

He Drew A Circle

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Rating: K+

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He drew a circle that shut me out

"Lois, hi..." Clark managed to stammer out when he found Lois at her desk. She looked like she'd been crying. "How've you been? Did you sleep okay last night?" It was stupid question, considering everything. She'd discovered his biggest secret, and he'd revealed all his other secrets to her. They had made love. He had promised to be with her forever. He had given up his powers for her. Then all hell broke loose. Now he was Superman again, and Superman couldn't have a relationship with a mortal woman. And she didn't really want plain ole Clark Kent.

"No, I didn't close my eyes at all last night," she said, confirming his suspicions - breaking up really was hard to do. Lois walked to the coffee machine and poured herself a cup. Then she walked into the conference room, pausing only momentarily to make sure he was following.

"Look, Lois, I..." he tried again.

"I understand, I understand," she said, cutting him off. She shut the door behind them. "I sat up all night listening to the voices of reason. Do you how vile it is to hear the first birds of the morning singing when you've been sitting up all night crying?"

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," she said. "I guess it's sort of like being married to a doctor... You know, the doctor gets a call in the middle of the night and the wife has to cope with the fact that he's gone. I guess I'm just too selfish."

"No, you're not selfish at all," Clark protested softly.

"Yes, I am selfish... I am selfish when it comes to you," she replied. "I'm selfish and jealous of the whole world."

"Lois, it may not be easy for you to hear this now, but someday, you'll..."

"Clark..." she interrupted him again. She smiled sadly. "Look, don't tell me I'll meet somebody. You're kind of a tough act to follow, you know?"

He sighed, not believing her.

"Now, I'm gonna be fine. You don't have to worry about me," she told him, turning away.

"I like worrying about you," he said.

"Would you stop?" Her back was to him, but he knew she had started crying again.

"Lois, I don't know what to say..."

"Then don't say anything. People do this all the time. No regrets, you know?" she said. "I mean I did it, didn't I? I got the man I love to love me?"

"Yes." He felt like all the air had gone out of the room. "We'll see each other. All the time, like before. But it can't be like..."

"Don't you think I know that?" she asked, her voice breaking. "It's tearing me up inside that I can't... I can't be with you. I can't show anyone how I feel. I do love you. You know that... But this is killing me..."

"I know," he managed to say.

He pulled her to him one last time. It was tearing him up inside to see her like this - heartbroken, in tears. It would be better for both of them if the previous few days hadn't happened at all. With those thoughts running through his mind, he kissed her.

One last kiss.

She responded with the same passion as before, as if she knew it was their last as well.

Then he pulled away. Her eyes were closed. She swayed as if dizzy and when she opened her eyes, there were no tears - only a touch of confusion.

"Clark? What just happened...?"

"Nothing much, Lois. Nothing much," he said. "I'll talk to you later." He wasn't certain what had just happened, only that somehow, he had managed to suppress the psychic link between them, suppressing her memories of their time together as well.

'It's better this way,' he told himself, knowing it was a lie.

Lois caught herself swaying again as another wave of dizziness hit her. What had just happened? She wiped the tears from her face. It wouldn't do to have the old hens in the newsroom figure out that she and Clark had just broken up - even though they didn't know she and her partner had been together in the first place.

But there was something off. She clearly remembered crying her eyes out because he couldn't see a way for them to be together. Crying because she'd had it all and had blown it. He didn't believe she was capable of loving Clark as much or more than his super alter ego.

But there was something wrong - it was as if she'd been told to forget the past few days of ecstasy and agony. That it hadn't been real.

She pushed aside one of the window blinds and looked out at Clark. He was sitting at his desk, looking for all the world as though he'd just lost his best friend. Jimmy came over to him, bouncing like a puppy. Clark managed a smile for the younger man but Lois noted that the smile didn't reach his eyes. He seemed to feel her watching him and she swore he actually blanched when he looked over and met her eyes.

'Clark? What just happened...?' her words echoed in her mind.

'Nothing much, Lois. Nothing much,' he had said. 'I'll talk to you later.'

She frowned and he looked away guiltily.

What had he done? Then she realized he had modified her memories, her feelings. He never told her that was one of his powers. He had tried to ease her pain, or ease his own pain at seeing her like that.

You bastard.

Clark watched as Lois left the conference room and headed for Perry's office. He knew it wasn't polite to listen in on conversations, but with Lois, he found he couldn't help it.

"Perry, I'm not feeling so hot," she was telling their editor in chief. The older man gave her a curious look. "I was thinking I'd pack it in early today, finish off that Niagara story for you tomorrow," she added. "Aunt Edna'll cry her eyes out."

"What about the follow-up story on Luthor's escape?" Perry asked.

Lois took a deep breath and blew it out her nose. "I'm sure you don't need me for that. And before you ask, Superman's been too busy looking for him to give interviews."

Perry gave her another look. "Lois, is everything okay?"

"I'm fine, Perry," Lois assured him. "Why shouldn't I be fine? It's just been a long couple days and..."

"You missed sending in a story about that Superman rescue on the falls," Perry told her.

"I was *supposed* to be honeymooning," Lois reminded him. "Yelling for Superman to stop and talk would have blown my cover. Besides, he didn't take the time to stop for an interview. He's a busy man."

Clark sighed. Another reason why he and Lois couldn't be together. Luthor had escaped federal prison while he and Lois were 'occupied'. Now the madman was on the loose and there was no telling what sort of mayhem he was planning. One thing Clark was certain of, he wasn't going to like what Luthor had planned.

The police monitor in the corner announced a bank robbery in progress. A quick check of the desks around him confirmed that no one was paying any attention to him. He disappeared in a blur of gray.

Lois finally escaped Perry's worried examination and headed out. Clark wasn't back yet from wherever he'd disappeared to, but she was sure he'd have something for Perry when he got back. He almost always did.

She wondered how she could have been so blind for all that time. 'I knew it. I guess I must really have known it for the longest time...' she had told him in the hotel. She realized she had been telling the truth - she had known on some level that there was more to Clark Kent than met the eye. Yes, he stammered and tripped over his own feet but he was knowledgeable on a whole slew of subjects and his writing was punchy and aggressive without being confrontational. Plus he was able to handle more touchy-feely subjects that she had a hard time with.

Lois found herself at Dooley's Bar and ordered herself a glass of merlot and a slice of pizza. She didn't want to go home. Her apartment was simply a place to sleep and store her clothes and books. She had spent last night cleaning in between bouts of crying. Normally she found cleaning to be cathartic - clean house, clean soul. It hadn't worked this time.

'Nine in the morning and you're drinking,' Lois admonished herself as she lit her cigarette. "Way to go, Lane."

She sipped her wine as she waited for her pizza. She remembered noting that Clark was never in the newsroom when Superman appeared. At first she had put it down to coincidence. Then it became more than coincidence. Clark was *never* around when Superman was working. Still, she refused to believe it. She simply hadn't been able to put her head around the fact that the bigger than life superhero was also a dweeby journalist from the Midwest who had a schoolboy crush on her and overused the word 'swell'.

She had spent her adult life being self-sufficient. She had seen how her parents had been together - if that was marriage, she wanted nothing to do with it. 'Oh, I've seen how the other half lives. My sister, for instance... three kids, two cats, one mortgage... I'd go bananas after a week,' she'd told Clark soon after he started at the paper. Her sister was one of the few people she knew who seemed to be making a go of a long term relationship.

'You're looking for a superman,' her sister had told her once after listening to Lois bemoan

the fact there were no real men left in the world. Then a real superman appeared and she fell hard. And it had seemed that he had fallen for her as well. And Clark, well tall, good-looking, eternally pleasant Clark - a guy she might actually have fallen for in another reality - got ignored except when it was convenient to send someone for pizza or burgers.

'No wonder Clark doesn't believe I would choose the man over Superman,' Lois mused. 'The only time I ever treated him like a man was after I realized who else he was.'

She sighed and waved to the bartender to bring her another glass of wine.

"Isn't it a little early for that?" a man's voice asked. She looked up to see a good-looking man with dark hair standing beside her table. He was smiling as though he hadn't a care in the world.

"Depends on which time zone you're from," Lois said. "Isn't it a little early to be hanging around bars looking to pick up women?"

"Depends on which time zone you're from," the man said, still grinning. He put out his hand. "Richard White."

She shook his hand. "Lois Lane."

His smile slipped just a bit into surprise. "*The* Lois Lane? The one who wrote 'I Spent the Night With Superman'?"

"Guilty as charged," Lois admitted. White sat down in the chair opposite her.

"So, tell me why the famous Lois Lane is sitting in a bar at ten in the morning drinking wine?" he asked.

"It's complicated."

"It always is," White said knowingly. "So, your story went bust or was it your boyfriend?"

"Both, I guess," Lois told him.

"In that case, since you're free and I'm new in town, how about you show me the sights?"

"Do you always work so fast?" Lois asked.

He chuckled. "You don't remember me, do you?"

"Should I?"

"We met five years ago at the Daily Planet Christmas party," he told her.

Then it clicked. *Richard White*. Perry's nephew. The pretty boy in the Air Force uniform who'd charmed all the ladies that night. She'd almost agreed to go up to his hotel room for a night cap, and probably more, but something had stopped her. Just like something was stopping her now.

"Ah, yes, the famous Daily Planet Christmas parties," she said aloud. "You do realize that nobody *ever* remembers anything that happens during or after the party, don't you?"

He frowned prettily. "You don't remember."

"I remember Perry extolling your virtues," she told him. "But I'm not on the rebound just yet."

"So that means no?"

She smiled at him and shrugged. "It means not yet. I'm still trying to figure out what to do about my idiot ex-boyfriend."

Part 2

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout

Clark turned in the article on the foiled bank robbery and a second one on the international hunt for Lex Luthor. Lois had taken off for the afternoon and the bullpen was buzzing with rumors and speculation.

'Their first day back from a honeymoon assignment and she's in tears and takes off?'

'Whodathunk Kent had it in him, leaving Mad Dog Lane in tears?'

'It's the quiet ones that surprise you...'

This was so bad. He had hoped no one had noticed their discussion in the conference room. He had hoped that no one would notice *him*. He was a nobody in the newsroom, one bee in a busy hive. He worked hard to be unnoticed and underestimated.

He sighed, even though he knew the people at the desks closest to his would notice and assume it had something to do with Lois.

"Kent!" Perry yelled from his office door.

Clark collected his notepad and a pen and hurried to the editor's office. He avoided tripping over trash cans that peeked into the aisle. At least one of them had deliberately been shoved in his way but he didn't feel like playing that game at the moment.

Perry shut the door behind him. "Take a seat," the older man ordered.

Clark did as he was told. He looked up at Perry, eyes wide with concern as the older man moved to lean against his desk, arms crossed over his chest.

"What the hell happened up there?" Perry began.

"I don't..."

"Don't even try to con me, Kent," Perry warned. "I've been in this business for longer than you've been alive. I want the truth and I want it now."

"Um... 'Up there' meaning Niagara Falls?" Clark asked.

Perry just stared at him.

"Things got a little 'strange'," Clark told him.

"Define 'strange'," Perry ordered.

"Just..." Clark began. He stopped and reconsidered his words. "It's not my place to say," he said after a moment. "But I think it would be better if you didn't assign Lois and me to work together anymore."

"And why should I break up a winning team?" Perry demanded.

"Mister White... I just don't think we can work together anymore... I..."

"Did you sleep with her?"

Clark didn't respond. No matter what he said, it would be a lie. He had slept with her, but she didn't remember. What happened could well be interpreted as date rape, even though she had been fully complicit at the time.

Perry was waiting for an answer.

"I wanted to," Clark said finally.

"Nearly every man around here wants to," Perry told him. "But that's not what I asked."

Clark nodded once, afraid to meet the older man eyes. Everyone at the Planet knew that Perry White considered Lois Lane his protégé. He even treated her like the daughter he'd never had. And Clark had just admitted to screwing the boss's daughter.

"That's what I thought," Perry said softly. He sighed. "I'll take your request under advisement. But the two of you need to get this worked out. I won't have your personal problems affecting my newsroom, understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"So, I'll have that story tomorrow?"

Clark nodded again.

Perry studied him for another long moment. "You look like hell. Go home, go get drunk, find a hooker and get laid, I don't care. But be ready to hand that story in tomorrow. With Lois."

"Yes, sir."

Richard White wasn't hard look at, Lois admitted to herself. But like many, if not most, good-looking men, he knew he was good-looking and expected the world and everyone in it to appreciate the fact. He hadn't taken no for an answer.

Despite her qualms, she spent the afternoon showing Perry's nephew around Metropolis. When he had visited the Big Apricot before he hadn't had a chance to see the city. They walked through the Metropolis Art Museum and the Museum of Natural History.

"So what have you been doing since that Christmas party?" Lois asked.

"Got out of the Air Force that spring," White told her. "Since then it's been here and there. Haven't found a place to settle yet."

"Staying in Metropolis long?"

He smiled. "You ask a lot of questions."

"Nature of the business. Reporters are natural born snoops."

Superman had been spotted cruising above the city. People on the sidewalk waved to him and he waved back, smiling. Lois tried to ignore him, tried to ignore the flutter in her stomach at the sight of him overhead. Tried to ignore the despair at having loved and lost him.

"So, what's he like?" White asked.

"Who?"

"*Him*. Who else?"

Of course White would ask about Superman. Everyone visiting the city tried to catch sight of him, asked the natives about him. In the four years since Superman's arrival, violent crime had gone down and tourism had gone up. Superman was good for the city.

"He's beautiful, charming..." she answered. "Alien."

"The tabloids say you're one of his favorite people," White said.

"I thought so too, once," Lois told him. She hated the tabloid articles linking her to Superman but they were simply jumping to the natural conclusion - Lois Lane was one of the few journalists Superman said more than two words to and was female. Superman was undeniably male. One plus one made for an interspecies affair.

"Once?" White asked.

"I haven't talked to him in some time," Lois said. "I don't know if he's avoiding me or he's just been busy."

"Why would he be avoiding you?"

She gave White a speculative look. He was asking questions like a reporter or detective.

"You ask a lot of questions for someone not in the business," she pointed out.

"I never said I wasn't in the business," White told her. "I said I'd been here and there. I've spent the past five years covering Europe and the Middle East for the International section of the Daily Planet. I'm hoping my uncle will let me stay in Metropolis for a while."

Lois stared at him. Another man she'd misjudged. It seemed to be a bad habit.

"So, why would Superman be avoiding you?" White asked.

"To distance himself. Because it's not safe to be someone known to be close to him," she explained.

"You mean you could be held as a hostage against him?"

She nodded. White was as fast on the uptake as his uncle. She was going to have to be careful around him.

"But wouldn't anyone fit that bill?" White continued. "It doesn't have to be you, specifically, that's the one targeted."

"Lex Luthor was making threats from prison," Lois told him.

"Then prove him wrong," White suggested. "Tell Superman to start spreading his interviews around and that you need a less exclusive relationship... I assume the idiot ex-boyfriend you mentioned is...?"

"You assume wrong," Lois told him. "But you're right about one thing. Maybe a loud public break-up is exactly what I need to get the tabloids and the other idiots off my back."

'Maybe a loud public break-up is exactly what I need to get the tabloids and the other idiots off my back,' Superman heard Lois say to the man with her. He wasn't certain who she was referring to as her 'idiot ex-boyfriend'. As far as he knew Lois hadn't been dating anyone. In fact, in all the time he'd known her, she hadn't mentioned seeing anyone although he knew from other people in the Planet newsroom that she'd had an active social life before Superman came on the scene.

'Maybe that's what she does need,' he mused. 'She needs me out of her life so she can have a normal life.'

Another call for help, this one not too far from where Lois and her new friend were walking. He hurried to check on it. Two thugs were holding an older couple at knife point. The matter was handled in seconds and a panda car with uniformed officers arrived within minutes.

Superman didn't need to stick around and normally didn't. But this time he waited for Lois to appear.

The sound of police or fire sirens echoing in the streets was always a lure for her. He wasn't disappointed. She rounded the corner of the alley with her companion a few minutes later.

She stopped and gazed at him levelly but he could hear that her heart rate was elevated. "Why have you been avoiding talking to me?" she demanded.

The two police officers shut the door of their car behind their prisoners then stopped to listen. The older couple looked astonished at Lois's audacity.

"I wasn't aware that..." Superman began, keeping his tone formal yet cordial.

"And what were you doing at Niagara Falls last Friday afternoon?"

"I go where I'm needed," he said. "You know that Miss Lane."

"But why there? Why not the Grand Canyon or Disneyland?" she asked. "Were you checking up on me?"

There was nothing he could say to answer her accusation so he didn't say anything. A small crowd had gathered including Gil Truman, another reporter for the Daily Planet, and some tourists with cameras. If Lois wanted media coverage of her tiff, it wasn't going to be a problem.

"You were!" she accused. "You were checking up on me! Do you really believe that I'm so reckless, so out of touch with reality, that I need you to keep me out of trouble?"

He opened his mouth to answer but she barreled on.

"I'm not a child. I don't need you to babysit me," she said, her voice becoming shrill. She was in full Mad Dog mode. It both was fascinating and terrifying to watch. And even though he was physically invulnerable, he knew his heart rate had jumped. He was fighting to stay on the ground.

"I'm a grown woman, perfectly capable of taking care of myself and I was doing it a long time before you showed up," she spat. "I don't need you watching over me like some perverted... alien watchdog!"

At the word 'alien' a gasp had gone up from the watching crowd. She had said it like it was an epithet and he hadn't been able to stifle his own hurt reaction. He had to force himself not to ball his fists in impotent anger.

"As you wish, Miss Lane. I won't trouble you again," he managed to get out before he launched himself into the air. He knew the sonic boom would rattle windows for blocks around, maybe even crack a few, but at the moment he didn't really care.

'Maybe a loud public break-up is exactly what I need...' she had said, so he had obliged by staying until she was present. But he hadn't expected her attack to feel so *personal*. She had sounded like she actually *hated* him.

'Maybe it would be better if I left Metropolis,' he mused as he hit the upper atmosphere. 'Start over in Gotham or Star City, or maybe London or Tokyo. Or maybe I can just start traveling again.' But he didn't want to leave the city he had come to love. He didn't want to leave the Daily Planet, the first place aside from Smallville where he'd been able to put down roots, have friends. And he didn't want to leave Lois, even if she didn't want him around her.

Lois allowed White to get her a cab and take her to her apartment building even though she didn't invite him up. She knew he was disappointed but she really didn't care. She had completely ignored Gil in the alley but knew he would report the incident to Perry, as well as documenting it for the next edition. She could see the headline now: 'Lois Lane calls Superman 'perverted alien watchdog'.

Once home, she unplugged all her phones. If anyone wanted to talk to her, they were going to have to come to her. And she didn't want to talk to anyone. She especially didn't want to talk to Perry about her actions. He was going to be furious with her for breaking her ties with the Man of Steel. The bean counters up in sales and in accounting loved the fact that Superman was associated with the Daily Planet. Superman articles sold papers.

"Now look! We're sitting on top of the story of the century here! Our only problem is how to get it - exclusively!" Perry had yelled at his top reporters as they stood in the conference room the day after Superman's first appearance. It was hard to believe it was four years ago.

"I want the name of this flying whatchamacallit to go with the Daily Planet like bacon and eggs, franks and beans, death and taxes, politics and corruption!" Perry had continued.

"Well, I shouldn't think he'd lend himself to any cheap promotion schemes..." Clark had managed to say. It was the most words he'd strung together verbally since he started at the Planet. Most of the people in the newsroom hadn't even heard his voice before that.

"Who's talking cheap? I'll make him a goddamn partner if I have to! I want the inside dope on this guy. Does he have a family? Why did he show up last night? What's he got beneath that cape, batteries? Who is he? Where's he from? What's his favorite ball team...? And I'll tell you one thing, boys and girls," he shook his hand at them, pointing. "Whichever one of you gets it out of him will have the single most important interview since God talked to Moses."

Lois had gotten the story - or rather Superman deigned to give her an interview and in that moment they had been linked in the minds of the media. She was the expert on him. She was the one he gave interviews to.

But not anymore. Perry was going to go ballistic.

And poor Clark, always in Superman's shadow even though it was a role he had created for himself. The invisible man, the naïve farm boy in the big city. The clumsy shy oaf who Perry White had hired and assigned to her. The sweet, innocent man whose favorite words seemed to be 'gee, golly, and swell.' The stiletto sharp intellect that no one saw outside of his research and writing. And no one in the bullpen ever bothered to wonder at the contrast, not even her and she worked beside him everyday. No one ever thought about the fact that he was an award winning journalist - he had won his first Kerth during his first year at the Planet, beating *her* out on the award. Everyone looked at his shy, stooped demeanor and dismissed it as a fluke.

'So much for the brilliant investigative reporter, Lane.' She sat on the edge of her filling bathtub and poured in lavender bath salts. They were a birthday gift from Clark after she'd told him she loved the smell of lavender. He knew her tastes in fragrances just like he knew the way she liked her coffee, her favorite authors, her favorite beer, her favorite restaurants. If it had been any other man in the newsroom she would have thought that level of attention creepy. From Clark it was sweet and charming.

'Took you four years to figure it out and then it was purely because he slipped up.' When talking to Jimmy Olsen about something or other Clark had straightened to his full height and crossed his arms over his chest. Jimmy hadn't noticed, but Lois had. It had been Superman's iconic pose. Even the cant of his head had been the same. Then, when Clark realized she was watching him he seemed to shrink in on himself. It had reminded her of an actor putting on a role and that was when everything fell together like a puzzle that she hadn't known what the picture was. Until that moment of crystal clarity.

Then she simply made a fool of herself, trying to force him to admit what she already knew. Twice she put herself in danger to force him to reveal himself and when that didn't work, she shot at him at point-blank range. He had straightened up and she watched the transformation from clumsy, geeky Clark to Superman as he removed his glasses and stood tall.

"You realize, of course, if you'd been wrong... Clark Kent would have been killed," he had told her, the timbre of his voice dropping to Superman's baritone.

Another slip - he hadn't realized the gun was loaded with blanks. She wasn't foolish enough to actually risk a man's life on a theory, although she did wonder a little that Clark thought she was that foolish, or that certain.

He had confessed to being in love with her. He had given up his powers to be with her as plain ordinary Clark Kent, an ordinary man with a job at the Daily Planet who didn't run off at the drop of a hat to handle emergencies. Only they both knew the world needed Superman. She had seen the grief in his eyes at the disasters he could have prevented had he not given up his 'superness'.

"I want the man I fell in love with," Lois had told him after he'd taken a beating protecting her from a thug.

"I know that, Lois," he had responded. "And I wish he were..."

She hadn't argued when he decided to return to Superman's northern fortress to see if he could reverse the process that had made him human. The world needed Superman - it was as

simple as that.

And now everything was a mess. She didn't dare have a relationship with Superman and he wasn't convinced she could love Clark.

'Maybe I should just get the hell out of town,' she mused as she slipped into the steaming tub. 'Move to Gotham or Star City, or maybe London or Tokyo. Or maybe I can go traveling, see the world, become a roving reporter.' But she didn't want to leave the city she loved. She didn't want to leave the Daily Planet, the closest thing she had to a real family. And she didn't want to leave Clark, even if he was a lunkhead who thought he knew more than she did what was best for her. Even her father knew better.

'Poor Clark. From the look on his face when he flew off, he had no idea what hit him... Perry is going to be so mad.'

Part 3

But love and I had the wit to win...

As usual, Clark was at his desk well before Lois rolled in. Not that anyone besides Jimmy and Perry noticed. The newsroom was abuzz with the latest scandal - Lois Lane had thrown over Superman, loudly and publicly.

'Maybe a loud public break-up is exactly what I need to get the tabloids and the other idiots off my back,' she had said. It didn't make him feel any better that she had planned it. If anything, it made it worse - she had known exactly what she was saying.

Of course a major part of the problem was that everything she said had been strictly true - Superman had been there because Clark Kent was and *he* was with Lois Lane. And yes, Lois's occasionally ill-considered actions brought out a protective reaction in him more than most people did.

But her tirade still hurt. And having his mother call last night to check up on how he was doing hurt even more. The news of Lois's tirade had even reached Smallville via the ten o'clock news.

"You haven't really been treating her like a child, have you Clark?" his mother had asked after assuring herself he was okay.

"Not that I was aware of," he had responded. "But Mom, sometimes she acts like one. I mean, before we left for Niagara Falls, she jumped out of a thirty story window to try to prove that *I* was Superman. She was lucky she wasn't killed."

"You went to Niagara Falls with her?"

"It was an assignment, Mom. We were undercover as newlyweds."

"And?"

"And nothing..."

"I hope you remembered to use protection."

"Mo-om!"

She had chuckled at his reaction. "I'm sure whatever prompted her yelling at Superman will blow over and things will get back to normal. Besides, she didn't break up with Clark Kent unless there's something else you're not telling me."

"Mom, Clark Kent doesn't even have a relationship with Lois Lane," he had admitted. "I'm a nobody who brings her coffee." It was a painful truth, but it was still the truth. To Lois he was invisible, not even worth considering except to get her coffee.

He heard Lois's heartbeat as she came into the building and walk into the elevator. As usual, he went to the coffee corner and fixed her a cup, black with one no-cal sweetener, making sure it would be on her desk when she walked in.

There was a sudden hush in the newsroom and Clark looked up to see Lois open the glass doors to the newsroom. She seemed a little subdued and thoughtful as she headed for her desk.

"Lane, my office now!" Perry bellowed at her.

She dropped her purse into her desk drawer and picked up the coffee, giving Clark a slight nod of acknowledgement. Then she headed into the lion's den, head held high.

Clark extended his hearing to listen in - speculations on Perry's reaction to Lois breaking off her 'relationship' with Superman had been running rampant through the entire building. They ran the gamut of Perry firing her to a suspension to... nothing more than a talking to. Clark sincerely hoped it was the latter.

"So, CK..." a voice said from somewhere close. Clark jumped, startled. "Whoa, big guy," Jimmy said, moving his chair closer. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay, Jimmy," Clark managed to get out. "I wasn't... I didn't see you there..."

Jimmy nodded knowingly. "So, what do you think the chief's gonna do? I mean, he's one of Superman's biggest fans so..."

Clark managed to tune Jimmy out as he went back to the story he was working on - more on the world wide hunt for Lex Luthor. The drone in his ears made it difficult to listen in on Lois and Perry. At least it didn't look like Perry was going to outright fire her for her actions.

Clark's phone rang and he answered it. A source getting back to him on another story he was working on. He noted down the information and thanked them.

"CK," Jimmy broke into his train of thought, nodding to the monitor mounted to the pillar. GNN had photos of Lex Luthor and Eva Teschmacher on the screen. "This breaking news," the announcer was saying. "Lex Luthor, the convicted nuclear terrorist who escaped from federal custody five days ago has been apprehended by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police near the town of Old Crow in the Yukon..."

Clark hurried to the AP printer. Other staffers were already crowded around it as the print head traced its path across the paper. Canadian authorities were confirming that Lex Luthor had been found in the northern Yukon. The locals had found him and his female accomplice, Eva Teschmacher, and had notified the RCMP. They were now in route to Whitehorse where they would be given over to U.S. custody despite Luthor's demands for political asylum.

"Thank God he's back in custody. I'm sure Superman will be relieved," Lois stated. Clark gave her a surprised look. He'd been so wrapped up in reading the AP story that he hadn't noticed she'd left Perry's office.

"How did...?" He gestured toward Perry's office.

She shrugged. "He'll get over it," she said. "The next time you see Superman, tell him that just because Luthor's behind bars again, it doesn't change anything. He still needs to spread it around, talk to other reporters, maybe even send out press releases on what he's doing."

"But..." Clark began.

"So, what are you doing for lunch?" Lois asked, interrupting him.

"It's nine-thirty in the morning," Clark responded, confused.

"Okay, breakfast. I'm hungry and you're buying."

Lois had known when she unplugged her phone the night before that there would be hell to pay for her stunt with Superman. On her way to work she'd been the subject of surreptitious glances and whispers in her direction. She did her best to ignore them.

She wasn't at all surprised when she walked into the newsroom and found Perry bellowing at her. She was only a little surprised to find that Clark had still made her coffee and it was waiting for her on her desk. She dropped off her purse and grabbed the coffee and headed off to be yelled at by Perry.

"What did you think you were doing?" Perry shouted at her in the confines of his office.

She refused to rise to the bait. She knew if she lost her temper with him, he would have her back on the roof shouting for Superman.

"Perry, I know you think the Daily Planet rises and sets with Superman, but it doesn't," she told him. "And with that mad man making threats against Superman and claiming I'm Superman's..." She hunted for a polite word. "Concubine..."

"You called him an *alien*!" Perry interrupted.

"He *is* an alien, as in 'not from around here'," Lois retorted. She took a deep breath and blew it out through her nose. "Perry, I know you don't agree with me, but it's dangerous for all

of us for me to be his only press contact. And yes, I may have acted a little harshly towards him, but he's a big boy. He'll get over it."

Perry sighed and shook his head. "What the hell happened up at that hotel?" he demanded.

"What do you mean?"

He held up his hand and started ticking off items. "One, yesterday you were in tears over *something* and left early. Two, I asked Kent about it and he tells me he doesn't think it's a good idea for you and him to be working together anymore and three, instead of going home to rest, you're out gallivanting around with my nephew and telling Superman where to go and how to get there in front of witnesses."

One item in his litany caught her attention. "Clark said he doesn't want to be partnered with me any more?" That hurt. It hadn't occurred to her that Clark might not want to work with her after everything that had happened.

"That's *not* what he said. He said he didn't think you two could work together after what happened up there."

"Did he tell you what happened?" she asked. Clark had never seemed the type to kiss and tell, but it was just possible she was wrong about *that* too.

"He told me it got a little 'strange'," Perry told her. "And since he can't lie himself out of a wet paper sack, I figured out the rest easily enough."

"Oh."

"And I'm going to tell you what I told him," Perry stated. "I'm not about to break up a winning team and the two of you need to get this worked out. I won't have your personal problems affecting my newsroom. And I'm not about to have a repeat of Norcross and Judd."

"Does this mean I don't have to come to Alice's dinner party Sunday?" Lois asked hopefully. Alice White's parties were infamous around the Daily Planet. It was her way of getting to know the people her husband worked with everyday and their families. But it was still uncomfortable for everyone, especially for the unmarried. Alice seemed to have a God-given mission to get everyone she knew married off.

Perry glowered at her. "Hell no. And make sure you bring a date or else she'll try and match you up with Richard. And that's a disaster just waiting to happen."

"Bring a date," she repeated.

"And make sure you bring me that blasted Niagara scam story before the afternoon deadline."

With that Lois knew she'd been dismissed.

Outside of Perry's office Lois scanned the newsroom to find Clark. He was standing with several other staffers beside the newsfeed printer. Clark appeared to be studying a printout. She moved closer and read the sheet over his arm. Luthor had been captured.

"Thank God he's back in custody. I'm sure Superman will be relieved," Lois stated, surprising him.

"How did...?" Clark gestured toward Perry's office.

"He'll get over it," she assured him. "The next time you see Superman, tell him that just because Luthor's behind bars again, it doesn't change anything. He still needs to spread it around, talk to other reporters, maybe even send out press releases on what he's doing."

"But..." Clark began.

"So, what are you doing for lunch?" Lois asked, interrupting him.

"It's nine-thirty in the morning," Clark responded, confused. She realized he was cute

when he did that. When she was able to do that to him. Other people assumed he was easily confused but she knew that wasn't the case. Clark was one of the few people she knew who could actually keep up with her.

"Okay, breakfast. I'm hungry and you're buying," she told him. "I hear there's a new place over on Hatcher and they have fresh squeezed orange juice."

The new place was called Manny's and offered fresh juices, organic eggs and an otherwise organic menu. Clark's eyes had widened at the prices but said nothing as she ordered an omelet with home fries, fresh fruit, and a large orange juice.

Clark ordered coffee for himself. Lois watched him as he studiously poured sugar into his cup of black stimulant and asked the server for real cream.

"Cream comes from milk and milk comes from mammals," Clark explained. "Not from beans."

"Clark, didn't you tell me once you were a vegetarian?" she asked. He seemed surprised that she remembered.

"Uh, yeah," Clark said. "But you don't kill the animal to get eggs or milk... Did you know you can raise goats and chickens in Metropolis, assuming you have the room? They don't allow roosters though. Too noisy."

Lois found herself chuckling. She couldn't help it. She didn't know if his going off on odd tangents was part of the 'Clark is a doofus' act, or if his brain really did work that way. She suspected it was both.

"Interesting idea for an article," Lois said. "'Unusual Pets in Metropolis'... I assume the city considers goats and chickens to be pets rather than livestock?"

"Goats, chickens, ducks, pigeons, pot bellied pigs, miniature horses, rabbits," Clark listed. "And of course, the usual dogs and cats and ferrets and guinea pigs."

"Maybe you want to run the idea past Perry for the next dry news day," she suggested.

He looked at her, eyes wide in surprise. Then his expression turned suspicious. "Lois, are you trying to butter me up? I mean..."

"Last week I would have laughed in your face and reminded you we cover the Metro?" Lois said.

He nodded.

"Well, that was before the chief sent us off on a story we could have handled with a day trip and a few phone calls," she told him. "By the way, we need to have it ready for him today."

"Accounting should have a copy of the final bill for us today," Clark told her. "It came to about triple the advertised price and it wasn't cheap to begin with."

"At least it wasn't a completely wasted trip," Lois commented. He stared into his coffee and Lois could have sworn she saw color rising into his face. "I mean, what the old hens at work don't know won't hurt us?" she added.

"You know what they're saying."

"Then I should warn you it's likely to get worse," she said with a grin. "I need a date for Alice's dinner on Sunday or else she's going to try to set me up with her nephew. I mean, he's cute and all, but I like my guys a little taller, broader in the shoulder..."

"Lois, after yesterday I don't think Superman is going to oblige," Clark commented drily.

"There you go, running yourself down again," she said, trying to make it sound light. "Besides, I would never dare expose *him* to Alice White. The universe might implode or something."

"So...?" Then his eyes widened as he realized what she was suggesting. "Oh... I suppose you want me to get a jacket with more than one vent and shoes that don't tie up?"

"What? And let word get around that there really is a great guy hiding under there?"

He gave her a shocked look and she grinned.

"I admit you've had me fooled for the longest time, and I'm nobody's fool," she told him. She heard his sharp intake of breath at her statement but barreled on before he could react further. "But you've got the invisible man act down to an art form. And when somebody does notice you, you put on the goofy act and nobody thinks twice about you except that you're a nice guy. It's an Oscar worthy performance, by the way."

"Lois, I'm afraid I'm not following..."

"Cut the crap, Clark," she warned. "You know exactly what I'm talking about. It's all an act. It has to be. Perry would never have hired a fool or an idiot. And you certainly wouldn't have lasted in the bullpen more than five minutes if you were either. So..."

"It's not all an act, you know," he told her. "I really am a little absent minded. My mom thinks I have a touch of ADD. And the bullpen is awfully crowded for somebody my size. And I really should avoid revolving doors. And I think the new printer hates me."

Lois found herself laughing. "See?"

"You really want to go with me to Alice's dinner party?" he asked. He seemed bemused by the idea.

She shrugged. "I know you probably think I'm on the rebound from what I did yesterday. And maybe I am. But I figure if I can't ask my best buddy to go with me, who can I ask?"

"I'm your best buddy?" he asked. He sounded like he didn't believe her and she didn't blame him. Ever since he started at the Planet he'd been her favorite person to abuse. And maybe that was one of her problems. Maybe she'd known even then that she could easily fall for him hard, and that had scared her to death. Superman had been so much safer. But now safe, at least in that fashion, wasn't an option. She *had* fallen for him.

She nodded. "Yeah. It's just taken me this long to realize it."

The rest of the day was a blur. He and Lois finished the article on the bait and switch practices that many of the honeymoon hotels were using to bilk innocent newlyweds. Perry loved it.

Clark was still stunned by Lois's revelation and her invitation. 'I'm her best buddy?'

He watched her work. Things seemed back to normal - she was asking how many 'f's were in 'catastrophe' to the amusement of everyone around her, not that anyone dared snicker at her. She didn't seem to notice when he left to handle some minor emergencies, but he did find scribbled notes on his desk when he returned.

Lois beckoned to him when he got back from handling a chemical spill over in Hob's Bay.

"Perry thinks the Luthor story is dead," she told him. A pang of disappointment shot through him. He'd been working on documenting the hunt for Luthor ever since they'd gotten back from Niagara Falls.

"I told him I think there's a little more we can get out of it, like where he was, why he was there..."

Clark sat down and moved his chair closer to her. "The FBI seems satisfied with the story both Luthor and Teschmacher have told them. They lost control of the hot air balloon and it took them the rest of the time to find civilization."

"And you believe that?" she asked.

Clark had to admit that he didn't believe the story. It smelled worse than the Metropolis Fish Market.

"I think either the FBI isn't telling the whole story or Luthor has them snowed," Lois said. "I think they think he was simply trying to escape custody. But we both know Luthor never does anything without a good reason. *I* think he escaped for a reason and *chose* to be found so he could go back and finish whatever he's working on."

Clark considered her suggestion for a long moment. It made a bizarre kind of sense. "In that case, he headed north looking for something. And he must have found it because according to the reports he basically turned himself in. But, neither he nor Teschmacher were carrying anything besides cold weather gear. They didn't even have any money on them."

"So, what he was looking for was something that would be mistaken for something else, or that he could carry in his head," Lois reasoned. "And it had to be something big, important, otherwise he wouldn't have bothered to risk escaping the pen. It had to be something he had to do himself."

"We know Luthor hates Superman," Clark said aloud, mind racing. "So what if...?" he let his voice trail off. Had Luthor been looking for the Fortress? It was on a glacier in the north of Alaska, hidden from detection by a permanent storm. But had Luthor figured out a way around his precautions?

"Doesn't Superman have his castle or fortress up north somewhere?" Lois asked softly.

Clark knew he'd gone pale at the realization that Luthor could well have found the Fortress. He nodded once, not daring to speak for fear Lois would realize how upset he was. The scientific knowledge in the Kryptonian crystals was far ahead of anything known on Earth. In the wrong hands that knowledge could do incalculable damage.

"Maybe I should see if I can find out what Superman thinks about this," Clark managed to stammer out.

"Good idea," Lois agreed. She opened her mouth as if to add something else then seemed to change her mind. "I'll catch you when you get back," she said instead.

Someone *had* been in the Fortress. He didn't understand why he hadn't detected it when he had brought Lois to the Fortress but the fact remained - he had missed that there had been intruders. They had tried to cover their trespass, tried to keep from leaving evidence, but there was a hair from a fur coat, skin flakes, even evidence that the sanitation facilities had been used in his absence.

He raised the air temperature to above freezing and sniffed. He could smell Lois's scent hanging in the air. The musk of their love-making still clung to the sheets. He could smell the meal he'd prepared for her. But there were other scents as well - the cloying perfume Teschmacher preferred overlaying the stink of stale sweat. He smelled Lex Luthor.

Superman checked the data crystals - they were all there, recreated when his father's AI gave him back his powers. He had no way to tell how long Luthor and Teschmacher had been there, only that it had been sometime before he had arrived with Lois.

He had no way of knowing which data crystals, if any, that Luthor might have accessed. He didn't know what knowledge Luthor may have carried away with him.

What he did know was that Luthor having Kryptonian knowledge in his head was a very bad idea and if Luthor had made it past the fortress's defenses, others might do it as well.

He ordered the AI to seal the ground level access points and to increase security on the remaining entrances hidden high among the crystals that made up the ceiling. The next

uninvited visitors to his sanctuary were going to be in for a rude, and painful, surprise.

Lois waited for Clark to return and finally gave up after GNN showed Superman taking care of a train derailment in Italy.

Before their fateful trip she had enjoyed watching Superman on rescues. It was like watching a movie where she knew the hero would win, the blood was make-up and the stunt-double was doing his job. Superman was a superstar and she was a groupie on the inside track.

But now she found herself worrying about what traps Luthor or some other fiend may have laid for him. His body was invulnerable but she worried if his spirit was strong enough to take the tragedy he had to deal with every time disaster struck. The people he couldn't save.

She realized that this must be how the spouses of cops and fire fighters felt every time their beloved left for work. 'Will he be okay or will some fool with a gun steal him from me? At the next fire call will he walk away, job well done, or will I be getting a call from his boss or worse, the chaplain?'

'Was this the pain he wanted to spare me?' she thought as she made herself a sandwich and sat down to watch a movie. 'This is simply the pain of being human. To know our own mortality and that of those we love.'

She knew it was too much to hope that Superman would land on her patio wanting to talk. That aspect of their relationship was well broken and best never mended. Superman, the godlike alien from Krypton, could never - should never - invest himself in just one person. Jor-El had been right about that. But Clark, the farm boy from Kansas? Clark could, if he chose to take the risk.

Part 4

We drew a circle that took him in.

Clark couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so nervous. Actually that wasn't true - with an eidetic memory he could remember very clearly the last time. Not counting introducing Lois to the AI version of Jor-El, it was the day he'd asked Lois out on a date the first week they'd met.

His heart had been pounding so hard he was certain she had to have heard it, even with human senses. He had shown up with a corsage that matched her dress - she never asked how he'd known what she was wearing. She'd been too bemused by her interview with his flashy alter ego to wonder about much.

The night went downhill from there, although Lois repeatedly told him she didn't mind. The restaurant Bill Meyerson from sports had suggested 'lost' his reservation. He and Lois ended up at Centennial Park dressed for a fancy dinner, sitting by the memorial fountain and eating hotdogs from one of the ubiquitous stands that dotted sidewalks around the park.

He'd been certain he was going to end up the laughing stock of the newsroom even worse than he already was - his clumsiness and shyness were already the stuff of legends. But Lois never told anyone about their date in the park. It was their private joke. But he never quite screwed up the courage to ask her out on a real date again. Until Niagara Falls.

"You clean up good, farm boy," Lois announced as Clark climbed into her car. He knew he was blushing and thanked heaven that she didn't say anything more about it. He had taken her advice and spent a good part of Saturday buying the informal clothes he was wearing: chinos, a sweater, and shoes that didn't tie up. His other clothes were either suits or jeans, neither of which was suitable for this occasion.

"I let Alice know my 'date' was a vegetarian," Lois told him as they drove up to Perry White's house.

"They don't know it's me, do they." He suspected Lois hadn't mentioned to Perry who it was she was bringing to dinner. Perry probably thought she had hooked up with a cop, or a stock-broker, anyone but someone from the newsroom, anyone but *him*.

Her chuckle confirmed his suspicions. "You know, you're about the only one in the newsroom who's managed to avoid one of Alice's dinners. Perry might give me a gold star for hauling in the invisible man."

"Being invisible has its advantages," Clark commented.

Lois pulled her car into the driveway. "Show time."

She knocked and Perry opened the door. If the older man was surprised to see Clark standing behind Lois, he hid it well.

"Right on time," Perry told them as he ushered them into the living room.

The house was simpler than Clark had imagined it would be. It was a big Craftsman style house in one of the older suburbs of Park Ridge west of New Troy Island. Four bedrooms, two and a half baths thanks to a recent remodeling. Perry and Alice had kept with the 1920's theme in the furnishings, real wood, real leather. Functional, homey, unpretentious really, but real. No fabulous fakes here, no photo-wood or vinyl pretending to be something else.

Richard White, two other newsroom people, Norm Parker and Polly Harper, their spouses, and a young woman Clark didn't recognize, were already waiting in the living room. Perry did the introductions. The young woman was Richard's date. She was a stewardess - very young, very pretty, very bored.

"So, what are you two drinking?" Richard asked. He was obviously the one designated to

tend bar.

Lois spoke up for both of them. "Ginger ale if you have it." Clark gave her a curious look. He knew that Lois knew he didn't drink much but he also knew she liked wine with her dinner and occasionally - more than occasionally actually - liked harder drinks as well. There was a bottle of tequila stashed in the bottom drawer of her desk.

She noticed his questioning look. "My stomach's been a little queasy the last couple days," she explained. "Maybe I'm coming down with something."

He nodded, determined to keep a closer eye on her. Lois was normally healthy as a horse. He couldn't remember the last time she was out sick. Her orange juice regime apparently worked, despite her pack a day smoking habit. But then, he hadn't caught her smoking the past few days either.

"Two ginger ales coming up," Richard announced. He handed them their drinks then turned to Clark. "So, my uncle tells me you two have been partners for a couple years and you know Superman pretty well."

"Yes, to both," Clark said.

"So, what does he think about Krypton being found?"

Clark felt the floor move before he caught himself. "Krypton?" To his embarrassment, he actually squeaked. He took a deep breath. *Krypton had been found?*

"We haven't heard anything from him about that," Clark managed to stammer out. "Have we, Lois?"

She shrugged and gave him a crooked smile. "He's not speaking to me at the moment, remember? I wonder if he even knows. I mean, wasn't he taking care of that grounded oil tanker off New Zealand this morning?"

Clark nodded. "He was pretty busy. But when did this information come in? I mean, *I* hadn't even heard about it, and I try to keep up on things like that."

"The way I heard it, Jerry Barnaby got a call from one of the astronomers last Friday," Perry said, handing Clark the science section of the Sunday edition of the Daily Planet. Lois read it over his arm.

'Astronomers Discover Krypton Intact. Signs of Life Found' the headline read. The article went on. The Cassini-Huygens probe sent to Saturn had sent back photos of more than just Saturn, its moons, and rings. A photo of what looked like dust had resolved itself into a distant star system when analyzed: a distant star system with a red giant sun and several planets, one of which appeared to be in the star's theoretical habitable zone. Spectrum analysis indicated there might be life. The co-ordinates matched those Jor-El had given for Krypton.

The article went on to explain how Krypton could have survived the blast - occasionally stars went nova, expended their excess energy then settled down again. Krypton could have survived with life intact *if* - and this was a big 'if' - the planet had managed to be shielded from the initial solar explosions. With budget cuts and the time factor - five to ten years to build and deploy another satellite, it was unlikely any more information would be forthcoming anytime soon.

"I assume Jerry double checked the information?" Clark asked.

"I would assume so," Perry said.

"So why do I think it's too good to be true?" Lois asked no one in particular.

"You think it's a hoax?" Perry asked.

"I think it's an awfully big coincidence. Luthor escapes, is found... Then this falls into Jerry's lap," Lois said.

"Lois, you think Luthor is behind every unexplained crime in North America," Norm complained mildly. Polly chuckled.

"Only the ones involving real estate and Superman," Lois corrected. "Luthor's two obsessions."

Lois considered that dinner at the White's had gone surprisingly well, despite the bombshell of Jerry's story about Krypton. Clark had actually gone pale when Richard asked what Superman thought of it. But the rest of the evening had gone swimmingly. It turned out that Richard and Clark had a lot in common. They were both fluent in several languages, had traveled extensively - Clark as a budding journalist and Richard as an USAF transport pilot.

The differences were telling as well. Richard adored horror films and thrillers, the bloodier the better. Clark, on the other hand, couldn't stand them. Lois knew that many people in the newsroom considered his aversion a sign of weakness. But she also knew it was a trait Clark shared with many police and fire fighters. People who dealt with horror in reality frequently couldn't stomach it in blown up on the big screen, or little screen for that matter.

Perry pulled Lois aside while Norm and Polly and the others listened to Richard and Clark exchanging stories about the various countries they'd visited in their travels. Norm and Polly seemed surprised that Clark even had stories to tell.

"You know Richard is out of our London bureau," Perry told Lois quietly. "Since Sid O'Neill's retiring at the end of the month, I was thinking of bringing Richard in to step in and handle International."

"Are you asking me if it's okay?" Lois asked.

"He's more than qualified for the job. But people are going to say it's nepotism," Perry said.

"Since when do you care what people think, Chief?" Lois asked.

"Clark may actually be better qualified. He's a stronger writer," Perry went on as if he hadn't heard her. "But I just don't think it's a good fit. The newsroom hyenas would tear him apart."

"He might surprise you," Lois said. "But why are you asking me about this?"

Perry looked off into the distance. "There was a rumor a while back that you and Richard... Well, not that it's any of my business; you're both adults. But if there's going to be a problem, I need to know now."

"First, the rumors were wrong," Lois told him. "And second, even if they weren't, it's like you said. We're adults here. Besides, I'm City. He'll be International."

"He'll also be assistant editor," Perry told her. "The powers that be think I work too hard, that I'm too hands-on. They think I need an assistant."

"They're crazy," Lois assured him. "But if you want me to promise to be good..."

"I just want you to promise not to hurt him too badly if he ever tries to give you or your buddy there grief," Perry said with a chuckle. "No blood in my newsroom, okay?"

"No promises, old man."

Perry shook his head with a smile and went to rejoin the others. The discussion had moved from travel to Superman and Lois caught Clark rereading the article on Krypton while Norm and Polly filled Richard in on what Superman had done for the city. The look of rapt fascination on Clark's face sent a frisson of worry down Lois's spine.

"Clark?" Lois asked as she drove him back to his apartment on Clinton. He'd been deep in thought ever since they left Perry's house.

"Yes?" Clark responded after a moment.

"Promise me something, will you?" She had a suspicion about what he was preoccupied with. The possibility of Krypton's survival had to be singing a siren song to him. The chance that his people were still alive, that there was a place in the universe where he wasn't a stranger in a strange land had to be an almost irresistible lure.

"What?" he asked. He gave her a worried look.

"Talk to me before you decide to take off for... wherever," she said.

"What makes you think I'm likely to take off for 'wherever'?" Clark asked.

"Clark, if Superman asked you to go with him to Krypton would you say 'no'?"

"And what makes you think Superman's going to take off to Krypton?"

"Because if I had just found out that the home I thought was dead and gone might still be there, the family I thought I'd lost, my people... I'd be packed with my ticket in my hand. But Clark, before I got on the plane, I'd check and make sure it wasn't a lie or a trap," Lois told him earnestly. "One of the problems with honest people is that they really don't understand how big a lie can be, or why someone would want to do it. And Superman is an honest person. He doesn't understand the lengths Luthor, or someone like him, would go to get him out of the way."

Clark sighed. "Okay Lois. I promise that if I get the urge to take off for parts unknown, I'll talk to you first."

"Good." She pulled her car in front of his apartment building and let him out. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Actually, I may be a little late," Clark said. "I want to check out Jerry's sources on that story, find out what Superman really thinks about it."

"I'll let Perry know when I get in," Lois promised. She tried to hide her relief that he wasn't going to simply run off to Krypton to see for himself. That the light of reason might actually have its way.

Clark gave her another worried look before he shut the door to the car. "Lois, are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine," she lied. Her gut had been acting up all through dinner, even though she had opted to share the vegetarian meal Alice had prepared for Clark. At least that hadn't turned her stomach like the smell of the meat had.

Clark gave her another worried look then seemed to decide against saying anything more about it. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

Lois waved and drove off. She had a suspicion what was wrong with her. Her sister Lucy had the same symptoms before discovering that she was pregnant. And Lois knew that she and Clark hadn't taken any precautions. He was immune to any earthly diseases and the likelihood that he could father a child with a human woman was remote to the point of impossibility - at least that's what they had both assumed.

She had a suspicion they had assumed wrong. She stopped at a CostMart and bought a home pregnancy test. The directions said it had to be used in the morning. It was going to be long night.

The next morning hardly came soon enough. Lois followed the directions on the package, set her oven timer, and waited. A blue line meant she probably wasn't. A pink circle meant she probably was. The oven timer went off but she found she was afraid to look. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and steeled herself for the results. She wasn't sure which result she wanted.

She opened her eyes and looked at the little stick in her hand. A dark pink circle. *Oh dear God. Now what do I do?*

She spent a good ten minutes sitting on the edge of the bathtub, mind spinning as she tried to come to terms with the pink circle. Finally she got dressed and drove to work, determined to make the best of an awkward situation. She had hoped she would be able to... 'seduce' wasn't the right word. It was too predatory, but she couldn't come up with one that fit. She had needed time to convince Clark that she was capable of caring for the *man* rather than the *superman* and she had just run out of that commodity.

Clark was as late as he had warned Lois he might be. Perry didn't say anything at the morning staff meeting but Lois could tell he was curious as to what Clark was working on. At least he didn't ask how she was feeling. She wasn't sure how she was going to handle Perry when he found out she was pregnant. She'd probably end up assigned to cover PTA meetings and dog shows in a misguided attempt to keep her out of trouble.

"Well?" Lois asked when Clark finally appeared in the newsroom and settled at his desk.

"I managed to track down the astronomers who are analyzing the Cassini-Huygens data," Clark told her. "Not one of them admits to having contacted Jerry Barnaby, the Daily Planet, or any other media. In fact, they were a little upset about the Krypton announcement. A few of them thought that publishing it was a little premature since the team hadn't had a chance to review that part of the data."

"And Superman's reaction?" Lois insisted.

Clark took a moment before answering. "Needless to say, he's excited about the possibility. However, he'd rather not make any statements until his own analysis of the raw data is completed. That will be in about six days. The probe sent back a *lot* of data."

The bile started to rise in her throat as her gut began to object to the smells around her - perfume, stale coffee, cigarettes, sweat. If this was what being pregnant was going to be like, she wasn't sure she wanted anything to do with it.

"Lois, are you sure you're okay?" Clark asked. He was almost comical in his concern.

"I'm fine Clark, just a little upset stomach," she assured him.

"But it could be a sign of something more serious," Clark protested. "You should see a doctor."

"Clark, this is neither the time nor place to discuss this," she told him. "But if you insist, you can buy me lunch after we talk to the M.E. about that triple homicide over in Pelham this morning."

The visit to the M.E. was short - the police already had enough evidence to make an arrest in what turned out to be a vicious family squabble that had turned horribly, tragically, violent. Lois was afraid Clark was going to get sick until the M.E. assured them the victims had all been asleep when killed. No one had called for an absent Superman.

"So, are you going to tell me what's going on?" Clark demanded after buying them both lunch at a deli not far from the Planet. She chose a salad, grilled cheese, and iced tea rather than her usual pastrami on rye with extra onion and a diet cola.

"Well, I figure it's one of three things," Lois said. She held up three fingers and began to count off. "One, my body has finally brought it to my attention that a steady diet of pizza, hot dogs, and cigarettes is a bad idea. Two, I'm coming down with the flu. Or three, I'm pregnant."

At her last suggestion, Clark's eyes widened to near saucer proportion and it was all she could do to keep from laughing as he stuttered out, "Pregnant?"

Lois watched as his eyes skimmed her body, finally concentrating on her belly. His

concerned expression became one of wonder.

"How?" he managed to say.

"Well, babies are a hazard of sex you know," she told him with a nervous chuckle, keeping her voice low.

"No, I mean... do you know who the father is?" Clark asked. He seemed embarrassed by the question.

"Clark, I should be insulted by what that question implies," she protested mildly. "But yes, I know who the father is and it isn't Superman."

"Oh," Clark said very softly. "Have you told him yet?"

"Told who? Superman?"

"No, I mean..."

She gave him a blank look until she realized he was probably referring to Richard White. Under any other circumstances she knew she would have been furious at what he was implying - that she had gone to bed with a man she didn't even know, and that *he'd* been keeping an eye on her, even if he *had* missed that one crucial point.

"Clark, I've only slept with one man since... well since Superman came on the scene," Lois admitted. "And he's being so incredibly dense I'm having a hard time believing it."

"I think you've lost m..." Clark began. Then: "*Me?*"

"Duh. And if you ever try to mess with my memories again, I swear to God I will tear your spleen out," she told him. She watched him straighten up in his seat as part of his Clark persona slipped away. It was like watching an actor leaving the stage and leaving the character behind with the make-up and costume. Only there was no make-up or costume.

"You remember," he said flatly. Even his voice had changed - not Superman's authoritative baritone nor the tentative tenor he used in the newsroom, but somewhere in between. She had heard it before at Niagara Falls and at the fortress. His *real* voice.

"Yeah," she admitted. She reached over and took his hand. At least he didn't flinch away. "I told you before that I wanted the man I fell in love with. His name happens to be Clark Kent. That he had another job was kind of an added bonus." He opened his mouth to say something and she put up one hand to stop him. "But I wouldn't have been looking to prove that he had that other job if I hadn't already fallen for him. If I hadn't already known there was a lot more to him than met the eye."

"Why didn't you tell me you remembered," he asked softly.

"Because I wanted to prove to you and to me that we could make it work. Not with the fellow in the costume. Mortals who take up with gods tend to get the bad end of the deal. But with *you*, the guy who grew up on a farm in Kansas and works for the Daily Planet. The one who brings me coffee in the morning and corrects my spelling and brings me marvelous croissants."

"And now?"

She sighed. "And now... This is so messed up. Kids were never on my radar screen. My sister was in the family way when she got married and I swore I'd never go through that. I mean, God help any kid that had Lois Lane for its mother."

"So, what do you want to do?"

"It kind of depends on what you want to do," Lois told him. "Are you up to becoming a daddy on top of everything else? I mean, this morning you were a happy bachelor and now... I would understand if you..." To her horror she began to cry. She had promised herself that she wouldn't let her hormones take command of her.

"Lois, please... I would never abandon you like that. It's just..." He paused a moment. "Lois, I never, ever, even considered the possibility that I could become a father. It's a little scary. Actually, it's a lot scary. So, what do *you* want to do? I mean, it's your body. I'm just..."

"I think a baby needs two parents," Lois said. "And given his parentage..."

"You know I won't always be able to there for you," Clark told her.

"Clark, I'm an army brat," she reminded him. "My dad was gone for months at a time and he never did come to terms with the fact that I wasn't a boy. Granted, he's not the greatest example, but I know it's doable. People do it all the time. And it's not like I'd be doing this alone. There's Lucy and Ron and my parents..."

"You didn't answer my question," he told her gently. "What do you want to do?"

"Well, I figure we can move in together. My place is bigger than yours but we'll probably want to get a house after the baby comes, assuming we can afford it. I mean, prices in the city are simply unbelievable. I know we both have decent incomes and all, but still..."

"Lois, I doubt that will be a problem," Clark told her.

"And my parents," Lois continued without paying much attention to Clark's attempt to interrupt her. "My dad's hated every boy I ever dated and I can guarantee he'll have a fit when he finds out I'm pregnant and I don't even have an official steady boyfriend..."

"Lois, hold that thought, okay?" Clark said. She stopped and stared at him. He disappeared and returned a few minutes later. Only now he had a small ring box in his hand.

He dropped to one knee in front of her and opened the ring box. Inside was an old fashioned wedding set. "Lois, I know it's sudden and you haven't had a lot of time to think about it considering everything... But would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

She found herself staring at him. As a girl she'd had the usual fantasies about being proposed to. The knight in shining armor would ride up on his trusty steed and sweep her off her feet to a life of 'happily ever after'. The billionaire industrialist would woo her with caviar and champagne. But this was reality. Her knight wore a tweed suit and glasses and had a part time job as a superhero.

And now he was on one knee in the middle of a busy deli in the center of Metropolis.

"Lois?"

Her hormones kicked in again and she started to sob, throwing herself into his arms and burying her face in his shoulder.

"Does this mean 'yes'?" he asked.

She managed a nod as she wiped her nose with one hand and he smoothed away the tears from her face.

"I think a short engagement would be a good idea," he added.

"I have a better idea. Forget the engagement. I think we should just elope," she told him. "How does tomorrow look?"

Lois remembers and she's pregnant. It was almost a litany ringing through his brain.

Lois remembers and she's pregnant.

Had the past week of Lois being nice to him, telling off his alter ego and warming up to Clark, had it all been a sham? A lie to get to make him think she was capable of caring for, even loving, the man rather than the super-man? He didn't know and he was afraid to ask. Afraid of what her answer might be. And then there was the child - not a child yet, just a piece of protoplasm with the potential of becoming a child, his child, his and hers.

He hadn't thought it was possible. Nothing in the data Jor-El had sent along with him had

indicated even the remotest possibility that he could be fertile with a human. It was still possible he wasn't. Just because the egg started dividing didn't mean a child would come of it. A million things could go wrong.

Clark looked up from his coffee to see his mother peering back at him as they sat at the old table in her kitchen. He had explained the entire situation to her, the assignment at Niagara Falls, Lois discovering his secret, even giving up his powers at Jor-El's demand. He told her how painful it had been, both physically and emotionally, but nothing had been more painful than recognizing Lois's disappointment in losing Superman. Martha had said nothing when he told her about regaining his powers and his attempt to erase Lois's memories of their time together but he knew she was disappointed in him. And now this...

"So, what do you plan to do?" Martha asked.

"Lois wants to just elope," Clark said.

"That wasn't what I asked," Martha said gently.

"Eloping feels so... self-centered," Clark said after a moment's thought. "Like we can't wait to jump into bed."

Martha chuckled. "Well, from the sound of it, that's not too far from the truth." He gave her a horrified look and she sighed. "Clark, I'm sure it wasn't like that. Neither of you are teenagers with your brains turned off by your hormones. And Lord knows how many babies around here show up a lot less than nine months after the wedding. It's not anything new."

"Mom, I do love her, but I don't know if she loves me or just what I can do. You didn't see her face when we were watching the coverage on that avalanche. All those people dead because Superman was 'unavailable'."

"Clark, has it occurred to you that maybe what you saw was simply a reflection of your own pain at not being able to do anything?" Martha asked. "Maybe she was empathizing with you. You gave up a lot to be with her. Maybe she thought you gave up too much."

"Do *you* think I was giving up too much?" he asked.

Martha took a long moment before answering. "Clark, life never gives us either/or choices. Life never gives us only the lady or the tiger. Having those abilities, that's part of you, part of Clark Kent, like being a good writer, or having blue eyes, or being six-four. Take any of that away and you've lost part of what makes you 'you'. Even if you never put on that suit again, it's still part of you. And I think Jor-El was just being mean when he forced you to choose between the woman you love and your specialness. It's like asking an Olympic runner give up his legs so he can have a life."

"It's not quite the same thing, Mom."

"Isn't it? You said Jor-El gave you a choice... part of yourself for the girl."

"But people lose arms and legs, even end up paralyzed, and it doesn't change who they are," Clark pointed out.

"But those are accidents or illness," Martha said. "Jor-El made you *choose*. And then you and Lois both realized that neither option was a good one. Not for you, not for her, not for the world."

Clark sighed, staring at his now empty coffee cup. It was a lot to process. And he still didn't know if the information the Daily Planet had printed concerning Krypton's survival was a hoax or not.

Lois remembers and she's pregnant. So, what do I do if Krypton survived? Dumb question - there is no choice. I'm going to be a father. And I love her. God help me, she's stubborn, difficult, self-centered, brilliant, complicated, capable, and I love her.

"I, Lois, take you, Clark, to be my husband. To have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; from this day forward until death do us part," Lois repeated the words Clark thought he'd never hear from the woman he loved. After a great deal of cajoling, Lois had agreed to a more traditional wedding so their friends could share in the event. Jimmy was best man while Lois's sister Lucy was matron of honor. Even Lois's father was there, finally. He had threatened to boycott the wedding because he didn't feel Clark was 'good' enough for his 'little girl' and Lois had refused to let him give her away.

"Would you give away a son?" she had asked her father. He hadn't answered her. Instead she had walked down the aisle alone, a queen bedecked in white lace, a freewoman giving herself in marriage.

"I, Clark, take you, Lois, to be my wife. To have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; from this day forward until death do us part," Clark repeated after Chaplin Fine in the Metropolis Chapel of United Faiths. He was an old family friend of the Lanes and had cheerfully agreed to officiate at Lois's wedding - after all, he had christened Lois and her sister.

"By the power vested in me by the State of New Troy, I now pronounce you husband and wife," Fine announced. Clark leaned in and kissed her. It was sweet and tender with the promise of more.

"I present to you the newly married couple, Lois and Clark."

The guests broke into applause.

When making out the invitations, Clark had been surprised to see how many people they knew - not just at the Planet and the other Metropolis media, but in the MPD and MFD, the mayor's office - Mayor Berkowitz himself showed up - the D.A.'s office, the governor's office, business people. Between Lois's rolodex and his, the chapel was nearly full. The Planet's publisher, Franklin Stern, had shown up and was sitting with Perry and Alice. Even some of his old friends from Smallville managed to show - Pete Ross, Lana Lang, Rachel Barnes, the Hubbards, and the Irgs. And this was despite the short notice.

Lois hadn't wanted to waste any time. She also hadn't wanted anyone to know that she was pregnant, especially Perry and her father.

"Clark, you weren't here when Simone Fulton got pregnant," Lois had told him. Her eyes had been wide in remembered horror. "She tried to keep it quiet and then Perry found out and she ended up covering the school board and dog shows... He wouldn't even let her cover the cat shows cause cats carry something that could have hurt her baby... He'll chain me to my desk... And my father... you think he's upset that I'm marrying a guy that never bothered to join the military? Wait till he finds out I'm knocked up. He will kill you."

"Maybe taking off for Krypton isn't such a bad idea?" Clark had joked. Lois just glared at him.

The wedding reception was held in the downstairs meeting hall. Jimmy had managed to find a DJ with purple hair who was playing a selection of light jazz and big band music on the sound system.

The wedding cake was one of Carlisle's Bakery's masterpieces. Clark didn't know how Ella Lane had managed it. Supposedly Carlisle's had a three month waiting period for custom cakes. But then Ella was a general's wife. Clark was sure that over the years she had

developed many talents, including that of convincing recalcitrant vendors to put her order at the head of the queue.

"We did it," Lois murmured. "I'm married to Superman."

"Lois?"

She smiled at him. "Never mind. By the way, you never did tell me where we're going for our honeymoon."

"We have the world to choose from, but I thought we'd start at the fortress and then I know of a private island with the most perfect beaches you can imagine. Clothes are optional."

"Why the fortress?"

"I haven't had a chance to check out the analysis of the Cassini-Huygens data."

She placed a hand on his chest. "Clark?"

He suspected he knew the cause of her worry. "Even if the report is true, I'm not leaving you or the baby. I love you."

"I love you, Clark." She reached up and pulled him into a soul-searing kiss. They ignored the cat-calls from Jimmy and some of the other younger people. "Let's blow this pop stand," she suggested with a grin.

It was happening so fast. Too fast. She was now Mrs. Clark Kent. That's what Jimmy kept calling her despite that fact that she had repeatedly told him she was keeping her maiden name. There was no rule that said she had to take her husband's name.

"Lois, are you okay?" Superman asked as they sped to the Arctic, to the crystal palace where Jor-El had ordered his son to give up a part of himself.

She nodded her head. "Everything's been happening so fast. I just need to catch my breath."

"We're almost there," he told her, nodding to a fog bank in the distance. "I beefed up the defenses. Nobody else can get in, unless they can fly on their own."

Superman came to a stop over the peak of the Kryptonian construct. He murmured something in a language Lois didn't know and she felt the slightest tingle when they dropped straight down into the center of the fortress. There had been no tingle the last time.

"This may take a few minutes," he told her. It was so odd, seeing him in the blue and red and knowing who it really was standing there. Who it was wearing the Suit.

"If you want to lie down..." he went on. She shook her head and entwined her arm with his.

"We're in this together," she assured him.

He took a deep breath and flew them both to the control console platform. He waved a hand over the controls and the console came to life. "Father..."

The holographic head of Jor-El appeared. If it noticed Lois standing there, it gave no sign.

"Is the data analysis complete?" Superman asked.

"Yes. The data from the Cassini-Huygens probe is insufficient to determine the existence of planets in the Rao star system. However, it is extremely unlikely that any of the inner planets survived the star's collapse."

"And the speculation that Rao did not collapse but was simply being subjected to violent flare activity?"

"The current evidence from the Cassini-Huygens probe, the Hubble telescope, and my long range sensors, indicate that such was not the case," the hologram stated. "All three sources indicate the presence of a white dwarf star and a stellar debris cloud where Rao used

to be. Additionally, spectral analysis indicates the presence of large amounts of Element 126, an extraordinarily rare substance created when the crystalline components of a Krypton-like planet is exposed to high levels of radiation."

Clark seemed shaken by the report. Lois moved close to him, putting her arms around him. "You were hoping it was still there," she said softly.

"I was hoping..." he began, pulling her even closer. She wasn't surprised to realize he was trembling ever so slightly. "I was hoping I wasn't the last one. That there was a chance the planet had survived."

"Maybe other people escaped the way you did," Lois suggested.

Superman shook his head. "Assuming the information my father sent is correct, the High Council would have stopped anyone who tried. Except for some terrorists trapped in a bubble dimension called the Phantom Zone, I'm the only one."

She took his hand and pressed it to her belly. "But you're not alone."

He gave her a tremulous smile. "You probably saved my life, you know, by not letting me leave on a fool's errand. And I would have gone. You know that."

"I know. And I'm glad you didn't," she told him.

He nodded and took a deep breath. "Fortress, can you determine the origin of the information given to the Daily Planet, specifically, the photographic evidence of Krypton's survival?"

"It is impossible to trace the origins of the photograph," the AI said. Lois felt his shoulders slump. "However," the AI continued, "based on the position of the background stars and the other planets depicted, the image is of Krypton two days before you were launched to Earth."

"How is that possible?" Superman asked.

"The image exactly matches the data in my storage matrix," the AI said. "This view is not possible from Earth's area of space."

"Luthor," Lois said simply.

"I really do need to learn to be more suspicious," Superman told her.

"Hey handsome," Lois said. "I figure that's what I'm here for."

He grinned at her. "There's quite a number things you're here for, Mrs. Kent." He pulled her into a sensuous kiss.

"Why Superman... Whatever will my husband say?" she managed to get out when she came up for air.

"That he loves you very, very much."

"And I love him very, very much."

He grinned even wider, brushing her hair away from her face. "I'll keep that in mind when you threaten to kill me in about eight and a half months."

"You are so *dead*," Lois screamed as Clark hurried into the delivery room. She knew where he'd been - Luthor's appeal hearing was this morning and, unlike Clark Kent, Superman didn't have an excuse for not showing up at the hearing. Lois knew this. She didn't care. She had wanted him with her and he hadn't been there. "Luthor had better be dead, too."

"Well, he'll be in prison for a nice long time," Clark assured her. "Westover wanted to invoke the death penalty."

"Pity he couldn't...Aaugh!" Another contraction rolled over her.

"Remember your breathing, Lois," Clark reminded her as the obstetrician checked her progress. "Pant... pant..."

"Just a couple more pushes," the doctor told them. "The baby's crowning. You're almost there."

"Push, Lois. Push," Clark urged. Sweat rolled off her face. He took a cloth and wiped her forehead. She gritted her teeth and grabbed his hand harder. Lucky for him he was invulnerable. She wondered vaguely at how many new dads ended up hurt during their wife's labor.

"We're almost there," the doctor assured them. "Just a little more."

Lois laid back to rest for a moment until the next contraction hit. She'd climbed mountains, fought thugs, went through Special Forces training as a teenager but nothing had prepared her for the level of work she was doing now. Then she steeled herself for the next bout.

"Push, you can do it!" Clark urged her. Then there was a new sound in the room, a wail of outrage from between her legs. The doctor held up a wriggling, bloody, slimy body with four flailing limbs and placed it on Lois's belly.

"Congratulations. You have a son," the doctor said.

Lois propped herself up on her elbows, ignoring the pain from the I.V., and looked down at the cause of all her recent pain and sweat. She counted the fingers and toes - everything was in its place.

"Would you like to cut the cord?" the doctor asked Clark, handing him a pair of surgical scissors. Clark snipped the purple-red cord at the point the doctor indicated.

One of the assistants bundled the baby into the towel and whisked him over to a nearby table to be checked out and cleaned up. "Weight seven pounds, ten ounces, Apgar score 9," the assistant announced. "He's a strong little fellow. What's his name?"

"Jason... Jason Lane Kent," Lois told her. She watched Clark looking down in awe at the newborn in the nurse's arms. He fairly glowed with pride and joy as he took the baby from the nurse and brought him back to Lois.

The last eight months hadn't been easy for either her or Clark. The fairy tale romances never mentioned how much work 'happily ever after' was. Neither of them had really been ready for marriage or family. After the first flush of excitement, Lois had discovered she was afraid of losing her independence and individuality. Clark's over-protectiveness had kicked into high gear when her pregnancy began to show, making things even worse for her. She'd had to tell Superman off more than once, reminding him she was married to *Clark Kent*. He also had an annoying tendency to obsess over things he had no control over - Superman wasn't omnipotent *or* omniscient. And then there were the times she had gone to bed alone, or woke up to find he was gone because the world needed him more than she did.

It was her mother who finally set her straight on that: Lois had managed to find a man much like her father. Although her father was brash, gruff, and opinionated and Clark seemed to be his polar opposite, deep down they were very much alike - family was important, but duty was more so. It was Lois who was Clark's anchor, his rock, the place he returned to. Like her mother was to her father. And even though Clark still occasionally worried over whether she was in love with him or his flashy alter-ego, they managed and they would keep on managing.

Clark's eyes were bright as he looked at her. Jason had latched onto a nipple and even though her milk wouldn't come in for a bit, he seemed to be happy suckling. Lois grabbed Clark with her free arm and pulled him into a hug.

"He's beautiful," Clark murmured, kissing her hair. He caressed the dark fuzzy down on

their son's head. "You will feel different," he murmured, eyes only on the baby at her breast. "You will sometimes feel like an outcast. But you will not be alone. You will never be alone. You will make my strength your own, see my life through your eyes, just as your life will be seen through mine. The son becomes the father, and the father... the son."

The circle of life went on.

Outwitted

He drew a circle that shut me out

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout

But love and I had the wit to win;

We drew a circle that took him in.

-- Edwin Markham

A/N: In the Lois & Clark fandom, there is a tradition of the 'plot untwist', stories where one simple, logical, or random event undoes the plot. This untwists **Superman Returns**.

A couple points:

Richard White: Since Superman never left, Lois wasn't interested in Richard; therefore there is no tension. (Unless he makes the mistake of trying to give Lois or Clark orders.)

Luthor: Since Superman doesn't leave for Krypton, he makes it to Luthor's hearing; therefore Luthor stays in prison and doesn't get access to Gertrude Vanderworth's millions. And, since Clark knows Luthor stole information from the fortress, he can take steps to thwart Luthor's attempts to capitalize on it - like patenting the crystal technology.