

# Cooking Class

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Rated PG

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Summary: Lois has a hot date for Valentine's Day. Problem is, she promised him a home-cooked meal.

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## Part 1

"What am I going to do?" Lois Lane wailed.

Lucy winced at the anguish smeared across her sister's expression, but squeezed all sympathy from her tone as she asked, "Why did you tell this guy you could cook?"

"He's French," Lois replied. "He's sophisticated. He has eaten in some of the best restaurants in Europe. He -"

"Doesn't that make lying to him about your prowess in the kitchen even more stupid?" Lucy said, trying not to think too much about how satisfying it felt to be the sister asking the difficult questions instead of the sister scrambling to defend spur-of-the-moment brain explosions.

"I..." Lois's distress became a plea for understanding.

"Claude is a really nice guy," she said. "He could be the *one*."

"The one?" Lucy gasped. "You really think you've finally found the *one*?"

"Maybe," Lois said dreamily. "He's suave, he's fashionable, he's charming, he's melt-at-the-knees gorgeous, and his French accent makes my toes curl."

Lucy had met enough of Lois's 'the one' candidates to be sceptical. "How's he going to react when he discovers you lied to him?"

Her sister's alarm surfaced again. "That's why I called you and asked you to come over," Lois said. "Claude will be here tomorrow evening, expecting something exotic, and my cooking skills are limited to boiling pasta without it sticking together — most of the time — and heating up bought pasta sauce in the microwave."

"What do you want me to do?" Lucy asked plaintively.

"You're taking cooking classes twice a week," Lois said, grasping her sister's wrist. "I thought you could teach me."

"I have had *three* classes," Lucy protested. "I've made fruit salad, plain scones, and grilled tomato on toast."

"I can't feed Claude tomatoes on toast," Lois shrieked.

"They taste pretty good topped with basil and black pepper," Lucy said.

That comment earned her a dirty look. "We have twenty-four hours," Lois said. "It can't be that hard. If we stay up all night devouring recipe books, surely by tomorrow we will be able to cook *something* Claude will love."

"No," Lucy said firmly. "You're going to have to get take-out or -"

"Take-out," Lois groaned. She dropped onto her sofa and buried her face in her hands.

Lucy sat next to her. "Maybe Claude will be so captivated by you that he won't notice the food is take-out," she said.

"He's going to notice," Lois said in a voice of despair. "He's already told me how much he despises 'the undeveloped and insipid palate of the masses'."

"I can come and help you," Lucy offered. "There's an exorbitantly expensive Italian restaurant near where I work that

has a take-out menu. I'll bring something from there; we'll dirty a few pans, scatter some vegetable scraps around the counter, and hide the containers in a dumpster two blocks away."

Lois dragged her hands down her face. "Italian?" she said.

"You don't want Italian?" Lucy guessed. "Because he's French?"

"No. No, Italian is perfect," Lois said.

"Why?" Lucy asked, unconvinced that anything about this situation was 'perfect'.

Lois gazed at her fidgeting fingers. "I told Claude I learned to cook from a sexy Italian chef," she admitted.

"Lois!"

"I thought I was covering my bases," Lois said. "I mean pasta is my best dish."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "You don't have a *best dish*," she said. "You can't cook!"

Lois groaned again. "What am I going to do, Lucy?"

"You have to look at all your options and decide which one is best," Lucy advised.

"What are my options again?"

For a Kerth-winning reporter, Lois could be exasperatingly dense at times. "You can call off your date with Claude, you can book a table at a restaurant and 'fess up about the Italian chef, you can get take-out and hope he's more interested in you than the food, or you can let me teach you how to make tomatoes on toast."

Lois screwed up her face. "I'm not calling off our date," she said. "That would send precisely the wrong message to Claude."

"Why did you suggest the home-cooked meal?"

"I didn't. Not really. Claude was telling me about all the glamorous restaurants he knows in Europe, and I told him about the Italian chef."

"And?" Lucy said blankly.

"And the next thing I knew, Claude was thanking me profusely and saying how eating in restaurants every night became tedious because American chefs are like sheep and never have an original idea."

Lucy shuffled a little closer to her sister. "Lois, are you sure this guy's worth all the stress? I mean, if you feel as if you have to lie to -"

"Of course, he's worth it," Lois snapped. "Claude is the most wonderful man I've ever met."

"Well, I guess you're going to have to choose between take-out and tomatoes," Lucy said.

Lois glanced into her kitchen as if in hope that a gourmet meal would materialise on the counter. "I suppose it's going to have to be take-out," she said grumpily. "I would die of shame if I gave tomatoes on toast to a man like Claude."

"Do you need my help?" Lucy asked. "I promise I'll sneak out before he arrives."

"You said you're free tomorrow night?"

"Yes. I can bring take-out from the Italian place. I can make the kitchen look 'cooked-in' while you get yourself all dolled up. I'll help you put the food in pots and pans on the stove, and I'll take all the containers with me when I go."

Lois put her hand on Lucy's arm. "Aw, Luce," she said. "You're the best."

Lucy stood from the sofa. "Just do me a favour and don't tell him you're a concert pianist in your spare time."

Giggling, Lois stood and hugged her sister. "Claude's due at seven-thirty," she said. "Can you be here by six-thirty? With something scrumptiously Italian that looks as if I cooked it from scratch?"

"Isn't six-thirty a bit early?"

"No. I want the food here. Otherwise, I'll stress."

"What if it gets cold?"

"Don't be silly, Lucy," Lois said. "It'll keep hot while it's in

the pans on the stove.”

“I don’t think overcooking is good for some dishes,” Lucy said doubtfully.

“We’ll watch it carefully,” Lois said. “What can possibly go wrong?”

Lucy choked down her extensive list of potential disasters. “I gotta go,” she said. “See you tomorrow.”

“Be here by six-thirty,” Lois said as she opened the door of her apartment. “I’m going to need you.”

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“What’s the time, Lucy?”

Lucy paused from her task of pouring the pesto sauce from the plastic container into the saucepan she had found at the back of one of Lois’s cupboards. “It’s ten past seven,” she said.

“Eek,” Lois squealed. “He’ll be here soon, and I haven’t done my makeup yet.”

“Go and do your makeup,” Lucy said. “I can finish here.”

“We’re not going to be ready,” Lois shrilled.

“Yes, we will,” Lucy said. “All we have to do is put the pasta in a big pot with boiling water and set the table.”

“Have you opened the wine?” Lois swung her head left and right in a frantic search for the missing bottle. “Where’s the wine? Did you put it somewhere?”

“It’s next to the stove, remember?” Lucy said. “We put it there so Claude would think you’d used it for your epicurean pasta sauce.”

“Of course,” Lois said, making a dash for the stove. She picked up the bottle and stared at it as if it were an unfamiliar object. “Shouldn’t we open it?”

“Go and do your makeup,” Lucy repeated, firmly taking the bottle from her sister. “And don’t forget to take the rollers out of your hair.”

Lois disappeared into the bathroom. Lucy shovelled the cooked pasta into a saucepan and added water from the faucet. She turned on the heat under both pans and then swept through the kitchen, collecting the bags and containers that bore evidence of their subterfuge. “Claude had better be one super guy,” she muttered.

Ten minutes later, the kitchen looked appropriately messy and the containers had been stowed away in Lucy’s bag. “Lois!” Lucy called. “Are you ready? Claude will be here soon.”

Lois burst out from her bedroom, hopping as she bent over to put on her second shoe.

“You look great, Lois,” Lucy said, admiring her sister’s figure-hugging black dress. “I don’t think Claude will be focussing on the food.”

Lois smiled weakly. “You’ve been an amazing help, Luce. I would have been a wreck without you.”

“I should get going,” Lucy said. “My cooking class starts in less than half an hour. I’ve got all the take-out containers.”

“What are you cooking tonight?” Lois asked as she stood before the mirror and brushed at a few specks on her dress.

“French toast,” Lucy replied. “Mrs Spangher seems to have a thing about toast.”

“You get the French toast,” Lois said with a slightly unhinged giggle. “I get the French guy.”

“I hope you have a great night,” Lucy said. She picked up the bag containing the take-out trash.

Lois hugged her sister. “Thanks, Lucy,” Lois said. “Call me tomorrow, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

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Left alone, Lois cautiously approached the stove. The pasta was bubbling away merrily, and the sauce smelled good enough to elicit a response from her stomach. She hadn’t had time for lunch, and breakfast had been a chocolate bar and two cups of coffee gulped down at her desk.

The bottle of wine was open on the table. Lois surveyed the

scene. Lucy had done a great job, adding a few extra touches that Lois would never have thought to include — a small vase of flowers and cutely folded napkins.

Was tonight the night her relationship with Claude would move to the next level? Was that what she wanted?

She didn’t want to lose him — she was sure about that.

He was more cultured than any man she’d ever met. And so very charming. Lois was aware that many women would find him attractive.

She returned to the stove and prodded through the bubbles. At least the pasta would be hot.

Back at the table, she poured herself a little of the wine and swilled it down, hoping it would help calm her nerves.

As she placed her glass on the table, the phone cut through the silence.

“Lois Lane,” she said, praying it wasn’t a story.

“Ah, Lois. It’s Claude.”

It was difficult to hear his voice above the riotous background noise. “Where are you?” she said loudly down the phone.

“I’ve been unavoidably detained,” he said. “I won’t be able to make dinner tonight.”

“You won’t?”

“No. Sorry. This thing came up. I can’t get out of it. I knew you’d understand, darling.”

“I cooked,” Lois said, fearing she sounded needy.

“Sorry? It’s hard to hear. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Can we re-schedule? What about next week?” Lois glanced at the wall calendar, and noting the date, she suggested, “Thursday?”

“Thursday?” He didn’t sound pleased, but Lois told herself it was probably due to the difficulties in hearing.

“Yes. It’s ... it’s Valentine’s Day.”

“You’ll cook for us, *ma chérie*?”

Cook? Again? At least this time, she would have a week to prepare. “Yes. Of course.”

“Excellent. I look forward to it. I have to go, Lois. Goodnight.” The line clicked dead.

“Goodnight, Claude.” Lois returned the phone, slipped her shoes from her feet, and poured herself a full glass of the wine.

What had been so important that Claude had had to cancel their date?

She went to the stove and turned off the heat.

An hour later, most of the wine was gone, one saucepan contained an inedible gluggy mound of pasta and the other a dry, blackened sauce, and Lois had reached the point where the alcohol had just about drowned her disappointment.

Leaving the food, the dirty pans, the set table, and the rest of the wine, she went to bed.

Home cooking was overrated.

Even Claude thought so.

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“That’s good, Lucy,” Mrs Spangher said. “Try to cut the potato cubes to the same size so they will cook evenly.”

“Mrs Spangher?” Lucy said, pausing from her dicing and looking over her shoulder at her instructor.

“Yes, Lucy?”

“Do you ever conduct lessons in a home?”

Mrs Spangher considered for a moment. “I haven’t before,” she said, “but I suppose I could if the kitchen were properly equipped.”

Lucy wasn’t sure Lois’s kitchen came under the heading of ‘properly equipped’, but there was no way she was going to risk a repeat of last week’s debacle. “Would you go to my sister’s apartment and teach her how to cook a meal?”

“What sort of a meal?”

“Something ... exotic.”

“Your sister has basic skills and wishes to advance?” Mrs Spangher asked.

“Not exactly,” Lucy said. “She has offered to cook a meal for her friend on Thursday night, but -”

“Valentine’s Day?” Mrs Spangher’s raised eyebrows softened to a little smile. “So there will be just two people eating?”

“Yes. It’s important the meal is perfect. I think my sister needs someone beside her ... to advise her, you know, and give her a few tips. About things like when the pasta is cooked.”

“She wants it *al dente*?”

“Al what?”

Mrs Spangher seemed to be reconsidering.

“Please, Mrs Spangher,” Lucy said desperately. “My sister really needs some help.”

“Thursday evening?”

“Yes.”

“What type of meal?”

“Anything. Anything that looks like it was made by a skilled cook.”

“There would be a fee.”

“Of course,” Lucy said. “I’m sure Lois would be willing to pay whatever you think is fair.”

Mrs Spangher nodded. “Give me her address before you leave tonight, and tell your sister to expect me at five-thirty on Thursday.”

“Thank you,” Lucy said as the cooking instructor moved to the next student. Under her breath, she added, “You’ve just saved me from the perils of Lois’s kitchen.”

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“She’s going to come here?” Lois said.

“Yes,” Lucy said firmly. “Think about how lucky you were, Lois. If Claude had come last week, you would have fed him mushy pasta and charcoal-chip sauce. You’ve been given another chance. With Mrs Spangher helping you, you’ll be able to produce something edible, and I’m sure Claude will be impressed.”

“But I don’t want to learn how to cook,” Lois whined. “I told you that when you asked me to join the class with you.”

“This isn’t learning how to cook,” Lucy said. “This is extracting yourself from the consequences of a foolish lie.”

Lois glared, but its ferocity quickly waned, and she said, “OK. When will she be here?”

“Five-thirty. She’ll direct the cooking and preparation. She’ll leave just before Claude arrives. He’ll think you cooked it.”

“Will you be here, too?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I have a date.”

“A date?” Lois said, making no effort to cover her surprise.

“Yes,” Lucy said. “Adam, from the cooking class. We’re going to High Spirits.”

“The bar on Seventh Avenue?” Lois asked. “Why would Adam take you somewhere like that?”

“His brother works there,” Lucy said.

“From what I’ve heard, people only go there to ... well, to pick up a companion for the night.”

“I’ll be with Adam,” Lucy said. “Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.”

“Oh.” Lois managed a smile. “That sounds great, Lucy. I hope you and Adam have a wonderful time.”

“Thanks,” Lucy said. “Your date will be wonderful, too. Mrs Spangher is a sensational cook.”

“Do I need to buy stuff? I wouldn’t know -”

“You don’t need to get anything. Mrs Spangher said she would bring all the ingredients. But you need to be here; she said she is an instructor, not a cook-for-hire.”

“Just be here? That’s all?”

Lucy nodded. “Be here, and look as if you have some interest

in learning the finer points of cookery. Excuse yourself early enough that you can dash to your bedroom to make yourself look ravishing. Bid goodbye to Mrs Spangher, greet Claude with a slightly self-satisfied smile, and wow him completely with your meal and your company.”

Lois broke into a smile. “Thanks for arranging it, Lucy,” she said. “Sorry I didn’t sound very appreciative. I never should have told Claude I could cook.”

“It’s done now,” Lucy said, patting her sister’s arm. “And I bet Claude will have the best meal he’s ever eaten on Thursday.”

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On the dot of five-thirty on Thursday, a crisp knock sounded on Lois’s door. She quickly cleared her counter of several folders of story notes, two used spoons, a scattering of toast crumbs, and an empty ice-cream tub. At the door, she looked through the peek-hole.

A man was there. Dark-haired. Young. Wearing glasses.

Leaving the chain hooked, Lois opened her door a few inches. “Yes?”

“Ms Lane?” He smiled tentatively. “My name is Clark Kent. Mrs Spangher has a migraine, so she asked me to come instead.”

### Part 2

Lois looked the stranger up and down. Under each arm, he carried a cardboard box, overflowing with more food and equipment than could possibly be needed for a single meal. “Mr Kent?” she said, scoring her words with suspicion.

“Yes,” he said, nodding earnestly. “Mrs Spangher told me your sister, Lucy, is in her cooking class and Lucy said -”

“Mrs Spangher has a headache?”

“A migraine.”

“Do you have ID?”

“Ah ... yes.” He placed both boxes on the floor, pulled his billfold from his jeans pocket, and held out his driver’s licence for her inspection.

“You’re from Kansas?” Lois said, also noting that, despite his youthful looks, he was a year older than she was.

“Yes. I’ve only been in Metropolis a few months.”

Her eyes slid from the photograph to his face, and from there, slithered down his body to the boxes at his feet. “You brought knives,” she said.

His gaze dropped, and he shuffled uncomfortably. “Mrs Spangher suggested I bring everything we need,” he said. “I can leave them out here if you would prefer.”

A second survey of the boxes’ contents revealed a lettuce, tomato, cucumber, and onions, which seemed to support his case. “You can put your licence away,” Lois said.

He returned the card. “I can give you Mrs Spangher’s number, and you can call her to substantiate my story.”

“Why did she send *you*? Specifically?”

“I work for Mrs Spangher,” he said, picking up the boxes again. “She received too many applicants for her winter class, so she advertised for someone to take a second group. When my original plans in Metropolis didn’t work out, I applied and got the position.”

“You’re a cookery teacher?”

“I think my official title is a ‘culinary instructor’,” he said with a quick grin. “But, yes, I teach people to cook.”

Realising that if she chose to slam the door in his face, she would be condemning herself to a desperate, last-minute quest for take-out, Lois released the chain. “Come in,” she said, keeping her tone free from any trace of discernible welcome.

“Thank you.”

Lois peered into the boxes as he walked past her. Some of the equipment was unfamiliar, and the number of little pots seemed patently excessive.

Mr Kent deposited the boxes on her counter and turned. “Mrs Spangher said you require guidance in preparing a special meal.”

Guidance? Lois studied Mr Kent for a moment as an idea curled through her mind. He looked blandly nice. Innocent. Gullible. Lois made a sweeping gesture around her kitchen. “I’ll leave you to it.” She picked up the folders of story notes and headed for her bedroom.

With a quick movement, the cooking teacher stepped in front of her, blocking her path.

“What?” she barked.

“Mrs Spangher said I was to cook *with* you, not *for* you.”

“I don’t have the time,” Lois said airily. “And really, kitchens and I don’t mix at all. I’ll probably ruin everything. You just -”

“No.”

She gasped. “No?”

“No. Mrs Spangher was insistent that we are to prepare the meal together.”

“But I have a date,” Lois said. “He’ll be here at seven-thirty.”

“Then we should get started.”

Lois gave him with a long, frost-covered stare and waited for him to crumble. He didn’t. “You’re actually going to make me help you?” she asked disdainfully.

“I thought I was here to help you.”

It was cards-on-the-table time. “I know nothing about cooking,” Lois said. “I have no interest in knowing anything. I simply want a delicious home-cooked meal for my guest.”

Mr Kent’s only response was a slight elevation to his left eyebrow, but his meaning was clear. If she wanted the meal cooked, she was going to have to get into the kitchen.

With a glare that had liquefied men with more credentials than a cooking teacher from Kansas, Lois stomped past him and into the kitchen. “What are we making?”

“Butter chicken with wild rice,” Mr Kent replied mildly as he began lifting items out of the boxes and placing them in well-ordered groups on the counter.

“Butter chicken?” Lois questioned. “Does that have pasta in it?”

“No,” he said. “It’s an Indian recipe.”

“Indian? I wanted something Italian.”

Mr Kent paused from his task of unpacking the boxes. “Mrs Spangher didn’t mention that you had a preference.”

“Perhaps she was too busy giving orders about exactly who was to do the cooking,” Lois grumbled.

“Would you like me to go and get the ingredients for chicken cannelloni?”

Lois checked the time. They still had almost two hours before Claude was due to arrive.

“It won’t take me long to get everything we need,” Mr Kent said. “I can be back in fifteen minutes.”

Lois cast a glance over the assortment of foods on her counter. Assuming they were edible and Mr Kent from Kansas could actually cook, the result should be impressively exotic.

“Did Mrs Spangher suggest butter chicken?” she asked.

“No,” Mr Kent replied. “She said you wanted assistance with a home-cooked meal. With today being Valentine’s Day, I made some assumptions. I’m sorry if there has been a misunderstanding.”

“What assumptions?”

“Ah ... that you’d want something romantic.”

Lois had never thought of chicken as being particularly romantic. But then again, her list of romantic foods started and ended with chocolate. “How is chicken romantic?” she demanded.

Mr Kent looked a little taken aback by her question, and she was sure the tops of his ears deepened in colour. “Well,” he said, “butter chicken is a perfect blend of smooth texture and spicy taste.”

“Did I ask for spicy?”

A tiny chink appeared in Mr Kent’s composure, and Lois felt

a corresponding lift in her spirits. Perhaps this wasn’t going to be such a drag, after all. “I’ll go and get the ingredients for cannelloni,” he said. “I’ll only be a few -”

“No! We don’t have time.” She sighed ... overdramatically. “It will have to be butter chicken.”

Mr Kent regarded her solemnly for a moment. Then, his smile slowly unfolded, and to Lois’s dismay, her annoyance dissolved with less resistance than butter in a furnace.

“We’ll make the chicken together,” he said, “and then I’ll prepare the salad and cook the rice so you will have plenty of time to get ready.”

He was offering a compromise, but Lois had recovered enough to lob a hand grenade at his feet. “You think I’m going to need a lot of time?”

Mr Kent didn’t falter. “No,” he said. “I think you look fine just the way you are. But you’re not going to enjoy cooking if you’re feeling stressed about time.”

“I’m not going to enjoy cooking even if we have all week,” she muttered.

That seemed to amuse him. “Do you have room in the fridge for a few things?”

Lois yanked open the door of the fridge, and he handed her chicken, butter, milk, cream, and yoghurt.

He removed the empty boxes from the counter, leaving the contents lined up like soldiers on parade. “We need *all* this just to make one dish?” Lois asked sceptically.

“If we’re going to make it properly. From real ingredients.”

“In Metropolis, we have ready-made sauces,” she said, hoping Lucy’s information was accurate. “They come in jars and are available at grocery stores.”

“But if you’d wanted that sort of meal, you wouldn’t have asked for Mrs Spangher’s assistance,” Mr Kent said.

“I told you already. I know nothing. I wouldn’t know how to use a jar of sauce. When I agreed to Mrs Spangher coming, I didn’t realise you were going to make everything so complicated.”

“I promise it won’t be complicated,” he said. “And it will taste so much better having been made from fresh ingredients.”

“It’s a huge waste of time,” Lois declared. “It would be much easier to -”

“I thought you were Lois Lane — the reporter from the Daily Planet.”

She regarded him blankly. “I am.”

“Your reputation indicates that you rarely take the easy option.”

“Really?” she snarled.

“Really.” His smile hovered around his mouth, and his eyes held hers in a gentle grip.

Lois jerked her attention to the counter. “Let’s get on with it,” she said. “My guest will be here in less than two hours, and you have to be gone by then.”

“Of course, Ms Lane.” Mr Kent took off his jacket, hung it on the back of a chair, and walked over to the sink, rolling his shirt sleeves to his elbows.

Lois picked up a hand towel and followed him.

His hands were strong and masculine. And his forearms ...

Lois gulped as she surveyed the long strips of muscle, her eyes gliding over the bunched-up sleeve to where the loose material couldn’t conceal the bulge of his bicep. When he wasn’t teaching a cooking class, Mr Kent must spend a lot of time working out.

“Ms Lane?”

She jumped and realised he had finished washing his hands and was waiting for her to give over the towel. She thrust it at him.

“Thanks,” he said, flashing his smile again.

By the time her hands were clean and dry, Mr Kent had lined

up two chopping boards and two knives. “We’re going to cut up the vegetables first,” he said. “Would you like to do the brown onion or the green onions?”

“Green?”

“You don’t sound sure.”

“Green,” Lois said decisively, hoping he wouldn’t realise that she’d never cut up a green onion before. However, the one time she’d cut up a brown onion, it had made her cry.

He handed her four onions. “Cut off the end,” he said, pointing to where murky strands protruded from the end of the white bulb. “Then peel off a couple of the outer layers, starting from the top.”

Taking a deep breath, Lois lopped one onion. “Like this?” she said, surprised at how easily the outer covering came away.

“Yep,” he said. “When it’s peeled, slice it widthways.”

Lois made three cuts and paused where the white morphed into green.

“Keep going,” Mr Kent said. “You’ll get little green circles.”

When she arrived at the end, she surveyed the disparity in the size of her slices and groaned inwardly.

Mr Kent smiled. “Well done.”

It wasn’t well done, but his approval gave her the impetus to attack the remaining three green onions. Next to her, Mr Kent peeled and diced a brown onion, handling the knife with practiced ease.

“Great,” he said when they had finished. He scraped his pile of perfectly regular squares onto a plate and added her mishmash of green onion pieces. “Now we need lemon juice, ginger, and garlic.”

There were no bottles among Mr Kent’s provisions. “I only have orange juice,” Lois said dubiously.

He picked up the yellow fruit. “We have lemon juice,” he said. “We just need to get it out of the lemon.”

“Oh,” Lois said, feeling her cheeks warm. “Of course.”

Mr Kent placed the lemon on her board. “Could you cut it in half, please?”

“OK,” Lois picked up her knife and hesitated. Did she cut it lengthways or widthways?

Mr Kent leant closer to her, his shoulder brushing against hers. “Along here,” he said, running his finger along its girth.

“I ...” Lois felt her cheeks heat. Annoyed at herself, she stated coldly, “I don’t cook.”

“That’s why I’m here to help,” he said, sliding a smile sideways.

She sliced through the lemon.

Mr Kent produced a little jug with a corrugated cone top. He took one half of the lemon and with a pushing and twisting action, extracted the juice. “Your turn,” he said, handing her the other half.

Lois pressed down, copying his actions. To her satisfaction, more juice dripped into the jug.

He collected up the onion scraps and lemon halves and put them in a container. “My mom composts,” he said.

“Did she teach you how to cook?”

“She’s the one who started my interest in cooking.” He picked up an oddly shaped beige nub and a vaguely spherical white globe that was splashed with purple blotches. “I’ve travelled around a bit, learning new recipes from every country I’ve visited.”

Lois had travelled, too. She hadn’t learned one single recipe from anyone.

“Would you like to do the garlic or the ginger?” he asked, holding them out for her inspection.

“What has to be done to them?”

“They both need peeling. After that, the garlic has to be crushed and the ginger grated.”

Crushing sounded less hazardous to her nails than grating.

“Garlic,” Lois decided.

Mr Kent pulled apart the white sphere and handed her four segments. “Cut off the top and bottom and peel away the papery wrapper,” he said.

When she pulled away the thin layer of coating, it stuck to her fingers. Lois flicked her hand, but it didn’t dislodge. Mr Kent chuckled as he reached over and plucked off the offending sliver.

“Thanks,” Lois said, allowing herself a small smile.

“You’re doing great.” He picked up an odd-looking instrument. “This is a garlic crusher,” he said. Opening its jaws, he placed one of the segments inside. He took her hands and positioned them around the levers, guided her to a position above a small container, and said, “Squeeze.”

Lois squeezed. Juicy flecks dribbled out of the crusher. She leaned forward to get a closer view, and stinging fumes stabbed at her eyes. She dropped the implement and -

“No, no.” Strong hands took firm but gentle possession of her wrists. “You can’t rub your eyes. “You have garlic and onion on your fingers.”

Lois relaxed in his hold. The burning slowly subsided, but she could feel moisture leaking from her tightly closed lids.

“Any better?” he asked.

“A bit.”

“Open your eyes and blink a few times.”

She obeyed. Mr Kent came into view, just a few inches away.

“Are you OK?” he asked.

“I ... I think so.”

He put both of her hands in one of his and reached behind her for a tissue. Still holding her hands, he patted around her eyes with meticulous care. Her nostrils caught an unfamiliar aroma as his hand hovered near her face.

“Better?” he asked when her eyes were dry.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, releasing her hands. “Garlic can do that, but you didn’t have any problems with the green onions, so I thought you’d be all right.”

“Thank you.” Lois pushed out a wobbly smile, trying to calm a heart that was beating wildly in response to his touch, his words, his close proximity.

Needing a distraction, she sniffed her fingers. The aroma of onion and garlic was strong. “I don’t even want to think about how much it would have hurt if I’d rubbed this into my eyes,” she said. “I didn’t know garlic could be so ferocious.”

“You were crushing it,” he said with a smile. “Consider it a protest.”

“I guess I would protest, too,” she conceded.

“Hang on. You’re leaking again.” He took another tissue and tenderly brushed it along her lower eye lid.

As he finished dabbing under her eyes, she caught his hand. “Is that ginger I can smell?”

“Y...” He cleared his throat. “Yes.”

She lifted his fingers to her nose and inhaled. “Wow.”

“Haven’t you eaten gingerbread before?”

“Yes, but that is a lot stronger.”

“Fresh ginger always is.”

She sniffed again — mostly to cover her embarrassment at having taken possession of his hand with such familiarity — and then quickly released him.

His smile flickered into the moment of awkwardness. “Shall we ... shall we continue cooking, Ms Lane?”

“I think you should call me ‘Lois’ now that you’ve rescued me from the vindictive garlic.”

His smile caused mini-explosions through her heart. “I’m ‘Clark’,” he said. “And I’m happy to rescue you any time you need it.”

Lois wasn’t in the habit of needing rescuing. Well, not that she admitted, anyway. But the retort she would have fired at just

about every other man was muted by the magnificence of his smile. “Thanks ... Clark.”

“You’re welcome ... Lois.”

### Part 3

Lois.

The way Clark said her name — sweet and warm and rich like melting chocolate — sent tingles skittering along her spine. She gasped, stilled, and stared at him.

Clark, however, had moved on. “I’ll see to the rest of the garlic,” he said, picking up the crusher and slipping another clove between its jaws.

Hauling her mind back to their task, Lois said, “Do you want me to grate the ginger?”

“It’s done,” he said. “You can get the garam masala. It’s the dark brown powder in the pot with the blue lid.”

Lois located the pot, skipped over its contents with a cursory glance, and settled on something more tantalising.

Broad chest. Wide shoulders. Neat butt.

Working the garlic crusher was doing incredible things to his arm muscles.

His head swung around, catching her in the act of inspection. “From a distance, the garlic smells kind of nice,” she said.

“That’s just one of the wonderful things about using natural ingredients,” Clark said. “You get to experience all the individual aromas as well as the combined tastes.”

Lois unscrewed the lid of the pot.

“Be careful,” Clark said, tossing a smile in her direction.

“That packs a punch, too.”

Lois sniffed cautiously, and an exotic potpourri of fragrances teased her nostrils. “You weren’t kidding, were you?”

“No,” he said. “It’s a mix of cumin, cardamom, black pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg -”

“Hold on,” she said, pointing an accusing finger at him.

“Didn’t you say we were going to make everything from scratch?”

For a suspended moment, Clark appeared startled by her tone. Then, she giggled, and his smile appeared with the brilliance of a new dawn. “I did make it from scratch,” he said. “It seemed easier than bringing all the containers of individual spices.”

“What happens if I want to make butter chicken for myself?”

Lois said. “How will I get the garam masala?”

“Maybe I’ll have to come back and teach you how to make it,” Clark said lightly.

That sounded good — surprisingly so, for a woman who had avoided the spectre of food preparation with the same tenacity that others applied to crazed gunmen. Turning back to the counter, Lois said, “What’s next?”

“We need a couple of bay leaves,” Clark said, taking out two dry leaves. “You should remove them before you eat.” He picked up a small elongated vegetable with a shiny green skin. “And chilli.”

“That’s hot, isn’t it?”

“Very.”

“Shall I slice it?” Lois said. She pointed to the stem. “I take this bit off first, right?”

“Right,” he said, although he didn’t give it to her. “Do you have any cuts on your fingers?”

Lois examined her hands, wondering if he would want to check them, too. “I don’t think so.”

“No paper cuts?”

“Maybe. I get those a lot. Why?”

“The juice of this stuff stings.”

“Really?”

“Really,” he said. “Perhaps I should do it.”

“Do you have any cuts?” Lois grabbed his hands and examined them. His skin was soft, contrasting delectably with the underlying strength.

“N...o,” he said. “No, I don’t have any cuts.”

The catch in his voice tightened her stomach muscles. She released his hands, reminded herself that the man of her dreams was coming for a romantic Valentine’s dinner, and said, “Perhaps it would be best if you dealt with the chilli.”

Clark turned to the board on the counter and removed the stem from the chilli.

Lois watched, her mind ticking over. He’d said he’d left Kansas and travelled, which suggested he hadn’t been in a serious relationship in his home town. He’d been in Metropolis a few months; surely, that was long enough for any number of women to show interest. “Do you have plans for this evening?” she asked casually.

He put the chilli slices in a small conical bowl and began grinding them with a stone club. “Yes,” he replied. “I’m teaching you how to make butter chicken. This is a mortar and pestle. We grind the chilli so it spreads evenly through the sauce and doesn’t give someone a nasty shock.”

Thinking she might have discerned traces of tension in his response, Lois quickly said, “I’m sorry. It’s Valentine’s Day. I hope Mrs Spangher’s call didn’t ruin your plans.”

“It’s OK.”

“You’ll be finished here by seven-twenty. You can change and be at her door by eight. That’s still early enough to have a wonderful -”

“Lois.”

Her name sliced gently through the deluge of her words. “Yes?”

“It’s time to start cooking.”

“Oh.” Was that an admission he had a date? A hint that he’d like them to hurry because someone he cared about was waiting for him to finish up here? “Of course.”

Clark took a large frying pan, set it on Lois’s stove, and added a squiggle of olive oil. “Would you like to stir?” he asked, offering her a wooden spoon.

“OK.”

“When the oil is hot, we add the onions,” Clark said. They stood, only a few inches apart, watching the oil creep across the pan. Did he have hopes for his date? Where were they in their relationship?

“Should we turn up the heat to save time?” Lois asked.

Clark checked his watch. “We have plenty of time,” he said. “You won’t be late, I promise.”

“You can leave early if you need to.”

“I’d rather stay and watch the meal while you’re getting ready,” he said.

“OK,” Lois said, remembering the pasta mush. “Thanks.” She dragged her eyes from him. “How do we know when the oil is hot enough?”

“Olive oil has a very high smoke point,” Clark said. “So smoke would be a definite sign that there’s too much heat.” He grinned as he turned to the counter and picked up the plate. “Throw in a couple of pieces of onion. They should sizzle; not spit.”

She did. The oil hissed. “Too hot?” Lois guessed.

“No. Just right.” Clark swept the rest of the onion from the plate with a knife. “Stir them while they cook.”

“OK.” Given his short time in Metropolis, the relationship was probably in its early stages. Was this the first date? Was he going to cook for her? Or take her to a romantic restaurant?

Did he love her? Did he know how she felt about him? Or were they still stuck in the circling phase where both were cautious about disclosing too much?

The aroma rising from the pan made Lois’s stomach growl with hunger. “I never realised onions could smell so good.”

“My mom always says that if she’s running late with supper, she fries up some onions just as Dad walks in, because they fill

the air with the promise of a meal to come.”

His affection for his parents was so tangible that it tugged on the cords of disillusionment strung through Lois’s heart. “You’re close with your folks, aren’t you?” she said.

“Yeah,” he said. “They’re great people. Keep stirring. I’ll get the butter.”

Perhaps Mr and Mrs Kent were the reason why Clark was such a nice guy. “There’s butter in butter chicken?” Lois asked with fake surprise.

“Just a little,” he said, smiling as he added two small chunks. They melted into a sputter of bubbles, releasing another aroma into the air.

“My apartment is going to smell like a restaurant,” Lois said.

“You like it?”

“Yes.” She took a deep breath, feeling like an intrepid traveller exploring new and surprising terrain. “Yes, I do.”

“Good.” Clark took the spoon from her, his fingertips brushing over hers. “I’ll stir now,” he said. “You can get the other ingredients.”

Lois swept a glance over the counter. “Is this a quiz to see if I remember all the names?”

“Do you?”

“Try me.”

“Crushed garlic first,” Clark said. “Keep it away from your eyes.”

That was good advice. The stinging sensation hadn’t been pleasant. Clark’s ministrations, on the other hand ...

Lois tipped the garlic into the pan.

“Ginger next.”

She tossed in the flecks of grated ginger.

“Garam masala. Bay leaves. Lemon juice.”

She got them, one after the other, and added them to the pan.

“I don’t think you were entirely honest with me, Ms Lane,” Clark said, his face solemn, his eyes twinkling. “You told me you know nothing about cooking.”

“I don’t.”

“Didn’t,” he corrected. He gave her the spoon. “Don’t let it stick to the bottom of the pan.”

Lois stirred, watching as the assortment of ingredients combined. Her mind flitted back to the upcoming date. His; not hers.

She figured a date with Clark would be wonderful. To be lavished with that smile ... to be the focus of his attention ... to talk and laugh with him ... to have abundant opportunities to check out his body.

And that was just at dinner. Afterwards -

“How much heat do you want?” he asked.

“Ah ...” Lois could feel herself reddening and hoped desperately that her face did not give away the train of her thoughts. “Ah ... I like spicy food.”

“How about ...” Clark paused. “... your guest?”

“Claude,” Lois said. “I’m not sure. He’s Italian. Do they eat spicy food in Italy?”

Clark added about half of the red chilli. “I’ll get you to test it later, and we can add more if you think it needs it.”

“OK,” she said. “What’s that?”

“Tomato puree.” He poured a thick red river into the pan.

“When you walked in with two full boxes, I didn’t think it was possible that you’d need so many different ingredients,” Lois said.

“If you think you might want to make butter chicken again, I can write out the recipe for you,” Clark said. “It’s not difficult.”

“I don’t think I could do all this,” Lois said. “Not alone.”

Clark opened her fridge and took out the cream, milk, and yoghurt.

“They go in, too?” Lois asked, her voice lifting with surprise. “I thought they were for dessert.”

“No,” Clark said, grinning. “They are important ingredients in butter chicken. They give it the creamy texture.”

Lois nodded sagely. “Making it romantic?” she teased.

She’d hoped her comment would prompt another smile, and it did ... eventually. But the pause was noticeable, giving her time to wonder if he was thinking about his date.

Was she someone he had met at the cooking class? A student, perhaps? Had she been disappointed when Clark had called to give her bad news that he was going to have to delay their date? Was she thinking about him now as she prepared for the evening ahead?

The bright red colour of the sauce had been tamed by the dairy foods, turning it golden brown. “This is making me hungry,” Lois said. “And there’s still over an hour before I can eat.”

Clark took a teaspoon, loaded it with some of the sauce, and offered it to her. “Have a taste.”

“Is that allowed?”

“Only a foolish cook puts a meal on the table without testing it beforehand.”

“Did your mother say that?”

“Yep.”

Instead of taking the spoon, Lois put her hand around his for steadiness and slipped the spoon into her mouth.

A sensation of taste bombarded her tongue as fire from the contact of their skin ignited her palm. “Mmmm.”

“Good?” Clark asked.

“It’s incredible.”

“Better than a jar?”

Lois pretended to consider. His expression turned stern. She felt amusement push against her mouth.

His mouth softened, poised on the threshold of a smile. “Well?”

“Much better,” she said.

His smile came, garnished with a dash of satisfaction.

Realising she was in danger of staring for a protracted time, Lois quickly asked, “What’s next?”

“We need to cut up the chicken.” Clark sprinkled some more garam masala and a red powder in a bowl and began cutting up the chicken and tossing in the little cubes. “Can you keep stirring the sauce?”

Lois slid the spoon through the sauce. “What’s the red stuff?” she asked.

“Cayenne pepper.”

“Whoa,” she said. “This is going to be hot.”

“I brought extra yoghurt,” Clark said with a grin. “Serve with a dollop on top. That’ll douse down some of the heat.”

Lois continued stirring, giving her task just enough attention that the sauce didn’t stick to the pan. She watched Clark cutting up the chicken. His hands moved with easy proficiency, arousing a bevy of questions. If cooking wasn’t his usual job, what did he do?

“How’s it doing?”

Lois jumped at his question. “Good,” she said. “I think.”

“Is it thickening?”

“Ah ... a bit.”

“Good job.” His compliment came with another smile. “You can move that pan from the heat now.”

She slid it across, and Clark put a new pan over the heat. He added oil, and said, “Next, we’re going to cook the chicken.”

They stood side by side as Clark tipped about half of the cubes of chicken into the pan and Lois wielded the spoon.

They weren’t physically touching, but she could feel his closeness. She could smell his aftershave. She glanced up at his smooth cheeks. Chin. Jaw.

Obviously, he’d shaved recently.

Probably in preparation for a quick getaway and rapid

transformation from cooking instructor to date.

“What are you going to do after we’ve finished?” she asked.

“Well, there’s the salad to prepare, the rice to cook, and I brought the ingredients to make something sweet to go with after-dinner coffee.”

“Do we have time for all that?”

“It won’t take long,” he said. “I’ll make the dessert while you get ready for your date.”

“Dessert?”

“A recipe of my mom’s.”

“Is it romantic, too?” Lois asked. “Like the chicken?”

“Very romantic,” he said solemnly.

She leaned sideways — just a few degrees — and nudged him to let him know she wasn’t necessarily accepting his definition of ‘romantic’.

He grinned. “You’ll see.”

“Thank you, Clark,” she said. “It’s very kind of you to plan such a wonderful meal.”

“Mrs Spangher said this meal is important to you.”

“It is.” Realising she sounded irresolute, Lois declared, “It’s really important to me.”

#### Part 4

The silence that followed Lois’s statement hung around them like a prickly blanket. She fixed her concentration on the chicken pieces and firmly subdued her mind’s inclination to line up Claude and Clark and conduct a thorough comparison.

Last week, she had told Lucy that Claude could be ‘the one’.

“You’re doing great,” Clark said. He turned the heat to low, skirted around her, and picked up the pan containing the sauce. “We need to switch the pans, and then you can spoon the chicken into the sauce.”

Lois slid her pan across the stove as Clark returned the first pan to the heat. “What are you going to do?” she asked.

“I’m going to grind the cashew nuts to a powder,” he said, turning from the stove to the counter.

“I’ll do it,” Lois said, grabbing the club-shaped implement. Was it the mortar? Or the pestle? Either way, she needed to get her mind on the real purpose of this evening, and another display of masculine muscularity wasn’t going to be helpful.

“Sure,” Clark said, smiling easily as he tipped the nuts into the bowl and pushed it closer to her.

Lois poked the club into the bowl. One nut split in half.

“You might have to be a little more vigorous than that,” Clark said, pausing from his task of transferring the chicken into the sauce. “A grinding circular motion with the pestle works well.”

Lois rammed it into the mortar. When she lifted it, some of the nuts had crumbled. She glanced up at Clark and saw his smile of encouragement. “Is your cooking class full?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied, stirring the chicken through the sauce. “Why?”

“I figure cooking skills could be useful.”

“You could apply for the spring class. It starts in a couple of months.”

“Will you be teaching it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You said your initial plans didn’t work out.”

“That’s right.”

“So being a ‘culinary instructor’ is Plan B?”

“Yes.”

“What was Plan A?”

Clark didn’t respond for a moment.

“Sorry,” Lois said. “I’m a reporter. Asking questions that are none of my business is a part of my job.”

He smiled again. “Mine, too.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m a reporter, too. At least, that’s what I want to be.”

Lois abandoned the mortar and pestle and walked over to the

stove. “You’re a reporter?”

“Yeah. I did some freelance work while I was travelling.

Then I thought it might be good to settle somewhere, so I came to Metropolis.”

“Did you apply at the Daily Planet?”

“I wrote the editor, Mr White, but he replied that there were no vacancies at present.”

“I guess you know I work at the Planet?”

“Yep.”

“You’ve read my work?”

“All the time.” He smiled, blushed a little, and said, “You’re brilliant.”

A gush of pleasure tumbled through her. “Ah ... thank you.” She returned to grinding the nuts, asking, “Did you apply at any of the other newspapers?”

Clark didn’t reply immediately, which kindled her curiosity. “The Metropolis Star,” he said eventually.

“No luck there, either?” Lois asked, wondering just how bad a reporter you’d have to be to get rejected by the Star.

“No. Not exactly.”

“Not exactly?”

“I worked there for a short time.”

“And?”

“And you need to add fenugreek seeds to the cashew powder.”

Lois slapped her hands onto her hips to let Clark know his evasion hadn’t gone unnoticed. That brought a smile to his mouth, but he said nothing as he opened yet another pot and sprinkled some wheat-coloured seeds into the mortar.

Lois picked up the pestle and resumed her assault. “Why did you leave the Star?”

“Fenugreek seeds can get a bit jumpy when you hit them. The cashew powder helps keep them in the mortar.”

Lois thrust the pestle into the mortar, and two seeds flew out and bounced along the counter.

Clark retrieved them, tossed them back, and shot her a grin. “See?”

“Yes,” Lois said. She used her other hand to make a cover for the bowl and began pounding again.

“The editor of the Star sent me out to investigate some missing funds at the Port Authority,” Clark said as he turned back to the stove and continued stirring.

“Really?” Lois said, immediately interested. “I didn’t hear anything about that.”

“That’s because there weren’t any missing funds.”

“Ughh,” Lois said. “I hate it when a story fizzles out to nothing.”

“I told Mr Carpenter, and he asked me to report on what I had discovered, so I wrote a few paragraphs about the funds being used for training in safety procedures.”

It didn’t sound like the most riveting story, but Lois refrained from commenting as she increased her efforts in crushing the seeds.

“He printed my story the next day, failing to mention the safety training and adding in a lot of innuendo about misappropriated funds,” Clark said. “I figured he must have found some evidence I’d missed, so I asked him about it. He said the newspaper business was about giving the readers what they wanted and he wasn’t going to let a lack of evidence stop him printing the best stories.”

“He dismissed you?” Lois asked.

“No. I quit.”

“And now you teach people to cook?”

“It pays the bills,” Clark said. “How are you going with the seeds?”

Lois drove home the pestle, catching her finger between it and the mortar. “Ouch!”

Clark was at her side in less than a second. He grasped her hand and gently peeled away her hold on the tip of her throbbing forefinger.

“I think I broke my nail,” Lois cried.

Clark gathered her hand in both of his. He pushed his glasses a little way down his nose and peered intently at her finger. As he set his glasses back in place, he turned to her with a dazzling smile. “No, you haven’t,” he informed her. “The nail’s fine.” He shuffled them both to the sink and put her finger under the slowly running water. “How does that feel?”

“My finger’s OK,” Lois said. Her hands, sheathed in his, were burning far more than the finger that had been squashed. “But I felt my nail break.”

Clark turned off the faucet and bundled her hand in a towel. As he carefully dried her fingers, he gave her a reassuring smile. “It’s OK. Really.”

His eyes connected with hers.

Time slowed; her heart raced.

“Are you OK?” Clark asked, sounding as if her answer were the most important thing in the world.

She slid her hand from his and examined her finger. It was a little red, but the nail was perfectly intact.

She tested it with her thumb.

“See?” Clark said. “I told you it was fine.”

“I must have bent it, but it feels secure enough now.”

Clark picked up the pestle and ground the powder for a few seconds. Lois took the spoon and mindlessly stirred as the streams of tingly warmth slowly abated.

She cast a furtive glance over her shoulder and was struck again by Clark’s good looks. He glanced up from the mortar and gave her a smile that reinvigorated the streams to rushing torrents. “How’s your finger?” he asked.

Her finger had been forgotten in the wash of physical attraction. “It’s ... it’s good,” Lois said.

He tipped the powder into a bowl, added some water, and stirred vigorously. “This will thicken the sauce as it simmers,” he said.

“It’s done?” Lois asked, disappointed.

Clark checked his watch. “You have an hour until your guest arrives,” he said. “I’ll make a salad and something sweet to go with coffee at the end. Then, I’ll set the table.”

“What about cleaning up?” Lois said.

“I’ll do that, too.”

“I could help,” Lois offered, reluctant to leave.

“I gave my word you would have plenty of time to get ready.”

“You’ll watch this?” she asked, indicating the pan.

His smile flashed. “I won’t let it burn,” he said. “I promise.”

“OK,” Lois said. She rested the spoon against the edge of the pan and went to her bedroom to get ready for her date.

With Claude.

\*\*\*

Clark’s smile died as Lois left the room.

The strain of covering his feelings had intensified with every passing minute.

Lois Lane was beautiful. Smart. Talented.

And currently preparing for her Valentine’s date with another man.

The sting of jealousy was something Clark had rarely felt before; now it was sharp, carving up his heart with a finely honed blade.

He’d been aware of Lois Lane — her work — before he’d written to Mr White. When Mrs Spangher had called a few hours ago and given the name of their client, he’d been excited by the prospect of meeting her.

But he hadn’t expected to be captivated by her before she’d even properly opened her door and granted him entry into her

apartment.

Until today, he’d been sceptical about the notion of love at first sight.

Now, he knew better.

He’d seen Lois Lane. He loved her. It was that simple.

Except, it wasn’t simple at all. There was a guy, Claude, whom she cared about a great deal. Someone she wanted to impress. Someone she wanted to be with on Valentine’s Day.

Clark assembled the ingredients for his planned dessert and glared at them.

When ‘Lois Lane’ had been merely a name in a byline, chocolate kisses had seemed to be the ideal way to conclude her romantic dinner.

Now ...

Lois was going to share the evening with Claude. They were going to eat the meal he, Clark, had planned for them. They were going to finish the meal with chocolate kisses.

Which could lead to -

He couldn’t think about that. He wouldn’t.

Clark beat the egg whites, added the sugar, and carefully folded in the cocoa and almond meal. He piped twelve individual mounds onto a baking tray and set them in the oven.

Ten minutes later, the salad was assembled in the bowl.

He took the kisses from the oven and allowed them to cool while he washed the equipment and packed his boxes.

He had dreamed of this a thousand times — preparing a meal in anticipation of sharing it with the woman he loved.

Never again would his dreams be about a vague lady.

Now, they would be all about Lois Lane.

He set the table, trying not to think about Lois and Claude sitting together. Would they hold hands? Would they laugh? What would they talk about?

Was what she planning to wear? She’d looked so pretty in her jeans and sweater, but Clark figured she was going to be stunning when she walked through the door, ready for Claude.

He melted the dark chocolate and stuck pairs of kisses together, trying valiantly to attain the indifference of a hired cook. He rinsed the rice and set it on the stove to boil.

By seven-fifteen, everything was prepared — the table awaiting diners, the food ready, and the air embellished with the aromas of butter chicken, tempered by the sweet fragrance of chocolate.

The bedroom door opened. Clark turned, and his breath stopped. His mouth dried. His heart bounced across his ribcage.

Her black dress clung enticingly, accentuating every feminine curve. He hauled his eyes to her face and clung to the smile that had become so familiar.

“You look amazing,” he said, careful to inject a measure of detachment into his voice.

“Thank you.” She surveyed her apartment. “Clark,” she said. “It looks great. Thank you for everything.”

“I put the dessert in the fridge.”

Lois walked across the room, her high-heels clicking on the floor, and put her hand on the fridge door.

“Don’t,” Clark said quickly, not wanting to face questions about the kisses. On her puzzled look, he added, “Keep it for a surprise.”

“Oh.” She backed away from the fridge. “OK.”

“The rice is simmering. Turn off the heat when the water has been absorbed. Don’t let it stick. And keep stirring the chicken.”

Lois reached for her handbag. “You have been fantastic, Clark,” she said. “How much do I owe you?”

Clark was sure he couldn’t stomach being paid for arranging the perfect evening for Lois and her date. “Mrs Spangher will send you an invoice,” he said. “Settle it with her.”

“OK.” Lois replaced her bag.

Clark slipped on his jacket and picked up the boxes. “I hope

you have a wonderful evening, Lois,” he said, hoping he didn’t sound too insincere.

“Thanks,” she said. “Bye, Clark.” She opened the door. He walked through it. The door closed.

And his brief presence in Lois’s life ended.

Clark wandered dejectedly down the corridor, mourning the loss of something that had never been his.

As he waited for the elevator, Lois’s phone rang. Before he had the chance to close down his hearing, he heard her say, “Hi, Lucy.”

The doors of the elevator grated open. It was empty. Clark didn’t enter; instead, he went to the stairs and descended a few steps. He stopped, stalled by an idea that sprouted in the fog of misery.

If he waited here, he would see Claude pass by on the way to Lois’s apartment.

Collecting memories to fuel his torment was a stupid idea, but Clark couldn’t help himself. He took less than a second to return the boxes to his apartment and then dropped back onto the steps to await the arrival of the luckiest man on the planet.

### Part 5

Lois’s mind reeled as her body collapsed against the wall.

“No,” she said into the phone. “No. You’re wrong. It was someone else.”

“Lois,” Lucy said. “It was him. He was French. He said his name was Claude. He fits your description perfectly.”

“You’ve never seen Claude. A description could fit dozens of men.”

“Yes,” Lucy said, heavy with sarcasm. “Metropolis is just bursting with womanising Frenchmen called Claude.”

“My Claude is on his way to my apartment,” Lois said stiffly. “We have a date.”

“He called you? He called to say he’s coming?”

“He’ll be here,” Lois said, unwilling to admit that Claude hadn’t returned any of her calls in the past two days.

“He won’t be there, Lois,” Lucy said. “After he hit on me, Adam told him to leave, and then he went over to a woman and squeezed her butt. She spun around and flung her arm at him. Her engagement ring caught him across the neck.”

“What happened then?” Lois asked, wondering if there was any possibility of a story.

“Another woman came to his defence and gave him a handkerchief to wipe up the few spots of blood. There was a short disagreement — the first woman accused Claude of sexual assault — and then he left with the second woman.”

“It wasn’t Claude,” Lois insisted. “He can’t be at High Spirits because he has a date with me tonight.”

“Lois,” Lucy said, her voice crackling with frustration. “I’m trying to help you here.”

“By calling to crow because you’re with Adam and you think I’ll be spending Valentine’s Day alone?” Lois demanded.

“Of course not,” Lucy said with a sigh of resignation. “Just ... just try not to be too blind, sis.”

“I’m not blind at all,” Lois said. “I know a good man when I meet one.” She slammed down the phone and leaned over her counter, gripping it tightly as she tried to calm the surge of dismay souring her insides.

It couldn’t be true.

Claude had a date with her. It was Valentine’s Day. Tonight meant something. It was important to both of them.

It was going to represent a new step in their relationship.

Lois straightened and went to the stove. She stirred the rice, turned off the heat, and banished Lucy’s call from her mind.

Preparing the meal had been fun. She’d enjoyed Clark’s company. He’d taught her with good-natured patience. He hadn’t ridiculed her lack of knowledge. He’d shown genuine concern when the garlic had stung her eyes. He hadn’t used their chance

meeting as an opportunity to ask her to speak with Perry on his behalf.

He hadn’t capitulated to her attempts to wriggle out of cooking, but he’d been considerate in ensuring she had sufficient time to prepare for her date while he’d seen to the boring bits like cleaning up and making the salad.

Her apartment looked great and smelled fantastic ... welcoming, warm, prepared.

Everything was perfect. It was going to be a night she would remember forever.

The clock ticked over to seven-thirty.

Lois glanced to her door, willing a knock to sound in announcement that her date has arrived.

He would be here, she told herself fiercely. He would be. Lucy had made a mistake. How dare she think she could accuse Claude simply because a Frenchman had behaved badly?

The minutes crawled past.

Lois checked her image in the mirror. Clark had said she looked amazing, and she hadn’t missed the veiled glimmer of appreciation in his eyes. By now, their cooking class had probably receded from his mind as he eagerly hurried to meet his date.

Lois wandered to the fridge and opened it. She took out the bowl and inspected the salad. The ingredients had been cut with neat precision and arranged like a work of art. Lois sighed. Clark had done everything to make the evening special.

He’d said there would be something to accompany coffee. She searched the fridge again and found a plate of lightly browned swirly mounds, joined together in pairs with dark icing.

She lifted the plastic wrap and inhaled.

The aroma of rich chocolate tantalised her senses.

Clark was so sweet. He’d thought of everything.

Resisting the temptation to appease her gnawing stomach with a premature taste, she returned the plate to the fridge.

Seven-forty arrived without Claude. Lois deliberately turned away so she couldn’t watch the clock mark each passing second and filled her mind with a thousand reasons why he was running late and hadn’t called.

Seven-forty-five approached, passed, and left her in its wake.

At seven-fifty, Lois turned off the heat under the butter chicken.

It was time to face the truth.

Claude wasn’t coming.

Last week, he had cancelled their date. At least he’d bothered to call.

Tonight ... nothing.

She snatched a tissue from its box.

Claude wasn’t coming.

Their relationship would never amount to anything.

It had never really begun, and now, it was over.

A sob escaped from her throat. Her tears rose, acid with mortification. How could she, an award-winning reporter known for her ability to cut through the extraneous and uncover the truth, be so blindly naive when it came to her heart?

That’s what hurt the most. Not losing Claude, but the knowledge that she could be so easily duped by a superficial attraction.

Then, it came.

The knock on the door.

For a moment, Lois couldn’t move. Then, she hurriedly wiped her eyes, patted down her hair, hauled in a breath, smiled, and opened the door.

Clark Kent stared back at her.

Her glutinous mind could form no words. He seemed similarly stuck, gaping at her, his throat bobbing.

“Clark,” she spluttered eventually. “You forgot something?”

“No. No. I ...”

“You?”

“I heard ...” His face had passed through multiple shades of pink and was approaching crimson. “I heard you cry.” He looked down, shoulders forward, as if awaiting her rebuke.

“You left my apartment half an hour ago,” Lois said.

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you go home?”

“I ... I -”

“You kept her waiting?”

He looked up. “Kept who waiting?”

“Your date.”

“I don’t have a date.”

“You don’t?”

“No.”

His confusion caused a gurgle of laughter to burgeon into her throat. “It seems that I don’t either,” she said, her statement edged with hysteria.

“You don’t?” he said with sympathy.

“He didn’t come. Didn’t call.”

“Ah, Lois.” Clark took a step forward, his hand raised. “I’m sorry. You went to so much effort. You must be devastated.”

Strangely, she’d moved on already. Only embarrassment lingered, but it was a small price to pay for finally being able to see Claude’s true colours. “You don’t have a date for Valentine’s Day?” she asked.

“No.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“No.”

That was absolutely, positively the best news Lois had heard in a very long time. She smiled, stepped back, and fully opened her door. “Come on in,” she said. “I have a delicious home-cooked meal, and I can’t eat it all by myself.”

“Lois ...” Clark grimaced. “I can’t.”

“Why not? You said you don’t have a girlfriend.”

“But you have a ... a guest. You said this was important to you.”

“It was,” she admitted. “But I’ve learned some things today.”

“Like how to make butter chicken?” he said with a sad smile.

“Other things, too.” She gestured for him to enter. “Please, Clark. Please come and share our meal.”

Still, he hesitated. “Lois ...”

“Yes?”

“You can’t know how much I want to spend this evening with you, but you’re feeling angry and disappointed now and I don’t want you to do anything you might regret later.”

“Like what?”

“If your guest ... Claude ... finds out we had dinner together, it might ruin any chance you have of fixing -”

“I don’t want to fix it. It’s finished.”

“I -”

Lois clasped Clark’s hand and yanked him into her apartment. She closed the door, and in a moment of clarity, realised only the truth would save her from appearing shallow and opportunistic. “I had hoped there might be something with Claude,” she said. “He’s handsome, charming, charismatic, and glamorous. He’s also unreliable, selfish, egotistical, and untrustworthy. Whether you stay and eat dinner with me or leave now, I’ve finished with Claude.”

Clark’s brow knotted with indecision.

Lois continued. “I realise it looks as if I’m using you as a convenient replacement, but the truth is ...” She smiled nervously. “The truth is, I really like you, Clark, and I can’t think of anyone I’d rather be with on Valentine’s Day.”

He shuffled a little, looked down at his feet, and then faced her squarely. “Lois, I like you, too. A lot. I -”

Harsh, loud banging vibrated her door. Lois’s eyes swung from Clark to the door and back again.

“You should get that,” he said.

She opened the door.

Claude was there, dressed in an expensive shirt, pants of the latest fashion cut, and a flashy scarf befitting his debonair style. He was holding a huge bunch of red roses and a bottle of champagne, and smiling as if he’d just won the lottery.

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The knock had shattered Clark’s hopes. He’d slid his glasses down his nose and looked through Lois’s door. He known it was Claude, even before Lois’s surprised, squeaky utterance of her date’s name.

“Lois,” Claude said. “*Ma cherie*. I am here. You have cooked? It smells heavenly.” He swaggered into her apartment and swept her into his arms, planting his mouth on hers.

Clark looked away, a quiverful of arrows piercing his heart.

Lois drew back. “You’re late,” she said with such evenness that it was impossible to gauge her true feelings about Claude’s tardiness.

“My sweet Lois,” he said. “I was unavoidably detained. You know I’m very busy. And then I stopped to buy roses ...” He held them towards her. “... and champagne — which had to be of sufficient quality to match the exquisite meal you promised me.”

Lois glanced at the bottle, but she didn’t take either of Claude’s gifts.

“You are upset,” Claude said. “I should have called, but that would have taken more time, and I was longing to be with my sweetheart.” His hands dropped to his sides, and he looked at Lois with soulful eyes. “I am sorry, my Lois. Please forgive me.”

Lois stared steadily at him, silent. Claude’s gaze shifted from Lois, and he seemed to notice Clark’s presence for the first time.

“Who is this?” he asked, also employing a carefully even tone.

“This is my culinary instructor,” Lois informed him.

Surprise, and perhaps relief, flooded Claude’s expression as he regarded Clark. “A culinary instructor? So he is about to leave?”

“He’s been teaching me how to cook.”

Claude gave a hesitant smile. “It smells splendid, *ma cherie*. I cannot wait for us to begin.” He took a step closer to Clark.

“Thank you for assisting Lois. You may leave now.”

Clark looked at Lois, awaiting her instruction. Her attention was fixed on Claude. “Take off your scarf,” she said.

“I have been unwell,” Claude said. “Would you mind terribly if it remained? It is from Paris. Made of pure silk.”

“Take it off.”

“Don’t be silly, *ma cherie*. It is not important I remove -”

Lois stepped forward and tugged at the scarf, revealing a solitary red welt across Claude’s neck. “How did you get that?” she asked.

“A misunderstanding. I merely asked a question, and the woman -”

“Were you at High Spirits? The bar in Seventh Avenue? Were you there tonight?”

“I know that bar. It is one of the best in Metropolis. I can take you there if you -”

“Were you there an hour ago? Did you hit on a brunette who was with her date? Did you get that scratch because you couldn’t keep your wandering hands to yourself and the woman you groped didn’t take kindly to you forcing your attentions on her?”

Claude’s mouth dropped with shock, and he pointed at Clark.

“You have been having an affair,” he screeched with indignation.

“You can cook. Why would you need a cooking teacher? He’s your plaything, coming here to take my -”

“Get out!” Lois screamed.

Claude dropped the roses and approached Clark, menacingly poking the bottle in front of Clark’s face. “You dirty dog,” he said, his words hissing with contempt. “You sneak in here and

help yourself to my woman. In France, we do not accept such reprehensible behaviour.” He raised the bottle behind his head.

“Claude!” Lois shrieked. “Don’t be stupid. You need to leave now.”

“I am not leaving until I have taught this dog a lesson,” Claude said. “He must realise that my woman is not his to -”

Lois lunged at him. Claude lifted his left hand to fend her away. Clark pushed Claude’s arm down, and Claude swung the bottle at Clark’s head. Clark fended off the blow and captured both of Claude’s arms, holding him still.

Claude kicked out at Clark’s legs. “Let me go, you filthy woman-stealing -”

“Get out, Claude!” Lois shrieked. “Get out now.”

“I am not leaving until -”

With a swift movement, Clark swung Claude over his shoulder, carried him through the door, and dumped him in the corridor. Lois followed, flinging the bunch of roses at him. “Don’t come back,” she said to the crumpled heap. “I never want to see you again.”

From his position on the floor, Claude pointed at Clark. “You will pay for this,” he snarled. “No one touches my woman and -”

Lois slammed the door and leant against it, shaking.

“Are you all right?” Clark asked, standing as close to her as he dared and clenching his fist in an effort to keep from touching her.

She looked up, her eyes wide with shock. “D...did he hurt you?”

“No. I’m -”

“I thought he was going to smash ...” Her expression crumbled, tears flooding her eyes. She covered her face with her hands.

Clark lightly touched her shoulder. She didn’t back away. Unable to stop himself, he eased her away from the door and wrapped her in his arms.

Lois tensed a little. Relaxed slightly. Encouraged, he nestled her closer, angry with Claude for having hurt her, but unable to quell his joy that she was willing to allow him, Clark, so close.

He would have liked to hold her forever, but too soon, Lois slipped out of his embrace and turned away.

“Lois?” Clark took a step closer.

“Why do I always get it so wrong?” she cried, spinning around. “I’m an independent, successful woman of the nineties, but I always choose jerks who pretend to be one thing and turn out to be something completely different.”

“Being able to see the best in people is an admirable quality,” Clark said.

“But I don’t!” she fired back. “I see things that aren’t there, and I miss the obvious. Like Claude!” She pointed at the door. “How could I miss that he hits on anything in a skirt? How could I have been willing to overlook that he’s rude and inconsiderate? How could I have thought ...”

With a sob, she slumped into the sofa.

Clark crouched at her knee. He waited while she stared ahead, her fingers knotting in her lap. He watched her fight for control, understanding both her need for release and her aversion to breaking down in front of someone who was little more than a stranger.

Through sheer willpower, she won the battle and looked directly at him, her eyes glazed with the shield of detachment.

“Thank you for coming and cooking with me,” she said in a cool voice. “I think it would be best if you left now.”

#### Part 6

Clark hadn’t moved. He was still perched at her knee, his hand on the sofa cushion.

Embarrassment flooded through Lois like a swollen river contaminated with slicks of self-disgust. For Clark to know she had been stood up was humiliating enough. For him to witness

Claude’s appalling behaviour and disrespectful attitudes was infinitely worse.

Lois couldn’t look at Clark. If she did, she knew she would see his sympathy and her churning emotions would crash through her tenuous grip on control.

As soon as he left, she would bolt to her bedroom and surrender to the storm of her tears, but for now ...

Clark still hadn’t moved. “Please,” Lois said, despising the quiver in her voice. “Please go now.”

“I would like to stay,” he said.

Five minutes ago, she had been imploring him to do just that.

How could she have been so impulsive after everything that had happened?

Hadn’t she learned anything? Tomorrow always came, and it always brought disillusionment and heartache. The more wonderful a man seemed, the greater her hope, and the more devastating her disappointment.

Clark Kent ... well, that would hurt more than anything had before, and Lois wasn’t going to risk that. “I can’t do this,” she mumbled, addressing the tense air around them. “Not anymore.”

“Do what?”

“Dating. The whole relationship thing. I’m so inept at choosing someone to be with that it’s a certain disaster from the beginning. And when it happens ...” She gulped, trying to smother a sob.

“Then don’t choose,” Clark said.

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t choose.”

“Don’t choose what?”

“Don’t choose a guy.”

“So you agree?” she said coldly. “I should stay single for the rest of my life?”

“You should let me choose.”

“You think I should let you choose a man for me to date?” she demanded dubiously.

Clark’s smile flickered. “Actually, I was thinking you should let me choose the woman for me to date.”

His meaning billowed like a summer breeze, eroding the sodden heaviness from around her heart. “Do you have someone in mind?” she asked.

He gathered her hand between his. “You.”

Tiny tremors capered across her heart. “You want to choose me as your ...”

“Yes.”

His affirmation came with soft certainty. His touch on her hand warmed her skin. “Your what?”

“Let’s start with this evening,” Clark said. “Let’s eat the meal we cooked and enjoy each other’s company.”

One evening would be worse than having never met him. She would always be tormented by what might have been. “You’re backing away,” she said, rekindling her embarrassment and using it to harden her tone.

“No. No, I’m not.”

“It sounds like you are.”

“Lois ...” He released a gush of air. “I don’t want to scare you away by being too intense.”

She stared at where her hand disappeared into the folds of his fingers. “Do you think this ... us ... you and me ... might have a future?”

“I’m sure of it.”

His quiet confidence snuggled into her heart as if it had belonged there all along, staring down her doubts.

Clark straightened, gently tugging her to her feet. “Let’s eat, shall we?” he said. “The food is ready.”

Apparently, he was staying.

It was Valentine’s Day.

And Lois was sharing it with a man who was an enthralling

package of gentle sincerity, patience, and good humour, all neatly bundled in a flaming hot body and topped with a six-star smile.

“Would you mind if I spent a few moments tidying up?” Lois said. “I’m sure my mascara must be smudged.”

“It’s not,” he said. “But you go and check. I’ll serve up the food.”

“Thanks,” she said, hoping he would discern that her gratitude covered so much more than a chance to gather her composure and fix her makeup. “I won’t be long.”

Clark let her hand slide slowly from his grasp. “I’ll be waiting for you,” he said.

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Lois peered into the mirror. Her eyes were a little red, but her makeup was undamaged. She drew back from the mirror for a full-length perusal.

The dress suited her, emphasising all the right places.

But she’d worn it — twice — for Claude, and that tainted it. She turned away from the mirror and advanced on her closet, hoping something would jump out at her.

Surprisingly, it did.

It was the outfit she’d bought for her cousin’s wedding last fall. Worn once, deep burgundy in colour, and with a neckline that suggested, rather than flaunted, her bust — it was exactly right for a date with Clark Kent.

She quickly changed her dress and shoes, re-assessed her image, smiled, and then frowned.

Was she going to be able to banish all remnants of Claude’s memory from whatever might be possible with Clark? Or would it always be wedged between them — the knowledge that they had met because she’d been so desperate to impress a man unworthy of her efforts?

She had behaved like a schoolgirl — a naïve, immature schoolgirl, reduced to mush by the superficial charm of a man whose character had less substance than fog.

There was no valid excuse for her blindness, but she needed to try to explain.

With a final glance in the mirror to boost her confidence, Lois opened the bedroom door and stepped forward.

Clark was standing next to the table. He turned. His mouth fell open. He dragged it shut and swallowed. “Lois,” he said, awe weaving through his voice. He shook his head as he glided towards her. “Wow.”

She smiled. “I didn’t want to wear the dress I’d worn for Claude.”

“You looked great in the black dress,” he said. “Now ...” His pause sizzled with appreciation.

“I want to forget Claude,” Lois said. “I want to forget everything that happened while he was here.”

“It’s forgotten. He’s not important.”

“Are you concerned he will follow up on his threats? I don’t want him to hurt you.”

“He won’t,” Clark said. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

He seemed sure. Lois gave herself a moment to skim over his broad shoulders and remember how easily he had ejected Claude from her apartment. “If you have any questions, would you mind asking them now so we can move on?”

“How did you know about his neck?”

“My sister called. He hit on her at High Spirits and then assaulted another woman, who swung at him and scratched his neck.”

“Did Lucy know it was Claude?”

“Not definitely. She knew his name and nationality and put the pieces together.” Lois groaned. “I didn’t believe her.”

“His accent is French.”

“That’s because he was born and raised in Paris.”

“You said he is Italian.”

“No, I said -” Lois stopped and covered her mouth. “I did,

didn’t I?”

“Yes.”

Her mistake provided some release, and Lois burst out laughing. “I told Claude a sexy Italian chef had taught me how to cook.” She’d gotten that two-thirds right. “I must have been concentrating on the butter chicken.”

“It’s not important now,” Clark said. He gestured towards the table. “We should eat before it gets cold.”

Lois grasped his arm. “Claude and me ... it was three weeks, a whirlwind of parties with glamorous people, a lot of hours spent listening to him preen, and very little else. I don’t think he ever saw me as more than a bit of fun on the side.” That sounded as if she had succumbed entirely. “I ... I didn’t sleep with him.”

A muscle twitched in Clark’s cheek. “That’s ... that’s not my business.”

“I thought ... hoped ... I wanted to believe.” Lois still wanted to believe. But not about Claude. “I wanted him to be the right one,” she said. “I wanted it so much that I ignored my gut and acted like a fool.”

“Was there something about him specifically?”

Lois shook her head as she searched for truth in the layers of emotion buried deep inside. “I wanted to believe there is a man for me,” she admitted.

“There is a man for you,” Clark said gravely.

Her eyes shot into his. His gaze didn’t waver. Her heart rollicked around her chest as hope and disbelief jostled for supremacy.

“Let’s eat, shall we?” Clark said.

“OK.”

As Lois moved forward, Clark placed a gentle hand on her back, radiating the warmth of his presence through her body. The few yards they travelled across the room seemed representative of so much more ... a new beginning, a sparkling dawn to a day that stretched before them with glorious promise.

They arrived at the table, and he pulled out her chair.

“Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome.” He waited until she was settled before sitting down himself. He opened the bottle of white wine and poured two glasses. “What are we drinking to?”

She pondered for a moment. “Cooking classes?”

He nodded in smiling agreement, lifting his glass towards hers. “To cooking classes.”

Their glass clinked. Their eyes locked. Time faded away, subordinate to the compelling lure of possibility.

Then, as if remembering that cooking led to dining, Clark broke away and passed her the bowl of rice.

“Ready to try it?” he asked when their plates were laden with food.

“Yes.” Lois speared a piece of chicken, swept it through the sauce, and lifted it to her mouth.

The taste pulsed across her tongue, setting off tiny explosions.

She chewed slowly, attempting to differentiate each individual facet of the whole. “Wow,” she said. “This is good.”

“Food always tastes better when you cook it yourself,” Clark said.

Perhaps he was right, Lois mused as she took another mouthful of the rice and chicken. Cooking had been fun. She’d enjoyed the laughter and camaraderie that had accompanied the skills and techniques.

The jovial atmosphere had been lost when she’d gone into her bedroom to prepare for Claude’s arrival.

She wanted it back. She took another mouthful, chewed and swallowed, and then paused, pretending to consider. “I’m still not sure about this recipe being romantic, though,” she said.

Clark’s quick grin was exactly the response she’d sought.

“Really?” he said. “The soft, creamy texture combining with the

fiery heat of the spices — I think that's very romantic."

Lois wondered if Clark realised he could have been describing them — he was the soft and creamy, she was the fiery heat. "Food isn't romantic," she said. "Unless it's chocolate."

His smile turned secretive, probably in reference to the little chocolate mounds he had stashed away in the fridge. "What do you think is romantic, Ms Lane?" he asked.

She sipped from the wine, taking time to consider her reply. "I think rescuing a lady from vindictive garlic is very romantic."

His grin exploded, warming her in its aura. "Anything else?"  
"A culinary instructor hanging around for half an hour after he was supposed to leave."

Clark grimaced. "Sorry. I wasn't stalking you."

"What were you doing?"

His eyes dived to the table, and he poked at a piece of tomato with his fork. "I wanted to see Claude."

"Why? Would you have said anything to him?"

"No," Clark said, looking up. "I just ... I just wanted to see him. I didn't want to leave until ..."

"What?"

"I wanted to see for myself ... Evidence ..."

"Of what?"

"That he realised he was the luckiest man on the planet."

Lois tried to contain the smile that wanted to scurry all over her face. "I don't think Claude would consider himself the luckiest man on the planet now," she said.

"He's not anymore," Clark said cheerfully.

"Who is now?"

He laughed at her question. "Can't you work it out?"

"I'd like you to tell me."

"I am."

"Why?"

"Because it's Valentine's Day and I'm with Lois Lane."

Lois searched his soft brown eyes for signs of flippancy or glibness, but found only candid transparency. She pointed her fork at him. "*That* was romantic," she said. "The chicken — no."

He shrugged with good-natured acquiescence.

"What about the dessert you made?" Lois asked. "Do you think they're romantic?"

"Did you see them?"

"Yes. And smelled them. They're chocolate, right?"

"Yes."

"What are they called?"

Clark hesitated for a moment. Then, with a bashful smile that liquefied a significant portion of her muscle mass, he said, "They're chocolate kisses."

"Kisses?" Lois squeaked.

He nodded, colouring slightly. "Before I came, I thought they would be appropriate for Valentine's Day. But then I met you, and ..."

She waited.

"... and they didn't seem such a good idea, anymore."

"As things turned out, they're perfect."

"You like chocolate?" he asked.

"It's my favourite food."

His smile came with soft satisfaction. "That's good."

Unable to resist, Lois asked, "You're not going to ask if I like kisses?"

Clark cleared his throat. "No," he said. "I'm not going to ask that."

"Pity," she said.

"Would I like the answer?"

"Depends on whether you like kisses or not."

He spread his hand across his chin as amusement glistened in his eyes and his mouth toyed with a smile.

And Lois decided that Clark Kent would not be leaving her apartment before she'd had the chance to discover if his mouth

could kiss as alluringly as it could smile.

He picked up his fork again and resumed eating. "How's the heat level?" he asked. "Not too hot?"

"The chicken? Or the kisses?"

His moment of surprise gave way to a wide grin. "The chicken."

She looked down at her plate, taking a moment to acknowledge the results of their efforts. "It's incredible, Clark," she said. "Better than anything I've had in a restaurant."

"Good."

If she was going to kiss him — and she was — this was going to get serious, and if it got serious, there were things she wanted to know.

"Would you mind if I asked you some questions?" Lois asked.

"Go ahead," he said easily.

"How many girlfriends have you had?"

"Two."

"At different times?"

"Yes. One in high school. One in college."

"Did you ever cheat on them?"

"No."

"Did you ever kiss another woman while you were dating them?"

"On the lips? No. On the cheek? Yes. My mom."

Lois smiled because — inexplicably — she believed him.

He was delicious on the outside, but charm and good looks often camouflaged an arrogant and devious personality. In Clark Kent, she'd seen no trace of guile. He'd told her he'd given up his job because it conflicted with his principles. He could be lying, of course, but it would be easy to check the facts.

She wanted to know more about him, but — unusually for her — she was driven by interest, not the chance to uncover dirt. "Tell me about your parents," she said. "Do you have brothers or sisters?"

"No. I'm an only child," he said. "And my parents are wonderful people."

If there had been a twinge of sadness in the first statement, it had been dissolved in the love and affection of his second.

"I would like to meet them," Lois said.

"They would love that."

"Do they live in Kansas?"

"Yes. Smallville."

Lois chuckled. "Smallville? Is that a comment on its size?"

"No. Its founder."

"Do you miss your folks? Your hometown?"

"I go back regularly and visit." He topped up her wine glass. "Is Lucy your only sibling?"

"Yes." Deciding to answer before he asked, she continued with, "My parents are divorced. It's difficult."

"I'm sorry," he said with more understanding than she would have expected from a man raised in an idyllic family.

"Tell me about some of the places you've travelled," she said.

Clark accepted the shift away from her family and told her stories of far-away countries. He was never the focus of his tales; instead, they were filled with his fascination for, and appreciation of, other cultures and people.

They moved from his travels to hers, and from there, to favourite movies and books.

When Lois next checked the time, she was surprised to discover it was almost ten o'clock. "Would you like coffee?"

"Yes, I would," Clark said. "But it's getting late. You probably have an early start tomorrow."

"I'd like coffee," Lois said. "And I still haven't tried your kisses."

This time, he didn't balk. "You will."

His words fizzed across the table like shaken soda. "Is that a

promise, Mr Kent?"

"Yep."

"I'll hold you to that."

The moment expanded, holding them captive in the strength of its implication. Clark picked up the napkin and wiped his mouth. "We should get the coffee."

"I'll make it," Lois said, glad that her reliance on regular doses of caffeine as she worked on stories in the evenings had made efficiency a necessity.

"I'll see to this," he said, rising from the table and beginning to clear the plates from the table.

Lois went to the coffee machine, glad that it didn't require much of her attention, leaving her free to watch Clark as he moved between the table and the kitchen.

He looked as if he belonged here.

Perhaps he did.

He took the plate of chocolate kisses from the fridge and removed the plastic wrap.

Lois inhaled deeply, embracing the sweet scent of chocolate as one welcomes a friend.

But this time, it wasn't enough.

Oh, she wanted kisses. But not chocolate ones.

### Part 7

Clark's thoughts were buzzing as he finished clearing away the meal.

The evening had surpassed his most lofty hopes. Lois was the best of his dreams made real. Everything about her enchanted him. Her beauty. Her laugh. Her femininity. Her smile. Her intelligence. Her fire. Her enthusiasm.

The way her dark hair swung on her shoulders.

The way his heart trembled every time their eyes met.

The way she'd allowed him to see the little nub of vulnerability hidden under her smart, competent exterior.

And every time she'd teased him about the kisses ...

The first time had been a shock. The second time, just as staggering. The third time, he'd been ready and had played along, promising she would sample his kisses.

He was trying to protect himself from crushing disappointment, but his mind kept drifting back to their words and then catapulting forward to imagine the moment when he might take her into his arms and seal their evening with a kiss.

But he couldn't think about that now. He had a more important mission to accomplish. He had to turn their earlier abstract speculation into the concrete promise of a date.

He took the plate of kisses to the coffee table near the sofa and turned to wait for Lois to finish preparing the coffee. From behind, she was stunning ... long sleek legs, rising to perfectly rounded hips, a tiny waist, and exquisite shoulders, adorned with the sheet of her dark hair.

He wished their bond were such that Lois would welcome him stepping up to her, placing his hands on her hips, and nuzzling kisses into her neck.

He pushed his hands into his pockets and casually said, "You think, maybe, you might want to cook again?"

"That depends," she said, turning from her coffee preparations with a smile that lit up the room.

"On what?"

"I don't think I'm ready to make a solo attempt," she said, "so I would need a culinary instructor."

"I'm available," he said quickly.

Lois giggled. "That's very kind of you, Clark, but I need to taste your chocolate kisses first." She left the coffee machine and came to him, her beautiful eyes glistening with fun. "You haven't quite established your credentials as a cooking instructor yet."

"The chicken didn't do it for you?" Clark asked.

She brushed her hand down the sleeve of his jacket. "Not quite."

"So our entire future association rests on the chocolate kisses?"

She grinned, her eyes twinkling. "That's fair, isn't it? I mean, you came highly recommended by Mrs Spangher, so I'm sure your kisses won't disappoint."

That spurred him to action.

"Lois?" he said, hooking his smallest finger into hers where her hand hung by her side.

"Yes?"

"Would you go out with me? On a date?"

Her fingers closed around his. "Do I have a choice?"

"Of course you -"

"You said you were going to choose."

He chuckled with relief. "I have chosen you," he said. "But you are free to accept or reject my choice."

"What happens if I accept it?"

"We have a date," Clark said.

She smiled, soft like sun rays on a spring morning. "And if I don't accept?"

"I don't even want to think about that," he said, trying to match her lightly teasing tone.

She slid from his grasp and brought the cups of coffee to the table, setting them next to the plate of kisses. She didn't sit down, but turned to him. Seriousness had clouded her demeanour, dimming her smile and loading her eyes with questions. "Why do you want to go out with me?"

"Because I've already walked out of your apartment once, thinking it would be the last time. I never want to do that again."

"Never?"

"Never."

"That's a long time," she noted.

"It won't be long enough."

She gasped. She eyed him, her expression teeming with indecision. "We've spent one evening together, Clark. Just a few hours."

"Time is irrelevant," he said. "The moment you opened the door, I felt ... *something*. The chain was still attached and I could only see about a third of you, but it was enough."

"Seriously?"

"Yes! I knew of Lois Lane before today. I'd read your work and been really impressed. But this isn't about Lois Lane, the reporter. This is about Lois Lane, the woman."

She inched a little closer to him and looked up at him with eyes that melted his heart. "I'm scared, Clark," she said. "I've never felt like this before."

"Please don't have doubts, Lois," he said. "This ... us ... it's going to be different from all the others. I promise you that." He ran a light finger across the silky skin of her cheek. "I've never felt like this before, either. I know ..."

"What?"

"I know I want to be with you — only you — for the rest of my life."

"That's how I feel," she said, causing his heart to leap. "But how can I know? How can I trust myself?" She laid her fingertips on the lapel of his jacket. "How can I trust you?"

"What worries you the most?"

"That what I'm feeling isn't real. That it won't last. That you're not really the person I think you are."

"I won't -"

"Clark." Her hand slid up to his shoulder. "I'm not saying you're unworthy of my trust. I'm just ..." Her grip tightened. "... terrified that I'll make it more than it is and be disappointed when it's not."

"That's not possi-"

"Did you really leave the Star because of the Port Authority story?"

"Yes."

“Are you still hoping to work as a reporter in Metropolis?”

“Yes.”

“At the Planet?”

“Of course, I would like to,” Clark said. “It’s the leading newspaper in the United States. But if you think we couldn’t work together and I have to choose between dating you and getting a job at the Daily Planet, I wouldn’t accept a position even if Mr White offered one.”

“You’d give up your dream?”

“No. Never. Not the dream that is most important to me.”

“Which is?”

“To marry a woman I will love forever. To make her happy. To be with her always, sharing everything.”

“That’s what you want?”

“More than anything.”

A reluctant smile arose from the debris of her uneasiness. “You are very romantic, Mr Kent.”

He placed a light hand on her hip. “More romantic than my butter chicken?”

“Definitely.” She reached up and linked her hands behind his neck. “I have a feeling your chocolate kisses might pale in comparison with the real thing, too.”

Her closeness infused him with scintillating boldness. “Want to find out?”

She inched closer, her mouth upturned in unequivocal invitation. Her eyes lingered in his and then slid shut. Clark rested his fingers on her neck, not quite able to believe what was about to happen.

Time stopped as the distance separating them slowly melted to nothing and his lips finally joined with hers.

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Kissing Clark was like nothing Lois had ever experienced before. The light touch of his fingertips burned spots of fire on her neck. His lips massaged hers, tasting and exploring, his unique blend of reverence and fervour luring her to intoxicating abandonment.

In his arms, she felt safe.

In his kiss, she felt wondrously feminine.

She’d found him.

The man who completed her.

His mouth eased away, curving to a dreamy smile. “Your kisses are sweeter than chocolate,” he murmured.

“Your kisses are more romantic than butter chicken.”

He grinned. “I think you are being unfair to my butter chicken.”

“My apologies,” she said through a chuckle. “You can make butter chicken for me whenever you want.”

“Whenever?”

She nodded.

“Tomorrow night?”

“Don’t you have a class?”

“No.”

“I doubt I’ll be finished until almost eight.”

“That’s fine,” he said. “I can prepare the food at my apartment and bring it over when you’re ready. Or you can come straight to my home from the office.”

“Are you serious about making butter chicken again?”

“Not if you want something else. We can have anything you choose.” He swept a few strands of her hair from her temple.

“I’m sure you can think of something romantic.”

“I can choose anything?”

“Of course. Just tell me -”

“I choose you.” Lois reached up and took possession of his mouth again as, just a few yards away, the coffee grew cold, and the chocolate kisses waited, forgotten.

### Epilogue

Lois Lane was humming as she tidied her desk and shut down

her computer.

Tonight was the night.

She was sure of it.

Clark was going to propose.

Even more earth-shattering ... she was going to accept.

OK, she was guessing the first, but hey, Clark been open about what he wanted right from the first evening — that incredible, never-to-be-forgotten cooking class when the chocolate kisses had been the second best thing on the dessert menu.

Lois felt as if her feet were floating as she hurried to her apartment. Her excitement built as she followed her strict pre-date routine — perfume behind her knee, rollers in her hair, new dress that she’d bought just for this occasion, extra care with her lipstick.

Had he already bought the ring? Or had he decided to wait so they could choose it together?

Would a proposal and subsequent acceptance lead to them taking the evening into his bedroom and consummating their promises?

*That* was an exciting prospect. Their rather steamy kisses had been a heady foretaste of intimacy with Clark. She was ready — impatient, even — to take the next step.

But, as much as he’d seemed to relish kissing her, he had always been careful to stop before they crossed the point of no return. With any other man, Lois might have questioned if he were really interested, but as she’d come to know Clark Kent, she’d realised that his caution was not a statement about her desirability, but the logical extension of his belief that making love was too special to be entered into lightly.

Clark hadn’t actually admitted it, but Lois had wondered if he were a virgin.

Not through lack of opportunity. Obviously.

If — *when* - Clark took her to his bed, they would both know it meant something.

Something real. Something lasting. Something strong.

Something dependable.

Something you could build your whole life on.

And that’s exactly what Lois Lane intended to do.

Accept Clark’s proposal ... make him hers if he gave even the slightest hint he was ready for that ... marry him ...

And live happily ever after.

\*\*\*

Clark opened the door, and Lois’s breath caught in her throat. The first sight of him never failed to dry her mouth and accelerate her pulse.

He smiled — which accentuated everything to levels that made her sure the oxygen was being syphoned from her lungs.

“Hi, honey,” he said.

She stepped into his arms, and he kissed her.

Thoroughly. Lovingly.

But restrained, as he always was.

When he drew away, Lois stifled her sigh and promised herself that by the end of the evening, she would either be in Clark’s bed or they would have decided on a — very near — wedding date.

“Come on in,” Clark said, closing the door behind her. He stood on the little landing and indulged in a long, slow, sensual sweep, his face so etched with appreciation that Lois could *feel* the touch of his eyes as clearly as if his hands had been wandering across her body. “You’re so beautiful, Lois,” he murmured.

“Thank you.” Needing a reprieve from the intense onslaught of attraction, she inhaled deeply and said, “Wow! Something smells incredible.”

Clark seemed pleased that she’d noticed. “Care to guess what I’m cooking for you?” he asked as they moved down the stairs

and towards his kitchen.

Lois stretched onto her toes, but Clark's broad shoulders blocked her view.

"No cheating," he said with another pearler of a smile.

Lois inhaled again. She recognised it ... yes ... it was ... "Bacon!"

His eyebrow arched, and his smile flashed. "You can smell bacon?"

She sniffed. "Yes. It's bacon. I'm sure of it."

His smile was slightly satisfied and wholly mysterious. Was bacon a part of the surprise? How could a man use bacon to facilitate a marriage proposal? With Clark, it was possible ... he thought butter chicken was romantic.

"I love bacon," Lois said enthusiastically. "What do we have? Maple bacon? Filet mignon? I know!" She gave an excited little jump. "You made that asparagus and bacon frittata that I loved so much."

"No," Clark said with an apologetic shrug. "Sorry."

Lois gripped his arm lightly. "You know I love anything you cook, don't you?"

Clark's nod was unconvincing; nervousness had clouded his brown eyes. "Take a seat," he said, indicating the little table set for two in the corner. "It's ready."

As Lois sat, she searched for clues. The table gave her nothing. In fact, it was disappointingly bare. There were two places set, but there were no decorations, no posy of flowers, nothing to indicate that it was to be the setting for the most momentous evening of their lives.

In the kitchen, Clark wasn't moving. "Is everything all right?" Lois asked.

"Yes," he said, but it didn't sound all right.

"Have you burned the bacon?" Lois said. "It's OK; I like it crispy."

"No. It's not burned."

"Is there anything I can do?" Lois asked, adding a jittery giggle at the absurdity of her offering him assistance.

"No. Stay there. I'll bring it over."

Lois watched Clark's back as he moved a pan from the stove. Frustratingly, he managed to keep his body between her and his task, so she was able to glean any hints. Perhaps he was going to serve her bacon topped with an engagement ring.

"OK," he said, still turned away. "Close your eyes, and I'll bring it over."

Lois closed her eyes, hauling in a big breath to steady herself. The aroma of bacon was strong.

She heard Clark place a plate before her, and then the chair scraped on the floor as he sat down.

For a moment, he said nothing, and the silence crackled with tension.

"It's going to be OK, Clark," Lois said.

"I hope so," he said, his voice tight.

"Can I open my eyes?"

"Yes."

She opened her eyes and gasped.

Her plate contained only a small pile of dark grains — not a strip of bacon in sight. "What's *this*?" she asked.

"It's black rice."

Lois looked up from the plate. "Where's the bacon?"

"There is no bacon."

"But I smelled -"

"There's no bacon anywhere in the apartment. What you could smell was black rice."

Lois leaned forward and sniffed at the mound of dark grains. There was a definite whiff of bacon. "That's weird," she said.

"Have a taste," Clark said.

She picked up the fork, swept a few grains onto it, and put them gingerly to her mouth.

It tasted all right. A little bland, but she assumed it was supposed to be eaten with meat and vegetables and a tasty sauce.

She glanced across to the kitchen. There were no other pans on the stove. No evidence of any other food. No bottles of drink. No champagne.

"Do you like it?" Clark asked, sounding as if he were hanging on her reply.

Lois scooped up another forkful — more this time — and put it in her mouth.

"Yes," she said after she'd swallowed. "It's nice." That was overstating it by a fair amount, but Clark seemed keen for her to like it, so like it she would. She quickly shovelled in some more, trying to hide her disappointment that the hoped-for ring seemed to have devolved into a small mound of black rice.

"You don't have to eat it," Clark said.

She placed the fork on the plate and looked at him squarely. "I don't understand what's happening here."

"No. I guess you don't." Clark's hand was on the table, his fingers curled a few degrees, lifting his palm. His little finger was twitching.

"Clark," Lois said. "Whatever this is ... it's OK."

He looked around, as he'd suddenly lost his bearings. "I ..."

"Why black rice?" she said. The answer came in a flash of inspiration. "Oh, Clark, why didn't you say something? All this cooking for me. Such a lot of food. You've fed me almost every night for weeks. I'm sure you don't earn much from a couple of cooking classes. When you start your probation at the Planet -"

"It's not -" He swallowed. "It's not the money, Lois."

"Then what is it?"

His fingers tapped the table. "There is something I have to tell you."

That wasn't good. She'd been hoping he had been planning to ask her something. But *tell* her something? "OK."

He chuckled, tight and grim. "The rice was supposed to make it easier."

"Really?" Her question leapt with surprise.

"Really," he said glumly. "But now I realise it was a lame idea."

"What are you trying to tell me, Clark?"

"When you walked in, you thought I was cooking bacon, right?"

"Yes."

"And you like bacon?"

"Yes."

"So when you opened your eyes and saw it was rice, you probably felt some initial disappointment. Shock even."

"The rice was good," Lois said hesitantly.

"It wasn't quite what you thought it was, but it was still good?" Clark said. "And you enjoyed it, even though it's not bacon?"

Feeling flustered by Clark's edginess, Lois lurched from the table. Clark jumped up, too, and stood facing her, his hands buried deep in his pockets.

"I'm sorry, Lois," he breathed. "I've made a complete mess of this."

"You're trying to tell me that something isn't what I thought it was," Lois said, her words coming slowly as she tried to draw some smattering of comprehension from the muddle of half-thoughts and questions gnawing through her mind. "Is that it?"

"Yes," he said, looking relieved for a moment. "I was hoping to demonstrate that even though the rice wasn't exactly what you thought it was, perhaps it can still be good. Different. But still good."

The penny dropped with a loud crash, shattering her hopes and dreams. "You're trying to tell me you're not the man I thought you were?"

"Yes! No!" His hands rose in emphasis. "I am. I am that

person. Just ... there's something else."

"What?" she demanded harshly. Then, "You've met someone else?"

"No! No. I want to be with you. That hasn't changed. That will never change."

"You made a mistake? Is that what this is about? You slept with the cute blonde in your cooking class?"

Clark's face scrunched a little. "What cute blonde? There isn't a cute blonde. And I certainly didn't -"

Lois's patience snapped. "Just tell me what you did, Clark."

"It's not what I did." His hands retreated into his pockets. "Not exactly. It's what I am."

"Oh, great," Lois said, throwing her hands into the air. "You're a murderer. A criminal. A wanted man. A cheat. A fraud. A charlatan. An imposter. A -"

"No!"

Lois closed her mouth over the gush of accusation, pinning him with a cold look that demanded nothing less than a complete explanation.

"I'm an alien."

Clark's announcement squeezed her lungs, and the air spurted from her mouth with grim laughter. "Oh, right," she said, heavy with sarcasm. "You're from Mars."

"No. Krypton."

"Krypton! Don't be ridiculous, Clark. That isn't even a planet."

"Not in our solar system," he said quietly. "But it is ... or was ... a planet, and I was born there."

If the charade with the rice had been meant to enlighten her, it had achieved that. She now understood that Clark Kent was delusional.

"I've never told anyone before," he said miserably. "My parents know. It's a secret we've kept for nearly thirty years."

Lois thought of Jonathan and Martha Kent — the lovely couple she had met when Clark had taken her to Kansas. "Your parents are aliens?" she said, brittle with disbelief.

He flinched. "No. They're human. My real parents knew our planet was going to explode. They put me in spaceship and sent me to Earth. My parents — the Kents — found me and raised me as their son."

"You said you came to Metropolis, hoping to be a reporter?" Lois asked coldly.

Clark nodded.

"Bad idea," she fired at him. "You should be a fiction writer. With this sort of ability for backstory ... wow, you could write a bestseller."

"It's true."

"Clark." She took a step closer to him, but stopped short of making contact. "An active imagination is a wonderful thing. But it needs to stay within the pages of a book. You *write* about characters. You don't pretend to become them."

"I'm not pretending," he said.

"Prove it. Show me your birth certificate. Although it wouldn't be too hard to forge an alien birth certificate. They probably sell them at carnival sideshows."

"I don't have a birth certificate from Krypton," he said. "But I can prove that what I'm saying is the truth."

"Really?"

"What would you like me to do?"

Lois folded her arms over her chest. "What can you do?" she said. "Other than cook black rice that smells like bacon."

"All black rice smells like bacon."

Lois glared at him.

Clark shuffled uncomfortably. "I can fly," he mumbled to his feet.

"Fly?"

"Yes." He looked up at her. "I can fly."

"Like a bird?"

"Faster. More like -"

Lois stomped her foot on the floor. "Stop it, Clark!" she said, close to tears now. "Stop this stupidity. I've had enough of aliens and planets and flying." She dragged in a wobbly breath. "I thought you were going to propose to me tonight. I thought this was the night when we were going to promise to be together forever. Instead, you give me black rice and an absurd story about ..."

Clark withdrew his hand from his pocket and stretched it towards her, palm up.

He held a ring box.

"You can't be serious," she breathed.

"I am," he said. "I want to ask you to marry me. But I couldn't do it until I'd told you the truth."

"Clark," she said bleakly. "It isn't the truth. Somehow ... something went wrong and you ended up believing something that isn't possible."

"I can fly," he stated.

His body lifted.

Her eyes dropped.

His feet were dangling half a yard above the floor.

"Cl..."

He dropped lightly back to the floor and stepped closer to her. "I love you, Lois," he said. "I want to marry you. I am the man you've come to know these past weeks. But there's a part of me I've kept hidden from everyone except my parents. I wanted you to know. I wanted you to know before you decide whether you are willing to spend your life with me."

The reporter part of her wriggled out from under the mound of shock and shook off some dust. "Is it just the flying?"

"No."

"No?" Her voice had shrilled again. She gathered her composure and said, "What else?"

"I can see through solid objects. Not all the time. I can turn it on and off."

"You can see through clothes?"

"Yes. But I don't look. I'm very careful."

"What else?"

"I can hear small sounds from a long distance. I can zoom in on things a long way away."

Lois marched into his bedroom. Once shielded by the wall, she said, "What am I doing?"

Clark gave a grunt that could have held a dash of dark humour.

"Well?" she demanded.

"You're poking out your tongue."

Lois retracted her tongue and moved back into his sight. She marched up to him and put her hands on his chest, pushing him back against the window. Picking up today's copy of the Daily Planet, she stormed up the stairs, opened up the Death Notices, and held it up. "Read the fourth one from the top," she instructed.

Clark pushed his glasses down his nose. "Bailey, nee Campbell, Ava Elizabeth, born 22<sup>nd</sup> of December, 1901, died -"

Lois turned the paper around, found the fourth notice from the top, and read.

She hastily closed the paper and tossed it onto the couch as she moved in on Clark. "Anything else?" she demanded, her hands braced on her hips.

"I can heat things with my eyes and freeze them with my breath."

Lois pointed to the forlorn remnants of black rice. "It'll be cold by now."

Clark slid his glasses down again and stared at the plate. A few seconds later, wisps of steam rose with placid indifference to the acknowledged fact that merely looking at something could not induce heat.

Although ... Clark's looks had had that affect on her more than once.

"I'm invulnerable," he said. "In body."

"Invulnerable?"

"I can't be hurt. Bullets bounce off me."

Lois scowled at him. "That's not fair," she said. "You know I won't test that."

"You could," he said mildly. "You wouldn't hurt me."

"It'd be just my luck that the bullet would bounce off you and get me," she grouched.

"No, it wouldn't."

She shot him a questioning frown.

"I'd catch it before it hurt you," he explained.

"You can catch bullets?" she asked, aware that intrigue was overshadowing her scepticism.

"Yes. I can move really fast. And I'm very strong."

"How many pounds can you lift? Two hundred? Three hundred?"

"I can lift a train." He stared at his feet for a moment, his shoulders curled in dejection. "I've never found anything so heavy that I can't lift it."

If even a skerrick of this were true, it was the biggest story of all time. "Is everyone from your planet the same?" Lois asked. "How many of these super-humans are here?"

"I'm the only one," Clark said. "Everyone else died."

The sadness of his statement dissolved a large chunk of disbelief from her heart.

Lois thrust everything else aside and stared at Clark ... captured his eyes ... the eyes of the man she had come to know.

Come to love.

The man she would always love.

Even if he wasn't exactly as she had thought.

"Do you still want to marry me?" she asked in a brisk, business-like manner.

He sucked in an avalanche of surprise. "More than anything in the world."

"Are you going to propose tonight?"

"I ... I'm not sure. Maybe you should take some time to think about what I've told you."

"You said only you and your parents know this?"

"That's right."

"You do realise this would be the biggest story ever?"

"Yes."

"And I'm a reporter?"

"Yes."

"Are you worried I will take what you've told me and turn it into a Pulitzer?"

"I hope you don't," he said. "I'm hoping that, even if you hate me, you wouldn't do that to my parents."

"Why would I hate you?"

"Because I didn't tell you the truth. And then I did."

His words from a minute ago reverberated across her heart. *I'm invulnerable. In body.*

In his heart, he was just like everyone else. No, that wasn't quite true. He was more vulnerable than everyone else was. Because he was different. Because he could never be completely confident he really belonged on this planet. Because he wasn't human.

Because he feared being alone.

Lois stepped up to him and put a light finger on his sleeve. "Here's the deal," she said.

He nodded, his expression carefully leached of all emotion.

"You take me flying," Lois said. "If you get me back here safely, you are allowed to propose."

Clark's smile unfolded with tantalising slowness. "You want to go flying with me?"

"Can you do that?"

"Easily." He made a jumpy gesture towards her. "I'll have to carry you."

"Is that a problem? You said you could lift a train."

"No. No, it's not a problem. Just ..." He dropped the ring box into his pocket and swept her into his arms. "Ready?"

Figuring this was almost certainly a dream and — thankfully — you couldn't die in a dream, no matter how recklessly you behaved, Lois nodded. "I'm ready."

Clark carried her onto the balcony. His arms tightened a few degrees, nestling her against his chest.

Then, the air shot past them, the buildings dropped away, and the inky darkness reached out in welcome.

Lois straightened, scanning the sky. "Clark, this is amazing."

"Yes."

"You're flying," she gasped.

"That's not the most amazing thing happening here." His mouth came close to her ear. "Thank you, Lois. Thank you for trusting me."

She looked into his face, and he smiled, filling her with warm familiarity. She was high above the streets of Metropolis, held in the arms of a man, and she had never felt more safe and secure. She laid her head against his shoulder.

"Warm enough?" he asked.

"Yes." His love would keep her warm always.

"Not scared?"

"No." Nothing could hurt her while she was with Clark.

His mouth brushed against her ear again. "I love you, Lois," he said. "From the moment, I first saw you, I loved you. I want to be with you ... always."

Of course, he loved her. He'd proved his love with the gift of total trust.

Lois reached up and kissed him. "Let's go back," she whispered.

She thought she saw a glimmer of disappointment. "You've have enough of flying?" he said.

"No," she said. "I want to do it again tomorrow. And the next day. And every day after that. But we had a deal."

He smiled. He lowered them gently to the balcony of his apartment. He guided her down his body until she was standing on her feet.

Clark took the ring box from his pocket and opened it. "I will always love you, Lois," he said. "My heart ... my love ... the fact that I want to be with you forever ... I've never tried to hide how I feel about you. Will you marry me?"

Lois put her hand on his wrist, trying to exercise enough patience to take a moment before making her commitment. She used the time to look deep into his eyes, trying to read his soul.

She saw emotions she had never glimpsed before — isolation, yearning, uncertainty ... and a transparent layer of hope.

And love. Such pure love. Such devoted commitment.

"I'm different," he said. "I know that changes things. I should have given you time to —"

"I've had enough time," she said. "I've known from the start that you are different."

"You couldn't have known *how* different. I mean ... flying ... that's —"

"Perfect. And exactly what I would expect from a man who thinks chicken is romantic."

His smile was a little piece of heaven, melting some of the lonesomeness from his eyes. "Lois Lane, would you do me the incredible honour of being my wife?"

"Yes," she breathed. "Yes. Yes!"

He slid the ring on her finger, and she tumbled into his arms. His mouth met hers, and he kissed her with lavish abandon and bubbly joy.

When they eased apart, both a little breathless, Lois examined

the diamond ring on her finger. “It’s perfect, Clark,” she said.

The tip of his finger brushed down her cheek. “My secret ... It doesn’t have to change anything,” he said.

“Oh, yes, it does,” she corrected.

“It does?”

“It changes everything. It means you are going to be saved from the lifelong ignominy of having fed your wife nothing but a few mouthfuls of black rice on the night you proposed.”

He nuzzled against her neck. “Want to go flying again? You can choose anywhere in the world.”

Anywhere in the world ...

That was going to take some getting used to.

Lois snuggled further into Clark’s chest, clinging to him physically as her mind began cataloguing her new knowledge.

Clark Kent was an alien.

He was the most human person she’d ever met.

He had been born on a faraway planet.

His home was with her.

His capacity to love was as big as the galaxy of stars.

For all that, he was the man who held her heart in his hands and she wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of her life with him. “I feel like ...”

“Yes?”

“Black rice and bacon.”

His eyebrow lifted. “Really? We can go anywhere; have anything you choose. That’s why I didn’t cook. I figured we could fly somewhere nice ... if you hadn’t left already.”

“I want what I didn’t know I had, but without losing what I thought was mine.”

“Everything I have ... everything I am ... everything I could be ... it’s all for you, Lois.”

She believed him. “And for everything you have ... everything you are ... everything you will be ... you have my love and support ... always.”

He lifted her chin and kissed her. “Shall we go?” he asked.

“See if we can find the best bacon and black rice dish in the world?”

Lois nodded, and with an exuberant grin, her fiancé swept her into his strong and loving arms.

As they flew from the balcony, Lois admired her ring again. Clark had proposed. She had accepted. They were going to be married.

“Happy?” he asked.

“Gloriously. I’ve finally found The One.”

“You sound wonderfully sure.”

“I am,” she declared. “He’s perfect. He can cook. He has a great body with muscles in all the right places. He has the best smile. He thinks butter chicken is romantic. And he chose black rice as the dish to accompany his proposal. What more could a woman want?”

“A normal man?”

“Nah,” Lois said. “Normal is overrated. Tonight, I realised I could never marry a man who couldn’t fly.”

His arms tightened around her. “Thank you for accepting me, Lois. All of me.”

“You’ll never be alone again,” she declared. “From now on, you’re with me, Clark Kent. And I wouldn’t change a thing.”

THE END