

Time to Love 2: First Days in Metropolis

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Rated PG-13

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Summary: After returning from her weekend in Smallville, Lois is finding it difficult to get Clark out of her mind. Then Perry's new reporter turns out to be none other than the man from Kansas, and Lois and Clark are thrown into their first story together. This is the second story in the Time to Love series that began with "Weekend in Smallville."

With many thanks to my wonderful BR, IolantheAlias, and to SQD for being the GE. Many of these characters are not mine. Some of the plot points have been adapted from the work of the writers of Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman.

Part 1

What if there *had* been a space capsule?

A baby alien?

A strand of hair?

What if the Sewells' story of an alien had contained some truth? *Any* truth?

Lois walked out of the elevator and to her desk at the Daily Planet. Franklin Hodge had said, "Do you have any evidence?" not, "There is no evidence."

Not for the first time, Lois Lane felt a sense of disquiet as she remembered her weekend in Smallville.

She accepted Clark Kent wasn't an alien, but it didn't necessarily follow there wasn't an alien. And it didn't make the rest of the Sewells' story a fabrication.

Was it possible?

Anything was possible, she thought grimly as she remembered her own actions. She was there as a reporter, yet she'd closed her mind to a whole side of the story as the saga surrounding the Kent family had completely distracted her.

Maybe it was the place. Smallville had a certain charm; she had to admit that. It drew you in and re-aligned your priorities.

Maybe it was the people. Martha and Jonathan Kent were uncomplicated, loving people whose personal contentment reached out and infused everyone in their vicinity.

Or maybe it was him — Clark Kent. Clark Kent, who lived his integrity as naturally as he breathed.

No, Lois told herself firmly, it wasn't him. Not really. No more than a little, anyway.

Yet, in the three weeks since she'd returned, she'd noticed tiny differences in herself. She was more human, less driven, more compassionate, less intense, more relaxed, less single-minded.

She was losing her edge!

All she needed was a good night's sleep, she told herself.

Dream-free sleep.

"Lois!" Jimmy screamed. "The Chief wants you in his office."

Perry was grinning. He probably had a dud story he wanted her to do — a story he knew she wouldn't want to do. "Lois," he said. "I've decided the Planet needs another reporter."

Uh oh.

"I want you to show him the ropes."

"No way, Perry. I don't babysit copyboys."

"You do this time."

"Perry, I'm working on the children's hospital story, I have no time for —"

Perry still had that ridiculous grin on his face. In fact, he was laughing at her. Lois heard a small sound behind her and swung around.

Clark Kent — freshly shaven and with his dark hair shining — stood there, looking sensational in a black suit, white shirt, and a diamond-patterned brown tie — the *exact* brown of the eyes she was steadfastly avoiding. Lois recovered enough breath to ask, "What are you doing here, farmboy?"

"Lois, this is Clark Kent," Perry said, clearly relishing the charade. "He sent me his résumé a while back, and I think he is exactly what we need. Clark, this is Lois Lane, the best darn investigative reporter this paper's ever had."

Clark shook her hand, grinning like a schoolboy. "It's a pleasure, Ms Lane."

Perry put one hand on each of their shoulders. "Now the formalities are done with, I want you kids to work on the hospital story together."

"Together?" Lois choked.

"Together," Perry confirmed.

"Why?"

"It will help Clark find his way around, and it worked fine on the alien blackmail story."

"That was Smallville."

"And this is Metropolis." Perry's tone was final.

Lois flounced out of Perry's office leaving Clark Kent to follow if he wanted to. He always did in her dreams.

"Where are we going?" Clark asked as Lois drove the Jeep way too fast through heavy traffic.

"To see Janet Thorp. She's a seamstress. She owns a tiny place on the East Side."

"What does she have to do with the hospital?"

"Lex Luthor wants to build a new children's hospital. He's bought most of the land in the area — only Janet Thorp is holding out."

"Who's Lex Luthor?"

"The third richest man in the world."

"Why won't Janet Thorp sell?"

"That's what we have to find out. Maybe a little publicity might push her in the right direction."

This is good, Clark thought, remembering how cautiously he'd had to solicit information in Smallville. "So you think the hospital is a good thing?"

She glanced disdainfully in his direction. "Don't you have sick children in Smallville?"

Janet Thorp's shop was little more than a counter with a tiny, poorly lit room behind it. They heard the sound of a sewing machine from the depths of gloom.

"Ms Thorp!" Lois called.

An untidily dressed woman came from the shadows. "Yes?"

"Lois Lane, Daily Planet. Oh, and Clark Kent."

Clark smiled at the woman and noticed with surprise she was very young — maybe not yet twenty.

"We understand you received an offer to buy your ... " Lois gestured to the room. " ... your property."

Janet nodded.

"Did you think the offer was fair?"

"I don't know."

"Did you understand the offer?"

"Yes."

"Why haven't you accepted?"

Janet looked down to where she was nervously picking at her fingernails. "I don't want to sell," she muttered.

“What did you say?” Lois demanded.

Clark rested fingertip pressure on Lois’s elbow. “Why don’t you want to sell?” he asked gently.

Janet lifted her eyes. She looked like a lost child, yet there was an undeniable dignity in her stance. “This was my mother’s business. I don’t want to leave.”

Lois brushed Clark’s hand off her arm. “Where is your mother?” she asked.

“She died last year.”

“Oh. Sorry for your loss.”

“We’re very sorry for your loss,” Clark said. “This must be difficult for you.”

“I believe the offer was very generous,” Lois said, her tone marginally softer. “If you sold, you could start again. Maybe somewhere a little bigger, a little brighter?”

“She died here,” Janet whispered.

“Do you know what Lex Luthor is going to do with this land?” Lois asked.

Clark saw Janet’s jaw muscles twitch as she shook her head.

“He’s going to build a hospital for our children,” Lois said.

“Oh.”

“So think about it, OK?” Lois suggested with an encouraging smile. “Metropolis needs this hospital, and you need somewhere better for your business.”

Lois and Clark turned back to the Jeep.

“Won’t ever sell to *him*.”

Clark heard Janet’s low words and turned back, but she had disappeared into her room. “Lois,” he said. “I think we should ask Janet more questions.”

“Why? We said enough to get her thinking.”

“I thought we were trying to find out why she doesn’t want to sell.”

“We did. Her mother.”

“I think there is more to her story,” Clark persisted.

“Of course there is,” Lois said breezily. “She’s young, she’s grieving. She’s trying to work in a small, dark room, and all the odds are set squarely against her achieving much at all.”

“So, maybe we could help her?”

“We did,” Lois said. “We basically told her to take Luthor’s offer. She’s fortunate she happens to be right where he wants to build the hospital.”

“She looked so alone.”

As they reached the Jeep, Lois stopped and faced him.

“Clark,” she said. She rested her hand on the sleeve of his jacket in a gesture that was sharply reminiscent of the Lois of his memories. “As we drive back to the Planet, look around. For every Janet Thorp there are a thousand other people in circumstances just as bad. We’re reporters, not social workers.”

“We should go back. She had more to say.”

Lois sighed and lifted her hand from his arm. “Just get in the Jeep, Clark.”

They were stuck in traffic, which further soured Lois’s mood.

Clark realised that his smartest move would be to clamp shut his mouth. But if he allowed that precedent to become established in her mind, it could take him months to claw back. “Lois?”

“What?”

“I’m not naive enough to think anything that happened in Smallville qualifies me to be your co-worker, or even your friend, but I’m confused by your animosity.”

“I work alone. I didn’t ask for this.”

“Neither did I!” Clark exclaimed. “It was Perry’s idea.”

“There are thousands of newspapers in this country. Why the Planet?”

“I sent Perry my résumé months ago. Before I had met you.”

“I can’t think of anyone less suited to working at the Planet.”

Clark swallowed down the sting of her words. “Why?”

“If it’s not obvious now, it will be very soon.”

“I’m not expecting this to be easy, Lois.”

“Good.” She accelerated suddenly and squeezed the Jeep into a gap in traffic that was barely big enough for a pushbike. “Your arrival at the Planet? Does it have anything to do with me?”

Clark shifted uneasily. “A little,” he admitted.

“Please don’t tell me you’re in love with me.”

“OK.” He gazed out of his window. “I’d been reading your work, and it inspired me. I thought coming here would help me become a better reporter. I didn’t assume we’d work together.”

“It didn’t occur to you to mention this in one of your e-mails?”

“Lois, I got a call from Perry late yesterday. I flew to Metropolis this morning. I interviewed just before lunch. I looked for you when I came in, but I couldn’t see you. Perry called later and asked me to come back to the Planet. He told me that I had the job, shook my hand, and called you in. There wasn’t a lot of time for national announcements.”

“So not once — in Smallville maybe, or since — you thought to say, ‘I’ve applied for a position at the Planet?’”

Clark sighed. “Lois, there was *no* position. I just sent my résumé. When I didn’t hear back, I figured nothing would come of it. And I didn’t want you to think I expected you to ... you know ... put in a word for me.”

“So you’re here now ... starting today?”

“Perry asked when I could start, I said, ‘Now.’”

“What about the Smallville Press?”

“My editor knew I was looking at other options.”

The traffic moved a little, and she pressed the accelerator, narrowly missing a cab. “Don’t imagine anything you learned in Smallville will be of much use here,” she informed him frostily.

“I’m sure you’ll point out where I slip up,” Clark said wearily. He was sure Lois had a retort, but he was saved from it by the traffic suddenly clearing.

They had been back at the Planet for less than five minutes when Perry called them into his office. “You have an interview with Sarah Crawford,” he said.

“Really?” Lois seemed pleased at this. “When?”

“Now.”

She was out of Perry’s office, past her desk, and at the elevator before Clark had the chance to speak.

“Who’s Sarah Crawford?” he asked when he caught up.

“The Crawfords are the oldest, most established family in Metropolis,” Lois said as they stepped into the elevator together. “They are very wealthy, very generous, and very exclusive. Two weeks ago, David Crawford was killed in a plane crash. The investigation is ongoing, but there is no evidence of foul play.”

“Is Sarah his widow? Or his daughter?”

“His widow.”

“Why are we interviewing her?”

“The children’s hospital was supposed to be a joint venture between Lex Luthor and David Crawford. Both are incredibly private — they give press conferences to discuss their projects but no personal interviews.”

They walked out of the Planet building and got into her Jeep.

“It was always thought Lex Luthor and David Crawford were good friends — or at least allies in the business world,” Lois continued as she started the motor. “They were similar ages and similar wealth; the only difference being Crawford had generations behind him — really old money — whereas Luthor is the archetypal self-made man.”

Lois pulled into the traffic, seemingly oblivious to both the line of cars behind her and the irritated honks of their drivers.

“Before Crawford died, there were rumours of a major disagreement,” she said. “Major enough to threaten the hospital project.”

“Does Luthor have an alibi for Crawford’s death?” Clark asked.

“Yes. Although it is ludicrous to think Luthor could be involved in anything like that.”

“What do we ask Mrs Crawford?”

“We don’t ask her anything,” Lois said. “She hasn’t been seen in public since her husband’s funeral. I’ll handle it.”

Clark bit back his reply. Somewhere, hidden under that neat-fitting suit she was wearing, was the Lois he’d known in Smallville. How long would it take for her to surface? Moments? Months? Longer? Did she even exist in Metropolis?

She was still beautiful though and being with her again was like ... waking up after a long hibernation.

Lois parked in front of a sweeping mansion. “Remember,” she said as they waited for someone to answer their knock. “I talk, you listen.”

Clark nodded compliantly, and Lois felt a pang of guilt. It was for his benefit, she told herself. If she smoothed his way at the beginning, the fall would be that much harder when it finally came. The sooner he realised this was unworkable, the better for everyone.

Sarah Crawford was in her mid-thirties, blonde, elegant, and very suited to the classy, understated wealth of her home. She sat them on a luxurious leather couch and settled into the adjacent armchair.

“Mrs Crawford, we’re very sorry for your loss,” Lois began.

“Thank you.”

“We know your husband was working on the proposed children’s hospital with Lex Luthor.”

“Yes.”

“Will the Crawford family continue to be involved?”

“That would have been David’s wishes.”

Lois took her pen and notepad from her bag. “Before your husband’s death, there were rumours that he and Lex Luthor hadn’t agreed on various important aspects of the project.”

Mrs Crawford folded her hands in her lap. “I heard those rumours and that is the reason I requested to talk to you,” she said. “David and Mr Luthor did have minor differences, but those differences never threatened the project.”

“What differences?”

“David thought a fifteen storey building would be best. He felt it would mean less disruption to the area and greater ease of moving patients and equipment within the hospital. Mr Luthor favoured a large, single-storey building. He believes sick children need to see gardens and flowers, not be stuck in the sky looking at other city buildings.”

Lois finished jotting notes from Mrs Crawford’s reply. “What had they decided?”

“They intended to discuss it further once David returned.”

Lois looked up from her notepad. “Mr Luthor is in the process of buying the surrounding land,” she said, wondering if that information would be news to David Crawford’s widow.

“Yes.”

“The building will be Mr Luthor’s preferred model?”

“It seems that way.”

“How do you feel about that?” Clark asked. Lois leant the point of her elbow into his thigh to remind him of his place.

Mrs Crawford’s attention swung to Clark. “It’s not important now.”

“You will be heading the Crawford family now?” Lois asked.

“Yes,” Mrs Crawford said. “I have two small children, and I must safeguard their future.”

“Do you have someone to help you?” Clark asked. Lois dug her elbow a little deeper.

“David was an only child.”

“Your children’s future is in good hands,” Clark said, and

Lois could so easily imagine the depths of understanding that would be apparent in his brown eyes.

She saw the flicker of appreciation cross the widow’s face. Yep, Sarah Crawford had noticed. “Will you be personally involved with the hospital project?” Lois asked.

“No,” Mrs Crawford said. “Our contribution will be limited to a private financial capacity. I would appreciate it if you could stress that my family’s withdrawal from public involvement in the project is entirely due to the passing of my husband.”

Sarah Crawford stood, and Lois realised the interview had finished. “Thank you for your time, Mrs Crawford,” she said.

The maid saw them to the door.

“Lois?” Clark said when they were outside.

“Yeah?”

“Why didn’t you ask her how she feels about Luthor? How she feels about her husband’s wishes being ignored now he has passed away?”

Lois turned on him. “Let me guess,” she blazed. “You think there’s more to *her* story too?”

“Well, yes.”

Lois took a deep breath and tried to sound reasonable. “Clark, if we keep chasing extraneous tangents, we will never actually write the story.”

“I’m going back.”

“She won’t see you.”

“Maybe she will,” he countered.

“You think your masculine charm will work a treat on a pretty grieving widow?”

Clark frowned. “No,” he said. “I think there is more to the story.”

It was clear he was too stubborn to listen to reason. “See you at the Planet,” Lois said. “And try to get back before the day is over. Stories don’t write themselves.”

Moments later, Clark was sitting on the leather couch across from Sarah Crawford. It was probably his imagination, but she seemed to have relaxed a little.

“Was it Mr Luthor’s decision that your input be limited?” he asked. “Or yours?”

“We have only communicated through our lawyers,” Mrs Crawford answered. “Mr Luthor notified us that he intended to continue with the project. He said we were welcome as silent financial sponsors.”

“Silent?”

She nodded.

“How do you feel about that?”

Mrs Crawford gave a wan smile. “I suppose it is for the best,” she said. “My children need me more than ever now.”

“But you wish things could be different?”

She lifted her shoulders in a discreetly ambiguous gesture.

“Luthor does things his way.” Her eyes sought the family portrait on the wall above the fireplace. “When I had David, I ran the home and the children and he ran the businesses.”

“Now you have to do it all,” Clark said compassionately.

“Yes.” She fought against tears for an instant. “Sometimes, it overwhelms me.”

“What concerns you most?”

She pushed a blonde curl from her forehead. “I know it sounds silly, but the Crawford Family is an institution in Metropolis. I wasn’t born into this family, but now it has become my responsibility. I feel as if past generations of Crawfords are watching me, ready to pounce if I make a mistake.

“Only five years ago, I was Sarah Dixon, independent career woman, with no responsibilities beyond my job and having fun. My most onerous decisions were whether to wear the blue suit or the cream one during the week and which party to attend on the weekend.”

“There’ll still be time to be that person,” Clark said softly.
 “Not in public,” she said. “Not now I’m the ...” She met his eyes with just a glimmer of self-mockery. “The Matriarch of the House of Crawford?”

“Maybe you could get a disguise and sneak out occasionally to have fun with your friends.”

That suggestion elicited a smile. It was feeble, but a smile nevertheless. “Be two people?” she said thoughtfully. “The sombre, responsible Mrs Crawford most of the time, but as occasion warrants ... be Sarah, without anyone knowing.”

“If I ever recognise you, I won’t blow your cover,” Clark promised with a smile.

“Thank you for coming back,” she said as she stood. She didn’t call the maid, but walked with him through the large and imposing entrance hall.

“Mrs Crawford?” Clark said as she opened the door. “Did your husband trust Mr Luthor?”

She didn’t answer for a stretched moment. “Off the record?” she said. “No.”

Her expression conveyed her unwillingness to elaborate. “Thank you for your time,” Clark said as he stepped out into the Metropolis sunshine.

“You’re welcome, Mr Kent.”

Lois was still smarting when she arrived back at the Planet offices. Clark Kent had been working in Metropolis for less than half a day and had challenged her judgement not once, but twice. In Smallville, he had been content to let her call the shots. Now, just because he was actually employed by the Daily Planet, he assumed he had something valuable to offer.

She took consolation in the knowledge that she was free from him for a couple of hours. It would take him at least that long to find his way back to the Daily Planet.

She emerged from the elevator and stopped.

Clark Kent was clearing the desk across from hers. How the - Forcing her feet forward, Lois approached him. “I guess you struck out with Sarah Crawford?” she said with a satisfaction she didn’t bother trying to hide.

Clark turned. “No,” he said. “I went in, and we talked.”

They’d talked? Clark and Sarah Crawford had talked? “What did she say?”

“That it was Luthor’s call for her to have a financial-only involvement in the hospital.”

“Anything else?”

Clark continued packing the things into a box. “Not really.”

“Not really?” Lois cried. “What do you mean ‘not really?’”

“I mean she said other things which might not be relevant to the story.”

“I can be the judge of that.”

He stopped mid-task and grinned wickedly. “Only if I tell you what she said.”

Lois wanted to throw something at him. Very hard. Instead, she went for the lowest blow she could think of. “Did you ask her for a date?”

“Do you think she’d accept?” Clark asked.

Lois stormed to her desk and deliberately turned her chair away from him. Fifteen minutes later, when she snuck a glance over her shoulder, his desk was deserted. Tidy, but deserted.

Clark saw the thieves run from the bank and leap into a car, which raced away before the doors had been properly closed. He melted their back tyres with his heat vision, and the car skidded towards the sidewalk. Hoping people were either watching the car or ducking away in fright, he circled around a couple of buildings and placed himself in the path of the car. As soon as he’d stopped it, he threw himself backwards and landed on his back.

A woman rushed over to him and bent down. “Are you hurt?” she asked anxiously.

Clark stood, remembering to seem a little shaky. “I ... I don’t think so,” he said. “What happened?”

“They skidded, and I thought they were going to hit you for sure.”

“I’m fine,” he said as he brushed some dust from his jacket. “Thank you.”

She walked away, apparently satisfied.

Clark saw two figures emerge from the car and disappear into an alley. He looked through the walls of the bank as they climbed into a van. The police arrived, and Clark sprinted over to them. “They’re in the white van in that alley,” he said, pointing.

The police officer spoke into his radio, and seconds later, two police cars converged on the van.

Clark slipped into the background, watching until the officers made the arrest. Then he slipped behind a building and flew to Paris.

The words were not flowing easily for Lois. Something had thwarted them. Something tall and dark. With glasses.

What had Sarah Crawford told Clark? Probably nothing, she reasoned. But it rankled anyway.

He’d been gone for half an hour. She would remind him this was not Smallville and he couldn’t disappear whenever the mood took him.

He walked in a few minutes later and came to her desk, carrying two cups and two paper bags. “Hungry?” he asked nonchalantly.

She chose to ignore the enticing coffee aroma. “I have a story to write.”

“You still have to eat.”

“I’ve eaten.”

He squatted next to her desk. “I’m sorry about the date crack,” he said.

Lois turned to him. His eyes shimmered with unmistakable sincerity. “Me, too,” she said.

He handed her one of the cups. “No fat, decaf, no sugar,” he recited. “And a chocolate croissant — not from Smallville — but I found somewhere nearly as good.”

She eagerly took the coffee and tasted it. He always gave her great coffee, and this was no exception. She peeked into the bag, and her exasperation thawed a few more degrees. “Clark?”

“Uhm?”

“What did Sarah Crawford tell you?”

“Something she said was ‘off the record’.”

“So?”

“So it’s off the record.”

“Did you tell her you wouldn’t tell me?”

“No, but I would have to be sure you wouldn’t put it in the story.”

He took his coffee to his desk and turned on the computer that had been left there for him during his absence. Lois sipped her coffee, pondering his answer. Maybe he wasn’t quite the eager-to-please pushover she had feared. Not that she minded him being a pushover with her, but she was concerned about what other people would do to this green, trusting, gullible guy from Smallville.

He wouldn’t last more than a month. She’d bet a lifetime’s supply of chocolate croissants on it.

Clark had his desk sorted and his computer connected. He’d met Jimmy and Ralph and Cat. His life had progressed very quickly today.

Lois turned off her computer and came over to his desk. “Where are you staying?” she asked. “Can I give you a lift?”

“No, thanks.”

“So you’re staying nearby?”

“Not really.”

“Then I’ll give you a lift.”

He was going to have to confess. “Actually I haven’t had time to get a place, so I’m flying home tonight.”

“To Smallville?”

“Yeah.”

“Clark, you can’t do that. It’s too far.”

“It’s OK.”

Lois hesitated, and then she said, “Would you like to stay at my apartment?”

He grinned. “I have your bed? You have the porch? Is that how it will work?”

“No, Clark,” she said with a smile. “I have my bed; you have the couch.”

“Thanks, Lois,” he said, genuinely touched by her offer. “But I need to go home. When I left this morning, I didn’t know this was anything more than an interview.”

“All right,” she conceded. “But tomorrow, we find a place for you to stay. You can’t commute from Kansas.”

“OK,” Clark said, thrilled because tomorrow would include being with Lois. “Thanks.”

Martha had made roast beef with baked potatoes for supper. Clark sat at his parents’ table, and for the first time ever, felt like a guest. He might not have actually spent one night in Metropolis, but the city already felt like his home.

“How was your day?” his father asked.

“Good.”

“How’s Lois?”

“Good.”

“Did you look for an apartment?”

“Good.”

Martha put her hand on his. “What’s on your mind, Clark?”

Her touch pulled him from his memories. “There was a bank robbery today. I stopped the getaway car and watched them until the police came.”

“Did anyone see you?” Jonathan asked.

“No. At least, I don’t think so.”

“You need to be careful, Clark.”

“I know, Dad.” Clark turned to his mom. “I’ve been wondering about a secret identity. If I had a disguise, I could help people and no one would know it was me.”

“What sort of secret identity?” his mom asked.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But I was talking to a woman today. Her husband belonged to a notable Metropolis family, and he died recently, so now she heads it. She said she wished she could go out and just be a normal person occasionally, and we joked about secret identities.”

“Are you thinking of a mask?”

A mask would be uncomfortable. “No,” Clark said. “If I take off my glasses and slick down my hair and wear an identifiable outfit, it may work.”

“What if people recognise you, Clark?” his dad asked.

Clark heard the concern in his father’s voice. “I’d have to risk that,” he said. “I can’t stand by, watching people getting hurt and knowing I could help them. I can’t continually think up ways to help without being noticed. My only option is to be someone else. Someone who can work in the open. Someone who doesn’t have to worry about people seeing his powers. Someone who isn’t Clark Kent.”

“Do you want me to make an outfit?” his mom asked.

Clark smiled. “That would be wonderful, Mom,” he said. “Do you think you could have it ready by tomorrow night?”

“I can try.”

Clark gave his mother a hug and went out onto the porch. The sky was so clear; the silence so deep. Would he miss this?

He remembered standing here when Lois had asked him for the film. He remembered giving it to her, terrified that his actions would indirectly lead to her death. He remembered her kissing his cheek. He touched his fingers to that spot again.

She thought he wasn’t suited to working at the Planet. That had struck home — had gone deep that she had such a low opinion of him when he thought she was . . . sublime. She might be right, Clark realised. Maybe he was nothing more — could never be anything more — than a small town journalist. But he intended to give it his best shot.

He might miss his home, his parents, Smallville. But if he stayed here, it would be like living without his heart.

Because his heart was in Metropolis.

Part 2

Lois pulled her knees into her chest and hunkered into the corner of her sofa. Her tub of chocolate ice cream sat on the coffee table, untouched. She glanced at it, noting that dots of moisture had run down the container and were gathering at the base.

She looked away.

She didn’t want to eat. Not even ice cream.

She wanted to think.

Clark Kent.

There was the problem. There, in two words. Clark Kent.

Clark Jerome Kent.

Kansas farmboy.

Except he wasn’t a boy.

No boy could have so tied her thoughts in knots and rendered her heart incapable of maintaining a regular rhythm.

She’d learnt, through painful experience, how Lois Lane did matters of the heart.

First — she picked the guy. Well, her heart did. A very good-looking guy with a body to match — confident, assured, high profile, powerful, driven, successful.

Then she’d fall hopelessly and pathetically in love with him, and her life would be reduced to constant fear-infested analysis of his feeling for her.

Eventually, he’d have the opportunity to further his success, or build his profile, or assert his power, or test his looks and body on another woman, and she, Lois, would be yesterday’s headline.

Soon after that, she would be alone — a torn and tearful ice-cream-eating globule of humiliation.

She had promised herself — never again.

Never.

But you didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to know that Clark Kent was different.

Oh, he had the looks. And the body. She’d known that the second he’d barged into his bedroom in Smallville.

But his considerable physical assets were balanced by a naivety that made her wonder if he’d ever looked in a mirror.

His confidence was balanced by a vulnerability he didn’t feel compelled to cover with phony superiority.

His assurance was based more on what he believed in than what he believed he could do.

He cared about success. He’d admitted he wanted to be a better reporter. But it didn’t drive him — not to the exclusion of things he cared about more.

Family. Honesty. Principles.

Lois vented her inner frustration with a loud raspy groan. She could control her unruly preoccupation with Clark. She could. When he was safely tucked away in Smallville.

But now he was here.

In Metropolis.

Working at the Planet.

She’d see him every day — even if Perry didn’t team them together on stories.

Lois shot up from the sofa and hurled the ice cream into the

freezer. She went to her bedroom and took a folded piece of paper from under her pillow.

She straightened it, caressing its creases. It was the copy Nunk — the National Inquisitor's eminent nuisance — had given her. It was the last thing she'd looked at every night since Smallville.

It was a fake — she knew that now. Nunk — when confronted with the full fury of a Lois Lane who had needlessly bartered her evidence — had admitted he'd been doing what passed as research for him and had stumbled upon the juicy detail that there was no record of Clark's birth. From there he'd simply obtained a photo of Clark, butchered it a little, and run with his alien fabrication.

Had she been in Metropolis, Lois would have had the resources to disprove his story without ever needing to part with the photos of Franklin Hodge.

But she hadn't been in Metropolis. She'd been in Smallville, cut off from her networks, and out of her comfort zone, and barely able to see beyond a family in trouble and a friend being victimised — a friend who, if she were honest, had already affected her beyond friendship.

She clutched the paper to her chest. It was one thing to look at this every night — remembering him and their time together — when she had the comforting buffer of many hundreds of miles.

It was quite another to be pawing over the photo of a colleague.

After a final lingering look, she resolutely ripped it into little pieces and deposited them into the trash.

Clark looked for an apartment first thing the next morning. He'd already checked the arrival time of the first flight from Wichita and knew he couldn't get to the Planet before ten o'clock.

He found an apartment — in a not-so-great part of town, with so-so decor and a lot of someone else's junk. He signed the contract and cleared and cleaned the place before he walked into the Planet, whistling softly and carrying coffee and croissants.

Lois was at her desk. *Her* desk, just across from *his* desk. At the Daily Planet. Life was good, so very good.

Lois looked up as Clark walked in with coffee and, she guessed, croissants. "How was your flight?"

"Fine, thanks."

"You look pretty good," she said and immediately felt her face heat a little. "For someone who had to fly in this morning," she added quickly.

He put her coffee and croissant on her desk.

"Clark," she said sternly. "If we're going to work together, there are going to have to be rules."

"Rules?" he said dubiously.

She hid her smile at his expression. "No more than one croissant a week."

He grinned. "Do you like doughnuts?"

"Clark," she said with feigned severity. "I'll be two hundred pounds if you keep going like this."

His grin said he didn't share her concerns. "What are we doing today?" he asked.

"We're finding you somewhere to live," she replied. "We're going back to Janet Thorp to ask if she's made a decision about selling. If she has, we'll call LexCorp and try to find out if there's a decision regarding a starting date for the hospital."

"I've found an apartment."

"You have? That was quick."

"Just needed a couple of phone calls."

"Is it —" Lois's question was interrupted by a commotion near the television. She hurried over to it. Clark followed, half a

step behind.

"A fire broke out in the tiny shop and spread quickly," the television reporter said. "A body was found and has been identified as that of the owner, Janet Thorp. It is believed the cause of the fire was faulty electrical wiring."

Lois heard Clark's low, despairing groan behind her. She turned and watched him shuffle to his desk and lean against it, head down, staring at the floor, hands buried in his pants pockets. She went to him and put her hand on his forearm. "You couldn't have done anything, Clark."

"I should have gone back," he ground out.

"It wouldn't have changed anything."

"She wanted to talk," he said. "I should have listened to her."

"It was my call," she said.

"You didn't hear what she said about Luthor. I did."

Lois had known that Clark's soft heart was going to be mauled by the harsh realities of life in Metropolis. "Clark," she said. "It was faulty electric wiring."

"Do you believe that?"

"I have no reason not to believe it," Lois said. "But I should get over there and ask some questions."

"I'll come, too."

"No, Clark," she said. "You stay here. Get settled in."

"OK," he agreed — far more easily than she had expected.

As Lois waited for the elevator, she snuck a look at Clark. He was sitting at his desk, his face bleak. This was his first test and — even though she had tried to cushion the blow with her suggestion that he didn't accompany her to the scene — it was going to be tough.

The elevator doors slid open, and Lois stepped forward.

Clark in Metropolis was not workable. He had to learn that. She had to remember that. Then hopefully, neither of them would get too badly hurt when the inevitable end came.

Clark dragged himself out of his daze and logged on to his computer. He needed to find out why Janet had been so adamant that she would not sell to Luthor. What was the link between them?

An hour later, he had some answers.

He left the Planet building and flew towards what was left of Janet Thorp's tiny shop. On the way, he saw Lois's Jeep heading back to the Planet. He landed in a discreet alley and approached the police officers.

"Clark Kent, Daily Planet," he said, showing his press badge. He felt a glow of satisfaction as he said it. *Clark Kent, Daily Planet*. Sounded good.

"Henderson," one of the detectives said.

"Pleased to meet you," Clark said.

"You're new around here?"

"Yeah."

"Where are you from?"

"Smallville, Kansas. What happened?"

"Electrical fault," Henderson said. "Looks like she was asleep. She didn't have a chance."

"Are you sure it's Janet Thorp?"

"Yes. The neighbour identified the body."

"Any suspicious circumstances?"

Henderson pulled his sigh, showing admirable patience. "Nothing."

"Mind if I look around?"

"Go ahead. We've finished."

Clark walked through the side door and into the murky room. Smoke hung in the air like a murky cloak. He lowered his glasses and scanned the room. The wires in the wall *were* badly frayed and worn.

He noticed something bright in the dark recesses of the room. He moved forward and picked it out of the wet ash. It was a

cufflink. Once outside, he examined it closely. It was heavy for its size and by Clark's estimation, seemed to be from the higher end of the market. What was it doing in Janet Thorp's sewing room?

The quality of the cufflink seemed incompatible with the girl he'd met yesterday. There had been no mention of a father. It was possible she had worked on a shirt, but it would be odd for a cufflink to remain with a shirt when it was being mended.

Clark scanned the room again, employing the various depths of his vision. Then, confident the matching cufflink was not there, he slipped the one he had into his pocket and left.

Again, he beat Lois back to the Planet. He was going to have to be careful. She would get suspicious if he continually got around her town quicker than she could.

"Anything?" he asked as she arrived at her desk.

"Nothing suspicious. The fire started in the wall behind the sewing machine, caused by the worn condition of the wiring. Most of those buildings are really old, and the wiring isn't up to standard. It will be a good thing when they're all demolished for the hospital."

"You think that's all there is to the story?"

"Yes. Don't you?"

She was asking his opinion. That was progress. "I don't know," Clark said. "It just seems a bit ... *convenient* ... that the one person standing in the way of Luthor's hospital is now dead." He didn't vocalise the thought that possibly the other person had been David Crawford and he also was dead.

Lois considered for a moment, chewing on her pencil. "My source says Lex Luthor offered her twice what the property was worth and he was willing to double it again. Janet would have sold. It was just a matter of time."

"Maybe Luthor doesn't appreciate being stalled."

"Clark!" Lois exclaimed. "First you insinuated that Luthor might have killed David Crawford, and now you think he's killed Janet Thorp."

"Are you sure he didn't?"

"Clark, remember what you said to me when you were offering to help with my story about Franklin Hodge? About how you knew the people and you knew the town?"

"Yes." Every shared moment of that weekend was etched in his memory.

"I can say the same to you now," Lois said. "I know Metropolis. Lex Luthor is a private man — an enigma. But he has done so much for this city and people respect him." She gave him a conciliatory smile. "So it might be wise if you were a little careful with what you say."

"OK," he said. "Thanks."

He decided this was not the time to tell her that Janet Thorp's mother had once worked for Lex Luthor.

Early that afternoon, Lex Luthor called a press conference.

"What are you expecting?" Clark asked as Lois drove them to the LexCorp building.

"Something concrete about the hospital would be good." On the edges of her vision, Lois saw that he was looking out of his window, and she took the opportunity to subtly observe him.

"Are you all right?"

"Yep," he said — too cheerfully.

"No, I mean ... about Janet Thorp. It was a terrible thing to happen on your second day."

"It was a terrible thing to happen."

She removed her right hand from the steering wheel and gave his arm a quick squeeze. "Are you flying back to Smallville tonight?"

"The apartment is vacant, so I can stay there."

"Do you have everything you need? Bed? Bedding? Food?"

She was doing nothing more than looking out for a colleague.

She would do the same for anyone.

"Mostly."

"I'll come around with a pizza, so you won't have to bother with supper." OK, that went beyond checking on a colleague, but it was done now ... and Clark was smiling, although his eyes were still sombre.

"Thanks, Lois."

She smiled in return. "Hey, I owe you Kents a few meals," she said in a desperate attempt to haul her invitation back into the sphere of friendly welcome to a newcomer.

The press conference was crowded. Lois thrust her way through the assembled media and positioned herself centrally. Clark followed, a little self-conscious at pushing through. However, he would have been more discomfited if he'd held back and Lois had summoned him forward.

A dark-haired man came through the side door and onto the raised platform.

Lex Luthor surveyed the crowd, stopping now and then to nod to individuals. He smiled. "It is my great pleasure to officially announce that construction of the Luthor Hospital for Children will begin within two weeks," he said smoothly.

There was an audible gasp, and Clark noted Luthor's gratification at the response.

Several people — including Lois — raised their hands and began to speak. Luthor gestured for silence.

"I wish to offer my sincere condolences to the family of Janet Thorp who tragically died this morning," he said. "Late yesterday, Ms Thorp signed the contract selling her property to LexCorp."

His air of satisfaction, understated though it was, chafed as Clark remembered the woebegone figure of Janet Thorp outside her meagre shop.

"The agreed price will, of course, be paid to her estate," Luthor continued. "I would also like to add that in a gesture of goodwill, her funeral costs will be met by LexCorp."

Clark heard the murmur of appreciation. Luthor smiled and then nodded to the newsman to Clark's left.

"Commencement of the building in two weeks seems ambitious considering you only purchased the last of the land yesterday," he said.

"We have a fourteen day settlement on Janet Thorp's property," Luthor replied.

"Do you have visuals?"

Luthor picked up a remote control from the lectern. Behind him, an image of a large sprawling building appeared on the wall.

"The hospital will be a single-storey building stretching from Waverley Road in the east to Glenferrie Street in the west. Lawns and gardens — places of tranquillity and restoration — will surround the wings of the building. A helipad will be built on the south-east corner of the property, enabling children to be brought from great distances to receive care and treatment at the Luthor Hospital for Children."

Lois raised her hand insistently. "Mr Luthor?" she called out loudly.

"Ms Lane?"

"When did you decide to reject the multi-storey model?"

Clark saw the glimmer of annoyance cross Luthor's face. He covered it with an ingratiating smile, aimed squarely at Lois. "Initially, there were two sets of plans," he conceded. "After much consideration, this plan was found to be inherently superior."

Luthor waved away any remaining questions and departed through the side door.

Lois turned to Clark, her face lit with excitement. "This is such good news. When David Crawford died, there were fears this hospital would never progress beyond the planning stage."

Clark forced a smile. “I guess Janet Thorp changed her mind about selling.”

“I guess so.”

A tall, refined-looking gentleman approached them. “Ms Lane?” he said with an English accent. “I’m Nigel St John. Mr Luthor has asked to see you.”

Lois beamed with surprise. “Of course,” she said eagerly. “Come this way, Ms Lane.”

Clark followed them to the door. St John held it open for Lois, but blocked Clark’s way. “Ms Lane only,” he said in a superior tone.

“I’ll see you back at the Planet,” Clark called to Lois. She nodded.

“Be careful,” he added.

The door shut in his face. Clark lowered his glasses and watched as St John and Lois walked down the corridor. Lex Luthor opened a door and greeted her with a kiss on her hand.

Clark pushed back his glasses, absolutely convinced that David Crawford had been right — Lex Luthor was not to be trusted.

Clark found a telephone booth and looked through the directory for the address of the nearest building company. Ten minutes later, he was in an office.

“What are the fundamental considerations in deciding between a low sprawling building and a multi-storey building?” Clark asked.

“Availability of land, price of land, condition of the soil, building regulations.”

“The low building would be more expensive,” Clark surmised. “Because of the need for extra land.”

“Not necessarily,” the builder replied. “A lot of the work for a multi-storey building happens underground. The higher the building, the deeper and more extensive the foundations need to be.”

“Thank you for your help,” Clark said as he stood.

“Let me know if you need any more information,” she said with a smile.

Back at the Planet, Clark clicked through to the LexCorp website and copied the impressions of the children’s hospital that had been already up-loaded. He selected the image of the floor plan.

Why was Luthor so adamant the hospital had to be single-storey? Maybe he liked acquiring other people’s property, and it gave him some sort of thrill to get his own way. Or maybe there was something underground that Luthor did not want disturbed.

Clark found a site of archived maps and selected those from the East Side that included details of below ground.

He chose a map, scaled it to match the hospital floor plan image, and superimposed them, placing the hospital between Waverley Road and Glenferrie Street.

The proposed helipad sat adjacent to an underground tunnel. The tunnel went fifty yards and then it terminated, just before the planned hospital building.

Clark searched the maps for tunnel details at other levels. He found a possible match, scaled it, and linked it with the other two.

The tunnel continued, at a deeper level, under the proposed hospital.

He continued adding more maps until he had tracked the main tunnel to deep under the LexCorp Building. There were also four offshoot tunnels, terminating in different parts of Metropolis.

Clark stared at the final result.

Convoluting though it was, one thing was remarkably clear — if these maps were still accurate, the hospital would give Lex Luthor a direct, hidden link between the helipad, his building, and beyond to the streets of Metropolis.

He could bring anything in.

He could send anything out.

He could distribute anything throughout the city.

All under the cover of mercy flights to a children’s hospital.

Clark saved his composite map, printed out a copy, and put it in his pocket.

Lois bought the pizza and found the address Clark had given her. She knocked on his door, and he opened it.

He was wearing jeans and a tee shirt that stretched tantalisingly across the breadth of his biceps.

“Hi, Clark,” she said, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Hi, Lois.”

She entered and looked down from the top of a small flight of stairs. “Nice place.”

“Thanks.”

They sat at opposite ends of Clark’s couch and opened the pizza and sodas. “What did Luthor want?” he asked.

“He wondered if I was interested in doing a feature article on the hospital.”

“And are you?”

“Are you serious?” she exclaimed. “It’s an unbelievable opportunity.”

“What’s he like? Luthor?”

“Charming,” Lois said. “And a lot more human than I ever realised. He’s very passionate about this project.”

“Did he mention Janet Thorp?” Clark asked darkly.

“Yes. Her funeral is tomorrow afternoon.”

Clark stared ahead. Lois studied him while feigning total fascination with her pizza. The depths of his remorse, so clearly depicted on his face, didn’t surprise her at all. What did surprise her was the surge of tenderness she felt towards him. How intensely she wanted to take him into her arms and hold him until he felt better. “When are you going to tell me what Sarah Crawford said off the record?” she asked lightly.

He broke away from his trance. “When you agree not to print it.” He sounded serious, but she could see the amusement glistering in his eyes.

“OK, I won’t print it,” she said, wondering if he would believe her.

“And you also have to agree to answer a question.”

Lois tried to contain that smile that wanted to break free. “You drive a hard bargain, Kent.”

“Deal?” he persisted.

“Deal.”

“She told me her husband didn’t trust Lex Luthor.”

“Perhaps the rumours were true about their conflict over the hospital plans.”

“It seemed more like it was a general thing,” Clark said. “That he didn’t trust Luthor, period, and not just regarding the hospital.”

“Then why would he have chosen to work with Luthor?”

“Metropolis can’t have too many people with that amount of money.”

Lois thought about that as she picked a piece of onion from her pizza. “Did Sarah Crawford say why her husband didn’t trust Luthor?”

“No.”

“It’s probably not relevant now David Crawford is dead,” she concluded. She wiped her fingers with the napkin. “What’s your question?”

Clark slowly placed his soda on the coffee table. “Why do you think I’m so completely unsuited to working at the Daily Planet?”

“Maybe not completely unsuited,” she hedged.

“But?” he persisted, contemplating her with that steadfast gaze that somehow transmitted itself from his eyes to her heart

and made it skip a little faster.

Lois closed the empty pizza box. “I just don’t think you and Metropolis are a good mix.”

“You don’t think I’m good enough to make it here?”

“I don’t think you’re ... hardened enough.” He glanced away, and Lois knew her assessment had wounded him. She hurried to explain. “Today, for instance, Janet Thorp dies. That cut you up.”

“Of course it did,” he said vehemently. “Yesterday, we talked to her. Today, she’s dead.”

Lois wriggled a little closer to him on the couch, close enough that she could touch him, although she didn’t. “But Clark,” she said, “what happened to Janet, that *happens*. Regularly. If it weren’t for her selling to Luthor, her death probably wouldn’t have made the news.”

“So in Metropolis, no one cares?”

“It’s not that no one cares, it’s that there is so much suffering, so much tragedy, so many wasted lives, that it’s overwhelming. No one is strong enough, or powerful enough, to change it.”

“So we just accept that’s how it is and turn away?”

Lois shrugged. “I don’t have any answers,” she admitted. “Except that we all have to survive the best way we know how.” Even as she vocalised the words, she knew they wouldn’t be enough for Clark Kent.

He stared at her, chin in his hand, eyes solemn. “I want to stay. I want to see if I can be successful here.”

She sighed. “I know you do.”

“Why don’t you want me at the Planet?”

“I *don’t* don’t want you at the Planet,” Lois stated quickly.

“You didn’t seem very pleased about it yesterday.”

“Yesterday ... I was thrown. You were the last thing I was expecting when I walked into Perry’s office.”

“And now?” Clark asked, his eyes steady as he gazed at her.

“And now, I don’t know.”

“I thought we worked together all right in Smallville,” he said with a small smile.

“It was great while it lasted,” she agreed. “But we both knew it was temporary. I was coming home; you had your family, your job, your life in Smallville.”

“Now, we’re both here in Metropolis.”

But for how long, she wanted to ask. “How are your parents?” Lois said, wanting to change the path of their conversation. “Do they miss you?”

“Some. But I can visit.”

Lois had a sudden insight of how good it would be to come home to that house, those parents. She sighed.

“How would you feel about coming with me sometime?”

Clark asked. “I know Mom and Dad would love to see you.”

Sometimes a taste of what you didn’t have just made it harder to pretend you didn’t care. “I’m pretty busy.” Realising she sounded rude and dismissive Lois hurried on. “But maybe one day. Your parents are wonderful.”

“They think you’re wonderful, too.”

“They only knew me for three days.”

Clark grinned. “Yes, but in those three days, you managed to make quite an impression.”

On his parents? On him?

“What about your parents?” Clark asked. “I don’t think you’ve ever mentioned them.”

The happy memories of her time in Smallville were swept away by his question. “That’s ‘cause there’s nothing to mention.” His face creased. “Are they deceased?”

“No,” she replied. “They’re divorced.”

“Oh. But you still see them?”

“When there’s no avoiding it.”

Clark’s confounded expression reinforced the enormity of the chasm between his experience of family and hers. Suddenly tired — and very sure that she didn’t want to explain her attitude to her

parents to Clark — Lois stood and gathered up her bag. “I’d better go,” she said.

He stood, too. “Thanks for bringing the pizza.”

He followed her up the stairs and opened the door for her.

“See you tomorrow,” she said as she walked into the darkness.

“I’ll walk you home,” Clark said.

“I’m in the Jeep.”

“Then I’ll walk you to your car.”

Lois had already learned that arguing matters of chivalry with Clark Kent was a futile exercise, so she headed for the street without comment.

She opened the door of the Jeep, turned, and found herself cornered by his body.

For one suspended moment, they froze, and her brain reeled with the prospect that he was going to kiss her.

“Good night, Lois,” he said. The catch in his voice triggered an echoing catch in her heart.

“Good night, Clark,” she said, sounding stiffly formal because she didn’t want him to guess the wayward track of her thoughts. Then she slipped into the Jeep and drove away.

But there would be no escape. Tomorrow, they would be together again.

And Lois wasn’t sure if that certainty was the best of news or the worst.

As soon as Lois’s Jeep was out of sight, Clark melted into a dark alley, levitated above the buildings and flew home to Smallville. He had been tempted to kiss Lois good night. So tempted, it had been nearly impossible to tear his eyes from her slightly parted lips.

“How was the pizza with Lois?” his mother greeted with a knowing smile.

“Good,” he said, trying to keep his tone from betraying him.

“How did you go with the outfit?”

“Come and see.” He followed his mom into his bedroom, and she took something from his closet. She swung around with a flourish. “Ta dah!”

Clark gulped with horror. It was ... excessive. Excessive in colour — bold blue with flagrant red and splashes of yellow. Excessive in form — shiny, body-hugging spandex which would give him next to no modesty. Excessive in style — from the flowing red cape to the large ‘S’ smack bang in the middle of his chest.

“What do you think?” Mom asked.

“What does the ‘S’ stand for?”

“Sex appeal?” she suggested with a girlish giggle.

“Mom!”

“Why don’t you try it on?”

Clark examined it doubtfully. There were red briefs dangling from the coat hanger hook. He lifted them off, hoping he was managing to keep most of his misgivings from being broadcast on his face. “I guess these go on the inside?” he said.

“No,” she said. “The outside.”

He took a deep breath. The secret identity idea was clearly *not* going to work.

His mother pushed the suit into his hands. “Call me when you have it on,” she said.

It took him five minutes to stretch the spandex around his lower body. At this rate, whoever needed rescuing would be dead before he’d even changed into his secret-identity outfit.

Clark wriggled into the harness attached to the cape and eased the top half of the suit over his shoulders. A pair of red boots stood next to his bed, and he slipped them on. He stood up and tentatively approached the mirror.

He looked like a five-year-old on steroids!

“Clark! Can I come in?”

“Just a minute, Mom.” He needed an excuse, something, anything ... but his brain refused to co-operate. “Come in,” he said lamely.

Her face lit up when she saw him. “Clark!” she said excitedly. “You look spectacular.”

Spectacular wasn’t quite the word he had in mind.

“Take off your glasses,” she instructed.

He did. He slicked down his hair and looked into the mirror again.

“Shoulders back,” Mom said. “Chest out.”

They both peered into the mirror.

“Fold your arms.” Mom patted his chest, just above the ‘S’. “Perfect,” she declared to the image decked out in a parade of primary colours.

“You really think so?” Clark said dubiously.

“Yes,” she insisted. “You just need to get quicker at changing from one to the other. With a bit of practice, you’ll be all set.”

“Thanks, Mom,” he said as he hugged her.

“That’s my boy,” she said. “Come and show Dad.”

Clark just couldn’t bring himself to squash her enthusiasm, so he dutifully followed her out of his room.

Jonathan’s reaction was as wholehearted as his mother’s had been, but Clark returned to his bedroom still unsure as whether his father had been merely conforming to his wife’s instructions.

Clark put his Clark clothes over the Suit, then hugged his parents, and flew to the East Side of Metropolis.

He hovered in the darkness, looking through the ground and tracking the main tunnel and its off-shoots. They were exactly as he’d seen represented on the maps. The main tunnel opened into a warehouse.

Even without the hospital, Luthor had an secret underground pathway into his building.

Did he use it?

Somehow, Clark was sure he did. What he needed to find out was how. And why.

And what Luthor’s real intentions were regarding the children’s hospital.

Lois was in bed, but sleep refused to come.

Clark’s a colleague, she told herself. Off limits.

She was sure he’d thought about kissing her tonight. And judging by the focus of his eyes, his intention hadn’t been a friendship kiss on the cheek.

Her heart rolled at the thought of him ... and her ...

He’s a *colleague*.

And worse ... a temporary one. Lois had no doubt that eventually the acid of Metropolis would burn through his soft Kansas hide and mercilessly shred his gallant heart. Then he would leave.

And she would be more alone than she had been before she went to Smallville.

Part 3

When Clark arrived at the Planet the next morning, Lois’s desk was vacant. Disappointed, he put her coffee on his desk and logged on to his computer.

Jimmy came up, holding photos. “CK,” he said. “Perry wants to see you.”

“What do you have there?” Clark asked, gesturing to the photos.

Jimmy showed him. “They’re for Lois’s story on Lex Luthor.”

Clark examined the photos of the confident man dressed in elegant — and no doubt exclusive — attire. Remembering the cufflink he’d found in the ruins of Janet Thorp’s shop, he scrutinised the sleeve of Luthor’s jacket where a small strip of white shirtsleeve and half a cufflink were visible. Clark lowered his glasses and magnified the area — and wasn’t surprised to

discover that Luthor’s cufflink was almost certainly a match to the one he had in his pocket.

“Did you take these this morning?” he asked Jimmy.

“No such luck. A guy like me doesn’t get to take photos of a guy like Lex Luthor. He sent these.” Jimmy took back the photos. “Better get to the Chief,” he reminded Clark.

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Clark said, turning towards Perry’s office.

“How are you doing, Clark?” the editor asked, having bid his newest recruit to enter.

“It’s early days,” Clark said. “But good, I think. I’ve been familiarising myself with the computer system and finding out where things are — both in the office and in the city.”

“Good.”

Clark studied Perry’s face. “Are you concerned I’m not up for this job?”

Perry laughed. “I back my judgement better than that,” he said. “How are you finding working with Lois?”

“Interesting.”

The two men shared a smile. “She’s a tornado,” Perry said. “But if you can stick with her, you’ll learn a lot.”

“I know that.”

“So you don’t mind if you two work together for a bit?”

“It’s fine with me, but you should ask Lois what she thinks.” Clark glanced through the windows to her still-empty desk.

“She’s doing the Luthor interview,” Perry said. “I’m not expecting her back until after lunch.”

“That long?”

“Luthor wants an in-depth feature on the hospital.”

“Do you think she’ll be all right?”

“Lois? Are you kidding me? She’ll be back here with everything she needs for a great story.”

“Perry?” Clark said. “Janet Thorp’s funeral is this afternoon. Would it be all right if I went?”

“OK,” he said. “And bring me back a short story — anything you can find out about her life and a few lines concerning the tragedy of losing someone so young.”

Clark nodded and returned to his desk, mulling over Perry’s words. Janet Thorp’s death was a tragedy, but Clark was not convinced that it had been an accident.

Lois still hadn’t come in when Clark left for the funeral. He couldn’t help feeling a little concerned for her safety, but both Jimmy and Perry were confident that Lois could look after herself.

The funeral comprised of a casket, an elderly preacher, an even more ancient organist, four church deacons and him. Clark felt dismay roll through him. Janet Thorp had lived and died ... and the only mourner at her funeral had spent less than twenty minutes with her.

The preacher came over to Clark. “Are you family?” he asked.

“No.”

“Can you help me here?” he asked desperately. “I know nothing about her.”

“Janet was a seamstress,” Clark said. “She worked in a tiny place on the East Side. Her mother died last year.”

“Anything else? Brothers? Sisters? Friends?”

Regretfully, Clark shook his head. “I only met her yesterday. I’m a reporter, and I was working on a story about the proposed children’s hospital.”

The preacher’s eyebrows drew together. “So you’re just here for a story?”

“Not *just* a story,” Clark said, trying not to sound defensive. “I talked to her yesterday, and today we’re burying her.”

“Sorry,” the preacher said. “I didn’t mean to sound insensitive.” He scanned the empty pews. “I suppose we should get started.”

As the preacher walked to the pulpit, a middle-aged woman came in. She slipped into the nearest seat — right at the back. Clark hurried over to her. “Hi,” he said. “My name is Clark Kent.”

“Mabel Simpson.”

“Did you know Janet Thorp, Ms Simpson?”

“I knew her mother, Ellie.”

“Thank you for coming.” Clark saw the preacher move to the front of the room. “Could we talk afterwards, please?”

“This is my lunch break. I have to get back to work.” She looked up at him with a weary sigh. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Did you know Ellie worked for Lex Luthor?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know why she stopped working for him?”

“No. But it was sudden.”

“Did she have any hostility towards Luthor?”

“She wouldn’t talk about it. Or him.”

“How long after she’d finished working for him did she pass away?”

“Not long, less than a month.”

The preacher was ready to begin. Clark gave the woman a smile. “Thank you for answering my questions,” he said.

“Why do you want to know about Luthor?”

“I’m a reporter with the Daily Planet. I’m just following up some leads.”

Her eyes widened. “Do you think Janet’s death wasn’t an accident?”

“I don’t know,” Clark said. “But you’ve been really helpful. Thank you.” With a brief squeeze to the woman’s shoulder, he turned to the front and chose a seat.

With memories of Janet being close to non-existent, the funeral was short. If it hadn’t been for the sluggish crawl through every verse of *Amazing Grace*, it would have been over in less than ten minutes. The preacher asked if either of the mourners wished to speak, but both declined.

The four wardens carried the casket out of the church, followed by the preacher and Clark, as the woman hurried back to her job.

Clark revisited his scant memories of Janet Thorp as he walked with his hands thrust deep into his pockets. It was so unspeakably sad that a life could end without causing so much as a ripple through the surrounding world. Her aloneness seemed to seep out of the casket and cling to him.

Then Clark felt a soft touch on his sleeve. He looked sideways. Lois. Lois — looking up at him, her eyes sweet with empathy.

Without saying a word, she lifted his wrist out of his pocket and slipped her hand into his. Her hand was small and warm, and as his fingers curled around her, a rivulet of well-being trickled up his arm.

He looked from their entwined hands to her face. He squeezed her hand and was rewarded with her answering smile.

Walking side by side, they followed the casket until they reached Janet Thorp’s final resting place. The preacher read a portion from the Bible about love, and Clark wondered exactly how much love Janet had experienced in her too-short life. Had she willingly sold her property to Luthor? Had her death really been the result of a tragic accident?

As her casket disappeared into the ground, Clark vowed he would try to find answers for her.

When it was over, the preacher extended his hand and Clark reluctantly broke away from Lois. After shaking the preacher’s hand, he immediately sought her again, inwardly sighing with relief when she allowed him to re-connect. It felt so right, so perfect to be holding her hand.

“How are you doing?” she asked when they were in the Jeep.

“You know, that would *never* happen in Smallville?” Clark said dispiritedly. He stared back to the graveyard. “Even if you didn’t have family or friends, the people of the town would always make sure there was a decent burial.”

Lois put her hand on his cheek and turned his face away from the cemetery. “Metropolis isn’t Smallville, Clark,” she said quietly.

Her eyes shone like polished jarrah. “Thank you for coming,” he said, knowing it didn’t begin to express the depth of his appreciation. He wanted to touch her, to complete the circuit she’d initiated with her hand on his face. Her dark hair curled around her jaw like an invitation. He slowly lifted his hand, giving her time to pull back. When she didn’t, he slid his hand under her hair and along her jaw line, his fingertips exploring the smooth skin below her ear. He gently stroked her cheek with the side of his thumb.

She put her hand on top of his and smiled at him.

Far too soon, she backed away and started the Jeep. “We should get back,” she said. “Perry will be wondering where we are.”

Lois pulled up outside a café. “I haven’t had lunch yet,” she said. “Let’s eat.”

“Haven’t you got the Luthor story to write?” Clark asked.

“Plenty of time,” she said, not entirely truthfully. She knew that as soon as they got back to the Planet, she would be engrossed in her story and Clark would be left to his own thoughts. Thoughts which would centre on Janet Thorp.

“I thought you said Perry would want us back.”

“I’ll call him,” she said. “The service is always quick here, and we won’t stay long.”

“OK.” Clark sprang from the car, and Lois knew he was going to come to her door and open it for her. She should open it herself . . . set the tone for their working relationship.

But she didn’t. She smiled at him and thanked him, and together they walked into the café.

“How was your interview with Luthor?” Clark asked after they had ordered.

“Different,” she replied. “Not your standard interview, that’s for sure.”

“Different how?”

“For starters, we had breakfast in Nantucket.”

“Nantucket? That would be crowded this time of the year.”

“Not if you book out the entire restaurant.”

“Oh.”

“As we flew back to Metropolis on his private jet, Luthor outlined the hospital project. It is going to have the very latest in technology. It will be large and spacious and able to meet the needs of the families and staff as well as the patients.”

“It sounds like he impressed you,” Clark noted.

“His plans sure did.”

Their food arrived. “How about the man?” Clark asked as they began eating. “Did *he* impress you?”

“Clark.” Lois put down her fork and pinned him with her eyes, trying to control the grin she knew was threatening in response to what looked suspiciously like a tinge of jealousy. “I’m not going to deny that I enjoyed the novelty of being flown to breakfast in the company of a charming man. And having Luthor’s undivided attention for so long is the sort of opportunity every reporter craves.”

“You deserve it,” Clark said graciously.

“But that doesn’t mean I think any less of you just because you can’t fly me to Maine for breakfast.”

“As we were leaving Janet yesterday, she said she would never sell to him.”

“I didn’t hear her say that, Clark.”

“I have very good hearing.” He nodded to a table on the far

side of the noisy café. “See the couple near the window? He’s ordering the quiche.”

Lois smiled at his attempt to justify his claims about Janet. “See the specials’ board? The first item is quiche. Half the customers are ordering it.”

“He wants ketchup on his.”

“Ugh. That sounds revolting.”

“I know Janet Thorp’s mother worked for Luthor,” Clark said.

Lois hid her smile as she chewed on her chicken sandwich. Clark’s investigative radar was off here, but his persistence showed that he definitely had one. “He’s the third richest man in the world,” she said. “Half of the people who live in Metropolis have worked for him at some point.”

“But it proves Janet would know Luthor more than just as a name. When his offer came, she would trust him or not, depending on her mother’s experience. That she held out suggests the experience wasn’t positive.”

Clark genuinely thought he was onto something. “Clark,” Lois said kindly, “you don’t have anything that can’t be fairly easily explained.”

“The hospital building is supposed to start within two weeks,” he said. “Don’t you think it’s all happening very quickly and smoothly — as if Luthor knew in advance that things would fall his way?”

“He’s a very successful businessman,” Lois said. “I imagine he’d cover every eventuality.”

“Then there’s the fact that the two people who stood in the way of Luthor are now dead.”

“Clark —”

He took a cufflink from his pocket. “I found this in Janet Thorp’s shop,” he said, showing her. “Luthor had one the same.” Lois examined the cufflink. “When did you go to Janet Thorp’s? This morning?”

Clark gestured to the waiter who was carrying food across to the couple they had watched place an order. The quiche on the plate was smothered in tomato ketchup.

Lois couldn’t help but laugh at his told-you-so look and satisfied grin. “Clark, ketchup on quiche does *not* make Luthor a criminal.”

He laughed with her as he pocketed the cufflink. But under the humour, she knew his suspicions still simmered unabated.

Lois and Clark were the only two still in the newsroom. Lois put the finishing touches to her feature on the Luthor Hospital for Children and closed down her computer.

She stretched, feeling tired. It had been a long day, starting many hours ago when Luthor’s chauffeur-driven limousine had arrived outside her apartment to take her to the airport. She recalled the novelty of the flight on the private jet. She remembered the funeral and Clark’s sorrow and wished there was a way to shield him from the inevitable heartache that resulted in caring about people.

She wondered about his distrust of Luthor. It seemed unlikely Luthor was involved in anything illegal. He was known for his philanthropy — hospitals, charities, youth resources. LexCorp was the financial backbone of so many community projects.

But Clark, despite being a little green, was not a complete fool. If he thought it possible that Luthor had a dark side, he must have something firm as his basis. Was it possible Clark knew something that he hadn’t shared with her?

He glanced up from his monitor and caught her looking at him. “Finished?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Is it going in tomorrow’s edition?”

“No, the day after,” she said. “But I wanted to finish it tonight.”

Clark turned off his computer. “Are you ready?” he asked, flashing that killer smile.

“You’ve finished, too?” Lois teased. “At exactly the same moment I did?”

His smile turned a touch sheepish, which only increased its power to affect her. “I finished awhile ago,” he admitted.

“So why are you still here?” Lois asked innocently.

“I’m waiting for you.”

She moved to his desk. “You know, Clark,” she said. “I *can* get myself home safely. I’ve been doing it for years.”

“Maybe that’s not why I waited,” he said. Despite his easy-going smile and the relaxed way he was leaning back in his seat, Lois discerned an underlying opening in his words.

She decided not to accept. She had enough to process once she got home and could clear her mind. Holding his hand today — there was a memory requiring some re-examination. “Let’s get out of here, Kent,” she said lightly.

He stood and put on his jacket. As they walked to the elevator, she felt Clark’s hand rest on her back. Had it been anyone else, she would have increased her pace and moved out of range.

Instead, she deliberately slowed, causing his touch to deepen. If he noticed, he gave no indication. But she noticed — noticed how it caused a little tremor to scurry across her back.

“Are you driving home?” he asked.

“No, I’d like to walk.” That took longer.

“You must be tired,” he said as they entered the elevator.

“I am,” Lois said. “But I’m too wound up to sleep, so I’d like to walk.”

Now she’d given him an opening. Would he take it and ask why she was wound up? And if he did, would she tell him the truth or retreat back to the oh-so-available excuse of work?

“May I walk you home?” Clark asked.

“Yes. Thank you.”

They didn’t speak in the elevator or as they walked out of the Planet building. It was dark outside. And they were alone. And she was just tired enough to fray the ends of her usual reserve. She shivered.

“Are you cold?” Clark asked instantly.

“A little.”

His jacket was on her shoulders within seconds. “Thanks,” Lois said. The warmth from his jacket enveloped her. It felt good; she *had* been a little cold. But she couldn’t deny that it felt particularly good because it was *his* warmth.

Oh, Lane, she admonished herself, you’ve got it *so* bad.

Clark couldn’t drag his eyes from Lois in his jacket. It was way too big for her and accentuated the disparity of their sizes. She sure packed a lot of personality into that petite body.

That it was *his* jacket made it so much more enjoyable. “Are Metropolis days usually so full?” he asked as they weaved through the evening crowds.

“It was big,” Lois said. “A funeral, a trip to Nantucket, the interview with Luthor, lunch, and a feature story.” She pulled his jacket tighter, and Clark wished their relationship was such that he could put his arm across her shoulders and draw her into his body warmth.

“Are you tired, farmboy, after only three days in the big city?”

Clark glanced at her before answering. Seeing she wasn’t serious, he said, “I will never be too tired to walk you home, Ms Lane.”

“Thanks.” They walked in silence for a few steps. “Clark?”

“Uhm?”

“Do you ever think about the Sewells? The scientists who said they had a space ship?”

He had hoped — probably naively — that Lois would have

forgotten about certain aspects of their weekend together in Smallville. “What about them?”

“What if they really did find a space ship? What if there *was* someone in it?”

“Do you think that’s likely?”

“No,” Lois said, although her tone suggested she hadn’t completely dismissed the possibility. “But it can’t be that simple to demand a million dollars from the government if you have absolutely no substance to your claims.”

“I suppose so.”

“I’ve thought about it a lot.”

“Have you come to any conclusions?”

“Only that I keep hitting dead ends. I don’t know where the Sewells are now. Jimmy gave me their address in Wichita, and I checked it out. The neighbours said they went to Smallville for the Sunflower Celebration just as they had the past few years. Only this time, they didn’t come back. A week later, a moving company came and emptied the house. They told the neighbours the Sewells had moved west.”

“Did the neighbours think that was strange?” Clark said, trying to negotiate the fine line between polite interest and his desire to lock down this conversation.

“They said the Sewells kept very much to themselves,” Lois replied. “They rarely left the house — rarely spoke to anyone beyond ‘good morning’. Makes you wonder, doesn’t it?”

“Wonder what?” Clark asked in a carefully neutral tone.

“Whether they really had a secret.”

“Or whether they locked themselves away to work on a hoax.”

Lois’s head swung to face him. “You mean build a spaceship yourselves?”

“It’s possible.”

“I hate that there are so many questions and so few answers.”

Her evident frustration clanged warning bells through Clark’s mind. He was acutely aware that a little digging from Lois Lane could easily detonate several land mines. His friendship with her was so new, so precariously balanced, so vulnerable, he just wanted to be normal in her eyes until they had established some sort of foundation. Something strong enough to weather revelations of Richter-scale proportions.

“You’ve gone quiet,” she said.

“Just thinking.”

“I wish I knew how to contact Franklin Hodge.”

“Even if you did, do you think he’d tell you anything?”

Lois grinned up at him. “You’re talking to the reporter who got the interview with Lex Luthor today.”

They arrived at her apartment, and Clark waited as Lois unlocked the door.

Would she invite him in? Or bid him goodbye?

Lois pushed the key into the lock with slow deliberation. She turned to him. “Clark, would you ... ”

“Would I what?” he said with a gentle smile.

“Come in?”

He blushed.

Every other man she knew would have taken that as an invitation, and by now would be hustling her into her apartment.

But Clark Kent just stood there, his face a little pink, his ears a definite red. He was man enough to see the possibilities, but gentleman enough not to assume they were a given.

The combination was intoxicating.

“Just for a moment,” Lois said. “There is something I want to say to you.”

“OK.”

He followed her and stood uneasily in her apartment, still jacketless.

She took a breath, hoping she would be able to speak the

right words despite not having been able to form them with any clarity in her mind. “Last night when you asked me why I thought you were unsuited to working in Metropolis, you seemed to think that I didn’t want you here. I just want to clear up any misunderstanding.”

“OK,” he said, sounding unsure about where she was going with this conversation.

“Clark, there’s no other way to say this,” Lois said. “If you stay here, you will get battered and bruised, and you’ll try so hard to make a difference, and for every small victory, you’ll face a hundred defeats, and eventually it will crush you — or worse, it will harden you — and when you do go back to Smallville, your parents will wonder where their son has gone.”

“You think I’m that fragile?”

“No, of course not,” she said. “It’s just ... I can only see two outcomes from you being here ... and I don’t like either of them.”

His jaw flexed as he swallowed and looked at his shoes.

Lois spoke up quickly to elucidate. “Either you’ll give up and go home.”

“Or?”

“You’ll stay and slowly become more resentful and more cynical ... and that would be ... just awful.”

“So ... you don’t want me to stay,” he said, looking confused. “And ... you don’t want me to leave?”

“Clark ... ” Now she regretted having gotten into this. The only way out was to say things she hadn’t intended to disclose. Not yet, anyway.

Could she trust him? In truth, she didn’t know. But on the balance of probabilities — maybe. He hadn’t betrayed her so far. He hadn’t stolen her story.

But this was her heart. And losing that hurt a whole lot more than losing a story.

“Why don’t you want me to leave Metropolis?” Clark asked quietly.

There was no graceful way to back out of this. “Because I like you being here,” Lois blurted out.

His smile exploded. “I like being here, too,” he said through a heart-stopping grin.

Lois smiled back, checking her gut for rumbles of panic. It was remarkably calm.

“So could you explain again why you don’t want me to stay?” Clark said.

“Because ... ” OK, she was going to say it and hang the consequences. “Because I like you the way you are.”

If she thought his previous grin was explosive, it had nothing on this one. After a long moment as he digested her declaration, he said, “And you think Metropolis will change me?”

“Clark ... you’re so decent, so sure the world is a good place. It hurt you when Janet Thorp died. That was one day, one person. Things like that will happen again and again and again.”

He stepped closer to her. “Then I’ll need someone to be there for me,” he murmured, his voice low and husky. “Someone who knows me well enough to tell me if I’m changing. Someone who cares enough to come and hold my hand.”

Lois felt her face break into a smile. She just couldn’t help it. They stood, not touching physically, just staring at each other, and grinning as if they had jointly discovered a great treasure.

“Lois, it’s late,” Clark said eventually. “I have to go.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Every tomorrow, Lois,” he pledged. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He brushed his fingers across her cheek, and his thumb lingered on the corner of her mouth. Then he turned and left.

It was only after he’d gone that Lois realised she was still wearing his jacket.

She took it off and breathed in deeply. His cologne — vaguely coconut — filled her nostrils, and she was overwhelmed

by how much she wished it wasn't just his jacket staying the night.

So why hadn't he kissed her when it had been clear that he'd wanted to and even clearer that she had been pitifully desperate for him to take their relationship a step further?

Clark strolled back to his apartment, his mind spinning.

Lois liked him! She liked him being with her!

Lois — beautiful, capable, independent Lois — had somehow seen beyond his country-boy exterior and, unbelievably, found someone not-automatically-dismissible.

He wanted to shoot into the stratosphere. Tomorrow morning couldn't come quickly enough.

The voice of reason hammered through his head. *Hold on, Kent, she said 'like', not 'love'; she might be thinking brother not lover.*

"Hey!"

Clark stopped abruptly. Two men glared at him, enraged by his sudden appearance and near collision with them. He didn't need x-ray vision to see one had a knife tucked into the hip of his pants.

Clark raised his hands in surrender. "Sorry. I didn't see you."

The man's hand reached for his hip, and Clark turned and walked away, hoping his disinterest and lack of fear would convince them that he was not a threat.

He tuned in his hearing. They remained silent until he was forty yards away, and then they continued.

"So it's coming in tomorrow night?"

"Yeah. Usual places. Spread the word."

"Are you sure? The streets have been dry for a week. There's a lot of desperate people out there."

"I'm sure. Be there just after eleven."

Clark heard their footsteps slink away in opposite directions.

He pushed the conversation to the back of his mind for later assessment and returned his thoughts to Lois.

What if she was thinking they could be great friends?

Friends would be excruciating. To see her every day; to laugh with her, and watch her, and work with her; to be subjected to her little touches on his arm or his shoulder — and to know that as much as she *liked* him, she would never be in love with him.

He could survive the evils of Metropolis, but *that* would surely destroy him piece by agonising piece.

He should have kissed her.

He should have kissed her full on those enticing lips just to see how she reacted.

Tomorrow he would. He would look for the opportunity, and when it came, he would kiss her.

Tomorrow morning just couldn't come quickly enough.

Lois's fractured frame of mind was evidenced in every aggressive step as she strode to the Planet the next morning. She had to walk because her Jeep was still in the Planet car park. That was his fault.

She hadn't slept. Not one wink. That was his fault, too.

She'd had to detour to drop his jacket at the cleaners because it was now crumpled from spending the night on her bed as she'd tried to sleep despite the doubts and questions curdling through her mind. That was most definitely his fault.

Clark Kent! Just those words elevated her significant headache to the level of intolerable.

Why couldn't he be normal? Why couldn't he have kissed her good night? She'd exposed her soul, confessed far more than was prudent, and he'd just grinned, said good night, and left.

Any normal man would have tested the waters. More than tested them. Any normal man would have jumped in feet first and completely soaked both of them.

But you've had 'normal' men before, her rational voice

argued, and look how they turned out.

But normal or not, here she was ... again ... obsessing over how a guy felt about her.

Lois fished in her bag, found three aspirin, gulped them down, and swigged on her water bottle.

Today was not going to be a good day. She could just feel it.

Clark was at his desk, listening intently for Lois's footsteps, although an observer would have thought his attention was exclusively focused on his monitor.

He studied the layer of maps he had assembled. Something was going to happen tonight. Something was *coming in*.

His conclusion — once he'd managed to prise his mind from Lois — had been drugs. It tied in with people being desperate. And if drugs were 'coming in', what better way than through the warehouse, into Luthor's tunnel, and onto the streets of Metropolis?

He needed to get out there. To familiarise himself with where the off-shoot tunnels came up to street level. To investigate the warehouse covering the main entrance to the tunnel.

And he needed to do it without Lois. She was too high-profile and too well-known to Luthor. Just the sight of the Planet's top reporter sniffing around could tip the balance and jeopardise tonight's delivery.

Clark logged off his computer and put on his jacket. He smiled, remembering how his other jacket was still with Lois. *I like you the way you are*. He replayed her words, for — oh maybe — the millionth time. "I like you too, honey," he muttered under his breath. "A *whole* lot."

He waited for the elevator. The door opened, and he was nose-to-nose with Lois. "Hi, Lois" he managed, caught off-guard by her sudden presence.

"Hi." Her tone was light and inconsequential. She swung past him towards her desk.

"I have to ... I'll be back," he said quickly.

She spun around. "You've got a story?" she asked. "Want me to come?"

"No."

That was like lighting a fuse. He watched the lightning transformation from disinterest to rabid curiosity. "Why?"

He stepped into the elevator and pushed the button. "See you when I get back," he said as the door closed.

Lois stormed — with as much vigour as her thumping head would allow — into Perry's office. "What's with Kent?" she barked.

Perry looked up from his desk. "Kent?"

"He's off on a story. By himself."

That annoying little know-it-all smirk settled on Perry's face. "I thought you didn't want to work with him," he said blandly.

"I don't," she snapped. "But I do want the best stories, and if he has one, I should be on it."

"I have no idea what he's working on," Perry said.

She considered him for a long moment, but his eyes didn't waver.

Lois slumped into the chair. "What could he possibly have?" she asked. "He has no sources, no contacts, no idea."

"Then he'll probably be back later with *no* story," Perry said reasonably.

That notion eased her headache a little. A dead end would teach him to go off without her. "But, Perry —"

"Let him go," her editor said. "Let's see what he can do. Meanwhile, I want you to get down to the school and cover the opening of their new gymnasium."

"A school gym?" Lois said in disgust. "Come on, Chief, surely you've got something better than that?"

"No, I haven't. I was going to send Kent, but seeing he's not

here, you can do it.”

Lois burst out of his office, ignoring the protests of her head. Lois Lane covering a school gym opening! This was most definitely, undeniably, absolutely, and entirely his fault, too!

Part 4

Maintaining a sizeable distance from his targets, Clark located the four offshoot tunnel openings. At ground level, each looked innocent — insignificant covers that blended into their surroundings. You could walk past them every day and never wonder what lay beneath.

He approached the large warehouse. On the outside, it was nondescript — neither the rundown nor noticeably new. It had a large sliding door at the front with *Company 110* painted above it and smaller doors in both side walls. Using his x-ray vision, he discovered that it was empty except for a cabinet that was pushed against one of the walls. There was a security camera in each internal corner.

Clark left the warehouse and went to the LexCorp building. One of the adjacent office blocks had an observation deck. He rode the elevator and then gazed across at Luthor’s building, the top of which towered above him. Lowering his glasses, Clark looked underground. He located the tunnel and saw access ladders into a subsurface floor.

A short passage extended behind the main tunnel. It led into a series of underground rooms. With walls and ceilings a foot thick, it looked as if it had been built to withstand the most extreme of circumstances.

Clark took a visual tour of the shelter. There were vast stores of food, water, fuel, and medicines. There were items to enhance a closed-in existence — furnishings, computers, works of art. It seemed Luthor was determined to survive — in comfort — if the rest of humanity perished.

Deep in thought, Clark returned to the Planet. Lois wasn’t at her desk. At his computer, he searched *Company 110* and found no significant information. The warehouse was owned by Luthor; it had been purchased three months ago from a Mrs Cox.

Clark looked up as Lois stomped in and sat at her desk without so much as glance in his direction. “Hi, Lois,” he said cheerfully.

“Hi.” Her tone dripped icicles, which was quite a feat given that it wouldn’t have taken a huge leap to imagine steam coming from her ears.

He went to her desk. “What are you working on?” he asked hopefully.

“Something real big,” she said, still not looking at him.

“Need any help?” he offered.

“Not from you.”

Clark crouched beside her desk so he was eye-level with her. “Are you angry because I went without you this morning?”

“Of course not,” she said, staring intently at her monitor and typing furiously. “If I had gone with you, I would have missed the potentially-Pulitzer-winning-story Perry had lined up for you. Except you weren’t here.”

“Sorry,” Clark said. He figured she wasn’t going to look up from that monitor no matter how long he stayed there. “See you later,” he said softly and stood up.

That wrenched her attention away from her screen. “You’re going out again?” she asked accusingly.

He nodded. “I have a few things to follow up.” He walked away before she could say anything else — knowing she was angry with him, knowing there would be a price to pay later, but also knowing he had to keep her out of this.

If those drugs came in tonight, he wanted Lois safely in her apartment.

If those drugs came in tonight, he needed the freedom to switch from Clark to the secret identity outfit. He was still not sure how being two people was going to work. He certainly

didn’t want to have to do it for the first time in front of Lois Lane, super-reporter.

He would just have to endure whatever vengeance she served up tomorrow.

If he shared the byline with her, maybe she’d forgive him?
Or ... maybe not.

Lois typed up the gym-opening story with such vigour that every key was in danger of being pummelled into her desk.

She finished her story, filed it, and resolved that she was not going to return to her apartment tonight until she had found out exactly what Clark Kent, from Kansas, was up to.

Clark went to the Police Station and asked for Henderson. When the detective appeared, he took Clark into an interview room, shut the door, and sat at the bare table.

Clark gave him the cufflink and the map of the tunnels. He told him the details of the disagreement between Luthor and Crawford and repeated the conversation he’d heard on the streets.

“You think something’s happening tonight?” Henderson asked, without much interest.

Clark nodded. “Just before eleven o’clock.”

“Your evidence is thin. It could mean nothing at all.”

Clark acknowledged that with a terse nod. “That tunnel is important to Luthor. A multi-storey building for the hospital would have been the simpler option, but the deeper foundations would destroy the tunnel. Currently he can bring in anything by road. With the hospital helipad as cover, his scope increases dramatically.”

“OK, I’ll deal with it,” Henderson said, his tone suggesting that he intended to forget this conversation within two minutes of Clark leaving.

“There are security cameras in each corner of the warehouse.”

“OK, thanks,” he said. “Is that it?”

“You don’t think there’s anything in this?” Clark persisted.

Henderson stood and held open the door, clearly indicating that it was time for Clark to leave.

Clark didn’t rise from the table. “I *will* be there tonight,” he declared. “Even if you’re not.”

Henderson studied him for almost a minute, face impassive, hand still on the door. “Stay here,” he barked.

“Stay here?” Clark said, taken aback.

Henderson stepped into the doorway. “Stay here,” he repeated. “Or I’ll have you arrested for tampering with evidence faster than you can type a headline.”

The door shut with a loud bang, and Clark sat there, feeling dazed. *Could* he be arrested for tampering with evidence? He’d brought the cufflink to Henderson. And Henderson himself had given permission for him to go into Janet’s shop.

Clark dragged his hand through his hair. Getting arrested wasn’t quite the start he’d envisaged to his career at the Daily Planet.

Fifteen very long minutes later, Henderson was back. He had two cups of coffee. He put one in front of Clark and sat opposite.

“Are you going to arrest me?” Clark asked evenly.

Henderson gestured to the coffee. “Drink,” he said. “We are going to talk.”

Clark sipped the coffee but his attention didn’t move from Henderson.

“Nothing said here leaves this room without my say so,” Henderson warned.

“OK,” Clark agreed warily, reeling a little at how abruptly he had morphed from criminal to confidant.

“We won’t be doing anything about tonight’s shipment,” Henderson said. “If you’re smart, neither will you.”

“You won’t be —”

Henderson raised his hand to silence Clark. “Orders from way above are to leave it alone.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s a lot more going on — things which will be threatened if we attempt to bust Luthor tonight.”

“So drug-running is the least of Luthor’s crimes?”

Henderson nodded, almost imperceptibly.

“But drug-running is hardly petty crime,” Clark reasoned. “If we could prove that, wouldn’t it be enough to nail Luthor?”

“It would nail someone else — that’s what happened last time.”

Last time? There was history here? “What happened last time?” Clark asked.

“Three months ago, we planned what we thought was the perfect raid. And it succeeded — in a fashion. We got Mrs Cox. Every single piece of evidence pointed to her being the mastermind.”

“So nobody suspects Luthor? Not the press? Not the —”

“You think we advertised that we went after Luthor and he outmanoeuvred us?” Henderson asked incredulously.

“I suppose not,” Clark conceded.

“The story we put out was that we had investigated Mrs Cox and caught her red-handed. All the evidence supported that. She looked guilty, we looked successful, and Luthor looked the innocently shocked employer. He held a touching press conference and garnered mass public sympathy.”

Henderson’s sarcasm had a brittle edge. “For what?” Clark said with disgust.

“Mrs Cox was from ... a disadvantaged family. Luthor’s press conference was all about how he’d risked his reputation to provide her with an opportunity to ‘make something of her life’. Apparently, her ‘betrayal’ caused him much sadness and disillusionment, but in a magnanimous gesture of forgiveness, he bought her warehouse to help her pay her legal costs.”

Clark had suspected Luthor was evil. Now he knew ... Luthor had to be stopped. Whatever it took, Luthor *had* to be stopped. “But this time, there is no Mrs Cox.”

“I imagine Nigel St John is in the barrel now,” Henderson said wearily.

“Surely St John saw what happened to Mrs Cox?”

“Three months ago, Nigel St John was a destitute former professor living on the streets of London. He’s another of Luthor’s ‘projects’.”

Clark’s frustration was building — and he was hearing it second-hand. “There *must* be records, files, which incriminate Luthor.”

“I’m sure there are, but he has an incredibly complex system which — with one flick of a switch — destroys, changes, replaces everything implicating him.” Henderson scowled. “That’s why we’ve sat back and let him flood our streets with drugs.”

“Can’t you get to him before he has a chance to destroy his records?”

Henderson raised his hands in frustration. “The LexCorp building is like a fortress — above and below ground. He has every tracking device known to us and probably some we’ve never seen before. No one gets in there without him knowing.”

“So he sees you coming, hits a button, and all the real evidence is destroyed?”

Henderson put his head in his hands. “When the time comes, we will have one chance — one chance to get Luthor. If we fail ...”

“What happens if we fail?”

Henderson looked up with the expression of a man who has lived too long on the edge of his limits. “Luthor has contacts with a foreign terrorist organisation.”

“So he needs the helipad to bring in whatever they supply

him?”

“You got it.”

“What?”

Henderson clenched his hands together, his skin rigid over his ivory knuckles. “I’ve already said enough that you could cost me my life with one word in the wrong place.”

“Weapons?” Clark guessed.

Henderson didn’t disagree.

“And?”

Henderson’s eyes slowly closed like a man desperately needing to shut out the world. “And VX.”

Horror coursed through Clark. “The nerve agent?” he exclaimed. “Luthor has VX?”

“We don’t think so. Not yet. But it is believed his contacts do.”

“And if he gets it?”

“The button he pushes won’t be to change records and files,” Henderson said ominously. “He won’t need fall guys anymore.”

Luthor’s underground shelter suddenly made sense — spine-chilling, terrifying sense. “If Luthor is even thinking VX, he has somewhere safe for himself,” Clark said, wondering if Henderson knew about the shelter.

“That’s what we thought,” Henderson said. “So we sent in someone undercover, one of our best men.”

“And?”

“We lost contact with him almost immediately. It was a stupid move.” Henderson thumped the table with a clenched fist. “But we were desperate, and he was willing to do it.” He stared at the table before glancing up at Clark. “The bottom line is — you can’t be there tonight and neither can we.”

“There *has* to be something we can do,” Clark said. “What do you need?”

Henderson shrugged, grim and fatalistic. “A decoy would be nice. Someone to take Luthor’s attention while we get into his building.”

“I’ll do it.”

Henderson studied him with a mix of grudging respect, stunned surprise, and pity. “You’ll be in a casket tomorrow if you do.”

Clark took a long, tattered breath, feeling as if he was about to plunge into a ravine ... sans the ability to fly. “Do you remember the mudslide in Borneo last December?” he said.

Henderson’s face knotted with confusion. “Vaguely,” he said. “How is that relevant?”

“Do you remember anything unusual about it?”

“Not really.”

“Despite the magnitude of the disaster, no one died.”

Henderson released a caustic laugh on a deep breath. “You’ve lost me.”

Clark pushed away the certain knowledge that there could be no retracting his next words. “Someone helped,” he said, keeping his tone impassive. “Someone who used his powers to rescue every person caught in the mud.”

“Do you have his phone number?” Henderson mocked.

“What do you need him to do?” Clark said.

“What *can* he do? Other than swim through mud?” It was clear that Henderson had lost all hope that Clark had anything of value to offer. He was probably only following along because this topic was preferable to that of chemical weapons in the hands of a psychopath.

“He’s very fast, very strong, and bullets bounce off him.”

Henderson glared. “Kent!” he roared. “I don’t have time for fairy tales.”

“I’m serious.”

“You’re delusional.”

“If I can get him here, will you talk with him?” Clark said doggedly. “Will you work with him tonight to get Luthor?”

Henderson scrutinised Clark, his face set hard against the birthing of impossible hope. “All right,” he conceded warily.

“Unlock the window.”

Henderson’s eyes veered from Clark to the window. “A locked window can keep him out?” he said sceptically.

“No, but a locked window will be harder to clean up afterwards.”

“What about the window grill?”

“He’ll take it off ... and then rivet it back on when he leaves.”

Henderson stood and unlocked the window. “What happens now?” he said. “I sit here and wait like Little Miss Muffet?”

Clark looked at his watch. “If I can contact him, I’ll tell him to be here at eight o’clock.”

“How will I know it’s him?”

Clark cringed, but hoped he covered it. “It’ll be obvious.”

“How do you know about this? The mudslide?”

“I was the reporter. Borneo Gazette. Look up the story on the internet.” Clark drained his coffee. “Who else knows about Luthor?”

“No one here.” Henderson gestured behind the closed door. “They all think I’m either grossly incompetent or hideously corrupt. About once a week one of them puts in a report to my superiors about me.”

“Which never comes to anything?”

“No. Which further convinces them I can’t be trusted.”

“Tough gig.”

“Yep,” Henderson said on a long, despondent sigh.

“So why tell me?” Clark asked.

Henderson’s exhaustion clouded his face. “Because I just can’t fake another murder investigation,” he grated. “I can’t take any more corpses on my conscience.”

Clark groaned as his suspicions congealed into awful certainties. “Janet Thorp?”

Henderson nodded.

“David Crawford?”

Henderson nodded again. “And before your time, Ellie Thorp, Samuel Platt, Toni Baines, Commander Laderman ...”

Each name wounded Henderson individually, and Clark’s respect for the man grew. “I can understand why you’d feel the need to tell someone,” Clark said. “But why me?”

“You’re from Kansas, and you’re working with Lois Lane.”

“So?”

“So no average hick from Kansas works with Lois Lane.” Henderson eyed Clark, his face clearing momentarily. “Most wouldn’t *want* to work with her.”

Clark answered with a smile, despite his qualms about the direction of this conversation. “You don’t think I’m average?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Henderson admitted. “But my brother-in-law is a trooper in Kansas, and when I called him, he called a sheriff he knows called Rachel Harris who swears you’re pathologically, almost neurotically, trustworthy.”

“Oh,” Clark said.

Henderson nodded. “And you agreed that nothing would leave this room.”

Clark stood. “You’ll be here — in this room — at eight o’clock.”

Henderson almost grinned. “Yes,” he said. “Against my better judgement, I’ll be here.”

It was early evening when Clark got back to the Planet. Lois was still at her desk. “Hi,” he said.

She didn’t look at him. “Hi,” she said indifferently.

“Would you like to come with me to get something to eat?”

“No, thanks.”

“Would you like me to bring you something here?”

“No, thanks.”

With a sigh of resignation, Clark turned away and headed for Perry’s office. Once in there, he brusquely shut the door and sat down without waiting for an invitation.

“I was wondering when you’d decide to include me,” Perry said easily.

For the next five minutes, Clark outlined what he’d discovered — the tunnels under Metropolis, the incoming shipment of drugs, the relevance of the single-storey hospital and its helipad, and his suspicion that Luthor was connected with the deaths of David Crawford and Janet Thorp.

When he finished, Clark looked anxiously at Perry, who had listened with neither interruption nor overt interest. When Perry didn’t respond, Clark shifted uncomfortably.

Perry picked up a pen from his desk. “Something like this blew up a few months ago,” he said noncommittally. “It turned out Luthor had nothing to do with it.”

“He had *everything* to do with it,” Clark said, more forcefully than he intended.

Perry’s eyes narrowed. “How do you know? Do you have any proof? Any evidence? Do you have anything more than feeble links and speculation?”

Clark looked at the floor for a moment, gathering his words. “Chief, I know what this looks like.”

“It looks like a novice trying to engineer a story into being just because he needs one.”

Clark swallowed. “I will have evidence,” he said earnestly. “Right now I can’t say anymore; I have to protect my source.”

“Do you have *any* idea how much this would shake this city?”

Clark met his eyes. “Probably not,” he admitted.

“What does Lois think?”

“I haven’t told her — not most of it.”

“You won’t share your story with her?”

“It’s not that. Nothing like that. I don’t want her getting hurt.”

“She won’t forgive you if you keep her out of a big story.”

Clark winced. “I figured that.”

“Maybe you should bring her into the loop.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

Clark dragged his hand through his hair. “Because this will end up bigger than anyone realises and —”

“All the more reason to include her.”

Clark lifted his eyes and looked directly at his editor. “I can’t, Perry. I’m sorry.”

Perry frowned. “Will the police be there tonight?”

Clark nodded.

Perry seemed to take a modicum of comfort from that. “You know, son, if it ends up your word against Luthor’s, it won’t be him that goes down. He has a lot of support in this city. And more resources than you could dream of.”

Clark acknowledged that with a grimace. “There’s something else, Perry,” he said.

“Uhm?”

“Lois’s feature on Luthor’s hospital.” Clark stopped, unsure how to word what he was trying to suggest.

Perry studied him, long and intense. “I’ll move the feature back a day and leave tomorrow’s front page clear as long as I can.”

Clark let out a long breath. Until then, he hadn’t realised he’d stopped breathing. “Thanks, Chief.” He stood to leave.

“Clark,” Perry said, his tone more gentle now. “Take care tonight.”

“I will.”

Clark closed Perry’s door, knowing he should walk straight past Lois’s desk without stopping. Anything he said would merely give her another chance to rub a little more antagonism

into his already chafed heart.

But, he couldn't resist.

"Still not hungry?" he said as he hesitated at her desk.

"What did Perry want?"

"Just a chat."

"Lucky him."

Clark sighed. "See you tomorrow."

She didn't bother to respond. Clark walked to the elevator. So much for kissing her today. He'd barely spoken with her. And when he had, she had made it abundantly clear that he was someone she wanted to avoid.

He would just get through tonight — get Luthor apprehended, preserve the incriminating evidence, keep the drugs off the streets, avert the threat of chemical weapons, endure peoples' reactions to his powers, and write a story of a standard such that Perry wouldn't regret his confidence in his newest reporter.

Then he could try to salvage whatever was possible with Lois.

Lois waited for two minutes after the elevator doors had closed behind Clark. She slipped into Clark's seat at his desk and turned on his computer. The computer asked for a password.

She typed *Smallville*.

The password was declined. She tried it with all small letters, then all capitals. It was still declined.

Applepie

Declined. She tried the variations again. Nothing.

An idea dropped into her brain. Surely, it couldn't be.

Loislane.

Declined.

She didn't know whether to feel relieved or spurned.

Threesugars.

Declined.

She paused. He would have chosen his password that first afternoon. She'd been annoyed because he wouldn't tell her what Sarah Crawford had said off the record. Then he'd left. When he'd returned, he'd brought her coffee and a chocolate croissant, thinking she could be bought with a little treat.

It had worked, she recalled dourly. He'd apologized, and so had she.

Then he'd gone to his desk and set up his computer.

Lois typed *Chocolatecroissant*.

In.

With a chuckle of triumph, Lois opened Clark's most recent document and recognised a map of the East Side, including the proposed hospital. At first glance, it looked about as ordered as spaghetti, but as she studied it, she was able to discern roads, alleys, and parklands, and finally realised that the lines running in contradictory directions were underground tunnels.

A tunnel ran from the hospital helipad to under the LexCorp building; a direct route, under the hospital, under roads, under the city to the bowels of Lex Luthor's building.

Lois printed out the map and shut down Clark's computer. She took the flashlight from her desk drawer, carefully folded the map, and put it in her pocket.

Outside the Planet building, she hailed a cab. "East Side," she said.

Henderson locked the door to the interview room and glanced again to the open window. Of the many long shots he'd gone with during his career, this was by far the longest. He was convinced he would be out of here by nine, home before ten, and nursing a strong Scotch by eleven. Anything to try to numb his mind to the realities of the poison that would be flooding through his city.

He felt a sudden gust of wind and spun towards the window. With a concentrated effort, he clamped his gapping jaw shut. He

had finally — irrevocably — lost his mind.

"Inspector Henderson?" The man in the skin-tight blue suit and red cape stepped towards him, his arms folded.

Henderson could only nod.

"When the truck arrives at the warehouse, I'll go to Luthor. I'll keep him occupied while your men do their job. I guarantee he won't destroy any evidence. When you come, I'll hand him over."

"That simple?" Henderson croaked.

"We have the element of surprise on our side."

Surprise didn't cover it. Not nearly. "Th ... thanks."

"Will you need any help convincing your superiors about this?"

"It's possible," Henderson said wryly.

"Have them here in one hour," the caped one said. He turned to leave, but stopped with one foot on the window ledge. "Can I ask a favour?"

Henderson nodded.

"If it becomes common knowledge that Clark Kent can contact me, he won't have a minute's peace."

Henderson nodded again and his visitor *flew* ... yes, flew ... out of the window.

Henderson slumped into the chair.

He might not need that Scotch after all.

But then again ...

When Lois arrived at her estimation of where the tunnel should end, she discovered a large warehouse. She crept along the side wall and found a door. It was unlocked. She opened it quietly and slipped inside.

"Anything from the prisoner?" Lex Luthor asked as he poured himself a glass of vintage red wine.

"Nothing yet, sir," Nigel St John said. "Should I lean harder?"

"Not yet. Let him think about his situation for a little longer."

"You want him killed?"

"I want to know why he's here and what he knows."

St John's mouth twisted to a cold, cruel smile. "He's considered one of the elite. He won't talk easily."

"He *will* talk though," Luthor said in a tone that left no room for contradiction. He sipped the wine, savouring it before speaking again. "So, Nigel ... tonight's the night — a fitting finale to a brilliantly executed performance." He lifted his glass. "To a job well done."

St John acknowledged the toast with his own glass. "To you, sir."

Luthor smiled with genuine satisfaction. "For two years, I have kept the streets of Metropolis awash with my drugs. I have stifled any and all competition ..."

"Dealt with any opposition ..."

"In the most emphatic ways."

"It is almost sad it is over."

Luthor stared into the red liquid. "Over in one sense. But what will replace it will make this look like child's play."

"You dealt with the Lane woman?" St John asked.

"Not in the usual way. But she won't cause any trouble. And having her as a starry-eyed advocate could be particularly useful." Luthor gave a satisfied sniff. "What time will the truck be here tonight?"

"Ten forty-five."

"Anyone snooping today?"

"Clark Kent was in the vicinity," St John said. "He didn't get close enough to actually see anything though."

"Clark Kent?"

"New reporter with the Daily Planet."

"Should I be concerned?"

“Hardly,” St John said with a sneer. “He looked at the warehouse, but made no attempt to enter it. Lane would have at least tried the door. He just stood there like a dolt and then left.”

“No other problems?”

“Not with Lane occupied elsewhere.”

“I feel a sense of disappointment,” Luthor mused. “I really had thought Lois Lane might have the intellectual capacity to be a potential adversary. Someone to add a little flavour to my life. Someone to apply even the slightest opposition as I carve through Metropolis. Someone to challenge me and prevent me growing sleek and lazy.”

“And she proved to be a disappointment?”

Luthor gave a disgruntled sigh. “One breakfast in Nantucket,” he said sadly.

The computer on Luthor’s desk beeped, and he moved to the monitor with St John at his shoulder. “Trouble?” St John asked.

Luthor smiled with appreciation. “My dear Lois,” he said to the monitor. “I underestimated you. Welcome to the Game.”

“How shall we deal with her?” St John asked.

Luthor considered for a moment and then smiled as inspiration came. “Put her with the prisoner,” he said. “Possibly the charms of Lois Lane can succeed where more traditional methods have failed.” Luthor downed the rest of his wine. “And if he still won’t speak, give the prisoner some prompting, and then put him back with the lovely Lois.”

Lois peered around the large, empty warehouse. It was eerily dark; the only light came through the high windows from the streetlights outside. The only cover was a cabinet against the wall to her right.

Hearing the sound of a voice, she crept along the wall and slipped into the scant shelter behind the cabinet. She peeked out.

Two burly male figures had appeared on the other side of the murky warehouse. After a short and mumbled conversation, one of them began stepping down into a hole in the floor. As soon as the first man had disappeared, the second followed.

Lois waited a few minutes and then scurried to the hole. Seeing the ladder, she climbed down it.

The limited light in the warehouse had minimal effect in the tunnel. Lois felt along the wall and moved a few steps forward. She reached into her bag for the flashlight she always carried and

-
A hand from behind seized her and roughly covered her mouth.

Lois was jostled forward, stumbling despite the beam of light from the flashlight held by her captor. She tried to gather enough breath to push out a sound, but her attempt only caused the grip on her mouth to squeeze painfully. She concentrated on moving her legs forward, not wanting to risk plummeting to the hard floor with her captor’s weight on top of her.

After what seemed like a long time, they came to what looked like a dead end. Then she saw a ladder leading upwards.

“Two choices, lady,” came a gruff voice in her ear. “You go up there, nice and easy. I’ll be at the bottom, and there’s someone at the top who won’t take kindly to any funny stuff. Or I go up first and drag you up by your nice dark hair. What’s it to be?”

Lois reached for the ladder, and the thug’s hand released her mouth.

When she reached the top, the light blinded her. Blinking furiously, she saw she was in a small, bare room. She rubbed her mouth and cheeks, trying to restore them to normal feeling.

Nigel St John walked into the room, his hands clasped behind his back. “Ms Lane,” he said, ominously polite. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to know where the tunnel ended,” Lois said, her head held high.

“That was a very poor decision indeed,” St John said. He

nodded to the thug. “Search her.”

The thug removed her bag from her shoulder and hustled up and down her body. He pulled the map from her pocket and gave it to St John.

He unfolded it. “Tunnels, Ms Lane?” he sneered. “Why would a lady such as yourself be interested in a few dark tunnels?”

“I’m an investigative reporter,” she spat. “I was investigating.”

St John nodded to the thug who was still standing behind Lois, and she felt a sharp blow above and forward of her ear. She stumbled sideways as pain stabbed through her head.

She managed to regain her balance without falling to the floor and gingerly touched her fingertips to the area near her temple. There was a sizable lump, but no blood. Lois glared at St John.

“Why this tunnel?” St John said, ignoring her look. “Why tonight?”

“I am working on a story about Lex Luthor. I spent yesterday morning with him.” She faced St John defiantly. “When he discovers how you’ve treated me, you’ll be unemployed.”

St John sniggered. “Take her to the cell.”

The thug half-carried, half-dragged her down the ladder and they retreated a short way through the tunnel. When they came to a door, he unlocked it and shoved her forward.

It was dimly lit, but Lois could see a figure slumped in the corner. The thug pushed her to the wall where hand cuffs dangled, forced her down onto the concrete floor, and captured her wrists in the cold metal.

Without a word, he turned and left.

She heard the door lock.

Lois let her eyelids fall and tried to calm the sledgehammers pounding through her head. When they had become almost bearable, she opened her eyes and allowed them to adjust to the gloom. She slowly turned towards her companion, noting he was male, with dark curly hair and, like her, handcuffed to the wall. His head lifted and realisation dropped like lead in her stomach.

It was Franklin Hodge.

Lois’s head fell back as she fought the panic sweeping through her.

Franklin Hodge. The ‘Invisible Aide’. The man with neither job description nor — as far as her extensive digging could uncover — a home address.

But one thing had become patently clear. With Hodge here, this was big. This was no two-bit operation, no amateur crooks using the fact they worked for Luthor to carry out some minor swindle. This was big. So big, it possibly involved Luthor himself.

And Lois had dropped herself right in the middle of it.

Part 5

Clark had just foiled another attempted burglary. That made two interrupted attempts and six arrests in less than two hours.

He was still dressed as Clark, although he wore the Suit underneath. Every time he had considered ditching the Clark clothes and announcing himself publicly, he’d found a way to influence the situation without his powers being too obvious.

He thought back an hour to when he had stood in front of a roomful of police, wearing the spandex, feeling like a sideshow attraction. Every eye had been fixed on him, full of scepticism, disbelief, curiosity, and here and there, a touch of wonder. He’d kept his arms folded, his shoulders back, his head high, and his voice deep ... and somehow he’d gotten through it.

It *would* get easier. People *would* get used to seeing him. People wouldn’t gawk quite so much. OK, they probably would, but he would become accustomed to it.

However, he doubted it would ever sit well with his natural preference for being firmly in the background.

Which is why the secret identity is perfect, Clark reminded himself.

“What’s going on, man?” Clark asked as he stood between the would-be burglar and his jewellery shop target.

“I need cash. I need it tonight.”

“But it’s not worth doing this.”

He wriggled out of Clark’s grip and sped away.

Luthor took a cigar from the case and inhaled along its length, savouring it. After lighting it, he drew on it deeply as he settled into his leather armchair. His attention hadn’t wavered from the screen in front of him.

He smiled as he reflected on his second windfall. First Hodge, now Lois Lane. If anyone had information that could be manipulated to advantage, it was Hodge. If anyone could extract that information, it was Lane.

Carpe Diem.

At the very least, Luthor expected to know within five minutes whether today was the day he would sacrifice that pompous Englishman.

Franklin Hodge laboriously twisted towards her. Lois heard his quick intake of breath as if the movement had caused him pain. “Sorry,” he said.

She ignored him. Her head hurt too much to consider moving.

“I’m sorry,” Hodge repeated.

Very slowly, she lifted her head. “For what?”

“For the bomb, for the truck, and for being here now.”

Lois shot him a surly look. “You mean when you tried to kill me in Sm-”

“I didn’t try to — “ He looked at the rough floor. “It was never my intention to kill you.”

“What bomb?”

Hodge raised his connected hands to the space between the side of his head and the wall. “At the paper. And I’m sorry for being here now.”

“Huh?” Her brain hurt.

His index finger unfurled from its fist and brushed across his ear. “I’m probably the last person you want to spend your final ... you want to be with now.”

“My final ... ” Her trepidation oozed another couple of layers into the depths of her being. “You don’t think we’ll get out of this, do you?”

Hodge rubbed his earlobe between his thumb and forefinger and made passing reference to his eye as his cuffed hands dropped back to his knees. “Sorry.” He stared at her intensely ... too intensely for an apology — even an apology for something that could have led to her death.

Suddenly, Lois understood. He was warning her that they were being both watched and heard. She fought and overcame the compelling temptation to search for cameras. “Don’t you have any ... ” She lowered her voice. “ ... spy tricks to get us out of here?”

He shook his head despairingly.

“But someone knows you’re missing, right?”

Hodge looked at her with a strange, embittered expression. “Like a wife?” He laughed, the emptiest laugh she’d ever heard. “Not in my line of work.”

“Then what about ... whoever you work for?”

“Remember what I told you when you said I was evil?”

That he looked after the big picture. Clearly, they were the little picture now ... or not even that. “They won’t care if you die?” Lois said in disbelief.

His eyes answered silently, and her stomach compressed another notch. Was that for the camera? Or for real? Did he really think there was no hope of rescue? Or was he ensuring he didn’t

alert someone else to the possibility of rescue? “It *looked* like you wanted to kill me,” she said reproachfully.

“Despite current appearances, I usually do my job well. Both times, I had pre-planned and calculated to cause a diversion, not a death. I could give you the details, if you wanted.”

“You threatened a plane crash,” Lois said acerbically. “I suppose that was a diversion, too?”

“No,” he said on a long sigh. “That was bluster.”

“You lied?”

Hodge looked sideways to the door. “I was trying to impress you,” he mumbled.

“*You what?*” Her raised voiced reverberated around the closed-in space.

Hodge shuffled, seeking a more comfortable position. “When you came and offered me the deal, I was so ... taken by your assurance, your forthrightness, your poise, your willingness to sacrifice your story for your friend ... ” He dropped his head. “I’d become so caught up in the job ... I’d forgotten what real people are like.”

“Real people aren’t generally impressed by threats to blow up a plane.”

He acknowledged that with a wry nod. “I wasn’t thinking too straight. It was that place. Some of the things that happened there ... I made fundamental mistakes.”

“Yeah.”

“It was like I lost my edge.”

“You, too,” Lois muttered.

They fell silent. The next time Lois glanced at him, Hodge had closed his eyes. She had only been here a short time, yet already the hard floor and the restrictions imposed by the handcuffs had caused an achy numbness to begin to creep through her body. Hodge hadn’t said how long he’d been here, but being shackled like this would quickly become excruciating.

Lois stared into the emptiness and forced herself to think. More than think, she had to analyse. Piece by piece.

Who? Who had ordered her capture? Luthor? St John? Someone else? Who had something to fear from her finding the underground tunnel?

What? What were they doing? Something illegal, clearly — both her and Hodge had been imprisoned. Clark’s map had the tunnels marked. The tunnel went from the warehouse to under Luthor’s building.

When? St John had asked why she had been in the warehouse *tonight*.

So something was happening in the tunnel, possibly tonight.

Who? It remained the biggest question.

Luthor or St John?

Luthor?

Surely not.

But Clark didn’t trust him. Clark had never trusted him.

Did she trust Clark’s instincts?

With a sudden incisive conviction, Lois knew.

Luthor, for all his generosity and community spirit, had a dark side; a callous, evil underbelly. She pushed aside that revelation, mind-blowing though it was, and kept going.

If Clark *had* worked out what was happening tonight, would he have taken his suspicions to the police?

Probably.

Clark had a deep-seated respect for authority and generally believed the best of people.

So, she could assume that Clark was working with the police.

If something had been planned for tonight, they would be desperate for it to go ahead.

Lois groaned inwardly. Although she knew almost nothing, her presence in the tunnel would surely jeopardise any plans.

Was there *any* way to undo the damage?

She would be flying blind. She didn’t know enough to be

able to judge whether she risked making a bad situation worse. She didn't know who was listening. Or what he was planning. Or how her presence had affected those plans.

But she had to do *something*.

Her mind conceived the germ of an idea. This had been Clark's investigation from the start. He was new to Metropolis; few would know his background. She knew from when she'd opened his internet history in Smallville that he visited a lot of foreign local information sites. Maybe he'd travelled. St John was English. She needed a way to tie all these snippets together into something believable. Something useful.

She needed to get Hodge talking. About what? She could hardly just blurt out, "Luthor's such a good guy, I'm sure no one suspects him of anything."

Their common reference point was Smallville. That is where she would start.

Luthor's cigar was less than half its original size. He glared at the screen, his contentment gone.

When Hodge and Lane *had* talked, it had been gibberish. Irrelevant, unusable gibberish about something past. Then they'd been silent. For endless wasted minutes.

Luthor shook his head in disgust. How *could* any self-respecting reporter stare silently into space when she had Franklin Hodge as her captive audience? Did she not realise the gravity of her situation?

A distinct feeling of unease swamped Luthor. It was as new as it was unpleasant. His usually unshakeable self-confidence was rattled around the edges. He needed to act.

He took a remote control from his desk drawer.

"Cheerio, Nigel," he said, in his best English accent.

"Was there a spaceship?" Lois said.

Hodge slowly opened his eyes and looked up. "Possibly."

She lurched upright, and her head protested painfully. "Was there a baby?"

"I don't know."

"What *do* you know?" she fired at him.

"After I met them that night, I reported what they'd told me. Three hours later, I had orders to take them in."

"So they had *something*?"

"Their home or wherever would have been searched and, if necessary, cleared that night," he said wearily. "Maybe even before that night."

"What did they find?"

"I don't know."

"Did they have the predictive picture?"

"I don't know."

"Did they have a hair sample?"

"I don't know."

Her arsenal of questions collapsed in frustration. "Or you don't want to tell me," she snapped.

Hodge considered her, unmoved by her accusation. "Are you familiar with the concept of 'need to know', Lois?"

"It's not that popular with reporters," she said derisively.

He didn't grin exactly, but she could tell he had appreciated her comment. "Lois ... what I do ... each individual knows a very small piece of the puzzle. Those who know more don't work on the ground. Sometimes, I'll be told to do something, and I never know why. Sometimes, I find out when I read your story in the Daily Planet."

"Really?"

Hodge seemed to be considering his next words. "Obviously, you know they ... the details on documents ... aren't true?"

"Yeah."

"I wondered if he *was* ... you know, what was said ... and he'd threatened you ... and you were trying to tell me you needed

help ..."

"Why would I go to you?" Lois asked incredulously. "You'd just tried to kill me twice."

"Divert you," Hodge corrected. "I didn't want to kill you, I just did —"

"What needed to be done," Lois said, chanting in a contemptuous mantra. She looked directly at Hodge as the embryo of her plan began to develop. "He's not an ... you know, what was said about him," she said emphatically.

"I figured that."

"How?"

"Let's assume he was. I'm the last person you would tell. I mean, just when the government are following up that particular story ... you ask for false birth details for a ... local."

That insight caused a sunrise of dismay to begin its slow ascent inside her, but Lois pushed it aside. Now was not the time. "So because of me, they would have checked up on him?"

"Undoubtedly," Hodge said. "But I assume he has an explanation; something he didn't want made public, maybe to protect someone else, his mother perhaps — so the false ID gave him a simple way to squash the rumour."

A sudden spark of inspiration illuminated the pathways in Lois's mind, connecting the numerous half-formed ideas into a cohesive plan. "Assuming communication happens across international borders, there won't be any problems," she said airily.

Hodge's eyes narrowed. With an almost indiscernible tweak of his eyebrow, he reminded her to be careful what she said. "No problems?"

"Clark Kent arrives in Metropolis and lands a job at the Daily Planet, a position he gets because of his extensive experience as a reporter for the venerated Smallville Press."

"Lois," Hodge said evenly.

"Don't tell me you were fooled by that country boy innocence," she mocked.

"Of course not," he said with no determinable expression at all. But the gleam in his eyes made her wonder if he understood that she wasn't speaking for his benefit.

She contemplated him for a long moment, a small smile playing on her mouth. "Maybe you really do know only your little bit." She chuckled. "But the timing made it obvious."

"Timing?"

"With just a little basic research," Lois said, "you will discover that Clark Kent — supposed backwater no-name — has periodically appeared in various exotic, nonsensical locations. Between carefully inconsequential sojourns in Sm —"

"Lois!" Hodge hissed.

By now, she was convinced that Hodge knew she had purpose and was acting his part of the cluey agent trying to quieten the blabbermouth reporter. "Who recently arrived from ... across the ocean?" she asked loftily.

"How do you know this?"

"I'm an investigative reporter," she said with pride that she didn't have to fake. "Kent should have realised that. He's only got himself to blame if this blows up in his face."

"What?"

She sighed with feigned frustration. "The tunnel ... plus this building ... plus the recently arrived foreigner ... refined foreigner ... who works in this building ... plus the Daily Planet's sudden inexplicable need for a new reporter ... a greenhorn from Smallville." Lois leant towards Hodge. "Are we on the same page yet?" she demanded, emphasising each individual word.

"Kent is ..."

"You didn't know," she exclaimed with an equal mix of triumph and surprise.

"When?"

“Tomorrow night.”

“He’ll know. With you here and me here, he’ll realise.”

“That’s not likely. Ni- ... he has been doing this for years. He’s very confident of his ability to fool everyone. Including Lex Luthor.”

Hodge didn’t respond, and Lois leant her head against the concrete wall, her job done. Whether it would make any difference, she didn’t know.

She stole a glance at Hodge. He was looking at her.

He winked. It was scarcely more than a fleeting spasm of his eyelid.

But she understood — they *were* on the same page.

As Luthor had been about to press the button on the remote control and activate the systematic replacement of the true records with the doctored ones, Lois had broken the silence in the dungeon.

Luthor paused, his finger poised. As he listened to their conversation, a small frown of surprise creased his forehead.

When his prisoners went silent again, Luthor put down the remote control and typed *Clark Kent* into his internet search engine. He discovered the Daily Planet’s newest reporter had filed stories from a wide range of seemingly unrelated places — New Guinea, Tibet, Nepal, Australia, Borneo — all within the past two years.

Luthor poured himself another glass of wine, deep in thought. He didn’t like being anyone’s fool. Certainly not Nigel St John’s. But it was a small price to pay for having things fall his way. Again.

Eventually a slow smile slithered across his face.

All that was required was to leave well enough alone. He would be rid of St John while avoiding the time-consuming tedium of recovering his files and resetting his programs.

But he needed to be sure Lane wasn’t bluffing.

He turned down the volume on the screen and paged his assistant.

The Englishman came through the door half a minute later. “Yes, sir?” he said in his usual irritatingly viscid manner.

Luthor took fresh interest in the face looking down at him. Yes, he could see a certain smugness, a certain thinly camouflaged superiority. “Lane isn’t getting anything out of the prisoner,” he said. “You know what to do.”

“Yes, sir.” Luthor didn’t miss the gleam of anticipation in St John’s eyes.

Luthor spoke as St John reached the door. “Nigel?”

“Yes, sir?”

“After the prisoner is out of the cell, go to Lane and inform her that Clark Kent was shot and killed earlier this evening as he poked around the warehouse.”

“Yes, sir.” Not the smallest semblance of emotion touched St John’s face as he turned and exited the room.

Luthor sipped his wine. Either St John didn’t know Kent was after him ...

Or he had English stoicism down to a fine art.

But Luthor was willing to bet that Lois Lane wouldn’t be able to mask her emotions so well.

Lois started at the sound of the door being unlocked. The thug walked in, undid Hodge’s cuffs, hauled him to his feet, and roughly dragged him out of the room. The lock clunked into place.

She rested her head against the hard, cold wall. Her head throbbled agonizingly. Her arms ached, her legs were cold and numb, and the steel of the cuffs jutted painfully into the soft flesh around her wrists. She was hungry, and it felt as if the mustiness from each breath had grown like mould inside the walls of her stomach.

Clark.

Her thoughts drifted to her weekend in Smallville with Clark. They were the best of memories. She remembered telling him she wanted all three of his sugars — and him giving them to her without hesitation. She remembered him hooking the worm for her — and then driving her to Smallville after she’d gone in the wrong direction. She remembered how he’d stood between her and Hodge when Hodge was threatening her — and how, when she’d asked him about it later, he’d been uncomfortable with even the slightest suggestion that he was a hero.

She remembered how, throughout the entire time she had been with him, his first thought had always been her — her comfort, her safety, her well-being.

And, in that respect, nothing had changed when he’d moved to Metropolis.

She remembered the moment she had met him. How he’d barged into her room, wearing only a towel and his glasses.

That chest. She would *never* forget that chest.

Lois groaned. She had finally found someone ... someone she could trust. Someone who was kind and decent and honest. Someone whose personal code of honour meant he would never pressure her into anything before she was ready.

She *had* kissed him. Once. In his car, when she had needed a ruse so the Sewells wouldn’t suspect she was following them. It wasn’t really a kiss; more an occupational fringe benefit. But it had been enough that, ever since, she’d hoped there would be a repeat.

But there hadn’t been and now she wasn’t sure there ever would be.

They’d had a total of seven days together. Seven meagre days. And on their last day together, she had barely acknowledged his presence.

Lois groaned again and rested her head in the arch of her arms.

The door unlocked, and Nigel St John sauntered into the cell. “Ms Lane,” he said.

She looked up at him, keeping her face blank.

“Clark Kent was shot dead earlier this evening,” he said soullessly. “That’s what happens to reporters who pry into other people’s business.”

An icy shaft plunged through Lois’s heart. She stared at St John’s slightly stooped back as he left.

The lock of the door resonated in her ears.

Clark.

Lois couldn’t move, couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t utter a sound.

Her heart thumped painfully. Tiny, darting icicles of pain scythed across the taut skin of her fingers, her hands, and up her arms.

Her dry eyes began to burn, and she forced herself to blink. She slumped back against the cold wall.

She needed air. With a breath that lifted her shoulders, she inhaled.

The image of Clark — lifeless, bleeding, dead — rammed into her imagination, and an involuntary moan escaped from her quivering lips.

Clark.

Her heart cried out for him, but there was no answer.

Lex Luthor smiled at the monitor with immense satisfaction.

Lane’s traumatised response had been as genuine as he had ever witnessed. It was far too raw, too innate, too instinctive, to be a reaction to the passing of a meaningless colleague.

Lois Lane was a smart woman.

Kent dead meant St John had discovered Kent was on his trail and had dealt with the danger.

Kent dead meant she had no hope of rescue, no hope of life

beyond the next few hours.

Kent dead meant she was entirely alone and at the mercy of a heartless murderer.

Luthor sipped his wine, watching with morbid fascination as Lois Lane faced the certainty of her impending demise.

Sure now that it was St John who was being hunted, Luthor picked up the remote control and returned it to the drawer. He glanced at his watch and switched the monitor from the cell camera to the warehouse camera.

Delivery was imminent.

St John walked in, his face impassive and his hands clasped behind his back. Together the two men watched the monitor.

Clark, now dressed in his blue suit and with the red cape fluttering in the breeze, heard the approaching truck. He hovered in the darkness as it backed into the warehouse.

He flew to the top floor of the LexCorp building, landed on the balcony, and strode into the room.

Luthor and St John looked up from the monitor.

Clark darted to the men, picked up both of them, and deposited them in the centre of the large room.

“Mr Luthor,” he said. “Mr St John.”

The initial shock on Luthor’s face was replaced by an arrogant smirk. “So they’ve resorted to a costume party act,” he said. “When all else has failed ...” His eyes flickered to St John.

St John moved quickly.

But Clark was quicker.

He pushed St John back against Luthor. In less than a flash, he disconnected a computer cable and tied the two men together, their arms pinned to their sides. He stood back, his arms crossed and his shoulders back. “If you move so much as a muscle, I’ll apply heat,” he warned.

Luthor’s hand inched towards the inside of his jacket. Clark aimed and fired a spurt of heat. Luthor’s hand shot back.

St John twitched. Clark repeated the dose, this time aimed at St John’s hand. The Englishman lurched, nearly causing both himself and Luthor to lose balance.

Luthor began angrily pounding behind him at St John, verbal abuse and curses flowing freely. In the midst of the chaos, his hand again approached his pocket. Clark fired two heat darts.

Luthor shook his hand while he regarded Clark with rabid abhorrence. “To think I finally get taken down by a mutant,” he sneered. His hand edged towards his pocket again.

“This is for Janet Thorp,” Clark said.

He took a deep breath and blew at Luthor’s right hand. It went frosty white, and Luthor stared at it, aghast. He began trying to clench it, hoping to work away the numbness.

“That’s about fifty degrees,” Clark informed him calmly. “I can drop it to below freezing — which will probably do irreparable nerve damage.”

Fearful, stark realisation flooded Luthor’s eyes.

The door crashed open, but Clark’s attention did not waver from the two men tied back to back. A deluge of armed police flowed through the door. They surrounded Luthor and St John, their weapons poised. Last in was Henderson.

With his left hand, Luthor dived for his pants’ pocket. Clark blew, and Luthor’s hand stopped in midair, frozen, almost literally.

With a blur that couldn’t be tracked, Clark relieved both men of everything except their clothes. He handed the contents of their pockets to Henderson.

“Thanks,” Henderson said.

“Are you right to take it from here?” Clark asked.

Henderson grinned. “Yep,” he said. “The computer guys will be here in less than two minutes. Luthor’s secrets will be hidden no longer.”

Clark walked to the balcony and flew away.

He had delicate peace talks to negotiate.

Lois was jarred from her cloud of anguish by the sound of the door being unlocked. She watched as the thug shoved Franklin Hodge into the room. Hodge was bleeding profusely from his swollen, distorted face. His left hand was cradling his right wrist.

The thug snatched away Hodge’s left hand and his right hand hung at a sickening angle. Lois swallowed against the rising tide of nausea. After cuffing Hodge’s uninjured wrist, the thug left the room.

Hodge slowly bent his knee and pressed it against his chest to provide some support for his wrist. His head slumped against the wall.

“Franklin?” Lois said as horror seethed inside her. “Why did they do this to you?”

“The usual,” he said flatly. “They wanted information.”

She couldn’t voice her fears for Clark. While they remained unspoken, she could keep her grief imprisoned in the depths of her mind. “Why didn’t you give it to them?” she asked. “I mean, it’s probably against secret agent rules or whatever, but it would have been better than this. Anything would be better than this.”

Hodge opened one eye. The other was swollen closed. His face was pallid and his mouth crinkled in pain. “I don’t *know* anything,” he insisted. “I was sent in as an employee and told to find out what I could about the layout of this building.”

“So they caught you snooping in the tunnels, too?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t get past Luthor’s office. I don’t know how, but they knew who I was. My cover lasted less than three minutes.”

“If I’d printed those photos from Smallville,” Lois said thoughtfully, “this would be my fault.”

“If you’d printed those photos,” he retorted darkly, “I wouldn’t be here.”

Lois looked at him, aware of a disconcerting inclination to apologise — although she couldn’t have stated precisely what she had done wrong.

Except being indifferent to how doing her job might affect other people.

But that was what made her such a good reporter — her fearlessness, her determination, her dedication to get the story and print it, no matter what.

But it was a fair bet Clark Kent thought about the implications of what he wrote.

Had thought, she corrected herself. Had thought.

Part 6

Clark flew to Lois’s street, found a deserted spot, and returned to his regular clothes. He called her from the pay phone.

His anxiety escalated each moment his call wasn’t answered. He replaced the phone and x-rayed into her apartment. It was empty.

Lois! Where was she?

Sharp anxiety plunged into the pit of his stomach — anxiety and stabbing self-reproach. He should have known he wouldn’t be able to keep her out of this. She was Lois Lane. She hadn’t become the city’s top reporter without some highly developed instincts for a story. And some less-developed instincts for danger.

Clark stepped back into the darkness and spun into the suit. He flew to the LexCorp building and x-rayed through the ground. After tracing the tunnel through a couple of levels, he found an underground room adjacent to the shelter.

Then he saw her.

Handcuffed to the wall!

A flood of pure outrage surged through him and simultaneously, a corresponding appreciation for the outfit that gave him the freedom to use his powers openly.

Without it, he couldn’t rescue Lois quickly — not without

subjecting Clark to a storm of questions.

With it, he could do the only thing that mattered.

“Thanks, Mom,” he mumbled as he torpedoed through the pavement.

Hodge closed his less-swollen eye, and Lois turned away as acidic comprehension blistered her insides. She should expect no mercy from her captors.

Her tears welled like a tsunami and cascaded down her cheeks like drenching rain.

Then, with a thunderous boom, huge chunks of concrete crashed to the floor, leaving a jagged hole in the ceiling. Lois recoiled against the wall. Through the hole came ... *something*. He landed as grey dust rose from the debris.

He had dark hair.

And a blue chest.

Red ‘S’.

On a yellow background.

Blue sleeves.

Red briefs.

Blue tights.

Red boots.

Red briefs with a yellow belt.

On the *outside*.

What *was* this?

He was beside her in two blurred steps, and Lois backed further into the cold wall. She gaped up at him as he towered above her.

He crouched beside her. “Are you all right?” he asked in a deep, authoritative voice.

She didn’t move.

He grasped the chains that connected the cuffs to the wall, and with a quick movement, snapped them.

Snapped them.

He pushed his thumbs under the cuffs and peeled them open as easily as if they were paper. They fell to the concrete with a jingly metallic sound.

He gently helped her to her feet. She stood unsteadily, rubbing her bruised wrists. He leant her against the wall, his hands hovering until he was sure she wouldn’t fall. Then he turned his attention to Hodge.

The ... whatever ... whoever ... saw Hodge’s arm and looked around the cell. Seeing it bare, he reached for his cape and ripped a rough triangle from the bottom of it. Quickly — but given Hodge didn’t scream in pain, he must have both been skilled and gentle — he eased the broken arm into the makeshift sling. He then released Hodge’s other arm and helped him stand.

His eyes rested on Lois. “Don’t be afraid,” he said softly. “The police have Luthor. You’re safe now.”

“Wh ... what a ... bout S ... S ... St John?” she asked, shaking uncontrollably.

“They have him, too,” he assured her. “No one else will hurt you.”

He picked up Hodge and simply elevated off the ground and floated through the hole in the ceiling.

Lois wilted against the wall and tried to steady her still-quivering body. Could this possibly be the Sewells’ alien?

He broke through concrete.

He shattered steel.

He flew.

But ... he was someone else’s headline. She had no desire to write another story. Not ever.

A minute later the ... him ... in the cape ... ripped cape ... was back. “Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes,” she lied.

He stepped closer. “Did he hurt you?”

She refused to give in to the temptation to shrink into the

wall. “Do you know Clark K ... ” Just saying his name brought burning renewal to her torment.

“He’ll be up there,” he said, indicating through the hole.

Visions of Clark’s dead body blitzed her again. “They sh ... sh ... shot ... ” She couldn’t say it.

The stranger’s hand gently gripped on her convulsing shoulder. “Clark’s fine,” he said quietly. “They didn’t shoot him.”

Her eyes rocketed to his face. “F ... f ... fine?”

He nodded. “Let me get you out of here, and you can see for yourself.” He lifted her effortlessly into his arms. She stiffened as her body came into contact with his broad chest. “Don’t be afraid,” he said in a deep voice that was inexplicably soothing. “It’s over; you’re safe now.”

They floated up, through the hole in the ceiling and beyond, until they reached ground level. He placed her down as if she were exceptionally fragile. Lois looked around expectantly. She saw a few groups of police, but skimmed over them as soon as she realised Clark wasn’t with them. “Where is he?” she whimpered.

“He’ll be here soon.”

She folded her arms tight against her chest, trying to suppress the whole-body tremor threatening to overwhelm her.

Suddenly, she felt a wandering warmth slide from her shoulders to her feet. It seemed to be coming from *him*.

“Is that you?” she said with chilly suspicion.

“You looked cold,” he stated steadily.

“So you ... just ... emit heat? Like some flying nuclear reactor?”

He folded his arms across his chest. “I can turn it on and off,” he explained easily, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “It comes from my eyes.”

Now Lois was sure he wasn’t human. “Are you an alien?” she asked.

“I’m ... someone who has come to help.”

Her questions fell into line like well-drilled soldiers. “You’re staying?”

“I’ll be around.”

“Where did you come from?”

“Honestly?” he said. “I don’t know for sure.”

“Two scientists recently claimed they had found a spaceship and had evidence there was a baby in it. Was that you?”

“I haven’t seen the spaceship they claimed to have,” he said. “I do know they tried to use their claims to stir up fear in people and blackmail the government.”

“Do we have anything to fear from you?”

“Not unless you’re Luthor or someone else wanting to hurt others.”

That seemed believable. After all, he’d rescued her, and apparently, Luthor had been arrested. “What else can you do?”

“I’m strong and fast and invulnerable.”

“Invulnerable to what?” she fired at him.

“Everything.”

“How long have you been here?”

“A while.”

“Have you helped before?”

“In other places. Where a stranger turned up and used his powers to help.”

“That was you?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes dropped the length of him. “I’d remember that outfit.”

“It’s new. I don’t want to be a stranger any longer.”

“What’s your name?”

Until now, he had answered impassively, but this question seemed to strike some place deeper. “Whatever you want to call me,” he said after a slight hesitation.

“You don’t have a name?”

“I don’t know what it is.”

Lois felt a hint of empathy, but quelled it. “I’m a reporter,” she informed him, expecting him to revert to immediate retreat.

He looked around. “Looks like you got yourself an exclusive.”

None of his answers had been less than mind-blowing, but this one stopped her cold. “So it’s OK if I run the story?” she asked, faltering. “I mean ... you’re not a secret or anything?”

He glanced down. “Do I look like I’m trying to stay inconspicuous?”

She stared at him blankly, her momentum exhausted. Insistent, brook-no-argument need consumed her. She needed Clark. And she needed him now. “Take me to Clark,” she begged.

He nodded behind her. “He’s just around that corner.”

She turned away from her rescuer, expecting to see Clark. When he wasn’t there, she paused, grimly fighting the shattering prospect that the alien had lied.

Then Clark rounded the corner and ran towards her.

Clark!

Lois cried out his name and used the final reserves of her energy to propel herself into his arms. He pinned her against the haven of his strong, warm body.

“Lois,” he breathed. “Lois.”

She clung to him for a long time — long enough for the cool night air to penetrate her light clothing. She unfolded her arms from his neck and slipped them around his waist, under his jacket. His warmth, so gloriously alive, permeated her body. She laid her head against his chest and listened to his heart beating strongly.

Just because she could.

Fifteen minutes ago, she had thought she would never see him again. Never hold him again. A tear squeezed from her eye and ran down her cheek. His thumb brushed it away with such tenderness that her tears threatened again. “He warmed me, too,” she said into his chest. “But this is so much better.”

Countless heartbeats later, he put his hands on her shoulders and eased her back so he could examine her. “Did they hurt you?” he asked. His tone was tender, but she sensed a restrained river of rage.

“Not much.”

Clark took her arms from behind his back and examined her wrists. He frowned when he saw the bracelets of bruising left by the cuffs. He lifted her wrists to his lips and kissed them individually. He replaced her hands under his jacket again and brushed aside her hair. He stared at her bump and then leant forward and caressed it with the lightest of lingering kisses. “Anywhere else?” he asked softly.

“Is there anywhere else I would like you to kiss me?”

He swallowed. “I meant, ‘Is there anywhere else you’re hurt?’” A little smile flirted around his mouth. “But I like your version better.”

She lifted her fingertip to her mouth. “Here?”

She heard his quick intake of breath. She saw his eyes converge on her lips and his tongue glide across his top lip. With heart-stopping slowness, Clark leant forward and captured her mouth with his.

He moved back the tiniest fraction and then sought her again, more definite this time. One arm cradled her against his body, while the other hand massaged her neck, working in tandem with his mouth.

Lois’s world melted away. There was nothing but Clark — his broad body, his warmth, his gentle hands, his skilful mouth. When he drew away, she collapsed forward onto his chest, and his arms cocooned her again.

His heart was thundering, loud and fast.

Lois’s thoughts returned to the stranger in tights and relief washed over her. Now he was here, no one could suspect Clark.

She tightened her arms around his waist. “Did you see the alien?” she asked.

Clark Kent had kissed Lois Lane.

That, in itself, was amazing.

But the fact that she had kissed him back, had encouraged him to go deeper into the sweet softness of her mouth, had even feathered the tip of her tongue along his top lip — that was what had blasted every rational thought from Clark’s mind.

After the timelessness of their kiss, she’d nestled into his chest. He knew his heart was thumping, knew she would know how cosmically this had affected him, but he had no interest in concealing it.

“Did you see the alien?” she asked.

His heart accelerated, but this time he did control it. He had seen no recognition in her face when he’d been dressed in the Suit. “Yes,” he said, carefully keeping his tone steady.

“He got me out of there. And Franklin Hodge, too.”

He, not you. Clark didn’t know whether he felt relief or regret.

His hand rested on the side of her head, wanting nothing more than to keep her there forever. The thought of Luthor, or anyone, hurting her had caused a volcano of protectiveness to erupt inside him.

Reluctantly, he distanced them slightly, loving that her hands remained on his chest. “I’m taking you home,” he said, looking around for a cab.

“No,” she said. “We should get the story.”

“Lo-is.”

She opened her mouth, but her protest waned as her body shivered.

Clark took off his jacket and put it around her shoulders. “I already have most of the story,” he said. “You have some, too. I’ll get the rest from Henderson as soon as I know you’re all right.”

“We need to get this in the morning edition.”

“We will,” Clark promised. “But right now, it’s either your apartment or the hospital.” He gently grasped her chin and raised it slightly so he could look directly into her beautiful, tear-doused eyes. “Please, Lois,” he pleaded.

“My apartment,” she said with a meekness that sent a chill through his heart. What else had Luthor done to her?

He looked anxiously for a cab.

A police officer approached them. “Henderson says to offer you a ride.”

“Thanks,” Clark said before Lois could respond. He put his arm across her shoulders and shepherded her towards the police car.

In Lois’s apartment, Clark insisted she sit on her sofa while he called Perry. After he’d hung up, he came over, his concern for her strewn across his expression.

“Clark, I’m fine,” she assured him before he could ask any one of his barrage of questions.

He crouched beside her. “You were captured, hit, tied up, pushed around, and that’s just the physical stuff. *Please*, Lois ...” His voice quivered a little, and his eyes were as troubled as she’d ever seen them. “Please, Lois, I need to know for sure that you’re OK.”

Sudden comprehension torched her consciousness. This had wounded *him* — and in no small measure. Right now, he needed her as much as she needed him. She groaned at her own lack of insight.

“Lois, what’s wrong?” Clark said quickly.

She shaped her hand along the contour of his cheek. He had the very beginnings of stubble, dark and thick. She’d never seen him other than completely clean-shaven. She flexed her fingers so their tips could slide over his texture.

“Sorry,” he said. “Did I scratch you when I kissed you?”

“I didn’t notice,” she said truthfully.

“I’ll shave as soon as I can.”

“I like it,” she declared.

“You do?”

“I like your clean-shaven look, but this ...” Her fingers explored under his chin and along the ridges of his throat. “... this is kinda ruggedly cute.”

His eyebrows lifted, and a questioning grin smoothed some of the anxiety from his face. “Ruggedly cute?”

Lois laughed and pulled her hand away. “Come on, Kent, we have a story to write.” She stood up and turned on her computer.

He was still watching her with concern.

“When the story’s done, you can look after me as much as you like,” she promised. “Deal?”

Reluctantly, he nodded. “My notes are in my jacket,” he said.

She slipped his jacket from her shoulders and handed it to him. He took two sheets of paper from its internal pocket and offered them to her. “How about you write the story, and I’ll go to Henderson and find out the latest with Luthor?”

Lois looked at him in surprise. “You’re giving me your notes?”

“Lois, keeping you out of this was never about protecting *my* story. It was always about protecting you.” He looked away, his expression laden with disgust. “Not that I succeeded in any way.”

“Clark, what happened to me was *not* your fault.”

“I should have realised that I couldn’t keep you out of it.”

“Just know next time,” she said with a little smile as she took his notes. “Thanks.”

Clark put on his jacket. “I’ll be back soon,” he said. “Promise me you’ll stay here?”

She nodded.

They both stilled, a foot apart, yet bound together by feelings not yet fully explored. Did they part with a kiss or not? “Clark?” she said.

“Yes?” he asked — too abruptly.

Whatever else, they had to work together. They had to find some normality in a situation overburdened with suspended questions and jangled emotions. “I don’t suppose you could bring back coffee?” She grinned. “And a *chocolate croissant*?”

He caught her loaded emphasis and stared at her, eyebrows lifted speculatively.

“My computer doesn’t work without a *chocolate croissant* either,” she quipped.

A look of sheer incredulity spread slowly across his face. “Did you ...”

She giggled.

Clark pointed a long finger at her, aimed directly between her eyes, his expression stern, his eyes dancing. “You should be ashamed of yourself, Lane.”

“Just bring back the chocolate, Kent, and no one will get hurt.”

With a grin, he turned and left. Lois was still smiling long after he’d closed her door. She began reading his notes, wondering how it was going to be possible to work when all she wanted to do was count the minutes until he would be back.

Clark was alive!

And she loved him.

Clark waited in the now-familiar interview room at the police station. A few minutes later, Henderson walked in. He looked ten years younger.

“Kent,” he greeted warmly, his hand outstretched.

Clark shook his hand. “How’s it going?”

“Much of what we suspected has been confirmed. How’s Lois?”

“She’ll be all right, I think.”

“Tell her to come in and make a statement.”

Clark nodded. “Is there anything I can’t print?”

“Not about Luthor,” Henderson said with evident satisfaction. “The sooner his true character becomes public, the better I’m going to like it.”

“But?”

“I’m nothing more than the Metropolis Inspector who arrested Luthor, OK?”

Clark grinned. “You work undercover as a cop?”

Henderson contemplated Clark with an unfathomable look. “I just do what I do,” he said. “Definitions can be dangerous.”

“Will Hodge be all right?”

“His wrist is busted pretty badly, but he’ll be fine.”

“He’s the man you sent in, right?”

Henderson nodded.

“So Luthor knew Hodge’s identity?”

Henderson sighed. “Luthor knew just about everything — including things that should never have left this station.”

“I didn’t —”

“He knew way before I told you anything,” Henderson chuckled, and his face cleared. “Luthor’s convinced you’re a spy working for an international agency. He thinks you’re in Metropolis to track St John.”

Clark laughed. “I’m just a country reporter trying to make it in the big city.”

“Really?” Henderson said in a tone that hovered just short of disbelief.

“Can you prove Luthor wanted VX?”

“No,” the detective replied. “But we can prove he’s done business with that particular terrorist group in the past. We found the munitions he smuggled in.”

“Can you prove he killed Janet Thorp?”

“We know her signature on the sale contract was forged. It’s going to take a long time to put together all the evidence.”

“And David Crawford?”

“We have iron-clad evidence that Luthor organised and paid for Crawford’s death.” Henderson stood. “I have a thousand things to do,” he said. “There’ll be follow-up details coming out for days.”

“Thanks for your time,” Clark said.

“Thank you,” Henderson said. “And thank the ‘S’ man as well.” They shook hands again. “Will you be staying in Metropolis?”

“Absolutely,” Clark said.

Henderson seemed mildly surprised. “If a hick from Kansas ever needs the help of a Metropolis Inspector, you know where to come.”

“Thanks,” Clark said. “Thanks a lot.”

Clark couldn’t contain his smile as he neared Lois’s apartment, juggling coffees and two hearty hamburgers.

When Lois opened the door with a welcoming smile, his heart did a perfectly executed forward flip.

She eyed his plunder. “Where’s the chocolate?” she demanded, her shining eyes belying the seriousness of her tone.

“Hackers don’t deserve chocolate,” he said firmly. He handed her the coffee and a hamburger. “But I thought you’d probably be hungry.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I’m starved.”

“I would have brought you a croissant,” he admitted half-apologetically. “Except there are no bakeries open at this time of night.”

She smiled around her first mouthful of hamburger.

Clark reached into his jacket pocket and offered her a Hershey’s Cookies and Crème candy bar.

She smiled delightedly as she took the bar. “You ... are something else.”

It was vague and cryptic, but her words, combined with her smile, filled Clark with overwhelming joy and hope — even better than the moment he'd realised he could fly. "How's our story?" he asked, knowing if he didn't say something, he'd still be staring at her with a glazed look of rapture when the Daily Planet hit the newsstands in the morning.

Together they ate, read what she had written, discussed, disagreed, contended, reached consensus, and crafted a story they both knew was outstanding.

"Lois?" Clark said as she sent it to Perry. "I think you should also write a story about the ... one who rescued you. Sort of an introduction."

"I don't know that much about him."

"You are currently the only reporter who has spoken with him. You should take advantage of that."

Lois opened the candy bar. "How did he know where we were?"

"He was working with Henderson."

"But how did he know precisely where we were underground? If he'd got it wrong, he could have killed us with falling rock."

"Apparently he looked through the ground and into the tunnels."

"Through the ground? He can see through concrete?" Lois bit into the candy bar. "He didn't tell me that. What else can he see through? Clothing?"

"I'm sure he wouldn't take advantage of his ability," Clark said quickly.

Lois smiled. "No Clark, *you* wouldn't take advantage, but not everyone is like you." She bit further into the candy bar. "He needs a name. We can't keep calling him the alien."

"Any ideas?"

"I wonder what the 'S' stands for," she mused.

"I don't know."

Lois offered him her bar. "Strong man?"

Clark hesitated, unsure if she really was OK with him biting from her bar. "Sounds all right."

She lifted the bar in his direction, repeating her offer. "He did bore a hole through the earth and broke through a concrete ceiling. Super-strong man?"

He bit a piece from her bar. "Too long, maybe?"

Lois licked a stray chocolate sliver from her finger. "Superman?"

Clark cleared his throat. The sight of her tongue flitting along her finger had his thought processes in disarray. "OK."

She smiled at him as she lifted the last piece of the candy bar towards his mouth. He opened obediently. As she popped it into his mouth, her fingers grazed against his lips. The candy was good, but her touch ... he was still recovering from that long after the chocolate had gone.

Lois finished her story about Superman and asked Clark to read it. They sent it to Perry, shut down her computer, turned off the main light, and turned on the lamp. She sank into her sofa and felt heavy fatigue infiltrate her body as the adrenalin seeped away.

Clark crouched beside her. "Show me your wrists," he said. "How's your head? Do you need anything? A pillow?"

"A pillow would be nice."

"From your bedroom?"

"No."

He gave her a questioning look.

"You'd make a good pillow," she noted conversationally.

Clark's reaction was one she had begun to anticipate. It was part disbelief, part delight, part indecision — and she found it irresistible. Offering him her candy bar had gotten the same response. Twice.

She giggled with the joy of knowing she had time — so much time — to elicit exactly that look on his face — over and over again.

Clark's heart thumped at her unambiguous invitation. He sat next to her, and she swivelled and leant back against him. Her head settled into the crook of his arm.

She took his hand in both of hers and looked directly at him. "Clark, I'm sorry I was so mean to you yesterday."

"I'm sorry I tried to keep you out of the story."

"Why were you so sure I'd get hurt?"

"I knew Luthor would be desperate. I believed he had killed before. I just couldn't stomach the thought of you anywhere near him."

Lois groaned.

"What?" he said, his anxiety surfacing again.

"My feature on Luthor. About how wonderful he is to fund the hospital. It's in the morning's edition."

Clark relaxed. "It's OK, Lois," he said. "Perry didn't put it in."

"Why not?"

"We both thought it would be wise, given the possible developments with Luthor."

Lois brought his hand to her mouth and dropped a soft kiss on the back of it. "Thanks."

Clark dragged his mind back to their conversation. "Did Luthor threaten you?"

"St John told me they'd killed you," she said flatly.

"Lois, I wasn't the one in danger," he rasped, again seeing her handcuffed to the wall.

She looked into his eyes. "I ... " Her chin quivered, and her tears sprung again. "I couldn't ... "

Clark tightened his arms around her and held her very close. "You're safe now," he said. "No one is going to hurt you."

After a long moment, she eased away from him. "It's not *my* safety I'm crying about," she said with a waterlogged smile as she swiped at her runaway tears.

He grasped her implication — and her need to climb out of her emotional quagmire. He answered her smile. "You still haven't told me exactly how you managed to *be* in Luthor's tunnel."

She squeezed his hand, wordlessly thanking him for his understanding. "I investigated," she informed him flippantly.

"You hacked into my computer," he accused. "And found my map."

"I didn't *hack* in," she defended with a giggle. "I deduced your password."

"Is there a difference?"

"You bet there is."

"How long did it take you?" he asked with an attempt at weary resignation.

"Not long. Less than two minutes."

Clark grinned, giving up trying to pretend he was anything other than captivated. "What else did you think of? And don't even try to tell me you got it with your first guess."

"Smallville."

He snorted. "As if I'd choose that. It's way too obvious."

"Applepie; chocolate; threesugars."

"Lois!" he exclaimed.

"What?"

"Applepie was one of my passwords in Smallville."

She grinned, her eyes shining. "Guess I just know you too well."

"No fair," Clark said, trying to sound offended. Except with that mischievous, gleeful look on her face, it was impossible not to grin back.

"I'll make it fair," she said. "I'll give you three guesses at my

password.”

“And if I get it, you’ll tell me?”

“Yep,” she agreed. “But I’ll change it tomorrow.”

Clark thought for a moment. “Pulitzer,” he said.

“Nope.”

“Scoop.”

“Wrong track completely, Kent.”

“Give me a hint.”

“OK. I changed it three and a half weeks ago.”

“When you got back from Smallville?”

“Yep.”

“So it has something to do with the Sewells?” he said. “Or Hodge?”

“Nope.”

“It has something to do with me?” he said in disbelief.

Her expression confirmed that it did, and Clark could do nothing but grin down at her and slowly shake his head, wondering how it was possible to be so enchanted by someone, so totally sure he wanted to be with her every moment for the rest of his life. “Hick,” he said. “Country bumpkin, yokel, backwater — “

“Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! You lose.”

“Farmboy.”

“No. And you’ve had your three guesses.”

“Tell me,” he demanded, knowing his expression diluted any possible seriousness from his words.

“A girl’s allowed secrets, Kent,” Lois said. “You, on the other hand, are going to have to be a little less obvious. If you want to keep any secrets from me, that is.”

He should tell her. She’d given him the perfect opening, and he should just go in. He should say, “Lois, I do have a secret ...” But he couldn’t. Not when she was lying so snugly across his lap. Not when he felt closer to her than he ever had before. Not when he too well remembered the sting of her disapproval yesterday. Not when their banter was easing her mind away from the horrors she’d endured at Luthor’s hands.

Not when the woman he loved was so happy and relaxed.

Part 7

Lois’s fingertip traced around the hills and valleys of Clark’s knuckles. “You know, I’ve been thinking,” she said.

Uh oh. “Uhm?”

“How did the alien — *Superman* — know we needed his help? I know he had contact with Henderson, but how did that contact happen? How did he just happen to be in Metropolis right when we needed him?”

“Lucky co-incidence?” Clark offered lamely.

“Clark, there’s a common factor,” she insisted.

“There is?”

“Who knew there could be an alien and also knew about Luthor?”

Clark caught his breath and slowed his galloping heartbeat. “What common factor?” he asked, doing his best to sound oblivious.

“Think, Clark. Who’s the common link?”

“I’m too tired to think.”

“Hodge,” Lois proclaimed triumphantly. “Franklin Hodge. I think he knew there *was* an alien in the Sewells’ spaceship, and somehow he found him and got him here.”

“Could be,” Clark said.

“Except Hodge showed no recognition when Superman arrived. And Hodge was sure we were going to die. So maybe he didn’t know.” She yawned. “But he thought we were bugged, so maybe he did know.”

“Perhaps you should try to relax,” Clark said. “You have to be tired.”

Lois sat up suddenly. “If he *did* come in the spaceship the Sewells found, he might have grown up in Smallville.”

“Hodge?”

She playfully swatted his arm. “No, silly. Superman.”

“Oh.”

“So did you ever see him?” Lois asked eagerly. “I mean, was there anyone else who didn’t have a birth certificate?”

“Lois,” Clark said. “I don’t know what city kids do during their lunch break, but I can tell you that we never sat around and discussed our birth certificates.”

She grinned. “Was there anyone ... different ... at your school?”

“We’re all different in our own way. Just some of us hide it better than others.”

“Flying to school is hard to hide.”

“I can assure you I never saw anyone fly to school,” Clark said, sure his attempts to hide his discomfort were floundering badly.

“Of course, he may not have stayed in Smallville.” She thought for a moment. “We don’t even know for sure he came in that particular spaceship. Or any spaceship. I asked him, but he didn’t answer.”

“Lois?”

“Yeah?”

“He is so different that even though he says he has come to help, there are going to be people who don’t trust him; people who allow his differences to feed their fears.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that if you believe he really is one of the good guys, maybe you ... we ... all of us at the Planet should encourage people to give him a chance.”

“By not focusing on his differences, but focusing on how he uses those differences?”

Clark nodded.

“What if we’re wrong?” Lois said. “What if he really is here to harm us?”

“Could he possibly be more of a threat than Luthor?”

“I suppose not.” She met his eyes. “You think he’s genuine, don’t you?”

“I’m hopelessly biased,” Clark said. “He brought about the arrest of the person who had kidnapped you and was planning who-knows-what. Then he smashed into Luthor’s dungeon and brought you back to me.”

“It’s too late to recall my story.”

“Your story is fine. You concentrated on what you knew and left alone what you didn’t.”

“I could have been more grateful,” Lois said. “I didn’t even thank him.”

“Your story was objective and factual. I think it is exactly right for the situation.”

Lois was quiet for a few moments. “You’re right, Clark,” she said. “We should realise that anything we print about Superman could have massive implications.” She stifled a yawn.

“You’re tired,” Clark said. “You should get some sleep.”

“I doubt I’m going to sleep on this sofa.”

“Try anyway.”

“And if I do fall asleep what are you going to do?” She grinned at him. “Just sit there until you cramp up?”

“No, I’ll put you in your bed and leave.”

A few minutes later, her fingers stilled on his hand and her breathing deepened. Clark didn’t move for a long time. Then he carefully stood and carried her to her bed. He removed her shoes, placed the bedcovers over her, and kissed her forehead.

He stood back, and his eyes lingered on her face.

He’d found her! All his life, he’d feared there would be no one for him. But he’d found her. And he loved her. *So* much.

It seemed possible ... more than possible ... that she had feelings for him.

Clark smiled at that thought.

He wanted to tell her. *I love you, Lois*, he mouthed silently. But was it fair to her to say those words before he said the infinitely more scary ones? *I'm an alien, Lois*.

His smile faded.

Their relationship — still so new and vulnerable — had a myriad of obstacles and complexities.

Most of which Lois didn't even suspect.

The wheels he'd set in motion couldn't be easily reversed. Of everything he'd done, only stopping Luthor brought him any peace.

The rest remained a cesspool of trepidation.

And if he was honest — he couldn't see any way it could possibly work out well.

Lois woke and saw it was mid-morning.

She lay still and let her mind work through each astonishing revelation.

Lex Luthor was a criminal. A murderer, a kidnapper, a drug dealer.

An alien — possibly the Sewells' alien — had come to Metropolis. He could fly and wore an out-there suit.

Clark could kiss. Boy, could he kiss.

And most surprising of all — Lois Lane was in love.

She showered and dressed and was about to leave for the Planet when a knock sounded on her door.

It was Clark, looking concerned for her well-being and unsure of how to greet her. She gave him a friendly hug.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Great, I slept really well."

He brushed back the hair from her forehead and frowned.

"It's much better," she assured him. "Come on, we should get to the Planet."

He pulled the morning edition from his jacket pocket. "We made Page One," he said.

She chuckled as she skimmed their story. "I doubt there was any serious competition to a story involving the fall of Luthor and the debut appearance of Superman."

"Perry can't wipe the smile from his face," Clark said. "No other paper has even a sniff in their morning edition."

"I love it when they have to play catch-up." Lois considered him for a moment. "You did well, Clark, really well."

He thrust his hands into his pockets, combining the movement with a small shrug. "Thanks," he said.

"Luthor had the whole city convinced he was a hero." She grimaced. "Even me."

"I had fresh eyes. Sometimes that makes it easier to see clearly."

"I guess this means Metropolis doesn't get a children's hospital."

"Maybe we should talk to Sarah Crawford," he suggested.

Lois smiled. "Maybe *you* should talk to Sarah Crawford. She seemed very partial to your beautiful brown eyes."

"It isn't Sarah I'm hoping to impress," he said.

Lois determinedly turned away, knowing those eyes would melt all over her heart if she allowed herself to be caught in his gaze. She patted his shoulder. "Come on, partner. We have work to do. I'm sure there are follow-up stories waiting for us."

He grinned. "Partner?"

"This time, I was glad to have a partner."

"And next time?"

"That's up to Perry."

"But?"

"But I wouldn't be completely against the idea." She closed her fist around his tie and pulled him closer. "But if you *ever* push me out of a story again . . ."

"I won't," he murmured, his eyes on her mouth. "I promise."

Her phone rang, and they both groaned. Lois answered it. It

was Perry.

"Lois," Perry said. "Sarah Crawford wants to talk to you. Can you and Clark get over there now?"

"Sure, Perry."

She returned the phone, smiled at Clark, and together, they set out in pursuit of their next story.

Sarah Crawford answered the door herself. She looked questioningly at Lois. "I asked to see Clark Kent," she said stiffly.

"Lois is my partner," Clark said quickly. "We work together."

Sarah's face broke into a shrewd smile that included both of them. "Lucky Lois," she murmured.

They followed her and sat on her sofa. "I can't face a press conference," she began. "So I'd like you to announce that Metropolis will get its children's hospital. It will be called the David Crawford Memorial Hospital." She fought back her tears, masking them with a small cough.

"That's wonderful, Mrs Crawford," Lois said softly. "Thank you."

"It will be a joint venture between the Crawford Family and the City. Off the record . . ." She glanced at Clark. "Off the record . . . the details are very complex and yet to be worked out, but it may be legally possible to use a large portion of Luthor's dirty money to contribute to the building of the hospital."

"Sounds fair," Clark said.

"I'll have my lawyer continually update you," Sarah said.

"Thank you," Lois said.

"I'd like to thank you," Sarah said. "*Both* of you — and Superman — for helping bring Luthor to justice. It doesn't bring back David, but it makes a difference. A big difference."

Her tears threatened again, and Lois felt a surge of sympathy for Sarah Crawford. For what she'd lost. Impulsively, Lois leant over and briefly squeezed the widow's hand.

Sarah looked shocked initially, but then she smiled weakly at Lois. "Do you have any problems with a secret identity?" she asked.

"No," Lois said uncertainly.

"Maybe you and I could go out occasionally, and have some fun," Sarah suggested. "But I would have to be incognito. It just wouldn't do for the Crawford Matriarch to be seen being frivolous."

"I'd like that," Lois said, realising with some surprise that it was the truth.

"Good." Sarah stood. "I'm looking forward to an on-going relationship between the Daily Planet and the DC Memorial Hospital."

"DC?" Clark asked.

Sarah smiled wistfully. "That's what I called David when we were alone."

As Lois and Clark walked towards the Jeep, she brushed the lingering tears from her eyes. "That is just so sad," she said.

Clark put his arm around her and pulled her close. "Now who's getting cut up by a story?" he teased gently.

"But she's not a story, she's a person." Lois stilled as her words ricocheted through her mind. "Aggh," she said in mock horror. "I'm turning into Clark Kent."

"Don't ever do that," he said with a soft chuckle. "I like you just the way you are."

Two days later, Lois approached a nurse in the men's ward of the Metropolis Hospital. "I'd like to visit Franklin Hodge," she said.

"We don't have a patient by that name," the nurse said.

"Has he been released already?" Lois asked in surprise.

The nurse checked the computer. "We haven't had a patient called Hodge recently."

“Oh.” Lois covered her confusion with a quick smile. “I must have the wrong name.” She leant forward and lowered her voice. “I was asked by a friend of a friend to visit him because none of his family live locally. Do you have a patient who has had very few visitors?”

“There is one man,” the nurse mused. “Other than a couple of police officers, he’s had no visitors at all.”

Lois smiled. “That would be him. Could you tell me which room, please?”

“Fifteen.”

Lois thanked her and headed for Room Fifteen.

Franklin Hodge was languishing on his bed, looking mind-numbingly bored. He started when she entered the room. “Lois,” he said, quickly straightening his crumpled bed covers with his left hand.

His facial swelling had mostly receded, but the bruising was an array of gaudy colours. She glanced to the name above his bed. “Luke Allen?” she said with a teasing grin. “Have we met before?”

He shrugged with a doleful smile. “Would you believe me if I told you that is actually my name? My real name?”

“No,” she said frankly.

“It is.”

Lois sat on the seat next to his bed. “No mysterious disguise? No spy —”

“I’m finished with all that,” he said tonelessly.

“You’re finished? Because of what they did to you?”

He shook his head. “Before I went into Luthor’s, I knew it would be my last assignment.”

That shocked her. The ‘Invisible Aide’ was retiring? “Why?”

“Partly because of the mess I made in Smallville. Partly because my heart isn’t in it anymore.”

“Why not?”

He hesitated, the fingers of his left hand fiddling with the cast on his right arm. “Because you reminded me of the cost of doing what I do.”

“Like a wife, a family?” she guessed. “And a real life?”

“Yep.”

Lois was taken aback that anything she’d said or done could have caused such a life-changing decision. “How did I remind you?”

Hodge stared ahead. “You put him before your story. I’d become so engrossed in the big picture, so proficient at the chess-master mentality, so good at convincing myself that as long as the king was protected, it didn’t matter if we lost a few pawns along the way.”

Lois recognised a trace of herself in his disillusionment and shuffled uncomfortably.

“And then there was Smallville,” Hodge continued disconsolately. “Those photos . . . that was so unbelievably careless.”

“I guess photos of you on the front page of the Daily Planet would have destroyed the whole ‘Invisible Aide’ persona?”

“Invisible Aide?” Hodge’s face broke into a sad smile. “I like that.” Too quickly, he sobered. “Those photos would have finished my career. First, we protect our cover. Even before our lives. Because if our cover is blown, it probably won’t be just *our* lives that are lost.”

He dropped into silent contemplation for a few moments. Then he looked up at her with a cheeriness that Lois felt sure was solely for her benefit. “I’ve been reading the Planet. The arrival of Superman has been a boon for business.”

She smiled. “It certainly hasn’t been dull.”

“Do you think he’s the alien baby the Sewells claimed to have?”

“Do you?”

Hodge reached for the triangle above his bed and used it to

reposition himself. “I don’t know,” he said, looking directly at her. “And that’s the absolute truth.”

“Did you know about Luthor?” Lois asked.

Hodge shrugged. “I knew more than I was willing to say in the cell.”

“Thanks for letting me know we were bugged.”

He grinned, and it seemed almost genuine. “When you started yapping about Clark Kent being sent here to bring down St John, I nearly had a fit.”

“But you caught up pretty quickly.”

“Yeah.” He looked at her, a little shyly. “We made a good team,” he said quietly.

Lois broke away from his eye contact. “I’ve been thinking about how you said I looked so assured that time in your hotel room,” she said. “Do you know why I came in so business-like and snappy?”

Hodge half smiled. “That’s just you?”

“I was stung when you said I only thought I had power. I was determined to show you that I could play with the big boys, too. Those photos gave me an advantage. And I intended to show you I could use it.”

His mouth twitched. “But it wasn’t just that,” he asserted.

“What else?”

“I’m trained to observe people, Lois,” Hodge said. “To determine their real motivation, despite what they’re saying.”

“So?” she said defensively.

“So you did it for *him*. For Clark Kent.”

“And his family, too,” she stressed quickly.

There was a definite hint of teasing in Hodge’s look. “But mostly for him.”

“Mostly for him,” she agreed.

A momentary grin flickered across Hodge’s face again, as if her admission was something of a victory for him.

“What are you going to do when you get out of here?” Lois asked.

“Visit my folks.”

She’d never thought of Franklin Hodge as having folks.

“That’s nice.”

“I haven’t seen them for ten years,” he said with a depth of regret that shook her.

“Why not?”

“When you never know if you’re being tracked, watched, followed — home is the one place you avoid.”

“They’ll be so pleased to see you.”

He sighed. “If they remember me.”

“I’m sure they will.” Lois stood. “I should get back to work.”

“Thanks for coming,” he said. She was surprised at the depth of appreciation in his eyes.

“Take care, Franklin.”

He grinned.

“Or should I call you ‘Luke’?”

“Franklin’s fine,” he said. “I like it from you.”

For a split second, she rested her hand on his uninjured one before walking out and leaving him alone.

Two weeks later, Clark sat at his desk, watching Lois.

Watching Lois.

He dragged his eyes back to his monitor with a smile. He’d lost count of the number of times he’d found himself watching Lois.

Without his ability to write very fast, he would have lost his job by now. Between watching Lois and being Superman, there hadn’t been a lot of time for other things.

The past two weeks had been like a dream.

He’d worked with Lois, which, had there been no other component to their relationship, would have been an experience in itself. Professionally, she was good — incredibly good.

He'd relaxed with Lois, a lunch here, a coffee there; occasional moments of closeness as they'd tracked a story together.

He'd kissed Lois. Not at the Planet, not when they were working — but after he'd walked her home or when he saw her to her Jeep.

But it wasn't enough.

He had the world, but he wanted more.

Two things more.

Two things he knew were contradictory. The more he advanced one, the more diminished became the likelihood of the other.

But he couldn't tell her he was Superman in the newsroom, so ...

Resolutely he sprang from his desk and walked, as casually as he could manage, to her desk. He pulled up a nearby chair and sat across from her. "What are you working on?"

She looked up with her trademark smile, and his heart began to dance. She held up the front page of the morning edition of the Daily Planet. It was — quite literally — covered in Superman.

Four pictures, the largest — one of him lifting a de-railed train back onto the tracks — covering four columns, one major headline, three lesser ones — and all about Superman.

"He's made quite an impression," Lois said.

"So it seems."

"Perry wants me to write a story about the effect Superman has had on Metropolis in just two weeks."

"Ouch."

She grinned at him. "I can be nice." She opened the paper to the classifieds. "Have you seen this?"

Clark glanced dismissively at the pages of small print.

Lois flicked through page after page. "Seven pages of Personal Notices," she said in amazement. "And only five notices start with a word other than 'Superman'." She rested her finger on a random spot. "How's this one? 'Superman, here's my number, here's my name, with your dreamy eyes, come and heat my flame.'"

Clark put his hand across his chin and watched her.

Lois put down the paper. "Do you think he does?"

"Does what?"

"Do you think he uses the notices like a phone directory whenever he wants ... company? It's not like he lacks for options."

"I doubt it."

"Why?" Lois said. "He's male. He has ... assets. Why not take advantage?"

"Lois," Clark said. "Some men *do* think with their brains."

Lois grinned mischievously. "But is Superman one of them?"

"I'm sure there would be other considerations," Clark said, desperately searching for a way to get the topic off Superman's sex life.

"Such as?"

"Have you seen the front page of today's Inquisitor?"

Lois laughed. "Ah, yes," she said. "At last count there were two women claiming their newborn babies were the result of a liaison with Superman two weeks ago and they'd had superpowered pregnancies, eight women claiming Superman is the husband or boyfriend or lover who walked out on them sometime in the past and thirteen women claiming they have spent at least one night in a 'love nest' with the Man of Steel."

Clark rolled his eyes. "Do you believe them?"

"No. But that doesn't mean I think he would never take what's on offer."

"Are you planning to interview him for your story?"

"Probably not."

Clark raised his eyebrows. "You're not?"

"The last time I interviewed Metropolis's most elusive, most

enigmatic bachelor, what started with breakfast in Nantucket finished with handcuffs and a dungeon."

"If I remember correctly, it was Superman who got you *out* of the dungeon," Clark said with a smile. "It's not like you not to be chasing every angle."

"The story is more about the impact he's had, rather than him. Sort of a summary of his rescues, how he's helped, what he's done, and the follow-on effects of him being here." She grinned at him. "He lucked out seriously, didn't he?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, from where I sit, I'm about the only female in Metropolis under the age of eighty who isn't panting after Superman. But he's stuck with me writing the story."

"Why exactly is that?" Clark asked with a wide grin.

"Because Perry told me to."

"No, why are you the only —"

Lois leant over and squeezed his hand. A brief touch, but his response rummaged through his entire body long after her hand had left his. "I've wondered that myself," she said, her eyes alight with teasing.

Clark stared at her, his heart pounding. "Would you like to go out?"

She glanced at her watch. "Now? Where?"

"No! I mean ..." Clark leant closer, resolute. He looked directly into those beautiful jarrah-brown eyes. "Would you go out with me ... on a date?"

Her quick intake of breath petrified him. She hadn't been expecting this. Maybe he'd read her wrongly.

"A date?" she breathed. "Like an official *going out*?"

"Yes."

"What exactly do you have in mind?" she said. She laughed, and it sounded a little forced. "I probably don't understand dating Kansas-style."

"Dinner, somewhere very nice, taking a long time so we can talk and laugh and —"

"No, I mean ..." Her cheeks were tinged the prettiest pink.

"Why? Why are you asking me out on a date?"

"Because you're amazing, and I'm very —"

"No." Lois put her hand on his arm. "I wasn't fishing for compliments. I'm trying to ask what you see happening after the date."

Clark knew his face had deepened in colour. "Lois, I would never expect —"

"Not that either." She was fully blushing now. "Maybe we shouldn't even think about a date until we can actually communicate."

"Maybe we should practise communicating on our date."

She smiled. "OK, let's try again. I'm not asking for a life-long commitment ..."

Why not? Clark thought. *I would give it, right here, right now.*

"... nor do I expect you to know exactly how you feel ..."

Why not? I do.

"... I just need to know if you see this as the first of occasional outings between friends who work together ... or if you see this as the start of something ... significant ... exclusive ... life-changing."

"I'm hoping for the latter," Clark said earnestly.

"How many more Janet Thorps can you take before you realise Metropolis isn't your city?"

"I'll never be indifferent to people's pain, but Janet Thorp's death made me more certain than ever that my place is here in Metropolis." *With you.*

Lois considered him for a long moment. Then she smiled. "Yes," she said on a decisive sigh. "I would love to go on a date with you, Clark."

"Tonight?" he asked, hoping.

“Tomorrow.” She leant closer to him. “Tonight, I’m going to a movie with Sarah Crawford,” she whispered.

“OK.”

Lois put her hand on his arm. “Don’t be disappointed,” she said. “We’ll have the whole of tomorrow to anticipate it.”

“I’ll pick you up at 7:30?”

She smiled, unguarded and open, and it took his breath away. “I can’t wait,” she whispered.

“Neither can I,” Clark said.

THE END

A/N — Jarrah is a hard, beautiful brown timber, grown almost exclusively in Western Australia.

<http://www.naturallytimber.com.au/timber-details.html>