

Shadows in Darkness

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Rating: K+

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Prologue

Do we stand in our own light wherever we go, and fight our own shadows forever?

Lord Edward Robert Bulwer Lytton, *Lucile* (pt. II, canto II, st. 5)

English statesman and poet (1831 - 1891)

We should never let our fears hold us back from pursuing hopes.

John F. Kennedy

American politician (U.S. President) (1917-1963)

He who wishes to secure the good of others has already secured his own.

Confucius

Chinese philosopher (c. 550-478 BCE)

Ed Straker threw down his copy of the Daily Planet and swore. That damned alien was back from wherever he'd been for the past six years and nobody seemed worried that an alien entity from only God knew where was being hailed as a planetary hero. This was despite the fact that it was alien technology that had put the planet in jeopardy in the first place. He also noted that Clark Kent was back at the Planet. He wasn't sure which one he hated more, Kent for sticking his nose where it wasn't wanted, or that damned alien.

He picked up the paper again and flipped through to the science section. *New Krypton* was what the Planet dubbed the alien crystal construct that was currently orbiting Earth's sun between Mars and Jupiter. 'New Krypton' he sneered. Even the name was an abomination. A glossy name for an alien staging platform in our own solar system, filled with unknown alien technology of incredible power. Technology that might, just *might*, be useful in fighting off the invasion he knew was coming. In fact, the invasion had already started and it was only a matter of time before Metropolis's resident space alien showed his true colors - and they weren't red, white and blue.

Straker considered both the reporter and the superhero for a long moment. SHADO, Straker's project since its inception in 1970, would still be doing its job defending the planet from an alien invasion, if Superman hadn't shown up in Metropolis, giving everyone on the planet the notion that aliens from outer space were benevolent and peaceable. The fact that the aliens Straker was charged to defend the planet against had disappeared was irrelevant.

But it was Kent whose actions six years before that filled Straker with venom.

When the various world governments who had been its sponsors decided to cut their support, SHADO had found other sources of revenue. Clark Kent had been the one to expose SHADO's new revenue sources, equating the organization to drug runners and arms dealers. The man saw no difference between criminals out after their own gain, and a once respected military operation forced to find funding wherever it could to continue its mission. Yes, Kent would get his due very soon. And soon that damned alien would get his.

One

Richard White walked up to the open door of the editor's office. Through the office windows he could see his fiancée, Lois Lane, talking with his uncle Perry White. From her body language she was not a happy woman.

"Why Clark?" she was saying. "Why not Richard? Why not anybody else in the news room?"

Richard tapped on the door, but they ignored him. He walked in anyway.

"Kent's been away from the city," Perry was explaining patiently. "He'll bring a fresh perspective to the changes that have happened in Metropolis the past six years, attitude, tempo."

"And Jason? Why Jason?" Lois complained.

"Can you think of anyone better? The kid's got journalism in his blood. It'll be great copy."

Lois seemed unconvinced but Richard knew Perry was right. It had the makings of a great story. And he knew she knew.

"Okay, but if anything happens..." she warned.

"What can happen?" Perry countered. "Jason shows Kent around, gives a kid eye view, Kent writes the article and Olsen takes the pictures."

"What about the reconstruction story?" Lois demanded.

"Half the staff is already on that," Perry reminded her. "And Olsen's already well started on his 'Heroes of Metropolis' series."

"And he's started with Superman, naturally," Lois huffed.

"No, actually," Perry said with a smile. "He's specifically not mentioning Superman. Just ordinary everyday people."

Lois looked confused.

"If Olsen can put it together, he's got a Pulitzer coming," Perry said. Richard heard pride in the older man's voice. Olsen was a talented photographer, no one could deny that, and if he could get his brain in gear, it would be an award-winning story. "So, everything's covered."

"What about Luthor? He's still missing," Lois reminded her boss.

"Maddox's got it covered," Perry told her. "But if you think the FBI, the CIA, and Interpol can't handle it..."

Lois's shoulders slumped.

"Superman's made a statement to the FBI and the D.A., so have you, me, Jason and most of Gertrude Vanderworth's relatives," Richard added. "And every government that had their consulate damaged during the 'quake, or had citizens injured, has Luthor on their most wanted list and a couple of them have already convicted him *in absentia*. Assuming he's found alive, he's not getting away with it." Richard grinned at her. "Besides, it gives us the day to ourselves. And Jason's all for it. You know how he's has latched onto Clark. It's like, I don't know, he's found an older brother."

"Clark's my age," Lois reminded him with a glare. "Whose side are you on?"

Richard shrugged, still grinning "Uncle, then. Besides, you're the one writing about finding people to create a childrearing village. And Jason really likes him."

Richard admitted to himself it *was* odd how his son had decided to include Clark in his life, a man he'd met less than a week ago. Oh, Jason and Richard had both heard about Clark from other reporters at the Planet. Jimmy Olsen thought the world of the man and had kept all the postcards Clark had sent back to the Planet from his 'world walk'. But Jason was normally

slow to make friends, even at school. It was like, somehow, Clark was someone Jason had always known, a member of the family he'd missed and who had finally come home.

Richard looked out the inner window of his uncle's office, over to where Clark Kent was seated at his desk in the bullpen, hard at work as usual. The space was sweltering. The AC has still out and the repairs were predicted to take another week at least. Most of the staff had fans to move the hot air around. Clark's concession to the heat was to hang his suit jacket up and loosen his tie. Richard realized with a start that while sweat was visibly rolling off everyone else, there didn't seem to be a bead of perspiration on Clark anywhere.

As if on cue, Clark looked over and gave him a slightly puzzled look, almost as if he'd felt Richard's eyes on him. Then the reporter picked up a file folder to use as a fan.

Two

Superman did his nightly flight through Metropolis.

The city was still picking up the pieces from the 'crystalquake' Lex Luthor had unleashed on the city only two days before. The EMP created by the stolen Kryptonian technology had been a temporary inconvenience. Unlike a normal electromagnetic pulse, the power grid, the cell phones and so on hadn't actually been damaged, just drained of power.

The physical damage from the accompanying shock wave was another story. The drained power had gone to feed a Kryptonian crystal Luthor had stolen and planted in the ocean as part of a demonic plan to grow a new continent he could rule while destroying the old ones, the ones with billions of humans on them. He had come too close to succeeding; creating a devastating earthquake that pummeled the coastline and threatened to shatter the nearest major city - Metropolis. It had only been by the grace of God he had failed, that Superman had managed to stop him. But even Superman couldn't stop a 6.2 Richter scale earthquake or the sea bottom fissures that caused it.

Some streets were still blocked off so work crews could remove rubble and repair the most seriously damaged buildings. Metropolis wasn't in an earthquake prone area. Local building codes hadn't required major earthquake proofing. Now only one bridge remained safe for traffic northbound out of the city and two bridges southbound. It would be months before the other bridges would be open to traffic. Months before the city was back to any semblance of 'normal'. Mid-winter, maybe, assuming winter came - one of the unforeseen side effects of the Luthor's plan was a warming of the ocean off the U.S. coastline, creating a massive heat wave. Meteorologists and oceanographers couldn't begin to predict the ramifications of such a massive change in ocean climate. They could only wait and hope that Mother Earth was resilient enough to recover.

The governor had called out the National Guard to help with law enforcement and clean up. Armed patrols drove through the streets of the financial district. More could be seen outside the downtown department stores with their boarded up windows. It seemed to Superman that the guardsmen were looking to find trouble - but this was Metropolis, his Metropolis, urban and urbane, American yet firmly international, polite but only warily friendly, realistic, optimistic. A city of contradictions, tempered by the past, looking to tomorrow.

Superman's city and Superman was back. All the banners said so.

It looked to be a quiet night. The heat had drained the energy out of everyone. A few workers on teams authorized to be out after curfew noticed him overhead and waved. He waved back, but didn't stop. He came to a decision and headed west, out of the city.

A few minutes later, he landed outside a farmhouse not too far from Smallville, Kansas. There was a RV parked in front of the house. The lights were on in the house, and he hoped his mom was alone. He'd forgotten to call and warn her he was coming. *My mom has a boyfriend and they're moving to Montana for the fishing.*

He changed into his street clothes and knocked on the screen door. "Mom?"

"Clark?" Martha Kent called out from her packing. He opened the door and stepped in. There were a few boxes piled on the kitchen table, and she looked hot and disheveled.

"Anything I can do?" he asked, looking around. The place was empty, except for the table and two chairs - no, more than empty, soulless.

"Just working on the last couple boxes," his mom said. "The new people move in Monday. They're nice people. You'd like them."

He'd take her word for it. He wasn't planning to meet the people taking possession of his childhood home.

"Where's Ben?" he said, referring to her boyfriend.

"I sent him off for some ice cream," she said with a smile. "I put everything but the photos in storage." She reached into her pants pocket and pulled out a pair of keys on a ring. She separated them and handed one to him. "I thought you might like to go through it. Choose what you want to keep."

"I'll do that," he promised. He thought of something. "I'd better get that 'meteorite' out of the cornfield," he said. His crystal spaceship, the one that took him to Krypton and back, was buried not too far from the house. "Wouldn't want somebody to start digging around and find it."

"It would be a little hard to explain," she agreed with a smile. She studied his face for a long moment. "You look tired."

He shrugged. "I'm not supposed to get tired," he responded. "All the papers say so, so it must be true." There was an uncharacteristic bitterness in his voice.

"Hard time at work?"

"It's been harder than I thought it would be to get back into the swing of things. Luthor and that damned stunt of his didn't help any. I still have some pain where they removed the kryptonite shard. But I found a place to live. I'm surprised I was able to find anything within the city, considering how much housing was destroyed. Not a great neighborhood, but I'm on the top floor and I have roof access. Makes it easier to get in and out. Better than the Metropolis Hilton. You know their windows are sealed?"

"I can see how annoying that could be," she said with a smile. She sat down in one of the two chairs. Clark leaned against the counter.

"Mom," he said seriously. "I have to ask you where you got the ideas for those postcards."

"National Geographic."

He'd half expected as much. At work, he'd been avoiding the subject of his 'trip' for more than a week. The 'llama rodeo' was too bizarre to be believed. Luckily, Jimmy Olsen was the only one at all interested and he was easily distracted. "I need you to do something for me."

"Anything, honey."

"If anybody asks, especially from the Planet, admit you wrote the postcards you sent to Lois and Jimmy."

"Okay, but I don't understand. You did ask me to write them."

"Please? Just tell them you got a card from me a month or so after I left that asked you to do it."

"All right, Clark, if that's what you want." Still puzzled, she turned back to her packing. "Ben and I were in Metropolis to see you," Martha told him. "I wanted to be there for you, be there for my boy. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to... I was afraid I'd be burying an empty coffin next to your father's." She turned to look at him. "We saw Lois and her son leaving the hospital. He's a fine looking boy."

"Yes, he is," Clark agreed. "Mom, Lois told me - at least I think she did, it was when I was in the hospital, when they thought I might not make it. She told me that Jason might be mine. Although I can't quite figure out how."

Martha grinned. "Babies are a common hazard of sex, you know."

Clark chuckled. *Trust Mom to be the voice of common sense.* "You know what I mean. I

didn't think humans and, you know, I didn't think we'd be compatible."

"We know better, now." Martha said. "I'm a little disappointed though. I thought your Dad and I...?"

"You thought you'd taught me better," Clark completed for her. "You did. Before the article about Krypton was published, before I decided to leave, I asked Lois to marry me. I gave up my powers to be with her, Mom. And yes, I spent the night with her. At that moment, it was absolutely right."

"But you haven't lost your powers," Martha pointed out.

"No. It became obvious pretty quickly that for me to do that was the worst decision of my life. I couldn't do it. Maybe I was selfish and wanted it all, but it wasn't going to work. As much as I've always wanted to be normal, to be human, I couldn't. Lois... Lois couldn't handle it. So I erased her memory of us. I didn't know she'd gotten pregnant. I swear to God I would never have left if I'd known."

"I know that, son. What do you plan to do?"

"Her fiancé is a good man," Clark said. "It's probably better if I don't do anything. But it's tearing me up inside."

"Clark, I know you'll do what's right," she said, touching his face gently.

They heard a truck drive up and stop in front of the house. The truck door slammed. "All they had was vanilla," Ben Hubbard announced as he walked in. He noticed Clark standing in the kitchen. "Clark! How did you get here?"

"I've got a friend with an airplane," Clark said.

"When do you have to get back?"

"I just dropped by to talk to Mom before you guys took off," Clark said. He gave his mother a peck on the cheek. "I'll take care of that other little matter. I've got to get going."

"Need a ride to the airport?" Ben offered.

Clark shook his head. "No. I'll see both later." He paused and turned back to his mother with a crooked smile. "Please remember to call. You have my new cell number. You don't want me to worry, do you?" He left, closing the door behind him.

A few minutes later, Martha and Ben heard what sounded like an explosion out in the cornfield. Ben started toward the window to look, but Martha held him back. "Just another meteorite. We are in Smallville, after all. Meteorite capital of the world."

Ben gave her a curious look. "Martha, tell me the truth. How did Clark get here so fast?"

"He flew. How else?"

A few seconds later, the air traffic controller on duty in Topeka spotted a momentary blip on his radar screen. The blip seemed to be heading north-northwest.

U.S and Canadian Air Force radar operators intermittently caught the blip. It crossed the border, still heading north-northwest, fast.

"Weirdest signature I've ever seen," Specialist Ellington commented to his supervisor.

"About the size of a jumbo jet, I'd guess, moving better than Mach 10."

"Can we get a satellite picture?"

Specialist Haynes called up the satellite imaging and peered at the picture on his computer screen. "I can't pick out anything in the visual range. It must be black. The infrared band shows something and it's moving, but there's no engine heat. It's not like anything I've ever seen, except when..."

"When..." prompted Major Paul Franks.

"I'll bet a month's wages it's Superman."

"If it is, he's moving something, but what?"

Haynes shrugged. "It's bigger than a 747. Overall shape looks irregular."

"Can we track it back to its origin?"

Haynes typed a command into his keyboard, his fingers moving with practiced precision. "Assuming it's maintained the same heading, I would hazard a guess that came from somewhere near Smallville, Kansas. Hey, didn't we track a good size meteorite in that area about three weeks ago?"

"Check on it," Franks ordered.

Haynes keyed in another command and text rolled down his screen. "We tracked one, but... that's odd - no 911 report on it, no seismic activity reported. Whatever it was, it either burned up before hitting the ground or it soft landed."

"Soft landed? Like a space ship?"

The specialist shrugged. "Maybe that's where Superman landed when he came back."

"Keep tracking it. Let me know when it comes to ground."

"We've already lost it," the radar man stated. "Northern Alaska, above the Arctic Circle. On or near the ice cap."

Franks headed to his office, stopping at the door. "Get me a copy of those scans and satellite imaging." He closed the door behind him, went to his desk, and picked up the phone.

Unlike what the comic book writers said, he couldn't breathe underwater, but he could hold his breath a very long time. He had done his best to stay below the radar, but he knew at least parts of the ship had shown up intermittently on the military scopes. It couldn't be helped. The ship was too large to fly it underneath trees.

On reaching the edge of the Arctic ice sheet, he dove under it, guiding the crystal ship toward the deepest part of the northern ocean, where he let it drop into a canyon on the ocean floor. With any luck at all, sonar would mistake it for an odd rock formation. In a few years, it would be encrusted with ocean life and indistinguishable from the natural ocean bottom.

Superman broke the ocean's surface and headed for home. He needed to get at least a little sleep before starting his day.

Three

Superman was taking Saturday off. Metropolis had survived six years without him, it could survive one day. He hadn't even bothered to put his 'suit' on under his street clothes. In this weather it would have looked suspicious to be wearing long sleeves, even though the heat didn't bother him in the least, one of the perks of being a Kryptonian living on Earth. Instead he had opted for jeans, a dark T-shirt and loafers. The jeans and T-shirt were actually loose on him. Luckily, that seemed to be the current style. He'd lost more weight than he'd realized while he was gone.

Jason tugged on his hand and Clark gave his temporary charge a bemused look. Jason White, Lois Lane's son, was five years old and positively chattering in excitement. Jimmy Olsen was bouncing around like a teenager, viewing the world through his camera.

Clark still wasn't sure why he'd gotten tapped for this assignment. Oh, Perry had explained it and it *would* make a great story if it came together as the Planet's senior editor expected. Perry had a remarkable nose for a good story, but Clark still had doubts. A more likely explanation was that Jason's parents wanted some time together and Clark and Jimmy became the designated sitters, thanks to Jason's great-uncle Perry. *Rank doth have its privileges.*

They'd spent the morning at the Metropolis zoo. Jason loved the chimps and gorillas. This particular enclosure was relatively new. At least Clark hadn't seen it before, so it was less than six years old. Zoo philosophy was constantly evolving and the gorilla enclosure was now a fair emulation of a jungle habitat. You had to look carefully to find the inhabitants unless they were out sunning themselves, or watching the humans. They liked watching humans. It was great entertainment.

Clark noticed that his favorite old silverback wasn't in the enclosure with the others.

"What happened to Jabbar?" Clark asked one of the zoo employees.

The man straightened up from his sweeping and frowned a moment, leaning on his broom. "Jabbar? Oh, the old guy. Yeah, he died about five, six years ago. Cancer. Not long after Superman disappeared, as a matter of fact." The man shook his head in bemusement. "Funny, some of zoo-keepers used to claim the old guy died of a broken heart. That Superman had been a friend of his and when Superman left, the spirit just went out of him. Crazy isn't it? A gorilla missing Superman?"

"Not so crazy," Clark commented wistfully, more to himself than anyone else. "Jabbar was a pretty bright guy."

Jason looked puzzled. "Mister Clark, did you like Jabbar?"

"Yes, I did," Clark admitted. "I'm going to miss the old fellow."

Jimmy snapped another photo, this one in Clark's face. "You look like you lost your best friend," Jimmy observed.

Clark hefted Jason onto his hip. The little boy didn't weigh much, but he was feisty, just like his mother. Jason squirmed himself into a more comfortable position and accidentally kicked Clark in the back, right on the scar that Lex Luthor's kryptonite dagger had left. "Ow! That hurt!" Clark yelped. "I'm not Superman, you know."

Jason looked at him curiously and then started giggling. "Yes, Mister Clark."

Clark gave him a solemn look. "Seriously, Jason. That hurt."

Jason stopped giggling. "Sorry." His expression turned serious. "Does Superman still hurt where that bad man stabbed him?"

"You'll have to ask Superman," Clark replied, ruffling the boy's hair with his free hand.

He turned to Jimmy. "And you, sir. One more like that in my face, and the Planet's next headline will read 'Daily Planet reporter breaks staff photographer into small pieces.'"

Jason giggled. Jimmy feigned alarm, hugging his precious camera to his chest. "How am I supposed to do a photo essay on you and Jason if I can't take pictures of you and Jason?"

"You'll think of something, just don't do it in my face. Or, at least turn off the flash."

Lois and Richard were having the first Saturday together alone since neither could remember how long. Probably since Jason was born. Richard White gazed fondly at his fiancée as they walked through the open-air market set up in the North City Mall parking lot. Lois normally favored wool or linen suits for work. But today was one of the rare occasions she chose to wear jeans and sandals. Her ensemble was topped with an 'I Luv Metropolis' t-shirt that Richard had bought her as a joke. She looked 'cute' and far younger than her age. A typical suburban mom.

When they first met, Lois was the most hard-headed, single-minded newshound he'd ever known, besides his Uncle Perry. Then, Jason was born, and the reporter added a new dimension - working mom. It was a change that he'd watched from its beginnings, but it still fascinated him. *I have to be the luckiest man alive.*

"Miss Lane, how's Superman doing? Have you heard from him?" shopkeepers and passersby alike asked when they recognized her. They ignored Richard. *She* was the celebrity. *She* knew Superman.

"He was fine the last time I saw him," Lois told them.

"When you see him again, tell him we were all praying for him, and we're glad he's back."

"I'll let him know when I see him," Lois would promise. "He's very busy, you know."

"They all love him," Richard observed.

"Everybody loves Superman," Lois said with a sigh.

"Not everybody, Lois," Richard reminded her.

"Anybody with a shred of decency in their soul," Her expression turned thoughtful. "He so 'good'. He has an aura of goodness about him. You felt it."

"Yes," Richard admitted. "I felt it."

"Funny thing, though," Lois continued. "I don't think he's really aware of how he affects people."

"Are saints aware of how they affect those around them? Would any of them have said they were doing anything more than their job to spread light and hope in a dark world, just doing what needed to be done, proving one person could make a difference?"

Lois had stopped listening. She checked her cell phone for missed calls - again.

"Lois, if Clark and Jimmy have any problems, they'll call," Richard assured her once more.

"I don't know why I let you and Perry talk me into this," Lois complained. "It was a stupid idea, letting Jason go with them for the day. Neither of them know the first thing about taking care of kids, especially somebody like Jason."

Richard grinned. Frankly, he was more worried about Clark and Jimmy.

Lunch was at a Rosie's, a Jewish-style deli only few blocks away from the Daily Planet building. They carried a wheat-free bread that was approved by Jason's mother.

"Sit anywhere," Benny, the owner, greeted them without looking up from his paper. The deli was empty of customers.

Clark, Jason and Jimmy took a table in the back. After a few moments Benny grabbed three menus along with three waters. His face lit up when he saw who was sitting there.

"Clark! When did you get back into town?"

"Last week, just before all the commotion with Superman and Luthor. Lot of changes."

Benny nodded agreement. "Want your usual veggie bagel dog and chips?"

"With lemonade, please" Clark confirmed. Some things never changed, thank goodness.

"I'll have the same with a Coors. Only make mine a real bagel dog," Jimmie said.

"And for Master Jason, his usual as well," Benny said with a smile. Jason nodded, a little glumly, or so it seemed to Clark. No bagel dogs for Jason. He was allergic to wheat, along with seafood, peanuts, and God only knew what else. Lois had given Clark a long list of what Jason couldn't have and an equally long list of the boy's medications and when and how to use them.

Benny hurried off to the kitchen.

Clark gave Jimmy a puzzled look. "Drinking on the job again?"

Jimmy started to make a retort but thought better of it. "You weren't such a stick in the mud last Wednesday."

"That was Wednesday," Clark said. "Don't you want to be a good example for Jason?"

"I figured that was for you, his dad, and Superman," Jimmy told him. "Besides, I'm over twenty-one. And so long as I don't get behind the wheel, it's all good."

"Life's so hard you have to bury it in a bottle?"

Jimmy studied Clark for a long moment. There was no guile in Clark's face. There never was. Just an interest in the answers and the people giving them. That was, Jimmy realized, Clark's secret. People bared their souls to him because he was genuinely interested in what they had to say.

"It's been a hard six years, CK. For all of us. Did you know I got married?"

Jimmy, married? "No, I didn't."

Jimmy sighed. "Didn't last. She ran off with a policeman while I was embedded with the troops in Chechnya. A mere photojournalist wasn't good enough for her, I guess."

"I'm sorry," Clark said. *He was a war correspondent? I should have read further into the papers Mom saved for me.*

"The chief says my work is 'uneven.' I never know from one day to the next whether or not it'll be good enough, or if he'll decide he's had enough of me."

"Jimmy, we all have that to worry about. Heck, I'm practically back to square one. He put me on obit duty, remember? Only got out of that cause Lois smelled a rat in those blackouts, and I was the only one not doing anything more important. I'm on ninety days probation to prove to the chief that I haven't lost it. And if he decides I have, if he decides I can't cut it, there's not a major paper in the country that'll have me."

"You won't have any trouble, CK. You're too good a newsman."

Clark chuckled. "Well, for what it's worth, my mother agrees with you."

Benny came with their drinks and lunches.

"Want to split it?" Jimmy asked with a grin as he started to pour his beer into the tumbler.

"Why not," Clark said. "I'm not driving." *Not planning on flying, either.*

Jimmy pushed the half full glass toward Clark while he took a swig from the bottle.

"Can I have some?" Jason asked with a cheerful grin.

"No!" Both men said simultaneously.

"Now can we see the crater where Superman landed?" Jason asked, impatient to get

moving after lunch.

"Sure," Clark said. "I wouldn't mind seeing it myself."

Centennial Park was on the other end of New Troy Island, but with the city so quiet, it wasn't too hard to find a cab.

Clark didn't remember the fall to Earth. He remembered using the last of his strength to heave the kryptonite/crystal mass away from the planet, watching to make sure it was far enough out so it wouldn't fall back into Earth's gravity well. Then, there was nothing, really, until he woke up in a bed at Metropolis General. He was sure he'd heard Lois's voice telling him about Jason. But then, he also remembered Jonathan Kent, his adopted father, the only father he'd ever really known, telling him it wasn't his time. He had a destiny to fulfill. Jonathan Kent had been dead for more than sixteen years.

The shock from the impact had shattered many of the ancient oaks and the impact crater itself covered nearly a city block and was more than 20 feet deep. Barricades had been placed around the hole and the most severely damaged trees had already been cut down, but people were still trying to get close. Hundreds, thousands, of cards, candles, and flowers had been piled beside the barricade. Several placards reading: "We love you, Superman" were stuck into the ground beside the pile.

"Was Superman scared?" Jason wondered.

Clark considered the question. "I think he would have been, if he'd been conscious."

"No, I mean when he went to find Lex Luthor."

"Not the first time. Worried, maybe. Angry, certainly, especially about what Luthor did to you and your mom. But, he didn't know Luthor had kryptonite, then. He didn't know exactly what sort of horrible things Luthor had done."

A boy, some years older than Jason, was listening. "Superman's not afraid of anything," he declared.

"Only a fool isn't afraid when he goes into battle," Clark said. "I guarantee he was afraid of what would happen if he failed."

"And how do you know that?" the boy demanded.

"I work for the Daily Planet," Clark said with a smile. "Everybody knows Superman and the Planet go together like Penn and Teller."

"Who are they?" Jason asked.

Clark shook his head. "Never mind."

"Next on the agenda, the Spires Memorial," Jimmy announced. "Should take us about thirty minutes to walk there."

Covering the ten blocks from Centennial Park to the Spires took much longer than the anticipated thirty minutes.

The city was in shambles. Many water mains and sewage pipes were still out, as were gas, power, and phone lines. City utility crews were working round the clock to repair the damage. Only a fraction of the Metro system was still in service. The utilities could give no estimates as to when services might be restored. Many residential buildings had been declared uninhabitable due to damage. Displaced citizens were still being urged to go to the Metrodome for shelter.

The governor of New Troy state had declared the city a disaster area, but FEMA funds seemed to be slow in getting to those people most seriously impacted by the disaster - the small business people whose shops were damaged, in many cases destroyed, by the quake, the

people whose jobs were lost because their employers had closed down, maybe permanently, the families who had lost loved ones, the families who had lost everything. Superman had saved many people, but even he couldn't save all of them. He hadn't even bothered to try to save property. Buildings could be rebuilt. Current death toll topped 300. It could have been so much worse.

People were out cleaning, fixing what they could. Clark stopped several times to help, lifting garbage cans into trucks, stapling plastic over broken windows. Clark was tall enough to reach most of the window casings, but Jimmy thought he saw - no that was too silly to even think, but a couple times, Jimmy could have sworn Clark's feet actually left the ground.

Finally, Jimmy managed to get Clark and Jason to the Spires. It was like herding cats, or maybe kindergarteners. Only, one of them was 6'4".

The Spires memorial was built on the remains of the two skyscrapers at the Global Commerce Center brought down by international terrorists in 2001. Or so the story went. No group had ever claimed responsibility for the atrocity, although the authorities claimed the criminals responsible were Middle-Eastern terrorists. *So much waste*, Clark thought. *And for what, an excuse to go to war? What kind of madmen could do these things to innocent people? Flying jumbo jets into buildings where there were children and mothers and fathers? Who? Why?*

"CK, are you okay?" Jimmy asked, worry in his voice.

Clark gave Jimmy a puzzled look and realized he had tears on his face. *I learned that from them*. He blinked away the moisture from his eyes and wiped away tears with the back of his free hand.

"Mister Clark?" Jason looked at him, forehead creased in thought. "Do you think Superman could have stopped it?" His breathing had gotten labored and he took a hit off his medication. The first time today. His mother would be pleased he'd been managing so well.

"I don't know," Clark admitted. "From what I've read, it happened pretty fast. I don't know if he could have stopped the first plane. I know he would have done his best to stop the second one, to save as many people as he could."

"Could he have found the bad people who did it?"

"I don't know that either," Clark said. "I mean, if the police and the FBI and Interpol couldn't find out who planned it, what chance would Superman have? He doesn't read minds, you know."

"When it happened, some of us were pretty sure Luthor or some of his cronies were involved," Jimmy said.

"Wasn't Luthor in jail?"

Jimmy nodded. "There was more evidence for Luthor than for Al Qaeda. But even Lois couldn't figure out how he could have executed it, or why he would have bothered, so we shelved it. Funny, though, the Spires came down exactly one year after Superman took care of the meteor storm and disappeared. Awful big coincidence, if you ask me." Jimmy's expression turned thoughtful. "Yeah, that was the day we all realized Superman really was gone."

"I'm sorry."

Jimmy gave him a puzzled look. "For what? You weren't the one who attacked the Spires."

"I wasn't here. I couldn't be here. I couldn't help." He was starting to feel tired, a little nauseous, and his head was pounding. *Kryptonite. There was kryptonite in the site. He*

remembered the two buildings, covering conferences there. There was no kryptonite before, where did it come from?

"CK, you're not looking so good," Jimmy observed.

"Let's get out of here," Clark said, swallowing hard. "I... I think I've had too much sun." Sweat had started to bead on his forehead. Clark set Jason on his feet and allowed the boy to lead him away from the site, toward the visitor center. He started to feel better by the time they reached shade and could sit down, but Jimmy was still watching him worriedly.

"I'll be okay," Clark promised.

Jimmy looked dubious.

"Really, I'm fine."

"Maybe we ought to head over to Lois's," Jimmy suggested, still concerned. "She promised dinner, remember?"

"Daddy's cooking," Jason promised.

"At least we know we'll get fed something edible," Jimmy said with a little laugh.

"Richard's a really good cook." But he was still watching Clark, worry written across his face.

Straker read through the reports Paul Foster/Franks had faxed him the night before. Superman, at least Foster's assumption was that it was Superman, had been on the move last night. He had transported something - probably the spaceship he used to get from Earth to Krypton and back - to the polar regions.

Straker sifted through the papers on his desk and reread one of them. *Smallville, Kansas?* A large meteorite had been tracked coming down near there only three weeks before, but satellite reconnaissance photos failed to reveal a crater and seismographs at the University of Kansas had not detected anything of that size impacting the planet. The only other oddity had been a burned cornfield at the Kent farm.

The Kent farm? Now that was an interesting coincidence. Before Kent's disappearance, he'd practically been Superman's press agent, along with the Lane woman. Nearly every article written about Superman's activities in Metropolis was by Lane and Kent. Now Superman's probable landing site was on the Kent family farm.

Straker picked up his phone and dialed. "Paul, I've got some assignments for you. First, find out what it was Superman dumped in the Arctic, then check out the Kent farm near Smallville, Kansas. I think there's a tie-in there."

Four

The TV was on when Lois and Richard entered the house. Lois went to check the family room while Richard put away the groceries.

Yes, the big screen was on and she recognized the movie that was playing: *Superman: The True Story*, an incredibly cheesy docudrama based on her, and Clark's, articles on Superman.

Lois hated the film. Not only had the writers outright stated that she and Superman had been lovers, but the woman cast to play Lois Lane looked and sounded nothing like her. The actor playing Superman had nowhere near the charisma of the real thing. What was even worse, they had Lex Luthor *helping* Superman defeat the villains, when nothing could ever be further from the truth. The only good thing about the film was the John Williams score.

Lois came around the sofa to grab the remote control. She could see Jimmy outside on the deck with his camera, taking pictures of the skyline across the river. She looked over to Richard's favorite chair and smiled, forgetting the movie for a moment.

Clark was stretched out with Jason tucked protectively under one arm. They were both sound asleep. Clark's glasses had started to slide down his nose, so Lois gently took them placed them in the pocket of his shirt. Odd she hadn't noticed before now how much he looked like... *No, that's silly.*

Clark moaned softly in his sleep, shifting his body as if in pain. *Nightmare?*

Jason stirred and opened his eyes.

"Have fun today, monster?" Lois asked softly.

Jason nodded. "We went to the zoo and saw the Spires and the crater where Superman fell. Clark got sick at the Spires."

At the mention of his name, Clark opened his eyes. His eyes widened in momentary panic as he realized his glasses were gone.

"They're in your shirt pocket," Lois told him. He hurriedly put them on. *He uses them like a shield*, she thought, then mentally shook her head. *That's ridiculous.* "Richard insisted on making lasagna, so it's going to be a while till dinner. I was going to use the time to work on my article," she said aloud.

"Sounds like a plan to me," Clark said, placing Jason on his feet so he could get out of the chair. He looked a little worried.

"Are you okay?" Lois asked.

"Jimmy's asked that a couple times today already," Clark said, annoyance sharpening his voice. "I'm fine, maybe a little tired. It's been a busy week."

She patted him on the hand and walked away.

She was gone, mind on her article. That was Lois, always the questions, but she wasn't always interested in the answers, Clark mused. He found his computer case where he'd left it that morning when picking Jason up for their outing, pulled out his own laptop and began outlining his story on the day's adventures in Metropolis.

Lois was already seated at the dining table, working on her article.

...of my heroes, they include my fiancé Richard, and Clark, a friend and colleague. Richard has always been there when I needed him. He has saved my life and my sanity. Clark has also saved my life, taking a terrible beating to protect me while we were working on an assignment in Alaska, and he was the most gentle lover I had ever known.

Lois reread what she had just written and frowned. She started to highlight the last

sentence to delete it when Richard grabbed her hand. "Why erase it?"

"I don't know why I wrote that," Lois admitted. "It's like it happened in a dream. I'm sure it really happened but the details are gone. Like I recognized the crystals Luthor had. I'd seen them before, and I knew they belonged to Superman, but I don't know how I know. I don't remember."

"Maybe Clark knows," Richard suggested.

"You're not upset?" Lois asked.

"Honey, it was how long ago? I knew you'd had other relationships before we met. I mean, you were pregnant," Richard said. "It's just a little odd to find out now that one of them was Clark Kent. I'm kind of used to the idea that you and Superman were an item." He turned and looked over to where Clark and Jimmy were working, hunched over Clark's laptop.

"We weren't an 'item,'" Lois muttered. "I'm not sure what we were."

Clark was explaining something about shock wave propagation to Jimmy. Jimmy was nodding dutifully, but Richard doubted the younger man understood half of what he was being told. Funny, but Jimmy had never mentioned that Clark was so scientifically savvy. Jason had even stopped playing his video game to listen. Clark seemed to realize his explanation had gone over Jimmy's head and rephrased it, using his hands to illustrate what he was saying.

The oven timer went off in the kitchen. "Ten minutes to dinner," Richard announced.

As if on cue, the doorbell rang and Jason ran to get it. "Uncle Perry!" Jason crowed as Perry White walked in.

"Am I in time for dinner?"

"As always, Uncle Perry," Richard called from the kitchen. "How's Aunt Alice?"

"Fine. Still at the flower show. I might see her tomorrow, maybe, if there isn't another women's club meeting to go to."

Perry walked around the room, peering over Clark's shoulder a moment to read what was on his computer screen.

Coming Home, Clark had titled it. It was still mostly outline, but Perry could see it had Clark's usual strong framework. As always, Clark had picked out important, but not necessarily obvious, points of interest. Changes at the zoo, ethnic restaurants serving newest batch of immigrants who'd come to the Big Apricot. One thing caught Perry's eye. Clark had written about how many tall buildings had gone up during his absence. He knew their heights and how they might affect the wind patterns in the city. An odd thing to see, wind patterns through the city. It was something a pilot might notice, but everyone knew how much Clark hated to fly.

Clark ended the article with a series of questions addressed to Superman, beginning with 'Do you believe in God?'

"Planning to interview Superman?" Perry asked.

"No, sir," Clark replied. "But Jason wants to. These are his questions."

"Think Superman will grant him an interview?"

"Who knows? He just might."

"I do like this second one: 'What do you mean by the American Way?' I'd like to know that myself. The American Way doesn't seem to mean what it used to," Perry said wistfully. There was a time, not so long ago, that being an American meant something good, something honorable. Now he wasn't so sure. "Do you think Superman believes in God?"

"Absolutely," Clark answered.

Perry gave him a questioning look. Clark's answer was so definite.

"Chief, there were about eight million people on New Troy Island when Superman fell out

of the sky. An uncontrolled fall at terminal velocity, a two hundred pound meteorite. What are the odds of hitting in the only place within miles that didn't have any people anywhere near? The impact crater covers a city block and no one was hurt. If that doesn't indicate the hand of God, I don't know what does."

Interesting answer, Perry thought as he stepped over to Jimmy. "Get some good shots today?"

Jimmy grinned at him and showed him a photo on his screen.

"This is very good," Perry said, impressed. It was a medium close up of Clark and Jason. Clark had Jason in the crook of one arm. The boy's eyes were wide with concern and his hand was on Clark's shoulder as if to comfort him. But it was Clark's expression that was so compelling. His head was bowed ever so slightly and there were tears on his face. He looked as if he'd just discovered all the horror of the world, the tragedy symbolized by what could be seen in the background - the memorial for those killed in the attack on the Spires - and it made him heartsick.

"What's your title for it?"

"I'm Sorry."

"Hmm?"

"That's the title: 'I'm Sorry'. It's something CK said while we were there. I've got another one of them that's almost as good. You know, as much of a goof as CK is sometimes, he makes a damn good photo subject. And unlike Superman, he's not moving at the speed of light."

Jimmy selected another photo file and opened it. This one had more action. Clark and Jason again, of course, this time with an old black woman and three boys age five to ten or so. There was a poster of Superman on the brick wall in the background. The boys were sweeping glass off the sidewalk. Jason was holding a dustpan for the woman. Clark was caught in the act of hefting a full garbage can onto his shoulder, moving toward the sanitation truck that was barely hinted at in the frame. "I'm going to title this one *Supermen*. And yes, I have the signed release. The boys were orphaned in the quake and she's their grandmother. They're all living in a one-bedroom apartment that still doesn't have power back."

"This'll be a perfect lead photo for your article," Perry said, clapping Jimmy on the shoulder.

"Absolutely, sir."

Richard came out of the kitchen, and went over to where his uncle stood. He looked over Jimmy's shoulder at the photo on the screen. "You know, people are going to think Clark's Jason's dad."

"Um, I wouldn't worry about that too much," Clark said without looking up from his own laptop. "You are Jason's number one hero. Superman is a distant second, and I'm not even on that list. And as to what other people think - does it really matter? You're his dad. You know it, he knows it. End of discussion."

Another timer went off. "Dinner is served," Richard announced. "But, house rule number one people: no computers at the dinner table. That means you Lois, honey."

Lois made a face at him and set her laptop on the side table.

Dinner was two versions of lasagna (one the usual way, with meat and cheese, and the other with tofu, zucchini, and rice noodles), Caesar salad with homemade dressing, and grissini. Lois poured chianti into the wine glasses, but stopped before filling Clark's. "Wine? We forgot to get ginger ale."

"I'll have some wine," Clark said. Lois filled his glass, but gave him a puzzled look as she then poured a thimbleful of wine into the aperitif glass in front of Jason.

"I thought you didn't drink," Perry said.

"People change," Clark said. "But I, uh, do draw the line at the lighter fluid Jimmy likes. That stuff is vile."

Richard started serving the lasagna. "I know Uncle Perry and Jimmy want meat. How about you, Clark?"

"I'll have the vegetarian one, if you don't mind."

Jimmy shook his head. "Not enough protein in there, CK."

"That's not true," Clark and Richard said simultaneously.

"Corn, squash and beans is the standard diet for most of the rest of the world, and combination creates a complete protein," Richard said. "Americans eat too much red meat." He sounded as if he'd had this discussion before and was tired of it.

"Corn?" Jimmy asked, with a smirk. "There's no corn in there."

"Corn is a generic term for the primary food grain in a given culture," Clark explained. "In the U.S. the grain called corn is actually maize, but in other places, it could be rice, or wheat, or oats, or any other grain, for that matter. Demeter is called the corn goddess, but her symbol is usually wheat."

"Clark Kent, walking encyclopedia, strikes again," Lois said with a laugh. "He's worse than you are, Richard. Don't get him started on platypuses, whatever you do."

"What about platypuses?" Jason asked. He started giggling. His laughter was infectious.

"Is it my fault I'm a font of completely useless information?" Clark wondered aloud.

"Not always so useless," Perry observed with a smile.

Dinner was spent talking about little things - office rumors, school, Lois and Richard's upcoming trip to London to cover the WTA conference. Richard brought out a second bottle of chianti and refilled everyone's glasses.

As soon as the dinner dishes were cleared, Perry's expression turned serious. "Clark, what do you remember about a group called SHADO?"

Clark thought for a moment, eyes focusing on some distant point. "Supreme Headquarters Alien Deterrent Organization, or Defense Organization, depending on the source. Organized in 1970 to combat an anticipated alien invasion of Earth. Body snatchers, that sort of thing. Major black ops, billion dollar budgets, accountable only to the Security Committee of the Congress of Nations, and even then, the Committee was kept pretty much in the dark as to their methods. The organization owned a film studio near London, research firms in the U.S. and Europe, military bases on every continent, satellite surveillance systems, the works. More hardware than most countries. There were rumors to the effect that SHADO had tried to build a base on the Moon in the early eighties or so. They were officially disbanded sometime in late '97. I'd have to look up the exact date."

"I remember hearing about them," said Richard. "The group's name came up again a couple years later in regards to high tech arms smuggling. The film studio was implicated, and they ended up closing down."

"There wasn't enough evidence to get an indictment against the former senior officers," Clark added. "But that was before I left. They're not still around, are they?"

"That's what I want you and Richard to find out," Perry said. "We've been getting reports that extremely high tech weaponry has been finding its way into the hands of Metropolis's criminal element, specifically armor piercing, high-powered ammunition small enough to be

fired from a concealable weapon."

"Nasty stuff," Jimmy commented. Perry nodded in agreement.

"My contacts in the FBI and ATF believe the operation has all the earmarks of SHADO," Perry said. "And since the two of you covered that story six years ago, albeit separately and from opposite sides of the Atlantic, you should be able to find out what, if anything, SHADO's been doing the past few years."

"Why were they disbanded in '97?" Jimmy wondered.

"That's the year Superman showed up in Metropolis," Richard said. "The devastating invasion SHADO was so worried about never happened, or if it did, it was a non-event. Why bother funding something that has no purpose?"

Clark gave Perry a puzzled look. "I left copies of all my files on SHADO at the Planet before I left. Everything should be there."

"It should be, except that two days after the Spires came down, the paper's main server was hacked and all the files on SHADO, Lex Luthor, and a couple North African dictators were erased. It was very specific. And when we went looking for the hardcopy that should have been in the basement files, we discovered we'd had a mysterious flood that nobody'd bothered to report. At least the microfiche copies of the paper weren't damaged." Perry sounded angry and bitter. "But all the background research, all the files, everything, gone. Coincidence? I doubt it, especially since IT claimed the backup tapes that went to safe storage had also been tampered with. Heads rolled on that one. All that's left is what's in your head and maybe in your files, if you still have them."

"I'm sure I do," Clark said. "Somewhere. I'll look when I get home and I'll get a copy of the computer files to Richard." He glanced at Richard for confirmation.

Richard nodded. "I'll go through my papers and see what I have. Between the two of us, we should be able to put together a decent dossier on them. At least something to start from."

"That's what I wanted to hear," Perry said. "But try not to let too many people at the office know what you're up to. SHADO was dangerous when it was legit. If it's involved in this, it'll be doubly dangerous now."

"We'll be careful," Richard promised. Clark nodded in agreement as he picked up his wine glass.

"On a lighter note," Jimmy announced. "CK, you never did get a chance to tell us about your trip. I really want to hear about that llama rodeo."

Clark emptied his wine glass in a single gulp. He sat back, studied the glass in his hand for a long moment and sighed. "There are days I really wish I could actually get drunk. I've never been able to, barely even a buzz. I just get sick instead." He didn't look up from studying the glass. "The truth is I never made it to South America, or much of anywhere else."

He finally looked up to see concern in Perry's face. He knew without looking that Jimmy was confused and Lois... Lois had grabbed her laptop from the side table and was back to work on her article. She wasn't listening *again*.

"Lois, you're an award winning writer. You're the top investigative reporter at the Planet, one of the top five in the country, if not the world," Clark said. He was getting angry and was frankly beyond caring that he was acting out of character. "Tell me how that can be when you. Never. *Listen!*"

Lois finally looked at him, eyes wide in astonishment. The others were watching him in various degrees of surprise and concern. Jason looked worried and maybe a little afraid. At the moment, Clark didn't really care. He pushed away from the table and walked over to the

French doors to the deck. He wasn't drunk. He couldn't get drunk if he tried. But all the frustrations of the past week had just come crashing down on him. For a moment, he considered leaving, walking out and never coming back. Instead, he stopped at the doors and stared through the glass at the skyline beyond. He couldn't remember ever being so impotently furious at anyone. His fists were clenched and he was trying to keep from shaking.

"Clark, I'm sorry," Lois said from just beside him. He hadn't noticed her approach.

She grabbed his arm to lead him back to the table. It was like trying to move a stone statue. "Come back to the table." No reaction. She took a deep breath and summoned up her sweet voice, the one she used when Jason was upset or sick, or when she wanted something out of Perry. "Clark, you said you never made it to South America. What happened?"

He didn't seem to hear her. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have lost my temper like that. I don't know why it happened," he said very softly. His shoulders slumped, and his hands relaxed, the fight gone out of him. He folded his arms across his chest and shivered as if suddenly cold.

"It's okay, Clark," Perry said. "Just tell us what happened."

"I'm not really sure," Clark admitted. "I crossed into China a couple weeks after I left here. I'd had what I thought was a reliable lead on the student dissident movement in the northern provinces and on some of the leaders. I couldn't get permission to enter the part of the country I wanted to get to, but I figured I could get in, stay low. Be back here in a couple months, maybe a year at the most. You'd yell at me for being stupid and lying to you and everything would be back to normal. I was wrong. I was so incredibly wrong."

"Go on," Lois urged.

"I got caught, spent six months in solitary in a Chinese prison."

"CK, if you were in a Chinese prison, who sent all those postcards?" Jimmy asked.

"My mom," Clark answered. "I didn't know she had such a flair for fiction." He smiled faintly, but there was no humor in it. "She said she had a card from me, asking her to cover for me until I got back. I never sent that one either. I think she was hoping that if she sent completely outlandish stories, somebody at the Planet would realize there was something wrong, get curious, and actually go looking for me. Didn't happen. Not that you would have found me anyway. I covered my tracks pretty well. Too well, maybe."

"You said you spent six months in prison," Perry reminded him. "What then?" He smelled a story. He was a newsman. One of the best in the business.

"That's where it goes into the Twilight Zone. After about six months, I was moved to somewhere in the mountains. I've no idea where. Spent a couple days on a train, was transferred from one truck to another more times than I could keep track of. Ended up in a little village. The people there were as much prisoners as I was. I tried to get away a couple times, but wasn't any use. After a while I stopped trying."

"How did you finally escape?" Lois asked quietly.

"I didn't. They let me go. About six weeks ago, a bunch of men in militia uniforms showed up. I don't think I'd ever been so scared in my life. I honestly thought they intended to kill me and everyone else there. Instead, I was hustled off into one of their trucks, driven to an airfield and loaded onto a plane to Shanghai. There was no explanation, nothing. They didn't even bother to tell me to get out and never come back. They didn't talk to me at all." Clark finally turned around to face Perry and Richard, still seated at the table. Perry looked thoughtful and a little worried.

"You don't believe me."

"No, that's not it," Perry responded. "I'm wondering who would want to keep you on ice

for so long. And I can only come up with one answer. Lex Luthor. The timing suggests they let you go not long after he got hold of the Vanderworth fortune. But why bother? Why not just kill you? And why just you?"

"I can't answer that," Clark said in all sincerity. *Of course I can't answer that, because it's all a fiction. A cover designed to keep my sanity, give me an excuse for all the things I missed, things I can't lie my way out of since, even in South America, I should have been able to get the news. I shouldn't have come back. This was a mistake.*

"But, what were you doing while you were there?" Richard asked. "I mean you obviously weren't in the fields, no calluses on your hands."

Clark looked at his hands. Invulnerable skin didn't develop calluses. He gave a sad little chuckle. "Oh, I worked the fields for a while then I was a teacher. I was only one there with a formal education of any kind." He shrugged. "The guards didn't really care. I'd stopped causing them trouble. After a while, it all seemed *normal*."

Perry and Richard exchanged a worried look and Clark wondered how he'd slipped up this time.

Perry stood up. "I need to make a phone call," Perry said, looking at Lois. Lois and Jimmy both looked stricken.

"Not Kraus the Kraut, chief, please," Jimmy pleaded. "She'll have him for breakfast. There won't be anything left!"

Perry gave Jimmy a sour look and walked out, looking for a quiet place to place his call.

"Kraus the Kraut?" Clark asked after a long moment.

"The Planet has a staff psychiatrist, Doctor Ursula Kraus. Her specialty is post-traumatic stress," Richard said. "There was quite a bit of it around the office after the Spires came down. We lost some good people there. It was bad for a while."

"I'm sorry I wasn't here to help."

"Clark, if you had been here, you wouldn't be having issues now," Lois said. There was an odd tightness in her voice. "You would be dead. You would have been the one covering the WTA arms control conference that day instead of Margot Tanaka. The only reason I wasn't there was Jason was sick that morning and Richard was out of town. It was months before I stopped having nightmares about being in there when that first plane hit."

"I said I was sorry. What more do you want? Blood?" His voice dropped to a whisper. Lois looked confused. He wasn't making sense.

"Clark, you've changed." Jimmy was openly worried.

"No, I haven't, really, and that's the problem. I've been trapped in a time warp for six years. I haven't changed. Everything else has and I seem to be having a little trouble adjusting." He allowed himself to slide down the wall until he was sitting on the floor, knees pulled to his chest, a picture of misery.

"Clark, it's okay to need help coping," Lois said softly. She crouched beside him, like she did with Jason when things had gone wrong at school. "We all need help sometimes. Nobody can do it alone, not even Superman."

He gave her a startled, almost frightened, look. She ruffled his hair. He brushed her hand away, then smoothed his hair back down over his forehead.

"Swell. You think I have PTSS, or maybe Stockholm syndrome," Clark stated. "And if I say I won't go? That I'm all right? That I just need some time?"

"You'll go, son, because I said so." Perry said firmly, walking into the dining room. "Nine o'clock Monday. Lois, your appointment is at ten."

"Chief, you can't mean it," Lois protested.

"Yes, I can," said Perry. "If our normally mild-mannered rock of Gibraltar there is having issues, you're not far behind with that Luthor incident and all. And I'm not about to risk losing the two best investigative reporters in Metropolis to stress problems. You've got too much work to do."

"Gee, thanks, chief," Clark and Lois both said.

Richard looked outside and realized how late it had become. A nine o'clock curfew was in place for New Troy Island and it was already past that. "Clark, why don't I drive you home?"

"I can get over to my flat by myself, thank you. It's not that far."

"Clark, Queensland Park is nearly twenty miles from here. The Metro isn't running right now, there's a curfew, and I have a car pass," Richard said. "I'm driving you home, end of discussion."

Paul Foster made two calls from a phone in a neighboring office. It was unlikely anyone would check the call records from a phone in a double-locked office. No one knew he had access to that room, or the files in it.

"Peter," Foster began, "Get your crew together. We have a job for you."

Peter Carlin was captain of the last remaining operational Sky-diver, a fantastic combination of submarine and underwater aircraft carrier. Only the newest generation of nuclear sub was faster, and none of them was as versatile. One of an original fleet of twelve twenty-five years before, they'd been forced to cannibalize the rest of the fleet to keep that one running.

"What and where?" Carlin asked.

"We believe an alien spaceship was dumped north of Alaska."

"Alien?" Carlin repeated. Their aliens hadn't been spotted in over fifteen years. General consensus within the ranks of SHADO was that their green-skinned horrors had been defeated, or simply died out when they could no longer raid the Earth for their supplies. Straker was the only one who really believed they were just biding their time, waiting to attack again.

"Kryptonian."

"We're on it."

The next call was to Gay Ellis, former commander of SHADO's moonbase.

"I've got a job for you and Mark," Foster announced when a woman answered the phone.

There was a time, not all that long ago, when SHADO ruled the Moon, guarding the Earth from the feared alien invasion force with space interceptors and armed satellites. Now, the moonbase belonged to an international mining consortium working hand in hand with the Extra Planetary Research and Development and the European Space Agency. They had even commandeered SHADO's fleet of launch vehicles, although EPRAD had soon retired them as being too costly to maintain.

Five

Queensland Park was the name given to the borough just south of the West River and was divided into the Newtown, Mount Royal, Pelham, North Bridge and Old City neighborhoods. Warehouses and light industry were housed near the river, while the residential areas were a burgeoning stewpot of immigrant communities whose members had come to Metropolis looking for their piece of the American Dream. Shops with signs printed in Thai shared frontage with Russian and Ukrainian storefronts. Chinese, Vietnamese, Pakistanis, and Indians shared space with Greeks and Moroccans. The list was endless.

The Clinton Bridge was down to one lane, but with the curfew, there was no other traffic except for repair crews and emergency workers. Richard had lived in Metropolis long enough to know his way around the city and one of his favorite Indian restaurants, was in the Pelham neighborhood, only a few blocks from Clark's new apartment. They made good time as Richard wove the gunmetal gray Audi A3 through the dark streets. However, Richard's mind was less on his driving than on Lois's revelation that she and Clark had a relationship that had gone beyond the platonic.

"Clark," Richard said finally. "Tell me, how does an ordinary guy compete with Superman?"

"Hmm?"

"How does a human compete with a god?"

"I'm not sure why you're asking me," Clark replied, giving him a puzzled look. "If you're worried that Lois still has a thing for Superman..."

"No, no, it's not that," Richard admitted. "I knew that going in. She wrote something about you in her article that surprised me, that's all."

"About me?" Clark's voice nearly cracked. "What did she say?"

"You took a beating to protect her while out on an assignment. And that you and she had been lovers."

Richard could almost hear the wheels spinning in Clark's head. "Oh, gee," Clark muttered after a long moment. "She said that? Oh, wow." Another long pause, then Clark sighed. "Richard, she has a good life with you. I've seen how she looks at you, the caring, the love. And if she had ever looked at me that way, even once, I would have moved worlds to stay with her. But she never did, and I finally realized she never would. I'm glad she found you. I really am. You're good for her, and Jason's a great kid. But I swear on my life, if you do anything to hurt her, I will break you in two."

He's in love with her. After all this time, he's still in love with her. No wonder he's so torn up. "Clark, I swear I would never do anything to hurt Lois," he said aloud. *And I have no doubt you would break me in two if I did.*

"There's my building," Clark said pointing out a five-story warehouse.

The old concrete and brick warehouse had been converted into ground floor retail and parking, and upstairs apartments for the newest influx of young professionals looking for cheap rent and proximity to the city in a neighborhood that couldn't quite decide if it wanted to improve or not. The ground floor housed a 24-hour natural grocery and a Starbucks, while hookers hung out on the street corner in front of a rundown triple X theater and a transient hotel. The grocery, the Starbucks and the theater were closed due to lack of electricity.

"There's a garage off the alley. You can park there."

The security gate was open and Richard pulled the car into a parking space in the ground floor garage.

"There's still no power," Clark observed, unfolding himself from the Audi's passenger seat. "And I'm on the top floor."

"Well, I guess it's one way to stay in shape," Richard quipped.

"I suppose I can find those files tonight. We can run over to the Planet and copy them." Clark began to lead the way through nearly pitch black corridors.

"Clark, is there going to be a problem with us working together?" Richard asked. He heard a sigh.

"No, not from me."

Richard heard Clark's footsteps as he started down the black hallway once more.

"Uh, Clark, it's very dark in here."

"Oh, yeah, sorry," Clark muttered. Richard heard a whooshing sound, like something moving fast, and a slight breeze, even though there were no windows in the hallway that he could see. Then a flashlight beam appeared. "Is this better?" Clark asked, holding a Mag-light. He turned and headed down the corridor to the stairwell.

"I bet you'll be glad when the power comes on, and you can use the elevator," Richard commented. Even though he was in excellent shape, five flights of stairs in pitch darkness was a bit much. Oddly, Clark hadn't stumbled once and the man had a reputation for tripping on the patterns in linoleum.

Richard heard a key turn in a lock, a door open. Clark disappeared into the darkness beyond, and Richard followed. He was startled when a candle flickered to life in Clark's hand. Clark used the one candle to light several others on the one low table in the room. In fact, as Richard looked around he realized the table was the only piece of furniture he could see besides the tall bookcases that lined two of the walls. The room's high ceiling was shrouded in darkness, but the night sky could just be seen through the industrial style roof windows. Clark's apartment looked more like a library than a place to live. He didn't see a bed.

"Where do you sleep?" Richard wondered aloud.

"With everything shut down, I haven't had a chance to get any furniture," Clark explained. He had pulled several plastic file storage boxes out of the corner and was going through the first one.

"With all the problems this last week, I'm surprised you found a place at all," Richard said, taking one of the candles and inspecting the library. Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Aristotle, Dante, Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, both in their original languages and translations. History, literature, science, politics, religion. There was even a copy of Perry White's **Reports from the Ground**.

"I was surprised, too. Turns out it's been empty for three years. That serial killer, Cary Grant Courtner, lived here. Neighbors claim it's haunted, even though he supposedly never killed anybody here."

"You don't believe in ghosts?"

"Not especially," Clark said.

There were several boxes on the floor, still sealed. "Amazon.com must love you," Richard commented. "You read Russian?"

"Yeah, some," Clark said. He'd started on the second box of papers. "I have kind of a knack for languages."

Richard walked around the room. Two walls lined with books. On the third wall hung a 4'x4' framed color photograph of the Earth from space.

"Which one is this?" Richard asked.

"Apollo 17," Clark answered. "Everyone should see the Earth from space. It's so beautiful, and so fragile. There are no borders, everything's connected, all part of the whole."

"Have you ever seen it from space?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Clark went back to looking through the file boxes. "Found it," he announced, finally. He sat back on his heels and handed the file to Richard, who sat down at the table to read the notes by candlelight.

"Damn," Richard said finally. "All this and nobody could get a conviction against these guys?"

"No physical evidence, nothing to actually tie them into arms smuggling. It's all circumstantial, supposition. And it doesn't help when key witnesses disappear, or end up in the hospital with specific amnesia," Clark said. He stopped suddenly, eyes focusing elsewhere, as if listening to something.

"Clark, what is it?"

"Nothing. Why don't you get that to the office and get copies made." Clark sounded distracted and worried. He found a manila envelope and stuffed the papers inside. "Put the originals in Perry's safe when you're done."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, just a little tired. Look, were you planning to come into the office tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow's Sunday. What time were you planning on coming in on your day off?"

"Ninish," Clark said. "Take the Mag-light, you'll need it."

Richard shook his head in bemusement. "I'll see you about nine and we'll get started."

Clark was into his costume and out of the apartment through the roof windows almost before Richard had closed the door.

The sound he'd heard was a sewer caving in, with workmen now trapped under tons of rubble. He hoped the delay in getting there wouldn't be fatal.

"Superman!" The backhoe operator called out in relief at seeing the blue and red figure swooping out of the sky.

"What happened?" Superman asked, surveying the area. The entire roadway had sunk, canting the backhoe, which looked like it might fall over. The portable generator and high-power lights weren't fairing much better.

"The whole street gave way. There's two men under there."

"Stand back," Superman ordered. He grabbed a shovel and began digging away at the debris. He discovered he had to fuse the walls to keep them from collapsing further. Within a minute, he had reached the two trapped men. The first one was able to climb out of the pit under his own power. He was scraped and bruised, but otherwise unharmed. But the second - "We need EMTs and a back board down here," Superman announced. "He has multiple fractures, including his spine. I don't dare move him." He didn't add that the man was already in deep shock.

"Emergency services is on its way," the supervisor assured him. Superman could hear the sirens and judged that the aid car was still minutes away.

"I'll be right back," Superman said and sailed out of sight. Within seconds, he was back with blankets and a medical oxygen kit. With infinite gentleness, he placed the oxygen mask over the injured man's face and covered him with the blankets. The first man he'd rescued climbed back down into the pit.

"Thank you, Superman," he said. "I'll stay with him till the aid car gets here."

"Thank you," Superman said quietly and soared straight up.

He looked down to survey the damaged street. The cave-in extended several blocks already and was continuing west, threatening the Queensland bridge onramp. He spotted a gunmetal gray Audi. It slammed on its brakes, and skidded nose first into the cave-in. The car alarm went off.

Superman came to earth beside the car. "Are you all right?"

"Superman," Richard said, startled. "What's going on?"

"An aftershock caved in the sewers," the man of steel said. "I don't think you'll be driving home tonight."

"I think you're right," Richard said, pushing the driver's side door open and climbing out of the car. He surveyed the damage - both front tires were trashed, the frame was probably bent, and only God knew what shape the suspension was in. The insurance company would never believe it.

"Want a lift home?"

"You're joking, right?"

Superman chuckled softly. "No joke. This is not the best place to be caught out after curfew."

"Thanks, I'd appreciate it," Richard said. "But I need to get to the Planet instead." He indicated the manila folder he was holding. "By the way. I didn't get a chance to introduce myself the last time we met. I'm Richard White, assistant editor of the Daily Planet."

"Lois's Richard," Superman said. "She told me a little about you, and I put two and two together in the plane. You're a lucky man. She's an incredible woman."

"I know," Richard said.

"Hold on," Superman instructed, picking Richard up as though he were a child.

Richard barely had time to open his mouth before they were fifty feet above the pavement. He flung his free arm around the caped shoulders to steady himself. After a moment, he realized how quiet it was, and how smoothly Superman cut through the air. He felt like a kid on his first plane ride, exhilarated, a little scared. "A plane comes in a poor second to this," Richard commented.

"I'm told hang-gliding comes close," Superman said. Richard could hear the smile in his voice.

They flew over the West River, rising ever higher over the buildings of New Troy. The Daily Planet was up ahead. The Planet's art-deco globe was still missing, making the observation deck feel naked, exposed. Superman landed lightly on the deck, setting Richard on his feet.

"Uh, thanks for the ride," Richard said. Superman started to lift off again. "Superman?" Superman stopped, turned in midair like a dancer, and settled back down to the deck. "A lot of people have been letting Lois and me know how glad they are you're back and that you were in their prayers when you were in the hospital."

Superman smiled, not the famous blazing smile of the Planet's front page photos of years back, but a shy smile, as if he wasn't sure how to respond. "Thank you," he said finally. "It's nice to be appreciated. Tell Lois I said hi."

"Will do," Richard said as Superman took to the air once more. "Thanks again."

Richard went inside the building, down to his office, to photocopy the papers Clark had given him. He called Triple-A about his car. Then he phoned Lois to let her know about the car and his flight with Superman.

Six

Richard had fallen asleep on the sofa in his office. He woke with a start and checked the time: 6:30 am. He got up and walked out into the newsroom. It was the usual Sunday crew. Matt Beatty and Leann Stern both nodded greetings as they finished their articles on the night's happenings - muggings mostly, a few PTA and scout functions on Saturday evening. Matt and Leann were among the older staff. Matt was only a few years from retirement.

Clark wasn't a normal member of the Sunday crew, but he was at his desk, head resting on folded arms, asleep. There was a smoky, chemical smell about him.

Richard gave Matt a questioning look, nodding towards Clark.

"He came in about 4," Matt said quietly, so as not to wake the sleeping man. "Filed a story on those arson fires last night on the West River, and one on the aftershock that caved in the sewers over in Queensland Park. Guess Superman had a busy time of it last night, too."

At the mention of Superman, Clark opened his eyes and sat up, blinking like an owl as he tried to get his bearings.

"Next time, try the sofa in Perry's office," Richard said with a smile. Clark's face was smudged with soot, as was his shirt. "Uh, Clark, you're supposed to be reporting the fires, not fighting them, you know."

"You gotta' be where the story is," Clark said. He handed Richard hard copies of the two stories. Richard quickly scanned the text.

"Any leads on the arsonists?"

"I was asked not to print it yet, but Superman caught two of them in the act. So far, it looks like they're part of a gang of Toastmaster wannabes. Forensics is going over the burned buildings now. With any luck, the police will be able to round up the rest of the gang in short order," said Clark. "They're dangerous and not nearly as smart as the original Toastmaster gang. That last warehouse, where they were caught, was filled with agrochemicals. Fertilizers, pesticides, you name it. If it had gone up, it would have been like a bomb going off, and I don't even want to think about the poison gas it would have made. Why all that stuff was being stored together is beyond me."

"What about this part about Superman?" Richard asked.

"Your call if you want to print that," Clark said. "I know what I saw. He was tired. It was an effort to stop that last fire." *Okay, so it wasn't strictly true that he saw Superman getting tired. But he knew what he felt and he knew that the firefighters saw it. He'd seen the concern in their faces.* "I don't think he's fully recovered from the kryptonite poisoning. Not that that's going to stop him. He feels responsible for Luthor's getting hold of the advanced tech he used to cause the quake."

"Leave it in, I say," Matt said. Richard and Clark both gave the older man a curious look. "Maybe if people realize Superman is more human than any of us thought, they won't take him for granted as much. It's just an idea."

"It's a good idea," Richard agreed, looking to Clark for confirmation. Clark simply shrugged. He looked completely done in. "Clark, why don't you doss down in Perry's office for a couple hours?"

"Thanks, I think I will," Clark agreed and headed toward the senior editor's office.

"Rich," Matt said. "I don't remember that kid ever looking so tired, even after an all-nighter. And believe me, he used to pull a lot of them. Him and Lois both."

"We're all getting older," Richard reminded him. Matt was the only one in the newsroom who ever called him Rich.

"No, it's more than that," Matt said. "He's not well. Hasn't been for the past couple days."

"Maybe he's coming down with something," Richard suggested.

"Clark?" Matt scoffed. "That kid never took a single sick day since he started here. Constitution of an ox. No, there's something else going on."

Richard sat at his desk going over the papers Clark had given him the night before. The documents were damning - phone records, copies of checks, bank statements, real estate tax records, income tax statements from both Great Britain and the U.S., bills of lading, customs records. Clark had done his homework before taking off to *wherever*. Pity the evidence he had accumulated hadn't been quite strong enough to take to court. This Colonel Straker and his bunch were bad news.

He checked his watch. After ten. Lois and Jason would be at church by now. Richard picked up the papers, put them back in their envelope and went into Perry's office to wake up Clark. Clark was already awake, standing at the outside window of Perry's office, staring out at the skyline.

"Feeling better?"

Clark nodded. "I've been really tired the last couple days, like maybe I'm coming down with something."

"Maybe you need a day off?"

"I've only been back a week," Clark reminded him.

Richard motioned the other man to follow him to the conference room next door to Perry's office. The large table would give them room to spread out. Clark set his laptop up on the desk by the window looking out onto the bullpen and plugged it into the network.

"I found my notes last night, too," Clark said. "I'd almost forgotten what a nasty bunch they were. They were so fixated on this whole alien invasion idea, they had no qualms about killing or mind-raping innocent people who simply got in their way. And when their funding got cut they went rogue, and started arms dealing to fuel their agenda."

"That's what I've heard," Richard said. "And seven years ago, they fixated on taking out Superman, only he then disappeared for nearly six years."

"They weren't thrilled with me, either," Clark commented. "I was the one who wrote the initial exposé on them. But after six years, where to begin?" He sat back, staring at the screen on his laptop for a long moment, then jotted down several names.

"One of us should try to back track any weapons the police may have confiscated. Maybe Bill Henderson knows something. He's still in Special Investigations, isn't he?"

"As far as I know. And what should I be doing?" Richard said it jokingly, but Clark seemed oblivious to the fact he was giving the paper's assistant editor marching orders.

"The International Astrophysical Commission is still around. They used to be in charge of SHADO's finances. Not a real oversight committee, but they did try. It's just possible someone there might remember Straker, kept tabs on him. And if we can run him to ground, we'll find the rest of them."

"Daddy!" Jason came running into the conference room and threw himself at Richard. Lois followed Jason through the door. She was dressed in a floral sundress and high-heeled sandals, a far cry from her usual business attire.

"I thought you'd still be at church," Richard said. He gave Lois a kiss.

"Jason got kicked out of Sunday school, again," Lois said with a grimace. "That's the fourth time in as many months, and I'm getting a little tired of the education minister's holier

than thou attitude when it happens."

"I don't like Mrs. Costerman," Jason complained. "She's creepy."

"Gee, Jason, four times in four months?" Clark asked. "You're working on a record, right? Which one was it, where is the land of Nod? Or, who did Noah's sons marry? Or what gives with not knowing pi is more than three?"

Jason giggled. "How did you know?"

"I managed to get kicked out of every Sunday school class in Smallville before I was eight," Clark said with a grin.

"You're kidding, right?" Lois asked.

"Nope. I had to sit with the grownups during Reverend Wallace's sermons. Long, boring, painful, sermons. I would have much rather gone to Saint Mary's. Father Patrick's homilies were so much shorter, and Mrs. O'Hara made the best shortbread cookies in town." There was a wistful note in his voice. He turned back to Jason "So which one was it?"

"One you wouldn't have come up with when you were his age," Lois said. "They were doing some sort of demonstration with bent up coat hangers, and Jason told Mrs. Costerman that Superman could straighten out things faster and better than Jesus could." She turned to Richard. "I think *we* may be banned from church, too." Lois flopped into one of chairs at the table. "By the way, Triple-A called. They've towed the car to the repair shop and we should know more tomorrow." She looked back at Jason. "I cannot believe you told Mrs. Costerman that Superman was better than Jesus."

"Superman flies without a plane," Jason insisted. Lois rolled her eyes.

Jason's statement was amusing, in an embarrassing sort of way. Superman had never, ever claimed to be a deity. Quite the contrary, he abhorred the very idea.

Clark chose to ignore the continuing discussion between Jason and his mother, and started looking through Richard's notes on the ammunition that had been flooding into Metropolis. One item caught his eye: The material the police had confiscated in one of their raids had been taken to STAR Labs for analysis. He opened a browser on his laptop - not the standard one, but the special one designed by STAR Labs. Jason came over to sit beside him to watch.

"Whatcha doin'?" Jason asked.

Clark raised a hand in warning as he spoke quietly into the computer microphone; "Kal-El of Krypton." Then: "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog." The browser connected. Next he inserted the credit card sized security token, read off the series of numbers on the LCD read-out, keyed in the 20-digit code and followed that with his personal identification number when the access program asked for it.

The STAR Labs secure access page came onto the screen with a listing of current projects. *He was in*. They hadn't changed his access protocols while he was gone. *Correction, Superman's access protocols*. He made a mental note to update his laptop and the access protocols as soon as possible.

He found the lab report on the ammunition. The material analysis seemed fairly normal, for full-metal jacketed shells. There was one anomaly and that one sent chills down Clark's spine. The slugs contained more than a trace of transuranic element 126. *Kryptonite*. The kryptonite alloy would make the bullets much harder than usual and on impact. They would have a good chance of actually detonating. *This was very very bad. Armor piercing shells out of a hand gun.*

He logged into the STAR Labs internal mail system and typed a quick note to Doctor Stoner, author of the report. Then he typed one to Doctor Kitty Faulkner.

Behind him Lois and Richard were deep in conversation, voices pitched low to keep from being overheard. Clark noticed Jason listening to them.

"It's not polite to listen to other people's conversations," Clark told him.

"But they're talking about you," Jason said.

"I know. I can hear them, too."

Jason gave him a confused look.

"It's still not polite."

"When are you going to tell Clark?" Richard had asked Lois.

"Tell him what?"

"About Jason."

Lois sounded upset. "Richard, Clark can't possibly be Jason's biological father. I don't know how, but on the boat with Luthor, Jason did things, things he shouldn't have been able to do. Things only Superman could do."

"So you think Superman's Jason's father?"

"I don't know how it happened, but yes."

"Is that true, what your mom said about you doing things on the boat?"

Jason nodded. "And I saw you in the water. I told Mommy and Daddy you were there and Mommy jumped into the water to get you."

"You saw Superman in the water," Clark corrected absently. "What happened on the boat?"

"A bad man was hurting Mommy, and so I pushed real hard and the piano fell on him," Jason said. Clark gave him a surprised look. Jason was years younger than Clark had been before his powers began to fully develop. But then, Clark had never had any overwhelming need to use them, either.

"Why doesn't Mommy see?" Jason asked softly.

"See what, Jason?"

"You."

How much does he know? "People see what they expect to see. Sometimes people get ideas about other people, and even when it turns out they were wrong, they still can't see the truth," Clark told him.

"So, what do you want to do?" Richard asked.

"I told him, when I thought he might not make it. I don't know if he heard me."

"Lois, I love you, and I want to marry you. But, if you want, I can move out, so you..."

"Don't be stupid, Richard. I do love you. I do really, truly love you, but..."

"But, you still love him too, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then what do you want me to do? Do you want me to give you some space or do you want to break it off? I can stay at Uncle Perry's for a while..."

"Jason," Clark said. "I, uh, think you want to go to your dad's office for a little bit."

"Why?"

"Because I'm betting there's going to be some yelling pretty soon, and it might get a little scary. Grownups sometimes say things they don't mean when they're mad."

Jason gave him a puzzled look, but left the conference room as asked. He looked back forlornly as he closed the door on the adults.

Clark took a deep breath and turned to face Lois and Richard. He was shaking inside.

"Lois, Jason has very good hearing, and so do I. Now, it really doesn't bother me that you don't

want to think Jason's mine. Frankly, I had assumed he was Richard's, until just now. And that's fine. You have a good life with Richard and he's done a great job with Jason. I've seen how you look at each other. I know you love each other. I know he would do anything for you. So, do everybody here a favor, marry the man, and don't mess it up by trying to make a fantasy real."

"What fantasy?" Lois asked.

"Superman. Superman is a fantasy, a fiction, a character, *he's not real*," Clark said earnestly, getting up from the desk to stand beside the table. "You don't know him. You think you do, but all you know is what he's wanted you to know, and that's very little, really. For all you know, he could have a wife and three kids out there somewhere."

"That's not true and you know it," Lois stated.

"Do I? Do you? Do you know his favorite movie, his favorite book, his favorite restaurant, where he was raised, where he goes to church? Does he even go to church? You don't have those answers. And even if you did, even if he had confided in you that much, think about it. He can't acknowledge paternity. He doesn't dare admit he fathered a child, much less that he did and then walked out on you."

"He didn't know."

"I can use that excuse. I'm a not-overly-bright hick from the mid-west. But it doesn't hold for him. He's Superman. Truth, justice, and all that jazz. He's supposed to know these sorts of things, like he got a woman knocked up. Maybe the world would forgive him a little slip like that, but we're also talking about Jason. If anyone got wind that Superman had a special interest in your son, it would be signing his death warrant. Jason's and yours both. And you know it. Do you want to risk that? Do you?" Clark asked. His voice was tight, just short of yelling at her.

Lois looked stricken, as though she couldn't decide whether to cry or come across the table and slap him. "Why are you doing this?" she asked after a long moment.

Clark's shoulders slumped and he stuck his hands in his pockets to keep them from shaking. He studied the floor, the toes of his loafers. "I love you, Lois. I have since the first day I met you, but you've never seen it. Superman was always there, bigger than life, and I'm just a farm boy from Kansas who happens to be a pretty good reporter. But you and Richard have something special, and I don't want to see you throw that away trying to create a relationship with someone that doesn't really exist. Someone who's already broken your heart once."

She came around the table to face him. He was nearly a head taller than she was and she had to put her head back to look up at his face, but he wouldn't look at her. "Clark, what really happened in Alaska? I know you had the crap beat out of you by some thugs, but..."

"We'd picked up a lead in Niagara that led us to Alaska. We were looking into a cover-up on problems with the oil and natural gas pipelines through the nature preserves. Our cover was blown and it got ugly. But we managed to get out with our skins and our story. Then we got a tip that Luthor may have found Superman's place near the Arctic Circle. We were already close, so we went to see if we could find it. Don't you remember?"

"If I remembered I wouldn't be asking. So we found it?"

Clark nodded.

Lois searched her memories. There were snippets of sights and sounds, a crystal palace, but nothing made sense. And Clark was there, or was it Superman? *How bizarre that she couldn't tell which one it was.*

"I recognized the crystals Luthor had. I knew they belonged to Superman," Lois said. "I was in the Fortress of Solitude. Luthor found it and stole them."

"Yes."

"What else happened?"

Clark didn't answer for a long time, then: "You took off with Superman for three days. When you came back, you couldn't stop crying. You wouldn't say what happened, but you took it hard."

"And so we...?"

"I was convenient," Clark said. "You needed a warm body beside you that night, some tenderness." *It was almost the truth. The timeline was only a little out of synch.*

"Why don't I remember it, except in dreams?"

"You were still in bad shape when we got back here. You wouldn't stop crying. Then, suddenly, you stopped crying, and I was back to being your goofy sidekick again. I never asked, but I suspect Superman had something to do with it."

"He erased my memory." It was a flat statement. Her expression was bleak.

A cell phone rang. Clark pulled his from his pocket, turning away from Lois. "Clark Kent speaking... Doctor Stoner, thank you for getting back to me so soon... Would you have some time later this afternoon to discuss your findings on the ammunition the police found...? Yes, sir, I understand. I'll let him know if I can, but I can't guarantee anything... Thank you, sir."

Lois was silent a moment, thinking about their previous conversation, then: "Don't tell me you have an appointment to interview Doctor Eldon Stoner?" she said in disbelief. "The man never grants interviews. He hates the press."

"Uh, gee, Lois, he seemed like a nice enough guy to me," Clark said. Lois glared at him. Clark shrugged. "Stoner would rather to talk to Superman. But, with any luck, I'll get to tag along."

"And you happen to have Superman's cell phone number? Cause if you do, I need to talk to him."

Clark ignored her remark, checking his watch instead. "If I hurry, I can get changed before going over there."

"Mister Clark." Clark looked down to see Jason standing beside the table again. *When did he come back in?*

"Your face is dirty," Jason told him.

"Thanks, sport," Clark said. He gave Jason a crooked grin as he shut down his laptop. "I promise I'll get cleaned up first. Oh, Richard, Emil Duvall was the chair of the IAC when SHADO was decommissioned, and he lived in Metropolis for a while."

"Okay." But Clark was already gone. *He's as bad a Lois. Zero to sixty in no time flat.*

Lois sighed. "I never realized till now how much Clark resented Superman."

"Honey, Clark just wants what's best for you, for all of us," Richard said, kissing her forehead. "He's a good man."

"But Jason *is* Superman's son," Lois said softly. "And I do still love him."

"I know, honey. But, it's been a long time. Does he still love you?"

Lois just looked at him, tears beginning to well in her eyes. "I need to get some air."

Richard watched as she walked out to the elevators, heart sinking as the elevator doors closed behind her. Then he headed for the elevators, Jason in tow.

He was there, on the observation deck, just as she knew he would be. Tall and perfect.

Then she looked more closely.

"Hello, Lois," he said. His voice was quiet.

"You look tired," she told him.

"I've been very busy," he said. "And you know what they say, no rest for the weary."

"I'm glad you're here," she said. "I need to talk to you."

He didn't say anything, waiting for her to continue. After a long moment, she did.

"Do you remember anything from the hospital?"

He considered her question. "I know you and your son came to visit. You were crying."

He looked into her eyes. "You told me that Jason might be mine."

He remembered.

"Jason did things while we were on Luthor's boat, and then on the plane that I can't explain, except..."

"Lois," he said gently, cutting her off. "I would be overjoyed if Jason were, in fact, my son. But I seriously doubt that humans and Kryptonians are genetically compatible."

"He threw a piano across a stateroom. He killed the man who was trying to kill me," Lois said. "Later, Jason was the one who spotted you in the water. We would never have found you without him."

Superman bowed his head in thought. "Lois, I've seen human beings do remarkable things, super-human things, when the need was great and the will strong. Jason strikes me as having a very strong will. And as to seeing me in the water, children frequently have a visual acuity that adults can hardly imagine."

"He's only five years old. How could he have done it if...?"

"It was an accident. Boats rock. Maybe all it needed was a *little* push."

She turned his suggestion over in her mind. She didn't believe the incident with the piano was an accident, but he seemed so sure it had to be. *Why didn't he want to believe her?*

"You're positive that you can't be Jason's father?"

"Lois," he said gently, caressing her face. "You have two men who love you more than life itself, a son who promises to grow into a fine man. Don't throw that away."

"I love you," she said. She had promised herself she wouldn't cry, but she felt tears running down her cheeks.

"I know," he said. He turned to go.

"Superman?" He stopped and looked back at her. "Clark said you and I spent time together in Alaska. Why don't I remember?"

He swallowed hard. "You told me it hurt too much. You were jealous of the world, knowing what it was you could never have all to yourself. You wanted to forget, to make it so it never happened, that we were never together." He closed his eyes a moment, and Lois thought she saw tears. "Good-bye, Lois." He lifted a hand as though to touch her one last time. Then he was gone.

Richard and Jason stood just out of sight, by the rooftop door, watching.

Jason watched Superman fly away then turned to his dad. "Daddy, why was Mister Clark acting so weird?"

Richard considered the question, although he was a little puzzled that Jason was worried about Clark when Superman had just left his mother crying. "I think Mommy and Clark have some things to work out. We just have to give them some time."

"Is Mister Clark my other daddy?"

"I'm pretty sure he is, Jason," Richard said. "Are you okay with it?"

Jason looked thoughtful then he grinned. "I've got two daddies now, like the other kids at school. Can I tell them at school?"

"I think you'd better ask Mommy and Clark, first."

Jason peered into Richard's face a long moment. "Daddy, are you okay with it?"

"Yeah," Richard said truthfully. "I think I am. Clark's a good man, even if he has been acting a little weird. You could do a lot worse for a second daddy."

Seven

STAR Labs was housed in a complex of buildings on the south shore of the West River. A privately funded think-tank, STAR Labs was internationally renowned for their research facilities. Chief Administrator Karen (Kitty) Faulkner was in the lobby to greet him as he landed. She hadn't changed much in six years, still slender, brown hair just beginning to gray. She was one of a select few who knew who Superman really was. She smiled as she caught sight of him.

"Welcome back, Kal-El," she said as she handed him his photo ID that would allow him access to the building. "You have to tell us about your trip to Krypton."

"Not much to tell," Superman told her. "One of Luthor's cronies faked the evidence of Krypton's survival. It was a dead world, a graveyard without bodies."

"I'm so sorry," Kitty said. "It must have been awful for you. To go so far to find nothing but death."

"I survived," Superman told her.

"Doctor Stoner is waiting for us in the conference room," she said, leading the way into the building.

"I read his initial report on the ammunition the police sent over for analysis. Any ideas on where the materials came from?"

"Unfortunately, yes," she said as they approached the door to the main conference room. "Stoner is the world's foremost expert on stable transuranics, specifically element 126. He's been studying ways to use it for energy production. We were more than a little disturbed to find that someone has been using it to enhance weapons. We still don't know what the effects of long term exposure to kryptonite might be on humans." She opened the door to the conference room and ushered Superman inside.

A slender, white haired man in his late sixties was sitting at large central table. His eyes were hidden behind dark glasses, but the face seemed oddly familiar.

"Eldon Stoner, I'd like you to meet Kal-El of Krypton, also known as Superman," Kitty said.

Superman stepped forward and held out his right hand, but Stoner ignored it.

"So, you're Metropolis's Kryptonian prodigal son."

"I guess so. I am the only Kryptonian around," Superman said. Stoner's attitude puzzled him. "I wanted to ask some questions about the kryptonite laced ammunition that's been coming into Metropolis."

"I've done the analysis, which I'm sure you have a copy, thanks to your Mister Kent." He practically spat out Kent's name as he glared at Kitty. "Except for the addition of Element 126, the items appear to be standard military issue ammunition. The 'kryptonite' makes the alloys 9% heavier and 74% harder than standard. As I'm sure you surmised from my report, it also increases the fragmentation of the slugs. They tend to explode on impact."

"How many metallurgists are there who would be capable of creating this alloy?"

"The initial research? Myself, Ivan Berinov at the University of Moscow, and Janus Warner at Caltech. However, once the procedures have been developed, any competent metallurgist able to follow instructions could recreate it." He pulled a small case from his pocket. "Would you like to see one of the bullets?"

"Eldon, stop it," Kitty ordered. "You are well aware of the effects of kryptonite on Superman."

Stoner simply looked at her and placed the container back in his pocket. "If you'll excuse

me, I have work to do," he said and walked out of the conference room.

"My apologies, Kal," Kitty said. "He is a brilliant researcher. Been here about five years. And he's very close to building a prototype energy plant using kryptonite as the power source."

"Where's the kryptonite coming from?"

"Smallville, Kansas. Kryptonite capital of the world, thanks to all the meteorite strikes near there. We've had teams out for the last five years collecting all the meteorites we can."

"Good thing Luthor didn't know about your collection."

"Our security's better than the Metropolis Museum of Natural History's," she assured him.

"I hope so. You know there's kryptonite at the Spires site?"

She nodded. "Both planes had several pounds of it onboard. We cleaned it up as best as we could. Went so far as to demand the debris be dumped into the deep ocean due to biological and heavy metal contaminants. Didn't want to alarm the public, since the attack was obviously a ploy to get you to react, assuming you were able to do so."

"But how did they get hold of so much of it? And who are *they*?"

"We think, or at least Professor Crosby and I think, that at least one of the teams we had in Smallville sent most of their finds somewhere else. By the time we realized it, they'd covered their tracks. We couldn't prove anything and couldn't trace it."

"Was it Luthor?"

"He is a psychopath," Kitty said. "But it doesn't feel like one of his plots. He denied having anything to do with it, and you know what a blowhard Luthor was, is. If he'd been involved, he would have said something. Besides, the break-in at the museum would indicate he didn't have a supply. "

"What about SHADO?"

She considered his suggestion. "Possibly. But to kill that many people just to get to you, that's a bit much."

"It was just a thought," Superman admitted. "Kitty, I need a favor."

"Name it."

"Remember those baseline psychological studies we did before I left?"

"Certainly."

"I'd like to retake the tests for comparison."

"Care to tell me why?" Kitty asked with a smile.

Superman looked at her solemnly. "I'm having coping issues. Clark has blown up at Lois twice in the last two days, in front of other people, including her fiancé. I, *he*, just doesn't do things like that. People are thinking he's heading for a breakdown, or maybe it's happened already and they're too worried to say anything for fear of making it worse."

Kitty stared at him a long moment. He could imagine the horrific scenarios running through her mind. A rogue Kryptonian running riot in the city was a frightening thought, even for him.

He smiled faintly, to reassure her. "I'm also not healing as well as I should, and I'm getting tired too quickly. Not good signs," he added.

"I'll have Professor Crosby and Doctor Andrews meet us at the metrics lab. By the way," she added, reaching into the copy of her lab coat and pulling out two small devices that resembled the new flash drives he'd seen at the Planet. "I assume you haven't had time to replace your old laptop?"

"No, I haven't, but I do need to get a newer one pretty soon."

She dropped the two devices into his hand. "The blue one has the new browser and

security program on it and the red one is your new security token. They should work on your old machine. And when you do get your new one, remember to bring it in so we can add our security measures to it."

"Kal-El," Charles Andrews, STAR Lab's prize-winning psychologist and psychometrician, announced. "According to the retests, you are probably the most psychologically stable individual on the planet. But..." he paused for effect, "based on other observations, you are in fact having some stress issues."

"What observations?"

"Normal people under stress, when they're nervous, chew their nails, play with pencils, smoke, other self-calming things. You levitate. The fact that you don't seem to be aware of it does cause me some concern."

"I'll try to be more circumspect," Superman promised. "Just out of curiosity, what would your conclusions be if those test results belonged to a normal human, say a reporter for the Daily Planet?"

"The assumption being that reporters for the Planet are normal?" Andrews quipped. Kitty chuckled, but Superman just gave him a curious look. Andrews was not a member of the inner circle. "Okay, these results would indicate a very serious case of Superman Syndrome. A pathological need to be of help, to get involved, be a good example to others."

The curious look became open puzzlement.

"Mild cases are no problem," Andrews told him. "In fact, most emergency workers, policemen, medical workers, have some measure of it. It's when it gets into the serious range that trouble starts. That's when the inability to live up to their own high standards, the inability to make the world a measurably better place, takes its toll. There's a high incidence of stress related illness, depression, even suicide."

"And the recommended treatment?"

"Symptomatic, mostly," Andrews said. "It's actually fairly difficult to treat since you can't really fault the concepts of helpfulness and high moral and behavioral standards. Generally, we try to treat the depression and stress issues, with drugs if necessary, talk therapy for suicidal ideation." A thought occurred to him. "You're not having suicidal thoughts, are you?"

"Well, jumping off a tall building is out of the question, I'd just float there," Superman said with a faint smile. Andrews frowned in sudden concern.

"No, I have no intention of doing away with myself," Superman assured him with a chuckle. "Thank you, Doctor."

Kitty nodded a dismissal. "I'll talk to you later," Kitty promised as Andrews left the room, closing the door behind him.

"Just out of curiosity, what is going on?" Kitty asked as soon as the door closed.

"Just one of those little coping problems," Superman said with a shrug. "An annoyance more than anything." *I hope.* "But the tests don't explain why I've lost my temper, twice."

"Kal, you said you were having other problems?" Bridgette Crosby asked. Crosby was one of the world's top bio-radiological researchers. Before he left, she had been looking into how to protect him from the effects of kryptonite.

"My back should have healed by now, even following kryptonite exposure. And I'm not recharging as quickly as normal, or as completely as normal. People have noticed it, commented on it. It's probably in today's Planet."

Bridgette was a large woman, with a round friendly face surrounded by curly brown hair.

She stepped over to where he was seated, placing a fist under his chin to raise his head, peering intently into his eyes. "Have you been exposed to kryptonite since the hospital?"

"At the Spires, yesterday afternoon. I was able to get out of range, and I was fine. At least as fine as I have been the last couple days."

Bridgette beckoned to Kitty. The other woman stepped closer, bending to peer into his eyes. She glanced at Bridgette. "Sub-clinical chronic exposure?"

"That would be my guess," Bridgette agreed.

"Residue from the Spires?"

"Possibly."

Superman brushed Bridgette's hand away. "Would you mind letting me in on this?"

"Kal, your eyes have turned the prettiest shade of turquoise."

His eyes widened as he realized what she was saying. "There's enough kryptonite in the dust in Metropolis to poison me, without me realizing it?"

"That's my guess. It'd build up in your tissues, like a heavy metal. Cause only minor symptoms, like tiredness, weakness, until it reaches critical, then wham, full blown poisoning and you'd be dead before you realized it. I'm betting one of the symptoms we've never noticed is emotional lability. It was probably masked by the physical symptoms."

"So, what do I do?"

"Stay away from Lois Lane?" Bridgette suggested.

"Not helpful."

"Leave town until you've healed up and recharged. I would hazard a guess that the low level of poisoning is what's keeping your body from regenerating normally."

"At a guess, how high is this dust likely to be?"

"The dust from the Spires went all the way into the upper atmosphere, but by now most of it has settled out, so I'd say a couple miles away from New Troy you should be able to minimize your exposure," Bridgette said.

"There is also an option here, if there's a need," Kitty said. "We've just completed the work on the new medical suite, and haven't had time to let the city know otherwise it would have been the preferred option when you 'fell', instead of Metropolis General."

"And that is?"

Kitty smiled and took his hand, leading him out of the conference room and down a corridor, deeper into the building. She stopped at a security door and keyed in a combination. The door swung open to reveal a small chamber with three inner doors, one straight ahead and one to either side - an airlock, of sorts. Kitty opened the door that was straight ahead and ushered Superman inside.

"This is a self-contained surgery and ICU. The air both in and out is scrubbed and filtered down to the sub-micron level. We have full spectrum lighting, including total control of the UV and infrared frequencies. We can duplicate the light spectrum and atmospheres of other planets in here, if necessary. It's also lead shielded and EM shielded."

"It looks more like it came out of *Andromeda Strain*," he commented. He nodded to the isolation suits hanging on rails in front of openings in the walls and the glass enclosed booth of medical instrumentation.

"That was based on real research. We can adjust the lighting to any intensity as well. How do you feel now?"

He thought for a moment. "Better."

"I thought you might," Kitty said. "Lead shielding and full spectrum lighting. Your natural

invulnerability makes it almost impossible for us to treat you medically. That was one of the problems they had over at Metropolis General. They couldn't even get a good x-ray off of you. Here, we can shift the light spectrum from Sol normal to something closer to red giant, like Krypton's sun before it died."

"I should become human, at least close."

"And we know how to medically treat humans, so long as you don't mind the drums and rattles."

Superman smiled, but there was worry in his eyes.

"That was a joke," she assured him.

He grinned. "Thanks," and headed out.

"Don't be a stranger, Kal," she called after him.

Eight

Lex Luthor railed at the indignity of being placed in a cell like a common criminal. The Cuban authorities were having none of it. Didn't they realize who they had? The man who nearly destroyed the U.S. east coast. The man who nearly killed Superman? The greatest criminal genius of this or any other century?

Luthor and Kitty Kowalski had been picked up off their tiny island by a fishing boat three days before, hungry and dehydrated. Despite Luthor's promises of riches, the fishermen took the two fugitives back to Havana, where the government, instead of rewarding him for crippling a major U.S. city, threw him in prison cell and notified the U.S. State Department of his capture.

The news hit the wire services late morning. Castro's government was willing to turn Luthor over to the U.S. in exchange for opening trade negotiations with Washington.

Lois read the bulletin as soon as it came in. She dialed Clark's cell phone. "They've found Luthor and his woman friend!" she announced as soon as he picked up.

"Where?" Clark demanded. Lois was surprised at his abrupt tone, but then Clark had been surprising her a lot the last few days.

"Havana, Cuba. They're being held at the Clovedeo prison complex. How'd the interview go?"

"Fine. I'll tell you about it later. Did he have anything with him when he was found? Did he have the crystals from the fortress?"

"There's nothing in the bulletin about it. Maybe they're just not saying, or he may have hidden them somewhere," Lois suggested. "Or he may have lost them while escaping from New Krypton."

"Well, there's no way of knowing without talking to him."

Alarms went off in Lois's head. "Clark Kent, you are not heading off to Cuba to interview Lex Luthor. Not without me."

"I have no intention of going to Cuba, Lois," Clark assured her. "Besides, isn't it still illegal? But I'm betting Superman will be there shortly. And he has a serious bone to pick with that bastard."

"Clark, are you okay? I've never heard you like this, and after this morning..."

"I'm okay, really. And I'm really sorry about blowing up at you. I don't know what happened. But just knowing what the misuse of Kryptonian technology did, having those crystals missing, scares the hell out of me."

"Scares the hell out of all of us," Lois admitted.

"Lois, I need to be someplace. I'll see you later."

"Uh, Clark, what about that interview with Eldon Stoner?" Lois asked.

"Lois, goodbye."

Just above the Daily Planet, Superman turned off Clark Kent's cell phone and tucked it into his belt at the small of his back where it would be hidden by his cape.

Superman landed just outside the prison where Lois had said Luthor was being held. Armed guards came out, stopping short when they recognized him.

"Señor Superman," Captain Gregorio Mendez called. In an instant, Superman's mind clicked over into Spanish. It was a faculty STAR Labs had not been able to fully explain, but Superman suspected was another bit of Jor-El's training to help him survive on Earth. He only

needed a few phrases of spoken language to begin understanding it. A day's exposure and he could hold a conversation. Three days of full submersion and he was talking like a native.

"What are you doing in Cuba?" Captain Mendez asked, leading the way into the building's office.

Superman noted the security cameras that were in place as he followed Mendez. "Looking for some items that were stolen from me by Lex Luthor. A set of crystals about 25 centimeters long."

"He had nothing like that with him when he was turned over to us," Mendez assured him. "When the fishermen were interrogated, they did not mention finding any crystals."

"May I to speak to him?"

Mendez was dismayed. "But, he's not here. A man from your State Department came with papers from the president's office, releasing him into their custody."

"Did you get his name?"

"Fletcher. Adam Fletcher"

"How long ago did they leave?"

"Less than an half an hour ago. Fletcher said they were flying him straight to Metropolis."

"I see," Superman commented, mostly to himself, then to Mendez: "I assume you confirmed the orders with the president's office."

"Of course."

"May I have a copy of the papers you were given?"

"Certainly, Señor Superman." Mendez gave orders to one of the guards to photocopy the papers and give them to their visitor.

"And if it's not too much trouble, may I see the playback from your security cameras covering the transfer?"

"Of course."

Mendez opened the door to a nearby room where several uniformed men were watching a wall filled with video surveillance monitors. "We have the most up-to-date security system available," Mendez boasted.

"I'm sure it is. Could you replay the recording?"

Within minutes, the recording appeared on a desktop monitor. Luthor looked tired, angry, dressed in prison overalls, but it was the other man, Fletcher, that sent chills down Superman's spine. He was older than Superman remembered, a heavysset man with graying hair and a hint of an Australian accent. The man's real name, at least the name that came up in his research, was Alec Freeman and he was a senior operative of SHADO. Former RAF officer, Freeman had been seconded to SHADO at its founding and was one of the lead suspects in both the arms dealing and a series of murders that seemed designed to cover up SHADO's continued existence.

"May I have a copy of that as well?" Superman asked. Mendez nodded yes. "The woman, Katherine Kowalski, did they take her, too?"

"No, sir. She's still here. Would you like to speak to her?"

"Yes, please."

Mendez led the way to a small isolated cell toward the back of the building. Kitty Kowalski sat huddled in one corner. She looked exhausted, worn out, and far older than her twenty-five years.

"Señor Luthor kept threatening to kill her," Mendez explained. "So we felt she would be safer here."

"Miss Kowalski?" Superman said.

Kitty looked up and after a long moment, the identity of the person standing beyond the bars registered on her mind. "Superman?" She struggled to her feet. "Are you here to get me out? Please, take me away from here."

"Miss Kowalski, where are the crystals Luthor stole from me?"

"Crystals?"

"Yes, the ones you and Luthor took from the Arctic and used to create that abomination he was going to use to destroy billions of people."

"I left them there," Kitty said.

"Where?"

She looked up at him, confused. "On Lex's new continent. I dropped them there." *They're still on New Krypton. They may as well be on Krypton itself, for all I can do about it.*

"Why?"

She studied his face, looking for some clue as to what he was after. "I didn't want Lex to use them again."

"What happened to the other men who were with you?"

"Dead. The whole place started falling apart and some of the big pillars fell on them. Are you going to get me out of here?"

"Miss Kowalski, please tell me why I should?"

She looked confused. "You're Superman. You help people. That's what you do."

"You stood there and did nothing while Luthor and his men tried to beat me to death and when Luthor stabbed me in the back. You did nothing when Luthor attempted to murder an innocent woman and a five year-old child. You did nothing when Luthor tried to destroy the planet and billions of people... Please, tell me again why I should help you get out of here?"

Kitty just looked at him.

He turned on his heel and walked out.

As soon as he and Mendez were out of earshot. "Captain, if it's possible, could you move her to somewhere more *congenial*?"

"Superman, I heard what you said to her," Mendez said. "Considering what she did, what kind of woman she is, why would you help her?"

"It's what I do," Superman said with a smile. "Thank you very much for your help, Captain."

Mendez watched in awe as Superman started to fly away, then stopped in mid air, turning to look back at the Cuban officer. "Captain, you wouldn't happen to know which landing strip they used when taking Luthor away?"

"There's a military strip about five kilometers north of here," Mendez told him. "I believe that's where they went."

Superman nodded thanks and then sped away five kilometers north.

The airstrip was lightly manned. The guard told him a Cessna Citation III, with USAF markings had taken off only half an hour before. Superman headed ten miles up and north to search for the plane with Luthor on it. There was no sign of it.

Colonel Alec Freeman of SHADO, alias Adam Fletcher, AKA too many other names to mention, picked up the radio-phone in the control cabin of the Citation III. After several satellite re-routings and encryption protocols, he heard the other end of the line pick up.

"We have the package," he announced.

"Any problems I should know about?"

"Smooth as glass. We'll be taking off again in a few minutes and we'll be in Metropolis in about 4 hours."

"Check in as soon as you land. I'll have our people meet you."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, good job, Alec."

"Thanks," Freeman said as he rung off.

The man known as Eldon Stoner hung up the private phone in his office at STAR labs. His ice blue eyes glittered in anticipation. The Kryptonian technology was almost in his grasp, and as soon as it was, Superman would be nothing more than a bad memory.

Back in Metropolis, Clark walked into the bullpen at the Daily Planet. Richard was still in the conference room. He didn't see Lois. Jason was curled up a corner, reading a book.

"Richard, has anything come over the wire about Luthor being transferred to U.S. custody already?"

Richard looked up at him. "No, why?"

"Because Luthor was flown out of Havana about forty-five minutes ago on a jet with USAF markings, supposedly by a member of the U.S. State Department by the name of Adam Fletcher."

"How do you know that?"

"Superman," Clark said. He pulled out the CD Mendez had made and handed it to Richard. "This is a copy of the security record at the prison Luthor was being held at."

Richard placed the CD in the conference room computer and opened the video file.

"*Ohmygod*, it can't be. Please tell me this is a fake," Richard murmured, watching the video.

"It isn't."

"That's Alec Freeman, isn't it?"

"We'll need to verify it biometrically, but yeah, that's Colonel Alec Freeman," Clark agreed. "SHADO is now in league with Lex Luthor. God only knows what they're up to. And to make matters worse, Superman tried to track down their plane, only it's disappeared, with Freeman and Luthor on board. That particular model has a maximum cruising speed of about 470 mph, and they took off about half an hour before Superman got there. Since I've no reason to believe SHADO has Star Trek cloaking technology, that puts them touching down less than 200 miles from Havana, probably somewhere in Florida."

Richard started sorting through the pile of notes on the conference table. "I saw a list of installations SHADO operated in the eighties somewhere here." After a moment: "Here it is." He read through the list. "They had a supply base in the Florida Keys, a hundred miles from Havana."

"From there they could go anywhere in the country," Clark said.

"You're forgetting about Homeland Security," Lois said as she walked into the room.

Clark gave her a puzzled look.

"Clark, you came back into this country from Shanghai, or wherever, and you didn't notice all the increased security at the airports? They do body cavity searches on suspicious people, for cryin' out loud. Nothing gets through by air without the TSA knowing about it, except maybe Superman."

"Not even military jets?" Clark wondered. "According to the guards at the airstrip, the

plane had U.S. Air Force markings when it left Cuba."

"And how do you know that?" Lois asked.

"I told you, Superman was looking for Luthor. Luthor was in Havana."

"So Superman went to Havana," Lois completed for him. "And he just gave you this evidence?"

"In trade for any information we come up with that might lead him to Luthor and the missing crystals," Clark explained. "According to Katherine Kowalski, the crystals were left on New Krypton when she and Luthor escaped."

"And you believe her?"

"I don't know," Clark admitted. "If she is telling the truth, it means the crystals are gone. There's no safe way I can think of for Superman to retrieve them. And if she's lying, I don't even want to think about the consequences. Especially since Luthor is now in the hands of SHADO. And I can't think of a worse combination right now, can you?"

Lois just glared at him.

"Uh, Lois," Richard interrupted before Lois could start up again. After nearly six years, he recognized the warning signs of Lois on empty. *Clark didn't stand a chance, and if he really was stressed to the breaking point...* "Have you had anything to eat today?"

Lois gave him a blank look.

"Thought so," Richard commented. "I'm positive he hasn't eaten at all today either. You know, it's a wonder that the two of you didn't starve to death when you were working together. I've never met two people who are less in tune with their bodies than the two of you. You don't remember to eat and he's worse than you are. He forgets to eat *and* sleep."

"I think I was in charge of feeding Lois back then," Clark said with a sheepish grin. "I kind of figured that was your job now."

"But who's in charge of *you*?" Richard shook his head with a grin and started putting the papers on the table into file folders so he could put them into Perry's office safe. "We can get a fresh start on this tomorrow," he said. "It's time for lunch, or for the two of you, breakfast. Then home." He stabbed a finger in Clark's direction. "You need some time off. I don't want to see you in here until after your appointment with Kraus."

Clark started to respond but Richard cut him off. "No 'buts'. By the way, I found Emil Duvall and a couple former members of the IAC. Duvall's in a nursing home, but I have an appointment to go out and talk to him tomorrow morning."

"I was trying to forget about Kraus," Clark said. "If you don't mind, I'm just going to head home, try to get some sleep." He turned to pack up his laptop.

"Clark, tomorrow we need to sit down and talk, the four of us," Lois said. She glanced meaningfully at Jason, sitting in the corner.

"Sure, but I'm okay with whatever you decide. I mean..." his voice faltered. He wasn't really sure what he meant. "Tomorrow."

"See ya' tomorrow, Unca' Clark," Jason said with a big grin.

"See ya' tomorrow, sport," Clark said, finally leaving for the day.

Lois turned to Richard. "Why do I think Jason's already decided for us?"

"Ya' think?"

Clark did not go to his apartment immediately. Instead, he flew high above the city, listening, watching. SHADO and Luthor were on the move. He knew it, even though he had absolutely no proof of anything. It simply made sense.

The sunlight was stronger at this height. It bathed him with healing energy and he started to feel stronger, better, than he had since leaving Smallville. The ache in his back finally receded to an unpleasant memory and soon, even the scar would be gone - he hoped. Recovering from kryptonite poisoning was unpredictable at best, and this was the first time he'd actually been cut by the mineral. It was just possible it would never completely heal. He didn't want to think about that.

He rode the air currents, dozing off and on for several hours, thinking, dreaming. Before, he'd only needed an hour or so of sleep a night, mostly for dreaming. Since the stabbing, he'd been needing far more than that.

It felt good to be away from other people's needs for a while. Then there was the stab of guilt at putting his own needs above those of the planet he'd pledged to protect so long ago. *But if I don't take care of myself, how can I help anyone else?*

Night was falling over Metropolis. There was the rumbling of a quake near Coast City. The epicenter was inland - no tsunami threat. An earthen dam in Thailand was threatening to breach, an apartment fire in Moscow, a wild fire in Oregon that was threatening a housing development. *Why did they insist on building so close to dangerous places?* Ten muggings, a lost child, and a bank robbery. All in all, a quiet day on Planet Earth.

Evening mass was just getting over at Sacred Heart Church in Metropolis, one of the oldest churches in the city. He landed softly behind the church and changed into his street clothes. The sign board next to one of the winged lions that guarded the entrance of the granite Romanesque church indicated Father Daniel Leone was still rector. Clark waited in the shadows until the church was empty then walked across the street to the rectory, a brownstone that dated back to the early parts of the last century. Lights still shown through the main floor windows as he climbed the short flight of steps to the door.

At his knock, a young man opened the door, peering up at Clark incuriously. "Can I help you?"

"Is Father Daniel around? I'm Clark Kent."

The young man ushered Clark into a side parlor and disappeared. Clark looked around the room. Little had changed over the years. The sofa had been replaced and there was a new rug under the coffee table. He stood a moment, reflecting. He'd met Father Daniel, *how long ago?* Nine years or so, not long after Superman made his first famous appearance in Metropolis, when he rescued Lois Lane and the Daily Planet news copter.

There'd been an explosion and fire in a child care center. Superman hadn't been able to get there in time and a dozen small children had died horribly. The emergency workers at the site had assured him at the time that he had done all that could have been done. He hadn't been convinced, and he'd had no one to talk to, no one he trusted besides Mom, and he knew this was one discussion he did not want to share with her. *So many tiny bodies, and for what? So a disgruntled non-custodial parent could collect insurance and get revenge on his ex?*

He'd frightened Father Daniel half out of his wits when he showed up in the middle of the empty church one evening after mass as Superman, wanting, *needing*, to talk, to confess that he wasn't sure he was up to the task he'd chosen to accept. He hadn't known, could not have known, that Daniel had his own demons, cancer being one of them. But their talk had helped and Clark had found someone he could trust, someone he could talk to, someone who understood, at least a little bit, the burden of knowing how much pain and need there was in the world.

After a few months Clark Kent the reporter actually started attending services

occasionally and discovered he found comfort in both the ceremony and the community.

A tall slender man with the face of a boxer and close-cropped hair walked in. Father Daniel was far thinner, and grayer than Clark remembered. The past six years had not been kind to the older man.

"Clark, I was wondering when you'd wander in," Daniel said with a wide grin. "I saw your byline in the Planet."

"It's been busy, what with Luthor and all," Clark explained.

"Want some coffee?" Daniel asked, beckoning Clark to follow him back to the kitchen.

"Sure."

The kitchen was large, with a breakfast table at one end. Coffee was brewing, and Clark scanned the cabinets to find coffee cups. Finding them, he pulled out two mugs.

"So, what has been happening? I read Miss Lane's article on Superman," Daniel finally said as Clark poured coffee and brought both mugs to the table. He remembered that Daniel liked his coffee black.

"Where to begin? My mom is moving to Montana with her boyfriend. I found out my girlfriend was pregnant and didn't tell me before I left, assuming she knew, so she now has a son and has found a man to take care of her and her son. I don't have a place in her life any more, really. And please don't give me the 'responsibility' lecture. My mom's beat you to it."

"I wouldn't dream of giving you that lecture," Daniel said, stifling a grin. "But I really want to meet your mother one of these days... So, what else?"

"Oh, I got stabbed in the back last week and I should be dead. I really, really want to pop Luthor's head off his body, and my boss thinks I'm suffering from post traumatic stress."

"Are you?"

"By all rights I probably should be," Clark said, sipping his coffee. "But no, I don't think so, at least, not as bad as it would be if..."

"So what's the problem then?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe I just need a reality check. I almost decided to not come back, not put the suit back on. Just go to work everyday, and not worry about the rest of the world."

"Couldn't do it, could you?"

Clark shook his head. "No. I heard a cry for help, and I had to respond. There was no choice. My personal trinity: 'Save me...'" He didn't voice the final word: *Superman*.

"There's always a choice," Daniel corrected. "No one forced you to take up that mantle again."

"And if I hadn't, there wouldn't be a Metropolis standing here, billions of people would be dead."

"It's not easy having a vocation like that," Daniel commented. He recognized the conversation. It had been an ongoing theme in their talks long before Clark disappeared to find Krypton.

"In Florida, when it was all over and everybody was safe on the ground and the people in the stands started cheering, it felt so good and I realized how much I had missed that."

"Being worshiped?"

Clark was horrified. "No, of course not. But it does feel nice to be recognized, appreciated, even if I don't necessarily deserve anything. I mean police, and firemen... every time they get a call, they're on the firing line. Me, there's not a lot that can hurt me. I certainly don't deserve to be called a hero, and definitely not a savior."

"Clark, I read the Planet. You nearly died."

"My own fault. I went into the situation without looking. It was a stupid mistake. I've been making a lot of those recently. When I left, I never considered how hard it would be to come back. I tell people I haven't changed, the world's changed but not me, but I'm lying. I've forgotten how to fit in. I've forgotten how to be 'Clark'."

"Coming home is always hard. And it's even harder when you discover your vocation might not be all it's cracked up to be. But you'd go ahead, even without recognition, wouldn't you?"

"Probably... yes. I forgot how good you are at reading minds," Clark mused.

"Just expressions and body language," Daniel corrected with a smile. "You have a calling, and I think you'd've made a good priest."

"I'm too flighty," Clark made a swooshing gesture with his hand. "Besides, my calling seems to be as a journalist. Truth and Justice. You can't have one without the other. And the power of the press is a remarkable thing. They say one person can't change the world, but one person with a printing press..." Clark stopped. He'd started preaching and Daniel was giving him a bemused look.

"Thanks, Daniel," Clark said, getting up and placing the two coffee mugs in the sink. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Pray for an old sinner?"

"So long as you'll pray for a not so old one."

"Always, Clark. You're always in my prayers, and have been since we met."

"Thank you."

Nine

It was early when Richard walked onto the newsroom floor, but Perry was already in his office, hard at work reviewing the previous night's events.

Richard knocked on the glass door to his uncle's office. "Uncle Perry, got a couple minutes?"

"Sure, shoot."

"What were Lois and Clark like together before he left?"

Perry gave him a surprised look, then sat back to think. "They were the best investigative team the Planet's ever had. And that's saying something. Between the two of them, they pulled in more Kerth Awards in three years than any two reporters in the city, *ever*. Pulitzer nominations, too. And before they were both thirty."

"But why did you even team them up?"

"Clark was probably the most brilliant writer I'd ever met. Still is. Sees angles and possibilities in the most innocuous things. Mad Dog Lane needed an anchor, a steadying hand. And Clark... he needed someone to keep him alive while he learned his way around the city, and my first choice was Lois. Have you read the first article he ever wrote for us?"

"A fluff piece on the closing of a theater."

Perry nodded. "I'd assigned that to Lois and she wouldn't do it. Couldn't do it. Clark wasn't even on the payroll and brought it in. And I bet it was a single draft, too. But, look at him, he's so shy most of the time, he trips over his own tongue, not to mention his shoelaces. I don't know how many times the barracudas around here stole his work and put their name on it without him saying a word about it, because it would mean being noticed. But together, they were magic. And as an added bonus, Superman latched onto the two of them as his press contacts."

"So, what happened? Why did he leave?"

"I don't know," Perry admitted. "I spent two hours trying to find out, trying to talk him out of it. I even offered him the job of assistant editor. He wouldn't budge. He kept giving me some nonsense excuse about needing to 'find himself,' but even before that, there was something wrong."

"When they came back from that assignment in Alaska?"

"Richard, I never assigned them to anything in Alaska. They were supposed to be to looking into a honeymoon resort scam at Niagara Falls. They faxed in their story, said they were taking a few days off. Next thing I know, Clark is calling in a story from Anchorage, about problems with the pipeline. They used to do things like that, start on one story and segue into something completely different. I lost count of how many times I wanted to fire them both, or tan their hides, and then they'd come in with a great story. An award winning story. More than a little nerve wracking, but that was when they got some of their best stuff."

"When they got back, Lois was in a shambles, didn't have a clue about what Clark called in even though he shared the byline with her, and Clark was moping around here like a whipped puppy. A week later, he was gone without saying a single word to Lois or Jimmy, his two closest friends. As near as I can tell, I was the only one he talked to about leaving aside from, maybe, his mother." Perry gave Richard an appraising look. "Why?"

Richard thought a long moment, considering whether or not he'd be betraying a confidence. But Lois had started putting it in her article. It would be public knowledge soon enough. "Lois finally admitted she and Clark became lovers while in Alaska. Clark is Jason's biological father."

"Great Caesar's ghost," Perry muttered. "Why didn't she ever say anything?"

"Superman. Apparently, she was on the rebound from a close encounter with *him* when it happened and then he did something to her memories to ease her out of it. I guess she couldn't handle whatever had happened between them. Clark got lost in the shuffle."

"And how do you know?"

"Don't tell Lois, but I was on the roof yesterday when Superman finally admitted it to her. And you don't want to mention *him* to her for a while. He all but told her to get on with her life."

"Dear lord. How did she take it?"

"I'm not sure. Disappointed that he wasn't Jason's father, I think. She wouldn't talk to me about it."

"And how are you doing?"

"I've known all along Jason wasn't mine. Lois was pregnant when we started dating," Richard said. "I admit I was surprised to find out the one man she never talked about, her partner for three years, was the father of her child. Although it kind of makes sense, in retrospect. He ran out on her."

"Clark would never have done that if he'd known."

"I know, but I'm not sure Lois does," Richard said. "Clark practically ordered her to set a date to marry me."

"Typical Clark, putting everyone else ahead of himself. He'd probably volunteer to stand up as best man for you, so long as it made Lois happy. Am I going to have a problem with the two of them?"

"I honestly don't know, Uncle Perry," Richard admitted. "Right now, they both need a baby sitter and I think I've been elected."

Perry chuckled. "Welcome to the club, my boy."

Richard checked his watch. "I have to get going. By the way, I told Clark not to show his face here until after his appointment with Kraus."

Oak Crest Convalescent Center was in the suburbs south of the city, beyond Queensland Park. Richard parked his rental car in one of the visitor's slots and crossed the manicured lawn to the main entrance of the low brick building.

Entering the building, he noted the smell of antiseptic, old cologne and stale urine. *God I hate these places.* An older woman with magenta hair was seated behind a sliding window near the main door. Richard stepped over to the window.

"Good morning," he greeted. The woman looked up at him with overly made up eyes. Her name tag read Molly Smits. "I'm Richard White with the Daily Planet. I have an appointment with one of your residents, Emil Duvall."

The woman looked confused. "I'm sorry, but Mister Duvall died last night."

Richard's journalist instincts kicked into overtime. "What was the cause?"

The woman shrugged. "Old age, I guess. You just missed them taking away the body."

"Where was it going?"

"Lothian Mortuary over on Carver," Molly said.

"Is there anyone here I can talk to about him?"

Molly shook her head. "Doctor Wilson is out for the rest of the day. But Mister Duvall did have visitors last night." She batted her eyes at him.

"Do you know who they were?"

She shrugged. "Some old friends, I guess. They should have signed the guest register."

Richard leaned his elbows on the counter and put on his most beguiling smile. "And may I see the guest register?"

She pulled out a guest book and opened it on the counter. He flipped through to the most recent entries. He didn't recognize any names, but some research was in order.

"May I borrow this until tomorrow? I promise I'll bring it back."

She made a show of considering his request. "I really shouldn't," she drawled. "But seeing as you're from the Daily Planet...Can you get me Superman's autograph?"

"I'll see what I can do," Richard promised and turned to go.

"Oh, yeah, I have a package here, for the Planet," she said. She reached under the desk and pulled out a manila envelope. As she had said, it was addressed to the Daily Planet.

Richard took it and thanked her again. He went back to the rental and opened the envelope. The papers inside were covered in spidery handwriting, which Richard assumed to be Duvall's. The notes were about SHADO, specifically, the whereabouts of mid and upper level SHADO officers. Richard noted that there was nothing on Ed Straker, Alec Freeman, Paul Foster or Virginia Lake.

He locked the papers and the guest register in his briefcase and headed back to the Daily Planet.

It was promising to be a beautiful day and Clark had decided to walk to work. He had plenty of time and he liked walking. It helped him feel more 'connected', more normal. And 'normal' was what he needed today.

The traffic across the Clinton Bridge was usually slow this time of day due to the morning rush hour. But today, it was at a stand-still. He looked ahead to see a semi-tractor-trailer jack-knifed across the north end of the bridge. There didn't seem to be any injuries or any actual danger from the situation. Just severe annoyance for those unlucky enough to be driving northbound on the bridge right now. Nothing for Superman to be concerned about. Funny, but he thought there was a rule against big rigs being on the bridges during rush hour.

The WGBS news chopper was overhead, and a news van plastered with the WGBS logo was parked in the southbound lane at the end of the bridge, close to the semi.

Mark Hadwyn and his cameraman, Pat Morris, were taping the scene when Clark walked up to them, avoiding the eye of the camera. Mark caught sight of Clark and gestured to the cameraman to stop recording. "Clark? Clark Kent! When did you get back?"

"Last week," Clark said.

"Well, you chose a great time to show up." Mark grinned. "I see Perry took you back."

"Only because Norm Parker died and left an open desk."

"Well, if you ever get tired of Perry yelling at you, and playing second fiddle to Mad Dog Lane, come talk to me. Jolene would love to have you on *our* news team." He was referring to Jolene Baker, the producer of the WGBS evening news. Clark had met her once, not long before he'd left. She'd actually made him an offer, but he'd turned it down. He'd already made his plans and they didn't include being a talking head on the TV news.

Clark heard a faint 'pop' from somewhere overhead. He scanned the area of the upper bridge rigging and spotted a shooter hiding in one of the bridge towers. A second 'pop' and he plotted the trajectory almost instantaneously. "Down!" Clark grabbed Mark and the cameraman and pulled them to the ground. There was a small explosion as the shell hit the van.

"Clark, what's going on?"

"There's a shooter up there." Clark nodded toward the tower.

"I don't see anybody," Mark complained.

"Well something put a hole in your van," Clark pointed to a ragged fist-sized hole in the metal at nearly the same level Mark's head had been only seconds earlier. Mark gestured to the cameraman to start recording again.

Clark dialed 9-1-1 and spoke quickly and quietly to the operator.

"Where is he, Clark?" Mark demanded.

"Northeast tower, near the top," Clark said, speaking into the cell phone as well.

Pat pointed his camera upwards and zoomed in on the tower. "I see him. Can't ID the weapon, though."

More shots and Pat was down. Clark grabbed the cameraman and pulled him to the far side of the WGBS van as Mark followed. People in the nearby cars were starting to realize what was happening. Several of them bolted from their vehicles and were cut down by gunfire. Clark focused on heartbeats and found none. It seemed the shooter was a marksman and was shooting to kill as many people as possible. Clark concentrated on Pat, pressing his handkerchief over the wound in the cameraman's leg. At least the bullet hadn't exploded but had passed all the way through Pat's thigh. Mark grabbed the camera to keep shooting.

Four cars back on the inside northbound lane, Richard White listened to the radio reports on what was happening around him. From where he sat, he could see Clark and the WGBS newsman. Odd that Clark was hanging out with the TV people, then maybe not so odd. Hadwyn had started out at the Daily Planet before going to WGBS.

Richard got out of the car, keeping low and close to the cars as he headed for the news van.

On the far side of the jack-knifed semi, the police had arrived and the S.W.A.T. team began to deploy. One of the officers, a middle aged, dark haired woman with olive skin wearing a flak jacket with S.C.U. stenciled across the back, ran over to crouch down beside Clark. The woman beckoned to another member of her team who came running over as Richard ducked under the rail that divided the north and southbound lanes and ran to the van. The policeman pushed Clark's hand aside and began treating Pat's wounds.

Clark turned to Richard first. "What are you doing here?"

"I should ask the same of you," Richard said. "I see you didn't make your appointment."

"Uh, nope. Something came up."

The policewoman looked from Clark to Richard and back again. "Okay, Kent, what's going on here?"

"Oh, hello Lupe," Clark recognized her and noted the change in rank on her nametag. "Captain... Let's see, there's a shooter on the northeast tower, we have one wounded and five dead at last count, and..." A sound from the shooter caught his attention and he stopped to listen. The shooter was speaking into a cell phone.

"Worked like a charm. We're all set. Everything's in place."

"Earth to Clark Kent," Lupe Teresa Leocadio-Escudero said, waving a hand in front of his face. "And what?"

Clark blinked and focused on her. "And that truck was jack-knifed to set this all up, so there'd be hostages on the bridge."

"And how do you know that?" Lupe asked.

"Because..." His cell phone rang and he flipped it open. He noted the incoming phone

number and didn't recognize it. "Kent speaking."

"Mister Kent. I know you used to be one of Superman's contacts. I assume that is still the case?"

"Possibly, why?"

"I want you to get a message to Superman. If he is not on this bridge within thirty minutes, I will destroy it. Any attempt to evacuate the bridge, I will detonate the bombs."

"And what do you want with Superman?"

"Let's just say you're going to get one hell of a story out of this."

Clark flipped his phone shut. "That was the shooter." He looked between Lupe and Richard. "He wants Superman here within thirty minutes, otherwise he's going to blow up the bridge. If there is any attempt to evacuate the bridge, he'll detonate the bombs."

"Why call you?" Mark asked.

"I used to be pretty good at getting messages to him," Clark said.

"How?" Richard demanded.

"He's tuned into his friends, or at least, people he's dealt with a lot," Clark explained.

"Lois was one, I was another, so was Jimmy Olsen." He looked over at Lupe. "If they want Superman here, that means something's going down somewhere else, and this is a diversion."

"Or it's a trap for the big guy." Lupe keyed her radio and passed the information along to her team.'

"Or both," Richard added.

"Can you get in touch with him?" Mark asked.

Clark shrugged. "Um, I guess it depends on if he can get away from whatever he's doing right now." He surveyed the situation. The WGBS news chopper was still hovering over the bridge and had been joined by a police chopper. Mark, Richard and Lupe were all watching him, waiting for him to 'call' and there was a S.W.A.T. team only fifty feet away. It was going to be difficult, if not impossible, to find a secluded place for Superman to make his appearance.

He checked his phone again and recalled the shooter's number. He showed it to Lupe.

"Can you find anything with this?"

"I'm sure I can," Lupe said, noting down the number. "I'll get back to you." With that, she headed back to the Special Crimes Unit support van and the S.W.A.T. team.

That left Richard and Mark and any civilians that might be watching. He noted that Mark was still holding the video camera and recording. He considered his options as he unfolded himself to stand beside the van. "Save me, Superman," he said aloud - the call they were waiting for him to make, not that it would make any difference at the moment. He scanned the area with x-ray vision and spotted the explosive devices. The trailer was loaded with enough explosive to take out this entire end of the bridge, as well as the on and off ramps. There were two under the tower the shooter was on. *Did the shooter know it was a suicide assignment?* Two more under the center span. Luckily the other towers were clear.

Clark moved away from the van, closer to the semi, ducking under the trailer to get out of sight of Richard and Mark, even momentarily. A quick look around, then he blurred his way to the far guard rail, then over it to dive under the roadway, switching to his costume as he went.

Out of sight, under the bridge, one by one, faster than the human eye could see, he froze the explosives with his breath and grabbed them off the towers. Reaching the edge of the southbound lane, he sped upwards, checking the skies above, then tossed the explosive packs into the sky. Less than a thousand feet up, the explosives detonated, shattering windows in

nearby buildings. Heat vision took care of the falling glass, turning it to ash before it hit the ground as he dove toward the trailer. He lifted it without any apparent effort away from the bridge and into the sky. He was peripherally aware of the WGBS cameras on him, aware the news chopper was attempting to follow. A burst of speed and the cameras and helicopters were far behind. He looked around for a safe place to drop his burden. The areas around the city had built up since he'd been gone. There was no longer any place close where he could leave dangerous cargo.

He headed out to sea instead, dropping the trailer and its contents into the ocean just off the continental shelf. *Lupe is going to be so pissed at me for destroying evidence.*

Back to the shooter on the bridge with only minutes to spare. "You asked for me?" He hovered fifty feet away from the tower, over the river.

"You think you're clever, don't you?" the shooter said. He was a dark skinned man of about twenty-five with a mid-Atlantic accent that was clearer now than it had been on the phone.

"Why are you doing this?"

"To get you right here," the shooter said. He raised his rifle and pulled off a shot. Superman twisted away, feeling a slight twinge as the bullet passed him. *Kryptonite.*

A quick blast of heat vision melted the rifle barrel. The shooter threw the gun away and it dropped into the water. He reached into his jacket.

A quick check with x-ray vision confirmed the man was wearing a vest filled with explosives. The one bomb he hadn't caught. Almost without thinking, Superman grabbed the man, dangling him above the river as he worked at super speed to get the C4 filled vest off the killer. He wasn't fast enough.

The blast knocked him backward, into the tower. He was covered in blood and ichor, none of it his.

He considered diving into the river to get the blood off and decided against it, heading instead for Lupe and the Special Crimes Unit van.

Captain Leocadio stepped out of the van. "What the hell happened?"

"It was a suicide mission," Superman explained. There was a haunted look in his eyes. "He set off the last bomb and I couldn't stop it."

"I'm not surprised. They had it all planned out," Lupe said. She recognized the look in his eyes, she'd seen it often enough in her own people following fatal incident. There was always the sense that something else might have worked, might have saved that life, if only they'd had more time, more foresight. *There was never enough time, and even Superman can't be in more than one place at a time.*

"I know you did what you could. I assume none of this blood is yours."

He nodded.

She beckoned another officer to her side. "Get samples. Maybe we can get some DNA for identification." She turned back to Superman as the officer grabbed latex gloves and started scraping blood and tissue off his suit. "Where did you dump the trailer?"

"In the ocean, about fifty miles out," he said. She glared at him, as he knew she would. "I can retrieve it, if you'd like."

"The detonator or the controller would be nice," she told him. "Then we might be able to track down the maker."

He waited for the officer to finish collecting samples, then rose from the pavement. "I'll be back."

A few moments later, Clark Kent walked up to Lupe and handed her what looked like a small aluminum box with an LCD readout on one end and thick wires hanging out of the other end. "Complements of Superman, Captain," he said.

"And where is he?"

"Around."

"Well, you tell him next time you see him that I want to talk to him," Lupe said.

"Destroying evidence is not good."

"Uh, letting bombs go off is even worse, I would think," Clark said. "But I'll let him know when I see him."

"By the way, you were right. This was a diversion," Lupe said. "The main branch of Mazik Diamond Exchange was hit about the same time Superman showed up here. They were after that big shipment."

"How much did they get?"

Lupe shrugged. "You know I shouldn't tell you, but it's in the tens of millions. All uncut gems."

"Lupe, keep me posted, please. You know I won't print any details about the investigation until you give the go ahead, but I'd like to be in the loop on this one," Clark said. "I don't like the fact that they used me as part of their set up."

"You need to give a statement," Lupe reminded him. "Come down to the station later and we'll see what we've got."

It took another half hour to clear the traffic snarl from the bridge. The outside lanes would be blocked for some time as forensics teams collected evidence and the medical examiner removed the bodies. This afternoon and evening, five families would learn the tragic news of their losses.

As Clark walked back to the WGBS van, Richard trotted up to him and grabbed his arm. "Perry is going to kill us both if we don't get this story into the next edition." He peered into the other man's face. Clark was pale, and there was a haunted look in his eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Five, six people dead so Superman would be *distracted*," Clark said almost too softly for Richard to hear. "I almost wish..." His voice trailed off and he seemed to shake himself into the here-and-now. "Hell of a way to get another Superman exclusive, having a human bomb go off over your head."

"How close were you?"

Clark just shook his head.

Richard led the way to the rental car. The traffic was just beginning to move as they got to the car. The Planet was only five minutes away.

On the far side of the SWAT team van, Jimmy Olsen lowered his camera and unscrewed the telephoto lens, placing the valuable accessory into its foam slot in his camera case. He'd gotten some great shots of Superman and the bomber, Superman covered in the bomber's blood speaking with the female police captain, Clark Kent speaking with the same female captain. Jimmy knew his job was secure for at least a few more days.

Ten

Perry White read the multi-page report from Doctor Ursula Kraus one more time. Severe case of Superman syndrome. Signs of acute depression, emotional lability, suicidal as well as violent ideation against co-workers. The woman was describing someone well on their way to going postal. He flipped to the last page. Recommendations: immediate suspension from all work related activities, observation in the psych ward at Metropolis General, symptomatic drug therapy. *This is bull. She's talking about Clark Kent, for Pete's sake. What the devil did he say to her to for her to write an evaluation like this? And how was she able to get it typed so fast?*

Richard parked the rental car in his space in the Planet's parking garage, then grabbed his briefcase from the floor of the back seat. Clark climbed out of the passenger side and followed him.

"Emil Duvall is dead, by the way," Richard said as they entered the Daily Planet building through the garage entrance. "Died last night. Natural causes, supposedly."

"You suspect differently?" Clark asked, following Richard to the elevators.

"He had visitors just before it happened, and he left a package of papers for me, addressed to the Daily Planet. What does that tell you?"

"He probably knew he was going to die and wanted to make sure the information made it to someone who could use it," Clark reasoned. "Who were the visitors?"

"Good question," Richard said. "But they supposedly signed the guest register and, guess what? I have it."

"Aren't assistant editors supposed to be above theft or have you been around Lois for way too long?"

Richard grinned. "Didn't have to steal it. But I did promise to bring the lady who let me take it, an autograph from Superman when I bring it back."

Clark gave him a sidelong glance as the elevator doors opened into the chaos of the bullpen. "I wasn't aware Superman was handing out autographs."

"We'll think of something," Richard promised.

Clark hurried to his desk shaking his head as Richard headed to his own office.

Perry beckoned to Richard from his office door and Richard veered to enter the senior editor's office.

"Close the door and read this," Perry ordered, handing Richard the report.

Richard read the printed pages. "This is a sick joke. Clark never made it to his appointment with Kraus."

"You're positive?"

"Uncle Perry, Clark was with me on the Clinton Bridge during that siege. He's over there writing the story right now. He was standing right under Superman and the sniper when the last bomb went off."

"He was with you the entire time?" Perry asked.

"He was out of my sight for ten minutes at most, and that was when he was with the S.C.U. team and getting the interview with Superman. There is no way on Earth Kraus could have seen him to make that evaluation. And the statements she's making are completely ludicrous. He's about as suicidal as I am."

Perry went to his office door and opened it, beckoning to Jimmy Olsen. The young man

looked confused as he came closer.

"Olsen, ask Kent to come to my office, and keep it low key," Perry ordered, keeping his voice low.

"Sure, chief." Jimmy trotted obediently to the far end of the bullpen, to Clark's desk. Perry watched him lean over and speak quietly to the other man. Clark's head came up and he looked over to where Perry was standing. He looked faintly worried as he followed Jimmy to the senior editor's office.

"You wanted to see me, chief?" Clark asked, entering the office.

Perry nodded. "Close the door."

The worry in Clark's eyes deepened as he did as he was told.

"I got Doctor Kraus's evaluation of you a little bit ago," Perry began.

Clark's expression turned to wide-eyed confusion. "But I... I haven't seen her yet."

"So I've been told," Perry stated. "Which makes this a very interesting document." He handed the report to Clark, who visibly paled as he read it.

"She wants me committed?" Clark nearly squeaked. His breathing was ragged and he was trembling. "Please tell me you don't believe any of this."

"Of course not," Perry assured him. *He's scared out of his mind.* "Relax, son. Nothing's going to happen."

He watched as Clark attempted get control of his breathing. He hugged his arms around himself to try to stop shaking.

"It must have been pretty bad out there this morning," Perry said finally.

"It was," Clark admitted. He was starting to calm down, but he was still pale. "I'll be okay. I've seen worse. At least there weren't any children involved this time." He paused. "I need to finish that story if I'm to make the deadline."

"I know how fast you type," Perry said. "You'll get it in on time. The question is what do we do about this report?"

"What can we do?" Richard asked.

They were interrupted by Lois slamming open the office door. "How dare you!" she screamed, launching herself in Clark's direction. Clark backed away as she raised her hand to hit him. Just as her hand made contact with his cheek he fell back - and hit the newly glazed glass wall behind him. The glass shattered as he hit the floor.

She was still screaming as Richard grabbed her, pulling her away from her victim. She struggled against Richard's arms clasped around her arms and chest, finally subsiding into sobs, repeating, "How could you?"

Clark managed to sit up, rubbing the back of his head. He was surrounded by beads of tempered glass.

"What is going on? What do you think he's done?" Perry demanded.

"He told Kraus..."

"Kraus?" Richard interrupted her. "Lois, Clark hasn't seen Kraus yet."

Lois looked back at Richard, then over to Perry for confirmation. The older man nodded. "Clark came in with Richard less than ten minutes ago. Whatever Kraus told you was a lie."

"But she knew everything that happened yesterday," Lois said. "Everything we talked about in the conference room. Things I said on the roof to..." She took a shaky breath and pulled herself out of Richard's arms. He let his hands drop, but stayed close to her.

"She said you were going to sue for custody." Her voice was shaking. "She said awful things, saying it was what you'd told her. I lost it, I simply lost it. I will not lose Jason, not to

you, not to anybody. Do you hear me?"

Clark had that deer-in-the-headlights look again and Perry had a suspicion that if he hadn't been sitting on the floor, he would have bolted. Instead, Clark just hugged his knees to his chest.

There was a commotion near the elevators as several men in blue security uniforms crossed the elevator lobby into the newsroom. They had guns drawn. The noise level in the newsroom dropped to near silence as conversations died and people froze in place.

"The bitch called security," Richard muttered.

"Who?" Lois wondered.

"Kraus," Perry said, watching the security team move down the center aisle of the bullpen toward his office. "She set the two of you up."

"Why?" Clark asked quietly, starting to get to his feet.

Perry motioned for him to stay down and he settled back onto the floor. "That is the sixty-four thousand dollar question," Perry said in answer to Clark's question. "Why indeed."

The senior security man, Arthur Klimas stopped several feet from the open door. Perry and Richard both noted that Klimas had his pistol pointed in Clark's direction.

"Mister White, are you all right?" Klimas stepped closer to Clark. Clark winced, as if in pain.

"I was fine until you barged in here playing bad cop," Perry grated. "And I will thank you to get the hell out of my office and my newsroom."

"We had a report of a possible hostage situation," Klimas said. "We were told Mister Kent was armed and making threats."

"The only threats around here are the ones you're making and the only arms are the ones you bozos are carrying," Lois spat. "Clark couldn't fire a gun if his life depended on it."

Perry caught the flicker of annoyance that crossed Clark's face before the reporter's expression resolved into watchful, if pained, neutrality, narrowed eyes focused on the security team. His body had gone absolutely still, almost inhumanly so. Perry wondered if he was even breathing.

He glanced at Lois. Her hands were bunched into fists and if Klimas had any sense, he would back off. Mad Dog Lane was ready to attack. It was one thing for Lois to attack Clark, but no one else had ever been allowed that privilege, not while she was around. Perry was heartened by Lois's about face when given new information. She was nothing if not adaptable.

"Who broke the glass?" Klimas demanded.

"It was an accident," Clark said, very quietly. "I tripped. In case you hadn't heard, I'm a world class klutz."

"My instructions also include escorting you out of the building," Klimas said.

"To a psych ward at Met General? No thanks."

"We know what Kraus wrote," Richard grated. "We also know it's complete bunk. And if you or any of your men so much as lay a hand on him, not only will you be out of a job, but so help me, I'll have you arrested for assault."

"You can't give me orders, White."

"But I can," Perry said. "Get off this floor, and take your goon squad with you."

"I have my orders."

"Get. Off. My. Floor." Perry hissed. "Kent is a member of my staff. He is my responsibility. Now get out!"

He watched Klimas and his men head back to the elevators before reaching down and

helping Clark to his feet. "Are you okay? You hit that wall pretty hard."

"Lucky for me I've got a hard head," Clark muttered, rubbing the back of his head again. "Thanks, guys. I'd rather not end up in a psych ward. By the way Lois, I do know how to use a gun. Remember? You made me take shooting lessons, so I wouldn't hurt myself. And I went through the MPD course." Clark's tone was halfway between annoyance and amusement.

"I figured it was better Kilmas didn't know about that," Lois said. "He was itching to shoot you."

"I know," Clark said. "He also had..." He sighed. *Clark isn't supposed to know that Kilmas had kryptonite.* "How did Kraus know what went on in the conference room yesterday? Unless the room's bugged?" *I didn't think to check.*

"And in that case, who, and why?" Lois added thoughtfully. She looked over at Clark. "I'm sorry. I should have known she was lying. You would never have said those things. It's just that things have gotten so crazy around here the last couple weeks, and she made it sound so plausible."

The noise level in the newsroom was too low. Perry looked out to see the staff watching the scene playing out in his office. He stepped to the open door. "All right people. Show's over, get back to work." He watched for a moment as they made a show of going back to their computers. He noted that Ralph Gunderson and Gil Truman were both still watching the office.

"If this little family squabble is over, I think you all have work to do," Perry announced. "Clark, you should still see someone."

"I already have," Clark said. "Yesterday, when I was at STAR Labs to talk to Doctor Stoner, I talked to their staff psychologist. The only thing in Kraus's report that was anywhere close is that I really do have a 'serious' case of Superman syndrome. But then I figure I'm in good company, 'cause so does Superman." He chuckled a little nervously and started for the door. Then he turned back to Perry. "Chief, I, um, assume you're going to have this floor checked for bugs?"

"I was thinking about it."

"Uh, could you have the building checked for kryptonite, too? I know I'm going to sound paranoid, but Superman's back and it's known that he hangs around certain people who work here. I just have a really bad feeling that the building's been contaminated," Clark said. "We don't know what the long term effects are on humans, but if my hunch is right, then everyone in the building may be at risk, not just Superman."

"STAR Labs should have some sort of detection devices," Richard said. "I'll give them a call and see what they can do for us. In the meantime, you have a story to finish."

Ursula Kraus swore under her breath as she listened to the conversation in Perry White's office over her headset. She had underestimated Lane's loyalty to Kent, and completely misjudged Richard White's reaction to the revelation that Kent was the biological father of Lane's child. The fact that Kent actually had an unshakable alibi for the time he was supposedly in her office was just plain bad luck.

The commander was not going to be pleased that a five year deep-cover mission had soured so quickly. She wondered a little at how Kent managed to have an alibi, how he managed to be on the bridge in front of witnesses when he was expected to be on his way to her office.

She keyed in a command into her computer station and hit enter. All her computer

records were gone. She'd destroyed all her hard copy files earlier. Another set of keystrokes and her personnel file was history. She couldn't do anything about the records in accounting. They were on a separate, secure, network with a different back-up system. But even if someone was bright enough to look there, it wouldn't get them very far. For that matter, getting the offsite backups would do them no good. She had made sure early on that her files were skipped in the mandatory back-ups.

She unplugged her headset, placed the receiving unit into her briefcase and walked out of her office on the twentieth floor of the Daily Planet building. Ursula Kraus no longer existed.

A couple more phone calls and Clark had the information he needed to finish the day's story on the bomber on the Clinton Bridge. The forensics lab said it would still take several days to positively ID the shooter, assuming it was possible at all. It was also confirmed that the ammunition the shooter was using was laced with kryptonite. There were still more questions than answers, but he could work with that. This story would be around for several follow-ups at least. Superman increased sales and sales were up.

He leaned back in his chair, stretching the kinks out of his back, and then turned back to the story on his screen. There was something still not quite right. Something he wasn't seeing, but he couldn't for the life of him figure out what it was.

He sighed and pressed the key that sent the story off to Perry. Maybe Perry could figure it out.

He started as a hand came down on his shoulder. "A little jumpy today, aren't we, Kent?" Ralph Gunderson said. "What was going on in there, anyway? Mad Dog looked like she wanted to knock you into next week. What'd you, turn her down for a threesome?"

Clark looked down at the fat, stubby fingered hand on his shoulder. "Take your hand off of me and don't ever touch me again," Clark said very quietly, looking up at the older man with narrowed eyes.

Ralph pulled his hand back. "Hey, no need to bite my head off. I was just asking what happened."

"Aren't you supposed to be covering that construction funds scandal?" Clark asked. "It's only an hour till deadline."

Ralph backed away. "I was just..." Clark glared at him. Ralph turned and hurried back to his own desk.

In six years, Ralph hadn't changed. He was still a greasy, muck-raking sleaze and Clark had no clue as to why Perry tolerated the man. He wasn't even a very good writer.

Lois had been handed the Mazik diamond robbery. Her sources had told her it wasn't any of the usual suspects - not Intergang, not any one of a dozen known gangs worldwide that specialized in gems, no known terrorist cell looking for a quick infusion of prestige and cash. The cash part was especially tricky. That much in loose diamonds would take a while to sell, months, possibly. So the theft was obviously not for quick cash. No one had called the Planet, or any other news service she knew of, claiming responsibility for the theft and the deaths of the four security people, so notoriety wasn't the motive either. And it didn't feel like something Lex Luthor would have planned. Luthor preferred to work with as few people on a project as possible, not a military style campaign.

The strike had occurred with military precision within seconds of Superman's appearance on WGBS's live video feed. Comments from the few surviving witnesses uniformly described

the crime as well coordinated and flawlessly planned and executed.

There were no prints. The security systems had been completely disabled, including the cameras that were, supposedly, on a separate circuit. The police weren't admitting it yet, but there were no clues, nothing to point to the perpetrators except for the fact that the theft was obviously coordinated with the attack on the Clinton Bridge.

She wondered if Clark had any ideas on how everything fit together. She looked over to where her former partner sat at his desk. He was rubbing the bridge of his nose as though he had a headache. Then his head came up in that annoyingly familiar way, as though he'd heard something only he could hear.

She watched as he hurried away from his desk, heading to the stairs. Good thing his desk wasn't too far from the door, he was less likely to bowl somebody over on his way out to wherever he has heading in such a hurry. *But he moves like a dancer when he's in a hurry. It's only when he slows down that he's a klutz. Why didn't I ever notice that before?*

She shook herself out of her reverie and found Richard standing over her shoulder. Richard nodded in the direction of Clark's desk.

"Did he always do that?"

"Do what?"

"Run off without a word of explanation."

Lois nodded. "Always. Drove me crazy. He'd come up with the stupidest excuses you've ever heard, and go missing for hours. But then he'd call in breaking copy on a disaster, or Superman, or both. It's when he did it when we were out on assignment that drove me absolutely insane. We'd be talking, he'd get this faraway 'listening' look, I'd look away and he'd be gone. There were even times when, I swear, Superman made excuses for Clark being MIA."

Something pricked Lois's memory. Superman on her patio, the very first interview: "*Clark says...*"

"*Clark?*"

"*He's nobody. A guy I work with.*"

Eight and a half years later, a different place: "*Clark says...*"

"*Clark?*"

"*A guy I work with.*"

"Richard, why would Superman pretend he didn't remember Clark? Clark actually wrote more on him than I did. I always thought they were friends. I mean, if you told Clark something, I guarantee Superman knew about it."

"Maybe Clark can explain it." Richard suggested. "Or you can ask Superman the next time you see him."

"I'll do that." *If there is a next time.*

Another arson fire. This time, the main floor was completely engulfed before he got there. Then he discovered the mandatory fire suppression system had been disabled and the emergency exits blocked. He hoped the thirty workers who'd been trapped inside had died quickly, in the first explosion. The flames had spread to the second floor, exploding the windows. Super cold was not enough. He managed to suppress the flames but they came back to life with a vengeance once he stopped to take a breath.

"Superman," Yobachi Obote, the brigade chief yelled. "It's no good."

Superman landed next to the grizzled heavysset black man. "I'm not making any headway. The main gas line into the building is ruptured and it smells like there are accelerants in there."

He had to raise his voice to be heard over the noise of the fire.

"I've got people trying to close off the gas. But the last thing we want is for this to spread," the chief told him, shouting.

"Hey, Superman's on the monitor," Polly called out. Richard and Lois both looked up to see the famous blue and red clad figure trying to douse a fire in the garment district. Jimmy had been dispatched to take pictures the moment the first alarm was announced over the emergency band.

Superman studied the neighboring buildings for a moment. The temperatures had not yet reached ignition levels, but would very shortly. He was heartened to see the buildings had been evacuated already. "What do you need me to do?"

Obote tried not to look surprised at how humble the young man in the blue body suit and red cape was. He'd never met Superman, had only heard stories that he had assumed were exaggerations. No one that powerful could be as considerate, as helpful, as the stories said. But here he was, asking an old fire fighter what needed to be done.

"Can you collapse the building in on itself?"

Superman took a moment to consider what he would have to do. "Yes, I can do it. But chances are it will destroy any arson evidence that's there."

"Can't be helped."

Superman took off, heading for the building's basement. Within seconds, he spiraled around the support columns supporting the upper floors, shattering them in a pattern designed to bring the building in on itself.

Within 30 seconds, the building collapsed, and the flames smothered by concrete and steel. Superman broke free of the rubble, covered in gray dust.

"That did it," Obote said. "We can handle it from here. Thanks, Superman."

"You're welcome," Superman said, lifting off. He came to earth out of sight and switched into his suit, tie, and glasses. Walking back to the fire crews, he spotted Jimmy Olsen, dutifully filling his camera's memory card with photos of the fire and the building collapse. He was sure Jimmy had managed to get a shot of Superman talking to Chief Obote.

Clark called in the story of the latest fire to the copy desk, then asked Margie to relay a message to both Mr. Whites that he was heading off to make his statement to the police and then going home for the day.

"CK!" Jimmy called. "Did you see that building come down? Wow, I've never seen anything like that, just whoosh and it came down and no more fire."

"Yes, I saw it," Clark said. "I've already called it in and you'd better get back to the shop if you're going to get anything into the next edition." Clark turned to go.

"Where're you going, CK?"

"Special Crimes Unit HQ. I still have to make give my statement on what happened this morning. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

He came to earth again in front of the Special Crimes Unit headquarters building next to police headquarters.

"I'm here to see Captain Leocadio," Superman explained to the desk officer who was doing her best not to look surprised at Superman standing in front of her. The desk officer made a phone call and Lupe appeared a few minutes later.

"Nice of you to drop by, Superman," Lupe greeted. "Come up to my office. We can take your statement."

Superman followed her upstairs to her office. Once inside, Lupe keyed her intercom. "Davis, could you bring in some coffee and," she glanced at Superman, "some Lapsang Oolong tea?"

"I'm surprised you remembered."

Lupe chuckled. "I should show you my Farley file sometime. I ought to give you a royal talking to about destroying evidence, you know."

"I didn't see any choice. The detonators were already triggered. But you know that," Superman said. "As to the trailer, I did offer to retrieve it for you. Have you found anything about that controller?"

"Military," Lupe said. "It looks like several of these make 'disappeared' sometime last year, along with an awful lot of C4 and C6."

"Disappeared?"

"They don't want to admit it, but it looks like an inside job."

"And the Mazik robbery looked like it had military planning."

"They have to be related," Lupe stated. "The question is: how?"

Superman shook his head. "I don't know, except for the obvious. Any luck yet on IDing the shooter?"

Lupe shook her head. "Nothing yet. You were the only one who got close enough to see his face."

"Have you got a pad and pencil?"

She gave him a curious look as she pulled a legal pad from a desk drawer and handed it to him. Within 30 seconds handed her a sketch of the shooter. "You might want to check with Jim Olsen at the Planet. He had a telephoto lens on his camera and it's just possible he got a shot of the shooter's face."

Davis arrived with the tea and coffee, followed by the stenographer with an audio recorder.

The statement on the Clinton Bridge incident didn't take long. It helped that Superman had an eidetic memory and had experience making witness statements to the police. He didn't add extraneous thoughts, or suppositions. The statement concerning the factory fire took longer as he meticulously described what he'd seen with his X-ray and telescopic vision, what he'd smelled. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that the fire was arson, but with the building collapsed, the arson investigators were going to have a hard time getting evidence.

Finally the audio recorder was turned off and the stenographer was dismissed, leaving Lupe and Superman alone again in her office.

"I read the statement you gave the D.A. on what happened last week on that thing Luthor made. I have a feeling there was a lot missing." She noted how still he had become and the bleak look that came into his eyes. "He must have hurt you pretty bad."

"Let's just say I now have an in depth knowledge of how it feels to be beaten nearly to death. The nightmares should go away, eventually." He stood up. "I have to get going."

"Another disaster somewhere?"

He just smiled at her as he opened the window and flew away.

A few minutes later, a tall, dark-haired man in a gray business suit walked through the doors of the Special Crimes Unit headquarters.

"Captain Leocadio, please. I'm Clark Kent?"

Eleven

"Damn," Richard muttered as he set down his phone. Margie from the copy desk had finally relayed Clark's message to him. He'd been hoping to do more work on SHADO after the afternoon edition had been put to bed.

He dialed Clark's cell number, but Clark's phone forwarded to voice mail instead. "Clark, this is Richard. Give me a call on my cell, okay?"

"Richard?"

He looked up to see Lois standing by his desk. "What, honey?"

"I was doing some checking on Doctor Kraus. I figured it wasn't a bad idea, considering what happened this morning, and we might get a story out of it."

"And?"

"As near as I can find, there is not now, and never was, a psychiatrist named Ursula Kraus. There's no record of her with the AMA, or any other American professional organization I can find. There's no record of her being credentialed in New Troy. No record of her entering the U.S. The University of Saltzburg has nothing on anyone by her name attending medical school there. Her personnel records are missing and so are all of her patient files. The only thing we have are the records in accounting. They paid somebody by that name for the past five years, at least." Lois sighed.

"I've asked Perry to put a call in for the back-ups of the personnel records, but given what happened to the computer files on Luthor and SHADO, I'm not holding out much hope. I'm having Holman down in research see if he can find a photo of her. Jimmy or somebody has to have taken a picture of her and put it in the system. If we can find one, maybe a photo will jog someone's memories."

Richard's cell phone chirped and he answered it. "White here."

Clark was on the phone: "Richard, I just got your message. What's going on?"

"I was wondering if you were up to doing a little more work on that assignment Perry gave us."

"Um, I just got home, but, uh, I'll come back to the office if you want," Clark said. He sounded tired.

"I have a better idea," Richard said. "We can work on it at your place. It's probably more secure than the conference room, anyway. At least until we get that room debugged."

There was a long pause, then: "Okay, I'll see you when you get here."

"Good." Richard folded his phone and put it back in his pocket. He grinned at Lois. "Why don't you take the rental and go get Jason?" He pulled the key off his key ring and handed it to her. "I'll call you when we're done and we can go out to dinner, just the three of us. I hear *Namaste's* reopened."

"Sounds like a plan," Lois said. She came around the desk and kissed him, tasting the coffee in his mouth. *He's such a good man. Maybe Clark's right. We need to set a date to be married. I don't know why I keep dragging my feet.* "I'll see you later."

Clark sighed as he turned off his phone. There was little more that he wanted to do this evening than grab a quick bite, listen to some music and simply relax. Too much had happened today and he needed time to think, to sort everything out. First the shooter on the bridge, then the thirty or more people trapped and killed in the textile factory. He didn't remember it being so hard.

He wasn't really hungry, so he made himself a cup of tea instead then changed out of his

three-piece suit into dark jeans and a dark t-shirt. He sat on the floor and sorted through his CD collection. Before he left he'd gotten rid of the furniture, but found he hadn't wanted to get rid of his books, his music, or the collection of native art he'd acquired while traveling the world before college. He picked out one of his favorite CDs and put it in the player, letting the music wash over him.

*Watching the world
From our window of life
Can we see all there is
That is real
That is right
To the distance so far
From our true understanding
Making us want more
Making us see less
The fire
Making me clean
Making me fly
Spinning me 'round and 'round
Spinning me 'round
The fire within your eyes
This mystic time
I've known before
Once before
The flame within in my heart
Agreements made
Are now realized
Like before
Speaking of worlds
Driven far far apart
How the industry
Crushes the nature of things
To the point that we lose
All we're trying to gain
Making us want more
Making us see less...**

** Dream (Kitaro)*

Lyrics by Jon Anderson (c) 1992

Clark woke at the sound of knocking. A quick check showed Richard standing outside the apartment door holding a sack of groceries and his briefcase.

"Clark!" Richard yelled.

"Coming," Clark called. He ran his fingers through his hair as he opened the door and realized he'd forgotten his glasses. "Sorry, I fell asleep," he explained as Richard walked in. He caught the curious look Richard gave him as he went back to the pile of CDs to look for his glasses.

"They're on the CD player," Richard said with a grin.

Clark grabbed his glasses off the top of the player and put them back on as he turned

down the volume on the music.

"I've never understood why it is that people who need glasses so badly can never keep track of them. Lois loses hers at least twice a day," Richard said, still grinning. He dropped his briefcase on the low table in the middle of the room. He looked around the room. It looked a lot different with light.

The walls were a linen color, about twice normal height with windows near the ceiling. The floor was hardwood and there was a large oriental rug under the single low table. There was a loft over the bathroom and kitchen. Richard hadn't seen that the last time, or the door to a fire escape on the outside wall.

He'd thought that two of the four walls were covered in bookcases, but he saw now that the cases were spaced out, allowing for the carvings, masks and other art to be displayed to their best advantage. Clark had a remarkable collection of African and South East Asian native art.

"I brought beer and snacks," Richard said. "Hope they're okay. Lois told me you were a junk food junkie."

"I'm trying to do better," Clark admitted with a chuckle. "I actually bought groceries today. The kitchen's over there." He nodded in the direction of the breakfast bar and the room beyond.

Richard went to the kitchen and started unpacking the grocery bag. He put the six pack of beer into the refrigerator, keeping out two bottles.

"Lois did some digging into Ursula Kraus's background and found out she was a fraud. No such person," Richard said, returning to the main room and handing Clark one of the beers. Clark had settled on the floor beside the table and had opened his laptop.

"She's also disappeared, along with her personal records and patient records," Richard added. "We don't even have her fingerprints. Her office was wiped clean."

"That's just swell," Clark muttered, taking a swig of the beer. It was surprisingly good and he checked the brand: Metroport IPA, a local microbrew. *I'll have to keep this in mind.* "So what did she have against me that she'd set Lois up like that? I never even met her."

"I don't know," Richard admitted. "But I have a hunch it's related to something you were working on. Maybe not something you're working on now, but something you, or you and Lois, worked on before. Somebody you embarrassed, or put away."

"That's a very long list," Clark reminded him.

"I know. I had research put together a list for me," Richard said. "The Metropolis D.A. should have had you on the payroll."

"There was an assistant D.A. who tried to talk me into it," Clark said with a sad smile. "We even dated a few times."

Richard noted the deepening regret in Clark's voice. "What happened?"

"A car bomb. The investigating officers thought it was meant for both of us. We'd had an appointment to discuss a case, only I was running late. I guess she thought I'd stood her up." Clark paused. "I'd just got there when the bomb went off."

"That had to have been tough."

"Lois and I got a Kerth nomination for the investigation that put Mayson's killers away," Clark said with a sigh. He was silent for a long moment, then: "Kraus was at the Planet for five years. That's an awful long time for someone to wait on the off chance I was going to show up again. Frankly, I hadn't planned on coming back to the Planet at all. I was either going to look for work at some small paper, or go back to school and get a teaching certificate. My mom

made me call Perry, and as luck would have it, something had just opened up."

"So you think you were just a target of opportunity?"

Clark nodded. "That's the only thing that makes sense, but then, it doesn't answer the question of what *was* she doing. Maybe we should take a look at any other employees who were let go or had problems related to her?"

"I'll suggest it to Lois," Richard said. He pulled out the guest register from the Oak Crest Convalescent Center and handed to Clark. "I thought you might recognize some names."

Clark scanned the last few pages. "Andrew Frost and Edmund Stone. I know those names. Pity you couldn't get a description of them, but I'd bet we're looking at Alec Freeman and Edward Straker. I wonder if the coroner might come up with something on cause of death. Maybe it wasn't as natural as you were told." Clark grabbed his cell phone and keyed in a number. The phone on the other end picked up.

"Hello?"

"Lupe, this is Clark Kent." He keyed his phone to speaker mode, so Richard could hear. "I've been looking into that high-tech ammo that's been coming into the city and one of our sources showed up dead this morning."

"I'm special crimes, remember? Serial killers, suicide bombers, Lex Luthor trying to destroy the city, aliens from outer space."

"I know, but I haven't been able to get hold of Bill Henderson," Clark explained. "And time is of the essence."

"Okay, Clark, I'll bite. Who died?" Lupe asked, sounding intrigued in spite of herself.

"Emil Duvall. He was a patient at the Oak Crest Convalescent Center, but he used to be chair of the IAC about eight years ago."

"Okay."

"I know I shouldn't ask, but is there any chance of an autopsy? I think it's just a little suspicious he ups and dies the night before we were going to ask him questions about one of the groups he used to oversee. One we think might be involved in arms smuggling."

"Clark, if you're looking into the group I think you are, watch your back. These guys don't play by any rules you know."

"I'll be careful," Clark promised.

"You do that," Lupe warned. "And warn the Boy Scout, too. The last thing I want is one of you on a slab, and these guys would do it without a qualm. I'll send a note through that Duvall's death may be suspicious and I'll let you know what happens."

"Thanks, Lupe. I owe you one," Clark said.

"Buy me lunch," Lupe said. "By the way, that phone number from this morning? Belongs to a trucking firm out of Gotham, Tri-state Transport. They claim the phone was stolen last week."

"So why didn't they cancel the service on that number?"

"Good question. I'm waiting to hear back from Gotham PD on Tri-state," Lupe said. "I'll let you know what they come up with."

"I'll let you know what we come up with, too," Clark promised. He closed his phone.

"Who's the 'boy scout'?" Richard wondered aloud.

"Superman," Clark told him.

Lois drove up to Jason's school only a few minutes late. Jason was waiting with Mrs. Morgan and ran to the car as soon as Lois stopped. Lois unlocked the back door for him and

he climbed into the back seat, throwing his book bag on the floor.

Mrs. Morgan stepped closer to the car and Lois rolled down the driver side window.

"Ms. Lane, I thought you might like to know. Jason's was telling the other kids today that his 'other' father has come home." The woman gave Lois a questioning look. Lois overcame the impulse to glare at Jason, seated behind her.

"Um, Jason's biological father came back to the States a few weeks ago and has moved back to Metropolis," Lois explained as simply as she could. "Frankly, I hadn't expected to ever see him again, so we're still working out how this is all going to fit together for Jason." A thought crossed her mind. "Jason wasn't causing any trouble, was he?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. It's just that I, and everyone else here, thought your fiancé was Jason's father. It just surprised us when Jason started talking about someone else."

"Well, it certainly surprised him to find out he was a father and hadn't known about it all this time," Lois said with a chuckle. "Serves him right for leaving town without a word or a forwarding address."

Mrs. Morgan gave her a surprised, speculative look.

"It's a long story," Lois said with a forced laugh.

"Can we see Unca' Clark?" Jason asked.

"I thought we'd go to home and wait for Daddy to call so we can pick him up," Lois said as she started the engine.

"Oh, Ms. Lane, remember the rest of the week is early dismissal for parent-teacher conferences, so Jason will need to be picked up at noon."

"Thanks," Lois said, putting the car in gear. "With everything that's happened, I forgot."

"I wanna visit Unca' Clark," Jason insisted.

Lois pulled the car into the street. "Jason, you'll be seeing him tomorrow, I promise."

"But you said we would have a talk today," Jason insisted.

"I did say that, didn't I?" Lois muttered. She pulled out her cell phone.

Twelve

Richard's cell phone buzzed in his pocket and he pulled it out, reading the tiny screen on the front. He flipped open the phone. "Hello, honey."

"Richard, Jason insists on seeing Clark tonight," Lois explained. "He wants us to have that talk we promised yesterday."

"I'll see if he's up for it," Richard said. He looked over at Clark who was reading through items on his computer. "Jason insists on coming over, if that's okay."

Clark shrugged. "Sure, that'd be swell."

"Do you like Indian food?"

Clark gave him a puzzled look. "Yeah."

Richard put the phone back to his ear. "Why don't you pick up some takeout from *Namaste* on your way."

"Will do. Love ya'," Lois said, ringing off.

Forty-five minutes later, Lois knocked on the door of the fifth floor apartment, holding a plastic bag filled with takeout boxes, along with her oversize purse, and Jason. Richard opened the door for them and Lois gave him a quick kiss as she entered the room. Richard grabbed the bag and headed to the kitchen while Jason made a beeline to Clark.

"Whatcha doin'?" Jason demanded, settling himself on the floor to look at the computer screen in front of Clark.

"Working," Clark said.

"Uncle Perry gives you homework, too?" Jason asked, wide-eyed.

"Yup."

Lois smiled at the exchange and turned to look around Clark's new digs. Compared to his old apartment, this place was positively bare. No furniture except for the table, a couple cabinets and an oriental carpet that looked and felt like it was real wool. Of course his first order of business would have been his books and art, but there was something missing.

"Clark, where are your Kerth awards, and your trophies?" Lois asked as Richard returned from the kitchen with loaded plates.

"Put away with my mom's stuff in Smallville. They didn't seem important, somehow. It seems so long ago, like they belong to somebody else."

"That's how I feel about that Pulitzer. Somebody else wrote that article. Somebody who was furious at being left in the dark when Superman left."

Richard handed her a plate and she accepted it, sitting on the carpet opposite Clark. "I'm thinking of refusing the award. What I wrote, it wasn't true."

"Lois, I've read the article. It's a brilliant piece of writing and it *is* true," Clark said. There was a sad earnestness in his expression. "You were right. The world doesn't really need Superman. People were getting complacent, counting on him to pull their fat from the fire, saving them from their own mistakes. You can't count on that. He's just one person."

"You think I should accept?"

"Of course," Clark said. "Just because you've moved beyond what you wrote doesn't make it less valid. He made promises he couldn't keep. Promises to be there for you, for everyone, to keep bad things from happening. Promises no one should be expected to keep, except that he's Superman, and Superman doesn't lie, so his failure was compounded. You pointed out that by depending on him, on one person, to solve everyone's problems, no one was bothering to take care of themselves. The world doesn't *need* a savior."

"Clark, that's the longest speech I think I've ever heard you make without it being a

political commentary," Lois said with a smile.

Clark looked down at his plate as the color began to rise in his face. "You didn't stop me. Besides, nobody's going to remember what you won the Pulitzer for, just the fact that you won."

"That's what Perry keeps telling me."

"Well, Perry's no fool, and he certainly didn't make it to where he is by yodeling."

"That's what I've been telling her for the past couple days," Richard told him with a grin.

"Clark?" Lois asked.

"Hmm?" He was trying to eat.

"Why would Superman pretend he didn't remember you?" She studied his face as he swallowed. The deer-in-the-headlights look was back as he tried to understand her question.

"When was this?"

"The first interview after he came back," she said. "Your name came up, and his response was a question, like he didn't recognize your name."

"Maybe you misunderstood his question." *Why had he said what he did? He knew she was bright and would pick up on it, so why did he do it? He honestly didn't know.*

"Maybe," she admitted. "Come to think of it, even in the plane, after the shuttle rescue, it was like he was repeating a script. He was repeating what he'd said to me at our first meeting. And later, it was like we were both following that same pattern, the script of that first interview. I wonder why?"

"Private joke?" Clark suggested, giving her one of his goofy grins. "Comfort zone?" he suggested more seriously. "Knowing you, you were ready to lay into him pretty good for taking off six years go."

"I was," she admitted.

Jason was looking at her, wide-eyed. "Mommy, you yelled at Superman?"

Lois nodded. "I wasn't very nice to him right after he came back, before we knew what Luthor'd done. I was really, really mad at him for leaving without saying goodbye, without telling anybody where he was going."

Richard noted Jason giving Clark a confused look and he saw the quiet, watchful expression on Clark's face as he watched Lois.

"You're not mad now, are you?" Jason asked.

"No," Lois said. "I'm not mad at him now."

"Good," Jason announced. "'Cause I like Superman."

The rest of dinner was spent with Jason telling his parents about school, Mrs. Morgan's talk with Mommy, the new girl in class named Kaitlyn who came from Gotham City.

When the takeout boxes were empty and the dishes pushed aside, Clark started to get to his feet to clear the table only to find Lois already on her feet.

"I'll handle it," she announced. "The sooner you two get started, the sooner we can get Jason home." She gathered the dirty dishes and headed off to the kitchen.

"Lois has been replaced by a pod person, right?" Clark muttered, low enough that only Richard could hear.

Richard chuckled. "Some days I wonder." He took the notes he'd placed on the floor during dinner back on the table. "Andrew Frost and Edmund Stone, who are you? Where are you?" Richard muttered to himself.

Clark shook his head, not looking up from his laptop. "I'm not finding anything that makes any sense. Jimmy used to be pretty good at this stuff."

"Still is. I'll get him on this tomorrow," Richard said. "Anything on those explosives?"

Clark shrugged. "I've tracked down reports on the thefts. Not much there. Timers, explosives, detonators, very high tech stuff. Inside job, obviously. Only came to light because the incoming CO demanded a complete inventory of the base when he came in."

"We should talk to the CO then. Which base was it?"

"Fort Pennington, New Troy. General Samuel Lane."

"Lois!" Richard yelled. "We need to talk to your dad."

Lois came out of the kitchen. "What's going on?"

"The explosives on the Clinton Bridge this morning. The S.C.U. thinks they were military," Clark explained. "Most likely from the theft at Fort Pennington. General Lane spearheaded the investigation when he took command of the base. And before you ask, there is no way I'm talking to him."

"Clark, that was seven years ago," Lois said, going to her purse and grabbing her cell phone. "He's really mellowed out since Jason was born. He's finally got a grandson. Lucy and Ron stopped with the two girls, you know."

Clark simply watched her as she keyed her phone and hit the speaker key. The other end picked up. "Hello, Lois?"

"Hi Dad, got a minute?"

"Anything for my girl," General Lane said. Clark tried to hide his astonishment. Six years ago, Lois and her father were barely on speaking terms. It was well known that Samuel Lane had been disappointed that his wife had only given him two daughters, rather than the sons he so desperately wanted. To compensate, Lois had become the 'son' her father never had - aggressive, strong-willed, competitive, a no-holds-barred fighter for whom 'be careful' was a meaningless phrase. And she had despised her father for being constantly disappointed in her because of her gender. *Things have changed.*

"I'm not so sure when I tell you what I need, Dad. Richard and Clark are working on something and that munitions theft at Pennington came up. It looks like some of the missing materiel was used in a bombing attempt on the Clinton Bridge this morning. Is there anything you remember that wasn't in the official reports? Impressions, anything?"

"Lois, those reports were classified."

"Da-ad," Lois warned.

"I won't ask," General Lane promised. There was a long pause. "The one thing I recall that bothered me about the whole thing was the officer in charge of that section, name of Peter Franklin. I had more than enough to send him to Leavenworth for a long time, but the charges were dropped and the JAG's office wouldn't tell me why, or if Franklin was transferred or discharged."

Clark spoke up, finally. "You wouldn't happen to have a photo of this Peter Franklin, would you, General?"

"No, I don't think so. The JAG investigator took the personnel files."

"If we emailed you photos of the people we're looking into, do you think you could ID him?"

"Probably."

Clark opened his email program and attached the photos of the defendants in the 2000 SHADO arms smuggling trials. He beckoned Richard over and the other man typed in Sam Lane's email address. Clark hit the send button and waited.

"So, Kent, where did you run off to this time, and why did you bother to come back?"

"Dad, you promised," Lois hissed, keying off the speaker phone function and putting the phone to her ear. "You promised me you would lay off."

Richard looked uncomfortable. He leaned close to Clark. "Uh, what did you do to piss him off?"

Clark shook his head slowly. "He's convinced himself I'm a coward, or worse."

Lois had moved to the kitchen so she wouldn't be overheard as she continued to argue with her father.

"Why? What happened?"

Clark seemed to consider his words for a long moment. "Remember the Nightfall asteroid?" He chuckled bitterly. "Of course you do. Everyone who was alive then remembers what they were doing while the world waited for Superman to keep it from ending - except me. All I have are bad dreams."

He took a deep breath. "About the time Superman took off to take care of the asteroid, I apparently went into a fugue state. I'd gotten knocked down by a car, banged my head pretty good, I guess. I wound up at the Fifth Street Mission, down in Suicide Slum. I had no ID, must have been robbed 'cause I was in somebody else's clothes, looked like I'd been living on the street for months. I had no recollection of who I was, how I'd gotten there, nothing. I was mentally MIA for about two days. I was lucky one of Bill Henderson's men recognized me, got me out of there, got me some help. General Lane decided, despite what the doctors said, that I was either faking it, or such a coward that I'd had a psychotic break to avoid facing the end of the world."

"You said 'apparently' went into a fugue state?"

Clark sighed. "When they finally got around to analyzing my blood they found traces of a very strong psychotropic drug." *Okay, red kryptonite was kind of like a drug, wasn't it? He'd been lucky the combination of red and green kryptonite in the asteroid hadn't killed him, and the Earth with it.* "The 'break' was induced. When I did recover, got my memory back, I'd lost those two days. We never did find out who or why." He hated lying about things, but it couldn't be helped. *Who'd believe Clark Kent was taken out by the asteroid?*

"And now he's completely set in his opinion of you," Richard completed. "And there's nothing he hates more than cowardice."

Lois cleared her throat and both men looked up to see her standing in the doorway to the kitchen. Clark wondered how long she'd been standing there, listening.

"I'm sorry Clark," she began. "I thought he'd behave better."

"It's okay."

"No, it isn't okay," Lois insisted. "I told him about the Chinese prison camp. He changed his tune real fast after that. I guess he figures if you survived five and a half years in a place like that, you can't be as much of a wuss as he thought."

Clark sighed. "Thanks," he said finally.

"Dad said he recognized several of the people in that photo you sent him. Peter Franklin is one of them."

Clark checked his email and discovered a return note from General Lane. He opened it to see the group photo he'd sent was imbedded in the email with additional notes indicating the man he knew as was Colonel Peter Franklin was identified in the photo as 'Paul Foster', a senior SHADO operative. Sam Lane also wrote that he recognized Alec Freeman and a third man identified as Peter Carlin. Both of those men were friends of 'Colonel Franklin'.

Lois looked over Clark's shoulder at the photo. "That blonde woman standing next to

Freeman. That's Ursula Kraus," she said.

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely."

"That explains a few things, then," Clark muttered. "That's Virginia Lake, SHADO's fourth in command and, until SHADO was disbanded, one of the top researchers in the world in high energy particle physics. She and Straker were trying to create FTL tracking and communications systems. And it's my understanding they may have been close to succeeding when they were shut down."

"But what was she doing pretending to be a psychiatrist, hiding out at the Planet?" she wondered aloud.

"Keeping an eye on the Daily Planet staff, I expect," Richard said. "The Planet was the paper that first broke the news that SHADO was bad news, remember? She was spying on us, just waiting her chance. And she would have succeeded in doing some serious damage to you and Clark, if he hadn't had an air-tight alibi this morning."

Clark looked thoughtful. "There's still something about this morning that doesn't jive. But I can't put my finger on it."

"Well, it's odd the shooter knew you were on the bridge," Richard said.

"There was nothing in the call to indicate he knew I was actually on the bridge. He probably figured I was close, at work maybe," Clark said, running through the conversation in his mind. "The Planet's, what, two miles from the bridge? But, how did the WGBS van get where it was? It was at the north end of the southbound lane, facing south."

"You think they were tipped off?" Lois asked.

"It's the only thing that makes sense," Richard said. "The people who planned it wanted media there. They wanted Superman in range of cameras."

"They wanted video of Superman getting hurt, or maybe killed," Clark said. There was a bleakness in his voice. "The shooter had some of the kryptonite ammo and took a shot at him. Luckily, Superman really is 'faster than a speeding bullet', and ducked instead of letting the bullets bounce off the way he normally would."

"Which brings us back to the task at hand. There's kryptonite ammunition coming into Metropolis and nobody knows who's doing it," Lois said. "You were going to tell us about what you found out at STAR Labs."

"Superman talked to Stoner, not me. And apparently Stoner didn't say much more than what was in his filed report. It really is armor piercing shells from hand guns. There's only about three people in the world who could have figured out how to alloy the crystals into the metal so it would work," Clark reported. "Doctor Faulkner also told me that STAR Labs had also been collecting kryptonite for a project using it as a power source, and they're close to building a prototype energy plant, but a lot of what they collected was diverted by unknown parties."

"That means there's an awful lot of kryptonite out there, somewhere," Richard commented.

"There's one small favor, at least. Luthor didn't have it or else he would have used that instead of robbing the museum," Clark said. "But, I did get to see STAR Labs new medical lab. They've got an ER and ICU in case Superman needs a hospital again. It's really neat. They just got it finished otherwise that's where Superman would have been taken last week."

"Well, that's a good thing to know, assuming there's a next time he needs a doctor," Lois said with a smile. "He is Superman, you know." Her expression turned solemn. "I wish we'd

never printed anything about kryptonite."

"It wouldn't have mattered," Clark said quietly. "Someone would have figured it out eventually." Clark's head went up in that so familiar way, eyes unfocussed as he listened for something.

"Earth to Clark," Lois said. "What are you listening to? What do you hear?"

"Sirens," Jason answered for him.

"Police sirens," Clark said, finally turning back to Lois and Richard. "Midtown, I think."

"I don't hear anything," Richard said.

"I told you, I have very good hearing." He unfolded himself from the table and went to the fire escape door, opening it. Faint sounds of sirens floated into the room. Clark sagged against the door frame in sudden exhaustion. "I'm sorry, but I'm all done in. Maybe we can do more on it tomorrow, figure out how it ties in with the Mazik heist and where SHADO is hiding."

Lois and Richard exchanged worried looks.

Clark's cell phone rang. He opened the phone and answered. "Kent here."

"Clark? Rachel Harris," a female voice said.

"Rache? What's up?" Clark recognized the voice and name. Rachel Harris was the sheriff of Lowell County, Kansas. They'd graduated high school together. Gone to the senior prom together. She was a good friend.

"I just got a call from your mom," Rachel said. "She and Ben were picked up a couple hours ago by some people claiming they were with the FBI. They're being held in Colorado Springs. I guess that's as far as they got on their trip to Montana. I'm working on getting them released and back here."

"What are the charges?"

He noted that Lois and Richard had stopped in the doorway to listen.

"Don't know, exactly," Rachel was saying. "The officers in Colorado were told it was an outstanding federal warrant, but didn't have any details. I know your mom was a firebrand when she was younger, but I've never heard about any warrants out on her. And believe you me, I'd know about it. Besides, it looks like the same two 'FBI' people visited the Newcombs this morning."

"The Newcombs?"

"Didn't your mom tell you? They're the ones who bought your parents' farm. They just took possession this morning and got scared half out their minds by these bozos."

"What did they want, Rache?"

"Not sure, but they were asking a lot of questions about you, and your parents, and Superman," she said. "Apparently, they think Superman's spaceship landed at the farm three weeks ago. You know, this all sounds a lot like that Trask fellow, what, ten years ago?"

"The UFO hunter that tried to shoot me? Yeah, you're right. It does sound like him. But he's dead. Suicide by cop, remember?" Clark reminded her. "Besides, Superman's spaceship is *not* in a cornfield at my Mom's old farm," Clark said. *It's underwater in the Arctic.* "But there was a pretty good size meteorite that burned up close to the ground. Set fire to a good chunk of the east field."

Over the phone, Clark heard Rachel chuckle, then: "I've got calls into Pete Ross, and Brandon Blakely, you remember him? He's a hot-shot lawyer now. We'll get this sorted out, Clark. Don't worry."

"Thanks, Rache," Clark said. "I owe you big time."

"What are friends for?" Rachel responded. "Just be careful, Clark. It's none of my business what you've gotten yourself into this time, but I don't like the games these people are playing."

"Neither do I, Rachel," Clark said. "Keep me posted, will you?"

"Will do. Take care, Clark," Rachel said, ringing off. Clark closed his phone, then realized Lois, Richard, and Jason were still standing by the front door.

"Clark, what's wrong?" Lois asked.

"That was Rachel Harris, the sheriff in Smallville. Some people claiming to be from the FBI were at my parent's old farm this morning, asking questions of the people who just bought it. Then my mom and her 'friend' were picked up a couple hours ago by the same people in Colorado Springs."

"What are the charges?" Richard asked.

Clark shrugged. "An old federal warrant, supposedly. Only Rachel's real sure it's bogus. If there was a warrant out for my mother, she'd know about it. Rachel's really very good at her job."

"Uh, Clark, I don't hear you protesting that your mom couldn't have an old warrant out on her," Richard observed.

"Because I already know how thick the NIA and FBI files are on her," Clark said with a sad grin. "Back before she got married, my mom was a civil-rights activist. She was on the FBI's watch list for a long time."

"You said something about somebody committing 'suicide by cop'?" Lois asked.

"It's probably nothing, but the whole thing reminded Rachel of something that happened before I moved to Metropolis. Jason Trask was supposedly part of a government agency looking into U.F.O.s, 'section 39', I think it was called. Anyway, he came to Smallville looking for evidence of a UFO landing in 1974. But, he came in claiming he was with the EPA looking for pesticide contamination. He tore up one of the neighbor's farms. Didn't find anything there, so started in on my mom and me. Before it was over he was holding me, my mom, and one of our neighbors, prisoner, claiming we were all traitors to humankind for aiding an alleged alien invasion. I mean, he was out of his head. I was all of two years old in 1974.

"He was getting ready to execute us when Rachel took him out. But, Rachel's right. There is a bizarre similarity between Trask and Straker."

He looked over at them, still standing in the doorway. "Look, I'm sure Rachel will have it all sorted out tomorrow or so, so you don't have to worry about it."

"Are you going to be okay?" Richard asked.

Clark nodded. "I'll be fine. And I'm sure my mom will be too, once Rachel gets things straightened out. I'll see you both in the morning, okay?"

"Sure," Lois and Richard both said as they closed the door behind them and headed down to their car.

As they pulled out of the garage Lois laughed.

Richard glanced at her curiously. "What's so funny?"

"Not funny really. I just realized where Clark gets his crusader mentality from," Lois said. "That's the real reason my Dad doesn't like Clark. The Nightfall incident is just an excuse. Clark is a crusader. He sees something and has to get it fixed. Oh, he's a lot more subtle than I am about it, but he also doesn't know when to quit. I at least know that once the story's published I can usually leave it up to the proper authorities to fix it. Clark doesn't always get that part."

"I don't get it," Richard said. "Isn't that what investigative reporting is all about, uncovering the truth so things can get fixed?"

"Oh yeah," Lois agreed. "Clark's just a little more stubborn than most. The NIA and FBI have files on his mom? I saw Clark's FBI file before he took off. Three years at the Planet and his file was as thick as mine was. He's a closet revolutionary. If you ever want to give Perry a heart attack, get Clark started on Revolutionary Theology versus unbridled capitalism as it applies to the third world, and do it in the middle of the bullpen. One of them won't live." She chuckled. "At least Clark has the sense to keep his political opinions out of his writing, at least most of the time. But Dad has no patience with anyone who isn't all 'my country right or wrong.' And Clark has no patience with blind patriotism or blind obedience."

"So much for the stereotypical farm hick," Richard commented. "You know we still haven't had that talk we promised Jason." He looked in the mirror at Jason's reflection. Jason was asleep in the back seat.

"We should have a little time tomorrow," Lois said. "It's early dismissal for the rest of the week, so Jason's going to be spending a lot of time at the office."

Thirteen

Straker looked at the woman seated opposite his desk in the small office near Suicide Slum he used when his daytime office was too risky.

"Five years deep cover, wasted, for what?" Straker grated. "Now everyone knows there's someone out to get Kent and possibly Lane and White. You promised me results. You promised me Kent would be out of the way."

"We moved too soon," the woman, Virginia Lake, responded. "I hadn't had enough time to get Lane, or White primed properly. Obviously, Lane and Kent care more deeply about each other than anyone had indicated to me. There certainly wasn't anything in their files that would have indicated that Lane *wasn't* the reason Kent took off so suddenly, or that she would fail to react with rage when he did finally return. There was also nothing to indicate that White had any knowledge that he *wasn't* the father of her child."

"Mister Luthor is convinced Lane's child was fathered by the alien," Straker reminded her.

"Luthor is a mad man," Lake said. "A brilliant mad man, but a mad man nonetheless. His repeated defeats at the hands of Superman has him jumping at phantasms. There is little doubt in anyone's mind that Kent is the child's biological father."

"He claims the boy threw a grand piano," Straker reminded her.

"I've been keeping tabs on that child ever since I joined the Planet," Lake said. "I even had access to his medical records. The child has never shown any sign of extraordinary abilities. If anything, he's small for his age and has medical issues. Hardly what I would expect of Superman's offspring considering the supposed superiority of Kryptonian genetics."

"And Lane's claim that the boy was Superman's offspring?"

"Superman denied it to her face," Lake reminded him. "He claimed to have doubts as to whether or not humans and Kryptonians were genetically compatible at all. As I said, Luthor is a madman and Lois Lane... well a child by a superhero is certainly more romantic than a one night stand with an unreliable co-worker."

"Well, if it's any consolation, Ellis and Bradley came up blank as well," Straker said. "As it turns out, Mrs. Kent, despite her questionable background, is a well respected member of her community. Instead of calling her son, as you and Murch both predicted, she called her hometown sheriff, who called the FBI. Ellis and Bradley have been forced to ground. I'm arranging for them to be relocated to Germany for the time being."

"Has Peter come up with anything?"

"He'll be in the suspect area sometime late tomorrow."

"You're hoping he'll find something," she observed.

She knew him too well. She'd been with him, supporting him, for better than thirty years. Once upon a time, she'd had hopes of a more romantic, more personal relationship with him. But he'd given up everything, his marriage, his son, his life, in keeping SHADO's objectives alive, to keep the planet safe from invading aliens. Now the best she could hope for was just to stand by him and not get in his way.

"I'm hoping he'll find the spaceship the alien used," Straker grated. "I'm hoping we'll find technology we can use."

"You're hoping we'll be able to understand it when and if we do find it," Lake said. "You know Luthor nearly destroyed the entire planet by misusing that technology."

"You said it yourself, Luthor is a mad man, too full of himself to admit he doesn't know everything. His hatred of the alien blinds him to the obvious. He'll be useful, for a while."

"Are you sure you're not blinded by hatred as well?" Lake asked. Besides Alec Freeman, she was probably to only person on Earth who could ask that question.

"No one being should have that much power," Straker said. "His existence is a clear and present danger to the planet. He has to be destroyed. And if I can take out a particularly annoying journalist with delusions of righteousness at the same time, so much the better."

Clark put the finishing touches on his first follow-up article on the Clinton Bridge shooter incident. The medical examiner had not yet identified the shooter but Perry had promised to run both Superman's sketch and Jimmy's photograph on the front page in hopes that someone, a relative, a friend, might identify the young man.

Clark had Lupe's permission to go ahead and link the explosives used on the bridge to the Camp Pennington explosives' theft. Clark noted the 'coincidence' of the shooter demanding that Superman be on the bridge while the Mazik Exchange was being robbed.

Lois was spending the morning looking into the on-going repairs to the city. Power was finally up in all but the hardest hit areas of the city. The National Guard presence was being reduced. Metropolis was quickly returning to normal. FEMA was still dragging its proverbial feet in releasing government funds to the people who needed it most.

Clark proofed his work one more time before sending it off to Richard.

After a few minutes Richard came out of his office and walked over to Clark's desk. "I promised to return that guest book to Ms. Smits this morning. Want to grab a cup of coffee on the way? My car's back from the shop and in the parking garage."

"Sure," Clark responded. "I'm pretty much caught up. I was just going to check in with Lupe later this afternoon and then run over to MPD headquarters, see if I can get hold of Bill Henderson. He still hasn't returned any of my calls. I don't know if he's still out of town or what," He looked at Richard curiously. "Didn't you promise Ms. Smits an autographed picture of Superman?"

Richard shrugged. "I haven't seen him to ask him..."

"I'm sure we can come up with something," Clark said, shutting down his computer and getting up from his chair. "Jimmy," he called across the room to Olsen. "You've got a couple of glossies of Superman in your files, don't you?"

"Sure, CK. Why?"

"Never mind," Clark instructed. "Just pick out one for Richard to take, okay?"

Jimmy shrugged and opened a file cabinet near the bullpen entrance. He opened a file and pulled out an 8x10 glossy of Metropolis's superhero. Clark took the photo to the nearest unoccupied desk, and grabbed a pen.

"What's her first name?" Clark asked.

"Mollie," Richard answered. He watched as Clark wrote across the bottom of the photo: *Thanks for your help, Molly. Best regards, Superman.*

"So, forgery is one of your hidden talents too, CK?" Jimmy asked with a laugh.

"Well, I can just about guarantee Superman won't complain," Clark said with another of his crooked grins. "Besides, I know how he hates to disappoint his fans. You wouldn't want that now, would you?" There was a mischievous glint in Clark's blue eyes as he grabbed a manila envelop from the desk, put the photo inside, and handed it to Richard.

It only took twenty minutes to drive out to the Oak Crest Convalescent Center. Ten minutes of that was spent in the drive-thru at Starbucks.

Again Richard parked the car in one of the visitor's slots and entered the low brick building, this time with Clark following on his heels.

The woman seated behind the sliding window near the main door wasn't Molly Smits. Instead, it was a young black woman. She looked up at the two men.

"Is Ms. Smits around?" Richard asked. "I wanted to return something to her."

The young woman's eyes filled with tears. "She was killed last night on her way home. A hit and run."

"I'm so sorry," Clark said. He did sound genuinely sorry to hear of the woman's death.

"Is Doctor Wilson in today?" Richard asked.

"No, I'm sorry," the woman said. "We got a call this morning he was going to be out for the rest of the week."

Richard sighed and looked over at Clark. "Would it be possible to get his number?" Clark asked quietly.

The woman shook her head. "It's against policy, I could lose my job."

"We really need to talk to Doctor Wilson," Clark insisted. "I believe he was treating my Uncle Emil before he died." Clark handed her his business card.

"I can try to get a message to him," she promised.

"Why do I have the feeling we brought this on?" Richard asked when they got back to the car.

"It's possible it was really an accident," Clark said.

"Do you really believe that?"

"Possible, but not likely," Clark admitted. "I'll get in touch with Lupe when I get back to the office. I doubt she'll think it's a coincidence."

"By the way, how often do you forge Superman's signature?" Richard asked.

Clark chuckled. "There's a first time for everything. I was actually yanking Jimmy's chain, a little. Before Superman disappeared, Jimmy had a scam going using Superman autographs, and I can just about guarantee Superman didn't have anything to do with the ones Jimmy was handing out."

Clark's phone chimed and he pulled it out: *Lupe*. "Hello Lupe, what's up?"

"I got curious about this Emil Duvall you asked me to check on," Lupe said. "There's now a funeral home under investigation. Lothian Mortuary, where they took Duvall's body. About ten minutes after I sent word to the ME I'd like an autopsy, they come back and tell me the body's just been cremated."

"Isn't there supposed to be a forty-eight hour waiting period on that sort of thing?" Clark asked. He knew the answer.

"You go it in one, Kent. I've notified the DA. They are not well pleased over there," Lupe said.

"There was another death related to the nursing home," Clark told her. "The receptionist Richard White talked to yesterday. Hit and run."

"Smits. We're already on it. The car was stolen, found abandoned near the warehouse district about midnight. It looks like the car was wiped clean, at least on the inside. Unless there were witnesses, I doubt we'll find the perps."

"Assuming her death is related to our investigation, I doubt the people we're looking at will be so accommodating," Clark said.

"Look, Clark. I know I've told you before but please, watch your back and when you get

in over your head, that's what us guys with the badges are for. Pass that along to White, will you?"

Clark chuckled. "I will, not that it'll do any good."

"I know," Lupe said with a good-natured sigh. "Keeping an eye on you and Lane used to be a full time job for Superman. He must be going out of his mind about now. Say hi to the big guy for me, will you?"

"I will, next time I see him," Clark promised and folded up his phone.

"What's up?" Richard asked, weaving the car through the now midday traffic.

"MPD is already on the hit and run, but Lupe doesn't think they'll find the perps. And to add insult to injury, Duvall's body was cremated before the ME could get hold of it for autopsy. The DA's office is not happy."

"Looks like you and Captain Leocadio are pretty tight," Richard commented.

"We've helped each other out. She knows I've always been fair to the department. I'm one of the few reporters even tolerated over at Dulin's. We used to go out to drinks there every once in a while." Clark explained. "Plus, I saved her ass from a corruption charge way back when."

"Oh?"

"Let's say it was a very good thing that Klimas didn't bother to check my early Planet assignments before barging into Perry's office. Not long after Nightfall, I spent six weeks undercover at the MPD Academy at Bill Henderson's specific request. I actually have a certificate for completing the accelerated course. I also helped crack open an internal affairs case. One of the instructors was crooked, owned by Intergang. He was trying to discredit Lupe, the S.C.U. I was able to get the evidence to discredit him, clear them, prevented a major scandal for them. Got my second Kerth while I was at it. Perry would have rather I broke the scandal, but he was cool about it. Lois was absolutely furious."

"Why?"

"Uh, because, truth be told, she was better qualified to do the job but Perry went along with Henderson. I was afraid to ask why he wanted me, instead of her," Clark said.

"Maybe they felt you made a more convincing cop," Richard suggested. "Isn't the accelerated course for officers from other jurisdictions who've moved to Metropolis?"

"Yeah, and they put together a real convincing background for me," Clark told him. "Even got Sheriff Harris to vouch for me." He chuckled and Richard gave him a curious look. "Back in high school I had a bad habit of sticking my nose into police business. Drove Sheriff Adams absolutely crazy. Half the time she couldn't decide if she wanted to haul me in for questioning, or recruit me."

"And what sort of police business could there possibly be in Smallville? Late library books?"

"We had our share of bad stuff. Nothing like Metropolis, though."

"Nothing's like Metropolis," Richard said with a grin as he steered the car into the Planet parking garage, pulling into his assigned space.

Just after lunch, Lois came back to the bullpen with Jason in tow. Jason pulled himself free of his mother's grasp to run over to Clark's desk.

"We have early dismissal all week!" Jason announced.

"He'll be spending a lot of time here this week," Lois told Clark, following her son. "Remember, Clark has work to do," she said to Jason, crouching down beside the five-year-old. "So, don't bother him too much, okay?"

"I won't, Mommy," Jason promised. Lois ruffled his hair, then kissed him on the cheek.

"Be good." She straightened up and turned back to Clark. "I've got to get out to that FEMA conference. Not that they're going to say anything new." She paused and looked at him more closely. "Maybe we'll have time to talk over dinner."

"You know I'll abide by any decision you and Richard make," Clark reminded her.

She patted him on the shoulder. "You know, Clark, sometimes you're just too honorable to be from this planet. We'll work something out. Soon."

She turned and waved to Richard in his office, missing the startled look in Clark's eyes. Richard waved back and she was gone.

Clark stuck his head into the assistant editor's office. Richard had just finished trimming a story to fit the next edition and sent it down to layout. "Richard, have a couple minutes?" Clark asked. He was holding two rolled up maps and a manila folder full of 8x11 print outs.

"Sure, what do you need?"

"An extra set of trained eyes. I have an idea on where those munitions are coming from. Remember that list of SHADO bases that were turned over to the DOD back in '96?"

Richard nodded.

"I checked into who the current owners of those properties are. Turns out the DOD disposed of most of that land in 2001. Some of it was auctioned off for industrial land, but most of it was turned over to the various states. New Troy got three of those bases. Two of them are now industrial parks and the third is now part of the Manahasset Park expansion. That one was a Sky-diver base. It was an underground sub base."

"And chances are, most of it's still there. It'd be perfect for smuggling," Richard said, following Clark into the conference room.

Clark unrolled the geologic survey map onto the conference table, and then taped satellite photos of the same area up on the inner window, along with an old survey map out of the Planet's archives.

"Okay, Clark, what are we looking for?" Richard asked.

"Anything that shouldn't be there, or should be there and isn't," Clark replied, scanning the photos.

"And what makes you think we're going to find anything if the FBI's hasn't?"

"We both know arms dealers survive because the governments who might be able to do something about it see an advantage to having criminals do their dirty work for them," Clark said, not taking his eyes off the photos. "And those same governments will turn a blind eye to other crimes committed by these people for the sake of expediency. Like the attack on the Spires."

Richard knew that. One of his first articles after being assigned to the London bureau was a report on the international arms trade. It had gotten him some attention, not all of it good. "I still don't know what sort of monsters would allow that to happen, or do it for that matter."

Clark shook his head and went back to the photos. "I don't know either. I've written about them, interviewed them. I understand Luthor, sort of. He's just crazy, sees himself as so superior to normal humans that people don't matter. They're not much above ants. But I have no idea what makes these other people tick. I don't understand people who can look at other human beings and only see numbers, statistics, acceptable losses. I don't understand them. I don't want to understand them. But I do want them stopped."

"Lois said you were a crusader," Richard said.

"I come by it honestly, I guess," Clark said with a faint smile. "By the way, Rachel got my Mom and Ben out of Colorado and back to Smallville this morning. And real FBI's looking into whoever it was who was impersonating federal agents. That's a pretty big no-no in their book."

"Glad to hear it."

Suddenly, Clark pulled one printout from the wall. "Got something." He placed the photo on the map and pointed to a section of the photo. "See it?"

Richard studied the photo. After a moment he spotted what Clark was referring to: a slight change of texture in the trees and a road that looked fairly well used, but suddenly ended. Richard checked the corresponding area on the newer GSA map. The road simply stopped. "This map shows this road ending right there, but that doesn't make any sense. There's no way to get out, no turn-around."

"The old map shows the road continuing another half-mile or so. It ends near an old mine." Clark took a marker and circled the area on the map. "I'm betting that's their transfer point."

"So now what?"

"So now I go out there and check it out," Clark said.

"It's about a three hour drive," Richard pointed out. "I guess I'm driving."

"I can move faster by myself."

"How, hitching a ride with Superman? I'll leave Lois a note and she and Jason can take a cab home tonight," Richard told him. Richard studied the older map. "That mine is in Manahasset State Park. I used to go camping there with my dad. Have you got any camping gear?"

"I haven't been camping since high school," Clark said. "Why?"

"A suit going out there would be suspicious," Richard said. "But two guys out on a camping trip..."

"Would be a lot less suspicious," Clark completed the thought. "I guess I'm getting some camping gear."

"Don't worry about it. I've probably got enough. I'll leave Lois that note and we'll get going."

Jimmy poked his head in. "The chief's looking for you guys," he said.

"Tell him we already left." Clark instructed, rolling up the two maps.

"Left for where?" Jimmy asked.

"We're going hunting," Richard said with a grin and followed Clark out. "Keep an eye on Jason, will you Jimmy? Lois should be back any time now."

Jason was not supposed to be in the parking garage, but he was bored with his Gameboy and had left his book in the back seat of his parents' car. He heard his father and Clark talking and climbed into the back of the sedan, hunkering down on the floor under the blanket his mom kept there so they wouldn't notice him.

The five-year-old was still sitting on the floor by the back seat when the car crossed the City Center Bridge and headed towards Richard and Lois's house.

William Henderson entered his office at Metropolis Police Headquarters after a half-hour flight from Washington D.C., and an hour in traffic. The week-long conference on arms smuggling had been little more than a joke, but he'd managed to get together with people he knew with the FBI and NIA, as well as his counterpart, Jerry Hodgekiss, of the New Troy

State Patrol. They, in turn, had linked him up with General Sam Lane, the commander at Fort Pennington, New Troy, who was heading up a military task force to counter arms theft within the U.S. military.

He quickly sorted through the stack of messages on his desk, then swore softly to himself. "Jennie, why didn't you tell me Clark Kent was trying to get in touch with me?" he yelled.

Jennie Wilson, his secretary of less than a year, stuck her head through the door. "Sir?"

"Kent from the Planet has been trying to reach me for the past week," he said, trying to keep his temper. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"He's a reporter," she stated.

"He's a friend, a good friend," Henderson said. "Any calls or messages from Kent, Lois Lane or Perry White are to be sent straight to me. I thought you knew that."

"I knew about Lane and White, sir," Jennie explained. "I've never heard of Kent until this week. I'm sorry. He didn't indicate it was urgent."

"He never does," Henderson said with a sigh. He reread the messages in his hand. *Shadow? What had Kent meant by that?* He sat down at his desk and dialed the cell number on the message. *Number out of service, leave a message.*

"Clark, Bill Henderson, I just got your messages. Give me a call back at the office as soon as you get a chance."

Shadow? Dear God, not SHADO. Back two weeks from wherever he'd gone and he's already up to his neck in trouble.

Henderson looked up Perry White's direct line at the Planet and dialed that number.

It was late in the day before Lois came back to the office. The FEMA press conference was as frustrating as usual and she wanted nothing more than to grab Jason, Richard, and Clark, go home and have dinner. Not that she was looking forward to have the 'discussion' about Clark and Jason and visitation and such. Clark was just too sweet and reasonable for his own good.

She looked around the bullpen. The lights were off in Richard's office.

"Steve, when did Richard leave?" Lois asked Steve Lombard. He and Richard were friends, of sorts. They frequently went to ball games together.

"I don't know," Steve said. "I think I saw him with Clark over in the conference room a while ago."

"Was Jason with them?"

"Didn't see him."

"Jimmy," Lois called, catching sight of the younger man. "When did Richard leave?"

"About two hours ago," Jimmy answered. "With Clark."

"Did they take Jason with them?"

"No, Richard asked me to watch Jason, but I'm not sure where he is. But they'd better get back soon. The chief is ready to kill them both."

"Why?" Everyone knew Perry got angry at staffers, sometimes for no apparent reason, but Richard had never done anything to upset his uncle, until now.

"He wanted to talk to them both about that group Clark was researching. I found them together, working on something and when I told them the chief wanted to see them both, Clark told me to say they'd already gone and Richard said they were going hunting. Like I said, Perry would like both their heads on pikes right now."

At that moment, Perry came out of his office, glowering at everyone in the bullpen. His

expression lightened a little when he caught sight of Lois. "Has my nephew and his current partner in crime checked in yet?"

"No sir," Jimmy responded.

"Have you tried calling them?" Perry asked, turning on him.

"I've left messages on both their cell phones to call us immediately. What more can I do?"

"Perry, what's wrong? And where's Jason?" Lois demanded.

Perry's expression shifted to worry. "I got a call from somebody who said they were with the NIA. They told me that if Clark Kent and Richard White did not cease their investigations into SHADO's operations, there would be serious consequences, for them and for the paper. I also got a call from Bill Henderson. He's worried, too."

"You weren't going to tell Clark to stop, were you?" Lois asked.

Perry shook his head. "No, not that it would do any good if I tried. Don't ever let that timid farm boy act fool you, he's as stubborn as you are, in his own way. But I do want the two of them to do it a little more quietly, for their own good."

"Perry, have you seen Jason?"

"I thought he was with you." Perry responded.

"I left him with Richard and Clark, only Richard's off with Clark," she said.

"He's around here somewhere, Lois," Perry assured her. "I don't think either of them is stupid enough to take him along on this little jaunt of theirs. I'll call security to keep an eye out for one small boy with a talent for trouble."

Most of the drive had been spent in a companionable silence. Clark seemed to be deep in thought most of the time, except for an occasional puzzled expression, as if he'd heard something and couldn't quite identify what it was.

"What do you expect to find when we get there?" Richard finally asked.

"I'll know when I see it," Clark responded. The puzzled look came back and this time Richard heard a scuffling sound from behind the driver's seat.

Clark turned and looked into the back. "Pull over," he ordered.

Richard pulled the car onto the shoulder and stopped.

"I'm sorry," a small familiar voice said.

"Jason!" Richard nearly shouted. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I got bored, and I wanted to go with you, and then I fell asleep."

"Get your seat belt on right this minute, young man," Richard ordered. "You are *so* grounded."

Jason climbed onto the backseat and did as he was ordered.

"We'd better call Lois," Clark said, pulling out his cell phone. "That's odd, no service. We passed a cell tower less than a mile back."

"This is not good," Richard said. "I'm thinking we should turn around and try this later."

"It's nearly dark now, and it'll be past eleven before we get back," Clark observed.

"We've come all this way. We may as well spend the night and head back in the morning. We can always blame the cell phone outage for not telling her where Jason is."

"Assuming she lets us live long enough to tell her," Richard said. "You think Superman could give us a lift off planet?"

"As far as the Moon, maybe," Clark responded with a grin. "But there's no air and the scenery gets a little boring after a while."

Lois turned on her computer and checked her Inbox. There was a note from Richard: I'm going with Clark to check out something upstate. I figure somebody needs to watch the boy scout's back. Should be back late tomorrow. Love you, Richard

"Perry, Richard left a note. They were heading upstate," Lois called out.

"Where upstate?" Perry demanded.

"Richard didn't say. Has security found Jason, yet?"

"They just called. One of the clerks downstairs saw him heading for the parking garage just before Clark and Richard checked out of the building."

"Jason knows he's not supposed to go to the parking garage. Perry, I have a very bad feeling about this. We have to find them," Lois said.

"Doesn't your car have GPS?" Perry asked.

Lois nodded, and picked up the phone on her desk. After about ten minutes, she turned back to Perry. "They can't get a read-out from the car. But, there's some sort of hole in their coverage around Manahasset State Park. They have their techs looking into it."

A few minutes later, Jimmy hung up the phone at his desk. "Two men and a small boy drove through the gates at Manahasset about half an hour ago. The camping permit they filled out said Richard White, and the descriptions match Richard, Clark, and Jason. I asked the park ranger to get a message to them to call the office immediately. He said he'd do what he could."

"Manahasset's only about three hundred square miles of near wilderness," Perry told him. "We're not going to hear from them till morning. Go home, Lois. Jason's safe with them and they'll be back tomorrow, I'm sure of it."

He's lying. "Perry, wasn't it Manahasset where those campers were found murdered last year?" Lois asked. "They still haven't found the killers."

"If we haven't heard from them by eight or so, we'll fly out there in the company chopper, okay?" Perry promised. "Now, go home and get some sleep."

They had parked the car in one of the designated overnight zones and hiked further into the forest. Richard was surprised at how well Jason was doing. Not a single complaint. And his allergies weren't acting up either.

Clark led the way, periodically checking both compass and map, but Richard wasn't sure how much he needed the compass. He seemed to know exactly where he was heading.

They reached a clearing near nightfall. "We're about a mile from where that mine should be. But this looks like a good place to set up camp." Clark shrugged his backpack off.

It didn't take long to set up the tents. The ranger at the gate had warned them not to set up a campfire. The underbrush was too dry and the wild fire risk high. Richard cooked a quick supper on the camp stove, instead.

"I haven't been camping since my dad died," Clark commented after the supper dishes were cleaned up. "Of course, there's not a lot of woods in Kansas." He paused, as if listening for something. "I think I'll go for a walk."

"It's dark out there," Richard reminded him.

Clark gave him a crooked grin and adjusted his glasses. "I've got pretty good night vision. I'll be back in a little bit."

"Can I come with you?" Jason asked.

Clark shook his head. "I suspect it's past your bedtime, sport."

Jason stuck his lower lip out in a pout.

"Clark's right, monster," Richard said. "It's bedtime."

"I didn't bring my jammies," Jason complained.

"One of the joys of camping," Richard said with a grin. "You get to sleep in your clothes if you want to. Now, get into that sleeping bag."

"Richard, you can use the other bag, if you want," Clark offered.

"And where are you going to sleep?"

"Don't worry about me. I can sleep almost anywhere." Clark said, and disappeared into the trees.

Fourteen

A few hundred feet from the campsite, Clark let go of gravity and rose to the level of the treetops. From here he could see the stars. He didn't bother to change into the suit. The night was a sufficient disguise along with the dark jeans and dark knit shirt he normally kept in his locker at the Planet and had changed into before they left.

He made a lazy loop and headed toward where the old GSA map had indicated the mine was. A steel gate blocked the gravel road.

He landed lightly, still under cover of the trees. Stepping out onto the road, he looked back at the gate and noticed a sign: 'No trespassing.' No matter, he was already beyond the gate. He knelt down to inspect the road. For an 'abandoned' road, it was clear of weeds and obviously well used. The mine entrance was a short distance away, but he decided not to get any closer. He peered over his glasses and focused on the mine entrance. The entrance looked old enough, boards weathered and cracked, a faded 'no trespassing' sign nailed to the door. But, behind the wood façade was another door, this one modern steel. And beyond that he couldn't see - the steel door was lined with lead, as was the chamber beyond.

He stepped back into the cover of the trees and lifted off again, tracing the extent of the lead-lined chambers beneath the hill. Three fairly large areas that he couldn't see into. The implications were more than a little troubling.

He flew back to the campsite, but instead of landing, found a nearby tree and settled down on a large limb. He watched the stars for a while, noting the heavy clouds that were coming in from the coast. Rain would be good. The last thing the state needed were wild fires on top of everything else. The autumn rains were late this year, and the heat wave New Krypton's creation had caused had just made the summer's dryness even worse.

After a little bit, he let the wind in the leaves lull him to sleep.

Lois took a cab to her empty house. Richard and Clark were in *so* much trouble. What in the name of all that was holy were they thinking when they decided to take Jason with them without letting her know?

The house was too quiet. She turned on the television in the family room and tried to concentrate on watching one of her favorite comedies. It wasn't funny tonight.

She opened and booted up her laptop, intending on working a little more on her novel - the same one she'd been working on ever since she was hired on at the Planet.

She fixed herself a sandwich and considered having one of the beers that had been in the refrigerator for the past week. She decided against it. She wasn't going to fall into that trap, anesthetizing herself against the world like her mother had.

Richard and Jason and Clark would be back from their outing in the morning, no harm done aside from Jason missing a day of school. At least that was what she was telling herself. So why wasn't she convinced? Why did she have this feeling of dread?

She went upstairs to the master bedroom, the room she shared with Richard, and got ready for bed.

Clark woke with a start - something was wrong. Very wrong. He scanned the campsite. Jason and Richard were asleep. The camp stove was cold, as was the electric lantern. No danger there. He looked further out and caught sight of it: a small fire in the underbrush and two men hurrying away from it.

The fire spread through the dry brush, slowly at first, picking up speed fast. Simply

blowing out the fire wasn't an option. The brush was tinder dry, even with super cold, there was a very good chance he'd simply be spreading the fire. The flames started to jump from tree to tree. As he had feared, the fire was heading towards the campsite. He looked up. Yes, the clouds were almost overhead. He launched himself upward, shedding jeans, shirt and glasses in favor of the more distinctive blue and red costume. A gentle nudge of breath brought one of the storm clouds over the fire and a blast of cold set off a torrent of rain. Within minutes, the fire was out.

Superman landed lightly at the campsite. Richard and Jason were awake, watching the rain from the cover of their tent.

"Superman!" Jason crowed.

"Hello, Jason," Superman said. "Are you two okay?"

"We're fine, but Clark Kent's out there somewhere," Richard told him.

"He's fine," Superman assured him. "He should be back shortly."

"What's going on? Why are you here?"

"The fire was not an accident," Superman told him, lifting effortlessly from the ground and disappearing into the night sky.

Moments later Clark appeared, soaked to the skin.

"Superman was here," Richard informed him.

"Yes, I saw him," Clark said. "I just wish he could stop the rain as easily as he can start it."

Lois hadn't slept more than a few hours. At least it didn't feel that way. Her eyes were scratchy and puffy and even though she wanted nothing more than to roll over and go back to sleep, she crawled out of bed. She checked her answering machine - nothing. Her cell phone ditto. Not even a message from Perry. She checked the time. Nearly seven. She was running late and the unsettling feeling of something wrong was still with her. *What the hell had they been thinking?*

Eight o'clock, Perry had promised they'd take the Planet copter and head out after them if Richard and Clark hadn't checked in by eight. She was going to hold him to that.

In anticipation, she chose to 'dress down' for the day. Comfortable jeans, a brown cable-knit sweater, comfortable shoes. She grabbed her camouflage jacket out of the entrance coat closet instead of her usual wool coat and stuffed her normal purse contents into the large jacket pockets.

The next morning was bright and clear. The two men packed up their gear, and headed for the car.

"I checked it out the mine entrance last night. Except for the gate and camouflage netting, I didn't spot any security around the entrance," Clark explained.

"So that was where you went last night," Richard observed.

Clark nodded. "I figure it was best to reconnoiter while it was dark. I'm surprised there's so little obvious security."

"Maybe they prefer something more subtle?"

"Let's not find out," Clark said. "Jason needs to get home and I have a very bad feeling about this whole setup."

"Not to mention what Lois is going to do to us, taking Jason with us and letting him skip school today," Richard said. He opened the car trunk and dropped in the backpacks. "Maybe I

should have asked Superman to take Jason home last night."

"Maybe you should have," Clark agreed. He noted the puzzled look Jason gave him. He gave Jason a little smile of reassurance. *I don't have Disassociated Personality Syndrome. It just looks that way from the outside - from the inside too, sometimes. Why the hell didn't I let Richard take Jason back home when we found him instead of staying the night? How the devil could I miss the fact he'd been hiding in the backseat?*

"I understand you've been looking for us, Mister Kent, Mister White," a man's voice said from behind them. There was just a touch of an Australian accent. Clark and Richard both turned to see several men dressed in military camouflage holding guns on them. One of the men stepped forward. He was older than the others, six-foot tall, graying hair, leathery, pock-marked skin, holding an automatic pistol.

Clark thought he recognized him. *Alec Freeman, Straker's right-hand man. This is bad. This is so bad.*

"Um, and you are?" Clark allowed a stammer back into his voice.

"Coyness doesn't suit you, Mister Kent," Freeman said. "Cooperate, and your friend and little boy here might just live to see tomorrow. If not..."

"Let them go and I promise to cooperate," Clark said, very quietly. There was a tremor of fear in his voice and he realized that the fear was real.

Freeman pressed the pistol into the soft flesh just behind Clark's chin, forcing the taller man's head back. Jason started to move toward Clark, but Richard grabbed the boy's shoulder and pulled him back.

"You are hardly in a position to negotiate anything, Mister Kent," Freeman grated. He peered into Clark's eyes for a long moment. "Fear. Fear is good. Fear let's you know you're alive. Tell me something, Kent. Does Superman know fear the same way a human does?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to ask him," Clark answered.

"I will," Freeman promised. "I most certainly will." He pulled the pistol away and holstered it, allowing Clark to lower his head.

Five men, including Freeman were in front of them and five more were hidden in the brush, surrounding the car. At least one of the men in the brush had a video camera. He could simply use his speed to get Jason and Richard to safety, but that would also mean exposing himself, his dual identity. It would mean putting his family, his friends, his co-workers at risk. Maybe, if he played his cards right, he would get a better chance to get them to safety. *I hope.*

"Perry, have you heard from them?" Lois nearly yelled as she slammed open the door to Perry White's office. The man looked up at her and she saw how worn, how tired he looked.

"I was hoping you had," he said with a sigh, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

"Chief, did you even go home last night?" she asked.

Perry shook his head. "I was hoping they'd call in. Bill Henderson called again. He wanted to know if they'd checked in, too. I went ahead and told him what I knew about what they were working on, our suspicions they'd gone out to the park to look around. Bill is seriously worried that they've gotten in over their heads. I invited him to come with us to look for them."

"When do we leave?"

"As soon as he gets here. I have the chopper standing by."

Richard and Clark found themselves being marched down the road toward the mine

they'd come out to investigate. Their hands had been secured behind their backs with cable ties. Jason trotted beside Clark, trying to keep up as Freeman hurried the group along.

Freeman used a magnetic key to unlock the steel gate that blocked the road. The gate opened without a sound. It was better built and better maintained than its rusty appearance indicated.

He closed the gate behind them, locking it using the magnetic key and signaled to his men to move the prisoners closer to the mine entrance.

"I do have one question for you, Kent," Freeman said, stepping close to the reporter. "How did you get in here last night? That fence is electrified, powerful enough to kill a normal human. There was no sign that the fence was compromised. Yet, you managed to get past it. How?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Clark answered, all wide-eyed innocence.

"Come on, we caught you on camera," Freeman said. "Or don't you want to admit Superman helped you?"

"All I know is that Superman was in the area taking care of a fire," Clark said. "Maybe he was checking things out here." *Where were the cameras? He was pretty good at spotting them and hadn't seen them.*

"And what would bring him here?"

Clark shrugged. "I have no idea. Why don't you ask *him*?"

Freeman raised his hand as if to hit him and Clark prepared to flinch away from the blow. Freeman studied the reporter's face for a long moment then dropped his hand.

"Get them inside," he ordered. One camouflage-uniformed man unlocked the padlocked door to the mine and swung it open while two more men pushed Clark and Richard forward, into the chamber beyond.

Jason ran after Richard, tears running down his tiny face. *Poor kid is scared out of his mind. What the hell was I thinking?*

The men shut the door behind them. Clark could hear the padlock click into place.

He took a moment to look around. They were in a small antechamber with another door on the far end, opposite the now locked entrance. Surprisingly, the chamber was well lit. There was a fluorescent fixture overhead and emergency lights attached to the metal paneled walls. Wooden crates were stacked along the walls.

Clark noted the two surveillance cameras set high into the walls, covering the entire chamber. He suspected there were listening devices as well, but he couldn't see them - the walls and ceiling were lined with lead.

Richard had hunkered down beside Jason to calm the boy as best as he could, considering his hands were still secured behind his back. Clark considered taking out the cameras, but a two shots of heat vision might give him away, making their difficult position even worse.

Clark went over to one of the stacks of crates, placing his bound wrists against one corner. He made a show of the 'effort' it took to break the 'unbreakable' plastic bindings. Once free, he pulled out the pocketknife he kept with him in his 'civilian' clothes, and cut Richard loose.

"Now what?" Richard asked as he hugged Jason. The boy had finally stopped crying and now watched the two men hopefully.

Clark shook his head. He wondered a little that Richard hadn't asked how he'd gotten loose. He also wondered that he wasn't asking about Superman coming to the rescue. *Does he suspect?*

"I honestly don't know," Clark said aloud. "I expect that Lois and Perry will eventually figure out where we went, and if we're missing long enough, they'll send out the cavalry. In the meantime... I wish I really knew what they were after."

"If it's who we think it is, they're after Superman," Richard said. "Good thing he's not anywhere around here."

Jason gave Richard a confused look and Richard tousled his hair, giving him a grin. "It'll be okay, Jason. Clark and I won't let anything happen to you."

Richard gave Clark a more solemn, worried look. "Will we, Clark?"

"Of course we won't," Clark promised. He went over to the entrance door and sat down beside it, listening. Jason came over and sat beside him.

"What do you hear?" Jason asked softly.

Clark shook his head, putting an arm around the boy. He wasn't about to tell them Luthor was near.

"I tell you, that's Superman's kid," Luthor was saying. "Can you imagine the opportunity we have here? He's young. He's malleable. He's controllable. Can you imagine having Superman in your power, at your command?"

'Over my dead body,' Clark promised himself.

The blue and white helicopter with the Daily Planet Logo was waiting for them as they came out of the elevator onto the landing pad on top of the Planet's parking garage.

Lois tried to calm the nervous flutters in her belly. She didn't really like helicopters. Not since the night she boarded the Daily Planet chopper intent on meeting Air Force One and the President of the United States at Metropolis Airport. The chopper had fallen off the roof in the midst of a vicious storm, and she had fallen from the chopper. By the grace of God, Superman had caught her in mid fall.

"I've got you, miss." His smile was so gentle, his eyes so impossibly blue.

"You've got me? Who's got you?"

This time, it was full daylight. The sky was clear and there was almost no wind.

Bill Henderson followed Lois and Perry onto the aircraft. "Manhasset State Park is out of my jurisdiction, but I've notified the state patrol and the FBI of your suspicions and the fact that you have two reporters and a small boy missing in the area. Jerry Hodgekiss is having some of his people meet us there."

"You're really worried," Lois observed as the helicopter lifted off, heading north, out of the city.

"I've just spent a week in conferences on the arms being smuggled into the country, especially the east coast," Henderson explained. "The group Kent investigated before he disappeared was high on the list of suspect parties. We also have reason to believe they may have been involved in those murders at the park last year. I just hope we're over-reacting and they haven't fallen afoul of these jokers."

"How long till we get there?" Perry asked the pilot.

"Ninety minutes or so, flying time," the pilot informed them. "Weather's good all the way there. We shouldn't have any problems."

Freeman looked over at the bald man raving at him. Freeman had dealt with psychopaths before. He hadn't liked it then. He didn't like it now. Luthor was demanding the boy be removed from the locked storage room. Freeman wasn't buying the idea. Superman's child or

not, emphasis on **not**, he wasn't about to put an innocent child into the hands of a psychotic.

Freeman turned his attention to the screens showing the input from the security cameras.

Kent was seated on the floor by the door, holding the boy on his legs. Looking at them on the monitor, there was no doubt that Kent was the boy's biological father, despite Luthor's ravings. White was looking around the chamber, testing the lids on the crates.

There was no tension between the two men, despite Lake's earlier predictions to the contrary. In fact, Freeman noted a physical resemblance between them, both dark haired, blue eyes, above average height, muscular but not overly bulked out. They could easily be mistaken for cousins, if not brothers.

Maybe that was what Lake had missed. The two men were so alike, so much like brothers. And they were both good men. Pity SHADO couldn't use them. But SHADO no longer recruited 'good' men.

Fifteen

Again, Richard inspected the crates that lined the room. One had a loose lid and he managed to pry it off with his bare hands to look inside. The crate was lined with gray metal and filled with shredded newspaper - but embedded in the shredded paper were crystals. Green, glowing crystals. He shut the lid, glancing over at Jason and Clark. Jason had fallen asleep on Clark's lap. And Clark seemed to be listening to something only he could hear.

"How close would Superman have to be before kryptonite affects him?" Richard asked. Clark seemed to shift mental gears as he looked over at the other man.

"I think it would depend on the size of the crystals and the purity," Clark replied. "Why?"

"Kryptonite radiation is line-of-sight though, right?"

"Yes," Clark answered slowly. "And lead blocks it, just like it does x-rays. Richard, what's in that crate?"

"Green, glow-in-the-dark crystals," Richard replied. "I think this is where all that missing kryptonite ended up. And if this is stuff ready to be shipped out, then I think Metropolis is in deep trouble."

"Not to mention, Superman," Clark commented. He sounded glum and rubbed his right temple. On his lap, Jason had started to snore softly, as though he was having a little trouble breathing.

"Headache?"

Clark shrugged. "I don't get them very often, but when I do, they tend towards migraines."

"That's not good. And I bet you don't have anything with you."

"Medications don't seem to do me much good, so why bother?"

"Must be tough, not being able to take anything for it," Richard said.

"I've got a pretty high pain tolerance, thank goodness. And I really don't get them that often."

Except when he's exposed to kryptonite. But the crates are lead-lined. How can it be affecting him through the lead? "How fast does it work on him?" Richard asked. "Kryptonite, I mean."

"How fast does it work on him?" Richard asked. "Kryptonite, I mean."

Clark gave him a speculative look. He seemed to be making an effort to hide the pain he was in. "Like I said, depends on the size and purity of the crystals. He was able to lift Luthor's crystal island out of the ocean, despite the kryptonite in the matrix. But those crystals weren't anywhere near pure. There was a lot of contamination. But, to answer your question, radiation from the pure isotope works pretty fast. But then, he also usually recovers pretty fast when the exposure ends. Normal people aren't always so lucky."

"So people exposed to it for any length of time could be looking at radiation burns, maybe cancer?"

Clark nodded. "Yeah."

"Do you think these people know that?"

"I doubt they care."

"How long now?" Lois asked. It felt like they'd been in the air for hours. The corporate helicopter was comfortable and the sound-proofing was good enough the passengers didn't need to wear headsets. But the feeling of dread wouldn't leave her alone.

"ETA ten minutes to the park," the pilot announced. "I have confirmation that the state

patrol has a SWAT team on its way."

She found Henderson patting her hand in reassurance. "We'll find them. Don't worry."
She just shook her head.

"We have incoming traffic," one of the technicians announced.

Freeman tried to recall the woman's name. Freidman, Gretchen Freidman. She was a relatively new recruit, one of the many SHADO had brought on in the past few years, hired not for their strength of character, but their hatred of Superman and their criminal skills. *How the mighty have fallen.*

They were deep inside the lead-lined bunker - all that remained of the former world network of Sky-diver bases. And SHADO didn't even own this one. They just never turned over the keys to the State of New Troy.

"Identification?" Freeman asked.

"Daily Planet corporate and a bunch of staters," came the response. "Should I call for reinforcements?"

"No," Freeman ordered sharply. "Prepare to abandon the base. Order all personnel to make their way to Metropolis. We'll regroup there."

"And the prisoners, sir?"

"I'll take care of the prisoners," Freeman said. "Tell Luthor we're leaving. If he argues, shoot him."

"You know they're not going to let us go, don't you?" Richard asked, crouching down beside Clark and Jason.

"I know," Clark admitted. "I'm hoping Perry or Lois sent out help, but we have no way of knowing."

"Clark, I want you to do something for me."

Clark looked puzzled. "Sure, what?"

"Swear to me you'll take care of Lois and Jason if anything happens to me. Swear you'll be there for them."

"Richard, we're getting out of this," Clark assured the other man.

"Swear it, Clark."

"What makes you think I'll make it out of here if you don't?"

"You're a survivor. And you've got Jason to protect. Swear it."

"I swear I'll do everything within my power to be there for them."

Richard put his hand on Clark's shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Thanks."

The Daily Planet helicopter landed in a clearing about a mile outside the park, settling down alongside several state patrol cars and a van with 'S.W.A.T.' painted on the side along with the logo of New Troy State.

A short dark man in a state patrol uniform ran over to the helicopter as Henderson, Lois, and Perry climbed out. Perry instructed the pilot to stay with the copter.

"Jerry," Henderson greeted the man. "This is Lois Lane and Perry White. It's her son and fiancé we're looking for, along with Kent." He turned to Lois and Perry. "Jerry Hodgekiss, my counterpart at state level."

Hodgekiss took a moment to look over the two newspaper people. They both looked like they hadn't slept in days and worry was etched on both their faces. He shook both their hands.

"Well, to get you guys up to speed. We found the car well inside the park, not too far from a camping site that looks like it was used last night. The car was, maybe, a mile from an old mine slash bunker that my sources tell me used to belong to this group your two guys were looking into. From what we can tell, it looks like your guys got their gear into the car, and something happened. There were a lot of tracks and we think they were taken to the bunker."

"So at least they were okay earlier this morning," Henderson said.

Hodgekiss shrugged. "No sign of violence we could see. If your guys cooperated, went along quiet, there's a chance they might still be okay."

"How likely is that?" Perry asked.

Hodgekiss shook his head. "There's no telling. Plus, as a complicating factor, we have no radio or cell communication in or out of the park. My tech-guys tell me there's an EM dampening field radiating about twenty-miles out from that bunker. If there's a frequency window in the field, my guys haven't found it yet."

"So, once we go in, we can't call out until whatever's causing the dampening effect is shut down," Perry said. Hodgekiss nodded in confirmation.

"That's probably why Richard didn't call last night or this morning," Lois realized. She glanced at Perry. "Richard would have called if he could. Clark, on the other hand, I'm not sure he knows what a cell phone's for half the time."

Freeman checked the ammunition in his gun. Straker had ordered all operatives to use the kryptonite alloy ammo. Apparently Straker believed Luthor's rants that Superman actually lived in Metropolis, lived among the populous as a normal man. He could be anyone, even one of those reporters locked in the storage area.

Freeman shook his head at that thought. Superman was supposed to be smart. He wouldn't let himself be trapped like a rat in a sealed room, not if he had the ability to escape. Unless... unless he didn't want his companions to know who he was. In that case, how far would he go to protect his secret?

Interesting thought. He would have to bring the idea to the attention of the psychology unit.

He arrived at the inner door to the storage area and pulled out the key to the magnetic lock.

"Someone's coming," Clark warned, looking to the inner door.

Jason nodded. "I can hear him too, Daddy."

Richard noted how pale and wan Jason looked, almost as pale as Clark and Clark looked as though he might pass out at any moment. Richard went to stand beside the inner door. He wasn't sure if he could do anything. But he was going to try. At least he wasn't affected by the kryptonite yet, unlike Clark. There was at least one advantage to being human. "Stay over there," he ordered the other man. "Stay with Jason."

There was a space between the first stack of crates and the wall beside the outer door. Clark pushed Jason into the space, motioning for the boy to hunker down.

The door opened in and a gun appeared in the opening. One quick glance with X-ray vision confirmed Clark's worst fear - kryptonite alloy bullets. Two shots rang out as Clark turned and crouched, placing his own body between Jason and the bullets, one hand on the lead-lined wall. Jason screamed.

Clark gasped. Fire tore through his left hand as he grabbed Jason with his right, pulling the

boy to his chest. He dropped to the ground, Jason beneath him, as another bullet whistled by, grazing the left side of his head. The pain was blinding and he allowed his body to go limp, not breathing, feigning death.

Clark heard rather than saw Richard slam the door on the gun. Then the door flew open. He heard Richard's body hit a stack of crates and several more shots echoed in the small room.

"Sir, we have to leave now, sir!" a female voice yelled. Clark heard footsteps. They were leaving. He focused on hearing Richard's heartbeat. It was hard through the pain in his head, the fire in his hand. Richard's heartbeat was growing fainter, more irregular. Clark forced himself to his feet, forced himself to take the several steps over where Richard lay crumpled on the ground. Jason was still huddled by the wall.

Clark checked Richard's body without touching the other man. The damage was terrible, un-survivable. Blood was pooling under his body. Clark was starting to feel more pain in his head, his joints, and warm liquid trickled down the side of his face onto his shirt. The gunfire had pierced the lead in at least one crate, allowing kryptonite radiation to leak out. He knelt beside the dying man. The pain was less, closer to the floor.

"Richard?"

The other man opened his eyes, trying to find the voice. He found Clark's face in his field of vision. "Tell Lois... tell her I love her... tell her I understand."

Richard's heart faltered and stopped. Clark reached over with his good hand and closed his friend's eyes.

Jason crept up to him, eyes wide. "I can't hear Daddy's heart."

"I know. I can't either."

"He's not waking up, is he?" A statement, not a question.

What horrors has this little boy already seen in his short life? "No, he's not waking up."

"Why couldn't you stop the bad man from hurting him?"

"Your Daddy wanted me to protect you instead. He loved... loves you very much. Always remember that."

The police team with the two journalists drove up to the locked gate in the van and several cars. Two of the Kevlar jacketed officers got out and walked up to the gate, prying open the gate with a crowbar held in heavily gloved hands. Lois recalled his name was Byrne.

"We were told by one of the park wardens that this fence was electrified," Hodgekiss told them. "Looks like they were right."

Byrne pushed open the gate, and the rest of the uniformed team filed through the opening. Hodgekiss allowed Henderson, Perry and Lois to follow his team at a discrete distance. If it hadn't been that Bill Henderson was with them, Hodgekiss would have ordered the two journalists back to Metropolis to wait.

He signaled his team to search and secure the area. After a several minutes, one of the officers returned to make a report. The area appeared clear, but there was evidence of recent activity and they could not confirm that the bunker had been abandoned.

"Get that door open," Hodgekiss ordered. Byrne applied the crowbar to the door, but the door was set too tightly into its frame. It didn't budge.

"We need to cut the lock mechanism," Byrne said.

Clark heard the voices outside the door, heard the officer fail to budge the door. He also heard other voices, warning to get out, warning others of explosives planted to destroy the

bunker. Then there were sounds of explosions somewhere in the distance, growing closer.

Clark went to the entrance door. He couldn't see the lock mechanism through the lead sheathing, but he could see the bolts through the tiny gap between the door and the frame. *Why didn't I get us out? Why? Richard would be alive. Jason's daddy would be alive.*

It was hard to concentrate, hard to focus his heat vision on the bolts. Finally, he managed a shot of laser-like heat, shearing the locking bolts. He pulled the door open. The explosions were getting even closer and he was starting to feel worse. *The explosions are putting kryptonite into the air.*

Clark grabbed Richard's body and headed for the now open door, Jason close by his side.

Hodgekiss and Henderson both looked over in surprise as the door opened in, apparently of its own accord. Both men pulled out their guns, aiming at whoever was coming out. Suddenly, Henderson reached out a hand, forcing Hodgekiss to lower his gun.

"Oh my God," Perry White said, catching sight of the tall man coming through the door.

"That's Kent," Henderson said, putting away his own gun. The explosions were louder and closer now. "Damn, it sounds like they're collapsing the whole complex."

Lois gasped as she turned and caught sight of Clark. He was covered in blood, carrying Richard's limp body in his arms. She hadn't realized Clark was so strong, or maybe she had and forgotten. She could see where the bullets had torn through her fiancé's body. "Richard?"

Clark shook his head. His face was ashen, eyes haunted. Jason was with him, holding onto his pant leg.

This was impossible. Richard can't be dead. He can't be dead. Lois stepped closer. Clark stumbled and Lois reached out to steady him, then she helped ease Richard's body to the ground. Clark dropped to his knees as Lois knelt beside the body, tears running down her face as she repeated to herself: *This can't be.* Jason hugged his mother and she raised her head as if just realizing he was there. She ran her hands over his small body, reassuring herself he was real and whole. She hugged him close.

The police medic ran over to them, carrying a medical kit. She quickly checked Jason over, and then turned to Clark, checking his pulse at his throat. "Sir, are you okay?" she asked after a minute or so.

Clark shook his head and showed her his left hand. Blood was still seeping from the wound.

"Were you hit anywhere else?"

Clark shook his head again without saying anything. He was feeling even worse, if that was possible. Even his bones hurt. *This is worse than that damned island. I'm not making it out of here.*

The medic bandaged his hand. "I'm going to have you medi-vacked out of here. So just take it easy, okay, sir?" The medic looked closer at the blood on the side of Clark's head, brushing aside his hair. That wound was still seeping as well. She pressed a gauze pad against the gash in his scalp, and then took Clark's left hand, positioning it to hold the compress.

"Here, keep pressure on it, okay?"

Clark didn't respond beyond a slight shiver. *He's in shock,* Lois thought.

"Clark, what happened?" Lois asked, trying to keep her voice from shaking. "Who did this?"

Clark opened his mouth to speak, and then paused as if he wasn't sure what she meant. "He took the bullets that were meant for me and Jason," he said finally.

"And where was Superman?" she wondered.

"If Superman had been here, that would be his body instead of Richard's. The room had kryptonite in it. They were using kryptonite bullets."

She studied his face. "Did Richard know?"

"Yes, I think so," Clark said. "If it's any consolation at all," he added softly, "his last words, his last thoughts, were how much he loved you. He wanted you to know that. He made me made me swear to always be here for you, to take care of you and Jason."

He lifted his right hand as if to reach for her then dropped it, as if he hadn't the strength.

Lois wanted scream, to rage at God, at Clark, at Superman, at the Universe, for allowing her life to be torn apart. Instead, she sat back on her heels. She watched Hodgekiss's men carrying several wooden crates out of the closest section of the mine. The explosions had stopped for the moment, but the men were hurrying to collect the cases, collect the evidence they needed of the crimes committed here today.

Henderson stepped over to Lois, crouching down next to Clark. "You're damned lucky, Kent, I don't haul you off to jail for interfering in a police investigation."

Clark simply lifted both hands out, wrists together, as if expecting Henderson to pull out handcuffs. His eyes didn't seem to focus. Henderson gently placed a hand on Clark's outstretched hands, forcing them down. "Clark, did you see who shot White?"

"No," Clark answered simply.

"You're positive you didn't see who fired the shots?"

"Yes," Clark said. There was still a tremor in his voice. "I'm sure. The room was lead-lined, you know."

"When we get back to Metropolis, you'll need to make a formal statement," Henderson said, standing up. He turned to Lois. "We'll need one from the boy, too, Lois."

"Of course," Lois responded as Henderson walked back to the police team.

"These things must be filled with lead," one of the men complained as he pried off the lid and opened the crate to inspect the contents. The crate tipped over, spilling mounds of shredded paper onto the crushed gravel.

She heard Clark's breath catch in his throat and turned to see him fall over, head hitting the ground with an audible thud.

"Clark?" She knelt beside him and checked his pulse. Nothing. He wasn't breathing. She put her ear to his chest. No heartbeat. There was the faintest tinge of green in his skin. *Almost like...* she put the thought out of her mind as she screamed for the medic and started CPR. Behind her, Jason was wheezing. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him pull out his inhaler, take a hit off it.

The medic ran back over to them, straightened Clark's body so he was lying flat and began chest compressions while Lois breathed for him. "Bring me the defibrillator and the med kit," she yelled. "Where's the medivac?"

"There isn't one. We still can't get through," Henderson said. There was an odd tightness in his voice. He turned to the other men. "Get this stuff back into that crate, now! All of it!"

The medic set up her equipment, pushing Clark's knit shirt out of the way. His heart was flat-lined. Epinephrine into the heart. Nothing. "Clear!" she shouted. Standard voltage, still nothing. All the while, Lois was holding the oxygen mask to his face, squeezing the bag to force air into his lungs. After ten minutes, the medic sat back on her heels. "I'm so sorry. He's gone."

Lois sat back. *This isn't happening.*

"Pity," the medic continued. "He looks like he was a nice guy, young, too. Thirty?"

"Thirty-four," Lois said numbly. *This isn't happening.* "He's thirty-four."

Henderson turned to the other officers on Hodgekiss's team. They had stopped to observe the drama. "Stop standing there like idiots and seal up that crate." He looked over to where Perry was trying to console Lois. "Leave them alone."

Lois wasn't going to be consoled. She pulled away from Perry and dropped to her knees beside Clark's body. "No!" she wailed. "I won't lose both of you. Clark Joseph Kent, you promised! You promised Richard you'd be here!" She pounded on his unmoving chest then laid her head over his heart, still sobbing: "You promised."

"Lois, honey, it's no good," Perry said. He tried to lift her away from the body. She pushed him away. *You promised you'd be around.* Suddenly, she felt a slight movement against her cheek. She held her breath. No, she hadn't imagined it. His chest had moved and she could hear a weak heartbeat. "Breathe, dammit!" she ordered, sitting back.

"Lois..." Perry started, and then he saw it too. Clark had taken a shallow breath. Perry grabbed the oxygen mask and started forcing oxygen into Clark's lungs. After several ragged breaths, Clark tried to brush the mask away.

"Relax, son, just breathe," Perry ordered.

"It's impossible," the medic muttered. She grabbed Clark's hand. "Mister Kent, if you can hear me squeeze my hand," she said loudly. Slowly his forehead creased in concentration and he squeezed her hand.

"Damn, he's strong," she said, pulling her hand back before he broke it. "I wouldn't want to be around if he got mad."

"It wouldn't happen," Lois said softly. "Clark is the gentlest soul..."

"But, I swear he was dead, ma'am."

Kryptonite!

"Bill," Lois called. "You have to leave the crates sealed. There's kryptonite inside."

She saw Henderson glance at Clark, still struggling to breathe. "I know. But kryptonite only affects..."

"Kryptonians, yes, I know." Her mind was racing. "But Superman told me a long time ago, that Kryptonians had visited Earth more than once, centuries, millennia ago, and they may have left offspring. If that's true, then their descendants could be sensitive to kryptonite, too."

"And Clark Kent just happens to be one of them?"

"They could be anybody."

Henderson gave her a crooked smile. "That makes more sense than... well, you know. If you're right, there could be thousands, millions, of people who could be poisoned by this stuff. And we wouldn't know until it was too late." He turned back to his crew. "Okay boys, you heard the lady, this stuff is deadly to humans. Nobody opens those crates without full protective gear."

Perry looked at Lois quizzically then he gave her a wry smile. "That was some of the most creative dissembling I've heard since..." he glanced down at Clark, "since he tried to convince us he'd spent six years in China and got back without being arrested by Homeland Security."

Sixteen

"You mean to tell me you left the kid in there?" Lex Luthor railed at Freeman as they stood at the mouth of a cave facing the ocean with the other members of SHADO's team, waiting for the boat that had been summoned to pick them up. "I told you, I wanted that brat. I wanted Superman's bastard."

Freeman stared at the bald man for a long moment. "Luthor, I am many things, but one thing I am not: I am not a panderer. I will not provide little boys to you so you can satisfy your perversions."

Luthor's eyes narrowed dangerously. "You just don't get it, do you, you cretin. That brat threw a grand piano across a room and killed one of my people."

"Good for him," Freeman gave him a grim smile. "Obviously Superman wasn't too concerned about his alleged bastard, because the big blue boy scout didn't show up to look for him."

"You're sure about that?" Luthor demanded.

"Absolutely," Freeman confirmed.

Luthor started to walk away from Freeman, out of the protection of the cave mouth.

"Luthor!" Freeman yelled after him.

"That brat is mine," Luthor announced. "And if you're too stupid to see the possibilities... I don't need you."

Freeman snorted. "If I wasn't under orders to keep you alive and cooperative..." he muttered, mostly to himself. He promised himself he would personally kill Lex Luthor when his usefulness to SHADO was over. Piano wire, maybe. That would be good.

Freeman pointed to four of the armed men waiting in the cave with him. "You men, come with me," he ordered as he followed Luthor up the rocky path towards the main entrance of SHADO's former bunker.

Clark struggled to sit up, finally pushing Perry's hand and the oxygen mask away from his face. He felt Perry's arm behind his shoulders, helping him up. Jason was on his other side, trying his best to help.

"Better?" Perry asked. There was an uncharacteristic gentleness in the older man's voice.

"No, maybe, I don't know," Clark admitted. "I'm cold and my head hurts really bad."

"Would aspirin help?" Lois asked. She picked his glasses off the ground where they'd fallen when he keeled over and handed them to him.

"I don't know," he answered, placing his glasses back on his face, seemingly oblivious to the dust that coated the lenses. Lois pulled a small tin out of one of the pockets in her jacket, shook out two white tablets and placed them in his hand.

He grimaced as he swallowed them. "They don't taste very good, do they?"

"Acetaminophen tastes worse, believe me," Lois said. "It takes a little bit to work." She turned his head and brushed aside his hair to look at the wound on his scalp. "It's bleeding again."

"Sorry," Clark murmured. He pulled away from her touch, head coming up, eyes focusing elsewhere. The look was so familiar.

"What is it?" Perry demanded.

"Luthor was here, with them," Clark said. "He wants Jason, and I think he's on his way back here." He grabbed Lois's hand, looked her in the eyes. "Lois, take Jason and get out of here. Run as far as you can and don't come back here, for anything."

"Clark, I'm not leaving you and Perry," Lois protested. He was scaring her.

"Lois, don't argue, just do it, now!" He was very close to shouting.

She looked at Perry, who nodded his head. Without another word, Lois grabbed her son and ran into the nearest brush.

As she ran she considered her options. Clark was scared, almost stupid scared, if that was possible for him. Logically, she and Jason should have stayed with Henderson and Hodgekiss's men, but obviously Clark didn't trust them. Henderson she trusted implicitly, but neither she nor Clark knew anything about the others. And when it came to Jason's safety, it was better safe than sorry.

First things first. She was unarmed except for the commando knife she kept in this jacket. That was something, at least. She was in better shape than when she and Jason went aboard the Vanderworth yacht. Her gown had kept her from running, from properly defending herself, and it wasn't exactly politically correct to be caught carrying an eight-inch knife in her dress purse.

She needed a gun. The guns were back at the clearing. She stopped running, looking around to orient herself. The van and the cars were on her left. She motioned Jason to stay quiet and to follow her as she carefully led the way towards the road.

She spotted the SWAT van parked behind the Audi. *Richard's car. Oh God, Richard's dead.* "Stay here," Lois ordered her son. "Stay in the bushes. Stay down."

Lois hoped the officers hadn't locked the van, or if they had, they didn't have an alarm set. She carefully tried the back door of the van. It was locked, but she made quick work of the lock. There was no alarm. The inside of the van was dark and she took a moment to let her eyes adjust.

She spotted what she wanted, a semi-automatic rifle. The ammunition was in a lockbox bolted to the floor. She silently gave a prayer of thanksgiving for her first boyfriend, as well as Jimmy Olsen, for teaching her how to pick locks. Who would have thought that baby-faced kid had such interesting talents.

Filling her pockets with ammunition, she took the rifle and carefully closed the van doors behind her. Lois made her way back to Jason.

"We're going back to help," she told her son.

"But Unca' Clark told us to run away," Jason reminded her.

"I know he did, but Uncle Clark is hurt and needs our help," Lois explained. "Now, I need you to do something. When I tell you 'down', I want you flat on the ground, head down. Don't look around, just play dead. Got it, munchkin?"

"Play dead like a possum?" Jason asked.

"Just like a possum."

Clark managed to get to his feet as Henderson walked over to him and Perry.

"Why did Lois run off like that?"

"Luthor," Clark said. "I overheard him saying he wanted Jason. I think he blames the boy for something that happened on the Vanderworth yacht."

"Luthor's here?" Henderson's voice went up nearly an octave. "And you didn't think that was important enough to mention?"

Clark just looked at him, giving a fairly good impression of an owl.

Henderson sighed. "Never mind."

The police officer turned to Perry. "Mister White, do you think you can keep him from

taking off?"

Perry chuckled. "I'll do what I can," the newspaper man promised. Henderson shook his head and went back to helping the other men with the crates.

Clark took a long moment to scan the trees. Despite the pain and weakness, his visual acuity was still there. Although he couldn't use the x-ray vision or telescopic vision, his regular eyesight was still better than Earth normal thanks to subtle differences in physiology.

"What are you looking for?" Perry asked.

"The cell and radio frequencies are being jammed. There has to be a transmitter and some sort of antenna. Henderson can't call in for backup or anything unless that transmitter is shut down," Clark explained. "If I can find the antenna, we can find the transmitter."

"And what would this transmitter look like?" Perry asked.

"Well, I know a cell transmitter antenna runs about twenty-inches tall, half of that wide and almost nothing thick. I assume the jammer would look the same, but I could be wrong. It could just look like a heavy wire," Clark said. "And since it seems to have a hemispherical pattern, there's most likely more than one, set in a circle."

"My eyes aren't as good as they used to be," Perry admitted.

A moment later, Clark nodded towards one of the trees just outside the fence. "I think it's up there."

"Pity Superman's not around."

Clark gave the older man an odd look. "Well, with all the kryptonite around here, I doubt we'll be seeing him any time soon."

Perry just watched him for a long moment. Long enough for Clark to get nervous.

"Uh, maybe we can do something about that, um, jammer? The cops seem a little busy right now, with all that stuff," Clark stammered.

Perry motioned for the younger man to lead. Clark headed toward the open gate, Perry following at his heels. Within moments, Clark found the tree he was sure the antennae were located.

Clark circled the tree trunk, looking. He felt the bark, long fingers playing on the rough surface, feeling the roots of the ivy that was climbing the tree trunk. "Found it," he murmured as he pulled out his pocketknife and opened it. He used the knife to separate one of the roots from the bark then pulled back on it. Perry watched as the 'root' peeled itself from the bark, separating itself all the way into one of the upper branches.

He took the loosened wire, looped it around his uninjured hand and jerked hard, straight down. Wire fell out of the tree, falling to the leaf covered ground. He put his pocketknife back in his pocket and pulled out his cell phone.

"That did it. Three bars," Clark told Perry, showing the older man his phone before shoving it back into his pocket.

Perry stepped closer to the fence. "Henderson, we have cell coverage!"

Henderson checked his own phone, obviously surprised by the news. He started keying in numbers, making calls.

"Um, we should probably get back with Henderson," Clark muttered. He wasn't psychic, but he definitely sensed someone near, someone following them. His super hearing was gone, but he could still hear well enough - a crackling twig, a scratch of fabric against brush.

He pushed Perry in front of him, wordlessly urging the older man to hurry. He heard the pop of a hand gun being fired somewhere behind him. Clark yanked Perry to the ground as more shots were fired in quick succession. Clark took a quick look over his shoulder at the

shooter - an angry bald man holding an automatic pistol. *Luthor*.

The surge of adrenalin left as quickly as it had come and Clark found himself dizzy and short of breath. His chest hurt and it was getting harder and harder to breathe. Trying to move away from the madman who was taking aim at him, Clark tripped and went down. He knew Luthor was approaching, planning to finish the job, but Clark found he was too tired to care. He closed his eyes and the world went away.

Lois heard the shots off to her left. "Down," she ordered. Jason obeyed, going flat on his stomach. Lois quickly piled leaves on top of him, camouflaging him further. "Don't move."

She headed toward the gunshots, keeping low, staying with the trees. She peered around a trunk and spotted Perry and Clark, both on the ground. She couldn't tell if they were alive or dead.

Luthor was walking up to them, pistol in hand. She could see him talking but couldn't make out the words. He lifted his pistol, taking aim at Perry. Lois raised the rifle she'd taken from the S.W.A.T. van, aimed and fired twice, just as her father had taught her so many years before. *A gun is for killing. Shoot to kill.* The first shot caught Luthor in the neck, the second in the chest. The bald man went down.

Freeman heard the first shots just ahead of him and his team. They already had their guns drawn but Freeman motioned for them to stop, to wait as he moved closer, crouching in the brush.

He watched the madman walk up to the two men on the ground. From where he was he could see the leaves beneath Kent's body being stained red.

"Where's the brat?" Luthor was saying. The automatic was still in his hand and he raised it, pointing at Perry White. "Tell me where the little bastard is now!" He stepped closer, pulling back one foot as if to kick the prone man.

Two shots rang out in quick succession. Luthor was on the ground, blood spurting from his neck wounds. Freeman spotted the shooter ahead and to the right of him - the woman, Lane, the child's mother. Her expression was cold, calm, implacable. Freeman's face creased into a mirthless smile. *Luthor was a fool to discount the child's mother. There is nothing more dangerous than a female protecting her young. She would have made a good operative, once upon a time.*

Freeman had a perfect shot at her if he decided to take it. Instead, he moved cautiously backwards, turned, and returned to his men as policemen came running out of the compound, toward the injured and dead.

He silently motioned his men to stay silent as he led the way back to the cave and rescue. Straker would not be pleased that they'd lost Luthor, but Freeman wasn't going to worry about that. One less madman in the world was a good thing.

Henderson, Hodgekiss, Byrne, and the medic, Mylonis, were first on the scene. The three men had guns drawn as they approached the area. Mylonis knelt beside Clark, checking for a pulse at his throat. "I don't believe it. He's still alive," she muttered. Byrne went over to check Luthor's body.

"Is the bastard dead?" Lois's voice asked from the cover of the trees. She stepped out, rifle slung over her shoulder, hands in full sight.

Byrne nodded. "He's dead."

"Good," Lois stated. She turned and in a softer, gentler, voice said: "Jason, it's okay, you can get up now."

Jason ran up to his mother, brushing leaves from his hair. He stared at the scene in front of him. Perry had rolled over and was sitting up. There was a bloody streak across the upper part of his right arm.

The remainder of Hodgekiss's men had come out and they were searching through the brush for more attackers. There was no reason to believe Luthor was alone.

Henderson grabbed gauze from the medic's kit and bandaged the crease in Perry's arm. Mylonis checked Clark over, carefully straightening his prone body.

"I need the long backboard and the airway kit," she told the other officers after they'd helped her roll him onto his side. "And we really need an evac-chopper."

Henderson checked his watch. "Five minutes?" At Mylonis's questioning look, he explained: "My first call after White told me we weren't being jammed was for backup and evacuation of civilians and injured. It's being dispatched out of Pennington."

The medic nodded and continued her work, carefully cutting the knit shirt away from Clark's body so she could evaluate his injuries. Lois noted there was no tan line around his neck or wrists where it would be expected. No paler skin under his watch. His skin was smooth and unblemished except for the wounds he'd suffered, muscles firm and well defined.

"Is there anything I can do?" Lois asked. She handed the rifle to Henderson, who unloaded it and set it aside.

"Hold his head steady, don't let him move," the medic instructed. "I count four entrance wounds, three posterior thorax, one posterior abdomen. One exit wound, anterior abdomen. Two of the entrance wounds are close to the spine. Not as much bleeding as I expected. Odd scar on his back, old stab wound?"

"Yeah," Lois said. "He's not always careful as he could be."

Mylonis snorted. "Thinks he's Superman, right?"

Lois gave her a crooked smile. "Yeah, that's about right."

Byrne arrived with the equipment. Mylonis positioned the backboard on the ground beside Clark. "Okay, just like before, keep his back and head straight, on a count of three. One, two, three." They rolled him onto the orange backboard. She secured the straps and wrapped a blanket around him.

Lois noticed he'd opened his eyes, finally. He'd lost his glasses again and the side of his face was bruised where he'd fallen. He was trying to look around, get his bearings. His confusion turned to panic when he discovered he was strapped to the board and couldn't move his arms or legs.

Lois came around to look into his face, laying her hands on his shoulders. He calmed a little at her touch. "Clark, it's okay. It's gonna' be okay. You're badly hurt, and you mustn't move. Do you understand? Tell me if you understand."

"Hurt, how?" he managed to say.

Lois chewed her bottom lip. "Luthor shot you. And I shot him. He's dead. He can't hurt you, or Jason, or Superman any more. But we have to get you to a hospital. We have to get you help."

"No hospital," he murmured, voice weakening.

"Clark, we have no choice. You'll die," she told him firmly.

"No hospital," he whispered, closing his eyes. "Cold, very cold..."

"Clark Kent, there is no way I'm going to let you die just because you want to be

stubborn," Lois announced.

"Lois, are you and Jason okay?" a deep voice asked.

Lois looked up to see a man in military camouflage gear and general's stars approaching from the road. "Dad? What are you doing here?"

"Leading the cavalry," he told her. "A little late, looks like." He motioned for two of his men to help the police medic.

"Let's get him packaged up and ready to transport," one of the army men said.

"Dad, I'm going with him," Lois announced when Sam Lane grabbed her arm to keep her out of the van the army medics had already loaded Clark into.

"Lois, think about this. Your fiancé was killed less than an hour ago and now you're chasing after a man who may well not live?" Lane stated.

"You're talking about my partner," Lois pointed out. "You're also talking about the father of my child. I know you hate that fact, but live with it, or by God, I will never speak to you again, and you will never see your grandson again. I am getting into that van. I am going on that helicopter. I am going to stay with him." She looked down meaningfully at the hand he still had on her arm.

He dropped it as if burned. She grabbed Jason and climbed into the van, beside her unconscious partner. Mylonis was seated on the other side of the van and Perry was sitting in front, beside the driver.

"Is Unca' Clark gonna' be okay?" Jason asked as Lois hugged him close.

"I don't know, munchkin," Lois admitted. "I hope so."

Henderson came to the back door and climbed in to sit next to Lois. "I'm out of my jurisdiction, and I've been told to go home," he said with a grim smile. Then he sighed. "This has been one hell of a day."

The doors to the van were closed from the outside and the driver pulled out, heading for the park entrance and the waiting medi-vac helicopter.

"I am sorry about Richard, you know," he said after a long moment. "Hodgekiss will make sure his body gets back to Metropolis."

"I'm sure my father will see to it, too, if only to throw it in my face sometime down the line. That I abandoned my dead fiancé to look after my live former working partner. That I'm not prostrate with shock. That I'm not the grief stricken widow he thinks I ought to be, being as I'm just a woman."

"That will come later," Henderson told her. "In the meantime, we have the living to worry about. By the way, that was damned good shooting, though I am a little surprised Luthor put himself out in the open like that."

"Maybe he finally, completely, lost it?" Lois wondered aloud. "He's been working with kryptonite. Maybe the radiation did something? Something to look into, later."

"Speaking of Luthor, I found this on his body." Henderson pulled a long crystal from the inside of his jacket and handed it to her. "I assume this is one of the crystals Luthor stole from Superman?"

Lois stared at it, then reached out and took it, feeling the oily smoothness against her fingertips. She gasped as the gates to her memories opened up full. Niagara Falls, the hotel, flying north in Superman's arms, the night in the crystal palace when they made love. It all came back like a door opening onto a sunlit garden. Like a picture that had just been revealed after having been in shadows with just glimpses allowed.

"Lois, are you okay?" Henderson asked, worry written across his chiseled face.

"I'm fine," she told him, tucking the crystal into one of her jacket pockets. "And yes, it is one of the stolen crystals. I'll make sure Superman gets it back. I know he's been worried about them. I wonder how Luthor kept it hidden while he was in that Cuban prison?"

"One thing about Luthor was he was resourceful," Henderson responded.

The van slowed and stopped. The back doors were flung open and two men ushered them out of the van. They grabbed the backboard with its unconscious occupant and placed it on the narrow bed inside the waiting air ambulance. There was another helicopter a short distance away and one of the men indicated that she, Jason, and Henderson should join Perry riding in that one.

"Perry, take Jason with you. I'm riding with Clark," she announced, handing her son to the editor.

"Ma'am, we don't take passengers on this one," the army medic told her.

"I'm staying with my partner," she told him. She glared at him and he finally dropped his eyes.

"Stay out of the way then, ma'am," he told her, helping her into the back of the helicopter and to the padded bench near the bed. The medic closed the side door and then helped her strap in. Mylonis settled in beside her. The army medic didn't bother talking to either woman, instead busying himself with getting the patient ready - oxygen, an IV with some clear fluid, oxygen sensor clipped to one finger, cardiac monitor.

"How's he doing?" Lois asked. He's vulnerable. He wasn't vulnerable last time.

"Better than I would have expected, considering," the police medic told her, checking the read-outs on the various monitors. "By the way, I'm Terentia Mylonis. My friends call me Terry."

"Lois Lane, Daily Planet."

"The Lois Lane? The one who wrote all that stuff about Superman?"

"That's me," Lois admitted. She was afraid to ask if the medic was for or against her Pulitzer-winning editorial. There didn't seem to be any middle ground except... *Superman agrees the world doesn't need him. It would be funny, if I wasn't faced with losing him again. Maybe the world doesn't need him, but I lied when I said I didn't. He looks so helpless lying there. What if he doesn't make it?*

Her thoughts were interrupted by the co-pilot calling back: "We should be setting down at Metropolis General in an hour fifteen minutes or so."

"Wait," Lois called back. *STAR Labs, Clark had said something about STAR Labs.* "He needs to go to STAR Labs, not Met General."

"STAR Labs is not an accredited medical facility," the co-pilot replied.

"But Met General doesn't have the facilities to treat someone with acute kryptonite poisoning. STAR Labs does," Lois explained.

Mylonis had given Clark's cell phone, wallet, keys, and an honest-to-goodness boy scout pocket knife to Lois for safekeeping after Clark was 'packaged' for transport. Lois pulled his cell phone out of her pocket and checked the numbers in his personal directory. *Please have a direct number for STAR Labs.*

She found a number that looked familiar: Dr Kitty. *Kitty Faulkner?* She high-lighted the number and hit dial. The other end picked up within a few rings. Luckily, the medivac copter was a newer one and well sound insulated.

"Clark?" a woman's voice asked.

"No, it's Lois Lane. I'm using Clark's phone," Lois explained. "Is this Doctor Faulkner?"

"Yes," the woman replied. She sounded wary.

"Look, Clark's been shot and they were using kryptonite bullets. He told me you had the facilities to handle something like this," Lois said in a rush, hoping Faulkner wouldn't think her call was a prank or worse.

"What's his condition?" Kitty asked.

Lois turned to Mylonis. "What's his condition?"

The medic took the phone. "He's barely stable. Four nine-mil gunshot wounds, three chest, one abdomen... We're about an hour away." She handed the phone back to Lois.

"Yes?"

"Ms. Lane? We'll have everything ready by the time you get here," Kitty promised. "Take care of him." *Faulkner knows. Was I the only one in Metropolis who didn't?*

"Thanks, I will," Lois promised, closing Clark's phone. "STAR Labs is waiting for us," she called to the pilot and co-pilot.

The co-pilot gave Mylonis a questioning look. She nodded. "STAR Labs."

The pilot picked up the microphone to notify Metropolis air traffic control of the change in plans.

Kitty Faulkner sat at her desk a long moment. When she showed Kal-El the medical lab, she certainly hadn't expected it to be needed so soon. This was so not good. They'd barely gotten their personnel arrangements in place and weren't altogether sure how it was going to work out.

Kitty looked up a number in her Rolodex and dialed it.

"Metropolis General Trauma Center."

"Doctor Andrew Bryant, please. It's Doctor Faulkner of STAR Labs."

A long pause, several clicks, then: "Bryant."

"Andy, Kitty Faulkner. We have a Green Fire emergency incoming."

"How soon?"

"He's being flown in by helicopter, ETA fifty minutes."

"Condition?"

"Barely stable. Multiple gunshot wounds, kryptonite ammo, nine-mil."

"I'll get a team ready, be over there in half-an-hour or so," Bryant said. "We couldn't be lucky enough for him to have some blood banked with you, could we?"

"No such luck," Kitty told him. "But I'll get onto the blood bank, have them send us a supply of his blood type."

"Do you think it'll work?"

"Do we have a choice?" Kitty responded. "See you in thirty minutes."

Bryant turned to the receptionist. "Get on to the rest of my team," he ordered. "We have to be at STAR Labs in thirty minutes."

"STAR Labs? What's going on there?" the woman asked.

"A high priority patient is being air-lifted in. Multiple gunshot wounds."

"How high a priority?"

Bryant chuckled. "Let's just say if it was between him and the president as to which one I was taking, the president would get Rodriguez."

Seventeen

The army medic did his check of Clark's vital signs. Lois saw Clark's eyes open as he tried to get his bearings. His forehead was creased in pain. She undid her safety harness and went to his side.

"Clark, it's me, Lois. Everything's going to be okay," she told him. He seemed to focus on her voice. "We're in route to STAR Labs. I've talked to Doctor Faulkner and she's handling everything."

She laid her fingers against the side of his face and realized how chilled he felt. "He's awfully cold," she told the medic.

"It's the shock," he told her. "We're doing everything we can and pain doesn't help any. At least he's holding his own," He moved closer to his patient, crouching a little to be at a less intimidating level. "Mister Kent, I'm going to give you something for the pain, so just relax and we'll be getting you fixed up here pretty soon."

Lois watched the medic add the painkiller to the IV solution. After a few moments, Clark's breathing became more even and his eyelids fluttered closed again.

Clark's phone chimed and Lois opened it. **Mom.** *Clark's mom? The silver-haired lady Clark used to send half his paychecks to?*

"Hello?"

A woman's voice responded. "Oh, is Clark there?"

"Mrs. Kent?"

"Yes? Who is this?" She had a pleasant voice, but needless-to-say, she sounded worried.

"Lois Lane. I'm Clark's partner at the Planet. How soon can you get to Metropolis?" Lois had to force her voice to keep from shaking. This was a call she had never wanted to be on either end of. *How do you tell a mother her child is dying? Doctors and police made those kinds of calls, not reporters. How do you tell something like this to Superman's mother? He's supposed to be invulnerable for God's sake.*

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Clark's been shot. We're flying him to STAR Labs right now. He's in pretty bad shape."

Lois heard a thumping sound in the speaker - the phone on the other end being dropped. "Mrs. Kent...? Mrs. Kent?" After a few moments, the other end was picked up again.

"I'm sorry," Martha Kent said, her voice shaking "You said Clark was shot? How?"

"Lex Luthor. He was using kryptonite bullets. Clark was trying to protect Perry White, our editor and Luthor shot him. How soon can you get here?"

"We'll try to get the first flight out tomorrow," Martha said. There was a muffled conversation in the background as though she'd put her hand over the microphone, then: "Miss Lane, take care of my boy, you hear? You don't know how special he is."

"I'll do my best," Lois promised and rang off. *And I do know how special he is, Mrs. Kent.*

"Does it ever get easy?" Lois asked Mylonis.

"Does what ever get easy?" she asked back, and then she realized what Lois was referring to. "It's not usually my job, but no, I don't think it ever gets easier."

In the other helicopter, the pilot turned to his passengers. "Just to let you know, the other chopper has been diverted to STAR Labs. We will be setting down at Met General in about ten minutes."

"Unca' Perry, what does that mean?" Jason asked. He held tightly onto the grizzled old man as if afraid to let go.

"It means your mommy and Uncle Clark are being taken to a different hospital."

"But I don't wanna' to go to a different hospital," Jason protested.

"Jason, son," Perry said, shifting so Jason wouldn't accidentally hit his injured arm. "As soon as the doctors over at Met General get me patched up, we'll go see your mommy and Clark, okay?"

General Sam Lane scowled as he watched Hodgekiss's men load the crates retrieved from the bunker into a waiting van. "What's in there?" he demanded. "What were they doing?"

"The perps in the bunker or the Planet reporters?" Hodgekiss asked. He closed the back of the van and waved it on. The van drove away.

"Both."

"Well, from what Bill Henderson told me, Kent and White figured out that this was the most likely place the arms being brought into the city were coming from. This used to be one of SHADO's sub bases. As it turns out, they were right, and I've got a couple people with egg on their faces because a couple of reporters figured it out before they did." Hodgekiss barked a quick laugh. "Hell, not even a couple reporters. One reporter who's been out of the loop for six years and an assistant editor. The second reporter shot Lex Luthor, and for that, I think I'll personally commission a medal for her."

Lane gave him a puzzled look.

"Didn't you know? Lois Lane's the one who took down Luthor after he shot Kent and was looking to finish the job." Hodgekiss paused to watch the army people go through their own paces, canvassing the area around the bunker, searching the surrounding area.

"Kent was shot outside the compound," Lane observed. "What was he doing out there, trying to run away?"

"Hardly," Hodgekiss said, giving the military man a puzzled frown. "He was out there with White senior taking out the RF jammer that was in one of the trees. And good thing he did, otherwise Henderson wouldn't have been able to call you. And before you say anything more about Kent, I just want you to know that if he was one of my people, I might be mad because he went out there without body armor, but I'd be damned proud he went out there, injured, to do a job that needed to be done, and in so doing, he probably saved my entire team, not to mention the other civilians. He shielded Mister White with his own body when Luthor started shooting."

A black soldier came up to Lane and saluted. "Roberts, reporting sir. We've found a cave that looks like it connected with the bunker. There's evidence of several persons having been there recently and we assume they were evacuated by boat. The water just beyond the cave entrance looks like it's more than deep enough to get something in and out."

"Notify the Coast Guard. Ask them to keep an eye out for unusual traffic in this area," Lane ordered.

"Already done," Hodgekiss told him. "I briefed them this morning and again about fifteen minutes ago. By the way, this is a crime scene and your people have contaminated the hell out of it."

"I was told your people needed backup," Lane told him. "By the way, you haven't told me what's in those crates you're hauling off."

"Evidence," Hodgekiss stated. Lane gave him a hard look. "We opened one and discovered it contained kryptonite, which, as we discovered, can be as deadly to humans as it is to Superman. We're not opening any of the others until we can get them some place safer,

some place with radiation suits and proper shielding."

"Straker is absolutely furious," Paul Foster told Alec Freeman. Foster was in command of the boat that had come to evacuate the team manning the former sub-base. They were now heading out to sea, to a ship waiting for them in international waters.

"Straker's been furious before," Freeman responded.

"But not like this," Foster stated. "He hasn't been this hot since Superman showed up the first time. What the hell happened back there, Alec?"

Freeman shrugged. "We were found out. Not exactly unexpected, considering how much we've been shipping into the city. All would have taken is some punk from Intergang to squeal on us, or someone to trace the properties the government confiscated from us when they tried to close us down. All it would have needed was a little research and leg work to see what's happening there now."

"And which was it?"

Freeman shrugged. "Doesn't matter, besides, Straker should be happy that Luthor took out Kent, and with the same gun that killed White. There's no material evidence to connect the rest of us to the killings."

"He won't be happy that Luthor's dead," Foster reminded him. "We called in a lot of markers getting him out of that Cuban prison."

"Luthor made that choice himself," Freeman stated. "I warned Straker that dealing with a psychopath was foolhardy at best. Luthor decided he wanted Lane's son. I don't want to know what sort of perversions that bastard was planning on, but he went out personally to grab the kid. What possessed him to shoot Kent and White is beyond me."

"So, who actually shot Luthor?" Foster asked.

"The kid's mother, General Lane's daughter, Lois," Freeman told him. "Which pretty well negates any possibility of SHADO ever getting back into his good graces. He was an ally until Kent exposed us, after Superman showed his face."

Foster turned back to scan the horizon with binoculars. "How much kryptonite do we have left?" He nodded his head, indicating the several cases the team had loaded into the boat.

"Enough to complete Straker's plan."

Foster scanned his associate's face. "You still have issues with it?"

Freeman shook his head. "To make an omelet, you gotta' break a few eggs. Besides, we can always make it look like Luthor did it, one last scheme he put into place before he was killed."

"And if the alien survives, the world will blame him for allowing a madman access to alien technology," Foster completed the thought for him.

"Exactly."

The army medivac copter set down in front to STAR Labs, kicking up a flurry of dust as the rotors slowed and stopped. The army medic threw open the side door, waving to the STAR Labs guards to help carry his patient out of the ambulance.

Kitty Faulkner was waiting at the entrance doors, holding them open as the guards carried an unconscious Clark Kent into the building and to the medical suite. Lois followed the guards into the building.

"Ms. Lane?" Kitty asked, grabbing Lois's arm. "This is a secure facility."

"I'm not leaving him," Lois stated.

Kitty sighed. The other woman's face was drawn with worry and there was a determination about her that wasn't going to take 'no' for an answer. "They're taking him straight in to be prepped for surgery," Kitty told her. "We've called in one of the best trauma surgeons in the country. He's in the best hands possible."

"I'm not leaving him," Lois repeated, watching the guards disappear behind locked doors.

"How about we monitor the surgery from my office?" Kitty offered.

After a long moment, Lois focused on the woman beside her. "Very well."

Kitty smiled and led the reporter through another set of secure doors, to the executive offices overlooking the West River.

"Coffee?" Kitty offered. Lois nodded as she watched the monitor showing the interior of the operating room. Clark hadn't arrived there yet. Lois assumed they were taking x-rays, running tests before moving him into the operating room.

Kitty put the cup of coffee on table in front of her, but Lois ignored it. "Ms. Lane," Kitty began.

"Lois," the reporter corrected quietly.

"Lois, why did you call us to handle this?"

"Clark was shot with kryptonite and he'd already been badly poisoned by it. He told us a few days ago you had the facilities to treat him, if he was hurt," Lois explained.

Kitty was silent for a long moment. "How much do you know about him?"

"He's the father of my child," Lois told her. "He has a second job that involves a lot of flying around and helping people. And he's susceptible to kryptonite. But you know that, don't you?"

Kitty nodded. "I promise you, we will do everything we can for him."

"Thank you, Doctor Faulkner," Lois said finally picking up the coffee.

"Kitty, please," Kitty said. "I have the feeling we're going to be seeing a lot of each other for a while."

Perry's wound was superficial and the ER physician confirmed it. The emergency room nurse cleaned the wound, bandaged it, gave him a tetanus shot and a dose of antibiotics. "Take it easy," he told the older man. "If there's any swelling or more pain, see your physician, okay?"

"Of course," Perry agreed, taking Jason's hand and leading him out of the emergency room, out to the street.

"This is where they brought Superman when he fell, wasn't it, Unca' Perry?" Jason asked.

"Yes, it was."

"Can we see Unca' Clark and mommy now? They didn't bring him here this time."

Perry looked curiously at the young boy tugging at his hand. *This time?* "Let's grab a cab and we'll go where they took Uncle Clark and your mommy," he said aloud.

Bill Henderson came in and sat at his desk, head in his hands. Jennie came in with a cup of coffee.

"Was it bad out there?"

"Two dead, two injured, one critically. A little boy watched his daddy die today and his mother's partner, my friend, is at STAR Labs where they're trying to save his life." He looked up at her. "It was bad. And the worst part is, despite the fact that Luthor is now dead, I'm not sure if anything we did, anything that happened out there, made a damned bit of difference."

He sighed. There was still a chance to redeem the situation, to track down the people who had harbored Luthor. He picked up the phone and called Lupe Leocadio at the Special Crimes Unit. *Clark, I hope you'll forgive me if this goes wrong.*

The cab pulled up in front of STAR Labs and let out two passengers, a grizzled older man and a young boy. The guard checked the man's identification, and then allowed the pair into the building.

A second guard showed them the way to the Chief Administrator's office.

"Oh Perry," Lois stood and gave him a hug as he walked in. She stepped back, registering that his arm was in a sling. "Are you okay?"

"It's hard to keep an old warhorse down," Perry told her. He nodded a greeting to Kitty, who motioned for him to sit down.

"We're monitoring the surgery from here," she said, indicating the scene on the flat screen on the wall. On the screen, the surgical team was setting up, waiting for their patient. "He's in the best of hands. But it's going to be a while."

Perry pulled out his cell phone to make a call. No signal.

"We don't allow cell phones or cameras in the building," Kitty explained. She pushed a desk phone toward him. "But you can use my phone."

Perry nodded thanks and punched in the number to the Daily Planet newsroom. "Polly? Perry. I need you to do a couple things for me. First, I want you to update Richard's, and Clark's, obituaries. Richard's is going in tomorrow's paper and hold on to Clark's in case we need it. They're taking him into surgery any time now. Second, let Jeff Ryan know he's off the reconstruction story for the time being. I want him on the shootings. I'll get him details as soon as I get there but have him get started by pulling what we have on those murders last year at Manahasset State Park. By the way, Lex Luthor was shot to death by Lois, right after he shot Kent. That should probably be tonight's lead. Third, get somebody over in Science and Technology working on exactly how dangerous kryptonite is to normal humans."

"I'll get right on it, Chief," Polly promised, finishing her notes as Perry rang off. "Marco," she called to one of the gofers. "Pull me up the obits we have on file for Richard White and Clark Kent." She noted the shock in Jimmy Olsen's face, as well as on several other staffers, and took a deep breath, fighting back sudden tears. "That was Perry. Richard's dead, and Clark was shot by Luthor. Perry didn't say what Clark's condition was, just that I'm to update his obit. But I'm guessing that it's not good."

"I'm with you on that," Jeff agreed. "One of my sources just called from Met General. The senior trauma team was called over to STAR Labs to handle a priority patient with multiple gunshot wounds who was being flown in. No name was given on the patient, but I don't believe in coincidences."

Bryant looked over the MRI scans on the computer monitor, glancing up at the X-ray films on the light panel to confirm what he was looking at. He hadn't realized that kryptonite was radioactive enough to react with the x-rays, leaving little fog spots on the films. The CCD version on the computer faired a little better. The kryptonite showed up as diamond bright stars.

He counted them. Twenty-five tiny pieces of death. At least the bullets had been small caliber. If the perp had been using a high caliber, high power rifle, Bryant's services wouldn't be needed. One bullet looked to be mostly intact, but it was lodged near his spine. One had

passed through his body, just missing major arteries but nicking the liver. The other two bullets had hit bone, exploding, ricocheting shards of radioactive death throughout his chest.

Looking at the general normalcy of the MRI and x-rays helped Bryant forget his patient was, in fact, an alien. A Kryptonian. *E.T. go home, this place is too dangerous for you.* The one, the only, clue that this was not a human patient was the density of his bones and muscles and even that wasn't too far outside human norms. Fifteen percent, maybe. Bryant suspect there were other, subtle differences, but nothing so different that a general, cursory examination would catch them. Of course, the invulnerability thing was a problem in most situations, as it had been when Superman was taken to Met General, but here, Andy Bryant's patient was a human being. And his instructions from Faulkner were that no one else on the surgical team was to know this man was anything other than fully human.

He called his assistant, Goldman, over and they began to quickly plan their strategy. Behind them, their patient was wheeled in and transferred to the operating table. The nurses started draping their patient with sterile clothes, exposing only the areas the surgeons would be concerned with.

The anesthesiologist had started his job outside and now finished attaching the various sensor leads to the patient's body before dropping his level of consciousness to the place where surgery could begin, where his body was completely relaxed and no hint of pain intruded into awareness.

"Alan," Bryant said to the anesthesiologist. "A couple things to keep in mind. We don't know how accurate our readings are or the dosages, so if you have any doubts..."

"Not a problem," Alan Forester assured him. "He'll stay under. By the way, do we have name on him? I was told this was a Green Fire priority, only I'm not sure what that means aside from get your ass to STAR Labs."

"Green Fire means kryptonite is involved. In this case, the patient's name is Clark Kent, he's a reporter for the Daily Planet and he was shot by Lex Luthor with kryptonite ammo. Why STAR Labs declared it a priority is their business," Bryant announced. "Our's is to do our job, keeping him alive and patching him up."

Lois watched the screen as the surgical team began its work. The team bantered about last night's Mammoth loss to the Raiders, whether Burt Snow should be traded or whether his new bride would improve his game. One of the female nurses commented on meeting the bride at a local restaurant. Bimbo was the most polite word she used.

Jason sat on his mother's lap, dividing his time between drawing pictures of Superman and watching the monitor. It was the pictures of Superman that broke Lois's heart. Superman was laying on the ground, bleeding, while a monstrous bald man held a big gun and a figure Lois recognized as her held an even bigger gun. Lois closed her eyes to block out her own memories of earlier, seeing Clark go down, bleeding, dying.

She opened her eyes to see Kitty watching her and Jason curiously.

"He resembles his father quite a bit," Kitty observed.

"Yes, he does," Lois said. "There's little doubt that Clark is his father." Lois turned to Perry. "Perry, I'm not sure I want Jason here."

Perry raised one white eyebrow at her. "I'm not sure the office will be much better. Jeff and Polly are putting together stories on what happened up there. There's bound to be talk, questions."

"I don't want him here in case... well, you know," Lois explained.

"Mommy, I want to stay with you," Jason protested.

"Honey, go with Uncle Perry. As soon as I'm sure Uncle Clark's going to be okay, you can come back and see him, okay?" Lois said.

Over the monitor speakers came swearing as something went wrong. Kitty turned off the sound.

"But what if he isn't okay?" Jason wondered plaintively.

"We'll worry about that *if* it happens, okay Jason?" Perry said softly, taking the boy by the hand and leading him out of the office.

Eighteen

Bill Henderson looked over at Lupe Leocadio sitting in the wooden chair on the far side of his desk. He watched her solemn expression as she considered the idea he'd just run past her.

"We'll need to clear it with Faulkner, but I think you're right. It's the only way to bring Straker and his people out in the open," Lupe said. "I'll canvas my people, get about a half-a-dozen volunteers. I shouldn't have much of a problem. Kent's pretty well liked by my people. He's one of the good guys."

"I'll let Perry White in on what's going on. We'll need his help to set the trap," Henderson reminded her.

Lupe simply nodded.

Perry walked across the bullpen, Jason in tow. He beckoned to Jimmy to take Jason. "You can use Richard's office," he told the photographer. "Don't turn on the T.V. in there though. I'd rather he didn't... If there's bad news I rather it came from his mother or me."

"Sure chief," Jimmy agreed. "How was CK? When you left, I mean?"

"They just started surgery. He was alive, at least. And I haven't had a call from Lois saying otherwise," Perry suddenly felt far older than his sixty-some-years. Old and worn out. "This isn't how it's supposed to be, you know," Perry murmured. "Clark's a little younger than my youngest son. I shouldn't be waiting for news that he's died at thirty-four. That he died because he made sure I was safe first."

"It's that bad?"

Perry nodded. "Yeah, it's that bad." He took a deep breath. "Polly, Jeff, in my office! We have work to do."

Jimmy grabbed Jason's hand and started to open the door to Richard's office as Polly and Jeff hurried to join Perry. The phone on Perry's desk rang and he picked it up as the GNN feed on the newsroom monitors changed scenes. Linda King, the GNN Metropolis correspondent, was standing in front of STAR Labs.

Perry listened to the person on the far end of the line, nodding, commenting briefly before hanging up to watch the monitor.

"New Troy State Police have just announced the death of convicted felon Lex Luthor in a shoot-out between a Daily Planet reporter and Luthor. This following attacks on two other Daily Planet staffers. The shootings occurred about 90 minutes ago at Manahasset State Park, leaving two dead and one critically injured. While the name of the first victim has not yet been released, we have been told that the second victim, Clark Kent, a senior reporter at the Daily Planet, has been brought here to STAR Labs for emergency surgery which is being performed by Metropolis General's senior trauma team. I have been told the reason STAR Labs was chosen over the Metropolis General trauma center is the fact that Luthor was using kryptonite laced bullets similar to what authorities claim to have found in the hands of local gangs. State authorities have also announced they have reason to believe that kryptonite may be as hazardous to humans as it is to Superman. And STAR Labs is a leading research facility with extensive experience with the radioactive mineral."

On the screen, Bill Henderson pocketed his cell phone, walked over to the correspondent and stopped beside her.

"Inspector Henderson, is there anything more you can tell us about what happened this afternoon at Manahasset State Park. I understand you were a witness to Luthor's death. Will

charges be brought against his killer? And what was the Daily Planet's involvement in what I've been told was an ongoing police investigation?"

Henderson glared at her. *"Miss King, Clark Kent is a key witness in more than one current criminal investigation. Lex Luthor shot him in the back in front of over a dozen police officers. Under those circumstances, I doubt any charges will be filed in regards to Luthor's death. On the other hand, I have every confidence charges will be forthcoming against Luthor's accomplices, once Mister Kent corroborates their involvement."*

"This is very bad," Perry said to himself.

"What the devil is Henderson doing, making an announcement like that?" Jeff wondered aloud.

Perry just shook his head. *I hope Henderson knows what he's doing with my people. I've already lost one. I don't want to lose any more, not like this.*

"Perry, what investigations is he talking about?" Polly asked.

Perry's thoughts snapped back to the here-and-now. "Luthor's involvement in the whole New Krypton thing, the bomber on the Clinton Bridge, at least two deaths that may be related to the kryptonite being brought into the city," Perry said. "And that's only what I know about because Richard told me yesterday. Oh and yes, Richard's death."

"He's been back from wherever for how long?" Jeff asked.

"He and Lois are both talented that way," Perry explained. "That's why they're the best. That's why I took him back."

Bryant heaved a sigh of relief as he tied off the final suture on another major bleeder. It hadn't been the only one, unfortunately.

The surgery should have been relatively simple, painstakingly locating and removing the pieces of kryptonite and steel. Unfortunately, every spot a kryptonite shard had come to rest seemed to have left a spot of necrosis that had to be dealt with and many of those caused major bleeding. Despite serious qualms, they'd had to use the blood and plasma Faulkner had ordered from the blood bank for him. Amazingly, the human blood had tested out as a good match. *Go figure, Superman has O negative blood.*

Finally, all the kryptonite that had shown up in the x-rays was removed to a lead lined container.

The MRI had shown that one bullet had taken a clean path through Kent's abdomen, just creasing the liver. The x-rays hadn't shown any kryptonite in that wound, but something had nicked a major hepatic artery and the lacerated blood vessel had finally given way. It took several minutes to locate the source of the bleeding and repair the artery.

Bryant instructed Goldman to finish closing and walked out of the operating room. He stripped off the gloves and surgical gown and headed for the executive offices to brief Doctor Faulkner. He found Kitty and a familiar looking dark haired woman waiting at the end of the corridor with two of MPDs finest. Apparently, someone decided his patient needed police protection.

"Well?" Kitty began.

Bryant took a deep breath and smiled. "He pulled through the surgery and I'm reasonably sure we were able to remove all the radioactive material from his chest."

"When can I see him?" Lois asked.

Bryant gave Kitty a questioning look. "This is Lois Lane, his partner," she explained.

Bryant raised one eyebrow in surprise. "Well, we want to make sure he's stable and

comes out of the anesthesia okay. We're moving in unknown territory here and the next few hours will be critical."

"He could still die?" Lois asked.

Bryant nodded.

"I want to see him."

With a glance at Bryant, Kitty led the reporter deeper into the building, to the medical center. Kitty opened the keypad locked door and ushered Lois through it, into the antechamber beyond. Lois put her hand on the door in front of her but Kitty shook her head, opening a side door instead. The corridor beyond had a glass wall that looked into the ICU area.

Clark had been moved to the narrow hospital bed in the center of the room. But something was very wrong. His eyes were open and he was fighting against the three people who were trying to finish getting him hooked up to the monitors.

"Damn," Bryant muttered. "I was afraid of this."

"What's wrong?" Lois demanded. Clark looked absolutely terrified.

"We had some problems keeping him as deeply under as he needed to be for surgery," Bryant explained. "It happens sometimes. People have different reactions to the drugs, they metabolize them faster, have a higher threshold than average." He stopped to watch. Forester and the two nurses had managed to get restraints on him, but he was still struggling, trying to free himself from the restraints, the ventilator tube in his throat.

Forester looked over to the people in the window, watching. "I'm keeping him under," his voice came over the speaker. He turned to his patient, who had finally stopped struggling, but was now holding himself so tense he was trembling. "Mister Kent, I'm Doctor Forester, everything's going to be okay. You've just come out of surgery and I'm giving you something for the pain." As he spoke, he injected drugs into the port on one of the I.V.s that was dripping colorless fluid into a vein. "It's okay. Everything's going to be okay," Forester kept repeating.

After a little bit, Clark's eyes fluttered closed again and his body relaxed.

Bryant turned to Kitty. "He'll need to be under constant observation. Do you have the people for it?"

"Yes, I think we can handle it," Kitty said.

"What does he know?" Straker demanded. Both Freeman and Foster stood in front the battered desk in Straker's secondary office.

"Nothing," Freeman assured him. "Aside from the team who picked him up, he didn't see anyone, didn't get inside the base."

"He can identify you," Foster pointed out.

"Superman could identify me from the security recordings in Cuba, and the boy saw my face as well," Freeman reminded them. "I'm already linked to the kryptonite."

"What do you suggest we do about that?" Straker asked.

Freeman shrugged his broad shoulders. "You've already sent Gay and Mark to Europe. I can head there, lay low. Set up the next operation from there."

"You're assuming there will be a next operation?" Straker grated.

"I'm assuming you want a back-up plan in the event this operation isn't as successful as hoped," Freeman said. "And you have to admit, we've had a lot of bungled plays recently. And I'm not sure we'll be able to convince our usual buyers in Metropolis to continue after that announcement on GNN on the dangers of kryptonite to humans."

"Do you believe it's dangerous?" Foster asked. There was a hostile edge to his voice that Freeman didn't like, had never liked.

"Our research indicates no," Freeman admitted. "But word is that Superman's not the only Kryptonian on the planet. There may be humans, a lot of them, whose ancestry includes these aliens. Are you willing to kill thousands, millions, to ensure the Earth is free from alien influence?"

"Luthor was willing to kill billions," Straker reminded him.

"Luthor was insane and we're well rid of him," Freeman said.

"Did we get anything out of him?" Straker asked.

Freeman noted he didn't answer his original question. "Only how much he hated Superman and how he was convinced the alien had a child by an Earth woman."

"Yes, I have heard that," Straker said. "Is it possible?"

"Ed, the aliens we fought twenty-five years ago couldn't breed with humans without massive genetic manipulation. Do you really think something as alien as a Kryptonian could breed with a human, even with help?" Freeman asked.

"You're right, of course. The whole thing was the imaginings of a mad man." Straker sighed heavily. "I'll let Gay and Mark know you're joining them. We'll talk later about those contingency plans."

Freeman nodded acceptance and left the office, leaving Foster and Straker alone.

"Are we going to have a problem with Alec, Paul?" Straker asked.

"You've known him longer than I have," Foster reminded the older man.

"Tell Gay and Mark to keep an eye on him," Straker ordered. "I think he's getting sentimental in his old age."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and Paul?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Make sure the last two witnesses, the one's that can identify Alec as being at Manahasset, don't have an opportunity to testify. It looks like Kent may be one of those Kryptonian hybrids. Maybe that's something we can use."

"Yes, sir."

Henderson walked over to Lupe's office at the SCU headquarters building and climbed the stairs to the second floor.

Lupe was waiting for him. "That was some speech," she commented as he closed the door behind him. "Looks like everybody bought it, too"

"Good," Henderson said. "Now all we have to do is keep Kent alive while the bad guys are gunning for him."

"I've pulled two female officers from Third over to keep an eye on Lane's boy," Lupe told him. "You did say Luthor was after him and he might be a witness. By the way, is he Kent, Lane, or White?"

"According to what I read last week in the Planet, he's Jason White."

"Poor kid," Lupe murmured. "Seeing his dad gunned down like that."

Henderson nodded. He had grandkids Jason's age. "Yeah, poor kid."

"This looks good," Perry said, looking at the evening's edition of the Daily Planet. **Lex Luthor Killed at State Park** screamed the headline. Jeff had done a good job with

interviewing Perry and Jason, putting together the facts from Henderson's reports and tying in the murders from last year near the same area.

On his desk were two obituaries. Richard's would definitely run tomorrow, along with more details on his murder. Next of kin had been notified. Perry had called Richard's older brother Christopher in Berlin. He and his wife were flying back to the States in the morning.

Polly had completed updating Clark's obituary as well. *Richard would say I was being morbid, and he would be right.* Perry looked it over. Polly had done a good job. Clark had won a surprising number of journalism awards in his not exactly long career at the Planet. Kerths, Merriweathers, others. The only one missing from the list was the Pulitzer and he'd been chosen one of the three finalists in investigative reporting just after he left. Perry wondered if anyone had told him how close he came to winning.

Graduated Metropolis University *summa cum laude* with a double major, journalism and history. He was present at the assassination of Kobe Asuru, wrote the exposé that revealed CIA collusion in the murder of the tribal activist. *I'd forgotten that.*

His phone rang and he set aside the obituary he hoped they wouldn't have to use.

"Perry?" Lois said over the phone. "Clark's out of surgery, but they still have him listed as critical. I heard what Henderson announced but it's going to be some time before Clark's going to be able to answer questions. I can't believe he made an announcement like that. Is he trying to get Clark killed?"

"I'll tell you about it when I see you," Perry said. "Do you want me to pick you up and drive you home?"

"Could you?" Lois asked.

"Jason and I and Officer Ryan will be there in about fifteen minutes."

"Officer Ryan?"

"The MPD has assigned a policewoman to keep an eye on Jason. Henderson is worried he might be targeted."

"And why didn't he think about that before he told the world there were witnesses to Richard's murder?" Lois fumed.

"That wasn't what he said and you know as well as I do those bastards already know Clark and Jason can identify them." Perry reminded her. "Jason and I will be there shortly."

"Perry, when you get here, bring Jason in, please."

She rang off.

Bring Jason into STAR Labs? To say goodbye or to say hello?

The nurse assigned to keep an eye on STAR Labs one and only patient finally gave Lois permission to come into the inner chamber of the ICU, and then only after Lois had showered and changed into a set of scrubs.

Lois nodded to the uniformed officer standing outside the locked door of the medical center. He gave her a polite nod of recognition as he used a keycard to swipe the lock and opened the outside door for her.

She knocked on the inner door and the nurse unlocked it, allowing her to pass. Lois stopped just inside the door, looking around. The room was larger than it looked from outside. The lighting was a little on the pink side. *Was this really what Krypton's light looked like? It's not too different from Earth.*

Beside the hospital bed, a respirator hissed and clicked. A tube went from it, and an oxygen tank, to a clear plastic tube that had been pushed down his throat. His chest rose and

fell in time with the machine.

Lois stepped closer. The head of the bed was raised slightly and the side-rails were up, covered with heavy padding. The bed's occupant was pale, eyes half open, un-focused, unseeing. His hair was mussed, over his forehead almost into his eyes, broad dark strokes against white skin. She reached out and brushed his hair away from his eyes. He was warm to her touch, too warm, fever hot. A pale green thermal blanket covered his body but it didn't disguise the refrigeration blanket under it.

A group of electronic monitors occupied a rack on the wall. Various lines and wires attached the different monitors to Clark's body. She glanced at the readings, although she knew she probably wouldn't understand what they meant. The EKG beeped with its persistent rhythm of 40 beats per minute. That was the reading the last time he was in the hospital, when all the doctors could do was watch and wait. *Was that normal or low for him?* She didn't know. Another readout caught her eye. Lois recalled reading somewhere what anything over 106° Fahrenheit was incompatible with human life. The internal temperature monitor read 108°.

She glanced at the nurse, afraid to ask.

"His temperature started spiking a little while ago," the nurse explained. She had a trace of an Irish accent. "I've been told by Doctor Faulkner that his normal temperature is a couple degrees paranormal anyway, so it's probably not as bad as it looks. I'm April Dunnigarth, by the way."

Several plastic bags hung on a pole by at the side of the bed. One bag was feeding a white fluid into a tube that was threaded through one nostril. Other bags fed other tubes that dripped colorless liquids into veins in both of Clark's arms. A drug pump was pumping measured doses of something into yet another vein, drugs to keep him comatose, unmoving, unknowing.

Oh Clark, what are we doing to you?

A large sign on the wall above the head of the bed read: NO SMOKING. Lois managed a chuckle. Metropolis had outlawed smoking in public places nearly five years before, and even though STAR Labs was a private firm, she doubted they allowed smoking anywhere on the premises.

Another, smaller sign read: 'My name is Clark Kent. I can hear you.'

"Can you hear us, Clark?" Lois wondered aloud. "I hope so, 'cause then we can tell you we're only trying to help. We want you to get well. And I don't want to lose you again. I don't want Jason to lose you."

It was well after dark when the cab dropped Perry, Jason, and Officer Patrice Ryan off in front of STAR Labs. The guard at the door must have been warned they were coming because he gave them a nod and opened the locked door for them. A second guard led them deeper into the building, past other locked doors. He nodded a greeting to the uniformed officer standing beside one more locked door.

A tall man dressed in black with a roman collar was waiting patiently with the officer. He carried a small leather case in one hand.

"Good evening, Father," Perry said.

Jason peered at the man, tucking his head into Perry's shoulder, eyes dark with exhaustion and worry. "You're not Unca' Perry's daddy."

"You're right, I'm not. I'm a priest."

"Are you a friend of Unca' Clark's?"

"Yes, I am," he said. "I'm Father Daniel. And you must be Jason." He nodded once to Perry. "Perry White?"

"I didn't think STAR Labs was on anybody's pastoral rounds," Perry commented.

Daniel smiled again, softening his rough boxer's face. "I had fifteen calls this afternoon, including three cops and one very annoyed Prince of the Church, letting me know that one of mine was over here. I know better than to ask why." He chuckled. "I wasn't aware milord archbishop even knew who Clark Kent was. I thought he only read the Star."

The police guard swiped a key card through the lock and opened the door for them. Office Ryan stayed outside as Perry, Jason and Father Daniel stepped into the small entrance chamber.

Nurse Dunnigarth glanced over at them. "You'll need to gown up before coming in here," she ordered, gesturing toward the green gowns hanging in the corridor to their left.

Perry handed one to the priest and took one for himself. He was surprised to find a small gown hanging there as well. It was still much too big for Jason but Perry handed it to the boy anyway. Jason watched the two adults and slipped the gown on over his clothes.

"Unca' Perry, why do we have to dress up to see Unca' Clark?"

Perry crouched down to be on eye level with the boy. "Jason, when people are badly hurt, sometimes they can get sick from the germs on your clothes. So we're going to cover up our clothes so the germs can't make Clark sick, okay?"

Jason gave him a dubious look, but let Perry tie the gown around him and pick him up. Nurse Dunnigarth unlocked the inner door and allowed them in.

The relief in Lois's face was palpable as she took Jason from Perry's arms. "Thank you, Perry."

"The peace of the Lord be with you," Father Daniel said as he followed Perry into the room.

"And also with you," Perry said, completing ceremonial welcome.

"I've missed you munchkin," she murmured. She moved closer to the unconscious man on the bed. "Clark, Perry and Jason are here along with...?" Lois gave the priest a curious look.

"I'm Father Daniel Leone," he introduced himself. "But you can call me Dan. Clark is a member of my parish."

"He is?" Lois asked, surprised. She had never imagined Clark going to church, although after a moment's thought she realized he had told her of his problems in Sunday school. "How long has he been going to...?"

"Sacred Heart," Daniel answered. "Oh, he started coming about nine years ago, right after that big arson fire at the day care center."

"I remember," Perry said. "He covered that story. Hit him pretty hard."

"It hit a lot of us hard," Daniel admitted. He took a moment to open his case and set out his tools - a white linen to cover the bed table, a crucifix, two candles, a bottle of holy water, a second bottle of blessed oil, a couple of small white towels. He placed a purple stole around his neck and lit the candles.

"Sprinkle me, O Lord, with hyssop and I shall be purified; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow," Daniel began the antiphon, sprinkling the room with the holy water. "Our help is in the name of the Lord."

"Who made heaven and earth," Perry intoned the response. Lois followed his lead. She was surprised she remembered. Hospitals were not her favorite thing and the last time she'd been part of a ceremony like this was when her Aunt Dorothy lay dying. It was called 'Last

Rites' then, but Lois had heard they didn't do that anymore. Jason watched, fascinated.

"The Lord be with you."

"And with your spirit."

Daniel began reading the prayers. He had a decent voice and Lois let the prayers wash over her. She wasn't religious at all. She felt there was something profoundly wrong with people who allowed others claiming the certitude of faith to rule their lives. But, there was also something immensely comforting in the time-honored prayers calling on angels and saints to protect them from evil. The down side of being non-religious, was there was no one to blame when things went wrong, no power to call on, no comfort in certain knowledge conferred by faith.

Superman has a priest. I guess even superheroes need help. God knows, he needs help right now. Oh dear God, Clark is Superman. Richard is dead and Clark Kent is Superman. She reached under the covers and took Clark's hand. His hand was limp as she rubbed her thumb over the back of his fingers, avoiding the gauze that covered the wound on his hand.

Father Daniel was nearly finished with the prayers and the scripture reading. She recognized the story out of Matthew from her few times at Sunday school, when her parents decided she should get some sort of religious education. It was a story about a centurion with a sick little boy. She recalled it was one of her father's favorite stories, along with the cleansing of the temple.

Father Daniel took the olive oil and went to the next section of the ceremony, the anointing of the patient's forehead and hands.

Perry completed the appropriate responses. Lois hadn't imagined her editor to be religious, either. She wondered how many times he'd been through this, waiting to see if a friend or relative or colleague would survive.

"Hear this prayer for our suffering brother. You are his redeemer: strengthen his hope for salvation and in your kindness sustain him in body and soul. You live and reign for ever and ever," the priest read.

Again, Perry completed the response for them. Father Daniel began a familiar prayer, one even Lois recognized. It wasn't quite the same words, a different translation than the one she learned as a child. But the Lord's Prayer was much the same, no matter what the translation.

Daniel finished the prayer and the ceremony. He collected his tools and pronounced a final blessing before leaving for his next stop in his rounds of pastoral care.

"Do you think he knows?" Lois asked Perry when the door closed. "Do you think he knows we're praying for him?"

"I don't know," Perry admitted. "Sometimes though, the prayers are more important to the living than to the dying."

"Perry, I don't know what I'll do if he doesn't make it."

"I know, hon'," Perry said quietly. "I don't know what any of us will do."

He couldn't move, couldn't see. He was encased in a block of ice, frozen in a place of eye searing light and mind-halting noise and pain. So much pain.

He couldn't recall where he was, or why he was there. Even who he was escaped him.

He was trapped in a bitter cold hell, and he was afraid.

Gradually, after several hours, or was it several days, he became aware of the susurrations of human voices in the noise around him. The voices called his name. But, he couldn't speak and it was impossible to move.

He was so very cold, so very tired, so very confused. He was enshrouded in an impenetrable, mind-numbing fog. Still, the voices persisted, demanding his attention, demanding and demanding.

He didn't know why. They didn't say why, but it did occur to him there must be a reason for this torture, for this fear, but he couldn't remember what it might be. He was so cold, and there was so much pain.

He had a vague foggy recollection of something awful, something terrifying. Of bodies, blood, gunshots, kryptonite, but he couldn't remember. Other memories filtered in. Richard, his friend, covered in blood, covering him in blood. Richard's blood. Luthor stabbing him, Luthor shooting him, Luthor dead. A helicopter and Lois's voice telling him it would be okay. It wasn't okay. He didn't want to remember. He wanted to scream, but he couldn't.

Even oblivion was preferable to remembering.

But, in the times the fog seemed to lift a little, he thought he saw people he knew, people he cared about, Lois and Jason, even Perry. They seemed so worried. Or, were they all illusions?

He couldn't tell anymore. He was so cold and so very tired.

He wanted the voices to go away.

He wanted to die, to get away from the pain, and the voices wouldn't let him.

Nineteen

Perry pleaded, threatened, cajoled Lois into leaving with him. It was obvious she was exhausted, her dark eyes like bruises in her pale, drawn, face. He knew he was beyond exhaustion, in that place where he knew had to rest but his mind refused to cooperate, thoughts chasing themselves round and round his brain like squirrels. Jason was dead on his feet, taking drags off his inhaler.

Finally, she agreed. "But can we stay with you and Alice tonight?" she asked. "I don't want to be alone in that house tonight."

"Sure, for as long as you need," Perry assured her. *There will be ghosts haunting that house for some time.*

Lois kissed Clark on the forehead. His hair smelled of antiseptic, but she could still detect the scent of *him*, fresh air and salt water, pine and tea. "Clark, I'll be back tomorrow. And your mom's flying in so she'll be here tomorrow, too. So you rest and get better, okay?"

No response, but she wasn't expecting one. The respirator clicked and hissed. The EKG kept up its constant slow beeping.

With once last look, she followed Perry out of the ICU, heedless of the tears that had started down her cheeks once more.

Bill Henderson, Lupe Leocadio, and a uniformed officer were already waiting in Perry's office when Perry, Lois, and Jason and Patrice Ryan walked into the newsroom early the next morning.

Perry noticed that Henderson and Captain Leocadio looked as bad as he felt. And he felt like he hadn't slept at all in the past two days. First from worry about Richard and Clark going missing, then grief at having his worst fears come true - the two men had gotten in over their heads. Now one was dead and the other fighting for his life. Despite his grief, he had an obligation to both of them to finish what they'd started, exposing their attackers' crimes to the world. And the world deserved to know.

"I thought it would be better if we took your statements here, instead of bringing the boy down to headquarters," Henderson explained.

"You can use the office next door," Perry offered.

"Jason, go with Captain Lupe and the officer, okay. Perry and I will be right here," Lois instructed her son.

"Can I show them my pictures?" Jason asked. Lois shot a look at Perry, who shook his head almost imperceptibly. "I'm not sure that's a good idea. Maybe later?" Lois suggested.

Jason nodded, took Lupe's hand and led her and the uniformed officer to the next office, Richard's office. *Richard's office. Richard's dead.*

As soon as the glass door closed behind Lupe and Jason: "What's in those pictures that you don't want us to see?" Henderson asked mildly.

"Jason really likes Superman. But yesterday at STAR Labs, he was drawing pictures of Luthor killing Superman," Lois explained softly, chewing her bottom lip. "There was lots and lots of blood."

Henderson chuckled softly, sadly. "You probably don't want his teachers to see those. I doubt they'll understand."

"I'm calling his school later, telling them he won't be there for at least the next couple days," Lois said. "At least until we're sure, one way or the other..."

Henderson's chiseled face took on a guilty look.

"What's happened?"

"The perps made their first attempt last night and we almost didn't catch it," Henderson admitted. He hurried to continue before Lois could get started. He really didn't want to be on the receiving end of one of her tirades. "There was kryptonite in the air filtration system, threw him for a loop. He started bleeding again, and they had to take him back into surgery early this morning. Faulkner claims they've put more safeguards in place, and forensics has been all over the place. But needless to say, this is a very disturbing turn of events. We knew these bastards may have infiltrated the MPD. We didn't realize they had high level access to STAR Labs."

"Would that have stopped you?" Lois demanded.

"No, but we might have taken a different tack on it," Henderson admitted. "We figured between their security and ours, he'd be relatively safe. We were wrong."

"How is he?" Perry asked.

"Critical, still," Henderson said. "Believe me, Clark's a friend of mine and I wouldn't have set him out like that if I thought there was another way to get at these people."

"If Clark and Richard were right, those people put bombs on the Clinton Bridge and killed how many people just to get at Superman?" Lois pointed out. "And I haven't seen any reports of Superman being around to help recently, have you?"

"The last report I saw had him putting out a fire not too far from Richard and Clark's campsite. There haven't been any sightings since," Henderson said. "And there are concerns at higher levels that the fire was a ploy to get him in range of the kryptonite they had in the park so he could be killed. I'm not counting on Superman coming to the rescue any time soon. Frankly, the commissioner has doubts we'll ever find his body."

"Do you believe he's dead?" Perry asked.

Henderson considered the question for a long moment. "No," he said finally, looking straight at Lois. "But I think *he* needs rescuing more often than he cares to admit. And this may well be one of those times."

Lois's cell phone rang and she opened it up. "Lois Lane." She listened for a few moments. "I'll be there in less than an hour to pick you up, okay...? I'll see you then." She closed her phone with a sigh. "I need to pick up Mrs. Kent at Berkowitz. I'll go to your office later and give you my statement."

She walked out of Perry's office and opened the door to Richard's office. "Jason, It's time to go and pick up Grandma Kent at the airport."

"We're done here, Ms. Lane," Lupe said. "Jason was just explaining how Luthor wanted to hurt you and him and Superman, but since you shot Luthor, he won't be able to do that."

"I did what I had to do," Lois said tightly.

"I know, and believe me, I would have done exactly the same thing," Lupe told her. "Look, I sent Ryan home till tonight and Nathifa Scott isn't here yet, so how about I ride shotgun with you to the airport?"

"If you want," Lois said. She didn't really want extra people around. It was going to be hard enough as it was to explain to Clark's mother that the local police had set her critically injured son out as bait. Her son *and* her grandson. *Did Clark even tell her she had a grandson?*

Another thought hit her. The Audi was still at the park, and was most likely being towed out by the state police. She didn't have a car to drive. She went back to Perry's office. "Uh, Perry, can I borrow your car?"

He sighed and tossed her his car keys. "Be careful!" he warned.

Lois found Perry's black late model Acura and let Lupe into the front passenger side. She buckled Jason into the back seat, making sure the belt was properly fastened.

"Lane's just pulled out of the parking garage," a man's voice came over a cell phone. "Black Acura, license plate E D I T O R D P. Female passenger, the kid's in the back, driver side."

Lois drove out of the Daily Planet parking garage over to Clinton, south onto Ordway Drive then headed east towards Park Ridge and Berkowitz International Airport. Jason was buckled in the back seat, while Lupe sat up front, watching the traffic.

It was after the morning rush hour, so traffic on Ordway was relatively light although Lois fumed at the number of large trucks on the highway.

"So, how long have you known Clark?" Lois asked, weaving the car through the traffic. She noted a dark green van that was trying to pace the Acura in the left lane. The windows of the van were blacked out.

"Years," Lupe answered. "Remember that cop killer back in '98? Clark covered the story. Did a damn good job of it, too. Though I have to admit, I wasn't real impressed at first. I mean, he fell out of a freakin' chopper and landed in a dumpster the day I met him." She smiled, a bittersweet twitch of the lips that softened her face just a little. "But, Clark's one of the good guys, which is a little rare in one of you. He'd've made a good cop if he wasn't such a klutz. In fact, he'd come down to Dulin's about once a month and join me and my boys for drinks. Bill's new guys thought Clark was one of mine, my new guy's all thought he was one of Bill's." She chuckled. "When they figured out he wasn't with Bill or me, they'd figure he belonged to the Dragon Lady. He'd fit in real well with that bunch. He was never mean enough to be mistaken for Internal Affairs."

"I think somebody mentioned once that Clark was one of the few journalists even allowed in Dulin's," Lois said.

The van was still keeping pace with them, keeping her from changing lanes to get around the semi that was slowing down in front of them.

"Let's say he and you were about the only ones, and you haven't been around since Maggie Sawyer left for Gotham," Lupe said conversationally. She had noticed Lois's hands tightening on the steering wheel, noted the green van that hadn't left the other lane and was now weaving more and more erratically in its lane. "My guys would be more than overjoyed to buy you drinks anytime you want. Luthor was a cop-killer and a lot of us were really pissed that judge tried to subpoena Superman, knowing he couldn't be served, knowing he wouldn't show up and using that to overturn a perfectly good conviction of murder one.

"But damned, it would been good if he'd bothered to tell us he was leaving. Or if he'd never shown his face around here in the first place," Lupe said.

"I know that's what I wrote, but I'm afraid I don't follow you," Lois said.

"I know Superman's friend of yours. Maybe a little more, if the rumors are true." She ignored the dark glance Lois threw at her. "But he's a loose cannon. How do you rein in somebody who can't be hurt, who can move so fast he can't be caught, who can lift a god-damned island into the sky?"

"He nearly died," Lois reminded the cop.

"Yeah, I was a little surprised, really. He really laid it on the line. You know the Federales

tried to get to him while he was in the hospital," Lupe added. "More cajones than brains. Tried to claim jurisdiction. Didn't wash with our guys at all. He may be an alien from outer space, but by God, he's our alien from outer space."

Lois didn't comment, watching the van as it moved closer to the lane she was in.

Suddenly, the van swerved fully into her lane. Lois threw the steering wheel over, forcing the driver just behind her to brake hard as she inserted the Acura into the adjacent lane.

"Jason, down!" Lupe yelled. She had her cell phone out, calling 911. In the back seat, Jason hunkered down, away from the side window just as it exploded. He screamed, covering his head with his arms.

The van crossed the lane lines after the Acura and another shot was fired, turning the windshield cloudy. Lupe swore and sparks flew from the running of steel against concrete as Lois drove the car onto the narrow shoulder, against the concrete and steel side of the elevated roadway.

The Acura came to a sudden halt and the van passed them, trapped in the flow of traffic. The WGBS traffic copter was already overhead, reporting on the 'accident'. Lupe gave more information to the 911 dispatcher, including the license plate number of the van.

Officer Darrin Evans had been following the van at a discrete distance on his motorcycle. The weaving through traffic worried him and he noted the license plate, preparing to pull the van over for reckless driving and possible DUI, especially since the last lane change was done without the benefit of a turn signal as well as forcing the Acura in the next lane to move over to avoid him. The driver of the Chevy in that lane had to brake hard to avoid a collision, causing a cascade of brake lights all down Ordway Drive.

Evans turned on his lights and sirens as he guided his motorcycle between the lanes of traffic toward van. There was something wrong on the side of the van. Then he saw a gout of fire coming from the open side door, and the back driver's side window of the Acura shattered. Evans was on his headset to dispatch. "O-39. I've got weapons fire on Ordway Drive. Green Chevy van, license plate Lima Zero-zero-eight-one-three. Driving west-bound. Need assistance."

As he spoke, he saw a second gout of flame reach for the Acura. The car's windshield went nearly opaque and the driver ran the car up against the side barrier before bringing the car to a halt. *Holy shit.*

"O-39, I have a PI accident west-bound on Ordway between Jefferson and Kant."

"Did you get them?" the driver of the van asked, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel in annoyance.

"I don't know," the shooter answered, pulling his submachine gun inside the van.

The driver listened to the exchange between the motorcycle cop and dispatch on the police band radio. "We've been made," he said. He pulled the van over to the right hand shoulder about half a mile beyond the Acura, got out of the driver's seat and pulled open the side door. "You know the drill," he said, stepping from the door onto the guard rail, then letting himself down to the ground below.

The other two men followed suit, leaving the submachine gun and an explosives pack behind.

"Lois, are you okay?" Lupe asked, unbuckling her seatbelt. The passenger side door was

jammed against the guard rail. She was going to have to get out via the window or out the driver's side.

Slowly, Lois nodded, taking stock of her condition. She had glass in her hair and something warm and sticky was running down the side of her face in front of her ear. Ignoring the blood, she turned around in her seat to look in the back.

Jason was huddled on the backseat, covered in shattered glass. But as he lowered his hands and sat up, she realized there was no blood anywhere. She tried to hide her surprise as seeing several bullets on the seat beside him - bullets that were flattened as though they'd hit something impenetrable, something invulnerable.

Overhead, they could hear the WGBS copter circling, watching the drama unfold on the highway below it.

"Stay here until help comes," Lupe ordered. She pressed the button on her door to lower the window, but it wouldn't move, making grinding noises instead.

Evans brought his motorcycle to a halt just in front of the Acura, got off and hurried back to the car. He peered in, fearing the worst. "Are you okay? There's an aid car on the way." Then he noticed Lupe on the passenger side. "Captain?"

"Yeah." She pulled her automatic from its holster under her jacket, broke the window with the butt of her gun then wriggled her way out of the car.

"The WGBS copter has them in its sights and is relaying the info to the ground units. There's an aid car on its way and Police 1 is in route," Evans said.

Half a mile west, across from the parking lot of a crowded shopping mall, the van exploded, catching several cars and a semi-tractor trailer in the explosion, tossing the cars like toys, rolling the trailer onto its side, setting it on fire.

"What the devil was that?" Evans asked. Fire was reaching for the sky.

"Nickels to navy beans, that was the perps' van," Lupe told him. Her face was grim.

"And where's Superman? This is right up his alley," Evans asked.

"Missing and presumed dead," Lois answered. Evans gave her a puzzled look. "Superman hasn't been seen since he went to take care of a fire that happened to be near Luthor's hideout. Put it together."

"Holy shit," Evans murmured.

"That's about right," Lupe agreed. She looked over at Lois. Blood had finally stopped dripping down her face. "I'll see if I can get Bill to pick up Mrs. Kent."

Berkowitz International Airport was one of the most modern in the country and was named after Frank Berkowitz, four term mayor of Metropolis until his assassination in 1998. Although the assassin was found, he was found dead and the assassin's killers were never found. Both murder cases were still open. There were too many unanswered questions.

Bill Henderson pulled the unmarked police car into a parking space not too far from the passenger pickup area. He placed his parking permit on the dashboard on the inside of the windshield and went inside, flashing his badge at the security guard standing inside the glass doors.

He looked around for an older woman, sixty-something, white or gray hair, glasses, who resembled the photo he'd seen on Clark Kent's desk at the Planet. He didn't see anyone and finally resorted to having her paged.

Finally, a white haired woman wearing gold framed glasses and wearing a simple pant suit approached the courtesy counter. She had an older, heavy-set man in tow carrying two travel

bags.

"Mrs. Kent?" Henderson asked.

She looked at him curiously, face tired and worn. "Yes."

"I'm Bill Henderson, I'm a friend of your son's," he said.

"We were expecting Miss Lane," she said quietly.

"There was an incident on Ordway Drive. She and her son are at Metropolis General, getting checked out." He saw more worry come into her eyes. "They're fine, really. It's just a precaution. But she asked me to pick you up and take you to STAR Labs, to where Clark is."

"And how is he?" the man asked.

Mrs. Kent looked flustered, as if she'd forgotten he was there. "Oh, this is Ben Hubbard. He's a friend."

Henderson bobbed his head in acknowledgement. "Clark's as good as can be expected, considering he took four slugs in the back. But, he's had the best trauma surgeon on the east coast working on him."

Henderson took one of the bags from Ben Hubbard and nodded for them to follow him to his car.

Ordway east of the interchange was still closed as emergency crews fought the fires the explosion from the bomb in the van had started. Ten dead at the latest count. Two of the perps had been caught near the Midtown Mall. The third had vanished, seemingly into thin air.

Henderson, Martha and Ben listened to the radio report in silence.

Finally, Ben spoke up from the back, "Clark's gonna' be a little upset, missing reporting on that, I mean."

Martha shook her head, staring out the window.

"Clark won't be upset at missing having to report on the dead and injured. I know he hates that part of his job," Henderson said. "But he'll be plenty unhappy when he finds out who we think did it, and why."

"We?" Martha wondered aloud.

Henderson sighed. "Miss Lane told us about what happened to you Monday, with the bogus FBI agents. I didn't want you to get worried that something like that was happening here," Henderson said. "I'm senior police detective, and I've considered Clark my friend for a long time. He's a straight up guy, and I'm real glad he made it back to Metropolis." Henderson hit the steering wheel with the palm of his hand in a sudden fit of frustration. "I just wish I'd gotten to him and White before they decided to go looking for those bastards. I might have been able to talk them into waiting until we were ready to move. Instead, they get themselves into a mess of trouble even Superman couldn't have gotten them out of."

"Clark's always been a little headstrong," Martha told him. "But he's a strong boy, he'll pull through."

"I hope so, Mrs. Kent," Henderson said. "The world needs more people like him, and we can't afford to lose even one. Especially not him."

Lois fumed at the emergency room crew at Metropolis General. A cursory check by a nurse confirmed the bleeding was from a superficial cut on her scalp, probably from flying glass. Her head didn't even hurt, aside from the sting of the cut.

But they'd had her and Jason sitting, waiting, for what seemed like hours. She'd called in her report on the attack on her and Jason on Ordway Drive. Perry had assigned to story to Jeff to take care of. For once Lois didn't mind that something she was involved in was assigned to

someone else. *You're getting soft, Lane. There was a time you'd fight tooth and nail to keep a story like this. Now...*

Lois checked her watch once more. An hour, they'd been waiting an hour and patience was not a virtue that Lois Lane cultivated.

"Come on, Jason, we're going to see Uncle Clark, and then we'll head back to work," she announced, taking her son by the hand and walking out.

They caught a cab to STAR Labs. This time the guards recognized her and Jason and passed them through, although they did give her odd looks at the blood on her blouse and on her face.

"Lois, are you okay?" Kitty asked, coming into the lobby before Lois was halfway to the doors that lead eventually to the medical center.

"It looks a lot worse than it is," Lois responded. "Scalp wounds bleed a lot."

Kitty nodded. They arrived at the far doors and Kitty opened them for Lois, following her through.

"Bill said you nearly lost Clark last night."

"It was closer than I would have liked, but we know what to look for, now. At least more than we did," Kitty said. "He went into brochospasm, almost like asthma. Bridgette Crosby was the one on call and she realized his eyes had gone green. Not a good sign. She had detectors brought in. Found there was kryptonite in the air. Henderson had his people check the entire ventilation system. I guess they may have actually found something."

"Has Mrs. Kent shown up?" Lois asked.

Kitty nodded. "Henderson's brought her and her friend in. She's with Clark now. She seems like a nice woman."

"I wouldn't know. I haven't met her."

Kitty opened one more door and allowed Lois and Jason through. Lois spotted Henderson and an older man outside the medical center door. The older man looked strangely familiar.

"Lois, this is Ben Hubbard. He's a friend of Clark's mother," Henderson introduced him.

"Nice to see you again, Miss Lane, and your little boy," Ben said with a smile. "I just wish it was under better circumstances."

"Have we met?" Lois asked. She couldn't place him.

"You spoke to Martha a couple minutes outside the hospital, after Superman got hurt."

Lois gave him a blank look. Jason tugged on her hand. "That's right, Mommy. She told you Superman was going to be okay 'cause he was a strong boy. Then she pinched my cheek but it didn't hurt."

"You were there? Why didn't you tell me who you were?"

Ben shrugged. "Martha didn't want to be a bother. We couldn't get hold of Clark."

"Clark is sometimes hard to get hold of," Lois agreed.

Ben's expression turned worried. "Look, I know Martha won't like my asking, but who's paying for all this? I mean, Clark's been back at work for two weeks, maybe. Does he even have insurance? I've seen that room, that kind of medicine isn't cheap."

"Don't worry about it, Mr. Hubbard," Kitty assured him. "Between the Planet, STAR Labs and various other agencies, I promise it'll all be taken care of."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

Henderson turned to Lois before heading for the door. "I'll see you at my office tomorrow to take your statement."

"I'll be there," Lois promised.

"Let Clark know we're praying for him," Henderson instructed.

"I will," Lois assured him.

The guard opened the door to the medical center and let Lois and Jason in.

Inside the outer chamber, Lois slipped on a gown and found the small one they had for Jason. He made a face as he slipped his on and waited for Lois to tie the ribbons for him. That done, Lois picked him up, knocked on the inner door and waited.

A different nurse opened the door this time. "Miss Lane and Jason, I presume," she said. "I'm Franci Vaness. Mrs. Kent is already here."

Lois had already recognized the older woman standing beside the bed. She was the one from the vigil outside the hospital, the one who had touched her arm, telling her Superman would be okay, but wouldn't say how she knew that. It was clearer now.

"Hello Miss Lane," Martha greeted her. The older woman looked tired, washed out, eyes colorless behind the lenses of her glasses. "You must be Jason."

Jason nodded politely. "You must be Grandma Kent."

The silver haired woman nodded, giving him a sweet smile. "That's right. But you can call me Grandma Martha. I'm Clark's mommy. And he's told me he's your daddy."

"My daddy's dead. Bad men killed him," Jason told her solemnly. "Unca' Clark's my *other* daddy. And bad men are trying to kill him too, just like that bad bald man who tried to hurt Superman."

"Well, that bad bald man is dead and can't hurt anybody anymore, remember?" Lois asked. "And we're not going to let those bad men hurt Clark *or* Superman, are we?"

Jason shook his head.

Martha gazed at him, brushing his brown hair away from his face. "You do look a lot like he did at your age." She looked back at her son, lying unmoving in the hospital bed. "I never thought I'd live to see a grandchild. Of course, I never thought I'd see my son in a hospital bed, either." She reached out with one arthritic hand to touch him. "My poor baby," she murmured. "Why is it the good ones are the ones to get hurt?"

"Tell me again how your people handled that little assignment I gave you?" Straker grated into the phone in his hand. He was watching the monitor on his desk, watching the feed from the security cameras in the ICU at STAR Labs. His security clearance wasn't high enough for him to legitimately have access to the security sections of the main frame, but one of his first self assigned chores on arriving at STAR Labs was to create a backdoor for himself into the main system. It was strictly against company policy to feed the information outside of the building, but he really didn't care - *in for a penny, in for a pound*.

"We had a good shot at the kid, sir. I swear it. He went down," the voice on the phone protested.

"If you had a clear shot and took it, how can he be at STAR Labs with his mother?"

"That's impossible!" the voice said. "The kid went down!"

"You missed," Straker said. "Now, what would you have me do?"

"I won't fail you again, Commander," the voice said.

"I know you won't," Straker told him, hanging up the phone.

He looked over at Lake and Foster, both waiting for him to finish his phone conversation.

"Well?" Straker asked.

"Graves has always been reliable," Lake reminded him.

"The boy is alive. Either Graves missed or something else happened," Straker said. "So, what is that something else? Could Luthor have been right after all?"

"If Luthor was right, why aren't there more like him around, more Kryptonian half-breeds? Why haven't we seen any? The alien's at least thirty years old and assuming his maturation rate is somewhat similar to a human's, he could have fourteen year-old offspring somewhere on the Earth," Lake said. "I mean, if you're going to rebuild your race, you need as much of a population as you can get."

"So you still maintain that Luthor was wrong. That Superman is too alien to breed with a human woman?" Straker asked.

"I see no reason to change my opinion. I doubt he could breed without at least the same level of genetic manipulation our aliens needed to use," Lake said. "And if you're using advanced genetics, you don't create something as flawed as that child."

"Then explain how Kent can be sensitive to kryptonite? The Daily Planet claims Superman made the statement that Kryptonians came to Earth and left offspring many generations ago," Straker reminded her.

"If that's true, then I can only assume that when they came, they did use advanced genetics in an attempt to create a master race and abandoned the project for some unknown reason," Lake said. "Just because they may have left superior specimens on Earth doesn't mean those bred true or weren't diluted by human genes. Kent may be part Kryptonian, but he's hardly an example of a superior species."

"So, what should we do about the boy?" Straker asked. "Graves's failure has alerted the police that he's a target. They won't let us get that close again."

"The police have already taken his statement," Foster pointed out. "Another attempt on him will merely let them know we think he's dangerous to us. His testimony by itself will be useless except to support what Kent can tell them. Assuming he ever gets the chance."

"So, Colonel, shall we make sure he doesn't get a chance?" Straker said.

"I don't have clearance for STAR Labs," Foster reminded him. "And under the current climate, I doubt I'd be able to get it. Both Henderson and Leocadio are hand-picking the security details, so that's no joy. We can't send Ginny here in because there's Planet staff around who could recognize her as Kraus."

"You're saying it's up to me?" Straker asked.

Foster shrugged. "That or we wait for them to release him. He'll be a much easier target outside of STAR Labs."

Straker nodded thoughtfully. "I'll think about it. In the meantime, I want one of you to get onto Captain Carlin, see what he's found, if anything. Report back to me."

"Of course, sir."

"Oh, and Paul, that was the last time Graves will fail us. See to that he's made 'useful'."

"With pleasure, sir."

Timo Virtanen was tops in his field and he knew it. Otherwise he wouldn't have been in charge of IT at Metropolis STAR Labs. He clicked his tongue in annoyance as he worked, overseeing security upgrades to the various computer networks used in the building as well as the main-frame. The huge computer was his baby and couldn't be beat for sheer storage capacity and ability to search and collate data. There was none better on the planet - at least not with human technology.

Six months before he had noted unlogged data transfers to an unknown IP address. For

six months he'd been privately logging the transfers, tracing out how contact was being made, tracking down the backdoor being used to gain access. Tracking down the computer with the unauthorized access codes.

The hacker was good, Virtanen reminded himself once again. Very good. If Virtanen had not been watching for security issues since the last major software upgrade on the system, he might have missed the clues.

He checked the program being accessed, the data being downloaded - the observation cameras in the new ICU. Nothing of interest there, except that it was a break in the usual pattern of downloading data from the various research departments, almost always data on kryptonite.

He made a mental note to call Dr. Faulkner in the morning and let her know about the hacker and the steps he was taking to track him down. Then the phone rang and he was off to deal with another 'emergency.' One of the dweebs in robotics complaining his new program wasn't working on his company laptop.

Twenty

Kitty Faulkner had put Ben in a cab for the Planet. There was nothing for him to do at STAR Labs but sit and wait outside with the police guard.

In the ICU, Lois watched Martha watching Clark's chest rise and fall in time with the respirator. The day nurse, Vaness, had brought in a boom box and some CDs. "I didn't know what he might like so I brought a selection."

"He likes almost everything, but I know he buys mostly classical, new age, jazz, and some international," Martha told her. Vaness chose a CD and put it in the player. "How does Sibelius grab you?"

"I think he'll like Sibelius just fine," Martha said. She turned to Lois. "Maybe later we can go get some of his CDs. He's got a pretty good collection."

Vaness excused herself. "I'll be back in fifteen minutes to check on him."

"What was he like, as a baby?" Lois asked as they sat. Jason was in Lois's lap, reading a book.

"He was about three when he came to us. Big blue eyes, thick black hair. Jonathan and I were so afraid someone would come for him, someone would find out how we'd found him. He was so happy and sweet, loved everybody. When he started talking pretty good, he would invite the grocery clerks home for dinner. He would tell them what I was planning to cook and he'd just invite them over."

"Did anybody ever take him up on it?"

Martha laughed, leaning forward. "Heavens no. They all knew he was just being friendly and helpful. He was always so cheerful." Her smile faded and she sat back once again. "It's hard waiting, not knowing. When Jonathan died, it was sudden. He was alive, and then he wasn't. Clark had just come home from school, they were talking, joking. Jonathan collapsed in the yard. He was dead almost before he hit the ground, massive heart attack."

"I'm sorry," Lois said.

"It was a long time ago," Martha said.

"You look tired," Lois said finally. "Why don't you go get something to eat?"

"I should find a hotel room for Ben and me."

"No," Lois said. "You can both stay with me. I've got room."

"I don't want to impose," Martha objected.

"It's not an imposition," Lois told her. "I'd really like Jason to get to know you. Get to know his grandmother."

Martha looked at the younger woman closely. "Lois, please tell me how this happened?"

Henderson looked around at what remained of the workshop/garage. It looked like a bomb had gone off in the building. In fact it had, scaring the neighbors, setting fire to the house. It had taken the fire department nearly an hour to put out the fire, keeping it from spreading through the older neighborhood with its closely packed houses.

The arson investigators were already at work, sifting through the apparent bomb factory. Henderson's team was already searching the house. Uniformed officers were canvassing the neighborhood, asking about the people who lived in the house. So far, all they had was a name, Russell Graves.

One of his detectives, Emily Douglass, came out of the house. "Boss, you gotta' see this."

Henderson followed the woman into the house, up the stairs, into the attic. Henderson stopped at the top of the access ladder. The room was partially finished. Taped drywall

covered the rafters and knee-walls and chip-board was laid on the ceiling joists of the floor below. There was no way the work had ever been seen by a building inspector. The floor sagged alarmingly under Detective Douglass's weight. There were no windows.

The knee-walls were covered in newspaper clippings, magazine articles. Every single one dealt with Superman and most were taken from the Daily Planet. Many of the articles had phrases highlighted in yellow, pink and green highlighter. There were two large folding tables beneath hanging utility fluorescents. The wiring looked more than a little suspect.

Henderson gingerly made his way to the first table. Among the papers scattered on the table were schematics for bombs, detailed drawings of the Clinton Bridge and the Mazik Building, schematics for the security system. Timetables detailing the movements of the security guards and the attackers in the Mazik robbery. Another set of timetables, this one dealing with the attack on the Clinton Bridge.

There was a notation on that sheet to call Mark Hadwyn at WGBS. A phone number had been hastily written next to Hadwyn's name.

"There's everything to show this was the place the Mazik robbery was planned," Douglass said. "And look what I found behind that wall." She held up a canvas bag, shaking it. It sounded like it was filled with gravel. "I'm guessing this is part of the take from the Mazik robbery."

"Make sure it gets properly signed in as evidence," Henderson reminded her with a smile. He beckoned her to follow him out to his car.

His expression turned more thoughtful. "The people who set this up want us to believe Graves planned and executed those operations. They're willing to give up that much in loose diamonds to convince us not to look any further."

"You're not buying it, Boss?"

"No. This whole thing stinks. Do you honestly think Graves masterminded the Mazik robbery and the Clinton Bridge as well as getting the explosives from Camp Pennington last year?"

"Well, we haven't had time to run a background check on him," Douglass reminded him. "I'll put a rush on it."

"Do that," Henderson said, getting into his car.

"By the way, have you heard?" Douglass asked. "Luthor's body was stolen from the morgue sometime last night."

"Who the devil would want his body?" Henderson demanded.

Douglass shrugged. "Hopefully somebody who wants to bury him at a crossroads with a stake through his heart."

Peter Carlin had commanded this strange combination of submarine and fighter launch platform for over twenty-six years. He was a triple ace with better than thirty kills, all alien craft from a race that considered humans as little more than harvestable animals. SHADO had not discovered the name of the invading race and it was likely it never would. The attacks, the abductions, the mutilations had stopped in the mid-eighties, nearly twenty years ago.

SHADO had maintained its watch over the planet for over a decade after the last verified alien attack. Its operatives and equipment grew older, more worn as time passed. Its funding was scaled back, by small amounts at first, then down to bare maintenance levels, and finally, SHADO was ordered to shut down, ordered to dismantle its network, divest itself of land and equipment.

Still, Carlin stayed on, patrolling the oceans with a four person crew, still watching, waiting for the return of the aliens SHADO had been formed to fight. At fifty-four he was tired. His ship was tired. His crew was tired. Sky-Diver had been designed to stay on patrol for three months at a time, watching coastlines, patrolling the sea lanes. Now, after years of cannibalizing its sister ships for parts, it could barely manage three weeks.

Carlin checked his navigation charts. After nearly four days at top speed, they'd reached the edge of the arctic ice pack. His charts, made by himself and his fellow Sky-Diver captains when SHADO was still a force in the world, indicated there was a deep ocean valley north-east of the Bering Strait and that was the most logical place to begin his search.

They surfaced to send a message to headquarters.

"Sky-Diver to Command, Carlin here," he announced into the microphone. "We have arrived at the initial coordinates and are beginning our search."

"Command to Sky-Diver," Paul Foster's voice came over the speaker. Security protocols designed twenty years before confirmed both location and identity of the voice. "Message received. Contact us when you've found it, and good hunting."

"Will do, Paul, Carlin out." Carlin turned off the radio receiver. After a moment, he turned to his crew, three youngsters who should have been in college who chose to ship out on an adventure on a private submarine rather than face the discipline of the real Navy.

"Set course 25 degrees starboard, full speed," Carlin ordered. The helmsman on the upper deck set the course and speed and confirmed his instructions. Carlin could feel the boat move beneath him; feel the change in depth as they dove to clear the ice.

"So, what are we hunting?" one of the youngsters asked.

Carlin had been under orders to keep their mission a secret, but now it seemed a little foolish not to tell them. "We're looking for Superman's spaceship. The one he came back to Earth with."

"But, why?" the youngster asked.

"Because Superman is an alien, and our job is to hunt down aliens and alien technology."

"But, Superman?"

"If you have a problem with that, Carlisle, you can get out and walk."

No answer.

"Keep an eye on the sonar and wake me if you spot anything anomalous on the seabed," Carlin ordered. He then went into his cabin, closed the hatch and pulled out a bottle of whiskey so he could sleep without too many nightmares.

"Before Clark took off for wherever, I finally put two and two together. I realized that what I'd admired about Superman wasn't the powers, but what he chose to do with them," Lois said. Her voice was soft as she remembered. "It was his integrity, his willingness to put others ahead of himself, his willingness to put himself on the line, to simply help when others wouldn't or couldn't."

Martha listened. Jason had dozed off on his mother's lap, but his breathing was a little labored. Odd, he'd been doing really well. The last time he'd needed his inhaler was when...*when Clark was being poisoned by kryptonite in the ventilation system yesterday.*

Lois handed Jason to his grandmother, picked up the phone in the ICU and tapped in the extension number for Kitty Faulkner. "Kitty, I think we have a problem. I think there may be kryptonite in here again." She looked over at Clark, still drugged into unconsciousness. He looked paler than before, or was it her imagination? The heart monitor showed an increase in

heart rate and a drop in blood pressure. She didn't know what it meant, but somehow she knew it wasn't good.

Kitty was inside the ICU within minutes, Bridgette Crosby following close behind her.

"Where is the nurse?"

"She left a little while ago," Lois said. "She said she'd be back."

Bridgette checked her patient, rolling him in onto his side as Kitty inspected the various monitors. After a moment, Kitty flipped several switches, swearing as she did so. Bridgette, Lois, and Martha all gave her concerned, curious looks as one of the alarms wailed. She turned that one off again. Jason looked around sleepily, worried at the sudden noise.

"Someone turned off the alarms," Kitty explained. "It wasn't an accident." She went to the phone, picked it up and keyed a number. "Security, this is Faulkner. Locate and detain Franci Vaness... She what...? Thanks." Kitty turned to Lois. "Vaness left the building ten minutes ago."

"He's bleeding internally again," Bridgette said. She held out her hand to show what she had found. A glowing green gem about half the size of a marble was laying on a gauze dressing. She pulled out a piece of soft gray metal and folded it around the stone, dropping it into her pocket. Then she went over and turned the kryptonite alarm back on. Silence.

"You always carry lead foil in your pocket, Bridgie?" Kitty asked.

"I do when I think there's green radioactive rocks around," Bridgette stated.

"I'll tell Bernie to get ready for surgery," Kitty said. "But we need an anesthetist. Vaness was ours."

"I'll see if I can get one from Met General," Bridgette told her. "If we can't, I can do it, but I'd rather not. I'm not certified."

Lois took a deep breath. She turned to Martha as she pulled her keys out of her pocket, taking one key off the ring. "Martha, please take Jason home. Three-one-two Riverside Drive. Here's a key. I'll be there as soon as I have a handle on this."

"I'd rather stay," Martha said.

"I don't want Jason here in case...you know."

"Are you sure?" Martha asked.

Lois nodded. Martha took Jason by the hand and walked out the door of the ICU. Martha left her gown in the entrance area, and helped Jason remove his. They both disappeared through the outer door.

"Kitty, we need to do something," Lois said grimly. "This can't keep going on."

Kitty Faulkner nodded. "But what, exactly, do you suggest?"

"I'm not sure," Lois admitted. "But whatever it is, we'd better do it soon, before they finish off what they started."

Kitty's pager buzzed. She hit the acknowledge button and went to the phone. She listened for a moment. "Okay, take him to my office. I'll have someone there in a few minutes." She hung up the phone. "There's a General Sam Lane in the main lobby, looking for you," she told Lois.

"My father," Lois explained, then her eyes widened. "Kitty, I have an idea."

Perry looked around his newsroom. Lois was still out, waiting vigil at STAR Labs. Clark was still in critical condition. Richard was dead which left an opening for an assistant editor.

Chris and Marie, Richard's brother and sister-in-law were at Perry's house with Alice. Richard's funeral service was scheduled for Saturday morning. He just hoped there wasn't

going to be another funeral this coming week.

It was hard when Norm Parker died of a heart attack in the middle of the newsroom floor. Everyone knew Norm had already had one attack and his doctor had told him to slow down. Everyone knew Norm had ignored his doctor's advice to lose weight and quit smoking. He'd had chest pains which he dismissed as heart burn. But Norm had been nearly sixty when he died.

Richard was thirty-five and Clark was thirty-four. Both men were too young to die like that, murdered for doing their jobs. Murdered for seeking the truth.

The rest of the staff was more subdued than usual. There'd been no Superman sightings anywhere in the world for nearly forty-eight hours, not since putting out the forest fire at the park Tuesday night. Current speculation was that he'd been captured, possibly killed, by Luthor and his confederates. He'd been back in action for less than two weeks.

Perry assigned Polly to the continuing Superman story. Normally it would have been Lois covering it, but right now, with everything that had happened Perry wouldn't dream of being so cruel.

Richard's death was tearing the heart out of his newsroom. Clark's death would tear his own heart out. And if Clark died, they'd have to announce Superman's death as well in a carefully concocted fiction that confirmed the speculation that had already been published. Perry had the rough draft already in his documents folder.

Metropolis would find itself in mourning for the one truly good and selfless man, who, although he hadn't been born on Earth, had made Metropolis his home and had done everything in his immense power to keep the city and its people safe from harm. Metropolis would mourn for its favorite son, murdered by those who would not tolerate the embodiment of good to remain in the world. *They used to crucify saints, now they die of bullets made with kryptonite.*

Lois entered Kitty Faulkner's office to find her father waiting. It was almost strange to see him in civilian clothes. All through her childhood, she barely remembered him ever wearing sports shirts and chinos. But here he was, doing his best to look like a civilian.

"How is he?" Lane asked.

"Are you asking because you really want to know, or are you being polite?" Lois asked.

Lane sighed. "I really want to know, honey. Commander Hodgkiss told me off when I was, how should I put it? Less than respectful concerning your partner. That officer thinks very highly of Kent. It has occurred to me that I may have been hasty in my judgment of the man."

"I guess there's a first time for everything," Lois commented. "They're taking Clark back into surgery. There've been two attempts on his life, so far." As she spoke, she turned on the monitor screen on the wall and started paging through the security cameras to find the operating room. She'd watched Kitty do it. It wasn't that hard.

Her father stopped to watch the screen. "Stop," he ordered sharply. "Go back one."

She hit the button on the remote and the screen changed to show a hallway with a man in surgical scrubs approaching the door to the OR prep room.

"I know that man," Lane said. "That is Peter Franklin. The officer involved in the munitions thefts."

"The one you told Clark about?" Lois confirmed. Lane stared at the screen and nodded.

"What the devil is he doing here, dressed like a doctor?" Lane asked.

"That is a very good question, Dad," Lois answered as she picked up the phone on Kitty

Faulkner's desk and punched in the extension for STAR Labs security. "This is Lois Lane. I'm in Doctor Faulkner's office looking at the security monitor. There is an intruder just outside the new medical suite. Looks like he's heading to the OR."

"We're on it, Ms. Lane," the man on the phone said. On the screen, Lois and her father watched as a two man security team rounded a corner and confronted Peter Franklin. They watched in horror as Franklin pulled out a gun.

Paul Foster had returned to Straker's office after talking with Peter Carlin. Straker gazed at him with ice blue eyes, listening to his report. Then the older man steepled his hands, resting his elbows on the cheap desk.

"I've just received word that Kent's condition has worsened and he needs surgery again," the white haired man said. He didn't sound disappointed at the news.

"And?" Foster prompted.

"Their anesthetist is missing," Straker said. "It's late enough; they may not find one at Metropolis General."

"And you'd like me to go over there and help as much as I can?" Foster asked with an unpleasant smile of anticipation.

"Exactly," Straker agreed.

Ten minutes later, Foster found himself ushered past STAR Labs security, dressed in surgical scrubs, his pistol safely hidden beneath his loose shirt. The security system accepted his forged identification as Laslo Finch, nurse-anesthetist from one of the Metropolis General medical clinics.

He'd almost made it to the prep area adjacent the medical center operating room when he was intercepted by a security team. He considered his options in the space of time it took for the security men to order him to stop and put his hands up. He made his decision. It would take less than ten seconds for him to pull his gun, run into the operating room past the skeleton crew they had working this evening and shoot Kent.

He pulled his gun and a shot rang out. He felt pressure in his chest and looked down to see blood on his shirt. As he hit the floor, he was vaguely aware that the two guards seemed astonished at the sound of the shot.

"What the fuck?" Lane said aloud as he and Lois watched the man he knew as Franklin hit the floor, shot through the chest.

On the screen one of the security men checked Franklin's body while the other pulled his gun and started after the shooter. Within minutes he was back, shaking his head. The shooter was gone.

"Even with all the security cameras, this place is like a maze," Lois commented. "The shooter could be anywhere, any one of twelve hundred people." She turned to her father. "Dad, I need your help to get Clark away from here. Inspector Henderson figured with all their security, the bad guys wouldn't be able to get to him or they would leave traces the cops could follow. Henderson was wrong."

"Pennington has a good medical center. I could arrange for a transfer there," Lane suggested.

"Unfortunately Clark's positively phobic when it comes to hospitals. And waking up in one at a military base will absolutely drive him off the deep end."

"We don't have a lot of options, then," Lane pointed out.

"Check him into Met General, but under another name. At least when he wakes up, he'll know he can escape if he needs to," Lois told him.

"'Escape' is a strong word there." Lane chuckled.

"No, it isn't. You weren't here when he came out of anesthesia the first time. Dad, he would have willingly killed himself to get away from here. And he considered this safer than Met General."

"Okay honey, what have you got in mind; and what do you need me to do?"

She told him.

"You know, Lois, you missed your calling," he said when she was finished. "You should have been a military planner."

"Dad, I'm better than that," she said. "I'm a working mom."

Sam Lane gave his elder daughter a peck on the cheek and left to carry out her orders.

Lois sat down in Kitty's office chair and watched the surgery, hoping the plans she and her father put together would be enough to keep Clark Kent alive.

The first time she'd watched surgery from Kitty's office, the surgical team had joked, talked amongst themselves, just like on TV. This time, the team was smaller and there was little talking beyond what was absolutely necessary to do their work.

Finally, surgery was finished. The surgical team was preparing their patient to be returned to the ICU when the heart monitor started to show irregularities. A flurry of activity, then flat-line. Kitty Faulkner pulled the surgical mask off her face and looked up at the observation camera. "Miss Lane, I'm sorry. We did everything we could. I'm calling this at six-fifteen."

Behind her, Lois could see the surgeon give Kitty a puzzled look and move forward, as though to protest. Bridgette put out a hand to stop him, shaking her head, motioning him to leave the room. "We'll finish this, Bernie," she heard Bridgette say. With one last look back, Bernie walked out, shaking his head.

From the office, Lois turned off the camera and microphones in the operating room. As hard as it had been to watch, the next step was going to be even harder. She picked up the phone and punched in Perry White's private line.

"Perry White," Perry answered his phone. It was well after the time he usually left for home, but the past few days he'd found he couldn't leave. It wasn't that he was keeping an eye on a breaking story. Luthor's death no longer qualified as a breaking investigation. He was killed while attempting to commit murder. It was the nightmares, that he hadn't done enough to keep Richard and Clark safe, although in all fairness, keeping Clark safe seemed more God's job than anyone else's.

"Perry, it's Lois. I need you to do me a favor," Lois's voice said over the handset. Caller ID confirmed the call was coming from STAR Labs.

"What do you need, hon'?" Perry asked.

"Run Clark's obituary in tomorrow's paper. Doctor Faulkner called his death at six-fifteen tonight."

Perry tried to keep the tremor out of his voice. "And what should we say he died of?"

"Complications," Lois said. "Luthor murdered him."

"Are we also announcing Superman's death as well?" he asked, afraid to hear her answer.

"They haven't found his body yet, have they?" she asked.

"No."

"Then there's a chance he's still alive," she told him. "Perry, I'm going to take the next

couple days off."

"I understand," Perry said. "Richard's funeral is scheduled for Saturday morning. I'll have Alice get in touch with you so the two of you can work out some of the details... Lois, what about Clark?"

"I need to talk to his mom before we do anything," Lois said. "I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Yeah," Perry said as Lois rang off. Perry hung up his own phone then put his head in his hands. After a long moment he stood and went to the door of his office. He looked around the sparsely occupied bullpen. Polly was still working at her desk.

"Polly, Clark's obituary is running tomorrow. I'm told he died at six-fifteen at STAR Labs. Complications, Lois said," Perry told her. Polly visibly paled at the news.

"Does Jimmy know yet?"

Perry shook his head. "I'll let him know."

Twenty One

Bill Henderson was at Dulin's Bar having a well deserved beer before heading home. His wife was visiting their son and daughter-in-law in California, welcoming their first child. She would be back in a week or so, but in the meantime, the house was empty, cold. Even sitting in a bar with Lupe the Wolf was better than an empty house.

Lupe poured another glass for him out of the pitcher on the table. "Has forensics got anything more on that fellow who blew himself up?"

"They confirmed the explosives were the same as what Superman found on the bridge. But you already knew that. The diamonds came from the Mazik robbery," Henderson said. "Initial background check says he was even at Pennington about the time the explosives disappeared."

"And you don't buy a word of it," Lupe observed.

Henderson sipped his beer, shook his head. "Graves was a small time hood. He didn't have the resources or intelligence to pull either caper off. The Mazik job was military through and through."

"Luthor could have pulled it off, and he had the habit of leaving his underlings holding the bag," Lupe reminded him.

"But Luthor's dead, even though his body's gone missing. And neither operation was his style," Henderson observed. "Which means somebody else is pulling the strings. SHADO maybe. Somebody Kent and Lane seriously ticked off."

"Kent maybe, but they weren't shooting at Lane this morning," Lupe told him. "They were going after the boy. And I have no idea how they missed."

Henderson's cell phone buzzed. "Yes...? I'll be right there." He folded up his phone. "There's been a shooting at STAR Labs."

The dark van backed into the parking space beside the one of the side doors to STAR Labs and opened the backdoors.

Kitty Faulkner disabled the alarm on the side door and opened it, allowing two security guards to push a gurney holding a body in a black body bag out the door toward the van. General Lane followed the body, helping the guards collapse the gurney and lift it in to the green uniformed attendant waiting in the van.

He nodded to the police officers arriving to investigate the reported shooting. Then he climbed into the van, shutting the doors behind him. The van driver started the engine and they drove off.

Inside the van Lane unzipped the bag, revealing its still unconscious occupant. Lane adjusted the oxygen mask that covered the patient's nose and mouth, making sure the seal was good.

"Mind telling me what's going on?" Doctor Mark Watson asked his old friend. The two men had served together for a long time. Watson had even delivered both of Lane's daughters.

"You know about the shootings up at Manahasset, right?"

"Yeah, your daughter's ex-partner wasn't it? The loser?"

Lane nodded to the body on the gurney. "The über-dork? That's him. The local witness protection program wasn't working, so Lois called in the cavalry."

Watson did a quick check of his new patient's vital signs; then glanced over the records on the metal clip board that had been slipped onto the gurney. "When was the last surgery?"

"Half an hour ago. Doctor Faulkner wanted me to tell you he has a very high threshold for

pain killers. She figured he'd be conscious before we reached the transfer," Lane told him.

"She's sure he's not a druggie?"

"Positive," Lane said. As he spoke, he saw Clark's eyes open. There was no recognition, no real awareness even, just a sense of puzzlement that was rapidly turning over into pained confusion and fear. Lane reached out with both hands to hold his head, to keep him from moving, from hurting himself. "Clark, it's okay, son. It's okay, there's nothing to worry about. We won't let anything happen to you. I promised Lois I would keep you safe. Just relax, let us help you. It's okay, son."

As Lane tried to calm him, Watson filled a syringe and found a good vein. Slowly, Clark began to relax beneath his hands. His breathing became easier as he stopped fighting the restraints.

"You may have missed your calling, Sam," Watson joked.

He hurt. Pain burned in his belly, his chest. It was hard to breathe. There was cool air along with the pressure of something held against his face. He didn't want anything against his face. He tried to move away from the pressure, but something stopped him, hands holding him, keeping him from moving away. Keeping him from moving. Keeping him from flying.

He wanted to fly. Away from the pain, away from the hands, away from the voices. Where was Lois? He was sure he had heard her in the midst of the pain, the brightness. Telling him it would be okay, that everything was going to be better, the pain would go away. He couldn't hear her, couldn't hear her voice, her heartbeat. LOIS!

Another voice, a man's voice. Dad? Father? That voice too kept saying it would be okay, not to worry, everything would get better. He felt the bite of a needle against his skin. More pain. He could feel rough fabric wrapped around him, slick plastic cocooning him, keeping him warm. Then, finally after a moment, after an eternity, the pain lessened a little and he could breathe.

The voice stopped.

Father, please don't go. Don't leave me.

Lois, where are you?

Henderson knelt down by the body in the STAR Labs corridor. Lupe stood over him, watching.

"So, neither of you had any place better to be tonight?" Jeremy Banks, STAR Labs head of security asked as he watched them. Banks was good at his job, despite his apparent failures the past few days.

"Nope," Lupe answered for both of them. "Got an ID on him?"

"According to General Lane, he was Peter Franklin, colonel, US Army."

"General Lane was where?" Henderson asked. He was surprised to find out the military man was in Metropolis.

"Lane's the one who spotted him on the security monitor. Another couple seconds, he would have been in the OR," Banks said. "Not that it would have made much of a difference. That special patient up and died on the operating table."

Henderson just stared at the other man. "Kent is dead?"

Banks nodded. "Yeah. They've already taken the body away."

"Where?" Lupe asked.

Banks shrugged. "Faulkner arranged it. I know better than to ask questions like that."

Lois paid the cab driver as she got out in front of her house. Martha was standing in the door with Jason as she opened the little white gate and walked up the front walkway.

"Perry called," Martha began as she came closer. The older woman's worry written in wide strokes across her face. "Is it true?"

Lois shook her head as Martha stepped back, letting her into the house. Lois tossed her bag on the sofa and pulled off her shoes. "No. We're moving him to Metropolis General. But, I did ask Perry to run his obituary, to throw off the bad guys. My dad agreed to help, which is something of a miracle unto itself."

Lois crouched down and put her arms out to Jason, who ran into her arms. "Unca' Clark's gonna be okay? And Grandpa Sam is going to help?"

"I think so, munchkin," Lois said, giving him a hug. "Have you eaten?"

Jason nodded. "Grandma Martha's a good cook. We had chicken and veggies and rice and she made dessert and she helped me with my homework."

"Your homework?" Lois gave Martha a questioning look.

"Mrs. Morgan stopped by and dropped it off for him," Martha explained. "She seemed very understanding of the whole thing. I have some leftovers for you, if you're hungry."

"That sounds good," Lois admitted and followed the older woman to the kitchen for the first home cooked meal she'd had in nearly a week.

The dark van pulled into the Daily Planet parking garage and parked next to the private ambulance that was waiting. The driver of the dark van helped the two older men transfer the gurney with its again unconscious passenger into the ambulance.

The ambulance pulled out of garage and disappeared around the corner, heading for Metropolis General Hospital.

Ten minutes later, the dark van drove out the garage exit, heading in the opposite direction, towards Ordway Drive, then west and north, to the suburbs.

The ambulance pulled in front of the emergency room entrance. The ambulance driver helped the two men pull the gurney out of the back and wheeled it into the admissions area.

The admissions nurse came around her desk to meet them. "Is this the patient being transferred from Benton Community Hospital?" Benton was a small community about seventy-miles north of Metropolis, not too far Camp Pennington.

Watson nodded. "Yeah."

"Patient's name?" she asked, preparing to write the information on the form in her hand.

Lois had given her father the various pseudonyms Clark had used when working undercover. She had told him she preferred the 'Charles King' one.

"Lawrence Samuel Lane," the general answered. They would work out the rest of the details later. He noticed the odd look Watson was giving him.

The nurse handed Lane the form to fill out as two orderlies hurried up and took possession of the gurney. "The trauma unit's expecting the patient," the nurse told them. They disappeared into the elevator.

Lane read over the form he was expected to fill out. Name, already filled in. Birth date, Lane knew that from Lois, but he shaved a few years off. No sense making it easy to find him. Allergies? Lois was allergic to bees and to penicillin, so he wrote that down. Jason had asthma and he didn't figure the boy got it from Lois, so Lane wrote that down for 'Larry' as well. Whether true or not, it wouldn't hurt him. The rest he filled out with little difficulty, handing it back to the nurse.

Watson stepped over to his friend. "Lawrence Lane? For the über dork?"

"I promised Lois to get him here and keep him safe. I figure nobody's going to be looking for Lois's fictional kid brother, and not too many civilians are willing to buck an army general when he says something," Lane said with a grim smile. "Besides, hospital rules would keep Lois from seeing 'Charlie King.' They can't say a damn thing about her visiting her brother."

"And what changed your mind about him?"

"He took four slugs in the back while protecting some else. He didn't have to be out doing what he did and he knew the danger, maybe better than the cops did. It certainly wasn't something I'd order a man to do," Lane said. "It wasn't the action of a coward."

"So you're admitting you were wrong?" Watson found a smile forming on his face.

Lane glared at him. "I still don't like his politics."

Jimmy Olsen looked over at the bottle of scotch on the table in front of him. He wasn't drunk. He was positive he wasn't drunk because he still hurt too much.

He'd just gotten home to his empty studio apartment when Perry White called. "Lois just called me. Clark died on the operating table," Perry told him. "But she seemed pretty sure there was still hope of finding Superman."

"Thanks, Chief," Jimmy had muttered before hanging up the phone. CK was dead. He hadn't even had a chance to say good bye to his friend. *First CK disappears for six years then he dies.* He was thirty-four and looked younger. It wasn't right for a guy to check out before thirty-five. *It's not fair.* Great, Superman might be okay, but that wasn't going to help CK. Where was Superman when Luthor shot him? *Oh, yeah, kryptonite. Luthor's kryptonite kept Superman from saving his friend. Has anybody told Superman that Clark Kent's dead?*

Jimmy didn't remember how he got to the Ace O' Clubs. Bo was there, as usual. Jimmy ordered his usual, but Bo seemed concerned. "Troubles?" the bartender asked.

Jimmy nodded. "Remember the guy that came in with me a couple weeks ago? The tall one?"

Bo nodded. Jimmy suspected he didn't remember. CK wasn't very memorable. Too quiet, too mild, *invisible*. Clark Kent, the invisible man. The tall fellow in the back that wasn't there, again.

"He died tonight," Jimmy told the bartender. "Lex Luthor shot him and it took him two days to die. I never even got a chance to say good bye."

Bo pulled out a bottle and a glass. He opened the bottle and filled the glass, setting it in front of Jimmy. "I normally don't recommend drowning your sorrows. But it sounds like you've had a real bad week."

"Yeah, a real bad week," Jimmy agreed.

After half a bottle Jimmy was still not drunk. He pulled out his cell phone and found Lois's number.

Lois picked up on the first ring. "Yes, Jimmy?"

"You didn't let me say good bye to him," Jimmy slurred.

"Jimmy, are you drunk?"

"I'm trying," he said. "I'm trying real hard. He was my friend too, ya' know."

"Jimmy, where are you?"

"The Ace O' Clubs," Jimmy told her.

"Jimmy have some coffee, sober up a little, then meet me at Met General Hospital," Lois instructed.

"Why?" Jimmy demanded.

"Because I asked you to. Because I want you to visit somebody," Lois said.

Jimmy was waiting for her at the hospital. At least he seemed less drunk than he had on the phone. "Who are we visiting?"

"My brother, Larry," Lois said, taking his elbow and leading him into the elevator.

"Lois, you don't have a brother," Jimmy told her as the elevator doors closed.

"Luckily, you and Perry are about the only ones around here who know that."

The elevator doors opened onto an upper floor in the hospital. She walked over to the nurses' station. "Larry Lane's room, please?"

The attendant directed her down the hall. "Family only, I'm afraid," the attendant added.

"I'm his sister, Lois," Lois told her. She nodded in Jimmy's direction. "He's a cousin."

The attendant nodded and Lois and Jimmy continued down the white hallway.

She pushed open the designated door and walked in. "Dad?"

"Here, honey," Sam Lane said. The room was dimly lit. The EKG beeped slowly, forty beats a minute. The table lamp on the bedside table was on and Lane set the book he was reading next to the lamp.

Lois pushed the privacy curtain further aside and beckoned Jimmy to follow her.

"CK?" Jimmy murmured as he caught sight of the person in the hospital bed. He turned bleary eyes on Lois "He's alive?"

Lois nodded. "I'm sorry, Jimmy," she said. "I should have told you myself. This was the only way to throw whoever wants him dead off the track. Please don't tell anyone at work."

"Sure," Jimmy said. "No problem." He stepped closer to the bed. "CK?"

Lois's father was seated in the armchair on the far side of the bed, where he could watch the door as well as keeping an eye on the person in the bed. Lois eyed the rack of monitors beside the bed. An EEG had been added to the mix, electrode wires snaking through thick black hair. "How is he?"

Lane sighed. "As well as can be expected, I guess. Doctor Bryant checked him over when they brought him up here. Put himself down as the attending. He's healing up well, which is good, and he started to regain consciousness on the way over here. Doc Watson gave him something for the pain, but he hasn't woken up since. Bryant had a neurologist come in and they've got more tests scheduled in the morning. He isn't in a coma, he isn't catatonic. He's just in a very deep sleep and he won't wake up."

Jimmy had reached under the green blanket to take Clark's hand. He looked like he couldn't decide whether he should be relieved or worried. His lips were moving, but Lois couldn't hear what he was saying to Clark. She thought she saw tears on his face. *Does Clark know how much Jimmy cares for him?*

"Did Bryant say anything else?" Lois asked her father, keeping her voice low.

"Only that he probably shouldn't be left alone. Bryant said something about they didn't approve of patients simply walking out, and doors being preferable to windows, whatever that means." Lane gave Lois a bemused smile. The EKG beeped its incessant rhythm. Green lines on the EEG drew slow wavy patterns across the screen.

"I told you, he's phobic about hospitals. Doesn't even like doctors much," Lois said.

Lane checked his watch. "I have to get back to base. I can only go AWOL for so long before they figure out they don't really need me." He stood to leave. "Let me know when Richard's funeral is, okay punkin'?"

"Saturday morning sometime," Lois said. "Perry's handling it. I'll call you with the details. Could you make sure Mom knows?"

"No problem. I talked to her yesterday, she's flying in tomorrow," he said, starting for the door. He paused. "Lois, I want you to know, I know it's too soon for you to be making any decisions. But, in the future, if you do choose to take up with *him*," he said, pointing his chin to the man in the bed. "I promise to at least try to keep an open mind about him."

"That's all I've ever asked, Dad. And thanks," Lois said. She gave her father a peck on the cheek and he left.

She turned back to Jimmy. He was drying his face with his free hand. "Jim, his doctor doesn't want him left alone. Do you think you could help out?"

"Sure," Jimmy said. He looked surprised. "I can come in for a while after work. Sit with him. I can stay now, if you want. You look all done in."

"Thanks, Jimmy. You're a pal. I'll try to get someone to relieve you in a couple hours. Want me to bring you some magazines, or a book before I leave?"

Jimmy picked up the book Lois's father had left. The **Silmarillion**. "I think this'll be enough to keep me for a while," Jimmy said with a grin. "I just hope there's coffee around here somewhere."

Lois looked at herself in the full length mirror inside the closet door. Black was an okay color on her normally, but today it made her skin look sallow, pale. She wanted to hide her eyes behind dark glasses, to hide the dark rings, the puffiness, but it was October and a cloudy day at that. The weather guessers were predicting rain today, snow before the end of next week.

The last two, three days were a blur. She'd finally made her statement to the police about the events of Tuesday and Wednesday. What she knew of Richard's death, Clark being shot, her shooting and killing Lex Luthor. Then her statement about the incident Thursday on Ordway Drive. Henderson had been suspiciously considerate when she came in, asking about Jason, Mrs. Kent. He'd asked about the funeral arrangements for Richard. He *didn't* ask about arrangements for Clark. *Does he suspect?*

Martha was at the hospital with Clark this morning. The neurologist Bryant called in had examined him, found nothing that would indicate a cause for Clark being unconscious. He did say Clark's, 'Larry's', condition resembled a deep trance, but if it was, it was deeper than anything he'd seen or read about. *Maybe it's a Kryptonian thing. Doctor Faulkner thinks so. Maybe they're like Vulcans in, which episode was it? The one where Spock was shot? Maybe it was a healing trance. Maybe he'll wake up today and everything will be fine.*

"Lois, it's time to leave," Perry called up the stairway. She grabbed the little black hat with the veil Martha had found for her, and looked at her reflection on more time. She looked the part of the grieving widow. *Why don't I feel it?*

It was a short drive to the Lafayette Funeral Home, to where Richard's service was being held. The chapel was filled with flowers. Richard was well liked. His brother and sister-in-law were already waiting.

Lois stopped short when she saw the coffin was open, squeezing Jason's hand. *How do I explain to him the only daddy he's ever known is in that box? How do I explain that he'll never see him again?*

"Don't cry, Mommy," Jason said. "Grandma Martha explained it to me. That's Daddy's body, but what made Daddy *Daddy* is with God, and he's watching over us and wants us to be

happy and remember him being happy. And it's okay to miss him, 'cause Grandma misses Clark's daddy too even though he's been dead a long time..." Jason started crying and Lois picked him up into a hug. "Mommy, I miss Daddy..."

"I know, munchkin," Lois murmured, ignoring the tears that had started down her face once again, kissing her son's hair. "I miss him too."

Lois looked up to see her father accompanying her mother into the chapel. General Lane made his way over to her. "Hanging in there?" he asked. Lois nodded, spotting Bill Henderson walk in. She was surprised to see him. To her knowledge, he'd never met Richard.

"I just wanted to say again how sorry I am, we all are, at White's death," Henderson began. "I really wish it hadn't happened that way, that we'd been able to get there soon enough to stop it."

"Richard knew going in it wasn't going to be safe," Lois told him. "Neither he nor Clark knew how to do things half measure." Lois wiped at the tears on her face. Henderson pulled out a folded handkerchief and handed it to her. It smelled of laundry detergent and whatever cologne he wore.

"How's your brother doing?" he asked quietly. She froze. *He knows.*

"As well as can be expected," Lois answered slowly. *He knows.*

Henderson nodded. "Well, when he's up to it, remind him I still need a statement from him."

"I'll do that," Lois promised, watching him walk away.

The chapel was filled to standing room. Richard had a lot of friends. She even saw men in air force uniforms, his old unit, she suspected. Jimmy was there, taking pictures, oddly subdued in his dark suit, dark silk tie, so unlike his usual tweed and bow-tie.

The funeral itself was simple. Richard would have wanted it that way. A song from Enya to bring things to order. ***If I Could Be Where You Are***. Richard especially liked that album, ***Amarantine***. Funny, so did Clark. He'd just added it to his collection before... *before all this was needed.*

*Is there a way I can find you?
Is there a sign I should know?
Is there a road I could follow,
to bring you back home?
To me...**

****Lyrics written by Roma Ryan***

A second song - ***To Where You Are***. Lois had just discovered Josh Groban. Richard had promised to get them tickets for his concert in Metropolis in late February.

*Fly me up
To where you are
Beyond the distant star
I wish upon tonight
To see you smile
If only for awhile
To know you're there
A breath away's not far
To where you are*

I know you're there

*A breath away's not far
To where you are**

***Josh Groban**

"We come to celebrate the life of Richard Peregrine White..." The minister began. He was from the church she and Richard attended for Jason's sake. He droned on for a few minutes.

*Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings.
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun split clouds - and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of; wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hovering there
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air;
Up, up the long delirious burning blue
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace,
Where never lark nor even eagle flew;
And while, with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high, untrampled sanctity of space
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.**

***Fl. Officer John Gillespie McGee (1922-1941)**

Perry did the eulogy. Perry had a way with words and his words today were perfect, drawing a picture of Richard the son, the nephew, the father, the journalist, the hero, the almost husband. A man cut down from a life too short but well lived.

*You can shed tears that he is gone,
Or you can smile because he lived,
You can close your eyes and pray that he will come back,
Or you can open your eyes and see all that he has left.*

*Your heart can be empty because you can't see him
Or you can be full of the love that you shared,
You can turn your back on tomorrow and live yesterday,
Or you can be happy for tomorrow because of yesterday.*

*You can remember him and only that he is gone
Or you can cherish his memory and let it live on,
You can cry and close your mind, be empty and turn your back,
Or you can do what he would want: smile, open your eyes, love and go on.**

***David Harkins**

Too soon the drive to the cemetery, Lois sitting between Perry and Richard's brother in the limousine. Jason fidgeted in Lois's lap. It had started raining, oddly suitable for a funeral.

At the gravesite the minister hurried through the prayer and psalm, anxious to get out of the cold, the rain. Last week's heat wave had broken with a snap, bringing winter with it.

What do I do now?

Twenty Two

The first thing he was aware of was noises - the tip-tapping of a keyboard, faint beeps of a heart monitor somewhere, music playing. The second was smells - bleached linens, antiseptic combined with Lois's perfume. There was something tied across his face and upper lip and he felt a cool trace of air entering his nostrils. *Oxygen? I'm on oxygen?* After a time, he opened his eyes. The light had a warm hue and was bright enough to hurt his eyes. After a moment, his eyes adjusted and he looked around. He was in hospital room, somewhere. He had no idea where.

He tried to find the source of the tapping. His body didn't want to work but he managed to turn his head to look for the sound. Lois was sitting nearby, working on her laptop, papers piled to one side of the bed-table in front of her. He watched her for several moments. She looked like she hadn't slept in a week, and was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. She was so incredibly beautiful.

She heard his movement and looked over at him. Her face lit up. "Good morning, sleepy. You're finally awake," she observed. She set aside her computer and got up, coming closer to his bed. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm not sure," he said, discovering his voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper. "Everything hurts. What happened?"

A worried look came into her eyes. "You were shot four times, hollow points laced with kryptonite. It was touch and go there for a while. Three surgeries. You kept bleeding. Good thing you have a fairly common blood-type."

"I guess I should be glad I missed it?" There was something wrong with her statement, but he couldn't for the life of him figure out what it was.

She smiled and his world lit up. "Would you like to sit up more?"

He nodded. It was hard to speak and he was tiring. Such odd sensations, exhaustion, pain. The fuzziness in his head refused to go away. And Lois was being so attentive. It wasn't like her. He expected her attention to be caught by something else at any moment and she would disappear.

She took the controls and adjusted the head of the hospital bed to a more upright position. He tried to shift himself to a comfortable position and discovered his wrists were in nylon cuffs secured to the bed frame. A stab of terror went through him.

"If you promise not to touch the IVs and the monitor lines, I'll undo your right hand," she said.

"I promise."

She smiled and undid the Velcro that secured the padded cuff, but held onto his hand, just in case. "Doctor Bryant gave me some instructions for when you decided to rejoin the conscious."

"Okay."

"Tell me your name."

A long pause as he considered the possibilities. He had no idea what she was expecting as an answer. He didn't know which name he'd been admitted under, wherever he'd been admitted to. As if she'd read his mind she added: "The one on your birth certificate, from Kansas."

Oh, okay. "Clark Joseph Kent."

"The year?"

"Um, 2006?"

She nodded. "How old are you?"

Another pause as he calculated the number. "Thirty-four?" She seemed amused that he'd had to think about it, but he didn't think about his chronological age very often, and he knew it wasn't accurate. The Kents had simply assigned him a birthday that made sense to them when they had to fill out his paper work. Given time dilation, time slips, he could be any age according to Earth calendars. Biologically, he was actually about twenty-eight and even that was a guesstimate.

"Do you know where you are?"

"A hospital? But I have no idea which one." Lois seemed to accept his answer. He tried to get more comfortable, grimacing that his left hand was still restrained. "Why am I...?"

"Every time you started to regain consciousness, you'd start fighting the nurses and you'd try to take the lines out. At STAR Labs they had to keep you heavily sedated," she explained. She let his hand go so he could undo the other restraint by himself. "When we got you here, you wouldn't wake up. The doctors aren't sure if it was a reaction to the pain meds, or some other weird thing going on with you."

"I think I remember waking up in an ambulance, and I think I remember a helicopter, but I'm not sure if I was dreaming or not. What I remember doesn't make any sense," he said. The fuzziness was getting a little better. "So, where are we?"

"Metropolis General. You were at STAR Labs about two days. We moved you because security there wasn't up to snuff. You've been here about three days, and doing pretty well, considering. You should be dead."

"Security's better here?" he asked. That didn't make any sense.

"It is when everybody thinks you're dead," she explained.

"Oh," he murmured, trying to figure out what she really meant. Finally he mentally filed it for later, as he was doing with most of the current conversation. "How's Jason?"

"He's a real trouper. Takes after his father. Your mom's been taking care of him, spoiling him unmercifully. Telling him all sorts of stories about you as a kid. I would've never guessed you were such a wild child."

"Mom?"

"She flew out when we thought we were going to lose you," Lois explained. "She's staying at the house. There's lots of room there, since... since Richard died."

"I'm sorry. It should've been..."

"No," she interrupted him. "He knew what he was doing, and why, and for whom. He knew, Clark. He knew before he went out there with you."

"He knew what?" He was close to panic. Very close. She took his hand again and squeezed it. He tried to pull away, but he was too weak. He couldn't understand what was wrong with him. Even without powers, he should be stronger. "What did he know? Lois, what did he know?"

"A suspicion, I think. He left me a note before he left with you. He called you 'the boy scout'. That's not a nickname anyone at the Planet would use for Clark Kent, even though it does fit."

"I wish I'd... I should have..."

"Clark," her voice turned sharp. "There was nothing anyone could have done. Anyone. Maybe the two of you going out there on your own was a mistake, given the bad guys had the one thing that would keep you from doing what needed to be done. But I can't imagine either of you doing anything else, running in where angels would have the good sense not to go."

He gave her a puzzled look. "They had kryptonite, but..."

"Clark, I remember Niagara Falls and I remember Alaska. I remember all of it."

He stared at her, the oh-so-familiar deer in the headlights look on his face that she saw so often on her son. His son. Their son. He tried to pull away from her again but she wouldn't let him.

"How?" he wondered aloud, still puzzled.

"Luthor had one of the crystals on him. I have it now," she told him. "When I touched it, it was like, I don't know, like a door opening. Everything came back. Us, Jor-El, the crystal chamber, everything."

He'd gone still, watching her with wide eyes.

"I remember the look on your face when I told you I couldn't take seeing you every day. That it was killing me," she said softly. "I remember you trying to live by the rules your father laid down and how it was killing you. I remember him forcing you to make a choice, the way he looked at me for corrupting you, how he disapproved of the choices you made, choices you didn't need to make, but he made you choose anyway. You nearly died trying to live up to his expectations."

He swallowed hard, trying to understand what she was saying. "He sent me here to be an example," he said finally.

"He sent Kal-El to be an example," she corrected him.

"But I am Kal-El."

"You've been Clark Joseph Kent a lot longer," she replied. "Jor-El wanted his son to be above us primitive humans, to be better than us, purer, holier. He warned you not to interfere but made it impossible for you not to. He told you you weren't human, but he knew you would be raised as one, that you would end up human where it counts, inside your head, in your heart. If he wanted you to be celibate, he should have told you to become a priest. And even priests are allowed friends and family."

"You don't like Jor-El, do you?"

"What clues you, flyboy?"

He laid his head back on the pillow, suddenly too tired to do more. He couldn't figure out how his life ended up turned upside down *again*. Exhaustion, pain. His eyes closed and he was asleep, rousing only a little at the touch of Lois's lips against his forehead.

Bill Henderson looked through the report on his desk one more time. It was Sunday, and his wife had come home from her visit. He should have been spending time with her but she'd gone to church without him. After thirty some years she knew him too well. She knew he needed to be working on the case; that he wouldn't rest until the people who had murdered Richard White, who had tried to kill Kent *and* his son, were behind bars.

Interpol had identified the dead man at STAR Labs as Paul Allan Foster. An RAF fighter jockey turned test pilot who, after crashing a prototype fighter in 1980, changed careers and became a key man at a British film studio - Harlington-Straker Studios, SHADO's cover company. Foster had even won awards for his film work.

It was a brilliant cover, Henderson admitted, as had many before him. A film crew could go nearly anywhere. In fact local film commissions in even the most despotic countries begged for films to be made in their locales. Under the guise of a movie shoot, a crew could bring in guns, vehicles, the most outlandish equipment and no one would ever think twice about it.

And it had worked as a cover for close to thirty years; until a brilliant, exasperating,

investigative journalist from Kansas named Clark Kent exposed the studio's involvement in the illegal arms trade, earning SHADO's ire.

General Lane had also identified the dead man, but as Peter Franklin, a USAF colonel implicated in the theft of munitions from Camp Pennington just last year. The Judge Advocate General's office was currently claiming they had no knowledge of a Peter Franklin. However Lane, through his own sources, had discovered an officer matching 'Franklin's' description had gone missing from a NORAD station in North Dakota about nine days ago. The officer in question was named Paul Franks.

The local sheriff had no leads. There was no indication of violence. Franks' apartment had been untouched, nothing apparently taken. Even his shaver had been left in the bathroom, charging. The man had simply vanished. The base's CO had started to send Henderson more information on Major Franks; then he stopped, saying the case had been taken over by Air Force intelligence.

Despite two days of phone calls around the country, he hadn't found anyone who claimed to know the name of the officer supposedly now in charge of the Franks investigation. He couldn't even get a number for the office it had been allegedly assigned to. He was being stonewalled and he didn't like it. Somebody was interfering with his investigation and he didn't like that either. *What are they hiding? And what do I do about it?*

Henderson picked up the forensics report. Foster had died of a single small caliber bullet straight through his heart. A search of STAR Labs had failed to locate the gun. The security cameras in the hallway where the shot was fired had been disabled. Someone had known Foster was going to be at STAR Labs, had known where he was heading within the building, had known when he would be there, had been waiting for him.

The question was who? The next question was why? According to Foster's dossier, he should have been perfectly able to take out the two guards and kill Kent, assuming that was his mission. *Why wasn't he allowed to do it?*

Virginia Lake sipped her coffee and peered at the white haired man seated across from her at a small table in the coffee shop across the street from STAR Labs.

"Any ideas on who took out Paul?" she asked.

Straker shrugged. "STAR Labs security, probably. At least Kent's no longer a problem. And the alien's still missing and presumed dead. I'd call this a good week."

"Faulkner has agreed to the next phase of testing on the power plant?"

Straker grinned. It had been a long time since she'd seen him smile, and she'd missed the way his finely sculpted face would soften when he smiled. But this smile didn't extend to his eyes. His eyes were cold, flat, dead.

Lake wondered why she hadn't noticed it before. His eyes. They looked like they belonged to the aliens they used to fight. Their eyes had been dead too. Dead eyes embedded in skin turned green by the liquid they breathed. She shivered.

He noticed. "Cold?"

She shook her head. "Just thinking about the war. How many friends we lost, how I thought when *they* were gone, dead, we could all go back to being regular people, have lives."

"The war isn't over, Ginny. It'll never be over. Just because they stopped showing themselves doesn't mean they're not here, not planning, not infiltrating themselves, positioning themselves for their next strike," he said. There was venom in his voice and she saw the two people at the next table give them curious looks.

"When's the test?"

"In a few days," Straker told her.

"Let me know," she said. "I'd really like to be there, see how our predictions work out."

"I'll let you know as soon as Faulkner and her bunch give me to go-ahead." He checked his watch. "I have to get back. The police having free rein of the building has put me behind. Do me a favor though, and see if you can get in touch with Carlin for me. See what's he's come up with."

She nodded and watched him leave. She shivered again, but this time she recognized fear. She had loved him once, when the war against the aliens was real, when he was the only one with a mind sharp enough to keep up with her. But that man was dead now, even though his body kept going. He'd died when the aliens stopped coming, when his purpose for living had ended.

Then Superman appeared. An alien, a god with a Midwest accent, able to change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel in his bare hands, able to fly. A being perfectly capable of declaring himself absolute ruler of Planet Earth, but who chose to be a servant, a helper, a rescuer. Everything SHADO's unnamed aliens weren't. Decent, compassionate, good. Everything Ed Straker wasn't, any more.

Virginia Lake sighed as she got up from the table and threw away her empty coffee cup, heading for the door. She knew she wouldn't be able to stop him. All she could hope to do was mitigate the damage afterward. *Who shot Paul?*

Lois opened the door to her house and walked in. Jimmy had come to the hospital to relieve her, to stay with Clark. Even in Clark's weakened state, Lois didn't trust him not to try something stupid, like walk out of the hospital. Or try to fly out the window like last time, even though the room he was in didn't have an outside window.

The staff at Metropolis General was still talking about how Superman had been brought in to them, unconscious after falling from the sky. How they had been impotent to help him, except to pray, to hope. His heart had stopped beating and he'd stopped breathing by the time they'd gotten to him, but he was still invulnerable. All they'd been able to do that day was remove the kryptonite shard from his back and wait.

So they did. So did all of Metropolis. So did the world. His heart began beating by itself, a slow forty-beats per minute. A steady rhythm slower than most trained athletes. He started breathing, but wouldn't wake up. The neurologist had been baffled. Superman hadn't been asleep, exactly, and the normal tests for a coma didn't work well on someone who didn't feel pain unless it was from kryptonite.

Then, between one fifteen minute check and the next, he vanished out an open window. Lois didn't understand why they were so surprised that he simply picked up and left. They were talking about *Superman*.

"How is he?" Martha asked, taking Lois's coat to put it in the closet.

"Pretty much what I told you on the phone," Lois said. She smelled something good coming from the kitchen and headed that direction. "He was still asleep when Jimmy got there, but the neurologist checked him and said it was a normal sleep. Normal brain activity. No sign of brain damage and Clark did wake up long enough to answer his questions. So that was good."

Martha had set a place for her at the breakfast counter. Soup and a sandwich, a bottle of cream soda. Vegetable soup, homemade no doubt. She just couldn't see Clark's mom doing

anything so mundane as just opening a bunch of cans. The big pot was still simmering on the stove. Probably enough there for several meals.

She took a bite of the sandwich, roast beef on a ciabatta with horseradish sauce. There were tiny shards of horseradish that bit her tongue. "Can I just cut out the BS and adopt you?"

Martha chuckled. "I think it's a little soon to be making life-changing decisions like that. Besides, I'm not about to let my grandson get away from me, so I think you're stuck with me anyway."

Lois chuckled. It felt good to laugh. Then the memories came back. *Richard is dead. Buried. Gone.* "I need to go through Richard's things, send things to Goodwill, or wherever. I wish his brother had been able to stay, to choose what he wanted." Chris and his wife hadn't been able to stay. They'd had to get back to Berlin, to their kids, their jobs.

"Lois, there's time to do that later, if you want," Ben said. She hadn't heard him come in. He poured himself a cup of coffee. "Martha and I can box his clothes up for you; put them away so you can go through them later. Too many people rush through it, get rid of everything, and then, sometimes, they realize it was a mistake to do it so soon."

"You sound like you have experience," Lois commented, taking a swig from her soda. It was her favorite brand and Richard had always tried to keep some in the house for her. One more thing that reminded her that he was gone. *Forever.*

"My wife died about a year before Jonathan did. Cancer. We'd been told she had about six months, to enjoy what we could. She died two weeks later. I was ready to walk away from everything, sell the farm, everything, because everything reminded me of her. Jonathan talked me out of selling the farm, but I cleared everything out, all her books, the things she'd made, the furniture, everything. I didn't even give my kids the chance to go through the stuff. It took them a long time to forgive me."

"So you're telling me to not get rid of things?"

"We're saying it's probably better to put things away for later rather than just get rid of them," Martha said. "We're also saying that what you're going through, what you will be going through, is normal. You're on a hard road that everyone travels at some point and the only wrong thing you can do is to deny that it's happening."

"No wonder Clark is such a good man," Lois said.

Martha smiled, and her cheeks turned pink. *She's so sweet,* Lois thought to herself. *Clark was so lucky to have been found by someone like her. The world was lucky.*

"Just remember, Lois," Martha said. "It's always good to talk about it, about him. And it takes time to work through to remember without it hurting so much."

Jimmy Olsen sat in the armchair by Clark's bed, reading. He'd actually finished the **Silmarillion**, although he was the first one to admit that he thought Tolkien was longwinded and his plots didn't always make sense. He didn't like the **Hobbit** much at all - *if Bilbo was the hero, why wasn't he allowed to be one, to solve the problems. Instead these guys we know nothing about kill the dragon, become the heroes, and Bilbo just goes home? Give me a break.*

Clark was still asleep, but not as deeply as he had been only yesterday. He was mumbling in his sleep, stirring as though trying to get away, trying to fight whatever it was that was haunting his dreams. He managed to roll over onto his side, away from Jimmy, pushing the covers down past his waist.

Jimmy reached over and pulled the covers over him once again as the tall man settled

back into a quieter slumber. The hospital gown had come undone, exposing Clark's back, the dressings that covered the bullet wounds, the neat surgical incision near his spine. Another scar, lower down, like an old knife wound. *When did Clark get stabbed? In China? He hadn't mentioned anything about it.* Jimmy pulled the gown together, intending to do up the snaps when Clark jumped, gasping.

"Lois?" Clark mumbled through gasps, struggling for air. He started to roll into his back and his breathing turned easier.

"It's me, CK, Jimmy," Jimmy said. "Lois went home for a little while, to get some sleep. So I'm here. Are you okay? It looked like you were having a nightmare."

"Yeah, I think I was," Clark said. He looked at Jimmy, confusion written across his face, dark hair covering his forehead, in his eyes. He didn't seem to notice. "Why are you here?"

"Your doctor ordered that you're not to be left alone for any reason, and Lois and your mom decided it would be better if it was somebody you knew instead of a stranger. At least Lois is pretty sure I'm not going to try to kill you."

"Someone's been trying to kill me? Who, Luthor?"

Jimmy gave him a puzzled look. "Luthor's dead, CK. Lois shot him right after he shot you," Jimmy said.

"So who, then?"

"Cops aren't sure but they think it's that bunch Perry asked you and Richard about. SHADO?"

"Oh, yeah," Clark murmured. A worried, horrified look came into his eyes. "They murdered him. I couldn't stop them. I couldn't do anything to stop them."

"CK, even Superman wouldn't have been able to stop them. They had kryptonite. They were probably waiting for Superman to try to save you and Jason and Richard. There wasn't anything you could have done."

Clark ran his fingers through his hair, and for a moment, Jimmy thought he got a glimpse of someone else, someone Clark resembled, but he couldn't put his finger on who it was.

"Jimmy, where are my glasses?"

"Right here, CK," Jimmy grabbed them off the bedside table and handed them to him. Clark placed them on his face. "You look more yourself now," Jimmy commented. It was the missing glasses, Jimmy decided, that had made Clark look 'wrong,' like someone else.

"So, uh, why am I not supposed to be left alone?"

"So you won't try to escape out the window?" a deep voice said from the open door, sounding faintly amused.

"Sir," one of the youngsters, Spelling, called, rapping quietly on the door to Carlin's cabin. "We have a communication on the ELF. Command wants a mission update."

Carlin grimaced and grabbed his leather flight jacket. He opened the cabin door and headed back onto the command deck. "Do they have any idea where we are?" he wondered aloud. Spelling didn't respond. She was used to his rhetorical questions. "Anything on sonar?"

"No sir," Spelling told him. "The bottom of this canyon is well below our crush depth, so we can't get closer. But we're not getting any echoes that would indicate anything artificial down there."

"Find an opening in the ice so we can surface, see what Command wants," Carlin ordered.

"Yes, sir," the helmsman acknowledged.

Clark and Jimmy both looked over to the door to see a man wearing surgical scrubs, a stethoscope hanging out of his breast pocket. "I'm Doctor Bryant. It's nice to meet to at last, Mister Kent."

"CK, Doctor Bryant's the senior trauma surgeon here," Jimmy told him. Clark was a little bewildered. He'd heard of Andrew Bryant, knew his reputation even before leaving Metropolis. "They called him over to STAR Labs especially for you. Even the president doesn't get such first class treatment."

"I must be special, then?"

"There are a lot of people who think so," Bryant said. He walked over to the bed and took his patient's wrist to check his pulse.

"Why would anybody think I'd jump out a window?" Clark wondered aloud. *They think I'm suicidal?* "I am *not* suicidal."

Bryant chuckled, letting go of Clark's wrist and taking his pulse at his throat instead. "Nobody thinks you are, Mister Kent. It was a bad joke, sorry. But we are going to be extremely miffed if you wander away without permission. Apparently, that's a bad habit of yours. Multiple gunshot wounds are nothing to sneeze at. So, how you feelin', big guy?"

Clark shrugged. "Okay, I guess. A little confused and weak, but alive. I suppose I should be grateful for that. The weakness bothers me. I'm not used to that."

Bryant pulled the privacy curtain around the bed, motioning for Jimmy to stay outside as he checked the various dressings on Clark's back, chest, and belly. "You've been through a lot the last five days. Your body's putting its energies into healing. You're healing up nicely, too. No sign of infection, no sign of kryptonite poisoning. I think we can start taking you off the monitors. Get you on your feet." As Bryant spoke, he lowered the one of the side rails and helped Clark move to sit on the side of the bed, legs dangling. "I have to say, I was really surprised to find out there were Kryptonian bloodlines on Earth. All the research I'd seen indicated Superman was unique, the only one from his planet to come here."

"Kryptonian bloodlines?" Clark repeated.

"Lois wrote an article on it," Jimmy said from the far side of the curtain. "You haven't had a chance to read it. I guess Superman told Lois, a long time ago, he thought Kryptonians had visited Earth before, and used their technology to leave offspring here."

"Superman said that?" *I know I never told Lois that. Where did she get that idea? She published it?*

"That's what Lois said," Jimmy reported. "I don't know why she didn't write it up earlier. Maybe she didn't think it mattered. I mean, if it was that long ago, what would being a little bit Kryptonian do for you?"

"Make you susceptible to kryptonite, for one," Bryant said. "Not too many people react as strongly as you do, or Superman. But on the plus side, I suspect you heal pretty fast, don't you?"

"Yeah, and I normally don't scar up much, either," Clark admitted. *How much does Bryant know? How much did Faulkner tell him?*

"So, CK, that knife scar on your back's newer than it looks?" Jimmy asked.

"Knife...? Oh, happened a couple months ago."

"Well, next time you're in Shanghai, or wherever, stay away from the sailor bars," Bryant said. "Safer that way." Bryant pushed aside the privacy curtain. "By the way, if they've forgotten to tell you, you were admitted under the name of Lawrence Lane."

"Who's that?" He looked over his shoulder at Jimmy who shrugged.

"You'll have to ask General Lane," Jimmy said.

"General Lane? What does he have to do with this?"

Jimmy shrugged again. "CK, he's the one who got you over here. When Lois decided to have you moved, she called in the big guns."

Bryant chuckled. "I'm going to have you moved to a private room, with a window, order you up something to eat. Inspector Henderson has asked permission to talk to you, so he'll probably be here this afternoon."

Twenty Three

"The commander wants a mission update," Lake said over the radio to Carlin. Sky-diver was floating just below surface, the sail peeking up through the ice floes so the ship's radio antennae could be in the air.

Carlin held the radio's microphone to his mouth, held down the send button. "Nothing, so far. This valley is deeper than our crush depth and sonar hasn't been giving us anything to indicate there's anything unusual down here," he said. "Virginia, even if we do find it, there's no way we can retrieve it."

"You're suggesting we call off the search?" she asked. He felt the eyes of his crew on him. He wasn't sure how fanatical they were, how far they would follow Straker's orders over his own.

"No, I'm not suggesting that at all," he said. "I am saying that if we do find it, we'll need outside resources to handle the salvage operation."

"The commander is not going to like that," Lake reminded him.

"Whether or not the commander likes it does not alter the facts," he said. "This ship is not equipped to handle the salvage, even if we find it."

"Very well," Lake said. "When you do find it, send two of your people inside and see what they can salvage that way."

"That'll be dangerous," he reminded her.

"We're at war, Captain," she said. "Just do it." She cut off the transmission.

Carlin hung up his microphone and looked around at his crew. *They're all so young. So which two do I condemn to death?* "You heard the Colonel, diving stations. Back to the search."

Oh God, this is getting out of control. Lake sighed as she turned off the transmitter. She knew she had just ordered two of Carlin's people to their deaths, and her one consolation - that she was just following Straker's orders - wasn't much of a consolation at all. One of the criteria for recruitment into SHADO had always been the ability to take charge, to think on your feet. That was no longer a requirement. It was blind obedience that was demanded now. It was the only thing demanded.

How did this happen? How, why, did SHADO turn from a respected military organization into a terrorist one? Had the IAC been right when they ordered SHADO shut down? Those were questions she and Alec Freeman had discussed over beer more than once.

Twenty-seven years ago, everything had been so clear - stop the alien invasion by any means possible. But then the invasion slowed and finally stopped. Either the aliens had gotten cleverer at hiding their activities or SHADO's researchers had been right and the aliens had been waging a last ditch, desperate battle to save themselves from extinction. They'd stopped being a viable threat twenty years ago.

Her cell phone buzzed and she glanced at the identification screen - Gay Ellis.

"Ginny, how are things going?" Gay Ellis's voice said over Lake's headset.

"Not bad," Lake replied. The radio operator was looking at her curiously so she stepped out into the hallway for privacy.

"We heard about Paul," Ellis told her. "He was a good officer, a good man. He'll be missed... Is there any word on who killed him?"

"The police haven't released any information," Lake said. "Considering it happened inside a secure facility... Gay, no one should have known Paul was even there."

"That's what we're wondering about too," Ellis said. "Ginny, be careful. I just got a report from Doctor Shangro from medical. He thinks the reports on the dangers of kryptonite may be correct and there are some serious questions... Ginny just be careful and watch your back. We both know how Paul died." Ellis hung up and Lake shivered. *Who shot Paul?*

Henderson picked up his phone on the first ring. "Bill, this is Mooney. They've moved Mister Lane to a private room, 1214," the voice on the phone said.

Henderson smiled. "Stay there, I'll be right over, and thanks."

"No problem, Bill. I'll be here," Mooney told him, ringing off.

Mooney was a good man, Henderson mused. A good cop. Joe Mooney was one of those who never really wanted more than to be a cop walking the beat. He was also one of the first officers who had ever seen Superman. On the young superhero's first night in the city, he had turned a cat burglar over to Officer Mooney. *'They say confession is good for the soul,'* Superman had said. *'You want to listen to this man.'*

Today, on his day off, Mooney was in civilian clothes keeping a warding eye on Clark Kent, AKA Lawrence Lane, without letting anyone but the duty nurse know about it. Henderson hadn't bothered to tell his own people about it. Henderson picked up his phone and dialed a number.

"Stacy? Bill Henderson," he said when the other end picked up. "Ready to do your stuff?"

The woman on the other end chuckled. "I'm always ready. Is he?"

"I figure we'll be lucky to get two words out of him once I get his statement," Henderson admitted. "But he could surprise me."

Clark was settled into his new room just a few doors down the corridor from the nurses' station. To his complete embarrassment, the orderly had insisted he use a wheelchair. Jimmy had kept up a chattering monologue about the goings on at work while he'd been unconscious. He noticed an older man wearing a sports shirt standing near the nurses' station, watching them. He seemed familiar somehow. *I know him.*

The room was very small, which bothered him a little. Clark had never really liked small, enclosed spaces. Even crowded elevators bothered him a little. Not claustrophobia, exactly, he just preferred to be out in the open, or at least in spaces that weren't too small. The room did have a large window at least, and he had Jimmy move one of the chairs close so he could sit in the sunlight.

As Bryant had promised, they brought him something to eat. Soup, juice, chocolate pudding. He barely had the energy to finish the pudding and it had only been Jimmy's threats to spoon feed him that got him to finish the soup. It wasn't very good, but then not much compared favorably with his mom's cooking.

He was tired. So tired. He closed his eyes and let himself drift back to sleep basking in the sunlight. *I remember him now. Mooney. That was Officer Mooney outside. Why was there a policeman outside?*

He woke with a gasping cough that sent pain shooting through his chest. Jimmy was standing next to him, a worried look on his face.

"Sorry, CK," the younger man said. "You were having a nightmare. Plus you've got company." Jimmy jerked his head in the direction of the door. Clark looked over to see Bill Henderson standing just inside the door. A gray haired woman in a dark business suit with a kindly, curious expression stood next to him carrying a notepad.

"If you hug a pillow to your chest, it'll help support the stitches while you cough," the woman suggested. "Didn't anyone tell you?"

Clark shook his head. "I don't think so. Maybe somebody did and I didn't hear it." His voice sounded soft, weak, tentative even in his own ears. Jimmy handed him the pillow off the bed and he hugged it to himself as instructed.

"I won't ask how you're doing," Henderson said. "You look like you've been to hell and back."

"Nice to see you too, Inspector," Clark said. He managed a weak smile.

"This is Stacy Ricco," Henderson introduced the woman. Clark didn't miss the fact that Henderson hadn't said what the woman was doing with him. "Ready to give me a statement about what happened?"

Clark nodded slightly. "Ready as I'll ever be, I guess." He watched as Henderson pulled a small recorder from his pocket and set it on the bed-table beside the lunch dishes. Then he pulled up a chair and sat facing Clark.

Clark let his tone go flat as he recited the events of Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, of how he and Richard had driven out to the park, belatedly discovering Jason on the floor of the back seat. The fire that Superman doused, including the two men Clark had seen but could not identify. He told them of reconnoitering the mine area, without saying how he got inside the fence, of being caught by Freeman and company the next morning as he and Richard were preparing to leave.

"You can positively identify the leader of the group that took you and White as being Alec Freeman?" Henderson asked.

"Yes," Clark said simply. He hadn't realized how much simply relating the events of those two days was taking out of him.

Henderson and Ricco exchanged a concerned look before turning back to him. "Do you want to keep going?" Henderson asked.

Clark nodded and went on to tell of being threatened with a gun to his head, of being locked in the storage room with Richard and Jason and Richard's discovery of the crates being filled with kryptonite. He told of hearing Lex Luthor in the next room making threats against Jason, the inside door opening and shots being fired.

"Then after a couple minutes, maybe not even that long, you guys got the door open, and you know the rest," Clark finished.

"Are you willing to state positively that Lex Luthor was with the group that locked you, White, and the boy in that room?"

"It sounded like Luthor and someone talking to him called him that, so that's as positive as I can get since I didn't actually see him until later," Clark told him.

"Clark, do you know why Luthor was making threats against the boy?" Henderson asked. The woman, Ricco was taking notes.

"From what I gather, something happened when Lois and Jason were on the *Gertrude* before he set off that monstrosity of his that made Luthor think Jason was Superman's son," Clark said. The sun was moving behind the neighboring building and he was getting cold.

"Do you know what it was?" Henderson asked. He'd kept his voice soft, gentle even, while asking his questions. "Do you know what Jason did?"

"I wasn't there," Clark said. "I know what Lois said happened, but I wasn't there. I don't know for sure."

"Is Jason White actually Superman's son?" Ricco asked.

"No," a woman's voice said from the door. "Jason is Clark Kent's son," Lois Lane said, walking into the room, Jason in tow. "I thought you knew that, Bill," she added.

"Well, let's say I suspected," Henderson admitted.

Kitty Faulkner ran her hands through her hair. STAR Labs had turned over copies of all their security logs and recordings to the MPD but she and Jerry Banks had gone over and over them as well. Nothing. No clue as to who managed to get kryptonite into the medical lab, no clue as to how Foster, if that was his name, got past STAR Labs bleeding edge security to get into the building, nor who the other person was who got in to kill him.

"Kitty, what if we're looking in the wrong direction?" Banks said finally. "We know Vaness was cleared through our usual protocols, but she apparently brought more kryptonite into the ICU and then disappeared. The security cameras that should have picked up the suspect activity didn't."

"And Henderson is convinced there's at least one and possibly more people here with high level access to the security system and the building itself who were collaborating with these terrorists," Kitty said. They both knew all of it, but saying it aloud seemed to help to clarify the situation in front of them. "But there's only five people in the building with that kind of access. You, me, Bridgie, Greg Robbs and Timo Virtanen in IT."

"That doesn't rule out the possibility of someone having unauthorized access," Banks pointed out. He picked up the phone on her desk and tapped in a number.

Eldon Stoner checked the formulas and figures on the paper he was planning to submit to the powers that be at STAR Labs and Met Power, the final figures for the prototype kryptonite powered nuclear plant. It was a good fiction, he admitted to himself. Luthor had been useful for that, at least. No one had known more about kryptonite than Lex Luthor.

The second sheet, the real figures that showed that the plant would fail catastrophically, he kept in his briefcase. The fact was that although element 126 was more stable than its cousins, uranium and radium, it became dangerously unstable when subjected to force including external heat and compression.

The experimental plant itself was finished, a small building adjacent to the nuclear power plant jointly owned and operated by Met Power and Con Ed, just west of the city on the Hobbs River. In theory, he could activate the kryptonite plant in two days, provided Faulkner and the board at Met Power agreed to the tests.

And of course the Met Power board would agree - a million a piece in diamonds insured their vote and their silence. And Superman hadn't been sighted in more than five days. The media was in a frenzy about it, speculating that Luthor had succeeded in killing the alien. The Daily Planet took its usual stance on Superman's disappearance - the world was a big place and there had been previous times that he'd been out of communication for days and then reappeared without a word of explanation.

Stoner noted with pleasure the absence of Clark Kent's byline in the paper. The reporter's obituary had run in Friday's edition of the Planet, but there was still no notice of a memorial service, either in Metropolis or in Smallville, Kansas. *Maybe the M.E. hasn't finished with the body*, he speculated. *I'll have Lake get me a copy of the autopsy report. It'll be good to know what sort of damage kryptonite does to someone contaminated with Kryptonian DNA.*

"Unca' Clark, are you okay?" a tiny voice asked from across the small room. Jason came

around the bed to check on his 'other' daddy. Children hadn't been allowed in the ICU, even the isolation one where Clark had been since Thursday night. Jason had been overjoyed when his mother told him he could visit Clark this afternoon.

"I'm gonna go grab something to eat then go home," Jimmy said to Lois. She nodded, patting his arm.

"Thanks, Jimmy," she said. "For everything."

"What are friends for?" he asked as he left.

Lois looked over to where Clark was sitting by the window. He looked paler than he had when she left, more tired, face pinched with pain. The back of his left hand had a gauze square taped to it to cover the wound had gone all the way through. His right hand had a livid bruise on it from when they'd removed one of the IVs. He was holding the bed pillow to his chest. *He should be getting better.* Then she realized the room was dark. Clark was sitting by the unshaded window, but the room was dark. She flipped the wall switch by the door and the small room was flooded with light.

"I'll be okay," Clark was saying to Jason. "I'm really tired, though."

Jason looked back at his mother, concern written across his face. She had warned him Clark was still very sick. He turned to Clark. "Mommy told me I have to be real careful 'cause you're hurt and we don't want to make you worse," Jason said solemnly.

"I'm feeling a lot better now." Clark tousled Jason's hair with one hand.

Henderson stood up to give Lois his seat. He picked up his recorder and put it in his pocket. He gave Clark a worried look. "Do you want to go on?"

"What more do you need?" Clark asked. "You have my statement."

Henderson looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Clark, I thought you knew. The city has some new procedures that went into place after you left, after the Spires came down. After a traumatic incident, all attending emergency personnel, police, fire, EMT, are required to attend what is called a Critical Incident Debriefing. It helps ward off post trauma stress disorder and it's supposed to be held one to four days after the incident. The Daily Planet has a similar requirement for its staff. If we call a CID, Perry sends his people to one, too. Lois has been to a couple of MPD ones." He nodded in Lois's direction and she gave him a little smile and a shrug.

"I don't understand," Clark said. "I'll be okay. Once I get out of here, I mean. I'll be fine."

"Clark, maybe you'll be fine, but maybe you won't. But when's the last time Clark Kent was admitted to the hospital?" Lois demanded.

Clark shook his head.

"Thought so. And by the way 'denial' is *not* a river in Egypt," Lois said. "Attending the CID is the rules and since you missed the one held after the Clinton Bridge Incident, *and* you missed the one for the factory fire, *and* you definitely missed the one for the newsroom staff after... after what happened at Manahasset..."

Jason climbed onto the arm of Clark's chair and pulled him into a gentle hug. "Grandma says talking about things always helps."

"Yeah, I know she does. And she's probably right," Clark agreed, but there was more than a touch of resignation in his voice. "That doesn't mean I want to talk about it, though." He sighed. "So what happens now?"

"First, I set the guidelines," Ricco started. "I'm Doctor Stacy Ricco. I'm a psychiatrist, and my specialty is Post Trauma Stress. I'm the senior Critical Incident Debriefing for Metropolis Emergency Services and I've been doing this for the past ten years, the last six in Metropolis."

She paused before going on.

Lois watched Clark go still, watching. It wasn't the deer-in-the-headlight look, although it could be easily mistaken for it for someone who didn't know him. He was... what? Assessing the threat level? Gathering his resources? After a moment he seemed to realize she was watching him and started breathing again, clumsily adjusting his glasses. In the blink of an eye he had gone from something not quite human back to being shy, mild-mannered Clark Kent.

"This is not a counseling session, but it is completely confidential," Ricco continued apparently oblivious to Clark's reaction to her previous announcement. "You don't have to tell us anything besides what it was you were doing where you were, what your role was. We will be focusing on the reactions the members of this group are having now. And be aware that you all may end up feeling worse for a while, but this is all normal. Just remember, whatever you're feeling, whatever you think is happening, is normal. What is hurtful is to disallow yourself from dealing with it by denying that it happened or that it had any effect on you." She smiled. "So, Mister Kent, how did you find out there was a problem on the Clinton Bridge?"

Timo Virtanen looked up as Kitty Faulkner and Jerry Banks walked into the IT lab. He was alone in the room, having sent his assistant out to bring back a take-away dinner. Knowing his assistant, it would be an hour or more before he came back.

"So, what have you found?" Kitty asked.

Virtanen cleared his throat. "I've been keeping an eye on a hacker who put a backdoor into the mainframe, trying to track him down."

"And why didn't you let us know?" Banks asked. "Didn't you think it was a security issue?"

"Until earlier this week the only files accessed dealt with kryptonite mostly," Virtanen explained. "Nothing flagged top secret, not even secret. When he started getting into the building security systems, I upped my efforts to track him down."

"Any luck?" Kitty asked.

Virtanen shrugged. "They are very good, or they have access to people who are very good. My next step is to set a trap for him, which I have already entered into the system. The next time the backdoor is used, it will not only let me know it, it should also send me back identifiers off the computer being used to do it."

"So then all we have to do is find one computer in a city of how many million?" Banks said.

"No, we have to find one computer in a population of twelve hundred people," Virtanen corrected. "The backdoor was placed in the system from here, from this room, and has been maintained from within this building. The hacker works for STAR Labs, but he is not a member of my team."

"And how do you know that?" Kitty asked.

"It is unlikely I would have found the traces at all, if he were one of mine." Virtanen arched his back to get the kinks out. "However, I have something else I wanted to show you. It's something you might want to consider adding to the security monitoring." He quickly typed a command on his keyboard and a schematic of the building came onto the large LCD monitor in front of him. "I was asked by General Services to create a tracking system for equipment in the building using the smart chips Receiving puts on them."

"Yes, I approved the request," Kitty said with a nod. "I'm told fewer computers have disappeared since we started tracking them."

"Very true," Virtanen said with a smile. "Our identification badges carry a similar chip inside, hidden under the photo."

"We were hoping we could use it as an automatic key," Kitty said. "Hasn't worked out, so far."

"But it does give us an additional method of tracking individuals through the building." Virtanen pointed to the screen. On the building schematic were coded dots, some moving around, some not. He pointed to one room near the back of the building - the IT lab. There were three dots inside and one outside, approaching the room.

"The three dots are we three and the one approaching is my assistant, hopefully with Chinese take-away."

"Do you have records for Thursday afternoon?" Banks asked, trying to keep the excitement out of his voice.

"As a matter of fact, I do."

Spelling spotted an anomaly on the sonar. The submarine was hovering above a deep canyon beneath the Arctic ice sheet, sonar aimed down to survey the bottom. "Sir?" she called out quietly.

Carlin stepped over to her, peering over her shoulder at the screen. "What is it?"

"The scans indicate this section may be crystalline instead of normal rock," she said. "There's a definite discontinuity between it and the strata beside and below it."

Carlin called up the image on his own monitor, increasing the contrast on the picture. There was something unusual there, something spiky, like quartz crystal. Something about the size of a jumbo jet deep within the sub-sea canyon. *Superman's star ship?* "Let's start down," Carlin ordered. "Stay in the center of the canyon. Make sure everything's recorded, all the sonar and the visual, exterior temperature, radiation levels, everything."

"Yes, sir," Ruggerio acknowledged from his station on the upper level.

Carlisle looked around worriedly. "Sir, the object is nearly at our crush depth," he said.

"I am aware of that," Carlin told him more than loud enough to be heard through the small ship.

"Very well," Lake had said. "When you do find it, send two of your people inside and see what they can salvage that way."

"That'll be dangerous."

"We're at war, Captain," she said. "Just do it."

"Carlisle, call out our depth, level us off when we're just above the object," Carlin ordered.

"Yes, sir...six hundred... six twenty-five... six fifty..."

The ship's hull creaked and groaned under the pressure. Water wept in along seams that should have been as strong as the metal between them. Carlin could see the worry in their eyes. He knew if he looked into a mirror he would see the same worry in his own eyes.

"Six seventy-five...seven hundred... seven twenty-five...holding at seven twenty-five."

"How far below us is it?"

"Twenty-five meters," Carlisle answered.

"How far is the bottom?"

"Four hundred." The ship's control center was silent except for the creaking of the hull and the ping of the sonar.

"Sir, you're not planning on sending... sending two of us out there, are you?" Spelling

asked.

"No, it's too deep," Carlin admitted. He looked up at Carlisle. "Take us back up."

"Yes, sir." Carlisle flipped several switches on his console. Nothing happened. "Sir, we have a problem."

Carlin ran up the ladder to the second level. He bent over Carlisle's control panel, looking over the tell-tales for the ballast controls. He tried the control switches again, turning them on and off several times. Finally, there was a woosh of air forcing water out of the ballast tanks. The ship began to roll over and Carlin realized only one tank had blown. There was a loud, shuddering scraping along what had been, what should have been, the upper deck of the ship. The sail, the bridge, was scraping along the side of the canyon wall.

There was the harsh crack of metal failing and water started coming in through the bridge hatch, a trickle at first, then more and more, knife-like under the tremendous pressure. Spelling was dead before she even knew what was happening, her body shredded by freezing intruding water.

Carlin closed his eyes. There was only one person on the planet capable of saving them and he was most likely dead, thanks to Straker.

"Que Dios tenga piedad de nuestras almas," he murmured. "Lord, have mercy on our souls."

The last Sky-diver in SHADO's fleet imploded only a few meters above the crystal star ship, breaking off one of its points. Both the remains of the submarine and the alien designed spacecraft slid lazily down the side of the canyon to disappear into the impenetrable darkness.

Virtanen, Banks and Faulkner watched the screen as the events of Thursday afternoon unfolded in the form of dots with numbers above them moving through a wire-frame version of the STAR Labs building.

"That's Foster," Banks pointed out a figure outside of the medical lab. The dot designating his guide had left, heading to another section of the building. Foster had been left alone. Suddenly two more dots arrived outside the medical center having come out of the medical section break area - the two security men sent to intercept Foster.

A fourth dot was in the corridor where the security cameras had been disabled. The two guards converged on Foster as the fourth dot waited, then hurried away.

"Okay, who is that?" Kitty asked.

Virtanen keyed a request into a neighboring computer and waited a moment. "Eldon Stoner, or someone wearing his photo ID."

"Doctor Stoner?" Banks repeated in disbelief.

"Of course," Kitty murmured. "It makes sense. Stoner's been very open about his dislike of Superman. And I know he doesn't much like Kent either, although I never found out why. Oh, crud, he's the one working on using kryptonite as a power source."

"You don't think he'd sabotage his own project, do you?" Banks asked.

"I honestly don't know," Kitty admitted. "But of the two foremost experts on kryptonite on this planet, one was Lex Luthor and he's dead and the other is Eldon Stoner."

"What about Superman?" Virtanen asked.

"I haven't seen the blue Boy Scout around for the last five days, have you?"

Twenty Four

Clark had started to relax a little. The debriefing process wasn't quite as bad as he had imagined it would be, at least for the Clinton Bridge and the arson fire Superman had put out that same day. In both those cases he knew he had done all that he could have done under the circumstances, both as Clark and as Superman. His left hand was itching under the gauze bandages and he was feeling better, not as tired, definitely stronger, even if it was human-normal. But even human-normal was better than he'd been feeling before and the pain was far less. *The ceiling lights must be full-spectrum.*

They were still talking about the arson fire that he'd reported on. He hadn't realized that Henderson's team had been assigned to help the arson squad investigate the spate of fires that had happened since the crystalquake. Or that Lois had been assigned the follow-ups to his original article, even though subsequent events got in the way and Perry had reassigned it.

"Clark, what were you thinking at the time?" Ricco asked.

"That I hoped that when fire started, the explosion had been hot enough, big enough to have killed them all instantly. That there should be a very nasty place in hell for anyone who would deliberately disable the fire-suppression system and bolt the doors on thirty people. That I was glad there weren't any children in the building." He glanced over at Jason. Lois had brought a pair of earphones for him while he played his Gameboy.

He turned back to Lois, Henderson, and Ricco. Ricco was frowning, looking at his hands.

"But what were your thoughts when you first came on the scene?" Ricco asked, looking up. "Lois said she was just hoping it wouldn't smell too bad so she could get through it, so she could get home."

"I, uh, can't answer that," Clark said. Ricco was looking at his hands again and he looked down to find out what was puzzling her. The bruise on his right hand had already faded to a faint discoloration and the damage to his left hand had healed to a circular scar that was already fading. The bandage was gone. He'd scratched it off without realizing it.

Ricco reached out and took his left hand, turning it over to look at the palm and the back. "If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have believed it," she said. She reached up to pull the hospital gown away from his neck, looking at the scar that still ran down the center of his chest, where the surgical team had split his sternum then stapled it back together. That wound had already knitted together as well. One of the staples was sitting on his skin and fell away when she touched it.

"How soon do you think before your powers come back?" she asked.

"Powers?" he squeaked. Lois chuckled and he gave her a dark look.

Ricco turned to Henderson. "William, how long were you planning to wait until you two let me in on this?"

Henderson shook his head with a laugh, putting his hands up. "I'm pulling a Schultz. I know nothing. I'm astonished you got anything out of him at all."

Ricco harrumphed at him then turned back to Clark. "If I asked you what Superman was thinking when he came on the scene, would you be able to answer me?"

"What makes you think I'd have any idea about that?"

"Because it has occurred to me that *you* can't answer the question because it wasn't Clark Kent who was first on the scene. That your first impression of the situation was not as a reporter but as a rescue worker. And that you work very hard to keep those points of view separate. So are you going to answer the question?"

"You told me I didn't have to answer any question I didn't want to," he reminded her.

"So I did, but a debriefing like this requires truthfulness and if you were on the scene in more than one capacity, and you only admit to one of them, well, that's a form of denial right there. And that does you and everyone else a disservice."

He looked over to Lois to see her reaction. She gave him a reassuring smile as she nodded. "She's right, you know," she said, placing a hand on his shoulder and giving it a gentle squeeze.

Clark gave Henderson a sidelong look.

"I figured it out right after Nightfall," Henderson said. "I thought it was odd that you could be attacked, have a concussion serious enough to cause memory problems, and not have a mark on you. I checked out the area where Henry O. found you. I also found Superman's uniform buried in the crater. The cape was scorched."

"Why didn't you say anything before?" Clark asked. His life had turned into something unrecognizable *again*. *This has been one completely screwed up week. Is it too much to hope I'll wake up and this'll all be a nightmare?*

Henderson shrugged. "You had your reasons to keep your identity under wraps. And so long as you didn't go too far outside the law, it didn't much matter."

"Who else has figured it out?"

Henderson chuckled. "I really don't know. It's not like there's a club or a secret handshake."

"Perry knows, Jimmy I'm not sure of," Lois said. "I'm sure Richard knew. Doctor Bryant knows, but that's because Doctor Faulkner had to tell him. If there's anybody else, they haven't mentioned anything to me, but they wouldn't be likely to."

"Perry knows?" He couldn't keep the squeak out of his voice, as much as he tried.

"Let's say he didn't believe my story about you being only part Kryptonian any more than he believed your story about where you'd disappeared to for six years," Lois told him.

"I blew it, didn't I?" Clark said. He managed a small self-deprecating chuckle.

"So, now that we have this out of the way," Ricco announced. "What were your thoughts when you first came on the scene?"

"It's less thoughts so much as a process," Clark said very quietly. He knew what he did when he arrived on an emergency scene but had never really analyzed it. It was a process he'd evolved over time. "First, I assess the situation. Are there survivors? Where are they, how can I best reach them, the extent of injuries. What else needs to be done to stabilize the situation. If it's already too late, like at the textile factory fire, the next step is to analyze the situation as a possible crime scene and try to determine the best way to put out the fire. That pretty much depends on my analysis of the fire and what the person in charge thinks should be done. In this case Chief Obote felt getting the fire out was more important than preserving the crime scene."

"What do you see your role as?"

Clark sat back and considered his answer. "Depends. A helper first. I'm fast. I'm strong, usually at least. I can usually come on a scene and see what needs to be done. But I'm not a cop, I don't do arrests. I turn perps over to the police so they can handle it. I'm not an EMT, although I can help them determine who needs what. Then, later, I'm a witness. I let the public know what happened, why it happened and maybe what might keep it from happening again."

"Why did you decide to do this?" Ricco asked.

"Because I can," Clark answered, focusing on a point on the far wall. "Because I can make the world a little better, I can be a good example. I can show people the world isn't as messed up as it sometimes looks, that one person can make a difference, whether or not they

have physical power."

He refocused on Ricco. "I guess I'm really just a farm boy from the edge of the Bible belt." That got a chuckle from Lois and Henderson.

"Ready to go on?" Ricco asked after a moment.

"Not really," Clark admitted. "I really don't want to think about what happened Tuesday and Wednesday."

"Clark, it's okay," Lois said, rubbing her hand over his arm.

"No, it isn't okay," Clark told her. "Someone close to you is dead because I made an incredibly stupid error in judgment. Then I kept making mistakes, making it worse."

"Clark, would you rather we continue this tomorrow?" Ricco asked.

"I'd rather we didn't continue at all," he said. "But I know I'll be vetoed."

"I take it that means you're willing to continue?"

"Yeah, let's keep going."

There was a knock on the door, a pause then the door swung open to reveal a white uniformed nurse. "Visiting hours are over until seven," she announced as she stepped into the room. "Miss Lane, I'm told you can stay per Doctor Bryant's orders."

"Thank you," Lois said. "Bill, do you think you can take Jason home?"

"Not a problem," Henderson assured her. Jason had pulled his headphones off as soon as the nurse had opened the door. He looked from his mother to the police officer, ran over and gave his mother a hug. Then he grabbed Clark and gave the tall man a hug as well.

"Get better, Unca' Clark," he said. He ran back to Henderson, taking the officer's hand.

"We'll be back tomorrow afternoon, okay?" Ricco said, following Henderson out of the room.

Kitty Faulkner keyed Stoner's extension from one of the phones in the IT lab.

"Doctor Stoner," she began when the phone on the other end picked up. "This is Doctor Faulkner. I just wanted to let you know, we're delaying the test on your prototype plant for a few days."

"Why?" Stoner demanded.

"It's just a precaution," she assured him. "I'm having our security people double check the building and the reactor before we proceed. You know we had two murders in the building last Thursday."

"Those had nothing to do with my project, and you know it," Stoner insisted.

"Actually, I don't know it," Kitty responded. "But considering your plant is using kryptonite, and it does affect normal humans, I think we need to err on the side of caution and make sure there's no possibility of sabotage or terrorist activity. We should be ready to resume the test say, in a week, once we've secured the facility."

"You can't do this," Stoner protested. "The Met Power board has already approved the test. They're expecting it to go ahead on schedule."

"I'm sure they'll be willing to wait a week, once I explain that we need to upgrade security for the test," Kitty told him. "Not that they're going to have a choice. The decision is made."

"You can't do this," Stoner told her. "Everything is set for this Tuesday."

"Doctor Stoner, are you telling me you've gone ahead with the test preparations prior to my signing off on the work?"

"Of course not," Stoner said. He sounded like he was barely in control of himself. "It's simply that I was working under the assumption that the test would go ahead as planned."

"You know what they say about people who assume, Doctor," she said. "I'll let you know when you can reschedule the test." She hung up.

"That went well," Banks commented with only a touch of sarcasm. "I'll send a team out in the morning to check out the reactor building, make sure nobody has sabotaged it."

"Would your people even know what to look for?" Virtanen asked.

Banks had no answer.

Henderson dropped Jason off at his home, waiting until the boy was safely inside with his grandmother before heading back to police headquarters with Doctor Ricco.

"When I first came to Metropolis it was just after Superman had disappeared," she started. "I'd read the newspaper accounts, seen the videos of the man who could fly. I watched the city wonder where he'd gone, if he'd been killed. I watched them get used to the idea he wasn't there anymore."

"And now he's back and people don't want him back?" Henderson observed.

"The world's a much darker place than it was when he left," she said. "Does he understand that?"

Henderson chuckled. "He understands. It's just... well, it's like something Perry White said to me about Clark once. He's in this world, but he's not really of it. He walks through the world as if it was the way it should be, rather than the way it is. Then he tries to show us how we can get from where we are to where we can be."

"You make him sound delusional."

"Nothing could be further from the truth," Henderson said. "But he really is a farm boy from Kansas transplanted to the big city. And he can be annoying as all hell."

"So the Clark persona is the dominant personality?"

Henderson chuckled. "*Clark* is who he is. Superman is... a character he plays. At least that's my observation. Although I suspect there are times even he gets a little confused. It should make your job a little easier. Now you know who to remind to show up for the CIDs."

"How are you doing?" Clark asked. He hadn't moved out of the chair, but had pulled the blanket more closely around himself. Lois was pacing the small room as they waited for Clark's evening meal to arrive.

"I don't know, not really," she said. "I know it's going to take time to work through everything that's happened."

"I kind of figured you'd be furious once you remembered."

"I've had five days to get through that part," she said. "I understand what happened, why it happened. As much as I would like to, I can't get mad at you for doing what I asked you to. I just hadn't expected you to be *able* to do it. And I certainly hadn't expected you to just take off like that."

"I told you why I did it."

"After the fact," she reminded him. "I didn't know then what I'd done, what we'd done, to drive you away, to make you want to leave. That's what hurt, the not knowing. I think that hurt more than not knowing how I managed to get pregnant when I honestly couldn't remember who I'd made love to."

"Then Jason ends up looking like me," Clark completed for her.

"I think Perry came to the conclusion early on that we'd both gotten so drunk that neither of us remembered, or maybe you did and that's why you ran," she said.

"We both know that's not true."

"I know now. I didn't know then."

"At least you didn't come to the conclusion that I'd raped you."

"No, that's the one thing that never occurred to me. I always knew on some level that it was consensual."

"So, what happens now?"

Lois stopped pacing and sat on the bed, facing him. "I'm guessing Bryant will release you tomorrow, considering how fast you're healing up now."

"I'm guessing tomorrow I could leave by the window, assuming I had something to wear besides a hospital gown," Clark said.

"I'll run over to your apartment tomorrow morning with your mom and get you some clothes," she said. "By the way, where do you keep the 'suits'?"

Clark smiled. "I won't need one tomorrow. I promised Doctor Bryant I'd leave by the front door like I'm supposed to."

A knock on the door and a young woman walked in carrying a covered tray. "Dinner time," she announced cheerily. She put the tray on the bed table and moved the table in front of Clark. "Enjoy." She hurried out.

Clark uncovered the tray. Soup again. He pushed the table away. "It's a wonder anybody gets better around here."

"Should I try to smuggle in some Twinkies?" Lois asked with a chuckle.

"I wouldn't mind that," Clark admitted. "Or *un pain au chocolat*. There used to be a little boulangerie on *rue de Dunkerque* in Paris. Best *pain au chocolat* anywhere. You'd love it."

"Richard and I..." her voice broke as she fought back sudden tears. "We were planning to spend the weekend in Paris after the WTA conference. He'd wanted to surprise me with the reservations, but I found out anyway. I can't believe he's dead. I can't believe how close I came to losing you too."

"I shouldn't have let him come with me," Clark said. "I could have reconnoitered the area, come back with the information for Bill."

"Do you honestly think you could have stopped him from going out there with or without you?" Lois asked. "Richard was an investigate reporter before he got promoted to assistant editor. Some of the stunts he pulled scared even me. And he probably knew the risks better than you did."

"We should have turned back when we found Jason had stowed away," Clark said. "Richard suggested it. But I talked him out of it. It was already late. It would have been even later when we got back and..."

"And you figured you could protect them," Lois said. "Clark, you and Richard, whether you intended it or not, gave Jason something he'd never even dreamed of. He will always remember going camping with his two daddies. And even though things turned horribly wrong, he will always remember that the two of you worked together to protect him."

"How's Jason doing, really?"

"He misses Richard. He cries at night because his daddy isn't around to tuck him in. He has nightmares. But your mom and Ben and I have been concentrating on the good memories, and that helps. He'll be okay."

"I'm glad," Clark said. There was a long silence as they regarded one another. "I do have a couple questions though, about me being here mostly."

"I'm not a doctor, but I'll do my best," Lois said.

"You said I had a common blood type and I've had transfusions?"

"Yeah," Lois said. "Sure surprised Doctor Bryant. You test out as having O negative blood. Your hemoglobin is a little different, but not enough to matter. They were able to cross-match your blood just fine and they figure your body will replace the transfused blood without any problem."

"That's nice to know, I guess," Clark commented. "Surprising, since I'm not even human."

"According to Doctor Bryant, no one in the operating room, except possibly the anesthesiologist, noticed anything out of the ordinary during surgery. There was nothing to indicate you were anything but fully human. The differences are all on the cellular level, at least that's what he told me."

"So then, why was I unconscious for five full days?"

Lois sighed. "Clark, you had three major surgeries in less than twenty-four hours. Their plan was to keep you in 'normal' mode because they had no way to predict how quickly they could make you normal in case you did need more surgery. Plus, I guess when someone's on a respirator, they're kept sedated and paralyzed, if they're not already unconscious. You have no idea how bad off you were. Perry had Polly update your obituary, for God's sake. Perry actually printed it," she told him. Her voice was shaking. "They came very close to losing you on the operating table more than once. When we transferred you here, Bryant did order the lights changed out in the room you were in. It just didn't seem to do a whole lot of good, until today. You simply wouldn't wake up."

"I'm sorry I caused so much trouble," he said softly hanging his head, avoiding her eyes.

"You are a lunkhead," Lois intoned solemnly. She was gratified to see surprise on his face as his head came up, eyes wide behind his glasses.

"Have you any idea how much worse it would have been if you had died out there too, if Jason had lost both of his fathers. If I... if *we* had lost not only Clark, but Superman was dead at the hands of Lex Luthor. I doubt we could have kept the medical examiner's report secret, and it would have come out in the autopsy. Jason and I would have been on the run, away from Luthor's cronies, and SHADO, not to mention all the crazies going after every one else you ever cared about."

"You've been thinking about this, haven't you," he said.

"Ever since I figured out who Jason's father really was."

"These figures calculate out properly," Bridgette Crosby commented. She and Kitty had been reviewing Stoner's calculations for the power plant test. "But that is assuming his initial figures on kryptonite half-life and radiation output are correct."

"According to Hamilton's original mineral analysis, those figures are correct," Kitty told her.

"Then, if there's a problem here, I'm just not seeing it," Bridgie said, shaking her head. "According to these figures, and my recalculations, there shouldn't be a problem with the power plant test. Kryptonite has to be one of the most stable high energy isotopes ever."

"No, there's something wrong, I feel it," Kitty told her. "There's something wrong with those figures."

"Kitty, a feeling isn't exactly a good example of scientific analysis," Bridgie commented.

"A feeling is what I have," Kitty told her. "I may not be able to quantify it yet, but there is something here we're missing."

"Pity Superman's not around to look at it," Bridgie said, giving her friend a sidelong look.

"I mean, he's dead, right?"

"They haven't found his body yet," Kitty said.

"Faulkner just postponed the test," Straker grated into his phone.

"Did she say why?" Lake asked.

"Something about additional security precautions," he told her. He sounded furious.

"Since that article on the dangers of kryptonite to humans came out, Faulkner and her bunch have been running scared of their own reflections."

"Would it hurt to postpone the test?"

"Everything is set for Tuesday, you know that," he said.

"So what do you intend to do?"

He sighed heavily. "We have too much invested in this project to let a bitch in a suit get in our way."

"You're going to go ahead anyway," she said. "Without permission."

"We can always blame Luthor's people, or terrorists," he said. "I want you to get onto Carlin again tomorrow. See how the search is progressing."

"He won't be happy being interrupted again," she pointed out.

"Since when does that bother me?"

"I'll send a message in the morning," she promised and hung up. She turned back to her computer monitor, to the real-time satellite pictures of the Arctic ice pack near Alaska. Infra-red imaging showed a warm area at the edge of the ice and the pack in that area was beginning to breakup, revealing more warm water and, more ominously, an oil slick. The satellite detectors didn't reveal any excess radioactivity in the area, but Lake suspected an analysis of the water would reveal the presence of both weapons grade and power grade plutonium.

It was unlikely Carlin and Sky-diver would respond to her message. She wondered if Straker really cared if Carlin responded or not. Straker had always been single-minded in his pursuit of the aliens that threatened Earth, but ever since Superman's return he seemed to have tipped over to fanaticism. No, more than fanaticism - paranoia.

Kitty Faulkner took the copies she'd made of the figures and put them in her briefcase. Bridgie Crosby gave her a concerned look. "I may know someone who can help," Kitty explained.

"Anybody I know?"

"I'd rather not say," Kitty admitted, snapping her briefcase shut and walking out of her office.

Lupe Leocadio looked over at her fax machine as it first chirped, did its electronic hand shake, and then started printing. She grabbed the first sheet. The cover sheet indicated it was sent from Gotham City, from the Office of Police Commissioner James W. Gordon himself.

"About time," she muttered to herself as she read the other sheets as they came off the fax machine. Tri-state Transport. It was owned by a holding company, which in turn was owned by other companies in a complex financial shell game that made her head hurt just trying to untangle it.

The clincher, however, was at the bottom. The four major stockholders of the company that ultimately owned Tri-State Transport: Eldon Stoner, Adam Fletcher, Paul Franks and

Ursula Kraus. They'd gained control of the company five years go. GPD was looking into the company in regards to illegal arms trading as well as transporting drugs.

There was a hand-written note at the bottom of the last page: *Wolf: Hope this helps. Tell the blue Boy Scout Darth says hello, Hope he's in the air soon. JWG.*

She chuckled in spite of herself. *Darth, huh? Suits him. So long as he stays out of my town. The Boy Scout is bad enough without adding a bat to the mix.*

Twenty Five

Kitty Faulkner walked two blocks down from STAR Labs before hailing a cab. She gave the cabbie instructions to take her to Metropolis General Hospital then settled back for the ride, pulling out her phone. She selected a phone number from her phone list and waited for the number to ring.

"Lo? Kitty," she started. "Is our buddy up for visitors?"

"Yes," came the answer. "But are you sure this is a good idea?"

"No," Kitty admitted. "But I've run across a problem he might be able to shed some light on."

There was a sigh on the other end. "Okay, I'll let my brother Larry here know you're on your way."

"I'll be there in about twenty minutes."

"Bring something up from the deli, will you?" There was a pause, voices in the background. "Veggie with Swiss on rye, okay?"

"Will do," Kitty agreed, closing her phone. *Larry Lane ?*

"Ma'am," the cab driver said, breaking into her thoughts. "I think we're being followed."

"What? Who?" she asked. *Followed? Who would want to follow me unless...?*

"Black sedan with blacked out side windows and a license plate I can't make out. Pulled out right behind us as I pulled away from picking you up. They've stayed with us whole time and even ran a red light to keep up."

"Instead of Met General, drop me off at F&N, okay?" Kitty ordered. The cabbie nodded and pulled to a stop in the taxi zone in front of the venerable brick department store across from Dacy's. Kitty overpaid the cabby and hurried into the department store. She strolled through the cosmetics department, peering into the many mirrors to see if she was being followed. She didn't spot anyone. She walked over to shoes, then out the far exit door, on the opposite side of the building where she'd entered.

Met General was just down the street. She stopped at the deli on the corner and picked up the sandwich Lois had asked for and got a cup of coffee for herself before making her way to the hospital.

The main doors were still open and the sign indicated there was an hour left of visiting hours. She asked about Larry Lane, got his room number, went up the elevator to the twelfth floor. She spotted the man standing by the nurse's station and nodded to him and the floor supervisor seated behind the counter.

Kitty knocked on the door corresponding to the room number she'd been given.

"Come in," she heard Lois's voice say. She opened the door and walked in.

Bill Henderson sat at his desk. It was late and he was sure his wife had given up on him coming home anytime soon. Dinner time had come and gone more than an hour ago. She knew how he got when on a murder investigation. She was a cop's wife. Worse, she was a detective's wife.

The final report from the ME on Paul Foster had come in, confirming that Foster had died of a single, perfectly placed shot that had torn through his heart. There were no signs of drugs in his system, not even over-the-counter drugs. Except for one thing, Foster had been a very healthy man of fifty-six at the time of his death. That one thing would have killed him in less than a year if a bullet hadn't killed him first - his lungs had cancerous lesions that the ME figured might well have been caused by kryptonite exposure. They were going to do more

tests.

The ballistics report came through on the bullet the ME had removed from Foster's body. It confirmed that the gun was a nine-millimeter. One final notation - the bullet matched the ones taken from the bodies of the hikers murdered last year at Manahasset State Park. Everything came back to Manahasset and SHADO.

His desk phone rang and he picked it up.

"Bill? Lupe," Lupe Leocadio's voice announced. "I just got some info back from Gotham PD related to the Clinton Bridge incident."

"Okay, I'll bite," Henderson said.

"We've been working on tracing the cell phone the shooter had," she explained. "The phone belonged to a company out of Gotham. And the company that owned that company had some familiar names as major stockholders. Eldon Stoner, Adam Fletcher, Paul Franks and Ursula Kraus. The call records for the phone finally came in too. The last call was to Kent, but we knew that before. The shooter's next to last call was to STAR Labs, to Eldon Stoner. The calls before that were to other cell phones. We're still working on tracking those down, but at least one of them belonged to that same company out of Gotham."

"That other number, what is it?"

Lupe told him. He shuffled through the file he had on Russell Graves.

"Lupe, that makes another positive link between the Mazik robbery, the Clinton Bridge shooter and the Manahasset killings," Henderson announced. "That phone number matches the one for the cell phone we found in Russell Graves's house and his were the only fingerprints found on it."

Lupe swore. "We're gonna' need a blasted task force on this one. Do you think we can get some help from the Feds?"

"Not likely," Henderson admitted. "I'm being stonewalled by the JAG's office. They deny knowing anything about anything. FBI won't touch it either. We're on our own."

"What are the chances we'll be able to build a good case?"

"I think the best we can hope for is to scare them away from Metropolis for a while," Henderson admitted. "But that doesn't mean I'm going to stop trying to bring them down."

"Should we bring Stoner in for questioning?"

"Let's see what we can get on him first," Henderson told her. "A positive ID on him as Edward Straker would be helpful, but I'm betting we won't get it very easily. I mean, he passed the STAR Labs' background checks. God, but I hate cases like this. It's like fighting a hydra, every time you cut off one head, two more come back to bite you."

"Tell me about it, Billy Boy. Right now we need a scorecard to tell who is who. I know I've heard of this Adam Fletcher, but I just can't place where," Lupe said. "I'm gonna' head home. I'll let you know if anything else comes my way."

"Sure, and thanks, Lupe."

Clark and Lois both looked up as the door opened and Kitty Faulkner walked in. She held up the bag with the sandwich. "Beware scientists bearing gifts," she announced handing the bag to Clark who was in the hospital bed, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. "You know, I could get into trouble smuggling in food."

"I promise to eat the evidence," he said, taking a bite from the sandwich. "Angelo's?"

"How did you know?" Kitty wondered aloud.

"They make their own Russian dressing, and nobody else's comes close," he explained. "I

wonder if they're still baking their own bread."

"I think they are," Lois told him. She watched as he wolfed down the sandwich, and then wiped the dressing off his chin.

"Clark?"

"Hmm?"

"I just realized something," Lois said. "You really are a klutz, aren't you?"

Color climbed up his cheeks as he nodded. "I sometimes have problems staying within 'normal' parameters. It's like my internal clock speed runs too fast and it's worse when I'm trying hard to be normal."

"Like at work?"

"Especially at work," Clark admitted. Embarrassed, Clark turned back to Kitty. "You wanted to ask something?"

Kitty sat down on the edge of the bed and opened her briefcase. She pulled out the sheets of figures and handed them to him. "These are Stoner's figures for the power plant he's got in the works using kryptonite as fuel. Bridgie and I have checked and double checked them, but my gut instinct says there's something wrong with them."

Clark spread the sheets in front of him on the bed, tucking his legs under him. "The math is right, but... I need to see the plans for the reactor, but I don't see anything that takes into account for the fact that kryptonite is crystalline instead of metallic, or how it behaves when subjected to heat and compression. And it does change behavior, drastically. That's why the kryptonite alloy used in that ammunition SHADO was selling was armor piercing. It can explode when compressed, as in striking something."

"So, if we add pressure and temperature estimates to the figures, how does that change things?" Kitty asked.

He held out his hand for a pen and Kitty handed him one out of her briefcase. He quickly wrote down a series of equations, humming to himself softly. The equations weren't in standard mathematical notation and he frowned at the resultant figures. "This doesn't look good," he said. "These documents also don't list what type moderator he was planning on using."

"The reactor is supposed to use graphite and lead. The rods were supposed to come in Friday," Kitty told him. "So, what's the initial verdict?"

"Like I said, it doesn't look good," Clark told her. "Based on my estimates, and these are only estimates, the reactor has a good chance of going critical on start up. If that happens, all bets are off. But it would take out Met Power's reactor. It would also put kryptonite into the atmosphere, contaminating the entire eastern seaboard. Not to mention a shock wave that'd put Luthor's crystalquake to shame. And that's all assuming the moderators were properly made and are free of crystals. If they weren't, if there are carbon crystals contaminating the mix, we could be looking at the equivalent of a hundred megaton bomb going off only twenty miles outside the city."

"You really think it'll be that bad?" Lois asked.

"Without asking the AI at the Fortress, I can only give estimates," Clark told them. "And since Luthor stole the memory crystals, the AI isn't exactly available either. But, um, Stoner's kryptonite reactor is looking like a very bad idea right now."

"I guess I'll have to do more than just delay his project," Kitty said. "I'll have to cancel it."

"How did Stoner take it when you told him you were postponing the test?" Lois asked.

"Not happy, but I guess he's just going to have to live with it," Kitty said. "I won't give final go-ahead on a project with such major safety issues."

"The question then becomes, what will he do then?" Lois asked.

"And what can we do about it?" Clark asked back.

Kitty picked up the sheet he'd been writing on. "Any chance you can translate this into English?"

"Uh, not really," Clark admitted. "The equations are actually within a multidimensional matrix and some of them use base twelve. Actually, I think that's where Luthor screwed up. The Kryptonian equations use different underlying numeric bases depending on the natural form of the crystals being referred to. Kryptonite uses base twelve, carbon would be base six, I think. It could be base twelve, doesn't change the results by too much. Salt is base four. Water is base six."

Kitty just stared at him a long moment. "Promise me that once we have Stoner taken care of, you'll figure out how to translate these into Earth math?" she said finally.

"I'll do my best," Clark said. "But I should warn you, I stopped at calculus in college, so I'm not altogether sure where to even start converting this stuff."

There was a knock on the door and a dark-skinned nurse stuck her head in. "Visiting hours are over," she announced, coming into the room. "I'm Nurse Mishlyn." She came around to the foot of the bed, picking up the metal clipboard that was tucked into its holder. She read through the day's notations frowning a little as she read.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," Kitty promised, placing the papers back in her briefcase. She walked out.

"So, Mister Lane, how are you doing this evening?" the nurse asked. She tucked the clipboard under one arm as she took his wrist to check his pulse.

"Fine," Clark answered.

"Well, it's nice to see you conscious," she said. She frowned more deeply as she experimented with different spots on his wrist. "You don't have a pulse."

Clark gave her an embarrassed grin as she placed two fingers against his carotid artery. After a few moments, she noted down her findings. She looked down at his hands then gave him a speculative stare. "You didn't have a radial pulse last time either."

"Last time?" Clark wondered aloud.

"I was the nurse on duty that night, when you took off," she said. "You could have let us know how you were."

"Uh, sorry?"

Lois chuckled. Mishlyn smiled. "It's okay, Mister Lane. I was the nurse assigned to Superman when he was admitted last time. But I've already promised not to tell Charlotte down in the ER that you're back here. Last time she threatened to come up and kick your cute butt the hell out of here so you'd get back to work saving people. She'd be seriously torqued to find out you got yourself shot and landed up in the trauma unit."

"Um, Superman didn't get shot," Clark said.

Mishlyn chuckled. "Whatever." She put the clipboard back in its holder. "I'll be back in a couple hours and you'd better still be here." She went to the door, placing her hand on the door handle before looking back at Lois. "Miss Lane, it's nice to meet the people who make him care for the rest of the world. It's nice to know that they're good people." The door shut slowly behind her.

*"When you wake up, you go to your loved ones," a woman's voice had said. She'd been holding his hand. "You go to those who make you care for the rest of the world."**

"Clark?" Lois's voice intruded on his thoughts.

"I don't remember falling out of the sky," he said softly. "I think I remember the ambulance and the ER, at least bits and pieces. I remember a white room that was too quiet. I remember that I couldn't hear you and then you were there, talking to me, telling me about Jason. And then, later, she was there, talking to me, holding my hand. She was the only other person who touched me, who talked to me."

"Bryant invited her to join the Green Fire response team," Lois said.

"Green Fire?"

"After that last time, Kitty and Doctor Bryant put together contingency plans for the next time, which as it happens, was last Wednesday. They'll be the ones to respond to Kryptonians in trouble."

"Me?"

"You *and* Jason, probably," she said. "You get some sleep. Your mom will be here shortly so I can sleep in my own bed."

"Lois, thank you."

"For what?"

"For still being my friend," he said. "Especially after... after everything that's happened."

"Clark, close your eyes, get some sleep," she ordered. "We'll talk tomorrow, okay?"

"Promise?"

"Promise," she said. *He is so much like Jason, so worried about everyone else, so hopeful things will be okay.*

Lupe Leocadio tossed and turned, her mind refusing to calm down enough for her to fall asleep. Something in the reports on her desk, something she'd heard or read was trying to link itself to the case she'd been spending all her waking hours on for the past week. Something about Luthor, but she couldn't grab the elusive wisp of memory, of connection. She pounded her pillow several times before rolling over to bury her head in her blankets.

Eventually, she gave up, pulled on an old track suit and headed back to her office.

Martha Kent watched her son sleep. She'd napped during the afternoon, and even though staying up all night and sleeping in the day was the exact opposite of her long standing habit from living on a farm for forty years, she was managing. She'd brought some knitting and despite her arthritis, she was managing the cable knit pattern she was working on. It had been a long time since she'd knitted a child's sweater. With any luck, she'd have it finished before Christmas.

The ceiling lights were off and the only light in the room came from the lamp on the bed stand. She'd moved her chair close to the light to see, wishing she'd brought her other glasses.

Clark muttered in his sleep, tossing and turning as if fighting some monster that haunted his dreams.

"Clark?" she said, coming to stand beside the hospital bed. She placed a hand on his shoulder and he shuddered, eyes opening as he tried to orient himself.

"Mom?"

"Go back to sleep," Martha ordered softly.

"That's all I've been doing," he complained. He sniffed the air. "You brought a dream pillow for me. Um, eucalyptus, sage, rosemary and thyme?"

"Healing sleep. But I think I should have brought you the one I made for Jason. Chases the nightmares away. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not especially," he admitted. "I think part of me doesn't believe that Luthor is dead. I can't believe that after everything that he did, everything that happened, he let himself be killed. Then part of me... I still see his face, his eyes after he... after he... stabbed me, after he ordered me to fly away. Mom, I ran. I never ran from anything in my life, even when it would have been smarter to do it. But I ran away from Luthor." He was shivering. Martha lowered the bedrail and sat on the side of the bed to hold him.

"Clark, you did what you had to do to save yourself, there's no shame in that. You did what you had to do so you could come back and take care of the problem. I think it's called a strategic retreat?"

"Withdrawal. Strategic withdrawal. Mom, when I went into the water, I knew I was dead. The cavalry wasn't coming over the hill. There was no miraculous rescue after the cliffhanger. Only three people besides Luthor and his cronies even knew where I was, and I'd ordered them to leave, to get away and not come back." His expression was bleak and he was still shivering, though not as much as he had been. His face was wet with tears.

"Good thing they didn't listen to you," Martha told him, brushing his hair away from his eyes.

"Lois never listens to anybody," Clark replied. "But then, I'm at least as bad, rushing in without looking. Luthor even made fun of me for that."

Martha didn't comment, waiting for the silence to urge him to continue.

"I knew a meteorite had been stolen from the museum," Clark began, finally. "I knew it was part of a larger one that Luthor had stolen pieces of eight years ago, so I should have known that Luthor had possession of kryptonite. But I went straight to him without doing any preliminary checking, got beaten nearly to death, and stabbed with a kryptonite dagger. Now, will somebody please tell me why someone who's supposed to be so smart acts so stupid?"

"Because despite of everything, you want to believe there's more good than evil in the world. Or maybe you've been around Lois too long?" Martha suggested with a smile. "Rushing in where angels would have the good sense not to go?"

Clark gave her a puzzled look then gave her a sad grin, wiping the wet off his face. "Maybe. Or maybe I've started to believe my own PR."

"No, I don't think that's it," Martha told him. "I think the problem is that you really don't understand evil. Your dad and I raised you to see the good and I'm not sure if we missed something or it's just the way you are. You just don't understand people who take pleasure in abusing their power, people who get their jollies hurting other people." She looked at Clark speculatively. "You don't understand evil. You always give people the benefit of the doubt. You feel for victims and it shows in how you approach things, how you interview people, how you write about them, what you do for them."

"Maybe," he admitted after a long silence. "Or maybe I'm just dense. Mom, I know Luthor is dead, but I still hate him. I don't think I've really hated anyone in my life, but I hate *him*. I'm glad Lois killed him, because it kept *me* from doing it." He'd started shaking again.

"Honey, I don't think you'll be going back to sleep any time soon," Martha said. "Why don't you put on some clothes and we'll see about rustling up some coffee." She nodded to a dark track suit tossed over the other chair. He nodded and his shivering subsided a little as he moved to do as he was told.

Lupe shuffled through the various files on her desk. Desk work was not her strong suit. She was a field officer, a hunter like her namesake, a wolf. But once the perp was brought to

ground, cuffed and jailed, it was a religious devotion to the paper trail that really brought them to justice. Reports, evidence chains, phone, financial, tax records. She knew there was a snippet of a clue in the pile on her desk and it had to do with Luthor.

Luthor - it had to do with Luthor. She opened the Luthor/New Krypton file. The overturning of Luthor's conviction by Judge Westover last year, even though it was a foregone conclusion that Superman could not be served the summons to come to the hearing, grated on her. The investigation into Westover's finances had been shelved for lack of evidence. She flagged that file. With Luthor dead, maybe it was time to look into Judge Westover again.

Better yet, she'd give a copy of the file to Lois Lane.

Next, the international hunt for the criminal mastermind. Bingo. Adam Fletcher, the State Department official who retrieved Luthor from the Cuban prison. A State Department officer who had no personnel records, no driver's license, no Social Security number. A bogus State Department officer who apparently was also part owner of Tri-State Transport. A man who had been positively identified as Alec Everett Freeman, formerly of SHADO.

Six in the morning. Bill Henderson should be up by now. The pieces were coming together. Now to prove that the camera shy Eldon Stoner was really the reclusive Edward Straker.

* From Waiting (part 2 of Not Human), by RoswellianMisha (used with permission of the author)

Twenty Six

"She can't do this to me," Straker ranted.

Lake watched him pace the decrepit office in Suicide Slum. "Exactly what did she do?"

"She cancelled the project outright," he fumed. "*Undue risk*, she said. We're two days to completion and she pulls the plug without so much as a word to me."

"So, what do you plan to do?"

"What do you think I plan to do? I spent five years courting that madman, planning this for if and when that damned alien showed his face again. And I don't believe for an instant the speculation that he went into the base to rescue people and didn't come out. Paul or Alec would have known."

"But, Ed, what if Faulkner's right, what if it is dangerous to humans?"

"We've seen no evidence of that," Straker reminded her. "Have you heard from Carlin?"

"Negative, sir. But you should know that I've checked the satellite recon data. There's an oil slick and radioactive debris very near the area they should have been in."

"Keep trying to raise him."

"Ed, with as much debris as I saw... there's not much use to..."

"Keep trying to raise him. If you haven't made contact in forty-eight hours, well, that's one more thing we can add to the list of crimes against that damned alien."

Lake's heart went cold. *Superman can't be blamed for this one. He didn't give the orders.* She took a deep breath and plunged on. "Sir, what should we do about Paul's body?"

"What about it?"

"Should we send someone to claim it?"

"If you can manage it without it coming back to you, go ahead. Personally, he was a damned fool getting shot by STAR Labs security."

Lake was finding hard to breathe. She'd seen the M.E.'s report on Paul. Paul had been dying of lung cancer and hadn't known it - or had he? Kryptonite exposure had been killing him and she knew he'd been seeing a doctor, even if he had refused to discuss the fact with her.

Did Straker know? Did he care? It hadn't been a security man's bullet that had gone through Paul Foster's heart. The bullet that killed her friend, her comrade, her former lover, had come from the same gun that had killed two people last year. A 9mm, like the Berrettas Straker and Freeman both favored. Only Freeman was in Europe. Straker was here, and Straker had been at the Sky-diver base last year. Straker was there when the two campers were shot down in cold blood.

"There you are, Mister Lane," Nurse Mishlyn said, walking up to the small table in the corner of the ward lounge. "I thought I told you to stay put."

"I haven't left the hospital," Clark defended himself, eyes wide in sudden concern. Across the table, Martha laughed, hiding her chuckles in her mug of coffee. Officer Mooney had taken a seat at a table on far from them and had been nursing his coffee the entire time they'd been sitting there.

"Well, come along," Mishlyn ordered, taking Clark's elbow to hurry him along. "Doctor Bryant's waiting for you. And it's not good to keep an important man like him waiting." Mishlyn looked over at Martha. "Don't tell me you guys were actually drinking that mud? Okay, him I can believe, but that stuff is not fit for human consumption."

"It's not nearly as bad as the coffee at the Smallville airport café," Martha managed to tell

her. "That is truly mud."

Bryant was talking to one of the floor nurses at the nurses' station when Mishlyn arrived with her errant charge and his mother.

"The next time you're admitted here, I think we'll put a tracking tag on you," she was threatening.

Bryant shook his head and went to the door of the room assigned to Larry Lane. Mishlyn pushed Clark ahead of her into the small room beyond.

"Well, it's good to see you up and around," Bryant began as Mishlyn made sure the door was closed behind them. "Considering everything, we weren't sure how long it would take for your special traits to kick back in."

Clark shrugged. He still wasn't sure how much Bryant really knew.

"How about you take off your shirt so I can see how you're healing," Bryant suggested.

Clark complied, standing still as Bryant checked his back, his chest, his hands.

"Interesting," Bryant murmured, going around to Clark's back once more. "Do you feel one or two points touching you?"

"Two."

"Now?"

"Two."

"And now?"

"Um, I can't tell, one, I think, and it hurts," Clark answered.

Bryant repeated the exercise, noting down his findings. Finally: "You can put your shirt back on."

Clark did so, and then settled himself on the edge of the bed, hands folded in his lap.

"Well?" Martha urged.

"Well, first," Bryant said, looking straight at Clark. "Most people can't resolve two points as closely as you can on your back. From all indications, the surgical wounds have healed completely, including the nerve endings, without any trace of scarring. If I could figure out how you do that so we could get normal people to do that, that would be a modern miracle."

"I don't know," Clark admitted. "It's just the way I am."

Bryant shrugged. "Secondly, the kryptonite contaminated wounds are taking much longer to heal, and I suspect you will have some scarring. And this is after decontaminating the wounds as thoroughly as I know how. Every test we ran indicated there was no trace of kryptonite in your body."

"You think the scars will be permanent?" Clark asked, looking at the marks that still marred his left hand. They were fading, not even as red as they'd been just that morning, but they were still visible.

"I don't honestly know," Bryant admitted. "It could simply be that it'll take more time for them to heal over. Does the stab wound still bother you?"

"Yes, a little, but not as much as it did," Clark told him.

"Good," Bryant said, snapping the note board in his hand shut. He held out his right hand to be shaken.

Clark got to his feet and shook the surgeon's hand.

"I'm releasing you. Take it easy the next couple days, wait for your strength to come back before tackling anything strenuous. If you have any unusual symptoms, fever, tenderness or redness around any of the wounds, come back here. Not that I'm expecting you'll have any problems of that nature, but I'd rather not have to do this again."

"I'll do my best," Clark promised. "And thank you."

"You're welcome," Bryant told him, heading for the door. "Now, go on, get out of here. We need the bed for a sick person."

It was early for her, but Lois Lane was at her desk, putting the finishing touches on the story she was working with Jeff Ryan - a follow up on the textile factory arson fire. Despite the ordered collapse of the building, the arson squad had found more than enough evidence to link that fire to the ones on the West River that Clark had reported on two days prior. *The textile factory fire was just one week ago. The arson squad must be in massive overtime to have as much sorted out as they already have.* Of course, the FBI was helping in this investigation. *Pity they couldn't be bothered to help out in looking into Richard's murder.*

Speculation was that Intergang was rearing its ugly head again. Bill Church Jr. and Morgan Edge had both been released from prison about the same time as Lex Luthor and both had promptly vanished from sight. Luthor was dead, but no one was admitting to knowing where Church and Edge had disappeared to. With their contacts, they could be anywhere on the planet.

The incoming mail chime went off on her computer and Lois opened her email program. Lupe Leocadio was asking her to meet her at Dulin's after work. 'It'll be worth your while,' Lupe promised.

She felt a heavy hand on her shoulder and shuddered, shrugging away from the touch as she turned to look up at whoever had dared enter her personal space. Ralph Gunderson was standing behind her chair, pulling his hand back as she raised her hand to push him away.

"Hey, I was just seeing how you were doing," Ralph protested. "I mean, with Richard and Clark both gone, I figured you..."

"You figured wrong," Lois spat at him. "And the next time you lay a hand on me, don't expect to get it back in one piece."

"Mommy, is he bothering you?" Jason asked, walking up to her. He was eyeing Ralph suspiciously.

Lois managed a smile at her son. "It's okay, honey. He's just leaving." She glared at Ralph as he stammered an apology and headed back to his desk.

"He's not a nice man," Jason observed.

"No, he's not," Lois agreed. *He's had to grow up so fast. Oh Richard, why did you have to be a hero? Because a hero was the only kind of man I could fall for?*

Martha paid for the cab that dropped her and her son off in front of his apartment building in the Pelham neighborhood. Clark hadn't said more than two words since they left the hospital and she was beginning to worry again.

The elevator ride to the top floor was spent in silence as she tried to judge how he was feeling. He was looking tired again.

"Lois thinks you should get an alarm system," Martha said, unlocking the door. "By the way, Lois had copies made so now I have a key and so does she. Just in case."

He nodded, looking around his own apartment as though he didn't quite recognize it. "I always figured an alarm system just told the bad guys you had something worth stealing," Clark told her. He walked over to the table. His wallet, pen knife, cell phone, loose change, watch, all the stuff he'd had with him when he left the Daily Planet last Tuesday afternoon, were on the table. He gave his mother a questioning look.

"They gave your personal effects to Lois," Martha explained. "I was calling you to let you know Ben and I had gotten back to Smallville okay when she told me you'd been shot." She blinked back tears. "I think there's only one thing worse than finding out your baby may be dying, and that's finding out it's already too late."

"I'm sorry, Mom," Clark murmured.

She came over and gave him a hug. "I'm just glad you're going to be okay. I was surprised to see you're still carrying around that old knife."

"Dad gave it to me, remember?" Clark reminded her. "When I made First Class."

"He was so proud of you," she told him. "And when you made Eagle... It was like you'd won the Pulitzer and Nobel all in one. He was so proud. And I know he'd be proud of the man you've become."

"I don't know Mom," he said. "I've made an awful lot of mistakes."

"Clark, the only people who don't make mistakes are those who don't do *anything*," she said. "Now, go take a shower, get cleaned up while I fix us some breakfast. Lois brought an electric razor for you and I bought some disposables yesterday. We weren't sure if you'd need them or not, but..."

"Thanks," Clark said. He opened the closet beside the bathroom and grabbed a change of clothes. Martha noticed he'd chosen a gray suit.

"Lois thought you might want to spend a few days at home, getting your strength back before heading back to work," Martha told him.

"I need to do something besides sitting around here," he explained. "I need to get back to work. Besides, Lois isn't my supervisor. Perry is."

"Doctor Bryant told you to take it easy," Martha reminded him.

"Doctor Bryant told me not to do anything too strenuous," Clark said, opening the bathroom door. "Sitting at a desk updating obituaries isn't exactly strenuous."

Henderson looked over the two medical examiner's reports that had just come into him from Hodgekiss's office. Richard White and Lex Luthor. He was surprised to see the report on Luthor. He'd been under the impression that Luthor's body had disappeared before the autopsy could be conducted. There was only one surprise in the report itself. Either wound would have been fatal, although the neck shot might have taken a minute or so longer to kill him. The chest shot had missed his heart but had torn through his aorta. He may not have been dead before he hit the ground, but nothing on earth could have saved him. The surprise was that Luthor had been dying. There had been cancerous lesions in his lungs and one in his brain. The one in his brain would have driven him mad eventually, assuming he wasn't already insane.

White had taken three shots to the body. The final shot, based on its trajectory through the body, had been the fatal one. It was also the M.E.'s opinion that White had been in a fight in the moments before his death. The skin on his knuckles had been torn, capillaries broken, but there'd been no time for bruising to occur.

Hodgekiss's office had taken its own sweet time getting the autopsy reports to him, although they'd been more than a little miffed when he tried to delay sending them the ballistics report on the slugs the surgeons had taken out of Kent. The bullets that killed White had come from the gun Lex Luthor had used to shoot Kent.

As far as Hodgekiss and his people were concerned, Luthor had killed White as well as shooting Kent. Case closed. *So why don't I believe it? And who the devil would have wanted Luthor's body?*

Lois's cell phone chimed and she answered it, listened for a moment. "Thanks Martha," she said before folding up her phone and putting it back in her pocket. She saved her document and sent it off to the laser printer before starting toward the elevator lobby.

Through the glass partition and doors she could see that one elevator car was approaching the newsroom floor. The doors opened and she saw a tall gray suited man in a camelhair overcoat with dark hair and glasses press a button on the control panel and the doors closed again. The telltale above the doors indicated the elevator car was going up again. *Clark, what are you doing?*

She turned on her heel and hurried to Perry's office, barging in despite the fact that Perry was in conference with Polly Harper.

"Yes, Lois?" Perry asked without looking up from the papers on his desk.

"Martha called. They released him this morning and she dropped him off here so he could come in to work. Only it looks like he's headed for the roof instead," Lois told him in a rush.

Perry finally looked up at her. "Go find him!"

Lois turned and ran to the elevators, nearly bowling over Jimmy and Gil as they started through the glass doors to the newsroom.

In Perry's office, Polly watched after Lois then turned to her boss. "Chief, what's going on? Who was she talking about?"

"Clark Kent."

"Clark's alive?" Polly asked. "But you ran his obituary."

"And now I'll be printing a retraction."

In the elevator, Lois fumed at the car's slowness. *Come on, come on!*

After what seemed like an eternity, the brass and enamel doors slid open and she stepped out onto the terrazzo floor of the observation deck on the roof of the Daily Planet. It was odd not being under the shadow of the great globe that had been such a prominent feature of the Daily Planet building since its completion. The globe had broken off the building during the crystalquake and was scheduled to be replaced once the building itself was restored.

She looked around the roof. Clark was nowhere in sight. She stepped over to the wide waist-high ledge that surrounded the deck. "Clark?" She leaned over the ledge to peer over it, at the lower section of the building to the ground below. *At least he didn't jump. Are his powers back?* "Clark?"

"Over here," a soft voice said. She turned to locate the voice and found Clark huddled in a corner, knees drawn to his chest.

"Clark, are you okay?" she asked, crouching beside him. He shook his head and she noticed he was scratching the back of his left hand. "What happened?"

"When the doors opened, I couldn't get out. I just couldn't. I couldn't face all those people who were going to blame me for Richard being dead."

"Nobody's blaming you for Richard's murder, except you," Lois told him. "It's called survivor syndrome. You survived, he didn't. You're glad you survived, but then you feel guilty for being happy that it was him instead of you. You still think you should have been able to save him. You couldn't save him, Clark. He made a choice. He made a choice to go after the story with you. He made the choice to protect you so you could protect Jason. And you did that even though you could barely save yourself."

"I should have been able to do something. I should have known there was going to be

trouble. I had opportunities to get us out of there and I didn't take them," Clark said. His voice was shaking.

"They say hindsight's twenty-twenty," Lois said. "I could have had Perry fly us out that night to get the three of you. I could have called Henderson when I found Jason wasn't where he was supposed to be, when I figured out he'd gone with you and I figured out I couldn't get in touch with either of you. Richard didn't have to stay out there with you. He could have insisted you all leave. He could have simply left you there and brought Jason home. But he didn't, you didn't, I didn't. And that's something we just have to live with."

"I don't know if I can," he admitted. He looked miserable, more miserable, if possible, than he had that Saturday at her house before all this happened.

"Clark, death happens," Lois told him. "Tragedy happens, grief happens, joy happens. It's part of being human."

"But I'm not..."

"That's not true," she interrupted. "Jor-El was wrong. You're one of us. You are the best of us. You are the very best human being I know, that I ever hope to know. You show us what a good and noble person is, without being condescending, without asking anything in return. And you do it, not through feats of strength or by flying through the air, but by caring enough to help. By being you. By being a good man."

He turned away from her and she reached out to turn his head to face her again.

"That's one of the reasons I fell in love with Richard," she continued. "He was a good man, like you. He was gentle and considerate, and strong when he needed to be, like you. He had honor and he wasn't above placing his life on the line for others, like you. He was, however, arrogant enough to go after a woman who was arrogant enough to think she deserved to fly with a god."

"I'm not a god. I never claimed to be one."

"You never had to," she said. He stared at her, not quite understanding what she meant. She chuckled. *He's just like Jason. Innocent in so many ways.* "We'd better get downstairs before Perry starts worrying that I'm trying to talk you down from that ledge."

"That was the first place you looked," he reminded her, but she noticed he was smiling just a little. He'd been scratching his hand and now it was inflamed. "It started itching in the elevator," he explained as she looked at his hand.

"Perry had STAR Labs check the building for kryptonite, like you suggested and he's having extra air filtration added on the newsroom floor as part of the repair and upgrades," she said.

"Maybe they forgot to check the elevators," he said as she helped him to his feet.

"Or maybe *they* haven't stopped trying to get you?" She took his arm to lead him to the elevator. "I wonder if Jason's allergy ointment will work on you?"

He stopped and shrugged off his overcoat, draping it over her shoulders. "You forgot your coat," he said.

"Find anything?" Jeremy Banks asked his team as they came out of the small concrete building on the edge of the Metropolis Power's compound twenty miles outside of Metropolis. The main power plant's cooling tower loomed over them.

"It'd help if we knew what we were looking for," one of the men complained. "We didn't find any bombs, and the place looks like it's completed."

Virtanen was right. You can't find something if you don't know what it is. "Set the alarms

and lock it up," Banks ordered. "I want three people here at all times and I want them to check in with me every half hour. I'll arrange six-hour shifts. Okay?"

The first three volunteers nodded and started to pace the perimeter of STAR Lab's small portion of the compound as the rest of Bank's team headed back to the south shore of the West River, to STAR Labs.

Lois handed Clark back his coat when they got into the elevator and he folded it over his arm. His body heat, captured in the coat, had taken the chill off her almost immediately.

"They're still his friends," Clark said softly.

"They're your friends too, if you let them," Lois told him. "Jimmy wasn't the only one who missed you, you know."

"He wasn't?"

The elevator door opened onto the lobby of the newsroom floor. Lois grabbed Clark's elbow and walked with him into the newsroom proper.

Perry was waiting in the middle of the floor, arms akimbo, stifling a smile. "It's about time you two showed up," he began.

From behind him, Jason ran toward the two reporters. "Unca' Clark, you're okay!" Clark caught him and hoisted the boy onto one arm in a seamless, easy move. Jason threw his arms around Clark's neck and the newsroom erupted in applause.

Lois felt him begin to back away and gripped his arm tighter, urging him forward instead. "Just breathe," she instructed. "It'll be okay. They're friends."

"Welcome back, CK," Jimmy said. He had his camera out, taking photos of Clark's return.

Polly, Jeff, and others chimed in in welcome. "Welcome back, Clark." "How are you doin'?"

Lois managed to push the three of them through the growing crowd, passing Clark's desk. Ralph had just settled into his chair, a smirk on his coarse featured face. Clark stopped, confusion in his eyes.

"Clark, it's okay. Ralph's just being a jerk, but Perry's assigning you a different desk," Lois said.

Clark shook his head, the apparent confusion turning to worry. "No, I heard something."

"What?"

"I'm not sure... Something, a switch, I think," Clark said, handing Jason over to his mother. He tossed his coat onto 'Ralph's' desk, listening intently. The group that had crowded around him began to move back, giving him room. Ralph started to get out of his chair but stopped when Clark put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't move." He turned to Lois. "Have you got a mirror?"

Polly ran to her desk and grabbed a small locker mirror out of a desk drawer. She ran back and handed the mirror to Clark, now crouching behind Ralph's chair. Clark reached under the chair, mirror in hand, and inspected the reflection of the office chair's underside.

"Lois, get Jason out here, please?" Clark said. His eyes had gone dark with worry. "And call the bomb squad."

"Bomb?" Ralph squeaked, and started to rise from his seat. Lois put her hand out, stopping him.

"It's pressure sensitive, isn't it?" Lois asked.

Clark nodded. "I think so."

Perry had his cell phone out and Lois was sure he was making the call to the police.

"Everybody out!" Perry ordered. His words broke over the people surrounding the drama that was unfolding. En masse, they seemed to stir, first moving slowly, then more quickly to gather coats and purses, heading out to the elevators and stairs. Lois handed Jason to Polly.

"Mommy?"

"Stay with Polly, munchkin," Lois ordered. He nodded unhappily, watching back over Polly's shoulder at his mother as Polly carried him to the elevators.

"What about me?" Ralph protested.

"What about you?" Clark asked. His voice was quiet, but his tone indicated it was a rhetorical question. The room had emptied with surprising efficiency. Within minutes, the only persons left in the room were Perry, Jimmy, Lois, Clark, and Ralph.

"Jimmy, do you think you can get a shot of this?" Clark asked. Jimmy crouched down and focused his camera on the reflection in the mirror. He clicked the shutter several times, adjusting the lens between shots.

"Got it," Jimmy said after a moment. "I'll download them onto the network." He ran off to his own station.

"We should be okay, unless Ralph moves," Clark said. "What I heard was the first trigger." By this time, Clark was laying on his back, looking up at the device. He reached out with his right hand and touched it. He jerked his hand back as if burnt.

"Are you okay?" Lois asked. He was looking at his hand, his finger tips. Lois didn't see anything wrong, but he was frowning.

"C4 and kryptonite. It's wrapped in lead foil," Clark explained.

"Uh, why would somebody put a bomb on my chair? Who'd want to kill me?" Ralph whined.

"Ralph," Perry said. "As far as I know, the only people who know you well enough to want you dead all work here. And believe me they're all clever enough to find ways to kill you that wouldn't involve placing a bomb in the newsroom. Besides, that was Clark's chair, so I'm pretty sure he was the target, not you."

"Which then opens up the questions 'who placed it and when?'" Lois noted. "I wonder where the bomb squad is?"

"Not here," Clark observed. After a moment, he reached up again and they heard a ripping sound. He was on his feet, heading toward Perry's office at a lope, holding something small and metallic against his chest. Lois watched as he opened the window and tossed the item outside. He watched after it for a moment then ducked down behind the wall as an explosion tore through the air outside the building.

"Clark!" Lois yelled, running toward the office. She found Perry and Jimmy right beside her as she ran into the office. Clark straightened up, brushing carpet lint off his suit.

"It was hot, getting ready to go off," he explained. "They've figured out to use kryptonite's energy characteristics as a detonator."

The elevator doors opened and two men in MPD uniforms, wearing heavy helmets and body armor stepped out. They guided a large metal box on a motorized mount into the elevator lobby.

"We heard an explosion," one of the men said, looking around the newsroom.

"He got rid of it, out the window," Ralph said. He was pale, but he hadn't moved.

"It was ready to go off," Clark explained simply. "Luckily, I've still got a pretty good throwing arm. By the way, Ralph, you can get up now." He looked back to the two officers. "The rest of the mechanism is still under the chair. I think you'll find it's very similar to the

mechanisms used on the Clinton Bridge."

"And how do you know that?"

"I was on the Clinton Bridge, with Superman," Clark replied. "And I'm pretty familiar with explosives. Comes with the territory, covering the city," he added.

The officer nodded. "Look, we're gonna' get a team up here, make sure there are no more surprises."

"I like that idea," Perry agreed. "Check the offices first, if you don't mind. At least that way, some of us can get back to work." He looked over at Lois and Clark. "The two of you can use Richard's office. Get started on writing this up and then I want to see a draft on Clark's point of view on what happened out there last week. Then, I want you both out of here."

"But, Mister White, I..." Clark began.

"You just got out of the hospital," Perry reminded him. "Take it easy for a few days. You do know how to do that, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," Clark agreed. He ignored Lois's chuckle.

"And your job, young lady, is to make sure he does it."

"But, Perry...!"

"No 'buts,'" he said. "Get to work."

Twenty Seven

It took an hour for the bomb squad's team to check and clear the newsroom. Ralph had gone home, claiming his nerves couldn't take it. By the time everyone else got back to their desks, Lois and Clark had most of the article on the newsroom bomb put together. Jason was on his knees in a chair across the desk from them, busily filling an artist's pad with colorful drawings, mostly Superman, but Richard as well.

Clark was objecting to his name being used in the story. He'd spent most of his professional life trying to be the invisible man, aside from his name on the byline. Having *Clark Kent* cast as a hero was making him nervous. Clark Kent wasn't a hero. That was *Superman's* job.

"Are you okay?" Lois asked. He'd finally stopped scratching his hand, after she'd slathered Jason's antihistamine ointment on it. The redness was fading as well. Clark was frankly astonished it had worked. *Placebo effect?*

"I know the public needs to know how far these bastards will go to eliminate people they don't like," Clark admitted. "I just wish we didn't have to use my name."

"Well, I figure if we don't do it, Ralph will just run over to the Whisper to sell his side of it," Lois pointed out. "What I'm wondering about it why they chose today? How did they know you'd be coming in so they could set it up?"

"I don't think they did," he said. He pulled out one of the enlargements of the photos Jimmy had taken of the bomb and studied it. "At least not exactly. We'll know more once the experts finish with the mechanism, but I think it was a multipart trigger. Someone saw me come into the building, and armed the device, probably by radio. Then Ralph sat down, setting it off. It probably wouldn't have reacted if it had been you or Jason, but Ralph weighs more than I do. The second part started a reaction with the kryptonite, which then acted as a detonator to set off the C4."

"And nobody notices the maintenance guys when they come in and change out equipment and furniture," Lois added, looking out into the bullpen. A man in a blue maintenance uniform was wheeling a replacement chair into the newsroom, heading for the empty space at Clark's, now Ralph's, desk.

"Exactly."

"It's unsettling to realize that someone working here would be capable of doing something like that," Lois said. "Planting a bomb in a room as crowded as this one, or triggering it."

"That's why they're called 'terrorists,'" Clark reminded her. "It's even possible that the person who pressed the button to trigger the device didn't know that was what they were doing."

Bill Henderson watched the dots on the computer monitor. Doctor Faulkner had called him earlier, telling him that STAR Labs IT and Security had found additional information concerning Foster's murder. Now he was standing with Faulkner in the STAR Labs information technologies laboratory, watching data as it played across the LCD screen.

"Explain this to me again?" Henderson asked.

Virtanen shrugged. "Yesterday we realized we had another way to track individuals in the building. A way that was not part of the official 'security' system. What you're seeing is part of that other system, the data from Thursday afternoon. We're seeing where the ID tags were at that time. And that tag in the corridor with the victim belongs to Eldon Stoner."

"Which puts him, or someone carrying his ID, at the scene of the crime," Henderson

observed. "Where is he now?"

"He didn't come in this morning," Kitty said. "I cancelled one of his projects over the weekend. He didn't take it very well."

"And what project was that?" Henderson asked.

"Using kryptonite as an energy source," Kitty explained. "The prototype plant was scheduled for testing tomorrow, but I came across information that led me to believe Stoner's figures and safety assertions were less than accurate."

"Do you mind giving me what you have on Stoner?" Henderson asked.

"Not a problem," Kitty told him. She handed him a slim CD case and he glanced at its contents. A CD labeled 'Property STAR Labs, Metropolis. Confidential.' There was a serial number printed across the bottom.

"I pulled the information last night," Kitty told him. "From our encrypted backups." She looked over at Virtanen. "Some of our personnel files were corrupted over the weekend. Stoner's was one of them."

"And we believe Stoner has had unauthorized access to our security files and was deliberately interfering with our security efforts," Virtanen added.

"I trust you appreciate how sensitive this information is," Kitty reminded Henderson. Henderson nodded.

Lois moved closer to peer over his shoulder at the computer screen, forearm resting on his shoulder in a familiar way. The way she did before he left, when they were working on a story together. He would type the story, taking her dictation, making corrections as he went. His obsessive-compulsive devotion to proper grammar and spelling made him a favorite of the line editors, unlike how they felt about Lois whose inability to spell was equally legendary.

"You didn't answer my question," Lois observed, straightening up.

"Which one?"

"How are you doing?"

Clark sighed. "Not a hundred percent, yet, but getting closer. And you?"

She took a deep breath, blowing it out her nose. "My head knows I *will* be okay, eventually. The rest of me... I don't know. Three weeks ago, I had a storybook life. I career I love, the acclaim of my peers, a beautiful son, a loving fiancé. Then everything blew up." She felt Clark's shoulders stiffen under her hands. "I don't blame you," she added.

"I should never have left."

"If I had known what you were planning, if I had found a way to stop you, you would have ended up resenting it, resenting me," she said. "We both know that. Leaving was what you had to do. And now surviving is what we both have to do. One step at a time."

"You've changed."

"Six years will do that to a person," she said. She checked her watch. "Let's grab some lunch, then we can see if Henderson's come up with anything more. Oh, and Lupe wants me to meet her at Dulin's after work."

"Any idea why?"

Lois shrugged, grabbing her purse and coat. "Only that it would be worth my while."

She looked back at him. He was listening to something and his expression had gone bleak.

"Sirens?"

He nodded. "Another factory."

She headed for the door. "Jason, go stay with Uncle Perry," she instructed. Jason gave her

a bland look, as though he wasn't surprised at the order. She looked back at Clark. He hadn't moved. "Get the lead out, Kent."

Lois didn't wait to see if he complied as she hurried toward the elevators. "Jimmy! You're with us!" she yelled. Jimmy grabbed his camera bag, camera and his coat as he hurried to fall in behind her. Clark was trotting close behind him.

From his office, Perry watched them leave, a small bemused smile on his worn face. "Now all we need is Superman back," he murmured to himself.

"Same pattern as the last one," Chief Obote told them after the three journalists trotted up to him. Then he ignored them and the GNN camera crew as he gave instructions to his crew. He had a schematic of the building spread out against the side of one of the engines.

"Any idea how many people were trapped inside this time?" Lois asked as Clark peered at the drawing.

"Not as many as last time," the brigade chief told them, finally giving them his attention. "This time somebody was smart enough to break out the windows when they realized the doors were blocked. Most of them made it out before the gas line blew this time." Obote kept looking up into the overcast sky.

"Looking for Superman?" Jimmy asked.

Obote chuckled. "Well, you've got to admit, the kid's pretty handy to have around, especially at times like this." He stopped and gave Clark a curious look. "You covered the one last week, didn't you?"

Clark nodded. "Mister Olsen and I were both there."

"You look awfully well for someone whose obituary ran last week," Obote noted.

Clark ducked his head, embarrassed. "The rumors of my death were greatly exaggerated," he explained. He looked around. Lois wasn't with them. "Jimmy, where did Lois go?"

Jimmy turned, looking around. "She was here just a moment ago."

Clark turned in a full circle, looking for Lois. He spotted her inside the building just to the west of the one that was burning. One of the fire crews was wetting down the walls to keep it from catching fire. Lois was heading to stairwell, to the basement of the building. "Blast," Clark muttered under his breath as he ran to follow her.

He remembered being in the building Lois had disappeared into. Six years before, a few weeks before he left, in fact, Superman had rescued Lois from thugs in that same basement. She'd been tracking information on illegal immigrants and modern slavery and had discovered that the buildings in the area had subbasements and hidden passages dating back to Prohibition and some even before. Passages that weren't on the plans the city had. At least the schematic Obote had hadn't shown them.

His special hearing had been back for some time, strength ditto, and his special vision had kicked in a couple hours before. Invulnerability was still iffy, even though normally that seemed to be the last to leave and the first to return. He was fairly certain his speed was back, although he hadn't tested it yet. Flying, he knew, wasn't there, nor was super breath. Those were always the first to leave and the last to return.

Oddly, the building was empty, apparently abandoned despite the high need for warehousing space in the city ever since the crystalquake. Clark made a mental note to look into that. It made no sense for the building to be empty when real estate prices were so high.

He listened for Lois's heartbeat. There - four flights down, through a secret door, around the corner. She was standing in front of a fire door. He was behind her before she touched it.

She jerked her hand back, swearing softly to herself.

"Um, Lois, what are we looking for?" he said just loud enough to catch her attention. He had to duck to keep from hitting his head on the overhead pipes.

She jumped, swirling around to face him. "Don't do that!" she hissed.

"Do what?"

"Sneak up on me like that!"

"Uh, Lois, it's not smart to open a fire door when there's a fire on the other side," Clark hissed at her. He reached up and felt the pipes overhead. "These pipes are heating up." He followed the pipes walking away from the fire door, the tips of his fingers skimming lightly over the large cast iron pipe he was eyeing. Lois followed him, suddenly curious. Behind them, on the far side of the fire door, flames snapped and roared, the noise growing louder.

"What are you looking for?" she asked. He shook his head as he stopped at a shut-off and quickly closed it off. He peered over the top of his glasses and within a few seconds, a hot spot appeared on the valve, sealing it closed. The noise from the fire seemed quieter.

"Shouldn't that have been turned off already?" Lois asked quietly.

"I would have thought so, yes," Clark said, keeping his own voice low. "But I noticed that this subbasement wasn't on the plans the chief had."

"And somebody repaired the secret door Superman busted six years ago," she added.

Clark heard voices coming toward them. He pulled Lois after him as he ducked behind a door into a closet, keeping the door open just a crack. He held up one hand in warning to Lois as two men approached, apparently thought better of it and went back the way they came.

"Wasn't that Billy Church?" Lois murmured.

"Uh huh."

"Maybe we should get out of here?"

"Sounds like a plan to me," Clark agreed, slowly opening the closet door and leading the way to the stairwell. They made it back to the street without further incident. The fire crews were finally getting the fire under control.

"Do you want to ask Obote about the valve or shall I?" Lois asked.

"You do it," Clark said. "I'll listen."

"Listen?"

Clark simply nodded.

Jimmy spotted them and ran over, relief written all over his face. "Where have you been?"

"Um, Lois saw something suspicious in the adjacent building," Clark explained. "We were just going to ask the chief about it."

"Chief Obote, a moment please?" Lois called. The grizzled black man stopped and waited for her to come closer. "Sir, I assume you sent someone to turn off the gas line that was feeding the fire?"

Obote looked puzzled. "Naturally, Miss Lane. However, the man I sent to do that was unable to find the valve. It wasn't in the place the plans we have indicated it should be. Luckily for us, someone did apparently find it, and did turn it off. We were preparing to turn the gas off to this entire section."

"Sir," Clark interjected. "We happen to know the plans you were given are inaccurate and are probably wrong for all the buildings in this area."

"And how do you know that?"

"Clark and I were involved in an investigation in this area about six, seven years ago,"

Lois told him. "All these buildings have subbasements and connecting tunnels dating way back. We found out then that most of the entrances to these areas were blocked off or hidden. They were being used by various criminal elements."

"And why wasn't this information given over to the city?" Obote asked.

"It was, six or seven years ago," Lois answered. "Superman scanned the area and submitted the information himself to both the city and the Daily Planet's archives."

As Lois spoke to Obote, Clark motioned for Jimmy to take photos of the fire fighting crew. "Get their faces," Clark instructed. Jimmy gave him a curious look, but complied. He already had some good mood and action photos of the scene.

Obote pointed to the map he had. "You wouldn't happen to remember where those entrances were, would you?"

"Clark?" Lois called. "He'll remember, I'm sure," she told Obote.

Clark started to head over to her, and then stopped suddenly at the sound of cracking timbers inside the burning building. He froze for just a moment, watching, listening. The floor was giving way beneath the feet of three firefighters making their way through the smoky interior with hoses. He started running toward the collapsing building.

"Clark!" Lois screamed at him. "It's too late!"

He skidded to stop and discovered he was shaking.

"It is too late, isn't it?" she asked quietly, watching him. Normal hearing wouldn't have picked up her voice over the noise of the fire, the water. He nodded, his back to her as he simply stood, watching the fire re-erupt through what remained of the building's shell. He started when Lois came up and took his arm, leading him back to Obote and Jimmy. "I think maybe it was a mistake, trying to get back to work so soon," Lois was saying softly. "You're not one hundred percent... And neither am I."

"I didn't catch that the building was that weak," he murmured. "They shouldn't have gone in."

"It wasn't your call," she said. Around them, the firefighters were redoubling their efforts to bring the renewed conflagration back under control. "Let's get back to the office. We'll get copies of those schematics over to Obote's office, write up what we have, and then get lunch with Jason."

"And then I'm supposed to have that debriefing with Henderson and Doctor Ricco," Clark reminded her. He couldn't stop a sigh of despair from escaping.

She stopped in front of him, grabbing hold of his arms. "Clark, back at the office, you said I'd changed. And you're right. I have changed. I know for a fact that the demons inside my head are infinitely worse than anything anybody else can do to me. And I know that I am stronger than they are. And I know that you are stronger than the ones inside your head. The world doesn't need a savior. But it is nice to have one around. But if Superman never shows his face again... then that's just how it is."

Clark let another sigh escape and looked over her shoulder to Jimmy and Obote. "Jimmy's wondering what's going on."

Lois chuckled. "Jimmy's smarter than he acts."

"CK, what were you thinking?" Jimmy asked over lunch. "Running toward that fire?"

"I wasn't thinking," Clark admitted. Clark's cell phone chimed and he opened it.

Henderson. "Hello, Inspector," Clark greeted.

"About time I caught up with you," Henderson's voice announced. "You forgot to let me

know you'd been released. I have some information you and Lois might be interested in. *And*, we do have an appointment with Doctor Ricco this afternoon."

"Yeah, Lois and I were just talking about that," Clark said. "How about we meet at your office in half an hour?"

"Make it an hour," Henderson said, ringing off.

"Henderson has some information for us," Clark told Lois. "And Doctor Ricco is expecting us for the CID."

Henderson was waiting for Lois, Jason, and Clark when they arrived at Metropolis Police Headquarters. He ushered them upstairs to his office.

"I won't ask how your day's been going," he began, settling behind his desk. He gestured for them to sit down in the wooden chairs on the far side of the desk. "I heard about the bomb threat *and* the factory fire. Sounds like you've been making up for lost time. So, no sign of Superman, yet?"

"Not yet," Clark told him. "But there's a good chance he'll show up in the next couple days."

"Good," Henderson said. "Because we may need him." He turned the monitor screen on his desk so that it faced the two reporters. On the screen was a photo of a middle-aged man with silver blond hair and blue eyes wearing a military uniform. A second photo, obviously from a security camera somewhere, showed an older man with white hair wearing dark glasses. "Recognize him?"

"The one on the right is Commander Straker," Clark told him. "The other one is... oh dear God... that's Eldon Stoner."

"We've confirmed it biometrically," Henderson said with a nod. "I won't tell you how hard it was to get a photo of Stoner. As Straker he was photo shy. As Stoner, he's positively phobic."

"He's been hiding in plain sight all this time. No wonder there were so many problems when you were at STAR Labs," Lois said. "We knew it had to be someone with high level access to the security systems, but we couldn't figure out who."

"According to Faulkner, he didn't have that level of clearance, but he had managed to break into their systems," Henderson explained. "We have good reason to believe he was involved in Foster's death and we have an APB out for him and the Kraus woman."

"Lake, Virginia Lake," Clark corrected. "What happened to Foster?"

Lois gave him a puzzled frown, and then her expression cleared. "Oh, I guess I forgot to tell you. Thursday, while Faulkner's team was getting you ready for your third surgery, Foster, or Franks, or whatever his name was, managed to get into STAR Labs using fake ID. My dad spotted him on one of the security monitors right outside the medical lab dressed in surgical scrubs. We alerted security but someone killed Foster before he could get to you."

"But that makes no sense," Clark protested. "Why would Straker kill one of his own people, especially if the mission wasn't finished?"

Henderson shrugged. "Most of this case doesn't make a lot of sense," he complained. "Oh, and Hodgekiss's people are closing the case on Richard White's murder. They've confirmed that the murder weapon was the same gun as Luthor used on Clark, and so they have Luthor down as the killer."

"But Luthor didn't do it," Clark said.

"Clark, you told me you couldn't see who the killer was," Henderson reminded him.

"I didn't, but I know it wasn't Lex Luthor," Clark explained. "I'd heard Luthor ranting on to someone, a man, that he..."

"I tell you, that's Superman's kid," Luthor had said. "Can you imagine the opportunity we have here? He's young. He's malleable. He's controllable. Can you imagine having Superman in your power, at your command?"

"Clark, what did Luthor say?" Lois prompted. Jason had climbed onto Lois's lap and was watching him worriedly.

Clark started. He hadn't realized he'd stopped speaking for so long. He shivered at the memory of Luthor's mad raving. "He was ranting on about Jason. He wanted Jason. The people he was with were humoring him, but I don't think they believed him. But the man who shot Richard was an officer. There was a woman with him, a young woman by the voice. She kept calling the killer 'sir.' 'Sir, we have to leave now, sir.' No one there called Luthor 'sir.' And I don't think the killer cared if Jason and I were alive or not. Luthor would have made sure I was dead. Even with the bunker coming down around him, he would have grabbed Jason and finished me off."

"So you think White's killer made sure Luthor had the murder weapon to use to throw us off the scent?"

"Makes sense, doesn't it?" Lois asked. "Luthor opened fire on Perry and Clark with cops only a few dozen feet away. The people he was with must have realized he was a liability, that he'd lost it. They let him go with the murder weapon, knowing he wouldn't be taken alive. Knowing that the natural assumption would be that he was the murderer."

"Clark, do you want to amend your statement?" Henderson asked.

"Would it do any good?"

"I doubt it," Henderson admitted. "I'm told there's been a lot of pressure being put on to put this one to bed as quickly as possible. Plus, you didn't see the killer. It could have been anyone, including Luthor."

"I guess you're right," Clark conceded.

"Doctor Ricco has the conference room reserved for us," Henderson told them. "And she's laid on coffee and donuts."

"Chief, I'm not sure what's going on with CK," Jimmy Olsen was saying. He had brought Perry the photos of the fire, including two he knew would never be published - they were too private, too unexpected. One was of Clark, his back to the camera, running toward the fire just before Lois yelled his name. The second was Lois talking to Clark. His head was down as he listened to her, her hands wrinkling the sleeves of his coat as she kept him in front of her. Behind them, fire fighters were hard at work trying to regain control of the fire.

"He was running toward the fire, like he thought he could do something," Jimmy continued. "That's not like him. I mean, CK's not a coward, but he's always been a little on a cautious side. When I asked him what he was thinking, he said he wasn't thinking."

"Jimmy, Clark's feeling pretty rough right now," Perry said. "And something you don't know, something I'd rather not have spread around the office, is that Richard saved Clark and Jason by distracting the killer. Clark was with Richard when he died, heard his last words. Carried his body out of the bunker."

"Oh, jeez," Jimmy murmured. "Something like that can really screw a guy up."

"Yes, it can," Perry agreed. "It may be a long time before the old Clark is back with us. In fact, the old Clark may never come back. We just have to be patient while he and Lois get

through this. While we all get through this."

"Yes, sir," Jimmy agreed. He started to pick up the prints, but Perry stopped him, picking out one of the collapsed building with the fire fighters in the foreground.

"Send this one down to composing for the front page," Perry instructed. He picked up the one of Lois and Clark together. "And print me up a good copy of this one. Five by seven will be fine."

"Sure, Mister White," Jimmy said, finally picking up the prints and heading back to his desk.

Sitting down, Jimmy looked closely at the photo, trying to see what it was that Perry was seeing. It was the one of Lois talking to Clark, yelling at Clark, he assumed from the bleak expression on Clark's face. Then it struck him. He'd seen that expression before, somewhere, on someone else. Someone Clark's height and coloring. Someone at a fire where there were fatalities.

He checked his files and pulled out one of the photos of Superman at the textile factory fire the prior week. Superman's head was down as he listened to Chief Obote. The older man's hand was grasping Superman's upper arm, as though to keep him from flying away. Superman's expression was guarded, yet there was pain there. Pain that he hadn't been able to do anything for the people who had died.

Oh my God. It fits. It all fits. 6'4", 200 some odd pounds, black hair, blue eyes, the same nose, the same bone structure. It wasn't my imagination that day. He really was floating. Oh my God.

He looked over to Perry's office and caught sight of the older man watching him. Perry nodded once and went back to his desk.

Oh my God.

Twenty Eight

True to Henderson's promise, there was coffee and donuts in the conference room just down the hall from Henderson's office. Lois and Clark poured themselves coffee and put donuts on napkins as they made their way to the conference table.

"I'm sorry I didn't bring anything for Jason," Ricco apologized.

"Don't worry about it," Lois told her. "He has his snacks in his backpack. He has bad food allergies."

"Can I have some coffee?" Jason chimed in.

Lois chuckled. "You won't like it," she warned.

Clark shrugged. "Let's go with decaf, sport," he said, going back to the counter and pouring a cup for Jason. "Cream and sugar?"

Jason nodded, giggling. Clark added the cream and sugar, stirred it and handed him the cup. "Careful, it's hot."

Jason took a sip, shuddering a little against the heat. He made a face but kept sipping. "Cocoa's nicer," he said finally, putting his cup on the table. He pulled his drawing pad and crayons from his backpack and put them on the table, then climbed onto his chair.

"You like to draw, don't you, Jason?" Ricco observed.

Jason nodded. "But Mommy gets worried when I show people."

"Why do you think your mommy gets worried?" Ricco asked. Lois opened her mouth as if to begin to answer for him. Ricco raised one hand, palm out. Lois sat back in her seat.

"Other people won't understand," Jason said, ignoring the nonverbal exchange.

"Why won't they understand?"

"It's a secret," Jason said very quietly.

"Jason, Doctor Ricco and Inspector Henderson already know about Uncle Clark and Superman," Lois told him.

"They do?" He sounded amazed.

"They do," Clark confirmed. He sounded like he wasn't sure if it was a good idea or not. "It's a club that just seems to keep growing," he added.

Henderson and Ricco both chuckled. Then Ricco's expression turned solemn again.

"Jason, would you like to show me your drawings sometime?"

Jason nodded then went back to his drawing.

"Children frequently work through trauma through drawings and play," Ricco explained. "I don't know how you feel about toy guns, but don't be surprised if he asks for them, so he can shoot Luthor himself."

"He already has," Lois admitted. "Clark's mom bought him a bright orange toy AK-47. I wasn't sure how I felt about it, then I saw him outside playing, telling his teddy bear to play possum while he went to rescue his daddy, Uncle Perry, and Superman."

"He's working through what happened," Ricco explained. "Rewriting the incident, gaining control."

Lois sighed. "That's what I figured. I wrote an article about PTSD in kids a couple years ago, after Columbus school yard shootings. The kids there were doing much the same things, playing games where they ganged up on the shooter and killed him. It helped them, so I'm not going to say anything about a toy gun except not to point it at real people."

"I wish you'd told me," Clark said quietly.

"Clark, you got out of the hospital just this morning," Lois reminded him. "There's a lot you're not caught up on yet."

"Maybe we should get to the task at hand," Ricco suggested. "Bill and Lois have both been through the CID I ran for the Planet. We did not cover much of what happened before they got to the incident site, since what they experienced is very much different than what you and Jason experienced. So, this debriefing is for you and Jason," Ricco told Clark. "Bill and Lois are here to fill in the blanks, so to speak."

"Okay."

"Same rules as before. This is confidential and we're focusing on what your impressions and thoughts are right now. So, I'll start. I found out about the shootings at Manahasset from Bill when he called me to do the CID for the Daily Planet. Bill?"

"I figured out there was a problem when I got back to my office Tuesday evening and checked my messages," Henderson said. "My secretary hadn't passed along Clark's messages while I was away from the office and what she wrote down worried the hell out of me. I called Perry White and he told me what Clark and Richard were working on, and that he hadn't been able to get in touch with them. The next morning he let me know they still hadn't checked in and he and Lois were heading out on the Planet copter to find them. I called my counterpart at the State Police that I suspected there was a problem then I hitched a ride with White and Lane on the Planet copter."

"Lois?"

"I came back from a press conference and found out that Clark and Richard had taken off and it looked like Jason had stowed away with them," Lois said. "Perry was not a happy camper. He wasn't able to get in touch with them. Wednesday morning, when Perry and I still hadn't heard from them, we went out to look for them."

"Clark?"

"I guess I need to back up a little," Clark started. "Um, Perry had assigned Richard and me to look into the arms that were coming into the city. He had sources that led him to believe a group I'd investigated before was involved. Richard had also done some work on arms smuggling so he put us together. By Tuesday we'd figured out where the stuff might be coming from and I told him I intended to check it out. He decided to come along. I couldn't talk him out of it without making him suspicious and his suggestion of a cover made sense. For some reason, I didn't pick up that Jason had stowed away in the car, at least not until we were nearly there."

"Jason?"

"I was bored and I forgot my books in the car," Jason said without raising his head from his drawing. "Then I heard Daddy and Unca' Clark talking and they were going to a park, so I got real quiet so they wouldn't know I was there so I could go with them. Then we got to the park and Daddy got mad at me but we went camping anyway. I got to sleep in a sleeping bag with my clothes on."

"Clark, what did you expect to happen?"

"I expected that I could reconnoiter the area we suspected was being used to store the arms, and that I could get in and out without being detected. I expected that we would be able to get out in the morning without anyone else being the wiser," Clark said. "I was wrong."

"Did you expect there would be violence?"

"No," Clark admitted. "And I figured, if anything did happen, I could handle it. I was wrong there, too. Somehow, I was detected entering the compound. I still don't know how. I didn't see any cameras. They were ready for us when we went to the car to leave. I knew we were being watched, but I hadn't expected them to come out and take us prisoner. I didn't

think they'd reveal themselves like that."

"What did you decide to do next?"

"Go along with them until there was a chance to get the three of us out of there, hopefully without obviously involving Superman," Clark told them.

"Why?" Ricco asked. "Why did you choose to go along with them?"

"A couple things," Clark admitted. "I already knew the complex was mostly lead-lined. I was hoping that I'd have a better view from the inside and I figured, if push came to shove, I could get us out, even if it meant letting Richard know about me."

"Jason? What were you thinking when this all happened?" Ricco asked gently.

"I was scared. The bad man with the accent had a gun and I thought he might shoot Unca' Clark, even though he asked him nicely to let me and Daddy go," Jason said, finally looking up from his drawing. "Then the bad man tied up Daddy and Unca' Clark and locked us in this room with kryptonite and Unca' Clark got loose and cut Daddy loose, but then he started getting sick."

"Jason, how did you know Clark was getting sick?" Lois asked.

"He had a headache and he was sweating," Jason explained. "Unca' Clark doesn't sweat. And Daddy was worried about him."

"Daddy was worried?"

Jason nodded and went back to his drawing.

"Okay," Ricco said, turning back to Clark. "What did you decide to do next?"

"Wait," Clark said. "I figured Perry and Lois would realize there was something wrong when Richard and I didn't check in. Especially since Jason was with us. I figured there'd be a chance to escape once they showed up. Freeman and his people would be distracted and I could do something. Assuming I was able to. I was getting pretty sick. I hadn't realized Richard had noticed."

"What were you thinking about while you were waiting?"

"I was thinking about what Richard had asked me to do, to be there for Lois and Jason," Clark said. "About what I needed to do to keep Jason safe. I was worried I wouldn't be able to do it. I was afraid that I wouldn't be up to the challenge."

"What happened then?"

"I heard someone approach the inner door," Clark reported. "Richard ordered me to stay with Jason. There were gun shots and I was hit. Not bad, really, not life threatening. I pulled Jason under my body. I figured with my mass, it was unlikely even a killing shot would hit him. I heard Richard struggling with someone, and there were more shots. I heard the door close. I heard Richard's heart falter. I heard him die. There was nothing I could do. There was absolutely nothing I could do." He'd started shivering. "My stupidity, my conceitedness, killed him. I went in thinking I could handle anything, and I couldn't even keep him alive."

"Can you tell me about your sensory impressions? What you felt, what you smelled, touched."

"Pain, a lot of pain, there was blood and burnt gun powder, fear. Fear has a sour scent. Jason, Richard, even me. I could smell the fear, I could smell death. I could hear Jason's heart beating fast, could feel it through his chest. I could hear Richard's heart stop. I could see the damage the bullets did. I could feel the kryptonite that was exposed. I could hear the explosions going off in the other chambers, people running to escape. I could hear Luthor ranting on. I could hear people at the entrance trying to get the outer door open."

"Clark, how long were you in there after Richard died?" Henderson asked. He ignored the

dark look Ricco gave him. Jason had started crying and crawled into his mother's lap.

"A few minutes," Clark answered. "Five at the outside."

"So if we'd been five minutes earlier?" Henderson asked.

"They knew you were coming," Clark said, his voice catching. "It wouldn't have mattered."

"Jason?" Ricco asked. "Can you tell us what you smelled, what you felt?"

Jason snuggled closer to his mother. "It's okay, munchkin," Lois assured him. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

"I heard the door open and Unca' Clark grabbed me and I heard loud bangs and something burning and I screamed," Jason began, wiping the tears from his face. "Then Unca' Clark fell on top of me and he wasn't breathing but I could hear his heart go real fast. He's *heavy*. Then there were more loud bangs and I heard Daddy's heart go real funny and the door closed. Then Unca' Clark started to breathe again and he went over to Daddy, and Daddy told us he loved you Mommy, and then his heart stopped. And then there were loud bangs far away, but they were different than the bangs from the gun. They were bigger, more boomy."

"Then what happened? What did you do?"

"Unca' Clark got the door open and then he carried Daddy out and Mommy was there with Unca' Perry and a lot of police people," Jason related. "He was real sick. Then I heard his heart stop and he fell over."

"Are we set?" Straker asked Lake as she climbed into the van next to him.

"Yes," she told him. "The kryptonite and the moderators are both loaded and one of our people has gotten himself assigned to the security detail at the experimental site. He should have everything ready for us about eight tonight."

"Good," Straker said, starting the van's engine. "Once we're in, we shouldn't have to worry about STAR Labs security. And twelve hours after that, we shouldn't have to worry about that damned alien."

"No sir," Lake agreed. *But we may not have a city to worry about either. Do the ends really justify the means?*

"I see that Kent wasn't dead after all," Straker announced after a long silence.

They were on Ordway Drive heading west. The right hand lane was still blocked off so road crews could complete repairs on the roadbed and side safety barricades that were damaged by the bomb in Grave's van last Thursday. Another failed mission whose repercussions had yet to be properly analyzed. Five million in uncut diamonds lost, five million that could have financed their current level of operations for years.

"Paul died for nothing," Lake commented. "It was a trap, obviously. We should have waited like he suggested."

"Hindsight is twenty-twenty," Straker told her. "We have a job to do."

Inspector Emily Douglass sighed as she reviewed the initial report from the fire marshals assigned to the latest factory fire. Three firefighters dead, twelve civilians. The mayor had been trying for the past five years to get the fire marshals of MFD and MPD Special Investigations to coordinate more closely. The best they'd managed so far was that MFD and MPD shared their reports *before* the investigation was closed and turned over to the D.A.'s office.

At least the situation was better than it had been the day the Spires came down. On that

day, the two emergency agencies hadn't even been using the same communications system. That problem was remedied quickly enough, although it had done nothing to help the 138 fire and police who had died that day. Even Superman would have been hard pressed to save them, assuming he'd been around.

She scanned the statements Lane and Kent had given Bill Henderson on what they saw at today's fire. *Bill Church was sighted in the next building? That put a whole different spin on the case.* She wasn't going to ask how Lane and Kent managed to be where they were to catch sight of Church.

Douglass picked up her phone and called her fire department counterpart. *Cooperation has to start somewhere.*

"Marshal Miller?" Douglass began. "Inspector Douglass. I just got a copy of your preliminary report... I've got some info on my end you might want to look at...How about we meet in neutral territory? There's a coffee shop about two doors down from your office. I'll meet you there at six...? Thanks."

She hung up her phone and sat back in her chair. *Cooperation has to start somewhere. And firefighter killers were at right about the same rung as cop killers.*

Ricco gave Henderson and Lois a puzzled look. "There was kryptonite at the site," Henderson explained. "One of the cases was opened and he was exposed."

"Your heart actually stopped?" Ricco asked Clark.

He gave her a sheepish look. "I don't remember it, actually. I remember the door to the room opening and coming out with Richard's body. I remember Bill saying something about me contaminating evidence, then nothing really until I woke up with Lois and Perry telling me to take it easy. Although, I did wonder at why the medic was looking so confused."

"You don't remember me screaming at you?" Lois asked.

Clark shook his head. "No. Why were you screaming at me?"

"Clark, your heart stopped. You were clinically dead for nearly ten minutes," Lois told him softly. "No pulse, no breath, no heartbeat, nothing. The medic was ready to declare you dead when you started breathing again, as soon as the kryptonite was put away."

"I've never had that strong a reaction before," Clark commented, mostly to himself.

"Maybe that's something you should explore later," Ricco suggested. "Jason, what happened then?"

Jason gave his mother a worried look. She gave him a reassuring smile. "Go ahead, honey. You can talk about it. Grandma Martha says talking helps, remember?"

The boy nodded. "The lady medic tried to get Unca' Clark's heart started," he said. "But it didn't work for a long time and Mommy got real upset. Then he started breathing again and he told Mommy and Unca' Perry that the bad bald man was around and Mommy should take me someplace safe. So she did."

"Clark, what were you thinking after you regained consciousness?"

"I heard Luthor somewhere nearby, still ranting about Jason," Clark told her. "I knew he wasn't going to give up. So I told her to take Jason and get away. Run and not look back."

"Why did you tell her to go?" Ricco asked. "Wouldn't it have been safer for them to stay with the officers who were there?"

"Doctor Ricco," Clark said. "Richard and I were on the trail of smugglers and arms dealers who are not above cold-blooded murder to attain their goals. I didn't know Hodgekiss or any of his people. I didn't know if SHADO had infiltrated them. I still don't know. I do know

that Lois is very capable of defending herself and Jason and she did."

"Jason, what were you thinking?"

"I was scared," Jason said. "Unca' Clark scared Mommy and the bad bald man scared both of them. But Mommy told me it was going to be okay and even though he had told us to run away, we going to go back and help."

"What happened then, Jason?"

"Mommy found a gun in the police truck and she told me to play possum, so I did," Jason told them. "And then there were loud bangs and Mommy shot the bad bald man and he was dead, but Unca' Clark was hurt and there was blood all over and Mommy was trying real hard not to cry."

"Clark, what were you thinking, what were you trying to do?"

Clark swallowed hard. "I had realized that the antenna for the transmitter that was jamming the radio and cell phones had to be up high and was probably in the trees. I spotted something that looked like it might be it and went out with Perry to investigate. I knew that if we didn't get communications going, chances were none of us were going to get out of there."

"But you were hurt," Ricco reminded him. "Why didn't you let one of the officers handle it?"

"They were busy," Clark answered as though his reasoning should have been obvious.

"What were your sensory impressions?" Ricco asked.

Clark was silent for a long moment. "The sun was out and the forest was drying out after the rain. The leaves on the ground were still dry and crackly when they were walked on. I could still smell the fear on Jason and I could smell it on Lois too. Not so much with Perry and the others. I'm not sure they understood how bad the situation really was. I could hear someone approaching through the brush. I didn't realize it was Luthor until after he started shooting."

"What did you do?"

"Perry was with me. He was hit. I pushed him down, out of the line of fire. Then, it was like I couldn't breath and I think I collapsed. After that it was basically nightmares until yesterday. Bits and pieces that don't make a whole lot of sense."

"That's not uncommon after physical trauma and hospitalization. It may come together in time," Ricco assured him. "Jason, what were your sensory impressions? What did you hear and smell?"

"The leaves smelled a little like dry dirt and they were all crackly when Mommy put them on top of me," he said. "Mommy wanted me to be real quiet, but the leaves were noisy. The police van had lots of neat stuff in it, but it smelled kinda' funny, like oil and chairs like they have at the school library."

"What else did you hear and smell?"

Jason looked back at his mother again. She nodded.

"Jason?" Ricco urged.

"Blood smells weird," he said. "There was lots of blood on the ground. And the doctor lady's gloves smelled funny too. I don't like that smell." He looked over at Clark, face screwed up in a frown. "The doctor lady had scissors and had to cut your shirt off and Mommy was helping her. Your heart sounded funny, too. Kinda' like Daddy's did, before his heart stopped."

"Oh my God..." Lois murmured. She put her hand to her mouth as she fought back tears.

"Mommy?" Jason turned in her lap to give her a hug.

"I'm sorry," Lois said. Her voice was shaking. "I just... I'd thought I'd lost you too. There

was so much blood, and... there were bullet holes in *you*. Luthor shot *you*. And when Mylonis was working on you, trying to find out how badly you were hurt... You're beautiful, you know that? And seeing those... And you were so cold. You've always been so warm..."

"Lois, it's okay," Clark said softly. "I'm okay."

"Clark, promise me I'll never have to go through that again."

"I wish I could make that promise," Clark said. "But I can't. No more than you can promise not to get hurt, or killed, when you walk into danger."

"We're both adrenaline junkies?"

"No, I don't think so," Ricco said. "What I'm seeing are two people who are so intent on doing their work they don't always heed the danger of the situation they're in. Or they deem it irrelevant to what needs to be done."

Lupe Leocadio and Skeeter Laughlin sat at a back table at Dulin's bar. Happy hour was well under way and the bar was very nearly filled capacity, despite it being a Monday.

"Any sign of the big guy yet?" Laughlin asked in his broad Southern drawl.

Leocadio shook her head and took a swig of beer. "Henderson's pretty sure he's gonna' show up in the next day or so. Keeps saying nobody's found his body yet."

"That's not real comforting, considering nobody's found Luthor's body yet, either."

"Lupe!" a woman's voice called from across the bar. Leocadio looked up to see two figures in civilian clothes weaving their way through the crowd of dark blue uniforms - Lois Lane and Clark Kent. Both reporters were being high-fived as they passed, although Leocadio noticed Clark's occasional fluster at the attention he and Lois were getting.

Lupe stood up from her chair and waved them over. The two reporters hurried over to the corner and sat down at Lupe's table. "Glad you could make it," Leocadio greeted them. She raised one manicured eyebrow at the sight of Clark. "You're looking pretty lively for someone who was declared dead four days ago."

Clark stared at his hands and Lupe could detect a faint blush climbing into his face.

"Wasn't my idea," Clark protested quietly.

"It was the only way we could come up with to throw Luthor's cronies off the track," Lois explained.

"Are you really a meta-human?" Laughlin asked.

"I don't know," Clark told them. "I've never really thought about it, and I haven't been exposed to kryptonite all that often. Not like Superman. But I do seem to heal pretty fast."

"Nice problem," Laughlin joked.

"What are you drinking?" Lupe asked.

"Whatever you're drinking is fine," Lois said.

Lupe turned to her second-in-command. "Why don't you wrangle up a couple more glasses, another pitcher of this swill and maybe a big mess of tater tots and onion rings?" She turned back to Lois. "You still on that vegetarian kick?"

Lois nodded. Lupe turned back to Laughlin who was waiting by the side of the table for instructions. "Go on," Lupe ordered with a wave of her hand. Laughlin headed off to the bar as instructed.

Lupe watched after him until he was hidden in the crowd then reached into her SCU jacket. She pulled out a thin sheaf of paper folded lengthwise and handed it to Lois. "You didn't get this from me," she said.

Lois nodded as she unfolded the papers and quickly scanned them. She handed them to

Clark who looked them over and placed them inside his jacket.

"So," Lupe began. "Any news on Supes? And don't tell me they haven't found his body yet."

"Well, they haven't," Clark told Lupe but he was looking to Lois as if asking permission to talk about it. "But we have reason to believe he may be back tomorrow or so," he added.

"Reason to believe?" Laughlin asked, returning to the table with two glasses and pitcher of pale beer. "The food's on its way." He filled the two glasses before sitting down.

"He's gotten in touch with you?" Lupe pressed.

Lois nodded. "He was hurt out at Manahasset. Pretty badly, as it turns out, but he'll be okay."

Twenty Nine

"How close is Superman to coming back?" Lois asked as they walked down the street to her car.

"Pretty close," Clark told her. "I'm pretty sure he'll be back by morning. I hope he'll be back by morning because Stoner was planning to test his kryptonite energy plant tomorrow. I don't think he's giving up on that."

"And you don't think STAR Labs security will be good enough to stop him?"

"Do you?"

"No," she admitted. "Do you want to come over to the house? I'm sure your mom wants to see you."

He shook his head. "I'm going to head back to my apartment. Try to relax. I'll stop by in the morning, see her then." He remembered the papers in his jacket pocket. "Oh, yes, you'd better take these," he said handing them to her.

She dropped them into her purse. "Clark, Superman can stay missing if he's not ready to come back. You know that," Lois told him.

"I know," he said. "I just hope the rest of the world will oblige by not needing him too much."

"We got along without him for nearly six years."

"I know that, too. But it's still... It's hard not to be able to the things I used to take for granted. It hurts that I can't do more."

Physically he was feeling almost normal, at least normal for him. He didn't want to test his invulnerability, but he had his levitation back, as well as his hearing, and vision. Strength was harder to test - he was loath to start breaking things - but he was fairly certain that was there as well.

He took a deep breath, taking in the familiar scents of his apartment - the dry musty scent of books, distinctive smell of floor wax, the slightly stale odor of this morning's breakfast of eggs and toast, his mother's perfume, latex paint that hadn't quite finished out-gassing, clean laundry. *Mom did the wash while I was at work. She didn't have to do that.*

Even though he'd only moved in a week-and-a-half before, and had spent half of that time in a hospital bed, the place felt more like home than anyplace else except for the farm, and that wasn't home anymore.

I have to ask Mom when she and Ben are heading to Montana again.

He changed into the blue and red uniform, testing his speed. That seemed to be in place as well. He launched himself toward the roof window, making sure to close it behind him, and then headed into the upper atmosphere and west, to catch the sun.

He hovered in the silence of the stratosphere, suspended between the blackness above him with its diamond bright stars and the brilliant blues, greens and browns of the planet below him. The sun felt good, its radiation feeding his body's hunger for energy. The kryptonite in Metropolis interfered with his ability to absorb and utilize the light frequencies his body needed. Up here, away from the city, he could rest, recover. He closed his eyes letting the silence wash over him. It felt good.

Without really thinking about it, he dropped slowly into thicker air and the sounds of the planet became noticeable. Thunderstorms, a volcano in the Pacific, water rushing everywhere - surf crashing on beaches, rapids, water falls, and dams. *Earth truly is a water world.* Wind in the trees, the thunder of rain on pavement. Trains and planes, automobiles and trucks, gun

shots, voices talking - some screaming - babies crying, children playing, elephants and seals, dogs and cats. A living, vibrant world full of joy and pain, and more importantly, full of life.

I was such a fool to leave. He headed north to the crystal fortress Kryptonian technology had created for him in the Arctic. He knew it was futile. The AI was dead thanks to Luthor. All the knowledge of an entire civilization, all that remained of Krypton, stolen by a mad man. Lost. Forever.

Luthor had one of the crystals on him. I have it now, Lois had said.

He paused in his flight then turned back to Metropolis. *Luthor had one of the crystals on him.*

He hovered above his apartment building, cell phone to his ear. "Lois, you said you had something Luthor stole... Where is it now?"

"At the office in Perry's safe."

"Thanks."

Perry spotted Clark coming out of the elevator. The bullpen was nearly deserted. The paper had gone to the pressroom hours ago, but Perry was still at work, reviewing the résumés of the several people vying for the assistant editor position Richard's death had left open. He wasn't happy with any of the current applicants and the three people he considered most qualified for the position hadn't given him any indication they were interested.

Clark loped across the bullpen floor, ignoring the curious looks from the few reporters who were working late. Perry suppressed a chuckle. Clark had to be in a pretty big hurry to come into the office without a jacket and a tie.

Clark opened the door to Perry's office. "Uh, Chief, Lois said she gave you something Luthor stole from..."

"It's in the safe," Perry said, going over to the plaque that hid the wall safe. He moved it aside and keyed in the combination. The bolts slid free with a metallic thunk and he pulled open the door. Perry had placed the multifaceted crystal in the black velvet bag that had originally held a bottle of liquor he'd been given at Christmas.

Clark reached over his shoulder and grabbed the velvet bag. He stepped back and untied the gold cord at the top, easing the crystal out of the sack. Perry studied the younger man's face as he exposed the alien crystal to the artificial light of the office. Fear and hope seemed to be battling it out in Clark's face as he studied the artifact still sheathed in fabric. Finally Clark tipped it out of the bag into his hand and the clear crystal erupted with green light. His eyes widened in wonder.

"It's the father crystal," Clark murmured. "He had the father crystal with him."

"What is it?" Perry asked.

"Everything..." It was almost a whisper. "It's everything... All the data, all the technology, everything that's left. The only thing left. Everything that Luthor stole."

"Clark, are you okay?" Perry asked. Clark was staring at the crystal as though mesmerized. As though he didn't quite believe what he'd been given.

"Yeah... uh, yes... I mean, yes sir," Clark mumbled.

"I think you need to find a safe place to keep it," Perry suggested.

Clark nodded, slipping the crystal back into the sack and pulling the cord tight. "Yes, sir. That's a very good idea." He straightened up, taking a deep breath. "Thank you, sir. I'll see you tomorrow, sir." He turned to leave the office, clutching the crystal in his hands.

"Um, Clark," Perry said. Clark stopped and looked back at him. "We still have an opening

for assistant editor. Do you know anyone you'd recommend?"

"Lois."

"What about you?"

Clark's eyes went wide again, but this time in surprise. "Me?" he squeaked. Perry managed not to laugh as Clark pushed his glasses up his nose, protectively holding the black velvet sack with the crystal to his chest with one hand.

"I've been gone a long time, Perry," he managed in a more normal tone. "And I've never much liked being stuck behind a desk, but thank you."

Perry shrugged. "I just thought I'd ask. See you tomorrow."

Night had fallen several hours before but the night afforded little cover around the Met Power nuclear power station. The entire compound was flooded with light, except in one insignificant corner to the north of the cooling tower, adjacent to the Hobbs River. In that corner the power was out. A careless construction worker had apparently severed the underground power cable to that section of the complex. Workers were scheduled to go out in the morning to repair it.

All this was of no particular concern to Aidan Kessler, in charge of the STAR Labs security detail at the experimental power plant. The fact that the lights were out in the area he was currently in charge of simply made his job easier. He looked around in the darkness. The glare from the light in the rest of the compound created deep shadows. In those shadows sat his teammates, drugged into near unconsciousness thanks to the white powder Colonel Lake had given him to put in the water cooler along with the drink flavoring.

Kessler had been surprised at how fast the drug had worked. Within minutes they'd started complaining of feeling woozy, drowsy. Kessler had told his team he would call for assistance but he had lied. There would be no assistance until the mission was completed. But he wasn't worried - Lake had assured him the drug was harmless. Now he wasn't quite so sure. Pat had started vomiting and Corey didn't seem to be breathing so well.

Kessler started at the sound of a vehicle approaching, tires crunching the loose gravel of the access road to the building. He could barely make out the vehicle in the darkness. It appeared to be a van, but the details were lost. It was driving without headlights. The van stopped in front of the door to the building and the engine turned off.

"Kessler?" a woman's voice called softly - Colonel Lake.

"Here, sir," Kessler responded.

"Is everything ready?" she asked.

"Yes, sir. Everything's ready," he told her. "The rest of them are around back. They shouldn't bother us." He elected not to tell her about Pat or Corey. The mission was too important for him to bring up such inconsequential matters to command officers.

"I thought he was supposed to be out too," a man said, coming around the front of the van. *Commander Straker*.

"I need to call in every half hour or else they'll come out and investigate, sir," Kessler explained.

"And we don't want that," Straker commented. "Good thinking." Straker jerked his head toward the van. "Help us get this unloaded," he ordered.

Kessler hurried to obey.

Superman sped north once again, this time with the precious crystal he'd thought he'd lost

forever. He'd thought it had been lost before, too.

The first time was when he gave up his powers to be with Lois, to sacrifice his Kryptonian legacy to walk the Earth as a mortal man. In its displeasure at his decision, the Fortress's Kryptonian Artificial Intelligence neutralized his powers, but also destroyed the master console, leaving it and the data crystals as nothing more than blackened shards.

But he discovered, to his horror, that he couldn't live simply as Clark Kent. Being Superman was a gift, a treasure, an obligation he found he could not live without. All the beings he could have helped. All the lives he could have saved. They still haunted his nightmares. He watched them on television asking 'Where are you, Superman?'

He'd seen the tears in Lois's eyes as she watched him watching the disasters he could have prevented if not for his selfish decision to put himself above them. Had he not succumbed to his petty greed for normalcy. He left her to return north, to abase himself to the AI, to attempt to return things as they were.

Lois didn't stop him and he knew then that she hadn't really loved 'Clark.' It was the demi-god in the flashy tights she really loved. He didn't blame her. He had discovered that the demi-god was the better part of him and he hated himself for killing that better part.

He found the father crystal lying in the snow on the floor of the fortress. He had no idea how it got here, why it hadn't been destroyed. He picked it up and it glowed in his hands, just as it had the first time he'd found it in the storage cellar under the barn at his parent's farm. It glowed and spoke to his mind. *You have returned so soon.* He thought the mental voice sounded like it was gloating at his failure.

"I can't not help," he told the crystal. "They need me. They need Superman. I cannot stand by and do nothing."

He followed the instructions he was given, to set the father crystal aside then stand in the center of the space at the heart of the fortress under the section that was open to the sky. It was late enough in the year that sun light should not have penetrated the inner sanctum of the fortress. But it did - searing, white hot, burning him, blinding him, stripping his body away molecule by molecule till nothing was left but his soul. Then it was over and he was whole, unscarred. He was Kal-El again. He was Jor-El's son. He was Superman.

The console had been rebuilt, all the data crystals in their places. Everything was as it had been. Or so he thought. He didn't know Lois had gotten pregnant.

He shook himself from his reverie, diving feet first through the ceiling opening into the inner sanctum, to where the central console stood, frozen, unusable without the data crystals. The fortress seemed dark, menacing. There was no life, no light. He placed the father crystal into its holder. For a long moment he was afraid nothing was happening, and then he spotted it - a slight energy flux, a faint light coming from the wall crystals, slowly banishing the darkness.

The fortress was coming back to life. No thanks to Lex Luthor.

Kessler's initial awe of the senior officers had worn off somewhat. Straker was dour and uncommunicative, except when giving sharply worded orders. Lake was a little forthcoming, but neither of them was particularly easy to work with. Kessler knew that Eldon Stoner's project had been cancelled for safety reasons. He wondered why Straker and Lake were so insistent those plans went ahead on schedule.

"How are we doing?" Kessler asked. Straker grunted and walked away from him, intent on placing the last of the green crystals into the matrix. They gave off an eerie glow, painting the walls a sickening green. There was no power to the building so they'd been working by the

light of battery-powered lamps until enough of the crystals were in place to light the room.

The light from the crystals turned Straker's and Lake's faces and hands green, washing away their apparent humanity. Making them look like the aliens SHADO used to fight. Kessler had seen photos of them during training, read the reports of their horrific raids. He didn't question SHADO's need to defend the Earth from the alien monsters.

"We're on schedule," Lake told him. "Now, help me with these tubes." She handed him one of the meter long metal tubes. It weighed more than he had expected.

"What's in them?" Kessler asked. He didn't expect an answer. Neither senior officer had been very forthcoming about details on what they were doing.

"Powdered lead and carbon," Lake told him. She kept her voice low. "Now be careful. Jostling them could separate the lead from the carbon and we don't want that. These are what will keep the reaction under control."

He carefully carried the tube over to Straker, who placed it beside the green crystal matrix.

"My son, you do not remember me...I am Jor-El, your father," the hologram of a white-haired man said. The voice was soft, compelling, familiar.

"Cancel introduction," Kal-El ordered. The hologram fell silent, the face staring at him.

"First order, seal all entrances to this structure except for the one at the highest point. Increase defenses of that point. Key access to structure to my genetic code, my voice with pass code. Program pass code 'To Kill a Mockingbird.'"

"Instructions understood," the hologram of his father responded. "Full compliance will take eight hours."

"Proceed," Kal-El ordered.

"Security protocols updated."

"Second order, create two copies of the primary uniform." The one he was wearing was the one he'd had the Fortress create for him before he left Earth. He'd repaired the tear at the back as best he could. The cape covered the repairs but he doubted the stitching would hold if he was forced to do much. The fabric was invulnerable while he was wearing it, but it wasn't indestructible.

"Instructions understood," the hologram of his father said. The two uniforms appeared in a small opening in one of the crystalline walls.

"Thank you," he said softly. The hologram didn't respond. "Third order, recreate the seven missing data crystals." Kal-El had sorted through the crystals that had been on the floor beside the console. He hadn't noticed their presence the last time he'd been here - he'd been too shocked by the discovery of the violation, the discovery that someone had gotten through the Fortress's defenses to steal from him.

"Instructions understood. Recreation of only the damaged unit is necessary." There was a brief flash of light, and seven missing crystals were suddenly in their storage sleeves.

"Explain, please." He was sure he was imagining it, but he thought the hologram was smirking at him.

"The data crystals are keyed to the father crystal. Undamaged data crystals removed from proximity to the father crystal can be automatically recalled on command."

"And if the father crystal has been removed from this location?"

The hologram was silent. *Did it know the mistake it made, allowing a human, Luthor, access to Kryptonian science?* He sighed. Assigning guilt to a computer wasn't going to get

him anywhere. He should have known that something might happen during his absence. He should have known that Luthor would come up with something.

"Fourth order," Kal-El said aloud. "Tell me about kryptonite, also known on Earth as Element 126, specifically energy characteristics."

"Element 126 is extraordinarily rare," the hologram began. "It has only been found in the debris of Krypton-like planets destroyed by the death of a red giant star. However, extensive research was done on the few samples found on Krypton."

"Proceed," Kal-El ordered.

The hologram of Jor-El began to speak and other holographic images appeared in the air showing the molecular structure of a green crystal. Kal-El watched and listened as diagrams and equations appeared and explanations given. Equations he barely grasped except to know the results he'd given Kitty Faulkner had been off by at least a factor of ten. A catastrophic failure of a kryptonite 'power plant' would not simply destroy Metropolis - it would destroy everything within 150 miles.

"Is there a method by which the energy cascade can be stopped?" he asked.

"Theoretically, the addition of pure, un-crystallized carbon into the matrix should moderate the reaction. However, crystalline carbon will add to the energy cascade."

"What about lead? What effect will the addition of lead have?"

"Once the cascade has begun, the addition of lead to the matrix will have no effect."

"And if it is present before the cascade begins?"

"It has the potential of slowing the initial stages of the cascade, dependent on the proportion of lead to kryptonite."

There was a chance. A miniscule chance if the worse case scenario was the one that came to pass. But he had a plan if he needed one. He prayed he wasn't going to need it. He prayed that Straker and company had more sense than to kill 50 million humans in order to destroy one Kryptonian.

Lois pulled the papers Lupe had given her and Clark and reread them. Thorgood Westover, age 65, married, one child - a son, Thorgood Westover Junior, a lawyer in Washington State. Westover had been a New Troy circuit court judge for the past twelve years. He was considered unimpeachable until the day he ordered Lex Luthor, Morgan Edge and Bill Church Junior released from prison, overturning their various convictions on appeal because the same key witness against each of them was missing. Westover knew Superman was gone, that he couldn't be served a summons. Yet Westover had taken the tack that Superman's absence was a contempt of court, and had dismissed the possibility that he might be dead or somewhere where he simply couldn't be reached.

The District Attorney had been beyond furious, publicly asking how many murderers and rapists Westover planned to release from prison because key witnesses had subsequently died or moved. Lois knew D.A. Griffin had asked for an investigation into the possible corruption of Judge Westover. She also knew nothing had come of it. Westover had turned out to be impossibly clean - not even so much as a traffic citation.

She also read the notes Lupe had made in the margins - nobody was that clean, which meant he'd been white-washed. Lois hoped Lupe wouldn't get into too much trouble for giving her leads concerning Westover.

"Interesting reading?" Martha Kent asked, settling into the easy chair opposite Lois's seat on the sofa.

"The judge that let Luthor out of prison because Superman was missing," Lois explained. "It's been suggested that I look into that situation. Find out why a mad man was put back on the streets."

Lois sighed heavily then noticed Martha watching her. "It's been a long day. Clark's idea of taking it easy is to simply put all his energy into one job instead of two. I think the second job may actually be easier."

Martha chuckled. "Clark has never been one to do things by half-measures." The older woman took a deep breath. "Jason's asleep with a bed full of teddy bears."

Lois smiled, even though she felt a lump growing in her throat. "He hasn't done that in years. But regression isn't surprising with everything he's been through. He's wet the bed twice this week and he hasn't done that in years either. Actually, he never did wet the bed, so this is a first."

"He was a little upset that Clark didn't come by and tuck him in," Martha added. "He made me leave the window unlocked, so he can come in if he wants to. I think he's worried that Clark is going to get hurt again or go away like Richard did."

"Jason is worried that Clark is going to get himself *killed* like Richard did," Lois corrected.

Martha's eyes went wide behind her wireframe glasses.

"Something came out at the debriefing today that made me realize exactly how much like Clark Jason really is. Jason heard Richard's heart stop," Lois said, dropping her voice to a near murmur. "He also heard Clark's heart stop. Jason... he heard everything. Martha. He's so little. I thought he didn't really know what was happening. I was wrong."

"It won't be easy, Lois," Martha said quietly. "But Jason comes from strong stock. He'll get through this."

"I'm sure being half Kryptonian won't hurt him," Lois stated.

"I was referring to your side of the family actually," Martha said. "Clark is sometimes too tenderhearted, too sensitive, for his own good. He also bottles things up inside. It's a wonder he hasn't given himself an ulcer."

Lois managed a chuckle. *Superman with an ulcer. I wonder how much Mylanta that would take?*

"After his dad died," Martha continued. "Clark just sort of curled up inside of himself and wouldn't let anybody in. Not me, not his friends. It was hard. I think part of the reason he took himself around the world was just to get away from the memories of that day. With all the things he could do, he couldn't save his own father."

"So now he tries to save the world?"

"Like I said, Clark has never been one to do things by half-measures."

"It's ready," Straker announced. Lake and Kessler stood back to study their handiwork. The crystals' glow was now muted, but the entire matrix had an alien feel to it. Lake wondered at that. Individually, the crystals resembled glowing emeralds. En masse, they were dangerous, alien, abhorrent. The green glow was sickly as it reflected off the faces of her companions. Straker was working on a small device Lake didn't recognize. He taped it to the inside of the door.

"Now what, sir?" Kessler asked.

A grim smile appeared on Straker's face as he pressed a button on the device then led them out of the building, locking the door behind him. "Sometime today, workmen will repair

the power conduit to this section of the complex and the control computer will power up. When that happens, the program will start running through its tests and the plant will begin to power up."

"And then, sir?"

Lake answered. "And then Superman, if he's alive, will no doubt try to stop it. After Luthor's little experiment, I doubt he will look kindly on our use of superior alien technology for any reason. He thinks we're too primitive to understand the science of his home planet. But, if he tries to stop the reaction, he will die."

Lake knew Kessler had no idea that she was lying. It was Luthor's contention, not hers, that Superman has withholding usable technology out of some sort of misanthropy. Her belief was that the technology was being withheld for the same reasons SHADO had never released what they knew about alien technology. There was nothing currently usable by humans.

Luthor's experiment had proved that. His 'continent' would have proven uninhabitable, unable to support plant life *or* animal life. Luthor's other assumptions concerning his crystal continent were also incorrect. The continent's growth, in and of itself, had not endangered the coastline. The crystals had been pulling and converting sea water into its matrix, not creating additional mass from nothing. Sea level had actually been going *down* during the monstrosity's growth phase. The question that begged to be answered was if Luthor had any idea how far the crystal conversion would go. She had a suspicion he had no idea how far it would go and he hadn't cared.

"I think we have reason to celebrate," Straker said. Lake didn't know if he had noticed her silence, or her misgivings. It was too late anyway. The project was now at the point that nothing other than an act of God could stop it. Lake didn't believe in God.

Straker pulled out a thermos bottle and filled a paper coffee cup from the contents. "I don't drink, so we'll have to settle for coffee," Straker explained. He handed the cup to Kessler and then poured two more cups, one for himself and one for her. Straker shook his head ever so slightly as he handed Lake her cup.

She noted that although Straker put the cup to his lips, he didn't drink. She followed his example. Kessler, on the other hand, emptied his cup.

"I just want you to know, it's been an honor to work with you both on this project," Kessler told them. He stopped and looked at the cup in his hand. "That's funny... I'm not feeling so good all of a sudden."

"It's been a long night," Straker told him. "Why don't you go sit down with the others?"

"I'll do that..." Kessler mumbled. Lake took his arm and led him to the back of the building where the rest of the STAR Labs security team was sleeping off the drug they'd been given earlier. She helped him slide down on the ground, back against the rough concrete. She checked his pulse - strong and even. He would be okay. As for the others - war had casualties and SHADO was at war.

Straker was emptying his and Lake's cups back into the thermos.

"What was the dose?" Lake asked.

"Forty-eight hours," Straker told her. "He won't even remember you contacted him, much less that he drugged his team and helped us out here."

"I'm surprised you bothered," Lake commented. She followed Straker to the van and climbed in beside him. He started the engine, spinning the tires in the gravel before putting it into gear and speeding away from the concrete blockhouse.

"I don't like to take chances," he told her.

"You're afraid the alien might find a way to stop it."

"No, I'm afraid someone else will find a way," he said.

"So that's why you booby-trapped the door?"

He nodded in the darkness. "Virginia, I know you think I killed Paul. The evidence is certainly damning. But I swear to you, I didn't kill him."

"Then who did?"

"I don't know," Straker admitted. "But I have an idea."

Thirty

Kitty Faulkner rolled over in her bed, opening one eye to peer at her alarm clock as she reached for the ringing phone that had woken her. "Yes?"

"Doctor Faulkner," a muffled voice said. "You want to have someone check out Stoner's experimental station." She checked the caller ID. Anonymous.

"Who is this?"

"An ally," the voice said then the line went dead.

She hit the button that would return the call. Nothing. No recorded notice. No ring back. Nothing. *That's not supposed to happen.*

She dialed STAR Labs security. If she was out of bed at four in the morning thanks to an anonymous call to her unlisted home phone, then Banks was going to be too.

Superman spotted Kitty Faulkner standing with several uniformed men and women outside a small concrete blockhouse not far from the Met General nuclear power plant. The many of the uniforms belonged to STAR Labs security, but there were MPD uniforms as well, from the bomb squad and the Special Crimes Unit. One of the vans carried SCU markings and he saw Lupe Leocadio getting out of the van. Several ambulances were speeding away from the area.

There were a number of pieces of heavy earth-moving equipment parked just south of the blockhouse and a ditch had been dug in the clay soil revealing heavy underground power cables. Several workmen stood by the ditch, apparently waiting for instructions. The lamps on the light poles were dark and the area was being lit by lamps powered by portable generators.

He came to ground a short distance from them and walked over to them, cape fluttering in the early morning breeze. The sun was just peeking over the buildings to the east of the plant.

Superman saw a smile of relief come into Kitty's face, while Lupe's glower lightened somewhat.

"It's nice to see you up and around," Kitty greeted him.

"It's nice to be up and around," Superman responded with a smile. He looked around, smile fading. "What's going on?"

"We think Stoner broke in here last night," a swarthy skinned middle-aged man said. His nametag identified him as Jeremy Banks, STAR Labs Security.

Superman remembered Kitty mentioning the name. He was supposed to be very good at his job.

"The bomb squad has already had the white devil vans out here and got nada," Banks continued.

"White devils?" Superman asked.

"Portable back-scatter radar," one of the bomb techs explained. "The vans are white. They're usually real good at finding things other people don't want found. So, we're going to drill through the wall and see what we've got."

Banks nodded the go-ahead to a man with a rotary hammer drill and a long drill bit. The man proceeded to start drilling a half-inch hole through the wall beside the door.

"I can get through that wall faster than the drill can," Superman reminded Faulkner.

Faulkner sighed. "I'm sure you can. The wall's only eighteen inches thick with a half-inch lead liner, but we have reason to believe Stoner or Straker or whatever his name is got in here last night and installed the kryptonite for the power plant test. We've got two men dead, the rest drugged out of their minds. Right now, the man who was in charge of last night's security

team doesn't even remember his own name, much less what happened last night."

"Do you want me to try and burn a hole through the wall?" Superman asked.

"Can you stop at the lead lining?" Faulkner asked back.

"I'm pretty sure I can," Superman told her. He motioned for the technician with the drill the move aside then focused his eyes on the concrete wall. Smoke began to pour out of a narrow horizontal slot that appeared in the wall. Within a minute he stopped, blinking his eyes. He was close to one hundred percent, but he still tired far too easily. "You should be able to drill through the lead and get in there with fiber-optics," he told the technician as he moved aside.

"I don't usually burn through things that thick so my focus was a little off," he explained as Faulkner and the technician inspected the hole he'd burnt. The inside surface was glassified and the hole was two inches wide on the outside of the concrete wall, narrowing to half-an-inch or so on the inside, where the lead sheathing began.

The technician started in on the slight barrier with the drill. "We're through," he announced after a few seconds. Another technician came forward with a thin black tube with an electronic fitting on one end that was attached to a control box and an LCD monitor. He snaked it through the hole, watching the screen. Finally, something besides the glassified concrete appeared on the monitor - a sickly green glowing mass of crystal. The technician moved the end of the device to see more of the inner chamber, stopping when he caught sight of the adjacent door.

"What the devil is that?" the technician asked no one in particular.

"Nickels to navy beans, it's a booby trap," Banks said. He turned to Superman. "You wouldn't be able to lift the whole building out of here, could you?"

Superman stared at the ground, using his x-ray vision to determine how the building had been put together. He shook his head. "The building won't take it. If it was wood, maybe. I could put steel girders under it, make a support grid. But not when it's built like this. In fact, it looks like it was meant to fall apart under stress. There's almost no rebar in the walls. How did this pass inspection?"

"Another good question," Faulkner commented, lips pulled thin in annoyance.

"So, what do you suggest we do about the kryptonite?" Lupe asked.

"I could open up the side of the building, or the roof and let the bomb squad in, but considering how much planning Straker put into this, I have to wonder what he's put into place to keep us from taking care of this," Superman told them. "There's one probable bomb. Chances are there are more. I'm also pretty sure he's added crystalline carbon to the mix."

"Crystalline carbon?" one of the techs asked.

Superman nodded. "The Mazik diamond heist? Diamonds in the mix will make it much, much worse. I should be able to deconstruct the building and use the lead lining to prevent the energy cascade from the kryptonite, assuming I can catch it before it starts. How about you clear the area? I wouldn't want anybody to get hit with flying debris."

Lois woke to the smell of coffee and breakfast wafting up from the kitchen. She checked the time on her bedside alarm clock. Six AM. She grabbed her robe from the foot of the bed and hurried down stairs. Martha was dressed and in the kitchen scrambling up some eggs and vegetarian sausage.

Ben was already at the breakfast table with Jason, pouring soy milk over his oat cereal. There was disappointment in Jason's face as he looked up at his mother. "Unca' Clark didn't

come and say good night to me," he said.

"Uncle Clark was really tired last night," Lois told him. "But he was planning to come over this morning."

Lois looked to Martha who shook her head. "Maybe something happened and he's planning to come over later..." Martha told him. She caught Lois's eye. "I turned the TV off and the radio..."

Lois poured herself a cup of coffee then headed to the living room. She turned on GNN news to see a helicopter view of the Met Power nuclear plant compound. The action seemed to be around a small blockhouse on the edge of the compound. There were several vans near the building and a crowd of people, some with dogs. And in his flashy blue and red, Superman was easily seen in the midst of the activity.

The people and vans were moving away from the blockhouse, making room for something. The reporter in the news copter was giving a running commentary on what seemed to be happening on the ground. A suspected terrorist plot against the power plant. The bomb squad had been called in by STAR Labs when it was discovered that the security team had been incapacitated. The idea of a bomb being in the building seemed confirmed by Superman's presence and the evacuation of everyone else to a 'safe' distance.

But if Clark and Kitty are right and this is SHADO's doing, then the nearest safe place is Cleveland, Lois thought as she watched the screen. She grabbed her cell phone and keyed in Perry's number. "Perry, Lois...I've got GNN on. How long has this been going on?"

"About forty-five minutes, maybe," Perry told her. From the background noise she knew he was in his office already. "The first word about a problem at the plant came though at just after five-thirty. Superman showed up about dawn, six o'clock or so. I sent Gil out to cover it."

"Perry, has anyone said anything about kryptonite?" She kept her voice low so Jason wouldn't hear.

"Not yet," Perry told her.

"I'm heading over there as soon as I get dressed," she announced.

"Lois..." he started harshly. Then he stopped and more softly: "Lois, be careful."

"Perry, if my hunch is wrong, nothing's going to happen," she said. "If I'm right and it turns out badly, I'll be sitting at ground zero and I won't feel a thing. Neither will anyone else in the city."

"Nothing happened," Virginia Lake noted. SHADO's Cessna Citation had gotten them well away from the potential blast zone and now Lake sat in a cheap hotel room watching GNN. Straker was reading something on his laptop computer, ignoring the action on the television screen. "STAR Labs called in the bomb squad," she told him.

"Someone warned them," Straker grated, getting up from the tiny table where his computer sat and coming over to watch the newscast.

"Did you really think Faulkner and Banks wouldn't take additional precautions against us activating the project?" Lake asked. "You knew she was suspicious, otherwise she wouldn't have cancelled it so suddenly."

"I had all those contingencies covered," Straker told her. "Including the last two calls Kessler was supposed to make to STAR Labs. The power was supposed to have been restored early this morning. I called maintenance myself and insisted on it. Plus one of ours is working there."

"Obviously it didn't happen," Lake pointed out. On the screen she could see the

maintenance team waiting for orders to restore the power to the blockhouse area. "And now Superman's there."

"So, maybe everything isn't lost after all," Straker commented.

"What do you mean?"

"Do the math, Ginny. All that kryptonite in one place," he said. "All that poison for one alien? It doesn't need to explode to kill him." Straker said.

"You mean you never planned to set it off as a bomb?"

He shrugged, not answering her question.

She chose to accept his non-answer as a negative - he hadn't planned on murdering an entire city. "Then why all the subterfuge?" Lake demanded. "People *died* putting this together."

"The wages of war, Colonel," Straker said. "Although I am gratified that you think I'm ruthless enough to kill an entire city to take out one alien."

"You allowed the Spires to be destroyed," she reminded him.

He shrugged. "I merely took advantage of an existing plot. I didn't steal the planes or pilot them into the buildings. I didn't even plan the operation. I just made sure they had access to what they needed in case the Kryptonian showed his face."

"You could have stopped it," she spat out.

"So could have any number of law enforcement agencies," he pointed out. "Besides, you are hardly in a position to question my motives or actions, *Colonel*. We are at war, remember?"

But who are we at war with when the real enemy is no longer a threat?

Something on the screen caught their attention. The area surrounding the blockhouse was being evacuated except for one brightly clad man who seemed to be studying the structure. Then he started to move, speeding up until he was little more than a blur.

"What the devil is he doing?" Lake asked.

"He's opening the building up..." Straker said. "The bastard is going to take the building apart piece by piece." Straker pulled out his cell phone and keyed in a number.

Superman had inspected the building's structure. It was barely able to hold up its own roof but he saw no choice - someone needed to enter the building and start disassembling the matrix. Only problem was - it couldn't be him. He beckoned to Kitty and one of the bomb squad people.

They both hurried over to him. "I was planning to collapse the building, but I think before I do that, someone needs to go in and start disassembling the crystal structure Straker built in there. That person also needs to check for other explosive devices, which I'm positive are there, and bring out the moderator tubes so I can check them," Superman told them. He looked over at the MPD officer. His name tag identified him as M. O'Connell.

"Bombs, I'm pretty good with," O'Connell said. "How much danger do the crystals pose for regular people?"

"For regular people, it's about as radioactive as radon. Long term exposure is not good," Kitty said. "But short term exposure shouldn't cause much damage."

O'Connell nodded. "Let's go, Big Guy."

Superman nodded and started to break a hole in the back wall of the building just large enough for a man to get through. O'Connell conferred with other members of his squad, setting up the cameras that would go inside first. As soon as Superman stopped working on enlarging

the access hole up to the lead sheath, one of the technicians beckoned him over to brief him as well.

He was handed a radio headset with a microphone and given instructions on how to use it. "Mike knows his job, don't worry about that," one of the other technicians said. "We'll send in some remote cameras to scope it out better. And we'll send in a dog team to sniff out conventional explosives before we let Mike go in." The tech indicated the monitor screen on the metal clad laptop that was sitting on a portable work bench. "We can watch the feed from here."

"Hey, who's got a pair of needle-nose I can use?" O'Connell asked with a grin. The tech with the laptop opened a large toolbox on the ground beside him and handed O'Connell a pair of insulated, non-magnetic needle-nose pliers.

"I want those back, you know," the tech reminded him. O'Connell just grinned as he put them in his pocket.

"Let's get this show on the road," O'Connell announced, adjusting his own headset.

Superman walked over to the hole he'd opened, followed by two other bomb squad members carrying remote controlled cameras on motorized chassis. At their signal he began slicing open the layer of lead that still stood between him and the kryptonite. Once the piece was nearly free he stepped away and nodded to the techs.

"Are you okay?" one of them asked worriedly.

"I will be once this is taken care of," Superman told him.

The tech set down his burden and pushed aside the lead just enough to allow both cameras through. The tech tried to pull the metal 'door' closed to keep the radiation in the building but it was too heavy to move back into place.

Superman followed the techs back to the workbench and the monitor. Using remote controls, the techs maneuvered the cameras into position, one on either side of the green mass.

"So, what are we looking at?" O'Connell asked.

"The dark tubes are plastic and contain the graphite that's supposed to keep the reaction from going out of control," Kitty told them. "The green is kryptonite."

"Once any triggering mechanism, like a bomb, has been dealt with, I need to inspect each one of those tubes. We also need to break that mass apart," Superman told them. He turned to Kitty. "It doesn't look like the floor has a lead lining."

Kitty nodded. "It was supposed to be lined like the walls. I suspect it wasn't in order to keep you from simply lifting the whole thing out of there from underneath."

"I don't see any obvious triggering mechanisms," O'Connell said, watching the split screen as the cameras made their way around the mass. "Let's send in Otto. See what he finds."

He nodded to the human half of the dog team who then led a German Shepherd to the opening. Otto was let off his leash and trotted into the building, sniffing around the mass, then the equipment. On the monitor they saw him sit, looking at the metal cabinet that held the control console.

"Bingo," O'Connell said mostly to himself. "Sitting down is the sign he's found something. Now it's my turn."

It was still early, so traffic wasn't too bad yet. Lois knew it would get far worse in an hour or so. The bridges that were open were still down to one or two lanes due to repairs. Most of the city was still in the midst of recovering from the damage Luthor's crystalquake had caused. Many businesses were still closed or open for business on shortened hours.

West to the Burton Bridge, through Park Ridge, over the Parker Bridge crossing the West River, then west again to the Met Power complex. The cooling towers overshadowed everything in their vicinity, but it was the section near the river, where the GNN news copter was hovering that was her goal.

She parked behind one of the SCU vans, flashing her press pass to the officer guarding the razor-wire topped fence and gate. He recognized her and opened the gate to let her through.

"Superman's still here?" she asked.

The officer nodded. "Captain Leocadio's with him and the bomb squad. From what I hear, they're still working on defusing the damn thing."

"Well, if anybody can do it, it'll be Superman and the Metropolis bomb squad," Lois assured him with a smile she didn't really feel. She'd seen Clark's face when he'd told her and Kitty Faulkner that Stoner's 'power plant' had the potential of going off like a hundred megaton nuclear bomb. *Have they told anyone else? Probably not. No sense in causing a panic.*

The officer had a small radio with him, tuned to one of the local news channels. She already knew all the local stations were giving the incident air play. The news reader announced that all commercial flights out of Metropolis were grounded until the threat was handled and all flights into the city were being diverted. All persons were requested to stay away from the area surrounding the power plant.

The Feds had just announced that the terror alert for the eastern seaboard had just been raised to its highest level - red. It would be laughable if it wasn't so horrifying. *So much for not causing a panic.*

Michael O'Connell was one of the 'new guys' in the thirty person bomb squad. He'd volunteered for the squad less than a year before and was fresh from the six week Hazardous Device School training course in Huntsville, Alabama. Before joining the MPD, he'd been an explosive ordinance technician with the army.

He was one of the few people Superman and Faulkner had taken into their confidence concerning the potential seriousness of the problem at hand. A nuke he could handle. He knew how render a standard fission device inert - nukes were delicate things and the slightest damage to the matrix or the shaped charges would keep the nuclear material from going critical. The triggering explosive might still go off, might still kill people, but its effects would be limited.

From what Superman told him about the material in the blockhouse, a standard nuke might have been preferable to what they were facing. At least that was technology he understood.

Otto's handler called the dog out of the building while O'Connell inspected the cabinet and control panel. He found a foil envelope taped to the bottom of the control panel. The foil was filled with explosives - C4 embedded with green glowing crystals. *Where have I heard of that before?* It was very much like the pictures he'd seen of the explosive charge found at the Daily Planet. This one also had a tiny radio receiver attached to it.

It was actually easy enough to defuse - simply disconnect the battery and remove the detonator. He had the detonator in his hand when he heard a click. "Uh, guys, somebody just tried to remote detonate this sucker," he announced into his headset.

"We're on it," Captain Leocadio announced into his ear.

He took the packet of explosives and dropped it into a ziplock bag. The C4 would be dealt with later at someplace safer. He took a moment to shine his flashlight on the device he

already knew was on the inside of the door. This one was C4 and kryptonite as well, although the trigger was a little more sophisticated. It was on a mercury switch attached to the door - if the door was disturbed, the switch would close. He didn't see any wires or the battery or detonator this time and suspected they were between the explosives and the door. Without x-ray vision he couldn't be sure of what other surprises were hiding behind there as well.

But the guy with the x-ray vision can't even come into this building.

He weighed the options. The water disruptor was probably the best bet. He called for it then asked for Otto to do another check of the room. As the dog sniffed the room again O'Connell cautiously removed one of the moderator tubes for Superman to inspect and headed outside.

Patience was not one of Superman's strengths, he mused as he waited for the bomb squad to do their work. It was a virtue he cultivated as Clark, but Superman was different. He was used to evaluating and handling problems fast and not necessarily waiting for others to catch up. He found himself fidgeting as he waited with the techs for O'Connell to come out. He forced himself to stand still after he caught one of the techs grinning at his impatience.

"I don't do waiting very well," he muttered. The techs laughed and he managed a chuckle.

One device had already been dealt with and he knew they were getting out the equipment to take out another. Under normal circumstances, he would have been able to take care of both of them in less than five seconds, letting them explode harmlessly in the air or against his body - but these weren't normal circumstances. The building was filled with kryptonite and he was powerless to help except as an advisor. It was galling.

O'Connell came out of the building holding one of the black plastic tubes that was supposed to contain graphite and powdered lead. The officer handed it to him and he scanned the tube with x-ray vision, looking for the tell-tale glint of crystal. *There, and there. Just enough to make the moderator useless. I wish I'd been wrong.*

One end of the sealed tube was covered with the same plastic as the tube while the other was sealed with lead. He pressed the palms of his hands on either end of the sealed tube, preparing to send a shockwave through the tube to shatter the diamonds. Then he found a hand on his wrist.

O'Connell was standing beside him. "Otto hasn't found anything else in there, but given how this whole thing's been set up, I'll bet anything that tube and the others like it are booby-trapped. Those other bombs were too easy. The bad guys wanted us to find them, figure it was safe then... *boom.*"

"You think so?"

"That's what I'd do," O'Connell told him.

"You're probably right," Superman agreed. "If you think it's safe, maybe you should bring the rest of them out and start disassembling the crystal matrix."

While most of the reporting staff of the Daily Planet newsroom had already headed off to handle their various assignments, Perry and a handful of others watched the monitors. The events unfolding near the power plant was still being broadcast by GNN. The reporter in the helicopter had been keeping up a constant monologue on the situation, although there was little to be seen on the ground, even with telephoto lenses. After a sudden flurry of activity, all seemed quiet as people went in and out of the blockhouse. Superman stood nearby apparently watching the work.

The reporter, Janna Dixon, speculated as to why the Man of Steel appeared to be doing nothing, but Perry noticed she didn't mention the possibility of kryptonite being involved.

Jimmy spotted a lone figure on the screen some distance from the blockhouse. The figure was on foot walking down the gravel road towards the activity. "Isn't that Lois?" he asked.

Perry nodded. "That's our girl. Knowing her, she'll come back with an interview with the damned bomb telling us what makes it tick."

"A good reporter doesn't get the great stories," Jimmy quoted with a grin. "A good reporter makes them great."

"Exactly," Perry agreed, but he wasn't smiling. "Assuming of course that reporter lives long enough to turn in the story." *Assuming there's a paper to print it and people to read it*, he added silently.

O'Connell and one of the techs removed the moderators from the building while others in the bomb squad moved them to a safe distance. Then, the techs removed the control panels and cabinets from the inside of the building, stripping it to the lead covered walls as O'Connell and Kitty Faulkner started disassembling the matrix, setting the crystals on the concrete floor of the blockhouse.

He waited for them to come out. He heard O'Connell swear and had to stop himself from entering the building to find out what was happening. Finally, O'Connell and Kitty came out of the building. Their expressions were grim.

"They rigged some sort of detonator system and epoxied them directly to some of the crystals," O'Connell. "I've never seen anything like them. No wires, no apparent controls, no batteries that I can see. But the matrix is disassembled, finally. Do you want us to separate out the ones with the caps?"

Superman shook his head. "It's my turn," he said, floating up to the level of the building's roof.

He started at the top, tearing off the metal roofing, exposing the trussed joists and the lead beneath. The soft metal sagged under its own weight as support was removed but he simply sped up. He removed the wall blocks layer by layer, keeping the lead sheets between him and the glowing crystals.

Superman had to accept the building designer's specification about the average thickness of the lead sheathing in the building. He hoped there would be enough to prevent an energy cascade from starting. He wasn't feeling any ill effects from the kryptonite, yet. But then, he hadn't felt the poison that had permeated Luthor's abomination of an island until it was too late either.

He went back to his chore, stripping everything away until all that was left was the lead that had sheathed the interior of the building and the kryptonite. Finally, the crystals were covered by the sheets of lead and he could stop for a moment.

"What now?" a familiar voice asked. *Lois*.

"Miss Lane, I wasn't expecting to see you here," he said, giving her a nod of greeting.

"You know me, always where the action is," she quipped. She nodded at the tent of lead in the center of what used to be a blockhouse. "What now?"

"Now comes the easy part," Superman told her. "Getting the blasted thing out of here before something else happens. Stand back."

She stepped back, moving to join Kitty and the bomb squad technicians as Superman softened the lead with heat vision then scooped up the metal covered crystal blob. He

launched himself into the air, still debating on whether to toss the mass into space or dump it in the ocean. Covered with lead, the crystals weren't going to interact with the ocean water even if they had been programmed for growth. He doubted they could be programmed that way in any case.

He was already high in the air when he heard a faint click from somewhere inside the mass. The 'package' began to grow warm to the touch, the lead covering softening once again, threatening to come away from the crystals. A quick blast of cold solidified the metal, at least temporarily.

The decision was made - space. Superman tossed the blob, aiming it toward the same point in space as the abomination known as New Krypton, orbiting Earth's sun in the asteroid belt. More kryptonite out there would hardly be noticed.

It was barely out of the atmosphere when it exploded.

Thirty One

The flash was blinding. A green sun erupting over the Planet Earth. Then the light was gone, replaced by shooting stars burning with orange flame as they plummeted to the planet's surface. As when Luthor had set off the crystal growth, there had been an electromagnetic pulse, momentarily knocking out any device that used electricity, either from batteries or line current. Then, just as it had happened twice before, everything came back to life.

Lois blinked several times to clear the afterimages of the explosion from her vision. Then she started searching the sky for the one object she hoped to see - that all of them on the ground with her hoped to see - Superman.

"Do you see him?" someone asked. There was no answer as everyone's eyes watched the skies for a trace of him.

Please let him be okay.

He had felt the mass heating up and knew it was only a matter of seconds before the crystals became unstable and fissioned, releasing all their energy in a single burst. He threw the mass of lead and crystal away from him and dove for the deeper atmosphere, heading west, toward the Rocky Mountains. The radiation would be line-of-sight and the mass of the mountains would protect him to a certain extent as well.

If he was lucky, he could out run the radiation from the blast. If he wasn't... at least Metropolis was safe. Lois, Jason, his mom, everyone he cared about. They were safe even though he felt like a coward for running away.

The shockwave caught him, shoving him toward the ground like a giant malevolent hand. He couldn't breathe, couldn't control his fall. He had a moment of panic, seeing the ground coming up at him - then, suddenly he could breathe. He was still in the air. He was still flying. He was still alive.

I'm alive. Why am I alive?

He paused a moment in midair to reorient himself then headed east, back towards Metropolis. The blob had exploded, but there was still the un-vaporized debris to worry about. It was falling fast toward the city and not all the pieces were going to burn up on their way through the atmosphere.

He was going to have to hurry if he was going to take care of them before they hit the ground. Before they hurt someone.

The GNN copter had floundered when the power went off, but within seconds of regaining control, Dixon was back on the air reporting what she and everyone else had seen - the detonation of a mass of kryptonite in the upper atmosphere.

Someone turned on a radio, tuning in the newscast being relayed from the copter. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, from the GNN cameraman: "I see him! He's flying! He's okay!"

He's okay. Thank God he's okay.

Behind Lois, the remaining bomb technicians had paused only momentarily to watch the fireworks display before climbing into the full-ton pickup that held the explosives containment unit and driving away. Lois knew they would be taking to contents of the containment unit to a safe place where they could deal with the problem the possible bombs posed.

Lois checked her watch. Less than five minutes had passed since she'd arrived on the scene. Lupe had started giving instructions to her team to sweep the area. Despite the damage

caused by both Superman and the bomb squad, the area was still a crime scene - a murder scene.

"There were two DOA from the security team that was here last night," Lupe explained to Lois. "We're guessing they were drugged. Something like one of the date rape drugs."

"So chances are the survivors won't remember anything about last night anyway?" Lois surmised.

Lupe nodded, her eyes turning to survey the area. Lois followed her gaze. There were concrete blocks piled near the river, along with what had once been the roof trusses of the blockhouse. Metal and plastic boards with electronic components hanging off them were piled near the blocks, along with the cabinets that had housed them.

Lupe managed a chuckle. Lois gave her a curious look.

"I'm glad the Boy Scout and the bomb squad guys are around, but they do wreck havoc with crime scenes," Lupe said. "Not their fault. Them, and the EMTs, have to make sure the civilians and everybody are safe before they worry about anything else. But it does make it harder for us to get the evidence to put away the bad guys."

"He did it," Straker fumed. "The alien did it. He pulled it off. The alien bastard stopped it! We had all the contingencies covered and he still did it."

Lake looked over at him. GNN had shown the explosion, the cascade of fragments falling over the city and the ocean beyond. The camera had picked up the purple blur that sped after the larger pieces.

"Actually, it looked more like Metropolis bomb squad," Lake observed. "He's just picking up the pieces. Quite literally."

"According to our psychological analysis, which you and Colonel Freeman put together as I recall, the alien should not have been able to do it," Straker stated. "He's supposed to be a loner, reliant only on himself, his own strength, trusting no one. According to you, he was supposed to try to handle it alone. That's his weakness."

"He *is* a loner. And until this incident we've seen no evidence that he even had the *capacity* to work with humans on an equal basis," Lake replied. "But Luthor was right about one thing. He cares. And the fact that he cares means other people care too. He has allies. He has friends."

"He has followers and sycophants who are blind damned fools," Straker said. "He's a filthy alien, or have you forgotten?" His expression was hard, his eyes fever bright.

"I haven't forgotten," Lake told him. "I'm just wondering if we've been going about this the wrong way."

"Are you questioning our mission?"

"Of course not," she said. "I agree the alien may be dangerous. I just think..."

"You think what?"

Lake snapped her mouth shut. Straker's tone had gone cold, hard. Dangerous. *The alien isn't a threat or if he is, he's a manageable one. Whatever happened to innocent until proven guilty?*

"You think what?" Straker repeated. "That Alec was right? That the alien might not be the threat I know he is? That the alien is telling the truth when he says he's the last one of his kind?" His voice had gotten loud, harsh, shrill even, a far cry from his normal quiet control. He possessed a very distinctive, very polished voice. A professionally trained voice. There was no sign of that now. He stepped closer to her, fists clenched.

She felt her stomach clench in fear and her heart sped up. Her mouth had gone dry and she tried to swallow before answering.

"I'm just wondering if we've been going... I'm wondering if Alec..."

Straker's face flushed and his expression turned thunderous but his voice was now frighteningly quiet. "Have you spoken to Colonel Freeman since he left?"

"No," she answered. "I thought we'd agreed there would be no contact until this operation was completed. Colonel Freeman is too identifiable."

"Virginia, Gay and Mark never reported in to me on Freeman's arrival," Straker told her. "In fact, we seem to be out of contact with Ellis and Bradley as well."

"That's odd..." Lake began then stopped. *'Ginny, be careful and watch your back. We both know how Paul died,' Gay Ellis had said. 'The reports on the dangers of kryptonite may be correct...'* Luthor had been insane, but Straker and Foster had to have had more exposure to the mineral than Luthor had. *Was that it? Had the exposure caused damage, driven them mad?*

"What's odd?"

"I talked to Gay just before Sky-diver went down," Lake said. "She was offering her condolences on Paul's death."

"That is rather odd, don't you think?" Straker asked. "Considering the dead man at STAR Labs was identified to the media as Peter Franklin and there were no photos released of him."

"Alec must have told them," Lake reasoned.

"And now Alec's missing," Straker pointed out.

The largest piece was fist-sized, Superman discovered as he sped over the city, catching the chunks of lead and kryptonite as they fell from the sky. He tossed them east toward the ocean.

His hands were burning and blistered where the purer crystals had touched him, even momentarily. But somehow he was still airborne, still flying. He felt woozy, even a little disoriented as though his brain was wrapped in cotton wool, but he kept at it. Oddly enough, some of the crystals seemed to have turned red. *Red kryptonite?*

Finally, the sky was clear of falling debris and he could pause to catch his breath. He was tired, bone tired. He still didn't understand why the explosion hadn't killed him, or why his hands had simply blistered with contact or what was making him feel so odd. *Maybe I can ask the AI later.*

He headed east, away from the city, heading higher to catch the sun. The sun felt good, warming his body, recharging his cells, letting him heal. The blisters faded away and so did the exhaustion.

He allowed himself to drop lower into the atmosphere and headed west toward the city. As he came closer he felt the pangs of kryptonite again - not enough to immediately hurt him, more like a tingling of his nerves, a slight headache or an itch. Not enough to stop him, but enough for him to be aware of it. He did notice that the effect was a little stronger than it had been before - had the bomb actually added more of the poison to the air of the city, or was he just more sensitized to it?

He dropped further, listening for Lois's heartbeat. She was still near the power plant. Telescopic vision confirmed she was with Lupe and Kitty surveying the area. Lois was hot on the story and probably wouldn't even notice he hadn't returned.

He heard a scream coming from an alley in New Troy and headed in that direction. A

woman was being held a gunpoint as the robber grabbed for her purse. The man with the gun saw Superman's shadow fall over him. He dropped the purse and ran. Superman was on him before he took three steps.

"Hey, I got my rights," the man started yelling as Superman took the gun away from him and grabbed him by the shirt collar. "You can't arrest me without reading me my rights!"

"Actually, that's not true," Superman told him. "I wasn't planning on questioning you. But I will certainly report anything you say to the proper authorities." He spotted an MPD patrol car and flagged it down. The car stopped at the curb and the uniformed officer inside got out. He noted that the woman had been threatened was now standing a short distance away, watching.

"Nice to see you back in action, Superman," Officer Reyes said with a grin as she hand-cuffed the man in Superman's custody.

"It's nice to *be* back in action, Officer Reyes," Superman replied, flashing her one of his bright smiles. She put the man in the back of her car and turned back to the super-hero.

"You look like you've had a long night," she commented, eyeing his face.

He rubbed his chin and realized he needed to get cleaned up. He needed a shave. "I've been trying to make up for lost time," he admitted with a faint chuckle. He handed her the gun and she placed it in a large baggy as he told her what he had observed in the alley. Then he took off, leaving Reyes to talk to the mugger's victim. As he left he could hear the mugger protesting he hadn't been read his rights. Reyes did so with an obvious sigh of impatience.

He checked the time on the Seaboard Tower time and temp display. It was still early - he had plenty of time before heading to the Planet to start his day there. He headed north, over the Hobbs River to Riverside Drive.

Coming to earth in the trees at the edge of the yard at Lois's house, he sped into his street clothes then walked over to the doors that opened on the deck. It looked like his mom was finishing putting the breakfast dishes in the dishwasher. Jason was watching a morning kid's show while Ben read the morning paper.

Clark knocked on the door, then opened it, letting himself in. "You really should keep that door locked, you know," he commented as Ben and Jason looked up. "This is the big city. There are dangerous people out there."

"This coming from a man who won't use the deadbolt on his own door?" Martha asked, coming out of the kitchen wiping her hands on a kitchen towel. Her eyes sparkled with amusement.

"Well, if I'm there they're not going to do much and if I'm not, I don't have much worth stealing," Clark explained with a shrug. He gave his mother a crooked grin as she shook her head.

"There's a fresh pot of coffee in the kitchen if you want some," Martha told him. She peered into his face. "Did you get any rest last night?"

"A little," Clark told her.

"You didn't come tuck me in last night," Jason stated. His lower lip was stuck out in a pout.

"I'm sorry, Jason," Clark told him. "There was something I had to take care of. When I was done, you were already asleep."

"Was not," Jason told him petulantly.

"Jason..." Martha chided gently. "Get ready for school."

Jason went to the front hall, grabbing his jacket and book bag. Outside a car horn honked

and Martha hurried to the front door to open it for him. Clark watched her check out the car and driver before letting Jason head out to the curb and his ride to school.

"You'll be here when I get back?" Jason asked her as he started out the door. The driver honked once again and Martha waved to them.

"Ben and I will be here," Martha promised. "Have a good day at school."

Clark watched after him as Jason ran to the car, book bag banging against his legs.

"He tried to stay awake last night so he wouldn't miss you," Martha told him. He followed her into the kitchen. She poured him a mug of coffee and handed it to him. "We didn't think to stock up on cream and sugar," she told him. "Ben and I take it black. And Lois takes hers with artificial sweetener."

Clark took a sip of the black brew. "It's fine," he told her. "I am sorry about last night. I did tell Lois I'd be by in the morning to see you and Ben... I hadn't realized Jason was waiting for me to show up."

"Clark, one of the things Jason needs most right now is stability," Martha told him. "He needs to know he can trust the grown-ups around him to be there for him, to keep their promises."

"Stability isn't exactly one of my strong points. And I don't even want to talk about promises," Clark reminded her. "So, when do you and Ben head to Montana again?"

"We're not," she said. "At least not right away," she amended. "We've got to straighten things out with the farm first."

"What happened?" It was funny in a way. He thought he'd pretty much taken in stride the changes that had happened in the world during his nearly six year absence. But five days unconscious in the hospital and he was thrown for a loop. *What else has happened that they've forgotten to tell me?*

"We're heading back to Smallville Friday to talk to the lawyers," she said. "Those people we had trouble with in Colorado Springs scared the Newcombs so badly they backed out of the deal. Luckily the sale was on a contract, so it will be a little easier to get everything squared away."

"I'm sorry," Clark told her.

"It wasn't your fault," she said. "And maybe it was meant to be this way. I can lease out the land to Ben's boy or Wayne Irig, or maybe the co-op. Plus Smallville's a good place to raise a family."

Clark noticed the clock on the coffeemaker. "I have to get on to work." He set his coffee mug down and gave his mother a peck on the cheek. "I'll do my best to come by tonight and tuck Jason in."

Perry looked out of his office, watching the comings and goings in the bullpen. Lois was already at her desk working on the bomb story. He knew the police weren't releasing the details to the public. He also knew that Lois had those details in hand, with possibly one exception - the exclusive with Superman.

A worried looking Lois kept glancing over at the elevators as though she was waiting for someone to appear. Finally, the elevator doors slid open and a slightly ruffled Clark stepped into the elevator lobby outside the newsroom. As usual, Clark looked a little lost as he headed through the glass doors. His head swung around and he adjusted his glasses as he scanned the newsroom. Perry wondered, not for the first time, how much of Clark's clumsy, lost, demeanor was an act.

The crease between Lois's eyebrows smoothed out and she waved Clark over to her. He managed to get to her desk knocking over only one of his co-worker's wastepaper baskets with his briefcase as he went. Perry watched him apologize for the mess, picking up the basket and setting it upright. He managed to get to Lois's desk without further incident. They exchanged a few words then Lois led the way to the conference room.

One Superman exclusive coming up.

Perry studied Clark as he and Lois crossed the newsroom to the conference room.

He looks tired. Maybe he wasn't ready to come back yet.

'If it turns out badly, I'll be sitting at ground zero and I won't feel a thing. Neither will anyone else in the city,' Lois had said. Maybe he wasn't ready to come back, but it was a good thing he did.

"Are you okay?" was the first thing that Lois asked when Clark arrived at her desk, briefcase in hand.

Clark bobbed his head. "A little off, but okay. I stopped in and said hi to Mom and Jason. I guess Jason's not real happy with me. Mom said she and Ben are heading back to Smallville Friday?"

It was Lois's turn to nod. "Jason's gonna miss them terribly."

"He can always visit," Clark said. "Smallville's not that far away."

"Only half-way across the country," Lois reminded him.

Clark managed a tired grin. "Like I said, not that far away."

Lois looked up and saw Perry standing at the inside glass wall of his office sipping the mud that was the newsroom coffee. He was watching them.

"Let's take this to the conference room," Lois decided, grabbing the files she arranged on her desk.

Clark followed her without question.

"I've already got a good start on the bomb story," she announced as soon as the door was closed behind them. "It's going to be days, if not weeks before the crime scene team and forensics has much to add."

"And of course the security guy who was helping Straker is in no condition to talk," Clark added. "I've seen the pattern and it points straight to SHADO. Witnesses with drug induced amnesia. It happened repeatedly when I was working on the arms smuggling investigation. I'd find witnesses, even underlings who were under indictment for doing the actual dirty work, and they'd have a hole in their memories for the twenty-four to forty-eight hours they were actually working for SHADO. There'd be an airtight case against the underlings but nothing could be traced back to Straker and company because they had genuine amnesia."

"Nice people," Lois commented with more than a touch of sarcasm.

"I'm sure an amnesia drug was helpful when they were legitimate," Clark said. "I think there really was an alien threat back in the late sixties - abductions, mutilations, murders. I think they had a mission, and it was an important one. And they needed to maintain their secrecy to keep the world from panicking. But the invasion never happened. The threat disappeared, stopped. But they didn't."

"And until forensics shows that Straker was there and he was the one who put the damn thing together, we still don't have anything other than circumstantial evidence that it was that SHADO planned and executed that bomb," Lois reminded him. "So what more do you have?"

"You've covered it pretty well," Clark told her, scanning what she'd written. "I'll write up

the Superman interview part as soon as I get back to my desk. Has anything come in on the fires?"

"The fire marshal working both cases has confirmed those last two big fires were arson using HTA, but nothing on what the accelerant was, or the trigger," Lois told him. "One other odd thing that showed up that links them together. White plastic disks on the concrete floors. Weird, huh?"

"Yeah, weird," Clark agreed. "I assume you have research looking into it?"

Lois nodded. "So far nothing. But, Lupe and I had a chance to compare notes while waiting for the bomb to get handled. Something she doesn't want out there yet, but she thought Superman would want to know, considering everything." She paused, gauging his reaction. "Luthor's body was stolen. The preliminary autopsy report showed he may have been suffering from kryptonite poisoning."

"Can we get a copy of that report?"

"She's going to try."

There was a knock at the conference room door and they both looked up to see Jimmy standing outside the door, a file folder in his hand. Lois waved him in.

"CK, I have those photos you wanted," Jimmy said, handing the file to Clark. "The firefighters from yesterday?"

"Oh, yeah," Clark murmured as he opened the file and laid out the photos on the table.

"What are you looking for?" Jimmy asked.

Clark shook his head. "I'll know it if I see it." After a few moments he picked out one photo and handed it to Jimmy. "Him... see what you can find out about this one."

Jimmy looked at the photo. There was nothing in the picture that stood out as far as the photographer could see. "Mind telling me what I'm looking for?"

"When Lois was talking to Obote yesterday, I was watching the men around him, to get a feel for their reactions," Clark explained. He nodded to the paper in Jimmy's hand. "He was listening to Lois a lot harder than the others and his reaction was just... off. I can't describe it any further than that. Maybe it's nothing..."

"But maybe it isn't," Lois added.

General Samuel Lane looked across the table at man with the graying hair and leathery, pock-marked skin, and his two companions - a fifty-something brawny black man with gray flecked hair and a petite woman with green eyes and brown hair. Lane found it only a little odd to hear a cultured British accent from the black man. The man had a possessive arm around the woman, whose accent also indicated British origins.

Lane had met all of them many years before while stationed in Great Britain. The black man was Mark Bradley and he had been a top pilot in the RAF and was a space pilot as well. Gay Ellis was his wife of twenty-five years and had been the commanding officer of SHADO's lunar installation when SHADO had been a military force with a mission.

Lane glanced at his own companions, two NIA agents who were doing their best to look authoritative but failing miserably. *Children, they gave me children to help face down jackals.*

"Okay, Freeman," Lane began. "We're listening..."

Thirty Two

Perry sighed as he hung up the phone. He looked through the glass wall of his office, watching his two star reporters. It was a title he would never speak aloud. A reporter in his bullpen was, almost by definition, one of the best in the business - even Ralph Gunderson was a top-notch gossip gatherer, as smarmy as he was. But these two were in a class by themselves. Together, they were simply magic.

A good reporter doesn't get the great stories. A good reporter makes them great.

Lois was on the phone, no doubt with one of her sources. From her expression Perry could tell she wasn't happy with the quality of information coming her way. Her hair was pulled up away from her face, and her black suit wasn't as flattering as it might be. Clark was also on the phone, taking notes. It was harder to read Clark's reactions behind his glasses but Perry suspected he wasn't happy with what he was getting either.

Well, what he was going to tell them about the call he'd just gotten *wasn't* going to make their day. Linda King wanted to interview Lane and Kent. The person on the other end of the line didn't know what she wanted to interview them about, only that King was adamant about it.

The scene on the overhead monitor changed to show Metropolis Police Headquarters. Linda King's face came on the screen and Clark's head came up as he started to listen. Perry grabbed the remote for his office television and turned up the volume.

"District Attorney Matthew Griffin has just announced the arrest of William Church Junior on charges of racketeering, arson and multiple accounts second degree murder related to the factory and warehouse fires that have plagued the city following the devastation caused by the crystalquake..." King was saying.

Behind her on the screen, talking to D.A. Griffin, was a pneumatic twenty-something blonde that Perry recognized - Bill Church Jr.'s stepmother, Mindy. Mindy's eyes went wide as she spotted the TV newswoman and hurried over to her.

"Oh, it's so terrible. I mean poor Billy's only been out of prison for a year now and he promised he'd go straight... I mean, he promised..." Mrs. Church gushed at the camera. *"You know his daddy died in prison don't you? It was so terrible..."*

Perry turned down the volume.

"That certainly puts a different slant on the arson story," Clark murmured to Lois. GNN had returned to its repeats of their video of Superman and the explosion. "The D.A. must have been just waiting to have Church picked up."

"Well, we did tell Henderson we saw Church in that sub-basement," Lois reminded him. "But I do wonder what he was doing down there. I also wonder what Missus Church has to do with it."

"You think *she's* involved?" Clark asked. His disbelief was obvious.

"Clark, trust me on this one," Lois said. "Mindy Church is involved up to her touched up roots."

She looked up as Perry's office door opened and he came out, heading toward them. He was holding a fax in his hand. He handed Lois the fax and she read it: 'Pulitzer Award ceremony rescheduled to Friday, October 20, 7 pm.'

"I'm still not sure I should accept," she told him. After the past week, the award seemed more irrelevant than ever. Superman was back and the world had never needed him more.

"We've been through this," Perry reminded her. "In a year's time, nobody'll remember

what you won if for. Just that you did."

"Besides, it's the truth," Clark added. "Never apologize for telling the truth."

"Homespun Kansas wisdom?" Lois asked and promptly felt awful at the crestfallen look in Clark's eyes. Clark had been trying so hard to be friends, to be supportive even though he was hurting at least as much as she was. Perry harrumphed at her and she knew he thought she'd behaved badly.

"By the way, Linda King wants to interview the two of you," he told them. Lois felt her stomach clench. *What now?*

"Perry, you know what I think of Linda King," Lois told him. "The woman is an embarrassment to journalism."

Perry sighed, a long, noisy in and out of breath. "Do it anyway?" he said, looking down at her.

"What does she want to talk to us about?" Clark asked, eyebrows drawn together in confused bemusement.

"The contact person wasn't sure," Perry admitted.

Lois shrugged. "If she starts asking about things we don't want to talk about, we don't talk."

"What did Perry want to talk to you in private about?" Lois asked. Clark and Perry had been closeted in Perry's office for a good fifteen minutes before she and Clark left the newsroom to head for WGBS.

"He wanted to brief me on how far he felt we could go in the interview before legal had a fit," Clark told her.

"And he didn't want to talk to me?"

Clark shrugged, an almost imperceptible movement of his shoulders beneath his suit coat. "He's got a pretty good idea on what you'll do. This is my first time doing this."

They took a cab to the WGBS building. Traffic seemed back to 'normal', at least as normal as possible considering how many streets were still being worked on.

"Why does King bother you so much?" Clark asked as they walked into the WGBS building to meet with Linda King.

"Who says she bothers me?" Lois asked, her heels clicking on the marble floors as they headed to the elevators.

"Lo-is."

"Okay, okay," Lois told him as the elevator doors opened. There was no one inside as they entered. "Linda was my roommate for my first two years of college. We worked on the school newspaper together, had the same major, took most of our classes together. I thought we were friends."

"What happened?"

"A boy," she said. "His name was Paul and he was the editor of the paper and we'd been dating, sort of. I'd told Linda all about him, and then one Monday, she strolled into the paper's office on his arm looking like the cat that swallowed the canary. And to add insult to injury, she stole a story I'd been working on and got an A in the class for it."

"And you've been wanting to tear her hair out ever since?" Clark observed. He watched her cheeks go a little pink and warm.

"I'm that obvious?"

"I keep expecting claws to come out of your little dainty paws and I feel I should find you

a saucer of milk," he told her, making a brief clawing motion with one hand. "Lois, that happened how long ago? Twelve, thirteen years ago? A long time to hold a grudge."

"And a stupid one at that. Paul dumped Linda almost as fast..." Lois looked up at him, eyes narrow with speculation. "You know, I never even told Richard about why I had problems with Linda. You're very good, you know that?"

"I have to be to keep up with you," Clark replied. He couldn't keep the grin off his face. The elevator doors opened onto the floor they'd been instructed to go to meet Ms. King.

Linda King was waiting for them in the elevator lobby. She looked much like she always did on the TV screen - blonde hair perfectly coiffed, make-up subtle, gray suit custom tailored for the body of a woman who worked hard to keep her figure.

She smiled when she caught sight of them. "Lois, how good of you to agree to talk with me," she said, holding out her hand to Lois in greeting.

Lois shook her hand then shrugged. "Mister White thought it might be important."

"I was sorry to hear about your fiancé," Linda said. "He was a good man. It's a shame Superman... well, I think I'll leave that to the interview." She turned to Clark. "And you must be Clark Kent."

"Guilty as charged."

Linda beckoned them to follow her as she led the way down a corridor into a small make-up room. Two older women were waiting for them. "You'll need to hurry," Linda told the make-up artists. "We go on in twenty minutes."

Clark watched her leave. "Why do I have the feeling I'm not going to like this?"

"Clark, we both know Superman wouldn't have been able to do anything," Lois reminded him. "We're just lucky we didn't lose him too."

Linda checked over her notes, the list of questions her staff had compiled for the interview. Getting the two top reporters from the Daily Planet to agree to come on **Daytime Metropolis** was a coup, especially on such short notice. Marketing wasn't happy at the moment, thanks entirely to the speed it had all come together - Lane and Kent promised to be a draw, even with the interview being a surprise addition to today's show.

Lois was going to be the difficult one - the woman had a long memory when it came to slights and Paul Bender had been more than just a slight. The man, Kent, would be easier to work with. He had less media experience and he didn't seem to be one of those who kept himself to single word answers. Those were nightmares for any interviewer, but especially for radio and television hosts.

Her sources had given her his background but there were odd missing pieces covering years. He was a college graduate and well regarded professionally even though he was also considered a bit of a nervous geek. She knew the type - no life outside his work, so shy he couldn't ask a girl out to save his life. A little attention and she'd have him eating out of her hand.

She checked her watch. Almost show time. She checked her make-up one more time and headed out to the studio. The two print reporters were waiting in the wings, waiting for permission to go on stage to the seating area of the **Daytime Metropolis** set. The audience was applauding the 'cooking with Kay-Leanne' part of the show.

"And now stay tuned because we've got something special after the commercial break. GNN's Linda King with an exclusive interview with award winning Daily Planet journalists Clark Kent and Lois Lane," Kay-Leanne told the camera.

The director motioned for Linda to take her place on the set. The sound man checked her mike and ear-bud while the director waved Lois and Clark onto the set. They settled onto the sofa nervously while the sound man moved to hover over them.

Finally, the director started the count-down and the sound man disappeared.

"Three...Two...One..."

"Welcome back to Daytime Metropolis. I'm Linda King and I'm joined today by award winning Daily Planet reporters Lois Lane and Clark Kent. Miss Lane is a Pulitzer winner for her editorial 'Why the World Doesn't Need Superman'." Linda smiled at the audience then turned to Lois. "First off, I'd like to extend the condolences of everyone here over the death of your fiancé, Richard White, assistant editor over at the Planet." She turned back to the audience. "For those of you who don't read the Planet, Mister White was murdered last week by Lex Luthor, the man responsible for the earthquake that nearly destroyed Metropolis almost two weeks ago. Mister Kent was shot by Luthor in the same incident."

She turned to Clark. "So Clark, you're looking very well for someone who was declared dead just last week."

"Those rumors were greatly exaggerated," Clark said with a crooked smile. "Actually, it was thought that I'd be a little safer if the people who had been working with Luthor thought I was dead as well. There have been attempts made on my life for my involvement in the investigation that led to White's death."

"And now?"

"I have been assured that Superman's keeping an eye out for me," Clark told her.

She looked over at Lois again. "So tell me, Lois, do you still hold that the world doesn't need Superman?"

On the monitor was a film clip of Superman lifting the mass of new Krypton away from the Earth. It cut to Superman's fall to Centennial Park, then Superman lifting the blob of lead and kryptonite into the air. The clip ended with the explosion.

"Well, it is nice when he's around," Lois admitted.

"But he wasn't around when your fiancé was murdered and your partner shot," Linda noted. "Where was Superman when all that was happening?"

Lois took a deep breath. "Superman's only one person. He can't be everywhere at once," she said. "However, as it happens, the group that took Richard and Clark prisoner had laid a trap for Superman. When he did arrive to help, he was badly injured. We were very lucky he recovered in time to help take care of that problem over at the Met Power complex."

"Homeland security has announced they believe the bomb at the nuclear power station was a terrorist attack," Linda said. "You were there, what do you think?"

"I don't think they're wrong," Lois said slowly. "But I think the information they released to the public less than complete."

"How do you mean?" She caught the look that passed between the two Planet reporters. It was Clark who answered the question.

"Richard White may have been murdered by Lex Luthor, but there is reason to believe Luthor was working with a paramilitary group whose stated mission was to protect the planet Earth from an alien invasion."

"Is that so bad?" Linda asked. There was a murmur of agreement from the audience.

"It is if their stated objective is to murder an individual who has never been indicted of a crime, who has acted repeatedly along side and even under the direction of local authorities, who has been applauded internationally for his humanitarian actions," Clark said. "It's bad if

they are the ones ultimately responsible for bringing radioactive armor piercing ammunition into the city and making sure it gets into the hands of criminals in order to keep emergency workers from doing their jobs. It's very bad when their conspiracy has resulted in at least thirteen deaths that we know of in the last week."

He was looking over at the audience and Linda saw the director giving instructions to the cameraman to go in close on Clark.

"This country has, as an underlying basis for almost everything else, the concept that an individual is innocent until proven guilty. That is the basis for nearly all of our jurisprudence, all of our criminal law. Presumed innocence until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law." Clark went on. Linda noted Lois's calm, almost amused, expression as she watched her partner. *My sources were wrong - he's no geeky hick from the sticks. And Lois knows it.*

"This particular organization has taken on the role of judge, jury, and executioner and has sentenced Superman to death for the crime of not having been born on Earth," Clark was saying. "They have done this despite the fact that the governments of nearly every nation on the planet have declared their borders open to him. And it appears this group doesn't care who they kill or how much carnage they create while they carry out their sentence. The bomb found at the Met power complex was designed to be the equivalent of a 100 megaton nuclear bomb."

There was a gasp from the audience. Linda felt the blood drain from her face. That factoid hadn't been in any of the news releases she'd read.

"Does this group have a name?" Linda asked, trying to regain control of the interview.

"The group Richard White and I were looking into was called SHADO, Supreme Headquarters, Alien Defense Organization. It was established in 1970 by the security committee of the Congress of Nations," Clark said. "They were ordered disbanded in 1997 and went rogue. I don't know what name they may have taken on since."

On the monitor, several photographs appeared - three older men and a woman. Linda looked more closely and realized the photos were of two men. One, the more finely featured man, had two pictures, one facing the camera and the other with his hair cut shorter and wearing aviator style glasses. The woman's photo was a little blurry, as if it had been enlarged from a much smaller picture.

"These are the most recent photos the Daily Planet has been able to get of the last known surviving senior officers of SHADO," Clark said. "The two photos at the top of the screen are of Edward Straker, also known as Eldon Stoner. He is a known expert on kryptonite and there is a suspicion he was involved in the attack on the Spires. The man on the lower left is Alec Freeman, also known as Adam Fletcher. There is strong evidence that he was a confederate of Lex Luthor. He was present at Manahasset State Park less than an hour before White's murder."

"And the woman?" Linda asked.

"Virginia Lake, also known as Doctor Ursula Kraus. For the past five years she's been posing as a psychiatrist in Metropolis," Clark said. "These are very dangerous people. They want Superman dead and they don't care what they have to do, who or how many they kill in order to make it happen."

The audience exploded in protest. *Superman may be an alien but by God, he was Metropolis's alien and nobody'd better forget it.*

"They'll never let us near him," Straker complained as he clicked off the repeated showings of King's televised interview with Lane and Kent. "The entire blasted city's behind the alien now."

The television news people wouldn't shut up about how courageous Superman had shown himself to be, facing down certain death to protect the city against vicious terrorists. The GNN was following Kent's lead on identifying SHADO as the group suspected of being involved in the kryptonite bomb. Straker's photo, along with Freeman's and an old picture of Lake were also being shown on the news along with warnings from the FBI that they were to be considered armed and dangerous.

"And now it's common knowledge that element 126 is more unstable than anyone realized," Lake added. "It's only a matter of time before the government declares possession of it to be on the same level as having possession of plutonium. Being labeled a terrorist group will make it harder for us as well. What do you plan to do now?"

"Go to plan B," Straker said. "But first, I have a little job for you."

"How nice of you to let me in on your plan to blow the whistle on SHADO on live television," Lois commented, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"It was Perry's idea, actually," Clark told her. "I wasn't sure how well it would work, but with the Feds dragging their feet on letting the public know... He figured it wasn't too likely SHADO would sue the paper for libel."

"You sure surprised the heck out of Linda," Lois added with a little laugh. "She was expecting to have the poor little ol' Kansas farm boy eating out of her hand and you went and took over the show."

Clark flagged down a cab and they got in. He gave the driver directions to the Daily Planet.

"You've ruined your tie, you know," Lois told him. After the live audience had burst out in loud vocal support of Superman, Clark had managed to dump most of a cup of coffee on himself. Then he tripped over one of the cables that snaked across the floor while trying to get off the stage to go to the rest room to get cleaned up.

"That's why I buy cheap ties," Clark told her.

The grizzled old cabbie was looking into his rearview mirror. "Hey, you're Lane and Kent, aren't ya? I saw you guys on TV just a little while ago..."

"Yeah, that's us," Lois admitted.

"You're friends of the big guy, aren't ya?" the cabbie said, getting excited.

"If you mean, Superman, we like to think so," Clark told him.

The cabbie nodded. "Next time you see the big guy, tell 'im we're all behind him a hundred and ten percent, ya' know. This is America, and if Superman wants to live in Metropolis, well, he's got rights too, ya' know. I mean, we're all immigrants here, right?"

"Well, there are people who don't think he should be allowed to be one," Clark said softly.

"Yeah and people used to say the same thing about the Irish," the cabbie said as he pulled into the loading zone in front of the Daily Planet. "You make sure to tell the big guy what I said... Oh, and Miss Lane..."

Lois stopped and looked back at him.

"I read your article about us not needing Superman," he said. "I just want you to know, I didn't agree with everything you wrote, but it's a free country and you're entitled to your

opinion, too."

"Thank you," Lois murmured as she closed the cab door. The driver sped away, no doubt to pick up his next fare. "That was weird."

Clark chuckled. "You're a celebrity."

"What about you? Aren't you worried somebody's...?"

Clark shook his head. "By tonight's news, all anybody's going to remember is us telling Linda King about a threat to Superman and me making a fool of myself on live television. I'm a little more worried that SHADO might make a last stab at bombing the Planet, or my apartment building."

"Maybe they'll get smart and give up," Lois said hopefully.

"With everything they've invested into killing Superman, I doubt it. But it would be nice."

Clark heard a yell for help even before they reached the elevators. "Um, I'll be back in a few," he said, just before he disappeared into the stairwell. The elevator doors opened and Lois stepped inside, shaking her head.

The yell had come from a construction site not far from the Daily Planet building. He heard the sirens of the emergency vehicles before he actually spotted the problem - one of the huge construction cranes had failed and collapsed, dumping its load onto the street and falling over into a mass of twisted steel. The load of steel girders had landed on several cars, crushing them and blocking the street. He checked for survivors in the cars.

He found one rapidly fading heartbeat then it was gone. X-ray vision showed no survivors. The fading heartbeat he had caught had belonged to an unborn child whose mother's chest had been crushed beneath one of the beams.

His distress must have shown on his face. One of the men below yelled at him to check the site. They had men missing.

He checked the area. The crane operator was dead, but it looked like he had died of a heart attack. He couldn't tell if it had happened before or after the accident. Two men were buried alive in the rubble. A third was a short distance away, pinned beneath the twisted steel of the crane.

Superman set down beside the man who had yelled at him. He was wearing a white hard-hat which, in Metropolis, usually meant an engineer.

"You have three men trapped under there," Superman told him. "The crane operator is dead, but I don't think it was from the accident."

Two fire trucks and two aid vans had pulled up. Superman turned to see the firemen heading for the cars. "They're all dead," he told them. "Five, six dead. I doubt they had any idea..." He turned back to the engineer.

"I'm Bob Collins, by the way," the engineer introduced himself, pumping Superman's hand. "I'm the project engineer."

"What happened?" Superman asked. The fire fighters and rescue teams had joined them.

"I think the earthquake loosened the soil beneath the crane," Collins explained. "This was our first day back on this project. I thought I'd checked everything but..."

"What do you need me to do?" Superman asked.

"We need the crane out of here," one of the rescue team members said. "At least the biggest parts."

"Can I take it out in pieces? I think it will dislodge less debris that way."

"Do whatever you need to, big guy," the engineer told him.

Superman floated upwards, surveying the situation. The trapped men were breathing, at least. He had a little time, but not much. He started to cut the crane apart with laser vision, supporting the pieces as they came away and then floating them to the other side of the site, out of the way. As he cleared away twisted steel, the rescue workers came in with shovels and crowbars to move aside the soil and concrete that had come down.

It was like deconstructing a crushed erector set toy, Superman decided. Within a few minutes the bulk of the crane had been cut into chunks and piled a safe distance away. He started to help the rescue teams and fire fighters move away the chunks of concrete, hefting the steel I-beams out of the way.

A shot rang out, then another. One of the fire fighters tried to pull him down, out of the line of fire. "Down!" the fire fighter hissed at him. Superman obliged by ducking under cover as several more shots echoed through the city canyons. The man keyed the radio velcroed to his vest. "FD-084 on location at 100 Grant Avenue. We are under fire."

"Acknowledged, FD-084, police are on their way to 100 Grant Avenue," the dispatcher told him.

"I am invulnerable, you know," Superman reminded the fire fighter. "I'm not feeling any kryptonite around."

"You're sure?"

"I'm positive." He was surprised that the old man had even tried to pull him out of the way. But then, by now everyone in the city knew that SHADO was out to kill him. It was odd being on the receiving end of everyone's concern.

"Let's get these men rescued," he announced. He started pulling the slabs away once more, using x-ray vision to make sure the removal of the debris wasn't endangering the trapped men any further.

Finally, the first two men were free, the rescue teams securing them to back-boards for transport. Ambulances sped away from the site, leaving one last injured man partially buried in the rubble. Superman and the remaining rescue team began the painstaking effort of freeing him as well. It was painstaking because of the crushing injuries to the man's legs. Bystanders were commenting that the man's legs might need to be amputated to free him. Superman seriously doubted it would come to that. There hadn't been a field amputation in Metropolis in decades.

A doctor and nurse had been called over from Metropolis General to check the man out. The doctor had climbed down to get beside the injured man as Superman moved aside more girders and concrete. The rescue team took care of the small pieces. Finally, the injured man was free and was quickly packaged for transport.

"What are his chances?" Superman asked.

One of the EMTs answered. "A lot better than if you hadn't been here. Thanks Boy Scout."

He nodded and floated up to the sidewalk. Getting the beams off the crushed cars took little time and the steel joined the debris pile on the far side of the site. Work crews would take care of it later.

The police were working to keep bystanders at a distance from the disaster. He felt a twinge of kryptonite somewhere near but there was so much of it in the city now it was hard to get away from it.

A short distance away a man in handcuffs was being put into the back seat of an MPD panda car. The man's face was bruised and it looked like he'd taken a beating. Superman

recognized the officer handling the arrest and doubted she had been the one to hit her prisoner.

"Officer Reyes, what's going on?" he asked.

"We had a call from Fire about a shooter in the area," Reyes told him. "When we rolled in, some citizens had the situation already in hand." She nodded to the little knot of construction workers standing at the back of her car. "I've already talked to them about it being smarter to simply call the cops," she added.

The men shuffled their feet nervously and one, a tall black man in coveralls, spoke up. "He was taking pot shots at our guys and the rescue teams, and Superman here. We weren't going to stand by and do nothin'."

The prisoner lunged at the car door as Reyes started to close it. "You're all blind fools!" he started shouting. "He's an alien, he can't be trusted. He's not even human." He spat in Superman's direction, spittle just missing the red boots. Reyes slammed the door. Her expression indicated she would have been willing to catch his fingers in the door frame if it could have been managed.

"You have the right to remain silent," one of the other men said through a thick Russian accent. "Use it before we do something this nice lady and our friend here won't like."

The prisoner glowered at them, but remained quiet. Reyes touched the brim of her hat in a brief salute then got into the car and drove off.

Superman nodded his own salute to the men before launching himself into the sky. He didn't have a lot of time to get the story written up before deadline. He spotted Jimmy Olsen on the ground taking photos. Another front page splash, even without Superman. He wondered if he was going to get a call from Doctor Ricco for a CID. *Probably. Several members of the team working on opening up the crushed cars looked positively green. I don't blame them at all. But Superman doesn't have the luxury of throwing up.*

Thirty Three

It didn't take Clark very long to get the information he needed to finish the story on the crane collapse. Names, mostly. The names of the men who captured the shooter, the fire fighter that pulled Superman out of the line of fire and those of the victims that had been pulled out of the rubble.

The names of those killed in the cars hadn't been confirmed yet. He wasn't sure if it was appropriate to mention that one of the dead had been pregnant. He couldn't help shuddering at the memory of the faint heartbeat that slowed, shuddered, and stopped. One more innocent victim of Luthor's insanity. *I'm glad the bastard's dead.*

"Clark?" Jimmy asked, coming up to his desk. "Are you okay?"

"Sure, I'm fine," Clark said. "A little tired, maybe," he added when Jimmy frowned at him, obviously unconvinced. "The crushed cars... it got to me a little. They can't have known what hit them."

"Yeah, but it's not exactly a consolation, is it?" Jimmy said sympathetically. "I got some good Superman shots. The Chief will be happy."

"Good." The phone on his desk rang, and Jimmy moved off to his own desk giving Clark a little privacy. Clark answered the phone.

"Clark, it's Bill Henderson," the voice on the phone announced. "I have a couple things you probably need to know."

"Okay, shoot."

"The NIA has finally gotten around to giving us a list of known SHADO operatives in the Metropolis area. The Grant Street shooter was on that list and he was using kryptonite ammo," Henderson said.

Clark felt a cold wave rush over him. *Kryptonite? He saved my life. That fire fighter really did save my life when he forced me down.*

"But Superman said he didn't feel any kryptonite around, at least no more than he had been feeling in the city," Clark protested softly, keeping an eye out for eavesdroppers.

"The shooter, his name is Brian Bixler by the way, was using a high-powered rifle with a sniper scope. Lucky for Superman, the ammo wasn't quite right so it didn't have the range or accuracy a normal bullet would have had," Henderson explained. "The shots went wild. God only knows where they went."

"I see... Do you know how the NIA got their hands on that list?" Clark asked. His curiosity had been piqued. SHADO had always been above top secret. Even when they'd been officially sanctioned there had never been a confirmable paper trail that led to them. That the NIA suddenly had personnel lists was highly suspicious.

"They won't say where the list came from, only that they vouch for its accuracy," Henderson reported. "One other thing. They claim they have reason to believe there will be at least one more attempt on your life before SHADO goes to ground."

"The two attempts today weren't enough?" Clark asked, keeping his voice low.

"Clark, the information I was given said they were going after White's partner. They're talking about you. You're the one who outed them, not Superman. And today's stunt on TV certainly wasn't designed to make you less of a target."

Clark sat back in his chair. He was aware that Lois had stopped typing and was sitting at her desk, watching him.

"Bill, do me a favor," he said, turning away from Lois's scrutiny. "Have your people check out Lois's house? Three-twelve Riverside Drive. My mom and her boyfriend have been

staying there and Jason should be home from school about four."

"You think they'll go after the boy?"

"They did once already, didn't they?" Clark reminded him.

"I'll get somebody on it," Henderson promised.

"Thanks, Bill," Clark said, hanging up the phone. He looked up to see Lois still watching him. Her forehead was creased with worry.

"That was Bill Henderson," Clark explained. "The NIA has turned over information about SHADO. A list of operatives for the MPD to pick up. Also, apparently I'm still number one on SHADO's hit list."

"And what do the police plan to do about it?" she asked.

"What can they do besides warn me to be careful and keep an eye out?" Clark told her. "I can't do my job if I have a police guard on me." He looked her straight in the eyes. "I asked Bill to check out your house, just in case."

She nodded. "How close are you to turning in your story?"

"About ten minutes," Clark answered.

"As soon as you're done, let's call it a day."

Officer Patrice Ryan watched as another black and white MPD cruiser traveled down Riverside Drive. It slowed as it came in front of the white two-story riverfront house with the seaplane docked in the back.

Ryan had already checked out the property - the doors and ground floor windows were secure. Mrs. Kent and Mister Hubbard were out but since Mrs. Kent had answered her cell phone, Ryan wasn't especially worried. They'd gone for a walk and had stopped in at a local coffee shop.

She climbed into her unmarked car and drove the four blocks to the coffee shop. She didn't have a new car - those went to the commissioner and assistant commissioners whose used cars went to various department heads who then handed them down to their assistants, until they reached the detectives who would drive them until they wore out or looked so beat up that narcotics would take them for their undercover people. The one she was using was assigned to a detective who was out on medical leave.

With any luck Ryan would pass her next exam and be promoted to detective. Then she would be assigned her own unmarked car and wouldn't have to borrow one.

The coffee shop was on the corner of an affluent block of jewelry and clothing stores catering to those who could afford to live in the area. The Lafayette neighborhood was one of the older Metropolis suburbs that had undergone a rebirth in the past ten years, becoming a magnet for middle and upper managers who wanted to live close, but not too close, to the city. Ryan knew she could never afford a house here on a cop's salary. The officers who did live in the area lived in apartments or older houses. But Ryan could still visit, enjoy the view and the shopping.

Mrs. Kent and her companion had both looked up as Ryan walked into the coffee shop. She nodded a greeting as she walked to the counter and placed her order. Then she pulled a chair up to their table to join them, making sure she was facing the front door of the shop.

"Clark does that," Martha Kent commented with a faint smile.

"Does what?" Ryan asked.

"Sits where he can watch the door," Martha answered.

"Considering his obvious talent for stirring up hornets' nests, I'm not surprised," she

commented. "The powers-that-be aren't sure what to make of him outing those guys." One of the counter people brought Ryan her order and she took a sip. "I just hope we catch the bastards before they do anything else," she added.

"I take it that the police are worried those guys might come after Clark again?" Ben asked.

"And the little boy," Ryan added. "The school's been warned, and we're taking other precautions. I'm here to give you two a lift back to the house."

"Thank you," Martha said. Ryan could tell she meant it.

Ed Straker adjusted the dark blue uniform hat he was wearing as he waited outside the Eleanor Roosevelt Elementary. School was letting out and masses of children were being hustled to buses and cars by school staff that seemed on the alert for anything out of the ordinary.

One small boy with brown hair wearing a plaid shirt, sweater vest and jeans was waiting in the school doorway with a middle-aged black woman. Straker checked the photo - Lane's son, Jason.

Straker pulled the black and white police car into the school parking lot. He'd 'borrowed' the car from the garage next to police headquarters. Chances were they wouldn't miss it until the officer it was assigned to went to claim it in the morning. By that time Straker would be long gone.

The woman, no doubt the boy's teacher, frowned at him as he got out of the car and sauntered over to them.

"You must be Jason," Straker began conversationally, crouching down beside the boy. "I'm Officer Stranges and I'm supposed to drive you home..."

The boy looked up at the woman, brow knitted in a frown. The woman returned his frown.

"I'm not supposed to talk to strangers," the boy said.

"But I told you my name," Straker pointed out. "Besides, don't you trust the police?"

The boy studied him carefully and Straker suddenly felt exposed. "What's the password?" the boy asked.

"Password?"

The boy nodded. "Mommy always makes sure to give my rides a password so I know it's okay."

"Well, I guess she forgot this time," Straker told him. The woman had a protective hold of Jason's shoulder and pulled him back, behind her.

"Police officer or not, I can't let him go with you without the password," the woman said.

Straker made a grab for the boy and the woman pushed the youngster away from him, into the building.

"I told you, I can't let him go with you without his mother's permission," the woman told him.

Straker pulled out the service pistol that went with the police uniform. "I think this is permission enough, don't you?"

Lois and Clark were only a few blocks from Jason's school when Clark's head came up and his eyes widened.

"Stop the car," he ordered.

"What is it?" Lois asked, pulling the car to the curb, disregarding the traffic behind them. Luckily, there weren't many vehicles behind them.

"Jason." Clark was out of the car almost before it was stopped. He disappeared around the corner of a nearby house and seconds later there was a sonic boom as Superman passed the sound barrier.

Lois pulled back into traffic, punching the gas. *Jason!*

It was the heartbeat that had alerted him. Jason's heart speeding up in fear. Clark tried to tune into the voices around the boy and heard Mrs. Morgan speaking to someone: *'I told you, I can't let him go with you without his mother's permission.'*

He flew over the school, spotting the MPD panda car in front of the school. A man in an MPD uniform was holding a gun on Jason's teacher. Jason was in the building, hunkered down behind a classroom door. Jason seemed safe for the moment. However Mrs. Morgan was too close to the gun. While he could conceivably beat the bullet to her and knock it aside, x-ray vision had confirmed his worst fears - kryptonite bullets. And unlike the ones used by the shooter at the construction site, these were properly made.

Superman came to ground a short distance from them. "Is there a problem, Mrs. Morgan?"

He watched the muscles in Mrs. Morgan's cheek twitch as she watched the man with the gun. The uniformed man turned abruptly and Superman recognized the finely honed features, the ice hard blue eyes - *Straker*.

The world seemed to slow to a crawl as he watched the muscles in Straker's hand begin to contract. The kryptonite was already affecting him, but super-speed had its advantages and lasers, even from laser vision, traveled at the speed of light. The gun's trigger was heat welded into immobility before Straker's index finger began putting pressure against it. Then, another shot of infrared heated the grip making it, literally, too hot to handle.

Straker threw the gun at Superman, who moved out of the way before it even left his hand. Before the gun hit the ground, Straker's hands were behind his back, secured with the cuffs that had been on his belt. He crushed the lock mechanism to make it impossible to simply unlock. Superman ignored the gawking looks of the remaining parents and children as he marched Straker to the police car, opened the back door and pushed Straker inside.

"I will have your head for this," Straker grated.

"And how many people have you killed trying to do just that?" Superman asked. "How many children do you intend to murder so you can claim your victory over an invasion of one?"

Superman shut the door on the car although it took all his self-control not to slam the door and risk turning the car over. He turned to walk back to the school entrance as Lois's Audi screeched to a halt against the curb. Her cell phone was in her hand and he picked up the voice of a 9-1-1 dispatcher over the tiny speaker.

"Superman... you're arresting a cop?" one of the parents asked. The woman was wide-eyed with confusion and fear.

He shook his head. "He's not a cop. He's a terrorist. His group is the one suspected of planning and building the bomb at the power plant." He didn't wait for a response, speeding into the building to reassure Jason that the danger was over. Jason hadn't moved from his place by the door. Superman scooped him up and carried him out.

"The policeman didn't have Mommy's password..." Jason explained, his voice shaking.

"He was going to hurt Mrs. Morgan."

"Mrs. Morgan is fine," Superman assured him as he opened the school door. Jason seemed unconvinced until he saw the woman standing beside the door.

"Mrs. Morgan!" Jason wriggled out of Superman's grasp and ran to his teacher.

"Superman saved you!"

The Mrs. Morgan smiled and ruffled his hair, nodding in agreement as Lois crouched down beside him.

"Jason, are you okay?"

"Superman saved Mrs. Morgan," Jason told her seriously.

"Yes, I saw that..." She looked up at Superman, eyes bright with unshed tears. "Thank you." He didn't need to be a mind reader to know what she was thinking. *Thank you for saving Jason from seeing any more death.*

"Glad to be of service, Miss Lane," he replied formally. He floated skyward, scanning the school building again as well as the surrounding area. He didn't see anything suspicious, but considering who had been caught at the school, he certainly wasn't going to take offence to having the bomb squad check things out.

He gave a little wave to the parents and children watching from the school parking lot then zipped off, away from the river. Away from Lois's house. He would do his patrol then circle back to fulfill his promise to himself to tuck Jason in tonight.

Lois, Jason, Mrs. Morgan and the several parents who had been close enough to the action to actually see what had happened waited for the real police to show up. The closest precinct house was less than a mile away and Lois knew several of the officers working there - they came to neighborhood watch meetings and did school safety programs. Many of them lived in the area thanks in part to the city's Resident Police Program which encouraged officers to live in the areas they patrolled.

Two panda cars pulled up, disgorging several uniformed officers that Lois recognized.

"The report was of a hostage situation..." the first officer, Curtis, started. Lois watched his eyes widen as he realized there was a prisoner in the back of the panda car that was already there.

Lois nodded a greeting. "Superman defused the situation. The weapon he was using is over there..." She jerked her head in the direction of the pistol that was lying on the gravel. "I believe that's Edward Straker. I'm pretty sure there's an APB out on him."

Curtis's partner noted the location of the gun before carefully picking it up using a pencil in the barrel and dropping in into a plastic baggy and marking it. Another officer checked the car Straker was in.

"HQ reported a stolen black and white. The numbers check," the officer reported.

Curtis nodded. "Read him his rights and get him down to the station," Curtis instructed. "Then let's get everyone's statement and let these good people get on home."

The city was quiet again. There was an apartment house fire, but everyone had gotten out safely and the fire department had the blaze well in hand. A few fender-benders, but again nothing that needed his attention.

People on the ground saw him fly by between the buildings. They waved and shouted to get his attention and he waved back, smiling. It really did feel good to be recognized and appreciated.

He headed north, across the Hobs River, toward Lois's house. He descended behind the trees that bordered the property and sped into his street clothes. He went around the house to come in the front door. He'd already checked to make sure everyone in the house was all right. Ben was with Jason in the family room. It looked like Jason was doing his homework. Lois was in the living room watching them as she sorted through papers spread out on the coffee table. His mother was in the kitchen with a woman he didn't recognize. The woman was armed, but no one seemed alarmed and he had spotted a police badge in a leather folder clipped to her belt.

Clark knocked and Lois came to answer the door. The unknown woman came out of the kitchen to check what was going on.

"You missed all the excitement at school," Lois commented with a smirk, shutting the door behind him. "Oh, that's Officer Ryan. Bill assigned her to help keep an eye on things until the rest of SHADO's goons are picked up. We have panda cars from the 110th precinct patrolling the neighborhood at random and I do believe that beater car parked in front of the Mathesons' belongs to an MPD plainclothes man."

"There's another unmarked car around the corner and I think the car parked just down the street is one too," Clark told her. "They're trying not to take any chances."

"Well, Perry called as soon as the news of the problem at Jason's school came over the police scanner. Apparently your little bombshell has gone international and Perry's phone hasn't stopped ringing from other news organizations demanding more information," Lois told him. "WGBS offered to buy you from Perry."

Clark stared at her for a long moment. "You're joking."

She shook her head as she walked back into the living room, to the paperwork she had been working on. She didn't look back to see if he was following her, trusting that he had fallen in step behind her as he always had before. "Have you checked your messages?" she asked.

He gave her a blank look then pulled his cell phone out of his jacket pocket, hitting the power key. A list of missed calls and messages came on the tiny screen. He had forgotten to turn his phone back on after the TV interview. As expected, he saw Dr. Ricco's number and listened to her message. She asked that Superman show up to the CID Friday morning.

The other messages were from people and numbers he didn't recognize. He listened to those messages as well - mostly other news people asking for more information. *They can read it in the Planet tomorrow.* Jolene Baker of WGBS had asked him to call her back. She was most likely the one who made the offer to Perry. "I'll call Jolene in the morning and remind her that slavery is illegal in this country," he told Lois, folding up his phone and putting it back in his pocket.

He sighed and Lois quirked an eyebrow at him. "I just wish this whole mess with SHADO was over with. I wish we could just get on with our lives without having to watch over our shoulders all the time."

"Every intelligence and police agency on the planet is now involved with running SHADO to ground," Lois told him. "They will be brought to justice."

"They may be stopped," Clark said. "But they will *never* be brought to justice."

Virginia Lake sat in the battered car parked a block up the street from Lois Lane's house. The report of Straker's arrest had come over the police scanner earlier, but her final orders from Straker precluded her from taking any action on that score. So she waited for her opportunity to finish her assigned mission then disappear. Leave Metropolis, leave the U.S.

Sitting in the car waiting was giving her too much time alone with her thoughts. Straker had all but stated that Freeman had been the one to gun down Foster. But somehow that didn't ring quite true. As much as the two men disagreed on tactics, as obvious as their dislike for one another had become over the years, Alec Freeman would never raise a gun to another officer. Straker on the other hand...

'Ginny, be careful and watch your back. We both know how Paul died,' Gay Ellis had said. 'The reports on the dangers of kryptonite may be correct...' What do they know that I'm missing?

Lake checked the automatic that Straker had given her one last time. He had insisted she take this gun rather than her own. It was a distinction that made little sense to her. Her gun was virtually identical to his. She knew her gun was not on record in Metropolis. She was fairly certain the same was true of Straker's gun. Unless...

The same gun that killed Paul had also been used to kill the two campers near the Sky-Diver base last year. She remembered reading about the incident in the papers. She didn't remember reading about it in the weekly reports from the base. At the time she hadn't thought any thing of it.

She checked her watch. It was time to move. The police car that cruised by moments before had disappeared around the corner. The neighborhood was quiet and it was unlikely anyone would pay her any attention in the dark. She was simply a grandmotherly figure in a dark wool coat, clutching her purse close to her.

Down the block and across the street. She could see the blue flickering lights of television sets through the open curtained windows of the houses she passed. People watching the news, watching movies. The house that was her goal had the drapes drawn across the front windows. It was a well tended house. No skateboards or bicycles in the driveway or front yard. The night was quiet, and the river lapped softly against the dock at the rear of the house.

Her shoes made little sound against the concrete as she made her way up the walk to the front door. She lifted her hand to grab the brass door knocker but stopped when she felt something cold and hard against the skin beneath her ear.

"Game's up, Ginny," a man's voice said from somewhere beside her. An improbably familiar voice with a touch of an Australian accent. "It's over."

"Alec?" She felt her purse leave her hands and saw Alec Freeman hand the bag to his companion, an intently earnest young man in a dark suit.

"Come on," Freeman said. "We don't want to be seen here."

"Ed gave me a final assignment," Lake protested mildly as Freeman wrapped a large hand around her upper arm. He tucked his own gun into a coat pocket and led her away from the house towards a dark van that had pulled up to the curb. The side door to the van was open and Lake could see two other young men waiting inside, watching them. She knew the type - deadly earnest cold-blooded trained killers. She knew if she tried to get away from Alec, she'd end up shot in the back.

"Is that Ed's gun?" Alec asked, nodding to the automatic the young man walking on her other side had pulled from her purse.

She nodded.

Freeman turned to his companion. "I think you'll find that is the gun that was used to kill Paul Foster as well as those two hikers last year."

Alec helped her climb into the van then followed her in, taking the seat next to her. The agent with her purse climbed into the front passenger seat while one of the other young men

closed the sliding door.

"What's going on?" she asked quietly. The driver started the van and pulled away from the curb. At the house, Lake saw the front window drapes twitch along one side, moving aside enough for her to see a tall man with glasses watching the van pull away.

"Besides Ed, you are the last known operative to be picked up," Alec explained.

"But Ed's already in custody," Lake told him.

Freeman shook his head. "Ed may be quite mad, but he's nothing if not resourceful. The patrol car he was in was in an 'accident'. Ed managed to get away. We're still working on identifying the people who staged it."

"Alec, did Ed kill Paul?" she asked softly. The men in front seemed to be paying them little attention, but she knew appearances were usually deceiving. Chances were that everything she and Alec had said has being recorded.

"Ed got wind that someone in the organization was talking to the NIA. Paul had several unexplained absences, probably to see Doctor Shangro," Alec said. "When General Lane showed up at STAR Labs... well, I guess that clinched it in Ed's book. Lane has ties to the NIA."

"So Ed killed Paul... Now what do we do?"

"Now, we do what we should have done nine years ago," Freeman said. "Come in out of the cold."

Clark pushed aside the drapes and watched Freeman walk away from the house with Lake and a young man who had an automatic pistol in a shoulder holster. The three men in the dark van were also armed. They didn't seem especially interested in the house. Freeman and Lake climbed into the van, the door slid shut and it drove away. He didn't see a license plate and the van's windows were tinted black.

He had the sense that a catastrophe had been averted, but he wasn't sure how. Lois noticed him watching out the window.

"What's so interesting?" she asked.

"Lake and Freeman were right outside the door. Then they left," Clark told her quietly. "A black van with no license plate."

The phone rang and Lois hurried to answer it. She listened briefly then hung up. Her forehead was creased in puzzlement. "That was my dad. He wanted us to know that the NIA and MPD have just picked up the last of the SHADO operatives. SHADO has ceased operations."

"And how would he know that?" Clark asked.

"I don't know and I'm not sure I want to know," Lois said. "But he wanted me to know we were out of danger, and it was partly because of you going public with the information. He said he was surprised you managed to pull it off."

"Does that mean there's a chance he might eventually change his mind about me?"

"I'm working on it, and he is coming around, but it takes time," she said. "I just hope Dad's right and SHADO's done for."

"Time will tell... We both know we won't find out anything from the NIA unless they want us to know," Clark reminded her. "I doubt even Perry with his sources will be able to get anything out of them about what went down tonight."

"So, tomorrow we finish of our exposé on SHADO and Straker," Lois said. "And then, we cover the Churches."

"Perry hasn't assigned it to us," Clark reminded her.

"Not yet." Lois was back in her game. Perry would never know what hit him and the paper would end up with an award winning investigation.

"And Judge Westover?" Clark asked.

"He's part of the Church story, so he's ours too," she told him. She checked the time. "It's Jason's bedtime..."

"I promised to tuck him in," Clark said. "We never did have that talk, you know..."

"I know," Lois murmured. She sighed. "It's too early to make any long term decisions, but we'll work something out. I promise."

"I know... I... Lois, you have no idea how much I wish I'd never left, how I wish I could undo all the stupid things I did..." The words came tumbling out and he couldn't stop them. He didn't want to stop them.

She stopped him, placing fingers against his lips. "Clark... we're both still hurting and we both need time. But in the meantime, your son wants to be tucked in and read a bedtime story... and then we can talk about Jason, and what the devil I'm going to say at Friday's ceremony."

Epilogue

Lois Lane looked out over the darkened banquet hall from her current place at the podium. She could just make out the table where Perry, Clark, and Jason were sitting. Her article, 'Why the World Doesn't Need Superman,' was on the overhead screen for everyone to read, assuming they hadn't already done so. It was now a famous editorial - one that would go down in history, whether she wanted it to or not.

"Less than a month ago, I was considering turning down this award," she began. Her heart was pounding and her mouth was dry. "I was going to turn it down because I thought that what I had written was no longer true. Then two very wise men gave me some advice. The first one told me that no one would remember what I had won the Pulitzer for, only that I had won. The second told me 'never apologize for telling the truth.' And the truth is that the world really doesn't need Superman and our belief that we did need him did us both a disservice. Without realizing it he lied to us and we made him do it. He promised us he would always be here to keep away all those things that go bump in the night. Like a parent promising a child to be there forever, he promised us he would never leave us. But he did and like children, we were bereft. We were angry. We didn't understand that he'd made a promise that no one could keep. But we went on and we grew up a little. We survived and maybe even grew stronger through knowing what was possible. That one person can change the world and that person didn't need to be a superman. As journalists, that is something we too often forget.

"Then he found his way back and we were glad. We were glad not because he was here to save us, but because a good and noble friend we'd thought we had lost had come back to us. The truth is we don't need Superman to be our savior. But it's nice to have a friend who can show us how to be the best we can be, who urges us to be more than we thought possible, and I'm very glad he's back. Thank you."

She stood for a moment, gauging her audience's reaction. There was silence then the applause began. She was sure it had begun at the Daily Planet's table. She could see Clark standing, holding on to Jason who was standing on his chair. She could hear her son yelling, "Yay mommy."

"Miss Lane," one of her professional colleagues shouted as she headed back to her table. "Who are the two 'wise men'?"

She paused and looked over at the speaker. "Perry White... and Superman."

Two figures watched the proceedings from the shadows - a tall man with a craggy face and gray hair and a heavy-set middle-aged woman. "Did you really think he'd show up here?" Virginia Lake asked her companion.

"The thought had occurred to me." Alec Freeman admitted. "He hates Kent enough for outing us. I hoped that would be enough to draw him out."

"And now?"

"And now we do what we should have done in the first place. We work out what needs to be done in the event the Kryptonian does go rogue," Alec Freeman told her. "We make plans on what to do if there are more out there like him and they're not as moral or benevolent as he appears to be."

"And the Commander?"

"We'll deal with him when we find him. And we will find him." Freeman promised her. She turned to leave and took a few steps away from him. Freeman stayed in the shadows, watching. "Kent. Just so you know..." Freeman began quietly. He was gratified to see Kent's

head come up as the reporter looked around as if to locate a sound. *Bingo* "If I had wanted you dead, I would have gone for a head shot."

"Darling, who are you talking to?" Lake asked, turning back to Freeman.

"No one," Freeman told her, turning away from the door to the banquet. He nodded to the two government minders whose job it was to guard and watch them. "It's not important." She didn't look convinced. "Really, it isn't. But we have work to do and the sooner we get started, the sooner everything will be ready when and if we need it."

"The car is waiting," one of the young men said. Freeman took Lake's arm and followed the minders out to the waiting limousine and their new/old mission - protecting Planet Earth from *malevolent* invaders.