

# Time to Love 4: So Many Questions

By Female Hawk <hawka@iinet.net.au>

Rated PG — 13

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Description: Clark has a question he wants to ask Lois. But then Lois discovers that Clark's proposal is only the first of many questions.

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

Warning — This story refers to acts of violence.

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## Part 1

It was bitterly cold — the first ominous blast of the impending winter.

Lois Lane thrust one hand into her coat pocket and looked down at her feet, wriggling her toes to ward off the encroaching numbness.

She felt an infusion of warmth penetrate her coat, spread across her shoulders, and trickle down her body. A cascade of heat showered her right foot. Then her left.

Lois smothered the runaway smile that leapt for release. She lifted her head, moulded her face to an expression of absorbed interest, and fixed her eyes on the bank executive as he droned on. How long could he stretch out his bank's gratitude to Superman for foiling an extremely-well-planned, but-for-the-intervention-of-Superman-almost-guaranteed-successful bank robbery? Did he really imagine the few hundred people assembled were here to listen to him? Lois was glad her tape recorder granted her mind the freedom to wander.

But maybe without it, she would have been forced to pay attention and take notes. It would have given her something to do ... something to occupy her mind ... a much-needed ally in her battle with the temptation to slide her gaze to the left of the boring bank executive and feast on the hunk in blue spandex.

Her willpower was dissolving fast, but Lois knew she had to resist. One glance to Superman, one meeting of their eyes, and one of them would be in grave danger of surrendering the flimsy hold on their charade of distance. Actually, both of them.

Lois could feel his presence. Visually, he was nothing more than a blur of blue and red on the periphery of her vision, but that in no way mitigated his magnetism. She glanced at her watch and sighed. Three o'clock. At least another three hours before they could leave the Planet and she could have him to herself.

Assuming no one else needed him, of course.

The crowd broke into applause, and Lois returned her attention to the makeshift stage. They shook hands as an oversized cheque passed from the bank-man in the business suit to the super-man in the spandex Suit.

Superman stepped to the microphone.

Now Lois had to look at him — everyone was looking at him. He was ... magnificent. She knew exactly what every woman

was thinking. She was thinking it. Except the difference between her and every other woman on the planet was as great as the gulf between reality and fantasy.

That thought warmed her — from the inside out.

"Thank you, Mr Parkin," Superman said in his deep voice.

"Thank you for your kind words and very generous gift. The money will go to the orphanage in Honduras that was destroyed by fire in September. They have new buildings; this will be used for the many other necessities ... teddy bears and games and skipping ropes and story books and footballs."

The crowd cheered with genuine enthusiasm. The City of Metropolis had taken the formerly unknown orphanage in Honduras to their hearts. It had been the catalyst for their burgeoning love affair with Superman. It had melded the city and its hero together — bound them and dissolved the final barriers of mistrust and difference.

The official part of the presentation was done, but Lois knew Superman would be besieged with questions and requests for his attention for at least another thirty minutes. If she returned to the Planet, she could make a start on the story. She'd probably have it almost knocked into shape by the time Clark appeared.

She turned away. "Bye, farmboy," she whispered, so low that no one in her vicinity could have heard.

But he would hear. Her farmboy.

*Bye, honey.*

She didn't *hear* it, of course, but she didn't need to hear it with her ears to hear it in her heart.

It was hard to walk away from him. Even though she knew there would be less than a mile separating them. Even though she knew he would meet her at the Planet as soon as he could — it was hard to walk away. Every fibre of her being seemed to have developed an insatiable hankering to be with him.

Every minute, every second.

Lois determinedly quickened her steps. The story needed to be written.

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Nearly an hour later, the elevator stopped with a gentle thud at Clark Kent's floor in the Planet building. As he waited for the door to open, he listened for Lois's keyboard, recognising her unique rhythm as her fingers danced out their story.

The elevator dinged, and the keyboard silenced. Clark grinned, sure she was listening ... hoping. He felt the familiar surge of excitement — the same surge he'd experienced so often since he'd met Lois Lane. But now there was a buoyant edge to that excitement, driven by the knowledge she anticipated his presence as joyfully as he anticipated hers.

He stepped out of the elevator, and his eyes darted to her desk. He located the back of her head; his fingers tingled with the desire to bury his hand into her shiny dark hair and merge his mouth with hers.

He arrived at her desk and pushed that thought to a far pocket of his mind for later retrieval. She looked up, their eyes met, and his excitement exploded into a million fizzing fragments. "Thanks for bringing me coffee," she said, her smile rich with welcome.

Clark remembered the two cups of coffee in his hands. He offered her one. She took it, casually brushing her fingertips across his knuckles.

Lois sipped her coffee and sighed with pleasure. "I guess there was a long queue."

"Long enough," he said.

"It's cold out there today," she said, her eyes pinning him. "You can understand people wanting to drink in something ... hot."

The final word pulsed across her vocal chords, causing copycat sensations to rake across Clark's nerve endings. "What about you?" he asked huskily.

“Oh, something *hot* warmed me,” she purred. Her tongue slid sensuously along her upper lip, ostensibly gathering stray traces of coffee. She looked up at him through her long eyelashes. “Thank you.”

He’d been about to sip from his coffee, but halted its progress to his mouth, not sure the simple act of swallowing would be within his current capacity to function. “How’s our story?” he asked breathlessly.

“We’re nearly done.”

“Thanks.” Clark swept the newsroom with a furtive glance. He was well aware he and Lois had been the subject of much speculation since they had returned from Smallville four weeks ago, but at this moment, no one was taking any particular notice of them.

This was his opportunity. His heart pranced like an unbroken colt. There would be better opportunities — more private than the middle of the newsroom — but he couldn’t wait a moment longer for her answer. Trying to smooth the ripples from his deep breath, Clark said, “Lois?”

“Yes?”

“Do you have anything planned for Friday evening?”

The extremities of her mouth twitched. “Nothing specific,” she answered.

“Would you go out with me?”

Her smile blossomed. “*Another* date, Mr Kent?” she teased. “If you’re not careful, a girl might get to thinking you’re pretty serious about her.”

“Oh, I’m serious,” he said gravely.

She studied him for a protracted moment, and the thought occurred to him, only somewhat flippantly, that she might have heat vision. She could certainly burn him. “I’d love to go out with you.”

He smiled, releasing his pent-up breath. “Dress warmly, and bring a comfortable pair of shorts and a tee-shirt.”

“Where are we going?” Lois asked.

He leant across her desk, blocking out most of the newsroom, and swept his hand lightly across hers. “You’ll find out on Friday.”

“What else should I bring?”

“Nothing,” he said. “I’ll see to everything else.”

Clark watched as her mind catalogued, sorted, and speculated. He’d known his attempts at nonchalance would provoke her curiosity. He steeled himself for the onslaught of her questions, fortifying his determination to keep his plans secret. “Do you want to read our copy?” she asked.

His eyebrows shot up.

Lois swivelled her monitor so he could read what she had written.

For a moment, he stared at her as *his* questions marched through his mind. Finding no immediate answers, he broke away and swung his eyes to their story.

*‘Superman smiled as he received the check to the enthusiastic applause of the gathered crowd. He’s our hero, and he knows it. He’s become comfortable around us, and we’ve realized that Metropolis wouldn’t be the same without him. The austere barriers of division and difference have evaporated.*

*We can only hope that one day soon, the Suit will, too.’*

Clark re-read the final line; sure he had misread it.

He hadn’t.

His eyes swivelled to Lois. Her hand covered her mouth, but she couldn’t conceal the little shudders of mirth that were jiggling through her.

She wouldn’t print that!

Would she?

Clark was still trying to compose an appropriate reply when Lois said, “What do you think?”

He regarded her sternly, applying tight control to his impulse

to grin in response to the laughter permeating the depths of her gorgeous eyes. “That last line needs work,” he said, knowing his attempt at gruffness was hopelessly transparent.

“I’d *really* like to work on it,” she replied smoothly. “Any suggestions?”

Clark cleared his throat. “One or two,” he said. “We will discuss them Friday.” He straightened, picked up his coffee, and scuttled to the refuge his desk.

He sat down and turned on his computer before daring to glance across to Lois. Her eyes had followed him. He winked at her, and her answering smile sparked a series of mini-explosions throughout his body.

Being with her was delightfully unpredictable. He loved it when she teased him, loved her wide-eyed comments that carried double-barrelled firepower, loved how she used her prowess with words in ways he had never expected.

It was like honeyed torture.

But he wasn’t sure how much more his body could take.

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Friday afternoon was the longest in the entire history of time. Lois regularly checked the series of clocks that hung high on the wall of the Daily Planet office, but they refused to advance more than five minutes between each inspection.

She glared at the one set to local time, willing it to speed through the next hour. She’d waited four weeks. Four weeks since she’d gone to Smallville and proposed to Clark. Four weeks that had stretched her patience almost to breaking point. And now, she felt as if she had been suspended between two ever-widening poles.

Because ... tonight ... it was going to happen. Clark was going to ask her to be his wife. She was sure of it.

Not that the four weeks hadn’t been wonderful. Clark’s courting of her had combined attentive chivalry with super-powered fun, rendering her breathless and enchanted.

He’d brought her flowers, coffee, edible delicacies from around the world, and little gifts — like a post card picture of the beach on Dirk Hartog Island — that had significance only to them.

He’d taken her on dates. The usual ... a movie, a meal, a picnic in the park amongst the fallen leaves. The not-so-usual ... watching fireworks — from above. Tobogganing high in the Swiss Alps — when Clark pushing her up the mountain was almost as exhilarating as sliding down it. Not quite though, because on the downward journey, she had Clark close behind her, his body wrapped snugly around hers.

And through it all, he’d found numerous ways — a touch, a smile, a look, a word — to communicate the sureness of his love for her.

Four weeks of their love deepening daily. Four weeks of ever-growing conviction that a life apart was not a life at all. Four weeks of waiting.

But tonight was the night.

For the past two days, Lois had employed all of her investigative skills in attempts to procure details about their date tonight. She’d asked him sneakily camouflaged questions when she’d judged his concentration to be elsewhere. When that had generated a harvest of exactly zero information, she’d employed tactics she wouldn’t use with any other interviewee — kissing him voraciously until neither of them could breathe, tickling him until they had both collapsed, helpless from laughter.

But he hadn’t budged.

She was to dress warmly and bring a pair of shorts and a comfortable tee.

That was it.

For a date in Metropolis in mid-November!

With any other man, it would be beyond cryptic; it would be unfathomable.

But Clark Kent was different.

Very different.

Lois glanced in Clark's direction. If he was experiencing any nervousness, he was doing a fine job of concealing it. His dark head came up from his desk, and she jolted back to her monitor. If she met his eyes, the inner whirlwind of her emotions — a volatile cocktail of elation spiked with a solid dose of butterflies — would surely eddy out of control.

Late afternoon, the unthinkable happened. Clark sidled up to her desk. "I have to go out, honey," he said very softly.

Her disappointment flared. "How long?"

"Shouldn't be too long. An airplane is coming in to Buffalo with jammed landing gear."

She found a smile for him. "OK."

"How about you go to my apartment when you're ready?"

Clark suggested. "I'll meet you there." He took his keys from his pants pocket and gave them to her. They still carried his warmth, and Lois cradled them before putting them in her bag.

She laid her hand on the sleeve of his jacket. "Be safe," she said.

"Always." Clark turned away, already loosening his tie.

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It took considerable effort for Lois to refrain from skipping as she walked to Clark's apartment. Skipping like a five-year-old on her way to a party.

Would he be there already? She fervently hoped so. She'd never had a wealth of patience, and the past month had drained every last ounce.

He'd be there ... surely. How long could it take to land a plane, for goodness' sake? He'd be there, wearing that secretive smile that had been prominent the past two days.

Lois's own smile unfolded as she imagined Clark's welcome in just a few short minutes. She hugged herself with bubbling excitement. Tonight was going to be -

A strong arm reached from behind her, abruptly halting her progress. She was wrenched backwards against a body and forcibly dragged into the shadows of an alley.

Lois tried to scream, but her assailant's hand plugged her mouth before she could utter a sound.

She flailed, but he was strong, and his grip was inflexible. She felt him ferret through the bag hanging from her shoulder.

As suddenly as he'd grabbed her, he released her and ran from the alley and out of sight.

Lois rubbed her mouth and cheeks, trying to wipe away the memory of his hand. She opened her bag ... cell phone, purse, money, press pass, her keys, Clark's keys, notebook. The vitals seemed to be untouched. After zipping up her bag, she adjusted it on her shoulder, gripped it firmly, and ran from the alley. There was no sign of anyone scurrying away, no one behaving suspiciously.

She scanned a few faces as people hurried past. Her impression was that her assailant had been male, but she had not seen his face — only the back of his dark, shabby coat and woollen hat as he'd run away.

As she continued towards Clark's apartment, Lois stopped occasionally to look in store windows, using the reflection to check for someone following her. She saw nothing unusual — no one acting strangely, no one wearing that coat and hat.

Lois arrived at Clark's apartment, unlocked his door, and entered, careful to lock it behind her. "Clark?" she called.

It was empty. Empty and silent.

Clark was still busy. Her hopes deflated.

Lois had never been in his apartment alone. She looked around at the books on his shelves, the photograph of him with his parents, the trophies from his college days — all facets of the man she loved. But there was no hint of the part of his life that he'd shared with only her.

She wondered idly where he kept the Suits. She'd seen him spin into one of them, but had never asked where he hid them. When they were married, she would know.

Lois felt her spirits soar. When they were married.

She strolled through Clark's bedroom and tapped loudly on the door of the bathroom. "Clark?"

There was still no answer. No sound of water running. Nothing to indicate he was here.

She paused at his bed, feeling a sense of intimacy in being alone in his bedroom. She sat on his bed and imagined him here. Did Clark think about her?

Of course he did.

Her last thoughts every night centred on him. He was her first thought every morning. It would be no different for him.

She dropped onto his pillow and inhaled the tinge of coconut fragrance from his hair gel. As she settled into a more comfortable position, she slipped her hand under the pillow and ran into something hard.

Lois lifted the pillow and discovered a notebook — a journal. Clark's journal. She hadn't known he kept a journal. But he was a writer, so it was hardly unexpected. She stared at it, battling the temptation to open it and read ... just a snippet or two. What did he write? Story notes? Sources? Contacts? Or something more personal? His hopes? His dreams? How he felt about her? Was this the story of how he had fallen in love with her?

Resolutely, Lois replaced the journal and covered it with the pillow. Clark's phone shrilled loud in the silence, and she jumped.

The caller was female, with heavily accented English. "May I speak to Mr Clark Kent, please?" she asked.

"He is unavailable at present," Lois said. "Can I take a message?"

The voice hesitated. "My name is Louisa Sanchez from the IHNFA. Please inform Mr Kent that I will call him on Monday."

"The IHNFA?" Lois questioned.

"This is a personal matter. Thank you, Madam."

The phone clicked as the line disconnected. Lois replaced it, her brow furrowed.

Clark had assured her there would be no more secrets. Other than his plans for tonight, of course, but that was different. So what was the IHNFA? And why were they contacting Clark?

Lois went to Clark's computer and logged on, using his *chocolatcroissant* password. With a little research, she learned that the IHNFA was the organisation that dealt with the adoption of Honduran orphans.

Rosa?

Was Clark planning to adopt Rosa? The little girl he'd saved from the fire? The little girl in the photograph with Superman?

Surely that would be something he would discuss with her. An icy stream of doubt swamped Lois's mind. What if tonight wasn't about marriage, but about his plans to adopt Rosa? What if he'd already begun the process? Without telling her?

Lois jumped as the door from the balcony swung open and Clark burst in, dressed in the business suit he'd been wearing when he'd left the Planet earlier.

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Clark was already loosening his tie as he hurried into his apartment. He shut the balcony door behind him and saw Lois rise from behind his computer. His breath hitched in his throat, as it did every single time he saw her. He strode to her and pulled her into his arms. "I'm sorry, honey," he said softly. He kissed her lightly, relishing how good she tasted, but pulling away far sooner than he wanted to. "I'll be less than a minute," he promised.

"Clark?"

He was already in his bedroom when her voice stalled his progress. "Yes, honey?" He noticed her expression, and his heart sank. He glanced to his watch. He wasn't *too* late ... less than an

hour.

“A call came for you,” Lois said.

Clark heard the cool distance in her voice, and his anxiety intensified. “From whom?” he said, trying to keep his voice casual.

“The organisation that deals with the adoption of Honduran children.”

In a flash, he understood. Well, he understood her displeasure. He didn’t understand why they had called him, but he could see how it appeared to Lois.

He sighed, hoping his explanation would be adequate. “Did they say what they wanted?” he asked.

“No. Apparently, it’s *personal*.” Her tone confirmed Clark’s fears.

“Lois,” he said gently as he walked to within a foot of her. He thrust his hands into his pockets. She didn’t look like she would welcome his touch right now. “I can see you’re upset. And I can understand why. But please don’t shut me out. Please let me explain.”

She nodded tersely.

“After I left Metropolis — but before you came to Smallville — I went to the orphanage most days and helped them rebuild it.”

“I know that.” Her unspoken accusation — that she hadn’t known he’d tried to adopt a child without telling her — hung between them, ticking like a grenade.

“I visited the hospital a few times and spent time with the kids,” Clark said quietly. “I saw Rosa a lot, and she seemed to like me.”

He paused long enough to study Lois’s face for a hint of her feelings. She remained impassive. He plunged on.

“I thought there was no chance of being with you, and my life seemed so devastatingly lonely and without purpose, so I called and made some enquiries. As Clark, not Superman.”

He hoped she’d see that last bit as a joke and smile, but she didn’t. She just waited for him to continue.

“They told me it is against their policy to allow adoptive parents to choose a particular child. They also said that although the policy doesn’t discriminate against single people, realistically, the chances of a single male American being approved to adopt a three year old girl were minimal.” Clark’s stomach clenched as sudden realisation swept over him — it was going to look as if his motivation for marriage was to facilitate his adoption of Rosa.

“What did you do?” Lois asked evenly.

“Nothing,” he insisted. “I accepted that it wasn’t going to happen. I wasn’t completely sure about it anyway. I called them on a whim — one evening when I was just so lonely, and I couldn’t see anything else for the rest of my life. Even before they answered my questions, I knew I couldn’t do something as huge as adopting a child unless I was totally committed to it.”

“Were you committed to it?” Lois questioned. “Are you now?”

“I was miserable, and I acted on impulse,” Clark replied. “I quickly realised that a child deserves far more than being a balm for my emptiness. I thanked them and hung up and never thought about it again.”

“So why did they call you now? And how did they get this number?”

“This number is listed in the directory under my name. As for why they called, I don’t know. I haven’t heard anything from them since my phone call — my *one* phone call.” Clark slipped his hand from his pocket and tentatively placed it on Lois’s shoulder.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked.

“Because, for the short time I considered it, I didn’t think you were a part of my life and believed that you never would be again. When you came back into my life, I had already decided

not to pursue it, so there was nothing to tell you.”

Lois’s expression seemed to soften. At least, Clark hoped it did.

“I didn’t try to hide it from you, honey,” he continued earnestly. “There was nothing to keep a secret.”

To Clark’s enormous relief, Lois smiled. She reached up and kissed him, flush on his mouth. “I thought you were going to be less than a minute,” she said.

“You’re OK?” he asked warily. “You’ll still be here when I get back?”

She laughed. “Of course I’ll still be here.” She kissed him again. “I was a little thrown when I thought you were serious about adopting a child and hadn’t told me. Now I realise it was nothing more than a misunderstanding.”

He wasn’t sure it could be this easy. “You’re sure you’re OK?”

“Clark,” she said. “You promised me there would be no secrets between us. I asked, you answered, no problems.”

Clark took his other hand out of his pocket and clutched both of her shoulders. “I’m sorry about what it seemed,” he said. “Thank you for not jumping to too many conclusions before hearing my explanation.”

“Thank you for answering me honestly.” They shared a smile, and Lois’s fist thudded gently into his chest. “You now have less than half a minute.”

## Part 2

Fifteen minutes later, Lois and Clark landed on a small island, one of an uninhabited group clustered in the Pacific Ocean. Clark had been silent for most of their flight, and Lois had sensed an unfamiliar tension in the way he held her.

The sun was high in the sky, and the sand was hot underfoot. Lois surveyed the pristine gift of nature. The clear, aqua-blue water lapped onto the platform of white sand. Three statuesque palm trees rose to form the points of an irregular triangle.

But spectacular though it was, it was the human handiwork — Clark’s elaborate preparations — that wooed her attention and pushed the wad of emotion into her throat.

To her right, a huge, brightly coloured beach towel hung between two of the trees, embellishing the tropical ambience. Two other large towels were on the sand, complete with soft blue cushions. Between them was a low table, covered with a sunshiny yellow cloth and featuring a vase of electric blue delphiniums rising from a ring of white gardenia. The table was set for two.

To her left, in the shade, Lois saw an assortment of covered platters and two bottles of champagne tucked into partially melted ice blocks that had been deposited in a pit dug into the sand. As she watched, Clark turned to it and blew, re-freezing the ice.

Lois completed her visual exploration and her gaze settled on Clark. “So you weren’t *just* landing an airplane in Buffalo?” she concluded.

“No,” he said. “I had to detour to rescue a couple of kids who had fallen into the Hudson River.”

“And this ...” Lois swept her hand around the island. “This just materialised all by itself?”

A hint of his smile surfaced briefly. “This only needed a few last-minute touches — most of it was planned days ago.”

“Clark, it’s beautiful,” she said. “You could put a picture of this next to the word ‘romantic’ in the dictionary.”

He looked pleased at that, although her comment didn’t seem to ease his qualms. Lois stepped across the sand and draped her arms around his neck. She sought his eyes, wanting him to know how much she appreciated everything he had done. “Thank you,” she said as she reached up to kiss him.

His hands found their spot on her neck and their kiss was developing very satisfactorily when Lois realised her clothing was completely unsuited to the potency of the sun as it bathed the

island. She unravelled from their embrace. “Whew, it’s hot here,” she said.

Clark lifted her jacket from her shoulders. “If you want to change into your shorts, you can go to the other side of the towel,” he said. “I’ll prepare the food.”

Lois grinned at him. “Clark?” she said.

“Uhm?”

“We’re the only two people here, right?”

He perused the vast ocean. “Probably the only two people for miles.”

“And you have x-ray vision?” she said, still grinning.

“Yeah.” Clark’s thoughts seemed to have drifted elsewhere.

“Then, I guess the screen is to stop *me* from invading your privacy?”

That got his attention, and Clark grinned. “No,” he said. “But I didn’t want you to feel uncomfortable.”

Still smiling, Lois picked up her bag and went behind the towel. She changed into her shorts and tee shirt. When she emerged, Clark had changed from his jeans and sweater into boardshorts and a blue tee, its sleeves perfectly primed to show off the bulges of his biceps.

The table was now covered with some of her favourite foods — creamy cheeses, chicken pieces, plump olives, seafood, sun-dried tomatoes, and crusty bread, with the latter’s delectably fresh aroma permeating the salty air.

Clark took her hand and sat her on one of the towels. He dropped to the other towel, uncorked the champagne with a pop, and poured two glasses. He gave her one and they touched their glasses together. “To you, Lois,” he said softly. “My love.”

“To you, Clark — my sweet farmboy.”

They sipped, eyes locked together. “Are you hungry?” Clark asked.

“Yes,” Lois said. “But I didn’t realise how hungry until I smelled that bread.” She picked up a piece. “It’s still warm,” she exclaimed.

“I flew to Western Australia where it’s early morning and got it straight from the baker’s oven.”

Lois felt her heart swell with love for him. “You thought of everything, didn’t you?” she asked softly.

“I wanted it to be perfect for you.”

“It is,” she said as she spread avocado dip on her bread.

“Is it what you were expecting?” Clark asked, the film of anxiety seeping into his expression again.

“I didn’t know what to expect,” Lois said honestly. “*You* wouldn’t give me one thing to work with.”

Her smiling accusation seemed to relax him a little. “But that didn’t stop you trying?”

“Did you mind?”

“Did I *mind* being vigorously questioned, voraciously kissed, and mercilessly tickled by you?” he asked with a wide grin. “Ah ... no; not for a moment.” His amusement faded. “Lois, you know this is the only kind of secret I’ll keep from you, don’t you? Please believe me about the adoption agency.”

So that *was* still on his mind. Lois leaned over the food to kiss him. She lingered, enjoying the feel of his mouth and the taste of champagne on his lips, but also wanting to reassure him. “I do believe you,” she said as she dropped back onto her towel again.

“Thank you.”

As they ate, Lois asked question about the food and its countries of origin, but Clark seemed disinclined to start conversations. She shot surreptitious glances at him, noticing the strain across his shoulders and the shadow of nervousness on his face.

Maybe it wasn’t just the phone call from Honduras. Maybe he was uneasy about whatever he had planned for tonight. Lois’s stomach clenched. What if he was thinking ... hoping ... that

tonight, they would go beyond undoing a few buttons? She gulped from her glass of champagne as she glanced around the island for any telltale hints. There was nothing. Other than, if that was what he had in mind, he had chosen an idyllic place.

Lois focussed on Clark and waited until he met her stare. He smiled, but it seemed unnaturally strained. Wanting him to enjoy this, too, she decided a little push wouldn’t hurt. “Are we here for any particular reason?” she asked innocently.

“It’s Friday evening, and we both have the entire weekend off,” he said, his tone matching hers in innocence. “Isn’t that reason enough to celebrate with the woman I love?”

“More than enough reason,” Lois said, reaching for a piece of Camembert.

Silence fell again, broken only by the gentle rush of the wavelets onto the sand. Lois swallowed the creamy cheese and, her hunger satisfied, positioned a cushion against the trunk of the tree. She sank into it with a sigh of contentment.

Clark shifted on his towel. “Lois,” he said solemnly. “This isn’t just a nice way to spend Friday evening. I want to talk with you.”

She straightened in response to the gravity of his tone.

They faced each other across the table. Clark glanced to the ocean, then sought her eyes again, and hauled in a cavernous breath. “Lois, you know I love you. Whatever I say ... however you feel about what I say ... please remember that I love you.”

A torrent of dismay washed over Lois. Clark was backtracking. He loved her — she didn’t doubt that for a second — but he was balking at the forever commitment of marriage. Maybe he felt cornered by her proposal a month ago and thought he had to offer an explanation why he hadn’t asked her to be his wife. “OK,” she said hesitantly.

“Soon ... after I’ve said what I need to say ... I’m going to ask you to marry me.”

Lois laughed, carried on an expelled breath she hadn’t realised she had closed down.

Clark’s smile glimmered at her response. “But I want you to promise me that you will think about what I say — *before* you answer my proposal. You don’t have to answer today.”

Lois nodded happily, knowing she would willingly promise him just about anything.

Clark’s knees were arched with his bare forearms resting one on each knee. He pressed his fingers together. “Lois, there are so many questions, and I have very few answers. They’ve been my questions since I first realised I am different. If you marry me, they will become your questions, too.”

“I’ve thought about the questions, Clark,” she told him with quiet confidence. “The only question I care about is whether you love me.”

“You know I do,” he declared. “But, if you decide to go ahead with this, I want to be sure you understand — as far as is possible — some of the things we may face.”

Lois wanted to gather him into her arms and kiss him until the cloud of uncertainty had cleared from his eyes, but she curtailed the desire because, obviously, this was important to him.

“I don’t know where I came from,” Clark said, his hands spread in frustration. “I assume it was another planet because my parents found me in a spaceship, and I’m hardly ... human. There is so much I don’t know ... and absolutely no place I can find answers.”

“To what questions?”

“Life-span,” he said. “So far, I seemed to have aged roughly the same as humans. But what if my expected life span is thirty years? What if it’s three hundred?”

Lois gasped. “But ... you look like a man in his twenties ... exactly your age.”

“But I can’t guarantee that will continue to be the case.”

Lois thought about that — and quickly realised that she had

no answers. No one had the answers. “OK,” she said. “What are the other questions?”

“Can I get sick?” Clark said. “And if I do, will I heal? I can’t go to a hospital or even to a doctor. I couldn’t have surgery, for instance. No scalpel would cut through me.”

“You’re the healthiest person I have ever met.”

“I am now, Lois,” he said, his eyes sombre. “But I need you to understand that I can’t guarantee it will continue.”

She had no answers here either. Except to assert her total faith in his invulnerability. “Understood,” she said, more brusquely than she intended. Deliberately softening her tone with a smile, she added, “What else, farmboy?”

Clark glanced away to the far horizon, the redness from his ears creeping into his cheeks. When he looked back to her, he had a wry smile. “How much honesty can you take?”

She chuckled, remembering she had asked him exactly that as they had chased the sunrise. “As much as you are willing to give me,” she replied.

He raised his hands, grappling for the right words. “Married people make love,” he said.

“I certainly hope so,” she breathed.

He smiled at that, but his discomfort didn’t fade. “Which raises so many questions that I don’t even know where to begin.”

“The Superman Suit suggests you aren’t that different from other men,” Lois said. *Other than surpassing them.*

Clark’s colour deepened. “What if I hurt you? Physically? You’re so ... petite. Like the most precious petal on a beautiful flower.”

This was firmer ground. “You won’t.”

“How can you be sure?” he asked desperately.

“You would never hurt me physically,” she stated emphatically.

Clark remained unconvinced. “Married people have children.”

“Are you asking if I want children?”

“Not exactly,” he said. “Although it is something we should talk about at some point. But, Lois, I’m not even sure it is possible for me ... whatever I am ... to father a child with you.”

“Whatever you are?” Lois echoed. She moved to him and put one hand on his cheek and the other on his bare knee. “Don’t you know? You are Clark Kent, the man I love. You’re the man who completes me. Wherever you’re from — that’s just a label. I hope you find some answers, I really do — but only because it means so much to you. As for me, I don’t need labels; I need you.”

“How would you feel if we couldn’t have a child together?”

“I want *you*, Clark.”

“And one day, you may want a child ... and you’d be married to ... an ... alien who can’t give you one.”

“Then maybe we visit Honduras.”

His jaw dropped. “I thought you were against that idea.”

“I haven’t thought about it enough to be for it or against it,”

Lois said reasonably. “All I’m saying is we have options.”

“Lois,” Clark said. “I couldn’t stand it if you were unhappy being married to me.”

She caressed his cheek. “I’m going to be personal here; is that OK?”

He nodded.

“Your parents couldn’t have children. I don’t know why — it doesn’t matter. But they couldn’t. Yet they have the most wonderful son, a loving family, and a fantastic marriage. Your mom isn’t any less of a mother just because she didn’t actually give birth to you.”

“Would that be enough for you?”

“Clark!” Lois took a deep breath. “If I had to choose between marrying you and never having any children — naturally or by any other means — or marrying someone else and having as many children as I wanted ... There’s absolutely no contest.”

His smile eased the tension from his jaw. Unable to resist, Lois kissed him tenderly. When she withdrew, she grinned. “Are we done?” she demanded flippantly.

“Not quite.”

Lois moved back to her towel. “I can’t be that close to you and not kiss you,” she said in explanation. “And you can’t kiss and talk at the same time.”

He grinned and was still grinning when he spoke. “This next bit is particularly embarrassing,” he warned her.

“For you? Or me?”

“Me.”

She grinned. “This could be fun.”

“What if I am so ... *superpowered* that ...”

Something in his deepening colour and flustered body language gave Lois the clues she needed to complete his sentence. She broke into delighted giggles. Clark’s expression stalled somewhere between mirth and mortification.

Lois managed to curb her laughter. “Clark, even if your swimmers are so supercharged that I get pregnant regardless of what precautions we take -”

“Do you want to spend your life pregnant?” he demanded.

She sobered. “No, I don’t. But, Clark, you’re right about something. There are no ways to find answers to these questions. We’re just going to have to see what happens.”

“Is that enough for you?”

“More than enough,” she insisted.

“There’s something else you need to consider.”

“OK.”

“If you were pregnant with my child, it would be like venturing into the unknown. Just the pregnancy could be dangerous. We wouldn’t know what is normal. And then there’s the birth.” Clark lifted his hands in frustration. “Lois, honey, I would never forgive myself if I put you in a position where you could be hurt. Or worse.”

Lois understood his motivation, loved him for his concern, and appreciated his exaggerated sense of responsibility. But what she wanted was simple. She wanted him. Forever.

She just needed a way to make him as sure of it as she was. “I have the solution,” she announced with a wide grin.

“You do?” he asked, his eyebrows raised.

“Celibate marriage.”

Clark’s jaw gaped open, and summoning every scrap of control, Lois managed to keep her amusement contained within her shaking ribcage. “Lois,” he breathed. “I wouldn’t survive.”

“Neither would I,” she said. “So, assuming you eventually get around to proposing, we get married, we make love, and whatever happens, we deal with together.”

He let out a prolonged breath. “Is that what you want?”

“More than anything in the world.”

His smile unfurled. “There’s one more thing.”

Lois rolled her eyes, teasing him. “Only one? You promise?”

He winced. “There are a few more, but I’ll keep it to one for now.”

“OK.”

Again, he studied his hands as he sought the right words. “Lois, you must know that the thought of being intimate with you blows my mind ... and a few other parts of my — ” Instead of finishing his sentence, he tossed her a casual, unabashed smile. “... and my restraint is shot to pieces, and every moment with you is breathtaking and excruciating all at once ... but ... How would you feel about waiting?”

“Until we are married?”

He nodded.

“Why?”

“Because I can’t ask you to take all those risks without first committing my life to you — publicly, officially, eternally.”

A part of her slumped with disappointment. This had seemed

like the ideal time — and the perfect place — to take their relationship to another level.

“And there’s something else, too,” Clark continued. “The night we came so close . . . the night I let my hormones overcome my common sense and my good judgement . . . the night your parents died. What if those two events are so closely tied together in your mind, you . . .”

“Clark, it was me who surrendered to my hormones. I seduced you.”

“I wasn’t unwilling,” Clark admitted ruefully.

“At the risk of giving you way too much information, I’ve thought about that time many, many times. It’s one of my most-visited memories. And when I do think about it, it doesn’t naturally follow that I think about my parents.”

“You think about it?” he rasped.

“Don’t you?” she challenged.

He swallowed. “More than I should.”

“Well, you just keep on thinking about it,” Lois said, “because soon, it’ll be just one of many memories.”

Clark took a moment to recover from that prediction. When speech was possible again, he said, “So . . . you’re willing to wait?”

“On one condition,” Lois said with a teasing smile. “I set the length of our engagement.”

“OK,” he said cautiously.

“I’ll give you two options; you can choose.”

Clark nodded his agreement.

“Three years . . . or four.”

He gulped. Blushed. Seemed to stop breathing. “*Three years?*” he gasped. He was trying so hard not to look horrified that her laughter bubbled again.

“Or four. Weeks.”

His dismay evaporated to a beguiling grin. “Four weeks?”

“Yep,” Lois said lightly. “They’re your choices.”

“A month?”

“Do you have any problems with that, Mr Kent?”

Clark raised his hands in surrender and shook his head. “No, no, none at all.” He sprang to his feet and offered her his hand. “Come with me, honey?”

Lois took his hand and together they strolled to where the water caressed the damp sand. They hesitated, allowing the warm wavelets to bustle around their ankles. Then, with a smile, Clark entwined his fingers in hers, and they paddled along the beach.

“I love how sure you are about this,” he said quietly.

“Before I came to you in Smallville,” Lois said, “I promised myself that I wouldn’t come until I was absolutely sure of my feelings. If there had been even the slightest chance that one day I would walk away from you, I wouldn’t have come. I couldn’t do that to you again.”

“I’m certain, too,” he said. “I’m certain you’re great for me. I’m just not so certain I’m great for you.”

“Then trust my certainty.”

He smiled and squeezed her hand. For a time, they walked slowly around the island, the shallow ocean at their feet and the sun warm on their shoulders. Then Clark led them up to the dry sand. He faced her and took both of her hands in his.

Lois’s heart accelerated. This was it. This was surely it.

He smiled at her, his gaze anchored in hers. “Lois,” he said and swallowed.

She smiled her encouragement.

“I love you,” he said.

“And I love you.”

“From the time I realised what a family is, I knew I wanted to be married. I knew I wanted to be with someone who loved me and accepted me, someone I could love with everything I am.”

Clark’s thumb worked across her fingers.

“I thought about her a lot,” he continued. “I wondered if there

could possibly be someone for me in this world. I feared that even if I found her, she would be scared off by who I am.”

He glanced to their joined hands, before returning his solemn eyes to hers.

“Lois, I never, ever thought I would find someone as incredible as you. I thought being in love would be wonderful, but I never imagined I could feel the way I feel about you.”

Lois felt her gathering tears press against her eyelashes. Clark brushed across the corner of her eye with the back of his fingers, catching her tear as it fell. He smiled.

“Just as we walked around this island and could keep on walking and never stop, so my love for you is like that . . . it will never stop . . . never end.”

“Clark,” Lois said, and her voice cracked.

“So . . .” He dropped onto one knee into the sand. He looked up at her, his eyes deepest brown and saturated with love. “Lois,” he said. “You are my world. You centre me. You fulfil me. A day without you is a wasted day. More than anything, I want your happiness, and I’m hoping I can be the one who makes you happy. Would you marry me?”

Lois dropped onto her knees in front of him. “Clark,” she said. “For a long time, I didn’t want to be married, and I didn’t think the man existed who could make me feel so secure that loving him wasn’t scary at all.” She took a breath, steadying herself. “But then I found you . . . and I fell in love with you . . . and the things I thought I wanted just aren’t enough anymore.” She squeezed his hands in hers. “Yes, Clark. I will marry you.”

Clark’s face split into a wide, exultant grin. His arms enveloped her in a robust hug, clamping her against his body. His mouth found hers, and he kissed her — abundant with passion and alive with joy. His tongue stroked her lips and inched into her mouth.

Lois felt her body respond. The carousel of sensation settled in her heart, infusing her with the warmth and security of his love.

She knew Clark was her destiny. And she knew with great contentment how profoundly she had been blessed. With her hand in his, with her heart beating next to his, with his grin to cheer her and his strength to encourage her, there would be no room for loneliness, no foothold for fears.

Lois tightened her hold on his neck, never wanting to let him go. Her mouth waltzed with his, and her response slithered lower. Then she remembered — they were going to wait.

She backed away, slowly and regretfully, and looked up into his face, loving that his mouth was still shaped to their kiss, adoring his breathlessness and the way his increased heart rate had pushed colour into his cheeks.

“Four weeks,” she murmured.

He grinned — a breathy, staggering grin. “Four weeks.” He looked at her, smiling, his eyes ablaze with excitement and wonder and the faintest tinge of relief. He started. “Oh,” he said and reached into the pocket of his shorts. He took out a ring box, flicked it open, and held it towards her.

The ring he had chosen was beautiful. It had a central diamond with two smaller diamonds embedded in the gold on each side of the larger one. The sun caught it, and it glistened.

“Aww, Clark,” Lois whispered.

“You like it?” he said as if there was any doubt.

“I love it.”

“May I put it on you?”

Lois held out her left hand, her ring finger aloft. Clark took the ring from the box and positioned it at the end of her finger. He looked up from her hand and captured her eyes again. “I love you, Lois,” he said softly as he pushed the ring the length of her finger.

Lois looked at her hand — at the tangible symbol of the love she shared with Clark. The promise they had made. He lifted her

hand to his mouth and kissed the back of her hand and then her knuckle next to his ring. “Thank you,” he said.

“Thank you, Clark.”

He stood from the sand and offered her his hand. When they were standing, he said, “I’d like to kiss my future wife.”

“I’d like that, too.”

He leant down to meet her lips. His arms surrounded her, one hand cupping her head, one buried gently into her neck. Their kiss was lengthy, full of sweetness, full of promise.

When they parted, Lois slid her hands from his shoulders and onto his chest. She smiled up at him. “What were you so worried about, farmboy?”

“You knew I was worried?”

“You knew I was going to say ‘yes’.”

“I hoped you would,” he said. “But somehow, actually saying the words ...” He grinned. “It’s the first time I’ve asked someone to marry me.”

“And the last,” Lois said.

“And the last,” Clark agreed readily. He swept his hand through his hair. “That’s one down, and two to go.”

“Two?”

“I have something else,” he said with a shrug. “But I’m really unsure about it.”

Lois was mystified. “Is it something you want to tell me? Something you want to ask me?”

“Something I want to give you.”

She didn’t understand how anything he gave her could cause him such concern. “Clark, if it’s from you, I’ll love it.”

“If it goes horribly wrong, can you try to remember that it was never my intention to upset you?”

Now she was completely perplexed.

Clark gestured for her to sit in the shade, reached for his bag, and rustled through it. When he sat next to her, his fist was clasped. He held it towards her, still closed.

“You want me to guess what it is?” Lois asked.

He smiled hesitantly. “No,” he said. “I’m trying to work up the courage to give it to you.”

### Part 3

Lois could not imagine what Clark could have hidden in his hand.

“Close your eyes,” he said softly.

Lois did as he’d asked. He took her hand, smoothed it open, and rested it on his knee. She felt something light and cool and metallic drop into her palm, and then Clark’s hand draped over the top.

“OK,” he said. “You can open your eyes now.”

She did. Peeking out from between their hands was a gold clasp and a few links.

With his free hand, Clark brushed back the slanted arc of her hair, stroking the crest of her cheekbone. “Ready?” he asked quietly.

Lois nodded, caught up in the mystery. Surely, it had to be jewellery, but that was completely incompatible with Clark’s hesitancy. His hand slid back, revealing one tiny charm. It was heart-shaped, with a series of droplet blue gems along one golden curve.

“This is a mother’s heart,” Clark said, his strong, deep voice as gentle as Lois had ever heard it. “The gemstones are sapphires, the birthstone for September — the month of your mom’s birthday.”

Lois stared at the tiny heart and a lifetime of memories engulfed her. Tears swamped her eyes, and the heart distorted to a blur of blue. She blinked and lifted her focus to Clark’s face.

“Are you all right?” he asked anxiously.

Lois nodded, her eyes full, her throat too constricted to speak.

Clark brushed the tear-trail from her cheek with such tenderness that a lump formed in her throat that had nothing to do

with the gift and everything to do with the giver. “If you want to stop, we can,” he said. “We don’t have to do this now.”

She shook her head and determinedly cleared her throat.

“What’s the next one?” she said thickly.

Clark took the clasp and eased another section from between their hands. Next to the heart was a tiny stethoscope. Lois’s tears tumbled. “This is for your dad,” Clark said. “A doctor who healed and helped so many people.”

Through waterlogged eyes, Lois stared at the two exposed charms on the delicate bracelet. Her parents. Her mom. Her dad. A part of her. And she, a part of them. Clark had found a way to normalise her family — a way to represent the best of them.

She looked up from their hands and saw his lingering concerns. “Clark,” she said. “It’s so beautiful. Thank you.”

The relief was potent on his face. He swept away her fallen tears, pouring his love into her eyes.

She took a deep, shuddery breath. “What’s next?”

Clark’s hand slid back, exposing a teddy bear. On the bear’s abdomen was the letter, ‘L’, fashioned in reckless red. “I chose a teddy bear to celebrate your birth,” Clark continued. “A teddy bear with ‘L’ for Lois. The stones are rubies — your birthstone — also red for your impetuosity and passion.”

A laugh rose up Lois’s throat, chasing away her tears. “He’s adorable.”

Clark grinned. Lois stared at him. His hair had been ruffled by the ocean breeze, his shoulders had — finally — relaxed, and his eyes shone with effervescent happiness. Her love for him overflowed. “Would you like to see the next one?” he asked.

“I love you, Clark,” she said, because no other words were possible.

His grin widened, and he slowly shook his head, maybe trying to convince himself that life really could be this good. “I love you too, Lois.”

After a suspended moment of silent communication, Lois said, “What’s next?”

Clark tore his eyes away and looked down. When his hand moved back, she saw a finely crafted pen. “This represents my admiration for you as a writer,” he said. “Your skill with words leaves me breathless. I’m honoured to work with you, and I have immense respect for you professionally.”

Her tears threatened again. She took a deep breath, driving them away and smiled her billowing happiness.

“Are you ready for the next one?” Clark asked, eyes crinkling with anticipation.

“What is it?” Lois asked suspiciously. “Please tell me there’s not a mad dog under there.”

He drew back his hand, unveiling a miniature glass statue — a duplicate Kerth Award.

“How did you get that?” she shrieked.

“Do you like it?”

“Of course I like it,” Lois exclaimed. “But how did you get it?”

“I took a photo of your Kerth when you weren’t looking.

Then, I took the photo to the jeweller and had him copy it.”

“Clark! You are ...” She really didn’t know how to finish.

“One day,” he predicted, “we’ll put a Pulitzer on here.”

She was speechless. She wanted to tell him how profoundly he had touched her, but this time, her proficiency with words failed her.

So she just looked at him, smiling, hoping he could read her heart. After a stretched moment, she looked down, ready to continue. The next charm was a sunflower. “The Sunflower Celebration,” Lois guessed.

Clark nodded. “Where you met the man lucky enough to, one day, be your husband.”

“I am the lucky one,” she told him.

He smiled. “Two to go,” he said. “Are you ready?”

She nodded, but when he hesitated, she asked, “What is it?”  
 “This one is my favourite,” Clark said. “Care to guess what it might be?”

Lois thought for a second and then grinned impishly. “A chest,” she said. “A male chest, stunningly defined.”

“This is about you, Lois,” he reminded her, trying not to grin.  
 “Yeah,” she said. “My password.”

Clark shook his head, chuckling. His hand slid back and she saw a boy, holding a pot with the word ‘honey’ on it. She looked at him with unspoken questions. “He’s a farmboy,” Clark explained. “With his honey.”

Lois pealed with laughter. “Clark, that is just so cute.”

He grinned, pleased with her delight. “Last one,” he said. She wondered what else he had included. His hand lifted, uncovering the final charm — three clustered palm trees. “To remind you of when you agreed to be my wife,” he said. “The day you made me the happiest man alive.”

Lois clasped her bracelet in her hand and put her arms around Clark’s neck. She held him, relishing his closeness, his face against hers, his arms tight around her, his steady breaths, his strong heartbeat, his coconut scent ... everything about him.

When she backed away, she put both hands on his face. “Clark,” she sighed, a little unsteadily. “I ... I don’t know what to say ... You’ve ... I never ... Thank you.”

“You’re OK?” he asked. “About your parents?”

“It’s lovely. I couldn’t have thought of anything so fitting, so perfect.”

“I wanted something to celebrate you ... your life,” he explained. “I couldn’t leave them out, but I really didn’t want to dig up your grief.”

“You didn’t hurt me; you filled my heart, in so many ways.”

Lois studied the bracelet in her hand, deliberating over each charm, recalling his explanations. “Clark?”

“Yes.”

“Could we put another charm on it?”

“Of course,” he said. “That’s the plan — to add more as things happen in your life.”

“No, I mean now. There’s something I want on it right away.”

“What?”

“A star.”

“Because you’re a star?”

“No, because you came from somewhere among the stars, and it would be easier to explain than a spaceship.” She smoothed back his wayward lock of hair. “But we would both know it represents your journey to Earth — because without that journey, I could never be whole.”

Clark’s throat leapt. She could see that her request had touched — touched him in that deep place where his need for acceptance and belonging simmered. “Lois,” he said hoarsely. His thumb skimmed across her cheekbone. “Do you have any idea how amazing you are?”

She grinned. “You’re pretty amazing yourself, farmboy.” She picked out the little farmer with his honey pot and dropped a kiss on him.

Clark took her hand into his. “Would you like to swim?” he asked.

“Oh,” she said. “I didn’t bring my swimsuit. Or a towel.”

“I brought towels,” Clark grinned. “And I deliberately didn’t ask you to bring a swimsuit.”

Lois’s mouth dropped.

“No, no, I mean ...” Clark reached into his bag and pulled out a one-piece swimming costume — a black background decorated with large, wildly colourful tropical flowers. “My mom helped me with the size.” He shrugged. “I hope it isn’t too personal.”

“Clark, in four weeks, I will be your wife,” Lois said. “Things are going to get personal.” She carefully stowed the

bracelet in her bag and took the swimsuit. She held it up, admiring it. “It’s gorgeous. I love it. Thank you for all of the wonderful gifts.”

“Today, you gave me the best gift of my life, Lois,” Clark said, lifting her hand to kiss next to the ring.

When he drew back, the skin on her hand was humming, and she felt the sharp pang of regret that she’d agreed to wait. She picked up the swimsuit. “I’ll go and change,” she said, depositing a quick kiss on his cheek.

Lois went behind the towel and put on the swimsuit. It seemed so intimate — against her skin, she was wearing something Clark had chosen for her. She imagined him doing it — actually walking into the women’s section of the store, looking at the options, considering, choosing. Had he felt out of place? Had he been self-conscious? How had he felt when he’d taken it to the assistant to pay for it?

Had he ever bought anything so feminine before?

Probably not.

She picked up her tee shirt and shorts and hesitated, undecided. Should she put them on? Would Clark want to see her in just the swimsuit? It was chaste for a swimsuit. It had no plunging neckline or high-cut legs, although it did cling intently to her curves. She decided to leave off her shorts, put on her shirt and, if he seemed disappointed, remove it later.

Lois edged around the palm tree. Clark looked up ... and smiled. “Does it fit OK?” he asked.

“Perfectly.”

“Do you — ”

“Would you — ”

They spoke together, and then stopped, both grinning. “You first,” Clark said.

Lois looked down at the sand. “I was going to ask if you’d like me to take off my tee shirt.”

Clark laughed. “I was going to ask you if you’d like me to take off my shirt.”

She laughed with him. “So ...” she prompted.

“Four weeks isn’t long,” he mused. “But it could seem like a *very* long time, so how about we swim with shirts off, but wear them when we’re out of the water?”

“Good plan,” Lois said. But then she waited, suddenly self-conscious.

“Or we could leave them on,” Clark suggested falteringly.

Lois snatched the hem of her tee and pulled it over her head, her eyes rocketing into Clark’s as soon as the material had passed. A trace of colour touched his cheeks, and his throat jumped. “It’s going to be a *very* long month,” he said.

“You could always take the three year option,” she teased. She lifted his glasses from his face.

“Not a chance,” he said emphatically. He peeled off his shirt and bent to place it and his glasses on the sand. Lois helped herself to a slow examination ... his shoulders, arching down from his neck, curving tautly up and around into his upper arms, then converging into the bulging barrels of bicep ... his back, an expanse of undulating muscle, dipping into the valley along his spine.

Clark turned, and Lois’s lower lip snagged between her teeth. *Thatchest* was still ‘that chest’. She wondered how it would feel to meander across its sleek contours. Four weeks, she told herself, four weeks.

He held out his hand to her and together, they strolled into the water.

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Clark’s mind was buzzing as he drifted through the temperate water. So many tempting memories, each one begging for his attention. He would never forget holding Lois seconds after she had accepted his proposal, trying to gather his brain cells sufficiently to comprehend that he really, really was going to

marry her.

His misgivings had been unfounded. Everything had gone so well — better than he'd dared to hope. Lois had cried a little, but he wasn't so scared of her tears any more.

As for the swimsuit — Clark deliberately shut down the image burned into his mind. If he dwelt on that, the next four weeks were going to seem like four centuries. Yet, how could he not think about her? Four weeks ... one short month ... and she would be his wife.

Clark stopped swimming and stood in the waist-deep water. Lois surfaced, just a few feet from him. "Wanna swim around the island?" he asked.

She grinned. "Bet I can beat you," she challenged. "If you don't cheat."

"Bet you can't," he said.

"You have to swim on the outside," she directed. "To protect me from the sharks."

"That means I'll have to swim further," he protested.

Instead of answering, Lois dived into the water and began smoothly stroking through the clear water. Clark watched her, unable to drag his eyes away.

She was magnificent.

And she had promised to be his wife.

She had progressed to nearly a quarter of the way around the island before he remembered that he was supposed to be in a race. He dived in after her, but his effort to catch her was not completely whole-hearted. When he estimated he was back where they'd started, he surfaced.

Lois was already standing, regarding him with triumph. "I won," she proclaimed.

"Congratulations," Clark said warmly. Although he couldn't see how chasing Lois could possibly be construed as losing.

"Did you try?" she demanded.

"I got distracted at the start and never quite caught up," he defended.

She laughed at him. "Well, as the vanquished, you owe me."

"Owe you what?"

"I'll think of something," she said with a smile so seductive, it bombarded his mind with a dozen possibilities.

Clark pointed at her, grinning. "Don't play with fire," he warned. "My girl," he added, just to see how she would react.

She smiled, and his world exploded ... again.

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After half an hour, they left the water. Clark picked up a towel and handed it to Lois, deciding against offering his heat-vision. He turned away so she could dry — using the towel — without being watched. He dried his back and chest and slipped into his shirt.

He removed the lid from the platter of fruit, poured the squares of creamy chocolate into a bowl, and liquefied them. He took a peach — at optimum freshness — bisected it with his eyes, removed the pit, and scooped a generous amount of melted chocolate into the divot. Then, he offered it to Lois.

She bit directly from his fingers and a trickle of chocolate oozed down her chin. He swooped with his forefinger and mopped it up. Lois captured his hand and sucked the chocolate from his finger, causing a flurry of sensations to crackle through his body.

With a smirk that implied she knew exactly the effect she'd had on him, Lois took a strawberry, dipped it in the chocolate, and held it for him to take into his mouth. He chewed slowly, clawing for some recovery time. After he'd swallowed it, he said, "Lois?"

"Uhm?" she said as she ate a red grape she had drowned in chocolate.

"Have you thought about how we are going to organise a wedding in just four weeks?"

"Sure."

He grinned. "Do you want to tell me?"

"I have it all planned."

"You do?" he choked.

She chuckled. "Nothing definite, but I've thought about it enough to know what I'd like. You can veto anything, of course, and add your ideas."

"Thanks," he teased, dunking a couplet of cherries. "What are you thinking?"

"I'd like to get married in your family church in Smallville."

He hadn't been expecting that. "You would?"

"Well, I don't have a connection to any particular church in Metropolis. I don't have any family there except Uncle Mike. If Lucy comes, she'll have to travel anyway, so why not Kansas?"

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely," she said. "The distance isn't a problem, not with Superman Express. And maybe your mom would like to be involved."

"Like to be involved?" Clark grinned in anticipation of his mom's reaction. "She won't be able to contain her excitement."

"I can't wait to tell them."

Clark glanced at his watch. "It's late in Kansas," he said. "I thought we could go there for breakfast ... and maybe stay the weekend."

"So that's why you spent fifteen minutes in Perry's office pleading for both of us to have two days off?"

"Yep." His grin faded. "Are you concerned that some people will think it is too soon after your parents' deaths?"

Lois shook her head. "Some people probably will think that, but the only two people who matter are you and me." She smiled, a little tremulously. "And I want small and simple. Beautiful, but without all the trappings that just make everything so stressful. We need a church, a minister, a place to have the reception, some clothes, and somewhere to honeymoon."

"You make it sound easy."

"It will be."

"Who will we invite?"

"Just the people we care about. Your parents, Lucy, Uncle Mike, Perry, Jimmy, Lucy's Aaron if he's still in the picture, Sarah Crawford, friends of your family."

Clark had to keep reminding himself — they were planning their wedding. Which filled him with pure excitement. But for Lois, there had to be some mixed feelings, some thoughts of how things should have been. "Lois?" he said, cradling her hand in his. "Have you thought about who will give you away?"

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All of her life, Lois had assumed that if she ever married, it would be her dad who would share her final journey as a single woman. But he wouldn't be there. Her grief blazed again, and she quashed her rising tears. "I've thought about it," she said quietly.

"Uncle Mike?" Clark guessed.

Lois shook her head. "He's too close to my dad. I can't really explain it, but having my dad's brother would hurt so much just because he isn't my dad." She took a grape. "Does that make any sense?"

"Yes, it does," Clark assured her. "So ... who?"

Lois jabbed the grape into the chocolate, lifted it, let the excess chocolate drip into the bowl, and then dunked it again.

"Your dad?" she said hesitantly.

"My dad?"

"Do you think he'd mind?"

"Lois! He'd be honoured." Clark took a strawberry and dipped it in the chocolate. "You never did explain how you two became so close."

"Didn't I?" Lois said as memories of the barn flowed back.

"We birthed calves together."

"You did what?"

“Didn’t he tell you?”

“No.”

“The day Superman ... you ... took me to Smallville — the day before the funeral — your dad and I birthed twin calves.”

Clark’s surprise was evident. “*You* were in the barn?” he said. “Birthing calves?”

“Twins,” Lois confirmed proudly. “I dried them.”

Clark shook his head. “Dad never told me.”

Lois grinned. “I bet there’s something else he never told you.”

“What?”

She slowly immersed her large red grape in the chocolate, allowing Clark to stew in his curiosity.

“Tell me,” he demanded with a heart-stopping grin.

“You wouldn’t tell me where we were coming today,” she noted casually. “I might have to keep a few secrets, too.”

“Do you need to be tickled?” he threatened. “Or maybe picked up and tossed into the ocean?”

“Superman doesn’t use his powers unfairly,” she reminded him.

“No,” he admitted. “But Clark might.” He made an abrupt move towards her, and Lois squealed, raising her hands in self-defence.

“OK, I’ll tell you,” she conceded.

Clark settled back on his towel, looking mildly disappointed.

“Three days before I came to Smallville ...” Lois hinted.

“Yes?”

“Where was your dad?”

Clark thought for a moment. “He went away ... ah ... A famers’ conference in Idaho ... That’s it.”

“Really?” Lois said in a tone laced with disbelief.

“He didn’t go to the conference?”

“Nope?” Lois said. “He came to Metropolis to see me ...”

“He did?”

“... and told me the distressing tale of his woebegone son. He begged me to marry you before you disintegrated into a puddle of heartbroken loneliness.”

“He did not,” Clark exploded.

Lois giggled. “No ... he explained about the Chrissie story.”

“And?”

“And helped me to realise that a future together could be possible.”

“I’m not sure anyone has ever been so grateful to a parent for interfering in his life.”

“Well, someone had to do something,” Lois said practically. “Left to ourselves, we’d made a horrible mess of it.”

“Yeah.” Clark looked up. “Do you think Jimmy would be my groomsman?”

“Of course he would,” Lois said. “Who will you ask to be your best man?”

“Steve Irig. His family are our neighbours. Steve and I have been friends for years.”

“I’m going to ask Lucy to be my bridesmaid,” Lois said. “But I’m not even sure she’ll come to the wedding.”

“Do you have someone else in mind?”

Lois grinned suddenly. “Sarah Crawford.”

“Sarah? I thought you barely knew her.”

“I haven’t seen her much the past few weeks because I’ve been engrossed in someone else,” Lois said with a smile. “But Sarah was such a good friend to me after my parents died. She was a good friend to you, too.”

“She was?”

“She constantly kept telling me how stupid I was to throw away what I had with you.”

“Does she know why I left the funeral?”

Lois grinned. “Yep. We’ve spent hours speculating if it would be possible to do something that would cause the Superman suit

to become so tight, it splits.”

Clark’s moment of shock was short, quickly replaced by a relaxed grin. “That is a lie, my love,” he said.

“Well, if you ask dumb questions, you get untruthful answers.” Lois smiled. “Sarah knows nothing except you’re a very cute guy who’s in love with her friend.”

The lowest arc of the sun had dipped below the western horizon, sending shimmers of gold to frolic in the waves. The heat had dissipated into a balmy stillness. “Are you tired?” Clark asked. “It’s well past midnight, Metropolis time.”

“A little.”

Clark positioned a fluffy blanket on the sand and added a couple of cushions. “Lie down for a while. I’ll wake you when it’s time to leave for Smallville.”

Lois lay on the blanket and squirmed until she’d shaped the sand to accommodate her hip. “Come and lie next to me,” she suggested, patting the blanket.

Clark hesitated.

“We’re both dressed,” she said. “It’ll be fine.”

He took off his glasses and lay down, facing her. “Have I told you how happy I am?” he asked.

“Not in the last few minutes.”

“Well, I am happier and more excited than I’ve ever been in my life.”

“Me, too.”

“I think what is coming will eclipse it, but I just can’t imagine feeling any better than I do right now.” Lois moved her hand into his, and he responded with a smile. “Lois?”

“Yeah?”

“There’s something I’d like to ask about, something I’ve wanted to talk about for a while, but if it makes you uncomfortable, please say so.”

“OK.”

“Your parents’ funeral — when I left.”

“Clark, we’re done with that.”

“Tell me what you were feeling,” he persisted. “Let me share it with you.”

“I felt so small and so vulnerable ... like a tiny boat on the open ocean. The water around me was so overwhelming — huge and unknown and frightening. It swept me wherever it wanted, and I had no point of reference any more. No harbour, no way home, nowhere I could be safe.”

His hand tightened around hers. His silence hummed with understanding.

“Clark, there is something I need to tell you. Something you need to understand.”

“No second thoughts?” he asked. She knew he meant it to sound like a joke, but she could hear the tiny thread of uncertainty in his voice.

“No second thoughts,” she assured him. “Other than realising four weeks is way too long.”

He grinned.

“I need to make sure you know that my wanting to marry you is not because I lost my parents,” Lois said. “It’s not because of my aloneness that I want to be with you ... it’s because of you.”

“Do you know why I waited four weeks to propose?” he asked softly.

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t want to take advantage of your vulnerability. I knew I wanted to marry you when you asked me. Truth is, I knew a long time before that. But I wanted to give you time — time to get your emotional bearings.”

Clark’s thumb stroked the back of her hand.

“I can’t pretend to know what you’ve been through these past weeks,” he said, “but on some level, I understand because I lost my birth parents.” He sighed. “Lois, what happened at the funeral was my worst nightmare. I knew you needed my support. I had

promised to be there for you. But I also knew that no one else could save those children. I was so torn.”

“I understand now.”

“But do you also understand that it will happen again?” he persisted. “Do you realise there will be times when you want your husband and you have every right to expect he will be there for you and he won’t be?”

“I know that. I know you’ll be there when you can be.” She grinned. “My husband,” she said, rolling the words off her tongue.

“You like that?” he asked.

“Uhhmm.” She traced his knuckles with her fingertips. “Do you know anything about your birth parents?”

“Not one thing,” he said sadly. “My parents — Martha and Jonathan — found me in a spaceship. They had wanted children so badly. My mom picked me up, and they took me home, and even before they got there, I know they had both decided I was theirs and they weren’t going to let anyone take me away.”

Lois could imagine a dark-haired baby — alone and so very far from home. How fortunate that exactly the right people had found him.

“We didn’t know I was different,” Clark said. “We didn’t know *how* different — not until I was a teenager, and I started doing really weird things. I had all these powers, and at first, I couldn’t control them at all. I was terrified of hurting someone, of doing something really bad.”

Lois gripped his hand a little tighter.

“And my parents were always so scared of someone finding out about me.” Clark’s eyes shot to hers. “Lois, the secret is more important than ever now.”

“Why?”

“Because if anyone discovers that Lois Lane is married to Superman, the easiest way to get to him is through you.”

“You’ll always find a way to look after me.”

“And what if we have to flee to avoid being captured? What if we have to live in a desolate place? What if we can’t stay in Metropolis? What if you can’t work for the Planet?”

“I want to be with you, Clark. That’s more important than anything else.”

“What if — ”

She moved with agile swiftness and clamped his mouth with a fiery kiss. When she pulled away, she grinned cheekily at him. “That’s what you get if you obsess too much,” she warned.

He grinned. “But — ”

“Clark, you know you worry too much.” She took his face in her hands. “This is supposed to be the happiest time of our lives. Your dream is coming true — in four weeks, you’ll be married. Let’s just enjoy it.” She paused. “You know, I could be worried about all sorts of things, too.”

“Such as?”

“Such as what if Superman gets tempted by any one of the thousands of women fawning over him? What if his heart is stolen away? He’s a very popular guy. He’s going to face a lot of temptation.”

“My heart yearns for only one woman — Lois, my fiancée.”

“What about Superman’s heart?”

“The heart behind that ‘S’?” Clark said. “I have it on good authority it’s completely captivated.”

Lois kissed him. “OK, here’s the deal, Kent. I won’t worry about a floozy tempting you away, and you won’t worry about any of the hundred unlikely possibilities that you obsess about.”

He smiled. “I’m never going to stop obsessing if you kiss me when I do it.”

“Then maybe I’ll stop kissing you.”

“That would definitely work.”

Lois kissed him again. “So you’ll stop worrying about every little thing? I mean, it’s possible we will have safe, uneventful

lives, a very long, very happy marriage, and a couple of well-adjusted kids.”

He sighed happily. “Sounds perfect.”

“Then concentrate on that.”

The darkness gathered — disrupted only by the meagre light from the crescent-shaped moon. The silence hovered, broken only by the pulse of the ocean.

“You think about your birth parents a lot, don’t you?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know enough to think about them, but, yeah, I have a lot of questions. Someone had to have put me in that spaceship, but I don’t know why. Didn’t they want me? Was I some sort of bizarre experiment? Was there something wrong with me? Something that disappointed them?”

“You did *not* disappoint them,” Lois said firmly. “I bet they wanted you. How could they not?”

Clark shrugged. “I wish I knew. I sometimes wonder if it’s possible that they watch me. Do they care at all? Were they in danger? Was I in danger? Or did they simply not want me?”

“You think they could be watching you?” Lois asked, trying to stifle the vaguely uneasy feeling that had crept upon her.

Clark shrugged. “Not really. I suppose it’s possible, but ...”

“Do you still feel as if you’re alone?” she asked.

“I wasn’t really alone,” he said. “I always had my parents.

And then one day, I walked into my bedroom, and there she was — the woman of my dreams. And I realised that if I could somehow convince her to fall in love with me, I would never be alone again.”

“Then I guess you’ll never be alone again, farmboy,” Lois said.

Clark grinned softly. And kissed her.

#### Part 4

It was Sunday evening.

In her apartment, Clark stood, locked in an embrace with Lois. Her arms were draped around his neck with her head resting snugly on the slope of his shoulder. His arms were folded across her back, his head inclined forward. The hint of her vanilla shampoo rewarded his every breath.

They both knew that parting was imminent.

They both dreaded it.

“I don’t want to leave you,” Clark murmured.

“I don’t want you to go,” Lois whispered.

“They were the three best days of my life.”

“And mine.” Clark felt Lois’s happy sigh quiver against his chest. “Your parents were so thrilled when we told them we are getting married.”

Clark smiled at the memory. “I thought Dad was going to burst with pride when you asked him to give you away.”

“I feel as if I’m a part of your family already.”

“You are, Lois,” Clark said. “But you’re still a part of yours as well. You always will be.”

“Lucy promised to come to the wedding,” Lois said as if she still didn’t quite believe it. “She even said she’d be my bridesmaid.”

They were silent again. Clark listened to his breaths ... her breaths ... and begrudged the passing of every moment that dragged them closer to the inevitable separation. “I should go,” he said, but there was not even a hint of movement through his body.

“You should.” Lois didn’t move either. Not one muscle.

“Have breakfast with me tomorrow?” he asked.

“I’d love to.”

“I’ll pick you up at seven?”

Lois sighed. “That’s eight hours away.”

“Eight hours too many.”

“Maybe it’ll go quickly,” she said, although without much hope.

“We’ll be asleep for most of it,” Clark added.

“Asleep ... alone,” Lois muttered. “I want to be *with* you, Clark.”

“And I want to be with you.” Clark kissed the top of her head. “Always.”

“Always.”

“I should go,” Clark repeated.

Still he didn’t move.

A dozen breaths later, Clark sighed and unfolded from her with a wistful smile. He gazed down into the depths of her jarrah-brown eyes. “In less than four weeks, you’ll be my wife,” he reminded her.

“And then you won’t have to leave.” She smiled up at him and slid her fingers through his dark bristles. “Thanks for not shaving,” she purred.

“I can’t believe you like it.”

“I love your clean-shaven classically Clark look,” she admitted freely. But this ... this has a relaxed roguishness that drives me crazy.”

Clark couldn’t dwell on her words. Not now. If he did, he wouldn’t leave. “I worry I’ll scratch you when I kiss you,” he said. He scrutinised her face, pretending to check for grazes.

Then he saw them.

Three distinct shadows on her right cheek.

Clark stared as dismay wormed through every part of him. He groaned and closed his eyes against the sickening evidence. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he grated.

He felt Lois’s thumb glide along the upper edge of his stubble. “Tell you what?” she asked casually.

He opened his eyes. They were still there — faint certainly, but he could see them, could feel their pointing condemnation. “That I hurt you.”

“You didn’t hurt me,” Lois stated with unconcerned certainty.

“Lois,” he groaned. “I can see the bruises.”

“Where?”

His fingertips hovered to the side of her mouth. “Here.” He winced as remorse needled him. He’d hurt Lois. He’d left bruises on her. “And here.” His eyes shot to hers. “Why didn’t you tell me I hurt you?”

“Because you didn’t do it.”

“Lois, other than when you were asleep in my bedroom, I have been with you every second since Friday evening.”

“It wasn’t you.”

“I can see the finger marks, Lois,” he insisted. “They’re too big for either you or Mom, so either I did it, or my father did it. And it’s been my hands all over your face these past two days.”

“But you were never rough. You *are* never rough.”

“It had to have been when I was kissing you,” he said wretchedly. “I must have got carried away and ...” He felt his shame chafe throughout his insides. “Lois. I’m so sorry.”

“It *wasn’t* you,” she repeated.

A slither of fear snaked around his heart. “Then who was it?”

“When I was walking to your apartment on Friday ... someone grabbed me.”

“Someone *grabbed* you?” Clark exploded.

Lois withdrew her arms from his neck and folded them across her chest. “Someone grabbed me from behind and dragged me into an alley.”

Clark took a deep breath, trying to curb the horde of reprehensible images jostling through his mind. “What did he do?” he said stiffly.

“Nothing.”

“*Nothing!* Lois, I can see the bruises.” His voice had risen. Clark looked to the ceiling and sucked in a deep breath. “Why didn’t you call for me?” he asked more calmly.

“His hand was across my mouth. I couldn’t call for you.”

Clark crushed her against his chest as delayed panic

inundated him. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he rasped into her hair. “Later. When you saw me.”

She backed away. “Because when I got to your apartment, you weren’t there. And then there was the call from Honduras, and when you arrived, we talked about that. And then we went to the island. And everything was so wonderful that I didn’t want to spoil it.”

“Where else did he hurt you?” Clark said.

Lois didn’t flinch despite the intensity of his question. “Nowhere,” she said. “He only restrained me for a couple of seconds. He went through my bag, and then he released me and ran away.”

“What did he take from your bag?”

“Nothing.”

Clark frowned. “Nothing? Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Lois insisted. “I checked. Everything is still there.”

“Your notebook?”

“Yes.”

“Keys?”

“Yes.” She put her hand on his shoulder and looked earnestly into his face. “Clark, I really think it was a case of mistaken identity. He thought I was someone else. He was expecting something to be in my bag. When it wasn’t there, he realised he had the wrong person and let me go.”

“Did he say anything?”

“Not a word.”

Clark’s initial frenzy of fear subsided, leaving a residue of anger. “So there wasn’t one moment — not one moment in the entire time we were together that you thought you could mention this?” he demanded harshly.

Lois’s hand dropped from his shoulder. “No,” she said, her tone brittle. “And you know why? Because I knew you’d react just like this.”

He deserved that.

He glanced away, trying to dispel the image of the brute holding Lois, his hand rough against her soft cheeks. “I’m sorry, Lois,” Clark said contritely. “I *am* angry. But not with you. The thought of anyone hurting you tears me apart. I’m sorry I sounded like you’d done something wrong.”

“I wasn’t hurt,” she said, looking up at him through her long lashes. “It wasn’t a big deal.”

“I’m staying here tonight.”

“No, you’re not.” She faced him staunchly. “I know it’s because you love me. I know you hate the thought of me being hurt. I know it’s easier for me because you’re invulnerable and I’m not ... but Clark, we have to find a way to do this. You can’t bodyguard me all the time. Even once we’re married.”

“Lois ... if anything happened to you ...” He couldn’t finish. He couldn’t even think about it.

She came to him again and put her hands on his face. “Nothing’s going to happen to me,” she assured him. “Nothing bad, anyway. We’re going to have a long and blissful marriage, remember?”

He put his hand under her chin and lifted her face. He bent to linger a kiss on her cheek. “If I promise to try to control how I react, will you promise to tell me if anything like this happens again?”

She nodded.

“Thank you.”

Lois kissed him. “Now, you *really* need to go,” she said with a little smile.

“I know,” he said. But he wanted to stay — more than he’d ever wanted anything.

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning,” Lois said. “For breakfast.”

He nodded.

“And Clark?”

“Yes?”

“Promise me you won’t sleep outside my apartment.”  
He hesitated because that was exactly what he had been planning.

“Promise me,” she said.

“All right,” he conceded.

She kissed him. “You’re to go to your apartment and go to bed. Before you go to sleep, you’re to think about the incredible time we’ve had these past three days and think about our wedding and what it will be like to be married. Then you’re to go to sleep.”

He almost grinned. “Any more instructions, Ms Lane?” he asked.

“You can work out the rest for yourself, Mr Kent,” she said. “Just don’t forget to be here at seven tomorrow morning.”

“As if I’d forget,” he said. “I’ll be counting down the minutes.”

He kissed her again and without any prior intention on his part, it escalated. Abruptly he broke away. “If I don’t leave now, I won’t leave,” he said hoarsely.

Lois walked to her apartment door and opened it for him. “Thank you for the most incredible weekend of my life,” she said.

He neared the doorway, but stayed inside her apartment. “Please be careful, honey,” he begged. “Please. And if anything happens, call me.”

“I will,” she promised. Her hand reached for his arm to impede him. “I have your keys in my bag. I’ll get them.”

He shook his head. “You keep them. I have the spare set with me.”

“You’re OK with me having keys to your apartment?” she asked.

“You already have the keys to my heart.” He stalled long enough to kiss her as he exited her apartment. “I love you,” he said.

“I love you,” she replied.

He left her, forcing himself to walk away. Eight hours. Eight hours until he would see her again. It stretched long and lonesome before him.

He missed her already.

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The next morning, Lois, dressed and ready, waited for Clark. Her fiancé.

That caused her heart to skip. She recalled the hours spent sitting around the table in the Kent kitchen, planning the wedding. It had been a taste of family, and they had done everything to ensure Lois knew she belonged. Martha and Jonathan had been so supportive ... and so careful not to intrude.

Lois pictured the wedding, imagined standing at the front of the church next to Clark. A little shiver of anticipation swirled through her.

And then there would be the wedding night. Lois smiled a secret smile. She had plans for that night. Plans she had shared with no one.

Her left thumb nudged Clark’s ring on her finger. It still felt unfamiliar, but she loved the feel of it; loved what it represented — the promise she shared with Clark.

She checked her watch. He was late — two minutes late. That was unlike Clark. Of course being able to move at super speed helped enormously with being punctual.

Lois waited with growing impatience for another fifteen minutes. Clark was never this late ... unless ...

He must have been called out on Superman business. With a sigh, Lois picked up her bag and headed for the Planet.

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Lois had been at the Planet less than twenty minutes when Perry called her into his office. “How was your weekend, darlin’?” he asked.

“Good.”

“Did you see Clark?”

Lois tried to hide her smile. “A bit,” she said. OK, she’d been with Clark the entire weekend, but Perry didn’t need to know that. She folded her arms, hiding the ring on her finger. They would tell Perry, of course, but when Clark was here to share it.

“So, where is he?”

“Who?”

“Clark.”

Lois looked out of Perry’s office as if she fully expected Clark to be at his desk. “He’s not here,” she said lamely.

“Do you know where he is?”

“No,” she said. At least she could answer that truthfully.

Perry looked at her suspiciously. “The last time Clark didn’t front for work, you and he had had a big-time falling-out.”

Lois sat down opposite her editor. “Actually, I do sort of know where he is.”

“You do?”

“We got a lead ... nothing concrete yet ... but it involves Superman ... so Clark went to see if it was going to develop into anything worthwhile.”

Perry looked unconvinced. “You two haven’t had a row?”

“No.”

“Any idea when he’ll be back?”

“I don’t expect him to be too long,” Lois said casually. “He may call in something.”

Perry eyed her for a stretched moment. “What are you working on?”

Suddenly, Lois had an inspired idea. “I’m going to chase up Sarah Crawford and see how the plans for the DC Memorial Hospital are progressing.”

Perry looked dubious. “Have you got anything else?”

“Not yet,” she admitted.

“Then we’d better hope Clark brings home a big Superman story, hadn’t we?” Perry barked.

Lois nodded, realising that the less she said, the easier it would be to fit whatever Clark was doing into what she had told Perry.

She stood and opened the door of the office. Perry’s agitated voice followed her. “And when Clark does show up, tell him to get himself in here. Pronto!”

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“Could I see Mrs Crawford?” Lois asked the woman who had answered Sarah’s door.

“Is Mrs Crawford expecting you?” she asked politely.

“No,” Lois said, “but would you please tell her that Lois Lane from the Daily Planet would appreciate a few moments of her time?”

With a demure smile, the girl invited Lois into the large foyer and asked her to wait. A minute later, she was back. “Mrs Crawford will meet with you in the library,” she said.

Lois followed her into a large, majestic room. Two walls were completely covered by floor-to-ceiling dark timber bookshelves, filled with regal-looking volumes.

Two minutes later, Sarah walked in. She said nothing until she’d closed the door, and then she turned, her face alight with welcome. “It’s so good to see you,” she said, giving Lois a quick hug.

“What’s happening with the hospital?” Lois asked.

Sarah looked surprised. “Didn’t you get my email? I sent you an update last week.”

Lois clamped down on her lips to keep her smile from erupting. “Yes,” she said evenly, “I got your email. But I told my editor I was coming here to ask about the hospital, so that’s what I did.”

Sarah’s face split into a knowing smile. “So why *are* you here, Lane? Really?”

Slowly, Lois lifted her left hand from her side and held it up. When Sarah saw it, her face erupted with excitement. “Nooooo!” she said.

“Yeeessss!” Lois hissed, grinning widely.

Sarah leapt to her and encompassed her in a big hug. Then she backed away and grabbed Lois’s hand to examine her ring. “Lois!” she said. “I’m so happy for you. What a beautiful ring. When did this happen? When’s the big day? How did he ask you? You must be so excited.”

“Friday, four weeks, on bended knee, and I am.”

Sarah stared at her, processing her answers. “Four weeks?” she whooped.

“Do you have anything planned for that weekend?” Lois asked casually.

“Probably,” Sarah said. Then her grin flashed conspiratorially. “But nothing I can’t get out of.”

“So you’ll come?”

“Is that an invitation?”

“Yes.”

“Then nothing would keep me away.” Sarah hugged her again. “I am *so* happy for you, Lois. You *and* Clark. You are perfect for each other. I’ve known that since the day you came here asking about Luthor. The way Clark kept looking at you ...” Sarah grinned exultantly. “He was a smitten man, even then.”

Lois couldn’t restrain her smile at Sarah’s enthusiasm.

“Would you be my Matron of Honour?”

“Me?”

“Is it too soon after David’s passing? Are you worried about how it could be received? The Crawford Matriarch and all that?”

Sarah shook her head. “I’d *love* to be your Matron of Honour, Lois.” She hugged her again. “This is *so* exciting.” She studied Lois. “Did you say four weeks?”

Lois nodded.

“Are you pregnant?” Sarah asked, sporting a huge grin.

“No, I’m not,” Lois said. “But we know what we want to do — there’s no reason to wait.”

Sarah shot her a playful wink.

“We’re still working on the details, but I’ll let you know as soon as I can.”

Sarah stared at Lois, her eyes twinkling and a smile hovering around her mouth. “Have you got a few minutes?” she asked.

“I don’t have one single lead that looks like it could ever possibly be a story, so I should be chasing down something ... but ...” She grinned. “I guess a few more minutes won’t matter.”

“Come this way,” Sarah said, looking like a teenager cajoling a more-cautious friend into something exhibiting a definite whiff of trouble.

Lois followed her out of the big, imposing house and into a large, formal garden, consisting of clipped lawns and precisely trimmed conifers. Sarah led her to the end of the garden and between two trees that were part of a long row of streamlined poplars. They stopped at the tall timber-paling fence.

Sarah turned to Lois, grinning excitedly. “Ready?”

“For what?” Lois asked. “Looking at a fence?”

Sarah giggled and pushed lightly against the fence. A section of it swung open. “Come on,” Sarah said eagerly.

Lois followed Sarah through the concealed gate and gasped. It was as if they had been transported into another world ... another time even. The scene before her wouldn’t have looked out of place in the pages of a fairy tale.

A tiny cottage was nestled into an arc of towering trees. The pale stone of the cottage provided the perfect backdrop for the explosion of pastel-coloured daisies sprawling along the meandering path.

Sarah turned to Lois, her eyes sparkling. “Do you like it?”

“It’s gorgeous,” Lois managed, still recovering from the contrast between the dignified grandness of the main house and

the cosy casualness of this cottage.

“David’s grandfather built it,” Sarah said. “His wife, Emma, was English, so he built it for her because she was homesick.”

“Who lives in it now?”

Sarah’s grin widened. “That’s the point, you see,” she said eagerly. “No one lives in it. David’s grandfather was a hopeless romantic, so when his wife died, he decided Emma’s cottage was to be available for family and friends.” Sarah put her hands on Lois’s shoulders and turned her ninety degrees away from the cottage. “See that flagpole?” she said.

The flag was predominantly red and positioned low on the pole. “Yes,” Lois replied.

“If the flag is low, like now, the cottage is empty and available. If the flag is high, the cottage is being used. If the flag is at half-mast, it has been used and is yet to be readied for the next couple.”

Lois didn’t really understand why Sarah was disclosing family history right now. Unless ... perhaps there could be a story here?

Sarah giggled. “You don’t get it, do you?” She pointed beyond the flagpole to the side fence. “On the other side of that fence is the lane that starts near the entrance to the main house. You come down the lane and check the flag. If it’s too low to be seen over the fence, you punch in the code to open the gate, hoist the flag high so there are no unexpected interruptions, and have yourselves a wonderful night — or nights — in the cottage. When you leave, you drop the flag to half-mast so I know to send in Tanya to make it perfect for whoever comes next.”

Lois looked at Sarah as comprehension dawned. “You mean ... Clark and I can use it?”

Sarah chortled. “You bet you can, Lane. Anytime you and Clark want to disappear for a little ... *bonding* ... the cottage is all yours.”

Lois didn’t know what to say. “Sarah ... Thank you. But we both have apartments in Metropolis; I’m not sure we’d need to use it.”

Sarah laughed again. “Of course you won’t *need* it, Lane, but you might enjoy it with that hunk of yours.”

Lois grinned, suddenly seeing the possibilities. “Thanks, Crawford.”

Sarah leant a little closer to Lois. “The code is 2315,” she said quietly. “Emma was born February 3, 1915. We don’t take bookings, you simply come, and if it’s available, you help yourself. It has everything you could possibly need except for perishables. There is no cost — it was David’s grandfather’s way of honouring the memory of his beloved wife.”

Lois hugged Sarah. “Thank you, Sarah,” she said. “I’m so touched you’ve offered it to us. Thank you for trusting us.”

“Thanks for being trustworthy.” A look of understanding passed between the women.

“I really should get back to work,” Lois said with genuine regret. She hadn’t seen enough of Sarah the past few weeks.

They went through the concealed gate and into the structured stateliness of the garden. As they neared the house, two small children ran to greet Sarah. She knelt and picked up both of them.

“Ms Lane, these are my children — David Junior, known as DJ, and ... Emma.”

Lois was sure she saw the flicker of a wink in Sarah’s eye as she introduced her daughter. The children regarded Lois with frank interest from the safety of their mother’s arms. Lois smiled at them. “How old are you?” she asked the girl.

“I’m three,” Emma said, demonstrating with stubby fingers. “And DJ is two.”

“They’re beautiful children, Mrs Crawford,” Lois said.

“Thank you, Ms Lane.” The girl who had answered the door appeared. “Tanya,” Sarah directed. “Please show Ms Lane out.” She turned to Lois. “I’ll expect to hear further developments,”

she said in a voice so formal, Lois nearly choked on her stifled laughter.

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Lois's cell phone rang as she got into her Jeep. She reached into her bag, already smiling in anticipation of speaking with Clark.

It was Perry. "Hi, Chief," she said.

"Lois. You need to get yourself to the Met Bank. There's been an attempted robbery."

"Another one?" Lois asked, remembering it was just last week that the executive from that bank had given the donation to Superman for foiling the previous attempted robbery.

"Yes," Perry confirmed. "But it was unsuccessful again."

Lois grinned and started her engine. "I'll be there inside ten minutes," she told Perry.

She drove out of the sweeping driveway of Sarah's house, her eagerness bubbling. Soon, she would be with Clark. She couldn't wait — even if she had to pretend she was just a reporter and he was just a superhero.

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Lois parked the Jeep and hurried into the bank. Mr Parkin — the man from last week's presentation — was surrounded by a handful of reporters. Lois surveyed the room, expecting to see Superman. There was no sign of him.

She pulled out the notebook and pen from her bag and tuned into what Mr Parkin was saying.

"... very fortunate that, yet again, the attempted robbery was unsuccessful."

"How did Superman stop them this time?" Lois asked.

The group of reporters turned to her as one, their faces a mix of disapproval and ridicule.

"It ... er, wasn't Superman," Mr Parkin said.

"It wasn't?"

"They triggered our state-of-the-art security system, which alerted the security company and the police," Mr Parkin said. "Representatives of both arrived before the alleged thieves had made their escape."

"So where was Superman?" Lois said brusquely.

Mr Parkin shot her a look of annoyance. "Are there any further questions?" he asked, addressing the group. "About this incident?"

There were other questions — from the other reporters. Lois scribbled his answers automatically — no, there was no link to the previous attempt; yes, the police had the suspects in custody — her mind on something else.

Someone else.

Where was Clark?

When the bank executive had finished, and the reporters had dispersed, Lois called Clark's cell. He didn't answer.

She called his desk phone. He didn't answer.

She called his home number.

No answer there either.

Lois drove back to the Planet, trying to smother the persistent stem of uneasiness that wanted to take root. As soon as she stepped from the elevator, her eyes sought Clark's desk. It was vacant. It looked exactly how he'd left it on Friday afternoon.

Lois sat at her own desk and logged onto her computer. She flicked through the three major news sites on the Internet. There was no breaking news of a major disaster. Nothing which would require Superman's extended presence.

And no mention of Superman appearing anywhere.

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By two o'clock, Lois's bank story was long finished, and she was hungry. She'd put off going for lunch, hoping Clark would come and they would be able to go together.

She knew the gnawing in her stomach wasn't solely due to the lack of food. She kept telling herself Clark had to be all right,

but knowing it in her mind had not safeguarded her stomach from degenerating into a pit of anxiety.

She'd trawled the internet repeatedly, looking for a story breaking somewhere in the world. Something that required Superman. Something that said he was there, providing the super-help they needed.

But there was nothing.

No disaster.

No crime bust.

No appearance of Superman.

So where was he?

He couldn't be hurt.

Could he?

He couldn't be sick.

Could he?

So where was he?

Irritated by the cyclic, unproductive eddy of her thoughts, Lois yanked her coat from the stand and hustled into it. She decided against informing Perry she was going out. There was nothing to be gained by putting herself in the firing line for more questions. She left the Planet building and hurried to Clark's apartment.

Inside, it was empty. And cold.

Lois went into his bedroom. His bed had been slept in; the sheets were still awry.

She looked around for anything to help her piece together his morning. Had he dressed for work? Lois opened the door of his closet. Four suits hung there next to a row of crisply pressed business shirts. Then came jeans and the casual shirts.

Lois lowered her eyes to the floor. Clark's shoes were neatly arranged in a row ... three pairs of dress shoes — one tux-worthy, the other two she recognised as his work shoes — two pairs of tennis shoes, a pair of rugged farm boots, his sandals, and lastly, a pair of casual shoes.

She sieved through her memory — she was fairly sure all his shoes were here. And she could only recall four business suits.

So, wherever Clark was, he must be wearing the red boots of Superman ... and the Suit.

That brought irrational relief. Somehow, Superman seemed less likely to be hurt than Clark. Which was ridiculous, of course.

But her mind didn't want to work logically; it was under fire from the trepidation flaring up from her stomach.

Where was he?

And wherever he was, why hadn't he contacted her?

Lois strode into his living area, shivering. Clark didn't need his apartment heated, but whenever she'd been here, the temperature inside had been pleasant. She felt an icy breeze and noticed the door to the balcony was ajar.

Clark had come in through that door on Friday. Had he closed it? She couldn't remember. He'd been preoccupied with being late, and her mind had been on the call from Honduras.

But surely one of them would have noticed it was open.

And even if they had left it open all weekend, Clark would have felt the cold last night and closed it.

So had someone broken in? Through the balcony door? Who — other than Superman — could get to that balcony from the outside? Or had they taken him out through that door?

Lois rushed onto the balcony and peered over the guardrail. With an exasperated sigh at her own stupidity, she hurried back inside. What had she been looking for? Clark? Outside on the ground? Had she really expected to see him lying there?

Lois closed the balcony door and locked it. She leant against it, her mind threatening to spin out of control. With resolute determination, she shut down the barrage of questions and forced herself to think clearly.

It seemed most likely Clark, as Superman, had left his apartment in a hurry. Possibly from the balcony, forgetting to

close the door.

But that didn't explain why he hadn't contacted her, or how his actions had managed to evade every news service in the known world.

Lois searched the fridge and the cupboards — unsure exactly what she was looking for, but hoping there would be something ... anything ... to give her a clue to Clark's whereabouts. There was nothing. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing to give her the slightest hint of where he might be.

She pulled her cell phone from her bag and dialed his cell number. Seconds later, she heard his ring tone coming from his bedroom. She hurried in and opened the top drawer of the chest next to his bed. There was his cell, along with his keys and wallet.

Wherever he was, he was there as Superman.

Lois shut down her call and closed the drawer. Back in the living area, she found a blank piece of paper and a pen and scribbled a note.

*Clark, darling.*

*Could you contact me as soon as you get this? Thanks.*

*I love you.*

*Lois.*

She put the note on the table where he couldn't fail to see it and left his cold and empty apartment.

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Emma's cottage looks something like this -

<http://www.thomaskinkadegallery.com/painting.php?id=184>

#### **Part 5**

The afternoon crawled by, each passing minute further tightening the tension in Lois's stomach and blunting her ability to think competently. Every time the elevator opened, her head spun around and her heart missed a beat.

But Clark did not come.

Lois tried to work on a story, but found she could concentrate for only a few minutes before surrendering to the compulsion to refresh the pages of the news sites.

The world was alarmingly serene.

There was nothing that needed Superman.

But she needed him. Now.

Late afternoon, Perry's voice cut across her private turmoil, summoning her. She stood obediently and trudged into his office.

"Where's Clark?" Perry's question had been fired before she'd even shut the door.

Lois folded her arms across her chest. "I'm ... I'm not sure."

"Has he contacted you?"

"Not recently."

Perry's eyes narrowed. "Should I be worried? Are you worried?"

"No," Lois lied. She wanted to leave it there, but Perry's expression told her more was expected. A lot more. "We heard a whisper about Superman," she added reluctantly. "We figured we couldn't both disappear, so I agreed to stay while Clark went to see what he could find out."

Perry's eyes narrowed further. "That's not like you, Lois."

Lois shrugged, forcing a hollow laugh. "It's a man-thing," she said, knowing exactly how lame that sounded.

"That's never stopped you before."

"I've never had a partner before."

Perry contemplated her for a long moment. "Lois, I've watched you and Clark these past few weeks and against my better judgment, I've said nothing. I've seen the dotting looks and the little touches you thought no one would notice. I've seen how you glow whenever he walks into the room and how he simply can't keep his eyes off you."

Lois matched Perry's stare, saying nothing.

"And Lois," Perry continued. "All along, I knew it could only lead to trouble — knew that when the crash came, it would

disrupt the running of this newspaper. Now I'm one reporter down, and I have another one who is next to useless."

It was true; other than the foiled bank robbery story, Lois hadn't come close to having anything for Perry all day. "I'm sorry, Chief," she said. "But it's not what you think. Clark and I haven't 'crashed'."

"Then where is he?"

Lois wished she knew. More than anything, she wished she knew. But she didn't. And she needed Perry off her back. So she gave him the one thing she had. She pulled her hand from its hiding place and displayed her ring.

Perry's face underwent a slow transformation from badgering to bewilderment. "You and Clark?"

"Clark and I," she confirmed.

"Engaged?"

She nodded. "We're getting married."

Perry rose slowly from his chair. "I'm happy for you, Lois, really I am, but ... I'm going to ask this just once. Are you sure?"

"Absolutely positive, Perry."

He crossed from his side of the desk. "Congratulations, Lois. You two sure don't waste any time, do you?" He gathered her into his arms and gave her a fatherly hug.

It was over too soon. It would have been so easy to cling to him and let her worries spill onto his broad shoulders.

But she couldn't do that, so Lois fabricated a smile and said, "Thanks Perry. Your invitation will arrive soon."

"Thanks."

"The wedding's in Smallville," she said. "In four weeks."

"Four weeks?" he gasped.

"We're sure about this."

Perry smiled, but it didn't screen his reservations. "I'll be there, darlin'."

"I'm sorry about today," Lois said. "I have a lot on my mind."

The editor patted her shoulder. "Just ensure Clark gets back here with a Superman exclusive and then everything will be fine."

"He will," Lois said, shushing her fears. "He'll be here soon." She opened Perry's door.

"Lois?"

When she turned, Perry was gazing intently at her, his face unreadable.

"If Kent hurts you," he warned sombrely, "He'll be answering to me."

Lois moulded her face to another smile. "I told you, Chief, it's not like that," she insisted. "Clark wouldn't do that."

She shut his door and made a beeline for her desk, but was thwarted by a high-pitched, contemptuous voice. "Hey, Lois?"

Lois sighed as Cat swaggered towards her.

"Nice ring," Cat said with a smirk.

Lois pushed her left hand into her pocket.

"It's highly interesting," Cat mused, "That you're wearing what looks like an engagement ring the very day the target of your rather primitive attempts at seduction goes missing."

"I haven't seduced anyone," Lois spat. "And Clark isn't missing."

Cat's immaculately shaped eyebrows lifted expressively. "So what is your explanation for the absence of a certain hot body in the newsroom today?"

She had no explanation, and that was precisely the problem. Lois's tears welled. She vehemently repelled them and turned away, aware that Cat's eyes followed her. At her desk, Lois closed down her computer, thrust her arms into her coat, and stormed to the elevator. The door slid shut, finally shielding her, and Lois's control crumbled. By the time she reached Jeep, her tears were coursing uncontrollably down her cheeks.

She needed Clark.

She needed him physically — needed his arms around her, needed his chest to support her.

Needed him emotionally — needed his quiet, reassuring voice to calm her and his steadfast eyes to restore her equilibrium.

And most of all, she needed to know he was safe.

Lois drove without any conscious intent. Ten minutes later, she realised she was outside Clark's apartment. She got out of the Jeep and went to his door.

His apartment was still empty. Still untouched.

Her note was on the table, exactly where she had left it. She hurried through his bedroom and into his bathroom, calling his name. The panic in her voice bounced through the emptiness, compounding her fears.

She stilled and was deluged by the silence — the eerie silence broken only by the serrated aftermath of her tears.

Lois sat at Clark's table and dropped her head into her hands.

She could no longer believe that Superman was caught up in a major rescue. Anything big enough to require his presence for almost a day would have found its way onto the internet. The world just wasn't that fragmented anymore.

Had he been hurt?

Had someone taken him?

Neither were possible.

Superman didn't get hurt and no one could hold the strongest, fastest man on earth.

Blistering terror birthed inside her.

Martha and Jonathan.

If they had Martha and Jonathan ... they wouldn't need physical strength to hold Clark.

Lois sprang to Clark's phone and began dialling the Kent number in Smallville. She stopped mid-number.

If someone was holding Superman and using Clark's parents as leverage ... Lois closed her eyes, her heart hurtling. She pushed away the too-awful-to-contemplate conclusion and continued dialling the number.

"Martha Kent."

Lois's pent-up breath escaped with a whoosh. "Martha," she managed.

"Lois, how lovely to hear from you."

"I ... I just wanted to thank you for a lovely weekend," Lois said, her mind spinning. She should have planned what to say. Should she tell Martha that Clark was missing?

"It's our pleasure, honey," Martha said. "We are so very, very happy that Clark has you."

In a split-second decision, Lois decided not to tell Martha. Not yet. Clark would be back soon ... by tomorrow at the latest. Why worry his parents unnecessarily? "Thank you." In any other circumstance, Martha's words would have warmed her heart. But now, it was so cold, nothing could thaw it except Clark himself. "Is Jonathan there with you?"

"Yes," Martha said, "Would you like to speak to him?"

"No, thanks." Lois knew she was incapable of a normal, breezy conversation. "Martha, I have to go. Sorry this is so short."

"I'll talk to you soon, honey."

"Bye, Martha."

Lois hung up the phone and slumped against the wall. They didn't have Clark's parents.

They didn't have them, but were they threatening them? Lois reached for the phone again. Should she tell them?

Tell them what?

This was about Superman — Clark was wearing the Suit. He wouldn't want his parents involved in this.

And yet ...

Lois felt her tears rise again as she wrestled the burden of lonesome indecision.

She moved away from the phone. Clark would be back ... tonight. He would be. No one could keep him away from her.

But where was he?

Her mind whirled along the already-much-travelled tracks, faster and faster, driven by fears spiralling helplessly out of control.

Abruptly, Lois slammed her eyes shut and thrust her mind into neutral. She couldn't give in to her fears. She had to think.

Seconds later, she rushed into Clark's bedroom and crouched next to the chest of drawers. She opened the bottom drawer.

It was filled with undershirts, the middle drawer contained briefs and socks, and the top drawer held his wallet, cell, keys, and two pens — exactly as she had left them.

She frantically searched under his bed. She rushed into the bathroom, scouring every inch of it. She opened the cabinet.

No glasses.

Where were his glasses?

If Clark were wearing his glasses, why wasn't he wearing any shoes?

And if Superman were wearing the Suit, where were Clark's glasses?

Had he hidden them somewhere? Maybe in the same place he hid the Suits when he wasn't wearing them?

But why hide his glasses?

So many questions.

And most frustrating of all ... Why, whenever she thought of something new, did it just multiply the number of questions that had no answers?

Should she inform the police?

She couldn't. What if she reported Clark Kent as missing, and they found Superman? And if she reported Superman as missing, no one was going to take her seriously.

Until she knew more, she couldn't trust anyone ... or ask for help. But how was she going to find out more?

Lois walked slowly back into Clark's bedroom, scanning, thinking, searching. Her eyes fell on his bed, and her heart began to pound.

The top sheet and blankets stretched from where they were tucked into the bottom of the bed to where they draped over the near side of the mattress and onto the floor.

If Clark had gotten out of bed, even hurriedly, he would have pushed back the covers.

But the position of the sheets strongly suggested someone had been pulled from the bed, trailing the bedding partway with him.

A chilling river of ice slid through her. He hadn't gone as Superman.

They had come here and taken Clark from his bed.

But who? And how?

He must have been unconscious ... or pretending to be unconscious.

Which explained why he wasn't wearing shoes.

Lois stood back and stared, imagining Clark's motionless form on the floor. What had happened next? Had they dragged him across the floor? There was no detectable trail through the carpet.

Lois dropped to her hands and knees and searched the floor. Nothing. Not even a strand of hair.

But did Clark's hair even come out?

She didn't know.

She dropped lower and sniffed the carpet.

Was that a trace of coconut?

Or were her senses toying with her?

Lois shuffled forward to the little ridge that separated the carpet in the bedroom from the timber flooring in the living area. She hunkered low and breathed deep.

Coconut.

She was almost sure of it.  
Had they wanted Clark?  
Or Superman?

If they'd come here for Clark, the secret may still be safe.  
But why hadn't Clark used his powers to escape? Why had he let them take him? He would have heard them approaching; would have seen them before they even entered his apartment. Why not just fly away?

Lois's mind jangled as the improbabilities competed with the impossibilities until she felt as if she were hopelessly lost in a gigantic maze.

The only thing she did know was that she wanted Clark and she wanted him now and the temptation to dissolve into a puddle of screaming, thoroughly panicked, totally useless pulp was almost stronger than she could bear.

Resolutely, she stood and surveyed his bed again. The bottom sheet was not flat, but had telltale undulations. The longer Lois stared at it, the more sure she became that someone had been forcibly dragged from the bed.

Clark.

But that was incomprehensible.

Mindlessly, Lois straightened the sheets and tucked in the blankets. She felt under the pillow and found Clark's journal. She hugged it against her chest, wishing she were clutching him.

He would be OK.

He would be OK.

Back in the kitchen, Lois put the journal on the table and opened the fridge. It was almost empty. He hadn't re-stocked since coming home from their weekend.

She found something that looked like frozen vegetable soup in his freezer. She decided to heat it in the microwave.

But there was no microwave. Of course.

Lois rustled through the cupboards, found a saucepan and defiantly tipped in all the soup. Any moment, Clark would fly through that window, and there would be enough for both of them.

She turned on the heat under the saucepan and sat down at the table — waiting.

The silence was overpowering.

Where was he? Where was Clark?

The soup boiled, and she was still alone. Lois ladled some into a cup and sipped it, vaguely aware that the warmth brought a smattering of comfort.

But she wanted only Clark.

She needed him.

Suddenly, she lurched from the table and picked up the phone. She dialed her own number. He was probably at her apartment, probably making a meal for her, waiting for her, wondering what had kept her.

Her phone rang out.

She dialed again.

It rang out again.

Lois replaced the phone and crumpled against the wall, as she was engulfed by yet another onslaught of fear.

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The evening hours crawled by. Lois waited in Clark's apartment. She spent long stretches of time on the balcony, staring into the darkness, willing him to come home. Every sound caused her to jump, sure it was him. It wasn't. Over and over again, she refreshed the news pages on his computer. Nothing. Nothing requiring Superman. She fought the frightening images that crowded into her mind.

He *couldn't* be hurt.

But, until today, she had believed he couldn't be taken from her.

It was past eleven o'clock when she stood, thinking she should go home.

Instantly, she realized that wasn't going to be possible. If she couldn't be with Clark, she needed to be as close to him as possible. She would be staying here.

She raided his closet and found an old tee shirt and some sleep shorts.

She went into his shower and lingered there until the water had turned her skin a glowing red. The thought came fleetingly that he showered here . . . but she wearily pushed it away.

She dried, using his towel, and put on his clothes. She brushed her teeth with his toothbrush.

Then she turned off the lights and slipped into his bed.

She curled herself around one of his pillows, wishing it were his warm, protective, perfect body next to her.

Would she ever cling to him again?

She would. She would. She would.

He was the strongest person in the world.

He would find a way to get back to her.

She had to believe that.

But it couldn't prevent her tears from spreading a damp patch on his pillow.

Lois assembled her memories — sweet memories of their moments together — from him, half-naked, arriving unannounced in his bedroom in Smallville, through Dirk Hartog Island, and to the endearing sweetness of his island proposal.

For a time, the battle was evenly fought, each tendril of memory standing firm against the creeping cobweb of apprehension. But slowly, the dark side inched forward and choked all the good memories, leaving her rigid with fear.

Lois glanced at the clock. It was ten past two.

She padded to his computer and checked the news sites again. There had been a collision between a train and a bus in France and a shooting in a doctor's clinic in China, but neither story mentioned Superman.

Lois picked up Clark's journal from the table and brought it back to the bed. She left the main light on in the living room — total darkness was a rich breeding ground for fear — and slipped into the warmth of Clark's bed. She stared at his journal, aching for a connection with him.

Would he mind?

If it had been him missing her, would she object to him finding comfort in her writing? Finding comfort in anything? No, she wouldn't.

With trembling fingers, she opened the journal to the most recent entry. It was dated Sunday, November 14 — two days ago.

Lois stared, allowing the words to blur, deliberately not reading them. Not yet. Just his handwriting gave her a sense of peace. She closed her eyes and slowly slid her fingertips over the writing, letting his presence seep into her.

Then with a shuddery sigh, she opened her eyes and began to read.

*November 14*

*Lois is going to marry me. Lois is going to marry me. Lois is going to marry me.*

*I am so happy. I can't wait.*

*I can't believe Lois said 'yes'.*

*Four weeks.*

*Four short weeks.*

*Four impossibly long weeks.*

*I love you, Lois. I always will.*

*You're my world.*

*And I'm the luckiest guy in the world.*

Lois closed his journal, clasped it to her chest, and wiped her moist cheeks.

On Sunday night, Clark had come home after leaving her apartment. He'd written in his journal, maybe as he'd laid here in bed.

Then he'd . . .

What?

What had happened to him?

Lois turned off the bed lamp and shuffled into a comfortable position, determined to sleep, determined to give herself a chance of waking tomorrow, rested, refreshed and in the best condition to help Clark.

Her determination lasted less than thirty seconds. Questions, speculation, and trepidation swamped her, filling her with mind-numbing dread. She needed to find a place of peace, even temporarily.

She thought of Clark's journal, still in her hands.

His words could calm her. She remembered the night her parents had died. She had gone to bed, tense and shocked and numb. Clark had come to her and his words and his touch and his love had soothed her.

Now she only had his words. But it was something of Clark. Something she could cling to. She turned on the lamp and opened his journal, flicking to the day she had met him.

August 6

*Today I met Lois Lane, famed reporter and the Daily Planet's brightest star ... in my bed!*

*I came out of the bathroom — with only a towel between me and a level of embarrassment I'm fairly confident would have been fatal — and stormed right into my room, never suspecting a beautiful woman would be in my bed.*

*But there she was ... and oh, my ... let there be no mistake ... she is beautiful.*

*I can't get her out of my mind.*

August 8

*Lois went back to Metropolis today.*

*I miss her. There's a massive hole in my heart. A hole that can only be filled by her.*

*I always knew she would go home, of course. There's nothing in Smallville to keep her here.*

*But there is something ... someone ... a small-town reporter ... here ... who's in love with her.*

*Someone who will always be in love with her.*

*The weekend was mind-blowing, in so many ways. I wonder — does upheaval follow Lois? Or does she find it? Anyway, the most extraordinary aspect of the weekend is this — how could it have taken me thirty-two hours to admit that I am in love?*

*Seconds after I met her I knew. My fate was sealed. There could be no one else. Not for me.*

*But she must have a hundred guys to choose from. Sophisticated city guys. Why would she even take a second glance at a Kansas farmer?*

*I called Mr White today. Just to ask if he had received my résumé.*

*I don't really know why.*

*A job in Metropolis? Working at the Daily Planet? With Lois?*

*You're dreaming, Kent.*

August 25

*Mr White called me today.*

*He asked me to go to Metropolis tomorrow to interview for a position.*

*I'm trying not to get too excited about the prospect of working at the Daily Planet. It's an interview; nothing more.*

*But I can't help getting very excited about the prospect of seeing Lois again.*

*Will she be happy to see me?*

*Will she smile at me? Just once? Just one smile to add to the catalogue in my mind?*

*Has she missed me?*

*Has she even expended one significant thought on me since she left Smallville?*

*Realistically, I doubt it.*

*Realistically, I know I yearn for the impossible.*

*She's a beautiful, talented, independent, successful woman. And I'm a hick from Nowheresville.*

*No chance, Kent.*

*But tomorrow, I'll see her again, and that thought brings the sunshine to my life.*

August 26

*Clark Kent, Daily Planet.*

*Woooo-hoooo!*

August 28

*Lois, Lois, Lois.*

*My mind, my heart, my soul is filled with Lois.*

*I went to Janet Thorp's funeral today ... and Lois came to find me. She held my hand, and I thought my heart was going to catapult out of my chest.*

*We had lunch. Together.*

*I walked her home, and she wore my jacket — my clothes have never looked so good.*

*We arrived at her apartment, and she invited me in.*

*Lois likes me!!!!*

*She admitted she likes me, and that revelation tingles through my mind like champagne.*

*She has reservations about my ability to cope with the harshness of the city ... but one thing I am sure of: harsh or not, I have to be where Lois is. I have to be with her. As much as she'll let me, anyway.*

*I love her.*

Lois re-read the last three words over and over, her tears streaming down her cheeks. Clark had loved her from the beginning.

An overwhelming desire for him burned though her. She wanted him so much. Wanted to hold him. Wanted to tell him she loved him. Wanted to quell his uncertainties and assure him what he yearned for was possible — more than possible.

It was his destiny.

Their destiny.

She stared at Clark's writing, wanting to turn the page and greedily consume more. But, like a stranded survivor on a deserted island with just one bar of chocolate, she needed to conserve.

Clark would find a way to come back to her ... she had to believe that. But the longer he was away, the more desperately she would need his words.

Resolutely, she closed the journal.

His words had given her composure, had lifted her from the quagmire, and given her the ability to see from a new perspective.

She would logically consider all the possibilities and work from there.

The first possibility — his own people had come to Earth and taken him back. Lois had shuddered when he'd said, "I wonder if they watch me." What if they had been watching him? What if they were unwilling to allow him to marry an Earth woman? What if their engagement had precipitated this?

With grim dismay, she realised that if Clark's people had reclaimed him, the unpalatable truth was that she was powerless. She had no doubt that Clark would try to get back to her, but it may not be possible. Maybe they had the power to change his mind ... to change his heart.

A shoot of pain tore through her at the thought of him living without any memory of her.

But it was preferable to him hurting like she was.

Would aliens need to physically remove him from his bed and drag him along the floor? Surely they would have ... other ways.

Lois forced her thoughts onwards. The second possibility was that humans had taken him.

If that had happened, he wasn't unreachable. But ... she had

so little to work with.

And whatever she did, protecting the secret had to be a consideration.

But he was Superman. How could anyone overpower him?

The third possibility was that Clark had left her.

She dismissed that immediately. If Clark had changed his mind about marrying her, about being with her, he wouldn't walk away with no explanation.

It was something he just wouldn't do.

The last possibility was that he was doing Superman work somewhere so remote that the world's news services weren't reporting it yet. It was possible, she supposed, but realistically, very unlikely after this amount of time.

It didn't explain his missing glasses.

And she was confident that Clark would find a way to let her know he was all right. For him, a flying trip to Metropolis — from anywhere in the world — would take less than a second.

So — there were two possibilities.

Aliens had taken him.

Humans had taken him.

Given Clark's powers, the former seemed most likely. Which filled Lois with piercing despair.

With a body-rattling sigh, she slipped from Clark's bed and went to his kitchen to make herself a hot drink. Perhaps it would help her sleep. As she reached for the tea caddy, her arm brushed against her bag and it toppled, strewing its contents across the floor.

Lois scooped up her cell, keys, purse, notebook, and pens and carelessly dumped them back in her bag. A small piece of paper remained on the floor. She picked it up and unfolded it. It read — in hand-written, stilted block letters — *PERSONAL CLASSIFIEDS FISHING ADVICE*.

#### Part 6

Lois flipped the piece of paper — the other side was blank.

She'd never seen it before.

Where had it come from?

How had it gotten into her bag?

And was there any possible way it could have something to do with Clark's disappearance?

Lois scrambled to the pile of recent newspapers that were stashed tidily under Clark's kitchen bench. She pulled out Friday's edition of the Daily Planet, turned to the Classified Advertisements, and found the Personals.

As usual, the largest section was 'Women Seeking Men', and the vast majority of those were women propositioning Superman. At the end of the column was the heading 'MISCELLANEOUS' — and under that, two notices — a birthday greeting for a pet python and then -

*Fishing advice — brown trout bait — bugs.*

Lois made the tea, her mind whirling. The note was in *her* bag. Was it meant for her?

If so, how had it gotten there?

The pseudo-mugging on Friday?

Lois was confident that whoever had forced her into the alley had taken nothing from her bag. But had he put something *into* her bag?

The note?

But why did she need fishing advice?

Bugs.

Bugs.

Could she be bugged?

Her cell? Her desk phone? Her computer?

Did that make her the bait?

For what?

With a frustrated groan, Lois slumped onto the table.

More questions.

No answers; just more questions.

She picked up the newspaper and read the notice again.

Could it be a warning?

From whom?

Was it a lead? A lead that could take her to Clark?

Lois sipped her tea, deep in thought.

If the note had anything to do with Clark, this was not an alien abduction.

Lois felt the slightest unravelling of her rigidly knotted muscles. Humans — whoever they were, whatever they had — were less frightening than aliens were.

Bugs.

She didn't know a whole lot about surveillance devices — other than suspecting it was an ever-advancing field of technology — but it was important that she think this through carefully.

For now, she would assume that both computers — hers and Clark's — were being monitored. She would assume that conversations on her home, desk, and cell phone were not private.

Was she being tracked?

Did they always know her whereabouts?

Did they have a listening device somewhere on her body that meant they could hear everything she said?

Were there cameras?

Her instinct was to research — and she needed to check Monday's Classifieds. But she couldn't do either — not on Clark's computer.

Lois checked the time. It was half past three. A copy of yesterday's Planet had been delivered to her apartment but she had barely glanced at it as she had waited for Clark to take her to breakfast.

She certainly hadn't read the Classifieds.

Lois folded Friday's edition of the Planet and carefully placed all the papers back in the correct order, with the latest on top.

Then she took the note and — behind the closed bathroom door — ripped it into four pieces, and flushed it. In Clark's bedroom, she hesitated long enough to make his bed and put his journal into her bag.

It was her lifeline to the man she loved, and she was not going to risk losing it.

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In her own apartment, Lois collected a few recent copies of the Daily Planet and went to her bathroom. It was possible there was a hidden camera in her living area.

It was also possible there was a hidden camera in her bathroom, but it was less likely.

She hoped.

She sat on the cold tiles and leant against the shower door. She opened yesterday's morning edition at the Classifieds and found the Personal notices. There were more offers for Superman, but no *Miscellaneous* heading. No fishing advice.

She did the same with the evening edition — nothing.

She backtracked and read every single Personal notice in both editions. Her stomach churned at the repugnant blatancy of some of the offers to Superman. How could women be so forward? Didn't they know him at all?

But there was no fishing advice. Nothing that could possibly be construed as pertaining to her — admittedly vague — specifications.

Lois leaned back against the shower and stared unseeingly ahead. What now?

She needed another direction for her lead.

Fishing.

She had been fishing exactly twice in her life — once with Uncle Mike when she was nine years old and once with Jonathan and Clark on the Saturday of her weekend in Smallville.

She had gone with Clark and Jonathan because —

Lois straightened abruptly ...  
 ... because Franklin Hodge had told her he was in Smallville  
 to fish for brown trout in Smallville Lake.

Brown trout.  
 The fish in the notice.

Hodge hadn't been there to fish. He'd been in Smallville to meet with the Sewells, the scientists who had been claiming they'd found a spaceship and had evidence there had been an alien baby in it and were offering the government their silence for the sum of one million dollars.

Lois's heart began to thump in her chest as her investigative instinct roared to life.

There were links — Clark, Superman, the spaceship, Franklin Hodge, Smallville, fishing, the note in her bag, and the notice in the paper.

Had it been Hodge who'd hauled her into the alley on Friday? She didn't think so. Hodge was taller and broader than her assailant.

But that didn't mean Hodge hadn't arranged for the note to be put into her bag.

Was Franklin Hodge was trying to warn her about being bugged? Was he friend or foe? And even if she knew she was being bugged, how did that help in finding Clark?

It was past four-thirty. If she showered and dressed, she would be at the Planet about five-thirty. Maybe there would be something in today's Classifieds.

Lois turned on the faucets and undressed — her outer clothes first and then Clark's shorts and tee. She checked the temperature of the water with her hand, but stopped as her mind whirled.

Franklin Hodge.

Wrapping herself in a towel, Lois crept into her living room. In the dim light emanating from the bathroom, she opened the drawer of her bureau and grabbed a handful of the condolence cards she had received following the deaths of her parents.

Back in the bathroom, now hot and steamy from the still-running water, Lois shuffled through the cards until she came to the one from Hodge.

She looked at the front.

The picture featured a lake. Was it meant to represent Smallville Lake?

Duelling emotions seared through her body. If this was a hint for the fishing notice, someone had been planning this many weeks ago. But it also indicated that she was finally on a path that may ... possibly ... take her to Clark.

Lois did a quick calculation in her head. Hodge had given her this card more than five weeks ago. If he'd known then ...

What if she'd ... they'd ... been watched, bugged, followed ... for five weeks?

Trepidation shivered the length of her body. Had she or Clark said anything, done anything that could jeopardise his secret? Had they, thinking they were alone, inadvertently said something that had somehow contributed to Clark's disappearance?

Lois swallowed down the sick feeling rising inside her. She opened Hodge's card 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'.

Lois closed her eyes and transported herself back to the conference room at the Planet. She pictured Hodge — his hair short, his right arm still in the cast — and the third person, the unidentified watchman, who had been there to ensure Hodge said nothing untoward.

Lois tried to picture the unknown person. Late thirties, she

remembered, maybe older, dirt brown hair, swept back, accentuating the central peak of his hairline, a face tending towards jowls and intense eyes.

She had been feeling nervous. It had been supposed to be a big interview, but she hadn't been prepared because the pain had still been raw from her parents' deaths and she'd been shaken from Clark's revelation and broken because he'd left her.

But Hodge had also seemed nervous. At the start, she'd asked him what she should call him and he'd replied 'Franklin'. Yet he'd signed the card, 'Hodge'. Coincidence? Was he trying to tell her this wasn't just a card?

She focussed on the exact moment he'd given her the card. The third person had examined it, but she'd had the impression that Hodge had been expecting that. Hodge had said something ... what was it? Something like ... the verse was cleverly written and because she was a writer, she'd be good with words.

Lois read the verse again.

It wasn't a great piece of poetry, that was for sure. She read the words again — hunting for a hidden message.

Was 'so-difficult days' a reference to Clark missing?

Could 'loved ones' memories' mean was Clark dead?

The volcano of dread threatened to erupt again, but she smothered it. Clark was invulnerable.

And anyway, it was plural — loved ones. Hodge must have had the card made specially — sympathy cards usually assumed the death of a single loved one.

There was even a typo. Surely, the last word of the fourth line should be 'rays', to rhyme with 'days'. And memories, plural, should shine like rays, plural.

But was it really a mistake?

Lois skimmed the right hand side of the verse, noting the final letters — *useyou*.

Use you?

Use her?

For what?

She glanced to the starting letters of each line — *killsm*.

Kills m.

Who was 'm'?

Then icy comprehension froze her heart

Kill SM.

Superman.

They were trying to kill Superman and intended to use her.

But as Clark? Or as Superman? Had they come to Clark's apartment knowing he was Superman?

Had they somehow managed to render him unconscious, knowing they would need — and being armed with — something beyond normal?

And if they had Superman, how did they plan to kill him?

Could they kill him?

Lois firmly stifled her creeping fear. She had to believe that Clark was OK. Would be OK. But she was possibly the only person — other than whoever had Clark — who knew that Clark had been captured. She had to be the one to help him.

And to do that, she had to think clearly.

Lois shook her head, calming the thousand ideas weaving recklessly through her brain cells.

She needed to contact Hodge. But how? He'd told her his real name when she'd visited him in hospital — Luke ... Lois closed her eyes and tried to picture his name above his bed. Luke ... Allen.

Could she access the hospital records to find his address? His phone number? They wouldn't just hand her the information, of course, but that hadn't deterred her in the past.

She would need to be careful. If she were being followed, she couldn't let them know she had contact with Hodge. He had gone to elaborate efforts to hide his communication with her.

Assuming Hodge was actually on her side.

Lois dropped the towel from her body and stepped into the shower, automatically washing her hair as her mind feverishly sought clarity in the ever-deepening labyrinth.

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Lois dressed in clothes from the back of her closet — clothes she had not expected to wear again. She pulled out her coat from four winters past. She found an old bag and another purse and transferred the bare necessities from her usual bag.

She deliberated over her cell phone — it was the only one she had. What if Clark tried to call her? But if he did, and their conversation was overheard ... With a sigh, Lois decided that her cell needed to stay in her apartment.

She removed her earrings and necklace and tossed them onto her dressing table. She stared at her engagement ring, blinking away her tears. Could there possibly be a hidden tracking device or bug in it?

She didn't know.

Sadly, she took a new tube of toothpaste from its box, dropped her ring into the box, and then replaced the tube.

She would wear her ring again soon, she promised herself. Soon.

When Clark put it back where it belonged.

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Outside her apartment, Lois hailed a cab and positioned herself in the backseat so she could see the driver's mirrors. It didn't seem as if anyone was following her. No one obvious anyway.

Lois arrived at the Planet as the morning edition hit the newsstands. She picked up a copy and took it to her desk.

With straining impatience, she worked through the paper, pretending interest. Finally, she reached the Classified section. Her eyes shot to the Personals column, found the 'Miscellaneous' heading, and there it was.

*Fishing Advice — Look for clownfish, halfmoon, ponyfish, pirate perch, nurse shark. Conceal bait.*

Conceal bait. She had to stay hidden. That bit was simple. But the rest?

The rest made no sense at all.

Lois was sure now that somebody — maybe Hodge — was trying to communicate with her.

But what was he trying to say?

And could she trust Hodge?

What if, in some way she couldn't yet comprehend, he was using her to bring about Superman's downfall?

Lois put on her outdated coat and headed to the Metropolis Hospital.

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"Patients' records are confidential," the efficient-looking nurse informed Lois.

"Yes, but I visited my friend, Luke Allen, on September 1st," Lois said, not needing to fake desperation. "He gave me his number and asked me to keep in touch, but I lost it, so now he probably thinks I'm not interested."

The nurse's cool stare seemed to be inquiring how this involved her.

"So, if you could just give me his number," Lois said. "I could call him. I have no other way to contact him."

The nurse didn't respond.

"He was in Room 15," Lois said. "I visited him on the Sunday afternoon."

"Why has it taken you over two months to decide to contact him?"

Lois thought quickly. "I needed to end another relationship and work out my feelings," she said. "I know how I feel now, and I really want to contact Luke."

The nurse's face seemed to unbend ... just a little. She slid the mouse over the pad and clicked a few times, her eyes trained

on the monitor. Lois longed to lean forward to get a view of the screen but she restrained herself.

"Luke had a broken right arm," Lois added as if that might be helpful.

"September 1st?" the nurse asked.

Lois nodded, trying to control her impatience.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Room 15 was empty on September 1st," the nurse said.

"No, it wasn't empty," Lois insisted. "Luke was in there. Luke Allen. I visited him."

The nurse twisted the monitor so Lois could see. Room 15 was 'unoccupied'.

"Could you please check the day before?" Lois begged. "And the day after?"

The nurse clicked on the mouse. The records said Room 15 had been unoccupied from August 29th through September 3rd.

Lois felt her shoulders slump. Of course. She already knew Hodge could manipulate hospital records. She had used that very fact to obtain a birth certificate for Clark.

She should have expected that there would be no record of his admission.

The nurse regarded her with something approaching sympathy. "Are you sure you have the right ward?" she asked.

Lois nodded. "Thanks," she said and walked away.

Minutes later, Lois left the hospital via its front entrance and walked along the pavement next the neighbouring park. Usually, it was empty other than a few mothers with their small children. Today however, it was a bustle of activity as a circus troupe set up their big top and settled in their animals.

Lois passed with barely a glance in their direction.

Clark had been missing for over twenty-four hours.

She had no lead other than today's cryptic message in the Classifieds.

She had no way of contacting Hodge.

She needed coffee.

The street was mostly stark office blocks with not the slightest suggestion of the availability of decent coffee. Lois sighed and turned back to the hospital.

She found the café on the ground floor and bought a morning edition of the Daily Planet and a latte. In a deserted corner, she sipped the not-completely-undrinkable coffee and nonchalantly browsed through the paper.

Her glass was half-empty when Lois arrived at the Classifieds. Her eyes went directly to the notice, and she read it again.

*Fishing Advice — Look for clownfish, halfmoon, ponyfish, pirate perch, nurse shark. Conceal bait.*

Clownfish? Clowns? She had just walked past a circus.

Was Clark being held at the circus? She doubted it. That just created a hundred more questions. Chiefly — why didn't he just escape?

She read the notice again. Nurse — could that mean Clark was sick? Or injured? That he needed a nurse?

Clark couldn't be either, of course, but he couldn't be held against his will for over a day, so things she'd believed weren't possible, clearly were.

If they tried to hurt him, how long would it take to realise he was no ordinary human? Was there any way for Clark to hurt himself? Maybe heat vision? Could he make himself bleed?

He would do it, Lois realised, as the acrid taste of horror clawed up her throat. If it meant protecting the secret, or her, or his parents.

It added another vile image to the already overloaded compilation in her head.

Lois forced her concentration back to the notice. It made no sense. There was only so much that could be relayed through

obscure notices about fishing. She needed to talk with Hodge ... or whoever.

She considered inquiring at the Planet as to who had placed the notices. But if Hodge could wipe hospital records, she doubted he would have any problems placing a classified notice anonymously.

She had to talk with him.

Somehow.

Then her mind sparked with sudden connection. What if this notice was about a possible meeting?

Clowns ... then halfmoon. If the circus was 'where' could the halfmoon be 'when'? Lois pulled her diary from her bag. Tomorrow was the half moon, she realised with a jolt of adrenalin. Maybe, just maybe, she was making some progress.

The ponyfish? A carousel? No, but she'd noticed that the circus had animals. She thought back — she remembered elephants and dogs. Perhaps there were ponies.

So was she to meet ... there ... Hodge maybe ... at the circus tomorrow, near the pony enclosure?

Which left the pirate and the nurse.

Pirates steal ... which was apt, because someone had stolen Clark from her. But pirates worked in the ocean. Was it possible she was meant to meet someone at a port? Hobb's Bay?

Lois looked up as a group of three nurses settled at the table closest to hers. They were identifiably nurses because they were all dressed the same — navy blue pants and a blouse of blue with a geometric pattern of alternating red and white diamonds.

The notice had said the bait must be concealed. Was she meant to come as a nurse ... and meet a pirate?

Lois drained her latte, deliberately folded the paper and left it on the table. If someone was watching her, she didn't want it looking like the newspaper was relevant.

She walked past the still-buzzing circus. A quick glance to the notice board told her the opening performance was scheduled for two o'clock tomorrow afternoon.

Lois continued walking, her attention carefully diverted from the circus.

Should she come back tomorrow?

Would she be walking into an elaborate trap? She didn't care. If this were the only way to get to Clark — so be it. It would be worth it to know he was safe. And together, they could deal with anything.

But what if she led someone to the meeting and blew Hodge's cover?

Lois walked back to the Planet, her mind buzzing with a hundred ideas and two hundred counter ideas.

But this was better. This was infinitely more bearable than knowing nothing.

She had a lead. And it would take her to Clark. She had to believe that.

She would find him. If she had to scour every inch of this city ... this nation ... this entire planet, she *would* find him.

### Part 7

By the time Lois exited the elevator at the Planet, she had decided she would be at the circus tomorrow at two o'clock. And she had already pieced together most of how she was going to achieve it.

Without being tracked.

She had one more piece of information from Hodge. Lois picked up her pencil, notepad, and tape recorder and went into the storeroom.

Once there, she unlocked her drawer in the filing cabinets and sorted through her disks and tapes. She found the tape of the Hodge interview and put it in her recorder. She plugged in the earphones and pressed 'play'.

She listened to the tape, searching for anomalies — and quickly realising the entire interview was one big anomaly.

But there was nothing specific ... nothing she could link to her current situation.

Could the verse in the card be a pointer? Just as the picture of the lake pointed to the fishing notices?

Lois rewound the tape and listened again, writing the first letter of the first word of each of Hodge's answers to her questions.

*USELLCKGETSM*

U sell, CK gets M

Could 'M' mean murdered?

Sell what?

U sell CK, get SM?

If she was to 'sell' ... betray? ... give up? ... Clark, she would get Superman back?

If she didn't pursue Clark's disappearance, Superman would come back?

Lois took the tape from the recorder, replaced it in her drawer, and carefully locked it. She ripped the top page and the next five pages from her notepad and left the storeroom. At the paper shredder, she pushed all six pages through it.

Back at her computer, she opened her email account. For the next hour, Lois re-read every email that had passed between her and Clark, looking for any slip, anything either of them had said that could put Clark's secret at risk.

Her tears rose more than once as she read his emails to her. Even when they were about a story, he'd managed to slip in a line that told her how much he treasured her. She could almost hear his quiet, loving voice as she read his words. Anyone reading them would have no doubt about their relationship.

His last email to her, sent Friday afternoon before their date, broke the dam, and her tears gushed.

She read it again. *Whenever we're apart, your farmboy misses his honey.*

It was a reference to her bracelet and the farmboy charm. Lois hadn't known at the time, but now, she could imagine Clark's smile as he wrote it.

And she had no doubt he was missing her. Desperately.

Lois dried her tears, taking comfort from the fact there was nothing in any of the emails to indicate that either of them had a special knowledge of Superman. Nothing — not even an oblique reference to super-activities such as chasing multiple sunrises or whizzing to a foreign country for breakfast.

When the Man of Steel was mentioned, it was purely in passing, in the context of a story they were writing. There was nothing to suggest Lois was in love with Superman. Nothing to suggest Superman returned her love.

Lois sighed and threw her damp tissue into the trash.

She needed these touches from Clark — his journal, his emails — but ultimately all they did was remind her of what she was missing from her life.

Something else occurred to her. If they had access to her emails, they would know she loved Clark. If she were being watched, they would expect her to react to his disappearance.

What would be a normal reaction?

Would not going to the police seem suspicious?

She recoiled from that idea. Could she trust the police? She was almost sure she could trust Inspector Henderson. Although Clark had hinted that Henderson could be more than just a city cop, that perhaps Henderson worked covertly in areas similar to Hodge.

If Henderson wasn't what she'd always assumed him to be, she certainly wasn't going to trust another police officer she barely knew.

And anyway, what could she say? If she reported Clark Kent as missing, it would lead to other questions — questions she couldn't answer with any real honesty. And if she brought to attention that Clark was missing, how long before someone

noticed that Superman hadn't been seen either?

No — she couldn't go to the police.

She needed an explanation for not reporting Clark's disappearance. If they had bugged her, it wasn't going to be difficult to feed them information. She just needed to decide the nature of that information.

"Lois!" Perry's voice scythed across the newsroom.

With a sinking heart, Lois went into his office.

"Where is Clark?" Perry growled.

Lois took an elongated breath. "Chasing a story."

Perry glared at her. "And whatever I ask, you're sticking to that?"

Lois said nothing.

His exasperation ebbed away. "Lois, if you or Clark are in any sort of trouble ..."

Illogically, his concern was harder to accept than his animosity. Lois swallowed. "We're fine."

He didn't believe her, but he said, "I have a real story, and you are going to write it."

Lois nodded compliantly.

"There's been something of a mini crime wave in Metropolis the past two days — unprecedented numbers of burglaries and break-ins; nothing too big, but in huge numbers. And mostly by unskilled amateurs — like the attempt on the Met Bank yesterday."

"I'll talk to Henderson," Lois suggested.

Perry contemplated her for a long, very uncomfortable moment. "Where's your ring?" he said.

"At home."

Perry took a deeply frustrated breath. "Get the story, get it written, and get it to me," he ordered.

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Between Perry's office and her desk, Lois had formulated a plan, including deciding she would call Henderson instead of visiting the police station.

If they wanted to bug her, she could play the game, too.

She dialed and asked to speak with Inspector Henderson. She asked all the right questions about the increased number of burglaries and scribbled the details on her pad. With the interview done — without even an allusion to Superman — Lois said, "Just letting you know, Bill, I'm not working with Clark Kent anymore, so I'd appreciate it if you worked directly with me on this one."

"You're not working with Clark anymore?" Henderson sounded surprised.

"No," she said curtly.

"I thought things were good with you two ... professionally ... and personally."

"You thought wrong." Henderson probably wasn't the nosy type, unless it involved a case, so Lois hurried on. "He's left. I haven't heard from him. I don't expect to, either."

"Do you know where he is?"

"The question is not where he is, but who he's with."

"Who is he with?" Henderson parroted.

"Clark Kent ..." Lois scoffed. "Clark Kent is with little Sally Smallville — his High School squeeze."

She heard Henderson's quick intake of breath. "Who?" he gasped.

"Some small-town bimbo wiggled her tush in Kent's direction and he's gone."

"Gone?"

"Oh, it's nothing terribly original," Lois said cuttingly. "He realised, like a million men before him, that his needs are greater below the belt than above the neck."

"How did you find out?"

"I have more contacts and sources than you've had hot dinners, Henderson," she bragged. "How do you think I found

out?"

"Have you spoken with him?" Henderson asked, sounding as if this news had genuinely shocked him.

"He isn't man enough to actually tell me himself, of course," Lois said with a level of venom she privately thought was quite impressive.

"Where is he?"

"Dunno," she said dismissively. "Not in Metropolis, that's for sure. Not in Kansas, he's too spineless to face his parents."

"So you don't actually know where he is?"

"No. And I'm certainly not going to waste a second of my time looking for him. Let him serve a life sentence with Sally Smallville."

"I didn't expect Clark would do that."

"He's male, isn't he?" Lois said with dripping scorn. "Keep in touch, Henderson. With me."

Lois replaced her phone. Outside, she wore a fragile veil of composure. Inside she was shaking violently.

Her story about Clark wouldn't stand up to much investigation, but she wasn't sure it needed to. All she needed was a reason why she wasn't informing everyone — Perry, friends, his parents, and the police — that Clark Kent was missing.

And, she realised with real regret, she'd done nothing for Clark's reputation.

But once he was back in her arms, that wouldn't matter at all.

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Lois wrote up the crime-wave story and emailed it to Perry. She slipped from her desk to the elevator, hoping to avoid further attention. She did — other than a disdainful stare from Cat which Lois was sure was a response to her choice of outfit.

Half an hour later, Lois entered the hospital café. The diners were split into two clear groups. There were the visitors, and there were the hospital employees. While waiting to place her order, Lois noticed a nurse sitting by herself. Once Lois had her coffee, she sidled into the chair across from the solitary nurse. The nurse glanced up, then immediately returned to reading her magazine.

"Hi," Lois said.

"Hi," the nurse replied, her voice and her body language unmistakably displaying her desire to be left alone.

"Uhhmm ... Could I ask you something?" Lois said in a whiny drawl.

The nurse's sigh was poorly concealed, but she did look up.

"This is kinda embarrassing," Lois said. "But I need a nurse's uniform."

The nurse's eyebrows lifted slowly.

Lois hurried on. "I'm going to a fancy dress party ... and there's this guy ... and he's *very* hot ... but, like, he hasn't noticed me at all ... and my friend told me he's going as a surgeon ... so I'm thinking it would be cool to go as a nurse ..."

Understanding flowed into the nurse's expression.

"So I thought if you, like, brought a spare blouse to work ... Could I buy it?"

"They cost thirty-five dollars new."

Lois took her purse from her bag. "I can pay for it."

The nurse shrugged. "OK, come with me."

Ten minutes later, Lois walked out of the hospital with a nurse's blouse folded in her bag.

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From the hospital, Lois went to her apartment and called Perry.

"Where are you?" he said, his annoyance sizzling down the line. "And why haven't you been answering your cell phone?"

"Perry," Lois said. "I'm sorry about everything, but there's something I need to tell you."

There was a pause. Lois could picture Perry, his irritation

tempered by concern. “What is it, Lois?” he asked more gently.

“I’ve just been to the hospital, and it seems I need a ... a procedure done urgently. Tomorrow.”

“A procedure?” he said, all traces of irritation gone now. “You’re OK, aren’t you, darlin’?”

Lois hated lying to him. “I’ll be fine, Perry,” she said brightly. “It’s just a little thing I need to have done.”

The silence buzzed through the phone. She heard Perry clear his throat. “Lois?” he said with more uncertainty than she had ever heard from her editor.

“Yes?”

“You’re not ... I mean ... Henderson called ... and I spoke to him because you weren’t here ... and Kent’s name came up ... and ...” There was a long silence. “You’re not pregnant, are you? With Clark’s child? And you’re not going to ...”

“No!” A wave of dismay washed over Lois. It hadn’t occurred to her that what she had told Henderson would reach Perry. “No,” she said more calmly.

“You’d tell me if it were serious?” Perry said quietly.

“It’s not serious,” Lois insisted. “And it’s not what you’re thinking. It’s just a little thing I need fixed. I need tomorrow off.”

“Of course, darlin’,” Perry said gently. “Take a few days. Whatever you need.”

“I’m trying to keep it quiet, Perry,” Lois said. “It’s personal. I don’t want any visitors. I’ve even booked under another name.” She forced a humourless laugh. “I wouldn’t want the National Inquisitor getting hold of it.”

Perry didn’t respond to her attempted joke. Lois knew him well enough to know he was either worried about her or he wondered if she were being completely truthful.

Neither sat well with her.

For the first time, she realised the full implications of Clark’s secret. It forced you to lie, to cover, to tell half-truths. If Clark had been a normal man, this would have been a simple disappearance — distressing but without the overwhelming complications.

For starters, she wouldn’t have had to work alone.

This had been the Kents’ life for so many years.

She should call them.

She couldn’t.

Not if there was the slightest chance that her phone was bugged. She realised Perry was speaking.

“... care of yourself, Lois.”

“Thanks, Chief.”

Lois hung up, made herself a cup of coffee, and took it into her bedroom. She really couldn’t face eating.

She wrote down the letters from Hodge’s interview again.

*U sell CK get SM.*

*USELLCKGETSM.*

She doodled with her pencil across the letters.

*Use LL CK get SM.*

They were going to use her *and* Clark to get Superman?

If that was what it meant, they didn’t know Clark was Superman.

But how did they intend to use her?

Take Clark? Track her to see if she had contact with Superman?

Were they waiting for Superman to rescue Clark?

Did they plan to threaten her safety in order to lure Superman?

Then what? Capture him?

Just like that?

Lois tossed away her pen in frustration and succumbed to her pent-up anxiety. While she’d been chasing leads, it had been possible to push aside her fear and immerse herself in the case.

But the reality was that Clark, her Clark, her partner, her friend, her fiancé, her strength, her comfort ... had gone ... and

she didn’t know where.

She missed him so much, she ached.

Tired and drained, Lois dragged herself to her kitchen and forced herself to microwave a frozen meal.

Then, infinitely more difficult, she forced herself to eat it. Most of it.

Whatever tomorrow brought, she would be better able to help Clark if she had eaten something.

Her phone rang as Lois cleaned up after her meal. She stared at it for a long moment before picking it up. “Lois Lane.”

“Lois; it’s Sarah,” came the buoyant greeting. “How are you, Ms Engaged?”

“I’m great.”

“You don’t sound great.”

Lois grabbed the first explanation that entered her head. “I have to go to the hospital for a procedure tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Now Sarah was concerned about her, too. “Nothing serious, I hope.”

“No, nothing serious.” Lying to friends was becoming a habit. “I’ll be fine.”

“Is Clark going with you?”

“No, he’s ... away.”

“What time will you be finished?”

That she didn’t know. It depended on what happened during the meeting. Assuming there was a meeting. “Five o’clock?” Lois estimated.

“I’ll send my driver to pick you up and take you home.”

“Really, there’s no —”

“It’s no trouble,” Sarah assured her. “His name is Hank. He’s completely trustworthy and the epitome of discretion. Sees everything, says nothing. He’s an old Dutchman. He’s worked for the —”

“What if I’m not finished by five?”

“Have you got a pen? I’ll give you his number.”

Lois wrote down the number. She needed to get Sarah off the phone. The longer they talked, the more likely something would be said that could be used by whoever could be listening. “I need to go.”

“OK. We’ll catch up soon. Good luck tomorrow.”

“Thanks.”

Twenty minutes later, Lois crawled into bed and opened Clark’s journal.

*August 30, 9am*

*I kissed Lois.*

*August 30, 10pm*

*The afternoon papers were trumpeting the fall of Luthor; but only the Planet had the story this morning.*

*Our story ... Lois’s and mine. Our first big story together.*

*Very early this morning, Superman rescued Lois from Luthor’s tunnel. Luthor had told Lois I was dead. Her relief ... joy ... at discovering I am alive is something I will never forget.*

*Maybe ...*

*Could it be possible ...*

*She asked me to kiss her. On her mouth.*

*I have replayed it a million times in my mind, and it still leaves me breathless.*

*I took her home. She accessed my computer by deducing my password.*

*I should change it.*

*But I won’t.*

*September 15*

*Tomorrow, I’m taking Lois on a date.*

*A date.*

*A man-and-woman, this-could-be-serious date.*

*It’s serious, all right.*

*It has been since the moment I met her.*

*But does she feel the same?*

September 20

*The funeral is tomorrow.*

*I wish I knew how to help Lois through this.*

*She is hurting so much. I can see her pain and confusion in her eyes and the hopelessness in her body language and the isolation in her face.*

*And there is nothing I can do to make this easier for her. Not one thing.*

*I want to hold her and not let go until all of my strength has poured into her and made this bearable for her.*

September 29

*I miss you.*

*My heart misses you so much, it has to be reminded to beat.*

*My arms ache to hold you.*

*You felt so good, your small body pressed against mine, your arms wrapped around my neck, your sweet breath on my cheek. And kissing you was like tasting heaven. I would give up everything to hold you one more time. To be whole again ... even for a second.*

*I dream about you. Every night. And every morning, I wake up and grieve that I lost you.*

*I miss you.*

*I miss you.*

*I wonder ... if I write it enough times, will the hurting stop?*

*The world would run out of ink first.*

October 4

*I want to go to her:*

*I fight it every second of every day.*

*I can't go to her.*

*I know what will happen if I do — she will repeat what she's already told me — that we have no future together. And that would be like a machete to my heart.*

*But that's not the reason I can't go.*

*I can't go because seeing me will re-open her wounds — wounds that I hope have begun to heal.*

*I have to leave her alone — and hope she can find a way through her grief ... and the pain I caused her.*

October 14

*Yesterday, the door opened, and there she was. Lois.*

*At first, I was sure my tortured mind had conjured her from the depths of my loneliness. Then her eyes met mine, and the jolt of our connection was so powerful, it had to be real.*

*Lois loves me!*

*She still loves me!*

*I have kissed her again and held her again and told her I love her again and looked into her gorgeous brown eyes and been totally captivated again.*

*She asked me to marry her.*

*SHE asked ME!*

*From the moment I met her, I've known. I still know.*

*Without Lois, my life is nothing.*

*"Without you, Clark," Lois whispered. "My life is nothing, either."*

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Early the next afternoon, Lois walked into the hospital and took the elevator to the day patients' floor. Once there, she went into the female bathrooms and changed into the nurse's blouse, a pair of navy blue pants, and flat shoes.

She fixed her hair into a tight roll at the back of her head and slipped on a pair of sunglasses.

At the elevator, she entered the first one that arrived. For five minutes, she rode up and down, getting out at random floors, changing elevators. Only someone with x-ray vision could have tracked her movements.

A few minutes after two o'clock, she crossed the ground floor of the hospital and walked casually into the weak sunshine. She turned left and headed to the field where the circus had set up.

The last of the spectators were trickling into the big top. Clowns congregated near the entrance, making balloon figures for the children. Excited laughter and the aroma of hot buttered popcorn hung in the air.

Lois circled the huge tent and saw a group of caravans dotted throughout various animal enclosures. As the music began inside the tent, signalling the start of the show, she noticed a temporary corral with a saddle resting on the top rail. Before she could decide what to do next, a hand grasped her shoulder, turning her into his body.

A mouth came down on hers — a mouth surrounded by a bushy beard.

She struggled to pull away.

His mouth left hers and his strong arms clamped her against him. "Stop fighting, and be glad to see me," he hissed against her ear.

His lips came back on hers, unmoving and aloof, and Lois subdued the impulse to squirm. She'd managed only the briefest glimpse of him — enough to see a large hat, a lot of hair, and an eye-patch over his right eye.

After a few seconds, he backed away, grabbed her hand, and pulled her to the nearest caravan. He opened the door, stepped back, and pushed her into the dimness.

He followed her and shut the door. Lois removed her sunglasses and when he turned, she saw his face for the first time. Even with the wild beard, she recognised him immediately.

"Fr —"

Hodge's hand shot to her mouth. His forefinger rose against his lips to caution her to be quiet. She tried to nod her understanding, and his hand fell away from her face.

He reached into the interior pocket of his shabby vest and took out a small black box with a series of LEDs along the top. He floated the device the length of her body and around her bag.

There was no response, either audibly or visually.

Hodge turned off the device, removed his hat, and pushed the eye patch back from his face. "I'm sorry about ..." He gestured out the door, looking decidedly uncomfortable. "No one is listening, not electronically, so you can sp -"

"Where's Clark? Is he all right?"

"He's alive."

Something in Hodge's tone twisted Lois's heart. "Alive?" she breathed. "Is he hurt?"

Hodge wouldn't meet her eyes.

So Clark had found a way to feign vulnerability.

"Do you remember the third person in our interview?" Hodge said in a voice barely above a whisper.

Lois nodded.

"His name is Jason Trask. He's in the business I used to be in. We never worked the same assignments; I avoided him — he's always been volatile and unpredictable."

"Does he have Clark?"

"Trask believes Superman is part of an alien invasion and -"

"That's not true! He's —"

"Sshh!"

"Sorry."

Hodge pulled his hand through his unkempt hair. "Trask believes there were many babies sent here, to different parts of the world. He believes they have secret ways to communicate and their purpose is to conquer our planet and massacre the entire human race."

"That's ridiculous," Lois said scathingly.

"Actually, it's not," Hodge countered. "The premise is sound." He saw her glare and hurried on. "If they had the capability to send one baby, why send only one knowing that would guarantee their eventual extinction? Why not send more, both male and female?"

"Do you believe there are others?"

"I don't know," Hodge admitted. "But Trask believes they've spent the past twenty-five years maturing to full strength, covertly gathering information, and planning their attack. He thinks the appearance of Superman is a strategy to lure us into overlooking how easily their powers could be used against us."

"Superman's heart is justice and peace, not destruction and domination," Lois declared.

"Which Trask will never comprehend."

Lois sucked in a shuddery breath. "What's he planning to do?" she asked.

"Trask is convinced the only way to protect our planet is to murder Superman. To demonstrate to the others that we are not defenceless and vulnerable."

"Murder Superman?" Lois was suspended between horror and scepticism. "That's not possible."

"Anything's possible, Lois," Hodge said with weary conviction. "When an evil man is driven by mindless fear and rampant paranoia."

Lois felt an icy chill slither down her spine. "How do you know about this?" she asked suspiciously.

"Trask has three men who work closely with him. One of them is feeding out information to me. If Trask gets even the slightest hint of a leak, or that I'm still involved, he'll kill them."

"So Trask wants Superman," Lois concluded, careful to keep her tone even. "But what does this have to do with Clark? Why take him?"

Hodge's blue eyes probed hers. "Because Trask doesn't believe for one moment that Clark Kent is just a city reporter."

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<http://www.spyassociates.com/spy-hawk-pro-rf-phone-tap-detector-p-1962.html>

### Part 8

Lois clamped her bottom jaw in place to stop it hanging slack and concentrated on wide-eyed innocence. "Huh?"

"Trask watched the video footage of our conversation when we were trapped in Luthor's tunnel," Hodge said. "You said Kent was some sort of international spy tracking down Nigel St John. I figured you were messing with Luthor, but Trask got real excited. He saw Kent as a possible partner in his war against Superman, but Kent wouldn't have anything to do with it."

That wasn't surprising. "So why not let Clark go?"

"Trask doesn't take rejection well," Hodge said ominously.

"He wants information about Superman, and he believes both you and Kent have it ... You've had so many exclusives."

Lois felt like her brain was connected to a hundred horses all rearing and straining in different directions. This ... Trask ... didn't know The Secret, but he thought Clark had another secret. He had captured Clark, initially hoping Clark would help him kill Superman. "How is Trask intending to kill Superman?" Lois asked, not at all sure she wanted to hear the reply.

"Trask presumed Superman would appear at one of the minor crimes he organised," Hodge explained. "Then it was a simple matter of testing his weapon."

"Weapon?" Lois gulped.

"He has a thing called a quantum disruptor," Hodge said.

"Apparently, it can separate and destroy molecules. Based on the Sewells' speculative research of Kryptonian physiology, Trask believes it can kill Superman."

Quantum disruptor? Kryptonian? "All I want is Clark back," Lois mumbled under her breath.

"Then we need to find Superman," Hodge said soberly.

"What do you mean?" Lois breathed.

"The only way for Clark to get out of this alive is for Superman to face Trask."

"And be killed by the quantum thingy?" she exclaimed.

"Superman hasn't been seen for five days," Hodge said, his impassive tone contrasting with her escalating panic. "Do you

know why?"

"You want me to help set up an attempt on Superman's life?" Lois asked incredulously. "You're working with Trask?"

"I am *not* working with Trask," Hodge said with quiet sincerity. "I wouldn't do that. Without Superman, I'd be dead now."

"We can't let Superman confront Trask if there's any chance the weapon could work," she said desperately.

Hodge stared at her, unmoving.

Lois stared right back. "You know where Clark is, don't you?" she said with cold accusation.

Hodge nodded, still steadily meeting her eyes.

"Then why can't we just ... just charge in and get him back?" she said, her tightly bound hysteria threatening to explode. "You said you have power. Just get the people, get the weapons, and get Clark out of there."

Hodge dropped a hand on her arm; then, as if realising what he'd done, he lifted it quickly. "Lois," he soothed. "Lois. A lot of people believe there could be something in what Trask says. We don't have the numbers to do what you're proposing. And I've resigned, remember? I can't just summon -"

"You put the note in my bag, didn't you?"

"I arranged for it to be put there," Hodge said.

"Then why can't you *arrange* to have Clark rescued?" Lois demanded breathlessly. "You have access to weapons. You didn't think twice about trying to blow up half of Smallville. This is your job, Hodge. You're supposed to be good at it. You have the resources. You have the training. All you have to do -"

"Lois, I know this goes against every grain in your body, but if Clark and you and me and any number of others are going to get out of this alive, you *really* need to do this my way."

"Then why bring me into it?"

A wave rustled through his beard, suggesting a smile.

"Because you're Lois Lane."

"So?"

"You're here now," Hodge said with open admiration. "I would've bet good money that not even you could have followed that trail. There's —"

"So this is about shutting down my investigation?" Lois surmised grimly.

"No," Hodge said calmly. "This is about warning you. With Superman in hiding, Trask is getting very jumpy. He's gone well beyond using petty crime to force a confrontation with Superman."

With sudden inspiration, an idea birthed in Lois's brain, conceived from the subconscious remnants of her hypotheses and conjecture since Clark had gone missing. There wasn't time to think through all the implications, but the impulse was too strong to be ignored. "Whatever Trask does," she declared. "Superman won't come."

The interest flared in Hodge's eyes. "What do you know?"

"I know that Superman has returned to his home planet," Lois said boldly.

"He doesn't have a home planet," Hodge said with a tinge of exasperation. "It was destroyed nearly thirty years ago."

So that's why they'd sent Clark to Earth. "How do you know that?"

"The Sewells. Their research indicates the spaceship they found came from a planet they called Krypton. A planet that was destroyed in 1966."

Lois loaded and fired a withering look. "And I suppose the Sewells' research also told you with absolute certainty that no adult ... Kryptonians ... survived?"

Hodge paled under his unruly beard. "Some did?" he choked.

Lois nodded, her face set with certainty. "Survived and settled somewhere else ... a new planet ... New Krypton."

"So there *are* others?" Hodge said with wonder.

“Not here,” Lois said with emphasis. “Not as far as Superman knows anyway. But there are others who settled on a new planet. Others who don’t need Earth. They already have a home. They already knew about Earth. They already knew Superman was here. If they wanted our planet, they really didn’t need to send babies.”

“So why did Superman go back?”

It couldn’t be an alien abduction ... too many parallels with Clark ... and it gave credibility to the idea of menacing alien forces. “His mother is sick.”

“His *mother*?” Hodge’s surprise caused his voice to squeak.

“You didn’t think Superman has a mother?” Lois asked scornfully.

“Will he be back?”

“Would you come back, if you knew a maniac like Trask was planning to kill you?”

“Does Superman know about Trask?”

Lois shook her head. “That I don’t know. He got word his mother was sick and left. That’s all I know.”

“Why hasn’t it been in the media?”

“You think it’s a good idea to announce to every would-be criminal that his worst nightmare has left the planet?”

“No,” Hodge acknowledged with a shrug.

“But now, we have no choice,” Lois said decisively. “So, we tell Trask that Superman has gone, and he releases Clark. Right?”

Alarm flooded Hodge’s face. “Lois, we can’t let Trask know Superman has left,” he said desperately.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Lois retorted. “We have to let Trask know; it’s the only way to get Clark back.”

Hodge covered Lois’s hand with both of his. She glanced down. His touch was unexpected, but not unnerving. “Lois,” he said. “Remember when you thought I was single-minded, brutal, callous, and indifferent to the consequences of my actions?”

“Yeah.” She still wasn’t completely convinced otherwise.

“You need to understand Jason Trask,” Hodge said with frightening intensity. “I am not in his league. He is a brilliant, meticulous planner and an utterly ruthless executioner of his plans. He stops at nothing. I think he revels in the death and destruction. For him, they’re not just the means to the end.”

“What are you saying?”

“Nothing short of Superman’s death will satisfy Trask.”

The chain of foreboding was slowly tightening around her stomach, but Lois refused to yield to it. “Well, that’s not going to be easy to achieve with Superman on another planet,” she said flippantly.

“Lois, you’re not listening to me,” Hodge said. “If Trask thinks Superman has gone, he will do *anything* to lure him back.”

“Such as?”

“Well, for starters ... kill Clark ...” Hodge’s eyes dropped to where her hand was still in his. “... and you.”

A sudden thought birthed in Lois’s mind. “If Trask captures me, thinking that will bring Superman, he’ll take me to Clark.”

“I’m not letting Trask anywhere near you,” Hodge vowed.

“You don’t understand, Franklin — I’m happy to be the bait if it gets me to Clark.”

Hodge’s grip tightened on her hand. “No, *you* don’t understand, Lois. I’m not letting Trask anywhere near you.”

Something in Hodge’s tone and his touch prodded her comprehension. She looked into his blue eyes and was hit by understanding.

Lois withdrew her hand. “Franklin,” she said softly. “I love Clark.”

Hodge breathed out an embittered laugh. “I know that, Lois. I’m socially awkward not delusional.” He stared at the floor for a moment and then looked directly into her eyes. “But I can’t help how I feel, and I’m not going to let Trask hurt you.”

“No matter what they do, Superman won’t come,” Lois said

with finality. “Trask needs to know that.”

“You can’t try to communicate with Superman,” Hodge warned. “All your communications are bugged.”

Not quite all. “Can Trask’s weapon — his quantum thingy — kill someone on another planet?”

“I doubt it.”

“Then I’ll write the story.”

Hodge closed his eyes, his face a portrayal of indecision.

The chain inside her tightened further. “You know something you’re not telling me,” Lois said.

Hodge grimaced and admitted it with a terse nod.

“Tell me.”

Still he hesitated. Then with a big breath, he said, “We believe Trask has missiles in place — missiles aimed at every major American city between Philadelphia and Las Vegas.”

“How did he get them?” Lois exploded. “Isn’t that why we have a Department of Defense?”

“Trask is very, very persuasive. And he has a phenomenal record of taking on impossible situations and fixing them. People in very high places trust him — and never look too closely at how he achieves what he does.”

“But hasn’t he realised that will kill us and not Superman? And reveal that *he’s* the danger?”

“I think he learnt a lot from Luthor’s system about how to shift the culpability.”

“To?”

“Superman, via the Daily Planet.”

“But Superman has never hurt anyone,” Lois railed.

“Differences breed fear; Trask uses that to his advantage.”

Lois slowly shook her head. If it hadn’t been for the fact that someone had held Clark for almost three days, she would probably have dismissed this as the ravings of a lunatic.

“Trask stops at nothing,” Hodge continued. “He *can* do it, and he *will* threaten it if he thinks it’s the only way to get Superman back to Earth.”

“But he’ll only threaten it.”

“No. He never bluffs. If pushed, he’ll do it.”

Lois swallowed. “So what are you going to do?”

Hodge almost smiled, as if he shouldn’t have been expecting that question, but he had been. “I’m going to blow up Trask’s control centre,” he said simply. “Before he fires the missiles.”

The dread ran cold again. “Where Clark is?” Lois breathed.

Hodge nodded sombrely.

Lois grabbed the front of Hodge’s shirt in her fists. “You can’t do that,” she said as loudly as she dared. “You can’t kill Clark.”

Hodge put his hands over hers. “I’ll do whatever I can to save Clark,” he said. “But I can’t let Trask kill thousands of Americans.”

“Whatever you can?” Lois hissed in a terrified whisper. “You’re going to *bomb* him!”

Hodge’s blue eyes shot into hers, intense and earnest. “Anyone can make a bomb. But making a bomb to destroy exactly what you want to destroy and leave what you want kept safe ... that’s -”

“You’re saying you can make a bomb to kill Trask, but not Clark, even if they’re in the same building?” she gasped disbelievingly. “Or is this more bluster?”

He didn’t flinch at her contempt. “I consider every aspect — the size, the building materials, the contents, how many rooms, every possible contributing factor, and I make each bomb precisely and specifically for the individual situation.”

Lois looked at him dubiously.

“I made a small bomb as a diversion and had it delivered to the office of the Smallville Press,” he said. “How much damage was there?”

“None,” she conceded.

Hodge shrugged. “It doesn’t matter whether you believe me or not; what matters is that you stay away.”

“While you bomb Clark?”

“Lois, I’m begging you to stay away, not just for your safety, but for others’ as well — including Clark,” Hodge said. His hands rested on hers, where she still gripped his vest. “But I have no faith that you will. So, I’m telling you this . . . If you do somehow get to Clark, please stay close to him because that will be your best chance of survival.”

A large part of Lois couldn’t believe she was hearing this, discussing this. But a small part of her managed to keep functioning. “So I write the story?” she asked, removing her hands from Hodge’s body.

He hesitated. “Will you send it by email?”

Lois nodded.

“So Trask will know about Superman this afternoon?” Hodge thought for a moment. “There’s another circus show here at seven o’clock tonight. We’ll meet then, same place, same get-up. Go home, write up your story, rest from your *procedure* and meet -”

“How did you know about that?”

“There are very few secrets in this business, Lois.” He winked at her. “But that was brilliant. Almost as good as Sally Smallville.”

Her initial shock evolved into a small smile.

Hodge smiled back as he took the device from his pocket. “Take this,” he said. He pointed along the LEDs. “This signifies telephone taps, this one is listening devices, this one is hidden cameras, this one is tracking devices. Don’t disable any of the bugs or do anything that could alert Trask. If he gets suspicious, he will kill anyone who could possibly be involved — starting with Clark.”

“Would he kill you?”

“If he gets the slightest hint I’m in Metropolis, yes, he’ll kill me. But don’t worry about that. You need to keep yourself safe.” Hodge replaced his eye patch and crammed his hand on his head. “We have to go. We’ve already been here longer than is prudent.”

Lois stilled him with her hand on his arm. “Have you actually seen Clark?”

“Not personally. I can’t risk being anywhere near there.”

“Is he badly hurt?”

“He’s not good.” Hodge put his hand on the door handle.

“Can you sneak away from here? Looking like you’ve . . . you know?”

Lois squeezed his arm. “Thank you, Franklin,” she said. “For everything. Stay safe.”

Hodge nodded brusquely. “See you tonight. Here. Seven o’clock.”

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Lois took a cab from the circus to the foreshore of the bay, where a small carnival permanently operated. She walked to the Ferris wheel and waited in the short queue. When her turn came, the man who had been standing behind her made a move to get into the cage with her.

She held up her hand to stop him. “Last time, I vomited,” she said apologetically.

He backed out quickly, and the attendant shut the cage door.

A few moments later, her cage was suspended high in the air as other people boarded far below her.

Lois did a quick check with the bug-detector Hodge had given her. Nothing.

“Clark, Clark,” she began, wondering why she hadn’t thought of this before now. “I love you. I miss you so much, farmboy. We will get out of this; we will be together again soon.”

She swallowed down her tears.

“An agent called Jason Trask wants to kill Superman. He captured you because he thought you would help him. But Clark, Superman has returned to his own planet.

“Clark, it’s really, really important that — no matter what happens — Superman doesn’t come. Superman *must* not come. There *is* another way out of this.

“I miss you so much, Clark.

“I love you. I love you.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m fine.

“I love you. I miss you. I’ll be with you soon.”

\*\*\*

Clark Kent lay on the cold, hard floor of a small room built into the corner of the disused warehouse.

He was in pain. He had been in agonising pain since they had brought him here. Crippling spasms of suffering thundered through his chest incessantly, and his head felt like each individual brain cell had been split with an axe.

Every breath was torturous.

Beyond the internal pain, his semi-naked body bore testimony to the vicious, relentless attempts to beat information out of him.

Then he heard her.

“Clark, Clark.”

Lois. Faint, but it was her. He knew it was her.

She was still alive!

Clark closed his eyes and summoned every ounce of his ravaged concentration to focus through the raging sea of torment.

“I love you. I miss you so much, farmboy.”

Her voice was like a soothing current of comfort.

“We will get out of this,” he heard very weakly. “We will be tog . . .”

Another wave of pain crashed over him, and Clark heard no more.

\*\*\*

Lois sighed with satisfaction as the lock to Jimmy Olsen’s apartment succumbed to her picking instruments.

She went to his computer and checked it for bugs. It was clear.

All she needed now was for Jimmy not to have password-protected his computer. He lived alone; the chances were good. She hoped.

Within moments, she was in.

She opened Clark’s email account using his *chocolatecroissant* password and quickly checked his emails. She found nothing of importance. Nothing relevant.

Then she composed the letter.

*Dear Lois:*

*I know you are at the hospital today, but I couldn’t leave without a more adequate explanation, so I’m using Kryptonian technology to access Clark’s email account to bid you goodbye.*

*As you are already aware, my own people contacted me last week. Although the planet, Krypton, was destroyed many years ago, a remnant of my people survived and established a peaceful, comfortable life on a formerly uninhabited planet.*

*My mother was one of the survivors. Upon realizing her time was limited, she decided to begin the long, arduous journey to Earth in the hope of contacting her son and learning of his fate. Last week, she became gravely ill and requested her attendants attempt to communicate with me, despite still being a long way from Earth.*

*My mother passed away this morning, necessitating my immediate return to my people to assume family responsibilities.*

*The vast distances between my new home and yours mean future communication between us will be impossible. However, I will never forget the hospitality and friendship shown to me, particularly by yourself and Clark. I trust you will be very happy together.*

*Please convey my deepest gratitude to the people of Earth for allowing me to share their home.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Superman.*

Lois proofread it twice, and then typed her own address and hit 'send'.

\*\*\*

Back at the hospital, Lois changed into her original clothes, having checked them with Hodge's device and found them to be untainted. She emerged from the hospital entrance at precisely five o'clock and immediately saw Sarah's car.

She got in and smiled at the driver, Hank, who was a burly man, probably in his late fifties.

At her building, she thanked him and walked wearily to her apartment.

With Hodge's bug-detector, she checked her entire apartment, discovering her phone, computer, and cell were bugged. To her relief, there were no other listening devices and no cameras.

She logged onto her computer and wrote the story of Superman leaving Earth.

She paused before sending it.

If this became public knowledge, there would be follow-on effects. There would be more crime and less hope. Death and injury would again be the normal consequence of disasters.

But it didn't necessarily have to be permanent. Once she was with Clark again, they would figure out a way for Superman to return. It that is what Clark wanted.

If Perry ran her story.

She attached Superman's letter to her email, but she doubted that would be enough hard evidence for Perry.

However, once she hit 'send', it was out of her control.

What about Trask?

Would he really do what Hodge feared?

Or was it nothing more than Hodge's excuse to indulge in a little destruction of his own?

There were still far too many questions. Still far too few answers.

She added a personal note to Perry. *I'm not feeling great, Chief, so I'm going to bed. Talk to you tomorrow.*

Then, with a deep sigh, she clicked 'send'.

\*\*\*

At seven o'clock, Lois — dressed in the nurse's uniform — walked towards the pony corral at the circus.

A hand fell on her shoulder and turned her around.

Two police officers faced her.

"Lois Lane?" one asked. Without waiting for her to confirm, he continued. "You are under arrest as a suspect in connection with the disappearance of Clark Kent."

### Part 9

Lois sat in the drab room at the police station. A young officer, who looked like he'd skipped high school for the day, watched her with an intensity that left him nowhere to go if he ever guarded a serial murderer.

She'd been told nothing. Brought to the station, put in this room, and left with the very rookie officer.

Ostensibly, she'd accepted it all with minimal protest, having realised immediately that a prolonged scene at the circus wouldn't help her or Clark. And she really didn't need the photos of her arrest sprawled across the front page of tomorrow's National Inquisitor.

But inside she fumed. At her own naivety. And at Hodge's duplicity.

He'd set her up. It had to be him. No one else knew of their meeting. No one else knew she would be at the circus.

So how much — of everything he'd told her — had been true? Did he really know Clark's whereabouts?

Hodge had said Clark was hurt. Badly hurt. Was that possible? Or just part of Hodge's story?

Lois grunted her frustration. She was stuck here, still with a thousand questions. Knowing more, but sure of less. Did Trask

really plan to kill Superman? Was Hodge really going to bomb Trask's control centre?

Why did Hodge even need a bomb? Surely one zap with Clark's heat vision could disable Trask's computers. Hodge didn't know that of course, but why hadn't Clark acted days ago?

Why had he just let them hold him?

There must be something she didn't know. A reason why Clark had allowed himself to be caught, held, and rendered ineffectual for three days.

He was probably protecting the secret.

But if he had to choose between the secret and the lives of thousands of people, Lois knew he wouldn't hesitate.

So why had he done nothing?

So many questions.

But, one thing was clear. She couldn't stay here.

Lois smiled hesitantly at her minder, and his expression deepened a couple of levels of trepidation. "Why am I here?" she asked in as non-threatening manner as she could muster.

He looked at the sheet he was clutching. "Lois Lane, arrested in connection with the disappearance of Clark Kent," he read in a stilted voice.

"Who ordered the arrest?"

He scanned the notes. "Inspector Henderson."

Henderson! "I want to see him," Lois said, her manner no longer affable.

"My orders are not to leave you," he stammered.

"There's a phone on the wall," Lois barked. "Use it and tell them that if I don't see Henderson within three minutes, every last second of this unconstitutional arrest and detainment will be plastered so thickly over the front page of the Daily Planet, you won't be able to see the paper underneath."

He picked up the phone, and repeated what she'd said verbatim.

A minute later Henderson walked in.

"You can leave," Lois brusquely told the kid cop.

He did. Very thankfully.

"OK, Henderson," Lois snarled. "What's going on?"

Henderson sat opposite her, his face impassive. "Clark Kent is missing, and all the evidence points to you as the most likely suspect. So we brought you in for questioning."

"So question me and let me go," she said tightly. "I'm supposed to be working."

"It isn't quite that simple."

"Then make it simple," Lois snapped. "You can start by explaining exactly how you made probable cause for my arrest."

Henderson folded his hands on the desk and stared at her, unmoved. "You were the last person to see Clark Kent alive. You have been in his apartment on at least two occasions since he disappeared. You didn't report him as missing. You didn't inform his parents he is missing. You told Perry White he was chasing a Superman story. You told me he had run off with a high school girlfriend. You had a secret rendezvous with a highly dubious pirate in a circus caravan, having elaborately set up a sham medical procedure as an alibi. Frankly, Lois, it's about as textbook as they come — jilted woman does away with lover."

Lois stared at him, speechless, as a dozen explanations volleyed through her mind and she dismissed each one of them.

"And," Henderson continued, "among your personal items, we found a government-issue bug detector, so you will likely be charged with theft as well."

"I didn't hurt Clark," she said eventually. "I love him."

Henderson sighed wearily. "You know, Lois, you'd be surprised how many times I hear that — and how many people are incarcerated right now for the crimes they committed against the very person they proclaim to love."

"Clark has been captured," Lois said, a little breathlessly. "By a government agent who is threatening to blow a canyon through

the middle of America if Superman doesn't come to stop him. And if Superman does come, he's going to shoot him with a quantum thi- ... weapon."

She hadn't realised, before now, that Henderson's eyebrows could stretch quite so far up his forehead. He stood and opened the door.

"I need to get out of here, Henderson," Lois said desperately.

Henderson looked at her, poised between scorn and pity.

"You won't be getting out of here anytime soon," he predicted.

"You can't just leave me here," she protested.

"There's been a new development," Henderson said.

"Someone will be in to question you as soon as possible."

Henderson bellowed for the junior cop to return. He scurried in and Henderson said, "Say nothing to her. Don't answer her questions. If she tries anything, call for backup."

The junior nodded, and Henderson left, shutting the door firmly behind him.

\*\*\*

Fifteen frustrating minutes later, the door opened, and a stocky man in a way-too-cheerful shirt sauntered in. He had dark wavy hair, nice teeth, and a boyish grin. "I'll take it from here," he told the junior cop.

The kid stood his ground, raising himself to his full height, which still fell short of the other man's chin.

The newcomer slipped what looked like ID from his shirt pocket. The kid perused it, nodded, and silently left the room.

As soon as they were alone, the man darted to the window, opened it, and using a wrench from his pocket, removed the outer grill. He turned to Lois with a dazzling smile. "Ready?" he asked as he held out his hand in her direction.

"Ready for what?" she squeaked.

"Well, I assume you don't want to stay here all night, and Clark is —"

"Clark?"

He nodded. "Clark is waiting for you. He sent me to get you because, clearly, he can't show his nose around here."

"Why not?" Lois asked sharply. "If Clark came here, they're going to have a hard time charging me with his abduction."

Her would-be rescuer flashed an ingratiating smile. "Lois, you weren't arrested because they think you had something to do with Clark's disappearance," he explained smoothly. "Henderson knows where Clark is — heck, Henderson's had a part in this right from the beginning."

Her stomach dropped. "A part in what?"

"The plan to kill Superman. Henderson and Trask are like this." He crossed two fingers, signifying closeness. "They're not sure if they believe your story about Superman going home to his mom, so they thought bringing you here would test it. That's why they're keeping you waiting. If Superman doesn't come, they intend to rough you up a bit. So Clark sent me to get you out of here before they hurt you." His hand stretched towards her, his face persuasive. "Come on, we need to be gone when Boy Sleuth gets back."

Lois hesitated. Torn with abject indecisiveness.

Could it be true? Henderson working with Trask? Even Clark had said he thought Henderson's job as a city inspector was a cover for other, more furtive activities.

And Hodge's card had predicted they would use her.

The man stepped closer to her. "Clark knew you would not trust me easily, so he gave me a message for you," he said, his eyes twinkling. "Your farmboy misses his honey."

Lois stood and followed him to the window. "What's your name?" she asked as she began climbing through the window.

"Please call me Daniel," he said.

\*\*\*

Daniel drove Lois to a warehouse on Bessolo Boulevard. The peeling sign on the front said it was, or had been, used for office

furniture. He shepherd her into a small office inside the warehouse. "Where's Clark?" she asked.

"Sit down," Daniel said with another smile. "Wait here; he won't be long."

Lois waited, a strange feeling — part apprehension, part anticipation — churning through her stomach. Could it be possible that Clark would walk through that doorway any moment? The thought of being with him again made her mind swirl.

Or had she just made one of the stupidest mistakes of her life?

The door opened. With a single glance at the man who entered, Lois knew the answer.

"Ms Lane," he said. "How lovely to see you again. I'm Jason Trask." Another man, someone she didn't know, came in and stood behind Trask.

Lois stood. "Where's Clark?"

"He's here," Trask replied with an oily smoothness.

"Can I see him?"

"Sure." Trask stepped closer to her. "When you have answered some of our questions."

"What questions?"

"Where's Superman?"

"On his way to New Krypton," she said.

"Where are the other aliens?"

"If by alien, you mean a Kryptonian, then on New Krypton, I suppose."

Trask's eyes darkened, and the crease between his eyebrows deepened to a line. "Define your relationship with Superman."

"He does stuff; I write about it."

"Beyond that."

"I have no relationship with Superman beyond that," she stated primly.

Trask strode to the nearby desk and picked up a piece of paper with text printed on it. Facing her, he read, "Superman smiled as he received the check to the enthusiastic applause of the gathered crowd. He's our hero, and he knows it. He's become comfortable around us, and we've realized that Metropolis wouldn't be the same without him. The austere barriers of division and difference have evaporated."

Lois recognised her story but could not see how it signalled a special relationship with Superman. Every other reporter had written essentially the same thing.

Trask read on. "We can only hope that one day soon, the Suit will, too." His eyes lifted from the paper and glared at Lois. "Did you write that, Ms Lane?"

She would not cower to this bully. "Yes, I did," she said.

"Explain the final line."

"It wasn't in the story."

"We record every keystroke on your computer," Trask informed her. "Explain the final line."

"He's a man; I'm a woman," she said with lazy insolence.

"He's not a man, he's an alien," Trask said, his voice rising with barely contained anger. "And you're supposed to be with Clark Kent."

"It was a throw-away line," Lois said contemptuously. "That's why I threw it away."

"Can you contact Superman?"

"Not anymore," she drawled. "Unless those very clever Sewells have discovered a way to communicate across a couple of galaxies."

Trask stepped towards her, his hand raised threateningly. She faced him, eyeball to eyeball.

"Go ahead, Trask," she taunted. "Hit me. Superman won't come."

He stared at her for a long moment, eyes dark, face angry. "You want to see Kent?" he sneered.

Lois's heart jumped. "Yes."

Trask pulled a photograph from the internal pocket of his jacket and handed it to her.

Lois gasped. It wasn't possible to hide her horror.

The photograph was of a man, sitting on a concrete floor, slumped against the wall. Dressed only in sleep shorts, his bare chest and legs were a mass of bruises and open wounds. His abdomen and thighs sported ugly clouds of colour that suggested he had been repeatedly kicked. Behind his glasses, his right eye was swollen, and a trail of blood ran down his temple from the gash above his eyebrow.

It was Clark. Without question, it was Clark. Lois's eyes welled with stinging tears. She blinked them away. "Did *you* do this?" she demanded of Trask.

He smirked. "Not personally," he said in a tone that left her in no doubt that it had been done on his orders.

"Take me to him," Lois demanded coldly.

"How long is it going to take for you to realise that you do not call the shots here, Ms Lane?" Trask said in his oily voice. He snatched the photo from her and peered at it, his face creased in genuine satisfaction. "This," he said, waving the photo, "this is a warning. You have half an hour to get Superman here. If you don't, you will be taken to Clark, and he will observe while you are given a taste of what he has endured the past three days. Then, you will watch while we kill him — slowly and excruciatingly."

Lois stared at him, but she said nothing.

"Not so nimble with answers now, are you, Ms Lane?" Trask jeered. He turned to the man standing behind him. "Put her in the third room. Tie her up."

The man grasped her arm.

"How am I supposed to contact Superman if you've got me tied up?" she asked Trask.

He smirked at her again. "That," he replied cruelly, "is not my problem."

\*\*\*

Lois was hustled the length of the empty warehouse. At the far end, there were three doors along a wall extending half the width of the warehouse. She was taken through the one furthest from the exterior wall. The room was small and bare other than a waist-high, unadorned window. Trask's accomplice tied her wrists together, pushed her to a sitting position, and secured her hands to her ankles. "Don't try anything," he warned, pointing high into the corner. "There's a camera."

He left, shut the door, and Lois heard it lock.

Lois closed her eyes and was immediately assaulted with the mental image of Clark, battered and bleeding. Her eyes shot open.

Clark was hurt, and there was nothing she could do to help him.

The ropes were tight around her wrists. Painfully tight. A camera recorded her every move. And the door was locked.

Hodge?

Had set up her arrest.

But there had been truth in what he'd told her. Trask *did* have Clark. Clark *was* hurt. Trask *had* bugged her computer.

Was there any chance Hodge would come here?

Maybe not. Maybe the whole bomb story was bravado. And even if he did come, Lois was no longer completely sure he was on her side. Maybe he was working with Trask. Maybe they had set this up together.

Lois groaned, but pulled it up short as she heard a muffled sound on the other side of the door. Her heart rocketed around her ribcage. The half hour wasn't up already.

She heard a familiar click, click and realised with a jolt that someone was picking the lock.

Clark? No, he didn't have those skills; he'd never needed

them.

So who?

The door swung open, and a figure dressed completely in black — pants, sweatshirt, and a bandana covering the lower half of his face — entered the room. He closed the door, crept along the far wall, reached up, and disconnected the power cord from the camera.

He slipped a knife from his hip and closed in on her.

Lois gasped.

She pulled her eyes from the knife to the upper section of his face and connected with familiar blue eyes. Hodge crouched in front of her and scythed through the ropes that held her. "Clark's in one of the other two rooms," his muttered. "Go to him, and *stay* with him."

When Lois was free from the ropes, Hodge pulled her to her feet and followed her through the door. He sprinted across the warehouse. Lois ran to the middle door and opened it.

It was similar to the first room except it had no window. In the corner was a spaceship — small and blue. It had been covered with an old tarp once, but the tarp had slipped partly off, revealing the blunt nose of the spaceship. It must be the spaceship that had brought Clark to Earth.

An assortment of scientific equipment had been haphazardly strewn around the spaceship. Stacked against the wall was an untidy pile of manila folders with dog-eared notes protruding from them. There were about ten green rocks on the floor — each approximately the size of a baseball — and a small globe with unfamiliarly shaped blue oceans and reddish-brown landmasses.

Lois rushed to the final room. She pushed it open ... and there he was.

Clark.

His pain-filled eyes sought her and recognition flooded his face. "L ..." he croaked.

She ran to him and crouched beside him. "Clark," she sobbed. "Oh, Clark." She tenderly cradled his face, sinking her fingers into his short, scruffy beard. He didn't feel like Clark. He didn't look like Clark. He didn't smell like Clark — his clean, coconut aroma had been replaced with the grime from the warehouse floor and the acrid smell of blood.

Never could she have imagined him like this, but when she locked into his deep brown eyes, she found him. Beyond his broken and injured body, he was still Clark.

And he still had the power to calm her and strengthen her.

She dropped her knees to the floor and nestled his head against her chest. She kissed his hair and caressed his forehead with the side of her thumb.

He lifted his hand — blood-encrusted and grimy — and seized her arm. "Lo ..." he rasped. "G ... go ... a ... way."

"It's OK, Clark," she soothed between soft kisses into his hair. "We'll wait a few minutes, and then we'll get out of here. Together. I'm not leaving without you."

He wanted to argue. She felt him tense with the effort and then sag in defeat.

She scanned the length of his battered body. When she reached his swollen and grotesquely misshapen foot, she turned away quickly, fighting down the froth of nausea. The room was empty except for a few more of the green rocks, scattered across the floor as if someone had tossed them into the corner and immediately forgotten about them.

The door was flung open, and Hodge burst into the room, bandana gone, his face aghast. "Get him low," he ordered urgently. Without waiting for her to respond, Hodge grabbed Clark's ankles and hauled him from Lois's lap. Clark moaned in agony.

Lois cushioned Clark's head on the concrete. "Be caref—"

"I miscalculated," Hodge said as he folded Clark's legs up against his body. "This end of the building will go, too."

“Miscalculated?” Lois screamed.

“I didn’t know the green stuff was littered throughout the warehouse. It’s from Krypton, and according to the Sewells, it’s highly explosive.”

“It’s green rock,” Lois gasped. “How much difference could it make?”

Instead of answering, Hodge clasped the back of Lois’s head and pushed her down on top of Clark. Her hands hit the floor and she tried to prevent her weight falling on Clark.

It was impossible, because Hodge came down heavily on top of her.

Her angry objection was lost in the loudest sound she had ever heard. It stormed her ears like a physical force. And continued. On and on. Long enough for her to wonder if it would ever stop.

Finally, the noise ebbed. Then, from frighteningly close by, came a series of thunderous booms, followed by a crashing sound.

She felt Hodge jolt. His anguished cry screeched past her ear.

The room had gone dark. And silent ... except for a muffled roar that sounded like flames and the occasional scream of small explosions.

The rising dust wafted into her nose.

She was going to sneeze. She pressed her nose against her upper arm.

Why didn’t Hodge get off her?

His weight bore down on her.

“Hodge!” Lois cried. “Get off.”

He didn’t respond.

Lois squirmed violently and managed to slither out from between Clark and Hodge. There was hazy, dust-freckled light coming from ... somewhere, enabling her to see Hodge’s outline, still slumped over Clark.

Lois placed the nurse’s blouse across her mouth and nose and shook Hodge’s shoulder. “Franklin!” she said. “Get up. It’s over.” Still he didn’t move.

Lois took a deep breath, dropped the blouse, and tried to haul him onto his back.

His shoulder gave a little, but his lower body didn’t budge. With a combination of touch and limited vision, she tracked Hodge’s body. Halfway down his back, her hands encountered a large pylon of wood. With sickening dread, she realised it had to be either part of the wall or the ceiling — and Hodge had taken the brunt of it.

Coughing now from the dust, Lois attempted to move the chaotic wreckage of building materials off Hodge. It was too heavy.

“Lois,” she heard Clark mutter. “Leave it.”

“I c...can’t. Franklin is under there.”

“He’s gone, Lois,” Clark said, his trademark gentleness surfacing through his evident pain.

“G...gone?”

Clark struggled to a semi-sitting position, his lower left leg still wedged under Hodge’s body. Lois squeezed her hands between Hodge’s shoulder and the floor and heaved him high enough that Clark could extricate his foot.

Hodge’s cell phone fell and clattered onto the concrete floor.

Lois lowered Hodge’s body. She hovered above him and peered into his blank, unseeing eyes. Gently, she closed his eyelids and brushed back a lock of his hair.

“Lois,” Clark said. He painfully lifted his arm and pointed in the direction of the light.

Significant sections of both interior walls had gone and the light from the street was coming through the smashed window of the room where Lois had been taken.

Between them and the window was a seemingly insurmountable pile of debris.

Then Lois smelled it — smoke.

They had to get out.

She snatched Hodge’s cell and dialled Hank, Sarah’s driver.

When he answered, she said, “Hank, it’s Lois Lane, Sarah’s friend. You drove me from the hospital today. Could you pick me up from the furniture warehouse on Bessolo Boulevard please?”

She expected him to refuse. “I’ll come now,” he said amicably.

“Come to the side,” she said. “The ...” she looked around the ruins.

“East,” Clark murmured.

“The east side.”

“OK.”

Lois hung up the call and shuffled across to Clark, realising with horrible certainty that moving him was going to be agonising. “Can you make it?” she asked.

He nodded grimly and reached for her shoulder. With excruciating slowness, he dragged himself to a standing position and leaned against her, heaving.

“Are you all right?” she asked, trying to support his weight.

“Dizzy.”

Lois grasped Clark’s right hand where he’d draped across her shoulders. His right foot hung between them, bloated and useless. “Lean on me,” she directed.

They trudged through the clutter, each individual step a battle faced and a victory won. Lois pushed up under Clark’s arm, trying to support his weight; trying also to protect his foot as she steered them through the clearest route.

When they reached the middle room, Clark stopped, his head low, his breathing tortured. “Just ... a ... minute,” he gasped.

Lois held him and glanced around the room. The spaceship was buried under the fallen roof. Illogically, Lois experienced a fleeting wish that she could take it with them. It would mean so much to Clark. Before the idea had even formed completely, she dismissed it as impossible. She needed to get Clark out. Nothing else was important.

The globe had been smashed to tiny pieces. Among its colourful chips were fragments of the green rock. Lois bent low and scooped up a small nugget of green. She slipped it into her pants pocket — a small token of home for Clark.

When he straightened again, they continued shuffling through the room.

Suddenly the portion of fallen wall under Clark’s good foot gave way, and he stumbled forward. Lois didn’t have the strength to save him from falling heavily. She heard his groan of anguish and crouched beside him.

His face set, Clark rose onto his hands and knees and crawled across the rubble. Lois moved with him, knowing every inch of progress was bought with intolerable pain.

Eventually, they reached the window. Clark used the ledge to haul himself to a standing position. Leaning against the exterior wall, he brushed away the shattered glass and offered his hand to help her.

“You’re going first,” she insisted with don’t-bother-arguing finality.

Clark sat on the ledge. Lois lifted his legs and eased them up and through the window. Clutching his waist, she steadied him as he slid out of the warehouse.

Lois followed. She peered along the vacant street, praying Sarah’s car would materialise through the smoky haze.

Clark had collapsed against the warehouse wall, pale, labouring to breathe, and shivering violently. Several of his wounds had opened and were bleeding freely, and there were new grazes on his hands and legs. Lois covered as much of him as she could with her body.

Then she heard them — sirens — in the distance.

She felt Clark tense. “Please,” he wheezed. “Please ... don’t

let them ...”

Then it came into sight — the Crawford car. Lois was pretty sure that if she ever saw the face of an angel, it wouldn't look too different from the face of the old Dutchman behind the wheel.

Hank pulled up next to them. He jumped out, but Lois had already opened the back door and pushed Clark into the spacious back seat. She followed and slammed the door. “Quickly, Hank,” she said.

Hank slipped into the driver's seat, smoothly turned the vehicle, and accelerated away from the burning warehouse.

Lois sank into the plush leather. She looked across at Clark. His eyes were closed, and his face was set with pain.

But they were together.

“Where to?” Hank asked.

“The cottage,” Lois said without hesitation.

Hank nodded.

Lois glanced behind. Nothing was following them, and the sirens had faded into the background.

She took Clark's hand in hers, closed her eyes, and tried to think ahead.

### Part 10

Hank stopped the car in the lane, next to the tall fence that gave privacy to the cottage on the Crawford estate. Lois jumped out, searching for the flagpole in the dim moonlight.

She located it. Bare. No raised flag. The cottage was empty.

As the wave of relief rolled through her, Lois leant into the car. “Clark,” she said. “We have to get you out. We'll be safe soon.”

Clark's eyes opened slowly. He tried to help as she half-dragged, half-hauled him out of the car. He stood shakily against it, shivering convulsively. Lois glanced over the fence, aware the cottage was at least fifty yards away.

Fifty yards.

They'd come so far.

They were so close.

But she knew there was no way Clark would be able to make it to the cottage.

And she couldn't carry him.

Hank brushed past her and heaved Clark onto his shoulder.

“Open the gate,” he said.

Lois ran to the gate, found the number pad and with shaky fingers, punched in 2315. The gate swung open, and Hank strode through it, Clark draped over his shoulder.

Lois ran after them.

When they reached the cottage, Hank opened the door and deposited Clark on the sofa under the window. The driver switched on the light, took the box of matches from the mantelpiece, and lit the prepared kindling in the fireplace.

Without a word, he stepped outside. He returned seconds later with an armful of chopped wood and stacked it next to the fire. “There's more outside,” he informed them. With a gesture in Clark's direction, he said, “He needs a doctor.”

“No!”

Hank shrugged, accepting her decision. “I'll hoist the flag on my way out,” he said. He stepped outside and quietly shut the door.

Lois locked it and rushed up the stairs into the bedroom. She pulled a sheet, blanket, and pillow from the bed.

Back downstairs, she put the covers over Clark and tenderly tucked them around his body. She gently lifted his head and put the pillow in place. He didn't respond; his eyes were closed and his skin pallid. Lois carefully eased the glasses from his face.

She stroked his forehead and dropped a kiss on his hairline. He grimaced and turned away.

“You sleep, darling,” she murmured softly. “I'll look after you.”

She added a chunk of wood to the rudimentary fire and

foraged through the fridge and cupboards. The latter were well stocked with crockery and kitchenware, but contained nothing edible.

Lois leant against the table, her eyes resting on Clark.

Right now, he needed warmth and rest.

But soon, he would need food.

Medical attention.

Clothes.

And they both needed to know if Trask ... or Henderson ... or anyone else still intended using either of them to harm Superman.

Or felt the need to permanently silence them.

But she couldn't leave Clark.

Couldn't risk him waking to find her gone.

Couldn't risk being seen.

Couldn't risk leading someone to him.

Whom could she trust?

Sarah, certainly.

But was it fair to involve her further in this? She had two children.

Lois could think of no alternatives. Her purse was with the rest of her personal effects at the police station, but Clark had to have food.

A complete search of the tiny cottage took less than ten minutes. Lois found an amply stocked first-aid kit and supplies such as soap and shampoo. But no clothes and no phone.

Back downstairs, Lois pulled up a chair and sat as near to Clark as she could. He groaned and turned towards the window.

The small room was now cosily warm. Warm enough that when Clark awakened, she would be able to pull back the blankets to assess and treat his wounds. She shuddered, dreading it, knowing she would inflict further pain when he had already suffered so much.

She was so deeply relieved to have him back. So glad they were finally together.

But counteracting her relief was her distress at the graphic testimony of what he had endured.

How had Trask been able to hurt Clark?

She couldn't dwell on that now. She needed to plan their next move.

Was Trask dead?

Did anyone still believe that Superman had to be killed?

Did they believe Superman had left Earth?

Had Hodge's bomb stopped the missiles being fired?

Did anyone suspect that Clark was Superman?

That, at least, was not going to be a problem. There was compelling evidence to the contrary.

She had been so scared she would never see him again.

Unable to resist, Lois leant over him and caressed his forehead. Without waking, he winced and shrunk away from her touch.

She must have hit a sore spot.

Lois backed away, settled comfortably in the chair and watched him sleep.

Minutes later, her eyelids grew heavy in the warmth of the room, and she allowed her weariness to overwhelm her.

\*\*\*

When Lois awakened, the first thing she saw was Clark looking back at her.

She focussed on his eyes, ignoring the injuries. She smiled. He smiled back.

“You came,” he said quietly.

She felt her tears sting her eyes. “Of course I — ”

Her words were cut off by a sharp knock on the door. Lois's eyes rammmed into Clark's, and she saw her fear reflecting from the depths of brown.

The knock sounded again. “It's Hank,” came a deep voice.

Lois handed Clark his glasses as she peered out of the window. She couldn't see much in the blackness, but the shadowy figure seemed to resemble Hank.

She unlocked the door and cautiously opened it. It was Hank; Lois scoured behind him. "Are you alone?" she asked.

He didn't answer, but stepped into the cottage and put the box he carried onto the table. "You need these," he said. He went outside and returned with more wood. He placed it near the fire, and left with a grunt of farewell.

Lois peered into the box. It contained groceries. She rushed to the doorway. "Hank!" she screamed.

He turned.

"Thank you," she called. "Thank you for everything."

Hank waved in acknowledgement and kept walking towards the fence.

The box contained two loaves of crusty bread, milk, instant coffee, sugar, butter, honey, and a container of what looked like homemade chunky beef and vegetable soup.

Lois unpacked the food. When she reached the bottom of the box, her tears rose again.

"What's the matter, honey?" came Clark's concerned voice.

Lois reached into the box and withdrew the block of chocolate. She held it up for him to see as tears splattered down her cheeks. "Come here," Clark said quietly.

She went to him, knelt next to the sofa, and took his hand in hers.

He flinched.

And tried so very hard to pretend he hadn't.

Lois's hands leapt from him. "Clark!" she exclaimed. "What is it?"

His shoulders curved away from her, and he stared at the wall. "Nothin'," he mumbled.

"Clark! Did I hurt you? Tell me."

"It's OK."

"It's not OK." Lois yearned to touch him, but she couldn't risk hurting him again. "I won't touch you," she promised.

"Please turn back and tell me what is going on."

He turned and stared at her, his mouth set.

"Tell me what is going on," she repeated.

"I don't know," he ground out.

"If our positions were reversed, you would be begging me to tell you the truth," she said. "No matter how hard it was to admit. Now, I'm begging you. Tell me why you wince every time I touch you."

"I'm just sore."

"It's more than that, and you know it," Lois said firmly. "I held you when we were at the warehouse, and that didn't seem to hurt you."

He stared past her, looking so totally defeated that it wrung her heart.

She rose and stepped away, propping her butt against the edge of the table. She folded her arms across her chest and eyeballed him. "Look at me, Clark," she said. "We need to find a way out of this."

"There is no way out of this," he said dejectedly.

"We're out of the warehouse," Lois said, injecting optimism into her voice. "Trask is probably dead. I found some bandages and antiseptic —"

"Lois, you can't come near me," he said with abject misery.

"What? Why?"

Clark turned away from her. "Because the closer you come to me, the more it hurts, and when you touch me, it's like being knifed."

"Clark, look at me," Lois pleaded. "I won't come any closer. We can do this together."

"How can we do it together when I can't tolerate you being near to me?" he said wretchedly.

"Clark, there's a way out of this, and we'll find it ... together."

He faced her again, his face embedded with lines of suffering. Lois unfolded her arms and gripped the table to stop herself from going to him and clinging to him.

She could touch him with her words, though. Just as she had been touched by the words of his journal. "We can overcome anything ... Now we're together," she said quietly. "Will you work with me on this? Please?"

Clark regarded her for long dragged-out seconds. Lois stared back, pouring out her love for him.

Eventually, he nodded.

"I love you, Clark."

"I thought I would never see you again," he said hoarsely. "And there was nothing I could do ..."

"Well, I'm here, and I'm real, and I'm in love with you," Lois said. "And as soon as we work out what is happening, I'll be right there with you on that sofa."

The shadow of a smile crossed his face. "Is that a promise?"

"You bet it's a promise, farmboy." She smiled at him and wiped the spilled tears from her cheeks. "Tell me what you're feeling. Which of your injuries hurts the most?"

"My foot is throbbing pretty badly," Clark said. "My ribs hurt when I move, and I'm fairly sure something is strained in my left shoulder. I've got a monster headache, and I think there's a wound on my back, because it hurts whenever it touches anything."

"What happens when I come closer? Does all that get worse?"

Clark shook his head. "It's different. I feel incredibly nauseous ... and it feels like my head is about to implode ... and there's an acute cramping pain in my chest."

"When was the first time it happened? This nausea and cramping?"

"When I was first taken to the warehouse."

"Before they ... hit you?"

He avoided her eyes. "No, they'd already hit me, but the first time, it didn't hurt."

"And while you were in the room?"

"I had the stabbing and nausea the entire time I was there," Clark said. "I wondered if they'd found a way to poison me with the bread and water they brought or if there was a gas I couldn't detect. Except it didn't seem to affect them."

"When did you notice it lessened?"

"When the driver picked me up and brought me in here."

"But it gets worse again if I come close to you?"

Clark nodded gloomily. "I'm sorry, Lois. I want you so bad. But I just can't take any more ..."

Then Lois knew.

The green rock.

She smiled in triumph and saw the hurt surprise weave through Clark's face. "It's OK," she said. "I know how to fix this."

Lois ran outside into the chilly night air and surveyed the garden. Seeing a small shed behind the cottage, she ran to it, guided only by the moonlight. Inside, she searched for a hiding place. There was nowhere obvious. Looking up, she noticed a series of gaps between the rafter and the corrugations of the roof. She took the piece of green rock from her pants pocket and wedged it into one of the spaces.

Back in the cottage, Lois shut the door and met Clark's questioning expression. "OK, I'm going to approach you," she said. "Tell me if you feel anything."

He nodded.

She stepped forward. Another step. And another. "Anything?"

"No."

She walked up to him, pausing when she reached the sofa.

She crouched and tentatively touched his face.

Clark uttered a deep sound of pleasure. “That feels so good,” he murmured.

“The green rocks in the warehouse — they make you feel bad.”

Clark didn’t reply. He hooked his hand around her head and guided her down onto his chest.

Lois relaxed against his bare skin, listening to his beating heart and basking in his warmth. She stayed until her knees protested the hardness of the floor. “Clark?” she said as she lifted from him. “Can I look at your foot? From what I saw, it was pretty badly damaged.”

He nodded, and she went to the far end of the sofa and gently pushed back the bedding. His right foot was swollen to distortion and murky grey in colour. She swallowed down her queasiness. “Is it broken?” she asked.

“Maybe.”

She wondered how it had happened but decided not to ask. Just looking at it pushed the boundaries of her tolerance. “Have you x-rayed it?” she asked.

Clark’s face darkened. “I can’t,” he said.

“You can’t?” she said gently, fearing she knew what he was about to say.

“I don’t have any powers,” he admittedly disconsolately. “Not the x-ray vision, not the heat, not the magnification, not the hearing, not the strength, not the speed, nothing.” He didn’t need to add that he was no longer invulnerable.

Lois covered his feet with the blanket and moved back to him. She brushed back his hair from his forehead. “You still have powers,” she said. “The power to move me, the power to touch me, the power to calm me, the power to make my world seem good regardless of everything else.”

She smiled, but he did not.

“We’ll be OK, Clark. We’ll -”

“But I can’t fly,” Clark said desperately. “I can barely move. If they come after us, we have no chance. We can’t stay here forever. If they come, we are so vulnerable. I can’t protect -”

Lois put her finger across his lips. “We’ll be all right.”

Clark shook his head. “I can’t -”

She increased the pressure on his lips and gazed at him, looking beyond the bruises and into the troubled cloudiness of his wonderful brown eyes. “For three days, all ...” Her voice wobbled, so she looked down and realigned the strands of her composure. “For three days, *all* I wanted was to be with you. Now I am with you. We can do this. We will do this ... because we’re together.”

He took her finger from his lips and kissed the back of her hand. “All I wanted was to be with you.”

“We’ll be OK,” she assured him softly.

He nodded, not because he was convinced, but because she needed his agreement.

“Are you hungry?” Lois asked.

“Until we left the warehouse, I was too nauseous to want to eat. I don’t feel hungry right now ... but I’d really like a shower.”

“OK. How do you want to do it?”

“Can you help me up the stairs?”

“Sure. And then?”

“I can take it from there.”

“Clark,” Lois said. “You’d have to stand on one foot, and keep your balance despite your dizziness, and try to wash off dried-on blood from among the injuries.”

His mouth tightened but he said nothing.

“So ... keep your shorts on, and I’ll help you. For most of it.”

He looked as if he were searching for an alternative — but couldn’t find one. With a sigh, he swept back the covers and swung his legs to the floor.

Lois helped him to his feet. “You need to rest for a minute,”

she said. “And it’s the perfect opportunity to do something I’ve been wanting to do.”

She slipped her arms around his waist and pressed him against her body. His arms folded around her. Lois closed her eyes and concentrated on the comforting familiarity of embracing Clark.

Conscious he was balancing on one foot, she separated from him far sooner than she wanted to. “How about that shower now?” she said, trying to sound as if it were something they’d done many times before.

Getting up the stairs was easier than she’d feared. There were rails on both sides, and Clark was able to use his arms to swing himself, on his good foot, up the stairs one at a time. He winced a little, but only a few minutes later, they were in the bathroom.

“I’ll start the water,” Lois said.

“OK.”

She removed his glasses and placed them on the cabinet. She turned on the faucets, waited for the water to heat, and stepped back so Clark could enter.

He hesitated, clearly uncomfortable. “I’ll do the front; you do the back,” he directed.

“OK,” Lois said, understanding how new and strange this would be for him.

Clark hopped into the shower, and Lois found herself staring at his broad back — a back which, less than a week ago, had been smooth perfection, but now had a long, angry gash running across his left shoulder blade, a roadmap of numerous grazes, and a series of bruises congregating along both sets of ribs.

Lois shut down her imagination. She could do this if she didn’t think about it too much. She took the cloth and held it under the water.

“I’ll try not to hurt you,” she said just loudly enough for him to hear over the noise of the running water.

She began on his right shoulder, working down the slope, trying to be extra gentle when she came to the places of trauma.

Five minutes later, she was very damp, and Clark’s back was clean. Lois squatted and washed the grime and dust and blood from his legs, being particularly careful not to upset his precarious balance.

She stood back and contemplated him, trying not to notice the way the thin material of his wet shorts clung to his butt. She felt better — wet, but better. Physical contact with Clark — achieving something positive together — had restored her and calmed her.

“I’ve finished,” she said. “How about you?”

“Yeah.”

“Would you like me to wash your hair?” she asked. “There’s blood in it.”

“OK, thanks.” He put both hands on the shower wall to steady himself.

Lois squeezed the shampoo into her hand and began gently rubbing it through his hair. She started above his forehead and slowly massaged back, around his ears, and down to his neck. Gradually the taut muscles of his shoulders and neck relaxed. She guided him under the stream of water to rinse, and then repeated the process with sweet-smelling conditioner. “Hey, don’t fall asleep,” she said. “Not in here.”

“Thank you,” Clark said. He looked over his shoulder. “If I promise to be careful, could I have some privacy?”

She nodded. “When I’ve gone, take off your shorts, and we’ll dry them in front of the fire. It won’t take long, and then you can put them on again.”

“OK.”

“Do you want to get into the bed up here?” Lois asked. “You need to rest.”

Clark shook his head. “I want to be downstairs with you.”

Lois gave him a smile. “Call me if you need anything.”

Ten minutes later, he came down the stairs, dressed only in a

towel and his glasses. Lois looked up from where she was tending the fire and stood, her eyes fixed on him as memories flooded back.

He hesitated on the next-to-bottom step. “What?” he asked with the merest suggestion of a twinkle in his eyes.

“I’ve seen you dressed exactly like that before,” Lois said. “And I’ve never recovered.”

He glanced down self-consciously. “I’m a long way from what I was then,” he said dolefully.

Lois crossed the room to meet him. He swung down the final step, and they stood together. “You still captivate me,” she said quietly. She put her hands on his shoulders and gently massaged them. “And you’ll heal; soon you’ll be as good as new.”

She looked into his eyes and saw his fear — fear that he would never again be just as he had once been.

Lois stretched up and kissed him. “Whatever happens, Clark, we’re together. OK?”

He nodded and manoeuvred his way to the sofa, dropping onto it with obvious fatigue

“I’m going to dress your wounds, OK?”

He nodded again.

Lois got the first aid kit and spent the next thirty minutes systematically working through his injuries. By the end of it, she was feeling more hopeful. Other than his foot, the injuries seemed to be such that they would heal with time and rest. She’d felt along his ribs and detected no significant internal damage.

But his foot ... Lois stared, knowing it was beyond her capacity to treat it. Maybe they should go to a hospital. Maybe they could get an x-ray — determine the extent of the internal damage.

She lifted her gaze and saw Clark staring at her. “We can’t,” he said in answer to her unspoken thoughts.

“We might have to.”

“We can’t. They’ll take blood; they’ll test it. I’ve lost my powers,” he said with a tinge of bitterness. “Not magically become human.”

Lois straightened the covers over him. “You rest, farmboy. I’ll make us something to eat.” She tipped the soup into a saucepan and soon the cottage was filled a delectable aroma that called urgently to her empty stomach. “I’m starving,” she said. “I haven’t eaten since lunch, and it’s almost midnight now.”

They ate in the warm light of the cottage as the depths of darkness pushed against the window. The meal was delicious, but Clark didn’t seem particularly hungry. Or particularly eager to talk.

Lois had questions, so many questions, but she curbed her curiosity. Clark must be physically and emotionally exhausted. He needed to rest. Her questions could wait.

They finished their meal with the chocolate. “Clark?” Lois said as she savoured the creamy sweetness.

“Yeah?”

“I think we should both try to sleep. We’re safe here — as safe as we would be anywhere.”

“OK.”

“You have the bed upstairs,” she said. “I’ll sleep on the sofa.”

“Is that what you want?”

“I don’t want to accidentally hurt you.”

“You won’t.” He looked into her eyes. “Stay with me,” he said. “Please. I need you.”

She nodded with a tired smile. “I’ll stay with you always,” she promised.

\*\*\*

Clark lay in the gradually warming bed, listening to the sounds of Lois in the shower. Soon she would come and share his bed.

She’d found him. He still couldn’t imagine how she’d managed it, but she’d found him.

He sighed. He had so many questions.

Why wasn’t she wearing her ring?

Had she lost it?

Had she changed her mind about marrying him?

But if he asked questions, Lois would have questions, too.

And he had so few answers. And the little he did know, he could not envision ever wanting to share with anyone.

Certainly not Lois.

He was dreading the moment when she realised he could no longer be what he had been before all this. So far, she hadn’t thought past the fact they were together.

But she would.

Soon she would comprehend the full implications of the past three days.

He was vulnerable. Just as vulnerable as every other person. More so because he was an alien.

Still different ... but with no advantages.

The water stopped, and Clark closed his eyes. A few minutes later, he felt Lois slip in beside him. He heard her shiver at the coldness of the bed.

He should offer to hold her. To warm her.

But he couldn’t.

And he couldn’t even begin to explain why.

The old Clark would have held her. Held her and warmed her and been strong for both of them.

But the old Clark was gone.

Left bleeding and helpless on the hard, cold floor of a warehouse.

And the new Clark ... Clark didn’t know him at all.

\*\*\*

Lois woke first the next morning. She opened her eyes and saw Clark, asleep, lying next to her.

She lay still and stared. His stubble had grown to a short, dark beard. Lois wished she could touch it, but she didn’t want to wake him. The swelling around his eye had reduced, and the laceration had begun to heal.

An avalanche of gratitude flooded through her.

Then with a sigh, she remembered. There was so much they didn’t know. They didn’t know if Trask were alive, still intent on Superman’s death. They didn’t know if Henderson ... or anyone else ... was looking for them. Didn’t know how badly Clark was injured.

But she did know they were together. And soon, this would be normal. She would wake up every morning with him. Unless he was away being Sup -

Her mind screeched to a stop.

Superman.

What if Clark could never be Superman again?

Lois pushed away that thought and concentrated on how wonderful it was to wake up next to Clark. To feel the warmth from the bed they had shared.

Thinking of warmth, Lois slipped out, pulled on her pants and blouse, and went downstairs to the fire. It was still alight from last night and just needed a little prodding and two more logs to have it blazing again.

She crept back up the stairs. Clark had changed position, but he was still asleep. Should she let him sleep? Or make him some breakfast?

Coffee, she decided. They only had instant coffee, but the aroma provided a nice way to ease from sleep. She turned on the oven and put the remaining loaf of bread in to warm. She found a tray, and a few minutes later, armed with coffee and warm bread, butter, and honey, she traipsed up the stairs.

Clark was sitting on the bed in his shorts, his feet on the floor. “Look at my foot,” he said.

Lois put down the tray and came to him. His foot was still swollen, but much less so, which significantly reduced the

distortion. “How does it feel?” she asked.

“I got to the bathroom and back,” he said with visible satisfaction.

“So it feels better than last night?”

He nodded. “I can’t put all of my weight on it, but resting it on the floor doesn’t hurt too much.”

Something in how he said ‘hurt’ shattered the dam inside Lois. ‘Clark’ and ‘hurt’ were not words that went together, not in a physical sense. Helplessness had been foreign to him. But Trask and his men had hurt him so very much. And even now as the physical pain subsided, she could clearly see the remaining reservoirs of emotional pain and insecurities.

Her tears fell, and she turned towards the little round window. She heard a shuffle, and Clark’s hand grasped her shoulder. “I’m sorry,” he whispered against her ear.

She turned and collapsed into his bare chest. His arms came around her and clutched her against him.

“Sorry for what?” Lois said.

“For not being able to protect you.”

“It wasn’t me they hurt.”

His hand tightened, and she sensed he was reliving something from the past few days. “You were defenceless, Lois. I allowed myself to get into a position where I couldn’t —”

She reached up and captured his mouth with hers. She kissed him, softly, gently, with infinite love, aiming not to inflame, but to restore.

When she broke contact with his lips, she put her hands on his black bristles. “We’re together, my darling farmboy. I love you. We’ll find a way out of this.”

“I can’t see how,” he admitted as if acknowledging a personal failing.

She smiled at him. “Hungry?”

He nodded and hobbled back to the bed. “What do we have?”

“Coff —”

She was interrupted by a loud knock on the cottage door.

“That’ll be Hank,” Lois said. She ran down the stairs and checked through the window.

It wasn’t Hank. It was Bill Henderson.

“Who is it?” Clark asked from behind her.

Lois turned, her heart thumping erratically in her chest. Clark had put on his glasses and was standing, a little unsteadily, at the foot of the stairs. “Henderson,” she whispered.

She saw the colour drain from Clark’s face. “He was there,” he said quietly. “Henderson was at the warehouse. I heard his voice.”

So Daniel had told her some truth.

“Who is with him?” Clark asked.

Lois scanned the garden. “No one that I can see.” She turned back to Clark, panic engulfing her. “What shall we do?”

Before Clark could answer, the knock sounded again, loud in the silence. “There’s nowhere to hide,” he said. “We have to let him in.”

Lois stepped towards the door.

“Loissss!” Clark hissed.

“What?”

“I’ll do it.” Clark limped past her and opened the door.

Bill Henderson gazed back at them. He was alone and carried no visible gun, but the look on his face was one of urgency. “It’s freezing out here,” he said. “Do you mind if I come in?”

### Part 11

Clark shuffled back, and Henderson walked in.

Clark fixed his eyes on the inspector, a spiral of unaccustomed emotions eddying through him. Primarily suspicion ... but also resentment ... and most galling of all ... apprehension. Lois stepped very close to him and slipped her hand into his. Together they faced Henderson.

“What do you want?” Lois said frostily.

Henderson didn’t appear to resent her tone. “To talk,” he replied evenly. “To see how you are. To see if there is anything I can do to help.” Clark watched Henderson’s eyes sweep the length of his body ... and saw him flinch with what looked like genuine regret. The detective slipped off his overcoat and held it towards Clark.

Clark’s gaze lifted from the coat to Henderson’s face.

“Take it,” Henderson urged.

Clark took it and put it on. It probably didn’t look great — two bare and bruised legs sticking out from a coat that was tight across his shoulders and didn’t meet properly at the front — but it beat being more-than-half-naked.

“You should sit down,” Henderson suggested.

Lois helped Clark to the sofa and they sat together, her hand still entrenched in his.

Henderson dragged the chair closer to the sofa and sat down, too. He leant forward, perched his elbows on his knees and stared at his clasped hands. The silence grew heavier.

Then Henderson looked up and faced them. “I can guess what you’re thinking,” he said solemnly. “Neither of you has the slightest reason to trust me, and I’m not sure anything I say will substantially change that.”

Clark glanced to Lois, seeking her reaction. He had overheard conversations in the warehouse; conversations that had suggested there was little to distinguish Henderson from Trask in their commitment to the extermination of aliens.

“Then why come?” Lois’s tone had not thawed one iota.

Henderson looked directly at Clark. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to make much difference for you at the warehouse, Clark. I couldn’t protest without risking my cover ... and then both of us would have been killed.” His eyes switched to Lois. “And I’m sorry Trask’s man got to you at the police station, Lois. That shouldn’t have happened.”

Clark turned to Lois. “Got to you?” he said tightly.

Lois rested her other hand on his, sandwiching his fingers in her softness. “They didn’t hurt me,” she assured him with a little smile. She faced Henderson again. “Why did you have me arrested if you knew I hadn’t hurt Clark?”

“Hodge told you he had someone feeding out information to him?”

“Yeah.”

“That was me. Although I understand it sounds very convenient now.”

“You were working with Trask?” Lois accused acidly.

Henderson nodded. “I’ve been working with him for over a year. Although he was popular and charismatic and had achieved some things against incredible odds, there were people in high places who worried about him. Worried that one day he would go so far past the line, there would be no going back.”

“And yesterday was that day?” Lois said with barbed perception.

“It certainly could have been,” Henderson agreed. “I was asked to monitor him. To ignore the minor violations of procedure and be there to stop the cataclysm.”

“You’re a Metropolitan Inspector; he’s a federal agent.” Lois’s tone said she wasn’t necessarily buying this.

“Titles are there because they have to be,” Henderson said. “We’re all supposed to be on the same side.”

“Yeah,” Lois said with biting sarcasm. “Why you? Why would Trask trust you specifically?”

“Precisely because I’m just a local cop. Whatever I’ve done has stayed way underground ... even among my colleagues.” Henderson leant back in his chair, looking marginally more relaxed. “You probably have a lot of questions,” he said. “I’m here to answer whatever I can.”

Clark’s questions were struggling to emerge from the gelatinous mass of his confusion, yet he felt a dragging

reluctance to become involved in this conversation. His normal composure, carefully cultivated through years of secrets, had shattered.

“Why don’t we start with the Sewells?” Lois said. Clark could hear the lingering hostility in her tone. “It seems to me they’ve caused a lot of trouble.”

Henderson dragged in a big breath before beginning to speak. “Max Sewell and his wife, Sheridan, worked for EPRAD,” he said. “Their assignment was to apply their expertise in human genetics to the goal of establishing permanent colonies in space.”

“How living long-term in zero gravity would affect us?” Lois asked.

Henderson nodded. “And, by extension, if certain people had a genetic predisposition that would aid or hinder their ability to live in space.”

“How did they go from that to finding a spaceship?” Lois asked curtly.

“They were supposed to be studying human genetics, but their agenda was very different. They had an unshakable belief that aliens existed and had — or would — contact Earth. They were driven by the tantalising prospect of studying non-terrestrial DNA.”

“Still doesn’t get them a spaceship,” Lois noted.

Henderson almost grinned. “They used their access at EPRAD to pore over records, reports, and old space tracking data, looking for aberrations.”

“Thinking they would find something everyone else missed?” Lois said, her tone falling just short of derision.

“Those were the years of the Cold War,” Henderson noted. “Everything was monitored, but if it had nothing to do with the USSR, it wasn’t deemed particularly significant.”

“So they found ... what?” Lois asked. “Exactly?”

“In the tracking data from 1966, they discovered the path of an object that defied the laws of ballistics.”

“Ballistics?”

“How things move in space.”

“So?”

“So because it didn’t follow the laws, they surmised it was powered. It was not an EPRAD project, so they concluded alien life. *Intelligent* alien life. The path of the object terminated in Smallville, Kansas. They went there and found the spaceship.”

Smallville, a spaceship, and 1966. Clark’s breathing had become fast and shallow as his mind whirled. His journey to Earth had been *tracked*. He leant a little closer to Lois, not trusting himself to speak, hoping she would ask the questions that he couldn’t.

“That’s a big leap,” Lois breathed, almost covering a tinge of respect. “Several big leaps.”

Henderson nodded. “They were lucky. Lucky and obsessed and with a voracious appetite for dusty data.”

“Where did the spaceship come from? Originally?”

Clark couldn’t breathe. That was the question that had dogged him his entire life.

“The Sewells say it came from a planet that was destroyed just after the spaceship’s launch.”

Clark closed his eyes momentarily, grappling with this information. He’d had a home, but it had been destroyed. He’d had a people, a family, but they were almost certainly dead.

“Did the planet have a name?” Lois asked.

“Max and Sheridan called it Krypton.”

*Krypton*, Clark repeated in his mind. Was that really the name of his home, or just something made up by two scientists?

“Why?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know,” Henderson said. “The name was used throughout their notes, but there was no explanation. There was also no explanation for their belief that the planet had been destroyed.”

“Where did the green stuff come from?” Lois asked offhandedly.

“Apparently, they’re meteorites from Krypton. Possibly they came here in the wake of the spaceship. The Sewells joined the two words and called them kryptonite.”

Lois seemed to be considering that. “So the Sewells took the spaceship home?”

“They didn’t want to share their find, or have their access to the spaceship limited by EPRAD, so they hastily resigned. They took it and studied it to a minute level and became convinced it had brought an alien to Earth.”

*Superman.*

The unspoken name hung between them.

“The Sewells had had no income for two years,” Henderson continued. “So they decided to try a little blackmail.”

“And through their attempted blackmail, Trask became involved,” Lois said darkly.

“Trask went through everything that was recovered from the Sewells’ house,” Henderson said. “After talking with them, he was convinced there were other spaceships that had brought other aliens — hostile peoples who lived among us, plotting our demise. When Superman appeared — complete with superpowers — Trask lost all grip on reason. For him, it was the final piece of a very terrifying puzzle — the indisputable proof that his theory was correct.”

“But Superman appearing did not mean he intended to harm us,” Lois said casually.

“In Trask’s deranged mind, it was enough. He pored over the tapes from Luthor’s dungeon — over and over again, driving himself into a manic frenzy of hatred and destruction. I realised Trask was willing to go to any lengths to rid the world of Superman. I knew I needed someone I could trust working on the outside to use the information I had. I contacted Hodge and persuaded him to come out of retirement. Just for this j...job.” Henderson’s voice cracked, and he swallowed. “He was a good man.”

Clark saw Lois nod in agreement. He gently squeezed her hand.

Henderson stared at the floor for long moments as the sporadic fire sounds crackled through the silence. When he looked up, his attention sought Lois. “When Trask read Superman’s email yesterday, things moved extremely quickly. He sent Scardino to watch your apartment until you arrived home from the hospital. Then, he was to track you. When you arrived at the circus, his orders were to bring you in using any means. I had to get to you first.”

“So you had me arrested,” Lois said, making no attempt to rein in her lingering indignation. “And left me with a rookie.”

“He was all I had,” Henderson said in his own defence.

“Superman’s departure hadn’t become public knowledge, but the criminal element had noticed his absence and were testing the waters, so to speak. My intention had been to lock you in a cell, but they were all occupied.”

Lois chose to ignore that particular disclosure. “Arresting me couldn’t have endeared you to Trask.”

“No,” Henderson agreed grimly. “After that, I knew I couldn’t go back to the warehouse.”

Clark understood why, and a potent mix of gratitude and relief swept through him. The officer caught his gaze, and a tentative smile passed between them.

“Who’s Daniel?” Lois asked.

“Scardino — one of Trask’s other two lackeys; George Thompson was the other.”

“Is Trask dead?”

“Yes,” Henderson said. “They all are. They didn’t stand a chance against Hodge’s bomb.”

“How could Hodge have not known about the kryptonite

being at the warehouse?” Lois asked.

“He never went there.”

“But you did.”

Henderson winced at the underlying accusation in her words. “Yes,” he said sadly. “And I will regret for the rest of my life that I didn’t think it was important enough to mention.”

“Was Trask really going to fire the missiles?”

Henderson’s eyes rose slowly from the floor. “He believed you, Lois. He believed Superman wouldn’t come to save you, so he skipped several steps and went straight for the missiles. I didn’t think he would, not straight away, but Hodge was sure. Thousands of Americans owe him their lives.”

“We do, too,” Lois said quietly.

Clark cleared his parched throat. “Missiles?” he said falteringly.

“Trask intended to target some major American cities,”

Henderson said. “He believed wholesale death and destruction would lure Superman back.”

“To kill him?” Clark asked.

Henderson nodded. He continued to speak, but Clark wasn’t listening any more. The humans feared him so much they were willing to sacrifice their own people to be rid of him.

They didn’t know him ... yet they feared him.

He’d come as a friend ... yet they hated him.

He was completely isolated ... the only one of his kind amongst billions of humans.

Lois’s hands tightened around his, and her thumb slid across the fleshy mound between his wrist and his thumb, massaging her love and understanding.

He looked into her face. Her dialogue with Henderson had continued unchecked. But she had known. Somehow, she’d sensed his estrangement and had responded.

*You are not alone. I am with you.*

Clark’s love for Lois clambered up his throat and lodged there, hot and fierce. Only Henderson’s presence stopped him clinging to her and unloosing the chaotic jangle of his emotions. He swallowed furiously and forced his attention back to the conversation.

“Is the spaceship ruined?” Lois asked.

“There’s some damage; nothing that can’t be fixed — superficially at least.”

“What’s going to happen to it?”

“With Superman gone, we thought we’d put it in the Metropolis Museum as a memento of the friend who visited with us for nearly thirty years but only allowed us to know him for such a short time.”

“What about the Sewells’ notes?” Lois asked. “And the green rocks?” she added as if it were an afterthought.

“The notes are water-damaged to a pulp. The green rocks exploded.”

“Not all of them,” Lois said. “There were still some chips on the floor. I saw them when Clark and I were getting out.”

Henderson shrugged. Either he had no idea of the significance of the kryptonite or he had perfect control of his body language. “Maybe whatever’s left will go to the museum, too.”

“Could you make sure it’s all cleaned up?” Lois asked. “I think Superman would hate it if it fell into the wrong hands. You know, people trying to sell it at huge prices because of its connection with Superman, maybe claiming it had special healing qualities or whatever.”

“I have two of my most reliable men guarding the warehouse now,” Henderson said. “I’ll make sure everything with any link with Superman is properly dealt with.”

“And the quantum weapon that Trask had?” Lois said. “The one he thought could kill Superman?”

“It was destroyed by Hodge’s bomb. Along with the

manufacturing instructions and the theories behind why it *might* have worked.” Henderson stood and took a cell phone from his jacket. “This is yours,” he said, offering it to Lois. “I’ve had the bug removed and charged the battery. I figured you’d have calls to make.”

Lois stood and turned to help Clark to his feet. As she reached for her phone, a soft knock sounded on the door.

Clark tensed. And felt Lois’s corresponding tension where her hand was encased in his.

Henderson must have noticed. “It’s OK,” he said. “Whoever it is, you don’t have anything to fear.” He opened the door.

It was Sarah Crawford. “Billy!” she said with a huge smile of delight. She stepped into the cottage and threw her arms around Henderson.

Clark stared at them, sure now that he was dreaming. He had to be dreaming. Lois had brought him to this storybook cottage and slept in the bed with him. Henderson had come with tales of destroyed planets and fervid scientists, missiles and deranged agents, and now ... Sarah Crawford was hugging Henderson with what could only be described as easy familiarity.

When she withdrew from the embrace, her eyes swung over Clark, and she grimaced. “I usually make it my business to stay away from the cottage when the flag is up,” she said. “But after I read the paper this morning, I hoped you’d had the good sense to come here. So I came to see if there is anything you need.”

“How do you know Henderson?” Clark asked, unable to keep the suspicion from his voice.

Sarah shot Henderson a laughing glance. “Bill’s father was the Crawford gardener for most of his life. He planted the trees behind the cottage and brought to reality Emma’s dreams for the front garden. When Bill was a teenager, he would sometimes come with his dad. David was a young boy, and he loved nothing more than following Bill and his father as they tended the garden.”

Henderson smiled. “He was a good kid,” he said gently. “But he *never* stopped talking.”

A look passed between Henderson and Sarah, a look of remembrance, of someone loved ... and lost.

“Do you trust him?” Lois asked Sarah with a nod towards Henderson.

“Billy?” Sarah said. “Completely. I would trust him with the lives of my children.” Her gaze flitted over Lois and Clark. “I’ll bring clothes and food.”

With a final hug for Henderson, she left.

“Did you plan that?” Lois demanded.

Henderson smiled wryly. “No, I didn’t,” he said. “But you have to admit, her timing is flawless.”

“So that’s how you knew about this cottage?” Lois concluded.

“Yeah. I’ve weeded this garden more times than I care to remember.”

“But how did you know we would be here?”

“I found Hodge’s cell in the warehouse and checked the call register,” Henderson replied. “Putting two and two together wasn’t difficult.”

“Do people still consider Superman a threat to their safety?” Clark asked.

Henderson looked at him and then at Lois. “Doesn’t he know?”

“We haven’t had much time to talk,” she said.

“Then I’ll leave you to it.” Henderson offered his hand to Clark.

Clark slowly put his hand in the proffered one.

“This morning’s papers have the basic story of an agent gone wrong and two captured reporters,” Henderson said. “I ensured Perry White got a bigger share of the details than anyone else. I told him you’re safe but not where you are. I also explained the

reasons behind Sally Smallville.”

Lois’s expression lightened for the first time since Henderson had walked through the cottage door. “Thanks,” she said. “And thanks for looking after the Planet.”

“I’m not going to tell you what you can and can’t print,” Henderson said. “But I’m sure you’re aware that if my part in this becomes public knowledge, it will affect my future viability.”

Lois nodded.

“Say the word, and I can have all the bugs removed from your apartment and the Planet. And I’ll make sure your personal effects are returned.”

“Thanks.”

Henderson smiled hesitantly.

Lois returned his smile, also hesitantly.

“See you on the beat?” he said.

“See you on the beat,” she agreed.

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Fifteen minutes later, Sarah arrived with Tanya, one of her staff members. They brought clothes — some of David’s and some of Sarah’s — enough food for at least two days, personal toiletries, and a copy of the morning’s Daily Planet.

“I thought we’d leave today,” Lois said, perusing the rather large pile.

But Sarah wouldn’t hear of it. “Stay at least another night,” she insisted. “But two or three nights would be better. If the flag is still up tomorrow afternoon, I’ll be back with more supplies.”

Lois hugged her tightly. “Thank you, Sarah.”

“Look after yourself, Lane,” Sarah said. “And your man. You both need it.”

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When Sarah had gone, Lois scrutinised Clark, still dressed in Henderson’s overcoat. Her laughter bubbled up, and she struggled valiantly to restrain it. Her mouth, she kept clamped; her eyes, though, gave her away.

And she knew it.

“Are you laughing at me?” Clark said.

She checked his eyes before answering. She could see the little sprigs of amusement in them. “Yep,” she admitted, granting her mouth freedom.

He glanced down and when his head lifted, he was grinning. “Now I have clothes, I should go and dress,” he said.

He picked up the track pants and polo shirt, tossed them onto his shoulder and attacked the stairs with a vigour that widened Lois’s smile considerably.

Sarah had brought a lasagne. Lois turned on the oven and put it in to warm. Then she put away the rest of the supplies and picked up the Daily Planet.

Ironically, Trask and Superman shared the front page. Her story about Superman returning to his people had equal billing with the story of Trask and his plans of destruction — a story that carried the by-line of Perry White.

Lois read the story — appreciating its smooth logical progression and readability. Without doubt, the Chief’s juices still ran bountifully when they needed to.

Lois found a pen and paper and began jotting a follow-up story. She left out any mention of Superman other than in the context of being the focus of Trask’s fatal obsession.

She needed to talk with Clark. He needed to know she had fabricated a home planet and sent him away. He needed to decide what happened with Superman now.

Although without his powers, it could be that the decision had been taken from him.

She glanced up, wondering what was taking Clark so long. He was standing — on one foot — at the bottom of the stairs, dressed and leaning nonchalantly against the wall, his arms folded across his chest.

Staring at her.

She met his eyes and smiled. “What are you looking at, farmboy?” she asked.

“My world,” he said softly.

### Part 12

Actually, Clark had been watching Lois for at least a couple of minutes, indulging, absorbing, relishing.

On the warehouse floor, his ability to conjure her image had dwindled until he could no longer retrieve her from his pain-ravaged mind. That had been the most agonising aspect of his ordeal.

Lois rose from her chair and came to him. She stopped, mere inches from him, and contemplated him with twinkling eyes. “You’re looking better,” she observed.

“I probably wouldn’t fall over if you were to ...”

“Touch you?”

Clark nodded.

“Hold you?”

He nodded again.

“Kiss you?”

He smiled an invitation.

Lois put her hands on his chest, slid them up to his shoulders, and curled around his neck. Clark closed his eyes, savouring the feel of her against his body. Then her lips plied his, and for the first time, he was able to shut down the lurking spectre of his memories and simply inhabit the present. His arms enclosed her. His hand cupped her head, and he kissed her. Longingly. And lengthily.

When they broke contact, Lois leant her forehead against his, her hands wrapped around his head. It was so incredibly good to hold her ... feel her ... kiss her ... taste her.

“Is that lunch I smell?” he murmured eventually.

“Yep. We didn’t eat our breakfast, so I put Sarah’s lasagne in the oven. Are you hungry?”

“Yeah,” he said.

Lois moved away from him and took the lasagne from the oven. When their food was served, she sat next to him and said, “Clark, there is something I need to tell you. Actually, two things.”

Something in her tone caused the fear to again pound on the door of his heart. Was this it? Was she about to tell him everything had changed?

But she’d kissed him. Surely she wouldn’t have kissed him like that if ... “OK,” he managed.

“Hodge told me Trask had you and the only way for you to get out alive was for Superman to confront Trask.” Her hand stretched across the table and covered his. “I knew that wasn’t possible, so I needed a way to convince Trask that Superman was no longer a threat.”

Clark looked at their joined hands. She wasn’t backing away. Not this time. “What did you do?”

“I told Hodge that Superman had been contacted by his own people and his mother died and he had to go with them and would never come back to Earth again.”

Clark looked at her, feeling dazed. “So ... no more Superman,” he concluded.

“I’m sorry, Clark,” Lois said. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

“All things considered, it’s not going to make a lot of difference,” he said with a shrug.

Lois passed him the Daily Planet, and Clark read her story as they ate. It was convincing — so convincing, he had to keep reminding himself that this world ... his mother ... these people ... didn’t exist outside of Lois’s imagination. “Superman *emailed* you?” he asked.

“Trask had my computer bugged, so I used Jimmy’s computer to send an email to myself from your account. I said Superman had used Kryptonian technology to access it.”

Clark’s mind latched onto that word again. “I’m

Kryptonian?” he said tentatively, feeling absolutely no connection ... no flash of familiarity.

“It seems so,” Lois said as her hand found his again. Her voice, her touch, her eyes all conveyed how clearly she understood his wonder at finally discovering something of his origins. Understood too, that it was little more than a morsel when he craved so much more.

“If the green rock ... the kryptonite ... is from my planet, why does it have such a debilitating effect on me?” Clark asked.

“I don’t know.” She smiled. “But I do know why your parents sent you to Earth.”

He did, too. “To save me,” he said in hushed awe.

Her hand caressed his. “To save you,” she repeated. “They wanted you, they loved you, they did what they could to give you a chance at life.”

He wished ... for so much more. Yearned to have something ... anything ... of them. If only he could tell them they had saved their son.

“I’ll think of a way to clear the kryptonite from the museum, and we’ll go and see your spaceship,” Lois promised.

Clark smiled sadly. It wasn’t much, but it was something.

“How did you find me?” he asked.

She gestured to the newspaper. “You should read Perry’s story.”

Clark did, trying to extract the answers he needed as he skimmed over that which he already knew ... and never wanted to revisit again.

“And here’s my follow-up story,” she said, offering him a sheet of paper.

He read that, too. He still had questions. How had Hodge communicated with Lois despite Trask bugging her phones and computer? Why had she been at the circus when Henderson had had her arrested?

And he still didn’t know why she was no longer wearing his ring.

“Are you going to phone it in to Perry?” he asked.

“If you’re OK with it.”

“It’s fine,” he said, deliberately avoiding her eyes.

“Do you want to add anything? Have I missed anything?”

“No.”

She considered him for a long moment, her face a bevy of silent questions. “Would you prefer if neither of us said anything else?” she offered. “Perry’s story covers the main points. We could just leave it there.”

That’s exactly what he wanted. But rationally, there was nothing remotely objectionable in Lois’s story. She’d mentioned little about his injuries ... hadn’t even hinted he’d been reduced to such a level of degradation. “It’s fine,” he repeated tightly.

Lois picked up her story, crumpled it into a ball, and threw it into the fire. “Want some coffee?” she said.

“Thanks,” he said. But he wasn’t thanking her for the coffee, but for somehow understanding what he needed when he couldn’t even begin to put it in words.

She stood and cleared away their empty plates.

“Lois?”

“Uhm?” She got out the cups and removed the lid from the coffee jar.

“What was the other thing you wanted to tell me?”

Her cheeks deepened to a pretty pink. He was sure it wasn’t from the fire. “I have a confession,” she said.

“OK,” he said as his foreboding pressed again.

“The first night you were missing, I went to your apartment, and I was so lonesome for you and so worried about you, I couldn’t leave, so I ate your food and used your shower ... and your toothbrush ... and slept in your bed.”

Clark pushed his chair back from the table. “Come here,” he said softly.

She did, and he pulled her down onto his lap. “Honey, you’re welcome to everything I have ... even my toothbrush.”

But she still looked a little uneasy. “What about your journal?” she said.

He gulped. His journal? “You read it?” he asked.

She nodded. “Not at first, but I ached for you so much ... and it was all I had.”

He didn’t mind ... exactly. Though he had written it assuming it would always be private. “It’s a bit sappy,” he said self-consciously.

“It isn’t sappy at all,” Lois said. Her hand curled around his neck. “It was incredibly beautiful.”

“It’s the truth,” Clark declared. “I did love you from the beginning.”

She leant forward and kissed him. So sweetly.

“What I want hasn’t changed,” he murmured into their kiss.

“What I want hasn’t changed either,” she replied.

He had to ask. Even if her answer was ‘no’, he had to know. He backed away so he could see her face. “So,” he said hesitantly. “Do you still want to marry me?”

Her eyes widened, and her mouth dropped. “Of course I still want to marry you, Clark,” she exclaimed. “How could you possibly think otherwise?”

“Things have changed,” he said bleakly.

“Not the important things.”

“Then why aren’t you wearing your ring?”

“Because I didn’t know if there was a tracking device in it. I took off all my jewellery. And ...”

“And?”

“And wearing an engagement ring when my fiancé had disappeared aroused questions I wanted to avoid.”

He hadn’t thought of that. “So you’ll put it on again?”

“The moment I get home.”

Clark closed his eyes and leant into her neck as he again pushed his fears to the recesses of his mind.

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Lois relaxed into the comfortable chair in the cottage garden, gleaning what warmth she could from the waning afternoon sun.

Her right hand rested in Clark’s as he reclined next to her.

Periodically, she lazily opened her eyes, just to look at him, just to assure herself he was still there.

Lois had suggested they come here, hoping the serenity of their surroundings would afford them the perfect opportunity to talk. Certainly, she still had questions. However, her motivation had not been her questions, but her desire to alleviate the hunted look that still clung to Clark’s troubled brown eyes. She believed his need to talk was even greater than her need for answers.

But talking seemed to be the furthest thing from his mind.

She’d asked a few questions — questions deliberately worded such that he could choose which direction he wanted to take the conversation.

But his answers had been vague ... evasive even. Then his eyes had closed, and his grip on her hand had loosened a little.

He was, understandably, exhausted. Physically. Emotionally. His body was healing. His mind needed to heal, too.

The jangle of her cell phone cut through the air. Lois answered. It was Clark’s mom.

“Hi, honey,” Martha greeted. “Is everything OK? I tried Clark’s cell, and there was no answer.”

“Everything’s fine,” Lois said, noticing Clark’s eyes had opened. “Here’s Clark.”

\*\*\*

Clark could not remember ever not wanting to speak with his mom. Maybe when he was a kid — on one of the rare occasions when he’d done something that had displeased her.

But in the last ten years, he’d always welcomed her presence, her voice on the phone.

But right now, he dreaded it. He really didn't want to speak with her.

"Hi, Mom," he said with what he knew was a pathetic attempt at normalcy.

"Clark," she said. She was concerned; he could tell from one word. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Mom."

"You haven't been answering your cell."

"I've been busy for a few days," he said. "There's a big story breaking."

"We read it," his mom said, her words heavy with meaning.

Clark's sigh escaped before he could shackle it. "Mom, I'll come home in a few days. We'll talk then."

"OK." She sounded hurt. Mostly confused, but there was hurt there, too.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he said. "I can't talk now. Lois and I are fine, and we'll see you and Dad in a few days."

There was a pause, then she said, "I love you, son."

"I love you too, Mom," he said. "Please don't worry."

"Bye."

"Bye."

He put the cell on the table, ashamed that he felt such overwhelming relief to have escaped the need to talk.

\*\*\*

Lois had watched Clark as he talked with his mom.

Yes, they would go to his parents. But it would take hours to get there, not minutes. They would have to plan, book, and be subject to the restrictions of an airline schedule.

Clark's life had changed. And she was only just beginning to realise how much.

He might have lost Superman, but he still had Clark. Maybe she needed to emphasise that part of him. Clark was clean-shaven. She leant over to him and ran her fingers through his bristles. "I noticed there's a razor in the things Sarah brought. Do you feel like shaving?"

"I thought you liked the stubble."

"I do," she said. "But I'm hankering to see your face." They went into the cottage, and Lois sorted through the bag and found the razor, still in its packaging. Perhaps it had been intended for David Crawford, and he'd never had the chance to use it. She offered it to Clark.

He took it, examined it at length, and then looked up with an inexplicable expression. "I've never used a razor before," he admitted.

"Then how ..."

He gestured to his eyes. "Mirror, plus heat vision."

Lois refused to be thwarted. "Well, I've used a razor before," she said lightly. "Come on, we'll do it in the bathroom."

She began to move, but Clark's hand reached out and caught her. "You're going to shave me?" he asked with disbelief.

She nodded, completely unfazed. "Of course. As soon as you can stand properly, you'll have to do it for yourself. But today ..." She grinned at him. "Meet you upstairs, farmboy."

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Being shaved with a razor was a totally new experience for Clark.

Being shaved by Lois was something else again.

From the moment she'd finished smothering him in shaving cream — then cheekily kissed him such that a fair portion of it transferred to her — to the moment she carefully dried every inch of his face and neck, it was nerve-jangling enjoyment.

With two outcomes.

His face was clean-shaven.

And his body had suddenly caught up with exactly how extensively Lois's hands had tended him lately.

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Lois just couldn't keep her gaze from continually drifting to

Clark.

It was true, she did like the stubble, but clean-shaven, he was definitively Clark — and it was so wonderful to have him back, to be able to look at him whenever she wanted to.

"I'm going to have a shower," he said, breaking into her reverie that had centred entirely on him.

"Can you manage without help?" she asked, trying to sound willing but not eager.

"Yeah ... thanks."

She felt a cloak of disappointment settle in her gut. "OK," she said casually. "But before you do, can I check your injuries?"

Clark slid the polo shirt over his head and sat on the bed. Lois stole a peek at his chest before sitting behind him and carefully removing the bandage she had put on his back. What she saw caused a quick in-breath of surprise.

"What?" Clark said anxiously.

"Does it hurt when I touch here?" She gently prodded along his back.

"Not much. Why?"

"Because I can't believe how quickly it has healed."

"Really?"

Lois gently cleaned around the laceration. It had closed up, the fiery redness had faded, and it looked — for a wound — clean and healthy.

She applied antiseptic cream and examined the rest of his back, shaking her head in wonder. The minor grazes had gone — she could see an occasional pink line here and there, but nothing that really needed her attention. She checked his ribs and discovered that the bruising had faded to splotches of gold and pale burgundy.

Clark may not need medical attention, but she decided they could both use some touch therapy. She started along the ridges of his shoulders, gently massaging.

A low, throaty murmur escaped from Clark.

"Good?" she asked.

"Better than good."

"Does your shoulder still hurt?"

"Not anymore."

Slowly and carefully, she worked down the centre of his back, luxuriating in his warm sleekness. Then she separated her hands and sidled towards his ribs.

He lurched, and her hands jolted from him. "Did I hurt you?" she asked, feeling horrified. "I'm sorry."

Clark looked over his shoulder. "Remember when you were trying to get me to divulge the details of our big date?"

"Yeah."

"Remember how you figured tickling me was such a great strategy?"

"Yeah."

"I neglected to mention that I wasn't ticklish."

"So you faked it?" Lois said, pretending indignation.

He nodded — with a grin that was so close to classic Clark, a lump rose into her throat.

"Why?" she said.

His grin widened. "I'm sure you don't need me to explain why," he said.

Her mouth opened, but he just grinned and turned around in an overt invitation for her to continue. "So you're ticklish now?" she said.

She saw his shoulders lift with a little sigh. "Yeah," he said soberly.

"Good," she declared. "Because as soon as those ribs are healed, I'll be taking advantage of that."

He didn't respond, and she couldn't see his face, so she clamped her arms around his waist and rested her head on slope of his shoulder.

This skin-on-skin interplay was becoming addictive.

With regret, she straightened and placed a kiss on his shoulder. “Time to do your front,” she said.

He turned, and her eyes lingered on his chest. It was the same as his back — it had healed significantly. And it was still a breathtaking tableau of male perfection. She wanted to comment, but decided against it. Last night, her appreciation had only served to remind him of what he’d lost.

She gave the necessary attention to his remaining wounds, then knelt on the floor and took his injured foot onto her thighs. It was almost back to its normal size and shape. Lois looked up to him, dumbfounded. “You have an amazing capacity to heal,” she said.

“It’s you,” he said, smiling down at her. “Your touch, your love, everything that is you. I couldn’t help but get better.” He reached down, took her hand and pulled her to her feet, then continued backwards so he was lying on the bed and she was on top of him.

Lois’s breath jammed in her throat and every receptor in her body responded to the stimuli of Clark beneath her. “This is very nice,” she said. “But if we are going to survive the three weeks until our wedding, I can’t stay here.” She kissed him fleetingly, rose from him, and headed for the stairs.

Before descending, she turned for one final look. He’d turned onto his side, head balanced on his hand, watching her, grinning roguishly.

She pointed at him, not even trying to hide her amusement. “Behave yourself, farmboy.”

He raised his hands in a gesture of surrender.

But he didn’t stop grinning.

\*\*\*

Lois leant snugly against Clark on the sofa, his arm across her shoulders. It was getting late, but she was too comfortable to move.

They’d spent the evening in quiet togetherness. Saying little. Savouring much.

She felt Clark try to stifle a yawn and gave up fighting her own sleepiness. “You’re tired,” she said.

“Lois?”

“Uhhh?”

“I think I’ll sleep on the sofa tonight.”

She shot from her haven and faced him. “Why?”

Clark shrugged and seemed to be having a difficult time meeting her eyes. “Because last night I wasn’t ... capable of appreciating your closeness, and tonight ... I am.”

“So you’re going to sleep on this sofa — which is half your length — when there’s a perfectly comfortable bed upstairs?”

He nodded.

Lois shook her head. “If anyone sleeps on the sofa, it’s going to be me.”

“Lois, I couldn’t sleep in the bed knowing you were on the sofa.”

“Then we share the bed.”

He did meet her eyes then. “You sure?”

She nodded. “What we both need is *sleep*,” she said decisively.

He wasn’t convinced.

Lois stood, took his hand, and pulled him up. “Come on, farmboy,” she said. “You can have the bathroom first. I’ll be up in a minute.”

“OK.” He walked to the stairs, his limp barely noticeable.

\*\*\*

The hard, cold floor thrust mercilessly into his back. The heavy blackness bore down on him, choking him, suffocating him. The pain ripped at his flesh — his chest, his shoulders, his neck — and erupted mercilessly inside his head.

From the blackness, he sensed the lurking shadow of a presence. Something ... someone.

Coming closer.

Closer.

Closer.

Ever closer.

Then he heard a terrified scream.

His eyes jerked open.

His heart thumped.

His body tingled with cold sweat.

He felt Lois’s hand on his arm as she shuffled closer to him.

“Clark?” she said softly. “Are you OK?”

His mouth felt like sandpaper. He swallowed. “I’m fine.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. Go back to sleep.”

She kissed his back, just down from his shoulder. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“There’s nothing to talk about. G’night.”

Her hand lifted from him, and he felt the icy stream of self-condemnation. She deserved better.

But he could no more have explained what had happened than he could have flown out of the window.

He felt the bed wobble slightly as she turned over. Away from him. “I love you,” he heard indistinctly from the other side of the bed.

He couldn’t reply.

His mind was still wrestling with the sinister reality of his dream.

He stared into the darkness, unwilling to close his eyes again.

He listened to Lois breathe.

She wasn’t asleep either.

He couldn’t sleep.

Couldn’t turn to her.

Couldn’t share this with her.

Couldn’t expose his vulnerability.

So he stared ahead.

And waited for first light.

\*\*\*

When Lois woke the next morning, Clark was already dressed. “Good morning,” she said.

“We should get back to work,” Clark said, continuing to tidy the room as he spoke. “I haven’t been there all week; you’ve missed a couple of days. Perry’ll be wondering where we are.”

Lois sat up in the bed, trying to get a better look at him. “Are you well enough?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Have a shower. I’ll make us breakfast.”

### Part 13

Three weeks later, Lois waited at the Metropolis airport for their flight.

It was delayed. So they waited. And waited.

It was Friday morning — the eve of her wedding.

Sarah Crawford and Lucy were flying with her and Clark to Smallville, via Wichita. Perry, Jimmy, and Uncle Mike would fly out tomorrow.

Their engagement had been announced. Perry had organised a hasty engagement party for them. Uncle Mike had provided the food.

Their wedding had been planned. Martha had done the bulk of it. With Lois and Clark needing to fly to Smallville the conventional way, their input had been limited to one visit and multiple phone conversations.

Now, everything was ready — church, catering, the hall for the reception, clothes, rings, flowers.

Everything was ready.

Except her — the bride.

Lois didn’t feel ready at all.

She glanced to Clark. He caught her glance and smiled at her.

Smiled.

But didn’t smile.

Smiled like he'd had to remind himself — *I should smile now.*

Not as if it had come from his heart. Not as if he were so happy, he couldn't do anything *but* smile.

Lois sighed.

Nothing had been the same since the warehouse.

There had been brief moments — in the otherworldly ambience of the cottage — where she had seen glimpses of Clark — moments of familiarity in a situation overwhelmingly foreign to both of them.

Then had come the nightmare.

The nightmare Clark still refused to acknowledge.

But Lois could not forget his scream.

A scream so full of terror, it continually jammed her mind with images of what had fuelled that dream.

They'd left the cottage and returned to their separate apartments. An hour later, they'd met at the Planet.

And life had gone on.

But as the wedding had moved inexorably closer, Clark had slipped further away.

Some things were the same — *appeared* to be the same.

He still plied her with his sweet gallantry. He was always there to help her with her coat, to open doors, to bring her coffee.

But every time he brought coffee, she felt him silently apologise because there was no chocolate croissant from Paris.

He worked with her, doing his share — more than his share, trying, she supposed, to compensate for his lack of super-speed.

He looked exhausted. He ran late. He arrived flustered.

She'd tried to tell him that she didn't mind covering for him while he recovered. His reply had been brusque and to the point. If he couldn't pull his weight, he'd resign.

Most mornings, his face carried a new nick from shaving. It healed by mid-morning and disappeared completely by lunchtime, but Lois's heart cried for him every time.

On one occasion, they had gotten into a situation ... the object of their investigation had pulled a gun on them. Without hesitation, Clark had stood in front of her. Protected her. Put her safety ahead of his own. The police had come; the danger had passed.

But later, she'd found Clark in the stairwell at the Planet, his head low, his breaths coming short and quick, his heart galloping.

She knew he dreaded the day when his human strength would not be enough.

And then there were the emergencies ...

The times when Superman's strength could have saved lives or prevented injury.

And Clark had had to watch ... helpless.

More than once, she'd seen him reach for the knot of his tie as he turned purposefully away. Then, his shoulders would slump, and he'd turn back.

With a look of absolute misery.

The warehouse, and whatever had happened there, remained taboo. Secretly, Lois was relieved to be spared the details. But she would have listened gladly, if sharing it could have eased the haunted look from Clark's face — the look he tried so desperately to keep hidden.

The subject of his powers — or lack of them — was also taboo. She'd concluded he was grieving — not unlike how she had grieved — still grieved — for her parents.

She believed his powers would return — believed they were so much a part of him, the effects of the kryptonite could only be transient. He'd accepted his powers had gone forever. It was a sore point they had both learned to avoid.

Lois looked at Clark again. He 'smiled' again.

So why was she here? Flying to Smallville? Intending to marry him in less than thirty hours?

Because she loved him.

And she wanted to be with him.

But she was sure he doubted her commitment.

He acted like a man awaiting the certain collapse of his world.

He'd offered — more than once — to postpone the wedding.

He'd told her — more than once — that he understood if she were having second thoughts. Things had changed.

Things had changed. He said it over and over.

Things had changed.

Meaning he didn't have powers anymore.

But some things hadn't changed.

Her love for him.

And, she hoped, his love for her.

So she was going to marry him.

And hope that somehow, marriage — and all that went with it — would bring back her Clark.

Because Lois missed him.

She missed him desperately.

\*\*\*

They finally touched down at Smallville airport — more than an hour late, having missed the connection from Wichita. Martha and Jonathan were there to meet them.

Lois directed herself, Lucy, and Sarah to travel in the car with Martha, leaving Clark to get into the truck with Jonathan. Maybe time alone with his father was exactly what Clark needed.

When they arrived at the farm, Martha had prepared a wonderful lunch for them. They ate.

Clark seemed relaxed, happy even.

Lois knew he was neither.

And she knew, too, that Martha wasn't fooled for one moment.

After lunch, Lois excused herself and wandered to the barn.

She needed time alone — actually she needed time with Clark, time to talk, really talk. But she had tried over and over again to talk with him, and every time, he'd shut down. Shut her out.

Patience and tolerance — never her strengths — had been required by the truckload. She managed, mostly, to keep her voice even and her words encouraging.

But now, she had nothing left to give. She felt like a dried-up sponge left too long in the hot sun.

She needed Clark.

Lois drifted among the animals in the barn, remembering when she had been here with Jonathan as the cow had given birth to her twin calves.

It had been three months ago — yet it seemed like years.

She'd just lost her parents, hadn't known Clark was Superman, and had been beginning to realise the depth of her love for the man from Smallville.

Now, there was no Superman, no powers, and she wanted her parents back — more so than ever in the past three weeks.

She heard a sound behind her and turned.

It was Clark.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi."

She waited, and determined she was going to wait. Wait until he spoke. He'd come looking for her — let him do the talking.

Every time she'd tried to initiate communication with him, he'd given her nothing but empty assurances.

So, this time, she would wait.

"Lois?" he said, his voice strained with uncertainty.

Hatred for Trask flooded through her. She hated him with a passion that rocked her with its intensity. Hated him for what he had done to Clark, for what he had stolen — not just Clark's powers, but Clark himself. "Yes, Clark?"

"Do you want to do this?"

"Do I want to do what?" she replied with forced composure.

“Do I want to look at the animals? Do I want to talk to you in the barn? Or ... do I want to marry you?”

He grimaced. “Do you want to marry me?”

She stepped closer to him. “Yes,” she insisted.

“I’m not sure anymore,” he said in a voice so low, she barely heard it.

“Not sure of what?”

“Of us.”

“Why?”

“Because we’ve drifted so far apart.”

*She* hadn’t drifted anywhere. “Any why do you think that’s happened?” Lois said, trying to keep the censure from her tone.

“I’m not sure what you want anymore,” Clark said.

Something in Lois snapped, shattering the layer of patience and tolerance and forbearing. She glared at him. “Clark!” she fumed. “Do you *ever* listen to me? Do you ever believe *anything* I say?”

“Of ... of course,” he stammered.

“No, you don’t.” She advanced on him. “I told you your powers weren’t why I loved you, but you wouldn’t believe me. When your powers went, you decided my love went too — even though I told you that wasn’t the case. I told you I wanted to marry you, but you preferred to listen to your own stupid doubts rather than believe me. I told you I would be here tomorrow, ready to marry you, yet you stand here and tell me you don’t know what I want.”

She stopped, her breaths ragged.

He looked dumbstruck — but only for a second. “You won’t accept that things have changed, Lois,” he said, his voice rising. “You have this fairy tale belief that my powers will come back, that everything will return to how it was. How can you even think about marrying me when you can’t accept the reality of who I am now?”

“How can you even think about questioning *my* grip on reality?” she screamed. “*You* won’t accept reality, Clark. *You* won’t accept what I tell you. *You* won’t accept the reality of my love for you.” Each ‘you’ was delivered with an accompanying poke to his chest. “Ever since the warehouse, you have acted like you are looking for a way out of this.”

“Don’t be so ridiculous, Lois.”

Never before had he spoken to her so harshly. So coldly. It shook her. Frightened her. Combusted her anger. “You’re right, Clark,” Lois seethed. “Things *have* changed. And it has *nothing* to do with your powers and *everything* to do with you.”

With that, she turned and stormed out of the barn.

\*\*\*

Clark stared after her.

Shaking.

Wishing he could take back the last few minutes.

Actually, wishing he could take back the last few weeks.

He slumped against the stall, hands in his pockets, head down, staring at the floor — seeing nothing but Lois’s fury.

Knowing it was justified.

And sure there could be no way back.

\*\*\*

When Lois entered the Kent kitchen, every eye looked up. Every face had questions. Every head turned to see if Clark was following behind her.

“Thanks for a wonderful lunch, Martha,” Lois said in a tight voice. “I think we’ll go and settle into our hotel rooms.”

Sarah and Lucy stood.

Jonathan handed them the car keys.

Lois thanked him with a strained hug.

And the three ladies walked out.

\*\*\*

Clark was still staring at the hay-strewn floor when Martha walked into the barn. “You don’t look like a man who’s about to

marry the love of his life,” she commented.

Clark forced a smile.

Which was dumb because this was his mother.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “And don’t give any answer that will insult my intelligence.”

He used the toe of his shoe to prod the hay on the floor of the barn. “I’m not sure Lois wants this,” he said dispiritedly.

He’d expected his mom to protest and assure him of Lois’s feelings. Instead she pinpointed him with a stare and said, “Why?”

“We’ve drifted apart, and whatever I do, I can’t get close to her again.”

“Why would she move away?”

He shrugged, although he knew that was dumb, too.

“You must have some thoughts about how this happened.”

“Things were different- very different — when I proposed. When she agreed to marry me.”

His mom’s mouth dropped with shock. “You think this has something to do with you losing your powers?” she said.

Clark didn’t nod. But he didn’t deny it either.

His mom was silent for a long time. Long enough to make him want to squirm.

“Then there are only two possibilities,” she said finally.

“Being?”

“Either Lois is a very shallow young woman or — ”

“She’s not,” Clark defended staunchly. “She’s anything but shallow.”

“Or you two haven’t been communicating.”

He didn’t want to meet his mom’s eyes.

“What have you told her about the events of a month ago?”

Martha asked.

“Not much.”

“More or less than you told me?”

“Less,” he admitted.

“Clark,” she cried. “I *still* have so many questions about what happened to you, but I could see you really didn’t want to talk about it, so I left it alone. But I assumed you’d have enough sense to talk to Lois.”

“At first, I was so tired and so ... needy ... and — ”

Sudden insight lit his mother’s face. “Are you embarrassed that you needed her?”

“Mom, I was a mess — bleeding and mostly naked and filthy. I couldn’t walk. I couldn’t look after myself, let alone her. It was ... humiliating.”

She pinned him again. “You know, Clark, it’s a pity you didn’t lose some of that obstinate male pride along with your powers.”

He pulled his hand through his hair. “She had to help me shower, Mom.”

“Poor girl,” she said with no discernable expression.

Clark saw the amusement twinkling in her eyes. His despair cracked, and he almost smiled. She smiled back. “I liked being Lois’s hero,” he admitted forlornly.

“And, without powers, you can’t be her hero anymore?”

Martha said with frank disbelief.

OK, when his mom said it, it sounded beyond stupid. So Clark conceded that one without even bothering to answer.

Martha put her hand on his arm. “If Lois truly wants out of this relationship because you don’t have powers, you need to find her and agree together that this was a mistake and both move on.”

“I - ”

“But,” Martha continued. “If the problem is that you haven’t been able to accept that any true relationship has to be a two-way thing, you need to find Lois and apologise and be genuinely willing to allow her to see you — the real you — your pride, your stubbornness, your uncertainties, your doubts, your fears ... your compassion, your selflessness, your integrity, and your great, big,

lovable heart.”

“Do you think that will be enough for Lois?”

“Do you?”

He sighed. “I don’t know.”

“Then you need to find out. Before tomorrow.”

Clark lifted his hands in frustration. “I *have* tried,” he said.

“But I don’t know what to say. I just can’t find the words.”

“‘I need you,’ seems like a fine place to start,” Martha said.

“‘I’m sorry’ could come next, followed closely by ‘Ask me anything, and I will answer as honestly as I can.’”

Clark grinned suddenly as one of his sweetest memories rose and caught him unawares. “Last time I said that to her, do you know what she asked?”

“What?”

“She asked at what age had I realised I was good-looking.”

Martha laughed. “What a great question,” she exclaimed.

“So, how old were you?”

“Mom!”

Martha leant up and dropped a kiss on his cheek. “Clark, you can’t marry Lois with this huge mountain of misunderstanding between you.”

“I know.”

“And if you don’t marry her, you will regret it for the rest of your life.”

“I know that, too.”

“So go find your girl,” Martha said. “You need each other.”

\*\*\*

“OK,” Sarah announced cheerfully into the gloomy atmosphere of the hotel room. “We’re out of here.”

Lucy looked up from the magazine. Lois didn’t move from where she was staring out of the window.

“Where are we going?” Lucy asked with negligible enthusiasm.

“Wichita,” Sarah said. “I’ve organised a car and accommodation. The driver will be here in ten minutes.”

Lucy nodded to Lois who was still transfixed at the window.

“You think it’s a good idea?” she asked Sarah.

“Staying here is not a good idea,” Sarah said.

“If those two get together again today,” Lucy said darkly, “there won’t even be a wedding tomorrow.”

Sarah walked over to Lois and put her hand on her shoulder.

“Come on, Lane, we’re going on a road trip.”

“I’m getting married tomorrow,” Lois said lifelessly.

“We’ll have you back in plenty of time.”

“I want to stay here,” Lois said.

“So you can stare out of the window for the next twenty-four hours?” Sarah asked. She turned to Lucy. “Put a few things in a bag for her.”

Lucy went into the adjoining room.

“Come on, Lois,” Sarah said. “We’ll have a great time. Just us three girls.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not? It’s your last night of freedom; a chance to have a fun night with your sister — something you will giggle over together when you are old ladies.”

“I should stay here.”

“To do what? Mope?”

“Where would we stay?”

“Crestview.”

“Which is?”

“A swish private Club.” Sarah grinned. “It has a reciprocal membership deal with the Metropolis Country Golf Club.”

“I had a fight with Clark,” Lois said disconsolately.

“Pre-wedding nerves,” Sarah said dismissively. “Everyone has them. They mean nothing. By tomorrow, you won’t even be able to remember what you were fighting about.”

“You think so?”

Sarah took Lois’s shoulders and turned her away from the window. “Let’s go party,” she said.

“I can’t be late tomorrow.”

“Forget about tomorrow,” Sarah said. “We’ll deal with that tomorrow. Today is a day for the girls.”

Lois stood, reluctance cloaking her posture like an old cape.

“I promise you,” Sarah said. “We will be back here tomorrow with plenty of time for you to be ready.”

“OK,” Lois agreed.

“Great,” Sarah said, hustling Lois and Lucy out of the hotel room before Lois could change her mind.

\*\*\*

Clark hurried through the reception area of the Smallville hotel, his mind completely absorbed with finding Lois and making things right.

“Clark?”

He turned as Jane, the receptionist, called his name. “Yeah?”

“If you’re going to Ms Lane’s room, they’ve left.”

His heart stopped. “Left?”

Jane nodded. “They took a couple of small bags and got into a cab.”

“Did they say when they’d be back?”

“No.” Jane looked at him with unconcealed pity. “But they didn’t cancel their booking,” she added, trying to soften the blow.

Clark shrugged, attempting indifference, but knowing it was so flimsy it did nothing to hide his distress. “OK, thanks, Jane,” he said. “I’ll catch up with her later.”

He stepped outside, away from Jane’s scrutiny and then froze as his stomach twisted with trepidation.

Lois wouldn’t go back to Metropolis, would she? Not without even telling him?

He tried to convince himself she just wouldn’t do that.

But when he came back later that evening, their rooms were still empty.

\*\*\*

Lois woke early the next morning. It was her wedding day! By tonight, she would be Clark’s wife.

A glance to the clock told her it was only just past seven o’clock. She wasn’t expecting Lucy and Sarah to wake any time soon — the three of them hadn’t gotten to bed until almost two and then had spent at least an hour indulging in meaningless blather — blather they had all found irrepressibly funny.

Lois’s stomach muscles were still complaining.

The evening had begun when Sarah had somehow procured three outfits — tight, daring, and dubitable, even had the women been a decade younger — and three wigs.

Lois had decided her last night single would be spent blonde.

The outfits, the wigs, and lashings of make-up had rendered them almost unrecognisable. It had set the tone for a roller-coaster night of ludicrous, stress-devouring fun.

Without doubt, it had been the most fun Lois had ever had with Lucy.

Sarah’s prediction had been right — they would not forget it. It would stand as a beacon in the pages of their history — the night they became friends as well as sisters.

They would recall it. Lois could see them now — two old ladies, with good memories. Better than good, because they were shared memories.

*“Do you remember the night before your wedding?”*

*Giggle. “The night we dressed up like teenage tarts and danced and sang and -”*

*“Laughed. I laughed so hard, I thought my sides were going to split.”*

*“Sarah’s dress did split.” More giggles.*

*“But she calmly took off her fishnet stockings and belted them around her waist.”*

*“Which was a little unconventional, but worked fine until.”*

*“We all got up on the stage and -”*  
*“And sang ‘You Sexy Thing’ with some never-before-seen dance moves -”*  
*“And a few never-before-heard notes.”*  
*“And Sarah decided she’d take off the —”*  
*“The stockings to finish with a theatrical flourish, not realising —”*  
*“The split was now -”*  
*“Three times longer than before.”*

In her bed, on her wedding morning, Lois chortled at the memory. Never again would she hear the Hot Chocolate song without visualising the expression of the matriarch of the Crawford clan when she’d realised she was no longer contained within her dress.

Not that it had hampered her enthusiasm at all.

Lois thoughts shifted to Clark, and her smile faded. How was he feeling? Was he nervous? Was he already counting down the hours until four o’clock? Had he thought much about yesterday’s disagreement?

Would he go ahead with the wedding despite his doubts?

How could he not know how much she loved him?

How could he not know how much she wanted to be with him?

What if he didn’t come to their wedding?

Could she go to the farm and literally drag him to the church?

Despite her concerns, that picture caused a little smile. The white dress could be problematic. The shoes, too.

Lois pushed away her doubts. She would be at the church at four o’clock. There was no point stressing over things she couldn’t control.

She was too wound up to stay in bed. And anyway, she was in Wichita — former home of the Sewells.

She took one of her notepads from her bag and turned to the page of scribble she had compiled in the weeks following her return from Smallville. Jimmy hadn’t been able to locate the Sewells’ home, but Lois had unearthed a possible address.

Now was the perfect time to try to find out more about Clark’s origins.

\*\*\*

Lois stood outside a modest home with a prominent central garage, a smaller garage to the right, and living areas to the left.

This could be where the Sewells had lived.

Where they had brought Clark’s spaceship.

Where they had meticulously researched — gleaming knowledge that rightfully belonged to Clark — knowledge that now, could remain out of his reach forever.

Where they had concocted their plan to benefit financially from their discoveries.

“Need any help, Miss?”

Lois looked around to see a greying man hurrying across the front lawn of the neighbouring house. “Do you know the people who live here?” she asked.

“Lived here,” he corrected. “They went away and never came back.”

Lois raised her eyebrows and studied him. “Did you know them?”

“I lived next to them for two years,” he answered. “Did I know ‘em? Not really.”

“Were their names Max and Sheridan Sewell?”

“You know them?” he asked with surprise.

“Not really. My father knew them a long time ago.”

“They kept very much to themselves. I only know their names because a letter for them was mistakenly put in my box.”

Lois surveyed the street as if she had all the time in world to appreciate the crispness of the new morning. “Who was the letter from?” she asked, still staring into the distance.

“Just the electric bill,” he replied with more than a tinge of

disappointment. “They never had any visitors — not the entire time they lived there.”

He looked like a talker — someone who enjoyed sharing his observations. “I wonder what happened to them,” Lois mused.

“It was a strange set-up right from the start,” he offered willingly. “The house was sold in May, nearly three years ago. Except no one came. Then, one night — the first weekend in August — they moved in.”

Was this when they’d brought Clark’s spaceship? “They came during the night?” Lois asked.

The neighbour nodded, clearly gratified by her interest. “The Saturday night. Then, exactly one year later — first weekend in August — they left Friday afternoon and arrived back Sunday lunchtime.”

“You have a great memory for detail,” Lois said.

He shrugged modestly. “They never went anywhere else,” he said. “It wasn’t hard to remember.”

“Where did they go?”

“They never said. In fact, they never said anything beyond ‘Good morning’.”

“Sounds like a regular thing, doesn’t it?” Lois said. “First weekend in August.” *The Sunflower Celebration*.

“Except this year,” he said triumphantly. “This year, they left Friday afternoon ... but they didn’t come back.”

“You didn’t see them arrive?” Lois asked with just enough interest to keep him talking. “That first time?”

“Nope.”

“The weekend they disappeared,” Lois probed. “Do you remember anything about that?”

“They left on the Friday. The middle of Saturday night, my dog went off. I looked out of the window and saw a big truck outside their house.”

*After the Sewells had made their demands known to Hodge?* “Did you see anything being put into the truck?”

He shook his head. “First thing I saw was the truck pulling out from the curb.”

“What sort of a truck?”

“Big, white, looked like it came from a rental company — though there was no identification on it anywhere.”

“Don’t suppose you saw the plates?”

Lois sensed his withdrawal. “It was dark,” he said shortly.

She shrugged. “If I could find the rental company, maybe I could get a forwarding address to pass on to my father,” she said, her tone imbued with a strong suggestion that her mind had already partially left this conversation.

“It was early Sunday morning,” he said quickly. “About four o’clock. There were three people in the truck cabin. All men. I couldn’t see their faces very well, except for the nearest passenger. He looked mid-forties. Darkish hair, not black though, and solidly built.”

*Trask?* “Then what happened?” Lois asked.

“The Sewells didn’t come home. About a week later, a van came — middle of the day — and emptied the house.”

“Emptied it of what?”

“The usual stuff. Furniture, beds, clothes, nothing out of the ordinary.”

“My father said they worked in research,” Lois said.

“I rarely saw either of them leave the house. If they worked, it was nothing regular-like.”

“So, they just ... disappeared?”

He slowly scratched his bristly grey whiskers. “Talk was they went west. I don’t know anything more than that.”

“Who could have known where they went?” Lois commented.

“That’s true enough. They were very private people.”

“Has anyone ever asked you about this?” Lois said. “Seems you’re a good source of information — you have a great memory

for detail.”

He grinned, looking pleased. “A reporter from Metropolis called a couple of weeks later. A woman. From the Daily Planet, she said she was. Didn’t tell her anything though. You can’t trust those big-city types.”

Lois grinned and wished him a great day.

\*\*\*

The women arrived back in Smallville just before noon.

Sarah had gone out to get lunch. Lucy was in the next room, doing ... something. Lois was at the window, staring out at the weak winter sun tried to break through the clouds.

Being back in Smallville had filled her mind with Clark.

She should have stayed here last night. Should have gone to Clark and tried to bridge the chasm between them.

But she had tried before — and had achieved nothing.

Sarah swung unto the hotel room. “Guess what?” she breezed.

Lucy came through the door. “What?”

Sarah sidled up to Lois, a mischievous grin on her face. “There’s a drop-dead gorgeous guy dressed in a tux waiting outside the church.”

Lois gulped. “There is?”

Sarah nodded triumphantly.

“But it’s not even one o’clock yet,” Lois said.

Sarah chuckled. “Guess he doesn’t want to miss it.”

“Or he wants to make sure you know he’s there,” Lucy said.

Lois shot to her feet. “I’m going to him,” she said.

#### Part 14

Clark Kent sat on the bench outside the church, his elbows on his knees, and his forehead slouched on the crest formed by his tightly clenched fists.

Three hours — more than three hours — to wait. Three hours until he would know if Lois would come to their wedding or if his self-doubts had cost him the only woman he would ever love.

Then he heard it ... the low, dulcet thrum of a heart. His own heart leapt in recognition, and his head jolted up.

Lois.

Dressed in track pants and an old sweater.

She took his breath away — as she always did.

“Hi,” he said, sounding as if he’d had to push the word through viscous mud.

“Hi,” she replied.

He moved to the far end of the bench and patted the space.

“Would you like to sit down?” he asked. “Next to me.”

She sat, ramrod straight, shoulders rigid. “You look great,” she said.

He winced. “It means nothing unless ...”

“You have doubts?” she asked, her eyes troubled.

“About what I want — no,” he said. “No doubts at all. About whether I’ve ruined the best thing in my life ... yes. I have grave doubts.”

“Why?”

“Because if I were in your place, I’d be considering whether this is what I really want.”

“Why?”

He chanced a peek into her eyes — beautiful brown eyes he would willingly drown in. “Because being married to someone who tries to pretend he doesn’t need you right at the point when he needs you most sounds like a pretty shabby deal.”

“If you throw in a spectacular chest, it’s an OK deal,” she said, her face blankly incompatible with her words.

Clark felt the stirrings of a smile, but he smothered it, held captive by the solemnity of her expression.

“I’ll smile if you will,” she offered.

He unchained his smile — and the breath he hadn’t known he’d throttled. She smiled back at him, detonating the thousand dormant pockets of excitement within him.

Clark held out his hand, and Lois grasped it. “I’ve been an idiot,” he said.

“Yes,” she agreed. “But, considering the circumstances, I understand.”

“You are amazing,” he said. “And I am so sorry.”

“I know.”

“Do you have time to stay and talk for a while?”

“Sure I do.”

“It won’t make you late? I mean ...” Clark grinned, a little hesitantly. “Don’t you have a wedding to prepare for?”

“Meh, I’ve got plenty of time.” Lois’s eyes danced. “The groom is a *very* patient guy.”

The dual meaning of her words hit him, and Clark could do no more than stare at her, grinning mindlessly. It seemed so long since the last time she’d bantered with him.

But her words carried so much more than a little dig at his past. They carried her promise ... and her anticipation ... and her desire ... for their future.

Which left him breathless. Speechless. And very impatient.

He needed to extricate himself from this conversation. For hopefully the last time, he needed out. He doused his thoughts and cleared the accumulated mass of emotion from his throat. “I know you have questions,” he said. “Please give me the chance to give you answers.”

“Do you love me?”

“With everything I am.”

“Do you believe that I love you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to marry me?”

“More than anything.”

“Do you believe that I want to marry you?”

He pushed through his doubts. “Yes.”

“Do you realise that you don’t have to always understand; sometimes you just have to trust what I tell you?”

“I’m trying to learn that,” he said honestly.

“So — no more doubts?”

Clark slowly shook his head as the dark cloud began to melt away, completely defenceless in the glowing sunshine of Lois’s love. He released a long, ragged breath. It was going to be all right.

Better than all right.

In just a few hours, he was going to marry Lois. “I can’t wait,” he breathed.

“Is that why you are here so early?” she asked with a teasing grin.

“I came to your room yesterday ... twice,” Clark said, as the hopelessness of the empty room swamped him again. “I wanted to tell you how sorry I am. Then this morning, I came again, and you still weren’t there. Jane told me no one had stayed in your rooms. I ... I wondered if ...”

“I’d left?”

Clark nodded. “So the only way I could think of to show you how much I want this was to arrive here early and basically parade myself in front of the church, hoping you’d see, or someone would tell you.”

“Wasn’t that risking dire embarrassment if I had already left town?”

“Lois ... if you’d left ...” He couldn’t continue.

She slipped her hand from his and shaped it along his jaw. “I’m not going anywhere,” she pledged as her eyes sank deep into his. “Not without you.” Her lips grazed across his. She backed away, blinking the dewy moisture from her eyes. “Ready for more questions?” she said.

“Go right ahead,” he said, hearing a new lightness in his voice.

“Did the Honduran adoption agency ever call back?”

“Yeah. It seems hundreds of people saw the photo of Rosa

with Superman, and they were inundated with offers to adopt her. They placed her with a family from Philadelphia, but then realised that the other orphans could benefit from the publicity, so they called everyone who had enquired and asked if they were interested in adopting a different child. “

“And are you?”

“Not right now,” he said. “Maybe one day, but only if my wife and I decide together.”

“Your wife?”

He grinned. “My wife,” he confirmed, loving how those words sounded on his lips.

Lois smiled briefly before continuing. “You had a bond with Rosa,” she said. “Are you sad she won’t ever be a part of your life?”

“Just a little,” he admitted. “But she has a family now, a new life.”

Lois paused, perhaps unsure how to phrase the next question. Then she plunged ahead. “I’ve watched you struggle with the changes since the warehouse.”

“I know,” he said with a small smile.

“What has been most difficult?”

Clark thought for a moment. “Learning to live with the reality that I could lose everything I have ... everything I value. I mean — the people I love, their safety, their health, my health ... even my life. I could lose it all, and there may be nothing — absolutely nothing — I could do to prevent it.”

“It’s the same for all of us,” Lois said quietly.

“I know,” he replied. “And I’ve never, ever thought of myself as being better than humans, never looked down on them or anything like that ... but my respect for them has increased so much. I want to help, to save, to rescue, to make their lives less uncertain.” He lifted his hands in stilted frustration. “Except now, I can’t.”

Her hand slipped from his face and her fingers weaved through his.

“It drives me even more to want to help, to save, to rescue, to make their lives a little less uncertain.” Clark lifted his hands in stilted frustration. “Except now, I can’t.”

Lois started to say something, then stopped.

“Go on,” he urged.

“I’m not sure I should say it.”

“You think my powers will return,” he guessed.

Lois nodded. “It’s who you are.”

“Will you be disappointed if they don’t?”

“For you, yes. For me, no.” She hurried to explain. “Please don’t think I’m only marrying you because I’m sure your powers will come back. I’m marrying you because I love you, and that won’t change whether you get super again or not.”

“If my powers don’t come back, will you regret marrying me?”

“Never.”

Clark took a moment to simply bask in the newly restored closeness he felt with this remarkable woman. He had missed her so much. “Do you have any more questions?”

“Why did you allow Trask’s men to take you from your apartment?”

“I heard them outside my door. I heard them say that if I wasn’t home, they would get you instead.”

“Did you think about flying to me and whisking me away?”

“Yes, I did,” Clark said. “But I didn’t want us living with the knowledge that someone was threatening you. I knew I wouldn’t have wanted to leave you even for a moment, and you would have found that restrictive. So I decided to allow myself to be captured, discover their plan, make a super escape, nail the bad guys, and write the story.”

“Keeping both me and the secret safe?”

Clark grimaced. “That was the plan, yeah.”

“It was a good plan,” she said, her fingers gentle on his face again.

“Except for the kryptonite,” he said ruefully.

“Except for the kryptonite.”

“They blew a gas into my bedroom,” Clark continued.

“Which had no effect on me at all, but I figured I should pretend it did. They came in, dragged me out of my bed, and took me to the warehouse.”

“Why couldn’t you let me share what you were feeling? After the warehouse?”

It was a reasonable question. Completely reasonable. And one Clark was willing to answer. Except he had no answer. “I don’t know,” he said.

“I think I do.”

“You do?”

She nodded.

“Would you mind explaining it to me?” Clark asked.

“Hiding things about yourself had become a part of your life. You needed to do it. Your life would have simply been ... no life, if everyone had known. So when you got into a new and strange situation, you naturally went from hiding what you do to hiding what you felt.”

That made sense — hiding from everyone else. But not from Lois. “I shouldn’t have shut you out,” Clark said.

“No,” Lois replied lightly. “But hey, we’re both still learning this relationship thing, so I’m willing to overlook it.” She grinned. “This time.”

Clark felt his simmering emotions surge again. “What did I ever do to gain your love?” he asked.

“You showed me who you are ... the important bits first ... your goodness, your tolerance, your trustworthiness, your integrity. None of those have changed.”

“Any more questions?”

“Two.”

He feigned a rollicking sigh of relief. “I may just survive this.”

She grinned. “Firstly ... do you have anything you’d like to ask me?”

“Who is Sally Smallville?”

Lois shook with laughter. “My rival for your affections.”

He grinned, because her laughter was contagious, but he was a long way from understanding. “You have no rival.”

“When you disappeared, I knew I was being bugged, and I needed a reason why I wasn’t acting like a distraught girlfriend, so I told Henderson you’d been lured away by Sally Smallville.”

“You told Henderson a story, so Trask, who was listening, wouldn’t be suspicious when you didn’t ...”

“Didn’t report you missing. Didn’t look for you. Not publicly anyway.”

Clark still didn’t fully understand, but it didn’t matter now. “Last question?”

“Are you sure you’re ready, farmboy?” she teased. “I’ve left the hardest one ‘til last.”

He grinned; all his apprehension had gone. “I’ll always be ready for you, honey.”

She smiled. Her eye-sparkling, full-curvature, cheekbone-emphasising smile that reached deep inside him and hugged his heart. “Wanna get married?” she asked. “Today?”

He grinned as the sweet harmony of joy and excitement whirled through him. “More than anything in the world,” he said.

“Then I should go and get ready.” Lois stood and nodded to the church building. “I’ll see you at four. In there, at the top of the aisle.”

He dragged in a deep shuddery breath. “I’ll be there, waiting for you.”

“You do that, farmboy,” she said with a parting smile.

Clark watched as Lois walked away. Then, with a leap of

irrepressible exuberance, he turned towards his car to begin what he expected would be the longest three hours of his life.

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Clark stood at the top of the aisle, his heart hammering.

Lois was late.

Five minutes late.

And it felt like five hours.

Then he heard a murmur from the congregation and spun around.

In the arched doorway of the church was the most enchanting sight he had ever seen. More beautiful than all his imaginings.

So beautiful, she was printed, immediately and indelibly, on every facet of his memory.

Lois, his bride ...

He stopped right there. That was enough to take in.

Lois. His bride.

She looked sideways with a laughing comment, and Clark dragged his eyes momentarily to his father — his dad who glowed with pride. It brought a smile to Clark's face, but nothing else could hold his attention, not with Lois about to begin her journey towards him.

Lois and Jonathan stepped forward together, steadfast in movement, sure in purpose.

Lois looked radiant.

Exactly as a woman should when she was about to wed the love of her life.

Clark slipped his forefinger under his glasses and brushed away the trace of moisture that had settled on his lower lashes.

Lois's attention floated right, seeking him. Their eyes merged, and he smiled. When her smile widened in response, his heart overflowed. If he lived forever, he would never be able to find the words to tell her how much he loved her.

Each step brought her closer. Closer to him ... closer to beginning their shared life together.

Then she was with him. Clark reached across to shake his father's hand. Jonathan pulled him close and encompassed him in a hug. "We love you, son," he said.

Clark could only nod as his father backed away to stand beside his mother. Clark smiled to her and felt her joy reach out to flow through him.

He stepped back to his place and feasted his eyes on Lois. She was looking at him, a sure smile on her face. She had no doubts. Her shoulders lifted, and her out-breath carried a chuckle of uninhibited joy. Clark felt the coils of his stomach begin to unfurl. It was going to be all right.

Within seconds, looking at her wasn't enough. He needed to touch her. He looked at her hand and saw the charm bracelet adorning her wrist. He'd asked her for it — so he could have the star charm added — but she'd evaded his request and told him they'd see to it after the wedding.

Lois spun it so he could see the gold star positioned next to the trio of palm trees. She flicked it over, and he saw the letter 'C' engraved on it. Her eyes met his. "For you," she mouthed.

Clark held his hands towards her, and she connected with him, forming an unbroken circle. He gently squeezed her hand and was rewarded with her smile, shot directly at him. He wished he could tell him something of his feelings, something of how much he loved her, how incredibly grateful he was to have her in his life, to be loved by her.

But maybe she understood without words, because a tiny, glistening tear emerged from her eye and shimmered down her cheek.

Clark heard the minister clear his throat ...

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Lois felt the wave of her happiness bubble through her like the soft spray of newly poured champagne.

Clark was smiling again.

Really smiling. Looking like it was impossible for him not to smile.

Nothing else mattered.

"Family and friends," the minister began. "We are gathered here together in the sight of God and in the presence of these witnesses, to join together Lois and Clark in holy matrimony."

His pleasant voice washed easily over Lois. It seemed as if everyone, including the minister, had receded into the background. There was just her and Clark.

Her hands rested in his larger ones. Her eyes looked up into his. He didn't seem nervous at all now. He just looked incredibly happy.

The minister came to the end of his preliminary comments and invited Clark to speak.

Clark hesitated long enough for his smile to widen as he gazed down at her. "Lois," he began. Her name sounded like a caress from his lips.

She responded with a little smile of encouragement.

"For most of my life, I thought I wouldn't find you," he said. "Then, one hundred, twenty-seven days ago, I met the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

His mouth curved to a grin that transported her to his bedroom and formed the image of him coming through the door, wearing nothing but a towel, a pair of glasses, and a look of flustered confusion.

Lois giggled, quickly dropped her eyes, and gathered her scattered composure. When she looked up again, Clark was still grinning.

"Within a moment," he said as his grin was overtaken by solemn resolve. "I loved you. Within a day, I knew I would love you forever.

"And as I've come to know you, I've realised that your beauty is so much more than skin-deep. I love your energy and your courage and your tenacity. I love how you enter a room, and the world brightens. I love how, with a single glance, you light up my heart.

"You inspire me, Lois. Inspire me to be a man worthy of your love.

"Thank you for finding me. Without you, I could never be whole."

Clark stopped speaking, but his eyes didn't stop communicating his love. Lois wanted to reach for his face, to touch the tiny speck of dew in the junction of his eye.

"I love you, honey."

He said it so low that if she hadn't seen his lips move, she would have wondered if her mind had received the message directly from his eyes.

"Lois?" the minister prompted.

Lois inhaled deeply and smiled into his eyes. "Clark," she said. "You dismantled my world. I used to believe that real love and total trust existed only in the pages of a fairy tale. But piece by piece, moment by moment, word by word, you dissolved my barriers — and you did it just by being you."

His hands closed around hers. She saw that the dewdrop in his eye had swelled a little.

"Then, you reconstructed my world. You showed me love; you taught me trust. You became my rock — my loving, constant, dependable rock. I love your inner strength — a strength that always supports, never demands. I love how you always choose to live by your principles."

The dewdrop seemed poised on the edge of eruption. Unable to resist any longer, Lois slipped her hand from Clark's and reached up to stroke it away with her thumb.

He thanked her with a smile, and she burrowed her hand back in his.

"I love you, farmboy," she said, lower than a whisper. "I will always love you."

He grinned, because he'd heard — or read her lips.  
 The minister led them through their vows.  
 "Do you Clark, take this woman ..."  
 "Do you Lois, take this man ..."  
 "... in sickness and in health ..."  
 "... until death ..."  
 "With this ring ..."  
 "... I wed you ..."  
 "With all that I am ..."  
 "... I honour you."  
 "I now pronounce you husband and wife."  
 And then ... "You may kiss your bride."  
 Clark slipped his hands from hers and lifted her veil. As he put it over her head, he leant in close, and Lois caught a whiff of his wonderful coconut gel.  
 Then Clark kissed his wife.

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Clark started the motor and eased the car away from the small gathering of family and friends who had shared their wedding. The vows had been pledged, the rings exchanged, the register signed, the toasts raised, the banquet eaten, the wedding finery replaced with travelling clothes, and the good wishes received. Now, it had come to this. Lois — his wife — and him. Together.  
 Alone.  
 Married.

A part of his mind — a small, wayward part — still speculated that this may be nothing more than the most phenomenal dream. That Lois Lane, beautiful, independent, brilliant, gifted, sexy —

His mind vaulted ahead two hours.

Two hours.

Two long hours.

Again, Clark mourned the loss of his powers. If only he could sweep her into his arms and fly her to their hotel room in Tulsa. Although, if he had powers, their destination probably wouldn't be Tulsa.

Clark pushed aside the yearning for things that were not and concentrated on the things that were. He moved through the gears and then held out his hand to Lois. "Have I told you how much I love you?" he said softly.

She entwined her fingers through his. "Not in the past few minutes."

"I love you, Lois Lane."

"You can use my new name if you'd like to."

For a moment, he didn't comprehend. When he did, he cast a questioning glance sideways. She answered with a little smile. "I love you Lois ... Kent," he said, not sure that was what she wanted.

"I love you, Clark Kent," she said.

"You want to be Lois Kent?" he said, trying to keep the surprise from surfacing in his words.

"Not at the Planet," she said. "I want to be Lois Lane and work with Clark Kent. But other than professionally, I've decided I'd like to be Lois Kent."

"I didn't ... expect ..."

"You really didn't think being married to me would be without surprises, did you, farmboy?" she teased.

He grinned. "Not for one moment."

"Are you tired?" she asked casually.

Exactly how loaded was that question? "Not ... really," he hedged.

"So you want to drive to Tulsa?"

"I'm not too tired to drive if that's what you're asking," he said.

She moved her hand to his thigh, half way between his knee and his hip — higher than she had ever touched before. She

seemed oblivious. He most definitely was not. The breath syphoned from his lungs. "I wasn't sure we would feel like the long drive, so I made other plans."

"You did?" he squeaked. Her hand was gently kneading into the muscle of his thigh, diluting his ability to concentrate.

"I offered our hotel room to your parents."

He wasn't firing on all cylinders. Not mentally, anyway.

"Huh?"

"I want to spend my wedding night in your bedroom ... with you."

"My bedroom?" he gulped.

Lois laughed. "Pull over for a moment, Clark."

He pulled onto the side of the road. She undid her seatbelt and wriggled closer to him. Her hands captured his face, and she lured him into an effusive kiss that drove every coherent thought from his mind.

When she withdrew, she licked her lips and grinned.

"Uhhmm," she said.

"Uhhmm," he echoed.

"We met in your bedroom," Lois said. "I want to go there with you now — and this time, you won't need the towel." She moved back and refastened her seatbelt.

"It'll take ten minutes," he murmured.

"Let's go."

Who needed superpowers?

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Clark pushed open his bedroom door and turned to his bride. "May I carry you?" he asked.

Lois nodded her consent. He bent low and gathered her into his arms. He hadn't held her like this since he'd lost his powers; it felt good.

Clark stepped into his bedroom, and keeping her close, lowered her to her feet. The room was toasty warm. He shut the curtains and switched on the light.

He faced her, searching for a hint of what she'd like him to do now. Specifically.

Lois gazed back steadily, a faint smile playing around the mouth that was slowly driving him crazy. "How many times have you kissed me, farmboy?"

He hadn't been expecting that. "Hundreds," he guessed.

"And of those hundreds, how many times have you wished you didn't have to stop?"

"Every single time," he breathed raggedly.

She grinned impishly. "This time we won't have to stop."

Clark covered the distance separating them in two steps. He didn't kiss her mouth — not yet. Instead, he took possession of her hands and kissed the shiny new wedding ring on her finger.

When he straightened, he found her eyes and allowed himself to be drawn into their depths. "You were the most beautiful bride imaginable today," he told her earnestly. "The first moment I saw you, standing with my dad, looking so composed, so absolutely assured, you took my breath away. I felt so privileged that you were marrying me. I will always be honoured to be your husband."

Her fingertips caressed the back of his neck. "Do you know why I looked so sure?"

"Why?"

"Because it was *you* waiting for me."

Then he did kiss her — a featherweight touch at first — relishing the timelessness — and then with a freedom that, until now, had been confined to his dreams.

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Lois felt her happiness ripple throughout her body. The last obstacle had been cleared. They were here — together, married, and finally free to express their love the way they yearned to.

"You were the most gorgeous groom," she said between kisses.

She felt him grin, although his kisses didn't subside. Then he

drew back. His hands rested momentarily on her shoulders and then slid down her arms. His fingers settled on the lowest button of her blouse. “Can I undo this?” he asked.

She laughed, remembering. “Just that one?” she teased.

“For now.”

“Yes.”

He undid it, and immediately his hands rose to her next button. “Can I undo this one?”

She nodded. “Can I ask you a question?”

He undid it and moved to her next button. “If I can undo this one.”

“Deal,” she said. His fingers brushed against her skin as he undid the button, and her breath caught in her throat. She had a question ... something she was going to ask him.

“What’s your question?” he murmured, his eyes fixed on his task.

That reminded her. “Did you ever peek?”

His eyes moved up and met hers, undaunted. “No ... yes. Can I undo this one?”

“What does ‘no ... yes’ mean?” she asked. She wanted to know, but the conversation was fast becoming secondary to the sensation of his touch.

“No, I never x-rayed through your clothes. Ever.”

“Ever tempted?”

“Oh, yes,” he groaned. “More times than you could imagine.”

“And the ‘yes’?”

“Can I undo this one?”

“If you answer my question while you undo it.”

He leant against her blouse to undo the button. When it hung loose, Clark said, “I’m taller than you. Sometimes that, combined with the style of your neckline ...” He left his words hanging as he moved to her top button. “Can I ...”

“Please do.”

He slipped the top button from its hole and pushed open her blouse, revealing lacy underwear and bare skin. “Lois,” he breathed.

She slid her fingers across his shirt, pressing hard enough to be able to track the definition of his muscles. “Are you feeling overdressed?” she asked.

He nodded, his eyes still anchored a little below her face.

“Is it OK if I undo all your buttons?” she asked.

“Go ahead,” he said distractedly.

A short time later, they were both naked.

And then, Clark Kent made love with his wife.

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After, Clark held her close as the delicious heaviness ebbed through his body. “Lois?”

“Uhhh.”

“It was your strength that got us through,” he acknowledged. He shuffled onto his side, so he could see her face. “Your belief, your drive, your certainty.”

“Clark, I still don’t fully understand why you expected I would have second thoughts about marrying you.”

Her words made him surprisingly uncomfortable considering the intimacy they had just shared. “It’s not that easy to explain.”

Lois smiled. “That’s OK.”

He brushed back her hair. “It’s just ... you’re so perfect. You’re so ... you’re everything I’m not — daring, intuitive, independent, passionate, fiery ... beautiful, sexy ...” Clark looked away. “I thought my powers balanced the ledger a bit.”

Her hand glided across his chest, drawing heat wherever she touched. His mind was struggling to deal with anything beyond how incredibly grateful he was to have her with him like this.

“Clark” she said. “You’re everything I’m not — careful, considerate, grounded, compassionate, kind, selfless — that’s why us together works so well. We’re two halves of the same whole.”

Clark surrendered to the lure of her touch. He found her mouth and began to kiss her with no intention of stopping any time soon.

But Lois pulled away, and his eyes shot open. “And anyway, your powers are back,” she informed him nonchalantly.

Clark didn’t understand. Maybe it was an obscure reference to his performance in bed. He could hope, anyway.

“I know there’s the whole fantasy of the earth moving ...” she said.

“Yeah?” he said uncertainly.

“But I think it did.”

Clark felt his face split with a wide grin. “That’s ... ummm ... good.”

“Did it move for you?”

“I ... ah ... wasn’t really concentrating on the earth.”

With a swift movement, Lois was lying across his chest, her face only inches from his. “I think we were floating,” she informed him.

“Floating?” he choked.

“Yes, Clark,” Lois said earnestly. “Floating ... like I was with ... Superman.” She kicked the covers from their feet and lifted her feet high. “Which ankle did I break?” she asked.

“Which ankle?” he faltered.

“I broke an ankle skiing. X-ray my ankles, and tell me which one has the scar on the bone.”

The perfection of his world clouded over as he faced the certainty that he was going to disappoint her. “You said my powers didn’t mean anything to you.”

“I said I loved you whether you had powers or not,” she corrected. “You do, and I love you.”

“Lois,” Clark sighed. “I don’t have powers. I’ve tried every day since the warehouse. I just *can’t* do the things I used to do.”

“Yes, you can.”

He studied her, his heart soaring at the possibilities; his mind not daring to believe.

“Yes, you can,” Lois repeated.

Clark squirmed a few inches up the bed so he could get a direct sighting on her feet. He summoned his x-ray vision.

Nothing happened.

He tried again, and suddenly, her skin became transparent, and her bones appeared — one bearing the clear evidence of a past fracture.

Clark closed his eyes and sank back into the bed, his heart pounding. When he opened his eyes, Lois was contemplating him with a ‘told-you-so’ look that just begged him to kiss her extravagantly. “So, which one?” she said with a wide grin.

“Your right ankle.”

“Good guess,” she teased.

“It wasn’t a guess,” he replied quietly.

Lois laughed. “I know that.” She buried her hands deep in his hair and kissed him. “Lift me,” she directed.

His hands circled her waist.

“Not like that,” she said. “Lift both of us.”

Clark tried. They didn’t move. He increased his efforts, trying to remember precisely how he did something that once had required no conscious thought. Then he felt the mattress drop away, and a sliver of cold air shoot along his bare back.

Lois wriggled up his chest and looked down over his shoulder. “We’re six inches above the mattress,” she announced.

They dropped back onto the bed with a soft thud.

Lois stared at him with a seductive blend of desire and mischief. “Making love with your wife seems to have been restorative,” she said with a sultry smile. “And that was only once.”

“What are you suggesting?” he asked hoarsely, although he had no doubts about what she meant.

“That if you want all your powers back, we have a lot of

work to do.”

“I think we could manage that,” he said thickly.

She took his face into her hands and locked into his eyes.

“Welcome back, Superman,” she said.

THE END