

Ricochet

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Rated: PG13

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Summary: Lois switches places with her future self.

Anyone who has read "Switch" and/or "Not Again" by Kipp, based on RodStewFan's "Switch", will recognize elements of those stories in this one. I wrote to them, wheedling for permission to play with their idea. My deepest gratitude to them both for their creativity and their graciousness in allowing me to use their brainchild. I've since learned that there's at least one other story with a similar theme, but I must shamefacedly admit that I haven't read it. Hopefully this is a different take from anyone else's.

My heartfelt thanks go out to alcyone, Jenn, and DJ who all read early versions of the first two/three parts of this story and offered insightful suggestions and welcome nits. Many, many thanks to Brenda who stepped in to help with the last part. This would still be sitting on my hard drive without her. If you're looking for WAFF, you're in the right place. I'm also deeply indebted to Janet, who helped whip this into shape for the archive.

I must disclaim that, while the characters and some of the dialogue are taken directly from L&C: TNAOS, no copyright infringement was meant. I did it all for love, not money.

Chapter 1

"Hindsight — ." HG Wells looked down at the hat in his hands, turning it slightly as he struggled for words. "It really is nearly perfect."

The silence that followed this remark felt awkward, so Wells bowed his head in deference and tried again to explain. "It seemed so simple. Alter one little detail, speed up the process, just a bit, and you can effect a change for the better. So that's what I did."

"You did more than that," his companion answered, their tone of voice flat. "You changed more than a 'detail'." The last word was spoken with something approaching scorn. "You changed *everything*."

"It was for the better," Wells persisted. "Once I realized what one little detail changed, how the wheels were set into a new motion, I saw that countless people could be spared terrible pain. I only meant to change one thing. I hadn't counted on the domino effect being quite so — far-reaching."

"So what was the one change?"

Wells cleared his throat nervously. "Yes, well, you see, each time I looked at the larger picture, the problem always started with Lex Luthor ... "

1998

It wasn't the first time she had been transported, so Lois knew immediately what was happening. It was, however, the first time she had been moved without any kind of a warning first. During the first moment or two, as the room turned black around her, she had the presence of mind to drop her purse onto the bed and close her eyes. She had learned through sorry experience that a person didn't want to be holding anything when going through a time window. She closed her eyes to counteract the dizziness that traveling this way invariably caused.

And then, almost as quickly as the sensation had started, it

was over. She was standing on a sidewalk, across the street from the Third Precinct. That's good, Lois told herself. You know where you are, the question is *when* are you?

One of the nearby storefronts had a large display advertising Valentine's Day specials and the air was certainly more frigid than the early spring evening she had left behind. Lois rubbed her arms and wished her sweater was a little more bulky.

An elderly man in a wheelchair stopped just short of hitting her and offered an apology in a warbling voice. "Oh, excuse me, miss."

Lois froze. There was something familiar about the man — about this whole situation — the weirdest sense of *deja vu*. When he spoke again, she realized with horror that she knew exactly *when* she was.

"Lois Lane," the man cackled in delight. "Imagine my good luck, running into you two days in a row. You know, I have something for you. Information about Lex Luthor ..." He began to back his wheelchair into the alley behind him. "... And the woman who stole his body."

It was *Lex*. Horrified and fascinated at the same time — and trusting that history would repeat itself — Lois followed him into the alley.

"Do you know the story of the phoenix?" he asked.

Irritation shot through her. Lex had always done this — the big gesture, the hokey story, layers upon layers of deception. Already impatient with his antics, she blurted out, "What do you want, Lex?"

For a moment or two he was taken aback — no doubt disappointed that he wasn't going to be able to dramatically expound upon his miraculous resurrection. Then he stood up, ripping away the latex from his face. "And they claim that love is blind," he said smoothly, still pulling at the mask. "I should have known that your heart would still recognize me."

Lois shook her head emphatically. "I'm not in love with you."

Lex paused in his advance toward her, tilting his head playfully as he considered her. "I've fallen from grace, haven't I? I can see it in your eyes. But surely a creature of such abundant benevolence would allow me the chance to redeem myself."

"No," Lois said firmly and turned to walk away.

Fast-as-that, his hand was gripping her arm, squeezing so hard that her fingers began to tingle.

"Let go of me," she ordered through clenched teeth.

"Everything I did," Lex replied, a furious edge to his voice, "Everything. It was all for you. You said 'yes' to me, Lois. You promised to be my wife."

"Wrong. I said I *couldn't* be your wife. Now let go of my arm or I'm going to scream so loud that every cop in a ten-block radius, plus Superman, shows up to arrest you."

He released her and took a step backward, into the shadows of the alley. She could no longer see his face but the malevolence in his voice was unmistakable as he offered a parting shot, "This isn't over, my love."

Lois turned and walked swiftly in the opposite direction, darting into the street and holding up one hand to forestall the traffic as she made a dash to the police station on the other side.

Perry was waiting at the bottom of the ramp when Lois got to the Planet. "Are you okay, darlin'?"

"Sure. Fine," she said briskly. That wasn't true. She felt jumpy and confused. The more she thought about being in a world where Lex was alive and on the loose, the more the panic started to bubble up inside her. Where was HG Wells to explain why she was here? Or was this some cruel joke that Tempus was playing on her?

"You don't look fine," Jimmy countered. "You look kinda pale. And when did you get your hair cut?"

"I like your hair." Clark was standing in the doorway to the conference room and he gave her a smile. "It's very chic."

Lois absentmindedly patted her hair. "Thanks," she said softly, fighting the urge to stare at Clark. He was wearing his old glasses and his hair was longer. And his tie — ugh. It was two ugly ties merged into one. The top was a garish geometric pattern while the bottom was inexplicably a solid glossy black. That tie had been one of the first she had thrown out under the guise of making room in his small closet when they were newlyweds.

"Both of you, get in there now." Perry waved at the conference room. "We need to figure out where this story's headin'."

Lois followed Clark into the conference room and sat down across the table from him. The sense of *deja vu* she had experienced in the alley only increased as she listened to Clark explain that his trip to the bomb squad had turned up no solid leads. The plastic explosives and triggers that had been stolen were versatile enough to be used for just about any kind of demolition.

Hadn't they used all those explosives to free Rollie Vale? Was that why she was here? Was she supposed to make sure that Vale didn't escape?

Jimmy set a mug of tea down in front of her. "So what did Luthor say he wanted? Besides you, I mean?"

Perry had been pacing the room, but he now rounded back toward them and gave Jimmy a cautioning look. "It sounds like your only solid lead for finding Luthor is Bender."

"Bender!" Lois sat up straighter in her chair as the memory of the hapless attorney's murder came back to her. "We have to warn Bender!"

"Warn him about what?" Clark asked and unconsciously adjusted his tie.

"Lex is going to have Bender killed. Tomorrow morning."

"Lex told you that?" Perry asked, incredulous.

"Uh, no, not exactly." Lois stood up. "I'm going down to the marina to talk to Bender. Clark, are you coming?"

"Of course." Clark pushed himself back from the table.

"Excellent. You two get down there and make sure that Bender talks to you," Perry directed. "You stick to him like flies on a t-bone until I say differently, you hear?"

Clark hesitated and turned back. "What if he leaves town?"

"Then you leave town with him. Round the clock surveillance, that's what I'm talking about. If he's stayin' there at the marina, you two can bunk up at Butch Kennebrew's place. He keeps a little hideout down there."

"But —," Clark started to say and it dawned on Lois that tonight was supposed to have been their first date.

"You got something better to do?" Perry asked pointedly.

Lois looked over at Clark and shrugged. They were never going to make that concert, but there was no good way to tell him so.

Clark sighed. "I guess not."

"Good," Perry said with a pleased smile. "Get going."

They were riding down in the elevator when Clark asked, "Shouldn't you go back for your coat?"

"Oh, uh ... I think I left it at the police station." Lois shrugged. "It doesn't matter. We're not going to be doing that much walking, are we?" Or, she amended to herself, she probably wouldn't be here long enough for it to matter. Lois glanced around the lobby, but didn't see the fastidiously dressed Englishman lurking anywhere. Where was Wells?

They moved from the lobby into the parking garage and the chill of the evening made Lois wish she hadn't been so insouciant about not having a coat. Luckily the purse in her desk drawer had contained her keys, so at least there was the promise of heat once she got the Jeep started. It was cold enough that she was

beginning to shiver.

She was trying to find the right key when Clark took off his coat and laid it over her shoulders. Without thinking she said, "Thanks, sweetie."

Clark let out a surprised chuckle. "Uh, you're welcome."

When she glanced over, he was smiling to himself. How had she managed to ignore that much blatant adoration for two whole years before succumbing to his charms? A pang shot through her as she realized how deeply she already missed the man who was standing next to her.

Lois spent the drive to the marina forcing herself to keep her eyes on the road, but she still indulged in little glances at Clark. Her memories skipped back to those first heady days when they started dating. It had been so exhilarating — and frightening — to realize that she had found someone she could love and trust without reservation. Again and again her left thumb worried at her ring finger, missing the familiar weight of her wedding ring. She had taken it off at the police station and secured it deep inside the front pocket of her jeans.

She was doubly grateful for his coat once they arrived at the marina. The breeze coming off the river was freezing. They walked along the pier, searching for the 'Sue U'. A light was glowing inside, so Lois climbed aboard and called out Bender's name. There was no answer.

Clark tried the door to the cabin and it opened. "I don't think anyone is home," he said. "Are you sure he was going to be staying here?"

Lois went inside the cabin and looked around. A cup of coffee was sitting on a table; steam was still rising from it. "Maybe he went to get something from his car?"

"How do you know that Luthor is planning to kill him?"

Lois knocked over the coffee mug to distract him. "Oh no!" she exclaimed, grabbing a t-shirt from the back of a chair and dropping to her knees to sop up the liquid. As she stood back up, she accidentally bumped into the table, sending the books near the edge onto the floor as well.

"Maybe we should watch for him from the condo?" Clark suggested. "Before you completely trash his yacht?"

Grateful that he was dropping the subject of Bender, Lois agreed. Clark went back to the car to get the surveillance equipment while she unlocked the condo. As she waited for Clark to return, she stood at the window, watching the vacant yacht. Where was Bender? He should have been there. What had happened to him? Had her altered confrontation with Lex changed his timetable? Was Bender already dead?

She was distracted from her thoughts when Clark came back. "Bender wasn't in the parking lot," Clark told her. "But his Mercedes is still there."

Lois looked out at the yacht again. Where could he have gone? She had never particularly liked Sheldon Bender, but she found herself praying that he was still alive. It was sickening to know that Lex felt as though Bender was nothing but a fly to be swatted. The intensity of Lex's delusions was even more frightening the second time around, if only because she knew that he was going to shatter her life more than once before his own finally ended.

"Hey." Clark's hand touched her shoulder briefly. "What's wrong?"

Lois bit her lip and reminded herself that Clark wasn't her husband yet. She couldn't turn around and cling to him without confusing him. The urge to blurt out the truth was overwhelming, to say to him 'Hey Clark, guess what? I'm from the future. And I'm your wife. Please, would you just hold me for a little while?'

What would he say? Would he even believe her? How could she explain to him why she was there when she didn't even know the reason herself? The events of the past couple of hours had left her feeling tired and drained. Again and again her mind replayed

the memory of Lex confronting her in the alley. It was frightening and eerie to know that Lex would stop at nothing in pursuit of his twisted dreams and there didn't seem to be a damn thing she could do to change history.

"It was really him," she whispered, half to herself. "Lex. He's alive."

Clark said nothing, but she could feel how close he was. So near and yet so far, she thought ruefully.

"Did something happen that you didn't tell us about earlier?" Clark asked quietly.

She took a deep breath to steady herself. "Lex thinks he's in love with me. He thinks that I still love him. He told me that it isn't over between us." Lois shivered and drew Clark's coat tighter around her. "He's never going to stop, Clark. He's insane and he's obsessed and he's ..." Fear welled up inside her, making her next words a broken whisper. "He's never going to stop trying to destroy Superman."

Clark's hand touched her shoulder again, this time in a gentle squeeze. The gesture was so familiar and comforting that she instinctively turned to him, throwing her arms around his neck and burying her face in the soft fabric of his shirt. The solid reality of Clark was the perfect antidote to how off-balance she felt. Without hesitation, his arms closed around her. His body swayed, rocking them slightly.

Lois relaxed against him. This, at last, was something she knew. Long before they were married or even dating, from the first time she had turned to him for comfort, she had trusted in and craved the sensation of Clark's embrace.

His hand smoothed over her hair and she sensed his split-second hesitation as he found it shorter. "So what did happen with Luthor tonight?" Clark asked, his voice carefully neutral.

With horror Lois realized how the situation must look to him. She had gone to the police station for a few quick interviews and had returned without her winter coat, wearing different clothes, and with her hair inexplicably shorter. She pulled away so she could look him in the eye.

"Nothing happened, not like that. Lex didn't hurt me. It was just so creepy to see him alive. To, to find out that he was following me."

Clark's jaw flexed, but he didn't say anything. Lois could tell that he was holding back his frustration that Lex was back from the grave and stalking her. Even worse, nearly everything she had said or done in the past couple of hours had no doubt exacerbated his worries. Clark had been upset enough the first time around. How much worse was it now that she was so altered after her encounter with Lex?

"I — . My hair was cut before I saw Lex," Lois tried to explain. "He had nothing to do with that. And I had already changed clothes." The half-truths felt clumsy, but she wasn't sure she could tell him the whole truth.

Clark's attention shifted to the window behind her. Had he heard something on Bender's boat? Lois turned to look outside. "Is Bender back?"

"I, uh, I thought I saw movement over there," he stammered.

Lois smiled. She had forgotten how clumsy Clark's own half-truths were. For a second or two she hesitated, unsure whether she should mess with history and warn Bender. Was the lawyer fated to die? But how could she know what was going to happen and then do nothing to prevent it? Absent any instructions from HG Wells, she was just going to have to wing it.

She touched Clark's arm. "Let's go talk to Bender."

1995

Lois was mentally surveying her closet as she crossed the street in front of the Third Precinct. Tonight was a big night — huge, actually. In another two hours she'd be on a date with Clark. Every time she thought about it — and she had thought

about little else for the past twenty-four hours — her stomach seemed to be riding its own personal roller coaster. Up, down, sideways, loops. But always with the mental scream of "wheeeel!" at the thought of being the center of Clark's attention for a few, hopefully uninterrupted, hours.

She was stepping on to the curb when she suddenly began to feel odd, almost dizzy. She took one lurching step to the side and then the world went black around her. Had she fainted? There was a distant roaring noise and then, inexplicably, she was standing in a bedroom. The bed's headboard was identical to hers, but there was a man's jacket lying on the comforter along with a purse. The contents of the purse had spilled and there was a wallet flipped open to reveal the driver's license inside. The picture looked like her, albeit with shorter hair. After a quick glance to establish that she was alone, wherever she was, Lois picked up the wallet and her eyes focused on the name.

"Lois Lane Kent"

Lois blinked, but the picture and the name remained the same. She pulled the license out of the wallet and held it up to the light, tilting it to ascertain its validity. The watermark for New Troy flashed at her. It looked like the real deal.

Where the hell was she? How had she got here? Why had someone faked a driver's license to make it look like she was married to Clark?

Still clutching the license, she turned in a small circle and looked around the room. There was one of her sofas against the wall. Pictures exactly like the ones hanging in her bedroom were on the wall behind it. A small television sat on a console opposite the foot of the bed. She took a step towards it, frowning as she realized that the crack in the frame above the screen was exactly like the one in Clark's living room.

A man's wallet was lying on the console next to the television and she snatched it up to look at the license inside.

There was Clark's picture and name. His address was not on Clinton Street, though. She lifted her bogus license and compared them. Both showed the same address on Hyperion Avenue.

Lois took an unsteady step backwards and her heel bumped against something. Startled and unsure of herself, she stumbled sideways, banging her elbow hard against the console before she landed on the pair of men's dress shoes that had tripped her.

"Ow, dammit," she moaned to herself. What kind of daydream involved actual pain?

What if this wasn't a daydream?

She stood up again, her hand rubbing her elbow to soothe it. No way, she told herself. This couldn't possibly be *real*. It made no sense. Why would someone kidnap her and bring her here? Lois tried, but she couldn't remember anything past leaving the police station.

Her spine stiffened as she sensed that someone was behind her. An arm wrapped around her waist just as she felt the heat of someone's breath tickle the back of her neck.

"Miss me?" a man's voice asked, low and sultry. The solid length of a very masculine body pressed intimately against hers. "Now where were we?"

Lois was shocked into immobility. Obviously, this couldn't be real, no matter how authentic it felt. She glanced down, taken aback when the man's other hand landed oh-so-casually beneath her breast and then crept higher. His arm was clad in a bright blue spandex sleeve — a lot like — , oh god, this was the weirdest daydream ever — married to Clark and being felt up by Superman.

"Superman!" She wriggled loose of his embrace and turned around.

Superman looked her up and down in a possessive way that made her knees that much weaker. His fingers brushed the ends of her hair and he grinned. "Are we indulging in a little revisionist history tonight?"

"What?" She was almost breathless with confusion and anxiety. Real! Her mind echoed the word over and over. This felt so incredibly real.

"Why are you wearing a coat?" Superman asked in a teasing tone of voice. "Did you want me to take you flying first?"

"First?" she echoed weakly. Her brain made the leap of logic. First. Before they — oh god! He couldn't be serious.

His hands took hold of her hips and pulled her close against him so that he could nuzzle her neck. "I love the wig," he whispered to her. "Where did you get it?"

"Wig?" She put her hands flat against his chest to push him away. "Superman, what are you talking about?"

His laugh was a low rumble just below her ear. "You're serious? Are you going to call me Superman the whole time?"

"What else would I call you?"

He seemed to hesitate for a moment. Then he moved one hand, smoothing it over the back of her head before taking hold of her hair and giving it a soft tug.

"Superman?" she asked, absolutely confused.

Superman took a step back, his expression frozen in shock. "Lois?" His gaze dropped to her ankles and then he looked up, his eyes wide and full of concern. "It's really you."

"Of course it's really me. Who else would I be? What's going on?"

"What day is it?" He looked worried and it sent a ripple of fear through her.

"Friday," she answered.

"No, I mean what's today's date?" he asked her urgently.

"February tenth," she replied slowly, absolutely baffled by the question.

"What year?" he pressed.

Bewildered, she answered him anyway. "1995."

He took a few steps back and held his hands up as if to show that he meant her no harm. "Lois, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize that you — . Well, I apologize."

"Superman, what's going on?"

"I'm not sure," he said after a few seconds thought. "But today is March 24, 1998."

Lois gaped at him. If it had been anyone else she would have laughed in their face, but this was Superman, and while he had been rather free with the use of his hands, it was inconceivable that he would play such an outrageous joke on her.

So, if this was the future ... Lois looked at the wallet on the bed. 1998. Lois Lane Kent. 1998. Lois Lane Kent.

"Oh my god," she said softly. "I marry Clark?"

Superman ran one hand through his hair and looked away. The gesture was so much like Clark when he was struggling for words that her breath caught in her throat. Her knees wobbled as the realization hit Lois hard. It was 1998. She was married to Clark. Superman had tried to become intimate with her in what was apparently her bedroom. Clark was forever running off on the flimsiest of pretexts. Superman was inexplicably nearby whenever she needed him.

// ...Did you want me to take you flying first?" "... Are you going to call me Superman the whole time?" "... What else would I call you?" //

She took a step backward and her leg bumped into the bed. Superman's bed, her mind whispered. Superman's driver's license. Superman's wife. With new perspective, Lois looked up at the man she had idolized for the past two years. Her entire body felt cold and her voice was a squeak as she asked, "Clark?"

Superman hesitated for a moment and then dipped his chin in a nod. "Yes."

Chapter 2
1998

For several seconds Lois simply stared at him as she tried to

take in the enormity of this discovery. It felt as though her mind had gone blank, unable to process the information overload. Above all, her instincts were screaming to get out of there. To get as far away as possible. To get somewhere familiar and safe. When she finally spoke, her voice was a dry whisper.

"Will you please move?"

Superman — no, make that *Clark* — looked taken aback. His head swung to look at the open door and then back to her. He looked startled, as though it hadn't occurred to him that he was blocking her way. She saw his lips part, as if he were going to say something and then he sat down on the bed, leaving her a clear path to the door.

Lois rushed past him, her senses heightened at the thought that he might follow her. A quick glance behind her revealed that she was alone in the hallway. She rushed down the stairs as swiftly as she could. As she neared the bottom she looked up to the landing above, but there was no sign of him.

On the wall to her left was a picture of her and Clark at what appeared to have been their wedding. Lois stared at it in disbelief. Their arms were around each other and their expressions as they looked into each other's eyes could only be described as joyous. For a few disorienting seconds Lois felt almost envious of her future self.

A floorboard creaked above her and Lois hurried out of the building. Superman! All this time and Superman was really Clark! It was Clark who had flown her from EPRAD to the Planet. Clark who flew into space to stop an asteroid. Clark who had saved her — and the world — time after time. It was Superman who edited her copy, teased her, and frequently annoyed her. The man who flirted with her and brought her coffee and opened doors for her was the Man of Steel.

And she *married* him.

The street outside was residential and well-lit by street lamps and the lights from windows. She walked to the end of the block and then turned to look back. He wasn't following her. Then again, she chided herself, he could just be watching her through the wall right now. The thought set off another spark of indignation — how many times had he acted helpless or clueless when he could have been *useful* in getting to the bottom of a story?

Lois raised her hand to signal for a cab. One pulled over and she gave the driver her address on Carter Avenue. The credentials taped to the Plexiglass divider revealed that the driver's taxi license had been issued in December 1997. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly as she tried to decide what she should do if this was all real. Credentials and drivers licenses could be faked, after all.

But why, her mind persisted, why would Superman, or Clark, or whoever the hell he was — why would he play such an elaborate joke on her? Sure he was a liar — but what could he possibly hope to gain by this?

As the cab worked its way across Metropolis, Lois noticed that some things were different. The little bistro that Lucy loved so much was gone, replaced by a cellular phone store. The abandoned warehouse on 17th Street was now a nightclub. The massive hole in the ground that had been under construction on the corner of Bessolo and Main that morning was now a gleaming thirty-story building.

This was real. She had leapt three years into the future. A future that included a husband who moonlighted in tights and a cape. The hollow, panicked feeling in her stomach increased.

The cab turned onto her street and she was relieved to see that it looked the same. When they stopped in front of her building, though, she felt a cold stab of dread. The front door was a different color. A large neon sign advertising psychic services was glowing in a ground floor window. That definitely had not been there when she left for work.

Inside her building, the carpet was no longer burgundy; it was beige. Her hand felt for the keys in her pocket but found nothing. Lois groaned as she remembered that she had left them at the Planet and taken a cab to the police station earlier.

Three years earlier, she told herself as she climbed the stairs. Unless this was all a hallucination, that was three years ago.

Lois stopped before reaching her apartment door. There was a tiny glimmer of light coming from the peephole; someone was home. Lois hesitated — should she knock? What would she say if someone answered the door?

The sound of a lock sliding open startled her and she took a step backward. Her door opened and a man stepped out into the hall. He was holding a plastic grocery bag that had been tied closed at the top as he walked past her toward the garbage chute just across the hallway. Lois moved to peek into her apartment. The walls were painted a pale green and that was definitely not her furniture.

"Hey!" the man called out, his tone full of warning. "Can I help you?"

The canned laughter of a television sitcom erupted from inside the apartment as he returned to stand protectively in the doorway.

"Oh, sorry, no." Lois hurried toward the stairs. "I think I'm on the wrong floor."

During the ten-minute ride to the Planet, Lois gave herself a pep talk. Instead of freaking out, she should be rejoicing. She was being given a glimpse of the future. Granted there were a couple of rather large surprises, but she should be practical about this. At the very least, she could find out who won the past few major sporting events and make a killing at the bookies if she ever got back to 1995.

When she arrived at the Planet, Lois stood on the sidewalk and looked up. The building seemed the same. Inside, the front lobby was unaltered. Lois pushed the button for the elevator and hoped that her desk was still in the same place.

It was — but the nameplate now read 'Lois Lane Kent'. The daily appointment calendar on her desk was open to Tuesday, March 24, 1998. Her hands shook as she leafed through the papers on her desk. There were notes there in her own handwriting about stories she wasn't working on. It was too surreal to be true and yet ...

Good grief — Dudley Michaels, the city councilman who had resigned under a cloud of controversy, was now the mayor? Had the voters lost their minds? How did a crook like Michaels get elected? That she'd still be writing stories about his shady dealings was the first non-surprise of the evening.

In the quiet of the after-hours newsroom, the elevator's 'ping' seemed overly loud. Lois tensed and looked up, absolutely certain that she knew who was going to step out of the elevator.

Clark was wearing a dark long-sleeved t-shirt and jeans. Now that his hair wasn't slicked back, she could see that it was shorter. His glasses had a sleek wire frame. There was a plain gold band on his left ring finger which caught the light as he raised his hand in greeting.

"Hi," he said. She was a little reassured by the fact that he appeared just as uneasy as she felt. Then again, he should be nervous. He was a lying, duplicitous fiend who got his jollies from pulling the wool over everyone's eyes.

"Are you following me?" she asked, trying to keep her voice even.

"We need to talk," he said, casting an apprehensive glance at the handful of people on the far side of the newsroom. "Can we go somewhere else? Please?"

She looked away from him and her gaze caught on a florist's card taped to the bottom of her computer monitor.

"I love you," it read and was signed simply, "Clark".

Lois closed her eyes. It was too much to take in, too much to be believed. Clark was Superman. Superman was Clark. She married Clark. *Married Superman!* Superman was standing in front of her in Clark's clothes. In spite of her anger she felt cheated out of the date she was supposed to be on tonight. Had it been a good first date? The evidence would certainly suggest that. Would Clark remember it well enough after three years to be able to tell her about it? How long did they date before he proposed? How did he ask her? And did she know that he was Superman when he asked?

"How long have we been married?" Lois reached forward to straighten her stapler, lining it up carefully next to her phone.

Clark sat down in the chair next to her desk. "One year, four months, two weeks and four days."

Lois frowned at him, unsure whether to be flattered or disturbed that he could answer so definitively. She adjusted her Rolodex so that it was parallel to the phone as well. "Are we happy?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation and grinned at her. "We're very happy."

"When did I find out? You know, about, uh ..." She made a swoosh gesture with her right hand.

"It's been almost three years."

"What?" she asked sarcastically. "You can't give me the exact count on it?"

His eyes widened and she felt a momentary flicker of triumph that he looked hurt before her conscience whispered that she was being petty.

Lois brushed her fingers over her keyboard. It was different; the 'e' wasn't worn away. The thought that someday her keyboard was going to be replaced made her sad. Was Dudley Michaels' lack of integrity going to be the only constant in her future? Was she ever going to have the last three years or was she stuck here? Clark had certainly caught on fairly quickly that she wasn't in the right time — he was the one who asked what day it was after all. How had he known?

"So what happened?" she asked, trying to sound a little more conciliatory.

"Do you mean how did you find out? Or what happened after you found out?"

Lois looked him in the eye and wondered at the incongruity of this moment. How many times had they sat at her desk or his, talking about a story or simply shooting the breeze? This would have felt familiar, if only the subject of their discussion wasn't so mind-bending.

"Actually I was wondering if you knew how I ended up three years in the future. But feel free to tell me about — ." She made the swoop gesture again. "Forewarned is forearmed, after all."

He shifted in the chair to take another glance at the people on the other side of the room. "How about we go somewhere else to talk about this?" he asked as he turned back to her. "Anywhere you want, just name it."

"I want to go home," she whispered and pushed the keyboard away. It bumped against her stapler, making it fall sideways with a 'clunk'. "But someone else lives there now."

To her horror, tears began to blur her vision. There was a huge lump in her throat and she wasn't sure she could breathe anymore. She couldn't go home — and even if she did somehow get back to 1995, she would never be able to look at Clark the same way again. She was supposed to be dating him tonight. She should have been hoping that he would kiss her good night and, instead, she was jumpy with the knowledge that he would do far more than merely kiss her in the future. And he was Superman, for crying out loud. Superman! Superman had sat next to her desk for the past two years and she had completely overlooked that fact.

"Hey." Clark's fingers took hold of hers. His light touch

startled her and he quickly withdrew his hand. "Lois, please don't cry. It's going to be all right, I promise."

Lois sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "How can you possibly promise that?"

"This has happened before. We've both jumped time and gone back, once it was even hundreds of years. And it never goes for any longer than a day or two."

"Really?" Lois swiped beneath her eyes with her fingertips. "This has happened before? Where did we go? So you know how to get me back where I belong? Why didn't you tell me this back at the house? Can you do it now?"

He held up his hands and made a shushing noise. "I can't — ." He stood and gestured for her to leave with him. "Please, can we go someplace else to talk?"

They rode the elevator in uneasy silence to the ground floor. It wasn't until they were outside that Clark turned to her and asked, "Did you want to catch a cab or — ." He made the swoosh motion with his hand.

"Oh, uh, well, I guess, uh, we could just, you know — ." Lois swatted the air, feeling incredibly tongue-tied. What do you say when your partner (husband!) just offered to *fly* you home? "That's fine," she concluded awkwardly.

"In here." Clark took hold of her elbow, guiding her around the corner of the building and into the alley.

They passed a dumpster and Clark moved so that it was blocking any view of him from the street. He blurred into motion before her and then, suddenly, Superman was standing before her. She gaped at him, momentarily awestruck by the sight of Clark so undeniably Super.

"So that's how you do it?" Lois asked, a little breathless. Even knowing who he really was didn't squelch the rush of euphoria she always got when seeing Superman from this close.

"What were you expecting?" He held out his hand in invitation.

"Oh, well, you know, I didn't know that you had to change clothes," she hedged and took a nervous step toward him. It was silly to be so tense, she told herself. How many times had she flown with Superman? She already knew the answer — eight times. Not that she had kept track or anything, mind you. Never once, not even that first time, had she felt as anxious as she did at this moment.

"But it makes sense — now. I mean, you can't really go around dressed like Superman all day. Not when you have a real job. Not that being Superman isn't a real job, it is. But it probably doesn't pay the bills and uh, you know ..." Lois closed the distance between them and, feeling even more awkward, cautiously touched her left hand to his shoulder.

He bent slightly and for a moment she thought he was stooping so she could get her arm around him. Suddenly her feet left the ground and she found that she was cradled against his chest as he straightened up.

"Ready?" he asked.

Dazed by the realization of who was actually holding her, Lois could only nod and mumble an "uh huh." And then they were rising, higher and higher, until the buildings were far below them. She tried to remember if Superman had always flown so smoothly. It seemed like he had, but it was impossible to think clearly when her mind was vacillating between awe and anger that this was *Clark*.

She cleared her throat to find her voice and then asked, "So how did I find out about you?"

His expression flickered, going from thoughtful to sad before he answered, "I'm not really sure how much I should tell you."

Indignation shot through her and she stiffened in his arms. "What? Are you kidding? You're Superman and we're married — is there really something else more shocking that you're hiding?"

"I don't know why you're here, in this time, now. I don't want to inadvertently tamper with the past by telling you too much. You're only a few months away from finding out so, hopefully, this is not going to change things drastically. I just wish Wells would tell us what's going on."

"Wells?" Lois asked.

Clark nodded. "HG Wells."

"The author? Isn't he dead?"

"Technically. But his time machine works and he's been known to show up on occasion to help us."

Lois gave him a skeptical squint. "Uh huh," she said slowly.

Clark smiled. "I can fly, Lois. You've just jumped three years into the future. Nothing is out of the realm of possibility."

"Fine," she temporized in an attempt to keep him talking. "So HG Wells — ." Lois fought the urge to roll her eyes. " — Has transported me three years into the future. Why?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. He only shows up when he thinks that Utopia is in danger."

"Utopia? So Thomas More is on this too? Is there a whole closetful of dead writers somewhere who — "

"No." He cut her off before she could work up to a full rant. "I don't know that much about it myself, but apparently, in the future, you and I help to create an ideal society. Which means that your being here has one other possibility; a man named Tempus. This actually seems more his style."

He shifted her closer against him and angled them into a descent. They landed in the back yard of a townhouse and Clark set her gently on her feet.

"Wait," she said, grabbing his arm as he took a step away from her. "At least tell me this much — was I angry when I found out?"

He looked a little nervous as he answered, "Not at first. You kind of worked up to it. Why? Are you angry now?"

"I am. Or I was. I mostly am." Lois scowled at him. "I'm not sure how I feel yet. This is a lot to take in. You. Us married. The whole flying and seeing through walls thing that you've got going on. Did you know that there's a psychic living in my old building?"

It was the first time she had ever seen Superman with Clark's grin. He had always been so formal around her; it was a revelation to see him so relaxed. If she wasn't feeling so irritated and overwhelmed, she almost could have forgiven him at that moment. That she could be as casual around Superman as she was around Clark was an appealing thought.

"Yes," he said, "I knew that. Her name is Star and you're friends with her."

In spite of the confusion and anxiety swirling inside her, Lois laughed. "Is she really psychic?"

Clark thought about it for a moment and then shrugged. "She's right more often than she's wrong."

"And does she know? About you being Superman?"

He shook his head. "No."

The thought that even a psychic hadn't figured out Clark's secret made Lois feel just the teensiest bit better.

"Good," she said and followed him into the house.

1995

"I don't think he believed you," Clark said conversationally. He leaned one shoulder against the outside of the condo and looked over to where Bender's boat bobbed gently on the incoming tide. "Then again, you didn't exactly offer much proof."

Lois made another irritated stab with the key at the lock, frustrated by Bender's pigheaded determination to ignore her warning and her inability to explain the truth to Clark. "This isn't a hunch. If we don't do something, tomorrow morning Nigel is going to kill Bender."

"Nigel?" Clark's attention swiveled back to her. "Nigel St. John? Why would he kill Bender?" Clark's hand touched hers, deftly taking the keys away to make his own attempt at opening the door. "What does Nigel, or Luthor, have to gain from killing him?"

Lois took a step back so Clark could access the lock as his question echoed in her mind. Why had they killed Bender? Whose idea was it? Nigel had double-crossed Lex. So was removing Bender part of Nigel's master plan and not necessarily Lex's? No matter whose idea it was, both men were after the same thing — the Kryptonite that was powering Rollie Vale's artificial limb. If Vale didn't escape, what was going to happen to the Kryptonite? She was going to have to find a way to warn Clark without drawing further suspicion.

"Maybe Bender knows too much?" she ventured.

"About what?" Clark opened the door and gestured for her to go first. "Any involvement Bender had with either of them technically ended after Luthor's death. Wouldn't it draw less attention to fire him instead of killing him?"

Instead of entering the condo, Lois turned to take another look at Bender's yacht. Did Bender know something that was worth killing for? All this time she had believed that he had been killed to cover-up bribing the judge. What if there was more to it than that? Was that why Wells had brought her back in time?

"Clark?" Lois turned back toward him, only to find he was already watching her closely. "I have to tell you something. Something important..."

Chapter 3 1995

"You're going to think I'm crazy," Lois warned. For a moment or two she faltered, wanting to tell him the whole truth, but the thought that there might be dire consequences stopped her.

"Go on," Clark urged softly.

"It's about Rollie Vale and Nigel and Lex and..." Lois gestured in the direction of Bender's yacht. "I can't tell you how I know any of this; I wish I could, but — I just can't, so please don't ask, okay?"

Clark's gaze flickered past her to Bender's yacht. Even in the dim half-light, the war between his worry and his curiosity was obvious. After several seconds of hesitation, curiosity won. "All right," he agreed.

Lois moved past him to enter the condo. She sat down on the sofa and hunched forward, bracing her elbows on her knees and clasping her hands together as she tried to think about the best way to explain.

"Tomorrow morning Bender is going to meet with a judge and pay him off to have Rollie Vale given an immediate hearing. Lex and Nigel are going to intercept Vale in transit to the courthouse."

Clark sat down next to her on the sofa, his posture unconsciously mirroring hers. "What does Luthor want with Vale?"

"He has a robotic arm; built using the same technology as that cyborg, Metallo." She saw Clark's mouth tighten and hated that she was dredging up a bad memory for him. "The chunk of Kryptonite that was recovered from Metallo was only half of the sample that the Vales stole from Lex. Rollie's using the other half to power his artificial limb."

"Rollie Vale has Kryptonite?" Clark asked slowly, as if he wasn't sure he had heard her correctly.

"Yes. Lex is obsessed with killing Superman. He's never going to stop trying." Lois looked away, shuddering as she remembered just how close Lex had come to destroying Clark with his quantum disruptor. What if changing the past now made it so that Clark actually died in another year when Lex struck

next? Lois pushed away that unpleasant thought.

"So, step one is to keep Lex from freeing Vale," she said, as Clark slowly nodded his agreement. "And we need to find a way to stop them from killing Bender. So you should, uh —." She was barely able to stop herself from blurting out the wrong sequences of words. "You need to get Superman to talk to Bender. He might not believe us, but maybe he would listen to Superman."

"And what about you?" Clark asked.

"What about me?"

"You know their plans, too," he stated, as though this should have been obvious to her.

"Yes, but they don't know that I know." Lois patted his knee in reassurance. "Trust me, my source on this is impeccable and there's no possible way for them to realize that I know anything." Was she touching him too long? She snatched her hand away and watched him anxiously. Please, Clark, she thought, believe me.

Clark pressed his lips together as he thought. "They don't know you're here either," he finally said. "Will you promise to stay here while I go find Superman?"

"Yes." Lois nodded eagerly and held up her right hand. "I swear it. I won't move from this spot." Unless, she amended to herself, Wells came to take her home.

Clark hesitated for a few seconds more and then stood up. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Don't leave before I get back, okay?"

"I promise."

Nearly ten minutes passed before Lois saw Superman land on the back of Bender's boat. What had taken him so long? Had he gone looking for Lex? Alerted the authorities that Vale had Kryptonite? Had he delayed to make it look like he'd actually had to find Superman?

He knocked on the door of the boat's cabin and then turned to glance over at the condo. She waved and he nodded in greeting. Lois lifted the binoculars to get a closer look. As Clark began to talk she wished that they had set up the surveillance equipment after all. By the time she got it working now, Clark would be done talking to Bender.

Then again, maybe not. Bender wasn't allowing him entry, so either Clark was having a conversation with himself or Bender was standing on the other side of the closed door. After another minute of Clark alternately knocking and talking, the door opened a crack. She still couldn't see Bender, but Clark leaned closer and his hand gestured toward the West River. Then Clark stepped back and the door opened fully. Bender came out and peered around nervously.

Clark stepped off the boat and onto the dock to untie the boat's moorings. Once the ropes were free, he tossed one onto the boat's deck and the other to Bender, who caught it, his movements still uncertain. There was another exchange between them before Bender reluctantly climbed the ladder to the pilothouse. Clark stood, arms crossed, and watched as the boat slid away. Once Bender was well on his way, Clark turned and started walking toward the condo.

Lois had the door open before he could knock. "Thank you," she told him and stepped back so he could enter.

"You're welcome." He gave her a stiff nod and Lois suppressed a laugh. She had forgotten how formal he had been around her before she knew the truth about Superman.

"Was it hard to convince him?" she asked.

Clark shook his head. "Not too hard. He was already on edge after the visit you and Clark paid him earlier."

"Did he say where he's going?"

"He didn't, but he did promise to contact you tomorrow."

"Thanks." Lois grinned at Clark, feeling immeasurably lighter knowing that her task had been fulfilled. It wouldn't be

much longer now before Wells showed up and whisked her back where she belonged.

"I need to be going," Clark said and took a step toward the door. "Clark should be back soon and he asked me to remind you that you promised you wouldn't leave before he returned."

Lois grinned at the absurdity of his words. Sensing that she looked like an idiot for smiling, and because the opportunity to tease him was just too much temptation to resist, she said, "Clark owes me a date. I'm not going anywhere until he pays up."

"A date?" The corners of his mouth twitched in an almost-smile.

"Jealous?" she teased.

His cheeks flushed and he shook his head. "No. I'm, uh, I'm happy for you both. I hope it works out."

"Bet on it," she answered softly, looking him straight in the eye.

Clark blinked and took a step backward as he smoothed one hand nervously over the 'S' on his chest. "I should ...go now." His hand fluttered up, as if to imply that he had merely stopped in on his way to somewhere else. He gave her a courteous nod and then left in a rush of red cape and sonic boom.

Lois sat down on the couch again and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. "Okay, Wells" she muttered. "Come and get me now."

Outside, in the distance, she heard the foghorn at Glenmorgan Point sound. There was no knock on the door, no polite clearing of the throat, nothing to indicate that HG Wells had arrived.

Lois cleared her throat and tried again. "Mr. Wells?"

There was still no answer and a flicker of worry shot through Lois. What if Wells had nothing to do with this? What if this was Tempus' doing? Once again she considered that Wells likely would have asked, or at least warned her before sending her back in time. Was Tempus gloating somewhere, rubbing his hands together in glee that she was screwing up her future?

Had she screwed up her future?

She flopped to lie down on the sofa and stared at the ceiling. There was a shimmering reflection from the aquarium and she found its random, shifting pattern soothing. A minute passed and the foghorn sounded again. Lois closed her eyes and wondered where Bender had gone and if he really would call the next day.

If he did call, would she still be here to talk to him?

Lois fervently hoped not.

Clark snuck another glance at the clock on the wall. He had been gone for far too long — it was now nearly two o'clock in the morning. Yes, Lois had promised to stay at the marina, but that didn't mean that she'd actually do it.

How in the world had she known about the plot to kill Bender? Or, for that matter, how had she known about Vale and his little stash of Kryptonite? Where had she really gone instead of the police station that evening? In less than two hours she had cut her hair, changed her clothes, lost her coat, and uncovered a secret conspiracy involving her suddenly not-so-dead former fiance. Despite his surroundings, Clark couldn't help a smile. Only Lois could achieve so much in so little time.

"Superman?"

His thoughts instantly returned to the present situation and he quelled his amusement as he answered the warden. "Yes?"

"We now have Vale in maximum security and will deny any motions for a hearing until after Lex Luthor is apprehended."

"And the Kryptonite?" Clark asked.

"We can't compel Vale's cooperation on that one. The best we can do is restrict his activities to his cell and ensure that no one has access to him until the lawyers have a chance to review our options. I'm sure you can appreciate that there really isn't any kind of precedent for this situation."

Clark nodded. "I understand. Thank you." He shook the

warden's hand and quickly left the prison.

A cursory check of Lois' apartment showed that no one was home. So she might actually have stayed at the marina. Much more likely was the option that she had stolen a boat and was currently pursuing Bender up the river. With Lois, there was no such thing as a safe bet.

Clark returned to the marina and saw that there was still a light on inside the condo. A quick peek through the wall revealed that Lois was there, stretched out on the sofa. He changed into street clothes and entered the condo, shutting the door softly behind him.

"Lois?" he half-whispered, not wanting to wake her if she was truly asleep. She made no answer so he went to the condo's bedroom to find a blanket for her. He returned to the living room and was just starting to cover her with the blanket when she stirred.

"Clark?" she mumbled. "You home now?"

"Yes," he answered, smiling at her use of the word "home".

Her head lifted a fraction and she squinted at him. "Clark? What time is it?"

He crouched in front of the sofa, savoring the opportunity to see her so drowsy and vulnerable — and loving the way his name sounded when her voice was slurred with sleep.

"Two o'clock," he answered, pulling the blanket a little higher. Unable to resist, he smoothed away a lock of hair from her forehead and wondered why she had cut it.

Her hand flopped around a few times before making contact with his wrist. "Never believe what happened."

"What happened?" he asked.

"Saw you ..." She smiled dreamily at him. "Mmm too tired to make love. Jus' take me to bed."

"What?" Clark froze, absolutely certain he had heard that one wrong.

Lois exhaled, a sound that was half-sigh, half-giggle. "Make it up to you in the morning. Promise." Her eyelids slid closed and her hand dropped from his wrist.

Clark reluctantly stood up. His heart beat faster as he argued with himself over whether he had heard her correctly. He glanced at the bedroom and then moved to sit in the chair near the window.

If she said anything else in her sleep, he wanted to be sure he caught it.

1998

"Are you hungry?" Clark asked after they had come inside the townhouse. They were standing in the kitchen and he gestured at the refrigerator. "I could make something, if you are."

"I, um, I, uh —" Lois stammered. She felt more than a little uncertain around this new Clark/Superman hybrid. The truth was she had been too excited about their upcoming date to bother with lunch and now the thought of sharing a meal with him was even more intimidating. Flustered because he was still wearing the suit, she found herself speaking compulsively. "Actually, we were supposed to have dinner together tonight. Do you remember our first date? The Pearl Jam concert?"

Clark shook his head. "We didn't go to the concert."

"You had an emergency?" she guessed.

"No, uh, something else came up and Perry made us go on a stakeout instead."

"Oh." Lois felt strangely let down. It wasn't that she much cared for Pearl Jam. But Clark had gone to so much trouble to set it up — and she had wasted hours daydreaming about having his undivided attention. Now that she actually had it, she felt anxious and tense — and disappointed.

"If it makes you feel any better, you're not missing out. We ate Chinese take-out and you got sick."

"Oh, well, good to know," she said and cracked her knuckles.

"So, uh, obviously, we did eventually go on a date though, right?"

"A couple of weeks later," he answered. "But that's all I should probably tell you." Clark leaned back against the counter, his arms crossed over his chest and his gaze fixed firmly in her direction.

Lois looked away, feeling self-conscious that he was practically staring at her. "So," she said, in an effort to keep the awkwardness of a silence at bay, "You said that you've jumped time before ... " She let the statement hang, hoping to draw him into a more detailed explanation.

"Yes, but we've only gone back in time, never forward."

We. She risked a glance at him, only to find herself mesmerized by the bulge of his biceps. Superman! That was Superman, standing not four feet away from her. She wanted to ask him for details, wanted to know the particulars of time travel, but found that she was tongue-tied by the realization that she was currently standing in her future kitchen, with her future husband.

And he was definitely staring at her.

"What?" she snapped at him. "Do I have something stuck in my teeth?"

Clark quickly looked away. How could he explain to her that this was just as strange and frustrating to him as it was to her? His wife was gone; replaced by this skittish and suspicious earlier version of Lois. What had happened to his wife? Had Wells swapped them? Or was this something Tempus had done? Either way, why was it happening? Then it dawned on Clark that he was still wearing the suit. Lois was clearly uncomfortable around him and his current choice of clothing couldn't be making things easier.

"There's some Thai take-out in the fridge from last night," he told her as he moved to leave the kitchen. "Why don't you warm that up and I'll go get changed?"

He zipped upstairs and changed into sweat bottoms and a t-shirt. When he returned to the kitchen, Lois was opening and closing drawers in a frustrated search.

"What can I help you find?" he asked.

She jumped, clearly startled by his return. "Silverware. Where do you keep it?"

Clark opened a drawer on the opposite side of the room from her. "We keep it in here."

She frowned at him as she crossed the kitchen to get a utensil. The microwave beeped and Clark, grateful for something to do, took the food out. He carried it to the table, where she had already set out two plates. Lois, somewhat grudgingly he felt, joined him, holding out a fork for him as she sat down.

"Thanks," he said quietly. Clark couldn't help sneaking glances at her as they ate. He knew she had lost weight over the past couple of years, but he had forgotten how curvy she had been. That should have been his first clue, he admonished himself. He should have realized the moment he touched her that she wasn't his wife.

Lois picked at her food, barely tasting it as she tried to think of something to say to him. It had been overwhelming to see him in the suit, but it seemed even worse now that he was dressed in sweat bottoms and a t-shirt that clung to him in ways that made her imagination run wild. He wasn't wearing shoes, just socks, and it felt overwhelmingly intimate to see him dressed like this when they were totally alone together in his — their — kitchen.

Good god, what was she supposed to say to him? What did she normally say to him? Did they really sit here, night after night, and talk about banal things? How could she sit across from Superman in a tight t-shirt and talk about the weather? It was that much more irritating that Clark clearly was unwilling to discuss important topics like how she found out he was Superman and what had happened over the past three years. He had been somewhat vague on the whole time travel issue, too, but at least he had offered up little nuggets of information that surely

deserved a follow-up question or two.

"So," she started, trying not to sound too eager for an answer. "Who is Tempus? Is that the right name? The other guy you thought might have brought me here?"

"Tempus," Clark affirmed and leaned back in his chair.

"He's ..." His voice trailed off and he stood up, taking his plate over to the sink to rinse it off. How could he explain Tempus to her without giving too much away? "He's from the future." Clark watched as a few grains of rice circled down into the garbage disposal. "He's determined to destroy whatever it is that we build."

"Utopia?" Lois prompted. "You said we build an ideal society, right?"

Clark turned around and made a helpless shrug. "Not really us, our children. Although ... "

"What?" Lois asked. "Although what? Do we have kids? It seems awfully quiet here. Too quiet for kids, you know?"

"We don't have children. We — , uh. Well, we just don't."

Lois' eyes went wide as she pieced it together. "You mean we can't have kids, don't you?"

Clark slumped back against the sink and looked away.

"Why?" Lois pressed him. "Is it me or you?"

He didn't answer, but his defeated posture spoke for him.

"It's you, isn't it? Or it's us, I guess. A Kryptonian isn't compatible with someone from Earth, right?"

"Maybe that's why," he said softly. "Maybe you're here so that you don't marry me; so that you can have children with someone else."

"What?" Lois asked, feeling strangely saddened as that picture of her and Clark at their wedding flashed in her mind. She was never going to have that. She was going to lose Clark — and Superman. It was beyond unfair to have been given this glimpse of the future only to have it snatched away again. A little boil of panic started inside her that she might never get to make small talk with him in this kitchen where the silverware was kept in the least-likely drawer.

"Or maybe that's what Tempus wants — for us to think that," she suggested hopefully.

Clark gave her a thin-lipped smile, obviously not reassured. "Maybe." After an uneasy silence, he spoke again, "Look, it's almost midnight and I'm sure you must be tired. Why don't we call it a night?"

Clark led Lois upstairs, his movements slow as he wondered if this was the last time he'd ever be this close to her. What if she went back now and everything changed? He'd never have the past three years, never have Lois. He wanted to hold her and beg her not to leave him, but that would be selfish. How could he deny Lois the opportunity to have children of her own?

Their bedroom door was open, his jacket still on the bed from where she had removed it before he was called away. It had been nothing — a false alarm — and he was choked with regret that he had left her. He should have stayed — would have stayed if he had known. Right now he could have been lying in that bed with his wife in his arms instead of showing her which drawers were hers.

"The bathroom is through there," he pointed at the door.

"Yours is the red toothbrush. The towels are in the cupboard next to the mirror." Clark looked around their room, trying to memorize every detail even though he knew it wouldn't matter once she went back.

"I'm sleeping in here?" she asked, with that same half-panicked look in her eye that she'd had most of the evening.

"It's your bed," he tried to explain. "I just figured you'd be more comfortable in here." His old bed was in their guest room and he didn't want to upset her further by asking her to sleep in what she would consider his bed. "I'll be in the room across the hall."

"Oh, sure, okay, thanks." Lois opened one of her drawers and looked at the lingerie inside. This was like being asked to use a stranger's things. How was she supposed to wear any of this stuff when it was entirely possible that Clark had, at some point, taken it off of her?

"Well, uh, good night, Lois." Clark turned away and shut the door softly behind him. Would she still be there in morning? What would tomorrow look like without Lois by his side?

You'll never know the difference, he told himself.

Unable to resist, he peeked through the wall. Lois had picked up the framed picture that sat on her dresser and was looking at it. The candid shot had been taken by Jimmy — them kissing in the newsroom after the fiasco with Leigh-Anne Stipanovik and her briefly "super" son, Jessie. Clark looked away, unable to bear the thought that he would never have that kiss.

Please, he thought, don't let me know the difference.

Chapter 4

1998

Lois couldn't sleep.

At first she had wandered around the room, looking at the framed pictures on the bureau and poking around in drawers and the bathroom cabinet. She kept coming back to the picture that had most caught her interest. It was her and Clark kissing, apparently oblivious to the fact that they were in the newsroom. His left hand was cupping her cheek and there was no ring on his finger so it must have been before they were married.

Just like the picture downstairs she had seen earlier, they seemed to be head-over-heels in love. Clark had said that they were happy together — were they still that happy? She looked around the room and wondered at their life together. That was Clark's jacket on the bed, his shoes on the floor, those were his toiletries in the bathroom mixed in with the familiar brands she used. It was odd, but somehow reassuring, to see how effortlessly their lives had intertwined.

Every time she looked at the bed she started feeling almost panicky. Did Clark honestly think that she could sleep in that bed? Sleep seemed completely out of the question. No, what she really wanted was some answers. Frustratingly, Lois couldn't find her journal. There was nothing in the drawers of the nightstand or on the bookshelf at the far end of the room.

She tried to read one of the novels on the bookshelf, but it couldn't hold her interest. A quick glance at the alarm clock revealed that almost an hour had passed since Clark had gone to bed. Would he be asleep yet? Did she dare to leave the room?

Two more achingly long minutes ticked by before she decided that she couldn't stay in there one more second. She opened the door cautiously and peeked into the hallway. The door opposite was closed. Lois waited for a few seconds, but couldn't hear any movement in the room. The door remained firmly closed.

Lois tiptoed out of the room, wincing when a floorboard creaked. She froze, but the door across the hall didn't open. She let out the breath she'd been holding and worked her way stealthily down the stairs. In the shadows of the room downstairs, she could just make out the outline of a lamp on a side table so she turned it on. The soft click of the switch seemed overly loud to her ears and she looked up at the ceiling, waiting to hear footsteps.

There still wasn't a sound. Was it possible that Superman was a deep sleeper? The odds didn't seem very good on that one, but she wasn't about to squander the opportunity to do some unsupervised snooping.

Lois turned in a small circle, looking around the room. Some of the furniture was new, but she could see pieces from both of their apartments blended together. Her fish tank. His desk. Her curio cabinet. Lois moved closer to the cabinet. There were more

than three Kerths in it now.

Hers. Hers. Hers. His. Theirs. She squinted at the etching on the award and read that it had been presented to Clark Kent and Lois Lane for outstanding reporting on "The Kryptonian Invasion". Next to the award was a picture of the two of them holding their shared Kerth. They were beaming at each other and she rolled her eyes, a little irritated by how saccharine she must have become. It couldn't possibly be never-ending sunshine and lollipops in the Kent household. No man, not even Superman, could be that perfect.

Her attention shifted back to the award. Kryptonian invasion? Was that in reference to Superman? Or had other people like Clark invaded Earth? There had been nothing during her crosstown trip to indicate that the world was under new management.

She sensed movement to her right and looked over to see Clark coming down the stairs. "Hi!" she blurted out nervously. "I hope I didn't wake you."

He shook his head. "I couldn't sleep."

"So, uh, I was just, you know, here." Lois took a step away from the cabinet and hoped he wasn't going to be upset that she was clearly snooping. "What I mean is that I'm still here. In 1998. I just came downstairs to get a drink of water."

Clark thought about calling her on that one, but decided to let it go. It had been foolish on his part to assume that Lois would just call it a night when there was investigating to be done. Then again, she was so cute when she backedpedaled that he couldn't help teasing her. "We keep the sink in the kitchen, not the trophy case."

Her head swung to look at the doorway leading to the kitchen. "So you do," she said and took another step backwards. "I just got a little distracted."

"How about some coffee?" Clark asked. "I doubt either of us is going to get much sleep tonight."

His earlier smile faded as he spoke, leaving him looking rather sad and lost, and Lois didn't have the heart to turn him down.

"Uh, sure. Why not?" Lois gestured for him to lead the way.

She followed him into the kitchen, wondering as she went about why he couldn't sleep. If he was so worried that she'd be looking around his house, he never should have left her alone. Was that why he was having trouble sleeping? And then it dawned on her. The reason why Clark looked like he had lost his best friend was because he *had* lost his best friend. All those smiling pictures were of Clark and the woman who wasn't here tonight.

"Where do you think she is?" Lois asked and leaned back warily against the counter closest to the door.

Clark didn't answer right away, instead concentrating on measuring the coffee and starting the pot brewing.

"I don't know," he said as he took two mugs from a cupboard. "I've been going over it again and again in my mind, and I still can't figure out what happened. I keep hoping that it's a swap. That you've switched places with yourself."

"So you think the me from now is back in 1995?"

"I have to believe that," he answered, his voice soft.

"Otherwise ..." He shrugged and Lois felt a stab of pity for him.

"I'm sorry," she said reflexively.

"It's not your fault."

A minute or so went by as Lois thought furiously. She was, undeniably, still here. There had to be a reason. She cleared her throat before saying, "So, maybe, I'm supposed to learn something else by coming here? Something besides you being Superman? Maybe you should be telling me what's happened over the past three years?"

He smiled faintly and shook his head. "Nice try."

"What?" she asked, deeply offended that he was keeping the

details of her own life from her. "You're seriously not going to tell me anything?"

"Lois, one thing I've learned from the other occasions where we've skipped time is that we have to be careful."

"Still," she persisted, "there's got to be a reason why I'm here. You don't have to tell me everything, just, uh, just tell me the one thing that you would change, if you could. Maybe you're supposed to warn me about something?"

"If we change anything, even something small, who knows what it will change going forward?"

"But it's already changed!" she told him impatiently. "Hello? I know that you're Superman. The least you can do is tell me how you told me the first time."

He sighed and she could sense that his resolve was weakening. "Come on, Clark. How did you tell me?"

The coffee had finished brewing and Clark poured it into the mugs. He put one down next to her and then set to work sweetening the other. "I didn't," he said finally. "You figured it out."

Relief washed over Lois. After dating him for a couple of months, she surely must have seen right through him. "How? How did I figure it out?"

"You had your eyes closed and I touched you, as Superman, and you recognized me."

His answer sent an unexpected blush to her cheeks, but she had to know more. "How did you touch me?"

Clark reached out to cup her cheek. "Like this."

His hand quickly dropped away, but the ripple of excitement his touch started continued to vibrate through her. He was touching her just like that in the photo upstairs, too. What were the circumstances that caused him to touch her like that as Superman?

"What did I say when you did that?"

"Nothing. You didn't say anything." Clark's expression flickered and she was convinced that he was still holding back.

"Nothing? Then how do you know that I knew?"

"You told me the next day."

"Why not just tell you then? What else was going on?"

He shrugged.

Lois rolled her eyes. "What if I promise not to change anything? Okay? I won't not marry you when I get back."

"Lois—."

"And another thing, if you're so keen to keep from saying too much, then why did you tell me — practically to the hour — how long we've been married? You do know the day, don't you? The day I found out?"

Clark stirred his coffee, uncertain what to say. She might not be his wife yet, but she was definitely Lois. And Lois was never going to let it go. He had never been on this end of her single-minded pursuit of the truth before, but he knew very well that she wasn't about to give up. It was one of the reasons he had first been drawn to her.

"Yes," he finally admitted.

"So why not tell me when I found out?"

"You seemed so upset, when I told you how long we'd been married, I didn't want to make it worse."

"I wasn't upset," she said defensively. "I was just overwhelmed. Now that I've a little time to let it all sink in, well, it's not that bad. My future, I mean." Her eyes sparkled mischievously. "I marry Superman, so it can't be all bad."

To her relief, he laughed. "No, not all bad."

Lois sipped at her coffee and went through her mental list of answers she needed to get out of him. How long had she known about him? How did he ask her to marry him? What was the Kryptonian invasion? Who else knew that he was Superman? Was their life together really that idyllic? Direct questioning had yielded her very little, she was going to have to be more subtle.

"Do we ever fight?" she asked.

"Fight?"

"You know — disagree? Exchange words? Raise our voices?"

Clark sipped at his coffee. Was he stalling or just giving the question some thought? Finally he sighed and admitted, "Sometimes."

Lois nodded, happy that he was being honest. "That's good. Because all these pictures of us looking so happy — well, it just seemed creepy."

"Most people smile and look happy for pictures." Clark's head tilted, as if he had heard something outside. She had seen him make that same gesture countless times before, but now it made sense to her.

"Do you need to go?"

Clark listened for a moment or two longer before shaking his head. "No."

"Maybe that's when it will happen? I came here while you were gone; maybe I return once you leave?"

"Maybe."

The thought made her just the teensiest bit sad. It seemed unfair to leave just as she was truly getting to know him. She had imagined being with Superman in all manner of steamy scenarios and, occasionally, had even wondered what it would be like just to casually hang out with him like she did with Clark. Now that she knew his secret, how different would her life be?

"Should I tell you that I know, when I go back?"

For once, Clark answered without hesitation. "Probably. I wanted to tell you for so long. It was such a huge relief, once you knew."

In spite of the novelty of standing in a kitchen with Superman in the middle of the night, Lois yawned.

"Sorry," she mumbled and then yawned again.

"It's understandable," Clark's elbow companionably nudged hers. "You haven't slept in three years."

Lois rolled her eyes at his lame joke. "Would it be okay with you if I took the guest room? I feel weird, kicking you out of your bedroom."

"That's fine — ." His head turned, listening to something she couldn't hear.

"Just go," she told him. "I promise I won't snoop around while you're gone."

"It doesn't sound really urgent," Clark explained as he set his mug down on the counter. "But I should probably go check it out."

Lois held out her hand. "Well, it was nice really meeting you, Clark."

His hand took hers and their eyes met. "It was May 19," he said.

May 19? And then it dawned on her — that was *the* day. The day she figured him out.

His fingers squeezed hers softly and then he stepped back. There was a red and blue blur in front of her that spun towards the outside door. He stopped for a moment at the door and gave her one last nod and then he was gone.

"May 19," she repeated to herself, treasuring that nugget of information.

The next morning Lois woke up in an unfamiliar room. It took her less than a second to realize where — and when — she was. She got and opened the door to the room, seeing immediately that the one across the hall was open and empty.

"Clark?" she called out.

There was no answer. Was he still out as Superman? The clock on the bedside table read 8:30 — had he gone to work? She went downstairs, calling out his name at the bottom of the stairs as a precaution. When there was still no answer, she went into the

kitchen.

There, propped on the counter in front of the coffee pot, was a note.

"Lois — I had to go to work for a few hours. I've told Perry you weren't feeling well today, so please stay at the house until I get back. — Clark"

Was he kidding? She was supposed to sit here and wait for him to come home? Did he expect the laundry to be done, the bathroom cleaned, and dinner on the table when he got back? Lois tapped the note a few times on the countertop while she fumed.

Then she crumpled the note and picked up the phone to make a call.

Clark was coming out of the conference room when he caught sight of Lois walking down the ramp into the newsroom. Relief surged through him; she was back and she was — . His eyes narrowed and he looked at her more closely. That blue silk shirt was stretched tighter across her chest than it had been last week when she wore it. His gaze dropped to check her left hand — no wedding ring.

"I thought you weren't coming in today," Jimmy called out as he waved to her.

"You thought wrong. I'm fine," she said breezily, watching Clark carefully for his reaction. His eyes narrowed and he started walking purposefully in her direction.

Busted, Lois thought. As Clark stalked toward her, she wondered at her own daring, goading Superman like this. She had just reached her desk and was starting to sit down when he caught her elbow to stop her. "Lois, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," she said and calculated how big a scene she was willing to make.

"Somewhere private," he clarified.

"People will talk," she teased, but gave in and let him lead her into the copy room.

"What are you doing?" he asked as soon as the door closed.

"Working." She tried to sound baffled by his question, but failed.

"I thought we agreed you were going to lay low."

"What?" Lois exclaimed. "When did I agree to that? What if I'm supposed to find something out here at work? I doubt that your HG Wells brought me here so I sit around waiting for you to come home. No one else suspects a thing. Don't make me have cut my hair for nothing. Incidentally, how did you know?"

"No wedding ring." He gestured at her hand. "How are you supposed to work? You don't even know what stories you're working on."

"Well, I saw notes about Dudley Michaels — ."

"Bad idea," he cut her off. "Even with your notes, you won't have a clear picture of what's happening with Michaels. It's probably best if you don't interact too much. Okay?"

"But I have you," she said and gave him what she hoped was her most beguiling look. "You'll help me. We are still partners, aren't we? I bet you know almost as much about which stories I'm working on as I do."

"This is such a bad idea," he muttered.

There was a knock on the door. "When you two are done in there, I want you in my office," Perry shouted through the door.

"What's it going to be?" Lois asked. "Either you partner with me or I go out there and ask Jimmy to pull every story I've written for the past three years."

Clark looked up at the ceiling like he was appealing for help from on high. Then he held up one finger in warning. "Let me do most of the talking, okay?"

Lois grinned in triumph. "See, that wasn't so hard, was it?"

Lois shifted unhappily in her seat and tried yet again to remember where Lex's underground hideout had been. She kept drawing a blank, so she had convinced Clark that their best bet for tracking down Lex was to follow Ramin. They had followed him the first time, surely it would work again?

They had been sitting outside of Ramin's apartment for nearly two hours without sighting him. As tempting as it was to ask Clark if Ramin was in there, Lois didn't dare. She comforted herself that Clark would have suggested another tack by now if Ramin hadn't been home.

A muted chirp interrupted her thoughts and Lois searched through her purse for the cell phone. "Hello?"

"Where are you?" Perry asked without preamble.

"Outside Ramin's apartment."

"So Bender is inside, meeting with Ramin?"

Lois cringed, remembering now that they were supposed to be sticking to Bender 'like flies on a t-bone'. "Uh, no. Not exactly. Bender is supposed to contact us today."

"How's that again?"

"Superman told Bender last night that he needed to go into hiding. He promised us that he'd — ."

"Superman promised? Or Bender promised?" Perry interrupted.

"Bender promised Superman?" Lois answered hopefully.

"Judas Priest! You believed that? Are you telling me you let Bender walk away?"

"Superman never lies ... "

"Lois, tell me something. Are lawyers known for their integrity?"

"Some of them," she shot back. "A man's life was on the line, Chief!"

"And now yours is too, if you come back here — ."

At that moment Ramin came out the front door of his building. "Gotta go." Lois hung up on Perry in mid-bark.

"You'd better be right about Ramin," Clark told her as he opened the car door to get out.

Lois didn't answer him, instead concentrating on tailing Ramin as he walked briskly down the street. He turned left around a corner. By the time they reached the corner, Ramin had disappeared.

Clark looked around, clearly astonished. "Where did he go?"

"There." Lois pointed at a grate in the sidewalk. "I bet he went underground."

Clark lifted the grate and held it open. "Ladies first."

Lois descended the stairs and looked around. It was just like she remembered — slick concrete, running water and a dim string of lights leading along a footbridge. She crossed the bridge and climbed the slippery set of stairs on the other side, holding tight to the rope railing to keep from falling. At the top of the stairs was a dank but well-lit room. Rope and netting hung along the back wall and a chill shot through her when she caught sight of the oubliette where she had been swarmed by rats.

Clark moved past her to examine the large crate fashioned into a makeshift desk. Four folding chairs had been set up around the crate.

"You were right," he told her, holding up a map. "They were going to free Vale en route to the courthouse."

"Of course I was right." Lois looked around uneasily. The room seemed to be a dead end, but there was no sign of Ramin. Where had he gone?

"But you're still not going to tell me how you knew?" Clark asked.

"Not a chance." Lois smiled to herself at the thought of telling him the truth.

"Someone's coming," Clark whispered.

"Who?" she asked him and he shrugged elaborately. Liar, she thought. Still, he didn't seem too upset, so it must not be Lex.

Lois could hear the footsteps now and she straightened her shoulders, ready to brazen her way out. Gretchen Kelly let out a gasp of surprise when she reached the top of the stairs. Then she grinned and pulled a small revolver from the pocket of her jacket.

"Lex told me to find you," she sneered at Lois. "Thanks for making it so easy." She gestured with the gun at the folding chairs. "Over there, both of you. Sit down."

After a quick shared glance, both of them complied. Gretchen sighed and seethed for a few seconds and then waved the gun at the pile of netting and rope. "Change of plans. Tie him up," she ordered Lois. "And I mean tight; don't think you can trick me, because I'm going to double-check the knots."

Lois shrugged and went to grab a length of rope. It really didn't matter how many ropes she used or how good the knots were, so she was perfectly willing to accede to Gretchen's request. She found the thickest rope and bound Clark's hands tightly.

"Happy now?" she asked Gretchen sarcastically.

"Sit." Lois did so and Gretchen swiftly began securing her wrists together. The rope dug into her skin and itched terribly.

"Now what?" Clark asked.

"Now you shut up and don't give me a reason to shoot you." Gretchen looked at her watch and then moved behind Clark to check Lois' handiwork. Satisfied that he wasn't going anywhere, she pocketed the gun and walked over to the edge of the oubliette.

"What does he see in you?" Gretchen pondered aloud, peering down thoughtfully into the dark hole. "I've never been able to figure that one out."

Lois swallowed reflexively, wondering if Gretchen was planning to toss her into that hole. Please, she thought, let her at least untie my hands first.

"You should let us go," Clark said. "The police know that we're here."

At that, Gretchen let out a genuine laugh. "If the police knew about this place, do you really think I'm stupid enough to believe they'd send you two down to check things out first?"

Clark looked at Lois and shrugged slightly as if to say it had been worth a try. Then his attention shifted to the stairs.

"Who's coming?" Lois whispered but he only shrugged again in answer.

Gretchen turned toward the stairs and nervously combed her fingers through her hair.

Lex. It had to be Lex. Lois took a few calming breaths and steeled herself to have to see him again. Where was HG Wells when you really needed him?

"Well, well," Lex said as he paused at the top of the stairs and surveyed the scene before him.

"They were here when I got here, Lex," Gretchen told him.

Lex tossed away the baseball cap he'd been wearing. "It didn't have to be this way, my love." He strode confidently toward Lois, a cold smile on his face.

Deeply uneasy at this new version of events, Lois twisted her hands and the rope dug deeper into her flesh. She heard a soft snapping sound next to her and realized that Clark had broken at least one of the loops of his bonds. The only thing more disastrous than having to face Lex would be to have Clark reveal himself in front of Lex, so Lois forced herself to relax and not flinch when Lex grasped her chin and made her look up at him.

"Was ever woman in this humor wooed?" Lex mused aloud as his eyes wandered to ogle her chest. "Was ever woman in this humor won?"

Clark shifted restlessly in his chair. "Leave her alone."

Lex shook his head. "Why did you do it, Lois? Why are you deliberately sabotaging all my carefully laid plans?"

"What plans?" Lois asked with more bravado than she actually felt.

"I just want to know how you knew." Lex sat down in the empty chair on her left. "You're going to tell me how you knew to warn Bender last night."

"Bender?" Lois repeated, horrified that Lex knew about that.

"Superman," Clark blurted out. "Superman overheard you."

A flicker of annoyance crossed Lex's features before he said, "If Superman had known where I was or what I was up to, why didn't he stop me himself?"

"Do you see, Lex?" Gretchen's voice was high-pitched with tension. "Do you see how she lies to you? Just leave her to me, Lex. I'll make sure she never lies to you again."

Lex ignored Gretchen and grabbed Lois' face between both his hands. "Tell me."

Lois wanted to spit in his face, but her mouth was too dry so she had to settle for turning her head fast enough to be able to bite Lex before he could move his hand away. He reflexively pulled his hand away and then lunged for her.

"Bitch!" she heard Gretchen shriek and then the room was filled with an earsplitting roar.

At the same moment she was thrown off her chair and onto the cold damp of the floor. Lois was pinned down, her wrists throbbing from ropes and the weight of whatever was pinning her down. The weight lifted and, just as suddenly, her wrists were free.

Lois pushed herself up so she was sitting and then froze.

Lex was lying next to her with sightless eyes and a gaping, bloody hole in his throat. Clark was kneeling next to the body, his expression stunned as he slowly said, "She was aiming for you, but Lex moved ..."

From the depths of the oubliette, Gretchen began to shriek Lex's name.

"He's dead?" Lois asked in disbelief. Not wanting to touch the blood on his neck, she leaned down and shakily pressed her ear to Lex's chest. Nothing — the only sound she could hear were the wails from Gretchen.

She lifted her head and whispered, "He's dead." Clark nodded.

Lois closed her eyes as a wave of dizziness overcame her. For half a second she hoped that it was Wells, coming to take her back. Just as quickly she realized that might never happen.

The future was going to be different now.

Chapter 5

1995

Lois made another circuit of her former living room and cracked her knuckles. It had been over twenty-four hours since she had been pulled into the past and there was still no sign from Wells — or Tempus — about why she was here. With every passing minute, her apprehension grew.

Would she ever get her life back or was she stuck in the past? Her mind turned in worried circles, wondering how drastically she had changed her own future. She could still remember clearly what was supposed to have happened, but her life now felt just like her apartment — both familiar and strange.

For at least the sixth or seventh time in as many minutes she picked up the phone to call Clark and then, just as quickly, hung it up again. She desperately wanted his advice. She wished she could tell him what had *really* happened today. She wished he could reassure her that she hadn't thoroughly botched their future. The feeling was made even worse by the niggling worry that she had, indeed, ruined everything.

Even worse, it had all been for nothing. Around the same time that the coroner's van had taken away Lex's body, a jogger on Glenmorgan Beach had found a body washed up on the shore. Perry had been nearly apoplectic when the body was identified as Sheldon Bender. Lois comforted herself that, at least, Rollie Vale was still locked up along with the Kryptonite powering his left

arm.

Lois sat down heavily on the bed and stared at the phone on her nightstand. There had been a flurry of sirens earlier, so it was possible that Clark wasn't even home right now. She could feel the emptiness of the bed behind her — the place where Clark wouldn't be sleeping tonight — and a wave of homesickness engulfed her. Of all nights, this was one where she wished she could have the steady resonance of his heartbeat beneath her cheek as she slept.

Unable to bear the solitude of her old bedroom, Lois went into the kitchen and searched under the sink for some cleanser. She had far too much nervous energy; she might as well do something useful. She started cleaning the grout on her countertop, but the repetitive circular motion wasn't as soothing as she had hoped it would be. She was able to while away almost ten minutes before she gave in and picked up the phone to call him.

He didn't pick up right away and she was about to hang up when she heard Clark's voice. "Hello?"

"Hi, it's me," she chirped. "I was just wondering if you wanted to come over?"

"Right now? It's almost midnight."

"Oh, right, I guess it's too late, really." Lois sagged back against the counter and wished she had never called him. Would she have called him this late at night three years ago if things had gone like they had today?

"I'll come over if you really want me to," he offered.

"No," she said quickly. "You're right. It's late. I didn't realize what time it was. Good night, Clark." Lois hung up the phone and picked up the brush to resume scrubbing. There was a tapping noise at the window behind her and her heart seemed to skip a beat. She rushed to the window to open it.

"I saw your light on," Superman told her, and there was something endearing in his shyness. "Is this a bad time?"

"No! Please come in. I was just, uh ..." Lois grinned as he came inside, delighted that Clark hadn't taken her 'no' as an answer. "I was just getting a jump start on my spring cleaning." She waved her scrub brush as proof.

The movement drew Clark's attention and his hand touched hers, turning her palm up so he could see the abrasions left on her wrist by the rope. "That looks like it hurts," he said softly.

"It doesn't," she reassured him. "It looks much worse than it feels."

Clark nodded slightly and let go off her hand. There was something different about Lois, but he couldn't pinpoint what it was. Was she mourning Lex Luthor? Was it possible that she still had feelings for the man? Or was she upset that Bender had been killed in spite of her attempt to save him? She was different — that much seemed obvious.

At a time when he expected her to be out beating the pavement for answers about Luthor's resurrection and Bender's death, Lois was uncharacteristically quiet. Practically in the blink of an eye she had become more ...subdued. And thinner? Was it his imagination or had she lost weight and he hadn't noticed? That seemed unlikely — if there was one thing he noticed on a daily basis, it was Lois' curves. She was wearing a loose-fitting t-shirt paired with an oversized flannel shirt, so it was hard to tell at the moment.

"I'm sorry about Bender," he told her. "But we both did everything we could to try and help him. You shouldn't blame yourself for that."

To his surprise, she smiled slightly. "I don't blame myself for Bender's death."

"Luthor's death wasn't your fault either," he said.

Her half-smile disappeared in an instant and she furrowed her forehead in obvious consternation. "Do you believe in fate?"

"Fate?" he asked, surprised by the question.

"Yes, fate. Do you believe that if two people are meant to be together, that they will, somehow, end up together?"

Clark stared at her. Was she talking about Luthor? What exactly had happened when that monster confronted Lois yesterday? What had he said — or done — to her? Whatever it was, Clark was pretty sure that her encounter with Luthor was the catalyst for the change in her demeanor. Ever since his sudden reappearance Lois had been more reserved.

Before he could answer, Lois looked away, apparently embarrassed, and waved the scrub brush dismissively. "Never mind," she told him. "Forget I asked."

Clark wanted to ask her if she had someone specifically in mind when she asked about fate, but he didn't want to upset her further. As always, he felt torn between spending more time with her and the worry that he was leading her on by using Superman to do it. He should have simply come over when she asked him, he chided himself. But he had been distracted, worried about the Kryptonite that Vale was refusing to turn over, and he had blurted out an answer without thinking.

"Well, I guess I should go," he said.

"Sure. Thanks for checking on me."

The wistful expression on her face made him wonder if her fate question had been about Superman instead of Luthor. He was halfway home before it occurred to him that maybe, just maybe, she had meant him — Clark — when she asked.

Lois went for a walk on Sunday morning, ambling slowly along the streets of Metropolis as she mentally cataloged the subtle changes that three years had wrought on the city. Without quite meaning it, her walk took her to the Daily Planet building. She stood outside, looking up at the fourth floor windows and wondered if Clark was in the newsroom. A flutter of excitement shot through her at the thought that maybe all she had to do was go inside and she would see him.

She considered for half a second and then decided to go inside. There had to be a reason that she was here and her gut feeling was that the answer lay in the newsroom. If Clark was here, right now, then it had to be a sign and she would ...what? Tell him the truth? Ask him out? Pretend that nothing was wrong?

The elevator seemed to crawl in its climb to the newsroom; the doors seemed to take an eternity to open. Let him be there, she prayed. Please let him be there. Lois stepped out, looking towards Clark's desk and ...There he was. He looked up, catching sight of her at almost the same moment that she found him. Lois smiled and waved at him as she worked her way across the newsroom.

"Good morning," Clark said as she neared his desk.

"Hi," she said, feeling oddly shy.

"How're your wrists?" he asked.

"My wrists?" Lois looked down at them in confusion, then swiftly comprehended that he was still worried about the abrasions from the rope. "Oh, they're fine. Great. Thanks for asking."

Their eyes met and she beamed happily at him. She was still here and Clark had to be the reason. "So, Clark, what are you doing here?"

"I'm just working on our story about, uh — ." Clark hesitated, not wanting to upset her by saying 'Luthor's death'. "About Luthor," he finished awkwardly.

"Our story?"

To his great relief, she didn't look grief-stricken. If anything, the gleam in her eye was flirtatious.

"Of course, our story." Clark pulled the chair at the side of his desk around to sit behind it, moving his own chair over to the right a few inches to give her room to join him. "You were there. Give it a read and see what you think." He adjusted his monitor to give her a better view as she sat down next to him.

God, she smelled great. Clark closed his eyes for a moment, savoring the faint coconut scent of her shampoo as she leaned closer to his monitor to read. Her knee bumped into his leg and he swallowed hard at the thought that she was doing it on purpose.

"There's nothing about Bender in this story." Her eyes darted back and forth, still reading.

"Right now we can't really tie Bender's death to Luthor's reappearance. It's just conjecture."

Her mouth opened as if she was going to refute that. Then she shrugged and appeared to change her mind. Her attention shifted from the monitor to him as she asked, "Clark, what are you doing tonight?"

"Tonight? Do you want to try and track down Nigel?"

"Nigel?" She gave him a wry smile. "No. You still owe me a date."

Clark gaped at her, caught off-guard by the abrupt change of subject. "Date? You want to go out with me tonight?"

Her smile widened. "There's no time like the present. I'll tell you what, it doesn't even have to be a date. Why don't you come over to my place tonight and I'll make you dinner?"

"You're going to cook?" His eyes went even wider with astonishment.

"Or we can order a pizza. It doesn't matter. I'd just like to spend one uninterrupted, non-work-related evening with you. Or are you afraid to be alone with me?" Lois asked tartly, finding something almost perversely satisfying in messing with him like this.

"Alone — what? No, of course not."

"So tonight is okay?"

He nodded, clearly flustered.

"Great. You bring the wine and I'll take care of the food." Lois pushed back from his desk and stood up. "The story's great, but it's all yours. You shouldn't give me a byline on it. I'll see you at seven."

Clark watched her cross the newsroom, his thoughts vacillating between exhilaration that he had a date with Lois that night and confusion that Lois didn't want a byline.

She turned to wave as she got into the elevator and exhilaration won out. He had a date with Lois tonight. Her words to Superman the night before last echoed in his mind: "*Clark owes me a date ...*"

She might have been reluctant to accept that first date, but she was certainly pursuing it now. Maybe it was best not to question why and simply be grateful that she really did want to go out with him.

Clark raised his glass in a salute. "This was really, really good," he told Lois. "I take back all the times I mocked your cooking."

"Maybe I called your mom and asked for the recipe." Lois smiled as she thought about how it had taken five successive Sundays and a couple of frantic phone calls before she had mastered Martha's recipe for roast chicken.

His eyes widened. "Did you?"

Lois laughed and winked at him. "I never cook and tell." She stood up and began to clear the table.

Clark quickly rose and reached to take the plates from her. "Here, let me clean up. It's the least I can do — ." His head tilted; someone was in trouble.

"How about you take the garbage out and I'll get started on the dishes?" Lois suggested quickly.

"Garbage?" Clark repeated, still distracted by whatever he was hearing.

Lois went to the kitchen sink and pulled her garbage can out from beneath it. "Would you mind? Please? Something smells really off in there."

Clark nodded, removed the bag and practically jogged to the door. Lois shook her head in amusement and wondered how long it would take before he could come back and what excuse he would invent. For at least the tenth time that night she was tempted to tell him the truth.

He returned a few minutes later, not long enough to need an excuse. He joined her at the sink to help and her memory flashed to the early days of their marriage when standing hip-to-hip by the sink was the prelude to an evening of lovemaking. More than once she had to stop herself from touching him in a less-than-accidental way.

As Lois set the last plate in the rinse water, the glint of gold on her right ring finger caught Clark's eye. Instead of the plate, he lifted her hand from the water.

"Is this new?" he asked, smoothing his thumb over the ring to wipe away the suds covering it.

"Uh, yeah, it is." She pulled her hand from his and plunged it into the sink to unstop the drain.

Clark continued to dry and put away the dishes, but he couldn't shake the feeling that Lois was nervous about his noticing her ring. She had taken the dishcloth and was wiping down a countertop so Clark looked at the ring again, tipping his head so he could focus in on it above the rim of his glasses. The ring wasn't new — it had microscopic scratches and nicks from long-term wear.

Lois stopped wiping the counter and threw the cloth into the sink. Her left hand moved swiftly to twist the ring anxiously, almost as if she knew that it had caught his attention.

As Clark was puzzling over that thought, he realized that there was a faint tan line on the ring finger of her left hand. That was even more confusing. He was certain he had only seen her wear a ring there once. That had been over a year ago when they were undercover at the Lexor Hotel.

Lois quickly shoved both hands into her pockets. Their eyes met and alarm bells went off in Clark's head when he saw how tense she'd become.

In an effort to lighten the mood, he teased, "Lois, did you get married and forget to tell me?"

"Married?" she squeaked. "If I got married, you'd be the first person to know it."

The increased beat of her heart and the guilty expression on her face were screaming clues to Clark that she was hiding something. But why?

Because she married Luthor — the thought sprang unwanted into Clark's mind.

"Is that why you asked me over to dinner tonight? So you could tell me?"

"This was supposed to be a date, Clark. What kind of a date would that be?" Lois was trying to act nonchalant but her legs were starting to shake. She hated lying to him, especially when she was becoming convinced that telling him the truth was the reason why she was still stuck in the past.

Clark tilted his head and gave her a considering look. There was definitely something going on with her. "But this wasn't a real date," he said as an idea came to him.

"It wasn't?"

He shook his head. "No." Clark reached out and took hold of her wrist, gently pulling her hand from her pocket so that he could hold it between his. "A real date is when I take you somewhere we both have to get dressed up to be allowed in. Tonight was too casual to be a real date."

Clark had half-expected her to pull away, but instead she tipped her head coquettishly and asked, "And when do you foresee this real date happening?"

"Friday?"

Lois pretended to think about it for a few seconds. "I'll have to ask my husband, but I guess Friday would work out okay."

"You could always bring him along," Clark suggested.
Lois laughed. "Maybe I will. I'm sure he'd tell you stop stalling."

"Stalling?"
"Definitely. My husband would have kissed me by now. You're putting it off until Friday."

His gaze dropped to her mouth and Lois caught her breath, giddy at the thought that he was about to kiss her. It had been nearly three days since she had last kissed him and she wasn't sure she could wait even a second or two longer. His face began to tilt toward hers and Lois closed her eyes, dizzy with anticipation.

She felt the heat of his breath and then the light brush of his lips. For a second or two that was enough, and then it wasn't nearly enough. Lois wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. She sensed his hesitation, but only for a moment, before his arms closed around her and he deepened the kiss.

Lois moaned into his mouth, thrilled by the discovery that Clark had always kissed her like this — it wasn't something that they had perfected over countless hours of making out. This kiss had been worth the entire trip back in time. She pushed against him, backing him up against the counter as her fingers tangled in his hair so she could kiss him even more thoroughly.

When the kiss broke, they were both breathless. Clark looked stunned and Lois gave him an affectionate smile as her finger traced over the full line of his bottom lip.

"I bet you're worried you won't know what to do with me after a real date," she teased.

Clark dipped his head to leave a kiss in front of her ear as he whispered, "I have a few ideas. Although I'm not sure your husband would approve."

Lois giggled against his cheek. "Sure he would. He'd tell you to go for it."

"Would he?"

"Yes," she whispered. Her tipped back so that she could look him in the eye. "Do you think I should go for it, Clark?"

"Tonight? Or on Friday?" he teased.

"Tonight. I don't think I want to wait until Friday. I want to go home."

"Lois, you are home."

She tipped her head forward, letting it rest against his chest for a moment. Then she looked up at him, her eyes dark and serious. "Do you remember last Friday, when I suddenly had a hair cut and forgot my coat and knew all sorts of things about Lex's plans?"

Clark nodded and gave her an encouraging smile, steeling himself not to get upset if she told him that she really had married Luthor.

"The reason why I knew what Lex was up to was because I'm from three years in the future."

He couldn't have heard that right. "You're — what?"

"I've already lived this, well, a version of this. The first time around Lex didn't die."

Clark stared at her, unnerved by how calmly earnest she was. "You're serious?"

She nodded. "Lex isn't the only one I know things about either. I know about you, Clark."

He went absolutely still. "Me?"

Lois pulled away his glasses. "You."

Clark couldn't seem to catch his breath. In all his daydreams, never once had he imagined this scenario. He had expected anything from a slap on the face to the silent treatment if Lois ever found out his secret. To be met with calm acceptance was bewildering. "You know?" his voice croaked out.

"Technically I've known for three years."

"Three years — . You — ." Clark pulled away from her, his

mind struggling to process the information overload. Lois knew his secret. Lois had known all those things about Luthor because she was from three years in the future. In a blinding flash of clarity, Lois' behavior over the past few days suddenly made sense.

"So what are you doing here?" he finally managed.

"That's the part I don't know. I've leapt time before, but I've always known ahead of time when I was going to and what I was supposed to do there. This time I just — showed up."

Lois had waved her hand in a gesture of confusion. Clark looked again at the tan line on her finger.

"You get married?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," she answered just as softly.

A searing twist of jealousy tightened low in his chest. Clark reluctantly met her gaze. He had to ask, but he was afraid of the answer. "Who do you marry?"

"Can't you guess?" Her eyes were sparkling with affection.

Clark hesitated, wanting to believe that it was true — that all of his hopes and dreams were only a few years away from being realized. "Really?"

Her hand cupped his cheek as her face moved closer to his.

"Really," she whispered, just before her lips touched his.

1998

Lois was furious and the constant ring from her cell phone wasn't improving her mood. She didn't bother to look at the phone's display; she was certain that it was Clark calling — again.

"What makes you think I'm going to answer that?" she muttered in disgust.

"I don't actually need you to answer it."

Lois whirled around, speechless at the sight of Superman so unexpectedly behind her.

"That's cheating!" she said in astonishment.

"Cheating? This from the woman who snuck out of the newsroom as soon as my back was turned?"

"I would have told you I was leaving, but you weren't there."

He gave her a baleful look, clearly not believing a word of it. Then he held up one finger in warning before ducking into the alleyway behind him to change.

"Parking tickets!" she fumed when he had reappeared in street clothes. "Really? Parking tickets?"

"You might, at least, have given me the courtesy of sticking around to hear the end of that pitch to Perry. You promised you'd let me do the talking, Lois. Do you see now why I made that the only condition?"

Lois stalked away, but he easily caught up to her and continued speaking. "You gave vague responses to Perry's questions before storming out of his office in a snit, which sent whispers around the newsroom that we're having marital problems, by the way. Then you asked what happened to Linda, who left the paper over six months ago. At this point the only reason Perry's not pulling you aside for a heart-to-heart chat is because everyone thinks you're out of your mind on cold medicine."

"You told them that?"

"Jimmy suggested it and I didn't disagree." Clark's tone softened. "I understand that it's a lot to take in, being thrust three years into the future like this. And I know I'm not your favorite person right now, but I wish you would trust me, just a little."

Lois shrugged, feeling utterly miserable. She hated to admit that Clark was right. Trying to fake her way through her future life had only created a mess.

Sensing that she was willing to listen, Clark pressed on.

"Writing a story about parking tickets was actually a way to bring you up to speed on the Michaels story."

"How in the world does a story about cops parking illegally

relate to Dudley Michaels?"

"Do you know why no one working at police headquarters gets a ticket for parking illegally there?"

Lois rolled her eyes. "Because they're cops. That's like ticketing a priest for double-parking in front of the church."

"No, it's because the Parking Enforcement division has a specific mandate not to ticket anyone on that block."

"So anyone can park in a handicap space and get away with it?"

"Not a chance. People still get tickets there, just not cops. Parking Enforcement doesn't do the ticketing because there's an office at police headquarters whose only function is to enforce parking on that block. And do you know who heads up that office?"

In spite of her annoyance with him, Lois was intrigued. "Dudley Michaels?" she guessed.

"Close," Clark said with a grin. "His brother-in-law, Wes Angelo. According to last year's city budget, that office brought in nearly a million dollars last year."

"In parking tickets?" she asked in disbelief.

"That seems a little excessive for an office that issued less than fifty citations last year, doesn't it?"

Lois looked up at him with grudging admiration. "Why didn't you put it that way when you suggested it to Perry?"

"I was about to, but you left before I could finish."

"And then you left!"

"That was kind of an emergency."

Lois sighed, hating to concede, but impatient to start working the story. "Well, assuming you don't have another emergency, are we working on this story together or not?"

"Definitely," Clark said with a smile. "We're definitely working this story together."

"That's a great angle, by the way," she told him as they started walking again. "How did you find out about Wes Angelo?"

"From you," he told her. "You told me about all of this yesterday afternoon before you, uh — ."

"Oh." Lois felt awkward, uncertain what to say. Should she pat his arm in comfort? Take credit for an idea that wasn't exactly hers? Say something pithy to change the subject? Lois half-stumbled, feeling out-of-place in every possible sense. The feeling dissipated as Clark's hand briefly touched her back to steady her.

"Thanks," she mumbled.

"Anytime," he answered.

It had been an automatic reply, just like the gesture that had preceded it. Clark had touched her like that countless times before and he had always been there for her — in one guise or another. Lois tried, but couldn't squelch the warm glow inside of her at the realization that he really did mean it.

Chapter 6 1998

The next day Lois stayed behind at the Planet when Clark and Jimmy left to document who was parking illegally at police headquarters. She was seven names into the dull task of checking who owned each of the cars parked illegally the previous day before she could no longer resist the temptation to use the Clark-free time to do a little research. She logged into the Planet's database and brought up the front page for February 12, 1995 — the day after she had been brought forward in time.

"LUTHOR ALIVE AND BEHIND BARS".

Lois gasped, reading with disbelief the story that she and Clark had written about how Lex Luthor came back from the grave, bribed a judge, killed Sheldon Bender and freed Rollie Vale before being captured by Superman.

Why Rollie Vale? Was Lex still in jail? Lois did a search on

Lex's name. There was a series of articles by her and Clark about Lex's trial that were written through the spring and summer of 1995. Then there was another story, written by Martin Prescott, about Lex breaking out of prison on February 10, 1996. There were a few more stories, written by Clark, about the search for Lex before she read that Lex had been killed in a sewage tunnel collapse on February 26, 1996. That story was also written by Clark.

Why only Clark? Why hadn't she shared the by-line on a story about Lex?

Lois searched for her byline, but could find no stories filed by her from February 9 until April 12. Why the lapse? Where had she been? Lois did another search, looking for any story with her name in it and found two: the first was a wedding announcement that she and Clark were to be married on February 10 and the other was a mention in the society pages of the February 11 edition about the Lane/Kent wedding reception.

That couldn't be right. Clark had been specific, to the day, about when they got married and now here was proof that he had shaved off at least half a year. Why was he lying about that? Where had she been for over two months?

Lois stared at her monitor without really seeing it. Had they taken a long honeymoon? She did another search, looking for stories written by Clark. To her surprise, Clark's byline only took a five-day break, appearing again on February 15 and appearing regularly during the entirety of her gap.

What had happened to her? Was this why Clark was being so evasive? Was this why she had been sent forward in time? Whatever had kept her from writing for two months had to be drastic, maybe even dire. Was she here to learn about it and prevent it from happening?

Above her monitor she saw the elevator doors open. Clark and Jimmy stepped out and Lois quickly closed the Planet search engine.

As they approached her desk, Jimmy held up two canisters of film with a grin. "We found lots of illegally parked cars and not a ticket in sight over there."

"And I," Clark added, "have a list of license plates that we can check against the list from yesterday. How far did you get in identifying those plates?"

"Uh," Lois stalled. "Can we talk? Somewhere private?"

"I'll just go get these developed," Jimmy told them and hurried away.

Clark gestured at the empty conference room and Lois quickly walked inside. She looked upset and Clark wondered what had happened in his absence. Perry was watching them from across the room; his interest seemed more than casual. Clark cringed at the thought that Lois might have said or done something anachronistic while he was gone. He should have insisted that she come along.

"I know why I'm here," Lois told him after he had closed the door.

Relief flooded through Clark. "That's great! Wells came and talked to you?"

"No. I did some research and figured it out for myself. Something happens to me in February 1996 because I disappear for two months. I don't write a single story until April. So what happens to me, Clark? Did it ever occur to you that maybe that's why I'm here?"

Clark gaped at her. He should have known better than to leave Lois alone when she had access to the Planet's database and three years of unanswered questions. Before he could even begin to formulate a response, she continued talking.

"Why did you lie to me about when we got married?"

"Lois," he said slowly, "I didn't lie to you. We got married on October 6, 1996."

"Then why is there a mention about our wedding reception in

the paper on February 10?"

Clark began to pace, running one hand through his hair as he tried to think how best to explain what had happened. Was she right? Was that why she was here? How different would their lives be if they had married that first time?

"I didn't marry you in February, Lois. Yes, that was when we were supposed to get married." He stopped pacing and looked her in the eye. "Lex Luthor broke out of prison and abducted you just before the ceremony. He left a clone in your place and that's who I married."

Lois stared at him in open-mouthed astonishment as the significance of his words sank in. "That's where I was for two months? With Lex? While you were off cavorting with ...with ...with my clone?"

"No. You were only with Luthor for a couple of weeks. You read the stories about Luthor, too, right?"

She nodded stiffly.

"You were there, when the tunnel collapsed. But you had amnesia and ...Look, Lois, it was a mess. The whole thing was a mess from start to finish. So maybe you're right, because if I could change anything about the past, I would change that."

"So what happened to my clone?" Lois asked. She saw Clark's expression sadden and the little twist of jealousy she had felt upon hearing he had married someone else increased.

"She died," he said softly. "She was there in the tunnel that day, too. She gave up her life to save us both."

"Did you love her?" The question was a dry whisper.

"No." Clark shook his head. "I even came close to hating her for a little while. She was ...she was nothing like you, Lois. She looked like you, but that was where the similarities stopped. We did become friends, near the end, but that was all."

A knock on the door startled them both. The door opened and Seth Allred stuck his head in to say, "Sorry to interrupt you guys, but I'm supposed to have the room now."

Lois was on her way back to her desk, feeling somewhat dazed from everything she had just learned, when Perry asked her to come into his office.

"How are you?" Perry asked solicitously as he shut the door.

"Fine," Lois answered with a big, bright grin.

Perry's eyes narrowed and he gave her an assessing look. "Uh, huh," he said, clearly not believing her.

Oh, she was in big trouble. There was no possible way to fool Perry, especially since he obviously knew something was amiss.

"Is this a social call, Chief? Because I have work I should be doing ..."

"Lois, feel free to tell me that this is none of my business, but are things okay?"

"Of course," she said, faking confusion. "Why wouldn't they be?"

"Well, you've been ..." Perry hesitated as he tried to think of a way to explain. "... different lately. You've been avoiding Clark ..."

"I'm not avoiding Clark!" she interjected.

Perry continued as if she hadn't spoken. "I haven't seen you two hold hands, or kiss, or even so much as bat an eye at each other for a couple of days now. And I'm sorry for spying, but you didn't look too happy with each other in the conference room just now. I'm just saying, if you want to talk, you know I'm here for you, darlin'."

The realization that Perry was exactly the same made Lois feel less like a stranger in her own life. For a few seconds she wondered if she dared to tell Perry the truth.

"I — . Thanks, Chief. If there was anything wrong, you know I'd ask for your advice. It's just been a weird couple of days, that's all."

Perry sized her up and then apparently decided that he

believed her. "Well, I'm here if you need me. I'm not going to take sides, mind you. Clark is like a son to me."

"And I'm not?" she teased.

"You know you're my favorite son." Perry chuckled and waved at the door. "Now get back to work."

As she left Perry's office Lois looked across the bullpen and found Clark sitting at his desk. His back was turned, but the set of his shoulders made her wonder if he'd been eavesdropping. She walked over and sat down in the chair next to his desk.

Their eyes met and she said, "I guess you heard that."

"Yes." He gave her an apologetic smile. "I normally don't listen in, but I've been worried about Perry since yesterday."

Her gaze dropped to stare at his left hand where it was resting on the desk. Lois wondered if she should reach out and touch him — would that fool Perry? Or would it just make things worse because she was certain that the gesture would only look awkward and clumsy.

"What do you want to do?" she asked him quietly. "Because now I know that truth and I'm still here it's starting to look like I might be here for a while."

Clark looked at his watch, then back at her. "We should probably stick around for another hour; we can go through the list of license plates. Then we can talk over dinner."

"Will you tell me everything?"

Clark nodded, the beginnings of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "It looks like the only option I have left, doesn't it?"

Lois was sitting on the countertop, watching Clark chop vegetables with faster-than-the-eye precision. It was truly amazing, the stuff that he could do without appearing to even be trying. All in all, it would seem that she had done extremely well for herself. Clark had to be the most useful husband in history.

"So do I ever cook?" she asked.

"Sometimes. Mostly you just, uh, supervise while I cook." Clark added the veggies to a saucepan and adjusted the burner's setting.

"Do I supervise while you clean up afterwards, too?" she asked, only half-kidding.

"Our deal is that I cook and you clean up." He opened the oven and pulled out a baking dish — without using hot pads. "But I always help you clean up."

Lois laughed. "So that's my future? Superman fulfilling my every domestic whim?"

Clark grinned at her. "Not so bad, is it?"

No, it really wasn't. But it did rather beg the question of why he seemed perfectly content with the arrangement. "And what do you get from all this?"

His smile widened and he replied as if the answer should have been obvious. "You."

Lois could feel a blush creeping across her cheeks, but tried to appear nonchalant. "For what? Sex? I think you got the short end of that deal."

He laughed. "The sex is great, but that's not what I meant."

She waited, hoping he'd explain. Clark stirred the vegetables and then took the pan off the burner, setting it aside so that he could give her his full attention.

"I became Superman because I wanted to help people. Sometimes there are people I can't help or the situation is beyond my abilities. Logically, I know that I can't do everything or be everywhere, but that doesn't make it any easier to accept. Being Superman wasn't something I could just leave at the door when I got home. But you — , well, that all changed when coming home meant that you would be there."

"Me?" she whispered in disbelief.

"You're my best friend, Lois. You take care of me. You're the only person in the world who can hold me and make all the

terrible stuff fade away."

Lois stared at him, remembering all the times that he had held her. She had always felt safe and secure in his arms. The gentle comfort and acceptance she experienced when he held her were why she had sought him out more than a few times. Was it really the same for him?

She was so quiet that Clark began to worry that he had said too much. He nodded in the direction of the table. "How about we eat this before it gets cold?"

Over dinner Clark laid out the entirety of their dealings with Lex Luthor, telling her the details that hadn't been in the paper about Rollie Vale and the kryptonite he had traded to Luthor for his freedom. He told her how Nigel had stolen the kryptonite and tried to use it to destroy Superman, but that the chunk of space rock was now securely stored at STAR Labs.

After dinner they had moved to the living room and Lois sat on the couch, hugging her knees to her chest, while Clark explained the twisted circumstances of their first attempt to get married and how she had ended up with amnesia while Dr. Deter played mind games with her.

"Wow," she said softly. "I'm not sure I want to go back now."

"Well, like you said, maybe forewarned is forearmed," Clark told her.

"But how do I change any of that? There are so many factors that even someone with your powers wouldn't be able to control." Lois got up and paced across the room to stare at the wedding picture of her and Clark with their families. "Even if I told you all of this, how are we supposed to stop any of it?"

Clark came over to stand next to her. For several seconds he, too, looked at the pictures on the wall. Then he softly asked, "Do you know what I would change, if I only got to change one thing?"

"What?" Lois turned to look up at him.

"I would never have left your side on our wedding day. Not even for a second. Maybe that's what you need to do, is go back and tell me not to let you out of my sight on that day?"

Lois looked up at him as another possibility entered her mind. "Clark! What if that's why I'm *not* here. What if the me from now went back in time to tell you then ..." Her forehead furrowed and then she laughed. "That's confusing, isn't it?"

"No, it's brilliant!" On impulse, Clark pulled her into a celebratory hug. "Maybe Wells was only able to explain what was supposed to happen to one of you."

Lois closed her eyes, savoring the hug as her mind reeled at how good he smelled and how amazing his arms felt wrapped around her.

Clark pulled away slightly and his chin dipped, as if he meant to kiss her. Then he straightened up and stepped away from their hug. "Sorry," he murmured.

"It's okay," she whispered, her heart hammering in her chest. "If you want to kiss me, I mean. It's okay with me. Give it a shot."

Clark stared at her mouth. He needed that connection with her, needed her kiss just as much as he had told her earlier that he needed her to hold him. And she had said it was okay, after all.

"All right." Clark leaned down again and she closed her eyes as he gave her a very chaste, barely there kiss.

It was sweet, but over so quickly that Lois felt cheated. "That's it?" she blurted out.

"What?" he asked, startled.

"That's how you kiss me? I don't want to seem rude, but that was pretty tame."

"I — ."

"Just, you know, kiss me like you normally would."

Clark took her face between his hands, his eyes meeting hers for a long moment. When his eyes closed, a shiver of anticipation

coursed through her and her own eyelids slid shut. His lips met hers again, this time with a little more pressure. She kissed him back and his mouth became hungrier, feeding on hers in long pulls and short nips. His arms went around her, holding her decisively against him as he coaxed her mouth open. Their breathing turned ragged as their lips and tongues met again and again. Lois moaned into the kiss and Clark abruptly broke it off.

"Good night," he gasped and then hurried up the stairs.

For almost a minute, Lois stood dizzy and panting at the bottom of the staircase. Her legs felt shaky as she climbed the stairs to the guest room. She changed into her pajamas and then sat on the bed. She couldn't stop thinking about Clark. That kiss had definitely been headed somewhere before he had stopped it. She shivered at the thought that in three years he wouldn't run away like that. In three years he would kiss her, touch her, lift her up in those strong arms and ...neither of them would be sleeping alone tonight.

Lois blushed and turned over, burying her face in a pillow.

Two days later Lois was standing in the newsroom when she saw a report on the TV about a boating accident in the harbor. Superman was there, helping with the rescue efforts. Lois shouted to Jimmy that she was going down to the marina and left the Planet in a hurry. She kept the radio tuned to the news channel and was only half-way to the marina when she heard that Superman had now left. Lois changed lanes, ignoring the annoyed honk from the driver she had just cut off, and headed for home.

Lois raced into the brownstone, pausing just inside the door to listen. Upstairs she could hear water running so Clark must be there. She hurried up the stairs and down the hallway to find the bedroom door halfway open.

Door's open, she told herself, just go in. She sat down on the sofa and waited, trying not to imagine what Clark would look like naked and failing miserably. She heard the water turn off and then the door to the bathroom opened.

Lois stood up quickly. "Hi," she said, feeling her cheeks color a little at the sight of him in nothing but a towel.

"Hi." He was clearly surprised to see her there.

Lois forced herself to look only at his face. "How are you?" she asked, wincing a little at the lameness of the words. She rushed to speak before he could answer, trying to look a little less stupid and a lot more supportive. "Is there anything I can do for you? Do you want some tea? Or a, uh, a hug? I'm not sure what it is I'm supposed to do for you."

"Oh," Clark said, looking as though he understood now why she had been waiting for him. "Thanks, but this one wasn't that bad. You don't have to do anything."

"Oh, well, good." Lois looked away, embarrassed that she had thought she could be what he needed. "Great. I'll just, uh, let you get dressed now."

She hurried out of the room, pulling the door shut firmly behind her before heading down the stairs and into the kitchen. Lois filled a pot with water and was setting it on a burner when Clark entered the room. He was dressed now, wearing jeans and a dark grey t-shirt that clung to the taut muscles of his upper arms and chest. He wasn't wearing his glasses and his hair was still damp. Just looking at him made her heart beat faster and her stomach tighten unhappily that he hadn't wanted her to hold him.

"What's for dinner?" Clark asked conversationally.

"Spaghetti?"

His lips quirked into a smile and then he coughed to cover a laugh.

"What? Do you think I can't even cook spaghetti?"

"No, sorry. It's just that having pasta for dinner is kind of a private joke between us."

"What's the joke?" He looked embarrassed, and now she *had*

to know. "What's the joke? Tell me."

"Uh, it was when we were first married. We had fettuccini one night and ..." He cleared his throat and shifted his shoulders in an uncomfortable shrug. "It just became our private joke, that it was the pasta that, well, you know."

Lois didn't know, but she could certainly guess. Flustered by the mental picture of Clark making love to her and feeling like an interloper in her own — albeit future — life, Lois quickly turned off the burner and lifted the pan.

"I think I'd rather have pizza," she said and poured the water down the drain.

Clark watched her leave the kitchen and sagged back against the counter. It was so hard to keep his distance and she wasn't making it any easier. For the past couple of days she had been so warm — flirting with him and acting the part of an adoring wife while they were at work. She had practically begged — or maybe that was dared — him to kiss her the other night and he had been weak enough to take her up on the offer. He had come so close to forgetting that she wasn't yet his wife that night.

Tonight she had shown up in their bedroom when he was practically naked and offered to hug him. Clark had wanted that hug desperately — still wanted it, in fact — but he wasn't sure he could hold her and leave it at that. Worst of all, he could see that he had, once again, mortified her by alluding to their shared intimacy.

For a moment or two he thought about following her into the next room and apologizing. Then he decided that could only make the situation worse. Clark sat down with a sigh and tapped his fingers nervously on the table. Behind him he heard the swinging door open and he half-turned in the chair to see her.

"They said it will be about forty-five minutes, is that okay?" Lois asked, her gaze fixed on the opposite side of the kitchen from him.

"Great," he answered. She glanced at him, then away, her cheeks coloring. Again, he mentally kicked himself for freaking her out by over-sharing.

"I'm going to, uh." Lois pointed at the ceiling and began to sidle back through the swinging door. "I think I'm going to go read in my room. Let me know when the pizza gets here."

Chapter 7

1995

Most people thought Superman wasn't affected by the elements; that he was indifferent to heat and cold, but they were wrong. The sensation of temperature was something Clark could feel — it just didn't burn or freeze his flesh to the point of injury. The effects for him were nonetheless cumulative and, after hours spent helping with the effects of a winter storm, he felt just as cold and numb as the people he had rescued.

It was nearly two o'clock in the morning as Clark wearily made his way home. He was utterly exhausted and wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and sink into a long and dreamless sleep. Clark stumbled through the back door of his loft and had taken two steps towards the bed before he realized that he wasn't alone.

Lois was there. She had been sitting at the foot his bed, but stood up as he came inside. On any other occasion, he would have been happy to see her. The past couple of days had been a revelation to him, giving him a glimpse of the woman he'd always been certain was hiding beneath the bluster. But right now, when he could barely stand up straight, he wondered if it would be rude to ask her to leave.

"I thought you might need a friend," she told him.

"I'm ... sorry. I don't think I'd be good company right now." Clark was so tired that going back out into the storm seemed impossible, and yet he couldn't let her drive home when the weather was so terrible. "I'll fly you home ..." Even to his own

ears the words sounded slurred with exhaustion.

"You're not flying anywhere." Lois took hold of his hand and it was the first warm touch he'd had in hours. "Come on, come sit for a minute." She pulled on his hand, tugging him forward and Clark numbly lurched to the end of his bed and sat down.

She knelt down and matter-of-factly began to unzip his left boot. It felt strange, to have her doing this for him, but the clinical detachment he had been effecting was still firmly in place and he could only watch, slightly dazed, as she removed first one, and then the other, of his boots. Then Lois stood up and touched her hand to his cheek.

"Can you stand up for just a little longer?" she asked softly.

Clark nodded and rose, somewhat unsteadily. Lois took hold of his arm to guide him towards his bathroom. "You're soaking wet, we need to get you warm or you'll never be able to sleep tonight."

"I — " he started to say, but stopped when he realized that she was right.

Once they were inside his bathroom, she moved behind him. Her hands swiftly gathered up the material of his cape, bunching it together before draping it over his left shoulder. He felt the slide of the zipper and then a gentle tug as she peeled away the top half of his suit. He almost protested, but her hands were so certain and confident that he closed his eyes instead, grateful for this small respite. Once the top half of his suit was hanging at his waist, her hands returned to his shoulders. Seconds later the harness holding his cape in place was being slid down his unresisting arms.

Lois was undressing him, but it didn't feel at all erotic, it felt reassuring. It seemed as though the weight of the night's horror was dropping away from him as his suit was dismantled. Not since childhood had he felt this kind of simple security, the sensation of being cared for so completely.

He opened his eyes when he heard the shower start up.

"You can do the rest," she told him with the faintest hint of a smile. "I'll put some clothes outside the door for you, okay?"

Clark nodded his understanding and she left the bathroom. He stared at the back of the door for a moment and wondered if, in the future, she didn't stop at his waist in helping him undress. He shook his head to clear that thought and stripped away the rest of his suit. As hot water sluiced over him in the shower, he bowed his head and tried to let the heat and steam wash away the gruesome images in his head.

The bad memories did seem more distant now, but it wasn't because of the water. Again and again his thoughts went to Lois and her obvious familiarity with his suit. A momentary ripple of happy warmth went through him at the thought that she had done this before. What would it be like to come home to Lois, instead of an empty apartment?

She was still there, wasn't she?

Clark turned off the water and held his breath, listening past the last drips from the shower to hear Lois moving in the next room. He towed himself dry and opened the door a fraction. As promised, there was a small pile of clothes waiting for him. In spite of his exhaustion, he tried to dress quickly so that he could see her again before she left.

Lois was turning down the covers on his bed, but she turned around to face him as he came into the room. "Feeling a little warmer?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you for, uh — ." He wasn't sure what to say next and he couldn't quite bring himself to say 'undressing me', so he changed the subject. "You aren't leaving now, are you?" he asked quietly.

Lois gestured at his front room. "I'd like to stay on your couch, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind." Clark scrubbed at his eyes, swaying slightly on his feet.

Lois took a small step towards him, then another, coming close enough that they were almost touching. She seemed to hesitate for a moment and then put her arms around him as she whispered, "Good night, Clark."

His response was automatic; his arms closed around her and his chin dropped, lowering his face so that it was buried in the fragrant softness of her hair. Her hands stroked delicately along his back, leaving a trail of warmth that seemed to penetrate all the way to the chill lodged deep inside him.

"We should get you into bed, sweetheart," she whispered.

Clark's arms tightened reflexively around her. He didn't want to let her go just yet so he tried to force himself to wakefulness. "Don't, not yet," he mumbled.

The room felt as though it were moving around him and then he realized that she was shuffling them. Her body shifted so that it was no longer pressed close to his and then she was guiding him down, urging him to sit on something soft. It was his bed, Clark realized. He slid over, hoping she'd join him.

There was no hesitation before the comforting heat of her body was next to his. He heard a click as the lamp was turned off. His room was now painted in blue tones from the half-glow of the newly fallen snow outside. The sheets whispered as she pulled them higher; their gentle weight made sleep seem even more irresistibly inviting. Lois' arms went around him, cradling him against her. His head came to rest on her shoulder and he closed his eyes, breathing in the scent of her. Her fingers tickled through his hair, soothing away the last lingering traces of stress.

"I've missed your hair longer like this," she whispered.

"Mmm," he answered. His body felt heavy and almost boneless. Never in his life had he felt this pampered and loved. Was this what it was like, being married? He wanted to ask her, but he couldn't seem to work up the effort that would require. He gave up trying and surrendered to the slow cadence of her breathing and the sweet oblivion of sleep.

Clark woke up slowly. He was loathe to give up the lingering dream he was having. In it he could hear the gentle thrum of Lois' nearby heartbeat. His arms tightened around her, pulling her deeper into his embrace.

"You awake?" Her voice was husky with sleep.

Was he? The circumstances would seem to indicate that he was still dreaming. That he wasn't come to him in a rush and Clark couldn't help grinning at her. "I thought I was dreaming."

She smiled back at him. "It's not a dream."

"It feels like one." He lifted one hand, smoothing it over the silk of her hair to tuck her more snugly under his chin. She made a quiet hum of pleasure and he dipped his head to press a soft kiss into her hair. Clark's lips stayed there, just breathing in the comforting scent of her.

"Is this what it's like, being married?" he asked.

He could feel her grin against his chest. "Pretty much."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." Her toes rubbed past his ankle as she answered.

Suddenly, holding her seemed much less innocent than it had the night before.

"When do we get married?"

Lois sighed. "More than a year from now."

"You can't tell me the day?"

"I'm not sure I should. But it does happen, Clark. No matter how hopeless it might seem at times, we do get there."

"Hopeless? Why hopeless?"

"Okay, let's say improbable. There's a lot that happens between now and then."

"Maybe that's why you're here? To warn me?"

And that was the question, Lois thought. Why was she here? If Wells had wanted her to warn Clark about something, why hadn't he told her that outright? Or was this Tempus' doing? Was

he sitting in front a monitor somewhere, munching popcorn as he gleefully watched her destroy her future?

There was no way to tell — and no way to know if warning Clark could change the future. Did it even matter when their future had already changed? Without Lex around — and Lois had double-checked that he really had been cremated — their future was already different.

"I don't know what to warn you about," she told Clark.

"Without Lex around, it all changes."

"So there's nothing else?" His fingers stroked slowly along her shoulder.

Lois thought about it. She hadn't been able to save Bender, but Gretchen Kelly was still alive. That could certainly change things. Would Gretchen be the one to interrupt their wedding now, looking for vengeance? She would have to escape from prison first, and Gretchen didn't have nearly the network as Lex. So was there something else? She thought back, trying to remember what else had happened in the early spring of 1995.

"Mayson," she whispered in a shocked tone. "Maybe it's Mayson?"

"Mayson Drake?" Clark's fingers stilled. "What happens to Mayson?"

"She dies. She's murdered, actually."

Clark sat up abruptly. "When?"

Lois frowned, trying to remember. "Next week, I think? Maybe the week after that? She was gathering evidence for a case. A scientist who used to work at STAR Labs. Uh, Stables or Gables ..."

"Stanley Gables?" Clark asked. "The one who accidentally killed his co-workers with that virus?"

"That's the one. Mayson was investigating him on other charges when he put a bomb in her car."

Clark glanced at his alarm clock; it was almost seven o'clock. "Do you think it's too early to call her?"

"You're lucky I'm not the jealous type," she teased as he got out of bed. "Or I might get upset that you're about to call your girlfriend."

"Mayson isn't my girlfriend." Clark looked at her like she couldn't possibly be serious.

"Good luck convincing her of that," Lois said with a smile.

"Although, if you think it will help, I'll come along when you talk to her and drape myself all over you."

He tilted his head. "You're jealous."

"Oh, please," she scoffed. "Why would I be jealous?"

"Not even the littlest bit?" he pressed.

Lois hesitated. She wasn't jealous, but she certainly had been at the time. "Okay, back then, now, whatever, yes, I was the teensiest bit jealous of her. But I'm not now."

Clark pulled a pair of jeans from a drawer and started towards the bathroom to get changed. He paused outside the door and turned back to her. "I'd never let Mayson take my cape off," he told her with a smile.

"If you ever do, Clark, I'll put the bomb in her car myself."

1998

They were driving home from work when Clark suddenly stiffened in his seat and urgently asked her to pull over. Lois immediately swerved into a no parking zone. She was still putting the brakes on as Clark opened the door and got out. He dashed to a nearby alley and, seconds later, she saw a blue and red blur as Superman flew past.

Was that something she ever got used to? Lois turned on the radio before pulling back into traffic, listening for a clue as to where he had gone. She was almost home before the breaking news bulletin aired. A train had derailed outside of Metropolis and some of the passenger cars had gone into the West River.

Once she reached home, Lois ran inside and turned on the

television. She sat down on the couch, her heart racing as she watched the aerial footage shot from a helicopter. It was hard to believe that anyone could still be alive in all that twisted wreckage. She watched, awestruck, as one of the train cars rose from the river and floated through the air before landing gently on the river's bank.

That was Clark doing that. Her Clark. Her future husband.

The view switched to an on-scene reporter, breathlessly bringing the audience up to date. There had been over five hundred people on the train. So far there were nineteen confirmed dead and it was feared that the toll would climb much higher. The reporter gravely announced that, while Superman was helping with the rescue efforts, it didn't appear that there was much he could do.

"... By the time Superman arrived here, the people in those train cars ..." The camera swung to show a second car rising from the river. "... were already dead. This was an instance when even Superman could not save them."

Lois stood up, full of righteous indignation. How dare that reporter? How could that man stand there, surrounded by so much pain and loss, and smugly pass judgment on Superman's efficacy? What was he doing to help? Nothing! He was standing there without a hair out of place and calculating the Emmy or Peabody he might win.

The camera panned over to show Superman peeling open the top of a mangled car so that rescuers could reach the people trapped inside.

"You're doing a great job, Clark," Lois whispered to the TV.

After a couple of hours, Lois found that she could no longer bear to watch the news. She had become increasingly agitated by every reporter covering the story. The higher the death toll climbed — and it had reached eighty-four confirmed dead before she turned off the TV — the more heartbroken she felt. The loss of all those people, who had left for work that morning without knowing that they'd never make it home that night, was horrifying to her. She couldn't, didn't even want to, imagine the anxious thoughts of their families and friends as they watched the news and waited for the phone call that would either relieve their fears or devastate them.

She felt guilty that she was sitting at a distance while Clark was selflessly helping out. Time and again the reporters had announced that Superman was going into the river to recover bodies. At least the cameras had tactfully drawn the line at showing footage of that heartbreaking part of Superman's service.

Lois went to the window that Clark favored when coming home as Superman. Despite the chill of the evening, she opened it wide. When he came home, she wanted him to feel welcome. She sat down on the couch, wrapped a blanket around her, and picked up a book. It didn't matter how late he got home, she was resolved that at least one person would acknowledge how much his kindness had cost him.

It was nearly midnight when Clark returned. He shut the window after him and then gestured at the stairs. "I'm going to ..." He didn't finish the sentence.

Lois nodded at him, her expression sympathetic. "Sure."

She remained on the couch, listening as the shower started upstairs. After several minutes, the house fell silent. Lois waited, but Clark never came back downstairs. She locked the front door, turned off downstairs lights, and then climbed the stairs. His bedroom door was open a crack and the light was on, but there wasn't a sound from inside.

"Clark?" she called out softly.

No answer.

Lois bit her lip, debating what to do next. Then she pushed on

the door to open it a few inches. Clark was there, sitting on the end of the bed in a towel, his shoulders slumped as he stared blankly across the room.

"Clark?"

This time he straightened up and half-turned his head to acknowledge her.

"Yes?"

For a second she hesitated, not wanting to disturb him when he was clearly tired and upset. The thought that he needed a friend propelled her into the room. Without a word, she stood in front of him and touched his cheek so he would look up at her.

"What you did tonight," she whispered. "It was amazing."

"One hundred and twenty-seven people," he whispered back.

Her eyes swam with tears, hearing in his voice the weight of all the lifeless bodies he'd brought back to shore.

"That's one hundred and twenty-seven families who will be able to lay their loved one to rest. You've saved them from having to wonder where the body was."

Clark bowed his head and Lois moved closer, wrapping her arms around him in a fierce hug. His arms went immediately around her waist, holding her to the hug. Lois stroked her hands slowly over his back, marveling at the strength that lay just beneath his warm skin. Was she doing this right? Lois wasn't sure. Her cheek dropped to rest on top of his head.

He murmured something into her shoulder, but it was too soft for her to catch it. A wave of affection for Clark, so intense that she had to close her eyes, washed over her. Yes, she had wondered about how Superman handled the pressures and she had even dreamed about being the one he turned to for comfort, but none of those half-baked fantasies had taken into account the very real person beneath the costume. He wasn't the alluring and mysterious god in blue tights, but the flesh and blood man who was her best friend. That he trusted her and looked to her for comfort and advice was both humbling and exciting. That his kiss could scramble her mental processes was only a slight problem.

Time slowed down and she wasn't sure how long she had been holding him before he whispered, "Lois, can I ask you for a favor?"

"Sure, anything."

He sighed and she felt his shoulders tense before he asked, "Can I hold you?"

Lois lifted her head, confused. "You are holding me."

"No, really hold you." Clark gently set her back so he could look her in the eye. "Will you trust me to just hold you and not push you for anything else?"

Trust him? Why wouldn't she trust him? She was the one having faintly impure thoughts, not him. "Of course."

Clark stood up and went into the bathroom, reappearing moments later dressed in the sweats and t-shirt that had so distracted her a few nights earlier. He stood in front of her and reached out, resting his hands lightly on her waist as his eyes searched hers. What was he looking for? She had already told him that she trusted him and that he could hold her. Lois was about to put her arms around him when he moved, lifting her into his arms.

"Oh," she said, surprised and a little dazed that this was how he wanted to hold her. She put her arms around his neck and saw his eyes close. Lois realized what he wanted now. He needed to reset the sensory memory of holding someone in his arms, to replace all those dead bodies with the weight of someone who could respond to him. She tightened her arms around him and kissed his cheek.

"You did good tonight, Clark."

He sat back down on the bed, still cradling her to his chest. "Will you stay with me tonight?"

"Yes." Her answer was immediate, instinctual.

She felt his body relax a little against hers, as if his tension

was draining away. They were floating just a fraction off the bed she realized, moving so that they could both stretch out. He set her down next to him gently. He rolled onto his side, spooning her body to his. Lois knew she should only be feeling compassion, but she couldn't quite suppress the thrill that he was holding her like this.

Clark heard her heartbeat accelerate and asked, "Is this okay?"

"Absolutely," she whispered back.

She had to be stretching the truth, but she was doing it for him. Clark squeezed his eyes shut tightly, grateful that she would let him this close.

"Thank you," he murmured. "Thank you for waiting up for me tonight. Thank you for trusting me."

Her hand covered his, lacing their fingers together. "Clark, do you remember when I was out of my mind on pheromones and came to your apartment to seduce you? You didn't take advantage of me that night and you easily could have. I've trusted you ever since."

She had told him that before, years ago, but it was strangely reassuring to hear it again. His chest ached with how much he loved her. "You're my best friend, Lois."

"You're my best friend, too, Clark." Lois swallowed hard, choking on the words she wasn't sure she dared to say just yet. It seemed silly to keep them from him, especially since it was something he already knew, but she still hesitated before quietly adding, "I love you."

Clark pressed a soft kiss to the back of her head even as his heart lurched joyfully. The feeling was the same as the first time she had whispered those words to him.

"I love you, too," he whispered.

Her eyes closed as something warm and lovely rippled through her veins. It was contentment, she realized. For the first time since she had shown up in her future, she felt as though she was exactly where she belonged. And the reason had nothing to do with Superman and everything to do with Clark.

Lois snuggled back a little closer against her best friend and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 8

1998

Even though it had been less than a minute since she last checked, Lois couldn't help glancing at her watch again. It was still just past four o'clock. The end of the workday — and her dinner date with Clark — were nearly two hours away. She sighed and lifted the camera slung around her neck to take a picture of the maroon car left unattended in a clearly marked 'no parking' zone. The sunshade splayed across the inside of the windshield made it rather obvious that the owner wasn't returning any time soon.

And speaking of any time soon ... Two hours. Two long, endless hours to go until the workday was officially over. Her stomach seemed to squish happily at the thought of spending time alone with Clark. Last night had been a revelation to her; one that went deeper than simply finding out Superman's true identity. She felt as though she was finally seeing him clearly after years of only catching glimpses of the real person beneath both the cape and the glasses.

The thought of losing Clark as her best friend had been the chief reason she had been so hesitant to date him. This taste of her future life had shown her how frightened she had been. For years she had pushed people away so that she wouldn't make the mistake of trusting the wrong man. Now she could see that she had run the risk of not trusting the right one.

Lois was about to raise her wrist to check the time again, when it was grabbed and she was violently pulled into an alley.

"Hey!" she exclaimed, stumbling over her own feet in

surprise. Her free hand rose instinctively to protect the camera as she was pushed toward the side of a building. Stars exploded in her vision as the side of her head met up with the brickwork. She wrenched her wrist free and turned around. Her eyes darted back and forth between the two bulky men who had her trapped in the dead-end alley. One of the men had a jagged white scar bisecting his left eyebrow.

"No pictures allowed," Scar said and a hint of a smile played on his lips. "You had to know we'd be watching."

She had to know that? Who the hell were these two and how did she know them? Clark's protest when she told him she was going to try and fit in now came back to haunt her: //Bad idea. Even with your notes, you won't have a clear picture of what's happening with Michaels. It's probably best if you don't interact too much."/

She was definitely interacting now. Lois straightened her shoulders and, with as much bravado as she could muster, said "It's a free country. And this is public property. My taxes pay for this building, so it's as much mine as anyone else's. I can take all the pictures I want."

The man with the scar glowered at her. "No more games, Lois. Have you forgotten the little meeting we had?"

"Meeting? I don't — ." The words died on her lips as she realized that her future self had no doubt met with these goons. "Refresh my memory. I've had a lot of meetings since then."

"This meeting you would remember. Do you really want me to go over the details again?"

Lois smiled weakly, her heart pounding with fear as she realized that she was not going to be able to fake her way through this. "I think it's the only way to keep you honest."

"Honest?" The man's scar looked even whiter as his face became livid. "You wearin' a wire, girlie?"

"What? No ... "

Scar reached out, his meaty hands taking hold of the front of her shirt, and yanked it open. Lois heard the fabric tear and caught a fleeting glimpse of one of her buttons before it dropped to the ground. Shocked, she slapped the man and was pushed hard into the brick wall behind her for her trouble. Something cold and sharp was suddenly pressing uncomfortably close to the inner corner of her eye. Lois forced herself to stand still, frightened of what might happen if she moved.

"Drop the story." Scar leaned closer to her, his breath fetid with alcohol and cigarettes. "Drop it now or your husband drops dead. Can I be more clear than that?"

"Clark?" she rasped in astonishment. "You're going to hurt Clark?" As threats went, that one seemed particularly ineffective. If she wasn't in such a precarious position, she might have been tempted to dare them to try. What were the odds that they were sitting on a secret stash of kryptonite?

"So we understand each other now?"

Lois gave a faint nod and the man stepped back, clearly pleased by her acquiescence. Her gaze fixed on the object he was holding and she felt a little queasy as she recognized it was an ice pick.

The other man grabbed the camera and had it open before Lois could react. He pulled the film out and she watched with dismay as the exposed film turned a glossy brown.

"You be sure and let us know how those pictures turn out." Scar raised his hand, pointing the ice pick at her in an ominously silent warning, and then both men walked away.

Lois clutched her shirt-front closed and stumbled back to the Jeep. To her horror, her hands were shaking so badly she couldn't get the key in the ignition. She caught sight of herself in the rearview mirror. Somehow seeing the abrasion on her temple just made it sting all the more. She tried again to get the keys in the ignition but this time they fell from her numb fingers to the floor of the car. Lois swore repeatedly under her breath and fought the

urge to cry.

It suddenly seemed like too much effort to pick the keys up, so Lois rested her forehead on the steering wheel and took a few deep breaths. She had been threatened before — so why was it so scary this time? Was it because she had no idea what those men had wanted or why they were watching her? The Dudley Michaels story seemed the most likely reason, but what if it was something else? What if she did something and they made good on their threat to hurt Clark? When they couldn't hurt him surely even mindless thugs like her attackers could put two and two together and come up with Superman?

What should she do? What would the future her do?

Nail 'em, her mind whispered. Those two must not have done much research or they would have learned that intimidation didn't work well with Lois Lane. Well, okay, short term it might work. But in the long run? She was going to see that they paid for whatever it was that they were trying to hide.

There was a polite tap on the window and Lois lifted her head to glance over. She gaped in disbelief at the familiar "S" shield at eye level. Through the glass she saw his expression change from mildly amused to fully concerned as he took in her disheveled appearance and the missing buttons on her blouse. Lois self-consciously pulled the front of her shirt together again.

Superman opened the door and touched her chin, tilting her head up so he could see her face. "Lois? What happened?"

"Would you believe me if I said I had no clue? Two guys accosted me in the alley. You know it's true what they say — there's never a cop around when you need one."

A tic twitched in Clark's jaw before he asked, "Big guys? One as tall as me and the other a few inches shorter? The shorter one has a scar on his forehead?"

She nodded. "That's them. They wanted me to drop some story or they said they were going to kill you." At that she let out a nervous laugh. "I didn't have a clue what they were talking about. Do you?"

"The tall one's name is Sal DeStefano. The one with the scar is Ice Pick Falsone."

"Ice Pick?" she repeated. Her stomach lurched as she realized who she had just met up with. A few months before she had leapt time, there had been rumors around town about a new mob enforcer whose trademark was giving people crude lobotomies with an ice pick.

"They threatened you a few weeks ago; the same day that you showed up here. Those two have a loose association with Dudley Michaels' favorite bookie and they warned you to drop the investigation into his building contracts."

"But I haven't been working on that story."

"Maybe they noticed our interest in the parking violations office and realized you'd found a different angle to pursue Michaels?" His gaze wandered to where her hand was holding her shirt-front closed.

Feeling self-conscious, Lois reached out to shut the car's door. "I should probably go home and change."

"Do you want me to fly you there?"

Clark saw her hesitate and his heart sank. Seeing her this way — her face bruised and her clothes torn while she shook from a mix of fear and righteous anger had awakened every protective instinct he felt for her. While she had trusted him the night before enough to sleep in his arms, there was no guarantee that she wasn't going to reconsider that decision in the cold light of day.

After several seconds, she gave a faint nod. "I would like that." Lois bent and retrieved the keys from the Jeep's floorboard. Then she climbed out and locked the door with shaky hands.

Clark lifted her carefully. More than anything he wanted to hold her close until she stopped shaking, but this was the wrong place and time to do so.

Clark set Lois down gently inside their living room. She didn't step away from him; instead she kept her arms around his neck and laid her cheek to his chest. When his arms encircled her in a hug, she closed her eyes and whispered, "When those two confronted me before, was I scared?"

"Yes," he whispered back.

"What did I do?"

"Well, first you came home and told me about it and we did this." Clark's arms tightened slightly and he pressed a kiss to the crown of her head. "Then you told me about the parking tickets angle."

"I think I'm out of angles now, Clark."

"Then we'll find a new one."

Lois smiled and hugged him tighter at the realization that they really were a 'we' now. Then she stepped back from the hug and smiled up at him. "Thanks."

"Are you hungry?"

"No." She looked up at him, hesitated and then said, "I'm going to go, uh, change shirts. Would it be okay if we did this again," she gestured at the space between them, "afterwards?"

He smiled and her heart flip-flopped in her chest at the thought that someday she was going to marry this man. "Sure."

Lois was snuggled up to Clark on the couch. The weight of his arm across her shoulders was comforting. He was wearing a short-sleeved t-shirt and the warmth of his skin against hers was creating a pleasurable tightness in her belly to replace the tension of her earlier encounter. She remembered how, only a few weeks ago, she had been tongue-tied around him, wondering what she possibly could find to say to him when they weren't at work. The answer was the same as it had always been — they talked about the little and big events of the day, gossiped about their co-workers or shared random memories. She felt relaxed — so relaxed that she dared to ask him one of the questions that had been on her mind.

"Where did we go on our honeymoon?"

A little smile played across his lips. "We were supposed to go to Hawaii."

She blinked — he hadn't really answered the question. "But we didn't? Why not?"

"We never really left the apartment."

"Oh." Lois cleared her throat nervously and blushed at the thought of her and Clark naked together. The memory of the kiss he had given her two weeks ago filtered through her memory and she was suddenly glad she was sitting down so he wouldn't see her legs wobble. "Whose apartment?" she asked, her voice squeaking a little.

"Mine." His hand took hold of hers and squeezed lightly. "You were the one who picked where we were going to live. You chose my apartment because it had the secret compartment."

Lois looked at their joined hands. How did she never notice that Superman and Clark had the same hands?

No, that wasn't exactly true — if she had never come forward in time she would have eventually recognized him by his touch alone. Her fingers stroked lightly over the back of his hand, shaping out the tendons and bones just below the skin. She touched his fingers, admiring the tapered length of them and then smoothed the pad of her finger over his thumbnail. Lois turned his hand over and traced the lines of his palm. She was full of wonder that he was the strongest man in the world and yet when he touched her, it was the lightest and softest brush.

Clark closed his eyes and tried to keep his breathing even. She had no idea what her touch was doing to him, what it was stirring inside him.

Lois snuggled closer against him, resting her cheek against the steady cadence of his heartbeat. She closed her eyes to listen to the sounds around her. There was Clark's soft, even breathing.

The faint hum of the refrigerator in the other room. A metallic clang as the radiator warmed up. Somewhere outside there was the distant wail of a siren.

"Do you need to get that?" she asked softly.

"No. It's a fire at an abandoned warehouse."

Lois opened her eyes and lifted her head to look at him.

"Really? How do you know that?"

He pointed at his ear. "I can hear the emergency bandwidth signal."

"All the time?"

His body quivered in a half-suppressed laugh. "Just when there's an emergency vehicle in the area. I used to go for everything, but once we started dating I started prioritizing."

"Oh." She hardly knew what to say. "Well, thanks. It's not every day that a girl hears she's more important than a warehouse fire."

He laughed and kissed the top of her head. "You also rank higher than cats stuck in trees. In case you were wondering."

The casual affection of his kiss sent a happy shiver through her. Lois let her cheek rest against his shoulder again. Her mouth was only a couple of inches from his neck and she wondered what kissing him there would be like. Before she could really think about the implications, she had pressed her lips briefly to the soft skin just above the banded collar of his t-shirt. His flesh was pliant beneath her lips.

He smelled so good this close; a musky, clean scent that made her long to kiss him there again. This time she went a little higher, stretching her neck slightly to reach him. The inside of her lower lip got the briefest taste of him. Clark didn't move or make a sound and it felt like an invitation. Lois took another, less accidental, taste of him — just to see if he really was as darkly sweet as she thought.

He was.

His head moved, tipping back to leave his throat exposed. She tasted him again, longer and more deliberately this time. Her heart was pounding with the knowledge that he was letting her do this and he wasn't stopping her.

How far would he let things go? Or was that up to her to decide?

Another kiss along his jaw showed her the soft rasp of stubble; a new tactile sensation. He tasted a little different here. She went back for another kiss on his throat, just to check. Yes, it was definitely different.

What would his lips taste like? His chest? The inside of his elbow?

Lips first, she thought, and kissed the corner of his mouth. His hand cupped the back of her head as his face turned so that their mouths met fully.

Like the kiss two weeks ago in the hallway, this one had the power to leave her trembling. His tongue teased hers, drawing her deeper into the kiss. His other arm slipped around her waist, bringing their upper bodies into full contact.

"Oh god," he whispered before kissing her again.

Lois shifted without breaking their kiss, raising herself up and then straddling him, her body alert for the slightest signal from him that she was doing this wrong.

None was forthcoming. Clark settled deeper into the couch and his kisses grew hungrier, more assured. Lois leaned forward, eager for more. The muffled sounds of pleasure from them both filled her senses and she found that her fantasies about Clark and this reality were so commingled that she wasn't quite sure anymore what was real.

His hands drifted across her back, setting off a new ripple of anticipation as she waited for his touch. When he reached her hips, his hands suddenly stilled in their exploration. After a few more breathless kisses it seemed that his entire body had become cautiously tense.

Lois pulled away slightly, feeling the first twinge of embarrassment that she was being too forward. How could you be forward with your own husband? Sure, technically, he wasn't her husband yet. So she hadn't done much with him; he had done *everything* with her. Why would he hesitate?

He brushed her hair back from her face so that his eyes could look into hers. "You're beautiful," he said softly.

She could feel the blush — half from embarrassment and half from excitement. Before she could reply the pressure of his hand increased, urging her lips back to his. Heat bloomed inside her as his tongue slid possessively against hers. A few breathless kisses later he groaned and pulled his mouth from hers.

"Lois, we, oh god," he murmured. "I don't think I can do this."

"Do what?" she asked breathlessly. "We're hardly doing anything."

Their eyes met again and she felt another, more intense, jolt of heat at the desire evident in his gaze. He gently moved her off his lap and back to the couch.

"We waited." His voice was huskier than usual. "We were engaged for almost a year and there were nights when I wasn't sure we'd make it that long. I wanted you so much that it was torture. To be at that point again, but know what I'd be missing when I have to walk away — ." His eyes closed and he let out a harsh sigh. "Even Superman has his limits."

"I — ." Did he think she had been deliberately trying to seduce him? Yes, okay, she was trying to seduce him. But she hadn't started out to do it *deliberately*. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment. "I wasn't trying to ... "

"I know." He leaned forward and kissed her forehead before standing up. "Maybe I had better go and check on that warehouse fire."

He disappeared in a blur of blue and red. Lois stood up and paced back and forth a few times, trying to get her heart and her hormones back under control. It wasn't working. She crossed the room to look at the pictures hanging by the stairs.

That was what she wanted — her future. But she wanted it now. She wanted to be the one he flew home to, the friend who held him, and the wife he made love to — she wanted all of that. Instead she was only getting tantalizing tastes of her future and the man who would share that future with her.

Lois glumly climbed the stairs and went to the guest room. She sat down on the bed and the word 'limbo' popped into her mind. Wasn't that what it was called when you were caught between heaven and hell?

She was definitely stuck in limbo.

1995

It had been nearly a month now and Lois was still there. Everyone thought that she and Clark were dating, even his own parents. Clark had told them that Lois knew his secret, but left out the details of how and why.

The longer she was stuck in the past, the more the boundaries between her friend and her husband seemed to blur together. No matter what year this was, he was Clark — her Clark. He was undeniably the man she loved with every fiber of her being. She was starting to feel reckless when they kissed and that made her afraid that some night, when she was feeling vulnerable and needy, she was going to take things too far.

Tonight, Lois feared, might be that night. They were sitting close together on Clark's couch and she was on her second glass of wine. She could feel the alcohol slowly unwinding her past the point of mere relaxation. The warmth of his leg next to hers had her thoughts moving in an unproductive direction.

Would it change anything if she seduced him? She had changed so much already and it didn't seem to matter. Lex was dead and Mayson was still alive.

And Lois was still here.

She took a sidewise look at Clark and her resolved slipped a little more when she saw longing in his eyes. Lois quickly looked away and took a deep breath. She knew she should move. She should get up and walk out the door but the thought of spending the night in her empty-feeling apartment was exactly the reason she had spent the last few nights sleeping on this very couch. That, she realized belatedly, might have been a bad idea. Surely HG Wells had not sent her back in time so that she could slowly torture both Clark and herself.

"What's wrong?" he asked, slipping one arm around her shoulders.

Lois bit her lip and almost wished he wouldn't touch her. Did he have any idea what he was doing to her? Deep down, she rather suspected that he did. He might be a virgin, but he wasn't exactly innocent.

"I'm just ...thinking," she mumbled.

"About what?" His hand stroked over the back of her neck, sending a pang of need straight through her.

She resolved to resist him and tried to steer the bent of her thoughts in a more constructive direction. "What if there's something I'm supposed to warn you about?" she suggested.

Clark brushed a kiss near her ear and whispered, "Like what?"

He had to stop doing that. She could almost resist the urge to touch him, but she'd never be able to stop him if he kept kissing her like this. Lois moved her head slightly away from his lips and shrugged.

"I don't know. It could be anything." She sighed and tried to think straight. What else was left to change? What was soon supposed to happen? After a several seconds she said, "Don't kiss Diana Stride."

His head lifted in surprise, taking the sensation of his warm breath from her neck. "From Top Copy?"

"That's the one. She's a contract killer and she gives you a kiss laced with kryptonite. And you should keep an eye on Kyle Griffin's father."

"The Prankster?"

"Yes, that guy. Oh, and this is important. If a smarmy DEA agent named Daniel starts putting the moves on me, you have my permission to deck him."

Clark frowned. "What do you mean, putting the moves on you?"

Lois waved her hand to dismiss the jealousy she could hear in his voice. She was on a roll now and she didn't want to get sidetracked. "Watch Nigel St. John and Jace Masik. Then again, the kryptonite they had came from Rollie Vale, so just make sure his cache gets turned over to Dr. Klein at STAR Labs."

"Dr. Klein?"

"Bernie Klein. You can trust him. But don't trust Bill Church or his son. They're behind Intergang. And probably his trophy wife, too."

"Intergang?"

"The group that steps in to fill the void Lex leaves behind." Lois looked at him. Clark's eyes were wide as he tried to take in the overload of information she was giving him. "Most of all, Clark, don't break my heart," she told him quietly.

"What?" He stared at her, not quite sure he had heard her right.

"You're going to break my heart."

He shook his head slowly, refusing to believe it. "No."

"Yes. You break up with me and we're apart for a couple of months."

"Why?" Clark's chest seemed to have tightened on him. It was impossible that he would ever do anything to hurt her, let alone that he would voluntarily choose to end their relationship.

Lois let out a rueful chuckle. "You thought it was for my own

good. You were afraid that people would use me to get to Superman. So you told me that we should just be friends."

Clark blinked a couple of times and then shook his head emphatically. "Lois, I promise I won't do that. How could I, when I know that we end up together?"

She swirled the wine in her glass, staring at it as her mind tried to push away the thought that haunted most of her waking moments. "What if I never go back?"

Clark didn't know what to say. Deep down, he had secretly started to hope that she really was here to stay. It would be too hard to go back to the way things had been. He had grown used to having Lois in on his secret — and he wasn't sure he could go back to having her keeping him at arm's length. The past few nights he had awakened several times simply to listen to her soft breaths in the next room. The night she had actually slept next to him in his bed was going to be forever etched in his memory.

Lois sighed. "I've changed the future, over and over again, Clark, and I'm still here. What if this is it? What if I'm doomed to spend the rest of my life reliving the last three years over and over again?"

She regretted her words almost instantly when Clark's mouth twisted into a frown. "Mind you, not all of it was bad. In fact, there are some things I would relive again in a heart beat." Lois set down the glass of wine and took hold of Clark's hand, squeezing it gently.

"Like what?" he asked.

Lois didn't even have to think about her answer. "Moments like this, actually. When it's just the two of us, hanging out together."

"So this is what it's like, being married?"

"Basically, yeah."

Clark gave her a knowing grin. "But not entirely. There are certain benefits to being married, right?"

Lois feigned ignorance. "Well, sure. There are a few benefits. Joint tax returns, for one."

"And you wouldn't walk away after a couple of kisses." His fingers tightened on hers.

"No, I wouldn't." Lois closed her eyes and wished that she dared to kiss him right now.

"When did you know that you were in love with me?" Clark asked quietly.

Lois opened her eyes and looked over at him. "When you got shot and I thought you were dead." She shook her head. "No, wait. That's not true. I first knew I felt something more than just friends when I was about to marry Lex. When you got shot, I knew for certain that I did."

"That was two months ago."

Lois nodded.

A surge of happiness shot through Clark — it wasn't just the future Lois who loved him. "So when you agreed to date me, you were already in love with me?"

She furrowed her forehead, trying to remember just how she had felt. "I was thrilled, and a little scared, when you asked me out. But, in the end, I was willing to risk taking a chance on you. And then we started dating and you drove me crazy with your constant disappearing act. But I couldn't walk away from you, Clark, even when I really wished I could."

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I really did want to tell you."

She touched his cheek. "I know that. Hindsight really is everything."

That had to be right, Clark thought. Foresight was maddening. It seemed insane to have to wait to marry her. Clark's heart began to race in his chest as he realized why she was here. The answer seemed so simple, so suddenly certain to him. He moved to kneel in front of her and took hold of her hand.

"Lois? Will you marry me?"

Chapter 9

1995

Lois stared at him. Clark's eyes were as hopeful as the first time he had asked her this question, his expression just as nervous.

Before she could answer him, he went spoke again. "You said it yourself, that you might not go back. Would you marry me again?"

She reached out and touched his cheek. "Of course I would marry you. I *am* married to you. But — ..." Lois hesitated, trying to sort through the mix of emotions his proposal had created. If they were married, she wouldn't feel obliged to sleep on his sofa anymore. The whispers and speculation around the newsroom about their relationship would cease — or maybe the rapidity of the wedding would increase them. It wouldn't matter. This time around, at least, it would be a different sort of wedding. There would be no crazed psychotics to interrupt the ceremony. Maybe it was true that the third time really was the charm.

How different would her life be if she had been married to Clark all along? Her mind swam with the possibilities that would offer.

"But?" he prompted, quietly anxious.

"Yes."

For a second or two, he didn't react. And then his heart felt like it would burst with happiness. "Yes? Really?"

"Yes," she confirmed again. "Yes, definitely."

"When?" he asked breathlessly. "You're the one who's done this before. How long do you think we need to plan it?"

Lois sighed. "Personally, I'm all for running down to city hall tomorrow morning and tying the knot. But my mother might disown me if we did it that way. We'll give her two weeks notice."

Clark grinned. "And you think she's not going to kill you for that?"

"Nah. Let her try." Lois kissed him lightly. "I have you to protect me if she gets too feisty, don't I?"

1998

Clark circled the equator twice — at a slow pace — before returning home. When he got there, it was just past three o'clock in the morning. A light was still on downstairs, but the rest of the house was dark. He stood in the living room and listened for a moment before easily finding Lois upstairs. The slow, steady cadence of her breathing indicated that she was most likely asleep.

Coward, he told himself repeatedly as he spun back into his normal clothes and hung the suit up in its secret compartment. Only a coward would have left like he had earlier. And only a coward would do what he was doing now, floating up the stairs so that he didn't make any noise.

When he reached the top of the stairs he could see that the door to the guest room was open. And there, illuminated by a strand of moonlight was Lois, one hand tucked beneath her cheek and the other resting on the pillow next to her. She was so beautiful, so precious to him that his chest tightened. Last night she had slept in his arms. If he hadn't fled earlier, would she be sleeping in them right now?

A soft knocking noise distracted him from his thoughts. Clark went downstairs to investigate. He heard the knock again and realized that someone was at their back door. He turned the light on in the kitchen and looked through the door to see HG Wells there.

Clark should have been glad to see him, but a sense of foreboding was the best he could come up with as he opened the door.

"Good evening, Mr. Kent." Wells took off his hat and clutched it in front of him. "May I come in?"

Clark stepped back and wordlessly gestured for Wells to come inside. Once the smaller man was a few steps past the door, Clark shut it and asked, "Where's Lois?"

Wells blinked and then frowned. "Isn't she here?" He pulled a small electronic device from his vest pocket and peered at it closely. Then he looked up at Clark in mild confusion.

"According to this, she's here."

"I meant my wife," Clark prompted.

"Ah, yes, well." Wells cleared his throat. "That will take some explaining. Could we possibly sit down?"

Explaining? What was there to explain? All the man had to do was say, 'She's outside.' or 'She'll be here in a moment.' That he wouldn't — or couldn't — was frightening.

They both sat down at the table. Clark watched Wells with growing unease as he sensed the man was stalling.

"Lois is all right, isn't she?" Clark asked.

"Oh, yes, quite. You might be interested to know, Mr. Kent, left to her own devices in 1995, your wife has changed events just as I hoped she might. She wasn't directly responsible, of course, but it is now true that Lex Luthor died in 1995. Ms. Lane also saved Mayson Drake from being murdered."

Clark narrowed his eyes. "How is that possible? If Lois has changed the past, why do I still remember the original events?"

"So long as Ms. Lane — and her memories of what would have happened — remain in 1995, she acts as a stopgap against the time ripple those altered events create. Eventually, of course, that ripple can no longer be contained and must go forward."

"So when Lois comes back, the ripple comes along and I'll no longer remember that Mayson died?"

"Ah, well, that's one way of looking at it, yes."

"One way? What's another way?"

"Well, as you must surely realize, even though the Lois who has been with you for the past few weeks is not yet your wife, she is most definitely still Lois Lane, is she not? When Ms. Lane returns to her own time, she will, of course, have to deal with the changes that her future self made. Her future is, most definitely, not the same now. And, by that token, neither is yours."

A trickle of apprehension filtered through Clark. "So the person I am now, that changes?"

"Only if you believe that the person you were then is so completely different from who you are now. Are you not very much the same man?"

Clark frowned. Of course he was still very much the same person. But there were still things that had changed. Until Lois he had never quite felt as though he belonged on Earth. That had all changed as their relationship deepened. "Yes and no."

"Those changes that have been made, what would you say they are due to?" Wells prompted.

Clark didn't even have to think about his answer. "Lois."

"Lois," Wells confirmed. "Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, you can see that having Lois in your life has shaped you for the past few years, correct?"

"For the past few years, yes."

"And Ms. Lane, the one asleep upstairs, is she not very much the same woman as your wife? After all, she *is* the same woman, just a few years younger."

Clark gave a grudging nod. Lois, especially now that she was comfortable with his secret and their marriage, was very much like her future self would be. Was Wells trying to find a way to tell him that his wife was never coming back?

"Hindsight — ." HG Wells looked down at the hat in his hands, turning it slightly as he struggled for words. "It really is nearly perfect."

The silence that followed this remark felt awkward, so Wells bowed his head in deference and tried again to explain. "It seemed so simple. Alter one little detail, speed up the process, just a bit, and you can effect a change for the better. So that's

what I did.”

“You did more than that,” Clark answered, his tone of voice flat. “You changed more than a ‘detail.’” The last word was spoken with something approaching scorn. “You changed everything.”

“It was for the better,” Wells persisted. “Once I realized what one little detail changed, how the wheels were set into a new motion, I saw that countless people could be spared terrible pain. I only meant to change one thing. I hadn’t counted on the domino effect being quite so — far-reaching.”

“So what was the one change?”

Wells cleared his throat nervously. “Yes, well, you see, each time I looked at the larger picture, the problem always started with Lex Luthor.”

“So what changes now that Luthor is dead? And are you sure he’s dead? We’ve thought that before.”

Wells nodded. “He’s most definitely dead, Mr. Kent. And cremated.”

“So what changes?”

“Yes, well, forgive me, Mr. Kent, for I find it necessary to speak about something rather delicate at this point.”

“Which is?”

“There can be no Utopia without your children, that is, the natural children of you and Ms. Lane.”

Clark flushed and looked away. “Then there isn’t going to be a Utopia. We can’t have children.”

“Not in this future, no. But in the past, with Mr. Luthor dead, there is no one to stand in the way of you and Ms. Lane marrying. And, if you are married prior to the New Kryptonians arriving on this planet, well, they will not compel you to join them. In fact, they will abandon this planet and you as lost causes and move on. When your people placed you in that molecular disruptor, Mr. Kent, you were temporarily, uh, disrupted. Yes, the process was reversed, but not everything was entirely restored. Were you never to be disrupted, you and Ms. Lane would have been able to have children.”

Clark stared at Wells in disbelief. “Are you sure?”

“I am quite certain. I’ve spent over a year analyzing why and how Utopia changed and I’ve traced it back to that moment. Even if you were to be condemned again by the Council, given the head start this little swap created, it’s quite possible that you two could already be parents before the New Kryptonians arrive here.”

“Head start?”

“I have calculated what the major stumbling blocks in your path to matrimony were. First, that Lois was not aware of your secret and then, naturally, that she would need time to become accustomed to all facets of the man you truly are. Second, that you yourself had doubts and worries about what would happen to those you care about deeply.”

“So you brought Lois here so that she could learn about Superman?”

“And be comfortable with you. Which, I do believe, she now is. And, quite fortuitously, the you of three years ago has likewise been given a glimpse of who Lois truly is and how wonderfully well the two of you get on together.”

“I always loved Lois — and I always wanted to be with her.”

“True, but you were willing and able to walk away from her when you first started dating. That choice set your relationship back by months and was also a factor in the troubles that followed.”

Clark grimaced, hating that all this history was being brought up. They were so far past that now, it felt awkward to be reminded of it again.

“So I swapped them,” Wells continued. “Like-for-like, in the blink of an eye. On the time continuum, there was no blip. Nothing to alert Tempus that events were going to be altered.

That was key. He couldn’t know what was happening.”

“But neither did anyone else.”

“I’ll admit it was rash, not telling anyone. I monitored events from a distance the whole time, just to be certain that what needed to be accomplished was done before the ripple grew too large to be contained.”

“So what happens now? Lois goes back and — ” Clark waved his hand in frustration. “That’s it? What happens to me? And my Lois?”

“Mr. Kent, she has always been your Lois.” Mr. Wells cleared his throat nervously. “It’s true, we could leave things just as they are now, but eventually — and most likely quite soon — a ripple will be created that could destroy everything.”

“And if Lois goes back?”

“Then this future ceases to exist.”

A chill went through Clark. Ceases to exist? Just like that? But that wasn’t entirely true, was it? It was only this *version* of the future that ceased to exist — not him or Lois.

“Please consider what will be gained,” Wells said gently. “Is that not worth what might be lost? Are you willing to give up this future for the chance of a different future?”

Chapter 10

1998

//“A different future.”//

The words seemed to echo in Clark’s head. A different future. A future with the possibility of children. A future that didn’t include Luthor kidnapping Lois on their wedding day. A future that might bypass many of the unpleasant events that had marred their early happiness.

But what else would change? Hadn’t all those tough times strengthened their relationship? Would an easier future cause them to take their happiness for granted? Or would new problems arise in their stead, problems that were potentially more devastating than the adversity they had triumphed over the first time around?

Was having children worth that risk? Clark certainly thought so when the younger Lois appeared without warning. Hadn’t he believed that Lois was there so that she wouldn’t marry him; so that she could have children with someone else? He had been prepared, in fact, to sacrifice his future with her to give her that chance.

Clark gestured at the kitchen ceiling. “Shouldn’t I wake up Lois so you can explain all of this to her?”

“No, please ... ” Wells nervously toyed with the brim of his hat. “Giving Ms. Lane a glimpse of her future is as much as I dare to interfere. I cannot compel her to marry you.”

“What if she goes back and doesn’t marry me, wouldn’t that destroy Utopia?”

Wells tilted his head in curiosity. “Do you believe she’d make that choice?”

Clark glanced over at the couch, remembering the heated embrace he and Lois had shared there only a few hours earlier. What if, all those years ago, he had proposed to the Lois currently asleep upstairs? A Lois who knew not just his secret, but also understood the balancing act that went with that secret? Would her initial answer still have been ‘no’?

“I — , I don’t know.” Clark took a deep breath and made another attempt to understand what Wells was trying to accomplish. “So Lois goes back and tomorrow morning I wake up to find my wife has returned and we have children?”

Wells’ expression softened. “I’m sorry, Mr. Kent, but that can’t possibly happen. Time is a linear thing and now that the past has been changed this future can no longer exist, except in her memory.”

Clark reeled at the thought that the past had already changed and his present life was irrevocably gone. There was nothing he

could do; nothing that could alter what had already been set in motion. A cold feeling of helpless dread filled him, similar to when he had dreamed over and over again of Tempus ripping Lois away from him. For a moment or two he imagined that he could actually sense the time ripple undulating inevitably closer, like a tidal surge that would wash away everything he knew.

Then Clark's hearing picked up the familiar sound of Lois' heartbeat. Since he had met her the simple rhythm of her heart had been the center of his world — comforting him, exciting him, always reassuring. She was his constant and it wouldn't matter what day or year it was so long as she was there.

"Will Lois remember everything that has happened to her here?" Clark asked quietly.

Wells nodded. "That, Mr. Kent, was the entire point in bringing her here."

"When will it happen?"

Wells gave him a sympathetic smile. "Soon. Very soon."

Lois was jolted from sleep; her eyes flew open and darted around the darkened room as her heart beat frantically. Something was different, but her brain felt too foggy to work out what it could be. She squinted, trying to make out whether that was a person or merely a shadow near the door.

"Clark?" She reached over to turn on the lamp.

"Sorry," he answered softly, his eyes squinting against the sudden brightness. "I didn't mean to wake you."

He didn't move from the doorway. He simply looked at her, his expression unreadable. Lois propped herself up on her elbows and asked, "Is something wrong?"

After a few seconds hesitation, Clark came over and sat on the edge of the bed. "I couldn't sleep," he confessed.

Lois glanced at the bedside clock radio — it was nearly three o'clock in the morning. "Have you slept at all tonight?" she asked.

He made a sound that was half-laugh, half-sigh. "No," he admitted.

"Aren't you tired?"

Clark's head bowed forward and his shoulders slumped. "Yes."

Her heart ached to see him so tired and vulnerable. Had it been a terrible rescue? Lois sat up and put her arms around him. "What can I do for you?" she asked.

"I ... I wanted to be close to you," he answered, leaning into her embrace but making no move to put his arms around her.

Lois stroked his back and felt his body relax slightly. What had happened after he left? What could she do to help him? She wondered at the irony of feeling so protective of the strongest man in the world. Only he wasn't always strong and he actually needed her. A rush of love for him filled her, surprising her with its depth and ferocity. Lois felt ashamed that her actions earlier had caused him to leave so abruptly.

"I'm so sorry, about earlier. I shouldn't have taken things that far and I ..."

She was stopped by his lips on hers. "Shh, no," he murmured against the corner of her mouth. "Don't ever apologize for kissing me. Lois, I love you." He kissed her again, and this time his arms closed tightly around her. The kiss grew deeper, feeling to her more like desperation than passion.

Lois pulled away slightly and took his face between her hands, wanting to look into his eyes. "Clark, what's wrong?"

His expression was stricken, deepening her worry for him. When he answered, his voice was a hoarse whisper. "You're going to go back soon."

Lois froze, hoping she had heard him wrong. "What? How do you know?"

He sighed and tipped his head to indicate the bedroom door. "Wells was here earlier."

"Wh — When is it going to happen?" To Lois her words seemed to be coming from very, very far away.

"He only said it would be 'soon'."

Soon. How much time did she have left with him? What if he flew them away, right now, somewhere that Wells couldn't find them? Was that possible? In the same instant it struck her that he should be happier about this — he'd be getting his wife back.

"So, I guess the future me will be returning then, right?" she asked, trying to sound upbeat and failing.

"No. It doesn't work that way. She, you, changed things back in 1995 and that changed our future."

Lois stared at him, trying to work out what he was telling her. "Changed it how?" she asked. "We don't get married?"

Clark pulled her onto his lap, needing to be close to her for as long as he might have left. He cradled her in his arms and kissed her forehead as he whispered, "Our future is whatever we make it. Wells said he wanted you to have a glimpse of what our future can be."

"A glimpse?" Lois repeated in astonishment. "A glimpse is a few seconds — maybe even a minute or two — but not weeks." She wrapped her arms around his neck and clung to him. It was so unfair that she was going back just as she was getting used to the idea of being married to him. "I don't want to lose this. I don't want to lose you."

"You won't. Lois, you can't lose me. I'm yours. I have been since practically the moment that we met."

"Really?"

"Yes, really." He kissed her cheek. "Three years ago I was absolutely, totally, completely in love with you and I wanted to have a life with you. That will never change, no matter what year it is."

Lois took his face between her hands so she could get a good look at him, wanting to memorize how it felt to have Clark look at her with love in his eyes. Was it really possible that she could have this kind of closeness with him for the asking?

"And will you believe me? If I corner you and tell you that I know your secret and I want to spend the rest of my life with you because I was sort of married to you in the future, you're going to believe that?"

Clark laughed. The sadness and tension that had been building slipped away as he imagined what his reaction three years earlier would have been to a Lois determined to have him. "I'll believe anything you tell me."

"Liar." Lois shook her head ruefully and then gave him a watery smile. "Okay, I'll do it. But if you reject me, I swear I'll make the rest of your life miserable."

The jangle of music startled Lois into wakefulness. She was about to raise her head when Clark shifted beneath her cheek to reach over and silence the clock radio. Lois let out a contented sigh and snuggled closer against him. She could hear rain tapping on the window which made the thought of staying in the warm bed with Clark even more appealing.

"I'm still here," she whispered in disbelieving wonder.

"Clark, I'm still here."

His hand stroked her shoulder. "I was certain you'd disappear in the night."

"Me, too." She wiggled her toes against his ankle, scarcely believing her good luck.

"You know what that means, don't you?" he said. "You're going to have to marry me."

It felt like her brain had stuttered. Had she heard him right? She poked his ribs affectionately. "Marry you?" she said in mock confusion. "Why would I want to do that?"

He kissed the top of her head. "Because I'm crazy about you."

"That's it? Crazy about me? Last night you said you loved

me," she teased.

"And it worked, didn't it? It got you into bed with me."

"And that's all it got you," she answered tartly.

"I have an idea," he whispered and shifted so they were nose-to-nose. "Let's not go to work today."

"You don't think Perry would see through both of us calling in sick on the same day?" she answered with a giggle. Then his mouth covered hers and any residual thought of going to work that day left her mind.

Several slow, deep kisses later his attentions shifted, moving lower as he left an intricate line of kisses down her neck. Lois opened her eyes to find that the room seemed ...different. The ceiling had timber beams. And the window wasn't the same. It was much larger and she knew in an instant that it had a not-so-picturesque view of a brick wall and a neon sign. This wasn't the guest room of the Hyperion Avenue brownstone. It was Clark's apartment.

"Oh my god," she wheezed as she rolled to the edge of the bed. "Oh my god!"

"What's wrong?" Clark sat up, confused by her abrupt mood change.

"Oh my god," she said again as she clambered off the side of the bed and looked in flustered disbelief at her partner. "I'm ...here."

Clark's eyebrows rose as he saw that Lois was wearing only an oversized t-shirt that did little to conceal the long, bare lines of her legs. That wasn't what she had been wearing last night, was it? His forehead furrowed in confusion as he realized that Lois had an abrasion on her right temple and a bruise on her cheek. Then he read the t-shirt's bright blue logo: 'Daily Planet 5K Fun Run 1997'

1997?

It only took a split second for him to comprehend who had really been in his arms. Clark scrambled off the opposite side of the bed and snatched up his glasses. Then he stared at her like he was seeing a ghost. For several long and agonizing seconds neither of them spoke, they simply watched each other warily over an expanse of tangled sheets.

"What day is it?" Lois asked, needing to break the silence.

"Tuesday," he said, then hastened to add, "March 7. Uh, 1995."

"So was I here? The me from three years from now?" Lois asked, feeling breathless. God, he was such a very, very good kisser. The fact that he was no longer, theoretically, her husband made the kisses they had just shared seem somehow illicit.

Clark gestured at her nightshirt. "You were there?"

Lois looked down and realized how short her nightshirt really was. Her cheeks colored slightly as she nodded. "Yeah, I was."

She looked beautiful, especially with her hair tousled from sleep and their kisses. The t-shirt was leaving miles of bare leg on view. Clark tore his gaze away, looking instead at the injuries on her face.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Nothing! Nothing happened!"

"To your cheek?" Clark motioned to indicate his own.

"Oh ...that." Lois touched her fingers lightly to the bruise given her to her by Sal and Ice Pick. "I had a run-in with a couple of guys." She shrugged. "It looks worse than it feels."

Lois couldn't stop staring at Clark. A twinge of sadness shot through her as she took in the fact that he had put on his glasses. He felt like he had to hide from her — she was right back where she had started. Well, okay, not quite where she had started. The first time she had appeared exactly where her older self had been. It would appear that her older self had come back in time and ...what? Gone straight to Clark's arms?

The words that he had spoken earlier came back to her and she narrowed her eyes suspiciously at him. "Wait. What did you

mean that I have to marry you?"

She could have sworn he turned pale as his mouth opened and closed without a single word coming out.

"And you kissed me!" Lois was getting warmed to her subject now. "I mean *really* kissed me. You wanted to play hooky and do that all day."

His coloring changed again, this time to a deep red. "I'm sorry. I didn't know ..."

Didn't know? Lois gaped at him, surprised at the dark streak of jealousy she felt. He had thought he was kissing *her*, after all. A future her, to be sure, but not some other woman. And she had most definitely been willing to do far more than kiss his future self the night before. Embarrassed, she looked away.

"You gave me a list of people to keep an eye on." Clark gestured at a notepad that was lying on the nightstand. "I wrote it all down."

She was dying to ask him more questions about what he and the future her had been up to, but a change of subject seemed easier. "I did, too. I took lots of notes, but they're all, well, in three years I guess we'll find them. Or not. Apparently the me that was here changed things."

Understatement, Lois thought. How much had she changed? How long had she and Clark been carrying on together? Had he made the first move — or had she? Was she the kind of woman to go after him that brazenly? The answer to that question was so obvious that Lois found herself swaying a little on her feet as another wave of irritated envy for her future self washed over her. It wasn't quite fair that she'd been able to marry Clark and then come back in time and seduce him at a glance. Lois Lane Kent had it all, but unfortunately that person was still a few years away.

Lois realized his attention had returned to her legs and she blushed as she tugged ineffectually on the hem of her nightshirt. Yes, she had worn it to get his attention, but she hadn't realized *when* he'd see her in it.

Clark couldn't believe that she was still there. The Lois of a month ago would have been long gone by now, leaving nothing but invective in her wake. Scratch that, the Lois of a month ago would have fled the moment she woke up in his bed, let alone his arms. Instead she had kissed him — at least until she realized that she was in 1995. But she still hadn't left and she wasn't even rushing to change into something less revealing. He felt a faint flicker of hope that maybe, just maybe, the closeness they had shared the past few weeks was still possible.

"What was it like?" he asked, hoping the question wouldn't spook her into leaving.

"What was what like?"

"The future." He hesitated and then softly added, "Us."

"We were ...us. Just, uh, you know, closer."

Clark glanced at the bed and then back at her. Lois could feel the blush all the way to her toes.

"Not that close! It wasn't like *that*. I never got that close to you in the future. I just, uh, okay, so I kissed you. A few times. But that's all! We didn't, uh, you know ..." She waved a hand at the bed and hoped he would reassure her that he hadn't got that close either.

He didn't say anything and that seemed worse. Lois glanced at the bed, imagining her future self and Clark locked in a passionate embrace there. And then it dawned on her that, if she hadn't opened her eyes, it could have been her and Clark rolling across those sheets at this very moment. Suddenly it was all much too real for Lois. Somehow it had been easier in the future, when their marriage was a foregone conclusion and the intimacy between them had boundaries that stopped short of the bedroom door. It had been so much easier to love Clark when there was no risk of being rejected or abandoned. Now, with their future unknown and wide open, she felt paralyzed.

"So ..." she said, hoping he would say something — anything — to break the awkwardness. When he didn't, she found herself speaking compulsively. "How much did she, um, I tell you about us? I'm guessing that you know that we, uh ..." Her mouth seemed to have turned to cotton.

"Get married?" he prompted.

"Yeah," she whispered.

Their eyes met. Lois searched his face for a hint that Clark was as nervous as she was. His expressive eyes were watching her with the same tenderness as the night before. He had looked at her that way for the past three weeks. Actually, he had been looking at her with love in his eyes for the last two years; she had just been too hesitant and stubborn to acknowledge it.

She realized with a jolt that Clark had been given as tantalizing a glimpse of their future as she had. He had spent the past few weeks with someone who accepted him completely; someone who wouldn't freak out at the first hint of commitment even as she publically lusted after his alter ego. No wonder he was so subdued — look at what he thought he had lost.

Only he hadn't lost her — she was right there. Couldn't he see that? Didn't he realize that it was her and not the future Lois that he had been kissing only minutes earlier? In a rush of certainty she knew that she had not lost the future Clark; she had found him. He wasn't gone, hadn't disappeared in some future mist of time, he was there — only a few feet away from her. She simply had to find the courage to trust in him, to trust that he was the same man.

Lois took a shaky step toward him, then another. It seemed that all her senses were suddenly vibrantly alive. She could feel the coolness of the floor and the brush of the hem of her nightshirt on her skin as she came around the end of the bed to stand in front of him.

"Clark, I ...I know," she whispered hoarsely. Her hand shook as she touched the center of his chest. Her fingers drew a shaky 'S'. "I know about you."

Clark blinked and took a deep breath. "Oh."

Lois could feel the rapid beat of his heart beneath her hand. She struggled to find the words to reassure him. "I know you. I know what it costs you to help others, know how you place total strangers' happiness above your own. I know that there is nothing I wouldn't do to help you."

He swallowed, but didn't say anything. Lois gave him a shy smile as she continued, "We had all these pictures, everywhere in the house, pictures of us, and we looked so happy and comfortable together. I want those pictures. I want a life with you. I thought I was going to lose that when I came back. I thought I was going to miss you, but you're right here. I love you, Clark, so much that it scares me just as much as it thrills me."

On impulse, Lois pulled him into a fierce hug, willing him to believe her. In an instant his arms closed tightly around her. Any fears that he would reject or abandon her melted away as she heard him whisper her name. Lois grinned into his shirt and inhaled the familiar smell of him. She wondered if her heart could burst from sheer happiness.

Clark cupped her face in his hands as he pulled back just enough to be able to see her face. He realized he was shaking almost as much as she was. "It's really you, isn't it?" he asked in wonder.

"Yes." Her smile widened. "Either you're not dreaming or we both are."

"I'm not dreaming." Clark leaned down and gave her a small, soft kiss. They lingered for a few seconds with their lips lightly touching.

"Definitely real," Lois murmured and went on tip-toe, increasing the intensity and pressure of their kiss.

Clark made a soft moan and his hand moved to the back her head as he deepened the kiss. Lois wound her arms around his

neck and pressed closer against him. Their kiss was just like the one that had left her weak-kneed in their future hallway. It was the same as the kiss that had her made her dizzy with desire on the sofa the night before. His kisses and his feelings for her were the same now as they would be in three years. Wasting another year before making it official was far too long to wait.

"Marry me," she whispered breathlessly. "Let's make our own future. Today. Right now. Marry me."

Clark laughed in delight. "What about your mom?"

Lois gave him a quizzical look. "What about her?"

"Won't she be upset if we elope?"

"I've seen the future." Lois kissed him again. "She'll get over it."

THE END

10/10

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