

The Body for It

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Summary: The Daily Planet staff attend a very important fancy dress party with a superhero theme. Some people look good in spandex, some don't!

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Part One – Characters and Costumes

“What’s that, Chief?”

Perry looked up from his avid polishing at the nosy photographer.

“Did you see a ‘Welcome’ mat at my door, Jimmy?” Perry growled.

“Err, no Chief.” Jimmy was just a little too slow to dodge the punchline.

“That’s because you’re *not welcome!*” the editor boomed, his face flushed with embarrassment and rage. “You *knock*; I decide if I can be bothered answering!”

“Sorry, Chief! Won’t happen again I swear! It’s just...” Jimmy hesitated, as though weighing up how many hours overtime, his answer would cost him. “I wanted to know if you’ve picked a character for the party yet.”

Perry glared daggers at the kid. He had moved heaven and earth to get out of going to the costumed ball, but Mr. Franklin Stern was just that. Stern. Every Planet employee would be there or risk getting sacked. That’s why he was sitting at his desk polishing a big red marble and a collection of steel rods filched from a building site near his home. Perry sat back in his huge leather chair with a huff, gesturing to the items on his desk.

“Take a guess.”

Jimmy peered at the odd assortment of bits. “Err, RoboCop?”

“You think I’m about to encase myself in metal?! No, it’s the Six-Million Dollar Man. That’s the eye, see, and if you’ll kindly leave me alone I have a bionic arm to make.”

Jimmy bobbed politely and backed out of the office, closing the door firmly behind him.

“Phew!” he exclaimed to Clark, who passed by him on his way to the copy machine. “Imagine if the Chief really did have super powers! Deadly!”

Clark grinned his agreement. “What about you, Jimmy? Who are you going as?”

“Well, I’m still trying to figure that out. I mean, I’d prefer to be one of my own personal heroes, like Henri Cartier-Bresson, but I don’t think that’s ‘super’ enough. Then there’s someone obvious like Captain America, but, well, some people have the body for spandex, and some don’t. I’m not sure I’m ready to let the public decide. I dunno, Clark. I was thinking of a half-way. Like Neo from *The Matrix*?”

Clark smiled at Jimmy’s worried face and clapped a hand on his shoulder.

“Well, you’re certainly the computer whiz. Neo’s perfect!”

Jimmy beamed at the approval and hurried off, muttering to himself about a long black trenchcoat.

“Dare I ask?” Clark jumped slightly at Lois’ voice so close behind him. He spun round to see that glint of curiosity in her eyes that usually meant she was onto a story she wouldn’t let go of.

“Ask what?”

“Who you’re going to be?”

Clark frowned. Truth be told, he’d been struggling with the idea ever since Perry announced the party three days ago. It annoyed him that he had the perfect costume right there in his closet, and yet Superman was the very last character he could consider going as. People would either believe he really was Superman, and then Clark would be in hot water for not showing up, or else he could admit he was Clark in costume, and the likeness would surely blow his secret out of the water.

“Maybe Batman,” he suggested. “I like the cape.” That part was true at least.

Lois’ eyebrows raised in surprise. “I’d never have thought of you as the tortured-vigilante type. More honest and upstanding, like Superman.”

“Oh, come on Lois! You don’t think there’ll be at least ten other Supermen at the party?”

“You’re probably right,” she conceded, “But make sure you don’t choose one that’s covered in fur — trust me I made that mistake myself once, sweated inside a gorilla mask all night and nearly fainted at the buffet table.”

“No gorillas, check,” Clark affirmed, trying to keep a straight face while the image of Lois as a giant hairy ape paraded through his mind. “What about you, Lois? Maybe Wonder Woman?” He braced himself for the clout that would surely come at him for that suggestion.

To Clark’s surprise, Lois only smiled enigmatically. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” She strode off through the newsroom, mentally going through her costume details. Unlike most of the staff, she’d decided upon her character almost the moment the party had been announced. No one would ever accuse Lois of being the most willing social-animal, and indeed if there had been any choice she wouldn’t be going. However, given that it was compulsory, Lois was determined to abandon the office-girl for an action-chick, and only one female in fiction could possibly live up to her impeccable standards. She was going to blow them all away!

End of Part One

Part Two – Making an Entrance

Mr. Stern had certainly spared no expense. The Metropolis Convention Centre was usually booked out a year in advance for some famous art exhibition or political campaign, but the Daily Planet owner had pulled some extremely tight strings to hold his party. This was the social event of the season, and almost everyone in the field of journalism was invited to attend. The entire hall was bedecked with banners bearing the Planet logo, allowing no one to forget for a second just which paper was top-dog in this city.

Stern stalked through the crowd in his flowing cape, gratified at the nods of appreciation for his costume. He’d put a great deal of effort into his helmet in particular...

“Ah, Magneto! My nemesis!” called a voice from a way behind him.

He turned to greet the grinning Harden Headley, the head of the Metropolis Star’s board of directors. He certainly had the easier costume out of the two of them — Professor Xavier wore a plain grey business suit and rolled around in a wheelchair... hardly any effort at all compared to Stern’s elaborate M-shaped headgear and cape!

“Hardy!” Stern exclaimed, clapping Professor X on the shoulder jovially. His suggestion that they appear at the party as the opposing X-Men characters was a nifty reverse-psychology trick on the media world, making everyone assume that they were really friends in real life. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The Metropolis Star’s ratings were forever nipping at the Planet’s heels, and Headley was still bitter that he lost the bid to absorb the Planet as a sub-publication under the Star’s ownership after that dreadful bombing incident.

“How’re your two sharks doing? Nolan and Lee, right?” Stern was winding Hardy up — Nolan and Lee were the Star’s primo

reporting team, but not a patch on his own fiery duo of Lane and Kent, and Hardy knew it. The ‘Professor’ smiled coldly.

“Oh, you know, waiting in the wings. Their Kerth will be in the bag this fall. But I’m disappointed to see that your top-bananas haven’t even deigned to show up! Or are they above all this dressing up nonsense?”

Stern allowed himself a smug smile, entirely fake. “Just choosing the right moment. Those two like to make an entrance.” He only needed to assure his rival that he was in supreme control of all his staff, whereas in truth he was daily confounded by the independence of his supposed subordinates.

Hardy returned the smile, equally false and rolled off to speak to a less hated media rival. Stern breathed out his tension and cursed silently. If Lane and Kent were absent for much longer it would embarrass him and the paper... scowling darkly, he turned with a dramatic swoosh of his cape and stalked off to look for Perry White.

‘Making an entrance’ was, as it happened, the farthest thing from Clark’s mind. He loitered in the shadows of the alley beside the convention centre, conscious that, as one of the foremost reporters in the city (a title which sat as uncomfortably on him as it did splendidly on Lois), he should have been among the first to arrive.

He was nervous. In the cracked window of an abandoned car, he stared at his reflection. Whenever he faced the public as Superman, his tight costume was secondary to his powers, and apart from the occasional suggestive comment made by an onlooker and picked up by his super-hearing as he flew away, he had never paid any attention to the world’s opinion of his body. But tonight, it would be Clark Kent under scrutiny, and his character’s spandex suit was just as revealing — more so, since he had no cape to hide his rear! He felt positively naked! Sure, he knew he looked good, but his modest farm upbringing still made him supremely embarrassed to display himself in such a fashion.

He thought back to the night his mom had worked her magic on a sewing machine and created his Superman uniform...

One thing’s for sure, nobody’s gonna be looking at your face!

The words came back to him, the memory of his mother’s impish smile lightening his mood a little. Tonight was about having fun! So what if his co-workers would be looking at his ass, and everything else besides? At least this time they *definitely* wouldn’t see his face!

“Lady, I said that’ll be twelve bucks! You hear me?”

Lois looked out of the cab window, ignoring the growing irritation of the driver. She’d been in the Metropolis Convention Centre hundreds of times, covering over-hyped exhibitions as a rookie reporter and investigating deep government scandal at many political party fundraisers. She had always felt in control, superior even, to those around her. When Lois Lane entered a building, people instantly knew her to be a hard-hitting, tenacious, fearless woman; the best in her field! So why was she cowering in the back of a taxi, scared to go in to a room full of her peers and people who respected her?

It could have something to do with the fervent desire not to destroy her reputation within five minutes of taking off her gigantic trench-coat. She cursed herself silently for choosing this character. It had seemed like such a good idea at the start; she had wanted to feel powerful and dangerous, but now she realised that her outfit was simply a magnet for innuendo and leering. But then, weren’t all heroine’s costumes? Comics and TV liked to make females a force to be reckoned with, just so long as the tits and ass were nicely displayed at the same time.

“Twelve dollars, toots, and get the hell out of my cab!”

Lois shot her meanest, coldest glare at the cabbie and flung him a bunch of notes — a ten and two ones; there was no way the

snotty little man deserved a tip!

She emerged onto the Centre steps, telling herself that she was overreacting. *It’s just a party*, she thought, *and everyone’s in costume, all equally freaked out about it...* She took a firm grip on the handle of the broadsword at her hip and put on her warrior-face.

Clark smiled inside his stretchy mask. His appearance at the party may have had an even more profound impact on the public than his first demonstration of Super-strength at the EPRAD centre over a year ago.

He strolled in, trying for a casual pace despite the rapid thumping of his heart. The first woman to see him gasped aloud before recovering her composure and muttering, “Nice costume,” her face flushed with embarrassment.

He continued through the crowd, conversations halting their flow as groups of people complimented his choice of character. He nodded his thanks, careful not to speak in case his voice gave him away. This was actually fun! He relished the game of hiding his identity for no other reason than to watch others puzzle over it! He reminded himself to be careful though... he wasn’t wearing his glasses under the spandex mask, so there was no way he was going to be persuaded to remove it, otherwise this light amusement could have serious consequences!

Clark chuckled to himself. There was a certain irony in Superman coming to a party as Clark Kent dressed as Spiderman!

Lois felt like two completely different people were warring inside her, wrestling for control of her emotions as she made her way up the steps. The insecure woman who balked at appearing in a crowded room wearing the tiniest of skirts and a corset which seriously exaggerated her other assets wanted to turn and run, but then there was that other side of Lois: devilishly sexy and proud, her eyes flashing with the kind of power that drove men crazy. This was the Lois that few people ever got to see — hell, she had almost never met that side of herself before either!

Sure, people knew she was a strong woman who always got her own way, but that was very much to do with her temper and her ability to make anyone feel like a mere insect in comparison. And in the quiet moments alone, Lois often regretted her behaviour. Why did she have to be such a bitch in order to keep her position and carve out her magnificent career?

On the top step, Lois reached for the ornate brass door handle and momentarily caught her full-length reflection in the gigantic glass doors. Suddenly, she knew exactly why she had chosen this character. A wicked smile crept over her face.

The youngest reporter on the Daily Planet staff, Josh Evans, was loitering near the entrance sipping carefully at a glass of punch, finding it really difficult to hold the beverage in his Wolverine claws. He’d opted for the movie version of his character of course, since a chat with his best friend Jimmy had convinced him not to go for the traditional yellow spandex suit. He’d saved himself time and money by adapting his own motorcycle-leathers, and they suited him far better anyway. He watched the crowd, eyes lingering on the revealing costumes of the super-heroines, but when Xena Warrior Princess strode in the front door he lost his grip on his glass entirely, so did most of the men in the vicinity. She approached him, and before he could recover his powers of speech, she complimented him on his claws with a cheeky smile.

“M-miss Lane?” he stammered.

Lois laughed, a low, musical laugh. “Not tonight.”

End of Part Two

Part Three – Punch and Passion

Perry’s eyes nearly popped out of his head when he saw Lois. Or, more correctly, the giant red marble that served as his bionic

eye nearly popped out.

He stepped up to her with a grin like it was Elvis' birthday.

"Lois, err, Xena, well, I..." It wasn't very often that the editor was lost for words. Lois only beamed all the brighter. She'd had plenty of admiration already, and Perry's meant a lot, but if she was honest the one person whose opinion she really wanted right now was nowhere to be seen.

If Clark pulled a sickie tonight, he would be on the sharp end of Lois' sword tomorrow morning. She was about to ask the Six Million Dollar Man if he had seen him, but her question was redundant as Perry asked, "You didn't arrive with Clark, then?"

"A-ha! There's one of them at least!" Mr. Stern bellowed as he strode up to join them. His tirade was suspended as he looked 'Xena' up and down appreciatively, but he scowled darkly as he demanded, "Where's that partner of yours? If he doesn't show up soon he's gonna get himself fired, star reporter or not!"

Clark, unaware of the hot water he was in with management, was simply enjoying his first lap of the party. He was pleased to bump into a researcher from Channel Five Network News who had dressed as Spiderman's arch-enemy, the Green Goblin. The official party photographer had a wonderful time posing the two in mock-fights.

He had been finding it quite difficult to remain silent all this time, since avoiding introductions was downright rude, so instead he'd settled for adopting a deeper tone to his voice — not unlike the one he frequently used when talking to the cameras as Superman.

A short distance away he spotted Jimmy, who had indeed turned up in the long black coat and sunglasses of Neo. Clark smiled to himself as he noticed his friend trying so hard to play it cool as he chatted to the Planet's new legal aide, Anna, who by all appearances had chosen to come as Trinity! At least Jimmy would have an ice-breaker...

"Now who might that be?" A deep and sensual woman's voice floated over to him from nearby. Clark looked over to a table laden with gigantic bowls of punch and the black-clad stunner standing in front of it.

She turned slowly purposefully letting him see every inch of her, from the shiny PVC covering her body to the little black ears pointing perkily out of the top of her head. There was quite simply no one else who would choose this character.

"Ms. Grant, isn't it?" Clark asked smoothly as he stepped up to her and extended his red hand covered in spider-web designs. He was warmly surprised to see the Planet's most extroverted and outrageous ex-employee at the party. "How's life behind the lens?"

The former gossip-columnist had shocked them all when she'd taken a course in TV production and quickly got a job as a studio camera-woman. Who'd have ever thought Catherine Grant would be happy anywhere other than in the spotlight?

"Just purrrfect," she replied, a sultry glint in her eye as she looked appreciatively at Clark's tightly-wrapped muscles. "You wouldn't believe what people get up to when they don't think the camera's on!" She placed a hand suggestively on his bicep. "But what I want to know is, who's the man behind the mask? You probably hide this breathtaking piece of art underneath a shapeless suit and tie, when all along you've got the body of a superhero."

She was practically rubbing up against him now, cat-fashion. Clark stepped back from her stroking fingers with an embarrassed cough he hoped didn't give him away. He drew himself up straighter and tried to be suave.

"I'm sorry, miss, I couldn't possibly reveal my secret identity; lives depend on it!" Clark grinned to himself — he never thought he'd be saying those words out loud! "And now, my dear Cat-woman, I'd better go see if there are any less... *capable* women who need saving." The answer seemed to satisfy her, and he strode

off toward the main entrance of the building, feeling himself flushed from her eager scrutiny. In his early days at the Planet, Cat had pursued him relentlessly, and it seemed that her voracious appetite was undiminished.

Clark was in for even more trouble as he rounded a particularly large potted fern to see a posse of men lavishing attention on another fine form of a woman, wearing a tiny leather skirt, an enticingly tight boned corset and bearing a gleaming sword. His first thought was that 'Xena' would surely be the most popular woman at the party, the fantasy of almost every man brought to life before their eyes. Her admirers were fetching her glass after glass of pink punch, and the light giggle that emanated from the warrior princess confirmed she was quite merry already. As she turned, Clark's heart practically skipped a beat. *Lois!?* The ice-queen of the office, champion of women's lib and the she-dragon most likely to bite the head off any male who looked at her with anything more than professional courtesy was breathtaking, simply breathtaking!

Lois was in serious danger of a dramatic character change, she warned herself. As the group of men around her were almost incapacitated by her skimpy outfit, she found herself basking in their adoration and, perhaps for the first time in her life, feeling sexy without being self-conscious and defensive. Of course, the punch she was drinking at an alarming rate helped, but it was surprisingly easy to let the spiky shell of 'Miss Lane' fall away and embrace her inner-Xena for the night. But, she pondered, how would she feel tomorrow, when the costumes were all gone and she had to go back to the office and keep her dignity intact? The questions and conflicts raced around the back of her mind, together with the idea that she should really curb her alcohol intake, but, suddenly, the voice in her head was utterly silenced; all musings ceased as the man in blue and red spandex approached.

Her first thought was nothing more than instant unwavering awe for his fine physique, rather like the way she had felt when her sister dragged her to a Chippendales show one year. Try as she might there was no way to tear her eyes away from every colourful inch of him. Then, the question became all-important: who is he?!

No matter what costume she wore, she was an investigative reporter at her very core, and her burning desire to put a name to this Spiderman led her to start considering each of her co-workers or rivals in the media world in turn. Clark's name was in the running for a moment, but was dismissed almost instantly. Her partner was far too shy to adopt such a guise, in fact he was such a coward he hadn't even bothered to show up!

Well, her slightly unfocused mind decided, if she couldn't have Clark's opinion of her outfit, then this Spiderman character would be a very welcome substitute! With a deep breath to clear her head, she strode over to the mysterious stranger.

Clark's heart quickened further as she approached him with a look in her eye that he had never seen before — she was almost predatory in her attraction for him! For one wild moment, he considered whipping off his mask and letting her know exactly who it was she was hungry for; then, maybe he would no longer be 'plain old Clark' to her, and maybe their relationship would move up a notch... No, he reprimanded himself, there would be no revelation tonight, he would not risk letting her and the rest of the media world know he was not Spiderman, but Superman!

"Superman!" someone exclaimed nearby. Clark jumped, terror gripping him immediately. Had someone heard his thoughts? He whirled round, as did Lois, shocked to see Superman himself come strolling across the room, flocked by admirers. All attention away from him and onto the newcomer, he floated a few inches off the ground to see who had decided to adopt his 'S' for the night. It was Patrick Nolan, one half of the Metropolis Star's top reporting team. The man did have a fine figure, trim and well-muscled, and

Clark was impressed at the outfit although it was clearly store-bought, not home made like his own.

“Superman!” A different voice rang out then, from the other side of the room. All eyes were drawn to the pretended malice in that shout, and from behind a giant pot plant stepped Charles Lee, Nolan’s partner, dressed as Lex Luthor! The history between Superman and Luthor had become public knowledge about six months ago; the story was broken by the Metropolis Star, much to Perry’s fury. The billionaire’s home had been sold off and his private records exposed by Nolan and Lee in a piece that was sure to win the Kerth Award this year. It was disconcerting to Clark that everybody now knew of the attempts on his life made by Luthor.

Lee wore a sharp tuxedo and strode out to the opposite side of the dance-floor from ‘Superman.’ The crowd drew back — there was clearly about to be some dramatic display.

“Your time’s over, Luthor!” Nolan announced in a heroic voice, his hands on his hips in Superman’s classic pose.

“You can’t win, Superman!” Lee spat back, “I will marry Lois Lane, and you will die!”

Lois gasped and flushed bright red, first with embarrassment, then with fury that they should bring up that painful episode of her life so crassly. Clark winced at the reference too, turned to see Lois’ reaction, and without thinking put an arm around her for comfort. Lois looked up at her Spiderman, grateful for his support, even though she still had no clue who he was. She drew closer to him, but he suddenly wrenched his arm away as though he’d been burned. Lois huffed at the mixed signals and looked back to the drama in front of them.

Clark enjoyed Lois’ closeness for all of a second before the pain hit him. He looked back to the dance floor to see that Lee had whipped a bright green chunk of kryptonite from his pocket! Nolan groaned and sank to his knees in exactly the way Clark would be doing at that moment if he wasn’t so desperate to keep his reaction to the stone secret.

Agonisingly, Clark wondered how Lee had got the kryptonite and why he would bring it to this party. Perhaps he didn’t know it was the genuine article that he was waving around so theatrically, or a more frightening prospect: perhaps he knew that the real Superman would be there in another disguise... Unable to regain his composure, he muttered an excuse that went largely unheard and bolted for the men’s room.

Lois scowled after the fleeing Spiderman and felt a familiar surge of annoyance. *Why does he always run off?* she asked herself automatically, before understanding the implications of the thought. Her punch-fogged mind took a moment to review things, and with a clang of recognition it came to her.

Oh my God, she thought, Clark Kent is Spiderman!

In the safety of a locked cubicle, Clark peeled off his tight mask and took slow breaths, recovering fairly quickly now he was out of the vicinity of the kryptonite. He x-rayed through the door to make sure the coast was clear and stepped out to splash cold water on his burning face. He had only just pulled on his mask again when Cat-woman slipped into the restroom and closed the door behind her, leaning on it in a sensual pose.

“Hiding from your admirers?” she purred. “You always were the bashful one, Clark.”

“How did you know?” he asked, flustered.

“Come on, Clark. You may have everyone else in that dreary newsroom fooled, but I’ve always seen past the polyester to the Adonis beneath! It’s such a shame the women out there don’t know who they’re drooling over.” She began a slow approach, like a panther stalking its prey. “I could promise not to tell them, for a price.” She began to pull the zipper of her tight PVC outfit down suggestively.

Clark backed away and circled around to the door, but Cat stepped in quickly and pinned him against it. She brought her

hands up his torso, feeling every muscle on the way, then wrapped them round his neck.

“We’re not colleagues anymore, no awkward office politics to deal with...”

Clark put his hands on her waist to move her firmly away from him, but was suddenly pushed forwards into her embrace as the door he was leaning on was jostled from the outside. Cat drew him in tightly and clasped his cheek to her chest in delight as Lois pushed into the bathroom.

She took one look at the situation and stormed out again, her rather inebriated brain flooded with anger. While she was trying to locate Clark, she had been struggling with the reality of her attraction to him, since knowing who he was did nothing to dispel the effect his tight costume had on her. Initially, she wondered how his fine form had escaped her notice, but then she remembered one morning long ago, even before they were partners, when he answered the door to her wearing only a towel. Ever since that brief exposure, Clark Kent had been to all outward appearances the most ordinary man who ever lived. She had meant to find him and playfully scold him for keeping such a secret, but instead had found him in the amorous clutches of the Cat-woman!

Lois recalled the way Cat had always flirted with Clark and she was still not clear what happened between them back then, but now it seemed they were picking up where they left off! She was just up to the edge of the dance floor when Spiderman came running after her, grabbed her by the arm and pulled her round to face him.

“Sorry if I barged in on something private,” Lois’ words were a little slurred from the drink, but her tone was venomous. Looking past Clark, she saw that Cat had followed them out.

“You’ve had plenty of time to stake your claim if you wanted him Lois,” Cat spoke out over Clark’s shoulder, one hand resting possessively on his bicep, her tone petulant. “You don’t deserve Clark for a partner!”

The commotion had attracted several people, and they all looked to Clark, suddenly aware of his identity. He cringed inwardly as his co-workers looked at him anew in his revealing costume.

Lois was utterly focused on Cat, and she threw up her hands in mock surrender. “Well you just go ahead then,” she spat, her voice rising. “Just make sure he pays you for your time.”

Cat hissed her outrage and flung herself at Lois, shoving Clark aside. The pair clashed, shrieking and yelping in pain and fury, falling onto the dance floor and continuing to wrestle savagely, despite the huge crowd now gawping at the spectacle.

The sight of Xena Warrior Princess and Cat-woman locked together and writhing about was clearly the icing on the cake for many of the men at the party, and the other women were just amused to see Daily Planet’s star reporter make such a fool of herself.

Clark looked around at the sea of grinning faces as they fought, incredulous. Lois and Cat were having, well, a cat-fight over *him!* His ego was briefly swelled at the idea that two women wanted him that badly, but he quickly came to himself and stepped into the fray. It was not easy to separate them, but as soon as he had them at least a foot apart, Perry stepped in to take Lois’ shoulders gently but firmly.

“Now Lois, honey, that’s enough,” the Chief warned her. “I don’t want to have to pay for anything you break!”

Lois wrenched herself free of Perry’s grip and ran for the door with tears forming in her eyes. With a nod of assent from the editor, Clark handed the weakly struggling Cat-woman over and headed after Lois.

He exited through the ornate gilded doors and gasped to see Lois lying on the landing between the two flights of marble steps which were slick with the evening’s rain. She must have slipped, and Clark dashed to her side at super-speed, cursing himself for

not catching up with her a moment sooner.

He x-rayed her whole body for damage and was relieved to find none. Well, he surmised, a drunk person is usually so relaxed they don't hurt themselves when they fall, thank god. He sat beside her and pulled her head into his lap, brushing away the strands hair that fell across her brow. He spoke her name softly over and over, coaxing her to wake up.

Her eyes fluttered open. "S-Spiderman?" she asked in confusion.

"I'm here Lois," he replied softly.

"Take me home."

"I'll call a cab—" Clark began. But Lois half sat up and pointed at the top of the towering skyscraper opposite.

"No," she complained, "Take me home *that way!*"

Clark sighed — she really believed she was being rescued by Spiderman. He glanced around. It was late, and the street was deserted. No one else had emerged from the convention centre to find them... What harm could it do to let her have her fantasy for the moment? She was so intoxicated; she wouldn't remember it tomorrow.

He helped her to her feet carefully and turned her into his embrace. He checked the area once more. Then, he held out his arm dramatically, aimed at the building and curled his two middle fingers back.

"I have a new web," he told her casually. "It's invisible, but twice as strong." Lois 'ooh-ed' her approval as Clark gripped her tightly and took off, flying in a way that would seem to her as though they were swinging.

Lois laughed delightedly as they 'swung' across the city, her previous anger forgotten. Within minutes, they glided over to her apartment and alighted on the windowsill. He slid the window open with a mental note to chide her later about locking it and deposited her inside.

"Come in!" she insisted, so he landed lightly next to her.

Lois swayed where she stood, so Clark put an arm around her to steady her. She mistook the gesture for an embrace and hugged him back. She pulled back and looked at him, or rather at his mask, with such emotion that he again wished he could just throw caution to the wind and let her really see him.

Without warning, she reached out to his throat and grasped the base of his hood. He jerked backwards, but she held firm.

"Just a little," she whispered. "Not all the way, but a little."

She gently raised the spandex mask over his chin and settled it on his nose, imitating *that* scene in the Spiderman movie. She kissed him with surprising gentleness and Clark struggled briefly with the thought that he shouldn't be taking advantage of her in this condition. But this was Lois, his wonderful partner, the woman who had haunted his dreams for as long as he'd known her. And, it had to be said, she was wearing a Xena Warrior Princess costume which was threatening to overcome any moral arguments he might have! Promising himself fervently that he would leave after this, he gave in to her sweetness for a while, enjoying this soft, willing and passionate side of Lois which no one ever got to see.

Breathlessly, he pulled away from her before his resolve could crumble completely. He rolled his mask down and stepped to the window.

"Be sure to lock this when I've gone," he told her, then made a polite bow and leaped out of the window, again pretending to shoot an invisible web and swoop away as she watched. As soon as he was out of sight, he flew on normally, instantly deciding to head home rather than back to the party. He couldn't face the rest of the people there now that they knew Clark Kent was the man behind the mask!

Lois gazed after her hero until he rounded a high building and disappeared, then closed the window and locked it. She shuffled to her bed and flopped down, her fuzzy mind thinking that she

should call Clark and tell him she got home okay. Her partner was such a worrier...

An echo of a yell reverberated in her mind: "*You don't deserve Clark for a partner!*"

Lois felt a welling of anger at the strange figure in black who had dared to suggest that. Of course she deserved him! Maybe she hadn't known his body was so fabulous before, but that didn't mean...

His body? Where did that idea come from? In answer her befuddled brain supplied the picture of that stunning Spiderman character. Now she was just confused... sorting out the multiple identities became too much and she drifted off into a dream of rolling green hills and riding a horse around with an immense sword strapped to her hip.

End of Part Three

Part Four – Office Politics

Lois didn't really care that she would be torn off a strip for being late for work. It was 10.30 before she could bring herself to roll out of bed and shower. The persistent throbbing in her head wasn't her only concern either. She had gone to bed still wearing the Xena outfit, and in the harsh light of day she could only curse the temporary insanity of choosing such an invitation to ridicule.

Her real concern was actually showing her face in the newsroom. She could already see the smirks on the faces of her colleagues, hear the comments they would mutter sotto voce as she walked in. And the photos... she wondered if there was any way she could find and burn all the evidence of the evening.

As she dressed in her typically sensible skirt-jacket combo, she ignored the temptation to erase it all from her mind. Instead, she forced herself to mentally run through the party from start to finish. The beginning was easy to recall — she was still sober then — and despite her vow never to be so outrageous again, she remembered the thrill of commanding the attention of all those men! For a moment, she let herself feel the admiration again, and the self-esteem of looking so magnificently sexy.

After that, it had all fallen apart — hadn't it? Her memory had started to get fuzzy around the beginning of that little play about Superman and Lex Luthor. She made a mental note to write a scathing email to Nolan and Lee for trivialising her private life.

She felt a shock of excitement as she remembered the way 'Spiderman' had put his arm around her then. The finest form of a man she'd ever laid eyes on, and he was clearly interested in her! The way he had called her softly back to consciousness after her fall on the slippery steps... Her hero had taken her safely home in his strong arms, but *how?! In her drunkenness, she had believed he was Spiderman, spinning his web effortlessly, but of course he was a man in costume.*

Scowling as she tried to piece together this confusing jigsaw, she brushed her damp hair and instantly winced at the pain from her tender scalp. A flash of anger at Cat for pulling her hair so savagely brought with it the sickeningly embarrassing memory of her very public brawl with a former colleague. She could almost cry. Would Lois Lane ever be anything other than an office joke from this day on? She had always been at odds with Cat, and this time, like most previous times, it was over Clark.

Over Clark? Or Spiderman?

Lois gasped, realising that it was Clark who had gotten her home and stood before her in his fantastically alluring costume... she was suddenly struck by the thought that something may have happened between them last night. She had woken alone in her bed, which was a relief, but somehow, she felt there was a hole in her recollection of events. Certainly, she had no memory of the cab ride home, only a splendid dream of rushing wind and swinging high over the city. Clark's costume had certainly had a powerful effect on her inebriated mind, and now she wondered what else she might have done in her wild fantasy-state.

Only one way to find out, she ordered herself firmly, straightening her jacket and heading for the door.

Clark breathed deeply in an attempt to calm his nerves as he rode the elevator up to the newsroom. He'd been out interviewing key members of the organisation committee for the upcoming Metropolis Pride festival about the possibility of trouble between the straight and gay communities. A serious issue, he thought, but the men he went to talk to seemed more intent upon teasing him about the party or making suggestive comments about his tight costume and the Lois-Cat wrestling match!

Now, he was heading up to the bull-pen to take more flak, fervently wishing he had enough fieldwork to keep him out of the office all day, because he expected a seriously cold reception from Lois. At the ping, the door slid open and his eyes roamed immediately to Lois' desk. He was relieved, but not surprised, to find it empty. She might even take the day off after the amount she'd had to drink last night!

As he walked towards his own workspace, he groaned inwardly. It was like rewinding time by six months... Cat lounged in his chair, tilted back with her stiletto heels up on his desk, her attire slightly less Gothic but certainly no less sexy than last night's. She spotted him and smiled her predatory smile, crossing her legs sensually and fixing her hair without moving from his chair.

Upon seeing Clark approach Cat, more than ten of his co-workers drifted over surreptitiously, smiles of nosy anticipation on their faces. Clark's sensitive hearing picked up their whispered gossip.

"This is gonna be good! I hope she's still here when Lois arrives!"

"How in hell does Kent get two chicks that hot tusslin' over him?"

"Well he's pretty buff... you saw that Spiderman get-up he had..."

Clark gulped his embarrassment and gazed at his colleagues with an unmistakable 'get-lost' look. With coughs and mumbles, they retreated – but not too far.

"Talk of the town, aren't we?" Cat's tone told how much she delighted in the scandal.

"Look, Cat—" Clark began, perching himself on the edge of the desk.

"Wait a second. Let me say this first." Cat sat up and leaned forward, taking his tie in her slender fingers as she used to do. "I just... want to get this out okay?" Clark nodded his assent.

"I apologise for last night. I guess you could say you've always had that effect on me, but I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"What about Lois?"

"She just embarrassed herself." Cat smiled wickedly, but Clark's serious expression made her drop the grin. "Okay, I'll apologise to Lois too, maybe in an email... but the point is that as much as you might think I love to cause a scene, I just had too much to drink and it got out of hand, that's all. I hope you'll forgive me?" She affected her cutest pout and her eyes mock-pleaded her innocence.

Clark had to smile. Cat would never change. He knew she was sincere in her own unique style. He gently drew his tie out of her hands and nodded. They both stood, and she leaned in for a friendly hug, which Clark granted a little warily. Sure enough, her roaming hands sought out his buttocks as she whispered in his ear.

"I'm just glad for once all of Metropolis got to see what I've always seen."

A strangled gasp came from the balcony where Lois stood after emerging from the elevator.

Lois stared in mute fury as Cat's hands journeyed down Clark's back. Her mind was again flooded with rage, though this time it was not fuelled by alcohol. So, she could only stand, fixed

to the spot and ignore the looks and the whispers as all eyes turned to her. Clark's eyes turned in her direction, and he jumped back from Cat as though he'd been electrocuted.

The collected journalists began to salivate at the prospect of a rematch as Cat patted Clark on the shoulder and strode through the bull-pen towards Lois, her chin high. Cat stopped as she reached Lois, and their gazes locked for a moment of horrible tension.

Then, Cat stepped in close to Lois, even though Lois drew back in readiness to defend herself.

"Look," Cat began in a tone so low that no one in the newsroom would hear, "peace, alright? We were both drunk, and we both want him, no matter how much you try to deny it. The difference between us, Lois, is that I go for what I want, even if I might not get it. You hide from what you want," she continued, turning and casting a long look at Clark, who was watching them from below, "even though it's already yours."

She sighed and stepped gracefully into the elevator, sweeping a gaze of nostalgia around the newsroom as the doors closed. The men of the Daily Planet must've had a very dull summer since Cat Grant left their territory, and Lois Lane clearly needed a rival's presence to raise her game. Maybe it was time to leave the cameras and return to the page...

Lois stayed glued to the spot for a moment, replaying Cat's parting words in her mind. Her eyes fell on Clark, noting his hesitant expression. Abstractly, she recalled that expression being on his face a lot since they had worked together. It was as though he always expected an angry lecture from her, and, she was forced to admit, he was right more often than not.

Perhaps she would try a different tack this time, because she was determined to find out the facts of last night's encounter no matter what.

She made her way down to the bull-pen amid stares and whispers, mutterings of her little wrestling match and her revealing costume. She felt the heat creep up her cheeks but forced her face into a taut mask of coldness as she steadfastly ignored it all and stalked straight past Clark without a word. She settled herself at her desk and booted up her PC, forcing herself not to make any motion of acknowledgement as Clark sidled up to her and stood there in silence, waiting for permission to speak in his infuriatingly submissive way.

Clark Kent was one of the foremost investigative reporters in the city, a wordsmith of extraordinary eloquence and, despite her usual assertions to the contrary, he was a natural detective whose gut feelings had often been the key to solving a complicated case. With all this going for him, it frustrated Lois that he set himself so low, behaved as though he was her subordinate. Of course, the part of her mind that bypassed all her stubborn denials acknowledged that he behaved this way because of his feelings for her, because he simply knew her feisty temperament so well and was happy to let her be the 'top banana' she would always claim to be.

Well, since that was what he was expecting... She took a breath and prepared to be his ice queen again. She slid her eyes up to him and, for a heartbeat, found his soft brown eyes impossibly attractive and remembered being held against his warm strong chest.

"What do you want Kent?" Clark winced. She only called him Kent when she was really, really mad. He opened his mouth to begin the well-rehearsed explanation, but Lois rushed ahead, her gaze firmly removed from his gaze and fixed on her screen.

"I mean it's not like I haven't got work to do. One little party doesn't stop the presses, you know. Honestly, what is this — the *National Whisper*? Why everyone's got their knickers in a twist over a little disagreement is beyond me! Cat and I are both professionals and you..." Suddenly, she lost the tirade, gulped, and struggled to continue.

"And you..."

“Lois,” he began. Just that. His voice was low and soft, and it cut through her flustered rant effortlessly. She held out a moment longer before meeting his eyes. Her own eyes were glassy with threatening tears as her treacherous emotions had risen without warning. Clark didn’t say another word, he simply stepped around behind her and held her shoulders gently, bidding her to rise. A hand in the small of her back guided her to the conference room, where the blinds were mercifully drawn.

Lois was acutely aware of all the eyes on her as she stepped into that private space with Clark following, aware of the ears that would be straining to hear what passed between them. She didn’t know whether to be angry at Clark for making such an obviously strategic withdrawal from the public or grateful that he understood her need to shed a tear or two away from the onlookers.

The second the door closed, she stepped away from him and leaned against the table for support, crying silently. In her imagination, her peers mocked her, spoke her name in jest all over the city, read her work with an amused smile and aired her scene of degradation at the party on YouTube twenty-four hours a day.

“Lois.” There was her name again, but there was no humour in that soft word, no mockery. She sobbed once, then struggled to hide that small action, but Clark’s hands were on her shoulders again, more insistent this time as they drew her back into his comforting embrace.

“How could I have done it Clark?” she asked in a small voice. “How could I have gotten so drunk? I’ve destroyed my career!”

Clark’s arms tightened around her a little. “No, you haven’t. I know it seems like that right now because the newsroom is buzzing with gossip. But you know the media world, Lois. Today’s news is tomorrow’s hamster cage lining! Don’t let the words get to you. You’re bigger than this...”

Abruptly, she turned in his arms, looking up at him with desperation. “Am I? I always thought I was the sensible one! Lucy’s the screw-up!” Clark remembered meeting Lois’ younger sister a few months ago, and smiled briefly at the description, but then quickly focused on Lois again as she continued. “But then there was that stupid outfit—”

A flash of Lois in her Xena costume made Clark smile again, and Lois noticed this time. Her teary eyes narrowed and she stepped out of his embrace, her vulnerable spell seeming to dissolve as quickly as it came.

“Don’t think you’re innocent of all this you know!” She pointed a finger at him accusingly, and at Clark’s genuine puzzlement she rushed ahead. “If I’m going down in history as a laughing stock, then I’m taking you down with me Kent! It was just as much your fault, wearing spandex and making out with Cat in the men’s room! You disgust me sometimes—”

“Okay that’s enough!” Clark interrupted her now, determined to stop this paranoid train she was riding. “It was a party, Lois! A party, that’s all. Everyone wore a costume. Are you going to tear Stan from graphics off a strip for going half-naked as the Hulk? No! By the way, nothing happened with Cat, and I don’t see why you care anyway...”

“Oh, you’re so dense; sometimes I wonder why you went into journalism! She only wants you because *I do*—” Lois stopped the sentence abruptly, a flush shooting up her cheeks as she realised what she had said. She whirled about to put her back to him and hide from whatever conclusions he might have drawn from her unguarded rant.

Clark took a half step back, blinking his surprise as Lois stood firm with her back turned. His mind flashed back to that night, the look he had seen in her eyes as she saw him, but did not know him, and then later, the honey softness of her lips as he gave in briefly to her kiss. Clark suspected that he had always been a source of antagonism between Lois and Cat, but he never expected to hear it spoken aloud.

He had drawn her into the conference room because he did not

want their colleagues to witness her deep embarrassment about the party, but he wasn’t expecting to face the truth of what came after. He had hoped that her drunkenness would have erased some of the more complicated feelings between them, but instead it seemed to have brought them even more to the surface. He could not bury them now.

He stepped forwards, reached out a hand, but stopped an inch from her shoulder and let it drop.

“What can I do?” he asked quietly. He didn’t know what she expected him to say or, more disturbingly, just how much she remembered of last night; he only knew that this must be resolved. Seeing Lois upset, rather than angry, cut him to the core. She turned slowly, and her eyes were dry, her breathing calm, as though she held herself ready for some hard words.

“Tell me the truth, Clark.”

She knows! Thought Clark with a silent gasp of fear. She must have remembered how he flew her home.

“Did we...?” Lois continued carefully, “Last night, what did we do? I know what state I was in, and I admit that seeing you in that outfit... had an affect on me.” Clark was glad she left it at that, as he felt his own face colouring to match Lois’. Nonetheless, he breathed a silent sigh of gratitude that she had not brought up anything about his spectacular city-swinging display. He took a half step closer.

“We kissed. Nothing else,” he said softly.

Watching his mouth as he formed the words stirred Lois’ memory again, and suddenly, she recalled the way she had rolled his mask up to find those hesitant lips. How he had resisted at first — of course, he would do that; he was Clark, the ultimate gentleman.

“Nothing else?” Lois asked again, trying to keep the merest hint of disappointment she felt out of her voice. *Disappointment?!* She should be heartily relieved, but she was shocked to find herself wishing there had been more...

“Lois, I swear—” Clark began in earnest, but Lois stopped him, drawing herself up straight and tall and smoothing her jacket down in a business-like fashion.

“Well, good. That’s all there is to it then. It was one stupid party and one little... ahem, interlude, and now we can just forget it and get on with our work.” She strode past him and went to the door.

Clark’s heart sank a little at the coldness of her response. Obviously, she was relieved that they hadn’t behaved totally irresponsibly, but Clark couldn’t help but wish that the vibrant side of Lois, who danced with such abandon and was able to explore her attraction to him, would not be so crushed in the light of day.

As Lois reached to open the door, she spoke over her shoulder. “I’ll tell you what, Clark, there’s no way I’m ever getting that drunk again! You know I don’t even remember the cab ride home! I thought I was rescued by Spiderman himself!” She laughed lightly and headed back out into the newsroom.

Jimmy intercepted Lois on her way back to her desk.

“Hey Lois, there’s a call for you on Line Two. It’s probably Lucy Lawless asking for her costume back!”

Lois shot Jimmy her iciest look at Jimmy as he bounded cheerfully away and headed over to take her call.

“Lois Lane,” she answered it clearly, but the other end of the line seemed very scratchy and it seemed the caller was having a coughing fit.

“Miss Lane,” the coughing ceased and the male voice which spoke was low and raspy. “Did you have fun at the party?”

Lois groaned inwardly and was about to tell the man to take a hike when he continued.

“It’s a shame that snitches weren’t invited; after all, you reporters wouldn’t have bupkiss without us! Well, anyway while you and your media darlings were overdoing the punch and finger food, I was out getting *your* next scoop! Did you know

Superman's got a rival in Metropolis?"

Lois' interest piqued as it always did at the mention of her hero's name. She held the phone tighter and spoke low in the manner she had developed long ago as a reporter's first defence against source-stealing.

"What have you got for me?"

"Uh-uh, not over the phone. Meet me in the Fudge Castle in fifteen minutes. And you're buying!" The line went dead.

Lois' casually replaced the handset and gathered her things. Clark picked up on the innocent action immediately.

"New lead?" he enquired hopefully from his desk.

"Oh, just a friend from college has arrived in town and wants some pointers on getting a job in the papers," she lied smoothly, suppressing a small stab of guilt at deceiving her partner. "Gonna go meet her for some brandy-triple-choc fudge."

Clark nodded and went back to his work without questioning her story for a moment. Lois wondered why he trusted her so much, and again thought about inviting him to go with her, but Clark was funny about leads on Superman. Any number of times a snitch had called her up with a nibble of information, and Clark had sternly forbidden any contact with the scumbag. It was like he had appointed himself Superman's personal protector from scandal, not that Lois would ever print anything even slightly negative about her idol.

But there was simply no way she was going to let a single bit of information, no matter how bogus, slip past her, because she knew that if the snitch didn't sell the story to her, he'd take it to someone else, someone more ready to drag Superman's cape in the dirt.

As she headed to the elevator, her pre-occupation with the embarrassment of last night seemed to fall away at last, and she tingled with anticipation about a new story – one which might possibly require her to question the Man of Steel for a response.

End of Part Four

Part Five – Comic Book Heroes

Lois emerged from the cab across the street from possibly her favourite place in Metropolis. The Fudge Castle was her haven in times of stress, and now it doubled as her usual snitch-meeting location. Years of sneaking around drippy underground car garages and loitering at the docks, knowing full well that she'd never get the fish-stink out of her jacket, had taught her a valuable lesson: Never let the snitch pick the place. These days she had put it quietly about that Lois Lane was always to be met at her favoured dessert emporium, and informants seemed to respond well to being generously supplied with confectionery.

She heard the racking cough of today's scumbag before she saw him. Clearly a chain-smoker, he wheezed his way into the shop and picked a table as Lois crossed the street and followed.

From behind an oversized laminated menu, she sized up her guy. A weasel-faced man, with more than three days stubble and hands covered in oil as though he'd spent all day fixing cars. He fidgeted nervously and cast his gaze around several times before settling into his seat to peruse the menu. Lois approached and stood beside his table, her notebook in hand.

"Will it be a sundae or a hot fudge brownie, sir?" she asked coolly. He jumped a little and started to cough again as Lois sat down opposite him.

"You should really see a doctor about that," she observed.

"And you should pick somewhere more private to discuss things," he spat back once he had his breath back. "I don't like it here — too many people."

"I suppose you usually live in a deserted amusement park surrounded by fibreglass clowns—"

"Enough, enough! Now do you want to know the dirt, or don't ya?"

Lois reached into her bag and took out a Dictaphone, placing

it demonstrably on the table between them and clasping her fingers before her in readiness. The man nodded.

"Like I told ya on the phone, our friendly flyer has a rival."

"An enemy?"

"No, not a villain, I mean another superhero! Someone here to do his job, maybe try to muscle in and replace him! In any case, he's already beat Supes to one save. I watched him rescue a girl and fly right off last night!"

Lois tried to ignore the glint of eager fanaticism in the guy's face, but wondered idly if this mooch didn't spend more time following Superman than she did.

"Okay, who's our new man in tights? I presume he wears tights? I mean to be a hero these days you've pretty much got to —"

"Oh, he's got the outfit all right! And you're never gonna guess who it is! I can hardly believe it myself! I had to polish my lens and look again! I was so sure this guy was a myth, a comic book hero!"

"Would you get to the point?" Lois prompted, exasperated.

The snitch reached into his satchel, pulled out a sheaf of small glossy photographs and passed them across to her whilst looking 'round at the other patrons happily eating their desserts. Lois looked at the first and gasped.

"Uh-huh, see!" the informant grinned his approval at her reaction.

Holding her breath, Lois flipped through all the photos. The pictures weren't the best quality, but it was clear to her eyes that a man in red and black spider web-patterned spandex was hovering outside an apartment-building window, holding a scantily clad woman in his arms as he fiddled with the window-catch.

In another photo, the pair could just be seen inside, the gauzy curtains obscuring the view a little, but the woman's hands were on his shoulders; their bodies were pressed together...

Lois felt the heat creep up her face once more. The only good part was that her face was not identifiable, although anyone who was at the press party would be able to pick out the costume.

The last two photos blew her away entirely. Spiderman squatted on the windowsill, his arm outstretched to shoot a web, and finally a dramatic action-shot of his brightly clad form in mid-flight. Lois suddenly recalled her rescuer telling her that he had a new kind of web which was invisible, but that had all been a dream! Some crazy dream where Spiderman was real and took her swinging across the city...

She stared again at the photo of the two of them, so close and intimate, and heard Clark's soft admission in her head. *We kissed...*

"So, shall we talk remuneration?" the weaselly man asked with a greedy smile.

"Eh?" Lois mumbled absently, still fixated on the photo. Her mind was screaming at the facts which were at once so unbelievable and yet right before her eyes. Clark was surely the man in the Spiderman suit, but how had he adopted all the other attributes of his character?

"Remuneration: *money*, Ms. Lane! Geez, I thought you reporters we're good with words!"

Lois dragged her eyes up to look at the snitch. She would work out the details later. The only thing she knew for sure right now was that these photos could not fall into anyone else's hands. She forced her poker-face back on and casually reached into her handbag once more. She drew sheaf of bills and placed them down in front of him. One hundred dollars exactly. The snitch eyed them with disdain.

"A hundred? Lady, you have no idea what these pictures would sell for on the other side of town!"

Lois huffed and topped off the pile of bills with another hundred.

"Look the photos are blurry — it'll take hours to Photoshop

them up to newspaper quality! And I happen to know the *Whisper* wasted all its informant budget buying off the mayor's mistress, so don't go sniffing for cash there! It's two hundred and anything you want on the menu. Take it or leave it." She folded her arms, hoping her bluffing skills were still as sharp as they used to be.

The snitch grunted and swiped the cash into his oily palm, counting it quickly before shoving it into his jacket. He raised a hand and snapped his fingers for a waitress, who hurried over.

"Get me the MOST expensive dessert you have. Make that two!" he demanded, grinning widely and looking back to Lois. "You want anything?"

Another forty dollars lighter, Lois emerged from a cab outside her apartment building, clutching her handbag as tightly as if it contained a bar of solid gold. In her excitement, she fumbled and dropped her keys twice before she managed to get safely inside her own home and shrug off her coat.

She sat on her couch and arranged the photographs on her coffee table.

"How the hell...?" she wondered out loud as she studied the last shot of Spiderman in mid-air. She had considered the possibility that they were fake, naturally, and at this point, she hoped that was the case.

She forced her agitated mind to focus once more on the night of the party, but this time she completely ignored the embarrassing wrestling-match. She recalled her first glimpse of the man in red spandex, and her heart quickened again. *Be serious!* Lois chastised herself for the indulgent thought and brought her mind back in line.

Spiderman's arm was around her shoulders as they watched that dreadful play-acting from Nolan and Lee...

Oh my— suddenly Lois remembered how he had jerked back from her just then. Lee had taken out his chunk of... Kryptonite! It had been real?! And it had hurt him, hurt *Clark!*

She took the photo in her hand of Spiderman on the windowsill.

"Invisible web... yeah, right... *Superman!*"

End of Part Five

Part Six – Seeing Red

Lois paced around her living room like a caged tiger, her cordless phone clutched so tightly in her fist she thought it might break.

She'd dialled Clark's work number four times now, each time reaching the Planet switchboard and then hanging up in frustration before entering his extension. She simply could not calm herself enough to form the first words she would say to him; it would only have been an incoherent scream of anger.

She stopped pacing for a moment and simply jumped up and down, stamping like a child as the fury heated her blood to boiling point.

"Liar!" she shouted to the ceiling. "You... you... aaarrghh!" She sagged down on the couch behind her and willed herself to calm down. It took a supreme effort, and the only way to claw back a measure of reason was to sever the cord of her emotions and find that logical, mechanical journalist's mindset that was key in any complex case-solving.

"Okay," she spoke aloud to herself. "Let's review the facts, shall we?" She reached automatically into her bag and pulled out her notebook and pen.

"So, Clark is Superman..." the words were hard to say, even to herself, and the anger threatened to rise again until she forced it down. "And I have photos of him dressed as Spiderman doing things he really shouldn't be seen doing. I'll bet that scumbag has copies—"

She glanced back to the pictures in question, and her eyes lingered on the more intimate one of them. For an instant, she

could not halt the rush of another emotion; somewhere between the anger at her partner's deceit and the frustration at the sudden predicament she found herself in, there was the breathless thrill of recalling that moment, that kiss, and the knowledge that the man holding her so tenderly was the one unattainable man she had always wanted.

She took up the picture of Spiderman holding a very inebriated Xena Warrior Princess in his arms. In a moment of vanity she couldn't help, she scrutinized her bare legs and arms, wondering foolishly what affect her costume had had on *him*.

How many times had Superman delivered her back to her apartment in this fashion, and how many times had she wished that his friendly wave goodnight wouldn't be the end of it? Well, it wasn't this time, was it? He had stood before her and succumbed to her desire, if only for a moment...

Superman's tight outfit had featured often in her dreams since he first flew into her life, but if possible the Spiderman costume showed off his perfect physique even better than his regular attire! He had no cape...

"Argh!" she huffed again, tossing the photos and her dangerously hot thoughts aside and sternly reminding herself that this was not the champion of truth and the tender hero of her imagination; it was Clark Kent: farm boy, hack, and liar.

And now it fell to her to save his lying ass from the world at large.

Perry's mini-pool table was on a slant. He scowled at it as yet another perfectly lined-up shot resulted in the tiny balls rolling unerringly toward the back-left corner.

He got up, went to his door and opened it to bellow for Jimmy. The lad was no doubt slacking off as usual, chatting up some office temp with an underdeveloped vocabulary, and as the editor drew in his breath for a shout that would carry across the bull-pen, his phone rang, making him jump and wheeze.

He slammed his door again and snatched up the phone.

"White," he barked, expecting to give whatever impudent caller had dared disturb him a stern talking-to.

"Chief..." Lois' voice sounded uncertain, a quality which it very rarely held. Perry's tirade was put on hold, and he went over to his window to lift the blinds.

"Lois? I thought you were at your desk."

"I'm at home. I could use a little professional advice. On a story."

Perry could hardly believe his ears; it usually took the threat of sacking to get Lois Lane to accept any help on any matter, but advice on a *story*...?

"Honey, are you in some kind of trouble right now?" the editor asked quietly, considering the possibility that she might be at gunpoint and using some kind of code.

"No, Chief, I just have some... sensitive information and I don't quite know how to use it."

"Well, bring it in here and we'll take a look."

A pause from Lois.

"Well, is Clark there?" Perry confirmed it, and Lois continued, "Can you send him on an errand or something? Get him out of the office?"

Now Perry was really confused, but he agreed to send Clark down to the docks to cover an environmental clean-up effort, trying to save some rare ducks or something. It was a waste of a top-line reporter, but at least it was a mood-piece, and the sensitive country-boy would never turn that down.

As Lois hung up the phone, Perry sighed and went out to find Clark, wondering what on earth had happened between them to cause this kind of behaviour. Lois was a real shark when it came to defending her stories, and the editor distinctly remembered one time when the rookie Kent had scooped her mercilessly, but they'd been partners long enough now to share their by-lines amicably

hadn't they?

That meant that it was another reason, a *personal* reason. Perry had observed their roller-coaster relationship for the past year, aware of Kent's feelings for his partner, and of course, Lois' general disregard for them. It was no secret who *she* was hooked on.

The editor issued his order, and Clark hurried eagerly away — Perry often wished Lois would be that willing to obey her editor's wishes.

It was less than an hour later that she arrived in the newsroom and strolled through the maze of desks towards Perry's office. He was frankly amazed that she actually knocked at his door, and he invited her in without getting out of his seat.

"So, Lois, what's the hubbub?" he asked as she stepped up to his desk.

Without answering, she tossed some photos down before him.

Perry's understanding of the facts came somewhat quicker even than Lois'. "Great shades of Elvis!" he exclaimed. "This is... this is, uh..."

"The biggest story we've ever uncovered? You bet!" Lois' tone was a touch bitter. Perry put the photos aside and focused on his star reporter.

"Seems like Clark's been holding out on us..." Perry watched Lois' face closely, noticed the gulp of pain she tried to hide. He stood and walked to his office window, peering out over the city he loved. "So, the question is, what do we print?"

"Well, nothing! I mean, we can't just expose..." She paused, visibly forcing herself to say it. "That *Superman* is one of our own, can we? How dumb would we look?! Not to mention the fact that Clark's whole life is dependent on keeping this secret. But the snitch who sold me these could easily take them elsewhere, and then Clark'll be ruined," she exclaimed, trailing off.

Perry turned to face Lois again, a slight smile on his face at the loyalty she held for her partner, even despite the betrayal she obviously felt.

The editor took a deep breath and said something he never imagined an editor would say: "Look, let's sit on this for the time being. You might do well to go see Clark and let him know about these," he said as he picked up the photos and held them out to her, raising his eyebrows suggestively. "And see what he has to say about it, huh? We've got a bunch of images here that tell us a fact, but not the reason behind it. He deserves a fair chance to explain himself. And if nothing else, we're going to need him to... err... comment."

Lois took the prints and stashed them carefully in her handbag again. She huffed reluctantly at the editor's suggestion. Clark was positively the last person she wanted to deal with right now, since she had every confidence that it would only result in a shouting match. He would fiercely defend his right to keep his secret with reasons which would be logical, sensible and entirely understandable to anyone except Lois, whose emotional ties to both her partner and Superman would prevent her from accepting any excuse for toying with her feelings so callously.

"He's down at the docks!" Perry called after her as she stepped out of the office. Lois acknowledged it with a backward wave of the hand and headed out, quickly deciding she would stay as far from that end of town as possible today.

The other stories that Lois had on her research agenda kept her occupied until the close of day, or at least they appeared to. Her investigation into a bank fraud took her to the financial district, where she circled the block four times without entering the bank in question, her thoughts consumed in rehearsal of *that* conversation. She then took a cab ride to interview a scientist with a wonder-drug about to hit the market, but her attention was only barely focused on the answers to her bland questions. As she left the pharmaceutical company office, she cursed Clark again for distracting her from her work.

Her journey back to the Planet took her past The Fudge Castle, and at that point she huffed her displeasure so loudly the cab driver jumped and asked, "You okay, lady?"

She told him to change course and take her home instead. She needed a bath, ice cream, and a serious session of pacing round her apartment hurling her angry thoughts at the ceiling to get it off her chest. Then maybe she'd be able to face her unknowing tormentor tomorrow.

Her alarm clock was not working again, mercifully. She slept way past her usual 7 am, and by the time the feeble sun striping through her gauzy drapes tickled her awake, she knew she should have been at work already.

She was stepping out of her shower feeling clean at least, if not in any way calm, when her cell phone chimed melodically on her bedside table: an unknown number.

"Lois Lane," she answered with her usual business-like tone.

"Where's my story?" demanded a gruff, raspy voice Lois recognised with a sinking feeling. The scumbag informant must have picked up this morning's early edition to find it surprisingly devoid of any Spiderman/Superman rivalry scandal.

"I'm still chasing up the details." Lois tried to sound cool through the lie. "After all a few photos don't mean much without an interview to validate them."

"Don't give me that crap!" the man spat back, setting off a fit of wheezing and coughing before he regained his speech. "Any other paper would have had them on the front page yesterday afternoon!"

"Any other paper isn't the Daily Planet," Lois replied crisply. "We don't print unsubstantiated claims. Can you imagine what we'd look like if we ran a story claiming that Spiderman was hanging around the city?!"

The snitch was silent for a moment, except for a few huffs of impotent disagreement.

"Well, he *is*!" he finally shot back, a petulant note to his scratchy voice. "And if you don't want to use my information I'll take it to someone who will! Better do your research fast Miss Lane, or you'll be scooped by the *Metropolis Star*!"

"Don't worry, you'll get your story, but if you want the photography credit, you'll have to supply your name."

That shut the snitch up again briefly, and at last he replied, "I don't want my name in the paper, just the story. So get on with it!"

Lois was about to retort indignantly, but the line was dead. She huffed again in frustration and went to raid the fridge.

Exhausted, Superman flew at half his usual speed over the stunning expanse of the South Pacific. About an hour ago, he had been sitting at his desk when a shrill cry of "Aidez-moi!" had reached his ears, followed by several similar pleas. In a flash, he had changed his drab office attire for his more colourful persona and sped off to locate the wounded of the little French colony of New Caledonia, where a cyclone had ripped across the island bringing flimsy buildings down upon the inhabitants. It had been a super-efficient search-and-rescue followed by a quick but thorough clean-up, and now he was basking in the tropical sun as he flew homewards, his ears tuned in to the pleasant sounds of relief still streaming from the island locals reunited with their loved-ones.

As he neared North America, his thoughts turned back to the strange events of this morning. For starters, Lois was absent from the office again. He knew the embarrassment of the costume party had been severe for her, but to take two mornings off work because of it? It didn't seem like Lois at all. Then there was the odd look that Perry had given him as he stepped in to deliver his copy of the docks clean-up story the Chief had unexpectedly dumped on him yesterday. Usually, his editor would look over his work for a moment or two and make grunts of approval or

suggestions of changing a sentence here or there. This morning, nothing. He just acknowledged the sheaf of papers with a nod and stared at Clark for a moment or so, as though he were looking for something. Very odd.

All of these tiny yet nevertheless strange details sat uneasily in Clark's mind, bringing the nagging feeling that he was missing something. Something important. With Metropolis in his sights now, he decided to change his intended destination from the Daily Planet building to Lois' apartment. He needed answers, and he also felt keenly that he should be there for his partner if she was going through a tough time. Sure, he was likely to get his head bitten off for such a display of tenderness, especially when Lois was probably trying to forget their brief moment of drunken intimacy, but that was a risk he was willing to take.

As he drifted down slowly into the alley beside her apartment building to quietly make the switch to his civilian clothes, he again had to gulp away a stab of hurt at the memory their conversation in the conference room yesterday.

We kissed. Nothing else...

She had seemed so relieved at that, so coldly dismissive of what Clark could very well describe as the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to him.

"Did your web break?" a voice from the shadows demanded. Clark whirled to face it. Lois stepped from behind a dumpster, her arms folded and a decidedly accusatory look on her face.

"Errr, what?" Clark mumbled, too surprised to see Lois lurking in an alley to catch her meaning. And what was with the attitude? He was quite used to her being petulant or snippy around Clark, but when he was Superman, he'd always known her to be a different woman entirely. Wistfully, he acknowledged that was because she had a hopeless crush on his colourful disguise.

"You said it as invisible, but twice as strong, remember?" Lois scrutinised his face to see the look of horrified realisation which flashed across it for the briefest of moments before Superman forced his cover back into place.

"I, err, think you might have me confused with someone..."

"Spiderman maybe?" Lois interrupted his fumbling excuses.

"Well..."

"Look, how about you... *change* or whatever and come inside. I don't want to talk out here." She wrinkled her nose at the stink of the alley and strode past him, chin high. She did flick a glance across to see him totally dumbfounded and wide-eyed with shock, a look she would treasure for a long time.

End of Part Six

Part Seven – Coming Out

"Lois, I'm sorry I lied to you, but I want you to know it was the only way to keep you safe."

Clark stared at the closed door to Lois' apartment, cursing his sudden inability to formulate an apology speech that didn't sound so lame.

The painful truth was that nothing he could say would erase that fact that he had simply deceived her. Superman, a symbol of righteousness to the people of Metropolis, was in this respect, a normal, selfish man. The brief times when he had considered letting her into his confidence, it was fear of this very conversation which had stopped him.

He shook himself from his melancholy reverie and made another attempt at a speech.

"Lois, I'm sorry—"

The door opened suddenly in front of him, cutting off his flow completely.

"Ah, the sorry speech," Lois stated contemptuously, looking distinctly unimpressed. "Well, you could always come in and say it instead of making excuses to my door." Her tone still held a touch of acid, and Clark gulped as he stepped inside.

"Well?" Lois prompted.

Clark made no attempts this time.

"What happened to 'I'm so sorry I'm such a lying, sneaking scumbag who likes to play with the feelings of his best friends', huh?"

Clark raised his hands instinctively, ready to start a defensive rebuttal against that. He had never wanted to play with her feelings. Instead, he let his hands drop. His shoulders slumped in surrender. It was Lois' right to rant and accuse now. He was the one on trial here.

"Why do you want me to say, Lois? You already covered most of it. Now you know the truth, and I wish I had told you myself."

Lois was a little stumped by that. She had expected to scold him, to shoot down his typical Clark-style excuses and felt fully justified in directing as many caustic phrases as possible his way. But this bland acceptance of her wrath was very uncharacteristic. Nevertheless, she clawed back the fire in her eyes and kept it burning into his.

"Why didn't you tell me then? And please no crap about how it was all in my best interests."

"I was afraid." He interrupted her quietly, halting her tirade. Sighing, he walked over to an armchair and sat down heavily into it.

"I never wanted to have this argument with you, and unless I told you everything there is to know about me on the day we met, it was always inevitable. You're a reporter, Lois, the best there is, and that makes you hungry for everyone's deepest secrets. I just wasn't ready to share mine."

Lois backed away two small steps to the couch and sat, her eyes never leaving Clark's. Truth be told, as honest a man as she knew him to be generally, she had not expected this honesty from him now, not about this. The thought that her best friend was afraid to tell her something shocked her, almost as much as the idea that Superman was afraid of anything at all. Being a reporter was more than a job to her; it was her whole identity, and she had never stopped to think that her ever-burning curiosity would be intimidating to others. Perhaps that was the reason she had so few real friends.

The thought struck her that she had to give Clark credit for choosing to be around her at all when he had this great secret to keep. Lois Lane, the pit-bull of journalism, was certainly not the safest friend to have from his point of view.

Clark watched Lois' face as she absorbed his speech, one of the few totally unrehearsed responses he had ever given her. Her brow creased and smoothed as she considered one point or another, and he dearly wished that telepathy was among his many talents.

Lois' mind was swirling with the arguments she had prepared, which would now go unused, including the excuses she had imagined coming from him; the whole conversation that had played in her head seemed suddenly redundant. A faint throbbing ache started in the back of her crowded brain as she glanced down to her right, her eyes falling on the coffee table.

She looked over at Clark, his whole posture anxious for her reply, and tossed him the little envelope of photographs from the table.

"You might not be ready to *share*, Clark, but someone is certainly ready to 'out' you."

Some days being Editor-In-Chief was tougher than others.

Perry had spent the past two hours red-lining the hard copy of a story from one of his international news teams. Schuster was in Brussels covering the latest nonsense being spouted by the European Parliament, and even though Perry particularly despised EU politics, he would grudgingly admit that the rest of the world would occasionally have to feature in his newspaper. The fact that Schuster had only volunteered for the post because he was fond of European women and their fancy lingerie made pulling something

usable from the report a labour of sheer torture. Perry pushed back his keyboard, stretched and bellowed for Jimmy.

The lad came running with an infuriatingly cheerful, “What can I get ya, Chief?”

“Coffee. And a jelly donut. And get Schuster on the phone now!”

“Err, it’s 10 pm there, sir,” Jimmy protested timidly, looking at his watch.

“Do I look like I care? Boy’s gonna get himself suspended if he turns in one more piece of this useless—”

Perry’s rant was interrupted by the painfully high-pitched ring of the phone on his desk. He huffed at he snatched up the receiver, mumbling, “That’d better be him.”

Instead, a racking cough sounded for a few seconds before the raspy voice broke through.

“Mr. White?”

“This is White,” Perry barked, too furious at his wayward reporter to play nice.

“Lois Lane has her phone switched off, so I’d like for you to give her a message if you will. Tell her, I just picked up the afternoon edition and my story is *not* in it! So, her time’s up and she’s lost her scoop. If she wants the juicy stuff, she should learn to write faster.”

Perry sat up stock-straight at that.

“Hey, wait just a hound-dog minute there, mister!” he cut in quickly. “I think I know what this is about: the, errr...”

Perry glanced over to the doorway and gave Jimmy a ‘shoo’ gesture. Jimmy rolled his eyes and bobbed out. Perry lowered his tone a little and continued, “The Spiderman thing, right?”

“Yeah, and it’s long past time that story should be in print. You’re her boss, so maybe you oughtta fire her lazy ass for this, huh?”

“Listen here, the Daily Planet is the only paper you want this story to be in, and I’ll tell you why; think about what you’re selling for a minute. *Spiderman*? You could have a film of him shaking your hand and still look like a sad comic book geek trying to get famous.”

The snitch scoffed and began a retort, but Perry bulldozed through. “Now, if you go running to the *Star* you’ll be laughed out of the building. You could try the *National Whisper*, and who knows... you might get your pictures in there, right beside the photo of Madonna’s alien baby.”

“Hey, this was *real*! I saw him myself! I’m not crazy!” The assertion set off another round of hacking coughs on the end of the line.

“I’m not saying you are, I just think you want to reconsider welching on your deal with Lois Lane. You sold her the photos, and the Daily Planet is the only place to break this news. We have the credibility, and Lane has the talent.”

Perry waited for the informant to consider this, and eventually, there was a grudging huff from the other end. “Well, just hurry it up okay. If Spiderman skips town, the exposé won’t be quite so dramatic.”

“Oh, I don’t think he’s going anywhere,” Perry replied in a low tone, and hung up.

He sat back in his chair heavily, leaning back and swinging round restlessly. Finally, he snatched up the phone again and dialled Lois’ pager number. As he set the thing to beeping, he was doubtful that she would call in as ordered. With a sigh, he wondered about his choice of staff members, most of whom seemed perpetually incapable of keeping their editor in the loop.

As angry as she was at his deception, Lois couldn’t help feeling a stab of pain at the look of utter horror that lingered on his face after he had flipped through the photos a few times, looking at them over the rims of his glasses with his superior vision. That in itself was an interesting moment for her, as she recalled him

doing the very same thing hundreds of times, and yet only now realised why he did so. It made her recognise that she would basically have to get to know him all over again, incorporating the other side of his personality.

Now, she fidgeted in the kitchen area, waiting for the coffee to percolate, avoiding his glum look and wondering what on earth they were going to do about all of this.

“I just can’t believe I was that stupid,” Clark moaned, not for the first time. “Huh, and you were worried you had ruined *your* career at the party.”

Lois had to admit to herself that his current predicament certainly topped her personal embarrassment, and now she racked her brain trying to think of a way out of it. She was just reaching for the coffee pot when a sudden loud beeping, making her jump.

She checked the pager at her belt. “It’s Perry; we’d better check in.”

Clark looked up at her, a question in his eyes that Lois interpreted easily.

“He knows too,” she said quietly, quickly following up with a hurried, “I’m sorry, I needed help. I didn’t know what to do about the photos—”

“So, telling the Chief seemed more sensible than, oh I don’t know, putting a match to them?” Clark’s tone held more biting sarcasm than she had ever heard from him.

“Jeez, for a reporter you really are obtuse sometimes, Clark!” Lois countered bitterly. “We need to keep the snitch sweet or your web-slinging act goes straight into our rivals’ laps. Then we all get egg on our faces, not just Superman.”

Clark lowered his eyes in acquiescence. “I guess we go to the office then.”

“I’ll see you there, then?” Lois asked, throwing a quick glance to the window.

“Can I get a ride? For some reason I really don’t feel like flying anywhere right now.”

“Sure.” Lois grabbed her keys and headed for the door, her dejected partner following. She marvelled at how quickly she was getting used to the idea of him simply flying to the office, and despite her lingering resentment at being kept in the dark about it, she was starting to see that he was still Clark, her partner, just with a few more skills to his repertoire.

The ride to the Planet was mercifully traffic-free. As Lois and Clark rode up in the elevator, Lois surreptitiously scrutinised his face and his hair, noting every detail that made up the disguise that had fooled her for so long.

“Stop it, Lois,” Clark sighed, and she jerked her eyes away.

“I’m just the same Clark you know, okay. I just have a second job, that’s all.” He noticed that they were just one floor away from their destination. “Now, before we go in there, is there anyone *else* who knows who I am?”

“No, just Perry. We just need to figure out what we can print that won’t expose you.”

The elevators doors opened smoothly, and Clark quickly surveyed the newsroom. Few people looked up at the sound of the elevator’s ring, but that was quite normal. He let go of the breath he didn’t realise he had been holding as he confirmed that no one was looking at him with any more than usual regard. It was just Lois and Clark, the ace reporting team, returning from the field.

They made their way over to the editor’s office, stopping only to greet Jimmy, who nodded at them with the phone clasped between his shoulder and his ear as he fumbled with a Flemish dictionary and talked in slow, extremely loud phrases as though the person on the other end of the phone was deaf, not foreign.

Clark briefly gave in the urge to listen in to the conversation with his super-hearing, and, fluent in most European dialects, he quickly understood Jimmy’s problem. The Planet’s most indiscreet reporter was up to his old tricks and had somehow gotten himself in trouble with the local police. Jimmy’s language difficulty was

not helping the problem, and the Belgian lieutenant seemed in no mood to release Schuster any time soon. Clark would have been happy to speed over to Europe and smooth things over with his international celebrity status, but he had more to worry about at the moment. Schuster would just have to stew for the time being.

Lois was already in Perry's office, holding the door open with an exasperated look. Clark wished Jimmy luck and hurried in.

Perry stood as he entered and walked around his desk to perch on the edge. This position usually meant the Chief was in interrogation mode.

Clark quickly ran through his prepared apology speech in his head, hoping that Perry would not be quite as furious at the revelation as Lois had been, but the editor beat him to the post.

"Kent, answer me one question: being as I am Editor-in-Chief of the greatest newspaper in the country, and I had Superman working for me for the last year without knowing it; do you think I should accept that I'm the least observant media professional in the world and hand in my resignation this afternoon?"

The Chief's face reddened and his tone rose steadily throughout the question, which Clark fervently hoped was a rhetorical one.

"Well, if you do Chief, I'd say you're taking the entire newsroom staff with you." Lois' slightly placating tone was not a reply, just a note of support. Clark stood straight, suddenly knowing exactly what to say.

"Sir, you were observant enough to give a job to a small-town hack with virtually no decent writing credentials and trust that he'd turn out to be a reporter worthy of this paper. That's a much tougher call than spotting a face behind some glasses. I'd say you can keep your job."

Perry's eyes widened slightly at the gravity of Clark's reply, and he silently went back round his desk and sat back in his comfy chair. The silence lengthened before a smile spread over the editor's face.

"Well, true, but I think maybe you missed your calling a little – you should've gone into acting. No shame in it neither, the King himself liked the silver screen better than the page."

The whole room seemed to sigh and relax as the tension melted.

"And it's gonna take some pretty fancy acting to get you out of this pickle I'd say," Perry continued as he beckoned for Lois to pass over the envelope of photos poking out of the top of her bag. Lois flushed slightly as he spread the glossy 8x9s out over his desk and considered each one carefully.

"You know our motto, Kent: 'Publish or Perish.' Well that's never been truer than right now, because Lois' snitch is threatening to take his Spiderman cock-and-bull story elsewhere. I put him off for a time, but we have to work fast, or you'll be on the other end of a Dictaphone before you can say Heartbreak Hotel."

"Well the ratbag wants to see Spiderman, right?" Lois piped up. "So what about if we just interview Spiderman? You've still got the costume, don't you?"

"That could work," replied the Chief, "But, see, fooling the snitch comes second to fooling everyone else who was at the party. We put out these photos, and Clark is gonna be under suspicion pretty quickly. People with sense don't believe in Spiderman, but they will put two and two together."

"Well, I guess I could—" Clark began but stopped as soon as he heard the door click open, and Jimmy bobbed his head around.

"Chief, I'm not getting anywhere with these Brussels people and Schuster—"

"Jimmy, *not now!*" Perry bellowed. Jimmy gulped and shot a bewildered glance at Lois and Clark before mumbling an apology and retreating.

"I swear I'm gonna put a lock and a doorbell on there," Perry growled. Clark barely heard him, however, as his head rang with an idea.

"You know, Shuster could use some help over there," Clark mused.

"You might want to focus on the problem a little closer to home Clark," Lois retorted.

"I know, but listen..."

As he outlined his idea, Clark felt a pang of guilt that this time it would not be a little excuse here or a white lie there to keep his secret, but a full-blown fraud.

End of Part Seven

Part Eight – Men in Tights

"Okay, I'm ready," Clark's reluctant voice stated from the bathroom.

"Well, come on out then. We need to get this done or we'll never make the deadline!"

An audible groan sounded from behind the bathroom door as the latch was undone.

Clark gulped and stepped out into the lounge area of Lois' apartment. At least the last time he had worn this outfit in public, he had anonymity on his side.

Thankfully, Lois' back was turned as she fiddled with the camera she had borrowed from Jimmy only after swearing that she would be extremely careful with it. Almost new, the sleek and high-spec digital SLR camera was paid for with months of Jimmy's hard earned wages.

She cursed under her breath as she adjusted the tripod legs, muttering that her floor must be slanted, but her grumbling was silenced instantly as she turned to see Spiderman standing right in front of her.

Of course, her mind knew it was Clark dressed in a suit, but she instantly felt the same thrill as she had experienced a few nights ago when she first saw the spandex-clad hero striding toward her. Lois could not hide the blush that flew up her cheeks, and Clark felt the heat in his own face at her awe-struck expression. He was suddenly very grateful for the mask.

"Ahem." Lois cleared her throat and shook her thoughts into focus. "Right well, let's get one of you crouched on the windowsill, just like the, um, other photo but from inside. That's a good corroboration pic."

Clark nodded and walked to the window, sliding it open and taking up his place. Lois directed him like a professional photographer, taking several shots until the room became frigid with the cold night air.

When she finally had a usable shot or so, he climbed back in and approached her to look through the thumbnails. As he bent to the camera screen, their faces almost touched, and for a split second, his heart stilled as he breathed in her delicate perfume and recalled the way she had rolled his mask up to kiss him that night. Those few minutes had caused all these troubles, yet he could not bring himself to regret them.

Lois' eyes drifted shut as she, too, recalled that same action. She was intoxicated by drink that night, but now she was only affected by his closeness, by the stress of the last two days and the sudden need to forget it all – identities, lies and cover-ups – and lose herself in strong arms and the heat of attraction.

Clark looked at her closed eyes, her upturned face and longed to give in to the illusion they were both living for the moment, but this time she would not forget everything in the morning. He drew away with a soft sigh, and Lois' eyes snapped open, her daze quickly shattering as she drew herself up crisply.

"Right, well..." she stammered hastily, trying to cover her embarrassment. "Now sit on the couch, and we'll get one of me interviewing you."

"Lois," Clark said softly, not knowing what to follow it up with, but just feeling the discomfort between them like a cloud.

"Clark, just... don't okay. We can deal with... whatever *this* is after we've solved the Spiderman problem. Now sit."

Clark decided to shut up and obey, and after they had gotten the faux photographs out of the way, he was glad to rush into the bathroom and get back into his own clothes.

Lois brought out a bottle of light white wine, and they began work on the interview with Spiderman. As much as they both felt a nagging sense of unease about blatantly faking an article, the tension between them dissolved as they started to relax and have fun inventing the questions and likely responses from the fictitious hero.

Clark really got into character, commenting that he was quite happy for the world to believe him just a cartoon character, because it helped him live a quiet life and do good works in relative secrecy and freedom. Between them, they invented that Spiderman and Superman were old friends, and ‘Spidey’ had dropped by to say hi to his pal when he noticed a woman in danger.

Lois typed up the article, prepared the photos and rushed off to the Planet to meet Perry, who was waiting irritably in the empty bull-pen.

“You’re late,” he barked when Lois came rushing in and handed him the copy. “You’ve been drinking,” he added with a scowl.

“Psssh, Clark and I had a glass or two to help with the creative process,” Lois began, but Perry cut her off with an uplifted hand.

“Listen Lois, I know a tippie helps in times o’ crisis, but remember, your overdoing the party punch was a large part of the problem in the first place. Now, I don’t want to tell you this again, got it?”

“Got it, Chief,” Lois said, chastened.

“Now, is Clark...?” the Editor mimed flying, adding a soft ‘woosh’ sound effect.

“Should be over there by now,” Lois confirmed.

“Right well, let’s go to press,” Perry said and picked up the phone.

Clark had always enjoyed the spectacular view of the Alps from the air, and at this altitude, the air was thin, crisp and fresher than almost anywhere else on earth. He noticed a 767 plane in the distance and smiled as he headed toward it. Usually he would have taken a dive to avoid being spotted, but today he wanted exactly the reverse.

As the plane approached, he altered his collision course so as not to alarm the pilots, but as he drifted past both of their mouths dropped open and his super-hearing picked up the quick radio call they made to the Geneva control tower. He made a graceful flyby, waving cheerfully to the passengers who all had their faces pressed to the port side windows, and then descended in the general direction of Belgium.

A hot-dog vendor went wide-eyed in surprise as Superman landed outside the police station in central Brussels and strolled in, affecting a similar reaction in every policeman and civilian in the lobby.

He strolled up to the desk sergeant and gave a slight cough, slipping into his flawless Flemish dialect.

“You’re holding an American journalist here, is that right? Mr. Bernard Schuster?”

“Yes, sir, we are. He was arrested for... for consorting with certain local woman...”

“I’m afraid he is a very poor representative of the United States, Sergeant. I don’t wish to disrupt procedure at all, but can I please speak with the Inspector in charge about it?”

The sergeant got on the phone immediately, and while he was waiting for the call to be answered, he commented, “Your Flemish is excellent, Mr. Superman.” Clark nodded his head in thanks.

Within minutes, he had been ushered into the chief inspector’s office and supplied with coffee and biscuits. The chief explained that Schuster’s deportation was in progress, but international

diplomacy takes time.

“I just thought I’d offer to fly him home for you, save you the expense and the paperwork. I can guarantee he won’t be returning to Belgium, sir.” *I don’t even know if Perry’ll let him keep his job!* Clark thought.

Eager to please, the Inspector bellowed for a junior officer to prepare the American for transport and get his papers. Then, just as Clark hoped, he requested a photo opportunity.

With impressive speed, the local media was alerted and every officer in the station gathered outside for a formal greeting. The Inspector shook Superman’s hand as the cameras flashed, and a reporter held aloft his Dictaphone for a quote.

Superman diplomatically thanked the city of Brussels for being so welcoming and allowing him to repatriate Schuster. As the last moment, he added, “Remember if you ever need me, just call. I can hear you across the Atlantic.”

At the edge of the crowd, a journalist from a French newspaper raised his voice above the general din.

“Superman! Are you aware zat zere is anozer ‘ero in America right now? Zere ‘ave been sightings of zee famous Spiderman in Metropolis!”

Clark grinned. This couldn’t have turned out better.

“Well, I didn’t know he was in Metropolis! He is usually based in New York, so I’d better get back home and say hello!”

“So, you know each ozher?”

“Sure, we’re old friends. Spidey is just a little more, well, reclusive than I am. He likes to do his job and stay out of the limelight. We don’t see each other often, but I appreciate what he does for New York and for the world. It’s very nice to know I am not alone in the fight for Truth and Justice.”

As the media circus settled, Clark turned to Schuster, switching back to English. “Right then, let’s get home, huh?”

Schuster still seemed quite dazed by the whole experience of being arrested in a foreign country and then rescued by Superman himself. He mumbled his thanks and then awkwardly turned so that Clark could get a decent grip around his waist.

The amassed Europeans craned their necks as they took off, and Schuster’s wail of fear drifted away into the clouds. Clark suddenly remembered that his colleague was deathly afraid of heights.

At 8 am, an aged grocery-store owner heaved up the roller-shutters and opened up his front door. He jumped slightly as a hefty stack of newspapers landed at his feet, thrown from the back of a delivery truck.

Groaning a little as his back creaked, he bent down to cut the plastic binding and place the stack of papers in the holder outside the door. As was his habit, he took the top paper for himself and settled behind his counter to read it.

His mouth dropped open as he took in the first page; for there, in full colour, was the cartoon character Spiderman, arm outstretched as he swung away from the heroic rescue of a Metropolis woman. His first thought was that it must be a joke, perhaps an elaborate advertisement for a comic convention.

The headline was bold and serious: DOES SUPERMAN HAVE A HELPING HAND? And just beneath: He’s Real!

The old man adjusted his spectacles slightly to read the tiny by-line. The article was written by Lane and Kent, so it had to be serious – these two were the best the Daily Planet had and not to be wasted on hoaxes.

He read on avidly, overwhelmed by the knowledge that the comic book hero he had cherished decades ago was truly alive!

Most of the newsroom staff was currently doing exactly the same thing as Lois and Clark arrived for work the next morning, since they had told no one about their upcoming scoop.

As soon as they set foot in the bull-pen, Jimmy bounded up to

them and began firing question after question about Spiderman, commenting that it was such a coincidence that Clark had dressed up as him only the other day. Clark received several such comments and kept up his vague but cheerful agreement that it was indeed an amusing chance occurrence.

The article used the snitch's photo of Spiderman leaving Lois' apartment, but they had cropped it to exclude the blurry form of Lois in her Xena outfit.

As Lois and Clark stepped into Perry's office, the Chief beamed brightly at them both and tossed them a newspaper, the French national *Le Monde*. Clark grinned at the paper's bold headline: L'HOMME D'ACIER EN BRUXELLES!

Clark obligingly translated the article for Lois and Perry, paraphrasing. It told of the Man of Steel's visit to Belgium to bail out Schuster and of the friendship between the two superheroes.

Just as Clark folded the paper and set it down on Perry's desk, the editor's phone rang.

"White," Perry barked his habitual answer. The racking cough on the other end of the line left the editor in no doubt who was calling. Perry put the call on speaker.

"Nice work," the snitch rasped when he had recovered his breath. "My photo looks great, and I told you I wasn't crazy — Spiderman *is* real!"

"Yessir, sure thing, you were right," Perry affirmed. "And the Daily Planet thanks you. Now if that's all..."

"Not quite," the informant cut in, and Lois and Clark exchanged worried glances.

"You may find it interesting that there is a monster in the sewers. It's huge and deadly, but very elusive. I've been tracking it for days." Perry tried to stifle a snort of laughter, taking a breath to force the humour from his voice.

"Well, the thing is the Planet has blown its informant budget recently, so I think we'll have to pass on that, err, news. You might try the *Herald* though. I hear they have some dedicated experts on, um, monsters."

Lois was glad she wasn't doing the talking, clamping her mouth shut to muffle the laughter.

The snitch began to protest, halting for another bout of coughing.

"You might want to see a doctor about that cough, too. Thanks for calling." The second Perry pushed the call-end button all three of them erupted into laughter.

"A monster in the sewer! Great shades of Elvis!"

When they had all worked through their amusement, Perry broke out his serious face and turned it on Clark.

"Now, Kent. You're out of one mess, but let it be a lesson to you that those that know you best should *know* you best, right? Lies don't become you, son. You or Superman."

"Are you saying I need to tell Jimmy too?"

"Tell me what CK?" Jimmy asked, his head poking around the door.

"Jimmy!" Perry bellowed. "Do you see a doorbell on my door?"

"Err, no Chief," Jimmy answered, confused.

"Well go *get me one!* NOW!"

"Right away Chief!" Jimmy yelped and disappeared back round the door. At that moment, a cry went up from several people in the newsroom.

Perry, Lois and Clark dashed out to join Jimmy and the rest of the news staff, their faces transfixed in horror at the images on the TV.

In down-town Metropolis, beside an open manhole, a slime-encrusted crocodile-looking creature was tearing savagely into a man wearing a fluorescent vest and a hard-hat. The Channel Six News reporter-on-scene tried in vain to keep the terror out of her voice as the carnage ensued. The beast tossed aside one injured sewer-worker and aimed for another.

"Oh, thank God!" The reporter exclaimed as a streak of red and blue flashed into centre screen. "Superman has got the monster, and he's... he's wrestling it to the ground!"

"Wow, can you believe this stuff CK?" Jimmy turned to where Clark had been standing a moment before. "CK?" He looked around the newsroom.

"Huh. Where'd he go?"

Lois looked over at Perry, sighing.

THE END