayson affirmed, briefly shaking Lois' outstretched hand at a red light.

Lois leaned back into the leather car seat. She rested her head against the backrest and sighed, rubbing her tired eyes. "Well, this is *not* how I pictured tonight going when I made these plans. The man I love has a secret identity. He picked up some weird

extraterrestrial disease no one has the slightest idea of how to treat. And now you and I are friends."

"All I had planned was a long, hot bubble bath and then settling down with the Napoleon I bought at a bakery on the way home from work," Mayson said with a wry grin.

Lois chuckled again. "Crazy night."

"You said it."

"I just wish there was more that we could do," Lois mused aloud, more to herself than to Mayson.

Mayson sighed quietly. "So do I. I guess all we can do is to go home, rest up, and be ready to see him in the morning."

"I guess so," Lois hesitantly agreed. She checked her watch. "God, it's already the middle of the night." She tried to stifle a yawn and lost. "It's been a very, very long night."

Mayson merely nodded and silence fell between the two new friends.

After a few minutes, Mayson spoke again. "Lois? Listen, I'm sorry about how things turned out tonight. When I first discovered the truth about Clark, he asked me to keep it a secret, even from you. *He* wanted to be the one to tell you. Not for you to figure it out on your own, because he knew you'd find it insulting. And not for someone else to — deliberately or accidentally — spill the beans, because he didn't want you to be hurt like that. To know that someone else knew the secret before he told you. Just... tonight...with him in trouble...I didn't think. I just assumed he'd told you by now. If I was wrong to call you, then I apologize."

Lois shook her head gently. "No, Mayson. You did nothing wrong. I'm grateful that you called. And as for the secret...I don't blame you at all. I mean, how could you have known that he hadn't told me yet? I guess...I guess if I'd been in your position, I probably would have assumed the same as you did."

"Still...I feel bad. He really *did* want to be the one to tell you. I should have asked him before I called you. But he was asleep and I was scared and..."

"Mayson," Lois interrupted in a soft tone, "I might not have known Clark's secret, but I *do* know *Clark*. He doesn't blame you for doing what you did. He's not mad. Trust me on this. It's just not in his nature to condemn a person for doing what they thought was right."

At first, Mayson didn't react. Then, slowly, she nodded. "He's a pretty special guy, huh?"

Lois nodded in turn. "The best."

"So...can I ask? And you can feel free to tell me to buzz off if you'd like. But..." She hesitated, as though unsure how to phrase her question.

But Lois knew what it was she was asking. "Am I mad at him? Can I forgive him for lying to me?"

"Yeah," Mayson said, checking both directions after stopping for a stop sign.

"I don't know yet. So much has happened. I haven't had a chance to sort through it all. The only thing I know for sure is that I won't be able to concentrate on anything until he's well again."

They rode in relative silence the rest of the way. Mayson dropped Lois off by her Jeep, and Lois took off in the direction of her apartment immediately. She was never so glad to be home as when she walked in through the door and set the locks behind her. Toeing off her sneakers, she shuffled to her bedroom. She didn't even bother to change into pajamas before climbing into bed, but once her head hit the pillow, her mind started to spin with all that had happened that night, with fear for Clark leading all of her thoughts.

She reached out to the night table and grabbed the little stuffed black and white bear that resided there. It was the bear Clark had won for her at the Smallville Corn Festival. She could clearly remember how he'd struggled to hit the hammer onto the target with enough force to ring the bell and win the prize for her. Or... had he struggled at all? Had it all been a ruse? Had everything

he'd ever done in front of her been a lie?

"No," she said after a moment. "He didn't lie about that."

She'd seen him bleed during those couple of days out in Kansas. In fact, there'd been times when he'd looked like "death warmed over," as Ellen always called such a sickly pallor. He really *had* been sick.

"The Kryptonite," she said with sudden realization. "It really *was* there. Trask must have found it. But if he really had it then..." Her stomach clenched. "Clark! That whole time, he would have been vulnerable. Trask could have killed him."

Of course, she'd thought Clark was no more than a regular Joe at the time, so it wasn't a new thought that his life had been in danger. But there was something to knowing that the deranged psychopath had nearly attained his goal of murdering Superman. A shiver ran down her back at the unbidden mental image of Clark lying dead at Trask's feet.

The more she thought about it, the more she came to the conclusion that Clark must have been confronting the threat of Kryptonite for the very first time, during those scary few days out in Kansas. How terrifying must that have been? To go from the strongest, most invulnerable man in the world to completely weak and helpless in the presence of a piece of that glowing green stone. To know, for the first time, that something could easily kill him. And yet, Clark hadn't complained once. He hadn't even appeared all that worried for himself. Lois' safety had been first. Hers and the Kents and Wayne Irig.

"That's his true strength," Lois murmured to herself, the words nearly lost into the bear's soft fur as she hugged it close. "His heart." She sighed as she turned out the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. "Please be okay."

It was one of the worst nights of Lois' life. It might have taken the prize for *the* worst, if she hadn't already lived through a night where she thought Clark had been murdered right before her waking eyes. Lois tossed and turned for hours. When she *did* sleep, it was in short, fitful bursts and filled with nightmares. The worst of them featured Clark's death. In others, she frantically looked for a cure, but she was never sure what *exactly* it was that she was looking for — some vial of medicine to heal him, some surgery to remove what was killing him, some treatment option that provided him some measure of comfort while his body fought off the infection. And, in a rare few, Clark recovered but their relationship did not.

In some of those dreams, Clark gloated over having kept her in the dark about his dual identities. In others, her insecurities — now heightened by the fact that Mayson had discovered the secret first — destroyed her ability to trust herself, her feelings, or even Clark. In one, the world found out that Clark Kent was the Man of Steel, and no one was silent about their disbelief that he could have chosen Lois — someone so beneath him, so unintelligent and blind as to be completely unworthy of him.

When she finally abandoned her bed only a few short hours later, she was more exhausted than when she'd laid down. To combat her lingering sleepiness, she downed three stronger than usual cups of coffee, all before calling Perry to get both Clark and herself out of work for the day. She made up a lie that they were both unwell — possibly from something they'd eaten — and shuffled her way into the shower. She purposely kept the water colder than normal, shocking her tired body into wakefulness.

As she mindlessly went about her usual morning routine — drying off, getting dressed, doing her hair and makeup — her thoughts constantly strayed back to Clark and everything she'd learned last night. For the first time, she really and truly had a chance to begin processing it all. And, more importantly, how she felt about it all.

There was the obvious, of course. She was hurt. Deeply and truly hurt that Clark hadn't come to her with his secret.

Admittedly, she could get on board with the idea that he'd wanted to give her a chance to love him for Clark, and not for not Superman and his powers. It was, after all, no secret that Lois Lane had been on a quest to become Superman's girlfriend, back when the hero had first come flying onto the scene. But they were well past that time now. She'd given up the Superman fantasy a long time ago, and Clark knew that she loved him with all her heart. But he'd still chosen not to trust her. Did he really doubt her feelings?

No, she decided. He doesn't doubt me. He's trusted me with every other part of his life and heart. But why then, didn't he just come out and tell me the whole truth?

Could it really be as simple a thing as him not having the courage to broach the subject?

That stirred the hurt in her heart. He'd shared every other deeply personal and potentially embarrassing secret he had. But this? This wasn't some embarrassing secret. This was something to be proud of! He was *Superman*, for crying out loud! A singularly bright beacon of hope and justice in a sometimes all too dark and unfair world. How could he be ashamed of all the good he'd done for the world?

Or...was he?

After all, he'd always seemed so confident and at ease with being Superman. And although he'd always been modest about Superman's accomplishments when he'd shared the stories he'd "happened upon," he'd never appeared to be embarrassed over what the hero had managed to do. Oh, sure, there had been times when he'd tried to downplay Superman's victories but that had always been because...

"Oh no!" Lois groaned. "It's my own fault! I always drooled over Superman like a lovesick schoolgirl. I always shoved Clark to the side and even compared him to Superman...and not in a good way. No wonder why he was uncomfortable with me knowing the secret. I mean, I always knew he was in some kind of bizarre competition with Superman, especially in trying to win my attention. And I knew it made him feel kind of...sad, I guess is the word. Now it makes sense. The whole time, he was competing against himself...and losing for much of that time."

Losing to himself.

It was a powerful thought that rooted her to the spot and rendered her temporarily unable to focus on any other thought.

Yes, in her eyes, Clark had constantly lost to the hero. But only now did she realize that she'd allowed the real man to lose out to someone who didn't exist. And she knew, without a doubt, that Clark was the real person — the person who powered the character in the cape. After all, she'd met his parents, had seen his baby photos, had seen the awards he'd won — academic, athletic, and professional alike. She'd even seen him filing his taxes. Clark was the one who opened the door for her at four in the morning when she excitedly rushed to him with a new lead on a story or was too afraid of something to sleep at her own place. Clark was the one who'd so often cooked for her, or brought her coffee, or good-naturedly teased her.

But Superman? Superman ceased to exist as soon as a crisis was over. He didn't have an apartment or a social security number. He didn't eat hotdogs from street vendors or laugh at cheesy old movies. He wasn't the one who was there to receive her with open arms and a smile at odd hours of the morning when she needed him. And he certainly didn't let anyone — Lois or not — into his heart.

"I really screwed things up," she softly lamented as she stared at her reflection in the mirror. "Oh, God, did I screw things up. After all I've done, can I really blame him for not being enthusiastic about telling me about Superman?"

Unbidden, her mind flashed back to just after Superman's first rescue. She'd been describing the hero while Clark looked on. She'd made comparison after comparison between Superman and

Clark. One particularly cruel remark stuck out in her mind. “Not dull, insipid mud brown, like Clark’s” she’d said of Superman’s eyes. She winced at the memory.

“I’m so sorry, Clark,” she whispered to the empty air around her. “I was too stupid and too blind to see what was right in front of me. Not your secret. But how truly wonderful you are...how much *better* than Superman you are.” She paused for a moment, thinking. “I just wish I’d known. I wish you’d told me or I’d been smart enough to see it for myself. How could I have missed it?”

How indeed?

How many times had Clark dashed off with a poor excuse — or none at all! — only to have the hero appear as soon as he was out of sight? How many times had Superman tried to steer her affections toward Clark? How many times had Superman taken the time to point out all of Clark’s good points? How many times had Clark said something to her, only to have the hero reiterate it some time later, knowing that if Superman said it, Lois might actually listen?

How had she been so stupid as to be fooled by a pair of glasses and a change in wardrobe? After all, while Clark put on a different persona for the world when he was in the blue, red, and yellow, he’d always been much the same to her, personally. In both his roles, he’d always been the perfect gentleman, the caring friend, the one person who could tease her without making her feel bad about herself.

“God, I’m such an *idiot!*” she chided herself, so upset that she couldn’t bear to look at herself in the mirror.

Anger started to creep into her heart, trying to push the hurt to one side. She let the emotion drench her, knowing it would be worse if she tried to bottle it up. How *dare* he lie to her every single day, almost since the moment they met! How *dare* he date her without divulging his secret life to her! How *dare* he let *Mayson* — once Lois’ sworn enemy — know without letting Lois in on things too!

Hot tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. Angrily, she wiped them away, hating the fact that her raging emotions were making her cry. Lois took a deep, steadying breath as she fought to master herself. Slowly, she let that same breath back out, releasing some of her anger along with it.

“It’s not like he’s a criminal or doing something terrible,” she finally admitted. “It’s not like he’s anything like Lex. Clark is doing something *good* for the world. He’s putting criminals away, helping out charities, giving hope to people, saving lives. Can I really fault him for being Superman?”

She shook her head. No, of course not. Superman was the best thing that had ever happened to the planet.

“He’s given so much of himself to the world,” she realized, “and has never asked for anything in return. Not praise. Not recognition. Not awards. Nothing. In fact, the only thing I’ve ever heard him truly desire was to spend more time with me. Something so mundane and normal that it’s...” She stopped herself. “*Normal*. Something he *can’t* do as Superman. No wonder why he kept the secret so closely guarded from the world.”

She looked up and stared at her reflection. “If anyone knew... if even one person found out and slipped — intentionally or not — his personal life would be destroyed. He’d never be allowed to do anything normal ever again. He’d be mobbed by everyone — there’s no way he’d be able to hold a job, date, or even go to the store. He wouldn’t be allowed to live his life as Clark anymore.”

It was a sobering thought. Of course, Lois knew she would never tell a soul about Clark’s dual identities. But the power of the secret she held was humbling and terrifying. It threw Clark’s fears into sharp clarity for her. Ashamedly, she knew that, in the early days of their relationship, when Clark was an unwanted partner and Superman had been both a fantasy and her ticket to the Pulitzer, she wouldn’t have been able to keep the secret. It would have been Page One news, that the mysterious new superhero was

nothing more than a farm-raised country bumpkin. There was no doubt in her mind that she would have drowned in the awards that story would have netted her. But now she realized just how devastating the consequences would have been to the best man she’d ever known.

“I’m glad I didn’t know back then,” she told herself. “But I still wish he’d trusted me sooner than he did.”

From the living room, she heard the clock softly chime, startling her out of her thoughts. She swiftly finished with her makeup and left her bedroom. While the coffeemaker brewed another vital mug of strong coffee, she picked up the phone and, with shaking fingers, dialed the Kents.

“Hello?” came the sleepy voice of Martha.

“Mrs. Kent? It’s Lois.”

“Lois?” Instantly, the older woman sounded awake. Something about Martha’s voice and the brief silence that followed screamed concern to Lois. “Is there something you needed?”

“I...uh...I’m not sure how to tell you this. Uh...Clark...”

“What’s wrong?” Dread dripped from her words.

“He’s sick. He’s...he’s at the hospital. Metropolis General, to be exact. And...I know how that sounds. I know he shouldn’t be sick, ever.”

“I’m not sure what you mean, dear.” The words were obviously chosen with care.

“Mrs. Kent...Martha,” Lois corrected, remembering how the woman was forever asking Lois to use her first name. “I know about Clark. I know what he does in his spare time. I...I found out last night, when a mutual friend of ours called me for help.”

“Mayson?” That was Jonathan.

“Clark told you that she knew,” Lois breathed as the knowledge sank in. It made sense. Clark was the typical good son who hid nothing from his parents. He’d probably wanted their opinion on what to do.

“Mmm-hmm,” Jonathan replied. “I’m sorry, Lois. He told us not to say anything to you.”

“I get it,” Lois replied. “The thing is...the doctor... Superman’s doctor, Bernard Klein? He’s not sure what’s wrong with Clark. He thinks...he thinks he picked up some kind of Kryptonian disease somehow. He’s not sure how or where. He’s not even sure how to fight it. And Clark...he’s...he’s not in good shape right now.”

“Oh, God,” came Martha’s tear and fear choked reply. “We’ll be out there as soon as we can.”

Lois shook her head, even though the two kindly farmers couldn’t see it. “I’m not sure that’s the best thing to do. He’s at the hospital as Superman. If you two went to see him...”

“It would blow his cover,” Jonathan said thoughtfully.

“Yeah.”

“Have *you* seen him?” Martha wanted to know.

“Yes,” Lois said with a nod. “Last night. Dr. Klein knows that Superman and I are friends. He didn’t question why I was with him when the ambulance picked Clark up or when I followed it to the hospital.”

“Is he going to be okay?” It wasn’t so much a question as it was a plea.

Lois hesitated. She didn’t want to scare Martha, but she didn’t want to offer false hope either.

“Dr. Klein is doing everything he can,” she said.

“We’re coming out there,” Jonathan said decisively. “Even if we can’t go to the hospital, we’ll be there when he’s released.”

“I think Clark would love that,” Lois said with a sad smile. “Do you have the key to his place?”

“We have a copy of it,” Jonathan assured her.

“Good. I’ll...I’ll try to come by, once you’ve arrived and update you on whatever I can.”

“Are you...going to the hospital today?” Martha asked.

"I'm heading out in a few minutes."

"Tell him... tell him we love him," Martha said. Lois didn't need to see the woman's tears to know she was crying.

"I will," she promised. "I'll take good care of him for you."

"Thank you," Martha whispered.

"Call me when you get to Metropolis," Lois said. "Did Clark give you my cell number?"

"Yes and we will," Jonathan said. "Lois?"

"Hmm?"

"Thank you, for letting us know. And, for the record, Martha and I are glad you know about our boy. He's talked about wanting you to know for a long time now. He's loved you since the beginning. He was just afraid of what his secret might do to your relationship."

"I know," Lois said, feeling a lump form in her throat. "He's a good man. I'm not surprised that he's given himself over to fighting for justice the way he has. I... we have a lot to talk about once he's well but... I want you to know... I love your son very much."

She could all but hear Clark's parents smiling. "That makes us so happy," Jonathan said. "We'll see you soon."

"Bye," was all Lois could manage.

She heard the click as the phone connection was severed.

Dazed, she hung up the receiver. That had been harder than she'd anticipated. Jonathan and Martha Kent were such wonderful people. They didn't deserve a phone call telling them that their only child was lying in a hospital with a serious illness than no one knew how to cure. They didn't deserve the possibility that their son would die.

Her coffeemaker beeped, letting her know that her caffeine fix was ready. She poured the black liquid into the largest travel mug she owned and swiftly prepared it to her liking. She made her way to the living room and sat down on the couch just long enough to stuff her feet into her favorite pair of sneakers. She shrugged into the coat she'd left draped over the back of the couch and grabbed her purse. Yawning as she rode the elevator down, she made the decision to hail a cab. She was simply too tired to drive.

She arrived at the hospital less than forty-five minutes later, with a burned mouth from sipping too quickly from her travel mug. It was all she could do to keep her poise as she made her way through the halls, each step taking her closer to Clark. Every second felt vital to her, as though her presence in Clark's room could cure him, or, at the very least, keep his illness at bay so he could find some relief. When she finally made it to his room, it took all her willpower not to gasp in horror as she laid eyes on him.

Somehow, Clark looked even paler, weaker, and sicker than he had during the night.

Dr. Klein was with him, so she dared not barge straight into his room like she'd envisioned she would.

"Thanks, doc," Clark wheezed.

"I'll be back in a bit, after I run these tests," Dr. Klein assured him. He paused to squeeze Clark's shoulder. "We're going to figure this out, I promise."

Clark nodded, but Lois' practiced eye saw that the move wasn't sincere. Maybe he still had some hope of getting better, but that hope lacked its usual steadfast conviction.

"Hi, Lois," the doctor said soberly as he neared the door.

"Morning, Dr. Klein," she offered in response. "How is he?" She couldn't help but to ask the question that was burning a hole in her mind.

"Not well," he replied with the shake of his head. "I've done everything I can think of to lower his temperature, but the fever refuses to break. At least it has stopped climbing. I was getting worried that it would just keep going up. But I would feel a lot better about things if I could just find a way to help him get cooler."

"What about his super breath?" Lois asked as the idea shot into her mind. She'd seen him ice down things with no more than a burst of his breath on several occasions.

Dr. Klein shook his head again. "I thought of it too. But, whatever this illness is, it's robbed him of his abilities."

"You mean he...?" She couldn't quite finish the thought.

"I got this from him without needing any... *help*," Dr. Klein said vaguely, holding up a couple of small vials of blood for testing.

Lois felt the blood draining from her face. "Oh no," she moaned.

This was bad. This was so much worse than she'd feared. Clark without his powers never boded well.

For the first time, she felt certain that she'd actually lose him.

"I have to run this to the lab," Dr. Klein said, by way of an excuse to leave. "You can visit, but he's pretty weak and needs to rest often."

"Don't worry. I won't do anything to jeopardize his recovery," she vowed.

"I'll be back if and when I have news."

With that, the kindly doctor strode away. Lois didn't even watch him go. Her attention was solely focused on Clark. She stepped through the doorway and into his room, closing the door gently behind her. He gave her a smile when she turned back around to him.

"Lois," he said. "You have no idea how good it is to see you. I was afraid you might..." He let his thought trail off into non-existence.

"I told you I'd come," she said softly, giving him a smile of her own, despite the dread in her heart. "How are you feeling today?"

"Honestly? Worse than last night," he said bluntly as she as moved to his bedside. He took her hand in his own. "I just want to be well and be home."

"I know," she said, smoothing his sweat-soaked hair back and away from his forehead, maintaining the look of Superman and hopefully cooling his body, even if only by the slightest degree. But what truly surprised her was the wave of heat she felt radiating from his skin, even without direct contact between her hand and his forehead. It was decidedly worse than the previous night. "I know," she repeated. "And you will. Soon."

"I hope so," he whispered.

Silence fell, making Lois uncomfortable. That was odd — feeling uncomfortable in front of Clark. She'd never felt that way before — not even during the awkwardness of him asking her out on a date for the very first time. No, uncomfortable was definitely a new emotion to connect to Clark. Even when they'd first met and Lois had been completely hell-bent on hating him and chasing him away, she'd felt completely confident in her dealings with him. As they'd become friends, she'd let him see every aspect of herself — the hard-bitten newshound, the vulnerable and lonely woman, the playful friend, even the jealous lover. Never once had she felt uncomfortable though.

But right now, she was. Because she knew she was lying to him. Or, at least, she was fairly certain she was. Even if he *did* recover, it could take days, maybe weeks before his health returned. *If* he recovered. Right now, looking at him, she wasn't sure if that would happen. Whatever he had, it was killing him, and fast. She didn't need a medical degree to see how much devastation it had already wrought on his body.

"I called your parents," she admitted after a minute. She let go of his hand long enough to sit down in the bedside chair.

"How'd they take things?"

"They're coming out to Metropolis."

"No," he groaned, his eyes closed.

"Don't worry. I talked to them about it. They won't come here. They just want to be nearby, you know? They want to be here for

when you get better.”

“What if I don’t?” he said, his voice barely more than a sigh. “You will.”

“But *if*,” he pressed.

Lois shook her head firmly. “No. I’m *not* discussing this with you. I don’t care what I have to do, but I *will* help find a way to get you well again.”

Clark gave her a tiny, playful grin. “Does that mean you still love me?”

That broke some of the tension in the room. Lois laughed.

“Yeah, you lunkhead. I still love you.”

“Can I still finally give you an answer to your proposal?” he teased.

That made Lois’ heart ache with sadness. What if he never became her husband? Did she even *want* that right now, before they’d had a chance to work through all the ramifications of Clark’s lies? Instead of answering directly, she gave his hand a squeeze.

“There will be plenty of time for that later,” she promised.

It wasn’t the answer he’d been hoping for. She couldn’t miss the fleeting disappointment in his features. Wordlessly, he nodded once.

“My parents,” he said after a few moments. “This is going to be hard on them, not being able to come here.”

“I’ll take care of them. I promise.”

“I appreciate that. And I know they will too.”

He tried to bite back a cough and failed. A harsh fit of coughing overtook him for two or three long minutes. Lois watched helplessly as his whole body tensed and spasmed against the assault. She could hear the mucus in his lungs as a sucking, wet sound as his body tried to rid itself of both it and the germs that had caused it. When the fit was finally over, Clark sagged back into his pillows, ashen faced and gasping for breath.

“How do people...deal with this...on a regular...basis?” he managed to jokingly ask between heaving gasps.

“We’re tougher than we look,” Lois laughed, though her heart wasn’t in the joke at all. She was too scared for it to be.

“Especially us women.” She winked at him.

Clark chuckled lightly. “No argument here,” he replied.

“Now *that* is a good sound,” came Mayson’s voice from the doorway. As Lois had, she was sure to close the door as soon as she was in the room. “Feeling any better?” she asked Clark.

“I wish,” Clark said.

“Sorry I’m late,” Mayson apologized. “Something came up. Thankfully, I was able to get it sorted out over the phone. My new receptionist is a bit of a disaster.”

“It’s no problem,” Clark said. He started to cough again.

Lois got up and checked the pitcher on the table. It was empty. She lifted the pink piece of molded plastic.

“I’ll be right back,” she promised.

“Thanks,” Clark said gratefully.

She quickly left the room and ventured down the hall to the ice machine. Filling it halfway with the crushed ice, she turned to the water dispenser. A few other people were in the little break room area, but she kept her head down and didn’t speak. With the pitcher full, she jammed the lid on and hurried back down to Clark’s room.

“Thanks, Mayson,” she heard Clark say as she entered his room.

“Anytime.”

“I’m back,” Lois lamely announced. “What’d I miss?” she half joked.

God, I’m still jealous of this woman! she realized as her mind wondered what Clark had been thanking her for.

“Not much,” Mayson offered.

“Mayson keeps me up to speed on certain cases,” Clark explained. “Nothing that oversteps confidentiality laws, of course.

But sometimes there’s more I can do, even after I’ve made a rescue or captured a criminal.”

“Like what?” Lois asked, growing curious, though she realized the question sounded almost like a challenge. She moved to Clark’s table and poured him a cup of water. She held it while he sipped through a straw.

“Thanks,” he said when his thirst had been abated. He thought for a moment. “Well, to answer your question,” he said as Lois sat back down in her seat, “sometimes I might find out that a man stole in order to afford medicine for a sick kid, or to ensure that he could put food on the table. Or maybe a victim of an assault can’t afford her medical expenses. Things like that. I take some of the information back to the Superman Foundation — things like the person’s name and address and what they need — and the board uses some of the donation money to help the person in need. Mayson was just letting me know about one such case, that’s all. Although, I guess it might be awhile, if at all, before I get a chance to pass along the information.”

“Oh,” Lois said, blushing. She felt just awful for being suspicious of Mayson yet again.

“You still don’t fully trust me,” Mayson observed neutrally.

“I’m sorry,” Lois apologized. “It’s just...I thought you hated Superman. You certainly oppose his actions every time I see your name in the news.”

“She has to,” Clark supplied with a slight shrug.

“I’m not sure I follow,” Lois said.

“Mayson has always been a voice of dissent when it comes to Superman. It would be too suspicious if she suddenly became his champion. People would question it.”

“It’s part of how I’ve chosen to protect Clark. I don’t want anyone making any connections about how, shortly after I tried to get involved with Clark, my attitude toward Superman softened,” Mayson added. “And...if we’re being completely honest, a part of me will always oppose vigilante justice in any form...even if it’s exactly the kind of help this world needs. It’s the lawyer in me.” She couldn’t — or wouldn’t — quite meet Lois’ eyes.

“In public, Mayson’s kept her same, unchanging stance on the whole Superman thing,” Clark said. “In private, she’s become Superman’s friend and ally.”

Lois slowly nodded as she thought it over. “I guess it makes sense on some level,” she admitted. “Still...I just can’t understand how anyone in the field of law and law enforcement could ever oppose what Superman does.” She made her tone light, as though she was joking, but deep down inside, she was completely serious.

Mayson declined to answer and Clark expertly guided the course of their small talk to other matters. But not for long. After only a short period of time, he began to speak less and less, until at last, while Lois and Mayson argued good-naturedly over some minor thing, he fell into an exhausted sleep. Mayson thought it best to take her leave then, so as not to disturb his rest, but Lois stayed on in a silent, thoughtful vigil.

Two days passed by. Two grueling days where Clark could feel himself getting worse by the hour. Two long days where every breath took effort and fell far short of giving his body the amount of oxygen it needed. Two days where Lois sat by his side in support.

She never complained. Not once did she comment on the tasteless, tepid cafeteria food. He heard not a word about how uncomfortable the hospital chairs were. And if she was getting annoyed with Dr. Klein’s slow and — unfortunately — ineffective treatments, she kept such thoughts to herself. She barely even checked the time, unless it was getting close to the end of visiting hours or she had an interview to get to.

He was impressed.

He longed to be able to discuss with her, at detailed length, the whole Superman thing. He was ready to tell her everything,

starting from the broken pieces of his past that Jor-El had sketched out in the messages he'd left for Clark in the globe, all the way to his adoption by the Kents, the emergence of his powers, traveling the lonely, harsh world on his own, and finding his purpose in Metropolis — both as a man in love and as Superman. He needed to let Lois yell, scream, cry, throw accusations... whatever she might need to do in order to...

To what? he asked himself in the middle of the third day of his hospital stay, while Lois was out conducting an interview he himself should have been handling. *To feel better? To hate me less? To sort out her feelings? To — hopefully — forgive me? Do I even deserve forgiveness?*

But Lois steadfastly refused to broach the subject — not even in whispered tones. It wasn't the time or place, she kept saying, any time he tried to bring it up. He understood why she wasn't ready to talk to him about it. He really did. But he was also terrified that he might die without her ever knowing all there was to know, and possibly with her still resenting him for it. He respected her wishes anyway and stopped trying after a while. *If* he got better, however, he wouldn't rest until he was sure that Lois heard all he so desperately needed to tell her.

He'd tried drafting, in his mind, the exact words he would say, but nothing sounded right. So he gave up on that too, putting his faith in the universe — that it would provide the right words if and when the time came. He wondered if there even *were* "right words" for the discussion to come.

Still, he had to believe that Lois wasn't thoroughly disgusted with him for his lies. After all, she dutifully came and kept him company. She asked Dr. Klein questions, even ones that had never occurred to Clark. She took care of whatever needs Clark had — getting him a drink, fixing his blankets and pillows, calling for Dr. Klein or a nurse if the need arose. Her devotion to him felt unreal, given the circumstances. But he was grateful for it nonetheless and took nothing for granted. If anything, he was afraid that Lois would finally snap out of whatever sense of duty she felt toward him and leave, never to return. If that happened, he wouldn't know what to do. A life without Lois wasn't a life worth living.

But she *did* return after every run to the cafeteria for a cup of the foul smelling sludge they called coffee, after every interview, after every forced retreat to her apartment to sleep the night away. It made Clark's heart skip a beat, every time the door opened and he discovered that Lois had, once again, chosen to be by his side.

Mayson came as much as possible too, but her job wasn't nearly as flexible. She typically only had time to swing by the hospital for an hour or two at night, before the visiting hours ended. Clark didn't mind. Mayson was a friend — and he was extremely thankful for that — but she wasn't the one whose mere presence lifted some of the fog of pain from his body. She wasn't the one who made his heart skip a beat in happiness.

There were two people he longed to see who *couldn't* visit him though. His parents. He wanted to see them now more than he ever had in all his life. He suddenly understood only too well why young children clung to their parents when they were sick. He longed for their comforting presence, their gentle reassurances, their loving words, the same as any sick toddler would. Maybe they could help drive away some of the fear that grew day by day — the fear that he was getting sicker, the terror that he might not recover.

But in that too, Lois did her best to cater to his needs. Every morning, she did two things as soon as she stepped foot into his room. The first was to check on how he was feeling and ask if there was anything she could do for him. The next was to deliver any messages from his parents, and jot down any messages he might have for them, so his exact words wouldn't be lost to memory in the intervening hours. It never failed to humble Clark, to see exactly how dedicated Lois was to his family. It left him aching to one day make his family hers through marriage.

For that to happen, however, he needed to get well. Needed to keep fighting. And he *was* fighting. But his best efforts weren't good enough, and he felt himself slipping away, little by little. He spent all his waking hours when Lois wasn't in his room wracking his brain for some untried idea that might have a chance of saving his life. All for naught. No thoughts, no new angles, no inspiration came to his mind. He wasn't a medical professional. He knew nothing about Kryptonian physiology. Oh, he knew the basics — like human Earthlings, he had a heart to pump blood, lungs to breathe with, kidneys to filter toxins out of his body. He had a brain to think with, bones and flesh that composed his body, muscles that made it possible for him to move around. But despite how closely his body resembled human beings, he *was* different. No one else had the powers that he did. No one else possessed invulnerability. No one else on the planet could be hurt by Kryptonite.

Lois was faring no better with new ideas.

"I've tried to think of something... *anything*... to suggest to Dr. Klein," she told him late in the evening, on his third hospital day. "But... all I've come up with is being short on sleep and distracted, less than stellar articles for Perry. I'm so sorry, Clark."

He shook his head gently. "Don't be. None of this is your fault, Lois. The truth is, I've spent a lot of time thinking about this too. And I've come up with absolutely nothing."

"I know it's not my fault," she said with a shake of her head, as though dismissing her own inner thoughts. "But... I don't know. I'm used to fixing things. I'm used to getting things done, you know? Investigating a story and getting criminals put behind bars and the like. I hate feeling so... so... *powerless*."

"I know," Clark offered. "I love that about you. Your passion and drive. Your refusal to back down on anything." He gave her a smile.

Lois fell silent. "There may be *one* thing I can do," she said after what felt like hours but was, at the most two or three minutes.

Clark arched an intrigued eyebrow. "Oh? What's that?"

"Well..." she hedged, drawing the word out. "It would require a certain amount of... shall we say... *divulgence*... of your condition. Nothing too personal, of course, but it *would* require letting someone else in on the fact that you're as sick as you are."

"Who?" Clark asked, trying to read her and failing.

"My father."

Clark found himself speechless as the words sank in. Lois' father. Samuel Lane. One of the most famous — if not *the* most famous — sports medicine doctors in the world. And while Clark's condition wasn't as simple as a torn router cuff or a busted knee, it *was* possible that the man might have some idea of how to treat Clark that no one else had yet thought of.

"Okay," he agreed without hesitation. "I trust you, Lois. If you think your father might be able to help, I'm willing to gamble on it."

Lois nodded solemnly. It was obvious to Clark that she appreciated his trust in her. "I'll call him when I get home and see what he has to say. I'd call now, but visiting hours are almost up."

"Thank you, Lois," Clark replied.

"For what? I haven't found a way to heal you yet, remember?" She was joking with him a little, but there was an inherent sadness and fear behind her words.

"I know your relationship with your father isn't great," Clark clarified. "I know you hate asking him for anything. So, I know how difficult this is, to have to ask him to save my life."

"You're right. My relationship with my father could be better," Lois admitted, fiddling with her empty coffee cup from her last cafeteria run, hours before. "He and I have been trying to fix things, ever since that whole boxing scandal he got mixed up in. But, even if we weren't making any progress on healing all the hurts between us, I would still ask him for his help right now. You're worth it."

Later that night, as promised, Lois called her father. It wasn't an easy thing to do. Not by a long shot. But Clark's life hung in the balance. He was getting sicker, not better, and it was happening quickly. So, as soon as she got back to her apartment, she locked the door, toed off her shoes, and grabbed the phone.

And then she simply sat on her couch, staring at the cordless headset in her hands.

For ten minutes, she sat there, gathering her courage, trying to find the right words to use. She knew she shouldn't be nervous. It was only her father, and despite their rocky relationship, she knew — or, at the very least, hoped — he wouldn't be able to deny her plea for help, especially considering that she was calling on Superman's behalf. She knew Sam Lane admired the hero, particularly since he, Lois, and Clark had all helped to clear his name in that boxing scandal. And yet, she was nervous anyway.

Finally, with trembling fingers, she dialed her father's number. It rang several times before going to his voicemail. She hung up without a word and dialed again, this time opting to call his lab. *Ring!* No answer. *Ring!* No answer. *Ring!*

"Hello?" came the sleepy sounding voice of her father.

"Daddy? It's me. Lois."

"Lois?" He seemed to perk up and snap to attention. "It's good to hear from you," he said after a few seconds of silence, as if he wasn't sure what he was supposed to say next. "How are you, Princess?"

"I...uh...I'm fine," she stammered. "I...I need your help with something."

"Oh? What's that?" Intrigue flowed from his voice. Intrigue and maybe a little disappointment that it wasn't a social call.

"I have a sick friend," she began. "I think he's dying. His doctor doesn't know what else he can do to try and save my friend's life. He's tried everything. I was hoping that maybe you could...maybe you had a new angle on treatment." She purposefully didn't say Superman's name yet. She didn't want that to be the only thing Sam heard.

Silence. Then, finally, "Well...that depends. What's wrong with your friend?"

"He has a...*unique* illness," Lois replied.

"Lois, honey, I'd love to help you, but I need more information," Sam pressed.

Lois sighed softly. "I know. It's just...promise me something."

"Anything." He sounded sincere.

"You can't breathe a word of what I'm about to say to anyone, ever. Not to Lucy. Not to Mom. Not to Misha or whoever your current business partner is. Not even to yourself under your breath when you think you're totally alone."

"Geez, Lois, who's your friend? The President?" Sam joked.

"Don't be silly, Daddy. It's...it's Superman," she said, her tone letting him know that she wasn't kidding.

"Su...Superman?" Sam said, stunned.

Lois rolled her eyes. "Daddy! I told you, you can't speak about this out loud!"

"Don't worry so much. I'm alone. Have been, all day. But, if it makes you happy, I'll keep it vague."

"Thanks," Lois said, nodding to herself.

Sam fell quiet a moment before speaking. "So, uh," he said, clearing his throat. "How is it that you and he...uh..."

"How do I know what's going on?" Lois supplied. "It's a long story, but what it boils down to is, he and I are friends. You know that, Daddy. I've told you before."

"Yes..." he said thoughtfully.

"When he got sick...he asked me to act as his medical proxy."

"He...*what?*" Shock and disbelief rang in his voice.

"Well, sure," Lois said casually, as though it was obvious that he would choose her. "Who else does he have? It was me or Clark, and Clark's on assignment so..." She deliberately let her voice

trail off. "So...do you think you can help?"

Sam took a noisy breath on the other end of the phone line. She knew her father well enough to know that it was his way of buying a few precious seconds as he thought. But, instead of his usual launch into some idea or another, he stayed quiet.

"Daddy?" she prompted after a minute or so.

"I'm thinking," he assured her. "Without knowing his medical history, or even how different he is from everyone else, I can't say anything with certainty."

"I understand," Lois said, her heart sinking.

"Tell me what you can," he encouraged.

So Lois did. She told him everything — about the suspected Kryptonian virus, how it was affecting Clark's body, what Dr. Klein had tried, how Clark continued to worsen. When she was completely finished, Sam took another minute of silence to mull it all over.

"It sounds like this Dr. Klein has been pretty thorough," he admitted. Lois could picture him scratching his chin as he thought. "I don't know what else there is, outside of what he's already tried. I'm sorry, Princess."

That was all it took to crush Lois' soul. The tears she'd been fighting back all day finally broke free of her iron will. A few spilled from her eyes and raced down her cheeks.

"I...see," she managed, somehow keeping her voice strong and steady. "Thanks, Daddy."

She was about to wish him a goodnight when Sam spoke again.

"Lois?"

"Yes?"

"There *might* be one other thing to try. Mind you, it's *extremely* dangerous and, well, basically a crapshoot, to be perfectly frank. It could very well kill him. But, it may be better than nothing at all."

"What is it?" she pleaded, a spark of hope fluttering like a damaged butterfly in her chest. "We're desperate."

"There's a theory...and, again, it's *only* a theory...that if a host body can be brought to the brink of death, the virus won't be able to survive. It will basically be starved out. The trick is to find that knife's edge, where the host body teeters on the edge of life, where it begins to die so that the virus dies, but stays alive enough to be pulled back into life and health. You see why I'm not eager to recommend it?"

"I do," Lois replied. "But we really *are* at that point. Thank you, Daddy. You don't know what your help means to me. But...I think I should go. I need to talk this over with him. Dr. Klein too."

"Go," Sam encouraged, sounding genuinely proud of her. "And good luck."

"Thanks, Dad. I'll call you soon." She paused and smiled. "I still owe you a dinner from the last time you were in town. Maybe we could plan something."

She could almost hear her father smiling in turn. "I'd like that. Goodnight, Lois."

"Night. And thanks again. You may have just saved Superman's life."

She hung up the phone, excitement and terror dueling in her heart. She had a potential treatment for Clark. And that's *all* it was at the moment — a *potential* treatment — unless and until Clark agreed to try it. But that same treatment could kill him faster than the accursed virus that was ravaging his body. Still, it was better than nothing, wasn't it?

"That's for him to decide," she told her living room.

She checked her watch. It was already after nine at night. Would Dr. Klein still be at the hospital? Or was he like Lois — driven to stay close to Clark for as long as humanly possible, until he was completely healed? She made the decision to take advantage of the fact that Dr. Klein had given her his private cell phone number.

Her body trembling with a mixture of hope and fear, she dialed the number and waited while it rang. On the second ring, the doctor picked up.

“Hello?” he said.

“Dr. Klein, it’s Lois. Are you still at the hospital?”

A yawn, then, “I was just about to head home for the night. Why?”

“Stay put. I’m heading back over. I think I might have solution to our problem.”

“Uh...what?” he replied, his voice heavy with exhaustion and confusion.

“I’ll explain when I get there.”

Lois hung up the phone without waiting for a response. Time was of the essence. She was sure of it. Every second counted as Clark’s condition worsened. Tossing the phone aside, she stuffed her feet into her sneakers again without bothering with the laces at all. She grabbed her purse and her car keys, and pulled her coat on only once she was in the elevator. She drove like a woman possessed, making it back to the hospital in record time, and only narrowly avoiding getting into an accident at one particularly busy intersection. The parking lot was nearly empty at that hour, now that visiting hours were over, so she had no trouble getting a spot.

Dr. Klein was waiting for her by the main check in counter. He waved away the receptionist’s questions and led Lois beyond the doors separating the lobby from the rest of the building.

“What’s this all about?” he asked Lois as they strode quickly down the hallway.

Lois shook her head. “Not here. Let’s get to his room first. There’s no sense in repeating myself.”

“Fair enough,” he said with a shrug.

Clark was asleep when they got to his room. But his sleep wasn’t restful. Instead, his skin was shiny and slick with sweat from the fever raging inside him. His breathing was the most labored that Lois had ever seen. Tremors shook his body now and again in the slightest degree. Alarm shot through her, and, out of the corner of her eye, she saw the worry in Dr. Klein’s face too.

“He wasn’t like this when I left him,” the doctor apologized. “Please, believe me.”

“I do,” Lois said with a nod, her eyes never leaving Clark. She went to Clark’s bedside. “Hey...Superman?” she called softly. No response. “Superman?” she tried again, louder this time. When he didn’t move or speak, pure terror drenched her heart. “Superman?” She gently shook him at the shoulder for good measure.

To her relief, his eyes fluttered open, but not fully. It was as if he was barely hanging on to consciousness.

“Lois?” he croaked.

“Yeah,” she said softly, smiling just a bit. “I talked to my father tonight, like I promised. Dr. Klein is here and I need to tell you both what my father said.”

Clark seemed to perk up just a tad. “Does he have a treatment?”

“Maybe. But it’s dangerous,” she said.

Swiftly, she told them what Samuel had said. She didn’t hold back on the details or sugar coat them in any kind of way. Instead, she carefully stressed just how dangerous this course of treatment could be. Clark needed to understand exactly what he was either going to agree to or reject. Clark said not a word as she spoke, save to ask for clarification once. He still said nothing as she sat back fully in her chair once she was completely finished speaking. He looked thoughtful, to her trained eyes.

“What you’re proposing...” Dr. Klein began, appearing to be almost at a loss for words.

It was hard for Lois not to cringe at “proposing.” All it did was to remind her how this had all begun — a wonderful night out followed by her disastrous proposal of marriage, made in complete ignorance of what she was getting herself into.

“I know,” Lois said. “It’s insanely dangerous. But, what other

choices do we have?”

“I’ll admit, I *have* heard of this theory before. But I’ve never heard of it actually put into practice. It would be hard enough to gauge how close a regular person would be — if they were too close to death to pull them back or not close enough, rendering the treatment pointless. With it being used on Superman...” His voice trailed off, leaving the implications left unsaid.

Lois nodded. “Like I said, it’s insane to consider. But it’s up to Superman. Superman?” she prompted.

But Clark didn’t respond.

“Superman?” she asked again, looking over to where he lay.

His eyes were closed, and at first, Lois thought he’d fallen asleep again. On a closer inspection, however, she knew something was wrong.

“*Superman?*” she cried, springing up out of her seat and gently shaking him. How she managed, in her panic, not to call him Clark, the way her heart was screaming, she didn’t know.

“Step back,” Dr. Klein gently commanded her, while simultaneously pulling her away from the bed. “Let me take a look.”

She watched without seeing as the doctor checked Clark over. Each second that passed, she yearned for an answer. But when Dr. Klein faced her again, face pale with fear, she wished for those seconds back.

“He’s slipped into a coma,” he announced, his voice hollow.

“Wh...what does that mean?” Lois asked, her throat suddenly dry and constricted.

“It means we’re out of time.” He heaved a sigh. “You’re his medical proxy. Do you want to try your father’s suggestion?”

“I...I...I...” she stammered, trying to buy time as her mind spun crazily.

How was she supposed to make that decision? Either way, Clark’s life was on the line. How could she be the one responsible for saying yes or no to a procedure that could quite possibly kill him? Dr. Klein saw her indecision and nodded.

“Look, it’s going to take me some time to go and retrieve the Kryptonite I’ll need, if you say yes,” he said, dropping his voice to a near whisper. “Think it over while I’m gone. At best, I’ll already have what I’ll need to get started right away. At worst, I’ll carry around a piece of rock for no reason. Okay?”

Lois swallowed hard, trying to moisten her throat enough to speak. “Okay,” she said with a nod. “Thanks.”

Dr. Klein checked his watch. “It shouldn’t take more than an hour for me to get to the lab and back again. I’d send an assistant to bring it here, but only Superman and I have had our biometrics programmed into the vault’s security system.”

“I’ll be ready with an answer when you return,” Lois promised, throwing a look at Clark.

Dr. Klein nodded, and, without another word, left the room.

Lois sighed as the door closed behind him. “What am I going to do?” she wondered aloud. “How am I supposed to choose between two *very bad* options?” She sighed again. “What would you choose?” she asked Clark’s unresponsive form.

She thought that maybe — just maybe — he might have chosen to risk everything and go with her father’s suggestion. After all, he hadn’t immediately rejected the idea as too dangerous. But, then again, that wasn’t Clark’s way, at least not when it concerned him. If it had been Lois’ life that was on the line, she was sure he would have voiced some kind of strong opinion on the subject.

“The Kents,” she finally realized, her voice no more than a gentle breath that even Clark’s super hearing would have had trouble picking up. “They should have a say in things.”

She pulled out her phone and hit the speed dial for Clark’s apartment. Jonathan picked up on the second ring. Lois could hear some kind of sports game playing on the television in the background. The man called for Martha to pick up the extension

and Lois hesitantly filled them in on what was happening. Neither one of the two farmers said much, which spoke volumes to Lois of how terrified they were for their son. In the end, though, Jonathan and Martha felt the way Lois did about the choice facing them.

The chance of death to the Kryptonite was preferable to the certainty of death to whatever virus was destroying his organs and body.

It was true that none of them felt particularly *good* about subjecting Clark to the deadly green stone. It was also true that they were all petrified that Dr. Klein wouldn't be able to find that narrow line between an ineffective treatment and certain death. But none of them were willing to sit back and watch as the virus slowly stole Clark away from them.

When Dr. Klein returned less than forty-five minutes later, Lois met him with grim determination.

"Do it," she told him, as soon as the door to Clark's room was shut.

Watching the Kryptonite ravage Clark's body and not being able to do a thing to help him was one of the most difficult things Lois had ever had to do in her life. But watch she did. At the very least, she knew it was better to see what was happening, rather than to step out of the room and let her imagination run rampant creating worst case scenarios. So she stayed by his bedside, watching as his body writhed and contorted in an unconscious effort to get away from the poisonous stone, until, at last, his muscles utterly failed and he lay eerily still.

Thus began her vigil over him. For most of the time, Dr. Klein sat with her, the two of them rendered mute by the gravity of the situation. Once in a while, one of them would silently get up. For Lois, she used those moments to leave the room just long enough to use the restroom and/or retrieve cups of coffee for them both. Dr. Klein always accepted his with a grateful smile, though the deep crevasses of worry never left his face. And each time he left the room for a few brief minutes, he returned the favor with a coffee for Lois.

During those all too short breaks, when Lois ventured out of Clark's room, she took stock of the life support equipment lining the hall outside of his room. She knew it was merely precautionary, in case Clark took a sudden turn for the worst, but it didn't soothe her nerves at all. Instead, it only reminded her how precarious Clark's situation was.

She kept the Kents as informed as she could, calling them to let them know the procedure was well underway and that, so far, Clark was tolerating the experiment. But after the third phone call to let them know that his status was unchanged, she simply promised to call only if something happened. Otherwise, it was pointless to keep getting their hopes up while simultaneously sending their hearts into their throats with fear.

She dozed a few times while she watched over Clark, as did Dr. Klein. The poor man looked utterly beat, and Lois didn't blame him for drifting off as they waited to see how Clark would respond to Sam Lane's idea. She did think of calling Mayson and letting her know what was going on, but thought better of it. She was too mentally and emotionally exhausted to have to explain the treatment theory and defend why she and the Kents had thought it worth the gamble. Besides, did she *really* want to admit to an attorney that her actions might just kill Superman?

Still, she felt a little guilty. She was *sure* Mayson would understand why Lois had chosen to take the risk with Clark's health. And she knew in her heart that, even if the worst happened and Clark *did* die, the woman would never even *think* to prosecute her. Not that she could, even if she wanted to. Clark had left all medical decisions in Lois' hands. That included any off-the-wall, out of the box, crapshoot experimental procedures that might have any kind of chance of saving his life.

So she didn't make the call and sent the one call Mayson made

to her straight to her voicemail.

She half expected the woman to come storming into the hospital, demanding to know why she was being ignored. But the hours passed and she didn't show up. And, really, why would she? Lois had to keep reminding herself that Mayson had no reason to suspect that anything was going on, and that it was also getting very late at night. With a full day of work under her belt and another long day of court ahead of her, Mayson wouldn't have the time to stop by. For that, Lois was glad. Though she and Mayson were making progress on the transition to friendship, she couldn't deal with the woman right now. And, selfishly, if these were to be Clark's final hours, Lois didn't want to share them with anyone else.

So she kept vigil with Dr. Klein, simply because the man refused to leave Superman's side, just in case the worst should happen. And, as much as Lois wanted to be alone with Clark, she was deeply grateful that help was just steps away if Clark's condition faltered. His presence was the only thing that calmed Lois' nerves enough to drift off in random spurts, giving her tired body a fraction of the rest it needed.

All night long and into the next day, Clark remained in his coma. There were no outward signs of the battle raging inside of him. There was no way to know if the treatment was working. But the fact that his status stayed stable gave Lois hope that they hadn't pushed the envelope too far and killed the man she still loved, despite her lingering confliction over his lies and deceit.

Night fell again. Dr. Klein, for the first time since Clark had slipped into his coma, left the room for about two hours to tend to a situation back at S.T.A.R. Labs that required his attention. Lois, for her part, finally gave in to her exhaustion and fell asleep in her chair. She dreamed of Clark while she slept, her imagination placing her back at the restaurant before her disastrous proposal. For the first time since Clark had run off that night, Lois felt a sense of peace and happiness in that dream.

She awoke to someone gently touching her arm.

Dr. Klein, her sleepy mind informed her before her eyes even opened.

She yawned and creaked her eyes open. It took a moment for them to adjust in the brightly lit room.

"Doctor?" she asked, her voice cut by a second yawn. "What's going on?"

"Lois?"

She froze as she jolted into full wakefulness. That wasn't Dr. Klein.

"C...Superman?" she asked, thunderstruck and nearly slipping up in her excitement.

"I'm okay," came the reply.

She could scarcely believe her eyes. There was Clark, reclining on his pillows, smiling at her. His skin was pink with life, that eternal tan of his a healthy bronze, as opposed to the ashen pallor he'd been sporting for nearly twenty-four hours. The familiar twinkle in his eyes had been rekindled and he almost looked strong enough to fly up out of his bed.

"Oh, thank God," she sobbed as a happy tear escaped from one eye. She sprang up out of bed and hugged him. "I was so worried about you."

"You opted for your father's treatment, didn't you?" he asked knowingly.

She nodded shakily as she pulled away again. "I didn't see any other way. Neither did your parents," she responded, noting Dr. Klein's continued absence. "I'm sorry, Clark. I didn't want to expose your body to the Kryptonite, but I just couldn't let you go without a fight."

"Sorry? Lois, you saved my life. I'm *thrilled* that you chose to give your dad's idea a shot. I wanted to give you the go-ahead for it. I just..." He shrugged, leaving the rest unsaid. He took her hand in his and reverently kissed it. "I owe you my life, Lois. I can't

even *begin* to thank you for all you've done for me these past few days. But, I promise, as soon as Dr. Klein clears me to leave here, I will do whatever it takes to make things up to you... for everything that's happened."

"Clark, you don't have to..."

"No, I want to," he interrupted. "I haven't been a very good friend to you and I've been an even worse boyfriend. I've continuously lied to you and withheld important information from you, simply because I was afraid. And then, after everything came to light, I asked you to make life and death decisions regarding my medical care. I *absolutely* need to start making amends."

Lois shook her head. "It doesn't matter right now. All that matters is if we truly beat this thing and how you're feeling."

Clark reluctantly nodded. "I feel...okay. Weak, but normal. Or, I guess, what passes for normal for me." He gave her a mischievous grin.

"And your powers?" she asked, running down a mental list of checks that might give her a clue about how close to being fully healed he might be.

Clark fell silent for a good three minutes, during which, his concentration appeared to be on the ceiling above him. Finally, he looked back at Lois.

"Still not back yet," he said, though Lois noted that he didn't seem particularly worried about that. "The sun recharges them, kind of like a battery. I probably need to spend some time in the sunlight before they'll return. That and...how long ago was the Kryptonite removed from the room?"

"Dr. Klein had it in a little lead box. He only kept it open for a short time, while he tried to gauge how close you were getting to the edge, so the virus could die off. Then he shut the box. That was almost twenty-four hours ago."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Under normal circumstances, I can recover from Kryptonite poisoning fairly quickly, but with everything else piled on top of it...who knows?"

Lois was rendered speechless by the nonchalance with which Clark spoke of his missing powers. She knew that, if it were her that was missing a part of herself, she would be panicking. But Clark was calm, collected, and seemingly at peace with his situation. Oh, she knew that his panic could be hidden deep within where it wouldn't outwardly show, but she didn't think that was the case at all. She knew Clark too well for that.

Or, at least, she *thought* she did. After all, up until a few days ago, she'd thought he was an average man with no kind of secret life at all. How wrong she'd been. Could she trust *any* of her assumptions that she knew *anything* about him? It was frustrating to think that she might not actually know anything about Clark with any kind of certainty. It upended her entire view of the world, in a way. Because Clark was *the* most trustworthy person she'd ever met. If she suddenly couldn't trust *him*, then who or what *could* she trust? It rocked her to her very core and scared her more than she could give voice to.

"Lois? Is something the matter?" he asked after a minute or two of silence.

"I...uh...no, everything's fine," she lied.

"Look, if you're worried about my powers, don't be. *I'm* not. It's not a big deal. They'll be back before you know it and I'll be back to work as Superman." He hesitated, looking uncertain. "Unless...does that bother you?" he asked in a soft tone, almost as if he was ashamed to be discussing the subject at all.

"You going back to being Superman?" she asked in turn, wanting to make sure she was understanding him correctly.

He nodded. "Yes."

"If I said yes, that it *did* bother me, could you give it up?"

She wasn't sure why she was asking such a thing. She would never be able to demand that of him. The world needed Superman. And, more importantly, she saw all too clearly that Clark needed to be Superman for his own sake. But she wanted to know the

answer anyway. It was almost like a test in her mind, to see if he would tell her the truth or not.

"Truthfully? I would try anything for you, Lois. But...in this one thing...I'd fail. He's a part of me, Lois. I don't think I could ever stand by and watch people in trouble, knowing I could help. I'm sorry, Lois. If that's a deal breaker, I'll understand."

"No," she replied gently. "It isn't. I don't want you to stop doing what you do. Despite everything, I know you need to be Superman, maybe even more than the *world* needs you to be Superman."

He chuckled softly. "That may be true." Then, sobering, "But I don't need Superman more than I need *you*, Lois. I hope you know that. Without you, there wouldn't even *be* a Superman. *You* inspired the idea, even if you didn't realize it. And, without you, I wouldn't have the strength to keep putting on the suit every day."

"You don't have to worry about me," Lois tried to reassure him. "Yeah, it's true that this is going to take some adjusting to. And yeah, it's also true that you and I still have a lot to talk about and work through. But I'll stand by you as you go around saving the world day after day. I'll cover for you at work or at social engagements or what-have-you. I'll be there if you need to talk after some disaster or another. I really *am* fine with you being Superman."

Now that you're being honest about the Superman thing, at any rate, her mind whispered to her. We still have a lot to work out between us about the all of the years you lied to me.

Dr. Klein kept Clark overnight for monitoring. Lois had thought that Clark might fight the doctor's overly cautious attitude, but, surprisingly, he graciously accepted the extra night in the hospital, claiming that it would put his own mind at ease to be there, in case the virus hadn't truly been knocked out of his system. So Lois left the hospital alone, making a relieved beeline for Clark's apartment, to share the wonderful news of Clark's restored health with his parents. Martha cried with joy and Jonathan clasped his hands together and sent "thank you" after "thank you" to the heavens.

For the first time since before their anniversary dinner, Lois slept well. So well, in fact, that she overslept completely and only awoke when Clark knocked on her door late in the morning. He'd flown over, he told her, setting her anxiety over his missing powers to rest. She hugged him tightly, then sent him on his way to see his parents, but not before he swore that they would talk about everything that night, insisting that she come over to his place.

Lois wanted to argue. She wanted to tell him to spend the time with his parents, that they had all the time in the world to talk about his secret, but she held her tongue at the sight of the naked fear that he might still lose her haunting his eyes. So she agreed, promising to stop by around seven o'clock that evening. Joy lit up his face and some of the terror in his eyes vanished.

It made her feel good inside, to see Clark looking back to his old self, but she honestly had no idea what she might say to him that night.

Still, at five minutes to seven, she arrived on his doorstep. She raised her fist to knock, but before she could, he was opening the door. A shy smile was on his face. Relief was there too, as though he'd perhaps doubted that she really would show up.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she replied.

"Come on in. Dinner's almost ready."

"Dinner? Clark, you've been out of the hospital less than twelve hours and you're cooking?" she asked, surprised.

He shrugged. "Why not? I told you, I feel completely back to normal, thanks to you taking that chance on your father's treatment idea."

"I just...shouldn't you be taking it easy, at least for a couple of

days?”

He chuckled. “I find cooking relaxing, Lois. Or, at least, it’s relaxing compared to my usual, uh, hobbies.”

Lois took a moment to inhale the wonderful scents that drenched the room and were making her mouth water. “Really? Cooking gives me anxiety. Well, relaxing or not for you, it certainly smells delicious.”

“Thanks.”

She followed him as he headed into the kitchen. He pulled open the oven and checked on what was inside.

“Looks like we’re all ready to eat,” he said.

“Great! What are we having?” She tried to sneak a peek at whatever was inside the oven and on the stovetop.

“Chicken cacciatore over ziti and garlic bread. Is that okay?”

“Mmm,” she replied with a nod. “How’d you know chicken cacciatore is one of my favorites?”

He shrugged again as he reached into the oven — sans oven mitt — and pulled out a cookie sheet laden with toasty, golden bread. “You mentioned it in passing once, during one of our first investigations together. It was during that stakeout, when we had that really terrible Italian takeout.”

Lois nodded absently at the memory. “Right. The Warner case. What was the name of that restaurant again?”

“Uh...Pauline’s,” he said as he starting bringing the food to the table.

“Yeah, that was it,” Lois said, taking the basket of bread from his hands and bringing it to the table for him. “I wouldn’t go back there if my life depended on it.”

“That ravioli should have been registered as a lethal substance,” Clark joked with a shake of his head.

“And that sauce! Or was it wallpaper paste?” Lois joked in turn.

How easy it was, slipping back into her normal realm of comfort around Clark! But, would it last? That was the question. There was still a lot they had to talk about. And when that conversation began, would Lois ever feel the same toward Clark again? What other secrets did he hold?

“I hope you like it,” Clark said nervously, his fork poised in midair, ready to dig into the meal he’d cooked especially for Lois.

He hoped the little details — remembering that chicken cacciatore was one of Lois’ favorite meals, her preference for garlic bread rather than just plain butter, her favorite brand of cream soda — would help her realize how much he truly loved her. So far, everything seemed to be going well. She appeared to be at ease with him, for the time being, at least. He only hoped that, after the conversation to come, she would still be able to tolerate him.

She’d refused to discuss the Superman thing with him throughout his illness. He understood why, of course. Neither one of them had been in the right frame of mind to talk about such serious matters. He’d barely been able to breathe at times, let alone have a prolonged conversation the way they needed to. And Dr. Klein had popped in and out of his room more often than Clark cared to admit, fretting over Clark’s worsening condition. Clark couldn’t blame the doctor. He was grateful for the doctor’s diligence and watchful eye, but it *had* restricted their already limited discussions. Even Mayson had been a problem. She’d insisted on checking in every night, and while Clark appreciated her friendship and support, he hadn’t really wanted an audience when he and Lois would finally clear the air between them.

And then there was the fact that, with everything that had been happening, Lois probably hadn’t had a chance to really process how she felt about his deception and lies. Even now, he couldn’t be sure she’d really gotten a chance to sort out her feelings on the subject. That was why he felt it was so important that they talk things over sooner rather than later. While Lois’ feelings —

whatever they were — were perfectly valid, he knew she had a tendency to blame herself and to wildly over-imagine things. He didn’t want her getting the wrong ideas about why he’d done what he’d done. He didn’t want her to think that there were other things he was hiding on her. He needed her to know that he was now a completely honest and open book to her, that she could ask him anything at all and be given a truthful and detailed answer.

But not just yet. Not over dinner.

“So, where are your parents?” she asked as she cut dainty pieces of her food, studiously not looking at him, it seemed.

“They wanted to give us some space, so they went out to dinner and dancing,” he replied, sipping at his glass of lemon water.

Lois paused, her fork in midair. “Dancing? Like, at a club?”

Clark chuckled. “Not quite. They went to *Palisade*. You know, that upscale place down by docks? It’s ballroom dancing night, and Mom’s always wanted to try that.”

“Ah,” she said in understanding. Then she took a bite of the food. He watched as her eyes rolled up blissfully in their sockets, the way they always did when she was tasting something she truly enjoyed. “Oh my God, Clark. This is amazing!” she pronounced after swallowing it down. “Where’d you learn to make this?”

“My mom,” he said proudly. “Everything here has been prepared the way she taught me.”

“You may have missed your calling as a chef,” she said.

He laughed lightly. “Nah. Journalism has been pretty good to me,” he said with a grin.

“We’ll see,” Lois replied neutrally, arching an eyebrow at him.

“In any case, I’m glad you like it. It’s actually my first attempt at making it. I, uh, I was a little nervous and nearly burnt the chicken.”

Lois nodded. “Well, it really *is* good, Clark. Thanks for making it for me.”

“You’re welcome,” he said sincerely. “If you’ll let me, I’ll definitely make it again for you, whenever you want.”

If you’re still talking to me, after our talk tonight, he sighed in his heart.

“Maybe,” she said in a non-committal tone. “But you’ll be *far* too busy in the near future to be cooking for anyone.”

“Right. My atonement,” he said with a slight dip of his head.

“Lois, I want you know, I’m ready and more than willing to do whatever it takes to earn back your trust and good graces. Chocolate from Switzerland? You’ve got it. Snow from the Andes? Just let me grab a cooler to put it in. Sushi from Tokyo? In a heartbeat. A trip to Hawaii, just to watch the sun set? I’m your very own, private jet.”

“Clark, that’s sweet and all, but, well, it’s not what I meant.”

“Oh?”

“I meant, you and I are both going to be busy figuring out how a Kryptonian virus was present at a nuclear facility. Who put it there? Why? If you ask me, the whole thing reeks of a murder plot.”

Clark nodded and sighed. “You’re probably right. It *is* pretty weird that something not of this Earth was suddenly exactly where I’d be pretty much guaranteed to be.”

A thought occurred to him and sent a shiver down his spine. His entire body shuttered in response.

“What it is?” Lois asked, sounding concerned.

“Well, I just had this thought. It’s no coincidence that the virus was at a disaster where Superman would be, right? And I started feeling unwell shortly after arriving on the scene. What if...the reactor leak wasn’t exactly...an accident?”

“You mean...someone may have sabotaged the reactor to lure you in?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe. It’s just a thought and I hope I’m wrong, but I don’t think we can discount it. I think I’ll have a

word with the authorities and whatever experts they may have called in on the case.”

“Let’s hope you’re wrong,” Lois said, her voice trembling with a lack of conviction.

“Okay,” Clark said as he settled down on the far end of the couch, taking his cues from the way Lois was sitting. “The dishes are done and the leftovers are packed for you to take home later. I’m ready to tell you everything and answer all your questions. No more lies. I promise.”

“Any yet, here you sit, still wearing your glasses,” she pointed out. “Isn’t that, in itself, a lie? You probably have the best vision on the planet. What do you need glasses for?”

“Yes and no,” he hedged. “My glasses are a part of me, Lois. No, I don’t need them. I just... I thought maybe it might be easier, if I kept them on for tonight. I want you to feel comfortable with me, Lois. I thought that, if I looked like the Clark you’ve come to know — glasses and all — it might help. Because that’s who I am. I’m not Superman. Not really. He’s not a real person. He’s just a costume and an alias I use as a cover, so I can continue to have a real life as myself while still helping people. This,” he said, gesturing to himself as he sat there, “is the real me, Lois. Fake glasses and all.”

“I know,” she said softly. “It’s just... it’s hard, reconciling the two of you as one man. I mean, I get it. Superman’s a job for you, no different than if you delivered pizzas during the hours you aren’t writing for the paper. But to have thought of you as two different men and now to recognize that one of them never really existed... it’s a bit of a mind trip.”

“I can imagine. In the beginning, when I first started as Superman, it was so strange to me, to have to think of myself as two different people. I had to keep Superman as far away from Clark as I could. I started talking about myself in the third person. It drove my mother crazy. And there were times when I was ready to just give up, because it was too hard to try and live two different lives.”

“But you didn’t,” Lois said.

“No, I didn’t,” he admitted. “And that was due mostly to you. You always said just the right things to me when I needed it most, and it gave me the strength and determination to keep going. It was incredible. You had no idea that I was Superman — or, more accurately, that I was *struggling to be* Superman — but you always managed to give me the pep talk I needed.”

“Really?” She sounded touched by his admission.

He simply nodded.

“Well, then, I’m flattered.”

“In a way,” he continued, “it makes you a hero. You are the woman who saved Superman.”

“Twice,” she pointed out with a little pride showing.

“More than twice,” he replied sincerely.

“So, what do you want to know?” he asked after a brief silence blanketed the room.

“Everything.” The response was immediate.

“Okay,” he said with a single nod. He scanned the room with his eyes as he thought about how to dive into the subject. “Where to begin? I guess... My name really is Clark Jerome Kent. It’s the name I’ve always gone by. I never knew any different, until not long ago. I was given the name Kal-El at birth by parents who had to give me up to save my life. I was a foundling child, as you already know. But you don’t know the *true* story, just the ‘official’ one we’ve always used. That is, that I was left on their porch.”

He looked to Lois and found her nodding. “My parents found me one night after seeing what they thought was a meteor crash into a field not far from their home. They followed the streak of light and found a tiny spaceship with me inside of it. I was maybe two months old. They couldn’t have children of their own, and they adopted me as their son. But they were terrified that someone

would come and take me away from them... a government official or scientist or whatever. So they told everyone I’d been found on their doorstep and hid the craft that had brought me to Earth.”

His heart was hammering in his chest. He’d never spoken of his origins to anyone before. “I grew up never knowing that I was Kryptonian. Oh, I knew I was different. All throughout my childhood, my powers started manifesting, one by one. I didn’t know why. Neither did my parents. Together, we worked hard and got each one under control. But, I always had questions. Who was I? Where did I come from? Why hadn’t my birth parents been with me? Why was I so different from everyone else? Would I ever stop gaining new powers? I was an outsider, even though I worked hard to fit in. I had friends, sure, but I was still alone, no matter where on Earth I traveled to. And then, I came to Metropolis. I started at the paper and met you. Suddenly, I felt like I really belonged to the world, like I could stop searching for a place to call home. And, through you, I found my calling... a way to save people in a more, shall we say, *immediate* way than just through investigations.”

“Please,” Lois said, blowing off his words.

“No, I’m being serious,” he said earnestly. “You inspired the idea of Superman, simply by suggesting that I keep a spare change of clothing on hand. Suddenly, I had this vision of how I could use my powers to help people, while still protecting myself. My parents were always afraid that, if anyone ever found out about me, they’d lock me in a lab and dissect me like a frog. Trask proved them right. Only he didn’t want to dissect me, he just wanted to kill me, because he was afraid of someone who was different than the rest of society. Anyway, when we had our first run in with him, here in Metropolis, and we found Bureau Thirty-Nine’s warehouse, I was drawn to a small globe.”

“The one Jack stole. The one with the hologram of the guy wearing Superman’s S,” Lois supplied.

“Yes. I took the globe and didn’t tell you. It killed me inside, not to tell you, but... how could I have explained it? So, for a couple of months, it stayed hidden in a box on my self, gathering dust and stirring up even more questions in my mind. Until one night, it lit up and this hologram started talking to me. It was my father, Lois. Jor-El. He’d left me messages within the globe, giving me a brief overview of my history. That’s when I learned that I’m from a planet called Krypton. My parents — Jor-El and Lara — sent me to Earth because their planet was on the verge of death. I barely escaped before the planet exploded, making me the only survivor that I know of, and creating Kryptonite in the same moment. For the first time in my life, I had answers to just a handful of the questions I’d always had. But those answers, as amazing as it was to have them, weren’t enough. I have more questions than ever before, but no way of finding out the answers.”

“I’m sorry, Clark,” Lois said sympathetically, reaching across the couch to him.

He took her hand. “Thanks,” he murmured, a little surprised at the contact.

He went on then, giving her a detailed account of his life. She asked only a few questions here and there, causing him to panic internally. A silent Lois on the outside usually meant a surging volcano within. It was only a matter of time before her anger would come spewing forth, rightfully burying him in fire and ash.

“I guess... that’s all there is to tell,” he said, nearly an hour and a half later. “If there’s anything else you want to know, just ask. I’ll always, *always* be honest with you, Lois. I swear.”

“Is that so?” She arched an eyebrow at him, as if gauging how serious he was.

“Absolutely.”

“So, if I asked you how many women you’ve dated...”

“Five,” Clark immediately responded, not waiting for her to finish, eager to prove that he would be true to his word. “Lana in high school, Sarah in college for one semester, Veronica for one

summer, Cathy just after I graduated for about, oh, I guess it was maybe four months, and you. And there were a handful of first dates in college that went so poorly that it never progressed to a second date.”

Lois nodded thoughtfully. “Boxers or briefs?”

Clark blushed a little at the personal questions, but it was more than obvious that Lois *wanted* to ask embarrassing things, to see if he would answer her.

“Boxers,” he replied, not meeting her gaze.

“The women you saw...how many did you...”

“None,” he interrupted, looking away. “I’ve never been in love before. Until I met you.”

“So, you’re...” Her eyes widened in shock.

He didn’t need her to elaborate. He knew exactly what she meant. “Yes.”

“How does that even happen?” Lois wondered aloud. “You can have anyone in the world. You’re...you. With your looks and the whole Superman celebrity thing...”

“I made a promise to myself, a long time ago, when I was first starting to become interested in women in ‘that way.’ I’d never give myself to anyone I didn’t love, and who didn’t know everything about me.”

Lois shook her head in stunned silence. Then, a nervous chuckle. “You really *are* being completely honest with me, aren’t you?” she asked in wonderment.

“I’ve always been honest with you, Lois. I just wasn’t being completely open with you.”

She crossed her arms and gave him a hard look. “Same difference.”

“No, it’s not,” he said quietly. “Everything I’ve ever told you has been the truth, Lois. Every emotion I’ve shown has been real. Every time I’ve share a like or dislike with you, or expressed an opinion, or told you have much I love you, has all been the real me. I’ve never held back anything from you, except for Superman. And even then, you *had* to realize that he treated you differently from anyone else in the world.”

“Well, yeah, sure. But I thought it was a perk of being his friend. And maybe even a sign that I might have had a chance with him, at least in the beginning.”

“I couldn’t help it,” he replied. “I could never hide the way I feel about you. I told myself, over and over again, that it was safer for the both of us, if Superman kept you at an arm’s distance. But then I’d see you at a rescue, or come to your aid, and...” He gestured vaguely as he sighed. “I’d be lost to you once again.”

“Clark...” Lois stood up from the couch and paced the living room.

He waited, but she didn’t continue. After a minute, he spoke again. “Look, Lois, I don’t expect you to forgive me. Not now, not ever. Not if forgiveness is something you can’t — or don’t want to — give.”

He got up and joined her where she stood near his refrigerator. With infinite caution, he put his hands on her shoulders, and the thought shot across his mind that, if Lois chose to reject him, this could well be the very last time he would ever be allowed to touch her in any way.

“Clark,” she said again, slipping out of his touch. She walked several steps away from him. Without turning around, she started to speak. “I’ve done a lot of thinking over the last few days, ever since I first found out about your secret. At first, I was too angry to feel anything else but mad. Well, angry and afraid for you. It was weird to me, to be able to have this intense fury at you, but to also still love you and be so afraid that I might lose you. It took a lot of self reflection before I was able to make any sense of anything I was feeling.”

“I’m sorry things happened the way they did,” he offered.

“I’m not sure that *I* am,” she replied, turning to face him. She retreated to the couch again and sat back down. “I’m *not* happy

that you were as sick as you were. But being in a situation where I had to face the very real possibility that I might never see you again made me realize just how much I need you in my life. It forced me to take a good, hard look at our relationship. It gave me a lot of perspective. And I came to the conclusion that I really *do* want you in my life.”

She patted the seat next to her on the couch and Clark warily sat as directed.

“Now, that doesn’t mean I’m not mad. When Mayson first called me and told me that you were at her apartment, I saw red. I was absolutely furious with you, because I thought that you...I don’t know. That I’d scared you off by asking you to marry me. That maybe you’d chosen her over me. That I’d find out that you didn’t love me the way I thought you did.”

“Lois! Of *course* I love you,” Clark replied, shocked that she could ever doubt his feelings for her.

“I know,” she said, nodding absently, “but in the heat of the moment...” She didn’t finish the thought. “I wasn’t thinking straight. I wasn’t even going to go to her apartment when she first asked. It was only when she said that you were sick and that she was scared that I realized that something bigger than you having cold feet was going on. So, I went to her apartment, only to find out that you’d been lying to me about an entire side of your life almost since the moment I met you.”

“I’ll go to my grave regretting how that night played out,” he said, hoping she knew how sincere he was being. “*Everything* about that night,” he clarified.

“I’m sure,” she said, appearing to be taking him seriously. “The next thing I knew, Dr. Klein was telling us that, short of a miracle, you’d die. And for the first time, it almost didn’t matter, that you’d been lying to me for so long. I was still angry and hurt, but the fear that I’d lose you took over, and I had to set aside my instincts to yell and scream and cry and question you. I hate to admit it, but, in a way, it was a good thing that I couldn’t go with my knee-jerk reaction. I think, had I been able to take out all of my anger and hurt on you that night, I would have said things that I would have regretted. You know my history with men, Clark.”

“I do.”

“It’s hardened me in a lot of ways. Because of that, something like this...under normal circumstances, I wouldn’t have thought twice about walking away from someone who’d hurt me so deeply. But...nothing about us or our situation is normal.”

“You can say that again,” Clark chuckled, feeling like maybe, just maybe, he still had a chance to save his relationship with Lois.

She laughed nervously in turn. “I mean, look at us. Look at our story. Unwilling partners at work — well, *I* was unwilling, at any rate — who somehow became best friends, then a couple. And then me finding out the two men I’ve fantasized most about in my life were actually the same person.”

“You fantasized about me? Uh, I mean, the Clark me?” he couldn’t help but to tease.

She gave him a smirk. “Don’t let it go to your head, Farm Boy.”

He put his hands up in a gesture of mock surrender. That made her laugh again, but this time, there was no nervousness in it, only pure amusement and some relief. But after an all too short moment, her features went back to being serious again.

“Most of all, not being able to take out my anger on you made me realize how much I love you. I’m not saying that I can just magically forget everything that’s happened between us. But what I can promise is that I’ll do my damndest to not let it affect us as we move forward and put this all behind us.”

“So...you’re giving me another chance?” It seemed too good to be true.

She took a deep breath and slowly let it out. “Maybe I’m crazy for this but...yeah, I am.”

“I promise you, Lois. You won’t regret it. The last thing I want

to do is to hurt you, Lois. I never want to make you doubt my feelings for you. Because I love you too much for that. I *respect* you too much for that. The truth is, I'm glad you know everything. I'm glad I don't have to be afraid anymore. Afraid that you'll find out and hate me for it. Afraid that I'd never find the courage to tell you. None of this happened the way I would have chosen, but I'm glad Mayson called you that night."

"You know, somewhere, in the back of my mind, even as everything was unfolding, I'll admit that part of me was surprised you still saw Mayson at all. I mean, I knew you were still friendly with her as Clark, but I didn't think you still...saw her."

Clark shrugged. "I don't. Not really. I've had a couple of run-ins with her as myself, all of which you know about. Mostly stuff dealing with our investigations. And a couple of times when I checked in with her after the attempt on her life. I see her far more often as Superman. Again, all in a professional capacity, like I told you about in the hospital. I didn't really enjoy seeing her while in the suit in the beginning. I felt...exposed. Like a ridiculous fraud. She *knew* who I really was. I was always afraid that she might...I don't know. Accidentally call me by the wrong name or something. Do something that might give away my true identity. Plus, it felt just plain weird, to be meeting on friendly terms with her after her very public mistrust and distaste for Superman."

"And what about me?" Lois asked thoughtfully.

"What about you?"

"Don't you worry that I might give you away somehow?"

"No," he replied confidently and without hesitation. "I know I can trust you. More than that even. I can't really explain it. I know you'd never betray me, just like I know the sun will rise in the east tomorrow morning and set in the west. I know it just like I know that I can find you anywhere you are, just by the sound of your heartbeat alone. I know it like I know my love for you." He gave her a wobbly, but hopeful, smile.

"Smooth talker," she said, shyly returning the smile and lightly patting his shoulder.

He didn't say anything right away, choosing to savor the moment for what it was — a meeting of hearts, an understanding between souls, and a promise of a more perfect, honest future to come.

"Lois?" he said after a minute or two had passed.

"Hmm?"

"Do you...mind that Mayson and I have remained friends?"

"A week ago, it would have, I think," she admitted slowly, as if she was carefully thinking over his question. "But now? No. Part of me hates to say so, but I've seen a different side to her throughout all of this. She's not the person I thought she was. At first, I *hated* that she was the one you turned to for help. I'm glad that she was there to help you, if I couldn't be."

Clark shifted slightly, facing Lois just a bit more than he had been. He took both of her hands in his. "I never chose her, Lois. Going to her when I was in trouble was a matter of necessity. I was literally too sick to make it any further. I couldn't make it to your apartment any more than I could have made it here."

Lois nodded and scooted closer, until she was leaning against him. "I believe you."

Belief.

Trust.

Could it be that Lois was going to grant him her trust again? Could it be that his deception hadn't completely destroyed her ability to believe that he could be truthful with her?

"You don't know how glad I am to hear that," he whispered as he snaked his arm around her body. "Your trust in me means everything, Lois. Because if I'd lost that...I would have lost you. And I know I'm not strong enough to handle that."

"Don't make me regret it." It was half an ultimatum, half a plea.

"Never," he swore. "You have my word, Lois. I *love* the fact

that I can be honest with you now. For so long, I've been alone in how I live my life."

"You've always had your parents," Lois pointed out, interrupting him.

"True," he agreed, "but it's different with them. They're my *parents*. Their support is...I don't want to say a given, but...it's kind of a given, you know? Besides, my entire life, I'd hoped and prayed to find love. To find a woman who accepts me for me, who I don't have to hide from. To find the one person in the world who'll be my shelter in the storm of life, someone who will be my source of strength, who will make me feel like I belong on this Earth. You've *always* been that woman, Lois. Since the moment I met you, it's been like...peace has come over my soul. For the first time, I wasn't afraid to let someone get past the protective barriers I'd erected around myself, lest anyone find out that I'm not a normal guy."

Lois put her head on his shoulder. "Well, I guess we've both been each other's rock. Once I stopped trying to push you away, you did the same thing for me. You healed the wounds that so many other guys had caused my heart. For the first time, I felt safe letting myself develop feelings for someone else. For the first time, I felt safe in letting myself fall in love."

"You still love me?" he teased.

"Of course I do, you lunthead," she smiled, gently slapping his chest. "I'm not saying that I don't still have a few things to work on getting through, but, I'm here for you, Clark. I still want to make things work between us, even if we take a minor step back from my, perhaps ill-advised, proposal."

"I'll wait for you, Lois, for as long as it takes," he vowed quietly.

"That was an amazing meal, Martha," Lois complimented as she daintily dabbed her mouth with her napkin. "Thank you for having me over."

"You're welcome, dear," Martha said with a smile as she started to stand to clean up.

"Mom, let me," Clark offered, putting his own napkin down. He stood and picked up the bowl of mashed potatoes.

"I'll help," Lois said, but before she could move to stand up, Clark shook his head.

"I've got this. Relax. Enjoy yourself."

He really *did* want her to relax. After all they'd been through in the last month, she certainly deserved any relaxation she could get. Between the two of them, they'd tracked down the team who'd evaluated the nuclear facility after Superman's rescue, as well as a good number of the people he'd saved. In the guise of Superman, Clark had persuaded the local authorities to allow Dr. Klein to take a look at the samples they'd taken inside the building. As they'd suspected, he'd managed to find traces of the Kryptonian virus that had almost taken Clark's life. Together, Clark and Dr. Klein had managed to procure numerous samples of the virus. The doctor spent days experimenting on them, only to find that the virus could easily be killed with fire. Teams were immediately dispatched to cleanse the place, though Dr. Klein kept the exact extent of what it could do to Superman tightly under wraps. Then, and only then, was Clark confident enough to return to the site to help dissipate the lingering radiation.

From there, he and Lois had uncovered leads to a particular scientist who worked at the facility — a woman named Asako Fukui — who'd been responsible for releasing the virus on the night of the reactor breach. But she hadn't been acting alone. Six others had been in on the plot, and, as Clark had feared, the problem with the reactor had been a purposeful attempt to lure Superman into a trap. With the seven conspirators safely behind bars, they had tracked the virus to Johnny Bermuda, who'd created the virus from crystallized microbes from the ship Clark had come to Earth in.

The stolen ship I came to Earth in, Clark mentally corrected himself.

The tiny space craft had disappeared during the first encounter with Trask and Bureau Thirty Nine, much to Clark's concern and despair. As it turned out, Mindy Church, the new head of the crime syndicate, Intergang, had somehow gotten her manicured claws on it. It made Clark feel only marginally better to know that all the parties involved were in jail and awaiting trial.

Throughout all of their relentless investigation, he and Lois had continued to work on their relationship. To say they had come a long way was a gross understatement. Because of their newfound ability to be completely honest with one another, they were now closer than ever before. Their trust in one another had blossomed. Their love had deepened. That wasn't to say that it hadn't been rough in the beginning. There had still been times where Clark had lain awake most of the night, worried that Lois might still change her mind and decide he wasn't worth the effort.

Now, here they were, celebrating Christmas together at the Kent family farm, just as they had planned weeks before.

"Clark, I really don't mind..." Lois protested.

He smiled. "Really, it's okay. I've got this."

"Fine, but no super-cheating," she teased him.

Clark offered up a good-natured, overly dramatic groan.

Jonathan let go of a deep belly laugh. "Atta girl," he encouraged Lois as he adjusted his glasses.

"Dad! You're ganging up on me?" Clark mock-complained.

"Sorry, son. But Lois is one of the family, especially since she knows our little secret."

"One of the family? What am I then? Chopped liver?" he tossed back lightly.

"Lois, I know we've said this before," Jonathan said, deftly changing the course of the conversation, "but Martha and I couldn't be happier that you're in the know now. We've always hoped for this day, when Clark no longer has to hide who he is from the woman he loves."

"That's right," Martha agreed. "I can't speak for Jonathan, but, as soon as we met you for the first time, I started praying for this day."

"Really? But I was just awful during that first meeting," Lois said in disbelief.

Clark chuckled to himself as he continued to clear the table of leftover food and dishes. He worked swiftly, to the point where he was borderline using his powers. He kept a watchful eye to make sure no one noticed.

"Nonsense," Martha said with a shake of her head. She reached for Lois' hands and covered them briefly with her own.

"We both saw fire and passion in you, and knew that you were the right match for our son."

"I wish I'd seen it so clearly that early on," Lois said softly.

"But, I want you both to know, I'll always take good care of him. And I'm honored that you're okay with the fact that I know the family secret. I'll guard it with my life. You don't have to worry. I know I've said it before, but I feel like, now that I'm here and we don't have to worry about Clark's health, I should say it again."

"And we should thank you, again, for being there for Clark when we couldn't," Jonathan said solemnly.

"I'm just glad my father had that crazy idea about how to kill the virus," Lois said.

"So am I," Clark put in as he transferred the remaining turkey to a Tupperware container and found a spot for it in the fridge. "It saved my life."

"We're *all* grateful," Jonathan said sincerely.

"Why don't you guys go on into the living room?" Clark asked as he poured the extra gravy into a container to put away. "I'm almost done here. I'll be in in a couple of minutes."

"Okay. But could you get the table set for dessert?" Martha asked.

"Of course," he replied with a dip of his head. He grabbed a dish towel to clean off a spot of gravy that had splashed onto the back of his right hand.

Once everyone was out of sight, he allowed his tight restraint on his powers to slip just enough to speed through the rest of the clean up and set up for dessert. He put out everything he could, including the butter cookies he'd whipped up the night before, using his grandmother's old recipe. It was a surprise for his mother. He hadn't told her that he was going to attempt to replicate her mother's cookies. And, from what he remembered of them, he'd gotten them just about spot on.

A few minutes later, he joined his family in the living room. Lois was sitting there laughing over whatever story she'd just been told. Clark settled down next to her on the couch, a content smile on his face and a warmth of peace in his heart. This is what he'd always yearned for — a family that extended beyond his parents and himself. This was the first step in seeing his dreams come true — to have a wife and children of his own.

Please, he silently pleaded to the universe. *Please let it be.*

"Clark, honey?"

"Yeah, Mom?"

"Could you hand me those two packages under the tree? The ones right up front?" Martha pointed. "The red with the gold bow and the green with the silver."

"Sure," Clark said. He slid off the couch to sit on the floor. He retrieved the packages in question and handed them to his mother. "You know we don't have to still do this," he said with a grin.

"What?" Lois asked.

"Christmas Eve gifts," Clark replied with a shrug. "Isn't it obvious?"

"But... I thought we were exchanging gifts in the morning. You said that was your tradition."

"It is," Clark clarified. "But, when I was a kid, I also got one gift on Christmas Eve, to tide me over until the morning. At first, it was Santa who'd bring the gift. Then, once I got older, it was something from my parents."

"It's been a tradition of ours since Clark's very first Christmas," Martha said fondly. "It goes back generations on Jonathan's side."

"Even when the family didn't have much to spare, they managed to keep the tradition going," Jonathan proudly boasted.

"It's a nice tradition," Lois said approvingly. "I like it."

"Welcome to it," Martha said with a smile as she handed Lois the gift in the shiny red paper.

"Oh...oh!" Lois said in surprise as the box made its way into her hands. It was clear she hadn't anticipated being included in the intimate family traditions. "Thank you! You didn't have to do this."

"She wanted to," Jonathan said with a wink. "We *both* want you to be as much a part of this family as possible."

"I'm honored," she replied, and Clark could hear the tears she was blinking back. The simple act of including her in the family's long standing tradition had touched her heart.

"Clark? This one is yours," Martha continued, handing Clark the bright green gift.

"Thanks," he said.

"Well? Go on. Open them," Martha encouraged.

Lois shared a look with Clark, then they both dived into opening their present. Lois pulled a fluffy, pink fleece robe and matching slippers out of her box, while Clark opened his box to find an identical set in maroon.

"I love it!" Lois exclaimed enthusiastically. "I was just thinking that I should replace my old, worn out robe the other day when I was doing my laundry. This is perfect. Thank you both."

"Glad you like them," Jonathan said.

"I love it too," Clark said. "It'll be nice to slip into after a long

day's work. Uh, reporting or superhero," he clarified with a grin.

Lois gently ribbed him with her elbow. "Who knew Superman enjoyed fuzzy bathrobes?" she teased.

"What? A guy can't relax after lifting a rocket into orbit, or cleaning up an oil spill?" he teased back.

"This is nice," Jonathan commented. "Being able to speak freely like this."

"No kidding," Clark said with a smile as he ran a hand through his hair. "It's such a relief to not have to hide anymore."

"It's nice to not feel like I'm the only one not in some kind of secret club," Lois said. "I always did wonder about those little looks you all used to give each other. I thought it was just some... I don't know. Something that close-knit families did that I wouldn't know about, given the federal disaster that was my family growing up. I just want to say... I'm truly honored that you both are okay with me knowing the family secret."

"Lois, you make our boy happy," Martha said with a smile. "That's what matters most to us. And we trust you to keep that knowledge you now have safe. Plus, on a selfish note, it's nice to finally have another woman that I can talk to about my son." She gave Lois a smile and a conspiratorial wink.

Lois' answer was to gently embrace the older woman. Then she got up and did the same to Jonathan.

"Thank you," she told them, in a voice that sounded humbled.

"Well, I don't know about you younger folks," Jonathan said, standing and stretching, once Lois had returned to her place on the couch. "But I'm going to head up to bed."

"Me too," Martha agreed, stifling a yawn.

Lois looked to Clark.

"I think I'll stay up for a bit and watch the fire," he said, nodding in the direction of the hearth.

"Just make sure it's out completely before you go to sleep," Martha reminded him.

Clark rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "Mom, you *do* know that I put out fires on what's become an alarmingly regular basis," he told her.

Martha smiled and patted his cheek. "I know. But, Superman or not, I'm still your mother, and I'll always worry about you."

"Goodnight, Mom," Clark said with a smile and a chuckle. "And don't worry about the fire."

"Goodnight, you two," Jonathan said. "See you in the morning."

"Night, Dad," Clark said, watching as his parents left the room. He turned back to Lois after they were out of sight.

"I love your family," Lois said softly. "They're so... normal."

"Yeah," Clark agreed. "Just two normal farmers who raised an alien as their own." He grinned widely.

Lois laughed a little. "Yeah."

"They really *are* happy that you know," he said after a few seconds of silence. He reached for her and she slipped into his waiting embrace. "You want to know what my mother said when it first came up in conversation?"

"What?" she asked, clearly intrigued.

Clark smiled at the memory. "She said she was relieved that you finally knew. That she'd been waiting for this moment ever since she met you."

"Really?" she asked.

He nodded. "Really. She was ready to throw a party. I've never seen her so excited over the idea that someone else might know about me."

"What about Mayson? I mean, she's clearly been on your side ever since that night with the bomb."

Clark shook his head. "Mom's first reaction to Mayson knowing was to try and enroll me in the witness protection program. Or close enough to it. And, before you ask, I'm not joking."

"No, you aren't," Lois said, searching his face for any sign of

humor. "But, she *has* proven herself, hasn't she?"

"Yes. And they *are* grateful for her help, in their own way.

They appreciate that she's able to help me out in what small ways she can. But they still hate the fact that she knows about me." He paused to kiss the top of her head. "Now, you? They *love* that you know. You've always been my rock, Lois. My source of strength. My...my refuge and my happy place. They are so grateful for all of the infinite ways you've always been there for me. Before I met you, I was so lonely, I thought I'd never know true happiness. And then, you stormed into my interview with Perry. Suddenly, my world was turned upside down in the best of ways. I wasn't lonely anymore. The restlessness in my heart that had been a major factor in my world travels was snuffed out. In an instant, Metropolis was my home, the place where my heart found rest and happiness."

"You and I aren't so different in that respect," Lois said after half a minute had passed. "You cured my loneliness too and quelled the unrest in my heart. You're my happy place too."

"I, uh... I have something I'd like to give you tonight, Lois," Clark said, his pulse quickening. "It's not a gift, per se, but it's something I'd like to give you in private. If that's okay, I mean."

Lois nodded. "I don't really have anything to give you tonight. I didn't think that we'd be exchanging gifts tonight. Maybe one of the smaller things I got you..."

Clark shook his head. "No, it's okay, really. I just... if it's okay with you, I never got a chance to, well, to answer an important question you once asked me."

He reached into his shirt pocket as he spoke and pulled out the small ring that was concealed there. He'd slipped it in there while he'd cleaned up from dessert, and, luckily, Lois hadn't noticed the few times he'd worriedly put his hand to his chest, making sure it was still safely there.

"Lois Lane, if I may... I'd like to answer your question. If you will still have me, then, yes, I would be honored to be your husband."

At a teary and encouraging nod, he slipped the ring onto her finger, the delicate golden band gliding effortlessly over the digit.

"Yes, I will still have you, Clark Kent," she said as silver tears escaped her eyes and raced down her cheeks. She wiped them away, seemingly embarrassed, then she took a moment to admire the ring. "It's gorgeous, Clark," she announced. Then, perhaps to cover the embarrassment of her tears, "Get some help from Mayson?" She was joking now, Clark was glad to hear.

"No, she wanted a completely different style," he tossed back. "Kidding!" He put his hands up in a gesture of surrender as she went to slap his pectoral. "Couldn't help myself," he explained. "Truth be told, I saw that ring right when I first met you.

Remember the jewelry shop that the 'Invisible Man' robbed? I kept the ring in the back of my mind, and, call me crazy, I went and bought it after our second date, hoping against hope that, one day, I'd be free to give it to you."

"Okay, you're crazy," she said, grinning. "Crazy but very sweet."

"I love you, Lois," he told her, drawing her close to kiss her deeply.

When they parted, Lois gave him a mischievous look. "Should we wake your parents and tell them the good news?"

"Nah," Clark said, waving off the suggestion. "For tonight, at least, it's our little secret."

THE END