

Time to Love 3: Adrift

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Rated PG-13

Submitted October 2011

Summary: After their first date, Lois and Clark come back to her apartment, and things start to heat up. But then there's a knock at the door — a knock that changes everything.

Disclaimer — Most of the characters are not mine; occasional lines, themes, etc are not mine.

Warning — this story has WHAMs.

A huge thank you to IolantheAlias for her wonderful betaing and generous encouragement. My fics are always better because of your input. Also thanks for agreeing to go through it again as the GE.

Part 1

Lois Lane had been listening for the knock for over fifteen minutes, but when it came, her heart bounced with excitement.

She permitted herself the time for a final glance in the mirror. Her black dress accentuated her slender curves ... her make-up was subtle yet effective ... her hair curled at her shoulders, dark against the creaminess of the pearls at her throat. Satisfied, Lois hurried to the door.

She needlessly checked through the peephole. Needless because she *knew* it was her date. But it did grant her a moment to indulge in a calming breath.

She opened the door and saw Clark Kent standing there, looking ... There wasn't really a word to describe how he looked. If she used half a dictionary, she still wouldn't come close.

He wore a charcoal suit that was probably new because she didn't recognise it, a white dress shirt, and a cornflower blue tie with splashes of burgundy. His hair was lustrous black, courtesy of a very recent wash. He'd shaved recently, too. And he was wearing that coconut cologne again — the one she'd never detected on anyone else; the one she now associated with him and him alone.

But all of that was as nothing compared with the expression on his face. It was a mix of excitement and anticipation with a dusting of nervousness.

It mirrored her feelings so precisely, Lois felt her confidence surge. "Clark," she greeted.

He smiled — with his mouth and with his melting brown eyes. "You look ... sensational," he said, his tone resonant with appreciation.

"You, too."

For a few moments, he seemed content to look at her. "Shall we?" he said eventually as he held out his hand, palm up.

Lois picked up her bag and put her hand in his.

As they walked towards her Jeep, Clark said, "Lois, may I have your keys, please?"

She handed them to him. "You want to drive?"

"No." He unlocked the driver's door and opened it for her. "My lady," he said with a smile and a gesture for her to enter.

When they were both in the car, she said, "I guess you can take the man out of the country ..."

"Do you mind?"

Lois hesitated. "I like it," she said. "I never thought I would. But I do."

"If I open a door for you, it's because I enjoy doing it."

"Did your mom and dad teach you that?"

"I don't remember them actually saying it. I do remember them doing it — a whole lot."

As Lois drove to the restaurant, their conversation centred on work and the stories they had written for tomorrow's edition of the Daily Planet. It didn't feel significantly different from the times they had driven to a story together.

But it was different.

This was a date. Their first date.

When Lois had parked, Clark said, "Don't move." He swung around the Jeep to her door, opened it, and offered his hand. A few moments later, he opened the restaurant door, and with his hand lightly on her back, he guided her through it. They were led to a table in a quiet corner, and Clark seated Lois before sitting opposite. The waiter brought them a menu and took their order for drinks.

Lois perused the menu and had to admit to being a little stunned by the prices. "I don't suppose we're going Dutch?" she asked.

The shock on Clark's face was so comical that she put her hand over her chuckle. "No, we are not," he said in a tone that left no room for argument.

The temptation to tease was too great. "I guess I'm paying then."

His mouth flew open to protest, but he saw her expression before any words emerged, and his remonstrance dissolved to a lazy grin. "When you date a Kansas guy, he pays. Not negotiable."

"I didn't know Kansas guys were so dictatorial," she noted.

"We're not. Unless it's not negotiable, and then it's simply ... not negotiable."

"And I suppose you'll insist on walking on the outside of the sidewalk?"

"Naturally."

"Even though it hasn't rained in weeks, and there aren't any puddles to splash me?"

"Even then."

"And you'll open doors for me?"

"Yep."

"And let me go through first?"

"Unless I have any doubts about it being safe."

Lois grinned. "This could get very interesting."

"It's already very interesting," Clark said with a knowing smile.

The waiter approached with their drinks. When he was gone, Lois said, "Clark, can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

She smiled, hoping to mitigate the seriousness of her question. "Is there an unwritten Kansas rule that when the guy pays for dinner, the woman owes him?"

She saw his jolt of surprise at her question, but by the time he answered, he was composed. "Not owes," he said solemnly, "But he's definitely hoping."

"Hoping for what?" she squeaked.

"A smile, maybe a 'thank you' if she had a great time. And if he's very fortunate, a promise that she'll consider going out with him again."

She gave him the smile — a few hours early — but she figured the chance he would get another one by the end of the evening were pretty high. "How about a goodnight kiss?" she asked.

"That ..." he said, "is entirely her decision."

"But surely the Kansas gentleman would have some thoughts on whether he'd like to kiss her or not."

"Lois," Clark said, looking just a tad ruffled. "When the lady is you, there isn't any doubt about what the guy would be hoping for."

“Well, you can relax,” she said to make up for teasing him. “I won’t be letting you go until you have kissed me goodnight. Lavishly.”

He grinned, eyebrows raised. “Lavishly?”

The waiter approached and inquired if they were ready to order. Clark chose the Wagyu Striploin, and Lois asked for the Confit of Atlantic Salmon.

“Tell me about your parents,” Clark said when the waiter had gone.

Lois forced a smile to cover the qualms lurking inside her. “They’re not like yours.”

“Tell me about them,” he persisted.

“There’s not much to tell.”

Clark eyed her steadily as he sipped his drink. “You don’t want to tell me about them?”

“It’s not you.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t want to spoil our first date.”

Clark smiled encouragingly. “We won’t let it spoil our date,” he promised. “But they’re a part of you, and I’m interested in everything about you.”

“What if you bolt?” she said, only half-joking.

“Lo-is,” he said, perturbed enough that a small line appeared between his eyebrows. “Whatever you tell me about your parents is not going to influence how I feel about you.”

He might as well have the truth, then. “If they ever loved each other, I never saw any hint of it,” Lois said. “Mom constantly looked for — and found — things to complain about. Dad looked for — and found — things to feed her insecurities. She’s an alcoholic; he’s a workaholic.”

Clark was trying to understand, but his evident struggle only served to magnify the gaping chasm between his home and hers. “But they had two daughters,” he said. “There must have been some affinity, some closeness.”

“Not that I ever saw.”

“But they loved each other?”

“I doubt it.”

“Lois,” he said, clearly at a loss for words. “I can’t imagine how awful that would be.”

This first date was in danger of sliding into a cesspit of self-indulgence. “Don’t let it bother you,” Lois said lightly. “I survived.”

“But childhood is meant to be more than mere survival,” Clark persisted. “It’s meant to be where children flourish and grow and thrive. Where they have the security to explore and experiment and occasionally make mistakes and learn from them.”

“Is that how it will be for your kids?” she said, ignoring the needling uneasiness caused by his vehemence.

“I hope so,” he said with soft conviction.

“That’s exactly how it will be,” she said. “With you for a father, it couldn’t be any other way.”

“What about for your kids?” he asked with a little smile.

Lois knew she should flippantly return his smile and agree that her kids would be raised in a home similar to the idyllic one Jonathan and Martha Kent had provided for Clark. But her doubts ran too deep. “Maybe it’s genetic,” she said dispassionately.

The waiter brought their meals. They thanked him, and Lois hoped the delicious-looking food would bring logical closure to their conversation.

“I don’t believe that,” Clark said after his first bite of steak.

“Mine’s wonderful, too,” Lois agreed.

He shook his head. “I didn’t mean the food; I meant about whether good parenting is genetic.”

“If not genetic, then it’s certainly environmental.”

Clark put down his fork and studied her. “Lois,” he said. “Surely you don’t believe you couldn’t be a great mom just

because your parents made some mistakes?”

He didn’t get it. He just didn’t get it.

He didn’t get how inherent it was. How pervasive. How inescapable.

Lois lingered over the melt-in-your-mouth salmon. “Clark, this restaurant was a wonderful choice. The food is unbelievable.”

He cut off another piece of steak. “Will you take me to meet your parents?”

“Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“Because Mom will find something about you to criticise and Dad will shake your hand as if you are completely inconsequential as he searches for an excuse to get away.”

Clark looked at her, his loaded fork poised. “I could take that,” he said gently.

“But I couldn’t,” Lois said decisively. “Not yet.”

He gave her a little smile of support. “When you’re ready, I would love to meet them.” They ate in silence for a few moments and then Clark spoke again. “You have a sister, don’t you?”

“Lucy.”

“Are you close?”

“I’ve barely seen her since I moved out of my dad’s place when I was seventeen.”

“Is there a specific reason you’re not close?” Clark asked. “A disagreement or something?”

“Nothing specific.” Lois speared a slice of cucumber but didn’t remove it from the bed of butter lettuce. “Her escape route of choice was procuring the perfect boyfriend. Mine was attaining the perfect career. Different people, different paths.”

“Did Lucy find the perfect boyfriend?”

Lois kept her eyes on her plate. “Whenever I do contact her, she has a new boyfriend.”

“Lois, look at me,” Clark said gently. When she lifted her head, his expression wrapped warmth around her heart. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have kept asking questions about your family.”

Lois sipped her wine and manufactured a smile for him. “Enough about me,” she said brightly. “What about you? What’s it like? Knowing you always have somewhere to go home to? Knowing you always have that support?”

Clark thought for a moment. “It is great,” he acknowledged. “But maybe I take it for granted sometimes.”

“Your parents know how much you love them,” Lois said. “I could see how much you loved them the first time I saw you together.” She smiled from behind her wine. “Do you know I was envious of you before I even met you?”

“Because of my lovely soft bed?” he teased.

“No, because of your lovely soft father,” she retorted.

Clark laughed. “Can I tell him you said that?”

Lois coloured a little at that. “You can tell him I think he’s a wonderful father,” she conceded.

“He’ll appreciate that,” Clark said. “So, tell me what happened before I met you.”

“The first night I stayed in Smallville, I was in your bedroom. I looked out of the window and saw your parents. They were walking together, chatting. Just normal stuff. Well ... normal for them. Anyway, they stopped and laughed at something, and then your dad bent down and kissed your mom’s nose.”

Clark paused, waiting for the rest of her story.

When she didn’t continue, his face closed a little as realisation hit. “Lois,” he said in disbelief, “you *must* have seen your dad kiss your mom.”

Lois sighed. “Clark ...”

“I’m sorry,” he said, his hands raised in retreat. “I have no right to expect you would want to tell —”

“It’s not that,” she assured him quickly. Lois studied her plate

for a few moments, searching for a way to explain. “Most of my life, I’ve lied about it. I’ve said it wasn’t too bad, or I didn’t care, or it didn’t really affect me.” She forced herself to meet his eyes. “But I don’t want to lie to you.”

His hand reached across the table and squeezed hers. “Thank you for that,” he said, understanding the gift she’d given him.

“But I also don’t want you feeling sorry for me or making excuses for me. It is how it is, and I have to deal with it.”

Clark’s thumb grazed across the back of her hand. “Will you help me understand?” he said.

She smiled and withdrew her hand to release some of the accumulated intensity. “I did see my father kiss my mother,” she admitted. “On the rare occasion when he got through the door and into the house before she’d started berating him. Even as he walked in, we all knew his heart and his head were still somewhere else. He would kiss Lucy and me, and then, if Mom wasn’t already radiating antagonism, he would kiss the top of her head. Like he knew he was expected to.” Lois smiled at Clark a little shakily. “When your dad did it, it looked like it was something he couldn’t live and not do.”

Clark didn’t respond, silently reinforcing the truth of her deduction.

Lois resolutely swivelled the virtual spotlight onto him. “Is it tough?” she asked. “Not knowing your parents? Your biological parents?”

“Yep,” he said in a low raw voice.

“Do you ever think about them?”

“Yep.”

“Do you ever think about trying to contact your father? Is there any way that would be possible? Do you even know if he’s alive?”

Clark hesitated as he pushed béarnaise sauce onto his steak. “I don’t think it’s possible to contact him. I don’t know if he’s alive, but I feel he probably isn’t.”

“If he were alive and you knew how to, would you contact him?”

“Yes, I would,” Clark said gravely.

Lois smiled. “I bet he was pretty special — you had to get it from somewhere.”

She’d expected Clark to grin, but he didn’t. Instead, he said sombrely, “Maybe Jonathan Kent had something to do with that.”

“I think both of your parents had a lot to do with it.”

Clark did smile, then, but it didn’t disperse the emptiness in his eyes.

“But you still feel ... as if there’s something missing? Something fundamental?”

“Yeah,” he conceded.

She guessed it wasn’t something he disclosed lightly. She slid her hand across the table, palm up. He placed his hand on hers and gently brushed his fingertips against the soft skin of her wrist.

“I feel that, too,” she said. “I used to be so envious of kids who had together parents and a stable home. I used to think how easy it would be to confidently venture into the big, unknown world, knowing there was always a refuge waiting if it got a little too scary.”

“Do you still feel that way?” Clark asked.

“Not so much now.” Lois disconnected from his eyes and stared at where his hand sheltered hers. “A little maybe. I always felt as if other kids had ... validity just because of who they were, but I had to prove I was good enough.”

“Lo-is,” he said. He was silent until her gaze returned to him. “You are more than good enough in a thousand different ways, each one more captivating than the one before it.”

His expression was so steadfast, so expressive, so ... loving.

The revelation hit her with tornado-like force. Clark loved her! It was so obvious. He was making no effort to hide it.

The transparency was adorably endearing. But did Clark know how vulnerable it made him?

With galling perception, Lois realised that she had looked at particular men in her past like that. She wondered if they’d noticed. If they had, the knowledge had curbed neither their willingness nor their ability to carve through her heart with unfeeling disregard.

The weight of responsibility settled deep in her gut. Clark was in love with her, which meant she could crush him as completely as those other men had crushed her.

She couldn’t do that to Clark. She mustn’t do that to Clark.

Lois smiled, shaking off the seriousness of thoughts. “You’re biased,” she said.

“Me?” he said with feigned innocence.

“You,” she said and found herself smiling because the wonderment of being loved by Clark Kent sat fresh and vital in her heart.

They continued eating, and Lois silently acknowledged that the food warranted the exorbitant prices. However, she also knew she would have been just as content with a pizza.

It wasn’t the food that made tonight special. She was with the man she loved, and they had explored some precarious topics, delving into deeper understanding of each other. And he *hadn’t* bolted. He didn’t even look like he was thinking about it.

But now, Lois wanted to lighten the mood. “How was your steak?” she asked.

“Incredibly tender,” he said. “How was your salmon?”

“Like a dream.” She relished the final mouthful and put down her knife and fork. “Wanna swap questions?” she asked pertly.

“I can ask you anything?” Clark asked, his eyes sparkling with amused interest.

“Within certain limits.”

His grin widened. “Go on.”

“Nothing about family.”

“OK,” he agreed. “Ladies first.”

“You just want more time to decide on your question,” she accused.

“I already know what my question will be,” he said. “But you can still go first.”

“How old were you when you realised you are so good-looking?”

She saw his shock collide head-on with his self-consciousness. He dropped his eyes to his lap, picked up his napkin, and dabbed his mouth. It looked like a thinly veiled ruse to give him time to devise an answer. When his eyes finally returned to her, he perceived her bubbling amusement and broke into a sheepish grin. “What sort of question is that?”

“One I’ve always wanted to ask you,” she countered.

He appeared to be thinking. “When I was about three years old,” he said, his expression deadpan.

Lois giggled. “Liar!”

He spread his hand across his chin and simply looked at her.

“You’re going to have to do better than that, Kent. If you want your questions answered.”

“You actually want me to answer?” he said.

“Yep.”

“I’ve never really thought about it, but ... I suppose it was about the time you agreed to go out with me. I must have something going for me if Lois Lane is willing to -”

“Clark!”

“What?”

“Don’t try to tell me you haven’t been fighting off the girls since you were about thirteen.” She grinned wickedly. “Or maybe you didn’t fight them off.”

Clark’s colour deepened. “Lois ...” he said awkwardly.

She’d embarrassed him. She hadn’t meant to. “I’m sorry,” Lois said quickly.

“It’s OK,” he said, recovering with some effort. “It’s just ... the reality is probably a long way from what you’re thinking.”

She wasn’t sure what she was thinking. Other than that Kansas girls had let a gem slip through their fingers. “What’s your question?” she said.

Clark didn’t hesitate. “What’s your computer password?”

Now she was the one surprised. Now she was the one thinking about reaching for the napkin. “Ahh ...”

“Come on, Lane,” he badgered, grinning again. “We had a deal.”

“You didn’t answer my question; you side-stepped.”

He didn’t deny it. “Are you going to answer my question?”

“Not now,” she said. “Certainly not here. But I will later.”

His eyebrows lifted in surprise. “You will?”

She nodded.

“I have another question,” he said.

Lois’s heart skippety-skipped. This was a perilous game. She hadn’t realised the potential hazards when she had suggested it. “OK.”

“Are you happy?” Clark asked.

The waiter approached and cleared their empty plates.

“Would you like to view the dessert menu?” he asked.

Clark looked at Lois. She hesitated.

“We’ll have the Chocolate Share Plate,” Clark told the waiter.

“Would you like coffee, Lois?”

“Latte, please,” she replied. “No fat.”

“Two lattes,” Clark said. “One full milk, please.”

The waiter nodded and walked away.

“I have one question left,” Lois said.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he said, pretending indignation. “Actually, you didn’t answer either of my questions.”

“Ask me again,” she said, angling for time.

“Are you happy?”

It wasn’t a throwaway question. “You mean now? Right now?”

“Right now and more generally.”

“I’m very happy,” she said. It was the truth.

“Happy about work? Happy about life? Happy about ... being with a farmboy?”

“All of them.”

He made no effort to hide his delight. “I’m happy, too.”

“Work? Life? Being with me?”

“I have my dream job. Life is great. And I hope to be with you a lot more.”

His honesty was exhilarating. “Can my question be about something personal?” Lois asked.

“You mean more personal than your last question?” he exploded, although his smile of amusement softened his outburst.

“Do you mind?” Lois asked.

He chuckled. “No. But I expect to regret this.”

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to,” she said.

Their coffees and chocolates arrived. Lois dropped three teaspoons of sugar into Clark’s latte and stirred it for him. “Thanks,” he said. But his smile seemed to hold a whole lot more, and Lois had the distinct impression he was remembering how she had sugared his coffee in his car in Smallville. “What is that question?” he asked.

She chose a chocolate and popped it into her mouth, savouring the sweetness as it oozed through her mouth. When she’d swallowed, she said, “How many times have you been in love?”

He laughed, although it was edged with a sprinkling of uneasiness. “I should have expected this,” he said.

“Expected what?”

“That dating Lois Lane would mean being pinned into a corner and hammered with incisive questions.”

The pinning into the corner sounded like fun. “So you regret dating me already?” she teased.

“Not for one moment,” he said with such low intensity, her heart reverberated in response.

Lois needed a moment to recover. Luckily, there were chocolates awaiting her attention. “So ...” she said, pretending to deliberate over the delectable choices on the platter. “How many times have you been in love?”

“You mean the can’t-breathe-when-she-walks-into-the-room type of love?”

She nodded, suddenly finding it difficult to breathe. “The can’t-stop-my-heart-exploding-when-I-look-into-his-eyes type of love.”

“Once.”

His answer — so full of quiet certainty — astounded her. “Only once?” she mused.

“Only once,” Clark confirmed as he sipped from his latte. “I know I have no questions left, but how about you?”

“How many times have I been in love?”

“Yes.”

“If you had asked me three months ago, I would have said twice.”

His eyebrows dipped a fraction as he considered her answer. “And now?” he asked slowly.

“Once.”

His lower lip curled beguilingly as he considered her answer. “Lois,” he said. “That math doesn’t work.”

“Yes, it does,” she said lightly.

He grinned. “Female logic?”

“Would you like me to explain?” she offered. “Or should I leave you to mull over it for a week or two? Like you have with my password?”

“I’d like an explanation.”

Lois chose another chocolate and let it melt through her mouth. “I’ve realised that what I used to think was being in love was nothing more than a poor imitation.”

“All right.” She could see him grappling with the possible extrapolations of her words.

“It didn’t even come close,” she said. “Not to the real thing.”

Clark leant back in his chair and caressed her so thoroughly with his eyes that her skin tingled. He loved her. He hadn’t said it verbally yet, but Lois had no doubt.

“I have another question,” she informed him.

He groaned, but the lop-sided curve of his smile didn’t falter.

“This is an easy one.”

“OK.”

“What is that amazing cologne you wear?” she said. “I’ve never smelled it on anyone else.”

“Do you like it?”

“I love it. What is it?”

“It’s not cologne exactly, it’s hair pomade,” he said with a little roll of his eyes. “It’s from Australia, it’s called *Gear*.”

“I didn’t think you used hair product.”

Clark gave a self-conscious shrug. “I like the smell, so I use a little at the back.”

“I never would have believed that coconut could be so ... enticingly masculine.”

He grinned. “I’ll order more,” he said. “Because you like it.”

“Thanks.” Lois drained her coffee. “Would you like to go for a walk now?”

“I’d love to.” Clark nodded to the waiter for their check.

After he’d paid, they walked out, his hand on her back. As they hit the cool air, Clark removed his jacket and placed it around her shoulders.

Lois turned to him and stalled him with her hands on his chest. “Clark that was wonderful,” she said. “Thank you.” She stretched onto her toes and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

His fingers touched the spot she had marked. “I remember the first time you did that,” he murmured.

“On your parents’ porch,” she said.

“Yeah.” Clark put his arm across her shoulders and snuggled her against his side. Together, they ambled into the night.

“Would you like to come in?” Lois asked at her apartment door.

He walked in.

“I had a fantastic time, Clark.”

“So did I,” he said.

Clark stood there; arms ramrod straight, shoulders box-shaped, hands buried in his pockets, giving no indication of what he was thinking. Or what he was hoping. If anything.

There was no way Clark Kent, principled to the back teeth, was going to make a move on her after just one date.

No way.

So ... if she wanted him ...

Lois closed her door, shimmied out of his jacket, laid it carefully on the sofa, and stepped towards him. She kissed him lightly, with a sprinkling of promise, but kept her hands by her sides.

He responded to her kiss, but his hands didn’t stray from his pockets.

She reached for his tie, brushed away a non-existent speck, then inched her hands up and loosened the knot just enough so it hung below his top button.

His Adam’s apple leapt against her fingers.

“Do you mind if I take this off?” Lois asked.

Clark swallowed again. “No,” he said, his voice not sounding normal at all.

She smiled up at him, slipping her fingers between his tie and his shirt to loosen the knot further. She knew his eyes were fixed on her face, but she kept staring at the lax knot as if it was the most fascinating thing she had ever seen.

Then, with a deft movement, Lois pulled one end of his tie free and allowed the knot to unravel in the palm of her hand. She reached up and unfolded his collar, pausing to dip her fingers into the softness of his hair, before slowly skimming down the lengths of each end of his tie, careful to allow her thumb and pinkie to stray onto the honeycomb texture of his shirt.

She lifted her hands from him and brought her fingers to her nose. The coconut scent was strong ... and alluring. She smiled up at him, and then pulled one end of his tie, causing it to slither around his neck until the other end flopped into her hand. She tossed it onto her sofa.

She skated up the contours of his shirt, until she reached where the white collar met the ridges of his throat. She slipped her fingers into the little niche behind his top button, and his throat convulsed. “Can I undo this?” she asked casually.

He swallowed again. “Uh huh,” he said tautly.

She undid his top button and drifted to his second button. “Can I undo this one?”

He nodded.

As she dropped to his third button, his hands emerged from his pockets, and he placed them over hers. His melting chocolate eyes settled into hers. “Is this what you really want, Lois?” he asked, the raw edge to his voice acting like a spur to her galloping heart.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Aren’t you?”

He took a deep, steadying breath and cupped his hands on her shoulders. “I know what I want to do now,” he admitted ruefully. “But I don’t want to do anything that could jeopardise our future — our very, very long future together.”

“I won’t regret it.” Lois settled her fingers around his third

button. “Can I undo this one?”

He stared at her, and Lois knew that the man Clark was waging war with the gentleman Clark. She needed to show him both could be winners here.

“I want this, Clark,” she murmured. “I want this so much.”

He continued to stare at her, his expression adorned with a combination of doubt and desire.

“I trust you, Clark.”

His resistance crumbled, signalled by his slow smile and the way his fingers began gently kneading her shoulders.

“So can I?” Lois chirped, still poised on his button.

He nodded. “You seem very keen to remove my shirt,” he teased.

“I’ve had one far-too-brief glimpse of what’s under here, and it’s been driving me crazy ever since.” She moved a button lower. “Can I undo this one?”

He nodded again. “Driving you crazy, hey?”

“Ever since you barged into my bedroom.”

“I thought it was my bedroom,” he murmured.

“Maybe it was our bedroom.”

Their eyes collided, and for a moment, neither of them moved. Then Clark’s smile broke like a crashing wave. “So you *haven’t* forgotten?”

“I will *never* forget that chest,” Lois vowed. “Can I undo this button?”

“That chest, huh?” Clark said. “Sounds like it made quite an impression.”

She left his just-released button and slipped her hands inside his shirt. His skin was warm and soft. His underlying tone was rock hard. “Such an impression, I made it my password.”

He tensed. Lois felt it and heard it, but she wasn’t sure if it had been a response to her touch or her words. Maybe both.

“My chest was your password?” he said, voice thinner than usual.

“Thatchest,” she said matter-of-factly. “One word. After tonight, I’ll change it.”

“I’m not even going to ask what you’ll change it to,” he said weakly.

“Good, a girl needs secrets.” She was back at his buttons. “Can I undo this one?”

“You can undo all of them,” he said in surrender.

“Thanks.” She grinned at him in delight. “What do you remember most about the moment we met?”

His colour deepened. “I’m not sure I should tell you. I’ll probably embarrass myself.”

“I bet you looked at nothing but my face, being such a boy scout and all.”

His look told her she had missed the mark and by a fair margin. Lois suppressed a giggle. “You couldn’t embarrass yourself more than I have. I admitted to thinking so much about this chest that I made it my password.” She undid the final button, tugged his shirt from his pants, and laid it open. “Wow,” she said, on a big breath.

Her frank admiration deepened his blush.

Her hands coasted over his ribs, luxuriating in the feel of him. “What do you remember most?” she persisted.

“Two incredibly shapely legs emerging from the pink satin shorts.”

“And?”

He blushed even more. His colour spread past his throat and to the upper reaches of his chest. “And a far-too-tight top that didn’t leave a whole lot to the imagination,” he blurted.

“Wanna leave nothing to the imagination?” she asked nonchalantly.

His throat was still bobbing feverishly when a sharp knock carved across their conversation. Lois glared at it, not taking her hands from Clark’s chest. “Who could that be? It’s after

midnight.”

“Do you want me to see who it is?” Clark asked in a voice beset with quivery undulations.

“No,” Lois said decisively. “If we ignore it, they might go away.” She reached up to kiss him, her mouth ajar, her tongue poised.

The knock sounded again — more emphatic this time.

Lois pulled away. “I’ll get rid of them,” she said. “Don’t move.” She walked to the door and opened it impatiently.

Part 2

Two police officers looked back at her — one male and older with a fatherly countenance, the other female and much younger, looking like she’d rather be anywhere else. Lois felt Clark’s hands settle on her shoulders.

“Ms Lane?” the older officer said. “Ms Lois Lane?”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid we have bad news.”

Her heart began to thump. “Wh . . .”

“Your parents were in a car wreck,” he said gently. “They are both —”

“My parents?” Lois shrieked.

The male police officer nodded, stark with compassion. “I’m sorry to have to inform you they are both deceased.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Lois snapped. “They can’t both be dead.”

“I am so sorry,” the police officer said. He stepped forward, his face furrowed with sympathy.

Lois shook her head. “No,” she said, raising her hand to ward him off. “No, you don’t understand. They couldn’t possibly have been together.”

The officer’s eyes closed momentarily as he gathered a big breath. “They were, Ms Lane,” he said with quiet composure. “They were in your father’s car. Another vehicle ran a red light, and they were both killed instantly. Neither of them would have suffered.”

Lois looked to the other officer, searching for the explanation, the sick joke, the reason why they had come. Maybe this was on-the-job-training for the young one. How to deliver bad news. “There’s some mistake.”

The young female swallowed. “There’s no mistake,” she said, her voice sounding strangled.

“But you don’t understand,” Lois insisted. “They haven’t been together — not in any sense — for years. It’s simply not possible they were in the same car.”

The veteran police officer glanced at his notes. “Mrs Ellen Janice Lane and Doctor Samuel Howard Lane. Both listed you as their next of kin.”

Clark’s hands slipped from her shoulders to her upper arms as he moved closer, his upper body solid against her back. Lois’s wildly thumping heart vibrated in her ears despite the fact she didn’t believe them for one moment. “There is absolutely no way my mother would be with my father,” she said.

But as she spoke, she could hear her resolve drain away.

“There is no doubt,” the older police officer said, his sympathy chilling her heart. “We don’t inform the family until we are absolutely certain of our facts.”

“What do I have to do?” Lois heard herself ask.

“You don’t have to do anything tonight. Tomorrow, you will need to make arrangements.” He held a piece of paper towards her. “Here are the details.”

Lois saw Clark’s hand reach forward and take the paper.

“Thank you,” he said.

The officer glanced behind her to Clark. “Is there anything we can do?” he asked.

“No, thank you,” Clark said. “I will look after her.”

“We’re very sorry for your loss.”

The two officers turned and walked away. Clark leant around

Lois and shut the door. Then he seized her and crushed her against his body.

After only a short time, Lois withdrew and stared at his shirt. “You did up your buttons,” she said, as if it were the most important fact in the world. “And tucked in your shirt.”

Clark pulled her against him again, his large hand cradling her head into his shoulder.

She didn’t cry, didn’t speak, didn’t move.

She couldn’t. She wasn’t feeling anything. Just a numbness that had descended like an opaque cloud between her and reality.

This wasn’t happening. It was just a dream. It had to be.

Mom would never be with Dad. It simply wasn’t possible.

She’d wake up soon.

She’d wake up and call both of them.

And this would be nothing more than a harrowing dream.

Sometime later, Lois pushed herself away from the refuge of Clark’s embrace and looked around her apartment. Nothing had changed. Clark’s jacket and tie were on her sofa — the only things out of place.

She walked over and picked up his jacket. She hung it on the back of a chair. Then she carefully placed his tie over it.

She went back to her sofa and sat on the edge. She clasped her hands in front of her and stared at the floor.

Clark crouched beside her, his hands cloaking hers. “Lois,” he said, unsteadily. “I am so sorry.”

She looked at him. His shock and distress were etched on his face. Yet, still, she felt nothing.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” he asked, so incredibly gently.

Lois registered that he had asked a question, but answering words were inaccessible. She shook her head.

His grip on her hands tightened. “Lois, honey,” he said. “We should call your sister.”

Lucy!

“Would you like me to do it?” Clark asked.

“Uh . . .” Again Lois scanned the room, although she couldn’t have said what she was looking for.

“Where is her number?”

“My . . . bag.”

Clark fetched her bag. She opened it and pulled out her address book. She handed it to Clark. He searched for the page and held it open. “This one?”

Lois nodded.

He crouched beside her, hand on her arm. “Are you all right to do this?” he said, his eyes brimming with concern.

She nodded and took the book from Clark. “I can do it.” It seemed that her words originated from someplace else.

Clark brought her the phone. She took it and peered at it, then glanced to the book — the words and numbers meaningless.

Clark eased the phone from her unyielding grip and dialled, and then placed it back in her hand.

It rang for so long that Lois jumped when her sister finally answered. “Lucy Lane.” She sounded impatient. Annoyed even.

Lois felt her insides churn. How could she protect Lucy? How could she cushion the blow she was about to inflict?

“Lucy, here. Who *is* this?”

“It’s Lo..is.” Her throat was so tight, her words scraped out.

“Lois? Is that you? I can barely hear you. We must have a bad line.”

“Lucy?”

“Lois? What’s wrong? You sound awful.”

Something clicked inside Lois. Something switched her from zombie-like numbness to automaton efficiency. “Lucy? Are you alone?”

“No, Aaron is here. My . . . boyfriend.”

Aaron? He must be new. “Is he . . . nice?”

“Lois,” Lucy said with clear exasperation. “Since when do you ring me at this time of night to ask if my boyfriend is nice?” Lois couldn’t find a response.

“He’s great,” Lucy said wearily. “Just great.”

“How long have you been with him?”

“Three weeks,” Lucy said in a tone that dared Lois to make an issue of it.

Lois groaned. Three weeks. What sort of support could he offer her? *You’ve only known Clark seven weeks*, a small voice niggled from the void of her mind. Her eyes swung to where Clark was standing, close enough that she couldn’t fail to feel his support, far enough away that she couldn’t possibly feel he was intruding. With telling certainty, she knew that Aaron — whoever he might be — couldn’t hope to be there for Lucy the same way Clark would be for her.

“Lois? What’s wrong?” There was a shadow of fear in Lucy’s voice now.

“How old is Aaron?”

“Lois.” Lucy’s exasperation was back, intensified ten-fold. “He’s twenty-two! Happy now?”

Lois groaned again. “Lucy, I think you should sit down.”

“Lois?” Her fear had returned. “Please,” she begged. “Please tell me what this is about.”

Again, the ocean of Lois’s vocabulary receded to the distant recesses of her mind. How could she say it? Was there any way to alleviate Lucy’s suffering? She felt a sudden intense sympathy for her little sister — who didn’t even know her life had been shattered. “Lucy, the police came here. It’s Mom and Dad.”

“What about them?” Lucy said in the scared little-girl voice Lois hadn’t heard for a long time.

“They were in a car wreck.”

“But they’re OK, right? In the hospital? I’ll come now. Tell me which hospital.”

“They’re not in the hospital,” Lois said. “They died, Lucy, b...b...both of...”

Lois’s body began to shake uncontrollably. Her eyes stung, but remained staunchly dry. Clark moved in and sat beside her. He put one arm around her and drew her into his shoulder. He took the phone from her quivering hand. “Lucy?” he said into the phone. “I’m Clark Kent. I’m Lois’s ... I’m here with Lois. I’m so sorry.”

Lois could hear the pitch of Lucy’s on-the-edge-of-control voice, but could distinguish no words.

“They were together,” she heard Clark say. “No, we don’t know why.”

Lois reached for the phone, straining every muscle to clamp down on her shaking. She put the phone to her ear and heard the anguished weeping of her sister. “Lucy?”

The sobbing lessened slightly. “Y...yes?”

“We can’t do anything tonight,” Lois said. “Whatever needs to be done, we can do tomorrow.”

“I’m coming now.”

“No!” The sharpness of her protest felt like a slap. Lois swallowed and controlled her voice with sheer willpower. “Lucy, you can’t. It’s too far, and it’s dark, and you’re upset.”

“I’m coming now, Lois.” Lois recognised that tone. It meant — you might be the big sister, but you can’t boss me.

“Please don’t, Lucy,” Lois begged. “If something happened to you ...” Lois took a deep, shaky breath and tried to continue. She couldn’t.

She could hear Lucy crying and for a moment, envied her. Lois’s eyes remained dry, but her insides felt as if she had emerged from hours of gut-wrenching weeping. Clark unfolded from her. “Superman?” he mouthed.

Lois put her hand over the phone. “Would he?” she whispered.

“We could ask.”

“Lucy?” Lois said into the phone. “Listen to me. I will try to send Superman for you tomorrow morning.”

“S...S...Super...”

“He’ll fly you here,” Lois said. “It’ll take you hours to drive. Even if you left now, you wouldn’t be here until morning, and you’ll be so tired.”

“All right.” Lucy’s tears had lessened but the hollow defeat of her trembling words seemed infinitely worse.

“Try to rest,” Lois said, knowing it would be impossible.

“OK.” Lucy’s desolation carved fresh wounds through Lois’s heart.

“Lucy, do you have someone who could come and be with you tonight? A friend?”

“Aaron’s here.”

“OK.” Lois hesitated. *I love you, Lucy*. The words were sitting right there, waiting for the breath to carry them forward. Lois wanted to say them. But she couldn’t remember saying them. Not to her sister. Not to her parents. Not ever.

And right now was just too turbulent to step into anything else unknown.

Neither spoke. Lois could hear her sister sniffing. “I’ll call you tomorrow, Lucy.”

Lucy didn’t respond. Then, after a few more moments of wordlessness, she hung up.

Lois stared at the phone in her hand. Clark gently took it from her and sat beside her. “Do you want me to see if I can contact Superman to bring her now?”

Lois shook her head, staring at her feet.

Clark gathered her against his body, his arm secure around her shoulders. “It might be easier for both of you if you were together.”

Lois shook her head again. “Not tonight,” she said firmly. She knew Clark wouldn’t understand. She knew he would ache to be with his family if tragedy struck them. But she and Lucy hadn’t been close for years, and the thought of facing Lucy caused Lois’s already clenched stomach to spasm unbearably.

She felt Clark kiss her head. “Is there anyone else we should contact?” he said quietly.

“Uncle Mike,” she said tonelessly.

Clark started to reach for her address book, but she laid her hand on his arm to stop him. “Why would they be together?” she said. It was her voice, but it didn’t seem to belong to her.

“Could they have reconciled?” Clark asked.

The question swirled around Lois’s mind. Surely not. Surely not. Her parents had barely been able to tolerate being in the same room as far back as her memories could stretch. “I just can’t believe that,” she said.

“But you didn’t see them much.”

“I saw them more than they deserved,” she sparked.

Clark’s arm tightened around her, and his cheek rested on the top of her head. “I didn’t mean it like that,” he said softly.

“I know,” Lois said flatly. “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for, honey.” She could feel his breath in her hair as he spoke. “I only meant that if they were seeing each other, you may not have known about it.”

The phone shrilled across their low voices. Lois startled, her stomach pitching erratically.

Clark’s hand strummed gentle reassurance the length of her upper arm. “It’s OK,” he soothed.

He answered the phone, and Lois didn’t recognise the voice on the other end. Clark spoke a little, listened a lot. When he hung up, he said, “That was Bill Henderson. He sends his condolences.”

“Oh.”

Clark slipped from the sofa and knelt before her so he could look into her eyes. “He says it was an accident, Lois. There’s no story; no hidden agendas. They were just in the wrong place

when a drunk driver failed to stop at a red light.”

“Has he been charged?”

“No.” Clark reached for her cheek and stroked it with a tender touch. “He didn’t survive.”

“Oh.” Lois stared ahead, not seeing anything. “I should ring Uncle Mike.” She blanched at the thought of a repeat of her conversation with Lucy.

“Would you like me to do it?” Clark asked.

“I should do it.”

“I can do it if you want me to.”

“Would you?”

“Of course I will.” Clark pointed to Uncle Mike’s name in her book. “Is this the right one?”

Lois nodded.

“If he offers to come here now, do you want him to?”

“No,” Lois whimpered.

Clark didn’t ask why, which was a relief because any sort of explanation was not possible right now. “Would you like him to call other family?” he suggested.

“Yes,” she croaked.

Clark dialled the number, and Lois waited.

She heard her Uncle Mike answer and heard Clark introduce himself and explain what had happened. Even as she listened, his words seemed completely removed from her. Like it had happened to someone else’s parents. She’d witnessed this before; countless times as a reporter, she’d watched other people reel in shock when faced with the ungraspable.

This felt no different. It felt as if she could turn and walk away — walk away to the normalcy of a still-intact world.

But she couldn’t.

Uncle Mike and Clark talked for a few moments. Uncle Mike must have asked how she was. Clark said, “As you’d expect.” Then he said, “Do you know why they were together?”

Uncle Mike spoke for a few moments, and then Clark said goodbye and hung up.

“Why?” Lois asked in a distant voice.

Clark twisted so he could face her directly. His hands were on her — one on her shoulder and one holding her hand. On his face was the pain she knew lay in wait for her if she ever ventured from the numbing cloud. “Do you know what today is?” he asked.

“You mean what date it is?”

He nodded. “It’s September 16th. Well, it was ... before midnight.”

There was no recognition. Even with her mind behaving like cotton balls, there was nothing to make today particularly special. Except for her first date with Clark, she remembered. And, from now on, the date she became an orphan.

“Today ... yesterday was your parents’ thirtieth wedding anniversary,” Clark said.

So?

“Your Uncle Mike said they had made a promise on their first wedding anniversary that they would go back to that particular restaurant twenty-nine years later.”

“And they did?” Lois said with cold disbelief.

“It seems likely.”

“But why?”

“Old times’ sake?”

“The old times weren’t worth celebrating,” she said dismissively.

“Maybe they were happy once.”

Lois stared mindlessly at the fish tank. “How do your parents celebrate their anniversary?” she asked, her eyes tracking the fish.

She heard Clark sigh. She also heard him try to cover it. “Lois,” he said.

“When is your parents’ anniversary?” she asked.

“May 12th,” he said quietly.

“I didn’t know. Not until now. I couldn’t have told you when my parents got married.” There was a desperate, streaky edge to her voice. Clark’s arm closed around her again. “I don’t remember them ever celebrating it,” she said lifelessly. “Not once.”

“It’s OK, Lois,” he soothed.

“September 16th,” she said on a harsh, gravelly laugh.

“Exactly the same as our first date.”

He cuddled her into the nook between his chest and his neck. “Lois, it doesn’t matter. Not now.”

Lois stood. Stood so abruptly, she almost keeled over. Clark was there instantly, steadying her. “You should go,” she said in a frozen, detached voice. “It’s late.”

He looked down, directly into her eyes. “Do you want me to go?”

She put her hand on his forearm. “Clark, this isn’t your problem. Thanks for tonight. I’ll see you in a day or two at the Planet. Tell Perry I mightn’t make it in today.”

“Lois,” he breathed. His hands came to her shoulders again. His eyes hadn’t left hers. “Do you want me to go?”

“This isn’t your family, Clark. You should get out of here. I’m sure this is all pretty gruesome for you. Thanks for everything. I’ll be fine, now.” She made a half-hearted attempt to move towards his jacket but gave up when he didn’t release her shoulders.

He didn’t move. He just looked at her, his solemn face tilted towards her, his brown eyes steady, his hands gently constraining on her shoulders. “You didn’t answer my question,” he said quietly.

“Clark,” she said evenly. “Get out of here.” She forged a cheap smile, but pulled it immediately, sure it had been more of a grimace than a smile. “I would walk out on all of this if I could.”

He let out a deep, wavering breath. “Lois, I’m not leaving here unless you tell me to. Unless you convince me you really would rather be alone.” He glanced to her door. “And even then, I’ll probably camp in the hallway.”

“Clark, you’ve been great and I ...” Her words died as her façade crumbled. She stumbled into his broad chest. “Would you mind staying?” she quivered against the white cotton.

“Aww, Lois,” he said. His arms surrounded her, holding her so closely that they bodies seemed to meld together. He held her until she backed away. Then he reached for her chin and lifted it so his eyes connected with hers. “We’re in this together,” he pledged.

For the first time, Lois felt the prickle of tears. She ruthlessly repressed them. If she cried now, she might not stop. Ever. “Thank you.”

“You should go to bed,” Clark said. “I’ll sleep on the couch.”

Lois went to her bathroom. She showered and brushed her teeth and slipped into her utilitarian flannelette pyjamas. There was a certain anesthetised peace to be had in doing things so mundane, so routine. The world hadn’t stopped.

Clark was sitting on the sofa when she reappeared. “Help yourself to whatever you need,” she said expressionlessly.

He stood. “Thanks.”

Lois didn’t know whether to kiss him goodnight or just go to bed. She didn’t know how to thank him. She didn’t know how to try to express that, without him, she wasn’t sure she could have continued to breathe. But she knew she wouldn’t be able to find the words. So, with a small shrug, Lois turned and went into her bedroom.

Lois’s bedroom door shut, but Clark continued listening. He heard her pull back her bedcovers and slide into bed. He heard her head sink into the pillow. Her heart rate was still abnormally high, but it had gradually slowed since those first awful minutes after the police had told her the shocking news of her parents’

death.

A huge sigh shuddered through Clark's body. He had never felt so out of depth, so ill equipped for a situation. Just how did you comfort someone in such distress? How did you try to help when you knew you could do nothing ... absolutely nothing to ease her pain?

Clark leant forward and dropped his head into his hands. If only ...

If only Superman had been there. If only Superman had prevented the collision.

If only Superman had saved Lois's parents.

For long minutes, Clark remained still, listening to Lois breathe in the room next door. His thoughts ventured haltingly to the next few days. Tomorrow ... today, really.

There were so many formidable obstacles ahead. So many impossible situations. So many decisions.

Clark closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. His ribcage, shoulders, arms, hands all felt as if they had been tightly coiled for hours. He consciously tried to ease the straps of tension. He had to be strong. He had to be strong for Lois.

He had no way of predicting what she would feel, what she would need, how he could help. He became aware of an unexpected gnawing need to talk to his mom. He knew that a few words from her wouldn't lessen the anguish, but she would help him see the way through the next few days.

Clark picked up the phone. Then he put it down. Lois might hear. He couldn't do anything that would sharpen her agony or remind her of what she had lost.

He walked to the window and gazed down on the city lights. The journey ahead would be completely unfamiliar. And superpowers wouldn't help at all.

An hour later, Lois still hadn't slept. Her breathing was ragged and her heart rate high. Intermittently, she shuffled, sighed, moaned, turned.

Clark hadn't heard her footsteps, so, being reasonably confident she was still in bed, he x-rayed through her bedroom door. Lois's eyes were wide open. As he watched, she sighed irritably and shut her eyes. Moments later, they were open again, and she was staring rigidly into nothingness.

He tapped on her door. "Lois? Can I come in?"

"Get some sleep, Clark."

"Lois, I'm coming in." He crossed her bedroom, knelt beside her bed, and brushed the hair from her forehead. "Close your eyes," he whispered.

"I can't," she whimpered. "I've tried."

"Close your eyes," he crooned.

She closed her eyes.

"Concentrate on my touch," he said. "Wherever I touch, relax."

Clark swept the width of her forehead with the pads of his fingers. With the edge of his thumb, he massaged away the creases between her eyebrows. He feathered along her closed eyelids and caressed the silken skin of her cheekbones. He meandered through her hair with long, deliberate strokes. "Relax, honey," he murmured.

His touch seemed to be dissolving her tension, and Clark had begun to hope she was asleep when her head suddenly jolted from the pillow and her eyes shot open.

He waited for her to speak. When she didn't, he said, "Close your eyes, honey."

"Cl...Clark?"

"Yes?"

"Would you hold me?" Lois said in a voice so tormented, it chafed his heart.

He slipped one arm under her neck, put the other across her far shoulder, and tilted her into his chest.

She pulled back impatiently. "No." She looked up at him in the murky light. "Would you get into bed with me?"

Clark was torn. He had to ensure nothing happened that would add to her pain, but right now, he was willing to do anything to lessen the raw agony in her eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." She slithered to the far side of the bed and shivered at its chill.

"Roll over," he said. "We'll spoon."

He took off his shoes and lay on his side, facing her back. He lifted his upper arm. "Come back," he said, wanting Lois to determine their level of contact.

She wriggled back and settled against him. She only stilled when she was as close to him as possible, meeting him at every possible contact point. He laid his arm across her waist and took a deep, steady breath.

"Is this OK?" she asked.

"Uhm."

"Cause it wouldn't be totally regrettable if we ..."

Every muscle in his body tensed. "Yes, it would, Lois."

"You're right. I'm hardly very attractive right now."

Actually, he'd never desired her more than he did at this instant and it had everything to do with his aching need to soothe her pain rather than the close proximity of her body. "You're always beautiful to me, Lois. Always."

"Then why not?" she asked pitifully.

"Because it wouldn't be fair."

"To me or to you?"

"To us."

"You could make me forget," she pleaded. "Just for a little while."

"But then you'd have to deal with remembering again."

"Please, Clark." The tremor in her voice touched him far more profoundly than words alone could have done. He clung to his resolve like a man in raging seas clings to a life buoy.

"No, Lois," he said firmly but with infinite gentleness.

She started to tremble. Clark took her hand in his and stroked along her fingers with his thumb. "This is so overwhelmingly awful, it's all you can see," he murmured. "The future is too unknown and too scary to even think about. Because I love you, I need to do the future thinking for both of us. I need —"

"You l...love me?" she said, still trembling.

He squeezed her hand. "I love you," he repeated.

"Oh, Clark." She inhaled deeply, and her tremors stilled.

"More than anything, I want to get back to this level of intimacy with you," Clark said. "But at a time for us. This is a time for grieving."

"You really do love me," she said with wonder.

"I really do love you."

"I thought so, but now I know."

"Because I wouldn't —"

"Yes, but not just that. Lying here with me when surely you must have thought about doing this ..."

"Many times."

"... but in very different circumstances."

He kissed the back of her head. "Lois, however tough this gets, however long it stays unbearable, I want you to know I'll be here for you."

She brought his hand to her face and rested her lips on it. "I love you too, Clark."

A tidal wave of emotion rolled through him. Lois loved him.

"Hold me tighter," she begged.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"It makes me feel safe. It's the only thing that makes me feel safe."

He tensed a few degrees.

"Tighter," she said.

He tensed again; sure he was right at the limit of what her

small body could take.

“Thank you for making me forget,” she said.

“Did I?”

“You told me you love me. That helped me see a future. Until then I couldn’t see one.”

“We have a future,” he promised her. “Starting with getting through this ... together.”

“Together,” she echoed.

Her breathing became regular and even. For long hours, Clark lay completely still, using his super strength in a way he’d never done before. He listened to her breaths, grateful for each one that delivered rest to her exhausted body and temporary peace to her tortured mind.

When Lois woke the next morning, her first awareness was a heavy sense of foreboding, like waking on the morning of a big exam.

Then memories lashed her consciousness.

She rolled over. She was alone. The space next to her was warm. With Clark’s warmth. He had slept with her. Every time she had risen from the depths of sleep, he’d been there to comfort her with words and touch.

She walked from her bedroom. A note lay on her countertop.

‘Lois, honey, I’ll be back very soon, Love, Clark.’

She read it three times. How long until ‘very soon’?

Lois sat on the sofa and pulled her knees into her chest.

She was alone.

Literally.

But worse — much worse — she was totally isolated. No one could push through the cloud to be with her. And she doubted she would ever again have the strength or the will to escape.

In his apartment, Clark showered, shaved, and pulled on clean jeans and a shirt — all at superspeed.

He dialed his home number. His mom answered. Clark closed his eyes and leant against the wall. Her voice was like a balm on exposed nerves.

“Mom,” he said.

“Clark, what’s wrong?”

Her concern, born of one word from him, washed over him. “Lois’s parents were killed in a car wreck.”

“Oh, Clark.” He could hear the impending tears in her voice. He could imagine her, in the farmhouse, her compassion so deep, so genuine, so ... mothersome. “How’s Lois?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Clark said desperately. “I stayed with her all night. She didn’t say much. I didn’t know how to help her.”

“Just being there would have helped her.”

“She didn’t cry, Mom.” He had to pause and reconstruct his crumbling voice. “Not once. Not when they told her, not later.”

“Everybody deals with these things differently, honey.”

“What can I do?”

“Be there. Give her the freedom to be whatever she needs to be. She’ll be angry, frustrated, dismayed; sometimes she’ll even smile over a memory.”

Clark swallowed. “I don’t think she has too many happy memories,” he said desolately.

“Then there’ll be regrets and guilt in the emotional mix,” Mom said.

“What does Lois have to be guilty about?” Clark demanded. He calmed his voice. “Sorry, Mom. I’ve just never ... never felt so useless. I don’t know what to do.”

“Go back to her, reassure her, hold her; just be there for her.”

“I did that ... I don’t think it helped.”

“Clark,” Mom said. “You are so much more than your powers. You’re caring and sensitive and more emotionally smart than any man I know except for your father. You’re exactly what Lois needs now.”

“I didn’t ... I wasn’t ... I wish ...”

“Clark?” she said, and her tone had imperceptibly hardened.

“Uhm?”

“You’re not blaming yourself, are you? For not saving them?”

“If only I’d been there -”

“Clark!” There was an undeniable thread of steel in her voice now. “Don’t even think that,” she ordered him.

He sighed. “I know, I know. I can’t save everyone. But ... this is Lois.”

“Be there for her. You don’t have to do anything. Just be Clark. That will be enough.”

He was far from convinced, but it was good to hear her say it. “Thanks, Mom.”

“We’ll be there for the funeral. Let me know the details.”

“I will. I have to get back to Lois.”

“Give her our love.”

“Mom?” Clark took a tattered breath. “Mom, I love you so much.”

“I love you too, honey.”

Part 3

Lois was still hunched on her sofa when a rap sounded on her window. Automatically, she stood and drew back the curtain, never considering the impracticality of a visitor being outside her third floor window.

Superman hovered outside. She stared. She’d reported on many of his rescues in the past two weeks, but she hadn’t been this close to him since they’d stood outside the LexCorp building after he’d bored through concrete to rescue her from the underground cell.

She opened the window, and he stepped into her apartment.

“Lois,” he said. “I heard about your parents. I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry you weren’t there?” Her words had erupted before she had chance to think.

He flinched, but accepted her hostility as if it was due him.

“Yes.”

“I guess even you can’t be everywhere,” she said coldly.

Even as she spoke, Lois was aware of a vague curiosity about the origin of her animosity. It wasn’t his fault. But her voice hadn’t belonged to her since she’d faced the police officers at her door.

His face was impassive — the same expression he’d worn in the hundreds of photographs published since he first appeared in Metropolis. “I’m sorry,” he said again. His voice was pitched low and steady, but she sensed his condolences were genuine. “Is there anything I can do?”

Give me my parents back, Lois screamed in her head. She covered her mouth with her hand; grateful this thought had stayed unspoken.

His jaw flexed, and she wondered if the ability to read minds was another of his powers. “Would you bring my sister, Lucy?” she asked, smoothing the hard edge from her voice.

“Of course.”

“I ... I have her number,” Lois said and felt herself colour.

“But I don’t know her address.” She felt an irresistible need to explain. “We’re not that close.”

Superman’s hand lifted, as if he had considered reaching for her, but then it dropped. “What’s her number?” he asked.

Lois picked up her address book and held it open towards him.

He glanced at it. “I’ll find her,” he assured her.

“Thank you.” It was formal, but at least she had managed to stifle the accusatory tone.

He stepped towards her window.

“Superman?”

He turned, one red boot already poised on her window ledge.

“Thank you for getting me out of Luthor’s tunnel.”

He nodded cursorily and flew out of her window.

Lois started towards her bathroom, thinking to have a shower. Half way across the room, she turned and moved towards the kitchen, thinking to have breakfast.

Instead, she went back to her sofa and sat, numbly staring ahead.

After what seemed an interminably long time — although the clock had moved less than five minutes — the soft knock sounded again on her window.

Lois's stomach lurched.

Lucy.

Somehow, her sister's arrival peeled away the opaque strips of this nightmare and set her inescapably face to face with the caustic realities. Mom was dead — lying cold and finished in the morgue. Dad was dead — still and inanimate and done with, when only yesterday ... *yesterday*... he had had life.

It didn't seem possible.

It wasn't possible. Yet it was.

Her heart pounding, Lois went to the window and opened it. Superman came in alone.

"Where's Lucy?" she said, panic piercing through her words.

"She's fine," he assured her quickly. "But she didn't want to come."

"What do you mean she didn't want to come?" Lois demanded, her voice shrilling across the room.

"I offered to bring her, and she refused to come with me," Superman explained evenly. "She said she'd rather drive."

Lois experienced a bizarre mix of pure relief and high-grade anger. She wanted to scream. Not words — they weren't going to be possible — but she craved loud and uninhibited release. Now was not the time, so she suffocated it. "Thanks," she managed. A sudden, sickening thought assaulted her mind. "She is coming?" she asked, aware of how pitifully needy she sounded.

"She said she would," Superman said. "She said for you to go ahead and make the arrangements and whatever you decided would be fine with her."

"How is she?" Lois asked shakily.

The impassive eyes seemed to soften. "She's grieving and in shock."

The cloud closed in further, engulfing her.

Superman hurried to the window. "I have to go," he said, quickly. He was gone with a gush of cool breeze.

Seconds later, a knock sounded on her door. When Lois opened it, Clark stood there, dressed casually in jeans and a shirt.

"I brought breakfast," he said. He skirted past her and put the coffee cups and paper bags on her countertop.

Lois stared at the food as the aroma of the coffee teased her nostrils. She was besieged by the sharp reminiscence of the night Clark had walked in with coffee and hamburgers. The night Superman had rescued her from Luthor's tunnel. The night she and Clark had written their first big story together. The night she had teased him about knowing his password.

The memory was like something she'd watched in a movie — other people in another world. A world protected and safe. A world where people lived each day, carelessly assuming that death could not touch them.

Clark swept her into his arms and held her against his warm, strong body. Lois allowed herself to languish in his embrace. But even this close to him, the cloud didn't dissipate, the deadness didn't recede.

He was outside the cloud. She was inside.

Alone.

The next three days passed in a blur for Lois. They were such long, exhausting days. It felt as if she'd crammed a month's worth of endurance into the hours since she'd opened her door and been confronted by the two police officers.

It was early evening. At her insistence, Clark had gone to the Planet. Until now, he had barely left her side. He'd slept every night at her apartment — starting on the sofa, but ending up next to her when she succumbed to the onslaught of fear and grief and images and loneliness.

He had held her and comforted her and never once let them cross the line of intimacy. Lois had no doubt he was the most decent human being she had ever met.

Uncle Mike had dealt with getting the bodies released and having them brought to Metropolis. He would be catering for the post-funeral afternoon tea, to be held at his cafe.

Lucy had called twice. Eventually Lois had managed to get a definite commitment from her that she would arrive the evening before the funeral. The numerous times Lois had called her, she hadn't answered.

Lois had spent many hours with the funeral directors, planning the service.

She remembered walking into the funeral home. It was painted cheery blue and had a vase of bright yellow flowers on the table. Paintings evocative in their serenity adorned the walls.

Yet the underlying morbid atmosphere had seeped through the surface decor and convulsed her stomach so remorselessly, she had feared she would vomit.

Clark had understood. His hand had found hers, and somehow, she had kept functioning.

The second they'd sat opposite the tall, greying woman exuding plastic efficiency, Lois had made the decision to pretend they had been a normal, happy family. She'd done it often enough before. It shouldn't have been difficult to maintain the mask.

But it had been mind-numbingly difficult. The woman's questions had aggravated her pain, torching her insecurities and uncovering the festering underbelly that had been her family.

Burial or cremation?

Lois had no idea of her parents' preferences. She'd never talked to either of them. She hadn't thought she would need to. Not yet.

Burial, she decided. Illogically, it seemed less final.

Would her parents like to be buried in a shared grave?

No! Mom would rather be anywhere than with Dad.

Yet, they had been together.

After agonising for what had seemed like an eternity, Lois had decided on two graves, positioned next to each other.

Would she like to view the bodies?

The thought had caused her to recoil in horror. View them? Why would she choose to add further fuel to her already tormented imagination?

One question, at least, had been easy. One funeral? Or two?

One!

Lois was absolutely certain she could not go through this twice and fervently pushed away the nagging possibility that her parents might not want to share the final vestiges of their lives. Every time she thought of the funeral, a paralysing panic erupted inside her. It loomed like a bleak and unforgiving mountain, waiting to be climbed. But Lois had no strength to attempt even the foothills.

What music would they like?

Musically, as with everything else, her parents had been poles apart. Mom liked opera; Dad despised it as whining, nonsensical trash. Dad liked rock and roll, which Mom always claimed gave her a headache.

Eventually, she chose a song she didn't recognise because the woman said it was popular at funerals. And, if Lois didn't know it, it couldn't wrench any response from her. Could it?

Who would do the eulogy?

Uncle Mike would do it, but Lois knew her mom would be slighted that she hadn't been represented.

Perry would be perfect — composed, steady, sympathetic —

but he had never even met them.

Clark would do it if she asked — but it was unfair to suggest it. And he hadn't met them either.

Lucy would refuse. She clearly wanted as little to do with this as possible.

Lois could get someone impersonal; the minister maybe, or one of Dad's colleagues. But having no one close who cared enough to speak on their behalf seemed to ram home the pathetic nature of their family bonds.

She couldn't let that happen. Couldn't expose her family's brokenness so publicly.

So ... it had to be her.

The searing thought of it tormented her so much, she had emptied her stomach twice. Thankfully, she had been at home and had gotten to the bathroom without embarrassing herself.

Lois didn't know how she was going to get up and talk about her parents. Just thinking about it turned her legs to slush and her ribs to a flimsy cage that collapsed in on her lungs.

She didn't know what she was going to say.

The truth?

Right.

Mom was a selfish, self-centred individual who rarely saw beyond her own needs and wants. Her most finely honed skills were in manipulation and heaping guilt upon those she professed to love when they didn't meet her demands.

Dad was a selfish, work-centred individual who had never grasped that being a father and a husband involved more than paying the bills.

Together, they were a self-destructive time bomb that had — eventually — exploded. Unlike most bombs, the damage before detonation had been as equally destructive as the damage of the explosion.

Lois stared at the blank sheet of paper in front of her. Two days. The funeral was in two days. She was a writer, but a writer devoid of words.

She hurled the pen across the table and watched it plummet to the floor. Her posture wilted, her head buried in her hands.

Her unshed tears had congealed into a huge, cold, metallic ball that was lodged in her stomach. She longed for release, but nothing could crack the surface.

A knock sounded, and Lois stood mechanically with a body-jarring sigh. She reached for the door without checking through the peephole, sure it would be Clark.

She opened the door and froze.

"Lois," Sarah Crawford said. "I'm so sorry." She stepped forward, pulled Lois into her arms, and held her there. "What's happening?" she asked when she'd released her.

Sarah's question threw her. "Well, my parents were killed," Lois said blankly.

Sarah smiled through damp eyes. "I know that," she said. "But you get so tired of people asking how you are when you have absolutely no means to answer them."

"That's so true," Lois said with a rueful sigh.

They sat together on Lois's couch. "So ... talk," Sarah said.

Sarah's matter-of-fact manner loosened Lois's tongue. "I'm doing the eulogy, and I don't know what to say," she said tonelessly. "Most of the time, I can't believe it has happened and I'm waiting for one of them to call me. Every time the phone rings, I think it's them. But, it's not, of course."

Lois stared at her hands, one fingertip distractedly picking at her thumbnail. "I keep thinking mindless things like, 'I should see what Mom thinks of this.' Then I remember, and it feels like my heart is being stabbed."

Lois snatched the blue cushion from next to her and clasped it to her body. "I feel like I've been cut adrift. And I'm bobbing around in a great big ocean like a little cork, and I'm terrified I'm going under."

Sarah's hand reached across and gently grasped Lois's arm.

"The stupidest thing," Lois said, "is that I've spent the last fifteen years trying to free myself from those ties."

"But the ties were there," Sarah said softly. "Hidden maybe, but there. You could always choose to go back."

"Now there is no going back. There's nothing to go back to."

Lois made a rough sound in her throat as she swallowed down her grief. "For the first time in fifteen years, I want so badly to run to Mom or Dad and be their ... their little girl again." She shrugged. "Instead, I'm the big girl with the decisions and responsibilities I'm not ready for."

"In some ways, this is harder than losing someone who was the joy of your heart."

Lois regarded her with rank disbelief.

"It is," Sarah insisted. "Last year, my grandmother died. She was a bitter and unlikeable woman. When she died, I felt very little for her — but a whole lot for me. A whole lot for what I should have had, but had never had. Her death took away my hope that things could change."

Lois stared at Sarah, slowly shaking her head as her throat convulsed. "That's exactly how I feel," she whispered. "I mourn more for what could have been than what was. But I can't let anyone know."

"And that is so very, very hard."

Lois was silent as Sarah's words drifted through her mind. "Was it different when your husband died?" she asked.

Sarah smiled, even as a fresh batch of tears welled in her eyes. "I loved David so much," she said. "And I miss him ... and the thought of never being with him again feels like I'm being torn to pieces on the inside, but ..." She wiped her damp cheeks.

"But it feels like it should feel?"

Sarah nodded. "And that's a comfort."

"I'm so angry," Lois rasped.

"With them?"

Lois nodded fiercely. "So angry that they left me. So angry that they never realised our time together was limited. So angry that they wasted so much of it with their stupid, meaningless conflicts." Her voice had strengthened and risen, and it felt good to batter against the pervading cloud instead of passively submitting to it. "And angry at myself because I didn't confront them and demand they see past their selfishness and work on making our family into something worthwhile. And I'm *so* angry that they left this mess, and I have to deal with it." Lois stood and paced the room. "How selfish is that?"

"It's normal to feel angry," Sarah said, her quiet voice contrasting with Lois's angry outburst. "I was even angry at David for a little while — for leaving me when I needed him so much."

"What about the guilt?" Lois demanded. "Is that OK too?"

"What are you feeling guilty about?"

"How angry I am. How if they walked through that door right now, I'd scream at them for half an hour before I'd even think about hugging them." Lois swallowed against the rising emotion. "How confused I am. How indecisive. How sometimes I struggle just to breathe, and it takes so much effort to do the most basic things like deciding whether to sit or stand. How I can't be there for my little sister, Lucy. How we have such a non-relationship, she has shut me out completely and would rather be with the adolescent-barely-out-of-high-school-boyfriend she's known for three weeks. How — for so many years — I just accepted we weren't close and did nothing to try to repair it."

Lois slumped against the wall, her momentum depleted. "And I'm so exhausted," she said dolefully. "It's as if every last ounce of energy and life has drained away and nothing I do ..."

Sarah stood and put her hand on Lois's shoulder. "What you're feeling is completely normal," she said. "You had deep issues with your parents — issues which also influenced your

relationship with your sister. Like all of us, you found it easier and simpler to bury these issues and hope they would, somehow, fix themselves in the future. But now, you can't bury them. Now, they're there, in your face, in your heart, right there, every time you turn around; there in every thought, every emotion."

"I suck so badly at this."

Sarah smiled again through her tears. "We all suck so badly at this, Lois." She leant forward into Lois's eye line. "Stop thinking there's a right way to do this," she said earnestly. "There isn't. You just get through it the best you can."

"Will it *ever* stop hurting?" Lois asked.

Sarah sighed. "The intensity will lessen, but no, it won't ever stop hurting."

Lois frowned at her, but Sarah didn't flinch.

"I'm not going to promise you things will be better than they will be," Sarah said. "The truth is you will never have your parents again. You will go through milestones in your life that you long to share with them — marriage, children, success, heartache, memories, something as simple as a shared coffee — and they won't be there. That's the reality. But the reality is also that there will be good things in your life. There will be things which make you smile and laugh and glad to be alive."

"I can't imagine ever laughing again," Lois said and grimaced at the forlornness of her tone.

"You will — that I *can* promise you." Sarah patted Lois's shoulder. "How's Clark doing?"

"Clark's been amazing," Lois said dutifully.

"So there are two corks bobbing around together?"

Lois shook her head. "No. He's here with me, but he's not there."

"Let him in, Lois," Sarah said quietly.

"I can't," Lois said, and she could hear the hysteria weaved through her words. "No one can get in. And I can't get out."

"Clark seems to be a very understanding guy."

Lois slumped back to the sofa and pulled her knees up against her chest. "But he doesn't understand."

"What doesn't he understand?"

"He doesn't understand my family. He doesn't understand how I'm feeling now. He doesn't understand how ... disconnected I feel ... from everyone ... including him."

"Try to reconnect with him."

"I can't."

"Try. Try to explain. Try to let him in. Try to let him feel this with you."

"I didn't mean to shut him out," Lois said woodenly.

"Of course you didn't. But let him in now. You know he wants to help you. Be honest with him. Tell him you're confused. He is, too."

"But if this were his parents, he would be feeling ... right."

"Are you worried he'll judge you?"

"No," Lois said. "Not Clark."

"Then don't pretend," Sarah said. "Not with him; certainly not with yourself."

"I'm doing the eulogy," Lois said plaintively. "I'm going to have to do some pretending."

"Are you scared?"

"Petrified."

"Of what?"

Lois shrugged. "It sounds so selfish."

"Lois! You're feeling what you're feeling. What are you scared of?"

"Standing there, bawling my eyes out in front of everyone. Failing my parents, embarrassing myself, not being good enough."

A knock sounded at the door. "Clark?" Sarah guessed.

Lois nodded. "Probably."

"He wants to be with you in this, Lois. Let him."

Lois felt the weight pressing down on her. "Be...before this," she said in a hollow voice, "being with Clark brought such joy. Now ..." She looked down. "Now, I just can't care whether he comes or not."

"That is natural."

"It's scaring him. I can see the confusion and despair in his eyes ... but I just can't do anything about it."

The knock sounded on the door again, gentler this time.

"When was the last time you held him?" Sarah asked.

"He holds me all the time."

"When was the last time you held him?"

"Before ... before all this."

Sarah stood. "Do it. Do it now. He needs you."

Lois nodded, but she wasn't sure she had the energy, even for Clark.

The voices inside Lois's apartment had caused Clark to hesitate before knocking. He'd stood there, fighting the temptation to walk away — to use the fact she had company to escape.

Not to escape from Lois, of course.

The aura of death was here. It had seeped into him, gnawing away at his strength.

But there could be no escape for Lois. And he'd promised he would be with her.

He just hadn't realised how incredibly hard this would be.

Lois — his beautiful, vibrant Lois — was gone. Her heart and her spirit had withered away, leaving only the shell of her body to continue on.

His heart ached for her. If only he could take some of her pain on himself and ease her torment.

But he'd been so ineffective she had withdrawn from him. He'd clung to her, desperate to keep her close, but she'd slipped away as surely as oil leaks from a clenched fist.

The door opened, and Clark saw Lois and Sarah Crawford. He smiled politely, knowing it was a feeble effort, and stepped into the room. As he waited for Lois to say goodbye to Sarah, the realisation reared up — he was standing exactly where he'd been when that fateful knock had come, changing everything. He deliberately stepped away, as if moving physically could shut down his memories.

It couldn't. Nothing could diminish the power of the memories here. His best memories. And his worst. Memories of Lois when she'd been so happy, so open, so relaxed. The night she'd lay across his lap and teased him about hacking into his computer. The evening he'd arrived here to pick her up for their first date.

And then there was the memory of his buttons.

With a start he realised that was just three days ago. Three days. It seemed like a lifetime. So much had changed, and he couldn't see any way back. Lois had changed forever. This suffering would change anyone. How could he even be thinking like this, thinking about what *he* had lost, when she had lost so much more?

Yet, one thing he knew. One thing that crushed his spirit a little more each hour — the knowledge that if their positions had been traded, he would be clinging to Lois, not pushing her away.

He watched as Sarah hugged Lois and left. Lois shut the door and turned to him.

They faced each other like two strangers. Two strangers thrown together in a situation neither were equipped to deal with.

Clark looked at her, a part of him wanting to smile just to give her a jolt of encouragement. He didn't — Lois had no reason to smile.

She looked at him. At his face. Into his eyes. She hadn't done that in days. She had stared into the nothingness as if her eyes had been unable to focus.

What he saw now caused his heart to leap. She didn't smile, but there was a lightening in those exquisitely beautiful brown eyes, as if ... almost as if she were pleased to see him.

"Clark," she said, sounding more like Lois than she had since the beginning of this nightmare.

Instead of clutching her to him, which he had done repeatedly, Clark held out his arms and waited. Waited for her to choose to come to him.

She did.

She stepped quickly into his arms and clung to his neck as if he was all that stood between her and capitulation.

"Aw, Lois," he breathed. *I have missed you.* He couldn't voice his distress; this wasn't about him. Could never be about him. But it felt *so good* to feel her in his arms again.

They were together.

And together, they could do this.

After a long time, Lois unwound from him, but she didn't step away. "I can't think of anything for the eulogy," she said. Her chin wobbled. "Would you help me? Please?"

"Aw, Lois," he said shakily. "Of course I'll help you."

She walked to her table, and Clark put his hand on her back. Somehow, that simple touch bridged an ocean of separation. He picked up the pen from the floor and sat beside her. Taking the blank piece of paper, he said, "Tell me something you remember."

"I can't think of anything except the fights," Lois said.

"What's the best memory you have of your dad?" Clark asked.

"My dad?" she said as if the question was unexpected.

"Your dad. Sam. He was a doctor, wasn't he?"

Lois nodded, and tiny creases appeared in her forehead as she sifted through her memories. "When I was little, really little, he would call me his princess."

Clark wrote that. "How did you feel when he said that?"

"I felt ... as if I were his; as if I were special to him."

Clark wrote again.

"Except as I got older, it became obvious I had disappointed him so much, he ..."

Clark put his finger on her mouth and shook his head, gazing into the sadness glistening in her eyes. "I know the bad stuff happened, honey," he said. "I know it seems as if that is all there is, but somewhere amongst all that pain, we're going to find good memories."

"OK."

"Tell me something else," he prompted.

"Both of my front teeth were missing, and I didn't want to go to school because one of the boys had been teasing me. My dad said I didn't need front teeth to be the smartest and the prettiest girl in the whole school."

Clark wrote, trying to hide the smile that tugged at his mouth in response to the picture that had formed so vividly in his mind. "What's the best memory of your mom?"

"When I was six, she took me to a store and let me choose whichever dress I wanted. From their entire range."

Clark scribbled more notes.

"Except —"

Clark looked up from the paper. "No 'excepts' allowed," he reminded her lovingly.

"Except she hated the one I chose," Lois said quickly. "But she still let me buy it."

Clark smiled at her story. "You're doing fine," he said. "What else?"

"When I had the chicken pox, she played chess with me for hours, even though she hated the game, and I won every time."

Clark wrote again. He continued asking questions and probing and encouraging until he had covered the page with jottings. Then he got a fresh piece of paper and with a little

thought, he arranged Lois's memories into sentences and paragraphs.

When he'd finished, he pushed the sheet across the table and watched her while she read it. When she reached the end, she slumped back in her chair and looked at him, her eyes bright with relief. "Clark," she said. "Thank you."

He smiled hesitantly. "We can do this, honey. We can do this together."

She rose from the chair and settled into his lap. She curled into the crook of his neck and relaxed against him. "I'm sorry, Clark," she said.

His arms closed around her, and he kissed her cheek. "Ssshhh," he murmured. "We're together, honey. We'll be all right."

Part 4

Clark's head lifted as Lois shuffled out of the elevator. She surveyed the newsroom, looking disoriented, looking as if this environment were foreign to her. Then she saw him and some of her bewilderment evaporated.

He strode to meet her, put his hand on her back and guided her to her desk. She smiled hesitantly at him and sat down, still looking so totally lost that his heart ached for her. She couldn't stay here.

He crouched beside her desk. "Lois, honey," he said gently. "What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't stay at home," she said wretchedly. "There is nothing else to be done for the funeral tomorrow. I was going insane."

"You shouldn't be here, honey," he said.

"I need something to do," she cried. "Isn't there something? Anything?"

Clark was working on the final edit of a human-interest story about a young mother battling ovarian cancer. There was no way he was letting Lois within a mile of that. "There's nothing, really." He took her hand. "How about I take you out? We could have coffee."

"You need to be here, Clark," she said. "It's hard enough for Perry with me being away. He can't lose you, too."

"I can have coffee with you and still get the story done by deadline." He offered her his hand. "Come on."

Lois shook her head. "I'll just sit here. Maybe read through a few files; check my emails."

Clark watched her as his mind cultivated a plan. This was a job for ... the other him. "Can I go and get you a coffee?" he said.

She nodded and tried so valiantly to smile, he wanted to take her into his arms and hold her — right here in the middle of the newsroom.

"I'll be back soon," Clark said with a little squeeze on her shoulder.

Lois watched forlornly as Clark stepped into the elevator. He was trying so hard to help her. He hadn't given up despite not knowing what she needed. She didn't know what she needed; how could he know?

She shouldn't have come here, though. Coming here was a bad idea. But Lois didn't have any good ideas.

Jimmy emerged from the storeroom and swung in her direction. He saw her, stopped abruptly, and then hesitantly approached her desk. "Lois," he said with an awkward half-smile. "How are you?"

She matched his smile. "OK."

"I'm so terribly sorry for your loss."

"Thanks, Jimmy."

He stood at her desk, not knowing how to continue, not knowing how to depart graciously.

"I have work to do, Jimmy," Lois said.

He couldn't hide the relief in his smile. "I'll leave you to it." Perry came out of his office. He told her she shouldn't be here, rested his hand on her arm in a fatherly gesture, and eyed her with palpable concern.

Cat came over, for once sincere as she expressed her condolences. As she walked away, Lois reflected that a typical Cat comment was just the normalcy she craved. But you couldn't fault her for trying to be kind.

There was an audible rustle of interest as Superman marched into the newsroom. Lois watched him, wondering — without any real interest — who he was here to see. She was surprised when he stopped at her desk. He crossed his arms over his chest and said, "Hi."

"Hi." Now she'd become more accustomed to the Suit, he seemed more human, less alien.

"I saw Clark on the way in, and he gave me an idea."

Lois was aware they had the attention of the entire newsroom. He should expect that, of course, wearing that outfit; not to mention the other things like flying. She squirmed a little in the spotlight, but hey, compared with the past few days ... "He did?"

"He asked me if I would take you to his parents."

"Smallville?" Why would Clark want her to go there?

"Lois, being here isn't going to help," Superman said pragmatically. "You can't be at home alone. Why not go and visit Mr and Mrs Kent?"

"I couldn't impose."

His left eyebrow lifted microscopically. "I thought you'd met Clark's parents," he said.

"I have," Lois said, shaking her head. "But I don't want to go anywhere. The funeral is tomorrow, and Lucy is coming tonight."

"I can fly you there," Superman persisted. "And I can have you home again by this evening."

"You'll fly me?" she choked.

"Why not?" he said, his tone suggesting this was an everyday occurrence. Well, for him, it probably was.

"No," Lois said decisively.

"If you won't go for yourself, will you do it for Clark?"

"Clark?"

"He's worried about you."

"I'd go if Clark came with me," she hedged.

"Lois," Superman chided gently. "You know Clark has to work." The superhero held out his hand towards her and awaited her response.

A hundred excuses scurried through her mind, but Lois didn't have the energy to voice any of them. And it was true — Clark would achieve very little while worrying about her. "OK," she conceded, reaching for Superman's hand and allowing him to help her to her feet. "But I should leave a note for Clark."

"He'll know where you are." In a swift movement, Superman swept her into his arms, and a few seconds later, they were flying over Metropolis.

Lois watched in awe as the city faded from view. "I'm dreaming, aren't I?" she said when words were possible again.

His austere expression softened somewhat, although it didn't come close to a smile. "Are you cold?"

"No."

"Anxious?"

About what? Falling? "No," she said, surprised it was the truth. She usually didn't trust this easily.

This time, his expression *did* approach a smile. Lois settled into his arms, closed her eyes, and gave herself up to the sensation of gliding effortlessly through the air.

Superman landed lightly in the front garden of the Kent farmhouse. Martha hurried towards them.

"Mrs Kent," Superman greeted. "I'm a friend of Clark's. He

might have mentioned me. I've brought you some company."

Martha ran forward and enclosed Lois in a hug. "Lois, honey," she said. "I'm so sorry for your loss." Clark's mom smelled of vanilla soap and fresh baking. "Come on in," she said.

Lois looked around for Superman, but he had gone. She followed Martha into the house, noting the things that had changed from when she was last here. A flowerbed that had been resplendent with flowers then, was bare dirt now.

As they passed through the porch, Lois glanced to the place where Clark had stood as she'd kissed his cheek. A smile birthed inside her as she remembered his surprise. The smile never reached her face, but the impulse had been there — and it seemed to reset something foundational to the rhythm to her life.

"Sit down, honey," Martha said. She busied herself, preparing coffee and scones. Then she sat next to Lois and smiled sadly. "Whatever you're feeling, it's OK."

Lois pulled her facial muscles into something she hoped resembled a smile. Martha was such a wonderful person — the embodiment of what a mother should be — but despite that, Lois knew with certainty that she wouldn't be able to open up to this woman.

How could she ever explain the anger she felt towards her parents for failing her? For leaving her? How could she explain that she was mourning the death of her childish dream that — one day — they would be a real family?

How could she admit that in the midst of all the raging heartache was the speck of shameful relief that the fighting had finally stopped?

Martha would never understand that.

So Lois drank her coffee, nibbled at a scone, and said very little.

When they'd finished, Martha said, "Lois, I have an art class in town. Make yourself at home."

Lois watched with a degree of shock as Martha walked out of the kitchen, leaving her ... alone. She didn't think this was what either Clark or Superman had had in mind when they'd colluded to bring her to Smallville.

She heard Martha leave and began mindlessly clearing away the cups. She needlessly wiped the table, then went to the sink and looked out of the window.

The vegetable garden grew to the left, and to the right was a large expanse of green grass. In the far corner, there was a big tree with low, thick branches. Lois could imagine Martha standing here and watching Clark climb the tree. She could almost imagine a dark-haired little boy waving from among the leaves.

Lois sighed as the emptiness unfurled inside her.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Jonathan coming through the door. "Lois," he said with a smile. "It's good to see you." He stepped closer. "I'm so sorry about your parents."

"Thanks."

His large hand rested fleetingly on her shoulder. "Has Martha left already?"

"She went to her art class."

"Oh."

"What's wrong?" Lois asked.

"One of the cows is struggling to birth her calves. She's having twins. I need Martha's help." Silence hung between them. "Would you mind helping?"

"Me?"

"If those calves aren't born soon, we might lose all three of them."

"OK," Lois said dubiously.

Jonathan took Martha's overalls — they were pink — from a hook behind the door and gave Lois a pair of rubber boots. When she'd donned the overalls and swapped her shoes for the boots, she followed him into the barn. The odour curled her nostrils.

The huge cow was lying down, her shiny black sides heaving. Jonathan directed Lois to the head of the cow. “Just try to calm her,” he said. He knelt at the other end of the animal and nodded to the old towels hanging on the rail. “When I get this one out, you’ll need to take it and rub it with the towel. Usually the mother would do the job by licking and nudging, but we’re going to have to do it for her.”

Lois crouched uncomfortably in the straw at the head of the cow. From there, she could see two tiny feet under the mother’s tail. Jonathan put one hand on the cow’s thigh, patting her reassuringly. He spoke to her constantly, his words unimportant, his tone calm and steadfast.

Slowly, more of the legs came into view. Then, with a sudden, violent gush, the whole body was expelled with a flood of reddened liquid. Jonathan lifted the calf and laid it on the fresh hay. He pulled off the membrane and used the corner of the towel to wipe around the calf’s mouth and eyes. With an encouraging smile, he handed the towel to Lois and returned his attention to the cow.

Lois knelt next to the calf. Its eyes were open, but it wasn’t moving. Its fur was dark and damp.

She carefully placed the towel over the bulk of the little creature and began rubbing. “That’s good, Lois,” she heard Jonathan say. “Not too gentle.”

Everything except for the calf receded into the background. Each breath lifted its side. Its body felt warm under her touch. She continued rubbing with the towel, venturing past the shoulders and onto the long, spindly legs.

“Pick her up and turn her over so you can dry the other side,” Jonathan said in the same low, reassuring tone.

Lois placed the towel on the straw and gazed at the calf.

“Put your hands under her and lift,” Jonathan instructed. “You can do it.”

Lois hadn’t looked at him, but she’d heard the quiet confidence in his words. She slipped her hands under the calf and, trying not to wince at the damp stickiness of the fur, gently flipped it. She brushed away the pieces of straw and began rubbing again.

When the calf was dry, Lois drew her fingers through the fluffy fur. The calf lifted its head and tried to stand. Lois backed away. The calf staggered back onto the hay.

“Keep touching her,” Jonathan said. “You’re doing great.”

“Is that calf OK?” Lois asked with a nod to the cow.

“Yep,” Jonathan said. “I was worried it would be backwards, and I’d have to pull it out quickly, but it’s fine.”

Moments later, Lois heard the rush again, and Jonathan picked up the second calf. He lifted it to the dry straw and pulled a clean towel from the rails.

“Can I do it?” Lois asked.

Jonathan handed her the towel. “Mouth, eyes, and nose first,” he said.

Lois cleaned the gunk from around the calf’s face and then began rubbing its side. Jonathan applied liberal amounts of brown liquid to the underside of both calves. “Antiseptic,” he explained.

The first calf made another gallant effort to stand, and this time got to its feet. It stumbled forward, regained its balance, and stood unsteadily, looking profoundly puzzled.

Lois laughed, and her delight echoed around the barn. She started at the sound and reflexively put her hand to her mouth as if to smother it.

Jonathan smiled at her. “Feels good, huh?”

She didn’t know if he meant the new life, or laughing, or working together with nature, but she nodded. This did feel good. She returned her concentration to the calf.

When it was dry, she lifted her eyes and saw that the cow was on her feet and nuzzling the first calf. A few moments later, the second calf stood and groggily sought its mother.

Lois looked at Jonathan and discovered they were both smiling.

Later, Lois sat with Jonathan at the kitchen table, enjoying a cup of tea and more of the scones. They hadn’t spoken much — just a few necessary details such as where to locate the butter and jelly — but she’d found solace in the quietness.

As Lois stared into her cup, she realised something. Right now, she felt closer to Jonathan than she had ever felt to her own father.

Maybe it was what they had done — what they had achieved together.

Maybe it was how he had included her — how he had treated her as an equal. Her knowledge had been so deficient, but he had never once doubted her ability to do it.

Maybe there was something in his calmness, his quiet confidence that reminded her of Clark.

Maybe he just naturally slotted into the role of a father figure.

“Thanks for your help, Lois,” he said. “You did very well.”

She smiled shyly at his approval. “Did Clark help you when he was a kid?”

Jonathan laughed. “All the time,” he said. “He just had to be involved in everything. He was only three the first time he helped me birth a calf.”

There was something in Jonathan’s tone — a pride, a joy, a treasure trove woven through the memory — that stung Lois’s heart.

She could not remember that pride from either of her parents.

Purposefully, she shut down the comparisons. They hurt. And they made her feel so disloyal.

The little smile lingered on Jonathan’s face. Lois knew he was remembering an eager little boy, trying to help beyond his strength. She could almost hear Jonathan’s quiet instructions and see little Clark’s efforts to help.

It was no surprise that Clark had grown into the man he was.

A solitary tear escaped, and Lois wiped it from her cheek.

“Now you know how to birth a calf, you can get a job here anytime,” Jonathan said.

“I’ll remember that if Perry ever kicks me out.”

“Lois?” Jonathan studied his tea. “Even without the calves, you know you’re welcome here anytime, don’t you?”

She nodded.

“Even if Clark can’t come, you’re welcome. Always.”

“Thank you,” she said, feeling her mangled emotions push into her throat. As she sipped her tea, its warmth seeped through her, bringing composure. “Did Martha really have an art class?”

Jonathan scratched his head, but she could see he was trying to cover a smile. “No,” he admitted.

Lois felt her mouth curl into a little smile. “Then why did she go?”

“Because she thought you could do better than being stuck in this kitchen with her.”

“She thought birthing calves would be good therapy?”

Jonathan looked like he knew he was being backed into a corner. Strangely, something of his expression reminded her of Clark. “Well, we can’t actually produce calves on demand,” he said with chuckle. “But any farm work tends to soothe the mind.”

“Did you *really* need my help?”

“Yes, I did,” Jonathan said earnestly. “The second birth could have been a lot more complicated. I needed someone to be there for the first little heifer.”

“Tell Martha ‘thanks,’” Lois said.

As they shared a conspiratorial grin, the door opened, and Superman entered. “Good afternoon, Mr Kent,” he greeted Jonathan. “Ready?” he asked Lois.

Lois stood. “Thank you, Jonathan.”

“See you tomorrow,” Jonathan said.

“Tomorrow?”

“We’ll be there tomorrow,” he said. “Martha and I will both be there.”

Then Lois remembered. The funeral. “You’re coming?” she said in surprise.

“Of course,” Jonathan said.

“Thank you,” she whispered. Then she hugged him.

They walked outside, and Superman lifted her into his arms and flew her back to Metropolis.

To face the night ... and the morning that would follow, bringing the day of her parents’ funeral.

That night, Lucy arrived.

She came to Lois’s apartment, stayed long enough for Lois to go over the details of the funeral, and then informed Lois that she had to leave.

“But I thought you’d stay here,” Lois said, trying to stop her disappointment from sharpening her tone.

“Aaron’s waiting for me at our hotel room.”

“Oh.”

They hesitated long enough that Lois wondered if her sister was considering hugging her. Impulsively, Lois attempted an awkward embrace.

Lucy stiffened, but she didn’t pull away.

Lois dropped a light kiss on her sister’s hairline as they separated. “I’m so glad I have you, Lucy,” she said. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Lucy gestured to the door. “I should get back to Aaron.”

“I’ll meet him tomorrow,” Lois said, trying to sound positive.

“And I’ll meet Clark.”

“Yes.”

“Are you serious about him?” Lucy asked.

“Yes. Are you serious about Aaron?”

“Maybe.”

“I hope it works out for you, Lucy.”

Lucy regarded Lois suspiciously. Then she shrugged, and the tiniest smile appeared. “If it does work out, it will be a first. I always pick the wrong ones.”

“Me, too,” Lois admitted.

Her admission seemed to surprise Lucy. “But Clark’s different?”

“Completely different.”

After another awkward silence, Lucy opened the door and stepped out of Lois’s apartment. “See you tomorrow.”

“Bye, Lucy.”

Lois closed the door and leant against it.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow, when her parents would be lowered into the ground and their caskets covered by the earth.

Lois walked, dreamlike, down the aisle of the church with Clark a step behind her, his hand on the small of her back. Halfway down, it became no longer possible to avoid the presence of the two white caskets positioned in front of the rows of seats.

The one on the left was her father’s. It was topped with a dome of gerberas — its predominantly fiery reds and hot oranges contrasting dynamically with the deep green of the bed of foliage.

The one on the right was her mother’s. It carried a spray of roses in shades of soft peach, pink, and cream.

Lois looked down to the polished wooden floor and concentrated on getting to her seat at the front. She deliberately avoided the eyes of the eighty or so people already assembled. One look from anyone, one expression of sympathy, and she was going to lose the already tenuous grip on her control.

When she arrived, she glanced to where her sister was already seated. Lucy was staring ahead, her face the colour and consistency of concrete. On the other side of Lucy was a young

man. That must be Aaron. He was dressed in a cheap suit and looked as if he would rather be anywhere else. Lois gave him points just for being here.

Lois sat and shuffled closer to Lucy to make room for Clark to sit next to her. She felt a hand on her shoulder. “You’re doing fine, honey,” came Martha Kent’s quiet voice.

The service began with a hymn. Lois couldn’t sing. Her throat ached with the effort to keep from crying. In the five days since the death of her parents, she had wanted to cry so many times. When she was alone, when she could do it without looking like an emotional wreck, but her tears had stubbornly refused to budge from their dungeon inside her.

Now, of all times, so public, so on-display, they throbbed for release. And the eulogy was just minutes away.

Every time Lois thought about getting up in front of all these people, her stomach clenched. And it wasn’t just her stomach; it was every muscle in her body. Her neck hurt, her shoulders ached, her back was so tense, she kept trying to stretch it — but that just seemed to make everything worse.

The hymn finished, and they sat. She felt Clark search for her hand and take it in his. She inched towards him, soaking up the support emanating from him. From the edge of her vision, she knew he was looking at her. She turned to face him.

“I love you,” he mouthed.

That nearly broke the dam. She looked away quickly, fighting against the avalanche. She stared at her hand, encased in Clark’s long fingers. She allowed it to blur and indulged in a deep, shaky breath. *Please don’t let this be a dream*, she thought. *I couldn’t do it again.*

She lifted her eyes, careful to skirt past the caskets positioned just in front of her, and tried to tune in to the minister’s words. Then she realised he had stopped ... and everyone was looking at her. She felt Clark release her hand with a small squeeze.

Panicked, she looked at him. He nodded slightly, his eyes brimming with support and love.

Lois forced herself to stand and walk past the caskets. She negotiated the four steps and stood behind the pulpit. She turned, carefully positioned her notes, took a great, shuddering breath, and lifted her head, searching for Clark, in desperate need of his reassurance and understanding.

His seat was empty.

Stunned, she looked to the far end of the church — just in time to see the back of Clark Kent disappear out of the church.

Part 5

He’d left her.

He’d gone.

Lois’s control disintegrated.

The heads and shoulders of the seated people blurred into an assortment of blobs. She drooped against the pulpit, heaving, as huge tears teemed down her cheeks and plopped onto her notes.

She registered the collective gasp that rose as she began to weep. It grew into an uncomfortable shuffling as it became obvious that she would not be able to speak one word.

Perry materialised beside her and pushed a large, clean handkerchief into her hand. He ushered her back to her pew and sat beside her in Clark’s empty place.

With steely self-control, Lois dammed the flow of her tears. She forced her unseeing eyes to the minister. He read her words, but they floated over her as if unrelated to the searing pain inside her. The cloud had darkened, thickened, congested.

After the funeral had finished, Perry shepherded her down the aisle behind the caskets. They emerged from the church, and the bright sunshine stung Lois’s waterlogged eyes. She slumped forward. Perry’s arms tightened around her shoulders.

“I can’t do it,” she sobbed. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“Lois, just a few more minutes, darlin’,” Perry said. “I’ll stay with you.”

That's what Clark had promised. She searched for him; scanned every face, daring to hope he was here, waiting for her, waiting to surround her with his support.

But Clark was not here. He'd gone.

Perry put her in her Jeep and drove them behind the pair of gleaming black hearses. Lois closed her eyes and concentrated solely on curbing the aftershock convulsions that were erupting through her body.

They arrived at the cemetery, and shrouded in an unworldly void, Lois watched as the two white caskets containing the bodies of her parents were lowered into neighbouring gravesites.

When it was done, she clung to Perry and gathered every scrap of tenacity from within her body. "Either you take me home now," she said, low and unwavering, "or I'll call a cab."

"I'll take you home," he said in surrender.

In her apartment, Lois faced Perry. She had never seen him so ashen. "Thank you for bringing me home," she said stiffly. "Please leave now. I want to be alone."

"Lois —"

"Perry, if you care about me at all, please go. I have to be alone."

He hesitated, clearly undecided.

Lois turned from him, walked to her phone, and took it off the hook. She went into her bedroom and firmly shut the door.

She lay on her bed and finally let go. Her tears came, relentless and terrifying in their intensity.

It was dark outside when the last of her sobs squeezed from Lois's rigid throat. Her head felt as if it had been pummelled with a club. Her face was hot, her body shivery. There was not one muscle that didn't ache. Her breathing was coarse and irregular. Her lungs burned, and her eyes felt as if they'd been scraped with sandpaper.

Isolation reverberated through every heartbeat.

A muffled knock sounded on her door.

Lois released the covers from one side of the bed. Slowly and painfully, she crawled between the cool sheets and covered herself completely.

She curled into the smallest ball she could and shut out the world.

She wanted one thing only. To never have to move again.

Clark, dressed in the Suit but without the cape, lay flat on his stomach, reaching forward under the bed.

His fingers stopped just short of her — the little girl cowered into the corner.

He spoke to her — a few words of comfort and reassurance — but it was doubtful she would hear him over the roar of the fire.

He considered wriggling forward, taking hold of her, and hauling her out. But that would frighten her more. And if she resisted, she'd hurt herself against the bed.

Clark sprang to his feet and dragged the triple bunk bed out from the corner. He flew to the now-uncovered girl and squatted beside her.

She was tiny — little more than a baby, probably not yet three years of age. She had soft, dark curls and black eyes — red-rimmed from the smoke. Clark smiled.

She considered him solemnly, but didn't move. She had the cutest rosebud mouth.

Clark spoke again, hoping she would sense she had nothing to fear from him. But frightened or not, he had to get her out of here now. The smoke was closing in on them, and the building could crumble at any time. He reached towards her. She didn't flinch. He scooped her into his arms, surprised by how little she weighed.

He curved his shoulders and dropped his head forward to

protect her as they flew through the broken window. Once outside, he carried her beyond the reach of the menacing heat and carefully stood her on the lush grass. He knelt next to her and checked for injuries. There was nothing obvious.

She was the last one.

The last one of at least eighty Honduran children he had rescued from their burning orphanage. He'd lost count after about fifteen.

Two children, he knew, were already dead when he'd laid them on the ground. There hadn't been time to grieve or even pay respect — not while other children were still trapped amid the flames.

Clark turned from the little girl to the blackened buildings. Flames curled from two of the second floor windows and smoke clustered thickly. The fire fighters had brought the blaze under control, but Clark doubted that the combination of fire and water would leave anything that could be salvaged.

He x-rayed into the buildings, doing one final, careful sweep to ensure no one was still inside. Another ambulance arrived as two others shuttled away, taking burned, scared, and traumatised children to the hospital.

Clark looked back to the little girl and noticed she was shivering despite the warmth of the late afternoon sun. He darted to the crumpled red heap that was his cape and wrapped it around her. He picked up her, and she laid her head on his arm, causing a surge of protectiveness to rise within him. She was so young, so defenceless, so alone. There should be a mother's arms straining for her baby with tearful relief. Instead ...

Clark slowly elevated and flew her to the hospital.

A nurse greeted him, showing no surprise at his Suit. She'd probably already heard about the strange flying man who'd rescued children from the flames consuming the orphanage. She reached for the little girl, and Clark felt sudden reluctance to let her go. He probably imagined it, but she seemed unwilling to go. With a final smile for her, he relinquished her, still bundled in his cape.

He left the hospital, flew to the orphanage, and dipped below the suspended smoke cloud. Only the fire crews remained, and the final wisps of flame were stagnant and unthreatening. Confident his part was done, he flew back to Metropolis.

In his apartment, Clark showered, lingering long in the stream of almost-boiling water. He scrubbed his hair, unleashing the clinging smoke. He wished it could be as easy to expunge the heaviness that had pervaded his heart the instant he'd made the choice to desert Lois.

He relived again the moment he'd reached the door of the church. The awful moment when he'd heard Lois's quick intake of breath. He'd wanted to turn — to meet her eyes and attempt to transmit something of his misery at leaving her.

But he'd known that had he turned, had he seen her pain at his betrayal, he would not have had the strength to leave.

So he hadn't even turned. He had simply walked out. Run out.

He had heard every sob, every wail. Even as he'd systematically worked through the orphanage, dodging the flames and the water, finding and saving numerous children, his hearing had been tuned to her. To Lois.

Clark dried himself and dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt. He should go to Lois. He *had* to go to Lois.

She would be angry, confused, hurt. And who could blame her?

He didn't have the heart for the confrontation he knew was inevitable. He wanted to drop into his bed, empty his mind, and sleep off the horror of the day. Instead, he walked disconsolately to Lois's apartment.

At her door, he hesitated. He could hear her crying. He could feel her desolation. He yearned to hold her. To pull her against his

body and feel her arms tighten around his neck. To feel her breath on his face. To have her heart beating in tandem with his — soothing away their pain.

He knocked. She silenced for a moment, and then he heard smothered movement. Her sobbing continued, more muffled now.

Clark collapsed down the wall, his elbows on his knees and his head slumped into his hands as he tried to think clearly.

He could knock again. But she'd heard his first knock and refused to respond.

He could break down her door. But it wasn't the physical barrier of the door that kept him out.

He felt destitute, empty. He had nothing to give Lois — no support, no comfort, no strength, nothing.

He flinched as memories lashed him. Memories of the small, unresponsive bodies of the two children he hadn't saved. He could still feel their lifelessness in his arms, their stillness against his beating heart.

He'd carried dead calves before — little creatures born too early, or too weak to make it through the first few days of life — but never a dead human. A dead child.

On the other side of the closed door, Lois was still weeping. Her sobs were softer now, but no less anguished. Her breathing was serrated; each in-breath barbed with suffering.

Sometime in the future, he was going to have to explain to Lois why he had left her. He was going to have to tell her truth. No other explanation would suffice. From the moment he'd known he loved her, he'd wanted to tell her, but he'd temporised, hoping for the ideal moment.

Now, he would have to do it in the worst possible circumstances.

Clark groaned. He couldn't do it now. He *really* couldn't do it now.

He scrambled up and shuffled away. Back in his apartment, he took the Superman suit from where he'd tossed it at the back of the closet. He washed it, heat-vision dried it, and hung it alongside several others. He closed the closet, feeling as if he were shutting the door on a part of his life.

He went to the shower again, thinking it might cleanse the despair from his soul. He turned on the faucet and watched while steam clouded the glass. Then, on sudden impulse, he turned off the water and spun back into the Suit.

Minutes later, he was back at the hospital in Honduras. He found the nurse who'd taken the girl from him. "Could I sit with the little girl?" he asked in Spanish.

The nurse hesitated for a moment, but then nodded her consent. Maybe she understood the trauma of little lives that couldn't be saved.

She led him to a flight of stairs. Under them, the little girl lay on a thin mattress on the floor, covered by his cape. She seemed to be peacefully asleep. "We have no other beds," the nurse explained.

"Is she all right?" Clark asked.

"She is just sleeping. She will be fine."

"Do you know her name?"

"Rosa," the nurse replied.

Clark almost smiled. Of course it was. With a mouth like hers, how could she be called anything else?

He sat on the floor next to the mattress. Through the long hours of darkness, he watched Rosa sleep and listened to Lois's tattered breaths. In the depth of the night, the nurse brought a cup of strong, bitter coffee and shyly offered it to him. He smiled his thanks, appreciating her gesture.

Rosa stirred and woke as the first rays of early morning sunlight crept through the window high above the stairs. She sat up and her dark, solemn eyes settled on Clark for a long moment.

He wondered if she remembered him.

Then she crawled out of his cape and towards him. She

reached for his chest and touched his 'S' with tiny, enquiring fingers.

"Bonito," she said gravely.

From nowhere came a smile Clark didn't know he had. Rosa smiled back at him with the irresistible simplicity of the very young.

The nurse came, smiling despite her obvious fatigue. Clark stood and left after a final wave to Rosa.

The night was over, and morning had come.

And he had to face Lois.

An hour later, Clark stepped from the elevator at the Planet and froze. Lois was at her desk.

When flying back to Metropolis, he'd turned off his superhearing, conscious that his continual monitoring of her invaded her privacy. But he hadn't been able to stop himself from flying by her apartment on his way home. He'd known she hadn't been there and had assumed she would be with Lucy or maybe Uncle Mike.

But she was here. At her desk.

He'd hoped that their first encounter wouldn't be this public. However, he couldn't turn around and retreat into the elevator, so he cautiously approached his desk.

He couldn't walk past her. Couldn't pretend the events of yesterday hadn't happened. Couldn't pretend he hadn't ripped out her already tortured heart. He forced himself to detour to her desk. "Lois?" he said uncertainly.

She looked up at him. She wore more make-up than usual, but it didn't camouflage her red and puffy eyes. "Clark," she said, devoid of expression.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," he said, painfully aware of the inadequacy of his apology.

"It's OK," Lois said dismissively. She turned back to her monitor.

"It's *not* OK," he said brokenly.

"Yes, it is," she said without taking her eyes from whatever she was working on. "It's best I find out now."

His heart crashed somewhere near the floor. "Find out what?" he had to ask.

"Find out how it is with us."

Words in his own defence sprung into his mind and nearly out of his mouth. He clamped them just in time. "Lois, there were reasons."

"What reasons?" she said, her disinterest smouldering.

He crouched beside her desk. "I can't tell you here," he rasped. "Come with me now. Somewhere we can be alone. I'll tell —"

"Clark," she said coolly and distantly. "Before you say anything else, you should understand this — whatever might have been between us is over."

Over. With one word, his life splintered into shards around his feet. "You can't forgive me?" he asked, knowing his agony lay bare in his tone.

She looked at him then, hard and cold and almost unrecognisable from the Lois he loved. "It's not about forgiveness," she said. "It's about who you are, and what I need. They're not compatible."

"Lois," he begged. "*Please* let me explain."

She turned back to her work. "It's over, Clark. Please make this easy for both of us and accept it."

His hand ached to touch her. Her shoulder, her arm, the very tip of one finger — anything to make a connection. "How are you?" he asked softly. "And please don't tell me you're fine."

"I'm exactly how you'd expect for someone who lost both parents a week ago. I'm exhausted, drained, numb, grieving, and in physical pain. I'm angry, and I'm sad, and I'm confused. I can't sleep, I can't think. Sometimes I struggle just to breathe. I

can't imagine ever feeling normal again, and I'm frightened that I can't do this, and I miss my parents more than I would have thought possible." She glared at him. "Is that enough detail for you?"

His head dropped. "Lois," he breathed.

"Do you want to help me through this?" she asked.

His head jolted up as hope birthed. "Anything, Lois," he said. "I'll do anything to help you."

"Then stay away," she said. "Stay right away from me. I want to be alone."

Feeling as if every single part of him had shattered, Clark retreated to his desk, his head low, his shoulders heavy.

He'd lost Lois.

It wasn't because of the funeral. It wasn't because of the deaths of her parents. It was because he was different. It was because of the unfathomable things about him that meant he simply didn't fit into this world. He could never fit.

He should have told her. Better yet, he should have stayed right away from her.

By grasping for the one thing he craved more than anything else, by pretending he was just a normal guy, he'd had them both chasing impossibilities.

Back at his desk, Clark noticed the morning edition of the Planet. He picked it up, not out of interest, but so he could hide behind it and avoid having to look at Lois.

A huge photograph dominated the front page. A photograph of him, dressed in the Suit, holding Rosa who was wrapped in his cape. It must have been taken just before he'd flown her to the hospital.

She looked so small against his chest. So vulnerable.

The headline read, *OUR SUPERMAN SAVES ORPHANS*.

Clark speed-read the foreign correspondent's story. The unadulterated praise and appreciation for what Superman had done sat raw in his gut. The two dead children warranted one line.

He folded the paper under his arm and strode out of the newsroom.

Lois purposefully stayed at the Planet as late as she could, even though she hadn't managed to write one usable word all day.

Her confrontation with Clark had been as strained and as difficult as she had feared, but there was solace now that it was done. She'd sighed with relief when he'd left and had been grateful that he hadn't returned. She'd heard someone mention that he'd phoned in a story.

On the way home, she bought Chinese takeout. As she was about to sit down and try to eat something, a knock sounded on her window. She didn't have to draw back the curtain to know who was there.

"Superman," she said as she opened the window for him. "How are you?"

He stepped into her room almost hesitantly and folded his arms before answering. "I came to find out how you are." His voice seemed a little quivery. Was it possible he was suffering from smoke inhalation?

"I'm OK," Lois said steadily. She stepped forward and tentatively put her hand on his forearm. "Are you all right?"

When he took a moment to answer, she quickly removed her hand. He probably didn't like being touched. "I'm OK, too," he said.

"You should be better than OK," she told him staunchly. "Many of those children would be dead now if you hadn't been there."

"Two did die."

His dejection leaked through his usual inscrutable expression, and Lois couldn't resist returning her hand to his arm. After all,

he was strong enough to flick it off if he really didn't want it there. "They were dead before you got there," she reminded him softly. "They didn't have a chance."

He said nothing.

Lois backed away and picked up the morning edition of the Daily Planet. She gazed at the photo. "Have you seen this?" she asked, holding it up for him to see.

He nodded, although there was no discernable reaction to the photo. She wondered what emotions were hiding behind the cloak of his stoic veneer.

"It's a beautiful photo," she said. "So poignant."

"Her name is Rosa."

She was surprised he knew. And even more surprised that he had shared the information with her. "Is she going to be all right?"

"Yes." Superman gazed at his boots and then swept the room, managing to avoid her eyes. "I went —"

Lois put her hand on his arm again. "You went ..." she encouraged.

He seemed undecided as to whether to continue. She deepened her touch on his arm and looked directly into his eyes. "I went back ... later," he said. "Rosa woke up, and she said my 'S' was ... pretty."

Lois smiled, even as her eyes flooded.

"I have to go," he said and turned away. Her hand slipped from his arm.

"Superman?"

He turned back.

"When you came before, I was upset. I'm sorry if it sounded as if I blamed you for not being there for my parents. I don't think that ... I never did. I don't know where it came from."

"Thank you." He stepped quickly out of the window and flew away.

Lois stared into the darkness, deep in thought. Somehow, she knew that Superman felt responsible for the deaths of those two children. For not being able to save them. And for not being there to save her parents.

She wished she'd hugged him.

But trying to hug someone around those tightly crossed arms would be like trying to hug a brick building.

As had become his habit, Clark patrolled as he flew home. He rescued a woman about to be robbed by two young men, but other than that, everything was quiet. Which meant he had no choice but to go home and face his indecisiveness.

In his apartment, he spun out of the Suit and into pants and a shirt.

He could not remember ever being so unsure about what he should do. He knew he had to go to Lois, but when? Now? Tomorrow? Next week?

He decided to do it now — although the thought of it twisted apprehension through his insides — because he would see her at the Planet tomorrow and it would — perhaps — be marginally easier if they had already talked.

He certainly couldn't do this at the Planet — or anywhere public.

And he knew she was home now.

So ...

Lois ate less than a quarter of her takeout. She stowed the rest into the back of the fridge, knowing it was unlikely she would ever finish the meal.

Lucy had left Metropolis that morning, driving home with Aaron. Lois dialed her number, not really expecting they would have arrived yet. When her call went through to voice-mail, Lois replaced the phone, wondering what to do now. She could go to bed, but it was still early, and she didn't feel sleepy at all. She

turned on the television, flicked through at least ten channels, and turned it off in disgust.

A knock sounded on her door, and she tensed.

Clark?

He would come; she knew that with certainty. He wouldn't ... *couldn't* leave things between them so incomplete. But now? Did it have to be now? She looked through the peephole. It was Clark. Her insides convulsed, and her heart accelerated.

Her inclination was to ignore him — to sneak into the bathroom and turn on the shower in the hope that he'd go away. But this confrontation had to happen. And the sooner it was over, the sooner she could pack away her old life and begin to reconstruct whatever was possible in a new life.

As she opened the door, her traitorous heart began to gallop at the sight of him. He looked tired. Distraught. Nervous.

"May I come in?" he asked quietly.

She stood back to let him in. Then she shut the door and waited. He had deserted her at the moment of her greatest need. He had come now. He could speak first.

"Lois, I'm sorry," Clark said, his voice threaded with tension. "I'm *so* sorry."

The depths of his brokenness almost caused her to cave. Her tears erupted and escaped down her cheeks. "Why did you leave me?" she asked bleakly.

"I had to."

His answer hardened her heart, and she turned on him with undiluted scorn. "You *had* to?" she sneered.

He stared at the floor, hands deep in his pockets, his mouth working. "I'm S-"

"I *know* you're sorry, Clark," Lois cried. "You could say it a thousand times, and it won't change anything. It won't change that on the worst day of my life, the man I thought loved me walked out exactly when I needed him. It won't change that you promised we would do this together, only for me to discover that your together wasn't quite as together as I had imagined." Her outburst stopped abruptly, her breaths coming rough and laboured.

Clark slowly raised his eyes from the floor. He looked like a man facing execution. "Lois," he grated. "I'm S-"

"Clark!" she screamed. "You just don't get it, do you? '*Sorry*' means absolutely nothing except you're hoping I'll get over being hurt. But what happens next time I need you? Can you promise me you won't walk out again?"

He stared at her dumbly.

"Can you?" she stormed, her voice grim and unrelenting.

"No," he said with abject defeat.

Her eyes flooded. "I need more than that." She opened her door. "Get out, Clark."

For a moment, he seemed too dumbfounded to move. Then, with despair beyond description, he trudged out of her apartment.

Lois slammed her door and collapsed against it, weeping uncontrollably.

Part 6

Two days later, one of the Honduran orphans, a baby boy, died after his burns had become infected.

Lois heard the news as she prepared to leave the Planet after another long, unproductive day. She walked past Clark's empty desk, not allowing herself even a glance in that direction.

He'd been at the Planet spasmodically during the past two days. He'd seemed as intent on avoiding her as she was on avoiding him, and neither had acknowledged the other in any way.

Lois knew the disintegration of their budding partnership would be the talk of the newsroom. No one had asked her about it — not even Perry, who had realised without being told that it was impossible for her to ever work with Clark Kent again.

Lois sighed as she unlocked her apartment door. She hadn't

been able to face stopping on the way home, so if she wished to eat, it was going to have to be the leftover Chinese takeout from two nights ago.

It hadn't been appetising when it was fresh.

A knock sounded on the door as she peered despondently into the fridge. Lois groaned. Why couldn't they just leave her alone?

She opened the door without checking through the peephole. It was Sarah Crawford, a pizza in one hand and a bottle of red wine in the other. "Hungry?" she said.

Lois sighed, but felt a smile creep through it. "Actually, I'm starved," she admitted.

"Good. My mother has the kids, which left me wondering which of my friends I should pester. You seemed the best candidate."

Lois got two glasses and two plates and put them on her coffee table. Sarah rummaged through her purse and produced a corkscrew with a grin of triumph. She opened the wine and poured two generous glasses. "I'm taking a cab home," she said, taking a substantial gulp of the wine.

Lois wanted to giggle — which was unexpected and ridiculous in equal proportions. She sipped the wine, and as she swallowed, the giggle escaped past her throat.

Sarah contemplated her with a roguish grin. "That was quick, Lane. One sip, and you're tipsy already."

Lois pulled her hysteria back from the edges of control. "You're a bad influence, Crawford."

"Don't you call me that in public," Sarah warned with feigned severity. She opened the pizza box. "Eat," she ordered.

Lois obeyed, instantly surprised by how good it tasted. She ate three pieces and then sat back, trying to ignore the protests of her overfull stomach. "I can't believe I ate so much," she said.

Sarah shrugged. "I bet you haven't been eating properly."

Lois sipped her wine and admitted nothing.

Sarah closed the box and also sat back, turning slightly to face Lois along the sofa. "How's Clark?" she asked.

Just the sound of his name caused ribbons of tension to tighten across Lois's shoulders. "OK," she said noncommittally.

Sarah raised her glass to her lips and held it there, contemplating Lois over the top of it. "Really?" she said finally, not making any effort to hide her scepticism.

Lois shrugged, wanting to convey that this topic was of little relevance and less interest. "We're not seeing much of each other."

Sarah lowered her glass. "I was at the funeral, Lois."

Lois hastily scrutinised Sarah's expression. "I ... I didn't see you."

"I was at the back." Sarah ran her fingertip around the top of the glass. "I saw what happened."

Lois shrugged again and focussed deep into red richness of her wine. "It's over."

"Your relationship with Clark?"

"We didn't have a *relationship*," Lois stated firmly. "We had *one* date."

"Are Clark's parents alive?" Sarah asked conversationally.

Lois frowned at the irrelevance of the question. "Yes."

"How do you think he's feeling?"

Lois's sigh was so substantial, her wine oscillated up the sides of her glass. "I have no idea," she said, hearing the irritation that had crept into her words.

"This must have been incredibly difficult for him," Sarah said in a non-confrontational tone, almost as if she were musing to herself. "He knew you were hurting so badly. He also knew he couldn't really imagine what it was like for you — but what he did imagine was awful enough. He didn't know what to do, but he was desperate not to do anything that would add to your pain."

"He failed there."

"He didn't know whether to mention their names. If he did, it

might upset you; it he didn't, he was afraid it would seem like he didn't care — like they never really existed for him and he was just trying to forget it had happened."

Lois could feel tears pressing for release. "But Clark didn't know my parents," she mumbled. "How could he grieve for them?"

"He has parents, Lois. The inescapable truth is that one day this will be him. Of course, he's always known that, but this makes it all so real. He was dealing with that ... and trying to help you at the same time ... and he had no idea how to do either."

"I always thought he would be there for me, Sarah," Lois said, as first one, and then a second tear snuck down her cheek. "It was one of the things I loved about Clark. I know that sounds very selfish, but part of what attracted me was his strength, his availability, his commitment to me. I thought he would be there when I needed him."

"He still can be," Sarah assured her.

"He walked out of my parents' funeral," Lois said with bitterness she could taste.

"Have you talked with him about it?"

Lois grimaced. "He said very little; I screamed a lot."

"Did he give you any reason?"

"Just that he 'had' to go."

"So because he's male and strong and he did an impressive job of hiding how much this shook him, you don't think he has a breaking point?"

"But why did he have to break at precisely *that* moment?"

Lois cried.

"I'm not sure anyone chooses the moment they can't take any more." Sarah drained her glass. "Clark didn't, Lois," she stated unequivocally. "I watched him as he walked out. I've never seen anyone more torn."

"I not sure I can trust him again."

Sarah contemplated her empty glass for a long time. "Lois," she said slowly. "I know what Clark did hurt you terribly, and I'm not minimising that, but there's something I know with absolute certainty — whatever David had done, regardless of how bad it was, if I *could* go to him, I would. In less than a heartbeat."

"But you and David had history," Lois protested. "You were married, you had two children."

"Are you saying what you and Clark had isn't worth saving?"

"I'm saying I don't know if Clark and I ever had anything."

"Then despite being a hotshot reporter, you're as blind as baked beans," Sarah told her frankly.

Lois turned on her, an angry retort on her lips. But when she saw Sarah's wistful longing, her anger died.

"Do you still love him?" Sarah asked quietly.

"I don't know if I can *trust* him."

"But you still love him." It wasn't a question.

Lois couldn't push the denial up her throat.

Sarah shuffled along the sofa and put her hand on Lois's arm. "You have a terrific guy who loves you. He made a mistake — certainly — but no greater a mistake than you'll make if you decide your hurt and anger are more important to you than Clark is."

"I'll think about it," Lois conceded.

"You do that, Lane." Sarah grinned impishly, her blonde eyebrows jiggling. "Cause if you don't want him ..."

Lois couldn't help but smile, sure she could trust Sarah implicitly and savouring that certainty. "Keep yer mitts off him, Crawford," she warned, failing completely to inject any venom into her tone.

Sarah raised her hands in retreat and with a breezy grin, she poured the last of the wine into their glasses.

Lois closed her door and could hear Sarah chuckling as she

made her way, a little unsteadily it had to be said, along the corridor. They had drunk too much wine. They had laughed at the silliest things — things not remotely amusing. They had fed off each other's hysteria and shed endless tears, not knowing with any certainty if they had been laughing or crying.

Her stomach hurt. Her face muscles ached. Yet the feeling of release was dynamic.

As Lois headed to her bedroom, she caught sight of the Daily Planet from two days ago. She stopped and studied the front-page photograph of Superman with the little girl, Rosa. It was a photo that compelled you to linger.

She sobered. A third child had died today. She knew Superman would have taken the news hard. Very hard.

Lois wandered to her window and looked out into the darkness. Where was he? Was he rescuing someone? Where did he go when he wasn't being Superman? Where did he go when he needed -

Her thoughts clanged to a halt. Did aliens need comfort? She didn't know. But *he* did. Alien or not, he had been devastated by the deaths of those children. Although he'd tried to hide it.

He'd be hurting more now.

Before she could think about the wisdom of what she was about to do, Lois opened her window and let out a full-throttle scream of, "Superman!"

She stood back ...

... and Superman flew in with a gust of wind that rippled her curtain.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, his face anxious.

Lois gaped at him. "Were you rescuing someone?" she asked. "You?" he said uncertainly.

Lois shook her head. "No. I'm fine. I just meant that I didn't want to interrupt whatever you were doing, particularly if it was something important like saving someone's life, but if you weren't, I wanted to talk to you."

His eyes narrowed, and his arms folded across his chest. She wondered if he could smell the wine on her breath. Too late, she realised she should have brushed her teeth before calling him. Actually, she probably shouldn't have called him at all.

He gazed at her quizzically. "Why did you call me?"

"I heard about the baby boy who died," she said softly. "From the orphanage fire."

Superman's jaw flexed.

Lois steadied herself with a deep breath. "I just wanted to say ..." She paused, unable to find the words. "Actually, I didn't want to say anything, I wanted to do this." She stepped forward quickly — before she lost her nerve — and put her arms around his neck.

His folded arms remained between them like a barricade. Lois leant the top of her head against his chin. The obstruction didn't budge. She registered his lack of response and began to back away, feeling flustered.

With a blur of movement, Superman's arms encircled her, pressing her into his chest. He held her there for one breath. Then he released her and backed away, out of her reach. "Thank you," he said formally. He turned and was gone.

Lois watched the curtain flutter back into place and tried to sort her kaleidoscope of emotions.

Embarrassment. Not even an excessive amount of wine was sufficient excuse for her forwardness.

Grief. Upon grief. Another death. Another life snatched away.

Empathy. For all his strength and strangeness, death affected Superman profoundly. She'd known. She'd understood. Without the need for words.

And joy — a subdued joy — at giving — how ever awkward and probably misplaced her gift was, she'd been the one *offering* support — not the one receiving it.

And it felt good. Therapeutic.

With a tired sigh, Lois turned off the lights and went to bed.

Clark hovered above the clouds, his heart hammering, his mind spinning.

Lois had hugged him!

He'd already been feeling rattled. Being in her apartment again ... being so close to her. His alarm when he'd thought she was hurt ... and then ... that. Her arms around him. The last thing he had been expecting.

In some ways, the last thing he wanted.

But now she'd done it ... he wouldn't give it back for the world.

Even though it did nothing but compound his confusion.

The newspapers were overflowing with Superman — stories, theories, pictures, speculation ... admiration ... respect ... appreciation.

Whenever he was in the Suit, people stopped him, congratulated him ... applauded him. Initially, there had been some suspicion. Since the fire in Honduras, the mood had changed. It seemed as if people had taken him into their hearts.

He'd finally earned acceptance. Even with his differences in full view. Except ...

When he'd dreamed up the whole secret identity idea, all he'd seen was the chance to use his powers to help others.

He hadn't given one single thought to the times when his powers wouldn't be enough.

Lois's parents. Two little Honduran children already dead. Now, a third one.

He couldn't do this.

The only time it had felt anywhere near right was when Lois had put her arms around his neck and held him.

But he couldn't keep going back to her. Not as Superman.

It was bad enough that she thought he was two people. He couldn't use that deception to garner comfort, when — if she knew his real identity — her response would be so different.

He couldn't do this.

He couldn't be Clark Kent, Daily Planet reporter. He couldn't see Lois every day and know he'd had a taste of everything he yearned for but had let it slip away.

He couldn't be Superman. Regardless of how many people he helped, it didn't counter the pain of the ones he couldn't save.

He couldn't do it alone.

He couldn't do it.

He was leaving.

The only remaining decision was whether to tell Lois or just go.

What would *she* want?

Clark sighed.

He didn't know. He really didn't know.

The next evening, Clark stood outside Lois's apartment. He'd been there for many minutes, unsure and hesitant. He could hear her moving around. He lifted his hand to knock on her door, but then lowered it again.

He was torn between going away and going in. He couldn't leave — couldn't just leave and let her believe forever that he had walked out of the funeral for no good reason. Right now, she probably hoped she'd never see him again — but he couldn't just leave.

With a sudden movement, he knocked on her door. It sounded more abrupt and aggressive than he had intended. Her movements stilled.

He heard her walk towards the door, heard the hesitation while she checked the peephole, heard the first of the locks click.

Her door opened, and his breath caught in his throat. She was so beautiful. Her skin had a delicacy that hadn't been there before her parents' deaths. Her eyes seemed deeper, as if the onslaught

of pain had ripened them. She had an untouchable aura, reminding him of how completely she had moved beyond his reach.

"Clark," she said quietly.

He scanned her face, expecting hostility, but finding none.

"May I come in?" he asked.

She stood back in silent invitation. "What do you want?" she said evenly.

He walked in. "I want to talk."

She shut the door. "OK," she said. "Talk."

"Lois, I am so sorry. I know I hurt you when you were already hurting so much."

Her eyes were fixed on him, her tears flowing without restraint. He glanced to the closed door, seeking escape. He couldn't watch her cry and control his longing to hold her. It just wasn't possible.

Then she was in his arms, clinging to him, as sobs racked her body and her tears dampened his shirt. His hand cupped her head to snuggle her closer. He kissed her hair and breathed in her presence.

She leant back and contemplated him with a teary smile. She was *so* beautiful.

He *knew* he shouldn't. Knew that on every level, this was stolen pleasure, but he leant forward and kissed her mouth.

She responded instantly, her hands plying his neck, her lips soft and sweet on his.

He tried to imprint the very feel of her in his memory. Imprint it so permanently, so comprehensively, he would be able to recall it at will.

He knew he should pull away. But he couldn't. Not yet.

So he kissed her. Kissed her so extravagantly, he was able to dismiss from his mind that which was to come.

When she finally backed away, he mourned.

She gave him a shy smile. "I know you're sorry you left," she said softly.

"But you don't know why I left," he said, his voice rough.

"Does it matter now?"

He wanted to shake his head and return her to his arms and rejoice in being with her. But the time for pretending was over.

"Yes," he said doggedly. "It matters."

She eyed him steadily. "OK," she said and waited.

He couldn't find the words. How could he tell her? He stared at her as if his brain had been severed from his flailing mouth.

"You don't want to tell me, do you?" Lois said with sudden insight.

"No," he breathed. "I don't want to tell you. But *I have* to."

He saw her snippets of anxiety as the possibilities flitted through her mind. He needed to get this done. Fast.

"Why don't you want to tell me?" she said, looking confused.

"Because I know that what I say will make you more upset, more angry, and more hurt than you are already."

She sighed. "That's not possible, Clark."

"Yes it is, Lois," he said with uneasy conviction.

The snippets evolved into fear. "What more could I possibly lose?" she whimpered.

"Your ..."

"My what?"

He shrugged. "I was going to say your respect for me, but that's already gone."

"Clark," she pleaded. She was scared now. "Tell me. Please."

He raised his hands in desperate indecision. "I don't know how to tell you."

Her fear evolved into anger. "How hard can it be, Clark?" she railed. "There has to be a reason why you walked out. Just tell me."

"I'm Superman, Lois. I left you because there was a fire in an orphanage in Honduras and I was the only one who could save

those children.”

Lois stared at Clark.

She couldn't speak. She was struggling to form a coherent thought in a mind swiftly unravelling.

Clark was Superman? Countless questions inundated her brain, squabbling like overwrought children competing for her attention. Clark? Superman? *One* person? Not two? *Clark* was an alien? Is that what he was telling her? He could *fly*? He wore *that* suit? How? When? Why?

She stared at him, searching for answers that weren't there.

His shoulders were slumped, yet his tension was obvious. His jaw was clenched, his face pale. Apprehension clogged his eyes. She recognised his expression. This was how he'd looked in his parents' kitchen when Jonathan had told her about the troubled friend who had brought them her little son.

Jonathan's story — it was a lie.

“There was no Chrissie?” she said, her disbelief camouflaging the storm of her gathering anger.

Clark gulped. “There was a Chrissie, but she wasn't my mother.”

“Your father lied,” Lois accused icily.

His eyes slid shut. “Yes,” he breathed.

“I guess it runs in the family,” she noted in a voice so callous, it stunned her.

That had hurt him. She saw the wound she'd inflicted, as clearly as if she'd driven a knife up through those rock-hard abs and into the core of his heart.

“Lois, you must have suspected something,” he said flatly. “The Sewells said they had a spaceship that had had a baby in it. It landed in Smallville the year I was born. I didn't have any identity papers, no birth certificate, and the story we'd told everyone for nearly thirty years was a fabrication.”

“No,” she said with scything calmness. “I didn't suspect anything.” She laughed, hard and bitter. “And I was worried about *your* gullibility.”

“You're not gullible.”

“No?” she said, her voice rising. “I knew no one could be trusted. I'd learned that before I learned to ride a bike. But I trusted you, Mr Honourable-Goody-Goody-Paragon-of-Truth-and-Virtue. I trusted your picture-perfect, homespun family. I trusted your salt-of-the-earth, chock-full-of-integrity father.”

Her angry breaths thundered loud in the vacuum of silence that followed her outburst. She'd hurt him again. Bringing his family into this was like giving the knife a savage twist.

“Dad was trying to protect me.”

Lois snorted with disgust. “I thought he was different from my father. More than different, I thought they were total opposites. But they're exactly the same. Yours is worse though, because my father never bothered with the idyllic-dad hypocrisy.”

She'd twisted the knife again but was powerless to stop. Clark looked at her, helpless, speechless.

“I guess I just didn't understand family dynamics,” Lois continued. “I didn't realise trust and integrity extend to family only. Those outside don't matter.”

“That's not true,” he said with a spark of spirit.

“Of course it's true, Clark.” Her unrelenting outrage steamrolled his fleeting resistance. “Have you forgotten the three of you sitting there, spinning me a tale? Have you forgotten the trio-act? Ensuring I could see in, but knowing I would never be accepted at one of you?”

“It wasn't like that,” he said. His spark had died — as if he had accepted his fate.

“Really?” she spat. “Did you laugh about it later? How the country bumpkins fooled the big city reporter? How you fed me a line, fed me an entire lifestyle, and I'd swallowed it whole?”

“Of course we didn't.”

“But that's what you thought, wasn't it?” she fumed. “Lois doesn't have a family. Poor Lois, she's so dumbstruck by the fact we don't cheat and drink and scream abuse at each other, she'll believe anything we say. Poor Lois, delusional enough to think she's one of us.”

“You're always wel- “

“Always welcome?” she shrieked, tossing away the last shreds of her control. “But I don't *belong*, do I? I don't belong anywhere. That's the difference between you and me. When this is over, you can slink home. You know they love you; you know they accept you. You know that whatever happens, you will always have somewhere to go. You belong with them. Always.”

“I can't feel guilty because I have parents,” Clark said, his voice so low Lois barely heard him over her laboured breathing.

Her aloneness swamped her, and to her mortification, hot tears burned her eyes.

She saw Clark lurch and knew his impulse had been to comfort her. Her fury seethed — with him, certainly — but also with herself for her own neediness. “Don't touch me,” she snarled — so viciously that he rocked back as if she'd struck him.

“I've told you now,” he said.

“So that magically fixes everything?” she mocked.

“No,” he said in a tone of absolute hopelessness.

“You were right,” she said with biting scorn.

That surprised him. “About what?”

“I *could* be hurt more.”

She'd twisted the knife again, deep and deliberate. And this time, she'd found her mark — someplace deep inside him, protected by layers of tolerance and patience and compassion, someplace where his inherent ‘Clarkness’ could be damaged.

And damage it, she had.

She saw the transformation in his face and realised — too late — that superpowers and anger were not a good combination. But Clark wouldn't hurt her? Surely?

“You know what, Lois?” he said, his voice deathly calm.

His restraint was more chilling than overt rage would have been.

“I have superpowers,” he continued in the same raw, tightly controlled voice. “But they don't extend to my heart. In my heart, I'm just like you. And you know what else, Lois? I can't take any more. I know I broke your heart, but I can't take your uncaring destruction of mine. You have every reason to be hurt, every reason to be angry, every reason to despise me, every reason to hate some of the decisions I made. Maybe, every reason to hate me.” He took a deep, ragged breath as the muscles of his cheeks rippled in anguish. “But I can't take your hatred a moment longer.”

He was trying to make this *her* fault. “You need to go,” she said stonily.

“I've given Perry my resignation.”

Clark was leaving. Not just her apartment, as she had meant, but the Daily Planet. Metropolis. Her. The shock reverberated through her overstrained emotions. “What about Superman?”

Clark scowled. “He's finished,” he said with pungent bitterness. “I wish I'd never created him.”

“You can't just ... walk away,” she said, reeling with shock.

“Watch me.”

With that, Clark Kent resolutely marched out of her life.

Gone — just like her parents.

Lois thought she'd plumbed the depths of aloneness many times since their deaths. But it was nothing like this. Nothing like the pain that assailed her as Clark decisively shut her door. This aloneness scolded like hot, condemning acid. And its track left wounds she knew would not heal.

She crumbled to the floor and wept for everything she had lost.

Somehow, Lois got through the next two weeks.

She rose when her alarm clock commanded her to. She prepared for work in exactly the routine she had kept for years. She wrote — with neither heart nor inspiration — what Perry told her to write.

She lived like a robot — a robot programmed not to remember. Not to grieve. Not to regret. Not to want. Not to hope. And most of all — not to feel.

She dealt with the continuing details of her parents' deaths with an aloofness and separation so proficient, even she wondered how it could be possible.

She hadn't seen Clark again. She hadn't attempted to contact him. He hadn't contacted her. She heard a whisper around the Planet that his sudden disappearance was related to a family issue.

Thoughts occurred to her at odd moments.

Leo Nunk had stumbled on the truth with his fake photo.

It had been Clark who had flown her to his parents' farm.

The Sewells' spaceship — the one they claimed they had when unsuccessfully attempting to blackmail the government — had brought Clark to earth.

It was Clark who had rescued her from Luthor's tunnel.

And Clark she'd hugged after the baby boy had died.

She pushed every thought into the recesses of her mind — to be resolved later. Maybe. If the pain ever lessened.

Questions rose, too.

Why didn't Superman smell like coconut? She would have noticed that.

Who had made that outfit?

Where had the spaceship come from? Who had put the baby in it?

And there were revelations.

It was Superman's body concealed under Clark's loose-fitting business suits.

That one left her mouth dry. Very dry.

Then one morning, Perry called her into his office.

She faced him across his desk, knowing there were several possible reasons why she was here — none of them pleasant.

Her work had been shoddy. Her attitude uncaring. Her disposition bordering on rude. OK, more than bordering.

"How are you, Lois? Perry asked with more gentleness than she'd expected.

She wanted to tell him to get to the point, but Perry deserved better than that. He also deserved better than a lie, so she just shrugged.

"I have a story for you," he said.

She felt some relief that she wasn't going to be berated — not this time, anyway — but her usual enthusiasm was non-existent. "Oh?"

"It's an interview."

"With?"

"Franklin Hodge."

Once, she would have killed — figuratively — for this opportunity. "Franklin? Why?"

"He's left the ... whatever department he was with."

She waited for the swell of enthusiasm, the slamming into gear of her reporter's instinct. "And?"

"And he's offering us — you — an interview."

She felt mild — very mild — interest. Just a stirring. But it was a start, and she tried to fan it into something respectable. "When?"

"Tomorrow morning."

Not today then? Good. She really couldn't muster sufficient enthusiasm for it today. Lois sighed. "Perry," she said. "I appreciate the offer, but an interview with Franklin Hodge ... maybe you should give it to someone else." Someone who could rally some fire, some passion.

"I want you to do it," Perry said.

"OK." She had tonight to plan her questions, to drill up some feeling for the story. "Thanks, Perry."

"Don't thank me yet," he said a little gruffly.

Uh-oh. "What is it?" she said suspiciously.

"There are strict guidelines."

"What happened to the freedom of the press?"

"It doesn't apply — not here."

"What's off-limits?" The reporter inside was finally stirring.

"His past and his future."

Lois felt her indignation rise. "What's left?"

"Basically, the transition ... from servant of national security to normal person."

"That's it?" Lois said in disgust.

"That's it," Perry confirmed. "You can't ask anything specific about any of his past assignments even if you already have information. For his protection, you can't ask anything specific about his future plans."

"Is there any point to this?" Lois demanded.

"He's keen to do it."

"Why?"

"I got the impression he wants to debunk some of the misconceptions of his job."

Maybe this was what she needed. Maybe this was Step One in the long journey back to fervour and commitment and normality. "OK, I'll do it."

Perry gave her an encouraging smile. "Good." His phone rang and he picked it up. Lois figured he was finished with her and stood up. "Ah, Lois?"

She turned, seeing he had covered the phone with his hand. "Yes?"

"There are two other conditions. The interview must be taped — one copy goes to them, one to us — and someone sits in on the interview and approves everything that is said."

"So if I ask a question he doesn't like ..."

"The interview ends."

Lois raised her hands in frustration and stormed out of Perry's office.

Part 7

Lois sat in the conference room at the Planet. Franklin Hodge sat opposite her, his broken right arm still in a plaster cast, his head of dark curls gone, replaced by a close-cut clip — which made him seem younger, perhaps closer to thirty than forty. He seemed nervous. He'd jumped when she'd walked in and had stammered over his greeting.

A third person — male, thirties, unidentified — sat between them, silent and foreboding.

Lois skimmed her notes in a final attempt to haul her thoughts into a cohesive whole. Then she smiled, businesslike, at Hodge. "What would you like me to call you?" she asked, hoping it would relax both of them.

"Call me Franklin," he said with a mirroring smile.

"No names in the story," the third person informed her gruffly.

Lois knew that, but she managed to refrain from responding in any way. She reached for her tape recorder and pressed 'record'. She cleared her throat and began. "Why did you decide to leave your former position?"

Hodge thought for a moment. "Unfortunately, the very nature of the job is incompatible with maintaining personal relationships."

"Have you visited with your family yet?"

"Sadly, no," he said without a flicker of emotion. "I have to go through a lengthy debriefing process first."

"But you will see them?"

There was another pause. "Eventually." His tone carried no eagerness, no anticipation. Maybe he'd already contacted them

and things hadn't gone well.

"What do you think will be the biggest challenge in your new life?"

"Learning to be a normal person again."

"Examples?"

"Learning a new mindset."

Lois waited for him to continue. When he didn't, she felt a jolt of annoyance. Why offer an interview and then give her nothing? "What are you looking forward to most?"

"Coming home every night to a wife. And a family."

He'd hesitated again before answering. All of his responses had been stilted ... as if he'd rehearsed this and needed to check the script before speaking. Maybe he was juggling the truth with what would be acceptable to the nameless watchman. "Are you concerned that any part of your former life could follow you into your new life? Enemies? Contacts? Information?"

"Knowledge is something I never had a lot of. My role was more the small pieces."

Lois knew she couldn't ask more about his role, so again, she'd hit a dead end. "Do you think you are being adequately prepared for your new life?"

"Generally, yes."

"Would you care to outline the process?" Lois glanced to the unmoving, all-seeing sentinel. "Without specifics."

"Essentially, it is a cutting of ties with the past and an establishing of new ties for the future."

"Can you be more specific than that?" Lois said, knowing her frustration was evident in her tone.

"Too many specifics aren't allowed."

She knew that, but this was bordering on the ridiculous. She couldn't claim to know Franklin Hodge well at all, but today he was weird ... tense ... preoccupied. She surreptitiously glanced to the third person. Who was he? Did he have something over Hodge? "Where do you see yourself in five years?"

"Somewhere I can enjoy life," Hodge replied. "Married maybe, with a family; just doing a normal job and being a normal person."

This was the second time Hodge had mentioned a possible marriage. Lois's reporter's instinct twitched. "Did something happen — you met someone perhaps — that influenced your decision to leave your job?"

"Maybe." Without warning, Franklin Hodge stood and pressed 'stop' on the tape recorder. The interview, such as it was, was finished. With his left hand, Hodge reached into the back pocket of his jeans and withdrew a small envelope. He held it towards her. "I heard about your parents," he said, his blue eyes steady as they gazed at her.

Before Lois could reach for the proffered card, the third person had taken it. He ripped open the envelope and removed the card.

"Excuse me!" Lois said sharply.

The stranger didn't respond. He studied the card — *her* card — and, seeming satisfied, he returned it to the envelope and dropped it onto the table. He ejected one tape from the recorder and slipped it into his pocket.

Lois snatched the card. "Thank you," she said to Hodge before shooting a glare at the other man.

"I liked it," Hodge said, stretching his left hand in her direction. "The verse is cleverly written ... and with you being a writer, I thought you'd be good with words."

She awkwardly put her left hand in his. He lingered in their hold a second longer and gripped a touch tighter than was strictly necessary.

Lois added the envelope and tape to her notes, not wanting to open it in front of the rude sentinel. She hoped Franklin would understand. Maybe that's what the handshake had been about.

Someone rapped on the door, and Perry entered. "Lois," he

said urgently. "Have you finished here?"

"Yes."

"Get down to the Waverley rail bridge. A truck ran into it; the track is damaged and a train has de-railed. Take Jimmy."

Without a backwards glance, Lois was out the door of the conference room and hurrying to a story, feeling like a reporter for the first time in weeks.

A huge truck — loaded with two tiers of automobiles — was wedged under the rail bridge. The top tier had rammed into the bridge, and the force of the impact had driven the front vehicle onto the train tracks. The truck's cabin, squeezed under the bridge, had caved in. The driver was still trapped inside.

On the bridge, a crowded passenger train had hit the automobile and left the train tracks. It was now listing at a precarious angle close to the edge. Lois could see the frightened faces of the people in the train. A police officer with a megaphone pleaded with them to remain calm and still until a safe and orderly rescue could begin.

It didn't take a whole lot of imagination to see the horrifying possibilities.

Standing next to Lois behind the press barrier, Jimmy feverishly worked his camera. She recognised the person in front of her as a reporter from the *Metropolis Star*. "They've sent for a crane," he informed her.

"How long will that take?" she asked.

"At least an hour."

Lois groaned. It would only take the smallest catalyst — one person in the train to reach the edge of tolerance — for the panic to spread.

If the train toppled, the driver of the truck would be hopelessly trapped. Rescue workers would lose their lives. As for the passengers — it wasn't possible to see how any of them could survive.

An hour for the crane.

It was too long.

Then the thunderbolt in red and blue crossed the sky.

Lois gasped. In unison with everyone around her.

Superman stood on the bridge next to the train, his red cape fluttering in the breeze. He moved to the front of the train and pushed it back from the edge. He worked along the train, carriage by carriage, carefully straightening them.

Then he opened the doors and people flooded out. Superman remained on the bridge, helping individuals who were a little shaky.

When the bridge was empty of people, Superman returned the dislodged automobile to its place at the front of the top tier. He flew down from the bridge and firmly grasped the back of the truck, easing it out from under the bridge. The crowd gasped audibly. Superman flew to the cabin and within moments, the driver was in the waiting ambulance.

The gawking, mesmerised crowd burst into loud, spontaneous applause.

"Superman!" the *Star* reporter called out. "Superman! Could we ask a few questions?"

A chorus of requests and questions rose from the gathered press. "Superman!"

The hero hesitated, and then he strode towards them.

Lois snatched her sunglasses from her bag. From the cover they afforded, she stared at him, more transfixed than when he'd crashed through the ceiling of Luthor's dungeon.

When he reached them, Superman folded his arms and faced them as a group, careful not to single out anyone.

"How is the truck driver?" someone behind Lois asked.

Superman's eyes swung towards her — causing her breath to cramp — but deliberately focussed behind her, giving no indication that he had seen her. "His legs were trapped, but his

injuries are not as severe as they could have been,” he said in a voice loud enough that all could hear.

Now that Lois knew, it was obvious. This was Clark. Same mouth, same brown eyes. Even the same little freckle above his upper lip. How *could* a pair of glasses have rendered her so blind?

She glanced sideways to Jimmy who was frenetically taking photos of Superman — not for one moment thinking the person in his frame was his friend, CK.

At least she wasn't the only one.

“Were there any injuries on the train?” someone asked.

Lois closed her eyes and concentrated on Superman's voice. “Nothing major,” he said. “You should check with the hospital.”

It was *his* voice. Clark's voice. It was deeper and devoid of his usual warm intonation, but it was definitively Clark.

Lois took a deep breath and opened her eyes. It hurt being this close to him. Having his deception laid out so graphically before her.

Yet, his proximity had set her entire body a-shiver.

She missed him.

Lois gasped as the revelation rolled through her. He must have heard, but he didn't respond — not even with a glimmer of movement through that angular jaw. Lois pulled her eyes from him, aware she'd been oblivious to several questions and answers. She scribbled some rough notes from the little she had heard.

“What are you going to do now?” someone asked Superman.

“Get the train safely to the rail yard,” he replied evenly.

“Clear the truck from the road. X-ray the bridge for internal damage.”

She missed him so much.

“You haven't been seen this past week,” came from the other side of the group. “Where have you been?”

“Around.”

“Have you left Metropolis?”

Superman's composure cracked a little. Lois could tell by tension in his upper lip. No one else seemed to notice. “It was time to move on,” he said.

He couldn't lie. And yet . . .

There were some cries of objection and disappointment, but Superman ignored them. He turned back to the scene of the near-disaster and walked away, his cape swinging to the rhythm of his stride.

He hadn't looked at her. Not so much as a glance. Not the slightest suggestion she was anything more to him than just one of the twenty media jostling for his attention.

Well, she wasn't.

And it was entirely her doing.

It was what she wanted.

Lois turned away, fiercely swiping at the treacherous tears which had sprung unbidden and leaked past her sunglasses and down her cheeks.

The next morning, Lois lay motionless in bed, hovering in the nebula between sleep and wakefulness.

She'd been dreaming.

The dream had been so vivid and she had awakened so gradually, it seemed the reality of the dream had followed her into consciousness and lingered still.

She'd had a similar dream a week ago. In that dream, she'd been with her parents. Not doing anything, not saying anything — just with them. Their presence had been like a balm and had left her with a feeling of wellbeing. It had been short-lived, but for a few, brief moments, she had been at peace.

Now, it had happened again.

Except this time, she hadn't been with her parents.

She'd been with Clark.

Lois kept her eyes closed and her body languid. It was almost possible to convince herself he was here with her, just as he had been in the nights following her parents' deaths. She could almost smell his coconut pomade. Almost hear his gentle voice. Almost feel his loving touch on her face.

You want him back, her inner voice screamed in her head, hard and accusing.

No I don't, her other voice retorted, low and desperate.

You want him back.

He wouldn't come back, not after what I said to him.

Lois eyes jolted open, and with a tired sigh, she headed to her bathroom to face the drudgery of another day.

“Lois!” Perry sprang from his chair and paced behind his desk, his agitation visible in every step.

She waited, knowing what was coming.

He stopped and faced her. “You don't need me to tell you that your Hodge interview story was . . .”

“Pathetic,” Lois finished for him. “Uninteresting, insipid, lacking insight, shallow . . .”

“And your story about the truck under the rail bridge —”

“Read like it had been written by a copyboy.”

Perry's irritation seeped away. “Lois,” he said, concern foremost in his tone now.

Lois sighed and tried to disperse her overwhelming apathy. “I know, Chief, I know.”

“Would you like some time away?”

That thought horrified her. Long hours, long days with nothing to do. Except think about what she had lost. “No, Perry,” she pleaded. “I'll do better, I'll get back to —”

“Have you seen Clark?” he cut across her promises.

“No,” she mumbled, refusing to meet her editor's eyes.

Perry leant across his desk and looked squarely at her. “I don't want you back here until you've seen him.”

“Perry,” she whimpered. “Please.”

“I never thought I'd say this, Lois, but you're not worth squat to me the way you are.”

“I can't see Clark,” she said, trying to sound assured and in control. Instead, she sounded desperate and forlorn.

Perry backed away and sat down. “I shouldn't have said that,” he conceded. “But I *do* want you to take a few days off, Lois. I'm serious.”

“All right,” she agreed — because she didn't have the spirit to argue.

“What happened with the Hodge interview?” he asked gently.

Lois shook her head. “I don't know,” she said. “He gave me nothing.”

Perry looked unconvinced.

“My heart wasn't totally in it,” Lois admitted, feeling herself colour. “But there was something else going on.”

“What?”

“I don't know,” Lois said, her frustration rising again.

“Maybe something between Hodge and the other guy.”

“I can't print your story.”

“I know.”

“Lois,” Perry said, his tone so paternal that it stirred her tears again. “I know this is a hard time. I know it's about now when the rest of the world gets on with their lives and you're still nostril-deep in grief.” He raised his hands in frustration. “But I have a newspaper to run.”

“I'm sorry, Chief.”

His expression softened to sympathy. “Go and do whatever you need to do,” he said. “Take as long as you need.”

“Thanks, Perry.”

“And don't come back until you're ready,” he said more forcefully.

Lois stood slowly and left his office. At her desk, she tidied a few things and closed down her computer. She took her jacket from her chair and put it on.

Clark's desk was vacant. Just like her heart.

The computer he'd used was still there. She could see a thin film of dust on it. She wondered if he'd ever changed his password. Chocolatecroissant. *French* chocolate croissants. From Paris, probably.

With a sigh that heaved her shoulders, she turned and left the Planet.

Lois arrived at her apartment and unpacked the groceries she had bought on the way home. Her hands stilled as she wondered if her apartment had always been this quiet, this hollow, this abandoned. She wondered how long she would have to stay away from the Planet before Perry would believe she was ready to work again.

She wondered how she was going to survive with nothing to do and no one to do it with.

She noticed the envelope on her counter. It was the card from Franklin Hodge. She hadn't opened it. She did so now.

The front was a picture of a country scene. In the foreground was a lake with a little wooden pier. Trees filled the background. It had the feel of being homemade — maybe he'd bought it at a market. She opened it and read the verse.

Kindly thoughts come to you

In these so-difficult days

Love surrounds you as you grieve

Loved ones' memories shine like ray

Shared joys, the best of times too

May they bring deep comfort to you.

It was signed, 'from Hodge.'

A knock sounded on her door, cutting through the silence. Lois's heart leapt with unbidden hope. What if? It wouldn't be. Why would he come back for more of her anger?

She opened the drawer of her bureau and added Hodge's card to the others she'd received. Then she looked through her peephole and collapsed against her door, heart thundering, stomach clenched, head spinning.

It was Jonathan Kent.

Could she pretend she wasn't home? He'd probably heard her footsteps. Could she call through the closed door that she didn't want to see him?

He'd come all the way from Smallville. Obviously, this meant a lot to him.

Although he'd probably come courtesy of Superman, so it wasn't that much of an effort.

Lois went to her window and looked out. If Clark were here, he was staying out of sight.

Back at her door, she opened it and faced Jonathan. "Is Clark with you?" she asked without preamble.

"No. He thinks I've gone to a farmers' conference in Idaho."

"So this wasn't his idea?" she questioned, allowing the full extent of her suspicions to sound in her tone.

"No."

Did she believe him? Did it matter anymore? Lois stepped back and gestured for him to come in.

Jonathan sat awkwardly on her sofa. "How have you been?" he asked.

"Fine," she said, taking a perverse, childish pleasure in lying to him. "Why are you here?"

"I know Clark told you his secret and —"

"And you want to know if I've told anyone?"

He didn't flinch at her hostility. "And I know this is none of my business, but —"

"If you've got a message from Clark, don't even bother," Lois said. "I don't want to hear from him and even if I did, I'd

expect him to be man enough to come himself, not send his father."

"Clark didn't send me," Jonathan said patiently. "He doesn't know I'm here."

"Why are you here?" Lois said.

"Because I had a part in this, and I'm trying to see if there is any way to undo some of the damage I caused."

Lois waited for him to explain further.

"From the moment we brought Clark home after we'd found him in that little spaceship, we were so worried that someone would take him away from us," Jonathan said. "We'd always wanted a baby of our own, but it was so much more than that, right from the start. As we carried him from the truck to our house, we didn't just want a baby anymore, we wanted *him*."

Jonathan shifted on her sofa. It probably felt hard and unyielding after the big, comfy armchairs at the farmhouse.

"I knew if anyone took him away, it would break Martha's heart. And I couldn't even bear to think about what they might do to him."

Jonathan shuddered, almost imperceptibly, but Lois saw it. She felt an echoing tremor. They couldn't hurt Clark physically, of course. But to lock him away, to keep him separated from the people he loved, to reinforce his alien-ness ... that would slowly destroy him.

But how could anyone keep the strongest man in the world locked away? A man who could pull a fully loaded truck out from under a bridge?

The answer came swift and harsh. They would threaten someone he loved. They would use the strength of his love to control his powers.

And the most likely target would be Martha.

Lois gazed at Jonathan as a groundswell of understanding and respect rolled through her. He was an unpretentious farmer, a man who'd taken an unknown child into his home, into his heart, and when that child had proven to be different from their expectations — his loyalty and love had not wavered, even when the child's differences threatened the safety of his wife.

"Clark always wanted to fit in and never did," Jonathan continued. "For all his physical strength, he's vulnerable in other ways."

Lois pulled in a deep breath, wondering if that observation had been aimed at her, but Jonathan didn't even seem to notice.

"So, I came up with another story," he said. "The one about Chrissie. I knew our original story — the one we'd made up in our kitchen that night as Martha had held Clark and hadn't been able to take her eyes off him — I knew it wouldn't stand up to any scrutiny."

Jonathan looked directly at Lois.

"I'm sorry that involved lying to you," he said with simple sincerity. "I didn't know then that you would become so ... so central to Clark's life. You had that photo of Clark that they said was the alien. I thought we were trapped with no possible way out. I was trying to buy us some time."

"You didn't trust me?"

"You were a city reporter; we were trying to hide a big story." *Big?* They'd been sitting on the biggest story of all time.

"How did Clark feel about you telling me the Chrissie story?"

Jonathan's face darkened. "He was angrier than I've ever seen him. He was so furious with me that he could barely speak. He sent Martha out of the room so we could talk."

That shook Lois. That wrecked her image of Clark conspiring with his parents to keep her out of the secret. "He was angry with you?" she said.

Jonathan nodded. "Eventually, he understood why I did it. He was never happy about it, though. He wanted to tell you the truth when he came to Metropolis."

"Then why didn't he?"

"I can't really answer for him, Lois, but my guess is he was scared of losing you, just like we were scared of losing him." Jonathan smiled sadly. "Fear of loss makes people do things they wouldn't usually do."

They were silent for long moments.

"You and Martha have the world," Lois mused eventually.

"You and Clark could have it, too."

"Not anymore."

"Because he's an alien?"

"He's *not* an alien," she flared. Lois paused, taken aback by the ferocity of her response. "He's the most human person I know," she added quietly.

Jonathan looked puzzled. "So ... what's holding you back?"

"The things I said to him."

"Can you understand that he had no choice but to leave you at the funeral?" Jonathan asked gently.

Lois nodded. "That's Clark. He can't ignore people who need his help."

"Even if it means hurting someone he loves?" Jonathan enquired softly.

"Even if it means hurting someone he loves," Lois replied, unable to keep her voice steady.

"Lois, I can't tell you what to do, but I'm asking you — begging you — to tell Clark what you just told me."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I'm scared."

"Of him hurting you again?"

"No," she whimpered, realising it was the truth.

"Then what?" Jonathan asked with deep concern that reminded her of Clark.

"Of me hurting him." Lois blinked to diffuse her congregating tears.

"Can I ask you a question?"

She nodded.

"If another reporter, or a police officer, or a government official — or Perry White, even — walked through your door now and demanded you tell them what you know about Superman's identity, what would you say?"

"I'd tell them I know nothing," Lois said without hesitation.

"You'd lie?" His words were full of affection, empty of accusation.

"I'd lie," she vowed.

Jonathan said nothing. But his silence said volumes.

Lois stood and took a tissue from the box on the countertop. "How are my baby calves?" she asked.

"Your calves are healthy and twice the size they were,"

Jonathan told her with a proud grin.

"Good." Lois winced as she sat down again. "Or maybe not so good."

Jonathan shook his head with a smile. "They're both heifers — females. They're destined to be mothers, not beef."

Again, they were silent. Jonathan waited, giving her time and space, not pressuring her for a decision. "I need time to think," Lois told him. "I have to be sure about this."

His smile was pure fatherly approval. "Good girl," he said.

For two days, Lois's mind was engrossed with thoughts of Clark.

She recalled every moment that they had shared, reframing them through the window of his secret. She tried to imagine his life — being so different, so alone, so far from home — wherever 'home' might be.

She reflected on the complications unique to him. The complications of loving someone. She remembered how he'd told her he'd been in love only once. At the time, she'd thought his admission to be significant — now she realised it was

monumental.

But despite everything, he'd fallen in love with her — and had admitted to his feelings.

That memory dragged a tortured groan from the depths of her soul every single time it played out in her mind. Not that he'd loved her, but that his love had made him so vulnerable to the cruelty that had sprung from her grief and shock.

He had loved her. Loved her so completely. So selflessly.

And she yearned to have that back.

But doubts still plagued her. Was it the lure of his family — the antidote for her aloneness — that attracted her?

Because Clark Kent deserved far more than to be used as a membership pass into his family.

If she went to him, she knew there could be no turning back. She couldn't hurt him again. Ever. She couldn't go until she was sure. Absolutely sure.

And then there was the other thing. The fear that chilled her heart in the dark depths of the night. What if his love for her had died? What if she'd battered it to death with her ferocious insults and venomous contempt?

What if he still loved her, but he couldn't trust her not to crush him again?

Then, on the second night, as she lay in bed, Lois made her decision. She would go to Clark and tell him that she loved him.

What happened after that was beyond her control. Peace descended upon her. She switched off her light and fell asleep.

The next morning, Lois was awakened by loud, persistent banging on her door.

She glanced at her clock and shot upright. Ten past nine! She had slept for eleven hours; she could remember nothing after turning off her light.

Lois got out of bed and slid into her robe as the knocking on her door continued. When she opened the door, Sarah Crawford grinned back at her. "Whoa!" Sarah said. "Big night, huh?"

Lois grinned. "Yeah," she said dryly. "A big night in bed."

Sarah peered around Lois with sudden interest. "You have company?" she asked suspiciously.

"I just got out of bed," Lois said with a yawn.

Sarah stepped into the room. "So ... am I interrupting anything?"

Lois caught her meaning and felt herself begin to blush. "No. There's no one else here."

"Pity," Sarah murmured. She glanced at her watch. "You have ten minutes to be showered and dressed."

Lois smothered her grin. "Why are you here, Crawford?" she said with phoney impatience. "And how did you know that I'm not at work?"

"I called the Planet and asked to talk to you about the progress of the DC Memorial Hospital and they said you were on leave indefinitely."

Indefinite. That pretty much summed up her entire life. "So, what are we doing?" Lois asked, surprised she didn't need to fake interest.

"Golf?"

"Golf?" Lois wrinkled her nose. "Really?"

"Tonight's the big charity ball," Sarah said as if that explained everything.

"So?"

"So, David belonged to The Metropolis Country Golf Club — the Crawfords were founding members. But because tonight's the big charity ball thingo, all the other golf members will be preparing for that, so we can have the course to ourselves."

"Are you going to the 'big charity ball thingo'?" Lois asked, her eyebrows raised.

"No. It's too soon after David passed away to be out like that — even when it's for charity. But a sombre round of golf on such

a beautiful fall day with a friend ...”

“Where’s your secret identity?” Lois asked.

Sarah smiled. “The wig’s in the car, but I can’t use it today. It’s a private course. We can’t get in unless I’m Sarah Crawford.”

Loose ends made swift connection in Lois’s sleep-nourished brain. “Who suggested you use a secret identity?” she asked.

“Clark.”

Suddenly, Lois wanted to giggle. She couldn’t explain to Sarah what was so funny, so she escaped to the bathroom with a muffled, “Hang on, I’ll be ready soon.”

The sun was warm, the air cool, the grass crisp, the course almost deserted.

By the second hole, Lois was glad she’d come. Even when the ball showed no inclination to drop into the hole, indeed no inclination to go anywhere near the hole, it was enjoyable. Sarah was good company — down-to-earth but sensitive, fun but caring.

Best of all, Lois could relax because Sarah understood about living with grief as a companion. About how it could wander away for a time and allow you to believe it might be possible to get your life back on an even keel. Only to return with such merciless force, it undermined every crumb of progress and rendered you feeble and exposed.

On the fourth hole, they were held up by two extremely ancient gentlemen putting on the green in the distance. Lois and Sarah sat down.

“How’s Clark?” Sarah asked, staring down the fairway.

“I haven’t seen him.”

Sarah turned and looked at Lois like a mother would look at a wilful child — a mix of disappointment and sadness, all bound together with loving concern. She said nothing.

Lois squirmed under her scrutiny. “You think I should make up with him, don’t you?” she said.

Sarah studied the doddering golfers. “If you love him, you should tell him how much he hurt you. Then you should forgive him.”

“He knows how much he hurt me. What he doesn’t know is that I know how much I hurt him. I said some terrible things.”

“Will he forgive you?”

Lois took a long, quivery breath. “With anyone else, I would say ‘no’. But Clark ...”

“So if you went to him,” Sarah speculated, “Any time, any place ... if you walked up to him and put your arms around his neck and sank into that broad chest of his, what’s he going to do?”

Lois tried to visualise Clark pushing her away, but the image simply wouldn’t form. She tried to feel his fury, but it just wasn’t there. Her eyes filled with tears. “He’s going to cling to me as if his life depends on it,” she said quietly.

“And can you think of anywhere you would rather be?”

“Nope.”

“I guess you’ve answered your own question, then.”

Lois looked regretfully to where the elderly gentlemen were still pottering around the hole.

Sarah chuckled knowingly. “We’ve finished,” she declared. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Are you sure?”

Sarah stood up. “Sure I’m sure.”

“Thanks, Crawford.”

“I’ve already told you, Lane, don’t call me that.” With a big smile, she pulled off her golf glove and flung it at Lois. “Not in public.”

Lois caught the glove and pushed it over the head of one of her golf clubs. The fingers sat up jauntily.

They dissolved into laughter — silly, releasing laughter — and set out for the clubhouse.

Part 8

Lois sat on the bench outside the cafe in Smallville, grappling with the indefatigable impulse to skulk back to Metropolis. Just being here was unnerving. This place was full of memories of Clark. What if he saw her? She found herself scanning every face, her heart plummeting every time a dark-haired man came into view.

On the golf course with Sarah, this had seemed straightforward. Now she was actually here, in Smallville, in *his* town, it was horribly complicated. Her vicious response to Clark’s disclosure played and replayed through her mind, corroding her confidence and dissolving her purpose.

She couldn’t believe she had been so brutal. It had stemmed as much from her insecurities as anything Clark had done. But would he understand that? And even if he did, would it make a difference?

What if he’d accepted her rejection and moved on?

Her cell phone had no network. The pay phone loomed next to her, calling her, challenging her, taunting her. Finally, she stood, still battling her self-doubts, and went into the booth. She called the Kent home, conscious that a significant part of her hoped no one would answer.

“Martha Kent.”

Martha’s voice thrust Lois’s escape reflex into overdrive. She really wasn’t ready to face Clark’s mother.

“Martha Kent,” she repeated.

“Ma...Martha.”

“Yes, it’s Martha. Can I help you?”

“It ... It’s L...Lois.”

“Lois!” Martha said with glad surprise. “I’m so pleased you called. Where are you, honey?”

The warmth of Martha’s reception drove a substantial crack through the dam holding back Lois’s tears. “Outside the cafe.”

“In Smallville?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.”

Suddenly, Lois *had* to know. “Is ... is ... h...he there?”

“No, he’s away. He’ll be home this evening.”

Lois couldn’t speak as her surge of disappointment twisted with a whirlpool of relief. She longed to see him — but the thought of facing him tangled her insides.

“See you soon,” Martha said.

Lois replaced the phone and collapsed against the cold glass of the booth. Her tears streamed down her cheeks.

So many times, she had wondered if Martha hated her. Had wondered if Martha would want revenge on her son’s behalf.

But despite everything Lois had done, the damage and the pain she had inflicted, Martha hadn’t turned away. She still cared. Mothers were like that.

But Lois didn’t have a mother.

She’d never had a Martha-Kent-type mother.

An acute, powerful yearning for her own mother erupted in Lois. For what they’d had, for what they should have had. The dam ruptured.

When Martha arrived ten minutes later, Lois was still crumpled in the phone booth, clutching a fistful of soaking tissues.

Martha ushered Lois into the car and said very little as she drove them to the farmhouse. Lois searched for censure in Martha’s silence, but didn’t find even a hint of reproach.

When they arrived at the farmhouse, Lois sat while Martha made a pot of tea and placed a plate of homemade chocolate chip cookies on the table.

Martha sat next to her and poured the tea. “It can hit you

from nowhere, can't it?" she said.

Lois had dried her eyes, although she knew they would still be blotchy red. She cradled the cup of hot tea and welcomed its steady warmth. "I'm sorry for being such a mess," she said.

Martha's hand rested on her arm.

"I miss my mom," Lois said, her voice barely audible.

"Of course you do, honey."

"Sometimes it is overwhelming. I just ... I just *want* her so much."

Martha squeezed her arm.

"Then, at other times, I just want my dad." Lois took a tissue from the box Martha had placed next to her. She dried her eyes again and took a gulp of her tea. "Where's Clark?" she asked, trying to keep her nervousness from showing in her tone.

"Honduras," Martha replied. "He's helping rebuild the orphanage."

That surprised Lois. "As Superman? There's been nothing in the Metropolis papers about it."

"As Superman," Martha confirmed. "And I think he's glad it hasn't been in the papers."

Was there an underlying message in her words? A warning not to publicise Superman's whereabouts? "I wasn't sure you'd see me," Lois said.

"Lois, do you remember what I said after you gave Clark the ID papers?"

Lois nodded, staring at the table.

"Lois, that day ... when you put the photo of Clark on this table and told us it would be reported in the paper that he was the alien ... that was our nightmare come true."

Martha took a tissue and dabbed her eyes.

"But you found a way to give Clark what we had never been able to give him — legitimacy in this world, a legal identity." Martha's flooded eyes sought Lois's, and she smiled. "You may never understand how much that meant to us ... but we will never forget."

"Don't you hate me now?" Lois asked.

"Of course not," Martha said without hesitation. "I feel so sorry that you had to go through what you did — your parents' deaths and everything before that and then finding out about Clark."

"But I hurt Clark so much."

"You did," Martha said without a trace of reproof. "I've always seen the paradox that Clark, so strong and so unable to be hurt physically, is so vulnerable emotionally."

"That's because he trusts so willingly and loves so completely."

"Yes." Martha sighed. "And I wish there had been a way through this without him getting so hurt, but ..."

"But?"

"But there wasn't, so now we have to deal with it."

"Do you blame me that I couldn't find a way?"

"It wasn't just you, Lois," Martha reminded her gently.

"Clark made choices too — choices he now regrets." She sipped her tea. "And he isn't the only one suffering."

"I guess you were hoping he would fall in love with a stable, uncomplicated, low-maintenance woman," Lois said dolefully. *Like you*, she thought.

"I was hoping he'd fall in love with someone who'd make him feel he belonged," Martha said with deep sincerity.

"Someone who'd make him feel his differences don't matter."

"Do you think I'm that woman?" Lois asked incredulously.

"What I think isn't important."

"I c...can't be you," Lois said.

Martha smiled. "Lois, honey," she said. "What makes you think *anyone* wants you to be me?"

Lois felt herself blush. "You're so ... perfect."

"So are you, Lois."

"My mother wasn't," Lois said, torn between speaking the truth and the hot flush of betrayal caused by the truth.

"You are not your parents' failings," Martha said firmly.

Lois contemplated her doubtfully. "If I were to leave now, to leave and promise never to come back? If you never told Clark I'd been here ... Would he heal?"

"Oh, he'd heal," Martha said with quiet conviction. "But he'd never be whole."

Lois felt her tears rise again, even as the heavy burden of condemnation rolled away from her heart. She smiled tremulously at Martha. "What do you want me to do?"

Martha's answering smile laid the foundation for their future friendship. "I want you to go to Clark's room and unpack your bags," she said. "When he comes in, I'll send him to you."

"You know I'm going to tell him that I love him?" Lois warned.

Martha's smile widened and tears pooled again in her eyes. She stood and dropped a maternal kiss on Lois's forehead, and then began clearing away their plates and cups.

Clark Kent, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt, landed in his parents' yard and ambled into the kitchen. His mother was at the sink, looking out of the window. "Hi, Mom," he said, careful to infuse light-heartedness into his greeting.

She turned, and he saw that she'd been crying. He was beside her instantly, his hands on her shoulders. "What's wrong, Mom?"

"You have company," she informed him.

He heard the tremor in her words, and his grip tightened as apprehension coursed through him. "Who?"

"Waiting in your room. You need to go there now."

"My room?" He leant forward. "Who is it, Mom?" he said anxiously. "I can see you've been cry —"

"Just go to your room," she said in a tone he'd learnt to obey a long time ago.

Clark hesitated outside his own bedroom door. Who was here? Franklin Hodge with something about the Sewells' spaceship? A government agent with a string of questions? Bill Henderson? Perry White?

Lo —

He couldn't even allow her name to form in his mind. If he did, if he gave himself permission to even consider that possibility, he would be devastated when it was someone else.

But what if it *were* Lo-

Clark darted to the bathroom, showered, shaved, dressed in clean clothes, and dabbed his Gear pomade to the short hair on his neck. He was back at his bedroom door in less than five seconds.

He took a deep breath, fighting a Goliath of a temptation to look through the door. He raised his hand and tapped lightly.

He heard footsteps. Featherweight footsteps.

Lo —

Don't go there, Kent. Do not go there.

The door opened.

Clark stared, his mind scrambled.

His breath jammed somewhere in his throat.

His heart thumped to a rhythm centred on her and her alone.

His mind scrambled as he tried to process her presence.

He knew he was staring. Knew he should say something.

But once he spoke, she would say whatever she'd come to say, and then she'd walk away, leaving him destitute again.

So he said nothing.

Just looked at Lois looking at him.

She was incredibly beautiful.

She'd lost a little weight. Her eyes were awash with unshed tears ... which didn't surprise him. She was grieving ... would still be grieving for a long time. She'd had so much pain — the

tragic death of both her parents.

And the betrayal of a friend she had trusted.

She was staring at him, her face devoid of expression. She was just staring at him. What was she thinking?

Maybe she was thinking revenge. Maybe she thought he didn't know how much he had hurt her. Maybe she'd come with questions about the whole Superman fiasco. Maybe she needed a story and an alien living on earth was the best lead she had.

"Clark," she said.

His name on her voice sounded like heaven. He thought he'd remembered every tiny detail of being with her, but he'd forgotten the exact intonation of how she said his name. Sometimes, it had been like a caress. Now, he wasn't sure. She didn't *seem* angry. But that wasn't necessarily a good thing.

"Lois," he said.

It felt so good to say her name. He hadn't allowed himself to think it, let alone say it.

"Lois," he said again, because whatever the outcome of this, right now she was with him, and he could say her name and watch her.

"Would you like to come in?" she said. There was the merest hint of a smile in her voice. As if she understood the irony of her inviting him into his bedroom. As if she wanted to share the irony with him, but didn't know how to.

He stepped forward, not into the room exactly, but into the doorway. He saw her bag on his bed. And a bigger bag. Had she come to stay? For how long? Why?

"Clark, will you do something for me, please?"

"Lo-is," he said, loaded with meaning.

She got the wrong meaning. Her face closed a little. She thought he'd meant, *Why would I do anything for you?*

He hurried to dispel her misunderstanding. "The ability to refuse you anything is one of the few powers I don't have," he said pragmatically.

She almost smiled! He saw it, recognised it, and it sent a crashing wave of joyful memories through him.

"What would you like me to do?" he asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Take me somewhere special."

His heart exploded. He stepped further into the room so he could gesture for her to go out first. "Go to the porch," he directed.

He lingered in his doorway, just long enough to give her some distance so that he could watch her as she walked. The swing of her hips, the bob of her hair. Memories, such compelling memories. When his eyes had feasted, he wanted to hurry forward so he could put his hand on her back. Touch her. But he wasn't sure she would welcome that, or even tolerate it. So he kept his distance and just appreciated the totally unexpected opportunity to once again trail a step behind Lois Lane.

On the porch, she turned to him. "Here?" she said. "Or were you thinking of somewhere else?"

"Somewhere else. Would you like to go by car?" He hesitated, taking refuge in a sudden interest in the distant fields. "Or some other way?"

Please say fly, he begged silently. *Please fly with me, one last time.*

Please accept me. With all my strange differences, please accept me.

When she didn't answer, he had to face her. She was watching him, waiting for him to stop cowering behind his interest in the fields.

"I'd like to fly," Lois said simply.

Exquisite sensation powered through him, leaving tracks of fire. He was going to hold her again. Suddenly awkward, he stepped closer and reached for her.

Then ... she was in his arms. Her side angled across his

chest, sending a streak of heat from his upper ribs, straight through his heart and along his lower ribs on the other side.

Clark glanced around. His dad appeared out of the barn.

Lois shifted slightly in his arms. "Clark?" she said. "Could you let me down, please?"

His disappointment burned. He placed her on the porch and watched anxiously as she ran to his dad. They spoke, and Clark consciously kept his superhearing off. His jaw dropped when Lois threw her arms around his father's neck and they embraced. She kissed his cheek, and he smiled in response.

But there was no time for Clark to unravel his confusion because Lois was running back to him — just like the dream he'd had a thousand times. She leapt into his arms, and he laughed, no longer able to contain his joy at being with her again.

He lifted off the ground, and then shot straight up, high enough to take them out of sight of anyone who happened to look up.

When they levelled out, he glanced at Lois. Her head was thrown back, her eyes were closed, her expression was one of ... peace. As if she was relaxed for the first time in a very long time. As if she ...

Clark strangled that thought. Lois would never trust him again.

But she was flying with him.

She knew he would never let anything hurt her.

Not physically, anyway.

But emotionally?

That was real trust.

That's what he would never reclaim.

He flew the most indirect way he could, hoping her unreliable sense of direction would give him the freedom to detour.

Eventually he knew he had pushed it as far as he possibly could.

He landed them on the shores of Smallville Lake — where they had come fishing the day he'd met her. Would she remember? With the utmost reluctance, he released her.

Lois looked around. "Did you bring the rods?" she asked.

Clark battled to suppress the grin that craved expression. She'd given him no hint as to why she was here. If he started grinning now, this was going to begin to feel so good. Which meant it would be so devastating when she walked out of his life again. "Not today," he said quietly. He found a soft patch of green grass on the slope overlooking the lake. He motioned her to it. "Would you like to sit here?" He suddenly wished he had done some pre-planning. "Or would you like me get you a seat?"

She sat down. She pulled up her knees and hugged them against her body. Sitting like that, she looked so young, so vulnerable. Again, he was tormented by how much he had hurt her.

He sat on the grass in front of her, ensuring he was far enough away that she wouldn't feel crowded by him, wishing he dared to go close enough that contact was a possibility.

Lois looked at the lake, but she didn't speak. The suspense inside him built to unbearable levels. He so badly needed to know why she was here. He thought it most likely that she wanted to clear the air, toss around an apology or two, so they could both put this behind them and get on with their lives.

Except without her, he had no life.

If she didn't say something soon, he was going to have to speak or burst. But if he spoke, he could only think of one thing to say — I'm sorry. And he'd said that many times before. And she'd already told him that it meant nothing.

"Clark?" she said. "Do you believe in time travel?"

This time his grin nearly won. She had always been able to surprise him. That hadn't changed. He couldn't hope to follow the machinations of Lois's mind. But that was part of the fun. Part of why he loved her so much. Part of why he loved being with her.

"I'm not in a position to be sceptical about anything," he noted wryly.

She almost smiled — he could see the amusement glisten in her beautiful eyes.

"What time were you thinking of travelling to?" he asked.

"The time when you told me you are Superman," she said.

His insides clenched. "Oh."

"Could we go back to the moment you said, 'I'm Superman, Lois. I left you because there was a fire in an orphanage in Honduras and I was the only one who could save those children'?"

There was no superpower in this world or any other that could stop the hope from beginning to bud inside him. He tried to smother it, knowing that if it took root now, its future demise would probably kill him.

He forced himself to respond. Surprisingly, it was almost as difficult as the first time. "I'm Superman, Lois," he said, his words coming unsteadily. "I left you because there was a fire in an orphanage in Honduras and I was the only one who could save those children."

Lois had thought about this exact moment more times than she could count. She'd agonised over how she'd responded the first time. She'd envisaged how she would respond if she were ever granted a second chance.

But now her chance had come — all the smooth words, all the ease of communication — had drained away.

Clark watched her, his apprehension as pronounced as it had been the first time. Except then, she had been too distraught to perceive anything beyond her own heartache. "I wish you'd say something," he said.

The candour was quintessential Clark. He didn't play games, didn't pretend he was impervious — even when it opened him wide enough for her to drive a truck through his heart.

"This was a lot easier when you weren't there," she said, sure he wouldn't understand.

"It usually is," he said.

She met his eyes, and silent rapport flowed between them.

"Do you talk to me when I'm not there?" she asked.

"All the time."

He was so honest ... yet he'd deliberately concealed a major component of his life. He hadn't trusted her until he'd been forced into it by circumstances. Yet he *had* trusted her. He had told Metropolis's most mulish and story-driven reporter the biggest secret in the history of the city. Probably in the history of the world. And at a time when he had known she was hurting way beyond any semblance of rationality. "I haven't told anyone," Lois assured him. "And I never will."

She saw a hint of his smile. "Thank you."

"But you knew that."

"I hoped."

"Who else knows?"

"Mom. Dad. Me. You."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

"You've *never* told anyone?"

"No."

Lois studied him. He looked so utterly lost. Adrift. As if the world was a jigsaw of infinite pieces, but however hard he searched, he just couldn't find his place.

But she knew his place.

It was right next to her. Forever.

"Clark?" she said.

His shoulders straightened as his anxiety kindled. "Yes?" he rasped.

"Would you marry me?"

His mouth dropped open, smacked shut as he swallowed

roughly, and then gaped again. His eyes probed hers, desperately searching for clarification, as if convinced he had somehow misunderstood. She had blown his thought processes to tiny pieces, and his reconstruction efforts were proving futile.

Lois smiled at him, giving unrestrained expression to her joy at being with him again. She knew Clark Kent would not be able to resist responding. Their relationship had been ravaged. But twenty minutes with him, and she'd discovered the foundations had survived the storm. Would survive any storm.

She was right.

He smiled for her. It began in his wonderfully expressive eyes. It spread to the rest of his face, calling in the dimple in his left cheek, and bringing completion with the curve of his perfect mouth. His lips parted, as the fullness of his smile billowed.

"Lo —" His voice cracked. He glanced down, summoning his composure. "Lois. You told me to leave you."

"I don't remember ever saying that," she said, imploring him to go along with her charade.

He pretended to consider, his eyes shining. "Then neither do I."

She ached to hold him close, but he wasn't within touching distance. She wanted to begin to heal what she had damaged. To communicate her remorse for their past and her certainty about their future. "But ... even though neither of us remembers it ... when I said some really, really stupid things ... some thoughtless and selfish things ... some things which I know cut you deeply ... I want you to know that I'm so sorry."

As she stared at him, a tear escaped from his right eye and shimmered down the curve of his cheek towards the precipice of his jaw. He backhanded it, turning the trail into a smudge.

Lois swung forward onto her knees and balanced herself with her hands on his chiselled shoulders. It was so good to touch him again. She couldn't resist kneading through his shirt as she gazed into his damp eyes. "I love you, Clark," she said.

A second tear emerged from behind his glasses and tracked its predecessor. She leant forward and kissed it.

"Lois," he whispered hoarsely. He moved too quickly for her to see, but suddenly she was being crushed against him as they knelt together.

Her tears, so common these days, swelled again. But this time they were not tears of grief. Or of pain. Or of loss.

They were tears of hope. And restoration. Tears at finally being home again after a long, exhausting emotional journey.

This isn't a dream.

The words reverberated through Clark's mind, extinguishing the spot fires of doubt with ruthless efficiency.

It couldn't be a dream.

The innumerable times past, it had been a dream. But *this* wasn't.

He knew because of his tears. Their presence, the dampness he could still feel in their wake, assured him. This wasn't a dream.

Lois's small body fitted perfectly in his arms, clamped against his chest. He felt as if the severed fragment of him had returned. He welcomed it and reconnected to it, as it infused life through his dormant spirit. "Lois." He squeezed her name through the confines of his rigid throat. "I love you."

She leant away, and he wanted to snatch her back. Her cheeks were drenched and her eyes swimming, but her happiness leached through the cloak of sorrow she'd carried since that awful night. "You never stopped, did you?" she said.

He shook his head. "I couldn't. Not then. Not now. Not ever."

She caressed his face with her hand.

"Lois, I'm so sorry," he said. "For everything."

She silenced him with her forefinger against his mouth.

"Enough," she said. "You've said it enough. I know. I understand."

It's done with."

Clark enclosed her hand in his and corralled it next to his heart. "But I deceived you, I hid the truth about me ... and then it all blew up in the worst possible way at the worst possible time." He inhaled raggedly. "When you needed me most ... I walked away."

"When you needed me most ... I wasn't there for you either."

"When did -"

"The first time you said, 'I'm Superman'. The first time you said it to me, the first time you'd said it to anyone." Lois curled her hand around his neck and burrowed her fingers into his hair. "I'm so sorry about the way I responded. I was shocked, I was grieving for my parents, I was angry and confused ... but I said some unforgivable things."

Her understanding was like a salve to his wounded heart. "Not unforgivable," he said.

"Only someone with a heart like yours would be able to forgive."

Clark opened his fist. Her hand rested in his, profound in symbolism. She was with him and her happiness lay exposed in his hands. In a silent vow of dedication, her lifted her hand to his lips and tenderly kissed her palm.

He found her eyes again and knew she had understood the essence of his gesture. They shared a smile. "Have you forgotten where else I like to be kissed?" she teased gently.

Her transparent invitation triggered a flurry of blazing darts inside him. He was going to kiss Lois again. He stared at her mouth, mesmerised. He had thought he would have only memories to sustain him, but they were going to make new memories. He lingered, relishing the anticipation, the sure knowledge of what was to come. Then, his restraint buckled.

Clark lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her, testing, tasting, re-acquainting. Lois met him, matched him, restored him, revived him. Her tongue sought his, causing a wellspring of euphoria to ripple through his veins. Finally, they parted, and Lois giggled delightedly.

"What?" he gasped breathlessly.

"Look down."

He looked. They were floating a foot off the ground.

"Did you do that?" she asked, her eyes sparkling.

"No," he said honestly. "You did."

Part 9

They landed gently on the ground, their arms loosely across the other's back. Lois wondered if Clark could hear her heart pounding as it pulsed molten fire through her body.

Superpowers or not, this man could kiss.

"Are you cold?" Clark asked.

Not likely. Not after being kissed by him. "There's no benefit to being cold," she said breezily. "You're not wearing a jacket."

"Is that the only reason you claimed to be cold?" he asked sternly, his eyes adorably lit with teasing. "So you could filch my jacket?"

She'd missed the banter. "Maybe."

He rested his forehead on hers; his sigh so full of contentment that Lois felt *she* could fly. "You still have one of my jackets," he said softly.

"I know. Unfortunately, I had it cleaned."

"Unfortunately?"

"When I got it back, it no longer smelled like you." She stood on tiptoe, put her hand on his shoulder, and stretched past his ear. She inhaled his coconut aroma. She'd missed that, too.

"Why did you have my jacket cleaned?" he asked, sounding puzzled.

Lois's initial instinct was to dodge his question. But this was Clark. So she smiled shyly and said, "Because the night you left it with me, I was so lonesome for you, I slept with it on my bed, and it got crumpled."

She watched as Clark processed her words ... as his delight grew out of surprise. That was something else she'd missed — reading him, witnessing his thoughts find expression in his face. He cleared his throat. "Uhhm ... have you thought about what you'd like to do now?"

Lois shook her head. "I didn't think past telling you that I love you."

Clark didn't speak for a moment. Perhaps he was allowing time for her words to lodge in his heart. "I've thought about what we would do," he said, brushing back her hair and allowing it to slide through his fingers. "If we were together without secrets."

Her curiosity stirred. "Go on," she said.

"Let's chase the new day," he suggested. "Let's go to one place and watch the sun rise, and then go further west and watch it again."

"You mean fly around the world?" Lois asked, her mind scrambling to absorb his meaning.

He smiled, although it didn't quite cover his disappointment. "That's OK," he said. "We can do it another time."

Lois put her left hand on his cheek and caressed the freckle on his upper lip with her thumb. "You don't need superpowers to impress me," she said gently.

"Do they make you uncomfortable?"

She moved her hand higher and slid her fingers through the soft hair above his ear. "Not uncomfortable," she said. "I just need a little time to expand my concept of what is possible."

"So you'll chase the sunrise with me?" he said. "One day?"

"You've planned this? Which countries? Where we would go?"

"Yep."

"Have you done it before?"

"No," he said. "It wouldn't be much fun alone."

Alone.

Suddenly, Lois understood something. Outside of his parents, Clark's powers had always been hidden. Masked. Not shameful exactly, but certainly not for public exhibition. Now, with her, he could be Clark without the mask.

She'd known his powers would require adjustments from her. But until now, she hadn't realised how new and different this would be for Clark.

"Let's not wait," she said. "Let's do it today. Now."

"We'll have to fly in the dark," he warned. "Is that OK?"

"I would fly anywhere with you," she declared exuberantly.

Clark beamed. "One moment," he said.

He was gone and back before she'd had time to draw breath. He carried a thick, soft blanket and a folded picnic rug. "Ready, Ms Lane?"

"Are you going to wear the Superman suit?"

"Not unless you want me to," he said.

"No," she said. "I want to be with Clark."

He handed her the picnic rug. He draped the blanket around her and as he lifted her into his arms, his face came tantalisingly close. Lois swooped to brush a quick kiss across his cheek. She saw his surprise in the slight lift of his eyebrows and his pleasure in the little unfurl of his contented smile.

"What will your parents think when we don't come home?" she asked.

"That I'm the luckiest man alive," he said. "Are you ready?"

She nodded, and they rose quickly as the earth fell away. Then they were gliding effortlessly, almost as if they had entered another realm. A realm where time had been suspended and nothing existed outside of her and Clark.

Soon, the light began to fade, and when it had gone completely, blackness surrounded them. Above them, the sky was clear and the stars resplendent. "Are you OK?" Lois heard Clark's voice close to her ear.

"Yes," she replied, trying to sound completely unconcerned.

"I assume you can see."

He chuckled. "Enough to ensure you'll be safe."

They landed softly on crunchy sand. Lois heard the restless rhythm of the ocean twenty yards away and inhaled its salty freshness. "How long before sunrise?" she asked.

Clark stood behind her, his hands secure on her shoulders.

"Not long," he replied.

"Where are we?"

"The north-eastern tip of Dirk Hartog Island."

"Which is where?"

"Off the Western Australian coast." His fingers ran down her arm. He captured her hand and lifted it to point into the blackness ahead. "The mainland is in that direction — about sixty miles away. There's a peninsula halfway across that we might be able to see later." He swung them to the left. "There's a smaller island that way — Dorre Island. The sun will rise somewhere between the island and the peninsula."

"Are we really on an island?"

"Yes. Why?"

Lois turned into the circle of his arms and leant her head on the curve of his shoulder. "It feels like we're the only people on earth."

Clark held her close for a moment, together, alone, separated from everything else by distance and darkness. Then he moved away, and Lois heard a shuffle of movement. "Shall we sit down?" he said.

Lois sat on the rug he'd positioned for her. She leant back against him. His arms surrounded her. She arranged the blanket over them. "Do you get cold?" she asked.

"Not unless it's extreme," he answered.

"So you don't really need the blanket?"

"No," he admitted. "But I like sharing it with you."

Lois searched for and found his hand under the blanket and entwined her fingers in his. A sliver of dark blue had appeared in the distant blackness. "Do you mind if I ask questions about you?" she said.

She could feel his smile against the side of her head. "Lois, I'm *so* glad you know about me. I don't want any secrets from you. Ask anything you want to."

"I *did* ask," she said pointedly. "But you didn't answer."

He didn't respond, not verbally. But she heard his quick intake of breath.

"Will you marry me?" she asked again.

"Lois ..."

"You could say 'yes'," she ventured. "Or you could say 'no'. But I should warn you that if you say 'no', you will break my heart."

Under the blanket, Clark's thumb slid sensuously across her hand. "Lois," he rasped. "I've already told you that I can't say 'no' to you."

"So it's 'yes' then?"

He took her hand from under the blanket and lifted it to meet his lips. He kissed her with such tenderness that the back of her hand tingled. "I don't want you to wake up tomorrow morning and realise you've made a commitment you're not ready for."

Lois giggled. "Which tomorrow morning?" she asked. "This sunrise? Or the next one?"

"I want you to be sure," he persisted.

The blue line in front of them had broadened. As they watched, its lower reaches continued to lighten in colour.

"I *am* sure," Lois said. "I still have questions — lots of them — but whatever the answers, the one certainty I have is how I feel about you. Regardless of how many more revelations you have, they won't shake my love for you."

He didn't answer.

"You have other revelations?" she guessed.

"A couple," he said.

"Clark, *whatever* you tell me, it won't change that I love you and I want to be with you," Lois said earnestly. "Your *differences* are a part of the man I love. I wouldn't change anything about you. Not one thing."

She heard his soft sigh and felt the tension ease from his body. "What would be the worst thing I could tell you?" he said.

"That you're already married."

"Nope," he said. "It's definitely not that."

"That you're in love with someone else," she said.

"Nope, not that either."

"What about all those women propositioning Superman through the newspaper columns?" Lois said. "How many did you respond to?"

"Three less than I read."

"You *answered* some of them?" Lois said, trying to keep the prickle of jealousy from her tone.

She felt silent amusement rumble through him. "Lois, honey, I read three of them — which was three too many." He kissed her temple. "Now, if there had been one from Lois Lane ..."

His unfinished sentence hung between them as on the horizon, the first streaks of orange appeared below the ever-lightening blue. Lois twisted and swung her leg over Clark, straddling his thighs. The sun's embryonic light allowed her to see the outlines of his face. "I know I've done nothing ... worse than nothing ... to deserve your trust, but if you feel you can tell me, I can promise you it will be very different from last time." She swallowed down her shame as her harsh words replayed in her mind. She stroked his cheek, just above his jaw line. "But if you don't feel you can tell me just yet ... I understand."

Clark took another of his deep breaths. "Before today, I had never cried," he admitted. "Not when I was a child, not since. Not until the most beautiful, amazing woman in the world asked me to marry her."

"Aww, Clark," she mumbled. She had hurt him so much.

"It's just one more way I'm different." His hand on her face channelled his love. "One more way I'm less different with you."

Her fingertips brushed the dampness under his eye. She kissed the spot. "Are there more revelations?"

"One." He glanced away and then cannoned into her eyes.

"It's about something else I've never done. I'm not sure if now is the right time, but it's something I want you to know."

"Is it big?" she asked.

He nodded. "Probably."

"Just tell me, Clark."

He clasped his hands behind her back, encircling her. "I don't know how to tell you because it involves the night your parents died."

"It was also the night of our first date."

"I wish the two weren't linked," he said.

Lois leant against him, her face deep in the crook of his neck as she fought the devastating memories of that night. "But, they are, Clark," she said. "And we can't change that. I don't want to forget our date because of what came later."

His hand swept away the spilt tears from her cheek. "I don't want to hurt you again ..." He shook his head in frustration. "I don't know ... I *never* knew what to say, what not to say."

"When you held me that night, you told me we would do this together." Clark tensed — as if he had sensed accusation in her words. Lois straightened so she could see his face in the dim light of the new day. "I didn't know what I needed. I didn't know how you could help me."

"Do you know now?"

"I know we can't let it be a barrier between us. If either of us needs to talk about it, we should feel free to say so."

His head dropped, and his breath warmed her neck. "But what if it upsets you?"

She smiled with newly gained insight. "I cry," she said

simply. “And we shouldn’t be scared of that.”

He skimmed the tears from her cheeks with his fingertips.

“And if I cry,” Lois continued, “there is no one more able to comfort me than you.” She smiled through her tears. “This is how we do it.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and clung to him as he held her securely against his chest.

“See?” she said when they parted. “That’s how we get through this.”

“I like this way a whole lot better.”

“I’m so sorry I pushed you away.”

Clark’s jaw flexed. The memories were still horribly real for him. “Please don’t do it again,” he begged. “I can take anything but that.”

“I won’t,” she promised. She dried the last of her tears.

“Now, what was it you were going to tell me? Something about our date?”

“After our date,” he corrected. “When ...” He swallowed.

“When you undid my buttons.”

Her hand continued caressing his jaw.

“If ... if we’d continued ... it would have been the first time ... for me.”

His obvious discomfort communicated more effectively than his actual words. “Oh, Clark,” she breathed.

He looked away, muscles working in his cheek.

Lois gently turned his face so he had to look at her. “I can tell you’re thinking something,” she said. “But, I’m not sure what. And I can imagine it’s difficult for you to put into words, but if you’re in any way thinking I see you as ... lesser, because of this, that’s not true at all.”

“What *are* you thinking?” he grated.

“How disappointing it must have been for you — to think it was about to happen, then to have it snatched away.”

“My disappointment hardly compares with what you were going through.” His gaze shifted away. “About us ... together ... Does it bother you that I’m an alien?”

“You’re not an alien,” she said with total conviction. “Not to me.”

“But I came from ... somewhere else,” he said with despair. “I don’t even know where.”

She saw his lonesomeness again, his isolation. “How much honesty can you take?”

His eyes sought hers, riddled with uncertainty. “As much as you’re willing to give me,” he said resolutely.

“And if what I say embarrasses you?”

Clark shrugged fatalistically. “I’d rather know.”

His evident assumption that she was disconcerted by his differences drove her on. She tried to arrange her thoughts into logical order. “I’ve always thought of myself as ... bold, not easily deterred, forthright ... impulsive, even. Certainly not someone who obsesses about the risks when action is needed.”

“That sounds like the Lois I know,” Clark said. “And love.”

“But I’ve realised I’m not like that at all.”

“You’re not?” he said with surprise.

“As a reporter, maybe. But not as a person.” Lois sighed. “I regret so much that I wasn’t open with my parents. That I never told them how much I hated their hostilities. That I never said how I longed for us to be a real family.”

Clark took her hand in his.

“It was easier to pretend that I didn’t care,” Lois said dispiritedly. “So that’s what I did.”

Clark waited.

“I don’t want to be like that ... not with you.” She smiled suddenly. “So here’s the truth, Mr Kent, bold and straight up so there’s no misunderstanding. The thought of you and me ... alone, naked, intimate ... parches my throat, somersaults my heart, and leaves me with an achy longing I can’t even begin to

describe.”

Clark’s brown eyes gleamed unnaturally bright, and his Adam’s apple bounced like a yo-yo.

Lois smiled, gratified by his reaction. “It won’t happen tonight. Maybe it won’t happen for a while because we have plenty of other stuff to work through. But I still have the same password on my computer, and I’m still completely captivated by the possibilities.”

“You *still* have that password?” he gasped.

“Uh huh,” she said matter-of-factly. “Thatchest.”

A slow, emphatic grin spread across his face. He glanced into her eyes, and his grin widened. He said nothing. He didn’t need to.

Lois seared him with a quick, blistering kiss and turned towards the rising sun in hasty retreat. The dynamic orange of the sky had spread upwards, morphing with the blue. Below, strips of gold garnished the water. “Wow,” she said.

“I think we missed most of it,” Clark said against her ear, his voice a little jagged.

She eased back into his warmth. “We can find another one.”

Clark chuckled. “Such nonchalance about flitting around the world,” he teased.

They watched in silence, appreciating both the spectacular display and the time to reflect.

“Are you hungry?” Clark asked as the orange developed vivacious amber contours.

“Yes. But I’m too comfortable to move.”

“Would you like breakfast? Or supper?”

Lois thought for a moment. “Those chocolate croissants you kept bringing me? They didn’t come from Smallville, did they? Or Metropolis?”

“No.”

“Paris?”

“You got me,” he confessed.

“Could you get them now?”

“I’m sure I could find something.”

“Then I’d like coffee and a chocolate croissant, please.”

He rose from behind her, and she immediately missed his warmth. She smothered a little shiver. He took the blanket from her lap and wrapped it around her shoulders, taking the opportunity to kiss her as he did. “I’ll miss you,” he said as they parted.

“I’ll miss you.”

Before she’d finished speaking, he’d gone, leaving a backwash of breeze. The colours of the sky were fading now. She could see the black shapes of bushes around her and in the far distance, the rise of the black land out of the water.

Lois sighed happily, trying to determine which of the multitude of sweet memories warranted first recall.

The moment she had opened the door of his bedroom and caught his look of stunned disbelief?

The moment she had asked him to marry her?

The moment he had held her and told her he loved her?

The sensation of floating as he’d kissed her? Discovering it was more than a sensation?

Before she could decide, there was a thud in the sand, and she caught the whiff of fresh coffee. She turned to greet Clark.

He handed her two coffees and slipped a backpack from his shoulder. With hands blurred, he shaped the sand and settled the cups into it. He opened his backpack, took out his leather jacket, and held it for her. “You’re going to get cold,” he said in explanation. “Even with the blanket.”

“You trust me with another of your jackets?” she teased as she slipped it over her shoulders.

“I trust you with my everything,” he said. Then he grinned.

“And I love how you look in my clothes.”

He sat next to her and removed four paper bags from the

backpack. “I got a selection,” he said, handing them to her. He picked up her cup, lowered his glasses, and gazed intently for a moment.

“You just re-heated it, didn’t you?” Lois guessed.

He grinned. “I flew high and fast. It was cold.” He gave her the coffee. “How’s the temperature?”

She sipped the smooth liquid. “Perfect. Thank you.”

As they ate, the arc of the infant sun peeped over the horizon.

“Clark?”

“Uhm?”

“You just went to Kansas, got your jacket, went to Paris for croissants, and got back here in less than two minutes.”

He smiled around his doughnut. “Yeah, I had to wait to be served at the bakery.”

“So . . . how long would it take you to get around the world? At top speed? With no stops?”

He shrugged. “A second or two. Less if I hurry.”

“Oh, my,” Lois said, struggling to grasp that the man who was sitting next to her — Clark, her friend and colleague — could circumnavigate the globe in a few seconds. “Clark?”

“Yes, honey?”

She put down her coffee and shuffled closer to him. “Would you mind if I took off your glasses?”

“No,” he said nonchalantly. “I don’t mind.”

She lifted them from his face and studied him. Looking back at her was a combination — part Clark, part Superman. She explored his face, visually and with touch. “You look a lot like Superman,” she said.

He laughed a little self-consciously. “What did you expect?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Maybe I was hoping the glasses had a magic quality that totally transformed you so I don’t feel so dumb about not recognising the man I loved when he rescued me from a concrete dungeon.”

“No one else recognised me either.”

“What would you have done if, when you dropped into the tunnel I’d said, ‘What kept you, farmboy?’?”

Clark laughed. “A part of me was hoping you would say exactly that. But they’d told you Clark was dead, so you shouldn’t beat yourself up too much that you weren’t expecting him to drop through the ceiling.”

Lois remembered her anguish of those moments when she had believed Clark had been shot. Then, the horror of death had been so foreign, so unknown. Now, it was her constant companion. She sighed and replaced Clark’s glasses.

“Lois?”

“Yes?”

“I do have something else I should tell you.”

“OK.”

“While I was away just now, I was listening to your heartbeat. I didn’t intend to. I just discovered I was doing it.”

“Why?”

“It tells me you’re safe.”

“Do you do it all the time?”

“No. The first time was when I listened to you breathe . . . cry . . . during the funeral, after I’d left. And when I was in Honduras. I turned it off as I came back to Metropolis.”

“You *listened* to me breathe?”

“Yeah.” He looked a little self-conscious. “Before that I didn’t know I could hear that well. I knew I could hear things other people couldn’t, but not to this extent.”

“You could hear my heartbeat when you were in Paris?” Lois asked incredulously.

He nodded. “Does it bother you, honey? I won’t do it if you don’t want me to.”

“How can you hear one heart beat out of millions?”

“It’s the most important heartbeat in the world to me.”

Her heart melted, and her tears threatened again. She

swallowed them down and smiled at him. “Honey? You called me ‘honey’.”

“Is that OK?”

“You’ve said it before. But I don’t remember when you started.”

“It was that night. After I’d come into your bedroom. I suddenly realised, and you didn’t seem to mind, and somehow, it just kept coming out.”

“I like it,” Lois said.

“So do I,” he said as he sipped his coffee. He smiled at her. “As much as I like you calling me ‘farmboy’.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yep. You can call me ‘farmboy’ anytime you like, honey.”

They finished eating as the sunlight spread colour across the sand and ocean. They packed the trash and the rug into Clark’s backpack. “Where to now?” Lois asked.

“Table Mountain? In South Africa?”

Lois laughed. “Of course,” she said. “Where else?”

Clark flew towards the darkness, his heart overflowing. Lois, with him. Lois, in love with him. Lois, knowing everything . . . all the secrets . . . and still choosing to be with him. “Are you cold?” he asked, aware his body was shading her from the sun.

“A little,” she replied.

“Put your arms under the blanket,” he suggested. “You don’t need to hold around my neck. I won’t drop you.”

She burrowed under the blanket, and they flew beyond the last sunrays and into the darkness. “Can you do two things at once?” she asked.

“Uhhh . . . yes,” he said. “Usually.”

Her hand slipped from under the blanket and landed on his chest, worked up to his throat, past the collar of his shirt, around his chin and to his lips. Having navigated with her hand, she followed with her mouth.

Clark’s hands and arms were fully occupied with cradling her, rendering them incapable of involvement. Her hand shepherded his face and her mouth plied his lips as she set the depth and the pace and the intensity of their kiss. Her hand slithered behind his neck, snaring him as her mouth plunged deeper.

Until now, he’d thought kissing Lois was the height of ecstasy, but being kissed by her was exhilarating in an entirely new way.

When she finally released him, the inferno still scorched through his body.

“Are we lost yet?” she asked.

“No,” he ground out huskily. “I’ve never been more found in my life.”

She put her arms under the blanket and laid her head against his shoulder with a happy sigh. When he finally mustered the composure to chance a glimpse at her, she was asleep.

Clark dropped gently through the thick fog and landed on a craggy western shoulder of Table Mountain, South Africa. He found a suitable place and sat down, leaning back against the smooth rock. In his arms, Lois slept on.

With inordinate care, he settled her onto his lap and rearranged the blanket so the dampness of the fog wouldn’t chill her. It closed in on them, enhancing the illusion they were alone in the universe.

He gazed at her, still trying to grasp the turn in his life. A few hours ago, he had landed in his parents’ yard, expecting nothing more from the evening than a few games of checkers with his dad until enough hours had passed that he could retire to his bedroom to mourn her loss. To mourn that he would never hold her again — never be more to her than a stony-faced, pseudo-stranger in super-hero-spandex.

He'd known he would see her, occasionally. Anytime Superman appeared in Metropolis, it would have been almost impossible to avoid her. Not that he had decided what he intended to do about Superman. Other than a vague hope that the memory would fade into folklore.

But now ... everything had changed.

How had she found the grace to forgive him?

Forgive him for deceiving her, for delaying telling her the truth, for walking out of the funeral, for leaving her with no option other than to believe he had deserted her? Then, at exactly the wrong time, at a time when she had already been so wounded, he'd burdened her with his secret.

You handled it so badly, Kent.

He kissed her forehead. She'd asked him to marry her!

He'd been expecting, "Clark, we can't be together anymore."

She'd given him, "Clark, I want to be with you forever."

He laid his head on hers and imbued her essence. He loved her so much. He closed his eyes, relishing her warmth, her softness, her trust.

Lois awoke and stretched, barely avoiding clunking Clark on the head. She felt him sway and heard his chuckle.

"Beware, I'm dangerous in the morning," she said, lacing her words with just enough undertone to suggest a double meaning.

"I'll take my chances," he said in a tone that told her he knew exactly what she'd been thinking. "But maybe we could use some light." He pulled a flashlight from his backpack, flicked it on, and wedged it in a crevice between two rocks. The light diffused in the fog, creating a golden halo.

"About marrying me ..." Lois said.

"I should have known that no one ever escapes a Lois Lane question," he said with feigned resignation.

She grinned. "Give me one reason why you haven't said 'yes'."

"I don't have a job."

"Then neither do I."

"Lois, honey, you've lost me again."

"Perry told me that I wasn't worth squat the way I was — so without you, I don't have a job."

"But I resigned from the Planet."

"If you walk in, go to your desk, fire up your computer, and find us a decent story, Perry won't say a thing except, 'Good to have you back, Kent.'"

Clark wasn't convinced. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. Perry wants the best."

Clark breathed in deeply, lifting her. "I guess we're both going to Metropolis. It's a good thing I never got around to giving up my apartment."

Lois grinned jubilantly. "You were hoping to come back, weren't you?" she said, gently poking his chest with each word.

"Always," he said softly. "But I didn't think it was possible."

Lois sprang from Clark's lap and took the picnic rug from his backpack. She placed it before him and knelt on it. She positioned his raised knees together, splayed her arms across them, and leant on hands, her face level with his and only a few inches away. "OK, Kent," she said. "You've dodged and weaved enough. I'm not moving from here until you answer my question."

Clark met her stare without wavering. "I remember Mom once telling me about how Dad had proposed. It wasn't so much what he did; it was that she remembered it so fondly so many years later." Clark ran his hand through Lois's hair, bringing it to rest on her cheek. "I want to give you the world, Lois. I don't want you to miss out on anything."

"I haven't missed out on anything."

"So my answer is this; you're going to have to wait — not for my answer, but for my question."

"I'm not a patient person."

"Then I won't keep you waiting for long."

"How long?" Lois persisted.

Clark grinned. "As long as it takes me to plan something even better than chasing the sunrise."

"That won't be easy." Lois turned, looking expectantly towards where the sun would rise. "It's foggy," she announced.

"Yep, it is."

"I guess we won't see too much of the sunrise," she said.

Clark turned his head towards the east and inhaled deeply, sucking in the white fog. Then, he swivelled to the west and blew. He faced Lois, grinning. "See? No problem."

Lois chuckled. "Clark Kent," she said. "You are full of surprises."

"So are you, Lois Lane."

"When have I surprised you?" she challenged.

"When haven't you?" he countered.

"Examples?" she demanded.

"Today, when you proposed. When you kissed me in the dark, even though I was supposed to be concentrating on flying. When you opened my bedroom door. That ... that was the best surprise of my life."

She leant against his arched knees, wanting contact, but also wanting to be able to see his face. "Did you ever think about coming to me?"

"It was all I thought about. It was a daily struggle to stay away. But I knew if I saw you ... just once ... I would ..." His voice faltered.

"But you did see me," she reminded him. "The day you saved the train on the bridge."

Clark groaned. "I was so close to scooping you up and flying away with you regardless of the consequences."

"You looked as if you didn't even notice me."

"You looked as if you wanted to be anywhere else."

"I did," she admitted. "But it was about that time that I realised how much I wanted to be in your arms."

Clark nuzzled into her neck. "So I should have simply done what I longed to do," he murmured.

Lois remembered that day. Remembered being on one side of the press barrier, while he, distant and untouchable, was on the other. "Why did you decide to become Superman?"

"Because of you."

"Me?"

"Until I came to Metropolis, I'd go someplace new, get to know people, start to make friends — as much as I could with all the secrets — then I'd do something or help someone, and people would start asking questions about me. So I'd leave, move on, find another home."

No wonder he'd looked so terminally lost. She reached for his hand and held it in hers.

"But Metropolis had to be different, because I never, ever wanted to leave." He smiled. "Because Lois Lane lived there, and I was in love with her. I hoped Superman could be a way to give Clark Kent a life and still be able to help people." He raised his hands in regret. "But I always hated that it involved deceiving you as well as everyone else."

"Didn't you trust me?"

"It wasn't that I didn't trust you; it was that I didn't trust your feelings for me. I thought you liked me, but I wanted far, far more than that, and I was so scared that if I told you the truth, you would run away in horror."

She pictured him in the suit — arms crossed like a barricade, eyes emotionless, posture austere behind the wall of detachment. The only time she'd seen a crack in it had been after the orphanage fire — when he'd been in her apartment, and she'd sensed he needed comfort but hadn't known how to get through his defences. "You've been going back to Honduras?"

“Yeah. The new buildings will be ready in a few days. The kids can move back home.”

“Have you seen Rosa again?”

“Yeah.” He chuckled. “She calls me *Bonito* ... pretty. I think she thinks it’s my name.”

“She’s a smart girl,” Lois said. “She knows a cute guy when she sees one.” She studied her hand in his. “What happens with Superman now?”

Clark sighed. “I don’t know.”

“I’ve thought about it.”

“You have?”

“We could be Superman together.”

His eyes seized hers, bright with questions.

Lois hurried on. “I mean, obviously I don’t have your powers, but I could support you. I could be there when things get tough. I could think of excuses when you need to leave. I could cover for you at the Planet. I could hold you when you’re tired or when you did your best and somebody still died. I could be the one you talk to, the one you can be open with, the one you come home to. I could ... love you.”

His face had frozen. His expression had become unreadable. Panic enveloped her.

“I’m sorry, Clark,” Lois said quickly. “I’ve burst in again and trampled all over your territory where I have no right to be. You must choose how you use your powers. Forget what I said.”

He swung her off his knees and pulled her tight against his chest. He held her for long, stretched moments. When he released her, he sought her eyes. “That is the only way it would be possible,” he said. “I can’t be Superman alone.”

She brushed his cheek with a tender touch and smiled for him. “You’re not alone,” she said. “You’ll never be alone again.” She curled into his side. Clark turned off the flashlight, and his arms anchored her against him under the blanket. The navy blue seam, the harbinger of dawn, reclined along the horizon.

It was dark, yet Lois could see with greater clarity than ever before.

It was cold; the chill nibbled at her cheeks, yet she was warm. Warm in the haven of Clark’s so-secure love.

They were alone, yet her life had never been so full.

They were on a foreign mountain, half-a-world from Metropolis, yet the sweetness of being home purred through her body.

“I’ve found where I belong,” Lois whispered, awash with surprise and awe in equal measure.

Clark’s kiss caressed her cheek. “So have I,” he said.

THE END

Wagyu — <http://www.blackgoldfarms.com.au/whywagyu.html>
[Map of Dirk Hartog Island](#)
[Information, Dirk Hartog Island](#)