

# Foreshadowing

By HappyGirl <michelloyd@aol.com>

Rated PG

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Summary: Superman's been in town for a month, and Lois Lane is in love. In her daydreams, he is hers, and she is his. What will she do when she suddenly finds her dream has come true? Will she like it as well as she thought? Or can a new dream take its place?

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Act One: Foreshadowing

Lois: "Will you stop? You sound like Dad. Jeez, I'm only twenty-six."

Lucy: "Twenty-six today. Thirty-six tomorrow."

"Lois! Lois Lane!" Lois was on her way to work on a crisp October morning when the smooth baritone voice called to her from the recessed doorway of a newsstand just ahead of her. As she raised a questioning eyebrow in that direction, a tall, clean-cut man in a grey business suit approached her with a smile and an outstretched hand. His smile was wide, his manner polished, but something about him rang false. He reminded her of a politician schmoozing for votes.

"John Doe, Ms. Lane," he said by way of introduction, shaking her hand as if she should know who he was. "We've met before, but I doubt you'd remember. I have some information that I believe will interest you. If you'll just step inside for a moment we can talk privately." The man stepped into the glass-enclosed storefront and turned to hold the door for her, his right arm reaching toward her and his head giving a slight nod as if to say, 'Ladies first.'

Lois glanced around her warily. She didn't like the idea of being alone in an enclosed space with a strange man who'd given her an obviously assumed name. But she was young, strong, and trained in martial arts. And she hadn't gotten to be the Daily Planet's best investigative journalist without taking calculated risks on a fairly regular basis. The newsstand had a plate glass front; they'd still be visible to the steady stream of passers-by on the street. And Metropolis's newest celebrity, Superman, was only a shout away. She hoped. Keeping her own body between her potential new source and the door, Lois took two cautious steps into the newsstand.

Turning to face her with that same false charm, Mr. "Doe" pulled two items from his jacket pocket. One was a business-sized envelope with her name and "Daily Planet" written in neat block letters on the front. The other was some sort of electronic device, about the size and shape of a deck of cards.

"Everything you need to know is in the envelope, Ms. Lane." Stretching her left arm out and leaning forward so as to keep as much distance as possible between herself and the stranger, she took the envelope from his outstretched hand. She snatched her own hand back before he'd have a chance to grab her arm. He didn't seem offended by her obvious wariness. If anything, his expression seemed...amused. He continued his obviously rehearsed speech as if her reaction were completely normal.

Displaying the electronic gadget as if he were a salesman at Radio Shack, he said, "I think you will be very interested in this device." As he spoke, the man pressed a button on the tiny machine, and Lois was momentarily disoriented by a brilliant flash of light and a wave of dizziness. As soon as she could see

again, she was out the newsstand door in two strides, ready to defend herself from the strange man—who was nowhere to be seen.

Lois shook her head and took a couple of deep breaths. When the dizziness passed, she did a quick scan of her surroundings. Where had her attacker—if you could call this an attack—gone? The sidewalk was crowded with the usual parade of morning commuters, but she could see no sign of Mr. Doe. With a renewed sense of vigilance and a determination to track down the practical joker and give him a piece of her mind, she began a search of the surrounding area. Maybe he'd ducked into the alley a few doors down from the newsstand. She started in that direction, having completely forgotten about the envelope still clutched in her left hand.

She had taken only three steps when she was stopped again, this time by the sight of two images in the newsstand window. One was her own reflection: she was wearing a different outfit—one she was sure she didn't even own—and her hair hung in soft waves down to her shoulder blades, the front sections pulled back from her face with a barrette.

The second image which grabbed her attention was the stacks of newspapers: the Daily Planet, the Metropolis Star, the Gotham Gazette, the Washington Post. None of them looked the same as she'd seen minutes before. She stepped closer for a better look at the Planet. The headline read "Davis Recalled, Schwarzenegger Elected in California Special Ballot." Grinning out at her from above the fold was the Terminator himself in a conservative business suit. Her mind in a whirl of confusion, she searched the banner for some clue.

She let out a startled gasp when her gaze fell on the date at the top of the page: October 8, 2003.

Lois staggered to the bench of a nearby bus stop and looked around her. She felt utterly out of sorts, and she was trying to gather her wits and make some sense out of the last five minutes. The sky was the same brilliant blue that only appeared on clear October mornings. The street echoed with the same noisy cacophony of taxi cabs, busses, and delivery vans that always coursed through Metropolis's business district. Even the smell was the same—that oily mix of car exhaust, cigarette smoke, and simmering hot dogs that screamed 'City Life' to anyone familiar with it. Everything was exactly the same as it had been before her run-in with Mr. Doe.

Or nearly the same. Now that she was looking for them, she could see subtle differences. Dozens of men and women passed by on their way to work, just like any normal Metropolis morning, but the fashions were slightly different. For one thing, several of the professional women were wearing pants suits rather than skirts. And many of the men sported slacks and sports coats rather than formal business suits. A bus came and went from the stop where she sat, and she noticed that the route number and destination were displayed on a lit-up digital screen rather than the printed roller-type sign she was used to. More than one of the pedestrians was talking into a mobile phone; and the phones were much smaller than the one the Planet sometimes issued her—they looked more like the communicators from the old Star Trek shows.

A woman in a business suit and walking shoes hurried past. In her effort to get around a slower pedestrian, the woman passed a little too close to Lois, grazing Lois's knees in the process. Thus startled out of her daze, Lois noticed the envelope now half-crushed in her absent-minded grip. She opened it and pulled out a type-written (or rather, computer-printed) letter. Eager for any clue as to what was happening to her, Lois read,

*"My Dear Ms. Lane,*

*You won't remember our last encounter, but I do. Thanks to your interference, it led to several mind-numbingly boring—not to mention filthy, cold, and malodorous—months in a barbaric*

*mental asylum for me. Without even a television set to break up the ennui, you can imagine the hours I spent plotting my revenge.*

*Turnabout is fair play. My lovely little toy has just erased the last ten years of your memory. Good luck getting it back. And, once you realize you can't, have fun in the loony bin. At least yours will have cable, even if it won't get 9,000 channels.*

*J.D.*

*P.S. Say 'Howdy' to Little Boy Blue"*

Well, that was no help. What was this nutcase talking about? Nobody had erased her memory; she had a perfectly clear memory of the last ten years, from junior year in high school right up to the toast and cream cheese she'd had for breakfast this morning. He had to be joking. This had to be some kind of sick trick.

Only, something *had* changed. The date on those newspapers...no...that couldn't be right. The newspapers could be faked.

But how could she explain her new suit, her long hair, the Star Trek Commuters, and, now that she thought about it, a few extra pounds on her own hips and a few tiny lines beginning to show on the backs of her hands. Her hands...one of which now sported a glittering diamond solitaire and a gold band.

Doe wasn't saying that she had lost her memory back to 1983. He was saying that she had lost it back to this morning—*her* 'this morning,' anyway. Could it really be true that she had lost ten years? That the morning she remembered starting out today was actually ten years in the past? Then how did she remember Mr. Doe himself? Some kind of delay factor on that machine of his? This was too much. She needed to think. She needed to get her bearings. She needed to regroup. She needed to scream.

No. She needed to calm down and make a plan. She couldn't sit here on the bus stop bench all day looking like a bewildered imbecile. She should get to the Planet and figure this out.

No, not the Planet. Not yet. If she really had lost her memory, there would be too many people there who would expect her to know things. Things she had forgotten. She wasn't ready yet to admit her apparent amnesia to anyone. She needed to feel more in control first. She needed a place where no one would expect anything of her, but where she could find some information, try to get her head on straight, figure out if things were really as they appeared, and decide on a next step. Picking up her shoulder bag (also new—she'd dig through that first thing), she headed for the public library.

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Her first stop in the library was the ladies' room. No one else was in it, so she had time to take a good look at herself. She dropped the new bag on the floor with an unceremonious thump. Her first glance in the mirror showed a small, frightened-looking person with an anxious expression. That would never do. She stood straight, squared her shoulders, and gave her chin a confident lift. Better. But still, this felt so strange, to be staring into the mirror at a person so different and yet so familiar. She looked like herself, only not.

Ten years. That would make her thirty-six years old. Well, the woman in the mirror looked about thirty-six. She was still in good shape, but a bit curvier than she was used to. Her hands went involuntarily to her hips, feeling the unfamiliar shape. There were the beginnings of wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. She leaned in closer for a better look. Laugh lines she thought they were called. <That's probably a good sign. Means I must laugh a lot, right?> Her hair was long—well past her shoulders, but she couldn't see any gray. Her make-up was more toned-down than she currently favored —<used to favor?>—her lipstick and blush a subdued rose pink rather than the darker orange-tinted shade she usually wore. And her eyes looked different—no, it was her eyebrows. They were thinner, less prominent. And her eye

shadow was more subtle. She stepped back now to get the big picture. The suit was conservative—her skirt knee-length and her blouse higher cut at the neck, and the color was neutral beige with a periwinkle blue blouse. The overall effect was elegant, classic, refined; professional and attractive but not attention-grabbing. Lois's hands had by now travelled to either side of her own face. She needed to feel that face in the mirror, to confirm with her fingers what her eyes were telling her. With nervous energy, she started to run a hand through her hair, but was stopped by the pull of the barrette. She frowned at the woman in the reflection, and the woman frowned back at her.

Who was this stranger in the mirror? Who had she become in the last ten years and how could she get her memory back? Could she track down this John Doe and force him to restore her memory with that gadget of his? Where would she even begin to investigate him? Obviously he had used a pseudonym, and she didn't have much to go on. He said they had met before, but she wouldn't remember it. So, they must have met somewhere in those ten years. If she could just remember. <How's that for circular reasoning? Argh!> She needed some clues to herself; something to help jog her memory. She picked up the heavy bag and slung it over her shoulder.

Pushing the bathroom door open with perhaps more force than strictly necessary, Lois headed for a table in a quiet corner of the reading room and started rifling through her shoulder bag. She pulled out her wallet first. Her driver's license identified her as Lois Lane. <Okay, no help there on the who-gave-me-these-rings question.> It listed her address as 348 Hyperion Avenue. She knew that neighborhood—she knew every neighborhood in Metropolis. It was in an older part of town, but gentrified, mostly turn-of-the-century brownstones owned by older couples or young professionals. There were four credit cards, a library card, and a medical insurance card, all with the same name and no further clues to her personal life. There was \$84 in cash and a half-dozen receipts: one for gas, one for groceries <Since when do I spend \$130 in groceries on one trip?>, one from the drug store, one for parking, one for overdue library book fines, and one from her favorite lunch deli.

An inner pocket of the bag held her press pass. "Lois Lane, The Daily Planet." So, still the same job. That was good. At least she had a shot at being able to bluff her way through a work-day if she needed to. A second inner pocket held one of those communicator-phones. She flipped it open experimentally. She was greeted with an image of a red rose with the heading "Verizon Wireless" and the date below; "Wed, Oct. 8 9:13 a.m." Along the bottom of the small screen were the words 'Message,' 'MENU,' and 'Contacts.' She pressed the small button to which the 'Contacts' seemed to point. The rose was replaced by a 'CONTACT LIST' in alphabetical order:

*Amber*  
*Bernie*  
*Bill*  
*Bobby B.*  
*City Desk*  
*Clark*  
*Dad*  
*Dr. Engels*  
*ICE*  
*Home*  
*Jim*  
*Jonathan*  
*Kate*  
*Lucy*  
*Martha*  
*Mike*  
*Mom*  
*Peter*

*Planet  
Stanley School  
Vanessa*

She pressed the down key until she came to the ‘Home’ entry. Then she tried the green key marked ‘Send.’ The phone rang four times before she heard her own voice saying cheerfully, “Hi. You’ve reached 555-6869. We can’t come to the phone right now, but we would like to hear from you. So leave us a message after the beep, and we’ll return your call as soon as we can. Thanks!”

We...she wasn’t used to that pronoun. ‘We can’t come to the phone.’ <Who is the other one of us that makes up we?> Of all the strange little changes she’d encountered in the last hour, those left-hand rings and the idea that she was now part of a couple, part of a marriage, were the most unsettling. She wracked her brain for some inkling as to whom she might have been persuaded to marry. As her sister was fond of pointing out, she hardly ever even dated. She couldn’t for the life of her imagine anyone she would be willing to commit to for a weekend, let alone a lifetime. She pressed the End key and was about to close the phone when a woman with a library I.D. hanging from her neck approached her.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but I’ll have to ask you to turn your phone off in the building. Thanks.” It was probably just as well. She wasn’t planning to scroll her way down that list, calling everyone she knew and asking “Hey, this is Lois Lane, do you know what I’ve been doing for the last ten years?” Nope, that would make for a short trip to that loony bin that she was trying to avoid. There was no “Off” button. But wait, there was “PWR” in small letters on the End key. She held it down for a moment and the phone shut down.

Further investigation of the shoulder bag revealed three lipstick tubes, a compact, three clean tissues and one used one (yuck!), a set of keys, a pair of sunglasses, a stack of business cards, a tin of mints, a small bottle of Tylenol, two pens, and a reporter’s notebook with about 1/3 of the pages filled with her scribbles, none of which gave her any further clues to her life. Except that her current investigation had something to do with something medical, judging from all the references to Met General and various doctors.

Her next stop was to the library’s medical reference section. If she had a whopping case of amnesia, she wanted to find out what she could do about it without ending up in that “loony bin” that Mr. John Doe seemed to think she was destined for.

Two hours later, she had the beginnings of a headache and very few answers. It seemed that cases like hers were extremely rare. Of course, most people weren’t accosted by vindictive villains with memory-erasing machines. She probably needed professional help, but she just couldn’t bring herself to give herself over to a bunch of strangers in white coats who probably wouldn’t know much more that she did after her morning of research. No, before she took that step she would try her own Plan A: fake it till you feel it. If she could just go about her normal life and pretend that she knew what she was doing, maybe it would all come back to her.

Deciding that she’d done enough research for the time being, she felt the need for a trial run. She needed someplace where people might recognize her, but not ask too many questions just yet. And, she was getting hungry. So, time for lunch at Macri’s deli.

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Lois was three blocks from the restaurant when she felt a sharp tug on her bag. Her martial arts training kicked in as she kicked out with her right foot while simultaneously yanking her bag away from the would-be thief. “Don’t even try it today, buster. I am not in the mood,” she growled.

“Nobody cares what mood you’re in, lady. Hand over the bag and nobody gets hurt,” came the voice of a second hoodlum from

behind her. She was pushed roughly into an alleyway. She still had hold of her bag, but now there were two men. No guns in sight, that was good. She knew the bag was not worth her life, but right now it was the only connection she had to this brave new world and she wasn’t going to give it up without a struggle.

She had felled one tough with a roundhouse kick, but the other had her by the throat from behind and she had fallen forward onto her knees when a sudden gust of wind pushed her long hair across her eyes and she heard the soft thud of boots landing on concrete. Suddenly the pressure on her neck eased and Lois drew a ragged breath.

“Two against one, boys—that’s hardly fair. How about I even the odds?” Lois knew that voice. Thank goodness! Finally, something in this new world felt familiar. She sat back on her heels and looked up, pushing the hair back from her face. For the first time that day, saw exactly what she knew she would.

Well, almost.

Superman had the two thugs by their respective collars, just as she’d known he would. Their feet dangled a few inches off the dirty concrete, and they wore the same frustrated scowls that she expected. But Superman himself looked different. The cool, collected air the hero normally wore was gone. He looked like he wanted to pound her attackers’ heads together until they would be lucky to wake up again. Lois had never seen him so angry. In fact, she’d never seen him show so much emotion of any kind.

It didn’t last long, that flash of anger. As the sound of sirens approached and stopped a few yards away, Superman visibly gathered himself together. By the time anyone else looked at the hero, his face was calm again, but Lois knew what she’d seen.

Superman turned to Lois and asked, in a very professional manner, “Are you all right, Ms. Lane?”

“I will be. Thank you, Superman,” she replied, her voice a little breathless. Sitting up straighter, Lois rubbed her shoulder where her arm felt like it had almost been dislocated from holding on to that bag.

The patrol car had arrived quickly, probably summoned by some passer-by with one of those ubiquitous phones. A young woman emerged wearing the familiar blue uniform of Metropolis’s Finest. She gave Superman a perfunctory nod of greeting and asked in the clipped tones used by professional colleagues who saw this kind of thing every day, “Mugging?” She began handcuffing the would-be thieves and leaning them against the side of the patrol car as she spoke.

Superman replied, “Yes. They were after Ms. Lane’s handbag.”

The officer looked at Lois and said in a wry tone, “Of course they were. I swear, Lois, I don’t know why he keeps pulling your fat out of the fire. You’ve been a trouble magnet from the day he first arrived.”

“Now, Officer Renner, you know that isn’t fair,” Superman admonished Lois’s accuser. The officer turned to Superman and lifted one questioning eyebrow. The hero didn’t miss a beat. With a straight face he continued, “Ms. Lane was a trouble magnet long before I ever came on the scene.”

The officer actually laughed out loud at that remark. “Well, I’ve got to read these two their rights and get them down to the station. I’ll see you around, Superman. And Lois? Try to stay out of trouble for at least another week, okay?”

Superman seemed to realize that Lois wasn’t actually going to reply, and he stepped in. “Thank you, Officer,” Superman replied. “Ms. Lane and I will be at the station shortly to give you our statements.”

As the patrol car pulled away, Superman seemed to scan the area. Apparently satisfied with what he saw, he turned to Lois and kneeled to bring his eyes on a level with hers. She’d been so transfixed by the scene playing out in front of her that she hadn’t even stood up yet. In an instant, she watched the face before her

transform from the kind but detached mask she associated with her hero to the tenderest look of concern she had ever seen. One gentle hand reached out to cradle her cheek as he almost whispered, “How are you, really?”

How was she? Superman was touching her with an intimacy she had only dared imagine, and speaking to her with a familiar tone she had never heard him use with anyone. She took an experimental breath; she could breathe easily again. She’d have a few bumps and bruises by the morning, but she wasn’t seriously harmed. Her stockings were ripped at the knees, but nothing worse.

And Superman was waiting for an answer. Well, she’d been waiting for an opportunity to try bluffing her way through this new life. She just hadn’t figured on the first person she knew here being Superman. Still, it wasn’t like she had a choice. It felt almost like stepping into character, like an undercover assignment, when she answered him.

“I’m okay, really, Superman. Nothing that a new pair of nylons won’t cure.”

He sighed with relief and glanced at the hole in her hosiery, then gently lifted her to her feet and drew her into a warm embrace as he murmured, “It’s okay, honey, you can drop the ‘Superman’ bit; Officer Renner’s long gone and there’s no one else within half a block of us.”

<<Honey?!>> What was going on here? Lois was in character, but Superman wasn’t.

Something wasn’t right, but she didn’t know what else to do except to stay in character and plow forward. Putting on her best professional face, Lois stepped back to answer the Man in Blue. “Superman, I’m fine, really, but you don’t seem yourself this morning. Is everything all right?”

Superman gave a soft little chuckle and a self-deprecating grin. “What, you mean because I was so angry I almost knocked those two street rats into next Tuesday?” He shot her an easy smile. “I’m fine; I just tend to take it personally when someone roughs up my wife; I’m a little funny that way.” His half-shrug was accompanied by a teasing twinkle in his eyes. Superman’s eyes could twinkle? Who knew?

Still mesmerized by that 1,000-watt smile and the warmth in Superman’s eyes, it took Lois a moment to focus on what he was actually saying. Had he just said that she was his *wife*? He had, hadn’t he? Lois Lane was *married* to Superman? He was certainly acting as if she were.

Oh, wow. This was beyond even her most hopeful late night fantasy. Sure, she had imagined all sorts of romantic scenarios, but they had all been short-term, stolen moments—dinner in Paris, a walk on some moonlit tropical beach, flying over acres of unspoiled wilderness to land for some passionate love-making in a remote mountain meadow—but *marriage*? Superman was her *husband*? He was the other part of the ‘we’ on her answering machine? He was the reason she bought \$130 worth of groceries? He had an address on Hyperion Avenue? eHeHHer head was spinning.

Then her head was completely emptied of thought as Superman lowered his lips to hers for the softest and sweetest of kisses. Too soon he raised his head again, saying, “By the way, Perry and I have been trying to reach you all morning. Your phone is off and you left your Blackberry at the Planet. I told him you were tracking down some leads on the Met General case, but you might want to check in soon. I was about to come looking for you myself.”

Before she could respond, he got a far-off look on his face and Lois knew he was hearing something beyond her human senses.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” he sighed in resignation, “I’ve got to go. I’m hearing a report of a Metro cave-in in Washington. I don’t know how long I’ll be, but if I don’t make it back to the office by

6:30, I’ll meet you at the ceremony tonight. Make my excuses to the police, will you?” Then, with a rueful smile and one more quick peck, so casual that she was sure he had kissed her good-bye hundreds of times, he was gone, and Lois was left standing in the alley with her mouth hanging open.

What had he said? ‘If I don’t make it back to the office?’ What office? Superman had an office? Wait, he must have meant *her* office—the Daily Planet office. Did he always pick her up there after work? Did he fly her off every evening to that house on Hyperion Avenue?

Did everyone at the Planet know they were married? Perry had been asking him about her, so he must know. Yet Superman had seemed to treat her distantly in front of the muggers and the police officer. No, wait; he had teased the officer about Lois about being a trouble magnet. So obviously the officer knew they were at least friends. Just how public was this marriage? Had Superman been wearing a ring as well? She couldn’t remember. But if everyone knew that she was married, they must know about him as well, mustn’t they? Unless she had given out some kind of cover story about an absentee husband? She’d better keep a lid on that idea until she figured out what people knew. And why would she have blackberries at her office?

What had he meant about meeting her at a ceremony? What ceremony? Well, if she was going to see him again this evening, she’d better hurry up with that police statement and get to the Planet so she could start figuring things out. Maybe the information was in her calendar at work. But she still had to give her statement to the police. And buy a new pair of nylons. It looked like lunch would be a cheese sandwich from the snack machine again.

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An hour later Lois stepped off the elevator into the familiar bull-pen of the Daily Planet. The place had undergone a major renovation some time in the last ten years, but it still had the feel and sound that meant she was in her element. The murmur of two dozen voices all speaking at once filled the air, along with the sound of hundreds of fingers tapping at computer keyboards and the constant ringing of telephones. But the best part was the sheer energy generated by a room full of people, each focused on their own task, but each knowing that at the end of the day those separate jobs were going to coalesce into the one overarching mission: the next edition. Just being in the midst of that crowd gave Lois a little jolt of confidence.

Despite the change of layout, Lois easily spotted her desk. The nameplate was a dead giveaway. She couldn’t help noticing that Clark Kent’s name was on the desk across from hers. So, he was still here as well. She was a little surprised that he had lasted ten years in the big city. Hoping that her sense of confusion wasn’t showing, she started toward her desk at what she hoped was her usual brisk pace. She was only half-way down the ramp to the bull-pen floor when Jimmy Olsen jogged up to fall in step with her.

“Hey, Lois! Have you got your acceptance speech ready for the Kerth Awards tonight? Or is it CK’s turn this year? You gave the speech last time, didn’t you? You know, you two could at least pretend to leave a little room for the competition,” he finished with a grin.

Wow. Ten years had made a big difference in Jimmy Olsen. He’d be almost thirty now. The blue jeans and cowboy boots were gone, replaced by khaki trousers and a navy-blue sport coat. His hair was shorter, and there was a change in his face as well. He’d lost that baby-faced softness that he’d always had. But he still had a boyish grin and the dimples to go with it. She stopped staring when she realized that he was waiting for a response.

“Yep, we’re all set!” she said, trying to match his friendly tone. Jimmy returned her smile and gave a parting wave as he headed for a desk on the far side of the room.

Kerth Awards—that would explain what Superman meant by ‘the ceremony.’ But what did Kent have to do with it? Why would it be ‘his turn’ to give an acceptance speech? And what did Jimmy mean by ‘you two?’ There was no ‘you two’—there was ‘he,’ there was ‘I,’—or was there? Had Perry actually foisted Mr. Greenjeans on her as a permanent partner? She looked around for Clark Kent. A coffee cup and a half-eaten donut sat on one corner of his desk, and his suit jacket was hanging over his chair, so he was around the office somewhere, but she didn’t see him.

Lois gave her head a little shake as she realized that she’d been standing at the bottom of the ramp for a full minute or more. She had to get to her desk and start getting a handle on this new life.

But first, come to think of it, she needed a detour to the coffee area. She was in serious need of caffeine to kick her spinning brain into gear. And that cheese sandwich.

She was stirring the milk into her coffee when a voice she didn’t recognize spoke a little too close to her left ear.

“Flying solo today, Lois? It seems to me that partner of yours is gone half the time. Maybe you should be looking for a more reliable man. Someone you can count on to be there when you need him.” Lois turned and came face-to-face with the most revolting leer she’d seen since Ralph got drunk at the last office Christmas party. She was trying to think of an appropriate comeback when Pete Turner from sports saved her the trouble.

“Watch it, Guthrie, you’re about to learn the hard way why Lane and Kent are the last people on Earth you want to be messing with!” Pete closed the door of the mini-fridge with a sharp thump and a scowl at Guthrie, then turned to Lois with a sympathetic smile. “Go easy on him, Lois, he’s new.”

Guthrie was backing off with his hands raised in apology, “Jeez! Sorry! No offense meant!”

Lois just glared until the low-life retreated back to his desk. Lois ambled her way to her own desk, mulling over all she’d heard on the way.

‘That partner of yours’... ‘Lane and Kent’... well, it was looking more and more like her foisting theory was on the money. Come to think of it, hadn’t ‘Clark’ been one of the contacts on that list in her cell phone? And yet, she couldn’t help noticing the note of respect with which her colleagues spoke of Clark Kent. No, not of Clark Kent. Of ‘you two,’ ‘Lane and Kent,’ ‘the last people on Earth you want to be messing with.’ Maybe Kent had improved in the last ten years. Well, he would have, wouldn’t he, if he’d been working under her for that long? Otherwise, she would have ditched him long ago, no matter what Perry said.

She finally sank into her desk chair. Trying to look like a woman busily at work on a hot story, rather than a lost kitten, she started rifling through the papers on her desk. There it was: an embossed invitation to the 40th annual Kerth Award dinner to be held at 7:00 that evening at the Lexor Hotel. Enclosed was a list of this year’s nominees, including, under the category of Best Investigative Journalist, “Lois Lane and Clark Kent, The Daily Planet, for the series titled ‘The Education of Robert Jakes; The Making of an American Terrorist.’”

As she glanced up from the invitation, her eye was caught by a photograph half-hidden behind a pile of paper. The frame was printed with the words “Three Generations,” and smiling out at her from their perches on someone’s front porch steps were three familiar, if older, faces—her mother, her sister, Lucy, and herself—and two small faces she’d never seen before. The new faces belonged to two dark-haired little girls, maybe two or three years old. Lucy had children? Or—no, it couldn’t be—one of those girls did have the same almond eyes as—Superman. She was a mother? The mother of Superman’s child? No, she couldn’t be sure. Lucy had dark hair, too, and who knew what Lucy’s husband might look like. Maybe he was Asian.

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Somehow she made it through the rest of the afternoon without giving herself away. Perry spent most of his time on the phone with the Planet’s Washington correspondents, following up on the Metro collapse that was all over the TV news channels, and with Kent away from his desk all afternoon there wasn’t anyone she had to get into any detailed work conversations with.

She was surprised by how many friendly greetings and good wishes she got from her coworkers. Lois was used to being a bit of a lone wolf (or a mad dog, if you listened to the rumor mill), but no one except Ralph and that new guy—Guthrie?—seemed to be making the usual effort to steer clear of her.

Left alone at her desk, Lois spent the afternoon poring over her own most recent clippings. There were a few articles with her individual byline, but most were by Lane and Kent. After perusing a handful, she had to admit that the joint pieces were even better than the ones she wrote alone. They had her trademark hard-hitting, take-no-prisoners aggressiveness, but combined with insights into the human lives affected by the various stories. She remembered the first article that Clark Kent had ever written for the Planet, a mood piece about an old theater, and recognized his touch. She even saw a bit of it in her individual pieces as well; something of his style had obviously rubbed off on her over the years.

From what she could tell from her notebooks and computer files, her current investigation involved Metro General Hospital cutting corners on patient care and possible insider deals between its Board of Directors and that of a certain HMO. And it was definitely a joint project with Clark Kent, if all the references like “CK to follow up with Granger” and “Clark thinks Lewis is lying” were any indication.

She had fielded two phone calls from sources. One was from a Stacey Cooper, saying sorry, she couldn’t give her anything right now; her boss was getting suspicious and please don’t call her at work again. The other was Bobby Bigmouth, calling to say that, yes, he had also heard rumors about Lewis giving kickbacks to Anderson, and please tell Clark thanks for the Indian food; the samosas were the best he’d ever tasted. And to have a good time this weekend. This weekend? What was that about?

By 6:00 Lois was beginning to doubt that Superman would make it ‘back to the office’ by 6:30. The TV monitors showed no easing up of his rescue work in DC. She was surprised at her own mixed feelings about seeing him tonight. All afternoon she had been focused on reacquainting herself with her work life. She had barely paused to consider her personal life. Now, as the work day was drawing to a close, she found herself more and more anxious about what came next. She had only had one brief conversation with Superman, and she had been stunned by the revelation of their apparent marriage. He had spoken to her with tenderness and concern, even with love, but simultaneously with such... casualness. For her, such intimacy with her hero was astounding, earth-shaking, mind-blowing. But for him, it was obviously the stuff of every-day life. Now, as the time drew near for her to see him again, she realized that she had no idea how to behave around him.

Things were winding up earlier than usual in the newsroom as many of the staff were going home to change for the Kerth ceremony. Apparently the rule about only nominees attending had been dropped somewhere along the way. She should start getting ready herself. Should she go home to change? It might be helpful to check out that house on Hyperion Avenue. But Superman had said to wait for him until 6:30. Surely he didn’t expect her to get home, change, and be at the hotel in 30 minutes? On a hunch, she headed down to the locker room. Sure enough, there was an evening gown and a bag of make-up, jewelry, and other accessories hanging near her locker. Obviously her working hours hadn’t gotten any more predictable over the years; even if

she didn't remember doing it, she'd obviously come prepared to go straight from the office to the ceremony.

It was 6:45 by the time she was ready to go. Lois made a quick stop back to the newsroom to check the video monitors. Superman was still winding things up in Washington. Lois headed for the elevator; she'd hail a cab to the Lexor. As she passed his desk, she noticed Clark Kent's jacket still hanging on his chair. Whatever he was up to, he hadn't made it back all day.

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At 7:10 Lois meandered into the Lexor's main ballroom. It looked the same as it had for any of the other formal events she'd attended there. Round tables surrounded the dance floor, each set for ten people and covered with elegant white linens and fine china, sparkling glassware and glowing candles in cut glass holders. An open bar occupied one corner of the room, surrounded by tuxedo-clad men waiting for drinks. A small podium stood on a slightly raised platform on the far side of the dance floor. Men and woman in formal attire were scattered around the tables, some seated, others standing, all engaging in the idle small talk that was inevitable when business colleagues met at a pseudo-social gathering.

Lois looked around for a familiar face. Alice White waved at her from a table near the dance floor. As Lois approached, Alice stood and leaned over for a friendly embrace. "Perry told me your other half might be late. I hope he'll make it in time for the announcement. Perry's running late himself, so you and I can be newspaper widows together until they get here."

Superman was going to make an announcement? She knew he made occasional public appearances. She had been planning to make a bid for a date with him at a charity auction this week. <You mean ten years ago this week.> She picked up her program and scanned it, but didn't see any mention of Superman; only the normal dinner speech and the announcements of the winners after dinner.

And what did Alice mean by that strange remark about newspaper widows? Lois had heard of football widows—women who were alone due to their husband's preoccupation with the game—and she supposed the metaphor might apply to Alice since Perry was delayed by his work. But why include Lois in the description—what did Superman have to do with the newspaper?

Alice gestured toward a seat with Lois's name card in front of it. She was seated between James Olsen (James?) and Clark Kent, neither of whom appeared to have arrived yet. Oh, wait, there was Jimmy (James?) heading her way with two glasses of wine from the bar. To her surprise he held one out to her.

Seeing her puzzled expression, Jimmy explained, "I heard CK was running late; white wine okay?"

"Sure—thanks," was all she could manage. What did Clark Kent running late have to do with Jimmy bringing her wine? The longer she stayed here <or now?>, the less she seemed to have figured out.

The table filled up with Planet employees, some familiar faces and others new to Lois. She chatted amiably, feeling incredibly awkward but trying not to show it. She wasn't used to being so warmly included in casual social conversation, but she put on her best smile and kept her responses vague enough to cover her ignorance—she hoped. Perry was among the last to arrive, having finally handed off the paper to the night editor. As the soup was served, only Kent's place was still empty. The band was playing old jazz standards and the dance floor was starting to fill up.

Lois was making her way back from the ladies' room after the soup course when an obviously drunk Guthrie (she hadn't even heard his first name) swooped her into his arms and stumbled her onto the hardwood.

"Let's dance, Lois; you could use a little loosening up." Guthrie attempted to pull Lois into the crowd of dancers, but she

planted her feet and grabbed his hands in hers, attempting to remove them from her hips.

"Beat it, Guthrie, I'm not interested." She gave him a little shove and turned to head back to the table, but he was not so easily deterred. He reached for her again, this time landing his sweaty hands on her bare shoulders.

"Oh, come on—your husband's not even here." The man was three sheets to the wind and either didn't notice or didn't care that Lois wanted nothing to do with him. He was starting to cause a scene.

To her relief, Lois suddenly found the two of them neatly flanked by Jimmy and Perry. Jimmy smoothly disentangled her from Guthrie's grasp and steered the jerk toward the terrace as Perry swept Lois into his own arms.

"I'm sure you won't mind if I cut in," she heard Perry say, and, simultaneously from Jimmy, "Yeah, Guthrie, it's a good thing for you her husband isn't here. He may seem like a boy scout, but he'll bite your head off if you mess with his wife. Come on, buddy, you need some fresh air."

Lois gave Perry a grateful smile and was just beginning to relax into the dance when they were interrupted by Clark Kent trotting in from the lobby.

"Sorry I'm late, Chief—mind if I steal my partner?" Kent said with a grin.

"Hey, far be it from me to come between Lane and Kent!" Perry replied with a twinkle in his eye. "I'm glad you could make it." And with that, Perry handed Lois off to Kent and gave a slight bow before returning to the table, leaving Lois to her fate.

Lois was speechless. She was in the arms of the third man in the course of one dance, and she was still trying to get her bearings. As she finally focused on Kent's face, she was taken aback by the light in his eyes and in his smile. "You, my love, are a sight for sore eyes!" he announced as he steered her into a turn and then pulled her close before planting a kiss on the side of her neck.

The nerve of the man! What was it with strange men just assuming that Lois Lane wanted to dance with them tonight?!

And yet, strangely, this felt nothing like being accosted by Guthrie. Kent was a graceful and talented dancer. His touch was sure but gentle, the look he gave her warm and joyful, and the feelings he was stirring in her just by the sensation of his hand on her bare back were...they were...

"Mr. Kent!" Lois scowled at him, "I'll have you know that I am a married woman!" At the moment, Lois was reminding herself as much as him, but he didn't need to know that.

"Thank goodness for that! I'd hate to think what kind of trouble Guthrie would get himself into if he didn't know you were already taken," Kent replied with an easy grin. He showed no signs of loosening his embrace and kept steering them smoothly around the floor.

"You saw that?" was all she could manage in response.

"I heard; I got in here as fast as I could, but it sounded like you and Jim and Perry had things under control. Jim's right; your husband doesn't like people messing with his wife. But, personally, I'd be more worried about the wife if I were Guthrie." And, with that, he actually winked at her and dipped her as the music drew to a close.

The dance floor was emptying as the main course was being served, and Kent guided Lois to their table, one hand resting softly at the small of her back. She was completely nonplussed by his reaction—or lack thereof—to her protest.

This was making no sense whatsoever. Perry and Jimmy were all over Guthrie as soon as he approached her, with dire warnings about the wrath of Superman <although they didn't actually use his name>. But here was Clark Kent touching her in a very familiar, almost possessive way, and all Perry did was look up with a warm smile as they approached the table.

“Busy afternoon, hey Clark? How’d it go with those sources?”

“Pretty well, thanks, Chief. This could pan out into a major story, but it’s too early to tell yet. I hear Menendez got the interview on the Metro cave-in from Superman.” As he spoke, Clark pulled Lois’s chair out and held it for her as she sat before taking his own seat next to her.

“Yeah; it’ll be Page One tomorrow,” Perry drawled, reaching for a roll and butter. “Too bad it couldn’t have been an exclusive, but I suppose he did have to talk to the Post, it being their town and all.”

Lois was just lifting her first bite of salmon to her mouth when Alice White turned toward her. “I hear you’re foot-loose and fancy-free for a long weekend; who’s got the children?”

Children? There are children? As in *my* children? As in *my plural* children? Who was supposed to have them? Who *did* have them?

Just as Lois was about to hit true panic mode, she heard Kent answer smoothly, “The boys are ‘camping’ with Grandpa; which, in this case, means burning hot dogs and marshmallows over the grill in the backyard, staying up too late in sleeping bags on the deck, and begging for a warm kitchen and Grandma’s French toast in the morning.”

Then, just as smoothly, Jimmy chimed in, “And Aunt Lucy is having girl’s night in with Lara and Cousin Tina, which, as far as I can tell, involves several sparkly pink hair doo-dads, a manicure, and a stack of Disney Princess movies.”

Alice gave a little chuckle and said, “Well, I know you’ll enjoy the respite from mommy-dom, Lois; and I also know you’ll be itching to get them all back home by Sunday evening.”

Lois flashed Alice what she hoped looked like a knowing smile. Now she was really starting to panic. Lois Lane, reporter she could be. She already was. Lois Lane, Mrs. Superman she thought she could quickly get used to. But Lois Lane, Mommy?! This was a nightmare. She didn’t even like kids, and now it sounded like she was expected to play mommy—no, to *be* mommy—to three of them.

Just as she was concentrating on breathing at a normal rate and keeping her face relaxed, Lois felt a warm, gentle hand reach under her hair to caress the back of her neck. Clark Kent shot her one brief glance—how could he pack so much concern and tenderness into one glance?—and quickly changed the subject. “Alice, I hear you’re spearheading the fundraising drive for the new family services center. How’s it going?”

She didn’t hear Alice’s answer. All she was aware of was that hand still massaging her neck and shoulders in slow, lazy circles. All the tension seemed to flow right out of her muscles and into that hand, only to disappear somewhere in the ether. Wow, that was some partner she had if he could calm her jangled nerves with one touch.

Wait a minute! The hand stopped its neck massage and moved under the table to give her knee a gentle squeeze. This was not how a work partner was supposed to touch his colleague. This was the touch of a lover; and delivered so familiarly, so almost casually, that he didn’t even make eye contact with her. He just kept chatting with Alice and the other people at the table, all the while sending her unmistakable messages with his touch.

What the heck was going on?! Lois was married to Superman—and having an affair with Clark Kent?! That made no sense! Why would any woman cheat on Superman? On the other hand, how could any woman resist a man who touched her like Clark Kent was touching her now? What? How could she be thinking of Clark Kent that way? The man was a nobody; a hick; a hack; all of the above!

Well, to be honest, those pieces she’d read that afternoon were not written by a hack. And he certainly no longer looked or acted like a hick, either. His hair was short and his glasses much

more subtle than the horn rims she was used to seeing on him, giving him a more mature, sophisticated look. Like every other man in the room, he was wearing a tuxedo, so she couldn’t judge his fashion sense. But, boy, did he make that tuxedo look good. And he held himself with an air of easy grace that was new to her. He was no longer the wide-eyed country boy in awe of the big city. He was more like a man who was confident in his abilities and his place in the world; a man who felt at home in his own skin. And, as for being a nobody...

“Clark! Lois! Congratulations on yet another nomination. When are you two going to flee those Metropolis winters and come join us in sunny California? You know you can write your own ticket.” The speaker was Greg Hanson, Editor in Chief of the L.A. Times, who had sauntered over from a nearby table as the dinner dishes were being cleared.

Perry quickly countered, “Greg, you old hound dog, you’ve been trying to steal my best reporters for years, but give it up. You know Lane and Kent are the hottest team in *this* town, and the Planet will match any offer to keep them here.”

Clark’s voice chimed in, “Greg, you know we’re flattered, but Metropolis is our home. Keep those offers coming, though; it makes Perry much more generous at bonus time,” he finished with a grin.

“Well, you can’t blame a man for trying. Meanwhile, I see that the M.C. is getting ready to start the announcements, so I’d better get back to my table. Good luck, you two!”

Lois was only half listening as the winners for the other awards were announced and made their speeches. She recognized several of the names and faces. Others were new to her. Mostly, she was trying to organize her thoughts, to make sense of this brave new world and where she fit into it. Some of the players were reassuringly familiar. Perry looked older, more tired than she remembered, but he was still Perry, and that was a comfort since he was the centerpiece of her working life. Jimmy was still bright-eyed and friendly, although he had matured over the years. He was a self-assured man of thirty, no longer an over-eager boy of twenty. He had spent half the evening answering questions from the man on the other side of him about the Planet’s ‘cyberspace presence,’ whatever that was. And she spotted a gold band on his left hand. (And one on Clark Kent’s as well. Not surprising, come to think of it; didn’t 90% of all people eventually marry?) Jimmy had been like a younger brother to Lois, one of the few people at the Planet who might have considered her a friend. And they were obviously still close if he knew where her daughter was for the weekend. <Daughter?! Boys?! Don’t go there, Lane.> The big question mark was Clark Kent. She had barely known the man before, but it was abundantly clear that Clark considered them to be on intimate terms.

And where was her husband? There was so much to adjust to that she was starting to question her own memory, but she could have sworn that Superman had said he would meet her at the ceremony. Hadn’t Alice even said that he was running late? ‘Late’ implied that she expected him to show up at some point, didn’t it? Yet here they were, well into the announcements, and there was still no sign of the hero in blue. She was suddenly struck with the ridiculous mental picture of Superman, resplendent in blue, red, and yellow, amid the sea of black-and-white tuxedos. He wouldn’t wear a tux, himself, would he? She’d never heard of him ever wearing anything other than the famous costume.

Her musings were interrupted by the sound of her own name being called by the M.C. What was he saying? Oh, yes: “The award for best investigative journalist goes to...Lois Lane and Clark Kent of The Daily Planet.” The table erupted in applause and “Congratulations!” as Clark rose and held his hand out to her. Numbly, she took his hand and followed as he led her to the podium. In a daze, she shook hands with the M.C. and held the

award that he handed her as Clark kept one hand on the small of her back and addressed the crowd:

“Thank you very much.” He paused as the applause died down, and when the room was still, he continued, “Ten years ago, I was sitting in Perry White’s office trying my damndest to land my dream job when this whirlwind of energy burst in, talking a mile a minute about the story she was working on and not even noticing that I was in the room. Perry introduced us, and within seconds she was rushing out again, onto a hot lead and without a second glance in my direction. I know she was as surprised as I was when Perry offered me that job, and shocked—actually more like offended,” he amended with a self-deprecating smile, “when he assigned me to work with her on that same story. I believe the word she used was ‘hack,’ and she wasn’t far from the truth. But Perry had seen something in me, and something in Lois, and he had the wisdom to see how much she could teach me—how much we both could learn from him and from each other. Lois had three Kerths of her own before I ever knew her, and she taught me so much so quickly that I won my first Kerth that next year, but I know that none of those awards mean as much to either of us as the—now—three that we have won together. So, on behalf of my partner and myself, I want to thank all of you for your kind recognition, but especially Perry White for having the foresight and the courage to pair up one naïve country boy and one cynical city girl to make a team that is better together than either of us ever could have been alone. Thank you.”

The crowd erupted in applause again, and Lois gave a gracious smile and a wave as Clark gently steered her back to their table. Dessert had been served as the announcements wound down, and a slice of chocolate torte greeted her as she took her seat, along with a cup of black coffee. After holding her chair for her and then taking his own seat, Clark reached for a yellow packet of sweetener and a miniature pitcher of milk and passed them to her before pouring two spoons of sugar and two packets of cream into his own coffee.

With one half of her brain Lois smiled and modestly thanked her friends and colleagues who were showering them with “Congratulations!” With the other half, she was still trying to figure out Clark Kent. His speech had not been what she would have expected—if she had had time to think of what to expect. There was none of the overweening male ego she had encountered in every other reporter she had ever tried to work with. She would have expected him to take most of the credit, maybe thanking her for her ‘assistance.’ Instead, he had made it clear that theirs was a partnership of equals. If anything, he had made her sound like the more experienced partner. Which, of course, she was, but, she could tell from the way everyone around her treated him, Clark Kent was also admired and respected in his own right.

The band was warming up again, and Clark leaned over to whisper in her ear, “May I have one whole dance with the six-time Kerth winner before the night is through?” Lois turned to answer him and found her eyes mere inches away from a gaze full of admiration and...pride? Yes, he was proud of her, and of himself. He was proud of *them*. She nodded her head and he stood and led her onto the dance floor. “They’re playing our song,” he smiled as the opening strains of “Fly Me to the Moon” wafted over the room.

And she was in his arms. And the universe contracted to this single point: Lois and Clark, touching, gliding, turning, the music filling her ears and his touch, his movement, his presence filling her awareness, and the fear, the anxiety, the frantic thinking was gone. She was at peace. She was safe. She was home.

The spell lasted as long as the dance. As the last phrase of music faded away, Clark drew her into his embrace and kissed the top of her head. She lifted her face to him, he lowered his head toward hers...and she panicked. He was going to kiss her,

right there in the middle of the dance floor. And he was married. And she was married—to Superman! She bolted. She mumbled something incoherent, made a vague gesture in the direction of the ladies’ room, and made a run for it.

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Even after ten minutes of deep breathing in the toilet stall and a splash of cold water on her face, she was still on the edge of a mental breakdown. As she emerged from the restroom, she squared her shoulders, pasted a smile on her face, and muttered through her clenched teeth, “I just want to go home.”

Lois made her way back to the table, determined to soldier on, since she didn’t have any other choice. As she approached, Clark turned from where he had been standing, chatting with a younger colleague—David? Derrick? Something like that. He addressed the table at large, “Well, folks, it’s been grand, but I think it’s time for me to call it a night and take this young lady home.” His arm came to lie gently across her shoulders. “It was good to see you all. Have a lovely weekend, and we’ll see most of you on Monday.”

He was turning to go, bringing her along with him, when David (Derrick?) caught his attention. “You’re heading toward Hyperion, aren’t you? I’m just a couple of blocks away. Mind if we share a cab?”

“Sure. Just let us grab our coats and we’ll meet you out front.”

As he steered her toward the coat rack, she whispered fiercely, “Kent! What do you think you’re doing?!”

He gave her a startled look. “You wanted to go home, didn’t you?”

<How did he know that?> “Well, yes...”

“So, I’m taking you home. Sorry about Devon butting in,” <Devon! I knew it was some D name> “but it’s a short ride. I’ll have you soaking in a hot bath before you know it.” And with that, he pulled her coat from the hanger, helped her into it, grabbed his own from the rack, and drew her toward the front entrance and the taxi stand, where Devon had a cab already waiting for them.

Devon rode in the front passenger seat, leaving Lois alone in the back seat with Clark. He rested his left arm on the back of her seat as the cab merged into traffic. She sat stock still, afraid to relax a muscle lest she come in contact with him. That just wouldn’t be a good idea. In a few minutes, the cab pulled up to her new Hyperion Avenue address, and she opened her purse to get a \$20 out of her wallet, but Clark beat her to it. He hopped out and reached his hand down to help her out as well. As he closed the door behind her, he waved goodnight to Devon, with a cheery, “So long, see you Monday.” Meanwhile, she had found her house key and was making her way to the door.

Oh God, he was following her. The cab pulled away. Why wasn’t Clark Kent in that cab? Was he such an old-fashioned gentleman that he felt the need to see her safely right into her house? Why hadn’t he asked to cabbie to wait?

She walked through the front entrance into a small foyer and fitted the key into the lock of the door marked “348.” Clark was still following her. She turned the key and pushed the door. He was right behind her. Reaching over her head, he was pushing the door wider and guiding her inside. He was closing the door behind him. He was turning the deadbolt and switching on the lights. He was hanging his coat on a tall coat stand. He was reaching for her shoulders, pulling off her coat and hanging it next to his. She kept her back to him, but she could tell he was reaching for her again. Oh, God, he was going to touch her!

His hands came to rest on her shoulders. She spun around, determined to put a stop to this highly inappropriate and—no, really!—unwelcome behavior. But the words never made it out of her mouth. As she turned, he released her shoulders and brought both his hands to her face. His left hand curved around her right

jaw, his thumb at her temple in front of her ear and his fingers buried in her hair behind it. His right hand gently stroked her face, from her forehead around her left eye and back to brush the stray strands of hair away. And his eyes. She could drown in those eyes. He gazed at her with tenderness, with concern, with... yes, with love such as she had only ever imagined seeing in any man's eyes.

"Hey, there," his voice was soft and gentle, "What's going on?"

She lost it. She had been thinking, analyzing, playing the part of the self-assured professional all day and all evening, but at his tender touch and loving concern, it all fell apart. Rational thought and self-control flew out the window and she disintegrated into a quivering, sobbing mass of raw emotion.

At the first tear, the first hiccup of a sob, his arms scooped her up and he carried her, evening gown and all, to a sofa. He settled her in his lap and held her head against his neck, stroking her hair and whispering tender nonsense.

"Oh, Clark!" She was whining, now, her voice high pitched and the tears spilling down her face to soak into his white shirt collar. "What am I going to do? Ten years ago I had it all under control, but now there's my job, which I know I can do, but there's also all these people who expect me to be this mature, friendly person, which I don't know how to be, and there's Superman, and I could swear he said we were married but then he flew off and he said he'd meet me at the ceremony but I haven't seen him all night, I mean maybe he's still busy in Washington, but Perry said, no that was you, wasn't it? Anyway, somebody said that he already gave Menendez an interview, which he wouldn't have done if he was still rescuing people, and then you came, and you weren't a hack, and you weren't a hick, and you touched me, and that was not just a work partner touch, Clark! And we danced and you were going to kiss me, I could tell, and you didn't stay in the cab and you followed me into my house and what if Superman comes home and finds you here? But I don't want you to leave. I don't want you to let me go. And I don't want to go to the loony bin!"

She was bawling into his shoulder and clinging to him with both hands, afraid that he would push her off his lap, but he just held her and let her frantic words run down into shaky breaths as her tears ran out of steam. Then he pulled the silk pocket handkerchief from his breast pocket and handed it to her. She wiped her eyes, and her nose, and looked up shyly, afraid of what she would see in his expression. But he only smiled, and softly asked, "Finished?"

She nodded, and replied sheepishly, "Yeah; for now."

"Okay. Now, do you want to slow that down and run it past me one more time? Because you kind of lost me at the Superman not coming back part."

She shook her head "no." She was embarrassed now and she didn't really want to repeat her rambling. It was too late now to pretend that nothing was wrong; she just didn't have the strength to explain it all again.

"That's okay. We'll just stay here as long as you like, and then I'll go run you a hot bath. I'll even bring you some chocolate if you're not still stuffed from dinner."

She was all cried out, and now she was feeling lethargic. It felt so good to be sitting here in Clark Kent's arms. She was afraid to move for fear of breaking the spell. Because she knew that as soon as rational thought returned he would realize what a compromising position they were in and he'd run as fast and as far as he could.

So she just sat there and carefully lifted her head just enough to look around at her surroundings. She was in the living room of a well-decorated but comfortable home. A staircase to her right led up to the second storey. Curtained windows in front of her were dark, and she could hear the occasional car passing by on

the street. A fireplace with a sturdy mantle took up most of one wall with bookshelves on either side. There was her fish tank—at least there was one familiar piece of her old life. There was her desk, piled high with stacks of paper just like always. Most of the furniture she didn't recognize. And there were framed photographs everywhere—on the mantel, the end tables, the bookshelves. Curiosity overcame inertia and she silently slid off Clark's lap and rose to her feet, approaching the mantel in a fog. Clark rose as well, kissed the top of her head, and gave her back one gentle caress. "I'll go get that bath ready for you, okay?"

Vaguely aware that he had spoken, she nodded mutely, not really hearing what he said and unable to tear her eyes from the gallery of family photos. There was a formal portrait of her parents, looking older but happier than she remembered them. And together; that was a shock. There was a more casual snapshot of another couple about the same age as her parents; a petite blonde woman and a robust-looking man sitting together at a picnic table. There was another copy of that picture from her desk—Lois, Lucy, Ellen, and two little girls. Next to it was a second photo in the same "Three Generations" frame. But instead of the women of the family, this one showed that robust older man, two little dark-haired boys, and, grinning for all he was worth, a very proud-looking Clark Kent.

What?! What was Clark Kent doing in Lois's family photo collection? Why would she have a photo of Clark Kent and his sons? And his dad? And that other picture of—Clark's parents? That must be who the other couple was. She moved to the nearest bookshelf. There was a frame covered in sand and tiny starfish with a photo of those same two boys flanking the dark-eyed little girl from Lucy's picture. They were at the beach, the little girl proudly displaying a starfish as big as her two hands.

But it was the next photo that made her catch her breath. It must be from a year ago; the children were smaller, but they were definitely the same kids. The background was a park playground, the trees surrounding it brilliant in autumn shades of russet and gold. The sky was the same deep blue she'd seen just that morning, and everyone was dressed in blue jeans and sweaters. There was Clark Kent, this time holding the little girl astride his shoulders. One of his hands rested on her shin to steady her. The other hand was on the shoulder of one of the boys, who was perched on Lois's back, piggy-back style while the other boy hung almost upside-down, his legs straddling Lois's hips and her arms supporting his back, while Lois was bent over, looking up at the camera with a wide smile while balancing the boy in front and the one on her back.

The joy and the intimacy of that picture were unmistakable. This was the couple of work colleagues whose kids were playmates. This was a family. Her family. She had a daughter. She had two sons. And she had... Oh. My. God.

She was up the stairs in two heartbeats. She followed the sound of running water and burst through the master bedroom into the bathroom. Clark was sitting on the edge of the tub in his shirtsleeves, just turning off the faucet, and he looked up with a startled expression as she blurted out, "You...you...you're my husband!"

Smoothly he rose and came to stand in front of her, taking her two hands in his, as he gently replied, "And you're my wife." He brought her hands up to his mouth and kissed her knuckles, his eyes never leaving hers. "Now, will you please tell me what is going on? You haven't been yourself ever since those punks attacked you at lunch time. Were you hurt worse than you let on?" She shook her head, but she let him lead her out of the bathroom to sit on the edge of the queen sized bed, still holding her hands in one of his, his other hand resting around her shoulders in a half-embrace.

There was no avoiding it now. She had stepped too far out of character, and it was time to come clean. She took a deep breath

and began, “I haven’t seemed like myself because I don’t know how to be myself anymore.” He pulled back far enough to see her face and gave her a confused little frown. He didn’t understand yet, so she forced herself to say it plainly. “I’ve lost the last ten years of my memory.”

His confused frown mutated into wide-eyed shock. “Lois! You’re kidding! Oh, honey!” He released her hands and pulled her into a tight embrace. Then he pulled back again, clearly not sure such intimacy was welcome any more. His concern for her was obvious, and she found herself unburdening herself to him.

“This morning when I woke up it was 1993. I was single, I had my job, which I was good at, and that was pretty much it. Then, next thing I know, it’s 2003, Arnold Schwarzenegger is governor of California, I’ve got kids I don’t even remember having, and Superman says I’m his wife, but it turns out that really I’m yours. And I barely know you, but it feels so right I know it must be true.” He was pulling back even farther now, and she reached for his hands again, needing to maintain physical contact. “Part of me knows that I’m yours and you’re mine, but I can’t remember how we got here and I don’t know if I can be the person that everyone expects me to be.”

He gave her hands a tight squeeze. “Oh, Lois! I’m so sorry! What happened? Are you injured?”

“No. Physically, I’m fine. I just can’t remember anything.”

He reached for her again, but changed the movement in mid-course, bringing his hands to rest gripping the tops of her arms. “Lois, this is a shock. But, whether you remember it or not, you *are* my wife, and I will do whatever it takes to help you get your memory back. I know how scary this is, but we will beat it.”

“How can you be so sure, Clark? I’m not sure of anything right now.”

Clark rubbed one hand on the back of his neck and gave a frustrated sigh. “Lois, I am upset; I hate that you have to go through this, and it feels really strange knowing that I know you as my wife but you don’t know me as your husband. But I’m not too worried. That’s because I know something you don’t. We’ve both been through this before, Lois, and we’ve both recovered. So I’m confident you will recover again.”

His face took on a look of grim determination. “Besides, Lois, do you know how many contacts we have? We have the President’s personal cell phone number. One of the best researchers in North America is our family physician. Lois, I will call in every marker I have if that’s what it takes to get your memory back. And, believe me, I have a lot of markers, and so do you.”

This was definitely not the naïve farm boy Lois knew. Whoever he had become in the last ten years, Clark Kent spoke like a man who knew he had power and wasn’t afraid to use it. She felt a sudden infusion of hope as realized she couldn’t have chosen a better ally if she’d tried.

He had brought up the physician. She didn’t like that idea. “I don’t want to go to a hospital yet. I just don’t have a good feeling about it.”

A small frown creased his brow, as if he was thinking something through, but then he reached for her hands again and said, “Well, it may surprise you, but I agree with you. For now. The last time you lost your memory you did go to a hospital, and let’s just say it’s not an experience we want to repeat. But when I lost my memory, I was told to just hang around with familiar people, in familiar places, and it came back to me in a few days. So, my suggestion is that we try that first. We’ve got the whole weekend. Let’s just hang around the house, or we can try an outing to a favorite place or two if you’re up for it. Hopefully your memory will come back on its own.” She nodded slowly.

“But if it doesn’t, we can’t wait too long. I don’t care about work; you’ve got more sick leave built up than me, and that’s saying something. But the kids will be back on Sunday evening.

They’re still little, Lois. They won’t understand why their mom doesn’t know them. So, if you still don’t remember anything by Saturday afternoon, we’ve got to get you some professional help.”

Reluctantly, she nodded her agreement. Neither of them seemed to know what to do next, and the silence was getting uncomfortable before he spoke again. “You said you don’t know me very well. I can leave you in peace if that would make you more comfortable, but I think it would be best if I were at least available to answer any questions you might have. If your memory doesn’t start coming back in a couple of days, we can talk about other options then. And, I know you’re exhausted tonight, but in the morning I want to hear exactly what happened, okay?”

“Okay.” She hesitated to mention it, but he had been so understanding and supportive, she felt he deserved to know. “Clark, it’s true I don’t know you well. In my memory, we’ve only known each other for a few weeks. I wouldn’t even call us friends, really.” She gave a half-hearted shrug. “Truth is, I wouldn’t call anyone a friend. Not really.” He was looking worried now and she tried to smile for him. “But I can tell, just from being with you tonight, you are a good husband. I’m glad you’re here.”

He returned her smile with a braver one of his own and squeezed her hands again. She found herself wishing he would hug her instead. He’d been more comfortable with her when he hadn’t known about her memory loss. “Any time, Lois. I’ll always be here for you. And we will get through this. Together.”

Clark took a deep breath and let it out, trying somehow to move this whole situation forward. He clapped his hands on his thighs and stood up, saying, “Now, how about that bath before it gets cold? I’ll lay some PJs out for you, and I’ll sleep in the boys’ room. You could use a good night’s sleep, and in the morning we’ll figure out what to do next.”

“No!” The protest escaped before she could stop it.

He had started toward the bureau, but he turned back, his eyebrows rising in question at her outburst. She was just as surprised as he was, but she found she couldn’t let him leave. She felt shy again, but a panic was tightening her throat at the thought of being left alone, even if he was just down the hall. She knew it was irrational to feel so clingy for someone she had just met, but she was emotionally exhausted and way past rational.

“Clark,” she was pleading now, but she couldn’t help it, “my world is completely topsy-turvy. There’s so much I don’t know. But you have been an anchor ever since you showed up at the ceremony tonight. Please, don’t go. I don’t really want a bath. And I don’t want to be alone. Stay? Please?”

He was back beside her in an instant. “Of course I’ll stay. I love being with you. I just didn’t want to make you uncomfortable. I know you didn’t like me much when we first met.”

Lois’s mouth made a wry twist. “I don’t know; I think maybe I liked you a little too much for comfort. But, in any case, we haven’t just met, have we? We’ve known each other for ten years; we have three children together! I don’t think we should pretend that we don’t know each other. I think we should act as normal as we can. That’s what’s supposed to help my memory come back, right? Now, if I still had my memory and I hadn’t spent all evening freaking out, what would we be doing right now?”

“Um…” She looked him in the face in time to see the blossoming of a furious blush.

“Oh. Right. Of course. Well, I’m not sure I’m ready to act that normal yet.” Now she was blushing, too. “Would you settle for a hug tonight?”

“Lois, I’ll take a hug from you any time.” He suited his action to his words. “And tonight what *you* need is a good night’s sleep. You take the bathroom first—your stuff is all in the left-

hand cabinet. I'll find you those PJs and we'll both turn in, okay?"

"Sounds like a plan."

Lois carried the proffered pajamas into the bathroom and set them on the closed toilet lid. She peeled off her dress and stockings and slipped into the pajamas. This felt so weird. She hadn't shared living space with anyone except Lucy since college. Even then, college room-mates were careful to keep to their own territory, even if that territory was half a dorm-room. But this—this was completely different. For one thing, she was uncomfortably aware that there was only one bed in that bedroom.

But even here in the bathroom, there were so many signs of casual intimacy. As she reached to let the water out of the bathtub, she noticed her shampoo and conditioner standing on the corner of the tub along with another brand she never used. There were two sinks—as Clark had said, "hers" was on the left. There was a jar of her favorite skin cleanser and a bottle of her moisturizer on the counter next to it, along with a bottle of liquid soap. Near the other sink was a matching soap bottle, a bottle of after-shave, and a black comb. On the counter between the two sinks stood a single tooth-brush rack with a half-used tube of toothpaste and two toothbrushes; pink on the left and green on the right. She washed her face and reached for the pink toothbrush. There was only one hand towel. She supposed they must share. <So what? He's your husband! You're about to share a bed with the man and you're worried about sharing a towel?> She was starting to wonder whether she should have let him sleep down the hall after all.

When she was ready <as ready as I'm going to be> she picked up the dress and the stockings and cautiously poked her head into the bedroom. Clark was standing at the open closet, hanging his tuxedo jacket and wearing black sleep shorts and a gray t-shirt. Wow, he looked good! He pulled a padded hanger from the closet and reached for her dress. He took the stockings as well, and zipped them into a small net bag before tossing it into a laundry basket on the floor of the closet. He turned from hanging her dress in the closet and caught her staring.

"What?"

Lois blinked. "Nothing. It's just that I've never seen a man so...comfortable with women's...things before."

He smiled as he ducked into the hallway to turn off the lights. "You've seen it plenty; you just don't remember. We've been married for seven years, Lois; I have plenty of experience with women's things."

He headed into the bathroom and didn't bother to shut the door as he brushed his teeth and washed his face. <Yep. Same towel.> There was an awkward moment as he emerged from the bathroom and headed for the bed. Lois had been standing in the same spot since he had taken her dress from her. She just didn't know what to do next.

Clark noticed her discomfort and immediately repeated his offer to sleep in the boys' room. She was tempted to take him up on it, but she knew she only had the weekend to jog her memory before her children <Don't think of that!> returned, and she wanted to keep things as normal as possible.

So she found herself lying next to Clark in a queen size bed, looking up at the ceiling and holding perfectly still so as not to accidentally touch him. After five interminable minutes, she was startled to hear Clark say, "Roll over."

"What?"

He turned to face her, his head propped up on one hand. "I feel ridiculous; we haven't been this awkward with each other since the Honeymoon Suite at the Lexor...never mind. Just roll over onto your stomach and I promise to behave myself."

Slowly she complied, folding her arms under her cheek, looking away from him because she was too shy to face him.

"Now, all I'm going to do is rub your back and maybe stroke your hair, just like I did earlier on the sofa. If it makes you uncomfortable I'll stop, but this is how I usually help you unwind when you're too upset to sleep." As he spoke, she felt his hands pull her long hair away from her face and smooth it down her back.

"Really? You do this a lot?"

"Well, you used to unwind by downing half a tub of chocolate ice cream, but this is more effective and doesn't require a trip to the gym afterward."

She let out a sigh that was half shudder. "This is so weird. You know me so well, and I don't know you at all."

"You do, Lois. You know me better than anyone. And it will come back to you. I know it will. Now, you don't have to talk unless you feel like it. You can just close your eyes and drift off to sleep."

She tried to do just that. His touch was so soothing, with a slow, gentle rhythm. Her breathing slowed and her mind quieted as she tried to let go of the day's events and just focus on the feel of his hand on her hair. But every once in a while a stray question would pop into her head, and she just had to know the answer.

The first one wasn't really earth-shattering; she just wanted to know. "Cla...ark?" she began, speaking in a hushed tone and dragging his name out almost into two syllables.

"Yeah?" he answered softly.

"How did Jimmy Olsen know where my kids are? I mean, Alice asked, and I didn't know. Then you answered for the boys, which makes sense now, but then Jimmy answered for the little girl. We were friendly before, but it just seems like we're closer now."

"We are. Jim knew where Lara is because she's at his house. Jim and Lucy were married five years ago. They have a little girl Lara's age."

"Tina."

"Right. So, Lara's having a slumber party at Aunt Lucy and Uncle Jim's house."

"Wow. I never would have predicted that one."

He chuckled softly. "No, there's a lot of things in the last ten years I never would have predicted."

She was quiet for a while, and then, "Clark?"

"Yeah?"

"You said we've been married for seven years, right?"

"Yep. Seven years and two days. Monday was our anniversary. That's why we have the long weekend off."

"And we have three kids? How did we manage that? I mean, I know how we had kids, obviously. What I'm wondering is, how did we have three in seven years? Lara's not a baby."

"Ah. That one's easy. Well, it wasn't easy at the time. The boys are twins. Sam and Jon. They're five-and-a-half, and Lara just turned three."

"Twins! Yikes! I can't imagine!"

"Yeah, it was a bit of a shock. But we had a lot of help. Your mom, my mom and dad, Lucy and Jim. We didn't do it alone. And we still have lots of help. Lucy was never the ambitious career type and she loves being home. Even before Tina was born, she took care of the boys at her home while we were at work. Now the boys are in kindergarten, but Lucy still takes care of Lara during the day and the boys take the school bus to Lucy's house after school. We pay her, which helps Lucy and Jim make ends meet and allows Lucy to be home with Tina. We try not to work as many late nights as we used to, but we can cover for each other when we really have to work late, so one of us is almost always home in the evening. If we have a real crisis, there's usually one grandma available."

"I can't imagine leaving my children with my mother."

He let out a soft little laugh. "I couldn't either, ten years ago. Your mom has mellowed over the years. She's better at

grandmothering than she was at mothering. I think she learned a few things from watching my mom with the kids. My mom's a natural, and so's my dad. And, your mom's been sober for years, so that helps a lot."

Clark knew about her mom's drinking problem. Well, of course he did, he was her husband. It just kept taking her by surprise how much he knew about her life when she couldn't remember much of anything about his.

They were quiet again, and Clark's strokes were growing softer and slower paced when Lois thought of a question so obvious she couldn't believe it had slipped her mind for so long. "Clark?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Why would Superman say I was his wife? I mean, I know I didn't imagine it. We had a whole conversation about meeting at the office or at the ceremony. And he called me 'honey' and 'sweetheart' and told me Perry was looking for me and my phone was off. And he kissed me. Why would he do all that if we're not married?"

Clark's hand had frozen as soon as the word 'Superman' was out of her mouth. Gently he turned her over to face him. Tenderly he brushed her hair back from her forehead, took a deep breath, and began, "That one's a little trickier to explain. Just hear me out, and try to remember that at the time I thought you already knew this, okay?"

He looked worried. Whatever he had to say, he obviously didn't expect her to like it, but she nodded her head.

"It's kind of a case of mistaken identity. You see, Superman rescued you from the thieves and handed them over to the police officer. But then, once you were alone, it wasn't Superman you were having that conversation with; it was me."

"What? Clark, you're not making any sense."

He let out a sigh and tried again. "Superman is not your husband, Lois; Clark Kent is. Superman is a persona; a way of using certain abilities in public without the whole world realizing that those abilities actually belong to... Clark Kent. As soon as we were alone I dropped the persona and I was having a private conversation with my wife. But you didn't know that, so you thought you were still talking to Superman."

She was staring. She knew she was. She could see him clearly even in the low light filtering in the window from the street outside. Now that she was facing him, she noticed that he had taken his glasses off, and he really did look a lot like... "Superman. *You are Superman.*"

His mouth made a wry twist and he let out another sigh. "Not really. But, yeah, Superman is part of me. So is the Clark Kent that most people know. But he's not all of me, either. It took me a while to figure that out; I used to say that Superman is what I can do, Clark is who I am. But you helped me see that the real me is a bit of both." Lois was wide awake now, every ounce of her mental energy focused on digesting this latest revelation in a day that seemed one long string of revelations.

"Look, Lois, everyone has a public persona that is not entirely the real them; no one is exactly the same person at work that they are at home or with their friends. I'm no different. Except that I have two jobs, and two public personas. Superman is the public face of the powers, and because of that he must always appear in complete control of his emotions. Otherwise the existence of a man with those powers would be terrifying for the general public. Clark Kent is a well-known reporter, with no hint of superpowers. Otherwise we would never have a chance at a normal life. The whole me, the person I really am inside, is known to very few people—people I can trust and people I am willing to burden with this secret; because it is a burden, Lois, but it's worth it."

He paused to gauge her reaction, but she made no reply, just stared at him in rapt attention, so he continued.

"You know, obviously. My parents have always known. Dr. Klein at STARLABS knows because he's also our family physician. We told Jim and Lucy when they became godparents and guardians for our children. And Perry at least suspects, but we've never discussed it explicitly. As far as I know, that's it. We'll have to tell the children when they're older, but they won't be ready for years.

"I won't lie to you, Lois. It's not easy being Superman, and it's not easy being married to him either. It makes our lives complicated. It means you have a husband with two demanding jobs. It means I have more than the typical struggle to balance work and family. And having a secret this big is isolating. It means there are very few people we can be completely honest with. But, at least so far, we've both always thought it was worth it. And, I have told you this before, but, since you don't remember, I will tell you again," he was looking her straight in the eye now, willing her to understand. "You are my wife. You are the most important person in my life. If you ever told me that it was too hard being married to Superman, that you couldn't be happy with this life, Superman would retire. You and our children come before anyone else. Superman is not mine. He's ours. And he only exists as long as you and I both feel that he's worth the cost."

Wow. The lights were slowly turning on in her head as the implications of everything he'd said starting registering in her brain. Not only was she married to Superman (although she understood what he meant about her really being married to Clark), she also held a great deal of power over him as well.

Clark Kent loved her. And because of that love he was willing, at a word from her, to set Superman aside. She had the power to destroy Superman.

"Clark, I'm stunned. I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. Lois, you've had a huge day, with a lot of stress and a lot of new information to process. Why don't we both try to sleep; there's no place we have to be in the morning, and we can just take things one step at a time."

"Yeah, okay." She was surprised to find that, instead of her mind whirling with questions about Clark and Superman, her mind seemed to be shutting down. Sleep sounded really good right now.

But, as she settled further down into her pillow and closed her eyes, she felt like something was missing.

"Clark?"

"Yes?"

"Don't you kiss your wife goodnight?"

"I thought you'd never ask." And he did. And it was beautiful, tender and sweet. And, safe in her husband's arms, she slept.

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Lois woke with a vague feeling that something delightful had happened, mixed with a niggling sense of anxiety. As she slowly surfaced from sleep, she remembered why: she had discovered, in one amazing day, that she had found what she had always secretly longed for and feared she could never have; she was loved. Truly loved by an amazing man. But that love came with a set of responsibilities that she wasn't sure she could live up to. It had felt so wonderful to sleep curled up in his embrace. But now morning had come, and it was time to face her new life head-on.

And she hadn't the first clue how to go about it.

Just then she felt a gentle squeeze from Clark's arm, which had been draped across her waist from behind.

"Hmm... Morning, beautiful." He was starting to nibble at her right ear, still only half-awake. She rolled to face him, and his eyes popped open wide. He immediately released her and sat bolt upright.

"Lois! I'm sorry! I wasn't fully awake!"

She sat up as well. She was probably as embarrassed as he

was, but he looked so guilty it was positively endearing, so she scooted over to tuck herself under his arm. “Clark, don’t apologize. I think this is a wonderful way to wake up.”

Relieved, he gave her a half-hug and kissed her forehead. “I’m glad to hear it; I was afraid I was going to get my head handed to me.” After another little squeeze, he suggested, “I’ll use the bathroom first and get the coffee started.”

As she listened to the sound of the shower running in the next room, Lois stretched and looked around the bedroom. She’d been too pre-occupied the night before, but now as she waited for her turn in the bathroom, she tried to familiarize herself with her own home. She didn’t recognize most of the furnishings. It made sense, she thought, that they would want new furniture for their shared home; things that were neither hers nor his, but theirs.

The furnishings were nothing fancy—the bed, of course, two matching nightstands, each with its own clock radio and reading lamp. On her nightstand lay a hair barrette, a casual watch with a leather strap, a Danielle Steele novel and a book by Thomas Freeman called ‘The Lexus and the Olive Tree.’ Clark’s held his cell phone, a handful of loose change, a paperback novel by Terry Pratchett, and a book by Brian Greene, ‘The Elegant Universe.’

Her old loveseat sat near the one window, someone’s robe thrown over the back. One wall was taken up with a wide closet with two sliding doors. Against another wall stood a low dresser, wide enough for two sets of drawers side-by-side. The top of the dresser held her jewelry box, an assortment of small, Shaker-style covered boxes, and a framed photo.

She got out of bed and moved in for a closer look. She let out a startled gasp and picked up the photo. It was a wedding picture. *Her* wedding picture. Hers and Clark’s. There were her parents, his parents, Perry and Jimmy, a man she didn’t recognize <must be the minister>, and, right in the center with the happiest looks she had ever seen, Lois and Clark. She felt a bittersweet swell of emotion. This picture represented the childhood daydream of true love that, as an adult, she had given up on ever finding.

Yet, obviously, she had. But she couldn’t remember it. Everything she was finding out about her life pointed to an amazing love story. She was just so frustrated that she had lost it. In her mind, it was as if it had never happened. A single tear escaped to slide silently down one cheek.

She didn’t notice Clark’s approach behind her until he placed his hands on her shoulders and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. She put the photo back in its place and turned around to face him. This caused her to come face to...not face...with a slightly damp and definitely stunning and very naked chest. She took a step backward and tried to pull her gaze up to Clark’s face. She noted thankfully that his lower half was wrapped in a sea-green towel. When she finally managed to look at his face, she saw that Clark was fighting to suppress a smile. When he couldn’t contain it anymore, he grinned at her and said, “Lois, it’s okay. I’m your husband; you’re allowed to look.”

She was reminded of the one and only other time she remembered seeing Clark in a towel, and she mumbled to herself, “I said nine. I thought you’d be naked.”

Clark burst out laughing. She had forgotten about his super-hearing. He was just so natural with her, so un-hero-like, that she found it difficult to merge the reality of Clark and the image of Superman into one person. She gave him a sheepish grin and rolled her eyes, happy to have a joke they could share together. “Yeah, well now I know how you can eat like an eight-year-old and look like Mr. Hardbody.”

“Yep. Now you know. Just let me throw some clothes on and I’ll get that coffee started.” He reached into a couple of drawers and pulled out a pair of boxers, jeans, and a long-sleeved cream-colored Henley shirt.

Lois backed away toward the bathroom. She gestured awkwardly as she stammered, “I’ll just duck in there so you can

have some privacy.”

“No need, Lois. Don’t rush. Watch this.”

Oh no. He wanted her to watch him dress? Married or not, she was not ready for this! But before she could protest, or move into the bathroom, he became a blur of motion and in the next moment he stood before her, completely dressed, holding the towel. As he walked past her to hang the towel in the bathroom, she could almost swear he winked at her.

Clark headed downstairs to the kitchen and Lois was left alone to shower and dress. Standing in the shower, looking at the unfamiliar controls and trying to get the water temperature just right, she was momentarily overwhelmed by the sheer newness of everything around her. Nothing was routine. She had to think about every single step along the way. Even a simple thing like washing her hair was different. She needed three times as much conditioner as she normally used just to coat this mane. And how was she ever going to get it dry?

With a mental start, she realized what she was doing. She was focusing on the trivial so that she wouldn’t have to think about the overwhelming fact that *she didn’t know if she could do this!* Last night it had felt empowering to think that she was actually married to Superman. Now it felt terrifying. He himself had said that it was a difficult life. Worth it, but still difficult. Was she up to the job? He obviously thought that she was. He had a lot of confidence in his wife. The trouble was, whatever she had learned over the last ten years that enabled her to be that person, she had completely forgotten.

As she wiped the steam from the mirror to reveal her new, older face, she squared her shoulders and gave herself a stern look. “Come on, Lane. What other option do you have? You have to do this; therefore you can.”

Striding determinedly down the stairs a few minutes later, dressed in blue jeans and a cinnamon-brown v-neck sweater, her long hair uncomfortably damp down her back, Lois was greeted by the delicious aroma of fresh-brewed coffee. As she entered the kitchen, Clark put down his newspaper and stood up from the breakfast table. He smiled at her as he poured her a cup of coffee, added sweetener and creamer, and set it on the table next to a small breakfast plate. She was about to take a seat when he took her by one elbow and said “Hold still.”

Before she could reply, he stepped behind her and she felt a wave of warmth envelop her back, shoulders, and the back of her head. Her hair was completely dry. As Clark sat down at the table, he simply said, “Heat vision. Doesn’t frizz it like a blow dryer and you won’t be walking around in a wet sweater all day.”

The table was set for two. A small glass of orange juice sat in front of each plate, next to the coffee mug. In the center of the table stood a dinner plate piled with pastries and a large bowl of fruit salad. Lois helped herself to a chocolate croissant as she sat and took a bite.

“Clark! This is amazing! Where did you get it? I’ve never found anything this good in Metropolis!” A thought occurred to her and she continued, “Wait, don’t tell me you actually flew to Paris for breakfast?!”

“Actually, I only flew to Chicago. But the couple who run the bakery are from Belgium, so it is semi-European. Indirectly, at least.”

Lois gave her head a shake. “I can’t believe I’m having this conversation. This is just so weird.”

“It works for us, though,” Clark replied with a smile and they ate in companionable silence until Lois remembered something.

“Wait a minute! A good horse is like a member of the family?”

Clark laughed, and replied, “Busted; that was Shanghai. I’d only been in town for a week. I had no idea where to get good Chinese food in Metropolis, but I so wanted to impress you.”

“Clark, I am the queen of take-out. If I’d known you could

fly it in from anywhere on the planet I might not have told you not to fall for me.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he replied around a bite of fruit salad, “you were a week too late as it was.”

“What do you mean?”

Clark’s face became serious and he reached to place his hand over hers. “Lois, I fell in love with you the moment you came bursting into Perry’s office during my first interview. It wasn’t the same love that I have for you now; I’ve grown to love you more and more as we’ve grown up and grown together over the years, but it was love. I knew right then and there that I just had to get to know you. That’s why I wrote up the mood piece that you didn’t want. I just had to get Perry to give me a chance; I had to find a way to be near you.”

“You’re kidding! You knew that early? Clark, those early days are so fresh in my memory. Besides yesterday, they *are* my memory of you. And, seeing how you treat me now, I’m ashamed of how I’ve been treating you the last few weeks. That is, the last few weeks that I remember, you know what I mean.”

“It’s okay, Lois. That water is *way* under the bridge. It took a while for you to realize that I wasn’t another Claude. Or Paul, or Sam Lane. You’d been hurt, and you were protecting yourself in the only way you knew how.”

“And you weren’t scared off. Most men would be.”

“I’m not most men. And you’re not most women. I could see who you were hiding underneath that prickly exterior. Maybe because I was hiding something, myself. Take off your wedding ring.”

“What?”

“Take it off; read the inscription.”

Lois pulled off the gold band and held it under the light. In tiny script, she read “CK to LL 10-6-96. I have loved you from the beginning.”

“Clark! That’s beautiful!” She put her ring back on and helped herself to a large scoop of fruit salad. The obvious question arose in her mind. “What does your ring say?”

Smiling, he took his ring off and handed it to her. In the same tiny script, she read “LL to CK 10-6-96. I will love you till the end.”

Was that true? Did she love him? She hardly knew him. Yet, sitting across the breakfast table from this near stranger, she felt less like a stranger than she could ever remember feeling before. Even as a girl, before her parents split up, she could never remember feeling this much at home. What was it about Clark Kent that made her feel that her layers of self-protection, so carefully built up and maintained over the course of a lifetime, were utterly superfluous?

They were. That’s what it was. For the first time in her life, she was in the presence of another person whom there was absolutely no need for her to impress. She didn’t have to be any particular way for him to respect her. Whatever she might have once needed to prove to him had been proven long ago. Last night she had been a complete and utter wreck, not because she had chosen to trust him but because she had had no conscious choice; she had simply reached the end of her ability to hold herself together. And he had shown his regard for her by his reaction. He loved her. That was crystal clear. It showed in his every word, every look, every touch. And, in the face of that obvious love, she couldn’t help but love him back.

And she needed to tell him so. She handed him back his ring, and as he reached for it she grasped his hand in hers. “Clark, there’s a lot I don’t know about my life, but I do know you love me, and I love you, too.”

He squeezed her hand and replied, “I know you do, Lois. And the rest will come back.” He leaned across the table to kiss her reassuringly.

At that moment, a wave of panic tried to overwhelm her as

she remembered just what “the rest” included. She beat it down by sheer force of will. She didn’t have any choice. This was her life now, and she had to learn how to live it.

“Yeah, well, it had better come back soon, Clark, because I can tell you right now that I don’t know how to do any of this.” Her expansive arm-waving took in the light airy kitchen, the house, her whole life. “I barely made it through one afternoon at work, and that was only because everyone was too pre-occupied with the Metro collapse to pay much attention to me. I bluffed my way through the dinner conversation, but as it is you and Jimmy had to take up the slack. And, Clark! We have children! I don’t even know how to be a decent friend, let alone a wife or a mother. I don’t do well with relationships, Clark, and I don’t do well with kids; how am I going to handle three kids who think I’m their Mommy?” Okay, so maybe that wave of panic hadn’t been beaten down so far after all.

“Lois, calm down. You can do this.” At her disbelieving look, he continued, “I felt the same way when I lost my memory. The whole world was desperately searching for Superman, waiting for him to save the day, and my parents showed up and told me that I was him. I had no idea how to be Superman.”

“What did you do?”

“I remembered. You helped me remember. And you will remember, too. Lois, you *do* know how to do all of those things. You’re a terrific reporter, a wonderful wife, and an amazing mom. It’s all in there, somewhere. We just have to find the key to let it out. Now, why don’t you tell me exactly what happened yesterday morning?”

So Lois related her encounter with the stranger and his memory-erasing machine. Clark drew in a sharp breath when she told him the man’s assumed name, but he let her finish her story.

As she continued, he began combing the fingers of one hand through his hair in what seemed to her a nervous gesture. When she finished, he stood up without a word and took a couple of turns about the kitchen.

Lois was completely nonplussed by this reaction. Up until now, he had taken everything in his stride, but her story seemed to have thrown him for a loop. Lois didn’t know how to respond to this sudden change in his demeanor. She just turned in her seat so she could keep an eye on him and waited for him to stop pacing.

Finally, he came to a stop in front of her and leaned back against the kitchen island, one hand planted against the counter on either side of him. Taking a deep breath, as if he were steeling himself for an unpleasant task, he spoke. “Lois, I’ve made a terrible mistake and I owe you a tremendous apology.”

“Clark? What are you talking about? You’re scaring me.”

“I’m sorry, Lois. This is my fault. I should have asked for more details last night. I should have realized sooner. You don’t have amnesia. John Doe didn’t erase your memories. He wouldn’t know how.”

“Of course he did, Clark! How else would I have lost all knowledge of the last ten years?”

“You didn’t, Lois. You didn’t lose any knowledge at all.” She started to argue again, but he kept talking. “John Doe’s real name is Tempus. He’s from the future. I’ve dealt with him before.

He can’t erase memories—as far as I know, anyway. But he can travel through time. That machine you described sounds like a soul-tracker. From what you’ve told me, I believe that Tempus traveled back to 1993 and switched your consciousness... with my wife’s.”

“What? Clark, I thought I *was* your wife! What are you saying?” She was on her feet now, too worked up to sit still.

Clark approached her then, one hand cupping her cheek in a tender gesture, desperate apology written all over his face. “I’m saying that you are the woman I fell in love with ten years ago.

But you’re not the woman I married. My wife’s

consciousness...her soul, if you will, was switched with yours. So, you ended up in her body ten years in your future, and she ended up in yours, ten years in her past.”

Lois shook her head in denial, causing his hand to fall away. “What? Why? Even assuming that this...Tempus...had some machine that was capable of doing such a thing, why would he want to? What does he get out of it?”

Clark threw his hands up in frustration. “What does Tempus ever get out of anything he does? He gives us a royal headache, which is all he seems to care about. He’s a psychopath, Lois; he’s not rational.”

Lois could feel a lump forming in her throat. It had been such a beautiful fantasy, but now the bubble was bursting. He didn’t love her after all. He wasn’t her husband. He wasn’t hers at all. That’s why he was suddenly keeping his distance. She wasn’t his wife, wasn’t the woman he’d thought she’d been when he lavished all that warmth and affection on her. A bitter tear of disappointment trickled down one cheek.

“Hey, come here.” He held his arms out to her. That look of concern was back.

She went timidly into his embrace. She didn’t really belong there. She was usurping the rightful place of his wife. But she needed him. And he still seemed to care about her, at least a little. At the moment, she’d take what she could get.

And that very thought grated. What was the matter with her? Ever since she’d stepped out of that stupid newsstand yesterday morning, she’d been accepting whatever this new world threw at her without question. She’d been reacting, not acting, and that just wasn’t her style. New data had been coming at her so fast that she hadn’t been able to get her feet under her, to get ahead of the wave. And she’d felt that she had no choice. But not any more.

Lois pushed herself out of Clark’s embrace and stood up straight. “You know, what, Clark?” She began her own circuit around the kitchen, her arms gesticulating wildly as she spoke. “I have had it. I have just had it! Who does this creep think he is? Two days ago, I was perfectly content. I had my trendy little apartment with my sister; my job, which, by the way, I am damn good at; and a junior partner, who, to be honest, was sometimes a bit of a flake. Oh, yeah, and a huge crush on the new celebrity in town. Then, thanks to Mr. ‘I’m-Going-to-Screw-with-Lois-Just-for-Kicks,’ I’m suddenly dumped here in Wonderland, where my sister is married to the office gofer, my crush is my husband, but, no! He’s not! Oh, wait, yes, he is, but he’s not just the celebrity. That annoying side-kick partner turns out to be this Mr. GQ Reporter with more Kerths than even I’ve got, except no, I’ve actually got more, I just don’t remember them. And he’s good to me. We’re talking Ivory-Tower-Hero-You-Could-Write-a-Romance-Novel-About-This-Guy good. And, by the way, come Sunday there’s going to be kids involved, so I hope you can bone up on the Mommy stuff real quick, Lois. And, just when I’m starting to love this life that I didn’t want and never asked for, he yanks it all away again! Well, that just pisses me off!”

Her pacing and her tirade came to a stop at the same time. She looked at Clark, only to see a broad smile that, at the moment, didn’t seem the most appropriate response to their situation.

“What?! What could you possibly be smiling about?” she demanded.

“You, Lois. Mad Dog Lane. *This* is why I fell in love with you.”

“You’re kidding. That’s just plain weird.”

“Nope. It takes a will like yours to put up with all the craziness of our life. Now, come on, I think it’s time get you back home.”

“What, you have a time machine and a...soul tracker?...in your pocket?”

“No, but I do have some ideas about how to contact...” he broke off, suddenly grasping her by the shoulders to keep her from running into the living room, where, through the open doorway, they could both see a line of bright light spreading into a square, through which stepped, “...Mr. Wells.”

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Act Two: Flashback

Lois Lane was ticked off. She’d been looking forward to this weekend for months. All the preparations were made. Even Superman had taken vacation time. And all it took was one obsessed psychopath with a piece of stolen technology to spoil it all. If only he’d followed his usual pattern. A show of firepower, a long smug monologue. Maybe she would have been able to disarm him and yell for her husband. But, no! All she’d had was one glimpse of the villain, just long enough recognize his smirk, before she was swept away in a flash of light and a wave of dizziness.

<Great! Just great! Leave it to Tempus to ruin our first weekend alone in two years! Okay, Lois, get a grip. You know the drill. Figure out where you are or when, then take it from there. Mr. Wells will be along soon to get you back home.>

She reached down to smooth her skirt, then up to smooth her hair in her usual nervous gestures. Wait a minute; something was different. She looked down at her clothes. She remembered this suit. She’d owned it years ago, but it hadn’t fit since she was pregnant with the twins. And her hair was short; it curled under above her shoulders in the simple page-boy cut she wore in her twenties. She placed her hands on her hips as she thought. Even that every-day motion felt different. She ran her hands along her waist and over her hips. Yes, it felt like she’d suddenly dropped a size or two. Reaching into her shoulder bag—<the one I lent to Lucy and never got back>—she pulled out her compact and took a peek. Yep. Her face looked years younger. And that make-up! Orange went out of fashion years ago.

<Well, here’s a new twist. Not only have I changed time—or dimensions?—but I seem to have changed bodies as well. At least it will be easy to blend in wherever—or whenever—I am.>

Alright, it was reconnaissance time. She needed to figure out two things: was she in her own dimension or an alternate one; and was she in her own time or, as she suspected, had she been thrown into the past? She was looking around her, trying to get her bearings, when a decidedly boyish Jim Olsen hurried up the street and grabbed her by the elbow.

“Come on, Lois! The Chief said not to bother stopping at the office first. The place is going to be a mob scene. We’ve got to leave now if we want a good spot. If we don’t hustle I won’t be able to get any good shots.”

Okay, this sounded familiar. This was a typical Lois-and-Jimmy-go-to-a-press-conference kind of conversation. Half-jogging to keep up, Lois followed Jimmy down the block and around the corner and helped him to clear a path through the crowd to stake out a position right in front of the podium.

This didn’t feel like a typical press conference, though. It was more like a cross between a press conference and a carnival. A Superman carnival. The air was full of helium balloons in the garish red, blue, and yellow of Superman’s suit. The street on either side of the platform was crowded with vendors hawking all sorts of Superman merchandise. And the usual crowd of reporters was joined by civilians of all ages, including several children.

As she was trying to place this scene in her memory, a tall, handsome man strode onto the stage wearing a custom-made suit and a very large key on a ribbon around his neck. Lex. At the height of his power. He was joined by a woman Lois recognized as the former Deputy Mayor of Metropolis.

Now she knew where she was. This was her own dimension; she remembered being here ten years ago. Superman had made his debut only a few weeks earlier, and he was about to be given

the key to the city. By his worst enemy. Of course, she hadn't caught that little bit of irony at the time, but she did now.

Pulling a reporter's notebook and pen from her bag, Lois stepped into her young-and-eager-reporter role. <Starring Lois Lane-Kent as the Young Lois Lane> she thought in wry amusement. Then she heard the excited murmur of the crowd and followed their gazes upward to see a *very* young Superman slowly descend to land awkwardly on the platform. Superman seemed dazed by the crowd. For just a moment, he wore the deer-in-the-headlights look that she had seen so often in her early days with Clark. He covered his discomfort with a typical Superman pose, placing his hands on his hips, but then he changed his mind and crossed his arms across his chest as Lex Luthor stepped to the microphone and began the proceedings.

"Oh, Clark! You really were a babe in the woods, weren't you?"

She had meant to keep her musing to herself, but she realized that she had spoken the thought aloud, at least to Super ears, as Clark's eyes instantly met hers and a frown briefly creased his brow before he resumed his carefully neutral hero face.

This was not good. She couldn't afford to let on to anyone, and especially to Young Clark, that she was any different from the Lois Lane of this time. She didn't know how long it would take Mr. Wells to notice the discontinuity in the time line, and she needed to preserve the original time line intact. Her future life depended on it. No more mistakes; from now on, she had to act, speak, *think* like the young woman she had been ten years ago.

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Clark Kent felt like a fish out of water. Here he was, dressed in an embarrassingly revealing costume, surrounded by what could only be described as a lot of Superman hoopla, in front of dozens of reporters. And not only reporters; ordinary people as well, all of them there to see him. Well, not him really; nobody was here to see Clark Kent. No, they were here to see Superman, the newest, shiniest celebrity in Metropolis. Every eye was on him, and he wanted to sink into the stage floor and disappear. He was fidgeting, he could tell. He needed to get a grip. <Think confident. Think tall. Think steady.> And then he heard it.

"Oh, Clark! You really were a babe in the woods, weren't you?"

It was only a mumble, inaudible to any ears except his own, but it had come from the lips of Lois Lane, who was looking straight at him.

<Oh, Lord, she knows! How can she know? Who am I kidding; how could she *not* know? How did I ever think a tight suit and a pair of glasses would fool the best investigative reporter in the country? No, the real question is what she intends to do about it. This could ruin everything.>

Somehow he made it through the rest of the ceremony, but he knew he looked as flustered as he felt. Through a sheer act of will he managed not to stare at Lois. He didn't want to let on that he had heard her. Information was power, and right now he needed all the power he could get. He thought about confronting her, but what if he was wrong? If she didn't know, if she'd been thinking of something else when she made that cryptic remark, he certainly wasn't about to blow his own cover. No. He needed to watch and wait, to confirm what Lois might know, but he would be keeping a close eye on his colleague from now on.

Clark's first chance at testing his hypothesis came at the Planet staff meeting later that morning. Most of the staff were already seated when he arrived, and, as had become their custom, they had left an empty seat for him next to Lois. Clark took his seat and looked around for Perry to begin the meeting, just like normal. But his senses were completely focused on Lois Lane. On the outside there was nothing out of the ordinary. But her heartbeat had quickened as soon as he sat down. Just like it always did when she encountered Superman. And it jumped again

when Cat Grant sat in his lap and kissed him. So, either Lois had developed a sudden attraction for Clark Kent, or she knew he was Superman.

There was another slight burst of excitement from Lois when he had to leave briefly to rescue a small plane. Again, he never would have suspected anything if he hadn't been already listening for her heartbeat. So, if she did know, as seemed more and more likely, she was trying to hide it. Why? Why was she not shouting it from the rooftops—or rather from the front page? The most ambitious reporter he knew was sitting on the biggest story of the decade—why?

Proof. That had to be it. She knew, but she had no proof. She must be waiting, biding her time until she could find the evidence she needed. If he was really lucky, she only suspected the truth. Maybe, if she couldn't find the proof she was looking for, she would decide that her suspicions were incorrect. But, since this was Lois Lane, she wouldn't be just sitting around waiting for the evidence to fall into her lap. She would be digging for it. Which meant that he would have to be more careful than ever, and he would have to watch her as closely as he could without her catching on. Oh, boy, this was getting complicated.

For the rest of the day, the pattern was the same. On the outside, Lois was her normal headstrong opinionated self, arguing with Clark at every step of their investigation of an "invisible" Robin-Hood-turned-hoodlum. But, on the inside, she had strong reactions to two subjects; Superman, which made sense if she knew or suspected the truth, and (which made no sense at all), marriage. Whenever the topic came up in discussing Allen Morris's relationship with his wife, Helene, Lois seemed strangely aware and uncomfortable. No one without super senses would have known, but Clark was looking for anything unusual, and he could tell.

Then, at the charity bachelor auction that evening, Clark didn't know what to think. It was the first time Lois had seen Superman since the ceremony that morning, and he was looking for her reaction. He had already noticed that she was aware of Clark's presence in a similar way to her usual awareness of Superman, but now the opposite seemed to be true as well. She bid for the date with Superman, and she acted disappointed when she lost, but her heart just wasn't in it. It was as if she didn't really want to win a date with her hero, but was going through the motions for show. Then, when he appeared as Clark to try to comfort her, she acted as if she could only think of Superman, but her pulse was racing at Clark Kent's nearness. What was going on in Lois Lane's head?

Over the next days, Clark began wondering what was going on in his own head as well. He knew that Lois was at least suspicious of him, that she was hiding something from him, that she was just as focused on him as he was on her; in other words, that she was dangerous. But he still couldn't resist the attraction, the fascination he felt for her. He loved working with her, the way their strengths complimented each other. He enjoyed the way she teased him, poking fun at his willingness to believe in an invisible man. He noticed the real concern she had for the Morris's relationship. Then, one evening on his balcony, as Allen Morris slept on Clark's sofa, the conversation turned personal. As Lois was talking about the things she had longed for as a child—"something I don't have, can't have," she'd said—he could see that she was on the brink of tears. Before he could give in to the temptation to pull her into his embrace, she turned the conversation back to him, but he knew what he had seen. Lois had a soft side, though she tried not to show it. If only she would let him in.

What was he thinking?! Let him in? No, he needed to keep as far away from Lois Lane as he could. That woman was Trouble with a capital T. And yet, he was drawn to her in a way he didn't understand.

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<Come on, Herb, where are you?>

It had been several days since Lois had been transplanted into her young, single self, and she was not enjoying it. She missed her kids, she missed her house, she missed the professional and social status that she had become accustomed to over the years. But, most of all, she missed her husband. It was torture spending every day in close proximity to the young man who would become—but was not yet—the man she was married to, the man she worked seamlessly with every day, the man she fell asleep with at night and woke up to in the morning, the father of her children and her best friend, the man who shared ten years of history with her and seven years of the ultimate intimacy that was marriage. She was exhausted from the stress of trying to remember what she had done and said every moment of every day ten years ago. She was anxious to get back to her family and her real life. And she was lonely. She had almost forgotten how lonely her life was before Clark.

And now, she was also bored. She was sitting in the vault of the Metropolis Gold Depository, waiting for Superman to burst through the wall and save her and Allen Morris from slow suffocation. The first time this had happened she had been petrified, but now that she knew that Clark was on his way with a large bag of phosphorus, she was just plain bored out of her skull.

What was taking Mr. Wells so long? She'd placed personal ads in the Planet asking him to contact her. "LLK needs to talk to HGW" was pretty specific, she thought. If any of his research assistants were keeping an eye on the Planet archives they would bring it to his attention. Maybe she was going about this all wrong. She was trying to preserve the time line so that she would have the future she loved to go home to, but maybe Mr. Wells wouldn't know to come help her unless something changed. But if something changed, her whole future could disappear, and it was that future she wanted to get back to. But maybe Mr. Wells wouldn't know to come help her unless something changed. <Wait a minute...didn't I just say that?...I mean think that...I mean...woozy...need to rest...need air...need to...Clark...need Clark...need...>

"Clark!"

There he was, bursting through the wall just like before, holding her in his arms as she gulped down the fresh air that flowed through the space left by his spectacular entrance. His head bent over her. He was going to kiss her, she could tell, but at the last minute he turned his head away, turning the kiss-that-wasn't into a hug. Why had he done that? She wanted so badly to kiss him.

"Clark?"

Then, frowning, he was lifting her, cradling her against his strong chest as he had done so many times before. Gratefully, she lowered her head to his shoulder. His spandex-clad shoulder. Oh, yeah, that was why he couldn't kiss her. They were in public, and he was...

"Superman!"

As he carried her out of the vault and into the fresh air, her thinking cleared and she remembered not only who he was, but also who—or rather when—she was. In her disorientation, she had reverted to her normal self, and she couldn't remember exactly what she had said. Had she given too much away? What had her younger self said after Superman rescued her the first time? Oh, yes.

"How did you manage to make Barrow and his gang visible?" Or something along those lines, wasn't it? But he wasn't answering her. He just looked down at her with that same frown still on his face and, without a word, carried her up into the Metropolis sky.

Oh, oh. This was not good. She knew this hadn't happened before. She had said something wrong, and now she was going to

have to explain it to one very concerned young Clark Kent. <No, not Clark, he's not Clark in that suit, he's *Superman!* Remember that!>

She saw almost at once where he was taking her. Her apartment. Ah, yes. Just the place for Superman to have a private conversation with Lois Lane. Her living room window was open, and Superman carried her through it and deposited her—not as gently as he might have, she couldn't help noticing—on her old white loveseat. Then, rather than inquiring after her welfare, or making a quick exit out her window, he did something very un-Superman-like. Something very Clark-like, in fact. He paced.

About every two turns he would look at her, open his mouth as if about to speak, close it again, and continue pacing. Finally, after half a dozen turns about her very small living room, he stopped directly in front of her.

Kneeling on the floor in front of where she sat with her feet tucked under her, he placed both hands on the front of the sofa seat, one on either side of her, effectively, if unconsciously, trapping her where she sat. And he began to plead.

"Lois, that's twice this week that you have called me 'Clark' when I'm dressed like this. I don't know how you found out, or what your intentions are, but I am begging you: please don't print what you know."

He really was begging, and it killed her so see him so powerless. If she could bluff her way through this, maybe he would decide he'd been jumping to conclusions. "Superman, I don't know what you mean. I don't know anything beyond what you've told me in interviews, and you know I wouldn't print anything without clearing it with you first."

In answer, he reached behind his back and pulled out a battered wallet. When he placed it carefully in her lap, it was open to a photograph of Jonathan and Martha. "Please, Lois, if not for my sake, then for theirs."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Superman. And what are you doing with a picture of Clark Kent's parents?"

She saw her mistake when his face went pale.

His pleading look was replaced with a scowl. "How do you know what Clark Kent's parents look like?" he demanded. "Have you been investigating them as well?" His voice was shaking, but he took a breath and got himself under control.

He rolled his eyes heavenward and heaved a sigh. He stood and took a few more pacing steps while he decided on his next move. Turning back to Lois, he tried a new tack. "Lois, you know I have superhuman hearing. I can hear your heartbeat. Did you know that? And, God help me, I can pick your particular heartbeat out in a crowded room. I know that you have been lying—to me and to a lot of other people—for the last few days—ever since the ceremony with the Deputy Mayor and Lex Luthor. I know that you have been anxious when you should have been calm and calm when you should have been surprised. I know that you have reacted to Clark Kent's presence in the same way that you have Superman's. And I know that you are lying to me now. So, I'm asking you again: Please, tell me what you know, how you know it, whether anyone else knows, and what you intend to do about it." He was back to that spot in front of her again, leaning toward her, practically nose-to-nose.

The gig was up. How had she ever imagined that she could fool this man? But she still had her family, her children, her future to protect. Only now, she was going to need his help to do it. She couldn't give him the whole truth. She only hoped that what she could give him would be enough.

Gently, tenderly, she reached for his hands and pulled him down to sit beside her on that damned uncomfortable loveseat. Still holding his hands in hers, she turned to face him, took a deep breath, and began.

"Clark, you're right." She felt him flinch, but she tightened her grip on his hands and went on. "I do know who you are. But

please believe me when I say that I have absolutely no intention of publishing your identity. I can't tell you how I know."

"Lois," he began, but she preempted him.

"Clark, please. I know you are desperate to protect your secret. I know you fear for your family. And your privacy. I promise, I would never do anything to endanger your folks, or to expose your secret. But I have secrets of my own, and my family is in just as much danger as yours if my secret gets out, even to you. So, I'm asking you to trust me. I can't tell you how I know, but I can assure you that no one else knows and that your secret is safe with me."

He hesitated, not truly satisfied with her answer, but in the end he seemed to realize that he didn't have another option. Reluctantly, he nodded his acquiescence.

"All right, Lois. I don't like it, but I don't see that I have much choice. What do we do now? Can we just pretend that you don't know? That this conversation never happened?"

"Not only can we, Clark, we must. For my family's sake, we have to pretend that Lois Lane has no clue that her greenhorn work colleague and her hero in a cape are one and the same man."

"Why..." he began, but she cut him off again.

"Please, Clark, I can't say any more than I have. I only hope I haven't said too much already."

Finally he nodded. "All right, Lois. I'll play along for now. But I still don't like it."

That was probably as good as she was going to get, so it would have to do. She stood up, drawing him with her by one hand before letting him go and heading for her front door. "Come on then, partner, we've got a story to write." As she began working her way down the row of locks, she turned back to add, "You might want to change first."

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Lois was as good as her word. For the next few days, she behaved exactly as if Clark Kent and Superman were two separate people. Or, at least, she never treated Clark Kent as if he were Superman. Clark hadn't seen her as Superman since that cryptic conversation in her apartment. If he wasn't still watching her closely, he might have come to doubt that conversation ever took place.

As it was, he was sure that he was the only person who caught the subtle changes in her heart rate when she talked about Superman: "I don't even know if Superman gambles," and—he still didn't know why this was such a touchy subject—marriage. Or maybe it was partnership. She'd been giving Perry White her best arguments about why a partnership between Lois Lane and Clark Kent would never work. "Partnership is like marriage..." she'd said, and her pulse gave a little jump. But afterwards, when he was teasing her and reassuring her that it wouldn't be that bad, she had countered that it would, but he could tell that she didn't believe her own line. Why was she pretending to be adamantly opposed to this partnership when he could tell that her prediction of doom was a lie?

He was relieved to see that her well-known admiration of Superman didn't stop her from arguing with Clark just as strongly as ever. She obviously got a kick out of putting him in his place in their debate over the Mason-Rodriguez fight. And she egged him on to get in the ring with Tommy Garrison. But then she was genuinely concerned when it looked like they might actually come to blows. To everyone else it looked like she was concerned for Clark's safety. But she could have been just as concerned for Garrison's safety, or at least for Clark's secret. And she was right; Clark had to control his temper or he could easily hurt someone, or at least give himself away.

On their way out of Mencken's Gym they ran into Sam Lane. That was a very strange conversation. Both Lois and Dr. Lane were obviously uncomfortable. It seemed as though neither of

them knew how to act around the other. Clark remembered the remark Lois had made in her apartment, 'I have secrets of my own, and my family is in just as much danger as yours if my secret gets out.' Did her secret have something to do with Dr. Lane? Was the doctor in some kind of danger?

Part of him wanted to press her for more information; he wanted to help. But another part of him remembered that whatever Lois was hiding involved Clark as well, and he just wasn't sure he could trust her. After all, she had recognized the photo of Clark's parents, which meant she had been doing some serious investigation of Clark Kent. He wasn't ready to trust her, at least not completely, and since he couldn't offer his own trust to her, he didn't feel he could ask her to confide her secrets to him.

If Clark was waffling over whether to risk a more open stance with Lois, a chance remark from Jimmy Olsen helped him make up his mind. Clark was on his way back to his desk with a cup of coffee one afternoon when Jimmy asked, "Hey, CK, any luck on that source Lois is trying to track down?"

"What source?"

"You know, that HGW she keeps advertising for?"

"HGW?"

"Never mind." Jimmy seemed to realize that Clark wasn't in this loop, and he tried to back out, but Clark wasn't about to let him off the hook.

"What do you mean by advertising?" Clark fixed Jimmy with his most authoritative Superman gaze. It lost something through the glasses, but it was good enough for Jimmy Olsen.

"Umm, well, it probably isn't anything important. It's just that Nancy—the cute redhead in classifieds?—well, she mentioned that Lois has a running personal ad: 'LLK needs to talk to HGW.' Nancy only asked me about it because she was wondering why it was 'LLK' instead of just 'LL'. So, I figured LLK was a new code name for Lane and Kent."

"Oh! That source! Nope, we haven't heard back yet, but it was a long shot anyway. Nothing for you to worry about," Clark lied.

"Okay, well, like I said, it was no big deal. I'll catch you later, CK."

Normally, Clark would think nothing of Lois contacting sources on her own. But this time, with the big deal Perry had made of teaming them up together, and his own worry about what Lois was hiding and what she planned to do with his secret... well, he might be a little paranoid, but it just didn't feel right. He wondered whether he should risk upsetting the apple cart by asking Lois about her ad.

As luck would have it, Lois took the decision out of his hands. As the last stragglers were leaving the office that evening, Lois approached Clark's desk.

"Hey, partner, it's getting late and we've still got a ways to go here. How about you rustle us up some Chinese take-out and we move this party into the conference room?" Her request sounded casual, but her heart was pounding.

"Dinner sounds great, but how about eating at that new Mexican place down the street? They're pretty quick, and we'd still have plenty of time to finish up here afterwards."

Lois leaned in and spoke for his ears only. "Actually, I'm expecting a phone call here, but I really need to talk with you first. Privately."

"Oh. I see." Or he hoped he would see, if she was finally ready to confide in him. She sure seemed nervous about it. "Sure. I'll be back with the food in two shakes."

When Clark returned with half a dozen steaming bamboo containers, he found Lois pacing nervously around the conference room table. A few files and computer print-outs were strewn haphazardly on the table, but Clark knew they were just for show. Lois Lane had something on her mind, and it was

making her more anxious than he had ever seen her before. Clark had just bitten into a dumpling when Lois finally stopped pacing and faced him, both of her hands planted on the table and her eyes meeting his with a direct gaze.

“There’s a serious flaw in my plan, and I need your help deciding what to do about it.”

Clark swallowed the dumpling and set his chopsticks down, giving Lois his undivided attention. “Okay. Shoot.”

“Alright, Clark. The first thing you need to know is that I am not the Lois Lane you know.”

Clark blinked. “Come again?”

Lois straightened up, lifting one hand to tuck her hair behind her ear. “The Lois Lane that you know, the one that belongs here, doesn’t have a clue that you are Superman. You need to know that because when she returns you have to keep your secret. That’s the first problem with my plan—you have to know that she doesn’t know what I know.”

“Slow down, Lois. You’re losing me. You say you are not the Lois Lane that I know. Then who are you, and where is the Lois I know?”

“Not where, Clark; when. I am your Lois, but ten years older. That’s how I knew who you were. The morning of your ceremony with the Deputy Mayor, I was taken from my own time and switched with your Lois. I can only assume that she has been thrown forward in time, just as I have been thrown backward. Ever since then, I’ve been trying to act like her, to be the person I used to be, because my future depends on preserving the time line as it was, but I’ve realized that I can only do that if you help me. When I finally get back home, and she gets back here, I can’t have you letting on to her who Superman is. She’s not supposed to know yet.”

This was too much. Clark didn’t know what Lois was trying to pull, but he didn’t like being taken for a fool, and he was getting angry.

“Hold on there, Lois. I don’t know what you’re playing at, but you can’t expect me to believe that you are a time traveler. A. Time travel is impossible, and B. There is no way you are suddenly ten years older. I would have noticed. Now, what’s really going on here?”

“Clark, I know this seems far-fetched, but you have to believe me. Time travel is possible; we’ve both done it before. That is, in my before...never mind. And, no, I don’t look ten years older, because somehow Tempus—that’s the guy who switched us, long story—switched our minds, or souls, or however you want to put it, and not our bodies. And I don’t know how it works, so don’t ask me.”

She had started pacing again, but she stopped and looked him in the eye, her hands gripping the back of one of the conference room chairs. “Clark, you said last week that you could tell I was lying. I know I’m upset now, but that’s because this is a crucial conversation. But if you think you can still tell the difference, try me. Ask me anything you like. I promise I won’t lie.”

“Alright, then, Lois. Here’s your chance.” It was Clark’s turn to lean across the table. He and Lois were practically nose to nose. “Who is HGW, and why are you advertising as LLK instead of LL? Why are you looking for him, and how did you know what my parents look like? What’s the secret that is so dangerous to your family, and what does it have to do with me? I don’t know what to think anymore, Lois, and I need the truth!”

Lois let out a breath and dropped wearily into the chair. Realizing that he had been crowding her, Clark drew back and sat down as well.

“Okay, Clark, you’re right. You deserve to know the whole truth. And, besides, I have a huge decision to make that involves you as much as me. So, here goes: HGW is Herbert George Wells.”

“The writer? Why are you advertising for a dead man?”

“He’s only dead part of the time.” Lois gave a wry half-smile. “He’s the one who started this whole time-travel business, but Tempus is the one who makes trouble with it. Tempus threw me back to this time, and I’m assuming that he threw your Lois forward to mine. I’ve been waiting for Mr. Wells to show up and bring me back home. But I expected he would have arrived by now and he hasn’t. If he doesn’t show up soon I don’t know how I’m going to get back home. That’s why I’ve been placing the personal ads; I’m hoping someone in the future, where Mr. Wells likes to visit, will notice the ads in the Planet archives and send him back here. But I’m starting to think that I’ve been too subtle. Usually he shows up when he notices a change in the time line. I think I’ve just been too good at keeping it the same.”

Clark was shaking his head in disbelief. When she paused he said, “This has got to be the strangest story I’ve ever heard. But I can’t find any signs that you’re lying. So, keep going. Why LLK?”

“So Herb would know it was me and not your Lois placing the ad. LLK stands for my married name.”

Clark’s eyes widened in surprise. “You’re married? In the future?”

“Yes, Clark, and that’s where this huge decision comes in. In...” —she glanced at her watch—“...twenty minutes, I’m going to get a phone call from Allie De’Nello.”

“The guy who called you Pumpkin?”

“Yeah. Clark, he’s like an uncle to me. He’s known me since I was in braces and pigtails. He’s going to ask me to meet him about a tip. But, in the original time line, as he was crossing the street to meet me, he was killed. The cops called it a hit and run, but I know it was a hit. He was taken out because he knew too much.”

“So you want Superman to save him?”

“No! Or yes!” She was standing again, wringing her hands in frustration. “Clark, this is the huge decision. Do I keep the timeline the same and let my friend die, or do I save his life at the risk of losing my own future?”

Clark blew out a long breath. “Lois, I’m no ethics expert. But, since you’re asking, I guess I have to ask, what is there in your future that might be worth a man’s life?”

Lois’s hands dropped to her sides and she stood up straight. He was not prepared for the intensity of the gaze she turned on him, nor for the deadly seriousness of her voice as she answered him in one powerful phrase:

“My children.”

She took a deep breath and repeated, “My children, Clark. If I change this timeline, I don’t know what effect it will have. I don’t see how Allie has anything to do with my marriage or my children, but how can I know for sure? Clark, Allie is my friend, and maybe if I were a better person I wouldn’t hesitate to save his life, but you have to understand that there is very little I wouldn’t do to save my family.”

She started moving again, pacing and running her hand through her hair as she thought out loud. “But it’s not that clear cut. It’s not as simple as Allie versus my kids. If it were, God help me, Allie wouldn’t stand a chance. But it’s not. It’s Allie’s life versus some small but unknowable *risk* to my kids’ very existence. And then there’s the issue of Mr. Wells. I really thought he’d have shown up by now. I’m getting the feeling that my very carefulness *not* to change the timeline is keeping him from realizing that I’m here. I’m thinking that he won’t show up to bring me home until I *do* change it. Argh! I hate time paradoxes!”

Clark had been frozen in place, just watching this ball of energy pace to and fro, away from him and back again, and trying to follow her reasoning, all the while trying not to give in to the urge to melt into a puddle of despair. His own future, the one he had hardly let himself dream about, the one that involved slowly earning Lois Lane’s trust, befriending her, hoping that,

eventually, she would come to feel for him some small echo of what he felt for her, was crumbling to dust.

She was married. She had children. She was, forever and always, off limits. She belonged to another man, and she would never be his.

He snapped out of his reverie as she approached him again, stopping this time to grasp his hands and implore him, as if he could solve her dilemma for her, “Clark, what should I do? What would *you* do?”

How was he supposed to answer a question like that? His heart wanted to scream “Save Allie! Change your future! Give me a chance to be in it!” Of course, he couldn’t actually say that. Looking down into Lois’s anxious face, he knew she was agonizing over her choice. What she needed now was not a suitor; what she needed was a friend. And, even if he could never hope to be anything more, he could still be a friend. So he tried to distance himself, to look at the dilemma objectively. The certainty of one man’s life versus the possibility of eliminating two (or more) people’s very existence.

A phrase from the Bible flitted through his mind: “It were better for that man if he had never been born.” What would it mean to have never been born? It wouldn’t be like being killed, would it? You wouldn’t be gone. You never would have been there in the first place. Was that bad? Not as bad as dying, certainly? But then, the pain of death wasn’t about the dead person anyway, was it? It was about the people left behind to grieve. And, even if no one else ever knew, Lois would know that her children were gone. It would be just as bad for her. How could he advise her? Who was he to tell her what to do? Why was she even asking him?

He tried to be gentle with his answer. “I’m sorry, Lois. I can see that this is tearing you up inside, but I don’t think I can help you. You’re the one who has to live with the consequences. I think it has to be your choice.”

But, even as he said it, he realized that it wasn’t really true. Now that Clark knew of Allie’s danger, Superman had a duty to save him. It wasn’t up to him to guarantee Lois Lane’s future happiness at the price of an innocent man’s life. He was opening his mouth to say so, when he realized Lois was speaking again.

“Actually, Clark, it isn’t only my choice.” She collapsed into a chair, rubbing her face with both hands before looking up at him again. “Because I’m not the only one who has to live with the consequences.”

He dropped into the chair next to her, both of them sitting sideways to the table, facing each other.

“I know, Lois. Allie...”

But she was still talking. “Because they’re your children, too.”

<What?!> “What?!”

“My children, Clark. My family. They’re not just mine.” She was looking at him with a strange combination of anxiety, tenderness, and sheepishness. She laid one hand gently on his trousered knee. “They’re ours.”

“What are you saying, Lois? That I’m your...that you’re my...” He remembered a crucial detail from earlier in the conversation. “LLK. Your married name is Lois Lane...” He needed to hear it from her.

“...Kent.”

And in that moment, he watched as her face transformed. He had caught glimpses of the inner Lois Lane before, in unguarded moments when she was excited about something and her joy leaked out before she could stop it. But never before had she willingly, unashamedly opened herself freely to him. Her smile was wide and her eyes shone. The mask was gone, and there she was, the Lois that he had suspected was hiding under there all along but had never expected to see so soon. And she was just as beautiful as he had imagined.

His heart soared. Seeing that face, it never occurred to him to doubt her story. He had hoped. He had planned to chip away at that mask, to earn her respect, then her friendship, and eventually try for something more. And now, all at once, he had it. Her trust, her admiration, her love, all shining out of those beautiful eyes. And all for him.

He wanted to do something. He should do something to cement this moment, to capture it forever and give it substance. To cross the threshold from what had been into this glorious new reality. Touch. He needed to touch her. His love. His...wife. Almost in slow motion, his hands rose to touch her face. She didn’t flinch. She sighed and leaned into his hand with her cheek, placing her own hand over his. In breathy whispers, they spoke simultaneously. “Lois.” “Clark.” Only those two words, but that was everything.

Feeling suddenly shy, he hesitated, but he needed more. “Lois, would it be okay...Can I...I’d like to...”

She didn’t let him finish the request. She just granted it. She leaned toward him, closed her eyes, and kissed him, softly, tenderly, slowly. When she pulled away, she heaved a sigh of relief.

“God, Clark, I’ve wanted to do that all week. I miss you so much! I’m dying to get home.”

No. His heart came crashing back down with a thud. No, it wasn’t all for him. She wasn’t his. She was...His. His future self’s. He wasn’t her husband, wasn’t her lover. He was her... friend? Yes. And something more, but not enough. She wasn’t here to make his dreams come true. She was here against her will, and she was trying to leave. To go back to her world where she was His and He was hers. But he wasn’t Him. He was...Him-to-be? Not her husband, but her...fiancé? No. Her...stand-in? No, that wasn’t fair. He was her something, but there was no name for it. Something in-between. A friend-that-will-be-more-but-not-quite-yet.

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Lois saw his face fall. She knew why, but it couldn’t be helped. Still, her heart ached for him. For this young Clark with so much love to give and so long to wait before it would be returned in kind. She couldn’t give him what he so desperately wanted. She couldn’t give him a young Lois to love him back the way he loved her. But she couldn’t pretend to be the young Lois who didn’t love him, either. And she still had to decide what to do about Allie, who would be calling any minute now. Watching the young man in front of her struggle for control of his emotions, she made up her mind.

“Clark, look at me.” Her tone was as gentle as she could make it. When she knew she had his attention, she went on, “I know this is a shock. Maybe a happy shock, but maybe bittersweet as well. I know I’m not her. And you’re not Him. But you will be. And she’ll see it, Clark, I promise. She has a lot of love to give. And you are the one who will teach her that she *can* give it. I know it’s hard to wait. You couldn’t pay me to go through all that again. But it was worth it. For Him as well as for me. Be patient with her, Clark. You won’t regret it.” She squeezed his hand.

When he gave her a watery smile, she went on. “And no, I can’t be your love, but I hope I can be your friend.” She nudged his knee with hers. “Maybe even a very affectionate friend.”

The ringing telephone brought both of their thoughts back to the immediate problem. It was after hours, so every incoming call rang on every extension. Lois picked up the conference room phone.

“Daily Planet.” As Lois listened to Allie, she was watching Clark signaling that he had something to say as well. Lois held a hand up to Clark in the same ‘Can’t you see I’m talking on the phone and I may have two ears but I only have one brain’ gesture that she used with her sons at home. When Allie finished she

asked him to hold the line and pushed the mute button.

Seeing that he had her attention, Clark began, “Lois, I’m Superman. If Allie’s life is in danger, I can’t just stand by. I don’t want to risk your future...our future...any more than you do, but I don’t know how I could live with myself if I just let a man die.”

“I know, Clark. I know you have to help. It’s what you do, and it’s who you are. Besides, I think the point is moot. If it’s our relationship we’re worried about, I think this whole conversation has changed the timeline more than anything Allie’s likely to do in the future. And maybe Mr. Wells will finally notice something’s changed and come set things right.”

She held her hand up again and took the phone off mute. “Allie, I’m coming to meet you. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Be careful...Yes, I will be, too. See you soon.” She hung up the phone and headed for the door. “Come on, Superman, let’s go save Allie.”

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The next few weeks were positively surreal, both for Clark and for Lois. In some ways, it was like a long undercover assignment, only they were undercover as themselves. At the office, or anywhere in public, they did their best to act as if nothing had changed. Lois never let on that she was in on The Secret. She quarreled with Clark about horning in on her story on the Metros gang. She complained loudly about her greenhorn partner. She accused him of male chauvinism after he slapped her butt and dropped her in a dumpster. Clark argued with Lois about taking too many risks. He teased her unmercifully about her chicken costume and her cocktail waitress uniform. And he accused her of being jealous of Toni Taylor.

But in private, they dropped the act and were honest and open with each other. They both needed that down-time when they could just be themselves, and they took to spending almost every evening together, hanging out most often at his apartment. Lois told Clark in advance what she knew about the Toasters, their link to Toni Taylor and Toni’s link to Lex Luthor. They couldn’t use Lois’s inside information in their stories. They still had to gather the evidence that Perry would require before they went to print, and “Lois knows because she’s from the future” sure wasn’t going to cut it. Besides, they still weren’t certain whether they should be changing the timeline more than necessary. For now, they drew the line at saving lives, like Allie’s and Max Mencken’s, but otherwise tried to keep things as similar to the original timeline as they could.

But boy, all that inside knowledge sure saved a lot of misunderstanding and hurt pride that had gotten between the young Lois and Clark the first time around. And it saved Lois some discomfort and inconvenience. For one thing, she didn’t have to spend a night in a rat-infested warehouse in order to know what Toni Taylor and the Toasters were up to.

On the other hand, it also added some discomfort from other sources. It was nerve-wracking for Lois even to be in the same room with Lex Luthor, let alone act as if she were taken in by his philanthropist façade. And she didn’t dare share *all* of her Lex Luthor history with Clark. She was starting to wonder whether she should be doing something about Lex—something to bring him down earlier than had happened before. There were probably even lives involved. But that would be such a drastic change of the timeline, she just didn’t know what to do. She hoped that Mr. Wells would turn up soon. She’d never been stuck out of her own world for this long.

At least she could confide her troubles in Clark. She’d come to depend on the close relationship she shared with her husband. There were so few people who knew what their lives really entailed; they had no choice but to rely on each other. Not that they minded. She loved being married to her best friend. And, while this young Clark was not her husband, he was a good friend. It felt especially good to vent to him when she had Amy

Valdez living with her. Lois was much more confident in her mothering skills this time around, but she didn’t have personal experience mothering a pre-teen girl, and it was still tricky trying to gain Amy’s trust enough to get her to lead them to the other “Smart Kids.” And, it made her miss her own kids even more.

After a couple of weeks, Lois found herself telling Clark more and more about their future life together. She wasn’t completely sure that was the right thing to do. For one thing, just telling him about the future created a change in the timeline; the original Clark had no idea what lay ahead of him. But it was too late for that already. For another, it seemed a little cruel to dangle the vision of a happy home in front of this man who couldn’t have it yet. But he seemed to like hearing about their kids, and she missed them so much. There wasn’t anyone else she could talk to, and she needed to talk to someone or she’d go crazy. She didn’t talk to him about her husband, though—not in detail, anyway. That would just be twisting the knife.

Meanwhile, Clark was dealing with his own mixed feelings. It was a tremendous relief to be able to be honest with Lois. He loved the time they spent just hanging out together. He’d never had a friend with whom he could truly be himself. It was positively liberating. And she really was his friend. She alone, besides his parents, understood the pressures he faced just living his life. And she helped him bear the burden. She covered for him when he had to leave work suddenly. She encouraged him to be honest with her and with himself about the state of his own emotions when a rescue went wrong. She constantly reminded him that he wasn’t God and therefore couldn’t be expected to be everywhere or save everyone. And she was good company. His whole life he’d been so careful not to let anyone too close. It felt good not to be alone anymore.

But she was driving him crazy. He didn’t think she even realized how often she touched him. A hand on his shoulder, a pat on his chest, a proprietary linking of arms as they walked. She didn’t really mean anything by them. They were just common, everyday gestures to her. Maybe this was even how she had been with Him when they were first getting to know each other. But to Clark, who loved her and knew he couldn’t have her—couldn’t even hope to win her—it was torture.

She herself was probably a little confused about where exactly they stood with each other. When she talked about her children, she would sometimes slip in a phrase like “your son” or “our kids.” Yet she didn’t treat him as if he were really her husband. Because he wasn’t. He knew that. But sometimes, when they were watching a movie on his sofa or cleaning up the kitchen together in the evening, he could almost pretend that he was.

It was at one of those moments, when they were just a little too close and domestic together, that she first called him “CJ.” He didn’t think she even realized why, but he did. It was a reminder. That she had her own Clark waiting for her at home, and he wasn’t Him. As if he weren’t aware of that every moment of every day.

And where was Mr. Wells? Lois was starting to get desperate. She had been determined not to let anyone else in on The Secret, but at some point she was going to have to give in and track down Bernie Klein. He was the only person she knew who A. could be trusted to keep Clark’s secret and B. had some hope of inventing something which would allow her to signal Mr. Wells. Even that was a long shot. But she couldn’t just stay here forever. Hmmm...how long would it take Wells to realize that this Lois and Clark were not going to get married, let alone have kids... <That would put a damper on Utopia, wouldn’t it, Herb?> She wasn’t going to wait that long.

Looking ahead, she realized that she couldn’t allow herself to still be there when Miranda showed up with her pheromone perfume. This young Clark was not her husband, but he was very

attractive. After all, he was the man she'd first fallen in love with. She was completely faithful to her husband, but it was sometimes a little difficult for her to keep her distance from young Clark. As it was, she probably was more physically affectionate with him than was strictly proper. If she got sprayed, Lois might not be able to control herself, and it would be terribly unfair to expect poor Clark to keep her in check like he had last time. No, if she hadn't heard from Herb by the time she got back from Smallville, it would be time to initiate Plan B.

Smallville. That was a comforting thought. Lois was looking forward to a few days in her favorite get-away spot. She loved Martha and Jonathan like her own parents. She was closer to them than she was to her own parents. And, even though this Martha and Jonathan didn't know her yet, and even though she still had to figure out how to deal with Jason Trask, she was still anticipating the comfort of just being in their home for a few days and the warm welcome she knew she'd receive.

She was in for a rude awakening.

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Clark was tired. Most people thought that Superman never got tired. But, then, most people didn't have to live his life.

First, he had spent the entire flight from Metropolis to Wichita trying not to break Lois's fingers in his death grip. He hated flying. Commercially, that was. But they had to keep up appearances, and Perry White would be expecting their expense report to come across his desk with two plane tickets included. Then, Lois had spent most of the drive on the interstate trying to convince Clark that the time had come to deviate from the timeline in an attempt to flag down the elusive Mr. Wells. They were still debating the point as Clark pulled the rental car off the interstate onto the two-lane state highway that would lead them into Smallville.

"Lois, you're talking about our kids' future. There has to be another way."

"There may be, Clark. If Wells doesn't show up this week, I'm going to track down a scientist friend of mine. But Bernie doesn't know me yet, so I don't know how he'll react. And, even if he agrees to help us, there's no guarantee that he can. Even a genius like Bernie Klein is limited by the available materials and equipment. And I don't know enough about how the time machine works to be able to help him. Let alone the soul tracker. I would like to have my body back, and I'm sure your Lois would, too."

His Lois. Clark didn't really think of the young woman he had first met at his interview as His Lois anymore. By now, he'd known this older Lois for just as long. And, frankly, sometimes he thought he liked her better. But that was beside the point.

"I don't know, Lois, it still seems like an awfully big risk. I mean, we've put so much effort into preserving the timeline so that you even have a future to go back to. It just seems a shame to blow it all now. Maybe we should try a less subtle method of advertising for him first."

"That's no use, Clark. If he hasn't seen the ads we're already running, there's no reason to think he'd see anything else that would be subtle enough not to attract unwanted attention from someone else. And it's been so long. Even if we could keep preserving this timeline forever, what's going to happen when your Lois gets back? How is she not going to notice that six weeks have passed? I think we're already operating way off the map."

"Besides, I really don't want you exposed to kryptonite. You don't know how close Trask came to killing you last time. And your life wasn't saved by anything I did. It was Rachel Harris who shot Trask, and not a moment too soon. Ten seconds difference in the chain of events could be fatal, Clark. Our kids would have no future anyway because their father would be

dead!"

That stung. He thought they were friends. Now she only cared about his life because it would one day belong to her husband? She must have seen the hurt look on his face, because she hurried to reassure him.

"Clark! I'm sorry! I didn't mean that the way it sounded. You know I care about you, don't you? I want desperately to get home to my family, but, even if I could never go back, if I was stranded here forever, I'd still be your friend. You believe me, don't you?"

He sighed, "Yeah, Lo. I know you care about me. It's just not the same."

"I know, Clark." She reached over from the passenger seat to give his shoulder a little pat. "You'll have your Lois back soon, I'm sure. And one day it will be the same for you, too. You'll see."

Maybe. If he could get her back. And if he knew what to do with her once he did.

In an obvious attempt at lightening the atmosphere, Lois turned to look out at the passing sun-drenched fields and let out a contented sigh. "I can't wait to see your folks. I love your parents, CJ. They're just so...normal. I know they don't know me yet, but they're always so welcoming. It'll be good to be in Smallville for a while."

Clark hesitated. He hated to burst her bubble, but... "Um, Lois, I wouldn't get your hopes too high. I mean, I've told my folks all about you, and I think my mom has her back up. She doesn't believe you're really from the future, and she thinks you want something from me. So I'm afraid she might be doing the Mama Bear thing, if you know what I mean. She's going to take some winning over."

"Clark!" Lois gaped at him in shocked disbelief. "You told Martha I was from the future! What were you thinking?" Then she rolled her eyes in frustrated resignation. "Oh, wait, what was I thinking? You're the original mama's boy; of course you told her."

"Lois! That's not fair, and you know it. I am not a mama's boy. It isn't my fault that you and my parents are the only people I can really talk to." The next part would sting, but he was mad, so he said it anyway, "And it's not my fault that you can't talk to your parents, either!"

Lois could have struck back. Hard. But she didn't. She remembered that this was not her husband she was talking to. This was a younger man with a thinner skin who had been a good friend to her for the last several weeks, despite how difficult it must sometimes have been for him. And besides, she could see from his expression that he was already sorry he had lashed out at her. She let the anger go.

"I know it's not, CJ. I'm sorry I hurt you. You're right, you're not really a mama's boy. I still wish you hadn't told them, though. Martha Kent with her back up is not a pleasant prospect."

"Yeah, Lo, tell me about it."

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"I don't understand, Martha. If you are so sure that this Lois Lane person is out to swindle Clark somehow, then why are we inviting her to stay with him at our house? Surely she can get a hotel room, Corn Festival or no." Jonathan Kent was packing his grilling gear—apron, long-handled spatula, tongs, plenty of paper towels—into a canvas bag while his wife loaded the dishwasher.

Martha looked up from her task to answer her husband.

"Because, Jonathan, I'll be able to keep an eye on her better if she's here. She's had Clark to herself for weeks now, feeding him this nonsense about time travel, and he's eating it up. I don't know what's gotten into that boy, but I intend to put a stop to it once and for all."

"I don't like it any more than you do, Martha, but Clark is a grown man. And, apparently, there isn't much he hasn't already

told her. You know that I didn't want him telling anyone about what he can do. You know how strongly I warned him against it. But, as far as Lois Lane is concerned, the cat is out of the bag. It's too late to change that now. At least she hasn't published what she knows."

"Yet. I just don't trust her, Jonathan. You heard how Clark was talking about her, even from the first day he met her. Our boy has fallen hard. And at first I was all for it. It's about time he finds someone to love. But not this one. She's up to something. I just have to find out what. And that is why she's staying at our house." Martha closed the dishwasher and started the cycle. Jonathan picked up his bag and took the keys to his pick-up truck from their hook.

"Well, come on then, Martha. My turn at the grill starts in twenty minutes."

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Lois was feeling even more out of place than when she first arrived in this time frame. At least the people in Metropolis knew who Lois was, even if they didn't know how old she was. Here at the Lowell County Corn Festival she was surrounded by familiar faces—Maisie Garver, Helen Randolph, Pete Ross's folks, Sarah and Dennis. She even knew most of the kids—they were teens in her day, but she could still recognize them. The trouble was, not one of them had a clue who Lois Lane even was. Not even her best friend in Smallville, Rachel Harris.

At first, Lois had argued for skipping the Festival altogether and heading straight for the Kent farm. But Clark had pointed out that his folks would be at the festival and it might be more politic to wait and let them be the ones to show Lois around the house. Besides, even if they didn't really need to go looking for Wayne Irig, they needed to look like they were. They might need Rachel's help later, and it would be good to lay the groundwork now.

What she had really wanted to do was bulldoze her way straight past Carol Sherman at the Irig farm and catch Jason Trask in the act of kidnapping. But Clark checked in on Wayne with his enhanced vision and, though he looked uncomfortable, he wasn't injured. Trask could just claim that Wayne was being questioned about the supposed pesticide contamination. They were unlikely to be able to make any charges stick.

So now Lois was striding through the Smallville town square on her way to meet Martha Kent. And she was not looking forward to it. As they drew closer to the barbeque area where Jonathan was manning the grill, Clark intentionally put his arm around Lois's shoulder. If they were going to have to face a hostile Martha Kent, they were at least going to present a united front.

Martha saw them before they saw her. "Clark!" she called out to her son as she dashed up to enfold him in a welcoming hug. Clark smiled as he returned her greeting, then stepped aside to reveal Lois standing on the other side of him. For a moment Martha was surprised. She'd expected Lois Lane to stick out like a sore thumb, a city slicker in a business suit in the midst of the hometown crowd. But she looked like every other young woman at the fair in her blue jeans and casual shirt.

"Mom, I'd like you to meet Lois Lane. Lois, my mother, Martha Kent."

Lois gave her warmest smile and held out her hand, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Kent."

The warmth left Martha's face in a rush. It was a cool hand and a cool greeting that met Lois's. "How do you do, Miss Lane." Oh. So, that's the way it was going to be.

Jonathan was a little more welcoming than Martha. But not by much. Clearly, he was taking the wait-and-see approach. Lois was walking on eggshells all evening. She barely said two words during the barbeque supper that the four Kents shared. <I'm still a Kent, even if they don't know it,> Lois thought stubbornly. She

was glad for the time alone in the car with Clark as they followed Jonathan's pick-up truck out to the farm after supper.

As soon as they all entered the Kent house, Martha lost no time in getting herself alone with Lois. "Clark, why don't you and your father put the packages away and make up the sofa bed? I'll show Lois upstairs to your room." It was a transparent ploy, but the confrontation was inevitable, and Lois gave Clark a brave half-smile as she turned to follow Martha up the stairs to Clark's old room. She set down her overnight bag and closed the door behind them.

Martha cut right to the chase. "Now, Miss Lane, while my son is otherwise occupied, you and I are going to have a little chat."

Lois walked to the nightstand and turned on the radio as loud as she could and still be able to hear Martha talk. <Just great,> she thought as sounds of banjo and mandolin filled the room, <The Back Porch Bluegrass Show is just what I need right now.> At Martha's startled look, she remarked in a low tone, "If you want to talk, Mrs. Kent, we will talk. But since I'm assuming that we will be talking about the world's champion eavesdropper, the least we can do is attempt a little audio camouflage." Lois sat cross-legged on the bed and faced Martha. "Okay, Mrs. Kent, what can I do for you?"

Martha stood with her hands on her hips and faced Lois head-on. If Martha was offended by the direct approach, she didn't show it. But she did return it in kind. "You can tell me how you found out about my son and what you want from him."

It was a fair question, and Lois couldn't really blame Martha for asking. She tried to keep her tone non-confrontational. "What I want is to go home to my husband and kids, but so far I'm not having much luck on that front. As to how I found out about Clark's other job, I believe Clark has already told you how, but I don't think you believe him."

Martha raised a skeptical eyebrow. "That you're his devoted wife come back from the future? No, I don't. I'll tell you my best guess. I think that you somehow discovered Clark's secret, realized that he was already half in love with you, and decided, for reasons I cannot begin to imagine, that feeding him this cockamamie story about time travel and a family-to-be would somehow give you a better chance of landing Superman for yourself."

If Lois were in Martha's shoes, this would have been her best guess as well. She knew that Martha wasn't a naturally suspicious person, but she could be fierce in defense of her family, just as Lois herself could be. Lois hated being at odds with this woman whom she loved, and who was usually her staunch ally. She hoped she could convince Martha of her truthfulness and win her over. She was certainly going to give it her best shot.

In her most reasonable voice, Lois tried to explain, "Mrs. Kent, I know my story is outlandish, but please hear me out. If my story weren't true, what would I possibly gain by making it up? As you have just pointed out, Clark was already falling in love with me from the moment we met. If I had discovered his secret and decided that I wanted Superman for myself, I wouldn't have needed to make up this implausible story in order to get him. You know how much he's always wanted a wife and family. If I were who you think I am, the Lois Lane that Clark first met, and I wanted him for myself, we could be well on our way down that road by now. As it is, I already have a husband. I'm not out to steal your son's heart, Mrs. Kent."

"I think you are, Miss Lane. I don't know how you think this story helps you; maybe you figure that, presented with your supposed marriage as a 'fait accompli,' Clark won't look too closely to see whether you really love him or not. And he's bought it hook, line, and sinker. I'm not blind, Miss Lane. Or stupid. I see the way he looks at you. Already, you have the power to break his heart. And maybe I don't have the power to

stop you, but I will fight you every step of the way.”

Lois was trying hard *not* to let this escalate into a real fight. She needed Martha Kent on her side. She stood up from the bed and faced Martha. Consciously, she uncrossed her own arms and made her face as open and non-threatening as she could.

“Mrs. Kent, can I tell you about your son?”

“Hmph! You can try!” was her mumbled reply.

“Your son is one-of-a-kind. But then, you know that; you raised him. Have you ever stopped to think about the world’s reaction to Superman? Metropolis has welcomed him with open arms. They’ve given him the key to the city. Little boys are wearing his symbol on their pajamas. People feel safer because they know he’s around.”

Martha made no reply, but the look she was giving Lois said ‘So?’

“Now, do you realize how unlikely that reaction is? Why in the world would people be *happy* to know that there is a man in their city who can break their neck with one hand? Who can burn them to a crisp with a glance? Who could ogle their wives and daughters at any time because he can see through their clothes? Who could do worse than that to them with impunity? Who could take anything he wanted at any time because the police and army would be powerless to stop him?”

Martha’s mouth was hanging open now and her eyes were wide with horror.

“No, I know. That kind of thought never crossed your mind. You know that Clark would never do any of those things. But that’s because you’re his mother. The incredible part is that it never crossed most other people’s minds, either. And the reason it didn’t is because Clark really is a friend, and he really is here to help. And that shines through in everything that Superman does and says.

“So yes, Mrs. Kent, your Clark is an amazing young man. He’s also a talented young reporter and a terrific friend. He’s been a pillar of strength for me for the last six weeks, and I understand why you would think that any young lady would be thrilled to have him, with or without his extra abilities.”

Martha opened her mouth to speak, but Lois wasn’t finished yet.

“But now, I would like to tell you about my husband. My Clark is everything that your son is, but he’s also much more. Intellectually, your son is brilliant, but my husband is just as smart with ten years more experience. You should see him conduct an interview. He can smell a cover-up ten miles away and he can finesse the truth out of a subject so subtly that she doesn’t even realize half of what she’s revealed.

“Your son is incredibly well-read. He can quote everyone from Aeschylus to Shakespeare to Miyazawa in the original language. My husband can do that, too, but he also has the life experience to at least begin wrestling with the answers to some questions that your son doesn’t even know how to ask yet. And, he can sing every verse of ‘The Water Buffalo Song’ with his daughter.

“Your son is a good partner and a loyal and compassionate friend. My husband has been my partner, my friend, my lover, my co-parent, and my birthing coach. He knows every facet of who I am, at my best and at my worst, and he loves me anyway.

“Your son would put his life on the line to save this planet. But he’s constantly running out on his boss, his colleagues, and his friends because he hasn’t yet learned the difference between a real Superman emergency and an every-day sticky situation in which a flying Boy Scout would come in handy. My husband is wise enough to know that sometimes the world just has to take care of itself. The day I left was the beginning of our anniversary weekend. Clark had a major getaway planned for us. He made all the arrangements. He farmed out the children to the grandparents (thank you in advance), he made hotel reservations in Florence.

And, six months ahead of time, Superman got on the phone with the Chief of Police, the Fire Marshall, the Mayor, the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Head of the Joint Chiefs, and the President of the United States to tell them all that Superman was going to be unavailable for four days in October and, barring Earth-destroying asteroids, they had better be prepared to take care of whatever came up.

“In short, Mrs. Kent, my husband is the man that your son has the potential to become. And yes, I love your son. Who wouldn’t? But I have no intention of seducing him. I’m not looking for young, starry-eyed romance. I’ve already done that, and it was great, but I’ve got my life-partner waiting at home for me, and all I want is to get home to him, the sooner the better.

“Now, what is the current status of your dishwasher?”

“I beg your pardon?!” Martha had been mesmerized by the fierce pride this young lady was displaying for her (fictional? Could she really be faking this?) husband and was utterly nonplussed by the sudden and completely irrelevant question which followed.

“Your dishwasher, Martha? Is it full? Empty? Clean? Dirty?” Somewhere during her little speech, Lois had come to the conclusion that she was through pretending with Martha Kent. She would act the way she always acted in this house, and this Martha could take it or leave it.

“Uhh...I ran a load before we left for the festival.”

“Good. Because I’ve been building up a bundle of nervous energy all day, and now I need to putter.” And, with that remark, Lois opened the bedroom door and started briskly down the stairs. Martha just turned off the stupid radio and followed her.

Just what did this girl think she was doing, coming into Martha’s house and acting like she lived there? Martha was composing a blistering take-down in her mind as she followed Lois into the kitchen. As the two women strode into the room, Jonathan and Clark looked up from their coffee cups, took in the sight of Lois Lane and Martha Kent both in high dudgeon, and, with vague waves in their general direction, made a bee-line for the back door.

So Martha was once again alone with Lois, and she opened her mouth to speak, ready to put that girl in her place. And froze. As Martha stared disbelieving from the doorway, Lois Lane marched right up to the kitchen sink, took a clean towel from the drawer on the left, opened the dishwasher, and proceeded to put Martha’s clean dishes away. Every one of them right where it belonged. Without opening cupboard after cupboard looking for the right spot, as a visitor would have done. She even carried the heavy platter across the eat-in space to the closet on the other side.

Noticing Martha’s dumbfounded expression, Lois explained, “You haven’t re-organized your kitchen cabinets in ten years, Martha. I’ve been your daughter-in-law for seven. I know where things go. Now, are you going to grab a towel and help me?” The words could have been hostile, a challenge, but Lois made them seem...friendly, like affectionate teasing.

Boy, if she was a con, she was a good one. Martha was trying to think of a test, something that would tell her one way or the other whether this young woman could be trusted, when Jonathan’s panicked voice came tearing through the night from the back shed. “Martha! Martha, come quick!”

“Oh, no! He didn’t!” Lois’s voice came from right behind her as the two women raced across the back yard. Martha couldn’t believe the sight that greeted her when they got to the shed. A sickly green glow filled the small room. It came from that strange rock that Wayne had asked Jonathan to keep for him. Jonathan was looking up at her in sheer terror, and, crumpled on the floor, writhing and groaning in pain, was her son. Her invulnerable son.

“Clark, you lunkhead! I told you to stay away from that stuff. Jonathan, close that toolbox! Now!” Lois was taking charge.



give him.

Her thumb stroked his cheekbone. “You have so much love to give.” She lowered her hand and took his in her grasp instead. “But it’s not meant for me. I need to get back to my family, and we need to get *your* Lois back here to you. She needs that kind of love, Clark, even if she doesn’t realize it yet. And you are just the man to give it to her. We’ve just got to get everybody back where we belong.”

Later, looking back, it seemed as if those words had been a cue. Because, just at that moment, the doorbell rang. Jonathan poked his head in from the kitchen, and, seeing that the coast was apparently clear, he made his way through the living room to open it, revealing a small man in an outmoded suit and bowler hat. Jonathan did a double-take, but years of good manners came to his rescue. “Can I help you?” he asked the stranger.

“Um, uh, yes, quite,” stammered the little man, “Pardon me, Mr. Kent, but I am looking for your son. My name is...”

Lois stood dumbstruck at Jonathan’s shoulder, and the two of them, the stranger and the young woman, spoke the word together: “Wells.”

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### Act Three: Forward

Herbert George Wells stood on the porch of a Kansas farmhouse on a fine November day in 1993. He knew that something terrible was about to happen to one of its occupants. Something that would change history and destroy Utopia. He just hoped he wasn’t too late. If only time weren’t quite so fluid, he might have been able to pin-point his target with more accuracy. Oh, dear, there was young Miss Lane now. She didn’t look at all well. Evidently she’d been weeping quite recently. And the elder Mr. Kent seemed to be in a state of shock as well. Perhaps he’d made a miscalculation. Perhaps he’d arrived too late to avert the catastrophe.

“Lois? Did you say that was Mr. Wells at the door?” Oh, thank goodness! He wasn’t too late after all. Because, whole and hale at Miss Lane’s shoulder, there now appeared the object of his concern. It was time for Wells to do what he did best: save the world.

“Ah, Mr. Kent!” Wells greeted the younger man. Then, remembering his manners, he addressed the owner of the house, a bit belatedly, “And Mr. Kent. And the lovely Miss Lane.” Oh dear me, he was in such a state at the moment. With an effort, he pulled himself together. First contact was always a delicate proposition, and required his full attention. “Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is...”

For the second time in as many minutes, he was interrupted by the young lady. “Wells! What took you so long?! Get in here!”

After introductions had been made and everyone settled at the kitchen table, the younger couple—he always thought of them as a couple, even when they weren’t together yet by local time—eating eggs and sausages and Wells sipping coffee, he began his prepared speech. “I realize that you don’t know me, but...”

“Herbert George Wells!” It was Miss Lane again, in an exasperated tone. Would he never be allowed to finish a sentence? “Will you please *listen* to what you are hearing? I *do* know you. I am not the Lois who belongs in this part of the timeline. I am Lois Lane Kent, from 2003, and I’ve been trying to reach you for weeks. Don’t your assistants ever check the classifieds?”

Oh, dear. This was an unexpected complication. Ah, well, at least he needn’t convince her of his identity, nor of the urgency of his current mission. Perhaps this would actually make things simpler.

He should have known better.

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“Let me see if I’ve got this straight.” Jonathan Kent was having a hard time getting his head around the idea of time travel,

but, since he had spent more than twenty-five years raising a child who had crash-landed in a space ship, he tried to keep an open mind. “If Lois here doesn’t go back to the future with you, then my son will die late this afternoon?”

“Quite so, Mr. Kent. It seems that when Mrs. Kent, at Mrs. Lane-Kent’s...”

“Ms. Lane.” Wells blinked at the interruption from the young lady.

“We’ve been through this before, Mr. Wells. Married or not, past, present, or future, I’m always Lois Lane.”

“Except for the purposes of classified ads,” Clark Kent mumbled.

Mr. Wells blinked again at the cryptic look that the young people exchanged. Were they both suppressing a smile? Never mind. Back to the business at hand.

“I beg your pardon.” Wells had never understood why any woman would not be proud to bear her husband’s name, especially a name as revered as this one, but one must bow to the wishes of a lady. So...

“When Mrs. Kent, at *Ms. Lane*’s behest, alerted the local authorities to the nefarious nature of the activities at the Irig farm, she inadvertently set in motion a chain of events with fatal consequences for Mr. Kent...the younger. In the original timeline, Mr. Kent recovered from his ordeal with the kryptonite in time to defeat Colonel Trask. But, having been alerted by the unwanted attention of the local authorities, it seems that the current Colonel Trask decided to expedite his plans. Being convinced of a connection between young Mr. Kent and Superman, he arrived here at your home, threatened yourself and your wife in an effort to extract information from young Mr. Kent, and, in the ensuing struggle, shot and killed young Mr. Kent. Or, rather, he will do so if we don’t take measures to restore the timeline.”

“So, if Lois goes with you, then Trask doesn’t attack until after Clark’s powers return, and everyone is safe?”

“No! It’s not as simple as that.” Ms. Lane sounded upset, almost frustrated. Mr. Wells turned to her in surprise.

“Of course it is, Ms. Lane. Mind you, it would have been even simpler if I had caught on sooner to your displacement. If I had arrived within the first twenty-four hours I could have simply used the soul-tracker to return your consciousness to its rightful body, and vice versa. However, now that you have been living here for several weeks, that will never do. The younger Ms. Lane would certainly be distressed to find herself suddenly advanced weeks into her future, and I’m afraid even time itself is not quite flexible enough to provide her with false memories for that long.”

“False memories?” This time it was Martha Kent who needed clarification.

“Yes, Mrs. Kent. In the past, that is, in mine and Ms. Lane’s past, she has on occasion been temporarily transported into the bodies of her earlier incarnations, if you will. At that time, I simply held the corresponding soul in a sort of suspended animation and, once they were returned to their proper bodies, their minds supplied the requisite memories based on their previous expectations of what the next day might hold and input from their environment. The human mind has a remarkable ability to disregard input which would call into question the very basis of reality as we understand it. But, the longer the disruption, the more difficult it is for the mind to explain away. I’m afraid six weeks is just too long.”

“Can’t you just use your time machine to go back to the day Lois first arrived here and make the switch then?” This came from young Clark Kent, who had apparently had more time to get used to the idea of time travel than his parents.

“That is one option, Mr. Kent. It would simply be a matter of choosing the order of operations, as it were. But the soul tracker is more reliable if fewer changes have been made in the timeline.

And, since I am already here, going back to October 9 now would actually remove me one more step from the original switch. It would be safer for both Miss Lanes if I could restore them to their rightful bodies first, then use the time window to replace the younger Miss Lane back into her original timeline. If I replace her in the early morning, before the switch ever occurred, she will never even know what happened.”

“You can’t do that!” Lois Lane was getting more and more agitated as the conversation progressed.

“Why ever not?” Wells inquired.

“Because if the switch never happens, then this Clark disappears. And that might be convenient for you and Utopia, but I can’t let you do that to my friend.”

Oh, dear, that did make things awkward. Wells drew Ms. Lane aside and spoke to her in a whisper. “It is not only Utopia which is riding on this timeline, Ms. Lane. It is also your own children’s very existence. And, need I remind you, this Clark Kent’s life as well. If we do nothing, you are trapped here and Mr. Kent will soon be dead.”

Ms. Lane whispered back, “I’m not saying we should do nothing. I’m just saying that there has to be a way to do both; to save Clark here *and* get me back to my family.”

“Take me with you.” Evidently they hadn’t been whispering as quietly as they had thought, because young Mr. Kent had obviously heard them.

Four pairs of eyes turned in unison to Clark Kent. “Take me with you to 2003. We don’t have time to hash this all out here. We don’t know exactly when Trask will arrive. Take me with you and we can figure it out without Trask breathing down our necks. You can always bring me back, right?”

Wells turned to Ms. Lane. Ms. Lane turned to Wells. He thought for a moment. It should work. “Very well, Mr. Kent.” He pulled a round device, about the size of a silver dollar, from his vest pocket and placed it on the table. “This is a time beacon. It will allow me to arrive back here in precisely five minutes. Without it, I can only be accurate to within eighteen hours, and that would be too late.”

He extracted a larger device from his coat and prepared to open a time window. “Unfortunately, I don’t have a time beacon set in 2003, so, allowing for drift of plus or minus eighteen hours, and leaving a small safety margin, I’m going to aim for the morning of October 10. Ms. Lane, Mr. Kent, if you will come with me.” So saying, he stepped through the portal. Lois and Clark were right behind him.

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Stepping through the time window behind Mr. Wells and Lois, Clark felt a momentary wave of disorientation, but quickly found himself in the neat living room of a comfortable-sized house. Before he could get a good look at his surroundings, his attention was hijacked by a squeal from Lois.

“Clark!!” She was running through an open door towards the Clark in question. Her target stepped around another woman to meet her and Lois threw herself bodily into his arms, straddling his waist with her legs so that he had no choice but to wrap his arms around her and hold her up. Not that he seemed to mind. Lois was kissing him with abandon, mumbling his name between kisses, and finally pulling her head away long enough to exclaim, “God, I’ve missed you! It’s so good to be home!”

At this, the older man set her gently on her feet and held his hands at her waist, answering her with a warm chuckle, “I’m happy to see you, too. Although I must say I don’t usually get that sort of greeting after a twenty-four-hour absence.” Then, sliding his hands up and down her sides experimentally, he added, “Good Lord, woman! You are nothing but skin and bones.”

“That’s what you think,” Lois answered with a grin. “This is the body you met me in, farm boy. You’ve just gotten used to more padding over the years.”

“Yeah, well, I like your curves.” He was smiling at her with warm affection.

There He was. The future self that Clark had been jealous of for weeks. He had her. To have and to hold. The funny thing was, now that he was here, Clark found that he couldn’t really hate the guy. He envied him, but how can you hate yourself? And how could he hate the man who made Lois Lane so obviously happy?

“Speaking of curves,” Lois said, “Mr. Wells, do you think that I could have my body back now?”

Her body? Oh, yes. It wasn’t until Lois mentioned it that Clark really looked at the other woman in the room. Taking a few steps toward the kitchen, toward Lois and her Clark and the other woman, Clark felt shy and out of place. He hadn’t seen her for weeks, had no idea what she thought of all this, nor even how much she had learned in her brief stay here, but he could see the resemblance, and that had to be her. “Lois?” he offered tentatively.

The woman in question had been staring at Lois and her Clark, obviously as much affected by the scene as he himself had been. At his greeting, she turned to him. She seemed as awkward as he felt. “Hi, Clark.”

At this quiet exchange, the still-embracing couple broke apart and each approached their younger counterparts, as if just now noticing that they were in the room. Lois Lane Kent was the first to speak. “Oh, Lois, I’m so sorry! That was thoughtless and rude of me. Here you are in a strange place and all I can think of is myself. I guess after six weeks I have a bit of a one-track mind.”

The older Clark had been reaching his own hand in greeting to his younger self, but got sidetracked by his wife’s remark. “Six weeks? You’ve only been gone for a day.”

“For you, yes, but this is time travel we’re dealing with. I’ve been stuck in 1993 for six weeks.”

“Oh, honey! You must have been frantic to get home.”

“I was. But I wasn’t alone. Clark here has been a good friend.” Lois tried to convey all the gratitude she felt for her young friend in the smile she turned on him.

The older man seemed a little taken aback by this comment, but he turned back to Clark, reaching his hand out again and shaking his with a sincere “Thank you.”

“Any time,” Clark answered, utterly nonplussed at finding himself conversing with, well, himself.

Nobody seemed to know what to do or say next. After an awkward pause, the elder Clark recovered first. “Where are my manners?” Taking his wife gently by the elbow, he drew her toward her counterpart. “Honey, you know young Lois, here. Lois, this is my wife, Lois Lane Kent.”

“Welcome to our home,” offered Ms. Lane-Kent.

“Thanks. Nice to meet you.” Ms. Lane was evidently still a little overwhelmed, but her manners were running on autopilot.

Still addressing the young Lois (in the older Lois’s body, which was very confusing), Mr. Kent continued the introductions. “I believe you know Junior over there, and this is Mr. Wells.”

Focusing on the strange man in the bowler hat, Ms. Lane seemed to come suddenly back to life. “Just a minute here. You’re the one who brought Clark and Lois here from my time? Do you have anything to do with John Doe?” Her volume was steadily rising and her tone was threatening.

“Oh, goodness, no!” the little man hastened to assure her, “Believe me, as soon as I return to Utopia I’ll have Andrus and the peacekeepers track that scoundrel down and bring him to justice.”

“Again.” The mumble came from Lois Lane Kent.

Ignoring the interruption, Mr. Wells continued, “Now, if the preliminaries are concluded, may I suggest that we proceed with the reintegration?”

“Come again?”

In answer to Ms. Lane’s query, Mr. Wells drew a small

electronic gadget from his breast pocket.

“That’s it! That’s the thing that psycho used to send me here!” Ms. Lane was advancing menacingly toward Mr. Wells again.

“Quite, quite, my dear, but please don’t be alarmed.” Wells held both hands, including the device in question, up in self defense. “This is a soul tracker. And although Tempus apparently used one to disrupt the time continuum by switching your consciousness with Ms. Lane-Kent’s, I merely propose to use this one to restore you to your rightful body.”

Ms. Lane was looking decidedly suspicious, and she looked to the older Mr. Kent for confirmation.

“It’s okay, Lois,” he soothed, “Wells here is one of the good guys. I’ve been through one of these before; it’s perfectly safe.”

“Yes, indeed,” Mr. Wells assured her, “but the experience can be momentarily disorienting. If we are ready, may I suggest that the ladies be seated?”

At young Lois’s nod of wary acceptance, the two women sat down on either side of the kitchen table. By some unspoken agreement, the younger Clark positioned himself next to the younger-looking woman. His older self drew the young Lois in the older body into a brief embrace.

“I’m sorry it’s been such a roller-coaster ride, Lois,” he spoke softly in her ear. “Please remember, you are always loved. Always. By me now, but also by him already. Remember what I told you. You were a week too late as it was. I have loved you from the beginning.” Finding that she couldn’t speak, Lois just nodded.

When it looked like everyone was ready, Mr. Wells pushed a button, then several more in sequence. The women both closed their eyes and a small shudder ran through each of their bodies. When they opened their eyes moments later, a wide smile broke out on the older woman’s face. “Welcome home, honey,” grinned her husband, his arm already around her shoulders.

“It’s good to be home,” she replied, reaching for her husband’s free hand.

“Wow! Lo! You look...”

“Old, I know,” Lois interrupted her young friend.

“No, I was going to say you look terrific. I mean, it’s not like you didn’t have a fantastic body before.” At this a furious blush arose in his cheeks and he very deliberately did *not* look at his young partner. “But this one just...fits. It’s you.”

Lois smiled. “Thanks, CJ. I think.” She turned her attention to the young woman across the table. “You okay, there? It can be a bit rough, the first time.”

“It’s not my first time. I’m fine.” Oh, yes. Lois remembered this stage of her life quite clearly now. This young lady didn’t want coddling. What she wanted was respect. Well, that was something that Lois could give her. And, seeing that no one else seemed to know what to do next, it was time for Lois to take charge.

“Alright, troops. Here’s the deal. First, we’re all just going to acknowledge that this whole situation is really mind-blowing for all of us, and we’re going to cut each other some slack. Second, the name thing is going to drive me crazy. There are four of us, but only two names to go around. So you,” she pointed at her husband, “get to keep ‘Clark,’ you,” pointing at her young friend, “are stuck with ‘CJ,’ and you,” turning to her counterpart, “can take your pick. ‘Lane’ or ‘Lois’?”

“Uh, ‘Lois,’ I guess.”

“Fine. I’ll take ‘Lane.’ Now, Clark, we’re going to need another pot of coffee. And let’s bring those pastries through to the living room. This could take a while.”

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When the four Lane/Kents and an uncomfortable H.G. Wells were settled in the living room, Clark rested his left arm around his wife’s shoulder and brought up the question that had been

niggling at his mind ever since the three time travelers had arrived.

“Honey,” (he just couldn’t bring himself to call his own wife ‘Lane’), “not that I don’t appreciate everything that CJ here has done for you while you were gone, but...why did you bring him back with you? It seems to me the solution is pretty simple. We just put you and Lois back before the switch ever happened, and everything goes back to normal, just like the first time we met Mr. Wells.”

“Excuse me?! I don’t think so!” Lois had been seated at the far end of one sofa, as far away from Cla...CJ as she could get. But Clark’s casual suggestion to effectively erase her memory of the last day brought her to her feet.

“Lois, calm down,” Clark tried to reassure her. “I know it grates, but it’s the only way. If you go back, knowing what you know, there’s no way that your future will ever be what it was before. I thought you liked this future.”

“I may like it, Clark, but that doesn’t mean I want my memory fooled with. I’ve already been through a whole day of thinking my memory was erased. Do you have any idea what that feels like? I’m not going to let you do it for real.”

“And I’m not going to let my family’s very existence be endangered!” Clark felt like a bit of a bully, practically shouting at this woman so much younger than him, but he couldn’t let her have her way. He turned to his wife for support. “Loi...honey, please, talk some sense into her.”

“Actually, Clark, it may be you who needs some sense talked into you.” Lane ignored her husband’s startled look. “But I think we’re jumping the gun here. So, if you two can put that question on hold for a minute...” she gave Clark and Lois her best Mommy glare. They each returned it with respectable imitations of Sam and Jon in their ‘Mom made me stop fighting, but I’m still mad at you’ mode, “...let’s try to keep all our options open until we have our facts straight.”

“Now, Clark, the reason CJ is here is that A. he is as much a part of this decision as any of us, and B. his life is in danger where he was. If we don’t do something to change the current ‘93 timeline, CJ’s going to be shot and killed by Jason Trask. We left the day of the Corn Festival, but things are a little different this time. That’s why Mr. Wells finally showed up.”

“Killed?” Lois interjected, turning her attention to her colleague, “I thought you were invulnerable.”

CJ did a double take at the question. He hadn’t realized that this Lois knew about his other identity. But he was used to being himself with Lois Lane now, so he freely admitted, “I was. But I was exposed to a poison that took away my powers.”

Meanwhile, Lane had turned on her husband in surprise. “You told her? I managed to keep the secret for almost a week. You couldn’t manage twenty-four hours?”

“I wasn’t trying to keep it a secret, Lois.” He sounded defensive. “Until an hour ago I thought she was you.”

Lane’s face took on an unreadable expression. “You thought she was me. For twenty-four hours. You didn’t...did you...”

Lois realized where Lane was going with this question and hastened to set her straight. “No! Lane, we didn’t. He kissed me, that’s all. It never went any further than that, I swear. Please, you don’t need to feel threatened by me.”

“Ha!” Lois turned an annoyed glare on Ke...CJ, who sat in the other corner of the sofa from her.

“What? What’s so amusing over there?” she demanded.

“Sorry, Lois. I didn’t mean to laugh.” He did have a teasing smile playing at the corners of his mouth, though. “It’s just the idea of Lois Lane Kent feeling threatened by anyone...even you...” he trailed off. This was not the Lois he now knew, and she was not in the mood to be teased.

But Lane was not through with this topic yet. It obviously bothered her. “You kissed. That’s all. That’s supposed to make me

feel better?” She waved one hand between herself and CJ. “*We never...*”

“Um, Lo?” CJ was looking at her with raised eyebrows and that same amused twinkle in his eyes. What was his point? Oh, yeah. She remembered now. It had been a while, but yeah. Okay. Never mind.

Lane let out a long breath and hastened to change the subject. “Okay, I’m sorry. Cutting each other some slack here and moving on before poor Mr. Wells loses the will to live.” Lane gave her husband an apologetic little smile and an affectionate squeeze of the knee. “I still think we need to keep as many options open as we can until we know better what our choices are.” She turned to CJ again. “And that means that you, young man, need to get under those sunlamps pronto.”

Clark stood and beckoned to CJ. “Come on, Junior. I’ll show you how they work.” He wasn’t through with this debate yet, but he couldn’t pass up the excuse to get his young counterpart alone for a few minutes.

CJ stood and followed Clark up the stairs. As their voices started to fade, Lois could hear CJ reply, “If you keep calling me ‘Junior,’ I’m going to have to start calling you ‘Pops.’”

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While Clark and CJ were occupied upstairs, Lane turned her attention on Mr. Wells. He had been sitting far back in a wingback chair, trying to pretend that he wasn’t hearing the embarrassing personal conversation taking place all around him.

“Mr. Wells, I have an idea that may solve our problem. How much do you know about alternate universes?”

The little man was taken aback by the question. “Mrs. Kent... uh, Ms. Lane, time travel and alternate universes are my field of expertise. I’ve made it my life’s work to preserve Utopia in as many universes as I can find. I thought you knew that.”

“Yes, Mr. Wells. I know that you can travel between universes. I’ve done it myself. My question is, do you know *how* a new universe is created?”

“Certainly. Any sufficiently momentous event leads to the creation of a parallel universe. You yourself have met the Clark Kent from the universe which broke from this one on the day that his parents were killed.”

“Yes, and he and I were both able to travel freely back and forth between those dimensions without putting anyone else in danger.”

“Quite so. A visitor from another dimension poses no inherent danger. Of course, they become an active agent in whatever dimension they visit. They can change the course of events there, as you did by creating Superman in the other dimension, or as Mr. Kent did by filling in for your missing husband when he was here.”

“Yes. So, why can’t this Lois and Clark begin a new dimension of their own? Why do their memories have to be erased at all?”

“Hmmm. Offhand I would say because they are not from an alternate dimension. They are from your own past, and therefore changes in their lives directly affect your own. But you raise an intriguing possibility. It might be possible to affect a divergence in the time stream if we can somehow anchor you and the elder Mr. Kent to your original timeline. I’d need to ponder that question.”

“Good. You do that.” Lane rose from her seat and removed a pad of paper and pen from her desk drawer. She handed them to Mr. Wells. Then she picked up the cordless telephone and dialed a number. After a moment she addressed the person on the other end. “Bernie? Lois. Listen, we’ve got a time travel, dimension hopping problem going on over here. I’m going to put Mr. Wells on the line and see if the two of you can come up with a solution, all right?” There was a brief pause. “Yes, that Mr. Wells. Who else? You’ve been working on this problem for years, and he’s

got the practical experience, so put your heads together and see what you can do, alright?” Another pause. “Thanks, Bernie. Here he is.”

Lane handed the phone to a bewildered Mr. Wells. “I’ll leave you to it,” she said and headed for the kitchen. Not knowing what else to do, Lois followed her.

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Lane walked into the kitchen and straight for the dishwasher. With a sense of *déjà vu*, she began putting away the dishes from Tuesday night’s dinner. She’d been gone for six weeks, and they were still there. She felt a strange little twinge as she reached for Lara’s sippy cup. Her daughter was supposed to be giving it up now that she was a Big Girl of three. But Lara had wanted it “for special” on the night before Mommy and Daddy went away for five days, and Lois hadn’t had the heart to refuse her. She gave her head a little shake. What was it today with her and nostalgia for dishes? <It’s a Mommy thing, Lois. Give yourself a break,> she thought.

With a mental start, Lane realized that it was only Thursday here. After weeks away, she still had three more days to wait before she saw her kids. She could cancel the Florence trip and bring the kids home early. But how would she explain that to the kids? No, for their sake she needed to stick to the original plan. She’d waited this long, she could wait a few days longer. Especially if her husband put all his considerable talents to the task of consoling her, she thought with a little smile.

Meanwhile, Lois sat at the table, idly picking out blueberries and bits of melon from the bowl of fruit salad and popping them into her mouth as she watched Lane bustle around the kitchen. Clark’s half-empty coffee cup and breakfast plate were still at his place, where she now sat. She could hardly believe that only that morning she had thought this was her house, her kitchen, her husband.

After a few minutes, Lane broke the contemplative silence, speaking over her shoulder as she worked. “So spill. What’s on your mind? This whole thing must be a huge shock. You must have questions.”

Lois was not one to spill her guts to anyone, let alone a stranger. But this wasn’t a stranger. This was the woman she had been trying to be since she’d arrived in this world the day before. The woman who used to be her. And there *was* something that had been worrying her for a while now.

“You’re still strong.” It was a statement, not a question, but it carried a sense of wonder. Lane stopped her puttering, dried her hands, and joined Lois at the table.

“How so?” It was Basic Interviewing 101. Encourage the subject to elaborate.

“I used to think Clark Kent was a bit of a wimp,” Lois explained. “He seemed naïve and out of place in the city. But he did stand up to me once, that time I stole his story. You remember. Anyway, then I got here and I thought that I was you. I thought I had a huge case of amnesia and was going to have to figure out how to live this life.” She made a vague gesture toward the refrigerator covered in the detritus of life with kids. “It was pretty overwhelming, and Clark was a really big help. I caught on pretty quick that Clark Kent was anything but a wimp. But after a while it seemed like he was always the one taking the initiative, and I was just sort of following along. I started to worry that being married to him had changed me somehow, made me more passive.”

“Then you turned up and I could tell that wasn’t the case. You don’t just follow along where he leads. You’re not afraid to argue with him. And he respects you. I saw what you did just now when Clark wanted to send me back without my memory. You’re married to the strongest man in the world, but he doesn’t dominate you. You stood up to Superman.”

“I stood up to Clark Kent. But I think you understand that

already.” Lane gave Lois the gentlest look she knew how. “What you’re asking about is the heart of marriage. In the best marriages, love doesn’t mean losing who you are. It means being encouraged and supported in being the best person you can be. Clark and I love each other with our whole hearts. He’s not perfect, and neither am I. But we don’t have to be. We accept each other, warts and all, and we help each other. I couldn’t thrive in a relationship where I had to hold back, afraid that the other person was going to crack or flee if I showed a little temper now and then. And Clark couldn’t thrive in a relationship where he had to worry about showing who he really is, either. He needs a partner who is as strong as he is. And so do I. We’re stronger together than either of us could be alone. That’s how real love works.”

Lois seemed to be mulling over Lane’s answer. After a moment she said thoughtfully, “Yeah, he said something like that. That it takes a will like mine to put up with his crazy life.”

That remark earned a laugh from Lane. “And vice-versa,” she replied with a knowing smile.

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CJ stood in his altogether, soaking up the ultraviolet rays emanating from every corner of the Kents’ shower stall. He could feel his strength returning with every passing minute. Beyond the open bathroom door, Clark sat on the edge of the bed, within easy earshot but out of the line of sight.

“Lo told me that she had a scientist friend, but this is fantastic,” CJ called. Like Clark, he couldn’t bring himself to call his friend by her last name.

“Yeah, it helps a lot. I don’t run into kryptonite as often as I used to. It’s pretty rare, and every time I do encounter it I either destroy it or give it to Bernie Klein to use for his research, but it’s good to be prepared just in case.”

“I’ll bet. Now if I do go back to the same time I left I should be able to deal with Trask in short order.”

“Doesn’t he still have the kryptonite that Wayne found?”

“Nope. Dad took it over to Larry Kent and got him to grind it up and wash it down the drain.”

CJ emerged from the bathroom dressed in his jeans and flannel shirt again.

“All set?” Clark inquired.

CJ rose a foot into the air. “Good as new,” he grinned. He started toward the door. “Shall we?” he asked.

“Hold on a minute.” At CJ’s inquiring look Clark ventured, “Can I ask you something before we head downstairs?”

CJ joined him on the bed and turned to face him. “Sure. Shoot.”

“What’s your take on this whole situation? Lois doesn’t want to go back without her memory. What about you? Are you willing to give up what you’ve learned if it means that you get to arrive back here in ten years?”

CJ had been asking himself the same question, but he hadn’t arrived yet at an answer. “I’m not sure, Clark. I mean, I’ve heard a lot about your life from Lo.”

There was that name again. It bothered Clark that this younger man and his wife had nicknames for each other. CJ must have misread the reason for his small frown, because he immediately began defending Clark’s wife. “Maybe she shouldn’t have told me anything, but she didn’t have anyone else she could talk to.”

He took a breath and his tone changed from defensive to thoughtful. “Anyway, it’s a great life. I mean, I’ve been here less than an hour and I can already see how much you two love each other. And she’s told me about your kids. A loving wife, a happy family, it’s what I’ve always wanted. You know that. But it’s not just my decision. I really need to talk to Lois about it.”

“That’s assuming that we even have any other choice,” Clark replied. “I don’t see that we do, but I think Lois, *my* Lois, has

something in mind.”

“I knew who you meant,” CJ replied. “I can’t call her ‘Lane’ either. It reminds me too much of when we first met and she always called me ‘Kent.’”

“You love her.” It was a statement, not a question. And maybe a challenge.

“Which one?” CJ stalled.

“You tell me. Maybe both.” Oh, yeah, definitely a challenge.

“Who wouldn’t, Clark? Don’t you?” There. Deny that one, old man.

“That’s different. Your Lois is the same person I fell in love with ten years ago. That doesn’t mean I’m going to pursue something with her. Why would I even want to? My wife is the person she grew into. We’ve been growing together for ten years. Why would I even want to go backward?”

“I’m not saying you would. I know that your wife is...”

“More” was what he’d almost said, but some small seed of loyalty wouldn’t let him, so he settled for “...different...than ‘my’ Lois. And I *know* she’s *your* wife. Believe me, I’ve had my nose rubbed in that truth for six weeks now. *You’re* the one she’s still head-over-heels in love with, not me. So you can just nip that ugly green monster in the bud right now, Pops.”

The two men were practically nose-to-nose now, CJ’s finger pointing accusingly at Clark’s chest, Clark matching CJ glare for glare. Suddenly, CJ’s sense of righteous anger deflated in defeat. He lowered his pointing hand and retreated from his threatening stance. His shoulders slumped, he looked at his toes, and when he next spoke, it was in a tone of resignation.

“You don’t have to fight me for her, Clark. You’d already won before I ever met her.”

It was a surrender of sorts, and Clark suddenly felt ashamed of the way he’d been thinking about his young counterpart. And about his wife, now that he thought of it. When had she ever given him the slightest cause to doubt her faithfulness?

“I’m sorry, CJ,” he said. The young man looked up in surprise and Clark continued sympathetically, “That must have been rough. You’ve been through a lot these past weeks.”

CJ accepted the proffered olive branch with as much grace as he could muster. “Yeah, she’s a handful. And I’m sorry if I’ve given you reason to worry. You don’t have to. She loves you completely, you know. And I’m sorry I’ve been so envious. It’s pretty silly, isn’t it? Being jealous of myself?”

Clark gave a wry half-chuckle. “Yeah, well, I’ve got some experience in that department too. Never mind. Let’s do what Lo [that name felt strange on his tongue, but better than ‘Lane’] suggested earlier and cut each other some slack.”

“It’s a deal.” CJ held his hand out, and Clark shook it for the second time that day. CJ hoped it was time to go downstairs now. He’d had about all he could take of this one-man tête-à-tête.

Before he could rise hopefully from the bed, though, Clark asked the next hard question. “What about your Lois?”

“What about her?” He knew he was stalling again, but he couldn’t help it. CJ dreaded what he knew would come next.

“Do you love her, too?” Clark pressed. “Can you give her the love she deserves after knowing my wife for so long? Or is she always going to be your second choice?”

CJ didn’t really have an answer for that, either, and he was tempted to get defensive. It wasn’t really Clark’s business anyway, was it? But he remembered to whom he was speaking. Clark cared about Lois because he had loved her. Just as CJ had. Did he still? Could he resist the impulse to compare ‘his’ Lois Lane, young, aggressive, abrasive in her own self-defense, with the Lois Lane he’d become friends with over the last weeks?

Clark realized CJ’s dilemma, and he sympathized. But there wasn’t much he could do for the young man, except maybe to help him spot the issue. He’d have to work it out for himself. “You don’t have to know the answer to that right now, CJ. And

maybe it'll be a moot point anyway. But, if you do end up keeping your memories intact, just make sure you figure it out before you start something with Lois. Nobody wants to be loved as a stand-in."

CJ just nodded. It was good advice, and there wasn't much more to say.

"Now," Clark suggested as he stood up, "Let's see what they've been up to downstairs."

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When Clark and CJ returned to the living room, they found Lane and Lois deep in consultation with Mr. Wells and Bernie Klein, now on speaker phone. The coffee table was covered in paper, with branching diagrams and arrows pointing every which way. Bernie's voice was coming from the telephone handset in the middle of the table.

Lane looked up as the men joined the group around the table. "Bernie, Clark and CJ are here now. Could you bring them up to speed? Briefly," she hastened to add.

"Hi Bernie," Clark greeted his friend.

"Hi, Clark. Hello, CJ," came the disembodied voice.

"Nice to meet you, Bernie. I've heard a lot about you," CJ chimed in.

"Okay, gentlemen," Bernie was in professor mode now, "Here's what we've got so far. The four of you started out in the same timeline up until the morning of October 9, 1993. At that point the first split occurred when Tempus replaced Lois '93 with Lois '03 and vice-versa. So then we had two timelines running in parallel. We believe. It is possible that the switch itself was still part of the original timeline if we end up with Lois '93 not remembering any of these events after today. In that case, there is no way to distinguish the altered timeline from the original, since Lois '03 and Lois '93 would still have the same memories in either case. But, regardless of whether or not the original switch caused a timeline split, we know that a split occurred early in the '93 timeline as soon as Clark '93 learned that the Lois there had been switched. So, CJ, can you tell me when you first noticed something different about Lois?"

"The first day. I was at a press conference as Superman and she called me 'Clark.'"

"And that didn't happen in your memory, Clark?" Bernie asked.

"No. It didn't," Clark confirmed.

"Okay," Bernie went on, "So we've got one split definitely happening on October 9. Then, we potentially have a second split a week later when Clark '93 saved Allie's life. And a third when he saved Mr. Mencken's. So, by the time Mr. Wells was alerted to the danger because of CJ's death in November of '93, we are already at least three, and possibly more, steps removed from the original timeline.

"Now, the question Lois, I mean Lane, has posed is whether leaving those changes intact, from the point of view of Lois and Clark '93, poses an inherent danger to Lois and Clark '03 and their current timeline. The answer is not clear a priori."

"Come again?" CJ inquired.

"We can't necessarily predict the answer ahead of time," Bernie clarified. "There are competing theories about the effect of these kinds of changes on future events. One theory, which Mr. Wells has been operating under, is that any change created in the past of a person's own timeline always affects that person. That was certainly the case when Tempus went back to 1966 to attack Clark as an infant. The adult Clark began to disappear. But there were special circumstances in that case. For one thing, the adult Clark was in the past at the time. He was necessarily in the same timeline as the infant at the time of the attack. If he had remained in his own time, it's not necessarily true that the attack on the infant would have killed the adult. It may have, and Tempus certainly believed that it would, but other theories postulate that

existing timelines are more elastic than that; that there would have been a split in the timeline, creating one new timeline with a dead infant Clark, but leaving the original timeline intact as well."

"So you're saying that we might not have to do anything at all? We could just send Lois and CJ back to 1993 with all their memories intact and nothing bad would happen to us as a result?" Clark asked. This was obviously what his wife was trying to accomplish, but would it work? Could he take the risk? "How do we know whether that would work? How can we tell whether our timeline has already been affected?"

Lane and CJ obviously got the same idea at the same time. They each gasped, and they looked at each other in horror. CJ was immediately on his feet. He turned to Clark and with an urgent tone demanded, "Where are your suits?"

"Huh?"

"Your suits, man! Where do you keep the suits?" As Clark reached for the bookshelf to open the secret compartment, he realized why CJ was suddenly so desperate to become Superman.

"The children!" Clark exclaimed. Clark and CJ were both instantly transformed into whirlwinds of blending colors before they each came to a stop. As soon as the spinning stopped, the younger Superman addressed the older. "I'll take Smallville; you check on Lara." At the older man's answering nod, both superheroes disappeared in a gust of wind. The patio door was left swinging behind them.

"Wow," breathed Lois. That was all she had. Just, wow.

"Lois? Lane?" Bernie's voice was coming from the speaker phone. "What's going on over there?"

Lois glanced at Lane, but the older woman wasn't really hearing anything right now. She was visibly distraught, waiting for word about her children's well-being. So, it looked like it was up to Lois to answer the scientist.

"Um...Dr. Klein, this is Lois. '93, that is. Superman just left. Both Supermen. They went to check on the children. Lane doesn't look too good. She's pretty worried."

"Lane? Can you hear me?" Bernie asked.

"She's nodding 'yes,'" supplied Lois.

"Listen to me, Lane. Your kids are going to be okay. Even if the change has started to affect them, it can still be reversed. All we have to do is follow Mr. Wells' original plan and put Lois back before any of this happened."

Lane seemed to snap out of her daze and turned her attention on Lois. "Would you do that? Would you go back if you had to? I know you don't want to give up your memories."

"Lane! I want to keep my memories, but not at the price of little kids' lives. Just how self-centered do you think I am?"

Lane sighed. "I'm sorry, Lois. I know you're not. I'm a little frazzled, that's all."

Lois reached for the older woman's hand and gave it a little squeeze. She wasn't really comfortable with this touchy-feely stuff, but the woman looked desperate and the men were both gone. Well, Mr. Wells was still there, but he sure wasn't going to be much help. "I know. It'll be okay." Lois hoped that was the appropriate thing to say.

Bernie's voice came from the phone again. "Lane, I do have a back-up option, if that would help."

"What do you mean, Bernie?" Lane would listen to anything that would help her kids at this point.

"You'll remember that a couple of years ago you asked me to try to devise a method of protecting you and Clark from Tempus's interference."

"Yes, I remember. Are you saying you've come up with something?"

"Maybe. What I've got is really a working prototype. It hasn't been fully tested yet, which is why I haven't given it to you yet. But I do have two of them."

“Two of what, Bernie? What have you got?” Lane was still worried for her kids and her patience was running thin. She wished her friend would get to the point.

“Time anchors. They’re small enough to fit in a pocket or a purse, and they’ve got a radius of about 30 feet, so you can keep one in your bathroom or your kitchen. Heck, once we’ve made enough copies you could keep one in every room of your house, at your desk at work, even in your car. Anyway, they interfere with the flux of the temporal field so you can’t be removed from your native timeline.”

“Really. And I couldn’t have had one of those forty-eight hours ago?” The irony was too much, even for Lane.

“Sorry, kiddo. Them’s the breaks. But it should at least help from this point forward.”

Lane visibly gathered herself together. If Bernie’s elastic theory was right, they might not even need the time anchors, but a back-up plan couldn’t hurt. And, in any case, they’d keep Tempus from making further trouble for them. “Okay, Bernie. I’ll send Clark over to pick them up as soon as he gets back. Oh, and here he is now.” Lane looked up as her husband stepped in the patio door. She knew from his face that Lara, at least, was safe.

“She’s fine, honey,” he confirmed, wrapping his worried wife in a strong embrace. “I watched her for five minutes. She and Tina are painting their nails and watching ‘Pocahontas.’”

Lane breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness.” She stayed there, wrapped in Clark’s strong arms and just absorbing his comforting presence for as long as she could. She’d come close to losing it when she thought her children might be disappearing into nothingness. She needed this infusion of strength that only he could give her. What she really wanted was some time alone with him, but she knew she wasn’t going to get it until this whole mess got sorted out. When she felt able, she gave her husband a grateful squeeze before pulling back to add, “Bernie has something for us at the lab. Would you be a dear?”

Clark had needed that hug just as much as his wife had. He’d been close to panic himself before he got to Lucy’s house and saw his daughter giggling with her cousin. But he, too, knew that there was still work to be done before the two of them would be free to comfort each other the way they really wanted to. So, when she made her request, he knew she was ready to soldier on. “Sure,” he answered her with a parting kiss on the forehead, “I’ll be right back.” And he was gone again.

“Wow,” commented Lois. “He sure comes in handy.” The flippant remark was a form of emotional distancing, even if Lois didn’t realize it. Last night Lois had been the one wrapped in that loving embrace. But, as she had realized this morning, it was Lane who belonged there. At least in this timeline. <What do you mean, ‘in this timeline?’ Does that mean *you* might belong in Clark Kent’s arms in some other world?> She was saved from having to answer herself by Lane’s response.

“Yeah, it makes up for all the trouble he causes. It just about evens out in the end.”

Shocked at Lane’s casual dismissal of her amazing husband, Lois gave the older woman a hard look. It took her a moment to recognize the teasing gleam in her counterpart’s eye.

At that instant, the phone began making a series of clicking noises. “Bernie,” Lane called, “that’s my call waiting. Can I call you back?”

“No need,” came the reply from the phone, “Clark’s here. I’ll show him how to use the time anchors and you can call me later if you have any questions. It sounds like you’re all set, though. I don’t think you’ll have any trouble, even if you do send Lois and CJ back with all their memories.”

“Thanks, Bernie. For everything. I’ve got to go.” Lane pressed a button on the phone and answered it, “Lois Lane.” The phone was still on speaker, so Lois heard the caller’s voice as well.

“Lois? Honey, is everything okay? I thought you’d be half-way to Florence by now.”

Lois noticed the warm smile that blossomed on Lane’s face. She obviously recognized the voice, although Lois didn’t. “Hi, Martha,” Lane replied, “We’ve had a temporary hold-up, but it looks like everything is going to be okay. How’s everything on your end?”

“Funny you should ask.” The caller, ‘Martha,’ Lane had called her, sounded bemused. “Superman was just here. Apparently his friend, Clark, asked him to stop by and check on two little boys who are now very excited to tell Mommy about their little adventure.” Whoever Martha was, she didn’t sound shocked to have a visit from Superman. She sounded more amused, or possibly puzzled. Maybe both.

As Martha spoke, CJ came walking through the patio door, still in the suit. Lane gave him an unreadable look. “Oh, he did, did he?” she answered Martha, “Well, I guess you’d better put them on then.” Two excited little voices came on the line and CJ gave Lane a sheepish smile and a shrug.

“Mommy, Mommy, we met Superman!” The little boys were talking over each other in their excitement, and it was difficult for Lois to distinguish one high-pitched voice from the other.

“You did?! I bet that was exciting.” While Lois talked to her boys, she was rolling her eyes at CJ. Apparently Superman was in trouble with Lois Lane.

“Yeah!” the young voices chatted happily from the phone speaker, “we were playing in the Fortress and he flew right up to the door. And he doesn’t just fly, Mommy! He can hover, too, like a helicopter. He said that Daddy wanted him to check on us, since you and Daddy were going to be in Florence all weekend. Hey, how come you’re still at home?”

“Something came up, but we’re leaving tonight. So we’ll still see you two on Sunday night, okay? Be good for Grandma and Grandpa.” Oh, so that explained it. Martha must be Clark’s mom. Lois felt a brief bubble of amusement. What would the Metropolitan public think if they knew that their superhero had a mother who tattled on him to his wife?

“We will. Love you, Mommy.”

“I love you, too, Tiger.”

“A bushel and a peck?”

With a catch in her throat, Lane answered, “a bushel and a peck and a hug around the neck.”

“Bye, Mommy.”

“Bye, sweetie. I’ll see you soon.” As Lane hung up the phone Lois noticed a shimmer of unshed tears in her eyes. Then Lane blinked the tears back, and, as Clark came striding through the patio door, she turned on CJ.

“Clark Jerome Kent!” Oh, yeah, he was in trouble. Her husband raised his eyebrows before he realized that she was addressing the younger man. “What do you think you are doing?! Do you have any idea how hard we have worked to keep Superman and Clark Kent separate in our sons’ minds? And you show up telling them that their Daddy asked Superman to check on them? They’ve never even seen Superman in person. And there’s a reason for that. You couldn’t just hover out of sight?”

The entire scene was bizarre. Lois was standing in her future living room watching her future self give Superman a good dressing-down. Meanwhile a second Superman stood by, looking glad that *he* was not the one getting the talking-to. And the subject of the scolding was Superman’s kids. Only they weren’t supposed to be Superman’s kids. They were Clark Kent’s kids. Which was the point of the dressing-down. Her life was just so strange.

Lois watched CJ, curious to see how he would respond to Lane’s rebuke, but he just grinned at Lane, utterly unapologetically. “Lo,” he said almost tenderly. “They’re amazing.”

And, as quickly as it had come, the storm of Lane temper passed. She returned his smile and, in a knowing tone, replied, “Yeah. They are.” Then, shaking her head to clear it, Lane explained to Clark and CJ that Dr. Klein didn’t think there would be a problem with the timeline. All four of them looked to Mr. Wells for confirmation.

“What Dr. Klein told us sounds plausible. If that’s what you all want, we can certainly try. I have a time beacon in November 1993. If I return Ms. Lane and young Mr. Kent there, I can check back here to make sure that there have been no ill effects. I can always bring them back here again if necessary.”

Clark took in Lois and CJ with his next remark. “Alright then, you two. It’s your choice. Do you go back with your memories or without them? It looks like it’s up to you.” Addressing Lane and Mr. Wells, he added, “And the rest of us had better give those two some privacy. They need to have a very serious discussion.” He turned back to the young man and woman. Catching their eyes, each in turn, he counseled them, “Don’t rush this.”

Then, gathering the older people and herding them into the kitchen, he inquired, “Mr. Wells, you’re a tea man aren’t you? Have you ever tried Oolong?”

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Well, this was awkward.

The young people hadn’t been alone together since before this entire episode began. And now they needed to make possibly the most life-altering decision of their lives. A decision that would both impact them each individually and determine the course of their future relationship and family. Which was especially odd given that, up until the day of The Switch, they hadn’t really had much of a relationship to begin with.

“Lois,” “CJ,” they both began at the same time. Each giving the other a sheepish smile, Lois nodded to CJ to go first.

“First off, please, while it’s just the two of us here, I’d rather you call me ‘Clark.’ That’s the name I’ve always gone by.”

“Sure.”

They were both quiet for a moment, neither knowing at all how to begin. Before the silence could grow strained, Clark asked, “Do you mind if we don’t talk just yet? I think we could both use a few minutes to just think first.”

“Sure.” Lois wondered if that was all she was capable of saying any more, but Clark didn’t seem to mind.

Clark started to sit in one of the armchairs, then seemed surprised to realize that he was still wearing the Superman suit. “Excuse me,” he said quietly, and in a blur of color he was dressed in his jeans again. Even that spin-change thing seemed subdued, if such a thing were possible.

Clark sat in the wingback chair that Mr. Wells had occupied earlier. It gave him the illusion of solitude. His elbows rested on the arms of the chair, his forehead leaned on his clasped hands. Lois wandered over to the tank and watched the fish swim. They were different fish from the ones she used to have. That was to be expected after ten years, she thought vaguely. The room was silent, save for the indistinct murmur of voices leaking through the closed kitchen door.

After about ten minutes, Clark rose from his seat and meandered slowly around the room, his eyes sliding over the books and photographs on the shelves. He came to a stop in front of the same family snapshot that had sent Lois running up the stairs the night before. They looked so happy—Clark, Lois, Sam, Jon, and little Lara. Carefully, he reached out and grasped the picture, bringing it close for a better look. He was suddenly aware of Lois’s presence as she gazed past his shoulder at the photo. Her tone was gentle, which surprised him at first.

“That’s what you want, isn’t it?” Her words lacked any sense of accusation or challenge. It was a simple, honest question. It deserved a simple, honest answer.

“It’s what I’ve always wanted. A normal life, a family. Until Lo told me, I wasn’t even sure I could have kids.”

“You could have it, you know. All we have to do is let Mr. Wells take us back before any of this happened. We won’t remember a thing. We’ll go about our lives just like they did, and in ten years, voila! Here we’ll be.” The option wasn’t her first choice, and she certainly wouldn’t have let the older Clark just railroad her into it as he had tried to do, but she knew she wasn’t the only one who would have to live with the consequences of whatever decision they came to, and she needed to find out what this Clark, her Clark, really wanted.

They were both still staring at that happy family. Was that what he wanted? To lose everything he’d learned over the last few weeks, everything he’d become, in exchange for the guarantee of the happy ending? It might seem the obvious choice—it certainly had to his older self—and there was no guarantee that he could ever have that happy ending any other way. This Lois Lane had barely tolerated him only recently, and he had no idea how she’d react to him now. He wasn’t even certain how he felt about her, let alone how she might feel about him. Of course she did know that he was Superman now. But that just brought up another complication. If they went back, erased everything that had happened since the switch, their relationship could develop gradually, as it must have done before. But it just didn’t sit right.

“It feels like cheating.” He was almost surprised to hear himself voice the thought aloud.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Going back, living out some pre-ordained future. It would feel like winning with loaded dice.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” she argued. “It wouldn’t feel any different for us than it did for them. Because we wouldn’t know anything about it. We’d just think we were living it all for the first time. We’d become them.”

“It feels different now,” he insisted. “And now is when we have to choose.”

They were both silent for another minute or two, just absorbing that idea. Her next question surprised him.

“Is it true?”

He turned his head toward her and tried to think what she might mean by that. “What, that I’m Superman? You saw for yourself, Lois. Of course it’s true.”

“No, not that. I know you’re Superman,” she said dismissively. “Is it true what Clark told me?”

“What did he tell you?” He turned his whole body to face her now, setting the photo back on the shelf. Whatever she was talking about, it was important and it required his undivided attention.

She lowered her eyes. It cost her a lot to ask, to display her vulnerability in front of him, but the answer could be the determining factor in this discussion. She needed to know. “Is it true that you fell for me the first time you saw me? That it was because of me that you stayed in Metropolis?” She raised her eyes to meet his. Her voice became steadier and her last question was almost a challenge. “Is it true that you loved me from the beginning?”

After all his own pining after Lois Lane Kent, after all his soul-searching, trying to identify his own feelings for this Lois Lane, all it took was the audacity of that question, the sheer bravery of asking it point-blank, and he had his answer.

“Yes.” What else could he say? It was the simple truth. And, for the first time since they had met, this seemed the time for truth between them.

“But you love Her more.” So this was it; all the cards on the table. It might make things simpler if he lied, but he knew what this woman had risked by even asking, and he couldn’t repay her with anything less than complete honesty.

“I thought so, for a time. I don’t any more.”

“Really? What changed your mind?” She wasn’t going to take his word for it. The older Clark had been right; she wasn’t going to settle for being a stand-in. Nor should she.

Clark led Lois to the sofa and took a seat next to her. Not too close, but closer than they had been during the earlier discussion with Clark and Lane. He turned his body to face her. He barely understood his own thoughts on this topic, but he owed her his best effort at putting them into words.

“Just now, when we were having our little thinking break,” he began, “one of the things I thought about was *why* she seemed different than you. It isn’t because she’s older, more experienced. I mean, she knew a lot of things from having been through them before, but that’s not what attracted me to her. I think the reason I liked her so much is because she let me. I still think there are things she didn’t show me, but mostly she was her real self with me. No walls, no games. And I was myself with her. I don’t think she’s a fundamentally different person from you. I’m sure she’s learned some things over the years, but then, so has He. But I don’t believe that people radically change their personalities as they grow up. I just think she doesn’t hide who she really is from me. She’s my friend.”

“So you figure if I were my real self with you, you would love me just as much?”

“That’s what I think, yeah. I know I’m attracted to you.” Both of them blushed at that direct admission. “But we don’t know each other very well. I don’t want to pressure you, either. I have a feeling it took Her a while to open up to Him. And vice-versa.”

And, he had something he needed to confess. “I haven’t been fair to you, Lois.” She raised a questioning eyebrow. “Before all this began, I mean. I saw something about you, something that drew me in and made me want to know everything about you. But I only got glimpses of who you really were. You’re very good at hiding it. I should know; I’m probably the world’s expert at hiding who I am. But I was a hypocrite. I’d been trying to get you to trust me, to let me see the real you, and all the time I’d been hiding my real self from you. That’s not fair. I didn’t realize that’s what I was doing until Lo showed me what it’s like to really be myself with someone. Other than my parents, that is. Maybe that’s part of why I don’t really want to go back to where we were. It was really great to have a friend who knew me for all of who I am. I don’t want to go back to hiding. Not from you.”

Lois looked thoughtful for a moment, mulling over all that he had told her. Finally, she said in a quiet voice, “Clark was real with me. That’s what made me love him, I think.”

“It wasn’t because you found out he was Superman?” Maybe it wasn’t a fair question, but he really didn’t want to start out competing with his own creation. He needed to know where he stood with her. <See, Clark,> he thought, <there’s more than one way to be jealous of yourself.>

A day ago Lois would have been offended at the very question. But Clark wasn’t the only one who had been thinking about what made their older counterparts so appealing. She had asked herself the same thing. Her feelings for Clark Kent had changed so much in such a short time. Why? When she had thought she was married to Clark Kent, had she only accepted it, only let herself start to love him back, because he was her hero in disguise?

“No. I didn’t find out Clark was Superman until late last night. We didn’t even know I had travelled through time. We thought I *was* Her. I thought I had amnesia and had lost ten years of memories. And I didn’t even tell him that part until we’d already spent all evening together. So for hours he was just being himself. Because he thought I already knew him. And, you know what, Clark? Clark Kent being his real self is a pretty great guy.”

“You’re not disappointed, then?” Clark ventured. He was starting to feel a little more hopeful, but he still needed some reassurance on the Superman front.

Lois gave a little frown of confusion. “Disappointed? That you’re a great guy? Why would I be disappointed? Embarrassed is more like it. I can’t believe how awful I was to you, all the while mooning over Superman.”

“That’s what I mean, Lois. You’re not disappointed that Superman is really just me? You had this perfect heroic image to adore, but it turns out the man behind the curtain is really just your greenhorn colleague.”

She shook her head at him. “Not the man behind the curtain, Clark. Superman is not just a mirage like the Wizard, and you’re no humbug. You’re the man *inside* the Suit. All those wonderful things that Superman does, *you* are the man who’s really doing them, Clark. You just don’t get the credit for it.”

Six weeks ago, Clark might have argued that point. He might have insisted that Superman was what he could *do*, Clark Kent was who he *was*. But his weeks of sharing the superhero burden with Lois Lane Kent had shown him that the two parts of his public life couldn’t be so neatly separated in private. Even though he’d been Clark Kent longer, the things that Superman said and did, and the things he saw and heard, shaped his soul just as much as his civilian life. The amazing part was that she saw it too. This truth that had taken him weeks to learn, this Lois had picked up in a day.

“You really get it. You really see what it’s like to be me.” If he sounded surprised, it was because he was. He’d enjoyed that level of understanding from Lo for weeks, but he’d never expected it from his own Lois Lane. He’d underestimated her. He realized that her brilliant intuition, this ability to make amazing leaps of understanding, was something he hadn’t seen as much of from his older friend. She hadn’t needed it, since she had been through the same events before. But it was shining through full-force in this younger Lois. He was starting to remember why he’d loved her at first sight.

Lois rolled her eyes and teased, “What did you expect? I was married to you for a whole day.”

She had meant it to lighten the mood, but her remark had the opposite effect. A sudden awareness enveloped the pair. They just stared at each other, both of them speechless and feeling almost trapped by the weight of the other’s knowledge. How did you make a first impression on someone who already knew what you’d be like in ten years? How did you negotiate a new relationship with your future spouse?

In unison, Lois and Clark each shook their heads as if coming out of a trance. Clark spoke up first. “We can’t do this to ourselves. If we’re going to go back to November, knowing everything we know now, we’ve got to get it straight in our heads that we’re not Them.”

Lois gave a determined little nod. “You’re right. I mean, that’s the whole point, right? If we wanted to be them, we’d go back to October 8 or something. The whole point of keeping our memories is that we want to be us, to be free to make our own choices and chart our own future. We don’t even know if we’ll end up together. Just because they did, it doesn’t mean we have to, right? I mean, it’s not like we’re going to fly off to Vegas and get married tomorrow, is it?”

Oh, no. She couldn’t believe she’d actually said that. She’d let her mouth run away from her brain again. One hand covering her mouth, Lois took a hesitant peek, not even daring to guess how Clark would react to that little slip. To her surprise, he was smiling.

“No, we’re not. But I hope we’re not going to go back to the way we used to treat each other, either.” He said it almost tentatively, as if he weren’t certain of her reaction.

“No, we’re not,” she agreed emphatically. “We’re not going backward at all. Let’s just try to forget about Them and just be... us. Going forward.”

“You got it, partner.” Clark held out his right hand with a

smile. He seemed to be shaking hands a lot today.

Lois reached to shake Clark's hand. Both of them felt the spark that jumped between them at the physical contact. Oh, yeah, there was *something* there. But it needed time—time for the two of them to get used to each other and probably some space away from their older selves as well. But, each of them thought privately, it had to be a good sign.

"Partner?" Lois questioned.

"Oh, that's right. You weren't there. Perry's teamed us up as more or less regular work partners. Lo protested at first, but I think she was just trying to stay in character. Our writing styles work pretty well together."

"Yeah, I saw that. I read a lot of Their joint pieces when I was at the Planet yesterday."

Relieved that Lois wasn't going to argue the point and glad for the opportunity to end the intense exchange they had just been through and return the conversation to more predictable ground, Clark began to fill Lois in on all the things she had missed in the last six weeks.

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Thirty minutes later, the odd foursome and Mr. Wells were gathered in the Kent living room once again. Mr. Wells opened a time window and addressed the younger pair. "I'll stay here and monitor this part of the timeline to make certain that there are no ill affects from your return. If there is danger of a disruption, I will return to November '93 precisely three minutes after you arrive to bring you back here and we can make alternate plans. If you don't hear from me, you can assume that the time stream has been safely divided."

"And we can just get on with our lives without worrying about Lane and Clark and their kids, right?" Lois thought she understood the temporal mechanics talk that had been going on, but she wanted to be absolutely clear on this point.

"Yes, indeed, Ms. Lane. Once a successful branching has occurred, you and Mr. Kent will be completely independent individuals. You will be free to make whatever decisions you choose."

The older Clark was standing with his arm around his wife, seeing them off. He reached into the back pocket of his jeans and handed CJ a business card. "I almost forgot," he explained, "I pulled this out for you earlier while you and Lois were talking. You're going to have to do something with Jason Trask, and, as much as I love Rachel Harris, a man with Trask's connections is over her pay grade. I wouldn't even trust him to the FBI. This is a friend of mine. I don't believe you've met him yet, but you can trust him to do the right thing. Even back in '93 he should have enough pull to make sure that Trask is dealt with by the military. Bureau 39 is a rogue agency, and this guy would love to get his hands on Jason Trask. I'm sure Superman could arrange to deliver Trask into his custody."

CJ's eyebrows shot up as he read the card he now held in his hand. "General Adam Rankin, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff?!" He looked up at Clark. "You don't think that's a little overkill?"

Clark smiled back at CJ. "I think he's only a Lieutenant General in your day. But he's a good man and he won't let Trask get away. He'll know who to trust."

Clark held his hand out to CJ. "Good luck." CJ shook the proffered hand and Clark turned to make his goodbyes to Lois. She held her hand out to him and he took it in his, pulling her closer and giving her a chaste kiss on the cheek. "Be patient with each other," he said as he stepped back. The parting advice encompassed both Lois and CJ. Each nodded their acknowledgement.

Now it was Lane's turn to send her accidental guests on their way. She turned to CJ first. "You aren't getting away without a hug, young man," she said, suiting actions to words. As she

stepped back from the brief embrace, she held him at arm's length by his shoulders. "Clark," she said, using the name she knew he preferred, "You were a true and loyal friend when I desperately needed one. I think I know a little of what that friendship cost you, and I will always be grateful. I hope you find what you've always been looking for."

Turning to her young counterpart, Lane offered her hand to be shaken and was surprised to be pulled into a warm embrace instead. "I spent a day trying to be you," Lois whispered in her ear. "I don't know how you do it."

"I learned one day at a time," she whispered back. "He's got a lot of love to give. When you're ready to accept it, you can trust him."

As the two women separated, Lane raised her voice to its normal volume. "You two have a lot of challenges ahead of you, but I know you can handle them. You're both strong bright people who care about doing the right thing. Help each other do it." Once again, the two young people just nodded in response.

Lane went on, "And you might want to start by investigating a certain crime boss in philanthropist's clothing." At Lois's confused "Who?" both Clarks said, in unison and both wearing the exact same scowl, "Luthor." Lois looked from one Clark to the other. She's never seen either of them look so fierce. Whatever Lex Luthor had done, it was clear that he had made a life-long enemy of Clark Kent. And after everything she had seen in the last day, that was good enough for Lois.

As Lois and CJ turned toward the time window, CJ placed one hand at the small of Lois's back. He probably didn't even realize he was doing it. Lois realized. She was surprised by the tingle that simple touch produced. Their heads might be confused as all get-out, but their bodies certainly weren't. Just before they stepped through the shimmering portal, CJ turned back to his hosts. "Thank you both. For everything," he said in parting. "It's been an honor knowing both of you." And with that, he followed his new friend through the opening.

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Martha Kent paced back and forth from her kitchen to her living room. She'd been pacing for the last five minutes, ever since her son and her new daughter-in-law had stepped through a square of light and vanished from her kitchen and, as far as she knew, from her universe. Her husband sat at the kitchen table nursing a fresh cup of coffee. As Martha approached him for the fortieth time, Jonathan pushed his chair back from the table, reached for her hand, and pulled his petite wife onto his ample lap. He wrapped a strong arm around her waist to hold her there. Planting a gentle kiss on her temple, he soothed, "They'll be back. Any second now."

Martha answered him in a tight voice, "My boy is gone. He was sick and now he's gone."

"He's getting better, and he'll be back." She needed to hear it, and he needed to say it. It had to be true.

Both of them jumped to their feet when that same square of light formed again, exactly where it had disappeared just minutes before. The older couple held their breath as Lois and Clark stepped through, Clark's hand resting at the small of Lois's back just as if he were ushering her through the farmhouse's front door rather than through a portal in time.

Before anyone could say a word of greeting, Martha rushed forward, gathering both young people into her welcoming embrace. "Oh, thank goodness!" she exclaimed, one arm around each of them. "That was the longest five minutes of my life." Martha stepped back to get a good look at her returning children. It never occurred to her to question the fact that she now had a daughter as well as a son. From the moment that Martha had been convinced of Lois Lane's love for her son, the young woman had become hers, just as Clark had been hers from the moment she'd opened that tiny space capsule so long ago.

Martha was so busy welcoming her kids back that it was Jonathan who first thought to ask, “Lois, why are you back? Did something go wrong?”

Martha caught on quickly and looked at her daughter-in-law in dismay. “Oh, honey! You couldn’t get back to your family, could you? Even after all that business with Mr. Wells and his time window? You must be devastated!”

As Martha reached to hug Lois once again, she finally noticed the look on the young woman’s face. It wasn’t relief to be back. It wasn’t frustrated grief at not being able to return to her family. It was utter astonishment. Martha realized with a start that, for the first time in their short acquaintance, Lois Lane was at a complete loss. Martha looked to Clark for an explanation.

Finally able to get a word in edgewise, Clark put a steadying arm around Lois’s shoulders and explained, “Mom, Dad, this isn’t the Lois that you met yesterday. This is Lois Lane. The one that belongs here, in 1993. Lo’s gone home to her family.” Turning to Lois, he continued, “Lois, I’d like you to meet my parents, Martha and Jonathan Kent.”

Taking refuge in the familiar ritual, Lois held her right hand out to Martha. Trying to hide the tremor in her voice, she greeted her, “Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Kent.”

Martha recovered quickly and, with a warm smile, took Lois’s hand in both of hers. “Oh, honey! I don’t care if you’re the one I first met or not, no Lois Lane is going to call me ‘Mrs. Kent’ ever again. To you, we’re Martha and Jonathan. Now, what time was it where you’ve come from? When did you last have something to eat?”

Swept along in the current of Martha’s hospitality, Lois soon found herself seated in a farmhouse kitchen dining on scrambled eggs with sausage and biscuits. She’d never been so warmly welcomed in her life. Not even when she visited her own mother. Ellen Lane wouldn’t be capable of true warmth if her life depended on it. Martha Kent exuded it from every pore.

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Lois Lane Kent snuggled up against her husband’s side. After they’d said goodbye to Mr. Wells, neither had wanted to wait for Florence. They could still go tomorrow. She let out a long, contented sigh. “Alone at last!” she declared in delight, “I’ve missed you so much, Clark. I was really starting to worry for a while there. It’s so good to be home in my own bed,” she placed a playful kiss on the corner of his mouth, “with my own husband,” she took a little nibble at his earlobe, “alone,” she kissed the side of his neck, “with a whole weekend ahead of us...” Something was wrong. Clark was holding her close, kissing her back, but he was not giving it his full attention. She sat up.

“Okay, Mister. Spill.”

“What?” Clark had been a little distracted, but he had hoped she wouldn’t notice. He felt ashamed to admit the reason why. It just seemed so petty.

“You’re obsessing. So come on and get it off your chest. You’ll feel better, and we can get on with more important business.” She wasn’t going to let him get away with it. She never did, and he loved that about her.

Clark sat up and leaned against the headboard. He put his left arm around his wife, pulling her close to his side. She knew he did it partly so he wouldn’t have to look her in the eye. Whatever was on his mind, he was pretty embarrassed about it. Finally, the truth came out.

“You and CJ, I wouldn’t have expected you to be so close. I mean, I know you were more or less thrown together with nobody else to confide in, and I know you are always completely faithful to me, Lois. To us. But...”

Here it came. What exactly was bothering him so much?

“Did you have to give each other nicknames? I mean really! ‘CJ?’ ‘Lo?’ I’ve never been CJ in my whole life. And what on earth would possess a man to call you ‘Lo?’”

That was it? That was the big crisis? Lois couldn’t help it. She burst out laughing in relief. “Oh Clark! You sweet, jealous man! You thought I called him ‘CJ’ because it was romantic somehow?”

When she had her laughter under control, she kissed him soundly and, still smiling in indulgent amusement at his misapprehension, asked, “Clark, why do we call our son ‘Samwise’ sometimes when his name is Samuel? Why do we call Jonathan ‘Little Jon’?”

Clark gave her a puzzled look, but he played along. She must be going somewhere with this. “Because we already have a Sam and a Jonathan in the family,” he explained as if she didn’t already know. “We give them nicknames to distinguish them from their namesakes.”

His wife touched her finger to the tip of his nose. “Bingo! Got it on the first try.”

“Wait, you’re saying you started calling him ‘CJ’ because...”

“...Because I already have a Clark in my life.” Her face and her voice were serious now. “He’s a lot like you, Clark, but he wasn’t you. And I missed you so much. Sometimes I just needed to use a different name. One that didn’t remind me constantly how much I missed you.” She held his face in her two hands. “Not that I ever could forget it. Not for a minute.”

Grinning broadly, Clark leaned in and gave his wife a proper welcome home kiss. When they came up for air, though, he couldn’t help teasing, “And ‘Lo?’ Where on earth did he come up with that one?”

“Mmmm...” she answered between kisses, “I think he did it in revenge. I don’t think he liked ‘CJ’ much, either.” After that, there wasn’t anything worth adding, and, besides, they were both occupied with more important matters.

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Lois Lane was overwhelmed. That wasn’t something that happened to her often. Usually she could adapt to pretty much any circumstance that presented itself. And, in her line of work, she was regularly presented with some pretty unusual circumstances. But this was positively surreal.

In the last forty-eight hours she’d gone from her normal, every-day life to thinking she’d lost ten years worth of memories, to discovering she was married to Superman, then meeting the new, improved Clark Kent and wondering at the attraction she felt for him, to realizing that *he* was the one she’d married, not Superman, to finding out that actually, she’d married both of them because Clark *was* Superman, to discovering that no, she hadn’t lost her memory after all, she’d just been transported through time and into a different body. And now here she was, back in her own time and her own body, except that now she really *had* lost six weeks of memories because she hadn’t been here to live them. And she wasn’t even back in Metropolis. She was in Kansas. In Smallville. Sitting in Clark Kent’s boyhood home, listening to Clark discuss Superman strategy with his parents.

Come to think of it, she was adapting pretty well. All things considered.

“What do you think, Dad?” Clark was saying. He was spreading strawberry jam on a biscuit. “Should Superman just swoop down on Wayne Irig’s farm and arrest Trask for the murder of George Thompson? Or do I wait for him to show up here and catch him in the act?” He popped half the biscuit into his mouth.

“The act of what, Clark?” Jonathan questioned, pouring fresh coffee in Lois’s cup. “We don’t know for sure what Trask will do when he gets here. Assuming that Mr. Wells was right and he actually does show up here. And who knows what he’s doing to poor Wayne in the meantime. I wish you’d at least go check on him.”

Clark’s chair made a loud scraping noise as he stood up

quickly. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of that when I first got back here. I’ll be right back,” he announced. In an instant he was out the kitchen door, followed by a sonic boom.

“I wish he wouldn’t take off so quickly,” Martha complained. She was standing at the sink, peeling an orange and dropping the peels into the garbage disposal. “The neighbors are going to start asking questions.”

“No, they won’t,” her husband reassured her. “They’ll just assume it’s the Air Force flying practice maneuvers out of Vance or McConnell.”

Before Martha could respond, Clark came striding back into the kitchen. He was already back in his street clothes. <Or farm clothes, as the case may be.> Lois was starting to get a little punchy, at least in her own mind. She hoped she wouldn’t break into hysterical giggles. That wouldn’t be good for her image. Or her self-respect. No, she could handle this. Really. She took a sip of coffee to calm her nerves. Chocolate would have been better, but Martha didn’t serve that with brunch, more’s the pity.

“Wayne’s fine,” Clark reported. “He’s not even there. I found him eight miles down State Route 23, headed toward town in his F-150. From some things Trask said to his men, it sounds like he was hoping that Wayne would lead him to the kryptonite, but Wayne was too smart for him. He headed in the opposite direction. I’ll keep an ear out in case he does head this way.”

“Even if he did come here, he wouldn’t find that poisonous rock,” Martha informed Lois. “Jonathan got rid of it last night.”

Clark sat down and resumed his meal, starting with the other half of his biscuit. He washed it down with a tall glass of milk and turned his attention on Lois.

“What about you, Lois? What’s your advice? Preemptive strike or lying in wait?”

Lois blinked once before replying. “You’re asking me for advice on how to do your Superman job?”

“Sure, why not?” Clark answered. “You’re more experienced at bringing down bad guys than I am.”

He said it as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. And she believed him. He was right. Superman had been in existence for less than a month—no, that was by her time. Counting the six weeks she’d been gone it was closer to two or three months here, but still, he had a point. Clark had amazing abilities, but Lois had a track record of uncovering corruption and holding the perpetrators to account. In her own way, she too fought for truth and justice. Lane’s parting words echoed in her mind. ‘You’re both strong bright people who care about doing the right thing. Help each other do it.’

Suddenly, she didn’t feel so overwhelmed. She felt strong, competent, needed. She was in a unique position to help Clark be the best Superman he could be. And, when the time came, he’d help her as well. <Starting with an exclusive interview,> she thought with relish. Yes. She *could* do this.

Meanwhile, Clark was waiting for an answer. “Let me think,” she began.

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By 3:00 that afternoon Lois was beginning to wonder whether her plan would work after all. The whole thing depended on Trask showing up at the Kent farm to confront Clark, as Mr. Wells had said he had done in the timeline that had gotten Clark killed. The one they were now trying to preempt. But Mr. Wells hadn’t said exactly *when* Trask would arrive, and all three of them—Lois, Martha, and Jonathan—were running out of ways to ‘look natural’ hanging around the farmhouse. They needed to stay together. It would make Clark’s job—swooping in as Superman to save the day—a lot easier if the three of them were all in one place. But Lois was supposedly in Smallville to investigate the EPA activities at the Irig farm. How much hanging out at the Kents’ place could she get away with? Hopefully Trask would be too busy trying to find Superman to think clearly about

Lois Lane’s whereabouts. She wished he would just turn up so they could get this over with.

Meanwhile, they were stuck here, waiting. Lois tried to think of it as just another stake-out. It almost worked. Jonathan sat at the now cleared kitchen table reading the Daily Planet cover to cover. <Why should you be surprised that they have the Daily Planet delivered?> Lois scolded herself, <Their son does write for it.> She’d been startled earlier by the headline below the fold on the front page. ‘Smart Kids Back to Normal, Beckworth School Reports’ with the subhead ‘DCS Stresses Need for Foster Parents.’ It was the byline that caught her eye: ‘by Lois Lane and Clark Kent.’ Clark had told her about the case when he brought her up to speed on the weeks she’d missed. But seeing it in black and white made it seem more concrete.

Martha was removing dishes from the cupboards one shelf at a time, cleaning the shelves with a damp cloth, and finally returning the dishes to their places before moving on to the next shelf. It was utter make-work, but there was only so much puttering to be done in the already neat kitchen. Lois was standing by with a clean dish towel, ready to dry the next shelf off before Martha replaced its contents.

Yep. She was bored. And she felt like a fifth wheel. At least if she’d been home in her own kitchen she could have burned some of her nervous energy off by scrubbing the grout between her tiles.

Martha’s quiet voice broke the silence. “Lois, while we’re stuck waiting here, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about.” She turned her face briefly to the ceiling and addressed her son, who had been hovering high above the farmhouse for the last hour. “And I know you can hear me too, Clark,” she said, “so listen up.”

She turned back to Lois. “I don’t know how much you saw or heard when you were in the other Lois’s world.” Lois opened her mouth to respond, but Martha overrode her. “And I don’t need to know. I understand that you are not the young woman I met yesterday who was so in love with my son—my older son.” Martha gave her head a little shake to clear that bit of confusion away.

“In any case, my point is this: nobody knows how things are going to work out for you and Clark. You two will have to decide that for yourselves, and I expect it might take a while to even know what you want. But, regardless of whether or not you ever develop a romantic attachment to my son, you are already a part of this family.”

Before Lois could protest, Martha hurried to explain herself. “I’ve watched you with him, Lois. I listened to the two of you brainstorming this plan of yours. You already understand that Superman is only one aspect of Clark Kent, and you treat him as a whole person.

“I won’t lie to you; Jonathan and I were not happy when we first heard that Lois Lane, crack reporter, might know our son’s secret. We worried. A lot. But I see now that all three of us can depend on you to guard Clark’s welfare. And I want you to know that goes both ways. Besides Jonathan, me, and Clark himself, you are the only person on the planet who knows this secret. And a secret this big is also a burden. I just want you to know that you’ll never need to bear it alone. You’ll always be welcome here, whatever happens or doesn’t happen between you and Clark.”

“Mrs. Ke...Martha,” Lois squeezed out of her tightening throat, “I don’t know what to say.”

“No need to say anything, dear,” Martha smiled. “I’ve always wanted a daughter, anyway, and now I’ve got one, one way or the other.” She addressed the ceiling again. “Hear that, Clark? She might be your girl or she might be your sister, but, either way, she’s family. So you’d better treat her right!”

Before Lois could worry too much what Clark thought about

his mother's little speech, the sound of tires on gravel brought three pairs of eyes to the kitchen door. <It's about time!> Lois thought. She reached into the pocket of her denim jacket. She was ready.

Glancing through the door to the living room, Lois could see two of Trask's gunmen standing on the front porch. Trask himself glared through the window of the back door, pounding his fist on the wood. His muffled shout came through clear enough. "Open up! Federal agent!"

Without rushing, but without hesitation either, Jonathan approached the kitchen door. Keeping one foot braced against the door, he opened it a few inches, just enough to talk clearly with the person on the other side. "What can I do for you?" he inquired politely. Lois reflected that this was probably not the Kents' first encounter with curious government agents.

"You can open this door and let me in. Or I can let myself in." With that last menacing comment, Trask unholstered his handgun and pointed it at Jonathan's chest. Jonathan looked from the gun to Trask's face and, with remarkable calm, delivered the line that Lois had taught him. "Do you have a warrant to enter my home?"

The smile Trask gave was almost a leer. The man was obviously unhinged. "Sure I do." He gave the gun a little wave. "I have it right here." Good. Trask was playing his part whether he realized it or not.

Jonathan didn't miss a beat. "What you have is not a warrant; it's a gun. I am letting you in my home under duress and I stand on my Fourth Amendment rights. This is an illegal search of my home without due process." <Good job, Jonathan. You got all the key words in there.> Lois knew that Trask could care less, but this would help their case later. Assuming that the rest of the confrontation also went according to plan.

Having delivered his assigned lines, Jonathan stepped back, allowing Trask to push his way past him and into the kitchen. The Colonel waved to the men on the front porch, and they came into the house as well. They immediately began a thorough and none-too-careful search of the Kent living room, tossing the cushions from the sofa, emptying the desk drawers of their contents, and generally making a mess of things.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?" Martha started into the living room to confront the armed men, but allowed herself to be restrained by Jonathan's hand on her arm. There was a plan to be followed, and it didn't involve any of them getting shot. Instead, she turned her indignation on the men's leader. "Why are your men destroying my property? What are they looking for, anyway?" she demanded.

"A meteorite, Mrs. Kent. You *are* Martha Kent, I presume?" The man was almost gloating.

Martha ignored his question and responded with one of her own. "A meteorite? What makes you think I have a meteorite hidden in my living room? And why would the government want it even if I did?"

"What I want is a weapon," Trask explained. "I have reason to believe that our nation is under attack from hostile alien forces. And this meteorite may very well be the only weapon that can stop them." The scary thing was that he said it so calmly, as if it were the most reasonable thing in the world.

The men had finished their investigation of the living room, and now they crowded into the kitchen and started opening cupboards and drawers. "Would you stop?!" Martha pleaded with the men. She turned to Trask. "I swear there is no meteorite or any other kind of rock in this house. Would you please stop making such a mess of my things?" It was true, too. The glowing rock had never even entered the house and at the moment it was lying in tiny pieces in Larry Kent's septic system two counties over.

Trask gave some kind of hand signal to his men. They didn't

stop their search altogether, but at least they were more considerate of Martha's belongings. They seemed content to rifle through her things without actually dumping them out on the floor. She wasn't really worried. There wasn't anything incriminating for them to find. Her mind went briefly to the black lace teddy tucked in the back of her pajama drawer. Hopefully they'd just take a cursory glance and notice the conspicuous absence of glowing green rocks. Honestly! If they really wanted to find that hunk of poison, they should try blacking all the windows, turning off the lights, and just looking for the green glow!

The search was making plenty of noise, but it really wasn't getting them anywhere. Lois needed to get Trask talking again. "Alien invasion?" she challenged him, "You're not still going on about Superman being an alien menace, are you?"

The strongman turned his attention on Lois. He hadn't seemed to focus on her until now. "Lois Lane," he said thoughtfully. "What brings you to Smallville, Kansas? Isn't it a little out of your bailiwick? And where is your partner? I'd expected to find him here, not you."

"He's running an errand. And I could ask you the same thing. What are you doing here?" Lois shot back.

"Oh, that's easy," Trask replied, not seeming the least bit worried. "Smallville is part of my portfolio. It's the site of a UFO landing in 1966. Only in this case, UFO is really a misnomer. This particular flying object is easily identified. It's a small spacecraft with a very distinctive symbol on the front. Superman's symbol. In addition, Smallville is also the source of a certain glowing green rock that turned up in a U.S. Geological Survey lab two days ago. Coincidence? I don't think so. I think this rock, which the geologists tell me is 'not of earthly origin,' is a piece of Superman's homeworld. And I believe that its radiation, which is apparently harmless to humans, would be lethal to an alien from Krypton."

"So your great plan to save the world is to kill Superman with a glowing green rock?" Lois made the question sound as dismissive as she could. The man was crazy, and she wanted that made crystal clear.

"In a nutshell, yes." That's the thing about crazy people. They don't realize how crazy they are. Of course, if Trask actually *had* a piece of that rock, his plan could actually work. But nobody needed to know that, least of all Trask himself.

"You're crazy, Trask," Lois accused. "There is no green glowing rock in this house, and there never was." That was true, as far as it went. "Meanwhile, you are trampling all over the property rights of these law-abiding citizens who have no connection to you or Superman to begin with. Why don't you just leave them alone?"

"Rights? Rights, Ms. Lane? What are rights compared to the safety and security of the entire world? I'm trying to stop a race of superpowered alien beings from taking over the planet. I need that rock to do it. I've dug all over the Irig farm, and that rock is nowhere to be found. I don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to figure out who Irig probably gave it to: the parents of Clark Kent, the reporter with more Superman stories than even you, Ms. Lane. If a few people have to get their precious rights stepped on along the way, so be it."

"So the Kents are just in your way? The same way George Thompson was? Was his right to life and liberty just another inconvenience that stood in the way of your mission?" Lois was taunting him now, and a saner man would have wondered why and held his tongue. But Jason Trask was no longer a sane man.

"George Thompson was a traitor to his country. He had a sworn duty to protect this nation, and instead he chose to protect the alien. His life was forfeit."

"And you were the appointed executioner?"

"I was the only one who saw what needed to be done for the

greater good.”

“So you killed him.” He wouldn’t be stupid enough to admit it straight out, but Lois had to try.

“It was necessary.” He was that stupid! Lois couldn’t believe her luck.

The sound of boots clomping down the stairs announced that the search of the bedrooms was over. The two henchmen appeared in the kitchen doorway and shook their heads.

“Negative, sir,” the older one reported.

“Search the outbuildings,” Trask commanded.

“That won’t be necessary.” The deep, familiar voice sounded from the open back door. Superman stood there, arms crossed over his chest, filling the frame with all his colorful splendor.

Before anyone could react, he became a blur of motion, disarming Trask and his men before tying the men back-to-back with a length of rope and holding Trask aloft by his shirt collar. Idly, Lois wondered where he’d kept the rope. She didn’t think the cape had pockets that big.

Trask began protesting, but stopped when Superman turned a baleful gaze on him. “I’d be very careful what I said right now if I were you.” Lois noticed that his voice was at least an octave lower than Clark’s. “You might want to exercise your right to remain silent, even if it is a bit late.”

Superman turned his carefully polite face to Lois. “Ms. Lane, do you have what you need?” he intoned. <No wonder I never saw it,> she thought. <He doesn’t look a thing like Clark when he acts like that.>

Lois removed a device from her jacket pocket. She pressed a button, resulting in a brief low humming noise, then a second button. A pounding noise could be heard coming from the device, followed by Trask’s muffled but clearly distinguishable demands to be let in. Lois grinned. “It’s all there on tape.”

Holding Trask at arm’s length with his right hand, Superman reached for the tape recorder with his left. “May I?” he requested.

“Certainly,” Lois replied. Clark tucked the tape, recorder and all, behind his back. <Ah! So there is at least some kind of pocket back there.>

Rachel Harris appeared at the door. With admirable composure, she addressed the superhero. “I’ve got the two from the van in custody. My deputy has them under guard in the patrol car. Anything I can do for you here?”

“Yes, please, Sheriff,” replied the hero. <You’d never know he was addressing his childhood friend,> Lois thought, <He really is the consummate actor.> “Could you stand guard over these two,” indicating the captured gunmen, “while I deliver Colonel Trask to my military contact?”

“Certainly,” the sheriff replied.

As Superman turned to leave, still carrying Trask in one hand as one might carry a dead rat or other vermin, Trask gained his voice again and lashed out in frustration. “You knew he was here all along, didn’t you, Lane? You’re part of his conspiracy! A traitor to your country, to your world! Are you in love with him, Lane? Is that what it is? You’ve been seduced by an alien? Do you know how perverted that is? Is that part of his plan? To contaminate the gene pool with his half-breed alien mongrels?”

“That’s enough, Trask.” Superman gave the man a cold, challenging glare. “We’ve got a long way to fly, and your ranting might disturb my concentration. I wouldn’t want to drop you.” And with that, the hero turned the madman to face away from him and, holding the man with a hand under each arm, lifted him into the sky. Trask fainted from the shock before they cleared the cloud layer. Mercifully, it would be a quiet trip.

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By 5:00 all the excitement was over. The older Clark had been right about General Rankin. Superman had had no trouble getting in to see the General, who had been surprised but pleased to be handed Bureau 39’s rogue leader on a platter. MPs had been

quickly dispatched from Fort Riley to pick up Trask’s underlings. Rachel and her deputy were headed back to the Corn Festival.

As the last patrol car pulled away, Lois and the three Kents lingered in the front yard. Nobody was in any hurry to head back into the house where they’d been effectively trapped for most of the afternoon. Clark stood with both hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans. He stirred the loose gravel of the driveway with the toe of his worn work boot. Martha put a supportive hand on her son’s back. “Clark? Is something wrong?” she gently prodded.

“Not really, Mom,” he shrugged, “I guess the whole thing is just a little overwhelming.”

Lois looked at Clark closely, surprised to hear her own earlier feelings echoed by her friend. He gave the gravel a stronger kick that sent one pebble flying into the distance. “You should have seen how General Rankin looked at me when I showed up,” Clark complained. “I didn’t have an appointment, I hadn’t called ahead. By rights, he shouldn’t have given me the time of day. But the moment I showed up the desk officer showed me right to him and he looked at me like I was some kind of...” he trailed off, embarrassed to even say it out loud.

“Some kind of what, Clark? Celebrity? Hero? Greek god?” Lois didn’t understand Clark’s reaction. It was as if he were embarrassed to be Superman. “You are, Clark. You’re all of those things. When you wear that Suit, you are the most recognizable man on the entire planet. And the most powerful. Of course they were happy to see you.”

“But I’m not, Lois! I’m not a god!” The frustration in Clark’s voice was mounting. How could he make her understand? “I’m just a hick from Nowheresville. I never wanted to be famous. I just wanted to have a cover so I can help out without ruining the rest of my life. I never expected all this attention.”

And that was it in a nutshell. Lois had the sudden realization that Superman, the grand hero that everyone assumed had come to earth on a well-thought-out mission to aid humanity, was actually one giant improvisation. Clark had greatness thrust upon him, and he was making it up as he went along. And the only three people who could possibly understand that, who could give him the support he needed to do what only he could do, were all standing right here in the front yard of a Kansas farmhouse.

Putting on her brightest smile, Lois took Clark by the hand and pulled him toward the house. “Come on, my reluctant hero,” she said cheerfully.

“Where are we going?” a bewildered Clark asked as he let himself be dragged along.

“I’m going to freshen up and grab my purse, and then you are going to show me what a real Kansas Corn Festival is like.” Lois was forced to stop because Clark was no longer moving along behind her. She turned to face him, her eyebrows raised. What was the hold-up?

“A date?” Clark looked pretty unsure of himself. “Are you certain that’s a good idea, Lois? I mean, we’re both on a little bit of a rebound, here. I don’t want to rush into anything.”

Lois rolled her eyes at him. “First off, it doesn’t have to be a date. I’ve been stuck in your parent’s kitchen all afternoon, and you’re feeling a little overwhelmed by the Superman hoopla. I figure we can both do with a little normalcy. So, forget Superman for the evening and just come be Clark for a while. We’ll have a good time.”

“And second?” he inquired.

“Second what?” What was he talking about?

“You said ‘First off, it doesn’t have to be a date.’ What’s the second?”

Oh, that. “Second, how can we be on the rebound from each other? We agreed that we aren’t going to get together just because they did. But if we find out we *want* to be together, and we don’t let ourselves just to prove that we’re not Them, then we’re still

letting Them run our lives for us, just in a reverse psychology kind of way. So forget about Them altogether. Let's just go have some fun."

He seemed to be convinced, because he let her pull him into the house. Ten minutes later, they were pulling out of the driveway in Jonathan's pick-up truck, headed for town.

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"I'm sorry about my mom," Clark said after about the third mile of country road. The radio was playing Garth Brooks.

Lois turned her eyes from the window and looked at Clark in surprise. "What's wrong with your mom?" she asked. "She's a gem."

"I know. I love my mom to death, but she does tend to stick her nose in where it doesn't belong sometimes. I hope she didn't put you off with her whole 'welcome to the family' speech."

"She didn't," Lois reassured him. "I hadn't really focused on it, but she's got a point. It would be pretty hard to know this huge secret and not have anyone I could talk to about it. I think she just wanted me to know it was okay."

"I'm sorry about that, too." What was with Clark tonight? He seemed determined to feel guilty about something.

"Sorry about what, Clark? Would you please stop beating yourself up?" It was getting almost irritating.

"That you're stuck with this big secret now. I hadn't thought about what a burden it is."

Lois let out a frustrated sigh. "Pull over," she commanded.

"Huh?"

"Pull the truck over. We're going to clear this up right now, and I want your attention on me, not the road."

Clark did as she asked and turned to face her expectantly. Who knew that Superman could be so insecure?

"Clark, do you know what I've been dreaming of ever since you flew me back to the office after the Prometheus launch?"

"Sure. You've been mooning over Superman like a dewy-eyed cheerleader."

"Maybe at first, yes. But it didn't take long for me to realize that Superman is a real person with feelings just like everybody else. What I've wanted for weeks is to be the one person that Superman could trust. That he could come to when things weren't going right, or when he just needed a friend. So don't apologize for burdening me with something I've been longing after for a long time. I *want* to be your friend. If you'll let me."

Clark gave a deep, warm chuckle that filled the truck cab. "I thought that was supposed to be my line," he said.

Lois returned his smile with a wry little twist to her mouth. "Yeah, well, like you said before, we've both been pretty good at the hiding game. Now, let's knock it off and go have some fun, shall we?"

"You got it," Clark replied, pulling the truck back onto the road. "You are in for a real treat, I'll have you know."

"Oh, really? The Corn Festival is the place to be, is it?"

"Sure. We'll see the Corn Queen and her court, the Husk-Off, the Corn-o-Rama. Popcorn, creamed corn, corn-on-the-cob. We're in luck."

Lois laughed. "Be still my heart."

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An hour later, Lois gasped and looked down at her chest in dismay. Only Lois Lane could manage to spill half a barbecue sandwich down the front of a pale yellow t-shirt. Earlier, it had been a surprise to Lois to find the clothes that her older counterpart had packed for the trip to Smallville. Lois would have packed more business suits for a field investigation, but Lane obviously knew how to blend in in a rural community.

"Lois, are you okay?" Clark's voice from across the picnic table brought her back to the present.

"Of course I'm okay, Clark. It's just a stain," she replied. Though she didn't really want to go through the rest of the

evening with a big red splotch on the front of her shirt. And another one on the front of her jeans as well, now that she noticed it.

Clark leaned in closer and spoke for her ears only. "Do you want me to fly you back to the house to change?" Now, there was a thought. This guy really could come in handy, couldn't he? But Lois had another idea.

"Actually, Clark, I don't think that will be necessary," she answered him as she rose from her seat and picked up her purse. "You stay put and finish your dinner, and I'll be right back."

As Lois melted into the crowd, Clark settled back in his seat and picked up his corn-on-the-cob. He'd only taken three bites when Rachel Harris took the seat across from him.

"Clark! You missed all the excitement at your folks' place this afternoon. Everything okay there now?"

"Everything's fine, Rach. I think Mom and Dad have had enough adventure to last them a while, though. They decided to call it a day and turn in early."

Rachel eyed the half-full plate of food across from Clark's. "You're not here alone, then, are you?" she asked in a hopeful tone.

"No. Lois is with me. She just had to take care of something for a minute."

"Oh. Her." The disappointment in the sheriff's voice was obvious. But Clark never got a chance to respond to it, because at that moment Lois reappeared dressed in a very flattering brown calico dress with a v-neck and a slit in the front that showed just a hint of white petticoat when she moved. Her soft boots set off the entire outfit and made her look the picture of the country girl.

"Where did this come from?" Clark couldn't hide the admiration in his voice.

Lois gave a little shrug and a sheepish smile. "When in Smallville..." she answered.

A wave of applause arose from the nearby dance floor where the country-rock band had just finished one song and was preparing to start another. Rachel stood up and beckoned to Clark. "Come on, Clark, let's show 'em how it's done."

Clark hesitated, looking from Rachel to Lois and back again. "It's okay, Clark," Lois told him, "You go get warmed up. I'll finish my supper and you and I can catch the next one." With a reluctant glance back at Lois, Clark followed Rachel onto the dance floor.

Lois never did finish her dinner, though, because almost as soon as Clark and Rachel left her table, a tall, slim man in Wrangler jeans and a red buffalo plaid shirt approached her with an easy grin. "You must be Lois," the stranger greeted her.

"I must be," she replied, wondering at his familiar manner.

"I'm Pete Ross. Clark and I have been pals since kindergarten. I see he's left you to your own devices."

"I don't think Sheriff Harris was going to take 'no' for an answer," Lois defended her partner.

Pete gave an easy chuckle. "No, I don't suppose she was. But that doesn't mean you have to sit here twiddling your thumbs. What say you and I give them a run for their money?" He held out a hand to her, inviting her to join him on the dance floor.

Lois hesitated only a moment. "Sure. Why not?" She rose from her seat and followed Pete into the crowd of dancers. She still had a trick or two up her sleeve.

The band was playing a line dance, and as the steps made a quarter turn to the right, Lois found herself next to Clark, who now had Rachel in front of him. He turned to Lois in obvious surprise, taking in the ease of her steps and the gracefulness of her movements. "Hey! You can really do this!" he shouted above the music.

"Last year a girlfriend convinced me it would be a good way to meet guys," Lois explained.

"Did it work?" Clark inquired.

Lois laughed, and, as the steps turned them away from each other again, threw her answer over her shoulder at him. “Define guys,” she grinned.

When the next song began, it was a slow ballad. Pete looked from Lois to Clark to Rachel. What were friends for? “Come on Rachel,” Pete said, reaching for the sheriff’s hand. “I’ll win you a Superman doll.” Rachel gave one last look at Clark and Lois before making the best of a bad situation. “Sure, Pete,” she answered with as much good cheer as she could muster. “Show me what you can do.”

The other dancers were either pairing up for the slow dance or leaving the dance floor. Lois looked at Clark. It was up to him now. Let him take the lead.

With a hopeful half-smile, he held his hand out to her. “Dance with me?” he asked softly. Without a word, Lois stepped into his waiting arms. A strange sense of déjà-vu encompassed her as they danced. Only the night before, by her time, she had been in the arms of another Clark, dancing to old standards in an elegant ballroom, he in a tuxedo and she in an evening gown. Now she was being gently rocked by her own Clark in jeans and cowboy boots. But the sense of homecoming was exactly the same. And this time there was none of the confusion of the previous night to mar the experience. So this time, when Clark lowered his face toward hers, she made no mad dash for the ladies’ room. Instead, she lifted her face to meet him.

As their lips parted a moment later, she opened her eyes to see her own hazy desire reflected in his. Still swaying to the music, he pulled her close. She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her cheek against the soft material of his flannel shirt. She could hear his heart pounding in her ear. She’d never heard a more beautiful sound. One strong arm stayed around her waist, holding her near, and his other hand stroked her hair tenderly. His voice was a whisper in her ear. “I guess that make this a real date, huh?”

She raised her head and looked up into his smiling face. It was full of joy, and also of wonder. She knew exactly how he felt. Reaching up for another kiss, Lois replied in the same hushed tones, “I’d say it makes this a promising beginning.”

THE END

Author’s note: This story was less than half-way finished for months when I started posting it to the lcficmbs.com message boards. I was hoping to be inspired to actually finish it, and it worked like a charm. The feedback was encouraging and helpful. We had some great discussions about time travel and whether a person’s past or future self is the same person or not, as well as how one would react to one’s spouse’s past self. I can’t say enough about that group of Folcs. Nor about my wonderful betas, Amber, Carol, and Ray. They all gave helpful feedback, and Carol held my hand while I learned the ropes of the message boards and the whole editing process. Thank you, thank you, thank you to all! — Happy