

Backwards

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Summary: In a world where it seems everything is backwards, some things remain the same.

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Author's Notes:

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And of course I don't own the characters or any of the rest of it and if anyone wanted to sue me, good luck as I have no job...

Links to the Kent Farm and Smallville etc. can be found at: http://www.lcficmbs.com/ubb/ultimatebb.php?ubb=get_topic;f=6;t=001440 [threads are noted]

And now...

Part 1

Clark's eyebrow's climbed into his hairline. "Smallville?!" he whined to Perry, startled. "Why am I going to *Smallville*?"

"Because I'm the editor and I said so," Perry told him, turning back to the paper on his desk, a sure sign that the conversation was over.

Clark sighed and headed back to the bullpen. He was a city boy, born and bred. Well, not born — maybe, he didn't know; he was a foundling after all and who knew if they had cities on Krypton — but certainly bred. Sure, he'd disappointed his dad when he'd decided to become a reporter instead of going into medicine but it had turned out well. His dad was proud of him. Winning a Kerth his rookie year sure hadn't hurt.

The two after that hadn't hurt either.

He sighed and closed down his computer, preparing to leave for the day — the week really. Why he was being asked to cover some story about the EPA looking for pesticides on a farm was beyond him.

Fifteen minutes later, he was in his apartment on Clinton, packing his bag. He looked at his closet — at the ten pairs of shoes there — and tried to decide what was appropriate for country living. Certainly not his dress shoes and honestly, probably not his casual ones either. He finally grabbed a pair of tennis shoes and hiking boots and stuffed them in his suit case. Blue jeans, T-shirts and the flannel an ex-girlfriend had bought him found their way into the bag. He was more careful with the two pairs of Dockers and one collared shirt and one dress shirt

that went on top.

His toiletries bag was packed in seconds and it was tucked in one side.

He glanced at the clock. No time for one last patrol before he headed to the airport to fly to *Kansas* in a metal tube.

Two hours later, he sat on the tarmac growing more nervous by the second. It amazed him but he was actually sweating.

They'd been sitting out there for nearly two hours with no real explanation. He'd tried to use his superhearing to see what was going on but with all the jet noise and people chattering and, he was sure, his own paranoia about flying, he couldn't focus in on the air traffic control chatter.

He sighed and his foot started practically jumping up and down in a nervous fashion until the lady sitting next to him glared and he forcibly stopped it by pressing down with his hand. He almost forgot to be careful until he felt the metal floor starting to give beneath the pressure.

It was another twenty minutes before they were finally underway. He thought he was going to hyperventilate and he'd caught the stewardess looking at him cautiously more than once.

Actually being in the air should have helped him calm down, but it didn't. He continued with assorted nervous twitches until several hours later when they finally touched down in Kansas City.

He managed to be one of the first ones off the plane without drawing any unnecessary attention to himself, but drew the ire of those behind him when he stepped off the plane and onto the jet way and stopped, taking a deep breath and blowing it out slowly — careful not to blow the walls on the other side down and cause planes on approach to have problems.

After a short pause, he continued, pulling the pilot case behind him. It was thirty frustrating minutes before he managed to get to the Enterprise counter and another hour before he was finally in a car — upgraded to a fairly decent convertible after they'd had to spend forty-five of those minutes searching for his reservation.

His elbow hung out the window and his head was propped up on his fist as he drove into the deepening dusk. He made it out of the city and headed south and slightly west towards his final destination.

As he neared Smallville, he finally looked around, taking in the countryside. It would, he grudgingly admitted, have been an okay place to grow up.

He could see himself as a kid running through the amber waves of grain, playing cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians with a kid from the next farm over instead of street hockey with the other kids on the cul-de-sac of the upscale community he'd grown up in.

That didn't mean he would have traded his childhood. He'd grown up with sports, art, music, culture, the big leagues of everything. But, he admitted, the big cities also had more than their fair share of drugs, crime and poverty that he imagined would be more missing in this part of the countryside.

The stars twinkled down in far greater numbers than he'd seen anywhere except for camping trips with his dad and his scout troop as a kid — or when he was flying above the clouds — as he pulled off the highway and headed towards the bed and breakfast where Perry had told him his reservations were.

He drove through the small town, passing the local junior high and high schools on Tank Avenue, the local pizza place that was still humming with young customers and even the offices for the town's weekly paper.

He didn't really *need* to drive through town to get to his destination but had decided to in order to try to get a feeling for the place. He headed further south and back east a bit, slowing at each crossroad to make sure he didn't miss turns in the unfamiliar blackness.

It was another fifteen minutes before he finally saw the sign and turned onto the gravel road. He carefully maneuvered the car into a spot and contemplated putting the top up but decided not to. There weren't any other vehicles in the area designated for guests so it seemed that he was the only one staying on a Tuesday night. He looked around and noticed signs that this was an actual, working farm as well as a bed and breakfast. That could be interesting. See if the image he had in his head — only slightly updated from the Little House on the Prairie reruns his mom had made him watch — matched reality.

He hoisted his bag out of the back seat and headed towards the door. It would be interesting, if not his next big story. He tested the door cautiously, even though the sign said to 'come on in and make yourself at home'. To his surprise, the door swung open easily.

He walked in, closing the door behind him. There was no one in sight.

"Hello?" he called.

"Just a minute!" came a decidedly female voice from the other room.

He set down his suitcase and shoved his hands deep in the pockets of his Dockers.

Footsteps neared. "So, how can I help you?"

He looked back towards the little check-in desk to see a beautiful young woman standing there, wiping her hands on a towel. She was wearing a pink checked apron covered in flour. Her dark hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail. Her golden brown eyes held something — slight irritation, perhaps?

"I have reservations for tonight," he told her.

"Name?"

"Clark Lane," he told her, pulling his wallet out of his back pocket.

She glanced at the book in front of her. "Hello, Mr. Lane. I'm Lois. Welcome to Kent Farms."

Part 2

Lois tried to avoid staring as she checked him in.

Her mom wouldn't appreciate it if another guest complained about one of the Kent girls ogling him. Of course, it was always Lucy doing the ogling, but that wouldn't matter to Martha Kent. Lois knew better. You were to smile, be polite and friendly but not ogle. Never ogle.

This was the first time in a very long time that she'd been tempted to risk the wrath of Mom in order to get a better look at a guest. The last time had been when Joe Malloy of the San Francisco 49ers showed up about two years earlier. And that had been more because of the celebrity factor than... hotness.

She handed him the form to fill out — pretty standard stuff but glancing over it gave her some insight into his life. Clark Lane, 26, from Metropolis. Daily Planet employee. That piqued her interest. She was the editor of the Smallville Press — for the moment, at least, while Bill was on his extended vacation.

"Is there something wrong?"

She looked up, slightly startled. "Excuse me?"

He sighed. "Do I not have a reservation or something? Is my name spelled wrong? Do you not give rooms to guys from the Big Apricot? I know it's kind of a girlie fruit name, but honestly, my boss told me this is where I was supposed to be." He ran a hand through his hair. "This is great," he muttered. "Just great."

"No, sir. Everything's in order, your reservation is here and even if it wasn't you're our only guest this evening so there would be plenty of room for you."

"So what's the problem?"

"There is no problem." She gave him her best smile. "I was just noticing that you work for the Daily Planet. I'm the editor of the local paper at the moment."

He smiled, politely and little more, she was sure. "That's

great."

She stifled a sigh. "Would you like me to take your bag for you? I'll show you to your room and then, if you're hungry, Mom would be happy to make you something."

"You haven't eaten dinner yet?" He picked up his own bag and waited for her to go to the stairs.

She started up them. "We have, but we knew you were coming and didn't know for sure what time you'd get in. Your flight was delayed. Mom has food from tonight's dinner in the warmer for you or there's probably leftovers from earlier this week if you want them instead."

"Your mom cooks?"

"Actually, I made tonight's dinner."

"Is it safe to eat?"

His voice had taken on a light teasing tone, though she could hear the underlying strain.

"It's very safe to eat." She stopped at the end of the hall.

"This room is on the northwest side of the house so you won't get as much morning sun. You're welcome to look around and take another room if you'd like and you're welcome to look around the farm, just make sure to stay out of the south pasture — Dad's got a mean ol' bull in there that would sooner gore you than anything."

"I'll remember that."

Lois turned as he set his bag down in the room. "If you're hungry, come on down. Down the stairs, kitchen is across the living room to the right."

"Thanks."

She headed to the kitchen, just in time to hear the timer going off. She opened the oven and carefully pulled the apple pie out of the oven.

"Get him checked in?" Martha Kent walked into the kitchen, her arms full of ears of corn.

"Yeah. Put him in the northwest corner — seemed like he'd had a rough trip. His flight was at least two hours late and it took him about five hours to get here after it landed so..." She shrugged and turned the temperature down on the stove before putting a tray of cookies in. "He works for the Daily Planet."

Martha looked up at that. "What're they doing in our neck of the woods?"

Lois shrugged again. "Who knows? They're the Daily Planet — they cover the world, remember?"

Martha wrapped her arm around her daughter's shoulders and rested her head on Lois' upper arm. "Jealous?" she asked quietly.

Lois shook her head vehemently. "No. Not jealous, just..."

"Jealous?"

She sighed and nodded. "Maybe a bit. But I was needed here so here I am. I'll make it; it's just taking a bit longer than I'd hoped. Midwest isn't exactly a hotbed of journalism recruiting for major papers, and running the Smallville Press isn't going to get me much investigative experience but..." She wrapped an arm around the smaller woman. "I love you and Dad, and if you needed me, you needed me. You still do."

"I'm sorry about that, sweetheart."

"I know." She turned so her mom wouldn't see the tears pooling in her eyes.

"Don't try to hide from me. I powdered your tush. I know how badly you want to be in Metropolis, working for a big paper, making a name for yourself."

Lois turned another sigh into a slight laugh. "You know me better than I know myself."

"I'm your mom, of course I do."

Lois gave her mom a big hug. "I love you, Mom."

"I love you, too, sweetie. So, trying to butter this guy up with some of your award winning chocolate cookies?" She reached over and popped one of the cookie dough balls into her mouth.

"Mom! Those have raw eggs in them!"

“And then there’s less for you to eat later?”

“Does everyone know about my penchant for chocolate chip cookies?” she whined.

“Besides,” Martha continued, as though Lois hadn’t said anything else. “The odds of encountering salmonella in an egg from a chicken we hand fed as a chick are about the same as sane people believing in UFOs pre-Superman. And even if I did, I’m not very young, very old or very sick already so I’d be just fine.”

Lois rolled her eyes and snapped a towel in Martha’s direction. Martha responded by snapping a towel back as they both dissolved into giggles.

“Am I interrupting something?”

Lois looked up to see their very attractive guest in the doorway and he looked like he was trying to smother a grin.

Lois tried desperately to regain her composure and straightened her apron. “Mr. Lane, can I get you something to eat?”

“Whatever you’ve got,” he said without moving.

“Have a seat,” Martha said, gesturing towards the table. “I’m Martha Kent. My husband and I own this place.”

He shook Martha’s offered hand as Lois got the plate of barbecue brisket out of the warmer. He sat at the table and Lois set the plate in front of him.

“What can I get you to drink?” Lois asked, heading for the refrigerator.

“Whatever you have is fine.” He took a big bite of the beef.

“This is really good,” he muttered around the mouthful of food. A minute later, he’d swallowed. “Sorry. I know it’s rude to talk with your mouth full and my mom would ground me for a week if she caught me, but this is really good.”

Martha laughed. “Oh, you’re fine. It’s not every day we have a Superman here.”

Part 3

Clark almost dropped his fork and choked on a bite of brisket. “Excuse me?” he managed to cough.

The young woman who had shown him to his room rolled her eyes. “She’s got some... *thing* for Superman.”

“Lois Kent, I do not.”

“Sorry, Mom.” Her tone indicated the opposite.

“I do *not* have a thing for Superman. Your sister might, but I don’t. Fascinated, sure, but who isn’t? And this young man certainly looks a bit like Superman so...”

Lois rolled her eyes. “If you say so.”

Clark breathed a slight sigh of relief. It didn’t seem like this woman had guessed his secret seconds after meeting him but he made a mental note to be a bit more careful.

“Do you prefer sweetened or unsweetened tea, Mr. Lane?”

He glanced up at his young hostess. “Sweetened please, and please, call me Clark.”

She set a glass down in front of him. “There you go, Clark.”

Martha looked at him from across the table. “So what’re you doing in Smallville, Clark?”

He shrugged. “My editor thinks there’s a story here.”

“About what?” Martha and Lois exchanged a glance. “The Corn Festival doesn’t start until Friday and I can’t imagine that the Daily Planet would be interested in that.”

He finished another big bite of brisket. “No. Something about pesticides on the...” He shrugged. “I forget the name of the farm. I’ve got it written down in my bag.”

“The Irig farm?” Martha asked, shocked. “Is *that* what they’re doing? They told us it was Mad Cow Disease from their fertilizer. We all thought it was pretty unlikely but we really have no idea how it’s spread or anything, and why would they make fertilizer out of infected cows?”

Clark shrugged. “I was told pesticides.”

“The Irigs have never used pesticides,” Lois told him. “Ever.”

“Well, now, not ever,” Martha corrected. “Wayne’s grandparents used DDT briefly in the 1930s but Wanda Mae had a bad reaction to it and they used it for... a year? Maybe? Something like that? Before and since, they’ve used natural means to deal with pests.”

Clark leaned back in his chair, his brow furrowed. “Why two stories? What’s really going on over there? They do make fertilizer from infected cows, but that’s rare. A company trying to cut costs, but not often. Besides being illegal, it would ruin whatever reputation they had and possibly ruin them financially.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing.” It was Martha’s turn to look a bit worried. “And what about Wayne and Maggie? Where are they?”

Lois rested a comforting hand on her mom’s shoulders. “I’m sure they’re fine, but whatever’s going on over there, it’s not completely above board. They wouldn’t risk hurting them, though. That wouldn’t look good when word got out.”

“And what about Josh?”

“Who’s Josh?” Clark asked.

“Josh Irig, Lois’ boyfriend.”

“Mo-om.” Lois turned to take a tray of cookies out of the oven. “He’s not my boyfriend. We went out in high school and have gone out a few times since then, but only because we had nothing better to do, not because he’s my *boyfriend*,” she explained. “And I’m sure he’s fine, too. He’s out of town this week.”

“Is there anywhere I can get proof of that? Where would the citations be kept if they’d gotten any, receipts for fertilizers, things like that.”

Lois sat down at the table. “Well, Dan would have record of any citations — or City Hall might...”

“Dan?”

“The sheriff,” Martha told him.

“...and Chris Davis at the feed store would have records of any fertilizers and stuff,” Lois continued as though neither of them had spoken. “I doubt you’ll get anywhere with them, though.”

“Why is that?”

Lois shrugged. “You’re not from around here, and people tend to get suspicious of people who aren’t from around here.”

Clark sighed. “I’m on the up and up, I promise. I don’t know why my editor sent me here, but he did. All I want to do is find out what’s really going on and leave. I won’t make anyone look bad who doesn’t deserve to look bad. If someone has nothing to hide, I won’t try to expose it. If someone really is a good guy, I have no reason to try to make something up. I’ll print the *truth*.”

“Sorry, Clark. That’s the way it is.”

Clark took the last bite of his meal as he thought. “I’ll figure something out.”

“Cookie?” Lois held out the slightly cooled metal sheet towards him.

“Thanks.” He reached for one, eating it slowly, savoring every bite. “These are really good.”

“Lois has won the cookie bake-off for six years straight.”

“I can see why. You could take over the world with these cookies.” He reached for another one. “It’s been a long day,” he sighed. “Do you mind if I turn in?”

“Oh, not at all,” Martha told him, patting his hand. “You’re our *guest*. You’re free to come and go as you please, eat when you want and anything we can do to make your stay more comfortable, please let us know.”

“Thank you.”

Clark stood and picked up his plate and glass. “What should I do with these?”

“I got ‘em,” Lois said, reaching for them.

He felt a slight shock as her fingers brushed against his. She didn’t seem to have noticed as she turned towards the sink. He

picked up a couple more cookies and headed back to his room.

It didn't have an attached bath, so he grabbed his things and headed across the hall. He tried to be conscious that he wasn't the only one who would be using the hot water, so he kept the shower fairly short.

He dried off using one of the towels he'd found in his room and swore under his breath. He'd grabbed the flannel shirt Mayson had given him, not the sleep shorts he'd remembered to toss in at the last minute.

He wrapped the towel around his waist and walked back towards his room.

No sooner than he had shut the door than there was a knock on it.

He sighed and opened it to see Lois standing there.

"Yes?" he asked when she muttered something under her breath.

He heard her breath catch in her throat as she stared at him. "Um, I meant nine, but I thought you'd be naked."

Part 4

"You should help him," Martha told her as Lois rinsed the plate in the sink.

"What? Why? He's a hot-shot big city reporter with three Kerths. He doesn't need or want my help." She shrugged. "That much was obvious when I mentioned that I was the editor here."

"Three Kerths?"

"I've heard of him, okay?" She sighed and leaned against the counter. "He's done some great investigative work, hard hitting and compassionate. That's why he's won three awards in two years. I think he thinks I'm going to be looking for a job handout."

"Bet you didn't know he was so cute," Martha whispered conspiratorially.

"Mo-om," Lois whined. "How cute he is doesn't matter. He sees me as a small-town hick who *might* be able to edit her way to *Smallville* — which is probably smaller than his whole high school — but couldn't cut it in the 'real world.' He's a guest. That's it." She turned back to the dishes while Martha pulled another tray of cookies out of the oven.

"You should offer to help him." Her mom's voice was quiet.

"I don't think he'd let me."

The shower turned off upstairs.

"Go talk to him and at least offer to show him City Hall on your way to work."

Lois sighed. "Fine. But don't get your hopes up."

Martha reached up to give her a big hug. "Honey, we don't need you around here as much anymore. If you left us for the big city, we'd be just fine."

"I'm sure you would, Mom," Lois told her with one last squeeze. "But that doesn't mean I'm going anywhere anytime soon." With a wave over her shoulder, she headed upstairs. The bathroom door was open so she knocked on the door to his room.

A second later it opened and all rational thought fled her mind. He was wearing nothing but his glasses and a towel.

"Oh my," she breathed. "Tomorrow morning..." she muttered.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Um, I meant nine, but I thought you'd be naked."

"Excuse me?"

She watched a drop of water fall from the lock of his hair that fell over his face and land on his chest. It was all she could do not to follow it further down there.

"Um, I mean, if you're dressed and ready to go by nine, I can show you where City Hall is so you can get started on your research."

He nodded. "Thanks, but I think I'm going to sleep in a bit later if I can. It's been a long day and I'm not sure where I'm

headed first."

Lois nodded. "Well, if you change your mind, I usually leave between quarter to nine and nine. Breakfast is any time after six. That's when Mom makes breakfast for Dad and Lucy. She has to catch the bus at seven so..."

"Lucy?"

"My sister. She's a senior in high school. If you need anything, pick up the phone and hit two — that'll go to my room. Tonight's my night on call."

"Thanks."

"Good night."

Lois turned to walk away but kept her eyes firmly on the mirror in the hallway, catching a great glimpse of his bare back as he went back into his room.

She sighed and headed to her room. Once there, she took a quick shower in the bathroom she shared with her sister before getting ready for bed. Morning came early on a farm.

Lois had no idea how long she stared at the ceiling trying to fall asleep. She consciously avoided looking at the clock knowing it would just depress her when she realized how little sleep she was going to get because she was dreaming about the chest she'd only too recently seen. The guy was built like Superman. Not overdeveloped, not underdeveloped — just right.

When she finally did manage to doze off, her dreams were filled with handsome big city reporters and, for reasons unknown to her, Superman.

She contemplated that as she stared towards the window where the light was starting to peek in around the curtains. She'd never dreamed about Superman before — at least not in a remotely romantic sense. Lucy had, she was sure. Her room was plastered with Superman paraphernalia and had been since the hero's appearance a year and a half earlier.

She'd dreamt of him once or twice before but only in the 'she was in danger because of her daring and brave investigative reporting and he'd rescued her from dangling over the jaws of death' sense.

She frowned as something occurred to her. The stories she'd been working on in her dreams — the ones where Superman rescued her — were some of Clark Lane stories.

What was that about?

Lois sighed as she hit the snooze button again before rolling herself up to a sitting position. It was time to get moving if she was going to help with chores before heading into Smallville for the day.

True to his word from the night before, Mr. Lane was still in his room when she was ready to leave. Shrugging to herself, she left and headed to town.

She spent two hours working on assorted things for the paper and by lunchtime she had wrapped up what *had* to be done. She headed to Maisie's for lunch before driving out to the Irigs'.

She parked on a side pullout that few people knew about. She only knew about it because she and Josh had used it to make out a few times in high school. She made her way cautiously toward the house until she saw what looked like Army tents set up in the area. She frowned. That was odd.

She looked around carefully and then moved towards one of them. She peeked in an opening, careful to keep herself hidden.

"Tell me what you know!" She could hear someone practically roaring from inside.

There was a thinking sound and grunt.

Someone was getting beat up.

She moved a bit further so she could get a better view.

On the ground, getting beaten within an inch of his life, was Josh Irig.

Part 5

Clark slowly came to awareness, the chocolate and navy

curtains doing a good job of keeping the morning sun out of the room.

A glance at the clock showed him that it was later than he'd planned on getting up. He sighed and, mere seconds later, was ready to go. Blue jeans, a T-shirt, the flannel he'd accidentally grabbed the night before and his boots seemed appropriate.

He went downstairs to find Martha in the kitchen. They chatted idly while she made him some eggs and bacon. He'd told her it wasn't necessary, but she'd insisted. Before he left, she gave him instructions on how to get to City Hall and the sheriff's office as well as to the Irigs' from there.

He went into town, but — as Lois had predicted — was met with little help. On his own, he managed to determine that there were no citations of any kind — unless they were kept somewhere else. He found the feed store and talked to Chris Davis — apparently Martha Kent's boyfriend from high school — and he'd confirmed that there was nothing unusual about the fertilizers bought by the Irigs.

With a sigh and hours wasted, he headed towards the property in question. There were a large number of military vehicles and personnel. He talked with Carol Sherman, who was surprisingly competent for a government employee. He looked around surreptitiously as best he could, but there was too much going on for him to really see or hear much.

He gave up and headed back to Smallville, going to the diner for dinner. He'd called Mrs. Kent earlier to let him know that he wouldn't be there for the evening meal. It was the best place to go. As soon as word got around who he was and why he was there, he found his table to be musical chairs for the citizens of Smallville.

Even though Sheriff Dan and the folks at City Hall hadn't been very helpful, apparently the military guys had irritated some of the rest of the town folks.

The more he talked to them the more he thought that the city officials might have been pressured into keeping their mouths closed by federal officials.

As the diner thinned out, he looked through his notes. He'd talked to quite a few people — several of whom had come in for the *sole* purpose of talking to him. Lana Lang, Pete Ross, the Tracewskis who ran the nursing home — after Mrs. Tracewskis mother, Jenna Small of the original Smallville Smalls, had passed on — the Belcantos who ran the grocery store, and Chris Davis' parents who'd run the feed store for years before him. Rachel Harris, the town's doctor, had even stopped by for a few minutes.

They'd all said basically the same thing. They had no idea what the military was doing at the Irig farm but they'd never done anything remotely illegal, hadn't used pesticides except for DDT one year in the late-30s or early-40s and there was no way they had Mad Cow infested fertilizer unless everyone in the surrounding countryside did.

Clark sighed as dusk fell. He was getting nowhere. He really should have brought dark clothes for undercover work but it hadn't occurred to him. He could fly back to Metropolis but he didn't really want to risk someone seeing something they shouldn't.

He finally headed back to Kent Farms. There wasn't anyone in the house — at least not as far as he could tell — when he got there, but there were lights on in the barn. He headed out there to see if anything else had occurred to the Kents during the day.

"I don't know what to do with it, Martha, but it's got to have something to do with what's going on over at the Irig's place."

That must be Mr. Kent. Clark had never caught his first name.

"Do we tell Mr. Lane about it?" Martha asked him.

"I haven't met the man. What does Lois think?"

"That he thinks she's going to hit him up for job help," she sighed. "But that he has three Kerth Awards for a reason."

"Then we tell him."

Clark decided he should tell him he was there. "Hello?" he called. "Mrs. Kent?"

She appeared in the open doorway of the barn. "Mr. Lane, how'd your day go?"

He shrugged and walked towards her. "Not very well. Everything's a dead end."

She sighed again. "Well, we have something that might help you. I didn't want to say anything without talking to my husband first."

He followed her into the barn.

"Mr. Lane, this is my husband, Jonathan Kent. Jonathan, Mr. Lane from the Daily Planet."

They shook hands and Clark leaned against a stall. "What is it that you have?" he asked.

Jonathan Kent leaned against a work table. "Wayne Irig came by last week. A big storm had uprooted one of his trees a few weeks ago. He found something and sent a chunk of it to Wichita to be tested. He said he'd gotten a phone call from some FBI types and asked me to keep it for him."

"What is it?"

Jonathan shrugged. "I have no idea." He reached over and flipped the latch on the case sitting on the work bench.

He opened the case and Clark staggered away from the wall towards a pile hay bales.

Pain.

Blinding pain.

And then blackness.

Total blackness.

The next thing he knew he was on the couch in the living room.

"Mr. Lane? Clark?"

The voice was familiar. It took him a minute to realize where he was and who was talking to him.

"What happened?" he whispered.

"Here, drink this."

A cool hand behind his neck helped him lean up enough to take a sip of water.

"How're you feeling?"

Her face swam slightly in front of him. "I'm... okay, I think," he said as she solidified. "What happened?"

"You passed out."

He looked at her, his eyes wide in shock. "Passed out? Why would I pass out? I haven't been sick... I can't get sick..."

His eyes were even wider as he realized what he'd said.

"It's okay, Clark," she said quietly. "Jonathan and I won't say a word. Your secret is safe with us."

"How'd you..." He couldn't finish the thought.

"We took your glasses off to make you more comfortable and as I put a wet washcloth on your forehead, your hair got slicked back a bit and I realized who you are."

"I'm Clark Lane," he said as vehemently as he could. "I have a family. Parents. Friends."

"We know, Mr. Lane. You have nothing to worry about from me and Jonathan. We won't tell anyone. But how're you feeling?"

He struggled to sit up. "I think I'd really like to get some sleep. Could you help me up?"

Instantly, both Jonathan and Martha were at his side. They helped him to his feet and he stood for a moment, just getting reoriented.

"I think I'm okay," he told them. "But I'm going to go to bed."

"Do you need any help?" Jonathan asked.

Clark shook his head. "No. I think I'm okay."

It took him a few minutes but he made it to his room. He looking longingly at the bathroom but decided he didn't have

enough energy for a shower. He opened the door, grateful that he'd left the curtains open earlier and there was a bright, full moon outside — enough that he could see.

He turned and stopped, shocked at the sight.

There, on his bed, was Lois Kent.

In the arms of another man.

Naked.

Part 6

Lois groaned as a door slammed.

Well, slammed might have been a bit of an exaggeration but it woke her up nonetheless.

"Josh," she whispered, trying to raise herself up off the bed.

"So you're in my bed with your ex?" The voice was irritated.

"What?" she groaned.

"Is there some other room I can have or something then, because I really just want to go to sleep."

Lois sat up. "What?"

She suddenly realized that she was practically half naked, but as she looked at the man lying next to her, she didn't care. She shook him. "Josh. Come on. Wake up."

There was no reaction.

Tears filled her eyes. "Josh. Come on." She shook him again.

"You can't die on me." The tears overflowed.

"What?" the voice was more shocked this time.

"They were beating him, Mr. Lane." She struggled to roll Josh over.

"What?" He was kneeling on the bed helping her move him.

"He's breathing."

Together they got him rolled over. Clark reached for something and handed it to her. "Here."

Lois looked at the cloth in her hand and then down at herself. Her dark bra contrasted sharply against her lighter skin.

"Thanks," she said as she pulled the shirt over her head.

"Go get your parents. They were in the living room a minute ago."

Lois nodded and headed downstairs to return a minute later with her mom and dad. By the time they returned, Josh had his eyes open — as much he could when they were nearly swollen shut.

"What happened?" Martha gasped as she rushed to the bed. "I thought Josh was out of town."

"So did I," Lois told her. "He's at least got a couple of cracked ribs. I wrapped my shirt around him and it seemed to help."

"Jonathan, call Rachel and Dan. Lois, turn that light on and get me some towels and such to use to clean him up and some bandages." Martha turned as Lois flipped the switch. She gasped. "What happened to you?"

Lois shrugged. "I got him out of the tent where they were pounding on him but to stay ahead of them I couldn't just walk through the woods dragging Josh behind me. We had to go down by Small Creek and hide out in that cave for a while. It's not the easiest hike without mad military men chasing you."

"Oh, honey. Are you okay?"

Lois nodded. "I'm fine. Cuts and scrapes but otherwise good." She winced. "I've got a bad one on my back from trying to get out of the cave — it's a lot smaller than I remembered."

"You were a lot smaller the last time you and Josh played down there regularly and 'cave' is being generous."

"Yeah, I know. Anyway, when we were getting out I scraped my back pretty good and it'll need some antiseptic and a bandage but otherwise..." She shrugged. "We made it back to the car and came here." She looked around. "I'm not really sure why we ended up in here, except it used to be my room before we converted the house. I'm sorry, Mr. Lane."

"It's okay. It just startled me a bit to see you in my bed half-

naked." There was a hint of a smirk on his face, Clark was sure.

Lois rolled her eyes and turned as Jonathan reentered the room, laden with supplies.

"Rachel and Dan are on their way. I told them to go the back way and no lights or sirens or anything," he told them.

Clark pinched the bridge of his nose. This was going to be a long night. The guy — Josh — seemed to be okay, at least he was breathing and didn't seem to have any broken ribs or anything.

"Um, can I use a phone to call my... Metropolis?" he asked.

Lois looked up from where she was handing her mom another wet cloth. "I'll show you." She led the way to one of the other rooms. "Here. There's a phone on the night stand. Dial nine, then one, area code, number."

"Thanks." He waited until she left before dialing the familiar number. "Dad? It's me," he said when he heard his father pick up.

"Clark? What's wrong?"

"That's just it," he whispered. "I don't know."

"What?" his dad sounded shocked. "That was a *rhetorical* question."

"I know, but it's not. Something wrong and I don't know what and..." Clark took a deep wavering breath. "How soon can you get to Smallville, Kansas?"

"What? Clark, can't you just come here?"

"No, Dad. That's just it. I can't."

"You can't?" Sam asked skeptically.

"No, Dad. I *can't*. I can't do... anything. I'm..." Clark ran a hand through his hair. "I'm *normal*."

There was a long silence. "I'm on my way."

"Thanks, Dad," Clark said quietly. "I appreciate it. But don't tell, Mom, would ya? I don't want her to worry."

"I don't keep secrets from your mom."

"Please, Dad. I'll tell her if we don't figure this out."

His dad sighed. "Fine. I'll get there as fast as I can."

"Thanks."

"Be careful, son."

"I will."

Clark carefully hung up the phone and stared at the rug covering the hardwood floors. It would probably be at least mid-morning if not early afternoon before his dad — the doctor who was an expert on his physiology — could get there. He flopped back onto the bed and stared, unseeing, at the ceiling.

He thought he'd dozed off when he heard the sounds of people coming up the stairs.

The next hour was spent with Dr. Rachel Harris patching up both Lois and Josh and Sheriff Dan Scardino was trying to put the pieces together of Josh's imprisonment and subsequent escape.

Clark gladly gave up his room to Josh for the night. He was going to take the room that he'd called his dad from. The elder Kents, Rachel and Dan headed downstairs to talk for a few more minutes. Clark headed to his room for the night leaving the door open — as he'd promised in case Josh needed anything. He just sat down on the bed when Lois crumpled to the ground in the hallway.

He was at her side in a second. "You okay?"

She groaned. "My ankle. Mom wrapped it up and is going to get me a poultice for it and I thought I could make it to my room, but..." She sighed. "It gave out. I'm not entirely certain why Josh and I didn't collapse on the couch, how we made it all the way to that room."

Clark stood and held out a hand. "Let me help you."

Lois grasped his hand and he felt that stream of electricity run through him again. Once she was standing, he bent over and scooped her into his arms.

"Clark! Put me down!"

"You can't walk," he said practically.

"But Mom and Dad said you collapsed earlier," she pointed

out.

He looked around. “Is there another room up here you can go in?”

Lois pointed to the door across the hall from his. “This one is fine.” She reached out and opened it with one hand.

He carried her through the door.

“That’s awfully forward of you, Mr. Lane,” she said with a smirk.

“Excuse me?”

She hopped down onto one foot as he stopped near the bed. “Around here, us small town folks wait till after the wedding to carry the girl over the threshold.”

“Well, you’re not going to get me into bed.”

“I never planned on it.” She sat on the edge of the bed.

“Thanks, Mr. Lane.”

“I thought I told you to call me Clark,” he said with a grin.

Part 7

That grin should be illegal — and probably was near freeways and airports. It could easily light up all of Smallville.

“Sorry, Clark. Thank you,” she told him scooting back a bit further on the bed.

“You’re welcome. Sleep well.” He turned towards the door, stopping as he reached the hallway. “Um, my dad’s going to be here tomorrow. Can he have a room here?”

Lois nodded. “Yeah. We’ve got room till Friday. Then we’re booked up for the Corn Festival, but he could always bunk with you for the weekend if you’re here that long. Your reservations are for a week so…”

Clark snorted.

“What?”

“Dad doesn’t *bunk*. When we camped out in Gramps’ backyard, me and Gramps would sleep either outside or in the sleeping bags in the tent. Dad had this little cot thing he brought with him. When we went with my Scout Troup, he roughed it on a foam thing so he wouldn’t embarrass me but…”

Lois shrugged. “Well, he can have your room and you can have my tent. How’s that?”

Clark crossed his arms in front of him and leaned against the door jamb, that grin firmly in place. “You take the tent; I’ll take your room.”

Lois raised a brow at him. “I’ve got a busted ankle and you’d make me sleep in a tent in the yard?”

He shrugged. “I’m the guest…” His grin took on a slightly wicked gleam. “You could always bunk with me.”

“So I am getting you into bed?” she asked, her own arms crossed in front of her.

He rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. “This is where the shotgun wedding comes in, isn’t it? Farmer Jon catches city slicker in bed with his daughter. Shotgun weddingness ensues?”

“Oh, no.” She used her best country girl drawl. “This here’s Lowell County. You sleep in a bed with a girl, even if it’s for no reason but sleepin’, and you’re already married. No shotguns needed.”

He laughed. “Good to know.” He winked at her. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

He turned towards the other room.

“Clark?”

He stopped and turned back towards her. “What?”

“Did you find out anything that you didn’t tell us already? About the Igrigs? Where Josh’s parents are?”

He shook his head. “No, but I’ll be out looking again in the morning. I’ll let you know if I do find anything.”

She wiped a tear that had streaked down her cheek, but it was followed by many others. A second later, Clark was next to her, his arms around her as the tears flowed.

“He’s one of my best friends,” she told him when the torrent

subsided. “I’ve known his family my whole life. His mom makes the best caramel apples every year for Halloween and the Corn Festival — and those are the only times we ever got them.”

“I’ll figure it out,” he said quietly, rubbing one hand up and down her arm.

“Let me help you. Please. I know you think I’m some small town hick editor but I know this area, the area around the Igrigs’ like the back of my hand. I know the land, the people and I know how to investigate even if I don’t get to do much around here.”

She could feel him hesitate before nodding. “Okay. We’ll check it out in the morning.”

Lois relaxed against him. “Thank you.”

She closed her eyes and felt the tension draining away for the first time in hours.

Before she knew it she was asleep.

Lois woke to a shifting pillow.

She groaned rolling over and pulling the blanket over her head.

It hurt.

Everything hurt.

“So does this mean we’re married?” came an answering groan from the other side of the bed.

What?

Who?

“Clark?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“What happened?” She surreptitiously checked and breathed a sigh of relief when she realized she was fully clothed.

“You were crying and…” He paused. “I don’t remember anything after that.”

“You *are* going to let me help you today,” she insisted.

“I’m not sure I remember agreeing to that.” She could hear the underlying amusement in his voice.

She rolled over so she could glare at him, but was stopped when the scrape on her back tore a cry from her.

“Are you okay?” he asked, a hint of fear tingeing his voice this time as she rolled again, her back arching away from the bed and the pain.

“My back.” The lingering painful tingle brought tears to her eyes as she curled away from him.

“Let me look.”

“I scraped it pretty bad yesterday.”

She could feel his hand at her waist, warm against her skin as he pushed her shirt up so he could look at her back. She’d taken her bra off before Rachel had patched it up.

“It looks like it hurts,” he said, his voice barely more than a whisper.

“It does,” she whispered back as his finger trailed along the outside of the bandage.

She could tell he was moving closer to her.

Chills went up and down her back for an entirely different reason when he brushed a feather light kiss at the top of the long bandaged area and then another over an unbandaged cut.

Then another.

And another.

“Are you kissing it all better?” she asked, her voice husky.

“I wish I could.” She could feel his breath against her skin.

She twisted her head slightly to look at him, meeting his chocolate eyes with her own. “Thank you for trying,” she whispered.

She wasn’t entirely certain who moved first, but the next thing she knew, his lips were on hers.

Tentatively at first then more boldly as he shifted closer to her, his arm snaking around her stomach to hold her to him.

She reached up to grasp the back of his head, her fingers tangling in his thick hair as she deepened the kiss further.

Until they heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

Clark moved away from her and she felt bereft as his lips left hers.

She could hear his ragged breathing as he shifted away and sat up.

“Um, your back *looks* fine,” he said, a bit more loudly than necessary, she was sure. “Some of the scrapes could probably use more antiseptic but...” He pulled her shirt down over her back.

A cover.
Right.

In case it was... Farmer Jon coming up the stairs.

“Mr. Lane?”

Lois closed her eyes and groaned quietly. Worse.
It was her mom.

She would definitely know something was up.

Clark moved off the bed. “Yes, Mrs. Kent?”

“There’s someone named Jimmy on the phone for you. I transferred it to the room you were in last night.”

She heard him thank her mom and leave the room, shutting the door to his room behind him.

She felt the other side of the bed depress.

“Care to tell me what’s going on?” her mom asked quietly.

“He heard me scream a bit when I rolled onto my back and came to check the scrapes for me.”

“Lois.” There was no condemnation in the voice, but Lois knew her mom knew more than she was letting on.

She sighed. “We both fell asleep in here. That’s it.” Or mostly it. All her mom needed to know.

“Is he a good kisser?” Martha whispered conspiratorially.

“Mo-om!” Lois said, indignant as she tried to sit up, glaring at her mom as she did.

“Is he?” her mom asked with a smirk.

Lois sighed. “Yes. And that’s all it was. A kiss. That’s it.”

“You’re both adults,” the elder Kent said with a shrug.

“Regardless, it was just a kiss.” Lois winced as she stood up. “He did say that his dad’s going to be here later and will want a room. He also said he’ll let me help him look for the Irigs and see if we can figure out what’s going on.”

“See? You should have kissed him sooner.”

“He said that last night and well before I kissed him,” Lois pointed out. “Or he kissed me. Or something.”

Martha laughed. “Oh, honey, I’m just giving you a hard time. I’m sure between the two of you, you’ll figure this out in no time.”

“I hope so, Mom,” Lois sighed. “I hope so.”

Part 8

“Thanks, Jimmy.” Clark hung up the phone and ran a hand through his hair. He’d never woken up with a woman in his arms before and he’d never felt as close to losing the tight control he kept over himself at all times as he had when he kissed her.

Of course, he also wasn’t... super at the moment and who knew if he ever would be again.

Maybe that was the reason he’d felt so close to willing to just lose control, lose himself in kissing her. To even kiss her back in the first place.

But he couldn’t afford that.

That Martha and Jonathan Kent knew his secret was bad enough.

A small town editor who — he was sure — was hoping for a big break in the big city someday was something else.

So what was he going to do?

He’d promised her that they’d work together and he wasn’t about to go back on that. She was right — she *did* know the area and the people a lot better than he did. Besides, she wouldn’t let him back out. He was certain of that.

And he *wasn’t* super.

So she couldn’t accidentally see him do something he

shouldn’t be able to.

And unless someone had more of whatever it was that Jonathan Kent had accidentally exposed him to, he’d be fine.

A phone call home told him that his dad had somehow managed to get on a very early flight from Metropolis to Kansas City and that he was already on the road to Smallville. He’d be there in a couple hours. And he’d managed to avoid answering his mom’s questions while still avoiding lying to her.

A glance at the clock showed that it was later than he’d realized and he really should get moving if he wanted to get anything done before his dad arrived.

He tested his powers — just to be sure — and he was right. He still didn’t have any of them.

Not even a little bit.

He got dressed at normal human speed, because he had to.

He opened the door to his room just as Lois was coming out of the room across from his.

“So we’re going to have to get moving if we’re going to get anything done,” she said, barely looking at him as they headed down the stairs.

So she wasn’t going to talk about it. That was okay with Clark — at least for now, until he could figure it all out in his head.

“Why don’t you see what my mom’s got for breakfast and I’ll get changed?” She stopped at the bottom of the stairs and looked him up and down critically. “The boots will do, I guess, but I don’t suppose you have any camouflage or anything? Like hunting clothes or something?”

Clark shook his head. “Nope. Sorry. This is about all I’ve got with me in the way of casual clothes.”

Lois sighed. “Dad’s clothes won’t fit you. I’d get you some of Josh’s but we can’t get to his house — they’d probably fit though.” She bit her bottom lip. “I bet Dan’s clothes would fit you. He’s a bit taller than you and maybe a bit heavier, but they’ll work. I’ll call him and we’ll meet him somewhere.”

“Why do I need camouflage?” he asked. “You didn’t wear any yesterday.”

“And do you know how close I came to being caught? Both of us? We’re not risking that again, Lane. Either we get you some camos or I don’t show you where to go.” Her arms were crossed in front of her and Clark knew, somehow, that this was one time he shouldn’t cross her.

He sighed, resigned. “Fine. I’m going to eat.”

With that he headed to the kitchen to find Martha making a hearty country breakfast. He sat at the table and found a plate in front of him almost immediately.

Her hand came to rest on his shoulder. “How’re you feeling?” she asked quietly. “I can’t begin to tell you how sorry we are.”

He shook his head. “There’s no way you could have known. I didn’t know. And I feel... fine. Just not... super. I was a bit weak last night still or...”

“You never would have fallen asleep with my daughter?”

There was an amused grin on her face as she sat across from him.

“She told you?” He couldn’t look her in the eye.

“Clark, honey, I’m a mom. I know these things.”

“Right.”

“You’re both adults, Clark. And to be honest, it doesn’t *really* surprise me.”

“Her ankle gave out and I carried her in there. She started crying about Josh...” Clark shrugged. “We just dozed off.”

“Well, you will have to marry her now, you know,” Martha told him, a twinkle in her eye.

“Ah, I was informed that in Lowell County if you so much as sleep in the same bed with a girl you’re already married,” he answered, a twinkle in his own. “I think I’m going to like you, Mom.”

She laughed. “That’s Lois for you.” She stood and went back

to the stove, stirring the gravy before turning to look at him again. “Don’t hurt her, Clark. She’s been hurt enough.”

He looked up again at that. “Excuse me?”

“She’s been burned in the past. Don’t hurt her.”

“I won’t,” he promised, though he wasn’t sure he saw a future where he could hurt Lois. Even though the kiss had been fantastic, he didn’t see that happening.

“So you’re really feeling better?” she asked again.

He nodded. “Yeah. I mentioned it to Lois last night but my dad’s on his way. He’s a doctor and…” His voice trailed off.

“Right. Lois mentioned he was coming.”

Lois walked into the kitchen wearing a faded pair of camouflage pants and a jacket, her dark hair tucked under a dark green hat.

“Well, at least they won’t find you, sweetheart, but you’ll have to keep Clark here out of sight.”

Lois shrugged as she opened the fridge and pulled out some bottles of water to put in her backpack. “We’re stopping at Dan’s to get him some clothes. They should fit okay.” She glanced over at him. “You got a belt with you, Lane?”

He nodded.

“Good. Make sure you bring it.” She tossed some granola bars in the pack as well. “Mom, do you know where the camelback is?”

“I’ll get it.” She left and returned a minute later, holding out to Lois.

Ten minutes later, they were ready to go. Martha held Lois tightly for a minute, then kissed her forehead. “Be careful, sweetie.”

“We will be, Mom.”

Martha turned to him before giving him a big hug as well. “Take care of her, Clark.”

“I’ll do my best, ma’am.”

She pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Take care of you, too. I’m getting attached.”

Clark chuckled lightly. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Come on, Lane. Let’s go!” Lois called from where she was standing by her truck.

A minute later, they took off down the drive.

Part 9

Lois ignored him.

The kiss had rattled her more than she’d ever let on but she wasn’t going to let him know that.

Ten minutes after they left the farm house, she pulled onto the drive of a similar farm. Still without saying a word, she motioned him inside.

“Here,” she finally said, holding some clothes out to them. “Go try these on.”

Clark took them and disappeared down the hall.

Lois closed her eyes and took a deep breath, willing the butterflies in her stomach to calm down. When she opened them, her eyes landed on a picture of herself. She picked it up, surprised he still had it displayed. Taken at the last Corn Festival, the two of them were line dancing. The smiles on their faces reminded her — painfully — of a happier time, when they’d been happy together but then...

A thunk brought her back to the present.

“Does this meet with your approval?” She could hear the exasperation in Clark’s voice.

She turned, the photo still in her hand. He looked... better. At least when it came to traipsing through the woods. The pants were too long and rolled a bit at the ankle. They were obviously cinched at the waist and the shirt was hanging untucked and, currently, unbuttoned. It was obviously a bit on the big side as well, but not too bad.

For a second, she wished he wasn’t wearing a T-shirt

underneath so she could see...

She mentally shook herself. She couldn’t go there. Not now. They had to figure out what was going on over at the Irigs’.

“Much better,” she finally said. “Let’s go.” She tossed the picture on the couch and headed towards the door.

“What’s that?” Clark asked as he followed her, stopping long enough to look at the photo. “Are you and Dan a thing? At least I guess that’s Dan since this is his house.”

“We used to be,” she told him, walking outside and heading straight for her vehicle. “Let’s go.”

It was nearly an hour later before Lois, Clark in tow, reached the spot where she’d seen Josh getting beaten. They couldn’t see or hear much and Lois, despite Clark’s protests, decided to move closer — to get close enough to the tents to hear what was being said.

There was no one in the tent where Josh had been so Lois skirted it, staying as close to the woods as possible, on her way to the tent next to it.

There was a slight gap where the corners met and she peeked through it, stifling a gasp as the object in the center of the room came into view.

“What?” Clark whispered.

“Superman,” she whispered back.

“What?” he hissed, loud enough that she shushed him.

“There’s a... spaceship here with Superman’s shield on it,” she told him, barely loud enough to be heard. “But it’s so little. There’s no way he’d fit in it, unless...” The wheels were turning in her head. “He’s been here longer,” she said, practically to herself. “He’s been here a lot longer than eighteen months. He came as a baby.”

She turned to see Clark looking pale beneath his normally tanned complexion.

“What?”

“Are you sure?”

“You had the first interview with him. What did you think?”

Clark just shrugged and Lois turned her attention back to the tent.

“They haven’t found any more, Colonel Trask.” It was some underling reporting to a guy leaning over a table and studying... something.

“There has to be more!” Trask practically yelled. “There were several UFO sightings in this area that night. There *has* to be. It’s related to the alien — it has to be!”

The underling scurried out of the tent, leaving his boss alone again.

Trask reached for a small box sitting on the table, opening it.

Lois couldn’t see what was inside, but could see a sickly green glow.

There was a thud behind her. She turned to glare at Clark, but her look quickly became one of concern.

“Clark! What’s wrong?” She glanced worriedly back into the tent to see that the box was closed and the man was leaving. She grasped his arm. “We have to go,” she hissed.

He stumbled after her, seeming to gain his footing as they went.

“And be quiet.”

Lois kept one hand on him as they headed deeper into the woods near the Irig Farm. She thought about heading towards the spot she and Josh had hidden the day before, but wasn’t sure it was still safe. She’d heard men not too far from them and she didn’t want to risk it.

She thought quickly as the underbrush grew thicker. That was good and bad. Good because it was harder to get through, bad because it was easier to leave a trail.

A flash of childhood came to her.

The branch swings near the dry creek.

She changed directions slightly and the ground cleared out a

bit.

There.

“Come on, Clark.” She didn’t fully understand the phenomenon but there they were. Branches that went from one tree to another, somehow winding together. Over the years, the branches had grown until they were practically swings, starting dozens of feet in the air on one tree, dropping to about three or four feet off the ground and back up to the other tree. There was a series of them that would allow them to ‘Tarzan’ thirty or forty feet to the dry creek bed.

It wasn’t *really* ‘Tarzaning’ but they could move from one ‘swing’ to the next.

If her throbbing ankle would hold out.

“Can you do this?” she asked Clark.

They’d been on the move for ten or fifteen minutes and he was winded and pale but seemed to be okay.

He nodded, his mouth set in a grim line. “I have to.”

She climbed nimbly onto the first swing and moved swiftly from one to the next. After reaching the fifth swing, she looked back to see Clark moving cautiously.

“Pick up the pace,” she hissed at him. “We gotta move. If they catch us here, we’re sitting ducks.”

She could hear men moving through the woods but they were still distant. It seemed like an eternity before she hopped onto a big rock at the other end of the swings. Clark was only a couple of trees behind her. She waited for him to catch up.

“Stay on the rocks.”

They hopped from rock to rock until they reached Small Creek. They stayed on the rocks, wet from the creek water for another twenty feet or so until Lois hopped onto the other bank. She hoped they wouldn’t be able to track them — even with dogs after using the creek to hide their trail, but she wasn’t sure they’d been in it long enough but she didn’t risk staying there any longer.

They headed back into the underbrush, doing their best to leave as little trail as possible and communicating with hand signals.

And then Lois disappeared.

Part 10

Clark couldn’t have been more than ten feet behind her.

But she was gone.

Vanished.

Into thin air.

If he was a conspiracy theorist, he’d think she’d been snatched by aliens using ‘beam me up, Scotty’ technology.

He was winded. Tired. Unused to being without his powers, this was taxing. And even if he hadn’t seen it, he was sure there had been some more of whatever it was Jonathan Kent had around that tent somewhere.

He looked but couldn’t see her.

Anywhere.

What was he going to tell her parents?

Then he heard a hissing sound.

“Over here.”

He saw her, behind a curtain of... something. He wasn’t sure what it was — ivy, moss, something green. The curtain closed as she moved her arm. He crouched and followed her.

It was roomier than he’d expected, though he wasn’t quite sure what he’d expected in the few seconds between discovery and entry into the small area.

Light filtered in through the green stuff so they weren’t completely in the dark. Lois was sitting with her back against the rock, her head leaned back and she was breathing heavily.

He situated himself but there wasn’t enough room and he found the whole side of his body in contact with hers. “Sorry,” he said. “There’s not much room.”

“It’s smaller than I remember, too. Just like yesterday.”

“Or maybe you’re bigger than you were as a kid.” He smiled slightly. “I can just see little Lois Kent running around the woods trying to keep up with the boys.”

She snorted as she pulled her backpack off her shoulders and situated it in her lap.

“What?”

“More like they were trying to keep up with me. You did really well on the tree swings. None of the guys ever made it all the way across without falling.”

“I had good incentive.” He took the offered bottle of water and gulped gratefully.

“And none of them ever found me when I hid here. I don’t think Josh even knows about it.”

Clark nodded.

“What happened back there?” she asked quietly. “Are you anemic or something?”

He shook his head. “Got... dizzy all of the sudden. I don’t know what it was.”

“The guy thinks something around here is connected to Superman — baby Superman, no less. There was something green in that box of his.”

He could practically see the wheels turning in her head. If she figured it out, she figured it out, but he wasn’t going to help her if he could help it.

“If Superman’s been here since he was a baby, then he probably has parents, a family, friends. Maybe he’s even married with kids,” she mused. “I bet he has a day job and bills and everything and he walks around and no one knows who he is. He’s not Superman *all* the time — I couldn’t believe that was all he did even before this.”

She was smart.

That was scary.

“Thank you,” he said suddenly, hoping to change the subject before she thought too much more about it.

“For what?” she asked, puzzled.

“Insisting on coming with me. I wouldn’t have gotten close without getting caught and I certainly wouldn’t have gotten away.”

She nodded and handed him a granola bar.

He took it, opening it slowly. “What now?”

“We wait till dark and then get the heck out of Dodge. Hope they don’t find us in the meantime. Josh, Dan, Pete — they all walked right by here more than once while I was hiding, but they’re not pros like these guys should be. They knew the woods but not how to track signs. I hope we managed to lose them with the swings and the rocks and the creek but...”

“Right.”

“You’ve met him, several times. Do you have any thoughts on who Superman might really be? What he does for a living?” she asked going back to the topic he was hoping to avoid.

“I haven’t actually talked to him that much,” he finally said. “Just seen him around some.” That much was true. Technically, he didn’t see Superman unless he happened to look in a mirror or a reflective window or something while in the Suit.

“I bet he does some job where no one notices if he leaves a lot. He does rescues and stuff during the day sometimes. Maybe he works from home.” She thought for a long minute. “I don’t but I can come and go as I please, for the most part.”

“Are you Superman?” he interjected, trying to insert laughter into his voice. If he ever really got to know her, he was going to be in big trouble; he could sense that already.

She laughed softly. “Right. That would be a great disguise though. If he could... shape shift into a woman.”

“It would be.”

“Or really, I guess he’d be a woman who shape-shifted into a man to be Superman. So I doubt that’s right — what woman in

her right mind would want to shape shift into a man? I bet he's just a regular guy." She bit her bottom lip. "Maybe he works for a newspaper. A beat reporter or something — he could be out on stories, tell his editor he's got a tip, all of that." She turned to look at him, her eyes narrowed. "Do you know anyone who might fit that description? Is Superman the Daily Planet's..." Her voice dropped to an even lower whisper. "...junior copy editor? Senior sportswriter? New photog?"

"What?" He stared at her. "You're insane. How can you even be sure that Superman has a secret identity? Maybe he lives in a cave somewhere in New Troy," Clark pointed out. "Or an... ice cave in the Arctic."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Right. Ice cave. Sure. No, that ship couldn't hold anything bigger than a baby. He's been here for years, living among us. Probably hiding what he could do — who he was — for fear of nut jobs like that Trask guy." Her brow furrowed even further. "And Trask — whoever he is — knows that. I wonder what it was that he had in that box. I couldn't see it but it... glowed. He thinks it has something to do with 'the alien'." She used finger quotes. "Who else could he mean? But he wants to get his hands on more of it — whatever it is. And if he's not a Superman fan, maybe he thinks it's detrimental to Superman? He wanted more of it badly and if he hates Superman like he seemed to, he'd want to hurt Superman, right?"

Clark stared at his hands. Her leaps of logic were amazing to watch.

If only her conclusions didn't threaten him.

His family.

Everyone he'd ever cared about.

Everyone he'd ever loved.

She shifted to look at him. "What do you think, Clark? *Could* something that must have something to do with Superman hurt him?"

He ran both hands through his hair.

Her gasp shouldn't have startled him but it did.

"You're him," she breathed. "You're Superman."

Part 11

Once she said it, it all made sense.

She wasn't entirely certain *why* but it made sense.

He had more interviews with Superman than anyone. He was in Smallville investigating guys she'd discovered were looking for something in connection with Superman.

He was... hot.

She mentally rolled her eyes as she continued to stare at him. *That* was a reason to make the connection.

The more she looked, the more she knew she was right, even if he hadn't confirmed it.

"So?" She looked at him expectantly. "Can't you just fly us out of here or something? And why did we traipse through the woods instead of getting us out of here?"

Clark sighed. "Fine. You're right. I'm Superman. But I'm so much more than that, Lois." He turned to look at her, his eyes earnest. "I'm *Clark Lane*. That's who I *am*. Superman is what I do, a costume I wear so I can help people and not lose *me*, not put my loved ones in jeopardy. Do you know what a nutcase like Trask would do if he got a hold of my parents?"

She reached out and rested a hand on one of his. "I'm not going to expose you. But why aren't we getting out of here?"

"Because I don't have my powers. Your dad..."

"What about my dad?" she asked, crossing her arms in front of her, defiant. "Don't you dare start accusing him of..."

He shook his head. "Nothing like that. Wayne Irig gave him something to keep — something he found. Your dad thought it might have something to do with all of this so he showed it to me last night. I don't know what it was, but it affected me. I passed out. I don't have any of my powers at all. That's why I called my

dad. He's a doctor and knows more about me and how my body works than anyone." He looked at his watch. "He's probably here at your house by now."

"They're probably worried sick," Lois said quietly. "Even if they don't know we're hiding out."

"Your mom made me promise to take care of you." He sighed. "Some job I'm doing."

"Do they know?"

He nodded. "Your mom figured it out last night after I passed out."

"My mom's pretty smart." She stared at the green curtain in front of them. "I thought you were invulnerable."

"I thought I was, too."

Lois stretched her leg as far as she could out in front of her. "You know it wasn't too bad while we were on the run, but my ankle is throbbing now. Must have been the adrenaline or something."

Clark was grateful for the change of subject, whatever the reason. "Let me look at it. My dad's a doctor and my mom's a nurse. I've studied some of this stuff. Don't know if I can actually do anything about it but..."

Lois shifted so her leg was lying on Clark's lap. He carefully worked her boot off then moved it around slowly. She winced a few times but it wasn't as bad as he'd feared.

"I think if we rewrap it a bit tighter that'll help keep it from swelling so much you can't get it in your boot, but it really doesn't feel too bad — at least it didn't from here. You weren't screaming or anything."

"No, I think it'll be okay. Mom put a poultice on it last night so..."

Clark looked up from where he was starting to rewrap the Ace bandage around her foot. "What? When?"

"How do you think we got the blanket, Einstein? She put it on after we went to sleep — I think I remember thanking her, but I'm not sure. I'm surprised you didn't notice the cabbage leaf wrapped around my foot this morning."

"I had other things on my mind," he told her honestly. Like getting caught making out with her. Like where his powers had gone. Like wondering if they were coming back. Like wishing he could kiss her again.

"Why'd you kiss me?"

"What?"

"Why'd you kiss me?" she asked again. "You're Superman. You probably have girls in every city — if you think the tabloids have even a smidgen of truth in them. Are you just looking for an 'I did a farmer's daughter in Smallville' sticker for your scrapbook? Because, Superman or not, that's not happening."

He sighed. Why had he kissed her? He wasn't sure. He just knew that when he'd seen the bandage and other scrapes and scratches all over her back that he wanted to kiss them and make them better. Just like his mom and dad and Gran had done when he was a kid. Not that he'd gotten hurt often, but when he did... "No," he finally said.

When he didn't go on, she spoke. "No, what? No, you're not looking for a sticker? No, not a sticker, a notch on my cape? No, you don't have a girl in every city? No, you don't find me attractive? No, your dad and his shotgun scare me now that I'm vulnerable? Which is it?"

"No, I don't have a girl in every city. No, I'm not looking for a notch or a sticker or whatever. No, I don't not find you attractive. And no, your dad doesn't particularly scare me, but your mom sure does."

"Smart man," she muttered. "Dad's a teddy bear but hurt one of his daughters and he's a grizzly. The only one worse is Mom."

He finished wrapping her ankle, letting her decide whether or not to put her boot back on. "All done."

She rolled it slightly, experimentally. "Not bad for a city

boy.” She worked her boot on and laced it up. “So, Superman. No holds barred interview. Not for publication. Anything I want to ask. You have to answer. You have to be honest and no, you can’t say no.”

“Do I have a choice?” he asked her resigned.

“No.”

“Then shoot.”

“Start at the beginning. Tell me everything from the time you got in that ship to the time you showed up in my house. *Something* in there is relevant to those military yahoos and we’ve got to figure out what it is.”

Part 12

She watched him take a deep breath before he started to talk. “My parents found me twenty-six years ago. They were at my grandpa’s cabin in upstate New Troy when they saw a streak of light and something land down the mountain. Mom, believe it or not, was the one who insisted they go look to see what it was. She’s not the outdoorsy type at all, but she insisted. Dad tried to at least convince her to wait until morning but she refused. They walked through the woods, down a trail that’s fairly steep in places, in tennis shoes with Maglites. They found my ship in a small clearing near a creek about half way down the mountain from the cabin.”

He picked up a twig and played with it in his hand. “They took me and everything they could carry with them when they left. Me, my baby blanket, a couple other little things, but they couldn’t carry the ship. They were going to come back the next day and get it but...” He shook his head. “Mom got a phone call from her college roommate in the middle of the night. Star’s a sometimes psychic. She’s often... wrong or at least off somehow — like if she’d said we’d sleep together last night but implying a lot more. Technically, she’d have been right but...” He sighed. “Anyway, she called Mom and told her that wherever she was, she had to leave because the baby was in danger. Star thought Mom had finally gotten pregnant and she was going to... fall down the stairs at the cabin or something or down the mountainside hiking with Dad, something like that. I guess Star didn’t know...” He shook his head and didn’t finish the thought. “So Mom woke Dad up and they took off for Metropolis.”

“Was Star right?” Lois asked quietly.

Clark nodded. “Everyone else who lived anywhere near there had Army men pounding on their doors in the next few days. My parents went back six months later and ‘just happened’ to hike down the mountain to where they’d found my ship but it was long gone by then. The military had been over it with a fine-toothed comb looking for part of a satellite — or that’s what they’d told everyone. One of the things they were able to rescue from the ship was this... globe. It played a message for my parents and told them about me — pretty much what you’ve read in the papers, just about a baby not an adult. Planet exploding, last of my people, that kind of thing.”

Lois wasn’t sure when she’d reached out to rest her hand on his arm, but she had. He seemed lost in his train of thought and she didn’t want to interrupt him.

“Over the years, Dad’s done research into UFO and shooting star sightings that night. There were a string of them, starting near San Diego and ending in upstate New Troy. Smallville wasn’t one of them, but it’s pretty close to the line connecting all of them. This area had the highest concentration of sightings of anywhere, I think, even more than near the cabin — but this area, believe it or not, is more densely populated so... As best we can tell, that was the path my ship took when it entered the atmosphere. My... guess is... whatever it is that guy Trask has, that Josh’s dad found, was in the wake of my ship and landed somewhere along the path it took. It’s possible there’s more of whatever it is all along that line. It’s possible that Trask already has a bunch and is

just waiting for a chance to try it out. Dad said he looked around pretty good while Mom was cooing over me, to see if there was anything else that they should take back with them and he didn’t see anything. If whatever it is glows green like you said, I’d think he’d have noticed it.”

Lois really wasn’t sure when she’d rested her head on his shoulder, but she had. “Was it hard growing up?” she asked quietly.

He was quiet for a minute before answering. “It would have been harder if I hadn’t known I think. That globe told me a lot about my heritage and what to expect living here. Krypton had a red sun while Earth’s is yellow. Something about the difference is what gives me my abilities. I had to be careful, always, to hide what I can do, but if I hadn’t known... If we’d thought I was a science experiment, genetically enhanced or some Soviet moon landing gone wrong, it would have been a lot harder. As much as I wish I had my ship, I’m really glad I have the globe.”

“I’m glad,” Lois said softly. “Will they come back? Your powers?”

She felt him shrug. “I don’t know. I’ve never encountered this... whatever it is before.” He was silent for a long moment, but she sensed he had something else to say. “They may not ever come back,” he finished, his voice so low she could barely hear him.

They sat there for a long time before she finally decided to ask him something else — something to try to take his mind off of the loss of his powers. “So, any brothers or sisters?”

He shook his head. “No. My mom can’t have kids. Neither can my dad, actually, but that’s a medical thing. They... They had a lot of rough years together before I showed up. High school sweethearts. Married at eighteen, ready to take on the world. Put themselves through school because all of my grandparents had told them if they got married, no college money, but they were young and in love so...” He shrugged. “Mom became a nurse and helped put Dad through medical school. Found out he’d been cheating on her ever since she went to work full-time after graduation. She worked a lot of nights because it paid better and med school is expensive. One woman after another apparently. They split up, but didn’t divorce. He got snipped because he didn’t want unwanted kids to interfere with his playboy lifestyle.”

He hesitated before going on. “They’d been separated about a year when Mom was in a car accident and they brought her into the ER where he was working at the time. He saw her and it scared him. Scared straight, I guess. When he realized that he could lose her, he knew he couldn’t live with that. They started to rebuild their relationship. He didn’t cheat anymore — he hasn’t since the accident. She started talking about wanting to have kids and he finally came clean with her about the vasectomy. He’d already started looking in to having it reversed. But then...” He sighed. “Then... It was about six months after the accident, but she still wasn’t completely recovered and ended up having a hysterectomy so he never bothered with the reversal. Dad had taken her to the cabin on the anniversary of the accident, of them starting to work their way back towards each other, and that was when they found me. And, as far as I know, I don’t have any biological siblings either.”

He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “I think that’s enough of a no-holds-barred interview for today, Ms. Kent.”

She nodded against his shoulder where her head still rested. He’d bared a lot of his soul to her — details she was sure very few people knew, even without the alien subtext to it. Why had he done that when they’d only known each other a couple of days?

“So what now?” he asked. “Just sit here for a few more hours.”

“We could always make out.”

Part 13

What?

“What?” he said.

“Um...”

He turned to look at her, sheer mortification written all over her face, but what he felt the most was a sense of loss that she’d moved as far away from him as she could in their makeshift hideout.

“I’m sorry,” she said, ducking her head and pulling her cap off so that her hair fell down around her face, hiding it from his view. “I can’t believe I said that out loud.”

“Is that what you and Josh did yesterday?”

She shook her head. “No. Yesterday I just tried to keep him alive. I mean, he was conscious and he wasn’t bleeding too badly and his ribs weren’t hurt enough to be fully broken, just cracked. Mostly I just held him while he tried to breathe.”

“Oh.” Silence filled the air. “So what do we do? Neither of us is having trouble breathing so...” He shrugged. “You owe me your life story?”

“Not happening,” she replied instantly.

“I told you pretty much everything,” he pointed out, “and you’re telling me nothing?”

“I was born at the hospital in Independence, raised in Smallville, went to Midwest for college, got my degree in journalism, moved home and here we are.”

“The Life and Times of Lois Kent in Thirty Words or Less... Sure to be a best seller.” He finished off the last of his bottle of water and stuck it back in her backpack. “Let’s see...” He turned to look at her. “You were top of your class, from kindergarten on. You dated Josh Irig in high school. Probably gave you a hickey or two behind the Dairy Freeze. Your parents secretly hoped you might marry him because then the farm might stay in the family — especially since it joins his family’s farm — but mostly they want you to be happy. You haven’t said why you moved back home, but I suspect it has something to do with helping out your folks, though I’m not sure why. Hard financial times, most likely. Injury to one or both of them so they needed more help to make ends meet. You dated Sheriff Dan for a while, but I’m guessing he was more serious than you were. He was... pushing you to get married, you told him to back off and that was the end of that?”

She shook her head. “Not exactly.”

“Then what?”

Lois sighed and tucked her hair behind her ear so he could see her profile in the dim light. “In college, I met a guy. Lex. Lex Luthor. He was a small town boy made good — kind of the male me. He was going into business management, certain that he was going to be one of those ‘bootstraps’ stories you hear about and we’d end up on top of the world together. The... material gain didn’t really interest me. I mean, money’s nice in the sense that not having it stinks but the limos and penthouses and all that didn’t appeal to me in the end-goal sense. Nice if it happened, sure, but not a focus for me. We dated for a couple years. He...” She hesitated, playing with strap of the bag that sat on her lap. “He was my first,” she finally said, rushing through the statement. “I thought we were perfect together even if I didn’t have his drive for material things. He treated me like a princess, talking about how we’d jet off to Paris whenever we felt like it and just... taking care of me. It’s kind of odd, because usually the girls who get sucked in by stuff like that are girls who never had Daddy’s approval and I always did. Lex... he treated me like I’d always seen Dad treat Mom and I wanted that for myself. I craved it.”

Clark reached out to lightly grasp her hand in his. “What happened?”

She gave a short bark of laughter. “Lex happened. In an effort to short circuit the path to wealth, he was running the largest drug ring on campus. And guess who finally brought down the

‘Midwest Drug Boss’ for the school paper?”

“You,” he said quietly.

She nodded, swiping at a stray tear with her free hand. “I’d been investigating for months and never knew that the key piece of evidence was under the mattress where I slept some nights. Not often, but sometimes. I found it by accident when I spilled a soda all over Lex’s bed one day while we were studying. He was in the bathroom when I went to change the sheets and I confronted him when he came out. I honestly thought he would hurt me, kill me even, to keep me quiet. I got away and called the cops. He ended up throwing himself off the top of the bell tower to avoid getting caught. He’s still on life support at a nursing home in his home town. There’s no brain activity — hasn’t been for nearly five years now. He doesn’t breathe on his own or anything, but his family can’t let go.”

“I’m so sorry,” he told her, rubbing his thumb along the back of her hand.

She shrugged. “He made his metaphorical bed...” Her head leaned back against the rock behind her. “Dan... I never told him all of this. Just that I’d dated Lex and that it had ended. If he really wanted to, he could have looked up the whole story. We dated for a year and he was... more than a little impatient with me because I wasn’t ready for a... physical relationship with him. I just needed to be *sure* before I went that far with a guy again. Then last year, the last night of the Corn Festival, up on the dance floor with all of Smallville watching, he proposed to me. I ran off. I just... turned and ran. I didn’t talk to him for two days and then we had a big fight. I told him I wasn’t ready for that and I didn’t know if I ever would be. I cared about him — a lot — but love? Marriage? All of that? I just didn’t know. I wanted to keep dating and he gave me an ultimatum. Said that was fine and he was okay with me turning him down, but if I wasn’t going to sleep with him then obviously this relationship wasn’t going anywhere and maybe we’d both best move on. It wasn’t like... sleep with me or else, but if you’re not willing, ready, whatever to sleep with me, then where is this relationship going? Does that make sense?”

She looked up at him, tears in her eyes, pleading for understanding.

He nodded. “I think so.”

“And he was right. I didn’t want to sleep with him because we *weren’t* going anywhere in the long run. So we both just cut our losses. Or I thought we did. He still has that picture. It was taken, literally, minutes before he proposed.”

He let go of her hand and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her towards him as the tears began to flow.

“It’s okay, Lois,” he murmured into her hair. “I’m here. I’m right here.”

Part 14

“How much longer?” he asked for the dozenth time in as many minutes.

Or at least it seemed like it.

Lois sighed. “It’ll be dark enough to get out of here before long — maybe fifteen minutes or so and then we can head out.”

Clark nodded and Lois stifled another sigh. After she’d broken down they’d sat there, saying not much of anything, for another nearly two hours. Clark’s suggestion of a game of ‘I Spy’ had been met with silence.

Lois had never told anyone much about her break-ups with Lex and Dan. The only one who knew nearly as much was her mom — and by extension her dad. It made her feel vulnerable to have told Clark that much, even though he’d unwittingly entrusted her with his much bigger, much more potentially newsworthy, secret.

If there was one thing Lois Kent didn’t like, it was feeling vulnerable.

She glanced at her watch again. She could barely make out the dial in the darkness. “Let’s go,” she said.

They carefully exited their haven, stretching tired muscles as they stood. They’d moved around as much as they could within the confines of their hiding place, but it hadn’t been enough.

A few minutes later, they were on their way.

Fortunately, it was still light enough that they could see where they were going. They made it back to the creek, crossed, and skirted around the tree swings.

“Where are we going?” Clark asked as they walked.

“Back to the Irigs’.”

“What?” Clark grabbed her arm and swung her around to look at him. “Are you *insane*?”

She glared at him. “Wayne and Maggie are still missing. Your ship is there. That green stuff is there and we need to get it away from the nutjob. We have to figure out what’s going on around here.”

She wrenched her arm away from him and pointed to her left. “If you head straight that way, you’ll hit the road. Take a right, then a right at the next road and the drive to my house is on your right. See ya later, Superman.”

She turned on her heel and walked off.

She could hear him give an exasperated sigh before his footsteps indicated that he was following her. She hitched her backpack a little higher, glad she’d had the foresight to get the headlamps out before setting off. She didn’t *want* to have to use them but if they needed to...

They’d made it to the edge of the clearing around the Irig farmhouse when a loud ‘crack’ stopped Lois in her tracks.

“Well, look what we have here,” a gruff voice behind her said as she heard the click of a gun.

Before she knew what was happening, they’d been shoved in the back of a nondescript van by Trask and one of his men.

“Don’t say it,” she warned Clark who was gingerly touching the bruise on his forehead. “I didn’t have a choice.”

“I know.”

Lois closed her eyes and concentrated on the turns they were taking. Her stomach dropped as she realized that they were headed to Parsons Lake. Parts of the lake were extremely isolated. That wasn’t good.

There were even a couple of cliffs tall enough that they could have ‘accidentally’ fallen over them to their deaths.

“I know who this guys is,” Clark whispered suddenly.

“What?”

“I’ve been thinking about it. A couple days after Superman showed up, some guys pretending to be FBI agents and some — apparently real — military men showed up at the Planet with a fake warrant looking for information about Superman. I wasn’t there when they showed up. I’d bet this is the same guy.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she hissed.

“I forgot all about it. They were only there about ten minutes. I never saw them.”

Lois nodded.

The van lurched to a stop and a few seconds later, the doors were yanked open and they were pulled out.

Lois watched as Trask dragged Clark several feet away and near one of the cliffs she’d been afraid of.

Clark was biding his time, she was sure. Even without his powers, he was a pretty strong guy.

Trask squatted down next to him. “Where’s Superman?”

Clark glared at him. “Even if I knew, I wouldn’t tell you.”

Lois winced as Trask stood upright and viciously kicked Clark in the stomach.

She felt the grip on her arm tighten slightly and she glanced at the man holding on to her. His face was set in a grim line and she wasn’t entirely certain that he approved of what Trask was doing.

Maybe she could use that to her advantage.

Trask kicked Clark again. “Sergeant Bass, bring me that box,” he called.

The man holding her hesitated.

“Ms. Kent won’t move,” the colonel glowered.

Her arm was released as the man went back to the van.

Like hell she wouldn’t move.

Trask turned his attention momentarily back to Clark who was groaning in pain.

Lois headed towards him, always mindful of the man behind her and the cliff on the other side of Clark and Trask.

She threw her first kick only to find it blocked by the bigger man.

“I’d say ‘nice try,’ Ms. Kent, but it really wasn’t.”

She managed to hold her own for a few minutes against the much larger Colonel Trask.

“Open that box,” Trask roared as Lois found herself on the ground with a 9mm pointed at her head.

Clark screamed in pain a second later.

The other guy must have opened it, she thought. She had to do *something* but what?

She was breathing heavily as she glanced around. Trask was no longer looking at her, but at Clark who was now *writhing* in pain.

“The alien took over your mind,” he said almost to himself, lowering the gun fractionally.

Lois took her chance. She brought both feet up and kicked as hard as she could into Trask’s gut. He stumbled backwards and she hopped up, following up with another blow.

Trask stumbled again.

She had one more shot. It wasn’t what she wanted to do, but as the gun started to come up, she knew she had no choice.

She kicked out with her bad foot, knowing even as she did that it was going to hurt like the dickens.

A shot was fired as Trask disappeared over the ledge.

Lois screamed in pain as she slipped, following him over the side of the cliff.

Part 15

“Lois!”

Clark saw her disappear over the side.

“Clark!”

There was only one splash.

He crawled towards the edge, pain searing his entire body as he did so. “Lois!”

“Help!”

He reached the edge and looked over to see Lois desperately hanging on to a rock. He held a hand out. “Grab on.”

She looked at him and then back over her shoulder into the black water and rocks below.

“Come on.” He could only hope that what strength he still had held out long enough to get her up and that the other guy stayed gone.

She bit her bottom lip and pushed upwards with the one foot she somehow managed to use against the side of the cliff.

His hand closed around her wrist as she grabbed onto him. He reached his other hand out. “One more.”

“Are you sure you can do this?” she managed to get out.

“Now!”

She tightened her grip on his wrist and lunged upwards again, their other hands finding their way together.

Clark pulled on her and did his best to slither his way backwards at the same time.

And then he felt someone grab his ankles.

And pull.

A moment later, Lois was lying next to him.

He wasn’t sure when or how but the searing pain had

disappeared. He rolled towards her, breathing heavily. He reached out resting one hand on the side of her now scratched up face. "Are you okay?"

She closed her eyes but nodded. "I'm okay. Thank you." She moved slightly until her forehead rested against his. "How are you?"

"In pain, but better."

He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to chalk it up to relief but he knew that wasn't strictly accurate.

"I'm sorry."

A voice interrupted his slow movement towards her.

"We had no idea Trask was insane."

They both turned in unison to look at the military man standing there.

Clark looked back at Lois to see her eyes closed as she took a deep breath. "Here's what we're going to do," she told them, struggling to her feet.

Clark eyed the other man carefully before taking his offered hand. It took help from both of them to get him to his feet.

Lois crossed her arms in front of her. "Okay, Sergeant Bass. This is what's going to happen. We're going to get in the back of the van. You're going to drive back to the Irig farm. You're going to back up to the tent I tell you to. You're going to get out and find all of that green rock that you can." She nodded towards the small box lying closed on the ground. "You're going to put it in a lead box and you're going to stand guard while we drive off with the van. No questions asked, no looking in the van to see what else we took. Got it?"

Sergeant Bass nodded. "With Trask gone, the rest of the team will scatter quickly. I guarantee it."

Lois nodded curtly and grabbed the box on her way to the van. "Let's go."

Clark sat near her, his head leaning back against the wall as they drove back. "How do you know we can trust him?" he asked her quietly.

"He was mad while Trask was beating you up, but he was more scared of Trask. Now that Trask is gone..."

"Are you sure he is?"

Lois nodded. "He'd have to be Superman to survive that fall. There's a couple of suicides there a year because of the height and the rocks at the bottom." She leaned slightly until her head was on his shoulder. "Thank you for saving me."

"I couldn't have done it without his help," Clark told her, his head tipping sideways to rest on hers. "I would have died trying but I don't think I could have pulled you up."

"That's the other reason I know we can trust him. He could have just pushed us both over."

Clark nodded against her. "Good point."

"We're almost there," Bass called. "Stay out of sight."

Lois quickly told him which tent she wanted him to back up to, telling him to make sure everyone else was out of there and that there were tarps available.

Clark realized her plan.

They were going to smuggle out his ship.

And any of that stuff that Trask had, that Jonathan Kent had, that made him pass out in pain and lose his powers.

The van came to a stop and a minute later, there were two quick bangs on the side. Lois cautiously opened one of the doors.

"The coast is clear," she called, hopping down.

Clark climbed out more carefully. "Wow," he breathed, getting his first look at it.

"Come on. We can stare later."

Lois dragged a tarp over the top of it. Working together, the two of them managed to get the ship in the back of the van. They covered it with several more tarps.

Lois did a quick search of the rest of the tent while Clark sat at the edge of the van.

"Anything?" he asked.

"Jackpot," she breathed, opening a file drawer. "UFO, meteor shower and falling star sightings. The day your parents found you." She pulled a stack of folders out. "Put those inside," she practically ordered, handing the files to him.

He turned and stuck them in the van, intending to look through one of them when there was a hissing sound.

"We gotta go. Get in."

Lois turned and took a large metal box from Sergeant Bass, climbing into the back of the van with it. Clark closed the doors behind them.

Bass hurried to the front of the van and practically spun the wheels in his rush to leave.

"What's going on?" Clark asked as they left the Irig property.

"The sheriff is on his way and I didn't figure you two would want to be there when he arrives. Where to?"

"My house," Lois told him without hesitation. "Try to get in unseen and park with the back of the van to the storm shelter near the barn."

"Yes, ma'am."

"When I tell you to, leave and don't come back. I don't care where you go, but stay away from the Irigs' and away from my house."

"Yes, ma'am."

The van slowed to a crawl as they turned. Gravel crunched under the tires. It seemed like forever before he put the vehicle into reverse, then park. "There you go."

Lois opened the doors and headed straight to the doors of the shelter. She swung them open as quietly as she could before coming back to the van. "Let's go, Lane."

They worked together again, moving the ship down the stairs. Lois set her side down and walked to the bare wall on the other side of the small room. From out of nowhere, an opening appeared.

"Let's get it in here."

"What's that?"

"This house wasn't on the Underground Railroad, but Kents hid plenty of runaway slaves back in the day," she grunted. "There's a tunnel leading to the house, but it caved in a long time ago."

They quickly maneuvered the ship into place, with the file folders and the metal box set on the ground next to it.

Once out of the shelter, Clark helped her carefully close the doors to it and the van.

Lois grabbed his hand and headed into the barn. "We'll wait till he's gone then head up to the house. Rachel's here and so is your dad — at least I guess that's who that other rental car belongs to." She sat on one of the still-overturned bales of hay.

He sat next to her. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For saving me."

Part 16

Lois looked up at him, puzzled. "What? You saved me."

She heard the tires crunching their way up the drive as he reached out, resting his hand on the side of her face, his thumb gently rubbing against her cheekbone. "You saved me from Trask. You're the one who attacked him."

"I killed him," she whispered.

"You had no choice."

"I know. It was him or us."

He reached towards her, pulling her to him. She rested her head on his shoulder as his arms wrapped around her.

They stayed like that for a few minutes, hearing another car pulling out of the drive as they waited.

"We should go inside," she said suddenly, pushing away from him and heading towards the house. "We need to get back over to

the Irgs, too. See what Dan found and see if we can find Wayne and Maggie if he hasn't already."

She heard Clark sigh behind her, but he stood to follow.

"There they are!" She heard her mom yelling from the porch.

Footsteps crunched on the farmyard as the five of them ran towards each other. Lois found herself enveloped in her father's embrace as her mother held on tightly to both of them.

She could hear man-hug back-clapping as Clark greeted the man she assumed was his father.

"Where have you two been?" Martha finally asked as they pulled back.

Lois pulled her hat off and ran a hand through her hair as they headed towards the house. "Hiding out at the Irgs' mostly. Then the head nutjob took us prisoner, drove us to Parsons Lake, and tried to kill both of us but I managed to get him over Sherman Cliff first, Clark pulled me up when I slipped, Sergeant Bass drove us back to the Irgs to, um, pick up something and then brought us back here."

"Why on earth would you go back to the Irgs'?" Jonathan asked.

"More like why on Krypton," she muttered.

The man she guessed was Clark's dad stopped short of the first step to the porch. "What?"

Clark sighed and took him by the arm to get him moving again. "It's okay, Dad. They know. We'll explain it all. Trask had my ship. The one you and Mom found."

They all took seats around the living room while Lois and Clark related their tale. As they finished, tires crunched in the drive.

"Hello?" Sheriff Dan Scardino called as he walked in the door.

"In here, Dan."

Lois was suddenly very aware that she was sitting next to Clark on the very small loveseat and that her hand was resting in his. He'd grown a bit emotional as he'd talked about finding his ship, seeing it for the first time, and she'd almost unconsciously reached out for him. His fingers had curled around hers and she was in no hurry to move it. Let Dan think what he would.

She felt his eyes on their hands and Clark squeezed lightly before moving away.

Lois felt tears begin to well up in her eyes but she swallowed them back until she felt Clark's arm come to rest on the seat behind her, his thumb brushing against her shoulder. She glanced up at him gratefully and he smiled back, leaning over to whisper to her. "Think that'll help him move on?"

She smiled slightly and shrugged. She could see her dad's glances and her mom's narrowed eyes. And then her mom winked at her. Maybe she realized more about Dan's continuing feelings than Lois realized.

Sam, Clark's dad, was giving them a strange look, though.

She was glad when Dan started to speak.

"The Irgs are fine," he told them.

There was a collective sigh of relief and Lois found her head leaning towards Clark and his head resting on hers.

"A little worse for the wear but otherwise okay. The military guys were all gone by the time we got there, including the head guy, Trask."

"He's at Sherman Cliff," Lois told him quietly. "He tried to kill us but went over the side. He was on the rocks when we left. He may have been swept off by now."

"And you didn't try to see if he was alive?" he verified.

Lois glared at him. "You know how hard it is to get down there. No, we didn't try to make sure he was still alive."

Dan nodded. "I'll send someone out there in a boat. The Irgs did say that a white van took off a bit before everyone else did — they saw it. Any idea who that might have been?"

Lois shrugged. "How would I know?" She looked at Clark's

father. "Dr. Lane, would you mind looking me over and taking care of some of these cuts and stuff? They're really starting to hurt."

"Of course, Ms. Kent." He rose from his chair on the other side of the room. "Clark, why don't you let me look you over, too? We need to get some ice on that eye, too."

Clark stood and held a hand out to Lois, who grasped it gratefully. "Thanks," she said, not letting go as they walked into the kitchen.

The door swung shut behind them. "Don't worry, Dr. Lane," she said as soon as it did. "I'm not going to tell anyone and neither will my parents." She pulled a bag of peas out of the freezer and tossed it to Clark. "For your eye."

"Thanks."

"Thank you, Ms. Kent."

"For what?" Lois asked, pulling the container with the cookies off the shelf and handing it to Clark.

"Saving my son." He took one of the cookies Clark offered.

"She's going to take over the world with these," he muttered through a mouthful of cookie.

Sam took a bite. "These are good." He ate the rest in two big bites before getting his bag out. "Let's take a look at you two."

He spent the next twenty minutes cleaning out the minor scrapes and putting some butterfly bandages over some of the worst ones.

Clark's ribs weren't broken, though one or two might have been slightly cracked. His dad wrapped them with an Ace bandage and Clark said that it helped.

"Clark," Lois said suddenly. "You didn't happen to bring your globe with you did you?"

He looked up from where his dad was putting a bandage on his upper arm. "No. Why would I?"

"Did you, Dr. Lane?"

Dr. Lane shook his head. "No. I didn't think about it. Why?"

"Well, Clark said it's played messages. I was wondering if you knew how to activate them and if maybe there was some others you hadn't seen or something that might help with Clark's powers."

Part 17

Clark and his dad stared at each other.

"Why didn't we think of that?" Sam asked his son.

"Because she makes incredible leaps of logic that you and I can only dream of, Dad," Clark told him with a grin. "I'm surprised it took her as long as it did to figure it out once she saw the ship."

"Well, we spent most of that time running through the woods and you weren't very super then," she reminded him, taking a cookie from the container.

Clark nodded. "Any ideas on that, Dad?" he asked softly.

Sam shook his head. "No. The only thing I can think of is maybe the sun since Jor-El said you would have powers because of the yellow sun but..." He shrugged. "It's worth a shot tomorrow. I'll call your mom and have her come out for the weekend. She can bring it with her."

Clark glanced over at Lois and grinned. "Guess I'm bunking with you then, Kent."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Your parents are welcome to have your room and you're welcome to have my tent." Her brow furrowed. "That reminds me. Where's Josh?"

"He went to the hospital earlier and then the sheriff hid him somewhere," Sam told her.

Lois nodded. "Good."

"You do have room for us, right?"

She shrugged. "We're booked actually, but that includes Clark's room. I'll only charge him half the normal nightly rate for the tent."

Clark smirked. “You could take the tent. Your argument was that you had a busted ankle.”

“I still do,” she pointed out.

“But I have a black eye and cracked ribs.”

“And I have that scrape on my back and a guilty conscience for killing that guy.”

“No you don’t,” Clark told her. “You don’t feel any more guilty than I do.”

“Dreams would be normal,” Sam interjected. “And you two fight like an old married couple.”

“It’s the dreams that scare me,” Lois said quietly, staring at the cookie in her hand.

Clark reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. “Did you have them...” His voice trailed off.

She nodded. “For weeks. Fortunately — well sort of fortunately — the timing was good, but that was when Dad’s back went out and I came home. Graduated and came home. It was two years before he was well enough to really do what he used to and...”

“You’re still here.”

She nodded. “I’m still here.”

“Come to Metropolis,” Clark said suddenly. “If they don’t need you still. I’d bet money that Perry would hire you on the spot once he sees the story we’re going to write.”

“We?” she asked looking up at him.

He nodded. “You saved my butt. You figured out as much as I did if not more. There’s a lot to leave out, obviously, but a great story nonetheless.”

She didn’t say anything.

“So come to Metropolis. You can stay with me.”

She raised a brow at him. “I’m not bunking with you at my house and you think...”

Clark shook his head. “No. I mean, I have an apartment in Metropolis, but I was planning on spending a couple weeks at my Grandpa’s and he’s got plenty of room. Right, Dad?”

Sam snorted. “Yeah. He does.”

“That won’t stop the dreams.”

“No,” Clark said softly, kneeling next to her. “But I bet you’re ready to move on, aren’t you? And I can help you do that.”

Lois nodded. “Maybe. I’ll think about it.”

Clark kissed her brow softly. “And even though we won’t be bunking together, if they get too bad, come find me. I’ll sit up with you.”

A throat cleared behind them.

They both turned to see Dan standing there. “I need you two to come give statements tomorrow.”

They both nodded.

“We’ll be in after we get up and around,” Lois promised.

“Thanks.” Dan looked like he wanted to say something else, but he just turned and left.

“What was that about?” Sam asked as the screen slammed shut.

“That’s what I’d like to know.” Martha joined the conversation with an amused tone in her voice.

Lois sighed. “Dan still has a picture from last year’s Corn Festival up at his house. I told Clark everything while we were hiding. I guess Dan hasn’t moved on quite as much as I thought he had and...” She shrugged.

“Clark was helping him?” Jonathan asked, a smirk on his face.

“Something like that.” Lois stood. “On that note, I’m going to bed.” She gave both of her parents big hugs. “Good night.”

Clark talked to the elder Kents and his dad for a few more minutes before heading to his room — his original room.

He tossed and turned long after he heard everyone else turn in and the light coming in under the door disappeared. He relived the night, the... poisoning by the green stuff. Seeing his ship for

the first time since he was an infant.

Seeing Lois dangling below him on that cliff.

He wasn’t sure how long it had been when there was a soft knock on the door.

“Come in,” he called quietly.

The door opened and he could see Lois’ silhouette leaning against the doorjamb. He pushed up until he was leaning against the headboard. “Bad dream?”

She nodded and he held out a hand towards her. She walked towards him leaving the door open in her wake.

“I don’t want to bother my parents and Lucy’s in town at a friend’s house and...” She curled up next to him. “I kept seeing him falling and then he turned into you and I couldn’t catch you...”

Clark wrapped his arms around her, kissing her temple softly. “I’m not going anywhere. You can get rid of me that easily.”

She looked up at him. “Are you sure?”

One hand came to frame the side of her face. “I’ve just found you. I’m not about to let you go,” he whispered.

He leaned in slightly as she moved toward him. Their lips met in a soft, sweet kiss.

She rested her head on his shoulder. “Can I stay with you?” she finally asked, her voice barely audible.

Clark moved his arm and tugged at the covers. “Of course.”

Together they worked the covers out from underneath her and she slid her legs under the sheets. Clark’s head was already on the pillow as she laid hers on the one next to him.

“Thank you.”

“This is just for sleeping, you know,” he told her with mock severity. “I’m not trying to get some notch on my cape.”

“I know.”

He leaned over just enough to kiss her forehead. “Sleep well.”

“Night, night. Sleep tight. Don’t let the bedbugs bite,” Lois told him with a yawn.

“You have bedbugs?”

She shook her head slightly as her eyes fluttered shut. “No bedbug would dare come within a mile of Martha Kent’s house.”

Clark pressed his lips lightly against her forehead again before he settled in.

This time, he fell asleep immediately.

Part 18

Lois woke to find someone looking at her.

“What?” she asked with a yawn. “Do I really look that bad?”

Clark shook his head slightly against the pillow. “You look great.”

She reached out to gently touch his face below his eye. “You look horrible.”

He laughed lightly. “Thanks.”

“What time is it anyway?”

“Almost noon.”

Lois sat straight up. “What?” She swung her feet over.

“Check-in is at three and we’ve got to move your dad’s stuff in here and get all the sheets and everything changed and the rooms cleaned up and...” She turned to see him still lying there.

“What?”

He smiled at her. “Nothing, but Dad moved his stuff in here earlier and went to Kansas City to meet Mom. Your mom’s been working for a while on the other rooms...”

“And you’ve just been lying there watching me?” she asked him.

He shrugged. “We’re on our honeymoon, right?”

“What?”

“Well, this is the second night we’ve slept in the same bed and this here is Lowell County, right?” he drawled.

Lois rolled her eyes. “Clark, I promise you, if we were to end

up on a honeymoon together, we'd be doing much more interesting things."

"I'd hope so," Clark told her with a grin.

She rolled her eyes again. "Regardless, we both need to get dressed and I need to see what Mom needs help with and the Corn Festival starts tonight and you need to get some sun. And at some point we have to go see Dan."

"He stopped by, too," Clark told her, swinging his legs over the other side of the bed.

"What?"

"I heard them talking downstairs."

She groaned. "Does he know we were in here together?"

Clark shrugged. "Not a clue. I was only half awake. But why would it matter? You two have been over for a year, right?"

Lois nodded. "Yeah. I'm just not sure I want it all over Smallville that I'm sleeping with the out-of-towner."

"So come to Metropolis with me. Let's get up and dressed and all that and then write the story with me and tell your folks you're coming to Metropolis."

She sighed. "I'll meet you downstairs in a few minutes."

Lois managed to avoid her mom as she headed to her room, changing as quickly as her injuries would allow. When she was dressed, she headed to the kitchen for a cup of coffee and something to eat.

"There's breakfast in the warmer for both of you."

She turned to see her mom standing against the counter.

"Thanks."

"Bad dreams?" Martha asked softly.

Lois nodded. "I didn't want to bother any of you. Clark wasn't asleep anyway so we talked for a bit and..." She shrugged.

"As bad as the ones after Lex?"

"Worse," Lois whispered. "I'd loved him, but he was a drug-dealer who threw himself off the top of a six story building to avoid being caught by the cops. This time..." She paused taking a long sip of coffee before continuing. "It was Clark. I couldn't save him and the world was taunting me, berating me, blaming me because I couldn't save Superman but all I could see was that I'd lost Clark."

"Oh, honey," Martha's arms were around her as tears fell.

"You really like him, don't you?"

Lois nodded against her mom. They stood there for a long moment before they both pulled back. Lois was eating when Clark finally walked into the kitchen.

"I talked to Perry," he told them. "He's holding space for tomorrow's morning edition."

"That's great," Martha said, handing him a plate.

"He's even going to give it the Lane and Kent byline if you still want to help write it."

Lois looked up as he sat down. "Lane and Kent? Really?"

Clark nodded.

"I don't think so. Try Kent and Lane."

"It's my paper," he countered.

"It's my town. You would have been stuck in that van far earlier without me," Lois reminded him.

"You wouldn't have a story if it wasn't for me."

"Sure I would. I was already starting to dig into what was really going on at the Irigs before you ever showed up, Cityboy."

Clark sighed. "We'll see. How's that?" He grinned suddenly. "Besides, shouldn't it be Lane and Kent-Lane?"

"Why on earth — or Krypton — would it be Kent-Lane?"

Clark winked at Martha. "We are married now, after all."

Lois rolled her eyes as Martha laughed. Lois stood and took her plate to the sink. "Go get a suntan, Superman. I've got work to do."

Four hours later, Lois sank to her bed, exhausted again — still? She wasn't sure. She'd helped Clark write the story —

which had gone very well, much better than she'd expected — helped get the rooms ready and guests checked in as they arrived, made another triple batch of cookies in between and surreptitiously ogled a sunbathing Clark when she could.

She laid there for a few minutes before getting up to get ready for the evening. She was tucking her shirt in when there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," she called.

The door opened and Clark was standing there with his suitcase. "Um, I know we haven't officially decided where I'm bunking yet, but can I stash my bag in here and you can help me figure out what the heck I'm supposed to wear to a Corn Festival?"

Lois nodded and he set the bag on her bed.

"I don't suppose you have another shirt with you? Like that flannel you wore the other day?"

"I have a black collared shirt and a blue dress shirt, two pairs of Dockers and a couple pairs of jeans."

Lois sighed. "Open the bag and let's see what we can find." She waited for him to unzip it before rummaging around. She set the Dockers and nicer shirts to the side. She pulled the blue jeans out and set them on the bed. "What about this?" She held up a faded denim shirt.

Clark took it from her and held it up for inspection. "I don't even remember *owning* this, much less packing it."

"Well, it and a pair of jeans will work tomorrow. Tonight, wear a pair of jeans and the black shirt, untucked please — it's got an untuckable hem so it'll be okay. Tomorrow night..." She sighed. "I'll see if I can find Josh and get you a shirt of his to wear for tomorrow night."

"What's tomorrow night?"

"The dance."

"Will you save me a dance?"

Lois looked at him with a raised brow. "You know how to Tush Push, Lane?"

Clark shrugged. "A friend of mine thought it would be a great way to meet girls."

"Did you?"

He grinned. "Define girls. I think they were all there looking for guys."

"Did they find them?"

"Define guys. I think Joe and I were the only two non-nerds there and I'm not entirely certain we fit in the non-nerd category."

"Oh, you're definitely not a nerd," Lois muttered under her breath.

"What?"

Part 19

Clark watched her as she examined his wardrobe. Or at least what he'd brought with him. She'd muttered something under her breath but without his superhearing he couldn't make out what it was and she refused to elaborate.

"So, how're you feeling?" she asked, in a desperate attempt to change the subject off whatever it was she muttered he was sure.

"Better," he said, willing to go along with it. "Not *super* but better."

She turned to look at him critically. "Your eye looks a lot better. Not better enough to be suspicious or whatever but better."

"I do *feel* a lot better. It doesn't hurt at all to breathe even without having my ribs wrapped."

"Good." She turned to leave. "Wear the jeans and black polo shirt tonight. I'll see you in a bit. We have to stop at the Sheriff's office on the way."

Clark nodded and she shut the door behind her. He changed quickly and wondered where he'd end up sleeping. He'd enjoyed

waking up next to her the last two mornings. He'd never woken up next to a woman before. That morning, he'd dozed off and on, hearing some of the comings and goings in the house long before she awoke. When he had woken up for good, he'd just laid there, watching her sleep and being grateful that she was okay.

He'd dated since he was sixteen — only one moderately serious relationship until Mayson two years earlier. They'd dated for over a year and she was the first person he'd seriously considered telling the truth about himself. He'd been talking it over with his parents when the idea for Superman was born. The speed skating suit had been his mom's idea and she'd been able to sew well enough to make a cape from a Halloween costume pattern. He wasn't quite sure where the idea for wearing his underwear on the outside had come from. A couple weeks later, after the Superman Foundation had been created to deal with the merchandise and everything else, he'd contracted with a well-known costumer for more custom-fitted suits.

He'd decided to put off telling Mayson until after he knew what kind of reception the superhero would get. She'd... not been crazy about Superman from the beginning. It had put a strain on their relationship from the start. She'd wanted to know more than he'd printed in his articles, but he wasn't entirely certain her motives had been altruistic. There was some kind of... underlying disdain when she talked about the superhero. His suspicions had been confirmed when she'd barely thanked him for saving her life when he'd flown a bomb out of the courtroom where she'd been prosecuting a case. They'd worked... okay together during the earlier parts of the process — Superman was a witness — but it was almost like she tolerated him.

He wouldn't have wanted idol worship from her — like he got from so many other quarters — but at least a little bit would have been nice.

He'd started running off on her at inopportune times and that put even more of a strain on their relationship. She'd finally given him a — well-deserved — ultimatum and they'd broken up.

It wasn't so much the loss of the relationship that had bothered him as much as the loss of the idea of the relationship. Could he ever have a normal life? Becoming Superman had absolutely been the right thing to do. But was it fair to ask a woman to put up with his life? He'd gone out a few times after Mayson but nothing serious. Several of the 'dates' — like Toni Taylor and Antoinette Baines — had been in pursuit of a story. He drew the line at anything more... intimate than dinner for the purposes of a story, but he wasn't above smiling and flirting a bit to get information.

And then he'd met Lois.

From the minute she'd looked at him, he'd been intrigued — though he didn't realize exactly what the feeling tugging at his heart was at first. But over the last couple of days, he'd come to realize that he wanted to try a relationship with her. He wanted to see if things could work out between them. The kiss that second morning was forever seared in his mind.

He sighed and headed out of her room without stopping to investigate it a bit, just to find out more about her. He went in search of Lois and a few minutes later was on his way to Smallville for his first ever Corn Festival.

"When's your mom supposed to get here?" Lois asked as they climbed out of his rental to see Dan.

Clark shrugged. "Her plane was late, I guess, so they should be here before too long but I'm not sure when."

He opened the door for her and they walked into the sheriff's office.

"The lovebirds are finally awake," Dan said, looking up from his paperwork.

"Don't start, Daniel," Lois warned. "We just want to make our statements and get going. I've got a lot to do."

He held out a hand as he neared us. "I don't think we've officially met. I'm Clark."

"Nice to meet you, Clark," he said, ignoring the offered hand in favor of digging through a file folder. "I'm Daniel."

"Nice to meet you, Dan."

"Please, call me Daniel or Sheriff Scardino."

He glanced at Lois who was trying not to smirk.

"Sure thing, Daniel."

He handed over two sheets of paper. "This is what you guys told me last night. See if it's accurate, make any necessary changes, sign and date."

Lois handed him one of the pieces of paper. "Did you find the body?"

Daniel shook his head. "No. They've been out looking since I left your house but nothing yet. Is there any chance he survived?"

Lois shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Well, we'll keep looking. I don't know that we'll dredge the lake or anything, but we'll look for a few more days at least."

Clark frowned. He wanted to know for sure this guy was dead, that he couldn't come back to haunt him again later. If they didn't find the body, maybe he'd talk to his dad about conducting a further search.

He looked over the sheet of paper and it was as accurate as it was going to get. He and Lois had agreed on what they wouldn't say about Superman and his ship and all of that. He signed off on it and handed it back to Daniel.

Lois had already given hers back so they turned to go.

"All right, Kent, show me how to paint this town red," he said, opening her door to his convertible.

She just glared at him as she climbed in.

"John Deere Green?" he asked, heading to his side of the car.

"Better," she nodded.

Part 20

"So what else is there to do at the Corn Festival?" Clark asked, holding the pink cotton candy out so Lois could take a piece off.

She shrugged. "There's the animals being judged in the arena. The pie eating contest will start before long. The elementary school has the scarecrow contest and Smallopoly tournament going on. There will be more booths and stuff open tomorrow. Maisie will have a full menu for dinner. There will be grills with barbecue for lunch tomorrow after the barbecue competition. Dad's won the last three years," she said proudly. "His pulled pork is the best in the state — he won the state competition two years ago."

"I'll have to have some of that then. What else?"

"Tomorrow night is the dance. What else do you want to know?"

"Where we go now."

"How did I get volunteered to show you around?" Lois asked as she took another bite of cotton candy.

Clark shrugged. "That's what happens when you survive life and death situations together."

"Clark!"

They both turned to see a blonde woman walking quickly towards them.

"Mom!" He handed the candy to Lois in time to wrap his arms around his mom, picking her up off the ground and swinging her around.

"Put me down," she said with a laugh.

Clark laughed with her but obliged, keeping an arm around her shoulders as he introduced her to Lois. "Mom, this is Lois Kent. Lois, this is my mom, Ellen Lane."

Lois smiled and held out her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Lane."

Ellen shook her hand. "Nice to meet you. Thank you. For

everything.”

“My pleasure,” Lois told her with a smile.

“She sure is pretty,” Ellen said to Clark. Her eyes widened. “It’s okay that I say that, isn’t it?”

Clark laughed again as Lois blushed. “I don’t know, Mom. You’d have to ask her. But we were just going to find the world’s best caramel apples.”

Ellen’s eyes lit up. “Really? I haven’t had one in ages.”

“Actually, I’m not sure if Maggie’s here,” Lois said quietly. “They were pretty banged up last night when Dan found them.” She nodded towards the food area. “We can go find out, though.”

They walked over to discover that, while Maggie and Wayne weren’t there, Josh was. He looked much better than he had a couple of nights earlier and told them that his parents were planning on being there the next day.

They spent the rest of the evening wandering around, watching some of the judging — the announcements wouldn’t be made until the next afternoon — and sampling some of the food.

It was late by the time they made it back to the farm. Lois took care of some of her jobs around the house while Clark sat on the porch. She still wasn’t sure what they were going to do for sleeping arrangements, but she put that thought out of her mind. She got the Sitkowitzes more towels and the Harrises were promised a seven-thirty wake up call. She’d taken Ellen Lane another blanket and more pillows to the Ronnicks.

By the time she made it back out to the porch, it was after eleven. She flopped onto the swing, gently propelling herself back and forth with one foot.

“Will you come with me?”

She looked over at him. “What?”

“To see my ship. I don’t really want to go by myself and my parents are asleep but I don’t really want wait another day either.”

“Sure.”

They stood and walked towards the shelter. Together they opened the main doors and went inside. Lois shut the doors behind them after lighting the kerosene lantern. She showed him how to open the secret compartment. They tugged the tarps off the top of the ship and then just stared at it.

Clark sank onto one of the rough hewn chairs as he looked at the ship that had brought him to his new planet.

Lois watched him, resting a hand on his shoulder. “Any idea what those symbols mean?” she asked quietly, moving away from him to run her hand along the ship.

He moved next to her, running his hand along the other side. “Not a clue.” His hand came to rest in an indentation seemingly made for that purpose. Lois’ came to rest in a similar spot on the other side. After a moment, they both moved on until an egg shaped panel fell off either side. With a hiss, the top lifted to reveal the interior.

Clark ran a hand gently over the seat.

“I wonder what this is,” Lois mused, her hand resting on an indentation.

“I bet that’s where the globe went.” Clark reached into the pocket of his coat and pulled out an opaque sphere. “This.”

He set it in the spot that must have been made for it and a glow surrounded them.

Lois gasped as she was enveloped by the white light, watching as a man appeared before them.

“I am Jor-El. That you are seeing this message means that you, my son, Kal-El have reached full physical maturity. This message will only be played when the globe is used in conjunction with your ship. There are other such messages that will play when the time is right. When your birth-wife finds you. If she is able. After the birth of your first child. Other appropriate times. Kal-El, you must find a way to use what you have been given, the great powers that are your birthright as the surviving member of a dead planet who is now living under a yellow sun.

Do not put yourself or your loved ones in danger if there is another way. Do not deprive yourself of having a full, happy life outside of what you can do, but do what you can. Laugh often. Live fully. Love deeply.”

The hologram disappeared and the light dissipated.

“Wow,” Lois breathed. “There’s more of those?”

Clark nodded. “Yeah. There were six, I think, that were... recorded or whatever on the globe. My parents saw the first one not long after they found me. I saw the other five when I was about sixteen, I guess.”

Lois wasn’t even aware that he’d moved during the presentation by his father, but there he was, his shirt brushing against her arm. She looked up at him and, for a moment, thought he was going to kiss her.

She moved away suddenly, her fingers running along the lettering on the front of ship, until her hand rested where Clark’s had before. “It does seem almost hand shaped,” she mused.

Clark placed his hand in the other spot — where her hand had been earlier.

In the absence of the House of Ra, you have my blessing.

She heard the voice in her head. It was the voice of Jor-El, she was certain. She gasped and looked at Clark wide-eyed.

“What?” he asked.

“Did you not hear that?”

He shook his head. “What was it?”

“Your father,” she told him and then hesitated. What did it mean that she had heard it and Clark didn’t?

“What did he say?”

Her brow furrowed. Sure it was his father and his ship and his globe, but she somehow felt the message was for her alone.

“Something about a house and blessing,” she finally said.

The words were imprinted on her mind, for eternity, she was sure, but for reasons that weren’t clear, she didn’t repeat them verbatim.

For some reason, she couldn’t.

Part 21

Clark could feel that she was holding back, but he wasn’t sure what or why.

And then she yawned.

He sighed, wanting nothing more than to stare at his ship for a while longer but realized that he, too, was exhausted.

Together they tugged the tarps back over the ship and closed the secret compartment. Lois turned out the kerosene lamp after they opened the large outer door. He still wasn’t entirely certain where he was sleeping. Somehow he didn’t think Lois was actually planning on bunking with him — though he didn’t think he’d turn the offer down if she made it.

What did it mean that his father had said something to her? Something that he hadn’t been privy to?

He puzzled over that until they reached the door to her room. She took a couple steps beyond it.

“Good night.” She smiled slightly and turned to walk away.

“Where are you sleeping?”

“Don’t worry about me. You get my room.”

“You’re not sleeping in a tent are you?”

She laughed lightly. “No.”

He reached out, brushing her hair back with his fingers.

“Come find me if you need someone to keep the bad dreams away,” he whispered. He leaned in, his lips brushing lightly against hers.

He had intended for that to be it, but he was drawn back to her. He found himself wrapping his arms around her as her hands rested near his shoulders, throwing herself into the kiss with wild abandon, just as he was.

It was long moments before they pulled back.

They were both breathing heavily as she moved out of his

embrace. “Good night, Clark,” she said softly, turning before he could say anything else.

“Good night,” he whispered to her retreating back. “Sweet dreams.”

With a sigh, he went into her room and sat heavily on her bed. It was a bit surreal, sitting in her room. The investigative reporter in him wanted to look around and find out more about her. The friend in him, the part that thought he wanted to be more than a friend, thought it probably wasn’t the best way to earn her trust.

If the situation was reversed, would she look through his things?

Somehow, he had no doubt she would, but he was okay with that. She already knew his deepest, darkest secret.

He sighed and changed into a pair of sleep shorts and slid under the covers on her bed. He could smell a bit of papaya — probably from her shampoo — on the pillow.

He sighed one more time and willed himself to sleep.

He awoke when the sunlight streamed in the window.

He felt slightly bereft when he realized she hadn’t come in sometime during the night. He hoped that meant that she hadn’t had any bad dreams, but he suspected she wouldn’t have come anyway. The night before had been one thing — chalked up to the emotions and forced closeness, forced intimacy, of the day.

He went quickly through his morning routine — omitting the shower for the moment — before heading out to the kitchen.

Once there, he discovered his parents and three other couples at the big table in the dining room. He also noted there were only eight seats. He said hello and gave his mom a kiss on the cheek.

Martha brought another plate of biscuits in and set it on the table. “Clark, do you mind eating with Lois in the kitchen?”

“Not at all, *Mom*,” Clark’s eyes twinkled at her, though he did get odd glances from his parents. He headed into the kitchen, grabbing a piece of bacon off plate on the table before heading to get a glass for some milk. “How’d you sleep?” he asked Lois quietly as she sat there, poking at her scrambled eggs.

She shrugged. “Fine.” She refused to look at him until he tipped her face up.

“You look like hell.”

She glared. “Thanks, Lane. Just what every girl wants to hear first thing in the morning. And for the record, you don’t exactly look like Superman yourself.” She turned back to her plate.

“That’s good, I think.” He dished up some food onto his plate and sat across from her. “So what’s on the agenda for today?”

“Whatever we want. Games and other booths are open this morning. Barbecue from the different competitors for lunch. Other stuff this afternoon. About four, they’ll have a big ceremony that announces all the winners from all the different contests. Everyone will either go home or to someone’s house or something to change clothes. Dinner from the barbecue places or Maisie’s starts at five-thirty. The dance is from six to ten. All the booths will get shut down and cleaned up sometime after eight.”

“So busy day?”

“If you want it to be. You don’t have to go at all.”

“Perry’s got me writing it up for next weekend’s travel section.”

Lois raised an eyebrow at him. “Seriously? Smallville in the travel section?”

“I guess.”

They finished their breakfast in near silence. Clark helped Lois clean up all of the breakfast dishes — including those from the other guests — even though Martha protested that he didn’t need to.

Fifteen minutes after the other guests left, he was climbing into his convertible and looking for Lois. He spotted her getting into her truck and jogged over before she could leave. “Want to ride with me again today?” he asked, leaning in her open window.

She shook her head. “I’m not sure if I’m going to need to come home early to unlock the house. Mom may leave it unlocked since all of the guests except your family have been coming here for several years. I won’t know for a while and I may need to run back for other reasons so I better just take my own car.”

He thought about asking if he could ride with her but decided that she apparently needed some space. He backed off and watched her drive away before getting into his car and following.

He stopped at the local grocery store and picked up a copy of the Daily Planet. He gave a satisfied smile as he read through the story he and Lois had written. The two of them complimented each other nicely, though she hadn’t been happy when he’d tried to edit her copy.

“And, in the end,” he read aloud, “‘Jason Trask’s obsession caused him to search for a mystical rock he alone imbued with destructive powers, and to entangle two reporters and a small town family in his web while trying to get to the target of his fixation, Superman. He came to see this strange visitor from another planet where he was not, and to see enemies where there were none. It was an obsession that for Jason Trask would prove fatal.’”

That had been all Lois. She had an ability to skate the fine line between telling the truth and protecting his secret. He tossed the paper onto the front seat and headed towards the Festival.

Part 22

Lois rested her head on her fist, her elbow hanging out the window, as she drove to Smallville. The reality was that Clark was too perceptive for her own good. She *did* look like hell and no amount of make-up could cover it up. It *helped* some, sort of, but didn’t hide the fact that she’d had a rough night. The 800mg of ibuprofen had helped some, too. She’d made sure she had more with her before she left the house. She had a feeling she was going to need it.

She hadn’t told Clark where she was going to sleep but after that good night kiss, she’d known she couldn’t trust either of them to just sleep if she went in after a nightmare. She’d slept well in his bed the night before. No more nightmares which had surprised her. They’d come two, three, even four times a night for months after Lex had tried to kill himself. She’d been there when he had, watching from the sidewalk as he plummeted to his near-death. She’d finally gone to see a psychologist in Independence who helped her work through it.

Intellectually, she knew she wasn’t to blame for Jason Trask’s death. It was him or her and him was by far the better choice. And if he’d killed her, he would have killed Clark, too.

He would have killed Superman without realizing it.

The world needed Superman.

And she was rapidly coming to believe that she needed Clark.

She wasn’t quite sure in what aspect yet, but she needed him. She wanted to be his friend, the person he could come to when something went wrong and he didn’t want to go to his parents for whatever reason. She’d watched Superman carefully over the previous months and she’d seen him after a difficult rescue — when he got there as fast as he could but people still died, when he left India after spending three days straight searching through the rubble for survivors of an earthquake and finding only bodies near the end, when he’d wrapped a little girl in his cape after he’d pulled her from the freezing pond she’d fallen in and he didn’t know if he’d made it in time.

She’d never believed that he was only Superman. From the beginning, she’d wondered if he had another identity or at least other clothes to wear so he could wander among the masses when he chose without being recognized. Everyone needed downtime — from her dad the farmer to the President of the United States. Superman was no different.

It had never *really* occurred to her that he might have been on the planet his whole life. She figured he'd been around for a few months before making his big debut at the Prometheus launch but no more than that, not years and certainly not since he was a baby.

To see his ship, to touch it, to see the message from his father, to hear his voice in her head — it was surreal.

She was sure she needed Clark in her life and she was pretty sure that he needed her in his. It scared her. The way she felt when he kissed her — the way her toes curled and she had to forcibly keep her foot from 'popping' the way it did for the women in the old black and white movies. No man had ever made her feel that way from kisses alone — or from anything else either.

And it scared her. It really scared her.

So instead of sleeping and having dreams that likely would have eventually driven her back to her own bed, his bed for the night, she sat in the swing on the front porch, dozing occasionally, but mostly waiting for the first light of dawn to chase away the cobwebs and any possibility of nightmares.

She sighed as she pulled into a parking spot near the arena. It could easily be a long day regardless and the lack of sleep wasn't going to help.

All of the baking competitions she and her mom had been in had been judged the night before so she didn't have that to worry about. Instead, she headed for the family barbecue booth to help set up. Her dad had been there for several hours already working on his secret recipe pulled pork. It was her favorite thing in the world to eat.

She'd miss it if she moved to Metropolis.

Where had that thought come from?

It had come from Clark, from his invitation, from the way he kissed her.

And she knew Superman — if she really wanted pulled pork, he'd come get her some, wouldn't he?

That would make the move to Metropolis easier — her own superhero airline at her beck and call.

Well, maybe not at her beck and call, but he'd bring her for visits, she was sure.

His father's voice had resounded in her head all night long. 'In the absence of the House of Ra, you have my blessing.'

What did that mean? House of Ra? His name had been Jor-El. Clark's name was Kal-El. Maybe they were the House of El. So the House of Ra... would that be the family of the birth wife Jor-El had mentioned?

That gave Lois an unsettled feeling in the pit of her stomach, but she wasn't sure why. If Kal-El, Clark, was the only one to survive, why would the birth wife be able to find him? Maybe there was more than one ship being made and they weren't sure how many of them would make it?

That might make sense, but it didn't mean she liked the thought that Clark might have a birth wife out there. She still wasn't sure she could trust him with her heart, but she was sure that she didn't want him to already be taken by some Kryptonian chick.

But if this Kryptonian birth-wife chick had arrived when Clark had, wouldn't she have shown up looking for Superman after he made his debut? Presumably, she'd have the same powers, so wouldn't she have tried to find him?

Lois sighed, putting it out of her mind as she gave her dad a big hug when she entered the small tent.

"You look like something the bull dragged in," he said holding her tightly for a long moment.

"Thanks. Appreciate it." She let him go and picked up a piece of bread lying there.

"So when are you leaving?" he asked quietly.

"What?"

"For Metropolis. For the Daily Planet. For Clark Lane."

She rested her head against his shoulder. "You think you know me so well."

"I do."

"I know."

"So when are you leaving?"

She sighed. "I don't know, Daddy. I just don't know."

Part 23

Clark wandered around for a while before heading to Kent tent. Lois was helping her dad with whatever it was he was doing to the pork.

"Go on," he heard Jonathan say. "Find Clark and show him around."

"I like helping you," Lois replied.

"I know, but you and I both know you'd rather show him around."

She sighed and stepped out of the tent. "Clark. When did you get here?"

"Just a minute ago." He took the rolled up paper out from under his arm. "For you."

She unrolled it and stared. "My byline in the Daily Planet," she practically whispered.

"Your *first* byline in the Daily Planet," he corrected.

She didn't say anything as she read through the article again. "I'm going to leave this with my dad," she finally said. "If that's okay with you. We'll have an article in the Smallville paper but it doesn't come out until next Thursday so..."

Clark's brow furrowed. "You haven't been to work in days."

She shrugged. "This week's paper was pretty well done already. Jenn could finish anything else and Bill's back so... I'm demoted as of this week anyway."

They wandered away from the barbecue booths towards the games and merchandise.

"What's going on over there?" Clark nodded towards a small crowd gathered around one of the booths.

"That's Pop Pop's baseball toss. It's probably time for the toss-off."

"The what?"

She sighed. "Pete, Josh and Dan have had this contest every year for as long as I can remember. Winner gets all the points to get a prize for their mom, or later, girlfriend. Five rounds, most strikes overall wins."

By the time she finished, they'd reached the edge of the crowd. "Anyone ever win you anything?" he whispered in her ear.

She shook her head. "No. The two years Josh and I were dating, Pete won. The last two years, I was dating Dan and Josh won both of them. Dan's never won, actually."

Clark chuckled. "I'd say I was sorry but..."

"Think you can do better?"

Clark looked up to see Dan standing there, tossing a baseball up and down in his hand. Clark shrugged. "I can throw a ball."

Dan moved a few steps closer. "So why don't you join us then?" He glanced at Lois. "I beat you, Lois dances with me tonight. Not you. At all."

Clark stood up a bit taller and took a step towards the sheriff. "I believe that would be up to the lady, wouldn't it?"

"Don't think you can beat me?" he taunted.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure I can throw a strike or two."

Dan swept his arm towards the booth. "Then why don't you join us, city boy?"

For some reason Clark liked it much better when Lois called him that. He pulled a string of tickets out of his pocket and counted out five. "Let's go, *Sheriff*." He put as much sarcasm as he could muster into the last word.

Lois was just standing there, glaring at both of them with her

arms crossed in front of her. Another girl stood next to her. “Don’t worry, Kara, next they’re going to see who can pee farther. But I’m sure Josh has better sense than that.”

Clark sighed inwardly. He should have known better than to go all macho in front of Lois if he wanted to impress her.

He was still a bit sore from the beating and exposure to whatever it was, but Josh looked like he was in worse shape. He chose that moment to speak up.

“Actually, if Clark’s playing this year, I think I’m going to sit out,” Josh told them. “I’m not even sure I can pitch after this week.” He took his tickets back from the older man running the booth — Pop Pop, Clark guessed. One of Lois’ grandpas? Josh moved to stand close to the girl Lois had been talking to.

“You know, I think I’m going to sit out, too,” Pete said suddenly.

“You and me,” Dan said, looking at Clark.

“Let’s go.”

“You’re the new guy. Go ahead.”

Clark took the baseballs and tossed one up and down lightly as he moved into position. He wound up and...

SMACK!

The ball hit the plywood catcher in the head.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm the nerves in his stomach. He tried again.

Wide right.

Way wide right.

One more in this round. He concentrated and sighed in relief as it went into the ‘mitt’.

“Only one,” Dan gloated. “Watch this.”

A minute later, Clark was down by one.

The next three rounds went quickly as they alternated going first.

“Coin toss,” Josh called as Clark got in place for the last round.

“What?” he asked, turning to look at the gathered crowd.

“Whoever’s losing goes last in the final round,” Lois explained. “If it’s a tie, there’s a coin toss.” She pulled a quarter out of her pocket. “You call it, Clark.”

The coin sailed into the air.

“Heads,” he said.

She and the others around her looked at the quarter in the grass. “Heads it is,” she said. “Dan goes first.”

Clark watched as Dan hit two strikes. It *was* his turn for two. They’d taken turns — Clark had one strike the first round; Dan had two. The next round was the other way until they each had six at the end of four rounds.

He’d have to be perfect if he wanted to win.

Not that he really thought that Lois would even dance with Dan, much less let him dictate who else she could dance with, but he had an inexplicable need to win.

Or, more likely, he had an inexplicable need to beat Dan.

He took a deep breath and threw the first ball. Strike. Then another. Then a third.

He grinned and turned to look at Lois who he found flying into his arms. He barely had time to react before her arms were around his neck. He swung her around before her lips planted firmly on his.

He set her down laughing, but something in her eyes told him everything wasn’t as okay as she was letting everyone else believe.

“I guess you get to pick your prize,” he said, tucking a wayward strand of hair behind her ear.

She shook her head, turning in his arms. “Mrs. Lane, why don’t you pick something out? It’s your son’s first win, after all.”

Clark tightened his arms slightly around her waist as his mom walked over to the booth. She studied everything carefully before finally sweet talking Pop Pop into giving her a few extra points

so that she could get a Superman doll.

“Good choice,” Lois told her.

The crowd dissipated but Clark left his arms around Lois until she pulled away from him.

“Don’t read anything into that, Lane, or anything into the rest of the day while you’re pretending to be my new boyfriend.”

Part 24

Clark left his arm around her, she was glad for that.

She wasn’t crazy about his whole macho ‘up the lady to decide’ thing but Dan was worse. At least Clark was probably *trying* to be a gentleman and all that, but she could have taken care of herself when Dan said it in the first place — she didn’t need Clark to do it for her. Could Dan really not get the hint? It had been a *year*. She and Josh had gone out a few times, but she was pretty sure that he and her cousin, Kara, were getting fairly serious. She didn’t think anyone else knew that yet, though.

“I don’t want to deal with Dan,” she told Clark. “So you’re being my boyfriend for the day.”

He nodded. “Okay. So why’d you let my mom pick?”

She rested her head against his shoulder as her arm wound around his waist. “Seemed like the thing to do. And besides, the look on your face when she picked Superman was priceless.”

He groaned. “I can’t believe she did that. No, I can. It’s a mom thing to do. Subtle.”

“Funny.”

“Right. Funny.”

She relaxed against him and decided that, just for today, she’d pretend it was real. She wasn’t sure what she was going to do about Metropolis and Clark Lane or if he was really interested in more — no matter what his kisses might have said the night before.

She was going to do something she’d never really done before — live in the moment. Not worry about the next day or the day after or the day after that. Just be with Clark, pretend it was real and go from there.

“You do realize that means you’re going to have to kiss me a *lot* today?” he whispered in her ear. “That we might need to duck into an alley to make out and maybe be a bit late getting back here for the dance tonight.”

His husky voice sent shivers up and down her spine. “I’ll suffer through somehow,” she told him. “But now, you’re going to win me a prize.” She pointed to the strongman bell. “Let’s see how close you can get to Superman.” She handed a ticket to the vendor. “Let’s go.”

She watched the play of his muscles underneath his shirt and, for a minute, she wished he was wearing the black polo shirt he’d worn the night before — the one that had made him look *incredible*.

He hoisted the hammer over his head and brought it down sending the ball into the air.

But not high enough.

Clark dug a ticket out of his pocket. “Let me try that again.” This time he was closer to the top.

“One more,” she said, handing one more ticket over.

She watched as Clark took a deep breath and tried one more time.

This time the bell rung.

She laughed and threw her arms around him again.

“Superman’s on his way back,” he whispered in her ear.

She pulled away from him, still suspended in mid-air. “What?”

He grinned — that illegal grin. “Not completely, yet, but coming.”

She closed her eyes and rested her forehead against his. “I’m so glad,” she whispered.

“Take your pick, LoLo.”

She turned to glare at the vendor. “Don’t push it, Justin. I can still take you down and you know it.”

He held out two options — a Superman doll like the one Ellen had chosen and a black and white teddy bear, just like the one she’d always wanted someone to win for her at the baseball toss off.

She glanced at Clark, at his resigned look, and grabbed for the bear. “I think I’ll name him Clarkie.” She planted another quick kiss on a surprised Clark. She threw a glance over her shoulder as she walked away. “And sleep with him every night after you go back to Metropolis.”

Live in the moment. That’s what she was going to do.

Before she knew it his arms were around her, pulling her back towards him. “I told you my grandpa has plenty of room for you. Or if you want to stay in Metropolis itself, you can always bunk with me,” he practically growled into her ear.

“Why, Mr. Lane, I can’t believe you’d even *suggest* such a thing!”

He turned her in his arms, bringing one hand to cradle her face. “Well, you *are* my wife, are you not?” he said softly, looking deep into her eyes.

There was no pretence there. She realized that. He was joking about the wife thing, of course, but the feelings she saw reflected in his eyes...

Reflected...

A reflection of what she was afraid to let herself feel.

His lips were on hers, soft, undemanding, but with underlying passion. She could feel it there, in his kiss, that he wanted more. He wanted to kiss her like he had the night before, but they were in public.

The kiss ended and she rested her head against his chest as he held her for a long moment.

‘In the absence of the House of Ra, you have my blessing.’

The words repeated in her head again. Did it mean what she was starting to let herself hope it meant? That since Clark’s birth Kryptonian chick wife wasn’t around, she was an acceptable alternative?

“Come back to Metropolis with me,” he said, interrupting her thoughts. “I don’t know what’s going to happen with this, with *us*, but I know you belong at a world class paper like the Daily Planet. Nothing against Smallville’s paper, but you’re a world class reporter, destined for reporting greatness and I have every intention of riding your coattails to a Pulitzer.”

She laughed and moved back slightly to look up at him. “You’ll have to pull your own weight, Lane. No riding coattails around here. Speaking of...” She moved out of his arms, grabbing his hand and dragging him towards a more secluded location. “You’re feeling better? Really?”

He nodded. “Not super, yet, but much better. I could feel my strength coming back at the bell thing. My hearing is better and I just *feel* better.”

“Can you do any of your buzz-buzz eye stuff?” she asked.

“My what?” he asked back, an eyebrow raised.

“I know you can do stuff with your eyes. Can you do any of it?”

He tipped his glasses down and glanced around. “No. Not yet. A little bit but not really.” He leaned in to kiss her again, lightly. “So whaddya say? Come to Metropolis with me.”

Part 25

She sighed in his arms. “I don’t know, Clark. Smallville is my home.”

He tucked a finger under her chin, his thumb gently rubbing over her lips. “Is it really? I mean, I know this is where your family is and where you grew up, but is it really *home* for you now? You’ll always be welcome at Kent Farms and *it* will always be home for you, but is Smallville? Do you feel like this is where

you belong for the rest of your life?”

Lois hesitated before shaking her head. “No,” she whispered against his thumb. “This isn’t where I belong.”

He wanted her to say ‘I belong with you. Wherever you are, it’s home.’ She didn’t, but that was what he wanted to hear.

“So come with me.”

She closed her eyes and leaned forward, resting her forehead against him. “I don’t know.”

“Lois? Clark?”

Clark sighed as he heard Martha Kent’s voice calling for them.

“We should go see what she wants.” Lois moved away from him and back towards the Festival.

“There you two are,” Martha said, seeing them. “They’re done judging the barbecue. We could use your help at the booth, Lois, but only if I’m not interrupting something.” She glanced back and forth between them.

“Where’s Lucy?”

Martha shrugged. “I’m not sure. She knows she’s supposed to be back in time but...”

Clark put his arm around Lois’ waist. “Let’s go. I’ll help.”

They spent the next two hours helping serve customers at the tent. After that they wandered around for a while longer before going to watch the announcements of the assorted winners.

As expected, Jonathan Kent won the barbecue contest, Martha Kent won the pumpkin pie contest and Lois won the best cookie contest.

After that wrapped up, they — along with almost everyone else — headed home.

Clark changed into his tan Dockers and blue button down shirt. Spending the day with Lois had been nice — very nice. He could only hope that she’d come back to Metropolis with him. He sighed. If all of his powers came back, he could fly out to see her whenever he wanted.

But he’d really rather she just came to Metropolis.

He stopped as he tucked his shirt in.

Would he move to Smallville?

If she didn’t want to come to Metropolis, would he move to Kansas?

What kind of job could he get? Where could he live? There was an apartment complex in Smallville. Parsons and Independence weren’t too far away and they were larger towns that might have more job opportunities.

But the Daily Planet was his dream job. Would he give it up for Lois? If they started a relationship and she didn’t want to move?

He’d cross that bridge when he got to it.

He headed to the living room to find Lois already there.

“Wow,” he said, his eyes traveling up and down her body. “You clean up good.”

“So I don’t look like hell anymore?”

He reached out and took her chin in his hand, turning her face slightly to either side. “You’ve looked better, but you’ve never looked better.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It’s the truth.”

The burgundy print dress hugged her body in all the right places before flaring to swirl around her legs and her soft brown leather boots. He extended his arm. “Shall we?”

He could feel the warmth of her hand through his shirt sleeve as she tucked it into his elbow.

They reached his rental car and he stopped before opening her door. “Lois?”

She looked up at him expectantly.

“Would you go out with me tonight?”

“Like on a date?”

He nodded. “Would you be my date for the Corn Festival

dance?”

“It’s called the Popcorn Ball,” she told him, straight-faced. His eyebrows raised. “Excuse me?”

THE END

She laughed. “Not this year, but it has been a time or two in the past.”

“So will you?”

“Be your date?” she clarified.

“Yes.”

“You mean like a real date? Like where I take out my best perfume, the one I bought after seeing ‘Love Affair’ the good one not the remake, and put a dab behind my knee, even though I have no idea why? Or I would except we’re already at the car?”

“Exactly.”

She smiled. “It would be my honor.”

He leaned down and brushed her lips lightly with his own.

“Good.”

“Does this mean you’re going to give me a hickey behind the Dairy Freeze?” she asked, looking up at him with wide, innocent eyes.

“If you’re lucky.” He grinned at her. “Or maybe I’ll just take all your dances tonight.”

“Not a chance.”

He laughed. “Well, I guess I can share you some, as long as you promise to come home with me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course I’m coming home with you. I *live* here. You’re staying here. It’s a no-brainer.”

With that they headed to town.

The next morning, Clark stared out the window of the small jet sitting on the tarmac. The evening had been everything he’d hoped for. Good food. Good company. Dances with Lois. Line dances with her as his partner. Slow dances where he’d held her close, aware that nearly every eye in Smallville was on them. A long, sweet kiss under the moon as they went for a walk when they got back to the farm. Her walking him to her room and another all-too-brief kiss before she turned and walked away.

And a short, chaste, good-bye kiss in the morning as he and his parents headed to the small airport in Independence, KS.

His grandpa had read about his fight with Trask and insisted on chartering a jet for them on the way back to Metropolis so Clark wouldn’t be stuck in the small seats and narrow aisles of a commercial airliner. He’d tried to convince his grandpa that he was fine but he’d have none of it. They’d returned both rental cars to the branch in Independence and were just waiting on clearance from the tower or something.

‘Airport’ was a bit of a misnomer. It was really an airstrip that mostly catered to crop dusters, but it was capable of dealing with a small jet or two.

“We’ll be taxing towards the runway in just a moment,” came a voice over the intercom. “They have one more thing to get on the plane.”

With a slight hiss, the door opened. Clark continued to stare out the window, heedless of what was happening behind him.

“I don’t suppose you have room for a tagalong.”

His head snapped around to see Lois standing there, suitcase in hand, biting her lip. She looked at him hopefully.

“Is there room for one more?”

He didn’t say anything but crossed the plane in one large step, wrapping her in his arms and kissing her soundly.

When his dad’s throat clearing and mom’s soft ‘Sam’ made it into his consciousness, he moved back, resting his forehead against hers.

“There’s always room for you, Lois. Always,” he whispered.

He took her hand and led her to the small loveseat his parents had vacated in favor of the captain’s chairs across the plane. They buckled in and, with his arm around her, the plane took to the sky.

They were headed for Metropolis.

Together.